

## SESSION 19: Caution

### WELCOME

Welcome again to our course on realizing a life of love! It's good to be with you!

If you're new to this course, I strongly recommend that you review the first ten sessions because they make up the core foundation. You'll need this to benefit from the remaining sessions.

### SO LET'S GET STARTED

Again, as a reminder, the 3 As of awakening are *Attending*, *Appreciating*, and *Acting* with love. Attending leads to appreciation, which then leads to skillful loving action. Appreciation has two meanings, however: both understanding the nature of things and understanding the value or sacredness of Reality. Both of these aspects of appreciation arise from careful attending. Together, the twin practices of Attending and Appreciating, called "Appreciative Attending," generate wisdom and reverence, which enable us to fulfill our purpose—to nurture and savor Life. Inspired by reverence for Life, we can then take *Action* to benefit all of Life—others and ourselves—with a loving heart, while enjoying each brief and precious moment of existence.

In our last session we discussed the practice of RAIN for processing pain. I hope you've been able to practice RAIN with one or two painful situations in your life.

Today we will be discussing the **love practice of caution**. Life entails risk, so we need to exercise caution to minimize our risk of harming ourselves or others.

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### What is Caution?

Caution is care taken to avoid danger or mistakes. Since life is inherently risky, we need to be cautious to minimize the risks of being harmed or harming someone else. We all risk being harmed either by our own mistakes or by the mistakes or hurtful intentions of others, and we risk hurting others because of our carelessness or selfishness. Our mistakes can be large or small, from misplacing our keys to forgetting an umbrella when it rains to driving while intoxicated or falling asleep at the wheel.

People die every day from a lack of caution. From car crashes alone, about 101 people die every day, while roughly 8,000 suffer injuries. In total, there are about 19,000 car crashes a day in the US, which is more than seven million a year! If you drive, odds are, you'll have at least one accident by the age of 35. Many people speed, which is known to increase the risk of accidents, and today, distracted drivers cause many crashes when they look at their electronic devices.

From all types of accidents, about 150,000 people die every year in the US. This works out to more than 411 people daily. Every year, about 31 million people or 85,000 people a day (roughly one out of every ten people) go to the emergency room for an accidental injury. Most of these are caused by negligence, folly, or misjudgment. So much avoidable harm is caused by the lack of caution.

While we're resilient, we're also easily injured. Sometimes, the wounds are permanent, such as paralysis after an accident. One careless moment can change the course of an entire life.

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Lack of caution can also cause non-physical harm. We hurt others when we aren't cautious with our speech. A careless, hurtful remark can sting for years, or a casual statement by a healthcare professional to the wrong person can violate the privacy of a patient. Our tone can also be hurtful even if our words aren't inherently so.

**One area in which we often forget to be cautious is when we have an impulse to help someone.** But in some situations, our efforts may be unwise. A mother might clean up after her 30-year-old son, thinking she's helping him, when she's actually teaching him that it's OK to not clean up after himself.

We also harm others through careless actions or inaction. We can all be selfish or disregarding at times. Examples include eating the last piece of someone's favorite pie or cutting in front of someone in the checkout line. More serious examples are having an extramarital affair or stealing. An extreme example would be beating someone in a fit of rage. A recent patient of mine got drunk, drove, fell asleep at the wheel, drove off the road, and killed two innocent people. Not only did he devastate the families of these victims and cut their lives short, but he seriously damaged his own life and the lives of his family members.

**Negligence is a common form of lack of caution.** The son of a patient of mine with early dementia fails to ensure that his mother takes her medications, that her house is kept safe and clean, and that she gets enough to eat. A parent of a teenage patient lets her son drive the family car while drunk and stoned. Another mother left her daughter alone with her boyfriend, who had sexually abused young girls in the past. Sure enough, her boyfriend also sexually abused her daughter.

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Every year, thousands of innocent children are abused in part due to the lack of caution of a parent or caregiver in failing to protect them from harm. Children also poison and shoot themselves due to a lack of caution on the part of their caregivers.

At the same time, however, **it's possible to be too cautious. Life requires some calculated risk.** If you choose out of caution to stay home and never drive to work, your caution may deprive you of a living. If you're afraid of going out on dates for fear of being hurt or rejected, you may never find a life partner. There are times when what is most loving is to be courageous, such as when we stand up to evil or injustice.

### Benefits of Caution

The primary benefit of caution, of course, is the reduction of harm. If you bring a friend when you go out at night, you'll reduce your risk of being assaulted. If you're cautious in your speech, you'll be less likely to hurt someone.

**Reducing harm through caution promotes wellness, vitality, and longevity.**

### Barriers to Caution

**Lack of attention or mindlessness is the number one barrier to caution.** Distractions can be dangerous, as most accidents are due to neglect and a lack of judgment—just not paying careful attention to what's happening in the moment.

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Negative emotions such as depression, anxiety, or anger cause people to lose their reverence for themselves and others, which in turn causes carelessness. When we're in pain, we may get a case of the F---its. When that happens, we can lose our drive to be cautious.

When we're angry or irritated, we may lose patience and lash out at others. When we feel judgmental, we may delude ourselves into believing that someone deserves our harmful speech or behavior. Angry parents who beat their children fall into this trap.

**Impulsivity is a common cause of carelessness.** Some people are just impulsive by nature. Others may become impulsive when inflamed by passion. Then, they might "throw caution to the wind." Addictive desire can cause victims to do all sorts of risky things, such as sharing needles infected with hepatitis or HIV.

**Mental illnesses can also cause a lack of caution, especially when they impair judgment.** A recent patient of mine went into severe debt during a manic episode when he bought two expensive cars that he didn't need. Another patient with intermittent explosive disorder drove her car into her boyfriend's house when he said he was too busy to see her.

**Rushing is another barrier to caution.** We live in an unhealthy, fast-paced society, but all of our rushing reduces our care and thoughtfulness, which increases mistakes. We all need to slow down.

We are also less cautious when we don't get enough sleep. Perhaps this is because it reduces our ability to pay careful attention. We simply don't take as good care of ourselves and others when we don't feel well, whether it's from lack of sleep or something else.

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Accidents go up the Monday after spring daylight savings time begins, for example, because people have lost an hour of sleep.

Stress and trauma can harm our vitality and make us less careful as well. With trauma comes shame—the feeling that we’re somehow bad and deserving to be harmed. As a result, many traumatized people fail to protect themselves, perhaps out of an unconscious belief that they deserve to continue to be harmed or the wish to “do it over” with harmful people in the hopes that this time they’ll be treated with care.

We can all be unloving, self-centered, selfish, and hurtful at times, but caution requires love and reverence toward ourselves and others.

### Practicing Caution

As with all the love practices, **your practice of reverence will inspire the motivation for caution.** When you experience the truth that you and everyone else are sacred, you’ll want to take great care.

**Mindfulness promotes caution,** so pay careful attention to what’s going on around you and to what you’re doing. Do one thing at a time with your full attention, especially if you’re doing anything potentially dangerous like driving.

**Caution requires thoughtfulness, so think things through.** If you need to have a difficult conversation with someone, for example, think about it beforehand to make sure your words don’t cause unnecessary harm. If you’re making decisions, such as for a large purchase or something to do with work, think carefully through all of your options and perhaps discuss them with someone else you trust.

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Weigh the pros and cons. Try to think of all of the possible consequences. Try to take only calculated risks based on your thoughtfulness.

Take care to be thoughtful in your interactions with others. While the goal, of course, is to be spontaneous and appropriate, there are times to take a pause, especially when you're emotionally aroused or simply don't know how to respond. When necessary, take the time to think through what to say to others until you have clarity as to how to be constructive and kind.

Sometimes, what you think is loving is actually not loving. One of my patients suffers from an addiction to opioids, and his father gave him money for rent. In doing so, the father unwittingly perpetuated his son's addiction. So remember to exercise caution when attempting to help others.

The family of another patient of mine with dependent personality disorder has been taking care of her for the past 30 years. In doing so, they have enabled her disorder and unwittingly deprived her of the much-needed mandate to take care of herself. As a result, she has failed to grow into an independent woman.

Remember that you can't be cautious when you're rushing. Speeding while driving increases the risk of accidents, and speeding through life in general leads to mistakes, errors, accidents, injuries, and even death, not to mention the failure to take the time to enjoy what life has to offer.

**To live life is to take risks, but we must balance risk with caution.**

Preparing and taking precautions will lower the risks that you must take. Lock your door when you leave the house. Wear your seatbelt when you drive. If you like race car driving or ski jumping, wear a helmet.

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If you like rock climbing, go with a friend, and tether yourself to the rock. If you have a big presentation at work, do your homework, and get your facts straight. If you're going on a trip, make a list of what you need.

Also remain cautious when deciding whom to trust. In general, you should **trust people to the degree that they have earned your trust**. If you're conducting a legal or business transaction, make sure to have a contract and read the fine print. You may want to have it reviewed by an attorney.

In new relationships, take small tests of trusting. You might meet on a first date at a public place during the day. I have one patient who brought her date home on the first date only to be raped. Trust takes time, and people vary in their capacity to love. People will also put on their best faces in the beginning, sometimes acting in deceptive, manipulative, and inauthentic ways. Watch what they do more than what they say. You can be open-hearted and cautious at the same time. Eventually, people reveal their true character. What you can trust is that people will do what they perceive to be in their best interest. If they consider it in their best interest to love you, you can likely be more trusting.

Your practices of assertiveness and authenticity are also necessary risks. **While you almost always want to be assertive and authentic, exercise caution in how transparent you are.** Consider both the person and the situation before you disclose something personal. It wouldn't be appropriate to tell your boss about your sexual preferences, for example. As you develop trust in your intimate relationships, you can take the risk to be progressively more transparent.



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Most importantly, we must remember that life is precious, fragile, and fleeting. So live it with care, exercising mindful caution as you go about your day.

### Our Next Session

In our next session we'll be discussing the practice of connection. This is the practice of seeing others and being seen by others.

**In the meantime, between now and then, I encourage you to do the following:**

1. Continue your daily presence practice—both a period of silence, solitude, and stillness in the morning and your practice of stillness in motion through the day.
2. Start your day with a morning intention to love. You might want to recite a daily intention in the form of a prayer as in the dedication to love prayer we have been using at the end of our sessions.
3. Practice Appreciative Attending. Inquire deeply into your experience with a king, curious eye, especially if you're in pain. Ask, "what is this?" and affirm, "this is sacred." Continue to let go of negative judgements as they arise.
4. Review how you are living your life. Are you cautious in your actions? In what ways have you not been cautious or are you not being cautious now? What can you do to exercise more caution while also taking necessary risks to do what you need to do?

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**Please take some time after our session today to share your reflections with your fellow members of the WellMind community and to read what others have to say as well. Let us share and support each other in our exploration of love!**

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