

SESSION 45: Courage

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 repair. I hope you've had a chance to begin making any necessary reparations in your life. Today, we will explore the love practice of courage.

What is Courage?

Let's begin by discussing what is courage? Courage is intentionally doing what's right despite fear. It isn't the absence of fear, but the overcoming of fear. It's having confidence in our ability to pursue a worthy goal despite risk and discomfort.

SESSION 45: Courage

Courage can be physical, such as when soldiers or political dissidents face the threat of death. A fireman shows courage, for example, when he goes into a burning building to save a child. Or courage can be moral, such as when we speak our truth in spite of the condemnation of others.

Courage can be psychological, as when we face the painful reality of a situation and see it clearly without defenses. This happens, for example, when someone wakes up to see the destruction of their addictions. It also happens when they look at their lives honestly and see, for example, their dependence upon someone who is harmful to them.

Psychospiritual courage includes the looking at ourselves honestly and accepting what we find unacceptable. It can mean the act of letting go of behaviors that cause us and others suffering. It can be terrifying to let go of egoic compulsions and surrender to a greater force of Nature—the force of love—that works through us. This is the courage of transcendence.

In all cases, courage is love. It's difficult to face danger, do the right thing, or stand up to evil if we don't care. Caring springs from our reverence for life.

Cowardice is to be ruled by fear so that we don't do the right thing. On the other hand, to act in the face of danger without fear or caution isn't courage, but recklessness.

Courageous people follow their heart and intuition. Their passion allows them to stand up for what's right. It sometimes takes courage to follow the calling of the soul. I had a patient who was a depressed accountant working in his family's accounting firm, but he had a passion for cars. It took courage for him to quit his job, endure the disapproval of his father, and open his own auto repair shop. Another patient left an unhappy marriage to a critical, controlling,

SESSION 45: Courage

and unloving spouse after 26 years, at great personal and financial cost.

Courage is perseverance in the face of danger or difficulty. It overcomes laziness, requires fortitude, and gives us the strength of endurance despite hardship. With courage, we persist despite the risks. We get up and keep going even when we fail and fall. It helps us dare to dream of a better world and doggedly do what we must to realize that dream despite the odds.

Courage sometimes requires patience and faith as we hope that doing the right thing will eventually result in a good outcome.

The capacity to suffer is courageous—the willingness to face and endure pain for a greater good with dignity, grace, and faith. This is what Nelson Mandela did when he was imprisoned for speaking out against Apartheid in South Africa. So courageous people shine their light in the face of evil and injustice, even at great personal risk and in the face of defeat. They do it simply because it's the right thing to do. An everyday example might be when someone shows courage by speaking out against an unfair office policy at the risk of their boss's disapproval or even losing their job.

Asserting ourselves is courageous. For example, asking for a promotion we deserve at work. Courage is giving our first public speech, asking someone out on a date for the first time, going someplace new on our own, or parachuting out of an airplane.

Benefits of Courage

Now let's discuss the benefits of courage. In the long run, courage is easier than fear. When we act for the good despite our fear and distress, we're more likely to achieve the good. We better our life and the lives of others through the practice of courage.

SESSION 45: Courage

It enhances our vitality and helps us overcome life's many challenges. It promotes accountability. When we can act to do the next right thing, we develop the capacity to take responsibility for our lives.

The courage to face pain leads to healing. This is especially true when facing the pain of trauma and neglect. We must feel the pain to heal the pain, and this certainly takes courage. People who run from their pain never resolve it. Instead, their pain rules them, poisoning their lives in the form of addiction, delusion, dysfunction, depression, anxiety, or neurosis. We must face and embrace to erase. This means seeing reality with compassionate clarity.

It takes courage to look at and see the workings of our mind with clarity, including our flaws, defects, psychological mis-programming, selfishness, self-centeredness, judgments, attachments, hostility, irritability, apathy, laziness, greed, lust, envy, pettiness, lack of care, and yearnings for power, status, affection, and approval. But courageous clarity is just what's needed because the awareness leads to a natural and spontaneous diminishing of these defects. In courageously seeing and accepting our dark side and the workings of our ego, we create the conditions for transcendence and transformation. This practice of rigorous self-investigation, combined with compassionate self-acceptance, is perhaps the most courageous thing we can do.

Courage to do what is necessary makes life better. The best way forward is through a difficult situation, not by avoiding it. I've had patients who never paid their traffic tickets, which led to warrants for their arrest. Then, they avoided turning themselves in for fear of the consequences, only to make the problem grow even bigger. If we're in an abusive situation, confronting the

SESSION 45: Courage

abuse or getting out is far better than putting up with it, even though it can be scary to do so.

Courage enhances the relationships that matter and inspires others. People respect us for standing up for what's right and taking risks. When we have the courage to speak our truth and be who we are authentically, we become a role model for others to also be assertive and authentic.

Courage promotes growth. We learn and grow by doing the uncomfortable and unfamiliar. We overcome our fears by working through them. This is how courageous people with social anxiety overcome their fears of criticism and rejection when they put themselves in social situations. People who have suffered from trauma or neglect can have a difficult time connecting and asking for help, yet taking the risk of connection and asking for help is what leads to healing.

Courage also builds confidence. Every time we act courageously, we increase our confidence in our capacity to do the next right thing. Success builds upon success as we develop our identity as courageous.

Barriers to Courage

Now let's discuss some of the barriers to courage.

Lack of faith. If we don't think we can do it, we might not try. So hopelessness can kill courage. It's more difficult to ask for a promotion at work, for example, if we don't think we deserve it. If we believe we're a failure, we'll be less likely to do what we need to succeed.

SESSION 45: Courage

Fear. If our fear is too great, our courage may falter. We may fear loss of something dear to us—even our own lives. We may fear discomfort, such as when we need to get a shot. We may fear rejection, like when we apply for a new job. Or we may fear failure, such as when we participate in a competition.

Attachment. This fuels the fear of loss. If we need money, power, prestige, the affection and admiration of others, or any other thing or condition, our fear of losing these things may overcome our courage. Attachments enslave us and rob us of our freedom to love.

Apathy. Courage requires care. If we don't care, we won't have the motivation to act with courage. Laziness is a close cousin of apathy. It takes stamina and vigor to act with courage, and it requires intent. Apathy and laziness will hamper our ability to be courageous.

Lack of clarity. It's more difficult to do the next right thing if we don't know what the next right thing is. So confusion clouds courage, while clarity solidifies conviction. When we can clearly see the next right action, we're more likely to do it. Awareness is ultimately the fountainhead of courage.

Cultivating Courage

Now let's discuss how to cultivate courage. Courage is a psychospiritual skill that can be enhanced through practice. The following practices will help you cultivate your courage:

See the value of courage. You can't live a joyful and meaningful life if you spend it hiding in an attic. Getting the right result requires doing the right thing. See that courage is good for you despite the fears and risks involved.

SESSION 45: Courage

Face and embrace fear. What do you fear? What blocks your courage? Is it fear of loss, harm, failure, or rejection? Accept that these are all possible consequences. Accept that you may lose something dear to you, suffer harm, or fail. Accept that you may be rejected or disappointed. Courage requires taking calculated risks. Fear arises from the nonacceptance of potential distress. So when you accept your fears and the possible painful consequences, you'll enable your capacity for courage. At the same time, embrace your fear as normal and understandable. Don't make it your enemy.

Fear is at the root of all egoic drives—the fear of discomfort or death. We're afraid of failure, rejection, harm, or loss. When we're enslaved by fear rather than informed by it, our purpose in life becomes restricted to serving our ego without regard for the greater Life of which we are a part. We become selfish and self-serving. In this way, our fear snuffs out our love.

A well mind is a mind that's fear-informed rather than fear-enslaved. It lives out of love. Then, we can live for a higher purpose that is greater than we are. When our purpose is to love, we fulfill Life's mandate that we nurture Life.

How do we move from fear to love so that we can live for our higher purpose? I recommend the following practices.

Cultivate passion. Every morning, reflect on your higher purpose. What's the unique way that you love, contribute, and nurture Life? Visualize it concretely. What specific actions will you take this day to fulfill your purpose? Commit to being kind and helpful. Commit to your higher purpose every day, all day with intention.

Acknowledge and address your fears. Awareness and acceptance are the keys to change and growth:

SESSION 45: Courage

- If you're afraid of rejection, learn to love and affirm yourself so that you can relieve others of the burden of having to love and affirm you.
- If you're afraid of harm, do what you must to minimize the risk while accepting that some distress in life is inevitable. Life is hard. When distress comes your way, say "of course." If there are painful realities about yourself or your life situation that you're avoiding, face and embrace them. Stop hiding from your pain. Don't play games to avoid taking accountability for your life.
- If your fear is of losing someone or something dear to you, do what you can to nurture what you fear losing, while accepting that loss is an inevitable part of life. Ultimately, we lose everything. This is the reality of impermanence. Make peace with this, and accept that you will go through a great sadness as you do so. Passing through this sadness will create the conditions for you to let go when you lose something. This sadness will also enable you to experience both compassion and joy. Your clarity and perspective will free you.
- If you fear failure, embrace it as the road to success. Life's greatest lessons come from our mistakes and failures. Commit to "failing forward."

Be mindful of your intentions moment by moment as you're radically honest with yourself. Why do you say what you say or do what you do? If you're serving a necessary survival purpose, such as working to make money, that's fine. But also note if you're serving your higher purpose. Get very clear on your purpose this moment. While it should be fear-informed, it should also be love-informed. Ultimately, living life out of love is what will fulfill you and give you the capacity to savor life.

SESSION 45: Courage

Embrace pain and distress. Pain is our greatest teacher—the source of growth and transformation. So value it rather than run from it. Have courage to face and embrace the painful truth of things, whether it’s a festering problem at work, the hurtful behavior of a friend, your own greed and self-centered behavior, or your broken heart. It’s by courageously going into your pain that you’ll ultimately grow from it.

Get support. We need each other to get by, so ask for help. It’s OK to lean on the support and encouragement of trustworthy people who love you. In the end, we’re all alone in sometimes terrifying solitude. At the same time, we can connect and benefit from the support of others in our simultaneous solitude.

Get clear. See the painful reality, and be honest with yourself. See and accept not only your feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, but also the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of others. Take off your rose-colored glasses, and look carefully with an inquiring mind. Ask yourself, “What is this?” Then, practice radical acceptance of whatever you see. Remember that change starts with acceptance.

Dissolve attachments in the light of your awareness. See how they enslave and compel you to avoid the risks of loss, harm, failure, and rejection. Recognizing how your attachments strangle your vitality and freedom will lead you to let go of them. Then, you’ll be free to act with love.

Foster faith. Trust yourself and your intuition. Believe in yourself. Have faith that doing the next right thing is what’s right, even if the outcome isn’t guaranteed.

SESSION 45: Courage

Accept risk. When you act, the outcome may be uncertain. Be willing to risk the potential painful consequences of courage for a greater good. Remember: nothing ventured, nothing gained. Blend caution and courage, however, so that you avoid recklessness.

Be honest with others. This goes back to the practices of authenticity and assertiveness. Say “no” when you mean “no.” Say “yes” when you mean “yes.” Have the courage to say what you mean; just don’t say it mean.

Make amends. Apologize if you hurt someone. Have the courage to hear and acknowledge their pain as you take accountability for your behavior without beating yourself up.

Forgive. It takes courage to do the work of forgiveness when you’ve been deeply hurt. Do that work because it’s best for you. Have the courage to grieve, let go, accept, and forgive.

Follow your heart. When you gain clarity on your soul’s demands, honor them. Don’t deny yourself. You have a mandate to follow your heart despite your fears. Though you may not know where you’re going, let your heart lead the way.

Speak up for what you believe. Free yourself from the fear of how others will react. Liberate yourself from being captive to the approval of others. Speak your truth, even if you’re the only one in the room who feels as you do.

Do the uncomfortable. Get comfortable with discomfort. Sometimes, courage calls that you do something new and unfamiliar, like the first time

SESSION 45: Courage

you drove a car. You aren't growing if you aren't practicing new skills and behaviors. Everything is difficult at first, so accept that doing the right thing may be uncomfortable.

Persist. Have the courage to get up when you fall and keep going. Remember that it's in the falling that you learn to keep your balance. Don't let failures and setbacks discourage you. Learn from them to figure out what you need to do differently the next time. Brainstorm solutions rather than give up. Success comes from overcoming the inevitable obstacles that arise with any significant endeavor.

Do the next right thing. As with all the love practices, ask yourself, "What would love do?" If it's scary, commit to doing the next right thing anyway. Make it your life commitment to try as best you can to do what love would do.

With practice, you can be a courageous person. Reflect on these practices, and begin to implement them in your daily life. Make a gentle, daily, steady effort to fan the flame of courage in your heart. In time, the flame will grow strong and steady.

OUR NEXT SESSION

In our next session, we'll discuss the love practice of discipline. Discipline is a much misunderstood but essential skill for the practice of love.

In the meantime, between now and then, I encourage you to practice the following:

SESSION 45: Courage

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 see and let go of negative judgments as they arise.
4. Read this lesson on courage. How are you courageous in your life? How would you like to be more courageous? What practices can you begin to cultivate your courage?

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.