

SESSION 48: Gratitude

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 contentment. I hope you've had a chance to reflect on where you wish to develop more contentment in your life and have taken steps to live a more contented life. Today, we will explore the love practice of gratitude.

What is Gratitude?

Let's start with discussing the nature of gratitude. The formal, commonly accepted definition of gratitude is to be thankful to others for how they have

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benefited us. A broader, less accepted definition is to be thankful for all that's good in our lives. This broader definition is a large part of the experience of appreciation.

We can be grateful for our existence—for the gift of life and for the miracle of conscious awareness. We can be grateful for the capacity to experience beauty, wonder, and awe. For our capacities to see, hear, feel, taste, smell, think, and act. For our many gifts, talents, and abilities. For the exquisite genius of Nature that has brought us into being.

We can also be grateful for the conditions of our lives that sustain us, keep us safe and comfortable, and give us pleasure and satisfaction. This can include food to eat, clothes to wear, a place to sleep, and whatever material comforts we enjoy. I recently experienced deep gratitude for having air to breathe, a life-giving sun, and water. A friend of mine reminded me that we can be grateful we aren't living during an ice age or in war. We can also be grateful for technology, for civilization, art, democracy, freedom, and our material abundance.

We can be grateful for the countless millions of people who contribute and have contributed over thousands of years to creating the circumstances of our current lives. We can have gratitude to others for feeding, supporting, loving, protecting, helping, guiding, teaching, and sustaining us over the course of our lives.

We can also be spiritually grateful for the One Life that sustains us and of which we are a part. We can be grateful to be one small manifestation of the sacred life force that surges through us and through all of life. We can be grateful for goodness and grace, as well as the difficulties, challenges, and

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even traumas we have experienced. For the ways they have brought us wisdom, compassion, forgiveness, and humility. For the pain that protects, teaches, and forces us to change and grow. Ultimately, we can even reach a point of gratitude for impermanence and death, which trigger love and compassion for all living beings and a deep reverence and appreciation for this fleeting gift of life.////

Benefits of Gratitude

Now let's discuss the many benefits of gratitude. Gratitude is good for you, and it's good for others. Emotionally, grateful people are happier. They experience greater overall well-being and life satisfaction. They're more optimistic and experience less depression and anxiety. Instead, gratitude creates more feelings of awe and wonder. Grateful people tend to focus on the good in life and in their past.

Gratitude also seems to go along with virtue. Grateful people tend to be less materialistic, less self-centered, and more optimistic. They're more likely to sacrifice their individual gain for the benefit of the community. Some might describe grateful people as being more "spiritual." They have greater self-esteem and self-acceptance. Gratitude also seems to inspire a greater sense of a higher life purpose. Overall, gratitude likely promotes personal growth.

Health wise, gratitude appears to result in improved sleep, less illness, and greater longevity. Enhanced health may be due in part to the fact that grateful people are more optimistic and exercise more, both of which correlate with longevity. Curiously, studies also show that grateful people check in more with their doctors, which also likely improves their health and longevity.

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Grateful people have better relationships, in part because they show their appreciation to others. They have healthier marriages, more friendships, and deeper connections. It turns out that expressing our appreciation to others makes us happier. Grateful people are kinder to others, more altruistic, more empathic, more helpful, and more generous. It seems that gratitude and generosity go hand in hand.

Gratitude also seems to promote more sociability and less envy of others. This makes sense because if we're grateful for what we have, we'll feel less of a need to covet what others have. Instead, we can be happy for others' blessings.

When we show appreciation to others, they tend to show appreciation back. This creates a virtuous cycle of appreciation, or what some call "reciprocal altruism." Gratitude just makes us more likeable. It helps us to be more assertive and express concerns when conflicts inevitably arise because it helps create a foundation of good will and trust for working out our difficulties with each other.

It just makes sense that if gratitude promotes better functioning and improved relationships that is would also benefit us at work. Indeed, studies show that grateful people are better managers, have more robust work networks, make better decisions, have better goal achievement, and are generally more productive. Greater success at work then leads to more work satisfaction and prosperity.

Gratitude makes us more resilient. When stressed, we cope better with adversity and seek out support. It helps us problem-solve and grow from difficult experiences. This is because gratitude helps us cope better by not

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avoiding or denying problems, blaming others for our difficulties, or escaping into addiction. Gratitude helps us stay positive as we ride the ups and downs of change, loss, and adversity.

Spiritually, gratitude helps us tap into the Sacred. It tends to reverse something called “hedonic adaptation,” in which we quickly get used to and then take for granted the good things that come into our lives. When we remind ourselves of the miracle of our existence and note the ten thousand things that sustain us, we feel a more reverent, appreciative connection to all that is. In gratitude, this moment just as it is becomes abundantly more than enough, and we experience contentment. Our focus shifts to our abundance and away from what we don’t have or the conditions of our life that we find distressing.

Finally, grateful people are more apt to be successful. Gratitude promotes positivity, which promotes positive action, which leads to positive outcomes. This then gives people even more to feel grateful for. As we focus on the abundance in our lives, we attract even more abundance.

Barriers to Gratitude

Now let’s discuss the barriers to gratitude. One of the chief barriers to gratitude is entitlement, the feeling that we “deserve” what people give us or do for us, or that we “deserve” our many blessings. Entitled people aren’t in touch with the truth that their lives are a sacred gift and that all that comes to them is a blessing. They don’t appreciate the good will, good intentions, and good efforts others make on their behalf. Instead, they simply expect that good be given them.

Another very human barrier to gratitude is taking the good for granted. We

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all tend to get used to the good in our lives. The initial thrill of pleasure or satisfaction from a new possession, relationship, or experience quickly fades. Once we get used to what's good in our lives, we risk entering the "prison of privilege," in which we find we can't live without the comforts and conveniences that we have become accustomed to. Then, we don't appreciate what we have, yet cannot live without it.

Another barrier to gratitude is negativity. It's also very human to focus on what we want that we don't have, to focus on what's distressing us, and to focus on what's "wrong" in our lives. We can be vulnerable to passing negative judgments on people, places, and things. While it's good to attend to pain, difficulties, and problems, we risk losing our gratitude if we judge these things to be "bad." Then, we're picking a fight with Reality, the Sacred, or God—a fight we will always lose.

Spiritually, negativity arises from living too much from our ego and not enough from our Higher Self. When we live from ego, nothing is ever enough. There's always a sense of lack of "something more." The ego is focused on safety and satisfaction, with safety never guaranteed and satisfaction always temporary, so living from ego is living in lack. This sense of continuous lack poisons our gratitude.

Cultivating and Practicing Gratitude

Now let's discuss how we cultivate and practice gratitude. We can grow our gratitude. Countering human habituation, entitlement, and negativity involves working with several intentional gratitude practices.

The first practice is to simply look carefully that you might see the many blessings of your life. Take note of what's good. Think of the many ways

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Life, including others, sustains you. Start with gratitude for the air that you breathe and go on from there. As they say, simply start counting your blessings. You may want to start a gratitude journal and write three new things to be grateful for every day. See if you can get to 10,000 things! (That would take about nine years). Wake up each day grateful for another day of miraculous self-aware existence. At the end of each day, reflect on the things that went well for you and the people who gave to you in some way.

Once you start counting your blessings, start ruminating on them, rather than ruminating on what you don't like or don't have. Savor, celebrate, take in, and appreciate all that's good in your life. Sit with it, and let it really sink in. Allow yourself to enjoy your life and lessen your striving for what you don't have. See that this is enough, and you are enough. Practice sustaining an attitude of gratitude throughout your day.

Develop the habit of saying, "thank you" to others. Quietly say it to the Universe or God every morning for the gift of another miraculous day of existence. Say it continuously throughout the day. Make it a point to tell others you appreciate them for being in your life and for the good they do. Write thank you letters and cards. You might even want to pay "gratitude visits" to people who have done right by you.

Practice presence, savoring the moment. Be the inner stillness at the center of your movement. This is the practice of mindfulness. Note and appreciate that you can see, hear, feel, taste, smell, touch, move, and think. Savor this sacred moment of existence, intentionally, on purpose, moment by moment.

Remind yourself that your life and everything and everybody in it are impermanent. All that is, including you, shall pass. The fleeting nature of this brief moment of existence makes it all the more precious. So be grateful for

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this short gift of life, and savor it while you can.

As you practice gratitude for the present, also practice it for the past. Reflect on the many past gifts and kindnesses of others, both small and large. Consider the thousands of meals over your lifetime that have sustained your life to this point. Reflect on the abundance and goodness of this Universe that brought you into existence. Note that while there is pain, there is also the overcoming of it. See that while we're all wounded, there is also healing. Have gratitude for the love and grace that have allowed you to survive to this point and will continue to sustain you into the future.

Have gratitude for your future possibilities, including the mystery of what may lay beyond this life. Have gratitude for your capacity to shape your future through your skillful practice of virtue today and for the truth that there is always hope, even if it's just hope for peace.

If you practice a religion, engage in religious rituals that involve gratitude. Take care not to do them mindlessly or by rote, but freshly, as if you were practicing each ritual for the first time.

Engage in a daily stillness practice. It's in stillness that we connect with the Sacred, which inspires our reverence. Meditate or engage in silent prayer consistently that you might sustain your awareness of the miracle of awareness. Your stillness practice, along with mindfulness, will help you dis-habituate to the Now.

As you cultivate reverence, combine this with a practice of humble, unconditional appreciation of this moment exactly as it is, no matter how painful. This is the practice of radical reverence. See each moment as a teacher, even if it's just teaching humble acceptance of the sometimes-hidden

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perfection of things. Remind yourself in times of distress that this moment is as it must and can only be. Look for the gifts in the midst of pain, loss, and adversity. If you look closely, you'll find them. You'll see that what has happened and what's happening to you have hidden blessings. You'll see that they were necessary to bring you to this place of healing, compassion, acceptance, and wisdom.

Practice contentment, allowing this moment to be more than enough. See the pain of grasping as it arises so that you might let it go. When you're content with all that you have and need nothing more, you're more able to feel gratitude for what you have.

Weave all these gratitude practices into your daily habits of being, seeing, and doing. You'll be grateful you did, for these gratitude practices will yield to you an abundance of joy.

OUR NEXT SESSION

In our next session, we'll discuss the love practice of hope. Hope for both ourselves and others when times are difficult and dark. As we'll see, hope is both powerful and self-fulfilling.

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 throughout the day.

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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. Study this lesson on gratitude. What are the barriers to gratitude in your life? What are you grateful for? How would you like to cultivate gratitude in your life?

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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