

SESSION 37: Generosity

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 again reflected upon contemplations of the Sacred. I hope you've had a chance this week to deepen your awe, wonder, and reverence with these contemplations. Today we will explore the love practice of generosity.

What is Generosity?

What is generosity? When we are generous, we give. We give freely and joyfully, not begrudgingly. We give more than is expected or required. If

SESSION 37: Generosity

we're truly generous, we give without expecting anything in return. We give for giving's sake alone. True generosity is not barter.

Generosity is far more than the giving of our money or possessions. We can be generous with our time, attention, and affection. We can give our hope, empathy, understanding, forgiveness, and compassion. We can give emotional support to someone who is having a hard time. We can help others, like when we help someone move. We can give our knowledge, wisdom, and skill. We can affirm others and give our acceptance of who they are. Many of the love practices are acts of generosity.

Benefits of Generosity

Let's talk about the benefits of generosity. You might say generosity is a selfish act because it feels good and enhances our physical and mental health, including our self-esteem. Generosity makes us happy. In giving, we receive the most. Generous people are happier, physically healthier, and less depressed than self-centered or greedy people.[1,2] Generosity is even associated with living longer.[3]

It reduces negative emotions such as depression, anxiety, and anger.

It seems to be encoded in our DNA to be generous, likely because a community of generous people has a better chance of surviving and thriving than a community of greedy people. Because of our interdependence, when we give to others, we ultimately also give to ourselves.

We all have a fundamental need to matter to others. When we give and see that our efforts benefit others, we feel fulfilled. This is especially true in our closest relationships, where we are more interdependent.

SESSION 37: Generosity

A giving mind and heart enhances the vitality of our connections with others and brings joy to our hearts. True to the law of karma, putting good out into the world through the practice of generosity and other love practices comes back to us, often several-fold and in unforeseen ways.

Barriers to Generosity

Now let's discuss the barriers to generosity. The barriers to generosity are many and usually arise from a lack of awareness of our oneness and our collective sacredness.

Greed and Self-Centeredness. There is a continuum from greedy to self-centered to generous. Greed and self-centeredness are hindrances to generosity that come from a sense of lack. We feel we aren't enough or that this isn't enough. We want more and more for ourselves, mistakenly believing if we devote all of our time, effort, and resources to ourselves, we'll feel better. We think that self-preoccupation is what we need, but this is misguided. Self-centeredness and greed don't heal our sense of lack. Only love heals it.

What self-centered and greedy people most lack is a sense of connectedness to a loving community brought about in part by the practice of generosity. We fill our emptiness more through the practice of generosity than by greed. Therefore, generosity is an antidote to greed and self-centeredness.

Scarcity and Hardship. If you're having a hard time, it may be more difficult to be generous. If there isn't enough to eat, it's human to focus on trying to find food. Scarcity and hardship can provoke some people to withdraw and focus on themselves. It turns out this reaction is also misguided. Due to the many benefits of generosity, people who continue

SESSION 37: Generosity

to practice generosity during hard times tend to endure better than those who don't.

Competitiveness. We live in a competitive society with a win-lose dynamic between the haves and have-nots. There are “winners” and “losers.” Of course, we all want to be “winners,” but we mistakenly believe that our well-being must come at the cost of someone else's well-being.

Competitiveness makes us take on an “us vs. them” mentality, which can create animosity. Animosity poisons the spirit of generosity. We need to counter competitiveness with the healing spirit of collaboration. Because of our interdependence, we do better in the long run with a win-win rather than a win-lose mentality.

Individualism. Some people see life as “every person for themselves.” They feel themselves to be separate from others, and they believe the individual is more important than the group. We see extreme versions of this in people with antisocial personality disorders, who may have a neurobiological deficit in their capacity to experience interconnectedness with others and to have compassion. To be generous for generosity's sake doesn't make sense to them.

Individualism fuels selfishness. When we wake up spiritually, we see that we're part of a greater whole, and life is not just about us. When we experience unity, our reverence for the whole sparks our altruism. We start to put others first (along with taking care of our basic vitality needs). When this happens, generosity feels natural.

Addiction. Addiction is a neurobiological illness that can make people extraordinarily self-centered. It's not their fault, as they didn't choose to become addicted. When caught in the vortex of addiction, however, the

SESSION 37: Generosity

brain's drive-reward system coopts the rest of the brain to put feeding the addiction at the forefront. When this happens, the capacity for generosity can wither.

Trauma and other Psychiatric Illnesses. Psychic suffering can hinder generosity because it promotes painful self-preoccupation and impairs functioning. Someone with severe depression who is paralyzed in bed, for example, may have difficulty giving to others.

Judgmentalism. Judging others can block generosity. If you judge another person to be bad—such as a homeless person for their illnesses or unskillful behaviors—you'll be less likely to experience compassion and a desire to give. You may close your heart to their suffering, even thinking that they “deserve” to suffer or that they're solely responsible for fixing their problems on their own.

Arrogance. If you consider yourself to be better than others, you might find yourself feeling less compassion. Arrogance can poison generosity because it turns upon the self as the center of concern.

Ignorance. Many people fail to give out of a lack of knowledge of two things. One is ignorance of the plight and needs of others along with the conditions and forces that led to their need. The other is ignorance of the benefits of self-transcendence through giving.

Difference. We're less likely to give to others we consider to be different from us or not part of our group. Differences create an “us vs. them” mentality. Therefore, we're more likely to give to family than to strangers. Republicans and Democrats are less likely to give to each other's political parties. Christians might be less likely to give to Muslims and vice versa.

SESSION 37: Generosity

Hatred. The negative emotions of hatred, anger, and resentment block generosity. Hatred fuels the desire to destroy, not enhance. People in the grips of anger need the antidote of forgiveness. Generosity can also be a way to dissolve resentments, as it's more difficult to resent someone when we've given them something.

Cultivating Generosity

Now let's talk about how to cultivate generosity. Generosity isn't a single act. We need to make it a life practice to experience its benefits. So what do we practice?

1. Wake up. Waking up isn't something you can do by will. You can nurture your awakening, however, by reflecting on your interdependence. See that you depend on others to survive and that you're part of the whole of life. This will trigger altruism and inspire generosity. You will want to give out of reverence for the one life that sustains you.

2. See that generosity is good for you. See that you have a human need to matter to others—to benefit others. Notice that it feels good to be generous. If you have an extra \$5.00, note that it makes you happier to give it to someone in need rather than to spend it unnecessarily on yourself. When you truly see the benefits of generosity, giving becomes a form of enlightened self-concern.

3. Practice acceptance. See the sacred nature of all things and all people. Separate people from their behaviors. Don't label them according to their behaviors (e.g. "he's a rapist.") While you might condemn harmful behaviors, don't condemn others for their harmful behaviors. If you accept people with their differences, faults, and flaws, you'll find yourself better

SESSION 37: Generosity

able to practice generosity toward them.

4.Cultivate Contentment. People are self-centered, stingy, or greedy because they fear that if they give of their time, talent, or treasure, they'll lose something they need to be happy. So to be generous, start with contentment. When you wake up and see that “more” doesn't bring more happiness, you can begin to let go of the fear and insecurity that giving will somehow leave you deprived.

5.Cultivate Gratitude. It's harder to be generous if we're feeling negative. Cultivate your positivity through the practice of intentionally appreciating all that's good in your life every day. Your gratitude will help to inspire your generosity.

6.Abstain from Self-Preoccupation. If we look closely at our self-preoccupation, we see that it's the result of an unconscious belief that focusing on ourselves—our needs, wants, issues, and concerns—will somehow enhance our lives. There's certainly some truth in this. We do have to look after our own well-being. Yet, compulsive self-preoccupation to the exclusion of others harms us because it cuts us off from the life-sustaining web of life of which we are apart. It fosters alienation, which makes us feel empty. So intentionally practice reflecting upon the people in your life. You might make a list of your family and friends, and review it regularly. Send out a loving thought to each person on your list, and check on them often. If someone is in distress or in need, reach out and give of yourself.

7.Give to Yourself. Give yourself time to love and play. Eat healthy foods, sleep, exercise, and relax. Remember that you're no good to others if you're no good. Be generous with yourself, caring for yourself as if you were your

SESSION 37: Generosity

own child. The world needs you to be healthy and vital. Just take care not to cross over into greed and self-preoccupation as you practice your loving self-care.

8. Give to Others. Countless opportunities for giving come up every day. Look for opportunities to give of your time, talents, and treasure. Is there a friend or family member who could use your help with something? Maybe you could babysit for a friend to give them a date night. Offer a friend or family member your time for a day. Could a coworker use your assistance? Schedule at least an hour a week of your time helping someone with something. You might take your neighbor's trash can back in from the street or help someone at home with their chores. Who could use your skills? Some people make a practice of paying for someone else's groceries or paying for the car behind them in the drive-through. Also, be generous in showing appreciation, giving compliments, and affirming others. Make it a lifelong practice to give your full attention to others, seeking through inquiry to deeply understand them. Our understanding and compassion are perhaps the greatest gifts we can give. Sometimes, our understanding is all we can give, along with a genuine desire for someone's suffering to ease. Simply being present with another person in their distress is profoundly generous and helpful.

9. Volunteer. One specific way of giving to others is to volunteer your time. What special talents and skills do you have to offer? Look around you. Where is there a need? How can you be of service, especially considering what you can do?

In practicing generosity, take care to do so skillfully. You don't want to give in a way that creates dependency, promotes illness, enables, relieves others of accountability, or in other ways harms the recipient. For example, don't

SESSION 37: Generosity

give money to the homeless, for it will likely go for drugs or alcohol. Instead, offer to buy a homeless person a meal or help with the purchase of toiletry items. This is where wisdom comes into play in the effective practice of generosity.

Take care not to make generosity an ego issue. Be mindful of the narcissistic feeling that we're special because we're so generous or loving. This is a trap. Like all of the love practices, we practice generosity because of the inherent fulfillment it brings, not to make ourselves special. We're already abundantly special through the simple fact of our existence. Generosity, like all of the love practices, isn't a worthiness project. It's only about suffering less and having more joy.

Look at how you're living your life. Two of the biggest things to note are how you spend your time and how you spend your money. Do you spend time unnecessarily on self-indulgences (for example, perhaps watching too much TV) that could be spent giving to others? Knowing that generosity is good for you, how can you be more generous with your time? Rather than turning your life upside down, are there small changes you can make—maybe a couple of hours a week at first—that would increase the amount of time you give to others?

Similarly, are you living true to your highest values in how you spend your money? Are you spending unnecessarily on things that don't promote survival or basic comfort and convenience while others around you go without these basics? Knowing the benefits of generosity, are there small changes you would like to make in the amount you give to people in need or to worthy causes? At the end of the day, would the combined practices of contentment and generosity leave you feeling better?

SESSION 37: Generosity

Generosity begets joy. Make generosity one of your daily, intentional love practices. Move toward gradually becoming more generous through small steps, one at a time. You and everyone around you will benefit.

OUR NEXT SESSION

In our next session, we'll discuss the love practice of helping others. We'll see that discerning how to best help others can sometimes be challenging.

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 generosity. Ask yourself how you can practice generosity this week. How can you give more generously of your time, your talents, your attention, your assistance, and your material support to others? Practice generosity this week and note how it feels to do so.

SESSION 37: Generosity

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!

© 2021 Michael McGee, M.D.

[1] Smith, Christian, Davidson, Hillary. *The Paradox of Generosity*. Oxford University Press, NY, NY. 2014.

[2] Altruism, Happiness, and Health: It's good to be good. Post, S.G. *Int. J. of Behavioral Medicine*. 2005. Vol 12: No 2. 55-77.

[3] Brown, S.L. An altruistic reanalysis of the social support hypothesis: The health benefits of giving. In: *NEW DIRECTIONS FOR PHILANTHROPIC FUNDRAISING*, NO. 42, WINTER 2003 © WILEY PERIODICALS, INC. Chapter 4. Pp 49-57.