

SESSION 31: Acceptance

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 practices for tapping in to our innate goodness. I hope you've been able to practice some of these meditations this past week. In today's session I'll be discussing the love practice of acceptance.

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What is acceptance?

Love starts with an attitude of **reverent acceptance of ourselves *exactly as we are, others exactly as they are, and the world exactly as it is.*** We are called to love everybody, including ourselves. That includes the people who annoy us, the people who don't like us, and the people we don't like. It even includes the people who want to harm us. It includes people who have molested children, murdered, raped, and engaged in other criminal activities. If we're a Democrat, it includes acceptance of Republicans and vice versa.

We aren't in a position to decide who is worthy of love and who is not.

We are all sacred beings of creation and, thus, worthy of love and acceptance.

We are all also crooked and flawed, and the seeds of evil exist in all of us. The differences between us are only matters of degree. It's true that some people are profoundly evil, even monstrous. Why is it that we're called to love even people such as Hitler? The answer is simple. Evil is a sickness of the spirit, and evil people are sick in a destructive way. They, too, are deserving of our love, even as we take precautions to protect ourselves from their destructiveness and do what we must to neutralize their evil with love.

We're called to love the sinner, even as we denounce the sin.

Just as people need our love, so do they need our acceptance. They want to know that we will accept them even when they make mistakes. They need to know that **our acceptance** of them is **unconditional**, even if we choose to limit our relationship with them to protect ourselves from harm. They need to know that we don't judge them as people, even though we may discern their actions to be unskillful or harmful.

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Nonacceptance causes great pain. It often comes out as negative, harsh judgments or condemnation. Wanting someone or someone to be different when that's out of our control only leads to anger, frustration, resentment, and even despair. Perhaps the **most toxic** form of nonacceptance is of ourselves. We may experience this as **self-hatred**.

Acceptance doesn't mean liking someone or the way things are. It doesn't mean choosing or wanting something you don't like. It doesn't mean you approve of evil, injustice, illness, or hardship. Rather, acceptance is simply saying to yourself, "I consent to What Is in this moment," even as you take action to change what you can. It also means accepting whatever you're thinking and feeling, even if it isn't particularly noble or loving. **When you accept yourself, you give yourself permission to be as you are and feel what you feel without self-condemnation.**

Acceptance doesn't mean you can't work on changing things. It isn't giving up. In fact, **acceptance actually creates the conditions for positive change** because it shifts you from acting out of hatred to acting out of love. For example, people who accept the things they don't like about themselves are better able to change what they don't like. This is because they hate themselves less and become kinder and more supportive to themselves. This gives them the motivation and inspiration to make positive changes. People who hate themselves, on the other hand, are more inclined to give up or even punish themselves.

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Benefits of Acceptance

Perhaps the **biggest benefit of acceptance is inner peace**, which lessens the tyranny of depression and bitterness. We stop fighting with What Is and instead decide to work with What Is. We let go and let be. We relax into the reality of things. This promotes contentment and equanimity, easing the bitterness of a resentful heart. It makes us more forgiving of the many injustices, hurts, and hardships of life. It strengthens our humility when we let go of the demand that the Universe revolve around us and operate according to our dictates.

Self-acceptance counters self-hatred and self-condemnation, which **leaves us feeling better about ourselves despite our faults, flaws, and failings**. Self-acceptance **boosts our mood and self-esteem, helping us to feel more positive about ourselves** as it eases depression, dejection, and despair.

All of these positive effects enhance our physical and emotional health and vitality. This gives us more positive energy to make changes. We simply do better when we feel better. It helps us to be more creative in finding our way through or around a difficult situation. And if we don't have control over the people and situations in our life, like when we're late for work and stuck in a traffic jam, at least we have control over our attitude. In all of these ways, acceptance is profoundly empowering.

Acceptance also **promotes healing when we accept our painful emotions without avoiding or denying our pain**. There's a saying that when we don't accept our painful feelings and bury them, we bury them alive, preventing us from grieving and moving on.

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Acceptance helps us “feel it so we can then heal it.” When we accept our pain, we can show ourselves compassion, so **acceptance promotes both self-compassion and compassion for everyone** who suffers and shares in our common humanity.

Acceptance also promotes clarity, which increase our wisdom, wise action, and success. We can discern the truth of our experience as it actually is rather than as we’d like it to be. This makes us better problem-solvers.

Because of a lack of acceptance of painful truths, many people go through life with either their head in the sand or wearing rose-colored glasses. When we look into the center of a painful situation without condemnation, we counter avoidance and see the painful truth clearly. When we accept “unacceptable” feelings, we know ourselves better. We become more insightful, which makes us better decision-makers. With acceptance, we can then do what we need to do. One patient of mine was in an abusive relationship, struggling for years to accept the truth that her partner wasn’t going to change. With this acceptance, she was finally able to let go of the relationship and move on.

Acceptance improves relationships. When people feel your unconditional acceptance of their personhood, they feel safe. When they know your caring for them is unconditional, they’re less hostile and more receptive to what you have to say. Ironically, you’re more likely to influence their behavior when they know you respect and accept them as they are.

When you reject others, they’re more likely to reject you. Acceptance is a gift that engenders good will, as it feels good to be accepted for who we are despite our mistakes and shortcomings.

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This is a core principle of psychotherapy. My patients need to know that I don't wish to change them. It's up to them to decide for themselves whether they want to do the hard work required to change and what they want to change. My job is to love and accept them exactly as they are. My wish is for an end to their suffering. I might express concern for behaviors that harm them or others, while making it clear that I accept them unconditionally as people. You can take this same stance toward the people in your life.

Barriers to Acceptance

I think the **biggest barrier** to acceptance is **judgment**, which is the emotional experience that something or someone is “bad.” Judgment **causes us to condemn what we don't like.**

When we appreciate the fact that What Is simply is a part of the sacred reality of the Universe at this moment, we can dislike something or someone while letting go of our condemnation of What Is. This puts us back into alignment with God or Reality. We can then consent to What Is without having to like it. We move from judgmental condemnation to nonjudgmental discernment of what's helpful and what's harmful.

Another barrier to acceptance is **the idea that we are giving up or giving in.** But **acceptance isn't passively giving up. It's humble, active consent to What Is in this present moment.** It's actively letting go of our condemnation of Reality or God as It manifests in this moment. Just because I accept reality as it is right now doesn't mean I'm not going to do what I can to make it better. I'm honoring The Now even as I take action to change the next Now.

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Acceptance is most challenging when we're in pain, either psychological or physical. Our emotional brain automatically reacts with “I don't like this” condemnation. Many life situations bring this up for us. We're challenged with self-acceptance whenever others reject or criticize us or when we fail at something or make a mistake. Other sources of pain include when we lose something of value to us, such as a prized possession, a job, our health, or an important relationship. Physical pain or distress can also trigger nonacceptance.

We struggle with acceptance when others disappoint or hurt us as well. **Expectations are a barrier to acceptance when Reality doesn't line up with them.** Then, we're prone to falling into negative judgments that fuel our nonacceptance. One example of this is when we encounter injustice or evil. When we condemn something because it's unfair, we have the expectation that life should be fair. Unfortunately, that isn't always the case.

How to Cultivate Acceptance

You can cultivate acceptance **with practice.** Begin by **attending carefully to the negative judgments in your mind.** Note feelings of aversion that go along with thoughts like “I'm bad. You're bad. He or she is bad. This is bad.” Humbly let go of negative judgments, and replace them with discerning thoughts such as “This is harmful” or “This is painful.” **This transcendence from judgment to discernment is the fundamental practice for cultivating acceptance.**

The practice of **acceptance also includes the practice of humility.** At the same time, we're both a sacred and insignificant part of the vast whole of Reality. Life is about Life and not just about us.

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When we move from an egocentric to a unicentric point of view, our humility softens the harsh condemnation that arises when we're caught in the delusion that Reality or God should operate according to our specifications.

Make a distinction between acceptance and approval, however. You can accept yourself and others without necessarily approving of your behavior or theirs. You can accept Reality, while not liking it, and also doing what you can to change it. The same holds true for your appearance, faults, flaws, and pain, as well as that of others.

Acceptance is an action. It's something we practice continuously—not a one-time event. When things are hard or we experience a lot of aversion, it takes continuous effort to say, “I consent” and let go of our condemnations of What Is. Keep practicing saying “yes,” or “I consent” to Reality. Say “yes” to What Is, to who you are, to who others are, to the past, and to what will be. Go through your life quietly and humbly saying “I consent” or “yes” over and over again as you feel judgment, condemnation, and aversion.

Start your practice of acceptance with self-acceptance. **Attend closely to negative, self-critical thoughts and painful feelings of shame, self-hatred, depression, anger, or anxiety. Also attend closely to destructive urges. Be on the alert for feelings of self-condemnation, and let those judgments fall away.** Intentionally say “yes” to your experience and to who you are with kind self-compassion. Say “I consent” to your faults, flaws, disabilities, and weaknesses. Honor them as part of the totality of who you are. Forgive yourself for your mistakes (see the lesson on forgiveness). Remind yourself that **perfection is “pure fiction.” Imperfection is part of the natural order of things.**

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To let others know you accept them, show them unconditional respect. It starts with your attitude. This will be evident in your tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions. You don't have to be overly warm or affectionate. In fact, it's sometimes better to be businesslike. You can be firm and kind at the same time.

Make it clear to your family, friends, and coworkers that you believe in them. There's nothing more motivating than knowing someone believes in you. That kind of faith can sustain people through the most difficult of times. All of your friends and family members should know that you believe in them and that you accept them unconditionally, even when you disapprove of some of their actions.

Avoid making blanket negative judgments about other people. Blanket statements such as "you're lazy" or "you're inconsiderate" benefit no one. If someone upsets you at work, for example, you're far better off starting out with something like, "I believe in you. I know you want what's best for everyone."

Make a distinction between people and their behaviors. Rather than saying, "you're such a slob," you might say, "I see that you don't always clean up after yourself." Follow this with an affirmation and a question: "I know you don't want to inconvenience others. How is it that you leave your dishes for others to clean up?" In all of this, keep your tone consistently respectful and nonjudgmental. It will make a world of difference because others will feel less defensive if they don't feel attacked. If you aren't attacking them, and they feel accepted and cared for, they will be much more likely to collaborate with you in addressing your concerns.

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Watch your mind because it's an automatic judging machine. You'll note judgments of others repeatedly arising in your consciousness, just as you experience negative judgments of yourself. Note them all, thank them for being there, and let them go. Refrain from holding onto them, even if they appear to be true. Instead, **reframe negative judgments in terms of disabilities and unskillful behaviors, with empathy and compassion for the pain or ignorance that drives those behaviors.**

I'll share one example with you. I know someone who likes to gossip. Rather than saying, "she's such a gossip," I note to myself, "this person has a bad habit of gossiping. She must hate herself to have to put other people down to feel better about herself." When I told her that her gossiping made me uncomfortable, I did so with kindness. She thanked me and said, "Maybe this is a message I need to listen to." My acceptance of her as a person allowed us to address her behavior.

Sometimes, it's best to overlook things we don't like in others, especially if they're deep-rooted aspects of their character. I know someone who is quite judgmental of others. She sees the world in black and white terms. She's always right, and others are always wrong. I have to refrain from judging her judging. She's harsh in her condemnations of others, yet there's nothing I can do about it but accept her as she is with compassion for her unskillful behavior.

Think about the people in your life. There's probably at least one person you've rejected or who has been rejected by others. Maybe there's someone whose actions you don't approve of. Perhaps you find it difficult to be with someone in particular.

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Start to show that person some attention and kindness. If they're alone in the world, your acceptance and care could make all the difference.

The world needs more love. **You can make a difference by intentionally showing acceptance and care to every human being with whom you come into contact. Just as you deserve this, so others deserve it from you.** Think how much better life would be if we all treated each other according to the truth of our sacred nature as fallible creatures. The time to start is now. The place to start is with every soul you touch. We're called to love everyone. Start by accepting everyone just as they are, including yourself.

OUR NEXT SESSION

In our next session, we'll discuss the practice of consideration. While acceptance puts us into harmony with what is, consideration helps us to be in harmony with others.

In the meantime, between now and then, I encourage you to practice 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 in the meditations in the resource section of my website.

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3. Practice appreciative attending. Inquire deeply into your experience with kind, curious eyes, especially if you're in pain. Ask, "what is this?" and affirm, "this is sacred." Continue to let go of negative judgments.
4. Attend very closely this week to any negative judgments, condemnation, or aversion that arise. Practice saying "yes," or "I consent" to whatever is triggering these feelings as well to these feelings; you want to accept, for example, your feelings of nonacceptance! See clearly the painful and unhelpful nature of condemnations, let them go, and relax into acceptance. Intentionally replace any negative judgmental thoughts with discerning thoughts, linked to feelings of compassion for yourself and others. Be kind and patient with yourself, as the practice of acceptance takes some time and repetition to become habitual.

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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