



MIND & LIFE

Mind & Life Podcast Transcript Sharon Salzberg - Love and Wisdom

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Opening Quote – Sharon Salzberg (00:04): *There's this idea that love is not a feeling, it's an ability. And I was so taken with that. Of course, it is also a feeling, and it's a feeling that we may long for. But I realized that every time I thought of it as a feeling, for me, it became kind of like a commodity. And it was always in the hands of somebody else—to give to me, or to take away from me. It struck me, if love is an ability, maybe it's also a responsibility. Because I realized, "Well, if I want love to be present in a conversation, maybe I have to be the one to bring it in."*

Intro – Wendy Hasenkamp (00:45): Welcome to Mind & Life. I'm Wendy Hasenkamp. We are back with Season 5 of the show! I'm so pleased to be able to kick things off with the renowned and beloved meditation teacher, Sharon Salzberg. Sharon was one of the first people to bring Buddhism and meditation into America and she co-founded the Insight Meditation Society, which is a retreat center in Massachusetts, in the mid 1970s. She's the author of many acclaimed books on meditation, she teaches around the world, and she's also the host of the Metta Hour Podcast. I spoke with Sharon last spring about her experience as a meditation teacher and practitioner, and some of the insights that she's gained.

In our conversation, we talk about how she came to Buddhism and meditation at age 17, and her experience as a woman in the early days of the contemplative movement. Then we get into lovingkindness meditation, which is one of the practices she's best known for sharing, and we talk about love as a feeling, as an ability, and as a responsibility. We discuss the role of narrative and storytelling in our world and in our minds. And Sharon shines a light on the importance of balance and self-compassion on the contemplative path. She also reflects on the role of the body in meditation, and why contemplation matters for societal change. And we end with Sharon's thoughts on the truth of interconnection and how we might better live into this wisdom.

As always, there's more information in the show notes, and you can also listen to the podcast extra there, where Sharon and I discussed some of the complexities and challenges of interpreting scientific research on meditation. Sharon was one of the first people to introduce me to meditation, so it was a great pleasure to speak with her. I continue to find her teachings so inspiring and accessible. I really hope you enjoy this conversation as much as I did. I'm so happy to share with you, Sharon Salzberg.

Wendy Hasenkamp (02:53): Well, I'm so pleased to be joined today by Sharon Salzberg. Sharon, welcome, and thank you so much for being here.

Sharon Salzberg (02:59): Thank you so much. It's great to be with you.

Wendy Hasenkamp (03:03): I always like to start by hearing a little bit of people's personal stories about how they ended up doing the work that they're doing. And I know you've shared yours in multiple places, but if you would be willing to go through whatever feels most relevant to you about how you've ended up in this field doing this kind of work.

Sharon Salzberg (03:19): Sure. Well, we're looking back a lot of years now for me. *[laughter]* It was 1969, I guess, or 1970 probably, when I was in college, when I did an Asian philosophy course. And it was in the context of that course, that I heard more deeply that there were methods called meditation, that they were practical, they were direct, that if you actually practiced them, you could be a lot happier. And I think about this moment so many times. I was 18 years old. At that point, I was actually probably 17. I was a procrastinator. I was a very frightened person. I had a very traumatic childhood, like many people do. And I was not really bold.

I was going to college in Buffalo, New York and I looked around Buffalo for a place to learn how to meditate and I could not find it anywhere. So I created an independent study project for the university and said, "I want to go to India and study meditation." So they approved it and off I went! So that was the beginning of everything. And I think, "How in the world did I do that? What was I thinking?" (Because I think that's a fascinating moment anyway, when we take something we hold an abstract appreciation for and say, "I'm going to make it real. I'm going to do whatever it takes to make it real." So please study that because I think that was an important moment.) I did find what I was looking for. I wanted something very hands on, how to, not highly embedded in philosophical systems that you had to declare your belief or allegiance or anything like that. And I found it and I haven't looked back since, in terms of my own practice.

In terms of teaching, I was in India in 1974—because I spent my year there, I went back to Buffalo, did what I needed to do to finish school and went back to India. So in 1974, I was getting ready to leave for what I was convinced was a very short trip to the US before I went back to India for the rest of my life.

And I went to see one of my teachers, who was a woman named Dipa Ma. She said to me, "When you go back to the US, you'll be teaching." And I said, "No, I won't." And she said, "Yes, you will." I said, "I won't." And she said, "Yes, you will." We had a whole conversation about that, including her saying to me, "You can do anything you want to do. It's your thinking you can't do it that's going to stop you." And I left her room, we would call it like a tenement room, walked down four flights of stairs thinking, "No, I won't. That's ridiculous." But as life evolved, of course I did. So that was the second strand that sort of wove together into my being a teacher.

Wendy Hasenkamp (06:09): And then how is it that you came to found Insight Meditation Society with Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein?

Sharon Salzberg (06:18): Well, Joseph and I had met in India in my very first retreat. That retreat was like a hotbed of friendship in a way. You know, Dan Goleman was the person who told me about the retreat. So I've known him longer than I've known the rest of the cast of characters. And at that first retreat, Joseph was a student. Ram Dass was a student, Mirabai Bush was a student.... Krishna Das. I mean, there were so many people. And he had come back to the states in '74, about six months before I had. And when I got back (from my "very brief trip," which has lasted 50 years), he was in Boulder, Colorado. It was the inaugural summer of Naropa Institute. And he was there, he was sort of Ram Dass's

teaching assistant, and Jack Kornfield was living down the hall. He had had a parallel life in Thailand while Joseph and I and friends had been in India. And a bunch of us thought, we don't know where to go. Here we are in the States, Joseph's the only one with a job and an apartment... Let's go visit Joseph in Boulder! And so at one point, literally nine of us moved into his one bedroom apartment. So he tells this story from his side. It was torture because he's very meticulous, and there were nine people living with him. He said it was really suffering until he gave up the thought that it was his apartment. Then we were just living together.

But that's when I met Jack. And then I stayed on... Joseph was invited for the second summer session. I stayed on with him, sort of his teaching assistant. Then we were invited to teach a month-long retreat. So we did that. And then we'd get letters—we had nothing, we were sleeping on people's living room couches (literally) and we never knew if there'd be another retreat until the next letter would arrive. But people would send letters and say, "I can get together, some friends and a cook. Will you come teach a retreat?"

So it was Jack, Joseph and I, and a few other people. And we would just go in different combinations in response. And then the person whose house we were crashing in the most, I think in some defense said, "I have this rental property down near Santa Cruz, California. Why don't you go stay there?"

So we went there and we opened it as a retreat center, maybe three extra bedrooms or something like that. We'd tell people, you can come do a retreat and we'll cook for you and stuff. And somebody came through and he said, "Why don't you start a real retreat center in this country?" And he said, "I know all the people who can help you. They're all in Massachusetts," which was correct. So we came back to the East Coast and looked around for quite a while and finally found this property, which was a Catholic novitiate at the time, in Barre, Massachusetts.

Wendy Hasenkamp (09:07): You said you started teaching retreats with Joseph when you were all out there in Boulder. I'm curious what it was like the first time that you took up that role as a teacher, especially when you thought you would never do that.

Sharon Salzberg (09:19): Yeah, well I was absolutely petrified of public speaking. So as you know, the format of our intensive retreats, which were an immersion experience, so that people practiced during the day, sitting meditation, walking meditation. There's teacher interaction. There's questions and answers. But the only really formal lecture is in the evening, it's like an hour or so. And I could not do it. I was totally petrified.

So poor Joseph had to speak 30 nights in a row because it was a 30-day retreat. And all these people were going up and yelling at him saying, "Why wouldn't you let her speak? Why wouldn't you let her have a voice?" And he would say, "I'd be delighted to have a night off! Just talk to her." Could not do it. I was petrified.

My big fear was that I'd be speaking and my mind would just go blank. And I would just be sitting there and everyone would know. It was months, if not years later that I thought, there's this one topic—lovingkindness—where there's a very handy guided meditation. So maybe I can speak about that one. Because if my mind goes blank, I'll launch into the guided meditation and no one will know. So that's when I began to be able to give talks, actually.

And the person-to-person interaction... Everyone was older than I was. I was 21 in the beginning, but I cared so much about what I had been given, and I had so much confidence that it had really done so much for me, that I was kind of carried by that, in terms of more individual contact.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([11:05](#)): Wow. So you came upon the idea of meditation at like 18, and then by 21 you were teaching?

Sharon Salzberg ([11:12](#)): Yeah, I know. Well, that was because of this one woman Dipa Ma, the teacher. It was like the old fashioned way. She said, "You're going to do this." And I said, "No, I'm not. I don't know how to do that. I can't do that."

Wendy Hasenkamp ([11:25](#)): I'm also curious what your experience was at that time, being a woman in that scene. And I feel like Buddhism can be very patriarchal in many lineages. And it seems like a lot of the folks that were doing this in the '70s were men, at least the folks that I've spoken to. And so, just curious how that felt for you.

Sharon Salzberg ([11:46](#)): Well, again, it was a woman, it was Dipa Ma who told me to teach. And it had some significance that one of the things she said to me was, "You can do anything you want to do, it's your thinking you can't that's going to stop you."

I think the zeitgeist was once, not coming necessarily even from the lineage or from Asia, Asian teachers, but just the zeitgeist in the States... You know, Joseph and I would give a course and people would thank Joseph at the end. And I'd be sitting there. *[laughter]* And we were not sophisticated enough to say, "Thank you so much. Let's spend some time appreciating everybody."

So things like that were happening. I think though it was on people's minds, like in that period when I wasn't able to give a talk, when people were going up and yelling at Joseph. It was thinking that, that was really him, which it was not. And you know, in the very early books people were writing about the movement of mindfulness into the country, maybe my name would be somewhere, maybe not. But it wasn't relevant in my mind.

Later, I mean, realized that I made some choices. I always practiced as a layperson. I never became a nun. I never entered Buddhism as a kind of institution, and I don't speak in its defense. My first teacher was SN Goenka and that was my first 10-day retreat in January of 1971. And the first night of that retreat, he said, "The Buddha did not teach Buddhism, the Buddha taught a way of life. And this is open to anybody. It's about the power of your awareness. It's about methods you can experiment with to see if they work for you."

So that was my first night, and it became my foundational understanding. So I'm not trying to have people become Buddhist or reject anything else, it's really about... just like he said, the power of one's own awareness, and some really interesting and amazing techniques that can further that.

[\(14:09\)](#) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp ([14:42](#)): You mentioned already lovingkindness, which is one of the first dharma talks that you gave. And obviously, you've become such a presence in sharing lovingkindness and metta, and just the message of love within this contemplative space. And I feel like, at least for me, you were the first teacher who really brought that out, at a time and in a world where I feel like everything was

framed towards mindfulness and attention and those kinds of practices. So I'm just wondering for you, if you could share a little bit about what prompted your focus in that direction—and how that was when you started sharing those practices, how that felt in the context of the larger mindfulness heavy practice movement.

Sharon Salzberg (15:29): Yeah. Well, I mean, this also leads back to your previous question. So my first retreat was with SN Goenka, and his basic method was what these days we call the body scan, which Jon Kabat-Zinn later popularized, and also reversed direction. Jon starts with the feet and moves up to the head; Goenka starts at the head, moves down to the feet. But that was the primary tool of his presentation. And then the very last thing he did, almost as a kind of ceremonial way of saying goodbye, was a little lovingkindness practice, which is a different method where... I mean, there are lots of ways of doing it. Because he was so sensation oriented, he did lovingkindness through sensations like, feel sensations of love fill your body, and then being offered. Later, teachers I've had very much emphasize phrases, like the silent repetition of phrases like, may you be happy, may you be peaceful, things like that.

But it was the first time I did anything and it was the first time I heard of lovingkindness practice. And so I was sitting there and I thought, "What was that one? I want to learn that one." But I didn't have an opportunity to actually really practice it systematically until I went to Burma in 1985, when I did a three-month immersion retreat in lovingkindness practice with a Burmese monk, Sayadaw U Pandita. And I had already been teaching for years and years, so I came back and I started teaching it right away. Because it was so profound for me even after so many years of mindfulness practice.

And it was very interesting teaching it, because I ran into sort of feelings or people saying like, "It's not a wisdom practice. You're not going to dissolve boundaries between self and other,"—which of course that actually is not true, but—"It's just about feeling good and feeling good is not the point. You have to be able to accept whatever you're feeling." And it was only later I realized they were saying in effect, "That's a girly practice."

But I knew from my own experience that it's not sentimental. It's not trying to force anything. It's not hypocritical. It was really a revolution in how I was seeing myself and seeing others. So it's about attention actually, in some ways, because we're paying attention differently. Instead of going with ourselves through the list of our faults, again, we're wishing ourselves well. That's a shift for a lot of us; it's a little bit of a stretch. Or instead of looking right through that person serving us in the supermarket, and objectifying them in some way or not recognizing their humanity, in effect we're looking at them and thinking, "May you be happy, may you be peaceful."

So we are shifting the way we pay attention, and it has some very big consequences in life. I mean, the ancient message about lovingkindness practice is that it's supposed to be the antidote to fear, and that's just what I found it to be. Instead of walking into a room with a primary motivation of fear, I would walk into a room and just sense connection with beings there.

And so I just kept teaching it even though it wasn't that popular in terms of certain kind of Buddhist hierarchy. But over time I began to see, and of course it took 10 years before I wrote *Lovingkindness*, which was my first book. But after that, and just life, it was so gratifying to me to see people in other traditions, Zen tradition for example, say, "You know, we have it all in our chanting, in our rituals, but we don't actually do the practice anymore. So I'm bringing back the practice." That was like an Abbott

somewhere. And I just began to see slowly that it wasn't so disdained, and I thought, "Yes!" And of course, then when the science and the research began, I was immensely happy.

Wendy Hasenkamp (19:50): Yeah. That's interesting too, that you bring up, of course, the link between the more feminine energy and bringing in these practices, which is very cool. One question that I know comes up for folks who are just starting the lovingkindness practice, particularly as you were raising that Buddhism is more a way of life and a lot of people view it less as a religion or that's not the part of it that they're attracted to. And so then sometimes I feel like the repetition of the phrases can feel like prayer... Kind of like, "May you be happy, may you be well," almost as if you're trying to invoke that outcome through some supernatural activity, or something like that. So just curious your take on how that might feel.

Sharon Salzberg (20:36): Well, people really define prayer in many different ways, like you just had a certain definition of it.

Wendy Hasenkamp (20:41): Sure, right.

Sharon Salzberg (20:43): And I'd say in the beginning of my teaching of lovingkindness—metta, M-E-T-T-A is the Pali word for lovingkindness, Pali being the language of the original Buddhist texts. So in the beginning of my teaching it, people would often say, "Is this like prayer?" but they were saying it with some suspicion and distress. You know, so many people had really difficult experiences in organized religion, or felt betrayed, or that they had to capture the living meaning of a scripture or something themselves, that often when people would say is this prayer, it was like, "Tell me, it's not."

I don't see it as petitionary prayer, because we start with the offering of lovingkindness to ourselves. The original phrases are usually things like, "May I be safe, may I be happy." And so people constantly ask me, "Well, who am I asking?" And it's like, we're not asking anybody anything, we're gift giving. We're offering. We're blessing. We're shifting what we're paying attention to, and how we're paying attention.

But more recently, interestingly enough, I've heard that question, "Is this like prayer?" and often there's a little tone of hope in people's voice like, "Tell me it's like prayer. That's the practice I'm used to. That's the practice I feel confident about. I've seen tremendous changes from the way I pray. It opens me to allowing not everything being dependent on my strategizing how it's going to work out. I can let the forces of the universe work." Whatever it is.

And of course, it would be easy to not listen deeply and just respond as though everyone was back in the day when they felt hurt, but it's not the case anymore. Some people are really obviously using their practice in a different way.

Wendy Hasenkamp (22:47): In thinking about this realm of love, which I mean, there's so much to say about, one of the points I love that you've made is that, we often feel like love is something we get from somebody else, when in fact it's generated in us. Do you want to share anything along those lines?

Sharon Salzberg (23:08): Some of the ways I expressed that actually came from this movie that came out maybe 12 years ago now, called Dan in Real Life. And my goddaughter who at the time was a little munchkin, she had a part in it, so saw it many times. And this character in the movie has a line, which says, "Love is not a feeling, it's an ability." Love is not a feeling, it's an ability. And I was so taken with that, because it reminded me of the kinds of experiences I'd had during intensive lovingkindness

practice where—I mean, of course it is also a feeling and it's a feeling that we may have longed for quite deeply. But I realized that as long as I thought of love only as a feeling... First of all, it was a limitation. Like, what feeling? And what about those moments when I see somebody more fully, but there's not sort of this emotional rush. What about those moments when I include somebody, realizing, "Oh yeah, they want to be happy too. We share that." There's so many times when what we feel as love is not a particular narrow emotional bandwidth.

Plus, I realized that every time I thought of it as a feeling, for me, it became kind of like a commodity. And it was always in the hands of somebody else—to give to me, in which case there'd be some love in my life, or to take away from me, in which case I'd be bereft, I'd have nothing. I used to get the image of the UPS person standing at my doorstep, holding a package of love, and glancing down at the address and saying, "No, I don't think so," and walking away. *[laughter]* And then I would be like, "Please come back. I won't have any love if you go away!" But when I realized it was an ability, then it's mine. It's within me. And other people certainly can inspire it, or ignite it, or threaten it. But ultimately it's mine.

I was actually at a Mind & Life conference in 2016, right after the US presidential election, so in San Diego. And I had written a book called *Real Love*, which was sort of based on that one line. And the message had come back from my editor, "You didn't finish the book." And I wrote, I said, "Of course I finished the book. That's why I turned it in." And she said, "No, no. You just told a story and you drifted away somewhere. You have to finish the book." And I could not finish that book. I couldn't finish the book. And I was at the Mind & Life conference when it struck me, "Oh, if love is an ability, maybe it's also a responsibility." And I finished the book in 15 minutes. Because I realized, "Well, if I want love to be present in a conversation, maybe I have to be the one bringing it in. If I want it considered as an element in a dispute, maybe I have to be the one to bring it in."

[\(26:05\)](#) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(26:27\)](#): You're such a great storyteller. I think it's one of the fantastic things about your teaching—it makes it so accessible and really graspable. One kind of practical question that I've just always wondered is, so many of the stories you tell in your teachings I'm sure you've told hundreds or thousands of times, but they always feel so fresh. So I'm wondering how you do that.

Sharon Salzberg [\(26:50\)](#): They feel fresh to me. I feel bad for the people who've heard me tell them 7 million times. *[laughter]* But part of it is that all of my teachers, meditation teachers, have been Asian. And there's a style of teaching, at least in Asian monastic pedagogy, which is all about repetition. It's like, you hear the same thing again, and again, and again, and again. And I'm just kind of used to that. It's like the rhythm of... it's not embarrassing. It's embarrassing for me in the West when I look out... Well now, I don't look out anymore because I haven't taught in person in a long time. *[laughter]* But back in the day when I would look at the people in the room and I'd think, "Oh god, they've been coming for 16 years."

Or once somebody said to Joseph, "Hasn't anything happened to you since you left India?" And you think, "Oh, I need a new story." And every time I write a new book, I think, "Uh, nothing's happened since the last book. This is really bad." But people tend to reassure me and say, "No, I got something out of it even though I've heard it 70 million times."

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(27:58\)](#): Yeah. That is what's amazing is even upon hearing it, if it's many times, it feels fresh on the reception too. But I think that's so much in the delivery as well.

I've been thinking a lot about stories and narrative lately. Both in the way that, it's the way we take in information and in a sense, our entire perception is a constructed story. And of course, a lot in meditation, we come up against the stories we tell ourselves, and you've talked so brilliantly about that. So I'm thinking about that. And then also the world that we're in now, this has just been exploded into these completely competing narratives that are almost exclusionary about what's happening in the world, and the way the world works. So it's such a divided world now, I feel like. There are just completely different narratives of reality. And I find that really quite troubling. So I don't know—I just thought I'd throw that out there and see if you have any thoughts about wrestling with the world of narrative and stories.

Sharon Salzberg (29:10): Well, I think it's complicated because I don't believe that just because a view exists that it has validity. Even my own. That there are stories and narratives that reflect, say, the truth of interconnection, which is the truth of how things are, like it or not. I remember years ago, one of my friends was an advisor on the film *Contagion*, a technical advisor because he was a physician. And so he brought me the premier in New York. So it's about a worldwide pandemic. And basically someone in Hong Kong has a bad day and a week later, half the Earth is dead. But modeled very carefully because they have these technical advisors.

I realized—it was the kind of film going experience where if you coughed, everyone went in the theater near you was like, "Aah!"—but it told a story that was not improbable. It certainly was not impossible. And based on the truth of interconnection, that that's how life is. And that's a very different narrative than excessive individualism. And what happens over there is going to stay over there. And what I do doesn't matter, rather than realizing it will ripple out. And something I have been saying for years is you don't need a spiritual understanding or belief to see that. Economic shows us this, environmental consciousness certainly shows us this. And I used to say, even epidemiology shows us this, because they're having seen that movie. And people used to say to me, "Why are you talking about epidemiology?" Or even, "What is epidemiology?"

Wendy Hasenkamp (31:08): Right. I bet you don't get those questions anymore. *[laughter]*

Sharon Salzberg (31:11): No. Now, I feel like I was prescient. Like, I was talking about epidemiology! *[laughter]* And it's troubling to face a narrative that denies the truth of interconnection. And yet, back to lovingkindness, the kind of hatred we could have in our hearts for somebody with a different view is a different thing than realizing, I really believe my vision is not my personal agenda. I believe this is reflective of the truth, and I am going to do everything I can to be empowered to express it. So that's different than kind of harboring this tremendous ill will against people who... And again, every time I say that I don't believe all views are valid, I say—and I hope truthfully—I'm not always right either. So I'm not saying other people's views are always invalid or anything like that, but I think that's also very important to bear in mind.

Wendy Hasenkamp (32:20): I think, along the lines of what you were just saying on interconnectedness, I'd be curious to pick your brain a little bit about the Buddhist view of self. So I think you mentioned even early on about self and other, and how that's such a central part of the Buddhist teachings. So I've also been thinking about that a lot in the midst of our current crises (pick whichever favorite one you want), but it feels like so much of it has to do with the way we conceive of ourselves as separate, and therefore the way we conceive of others. So just curious your thoughts about that Buddhist conception and its relevance today.

Sharon Salzberg (33:06): Well, it too is a little complicated to understand, because it's usually expressed as "no self" or something that sounds a little blank. What do you mean there's nothing in me? I got off this morning. I made choices. Who was that? So interconnectedness is actually one of the explanations that what we see... Well, if we went out and looked at a tree, there's a level of reality in which we just see a tree. It's like an entity there, singular. There's another level of reality, which we don't always get to, where we just sense the soil that is nourishing the tree, and everything that affects the quality of the soil. Which would also mean the quality of the rainfall, and everything that affects the quality of the rainfall, which we now know is pretty extensive. And the sunlight and the moonlight and the quality of the air. There's a way of looking at the tree and seeing a network of relationship and influence and connection that is also true. But one doesn't negate the other. It doesn't mean that you can't build a tree house. You can't climb the tree. It is also this singular entity.

But when we only see it as the singular entity and we're problem solving, we're kind of stuck, because maybe the problem is in something affecting the soil. Or a relationship that goes back a way, like who planted it and where? Or something like that. And now it's fascinating... what do they call it—the "wood wide web"—seeing how trees influence one another, and they almost speak to one another, and they nurture one another. And if one tree's not doing well, these older trees shoot food over, things like that. So we don't want to use one aspect of the truth to annihilate the other, but it's a much more valid and realistic world when we can take in the nature of relationship, which we don't often look at.

[\(35:17\)](#) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (35:45): You mentioned, and you've talked about in a lot of different forms, your early childhood and it was very difficult and traumatic. And in a way it sounds like that's part of what drew you to these practices. So I'm wondering if you would be willing to share a little bit about how this path gave you a lens on the suffering that you might have been experiencing, and has hopefully led to some healing. Or just your perspective on working with trauma on the contemplative path?

Sharon Salzberg (36:17): Well, I think it was of course because things had been so disruptive and chaotic in my childhood that I listened in that Asian philosophy course in a whole other way. Even aside from hearing about the methods of meditation, the first thing I heard that was important was, from within the context of the Buddhist teaching, that life has suffering in it. You know, I'd grown up.... My parents divorced when I was four. My mother died when I was nine. And by the time I went to college at the age of 16, I'd lived in five different family configurations. And each of those changes that happened because somebody died or something horrible had happened.

So I never felt like anybody else. I never felt like I belonged. I didn't think my family... Obviously, my family didn't look like anyone else's. And what I heard in that class was, the Buddha says life has suffering in it. Which translated in my head to, "It's not just you. You're not weird. You're not outside. This is the nature of life." And it's not that we all suffer in the same degree, because we don't. But that vulnerability, the kind of fragility of life, the insecurity of life, we share that. And it felt, really for me the first time in my life, I felt included. And that was just in the problem. But that was huge. That was very important.

I've seen of course years later that no one's childhood was really necessarily all that good, however it looked on the surface, and that a lot is hidden. We tend to have a lot to work through, each of us. I was

18 when I started practice. I'd never been to therapy. I'd never used other modalities. So I did it all in a different order than people might...

But I kept coming back and I keep coming back to things learned in the course of practice that are really important. Even the question of balance, the idea, say, if you're meditating and something painful is coming up, not to throw yourself into the pain and get overwhelmed by it, but to develop a different relationship to it. So you may not be adding so much unkindness towards yourself, blaming yourself ("I shouldn't be feeling this") or isolation ("I'm the only one who ever feels this") or sense of permanence ("What's this going to feel like in a year and a half when it's still here?"), whatever. And so those are skills of learning to let go of all of those add-ons. And then realizing deeply: everything is changing; nothing is permanent, and I didn't have to be so afraid.

Speaking of the first group of people I was meditating with on my first retreat with SN Goenka... I'm somewhat famous for having marched up to him at one point and looking him in the eye and saying, "I never used to be an angry person before I started meditating!" thereby laying blame exactly where I felt it belonged, which was clearly on him. *[laughter]* It was no doubt all his fault. And he just laughed. And of course, I'd been hugely angry, but I hadn't seen it before, because I'd never just done the introspection. And I did not like what I was uncovering. And so that was the whole part of the training.

And then balance in the sense of, many teachers would say through the years, if something painful is happening—imagery, emotion, even physically—don't just be with it, and be with it, and be with it, and be with it relentlessly. You need a break. Be with it, move your attention to something that's easier to be with. And there's a whole list of things. Listening to sound or something like that. And then maybe you go back to it, and then you leave it again. And as one teacher, this Burmese monk Sayadaw U Pandita said, "It's not wrong to just be with it, and be with it, and be with it. But you'll likely get exhausted. So why not build in balance all along the way?" And I'll tell you, of all the meditation instructions I give, that's one of the least popular.

Wendy Hasenkamp (40:43): To move away and back?

Sharon Salzberg (40:45): Yeah.

Wendy Hasenkamp (40:45): Huh.

Sharon Salzberg (40:45): People say, "You think I'm a coward," or "You think I don't have it to really do the real thing." Which is just to confront pain. But that, if you know anything about trauma therapy, it's right out of there as well. The meditation practice is still a kind of, for me, a profoundly appropriate skill to be applying in a lot of situations.

Wendy Hasenkamp (41:14): Yeah. And how about, for you in your practice and your training, the role of the body as a key to, or its relationship to, the mind?

Sharon Salzberg (41:28): Well, my first teacher, his main method was the body scan. So that was how I started. In that 10-day retreat, we spent three days being aware of the breath at the nostrils (only at the nostrils, that was his style), and then you did a body scan for seven days. And you did that teensy little bit of lovingkindness at the end.

Wendy Hasenkamp (41:47): And that was the practice in which you became so angry?

Sharon Salzberg ([41:51](#)): Yeah.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([41:52](#)): Interesting.

Sharon Salzberg ([41:54](#)): I mean, I didn't know anything. I didn't know anything about the body keeps the score, or anything about trauma or anything. But it was so much his style, and it's what I really practiced for years. So I never thought of meditation as cognitive—reappraisal or anything like that. I thought it was just this very embodied thing. And then even later, with other teachers, then there was walking meditation or then there was... With the school of practice that Sayadaw U Pandita, my Burmese monastic teacher, was a part of, they're very, very into continuity of awareness. So it's like, feel the warmth of the tea cup. Feel the weight of it, smell the tea, taste the tea. Feel everything happening in your body as you get up from the sitting. That's as important as anything happened in the sitting. So there are elements of that as well. I would say, not always and not always emphasized in those ways, so for sure.

And I think there's a strong Western proclivity to think, "If I can only understand this, then I'll be free." And sometimes we do understand it intellectually—and that's not nothing, that's a big thing. But it's also probably not everything.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([43:17](#)): Yeah, I wonder what your perspective is, having trained so much in Asia and then obviously teaching so much in the West and the US context. There is such a different mindset it feels like in so many of these ways. You just brought up how people tend to not really like the idea of giving yourself a break and moving away from difficulty, rather just power through it. And that feels like a very American, Western mindset. So what's been your experience of coming up against that mindset? What are some of the salient parts of that, that you've found?

Sharon Salzberg ([43:49](#)): Yeah. Well, I think we do tend to be a little bit over-heroic, and we have this model maybe of breaking through, rather than integrating and being able to hold, say, a difficult memory or mindset. And really the practice is about the holding environment. Not about battling with the thing itself that's uncomfortable. And that's very difficult.

When I said that it was not a popular meditation instruction, I meant it. The only meditation instruction as unpopular is very similar. Which is, in the practice of lovingkindness, the underlying principle is to do it in the easiest way possible. It's not meant to be a struggle. It's creative. It can be fun. And that underlying principle is confounding for a lot of people, because traditionally you start with the offering of lovingkindness to yourself, because you are supposed to be easiest. And clearly that is not the case for many, many people.

I always go back to the underlying principle. I say, stick yourself in later. Start with a benefactor. I actually once had a public dialogue with Barbara Fredrickson about this, because one of her books had just come out and we were somewhere in New York doing this talk together. And she said, in teaching lovingkindness that she does, or having lovingkindness taught so much as she does for research, she felt like someone had to have at least some positive experience of it within the first few weeks, or they wouldn't continue. And that was especially hard because you start with yourself and that can be so difficult. And I said, "Well, change the order." And she said—she's since changed her mind, but at the time she said, "Well, I can't change the order because it's for research. So everything needs to be replicated exactly."

Wendy Hasenkamp ([45:51](#)): Ah, right, of course!

Sharon Salzberg ([45:53](#)): And I said, "God, as a human being who's a teacher, if I had somebody in front of me who was struggling, I change the order in 10 seconds." So anyway, that's another subject.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([46:03](#)): Yeah. That's an interesting challenge for research.

Sharon Salzberg ([46:06](#)): But she has changed her mind since then. But I know that it's going to be a struggle for a lot of people. And we need to understand that and just shift the order.

So the other part of it comes in as you offer lovingkindness to this variety of beings—those you feel close to, and as you don't feel so close to. You come to someone you find difficult, which in Asia is usually translated as an enemy. So you come to the offering of lovingkindness to an enemy. And here too, they say, maybe you don't start with the most unthinkable person in your life who has hurt you so badly, or who in your eyes has behaved so terribly on the world stage. Start with somebody who is a little bit of an annoyance, and slowly make your way over.

And again, it's not wrong and you're not bad for jumping in off the deep end, but it's going to be harder. Why do it in the hardest way possible? If you put the building blocks in place slowly, then when you offer lovingkindness to an extremely difficult person—and it's back to an embodied understanding you may not even have the words for—oh this is what it feels like to have compassion for someone else and for myself. Or this is what it feels like to have lovingkindness for someone and realize, "I can't fix this." Or to have lovingkindness for someone and realize, "I so disagree with how they behave or what they stand for that I'm going to fight against it with everything I've got, but not from the same place of so much hatred and alienation." And so, if you make your way there slowly, it'll be more genuine.

[\(48:01\)](#) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp ([48:27](#)): I know you've been thinking a lot recently—your latest book is called *Real Change*—and so I know you've been thinking about of activism and change in society. So I'm just wondering if you want to share some thoughts there about the relevance of the Buddhist path, or these ideas, to creating change.

Sharon Salzberg ([48:42](#)): Yeah. A lot of my teaching, for a while... Most of my teaching is just public, like whoever shows up on Zoom or, back in the day, in the room. Some of it is more targeted toward particular populations. And so for many years, a good amount of my teaching was for people we call caregivers. I always think there needs to be a better word, but people who either in their personal life, taking care of a family member, or in their professional life, they're working often on the front lines of suffering, dealing with some intractable system.

And part of my effort is gratitude, because I really believe these are the people who are holding up the world for the rest of us, often unheralded and uncelebrated. And part of it is, as you know far better than I, the kind of distinction that's made these days between empathy and compassion. And I've seen... We have all seen, I think a world without a lot of empathy, which is really cruel and very cold. And so I've really celebrated the efforts people have made to do empathy training and things like that.

But then I think of my people and they've got plenty of empathy. They resonate with other people's situation. That's often why they're doing what they're doing. But they're burning out for some other reason. And so sometimes it seems that's a certain lack of balance. It's compassion for others, but not for themselves so much. Sometimes it seems like a lack of balance in that there's maybe tremendous caring, but not a lot of wisdom in a sense of better boundaries, or a sense of limits. Like wisdom—"Yeah, I'm not in control of the universe. I can't fix it according to my timetable," and so on. So I'm really interested in that, and helping foster some of that kind of balance for these tremendous people.

And one day I woke up and I thought, "Who reminds me of those caregivers?" And I thought, "Oh, activists." It's the same kind of dynamic. And so I did a bunch of exploration, and did a bunch of interviews and stuff for that book, for *Real Change*. And it was very gratifying for me. It came out right in the pandemic. It was supposed to come out I think June of 2020. It came out in September instead. And in that period, I showed it to a friend who was excerpting it for something, and he said, "I really liked the book, but I kept reading those examples you used and thinking, THAT'S what made you anxious? Wait till you see what's coming."

So I went back to the publisher and I said, "Would it be okay if I wrote a new preface to try to contextualize the book?" And they said, "Sure." And my overarching question for myself in writing that preface was, what's still true? There's been so much disruption and upheaval and change, and not knowing, like what's still true? And in effect, what am I counting on? What am I leaning on? And I really looked, and it came back to those same elements of the meditation practice that I've been utilizing. And the same kind of wisdom. There needs to be balance.

I was so grateful that the topics in the book... I would wake up in the morning thinking, "Did I write a completely irrelevant book?" But it has chapters like *Moving from Anger to Courage*, or *Moving from Grief to Resilience*. And I thought, "Well, thank goodness." There are perennial truths.

Wendy Hasenkamp (52:40): Just in closing, I want to come back to some of what you were talking about, about interconnectedness and that being the real state of affairs. I've heard you say one of the most powerful and common outcomes of practice is that you end up feeling more connected—which can seem a little bit counterintuitive, often we're doing this individual practice by ourselves. So just wondering if you want to share the thoughts on that trajectory, how that ends up making us realize interconnectedness.

Sharon Salzberg (53:10): Yeah. I mean, I think it's the nature of wisdom. Because I think sometimes people feel, "I'm going to end up really kind sanctimonious and I'm always going to give myself a lecture and I'm going to see this stuff come up in my mind and I'm going to slam it down. And I'm going to make myself be kind of a hypocrite, like I'm not going to like this person, but I'm going to pretend to be interested in what they're saying," or whatever. But I haven't found the experience to be anything like that.

Things shift inside of us because we're seeing things differently. It's very genuine. And some of it has to do with remembering to pause. If you're about to react to what somebody's saying, maybe you want to pause and listen a little bit more. Or something I started doing during isolation in the pandemic, which I had learned from other people, they said they got in the habit of not pressing send on the email right away, but reading it again, and then thinking, "What would it be like to get this as a recipient?" And then maybe rewrite it. I thought that's a really good habit. So I took it up, which was great.

So we might have to make little adjustments to give wisdom the chance to arise. But it's the wisdom. It's just like, we see things differently. You see somebody struggling and you think, well, maybe they're giving a bad time to everyone they supervise at work because they're having a hard time themselves. And you can kind of see it on their face, if you stop. Or a real belief that everybody wants to be happy. And we are taught so many things that are just wrong about where happiness is to be found.

Or understanding that somebody... My favorite question in going into an organization or a company to teach is, who else needs to be doing their job well for you to do your job well? I was talking to a physician, who's the head of a large medical practice in a hospital, also in the height of the pandemic. And he said, "You know who I have an increased appreciation for? It's the cleaning staff." I thought, "Well, yeah!" But I tried that question not too long ago on Zoom with this company, and nobody was very excited by it. So then I said, "Well, how many of you work outside of the home? And what are you relying on for transportation? There's like a train driver or there's a car mechanic, or there's somebody maintaining the roads." And that wasn't really doing it either.

So I said, "How many of you eat where you don't grow your own food?" And you just see, we are embedded in these chains of connection. That's just how things are. And maybe we stop for a few moments and thank somebody who we normally take for granted. Or we realize, if someone's counting on me, I need to perform to whatever degree of excellence I can. There's so many ways in which we can see it, because it's just the way it is. And we don't need to romanticize it or think it's anything special, but it's also not... It's a shift that happens. And so, you're about to ridicule somebody and you stop for a moment and you think, "They don't look that happy. Maybe I'll just be a little kinder. Or say what I have to say in a nicer way." Something like that. It's so genuine and it's so kind of flowing that, that big fear—"I'm going to be this awful, stern, made up person"—it's not like that.

Wendy Hasenkamp (57:04): Yeah. Well, thank you so much for spending the time to chat with us today. This has been so nourishing and wonderful. And I really appreciate everything you're doing in the world—and you've been a great teacher to me so, personal thanks as well.

Sharon Salzberg (57:18): Well, thank you. It is just lovely to be with you.

Outro – Wendy Hasenkamp (57:26): *This episode was edited and produced by me and Phil Walker. Music on the show is from Blue Dot Sessions and Universal. Show notes and resources for this and other episodes can be found at podcast.mindandlife.org. If you enjoyed this episode, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts and share it with a friend. And if something in this conversation sparked insight for you, let us know. You can send an email or voice memo to podcast@mindandlife.org.*

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