

SESSION 34: Empathy

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 reflected on a few contemplations for cultivating reverence, awe, and wonder. I hope you've had a chance to reflect on these.

Today we are going to dive into the love practice of empathy.

To begin, let me share a quote with you about empathy by Harper Lee. "You never really understand a person until you consider things from their point of view—until you climb into their skin and walk around in it."

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What is empathy?

Empathy is understanding the experience of someone else. This includes understanding another person's feelings and thoughts. Affective empathy is when we feel what someone else is feeling. Cognitive empathy is when we intellectually understand what someone else is feeling and thinking. When we're empathic, we know what it feels like to be in another person's shoes.

Empathy is different from sympathy, which is feeling sorry for someone. With sympathy devoid of empathy, there isn't the feeling of connection with the other person. Instead, there's a feeling of disconnection.

Empathy entails taking someone else's perspective and truly understanding their experience. To do this, we need to avoid judging the other person. But there is another part to empathy beyond just understanding their experience that involves communicating our understanding of them. So empathy requires action to understand another person by listening, asking questions, and using our imagination to put ourselves in their shoes. Then, we communicate our understanding to them.

When we choose to open ourselves to resonate with another person's feelings and experience, we make a choice to be emotionally vulnerable. This requires stamina, courage, and equanimity.

Benefits of Empathy

Now let's talk about the benefits of empathy. Empathy is good for everyone. It helps us determine how best to respond to others for their sake and our own sake. It warns us when someone wants to harm us or is upset with us. It stimulates our desire to help others.

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Empathy diminishes negative judgments of others since it allows us to truly understand why someone acts or thinks as they do. This naturally elicits compassion, which leads to forgiveness and the falling away of harsh judgments. Compassion requires empathy, as we can't relieve another person's suffering skillfully if we don't fully understand their experience.

Empathy makes other people human and counters the tendency to "other" others. As the antidote to judgment, it reduces the destructive aggression that comes with dehumanizing others. In this way, it makes us more caring, kind, generous, and supportive. Out of our compassion, we're moved to help others who are having a hard time.

When we accept and understand another person, we help them to accept and understand themselves. This feels good and diminishes their self-condemnation. People also don't feel quite so alone in their pain when they know we understand how they feel. So the emotional connection that empathy creates is very healing. We all want to be understood. We all want to be cared for. We all want to be free of judgment and condemnation. Empathy is how we give these gifts to others. In doing so, we create connection, community, and collaboration. This results in more satisfying relationships and better workplace performance.

Empathy reduces stress. When someone knows you understand their experience, they're more willing to understand yours. For this reason, practicing empathy is especially useful in times of conflict. Mutual empathy fosters goodwill and helps people work things out. The caring connection created by empathy promotes trust, honesty, and the capacity to be authentic and transparent.

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Empathy is a gift you can give others that also benefits you. It's a win-win act of love.

Sometimes, however, affective empathy can be too much of a good thing, especially if we haven't developed the capacity for equanimity. This means we're able to keep our emotional equilibrium in the face of stress, pain, and adversity. If equanimity is difficult for us, affective empathy can lead to burnout and "empathy fatigue." It can also cloud judgment when we make decisions based solely on affective empathy.[1]

Barriers to Empathy

Now let's discuss some of the barriers to empathy. Some people can't handle the emotional distress that comes with affective empathy. If you have difficulty tolerating other people's pain, you may close off your heart to them. Our natural reflex is to minimize our own pain and discomfort. You see this when people react to another person's pain by dodging the issue, painting a silver lining, minimizing the difficulty, or giving advice to "make it better" when what the other person needs most is just understanding and care.

Sometimes, people avoid emotional pain in others by telling stories of their own difficulties. Some people might even try to one-up the other person by sharing a "you think you've got it bad? Let me tell you about my experience" story. Then, we make it about us and not about the other person. This kills empathy.

Another way we block empathy is by overreacting or overdramatizing a person's pain. This is usually off-putting and disturbing to the other person.

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“Freaking out” doesn’t help anyone.

Empathy requires curiosity, so apathy blocks it. If we don’t care how others feel or we’re closed-minded, we won’t make the effort to understand them. Apathy leaves us emotionally disconnected from others, which is bad for us. When you notice apathy, make an intentional effort to open your heart and be curious about your fellow human beings.

It’s more difficult to empathize if we’re self-preoccupied. This can happen if we’re self-centered, distracted, anxious, stressed, or hurting. Then, our attention tends to turn within rather than out toward others.

Our need to be right and make others wrong cuts off our ability to empathize. This is called *antipathy*. Rather than validating others’ experiences, judgmental people react by invalidating others, telling them why their experience is “wrong” and why they shouldn’t feel or think as they do. Ironically, validating another person’s experience paves the way for them to listen to us and validate our experience. They just might see things from a different point of view. In the end, dropping judgments at least allows for us to agree to disagree and walk away feeling understood and respected.

I’ve sometimes found it difficult to empathize due to my negative judgments of particularly destructive people, especially people who have murdered or molested children. It takes extra work to consciously set these judgments aside and make the effort to empathize.

Not having had a shared experience with someone is a barrier to empathy. We find it more difficult to empathize with people of different cultures,

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racism, religions, ethnic groups, genders, sexual orientations, or political orientations. Likewise, it can be challenging to empathize with people who have disabilities and mental illnesses. This is especially true for people suffering from addictions, which can be baffling to those who haven't experienced such a thing.

When we perceive that someone is different from us, we can be vulnerable to “us vs. them” thinking. This can lead to dehumanization and even demonization, in which we project our own shadow—the parts of ourselves we don't like—onto others and see them as evil. This happens in war all the time. We stop thinking of “the enemy” as someone human, just like us. There's no understanding of this person's experience as a complex human being with feelings and beliefs, just like us.

Fear can block empathy. This is a natural survival mechanism that requires intentional work to overcome. Most of us need to feel safe before we can do the work of deeply understanding another's experience beyond seeing that they want to harm us.

Hurt and anger can also block empathy. When someone hurts us, our instinctive response may be to hurt back, but this is more difficult to do if we see the other person as a human being just like us. When we feel aggressive, empathy shuts down so that we might inflict pain without feeling the pain we're inflicting. For these reasons, processing hurt and anger are often necessary before we can do the work of empathizing with someone who has upset us.

We set up empathy roadblocks when we give advice, make suggestions, tell people what to do, ask questions that derail people from talking about their

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thoughts and feelings, provide reassurance, offer explanations, or change the subject. Anything we say that interrupts a person's attempt to share their head and heart with us blocks empathy.

Finally, the community fragmentation and social isolation promoted by technology and social media also hinder empathy. These factors, as well as other social factors, have led to a 40 percent drop in empathy since 1979. [2]

How Do We Cultivate Empathy?

Now let's discuss how to cultivate empathy. To begin, reflect on the benefits of empathy. See why it's so central to the practice of love and how it's good for you and others.

Start your practice of empathy by being empathetic toward yourself. Empathy starts with authenticity—being real about how you feel. This requires accepting feelings and urges that seem unacceptable. You can reduce your defensiveness about negative feelings such as anger, hurt, fear, jealousy, or insecurity through the intentional practice of radical self-acceptance and letting go of negative self-judgments. You need to feel safe and OK to be exactly who you are. Through the practice of mindful presence, you can bear witness to your experience with an unconditional friendly attitude, letting go of any judgments. Knowing what you're thinking and feeling sets the stage for you to explore how others are thinking and feeling.

It's also important to develop the capacity for tolerating distress. You need to have the capacity to embrace suffering and allow for intense feelings in yourself and others, including fear, hurt, confusion, anger, sadness, grief,

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shame, guilt, joy, and happiness. This requires that you consciously turn toward suffering, while at the same time nurturing and grounding yourself. Avoid merging with the other person's experience. This can be disabling. Keep your sense of yourself as a separate person even as you allow yourself to know the other person's experience. You want to identify feelings without taking them on as your own. Close the distance between you and the other person, while keeping a certain amount of distance at the same time. Strive for balance. This will allow you to maintain objectivity and stay differentiated.

You must cultivate your equanimity by being open-hearted, humbly accepting, and honoring the realities of life's ups and downs, joys, and sorrows. With equanimity and good self-care, you can counter empathy fatigue.

Another empathy practice is to pay close attention to others. This requires curiosity. Focus attention outward. Look closely at another person, observing "microexpressions" on their face. Listen closely so that you can truly hear them. Practice full presence to deepen your understanding of them. Make eye contact, but don't stare. Listen with an internal silence and stillness in which you refrain from thinking about what you're going to say next. This kind of deep listening comes from the practice of curiosity and a willingness to explore the experience of another person.

This open, receptive, and curious listening allows for questions about what the other person is thinking and feeling. A good inquiry is "help me understand." Seek to understand thoughts, feelings, beliefs, motives, and concerns. Seek to understand the other person's "value perspective" and their way of seeing the world. If you can, key into any shared values. Inquire

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into what it's like to be the other person.

As you listen, make “mirror statements.” To see if you got it right, reflect your understanding to the other person. This gives them the chance to correct you and also helps them feel understood. This practice of reflecting is called “connected knowing.” If you don't have shared experience, use your imagination to try to understand the other person.

You may have to challenge your biases and prejudices. When you notice judgments arising, remind yourself that there are “different strokes for different folks.” There's a certain genius of Nature that has created a diverse world with different types of people of differing values and views. We can honor this even as we honor our own beliefs, values, and assumptions.

Be on the lookout for your own unfounded assumptions. Listen and inquire with an open mind. This will help you become more tolerant and accepting of the lifestyles and values of others. If you find something in another person you disagree with, such as bigotry, racism, or hatred, see if you can find the seeds of these qualities in yourself to counter your judgments and cultivate compassion.

You can also temper your judgments by seeing that we all have egos with vulnerabilities that can lead to selfishness and the urge to harm. Strive to move away from “right or wrong” thinking. The truth is often in the grey, mixed with paradox and contradiction.

You don't have to agree to understand another person's experience. Your goal is to create a resonance with the other person where they know you understand them. If they're in pain, acknowledge it. Look for universal

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commonalities such as our collective needs to belong, to be safe, and to be comfortable. This will help you move from “us vs. them” thinking to “you and I” thinking.

Sometimes, someone may share something with you that’s very painful and even shameful, such as a mistake or failure. You can help by sharing your respect for our human predicament. We all make mistakes, we all fail, and we’re all learning. Ground yourself and the other person in the truth that we’re all growing, and there’s an innate drive toward healing and mastery. Distinguish between unskillful behavior and a person’s character.

If you regularly interact with people who are different from you, broaden your experience by exposing yourself to their lived experience. You may want to visit where they live, have a meal with their family, and spend time with them. You can also broaden your experience through travel, reading (including fiction reading[3]), watching TV, videos, movies, and educational programs. Trainings I received on microaggression and implicit bias helped my capacity to empathize.

In all of these empathy practices, it’s important to use your imagination. Actively imagine yourself in their shoes, living their life. Imagine what it’s like to have their experience.

Our brains are designed to make associations and generalize. This makes us more efficient at processing information, but it can also cause us to lump people together and apply stereotypes to them. Be aware of this tendency. Take each person as they come, and appreciate their individuality without making assumptions about what they think or feel.

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Help people feel safe in sharing themselves with you by showing warmth, kindness, and an open, caring heart. If someone is guarded or mistrustful, sharing your own experience may help them to share theirs. At the same time, try to limit self-disclosure so that it doesn't become all about you. Ask yourself whether self-disclosure will help, and be aware of your intention to help the other person feel comfortable and safe with you. Make it your intention to be helpful.

Just as empathy is the foundation for compassion, practicing a compassion (loving kindness) meditation also enhances empathy.[4] This makes sense since cultivating loving kindness counters the judgment and indifference that can block empathy.

Take care to avoid the “empathy killers.” These include the various barriers to empathy previously discussed, such as changing the subject, telling someone they shouldn't feel the way they do, or trying to fix a problem. Be cautious about giving advice, even if it's solicited.

Absolutely refuse to hate anyone who hates you; that only makes things worse. Our goal is to practice universal love, even toward those we don't like or approve of.

The Importance of Practice

Empathy is foundational to the practice of love because it enables other practices such as compassion, nurturing, acceptance, forgiveness, connection, and helping others. It's a highly practical skill that takes intentional effort to develop through active practice. When you set your morning intention to practice love, include your intention to practice empathy. Look for opportunities throughout your day to look, listen,

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inquire, and reflect. Then, notice the positive responses you get from others when they feel understood. See how empathy enhances your relationships. You will find your investment of effort highly rewarding.

OUR NEXT SESSION

In our next session, we'll discuss the love practice of kindness.

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 empathy. Make an effort throughout the week to practice empathizing with others. Attend closely to others. Look carefully and listen deeply. Inquire into their experience and reflect back your understanding. As you do this, take note of the impact of empathizing on the quality of your connections with others.

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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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