

SESSION 35: Kindness

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 love practice of empathy. I hope you've been able to practice empathy this past week. In today's session, we'll be discussing the practice of kindness.

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What is Kindness?

Let's start by discussing what is kindness. When most people talk about being kind, they're really talking about being loving. People equate kindness with being helpful, supportive, empathetic, compassionate, generous, considerate, affirming, and so on. When they talk about acts of kindness, they usually mean loving actions.

I will use a narrow definition of kindness, however, as just being nice. It's being friendly and pleasant with an attitude of caring. When you're kind, you greet others with a friendly smile and genuine concern for their well-being.

Kindness stems from an attitude of reverence and care for others—the foundation of love. That may be why Robert Louis Stevenson once said, “The essence of love is kindness.” The impulse to be kind arises from seeing the beauty in others and recognizing that each person is equally significant and sacred, just like us. Kindness is a spiritual act.

It's the opposite of harming and meanness. It's a benign attitude of non-harm, even when we're angry with someone. Kind people aren't violent except in extreme situations where there's no other way to protect themselves or others from harm. When you're kind, you authentically show your anger, while also taking care not to cause harm to anyone.

While evolution has wired us for competition and aggression, evolution has also wired us to be kind. Like the other love practices, it's in our genes. So when you're kind, it's because it's in your nature. When you aren't kind, it's because you've been wounded or feel frustrated or threatened.

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Benefits of Kindness

Now let's talk about the benefits of kindness. Kindness is good for everyone because it creates loving connections and leaves us feeling happier. It brings us closer to each other and creates a sense of safety that allows us to be authentic and vulnerable. It's a kind of social lubricant that enables us to love each other, promote friendships, and foster family.

Loving deeds that stem from kindness compel others to also be kind and loving. It's contagious, triggering a chain reaction of loving actions that ripple out across the world. It changes the world for the better.

When you're kind, you feel better and happier. It boomerangs back on you because when you're kind, others are more likely to be kind to you. It's a healing balm in a world of negativity and adversity.

Kindness helps all of us get by during difficult times, giving us hope that we will survive and even thrive. Love heals, and part of the healing power of love is kindness.

The greatest good you can do for others is to show them their value and worth, and you do this when you're kind to them.

Studies on kindness are a little confusing because so many people equate being kind with being loving. Nevertheless, it's likely that kindness improves mental health. Kind people likely suffer less from depression, and being kind makes us more attractive and likable. Kind people are overall more successful and happier than mean people.

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Kindness promotes the release of the bonding hormone, oxytocin, which helps us feel close and connected to others. After all, who wants to connect to someone who is mean?

Dr. David Hamilton says that kindness also improves physical health. Oxytocin apparently binds to blood vessel walls and releases nitric oxide, which opens arteries and improves blood flow. So kindness is good for the heart, literally and figuratively. Kind hearts are strong hearts.

Since kindness reduces the stress of hostility, aggression, and emotional hurt, kind people have lower levels of the stress hormone, cortisol. It appears that kindness also reduces inflammation. Kind people have higher rates of a protective molecule called DHEA, so it seems to slow down the aging process and promote physical vitality.

Studies of particularly kind communities, like the close-knit one of Italian immigrants in Roseto, Pennsylvania, show the beneficial effects of kindness. In Roseto, the rate of heart disease is about half of that in surrounding communities. It appears that living from the heart is good for both the heart and the mind.

Barriers to Kindness

Now let's discuss some of the barriers to kindness. Barriers to kindness include anger, hurt, pain, judgment, hate, mistrust, and indifference. Since like all of the love practices, kindness goes both ways, you'll find it more difficult to be kind if you hate yourself or are tortured by harsh self-judgments. A Love Wound also wounds the capacity to be kind. If you look closely, you'll see that mean people are wounded people.

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Adversity can be a barrier to kindness, as it can trigger narrow self-concern and selfishness. Distress can poison your sense of reverence for life, including others. If you're in survival mode, you may find yourself less focused on being kind to others. Curiously, however, the survivors of concentration camps tended to be kinder, so kindness can also make you more resilient.

Our society poisons kindness by nurturing the idea that we must compete, consume, and be better than others in order to be happy. If you equate being happy with being a winner at the expense of others, hostility will poison your friendly attitude. Our political climate lacks respect and civility, creating judgments, disparagement, and an "us vs. them" mentality. It also fosters fear and hate, poisoning kindness.

The media also poisons kindness with bad news stories that outweigh the good news stories by about 17:1. Watching the news creates stress, anxiety, depression, and helplessness, as the media fans the flames of fear and distrust. It creates a distorted, negative image of an unkind, dangerous world, when, in fact, there is far more love in the world than there is evil. It can be harder to be loving or kind with such a negative view of humanity.

Finally, disconnection can be a barrier to kindness. Too many people live in a world of strangers, as modern life has brought about a fragmentation of community. Kindness and connection support each other. The pain of a lack of loving connection to a greater community can poison kindness.

How Do We Cultivate Kindness?

Let's finish up now by talking about how to cultivate kindness. As with all of the love practices, you can cultivate kindness through your contemplative

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practices of attending and appreciating. These stillness practices cultivate reverence, which inspires kindness.

See that everyone has been hurt just like you. See that everyone struggles just like you. See that everyone deserves kindness just like you. Reflect on the pain and hardships of all of those around you, and look and see that we're all uniquely the same.

Energy flows where attention goes, so attend to the sacred in others. See the beauty in yourself and other people. See that we're all equally significant and we all matter equally. You and others are equally deserving of kindness. Seeing the sacred in yourself and others will inspire you to be kind to yourself, as well as everyone you encounter.

See that kindness is good for you and that it's better than meanness. See that it's good for everyone and that you're part of the whole of life.

Start each day with an intention to love—to treat each person according to the truth of their sacred nature. As part of this, visualize yourself being kind, starting with kindness toward yourself. Decide to be kind. Live each day with that intention, unconditionally, toward everyone, no matter what. You won't always succeed, so start each day fresh with a renewed intention.

When you see people, smile and greet them. Look deeply, and pay close attention to them. Ask them how they're doing with genuine interest and care. Be friendly and nice. Make it authentic by letting kindness flow from your heart into your face, your tone of voice, and your words.

Practice living moment by moment with an open heart, reminding yourself that an open heart is a healthy heart.

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If you feel an urge to be mean, abstain from acting on it. Remember your vow to not harm. If you're hurt or angry, look closely at the roots of these feelings. What is the hurt? What judgments do you have about how the world should be or how others should be? What are your expectations? Let your judgments and expectations fall away in the light of your awareness of their poisonous nature. Practice humility; this will ease your pain when you realize it isn't all about you. Soothe your hurt and anger through acceptance, self-care, and the loving support of others.

See your oneness with others, and see that when you're mean to someone else, you're mean to yourself. We're all ripples on the ocean of the Universe. When you're kind, you send out ripples of love.

See kindness as a practice for healing, like all love practices. Be kind to others the way you wish they would be kind to you. The kinder you are, the more you heal.

Kindness is both something you do and how you live. It's a way of being, seeing, and doing that is reverent, caring, and supportive. Recognize that valuing kindness isn't the same as practicing kindness. You must translate the attitude of kindness into your daily interactions with others. As you cultivate your intention to be kind, combine intention with your will to act on this intention.

OUR NEXT SESSION

In our next session, we'll return again to consider some more contemplations that enhance our sense of the Sacred.

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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.
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. Read this lesson on kindness. Make it your intention every morning to go about your day treating everyone with kindness, especially those who upset or annoy you and those you dislike.

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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