

## **SESSION 52: Conclusion--A Life of Love**

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### **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 nine sessions because they make up the core foundation of this course. You'll need this to get the most 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 conceptually and nonconceptually the nature of things and understanding the value or sacredness of Reality. Both aspects of appreciation arise from careful attending. Together, the twin practices of Attending and Appreciating, called "Appreciative Attending," generate wisdom and reverence. Appreciative Attending enables 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 devotion. I hope you've had a chance to reflect on how you can strengthen your devotion to the people, activities, and practices you most care about. Today, I will conclude this course with some reflections on our practice mastering the Art of Loving.

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By now I'm sure you realize that mastering the art of loving is a lifetime practice. I hope you also see, however, that with some effort and practice, we really can develop our love skills and realize a fulfilling life of love! Almost anyone can do this with the right intentions, effort, support, and guidance.

In a way, finishing this course is not an ending. It is just a beginning. It is the beginning of a new day in which we continue to heal, grow, and deepen in awareness, wisdom, and skill. May you begin anew each day in your mastery of the Art of Loving.

I personally find myself continuously learning new things, coming to new realizations, and developing new skills. For example, after finishing this course, I came across the wonderful work of Marshal Rosenberg in his book, *Nonviolent Communication*. This book is truly a masterpiece that speaks to so many love practices like assertiveness, empathy, nonjudgment, and collaboration. It should be required reading of every human being.

I hope that like me, you will continue a lifetime of seeking, openness, and learning. There are so many good books and sources of wisdom on relationships, loving, awakening, healing from trauma, and self-transcendence that I find it difficult to know where to begin in suggesting further study. I'm sure there are hundreds of books that I don't even know about that are of benefit. Maybe you will share with me books that have helped you! Books that have had an influence on me include William Miller's book, *Lovingkindness*, Tara Brach's book, *Radical Compassion*, and Sam Harris' book, *Waking up*. Peter Russell's book, *Letting Go of Nothing* was hugely beneficial to me in helping me to let go of painful yearnings for better connections with people I love. Other authors who have benefitted me include: Terry Real, Debra Solomon, Janina Fisher, Pema Chodron, Thich Nhat Hanh, Mark Epstein, Bessel Van Der Kolk, Daniel Siegel, Ron Siegel, Rick Hanson, Thomas Merton, Anthony DeMello and so many more. I encourage you to continue to read, go to workshops, listen to podcasts, and take other courses to foster your ongoing healing, growth, and joy. May this be a lifelong practice for you.

Recently my wife Linda and I spent a Sunday together. I wanted to go running in the early morning. She asked if I could wait a bit while she got going and join me to walk while I ran. I agreed and changed plans.

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I sat down to read Ron Siegel's book, *The Extraordinary Gift of Being Ordinary*. When Linda was ready, we went down to the beach, where I ran about 6 miles while she walked. We then met up and had lunch.

I felt such joy, running along the ocean, grateful that I can still run, see, and savor this simple act of running. I kept attending to the act of running, slipping into a state of experiencing, just seeing, feeling, and running. This went on for a while until my thoughts arose and took me away. But then I was seeing this and coming back to the present, over and over. More and more this kind of daily attending practice has become my norm. I hope this will be the same for you. This retrieval of awareness from immersion in thoughts and feelings is so necessary for our well-being. It is truly liberating and refreshing. It helps to restore our reverence for this mysterious miracle of sentience.

And I felt such gratitude for my wife, my work, my capacity to benefit others, my friends, and for living in a country with such freedom and prosperity. I felt a sense of great peace and fulfillment. There is nothing more that I need or want. This is enough. I am enough. I have enough. All is well. Gone is the painful underlying compulsive striving to achieve more and more to make myself worthy. I have tasted contentment, and it is good. I reflected on Will Storr's book *The Status Game*. Storr explores our human drives for social status through domination, virtue, or success. He argues for the necessity of this for civilization. Perhaps he is right, but the cost of this in the form of the Love Wound is so great for many, as we link our worthiness to our social status. I see that I am still vulnerable to this, especially to playing "virtue games" to enhance my virtue, and how dangerous this can be in contaminating my intentions and dragging me into what is called "communal narcissism," or countering feelings of unworthiness through the practice of love. It is a bit of a paradox. Take care in your practice of love to do so for love's sake alone, and not to be virtuous or special. At the same time, let your loving be an affirmation and reminder of your innate goodness. Remember that your goodness is a given, unconditional and unearned.

As you move forward with your life, may you too, with the power of Awareness, see these human forces in your mind that conspire to shore up your worthiness and heal your Love Wound through conditional virtue status games. May we all, through the power of Awareness, unhook ourselves from these status compulsions and ground ourselves in our innate, unconditional goodness.

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May we then extend this awareness to all those we meet. May this practice bring you contentment as well. You are enough. You have enough. This is enough. May you too, through awareness, purify your intentions to do good for good's sake alone, that you might enjoy the fulfillment of loving for loving's sake alone.

As my wife and I enjoyed lunch, we both reflected on our gratitude for and appreciation of each other. We like each other. We take care of each other. And yet we each stand on our own two feet. We are best friends. And we are lovers. We forgive each other for our shortcomings. We are generous to each other. If one of us is grumpy or if we snap at each other, the other of us will show empathy and concern. When we hurt each other, which is now quite rare, we own it and do what we need to do to repair the harm. We look to each other as an opportunity share this wonderful life together and as an opportunity to care for one another. We are both reasonably well grounded in our goodness. We are open and honest with one another. There are no secrets. We openly share our lives with each other. And we help each other grow in awareness and skill with kind feedback to one another.

What a blessing, this ordinary, extraordinary marriage we have. It is a work in progress, and it requires continual effort to manage and maintain, like a garden. We continue to invest in and nurture one another, day by day. It truly is a labor of love.

I hope that you too have been able to invest in nurturing your relationships through your engagement in these love practices, and that you too will experience the wonderful gifts of the practice of love. I hope you can see that this is yours to be had, right now, with the very next interaction you have with someone. This moment, right now, is an opportunity to benefit life—yours and others. Again and again. Moment by moment.

I savored that day, as I now do most days, aware of several things. First, this day was the manifestation of my practice of loving. At this moment, life is good. We aren't rich. I'm not famous. But I love my work as a healer. I feel blessed to be an instrument of love and care that benefits others. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

I know there is more to come. More growth, more healing, more awareness, and more skill. Even as I write this, I am aware that more and more I feel grounded, at peace, clear, with a growing sense of no self. It seems I am becoming nobody. What a relief! All I need to do is keep up my life practices. As fulfilling as this sacred life is now, I know there is more. Not that I need it, but still, I know there is a capacity for even greater love, peace, freedom, clarity, wisdom, skill, and joy. How wonderful.

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But I am also keenly aware that this shall pass. Pain, loss, failure, mistakes, illness, disability, and other harms await me. When I woke up this morning, I was aware, as I am each morning, that I have one less day to live. Soon I will be dead. I will lose everything that is dear to me. Nothing lasts. I'm in for a world of hurt, as are we all.

But that's OK. It is as it must and can only be. When I combine pain with understanding and acceptance, suffering diminishes. For now, I will savor this precious and mysterious miracle of conscious existence moment by moment.

When I look back on my life, I feel some sadness for the many years I strived needlessly to achieve to secure my worthiness. I was in such pain but was barely aware, so caught up was I in my compulsive worthiness project. Letting this go has been both liberating and purifying. When we abandon these compulsive strivings, we liberate ourselves to fully live and love.

Not that this symptom of my Love Wound doesn't occasionally arise. It does. The difference now is Awareness. I see it. It is real, but not true. Recently, I arrived back at my hospital after a long weekend with three patients not doing well, one in restraints, and one feeling ill, perhaps because of a medication change I made. The familiar feeling of self-doubt came over me. Maybe I wasn't good enough?

In my attending to my experience, I noted this familiar feeling of inadequacy and self-doubt. I even said it out loud with some humor to a colleague, sharing the way my mind automatically goes to the default of feeling unworthy when things go awry. "Funny how my mind still does this after all these years," I said to my colleague. My colleague said to me, "I understand that feeling, Mike, but you should know that you are the best psychiatrist I have ever worked with. Things aren't always going to go perfectly, no matter what you do."

It was nice to receive my colleague's validation. Sometimes, borrowing this kind of support from others can help. We need feedback to optimize our performance, because we are so vulnerable to falling into delusion that we are either doing better or worse than we really are.

This kind of praise can be dangerous, however. It can seduce us into thinking we are special and damage our humility. I do think I am a pretty good psychiatrist overall, but with many faults and failings and much room for improvement. I'm special, just like everyone else. And my gifts are gifts I did not earn. With this realization I feel a rush of both humility and gratitude.

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I share this because you too will want to be vigilant about this kind of praise as you work to master the art of loving. People will value you for this. Take care not to let this go to your head and damage your humility. The fruits of loving can poison your capacity to love if you aren't careful.

I think the challenge here is for us to do two things at once. One is to continuously ground ourselves in our innate unconditional goodness when that familiar feeling of unworthiness arises, and at the same time allow ourselves to be vulnerable and reach out for support. As I said before, it is a paradox. We are all human and vulnerable. We all have needs to be loved and cared for. We all go through dark times of pain and doubt. And yet we must also renounce depending on anyone to heal our Love Wound. Ultimately, that is our job through our practice of kind awareness and self-compassion. But do seek out and ask for the support of others in this practice. No one heals and masters the art of loving alone.

Because of the practice of awareness and love, life is very different now. How nice, to be able to note what my brain does with acceptance and humor, and hold it at a bit of a distance. How nice to not be quite so entangled and swept away by experience. What a relief it is to see that my shame reactions are incredibly common and all too human, and to have some compassion for myself that my brain does this, as well as for all of us caught in this human predicament.

And I also find that the love practices in this course are there to be refined over a lifetime. For example, it is unlikely you, I, or anyone will become a master of universal and unconditional love, compassion and forgiveness after just one week or even years of practice. I know that I will be working on these and the other love skills for the rest of my life. This is how the practice of any art is.

As we've discussed, everything starts with the cultivation of awareness. So, make appreciative, nonjudgmental, kind attending to this moment a daily practice. Sit at the beginning of every day for a period of meditation, even if it is just for five minutes. Then, continue this practice of appreciative attending as you go about your day. Like me, you will undoubtedly get lost in the trance of thought continuously. That is what happens for most of us. Just keep remembering, over and over, to attend kindly and curiously to each moment. Keep coming back to the Now.

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Treat each interaction with another person as a sacred moment, because it is. It is easy to forget the sacred nature of all that is in the difficult, frustrating, and mundane. You will continue to forget this, over and over. As you practice kindness and patience with others, also practice these with yourself.

Live each moment wholeheartedly. When cleaning the toilet, do so wholeheartedly. When talking to the clerk at the counter, do so wholeheartedly. When making love, do so wholeheartedly. Do all that you do wholeheartedly. Greet each moment freshly, noting that each moment is indeed unique, and both the first and last moment. Give your all back to the precious life you have been given.

I hope this course has kindled in you the inspiration and motivation to attend with appreciation to this sacred gift of life and to make every day a sacred day of devotion to the practice of love. If you are like me, you will want to revisit these lessons over and over for reminders and refreshers. There is a lifetime of material here to learn!

Again, be patient, kind, and gentle with yourself in this practice. Just as you can't make a tree immediately grow and bear fruit by watering it, so you cannot change your neurons to manifest awakening and the capacities for loving. All we can do is practice and persevere and have faith that in doing so, the trees of our lives will gradually grow and bear fruit.

This brings me to a final thought on faith. Have faith in your own rational intuition that tells you that these practices work, that love is the way, and that no matter your wounds and weaknesses, you too can realize the joys of a life of love. Have faith. You can do this! Change can be slow and incremental. For me, I can only notice significant change as I look back over the past 10-20 years. And then there are hundreds of daily positive exchanges with others that, if we look closely, can remind us of the rewards of this work. But for most of us, awakening is a gradual experience. So have faith. It works if you work it. So work it. You deserve it, and the world desperately needs you to do so.

May you too realize the blessings and joy of love. May you become a master of the art of loving.

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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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[1] Storr, W. The Status Game. 2021. HarperCollins. New York.