

# SESSION 38: Helpfulness

## 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 generosity. I hope you've had a chance this week to practice generosity. Today we will explore the love practice of helpfulness.

### What is Helpfulness?

First, let's discuss the nature of helping others. Helpfulness involves helping others in need, acting for the benefit of others. It's a form of generosity, in which we provide assistance. It can be obligatory, such as when we're paid to

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provide a service. But helpfulness as a love practice emerges when we help others not out of obligation, but simply for the sake of helping. When we do it without expecting or receiving anything in return, we're acting with love.

We all need help to get by. The world is full of opportunities to help, from holding a door open to cooking, cleaning, and doing errands for someone who's recuperating from surgery. Hardship and even disaster befall each of us, and many of us are born with disabilities that may require lifelong assistance. If you have a medical or psychiatric illness, including an addiction, getting help from others is essential.

Helping others can be tricky, however, as it can sometimes be harmful. If you do for others what they can do for themselves, you can foster dependency. An example might be paying your family member's rent because they choose not to go to work. In that situation, your help might be better directed at motivating your loved one to work. Another example is cleaning up after a housemate. When you help in this way, you teach them that they don't need to take responsibility for cleaning up after themselves.

When help creates dependency or a lack of accountability, helping is harming. Skillful helping requires wisdom and discernment. All things considered, you're often better off helping people to do something for themselves than doing it for them. Skillful helping includes the expectation that people will do for themselves what they're capable of doing.

Another form of harmful helping is when you prevent someone from experiencing the natural negative consequences of their behavior. If someone over drinks, sleeps in, and misses work, for example, it isn't helpful to give their boss a false excuse. We learn and grow the most from the painful consequences of our actions.

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A friend of mine shared the following story with me. An Indian businessman, dripping with gold and diamonds, came one day to visit Mother Teresa, fell at her feet, and proclaimed, “Oh, God, you are the holiest of the Holy! You are the super-holy one! You have given up everything! I cannot even give up one samosa for breakfast! Not one single chapatti for lunch can I give up!”

Mother Teresa started to laugh so hard that her attendant nuns grew scared (she was in her middle eighties and frail from two recent heart attacks). Eventually, she stopped laughing and, wiping her eyes with one hand, leaned forward to help her adorer to his knees.

She said to him quietly, “So you say I have given up everything?” The businessman nodded enthusiastically. Mother Teresa smiled. “Oh, my dear man,” she said, “you are so wrong. It isn’t I who have given up everything; it is you. You have given up the supreme, sacred joy of life, the source of all lasting happiness, the joy of giving your life away to other beings, to serve the Divine in them with compassion. It is you who are the renunciate!” To the Indian businessman’s total bewilderment, Mother Teresa got down on her knees and bowed to him. Flinging up his hands, he ran out of the room.

Much of the unhappiness, addiction, and depression epidemic in our society springs from our “Big Me” self-preoccupation with achievement, wealth, and compulsive consumption, spurred by the relentless media messages telling us what we need to buy to be happy. In this way, our culture is diseased. We are one of the wealthiest nations on earth, yet many live joyless lives.

We’ve lost touch with the timeless wisdom of compassionate service—the gift of joy we give ourselves when we give to others.

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The Buddhist mystic Shantideva spoke to this:

All the joy the world contains  
Has come through wishing happiness for others;  
All the misery the world contains  
Has come through wanting pleasure for oneself.  
We lose joy and happiness when we grasp for them.

Reflect on the people you know and the times when you have felt truly happy and fulfilled. You will notice that you and others experience the greatest joy when nurturing Life. This is why devoting ourselves to the wellbeing of others is so critical to our own wellbeing.

If you wish for happiness, joy, and fulfillment, make a commitment on purpose to a daily, intentional practice of compassionate service. Ask yourself, “What does the world ask of me?” Look and listen for your higher purpose to be revealed. If something is blocking you, such as resentment, negativity, victim thinking, compulsive consumerism, self-preoccupation, or self-gratification, mindfully note these unskillful habits of mind, and let them go. This will clear the way for your Inner Goodness to manifest. As you allow yourself to become a channel of Love, the experience of joyless insufficiency and lack will dissolve.

### **Benefits of Helpfulness**

Now let’s discuss the benefits of helping others. We are hardwired by Nature to help. It’s encoded in our genes. Long ago, the bands of our hominid ancestors who helped each other had a better chance of passing on their DNA. As with other forms of generosity, Nature has programmed us to feel good when we help others. Since it’s part of living in harmony with our

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Higher Purpose, helping others is fulfilling, boosting our happiness and giving us a “helper’s high.” As with all of the love practices, doing good by helping others does you good.

Since helping is a form of generosity, it likely promotes longevity and better health, reducing depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues. As a love practice, it contributes to our sense of meaning and purpose. Some say meaning isn’t found but created through our actions, including helping others. When you help someone, it’s often you who benefits the most.

Helping others may also reduce our own negativity, for when we see the hardship and misfortune of others, it puts our own unique mix of difficulties and blessings into perspective. We realize we aren’t alone in this often difficult and challenging venture of living.

As a love practice, we don’t help to be helped. That’s barter, not love. Still, helping others can result in more help from them when we’re in need. Helping enhances collaborative reciprocity.

Since we’re all interconnected, helping others is helping ourselves in disguise. When we help others, we help them to then help others. If done skillfully, it can be contagious. We spread goodness and inspire people to “pay it forward.” Through the chain of helping, life gets better for everyone.

We know that connection heals, and helping can strengthen our connections. Helping can even be an antidote for the disconnection of modern society. We all want to belong. Like many of the love practices, helping enhances our feeling of belonging to the One Life of which we are inextricably a part.

Helping others may also improve our resilience to adversity. Seeing the

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adversity of others builds our acceptance of our own adversity, which is so important for weathering the difficulties of life.

Helping improves job satisfaction, too. It feels good to ask coworkers, “Can I help you?” and then help as needed. Contributing to a culture of helping at work—being of service to others—makes the workplace a more congenial and pleasant atmosphere for everyone.

Spiritually, helping others takes us along a path beyond ego. It’s good for us to put others’ needs before our own (as long as we also tend to our own basic vitality). While it can be a struggle to surrender, the transition from ego consciousness to love consciousness reaps the rewards of joy, peace, and fulfillment. A life of skillful, helpful service to others is a key component for triggering this spiritual transformation.

### **Barriers to Helpfulness**

Now let’s discuss the barriers to helpfulness. The biggest barrier to helping others is the ego, with a sense of disconnected separateness from others. Being imprisoned in “I,” “Me” and “Mine” cultivates indifference, self-preoccupation, fear, and a “me vs. them” mentality. It can also create animosity if we feel frustrated or threatened. All of these ego states poison generosity, and thus the desire to selflessly help. Then, helping others gets reduced to an ego-driven way of getting something back. Ego-possessed people will then only help others when they perceive it directly benefits them. Their ego robs them of the ability to feel the fulfillment of helping from love.

Living in ego is living in insufficiency. The sense of insufficiency promotes compulsive self-preoccupation, as you worry that helping someone else will

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leave you without enough.

With ego dominance comes a lack of reverence for others. While many ego-driven people are indifferent toward others, some harbor destructive impulses. Some with “martial personalities” are oppositional, competitive, provocative, and outright hostile. They relish dominance and fighting. Their intentions are to harm, not to help. This neurobiological perturbation of our natural aggression leaves these unfortunate people incapable of loving or helping.

In addition to the ego’s “Me vs. Them” mentality, we can also fall prey to an “Us vs. them” mentality based on our differences. We divide ourselves by race, ethnicity, class, religious beliefs, sex, sexual preferences, political preferences, and so on. We’re less likely to help those who differ from us or those who are outside of our family or group. Discernment of our differences can too easily lead to negative judgments, and we’re less likely to help those we have judged.

An example of this for me has been homeless people who refuse assistance and live their lives begging. Another example is people who are criminals. It takes some spiritual work to see the sacred beings woven into these people’s dysfunctional and often destructive psyches and to then feel compassion for them. But without understanding, there is no compassion, and without compassion, there’s little desire to help.

Another barrier to helping is a lack of clarity, wisdom, or skill, which means we don’t know how to help effectively. Take the example of our homeless person. For some at least, giving them money isn’t helpful, for they’ll likely spend it on drugs or alcohol. Then, there’s the problem of discerning if someone truly isn’t able to provide for themselves. Will helping create an

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unhealthy dependency? Which is wiser? Providing food or offering other assistance?

Helping homeless people in an effective way can be vexing. The same can be true for friends and family members. I've devoted my life to the art of helping people with mental illnesses, spending much of my waking time contemplating how to be most effective. At times, this has been very challenging. The way forward can be clouded by lack of understanding and sometimes even by negative judgments. We're all limited, flawed humans.

Finally, another barrier to helping others is our own lack of vitality. Someone caught up in addiction, psychosis, or suicidal depression is likely less capable of helping others. Caregivers suffering from burnout are less helpful.

### Cultivating Helpfulness

Now let's discuss how to cultivate helpfulness. The following practices will enhance your helpfulness.

**Self-care.** Take good care of yourself so that you can help others. We're best able to help when we're vital. Don't overwhelm yourself, start small, and go from there.

**Be mindful of your intentions.** As with all the love practices, purify your intentions. Help others with no need for anything in return except the fulfillment of helping. Avoid narcissism. When you have thoughts such as, "look how helpful I am," see their foolish and unwholesome nature clearly so that they fall away in the light of your awareness. Don't expect rewards, praise, appreciation, or gratitude. Doing good is not about being special.



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Also let go of any need for your actions to be effective. This means to engage in surrendered action. Hope for, but don't demand, a particular outcome. You can only do your best. The outcome of your efforts to help is beyond your control.

**Look for opportunities to be helpful.** Be proactive. If you see a problem, figure out how to be part of the solution. Look for people who are having a hard time and need assistance. Check regularly on your friends and family to see how they are doing and if there is anything you can do to help. Connect to your community to see how you can help. Tune into the suffering of others, both in your backyard and globally.

If you see someone in need, stop to help. If they refuse your offers of assistance, let it go. Don't force yourself on people; respect their autonomy. If someone is in crisis, you might decide to just check up on them from time to time.

**Seek understanding.** Listen carefully with your full attention. Look deeply, practice empathy, and ask questions. It's helpful when others know you understand their difficulties. As you seek to understand, you will help them to also understand their dilemma more clearly.

After you understand as best you can, ask how you can be helpful. Get clear on what they want, not what you think would be helpful. Then, think through whether your actions would be helpful. When it's wise to do so, honor people's preferences. A deep understanding of a person's needs and preferences will help you be helpful.

**Follow through.** Actions speak louder than words, so make it a habit to be reliable. Be someone others can count on.

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**Support.** Your presence as a witness to someone's difficulties and suffering is often the most helpful thing you can do. Give others the gifts of your time, attention, and understanding. Don't necessarily look to do something or offer advice. Sometimes what is best is to just be with people in their pain and dilemmas. You don't need to have all the answers. Remember that your loving presence is often more helpful than words. As one teacher once advised, "Don't just do something, sit there!"

When others are in emotional turmoil, you can practice HERO: Hear. Empathize. Reassure (normalize). Offer support/help. Don't say you understand unless you truly do from your own lived experience. Ultimately, we never fully understand all aspects of another person's experience. Provide reassurance and hope. Affirm the other person's ability to endure, persevere, and prevail.

**Give advice and feedback cautiously and wisely.** You may need to take time to process how to be helpful to others before giving advice or feedback. Often, less is more. You're most helpful when you help others to come to their own conclusions about what to do. It's better to empower people to make their own wise decisions than to give them advice.

First, seek to deeply understand the other person's experience, dilemma, options, needs, values, beliefs, and preferences. Too many well-intended people give advice prematurely and even recklessly.

It can be useful to talk about what has worked for you in your experience. This is an indirect and respectful way of giving advice. It also carries the authenticity of what has worked for you in similar circumstances.

It may be best to withhold from giving advice unless asked, however. If they

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ask, help them explore their options, and then sort out the pros and cons of each option. If you don't know what is best, be OK with saying "I don't know."

If you're going to give unsolicited advice, ask permission first. Then, exercise humility, knowing that you may not have the answer and your advice may not be what's best. You may want to offer it tentatively. Let's imagine someone asks you to help them decide what to do with a troubled relationship. You might refrain from advising them what to do, but advise that they do what they must to protect themselves from harm. You might invite them to explore their role in their difficulties. Here, you give advice on following general principles rather than on specific actions. You can sometimes be most helpful by encouraging their conviction and courage to do the next right thing.

Unless something is clearly black and white, refrain from telling people what to do. For example, if a friend is contemplating doing something destructive such as having an affair, a clear and forceful "Don't do it!" may be helpful. But limit specific advice to what is clearly good and wise. There are times when others will need you to help anchor them in reality.

If you do give specific advice, give concrete reasons for it. For example, if a coworker asks you if they should take another position, give the specific reasons why you think they should or shouldn't do so.

Honor that people may or may not follow your advice. Don't pressure or coerce them. Offer your unconditional support, even if you disagree with what they do. If possible, don't abandon people if they act in ways you consider to be unwise or unskillful.

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When giving feedback, be kind, honest, and sincere. The truth spoken without compassion is a weapon, so speak from the heart. Take care not to just tell people what they want to hear. Have the courage to tell the truth if that's most helpful, even if it might cause the other person distress. If someone is harming themselves or others, for example, I might say, "That's unloving and unskillful. You need to find a better way to manage your distress and impulses to cause harm. I'm willing to help you with that." We all have blind spots. If someone trusts you and is seeking your feedback, you can kindly and gently point out behaviors of which they're unaware.

**Help wisely.** Remember that we aren't each other's therapists. Take care not to take on the savior role. I know someone whose family has provided her room and board for the past 30 years, nurturing her dependency. While well-intended, this help is unwise.

Take time when helping others to get clear on whether your help will enhance their well-being. This requires careful thought and discernment. Think it through with other wise people, if necessary. Skillful helping empowers others. It's generally better, for example, to help someone to feed themselves rather than feed them yourself. As a rule, refrain from doing for others what they can do for themselves. This requires that you figure out as best you can what someone can do. High, but realistic, expectations of others, combined with relentless hope for them is most helpful.

Try not to shield people from the painful consequences of their unskillful behaviors. Offer support, but try not to rescue if someone needs pain to help them learn, change, and grow. For example, if someone goes to jail for driving drunk for the third time, it may be most helpful to not bail them out. You may offer, however, to help them get into a rehab program once they're released and help them with transportation.

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Reward loved ones heavily for skillful behavior, and remove those rewards for unskillful behavior. Give praise and appreciation for positive behaviors, such as when a housemate cleans up after themselves. Remove rewards for unskillful behavior, for example, by not spending time with loved ones when they're abusive or intoxicated. It's most helpful to others to not end a dysfunctional relationship but to limit the nature and scope of the relationship to protect yourself. By setting boundaries and asserting yourself while keeping the door open, you can help them heal and grow.

This combination of love, support, and reward management is very helpful for triggering positive changes, especially when combined with not shielding people from the painful consequences of their actions.

**Practical ways of helping.** There are thousands of ways to help others! Use your creativity. Here are some examples:

- Donate unused items.
- Introduce people to each other.
- Babysit.
- Work on a personal flaw in yourself that bothers your partner.
- Donate vacation or sick days to a sick coworker.
- Check in on people who are having a hard time.
- Ask what you can do for someone.
- Stand up for someone being treated unfairly.
- Help someone whose car has broken down.
- Offer to cover a coworker's shift.
- Go to a friend's kid's recital or sports event to show your support.
- Give up your seat.
- Offer encouragement.
- Send a care package.

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- Help a tourist.
- Offer the worker at your home a beverage and a meal.

### OUR NEXT SESSION

In our next session, we'll discuss the love practice of humility. As you'll see, humility may be one of the most important and fundamental of all the love practices.

**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 helpfulness. Ask yourself how you can practice helpfulness this week. How can you be more helpful to others? Practice helpfulness this week and note how it feels to do so.

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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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