MINDFUL
IN MAY

Dr. Elise Bialylew, founder of Mindful in May (mindfulinmay.org) and The Mind Life Project (www.mindlifeproject.com) and author of The Happiness Plan, interviews Sharon Salzberg

Sharon Salzberg *is the New York Times Best Selling author and teacher of Buddhist meditation practices in the West. In. 1974, she co-founded the Insight Meditation Society at Barre, Massachusetts with Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein. Her emphasis is on vipassana (insight) and metta (love-kindness) methods, and she has been leading meditation retreats around the world for over three decades. All of these methods have their origins in the Theravada Buddhist Tradition. Her books include Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness, A Heart as Wilde as the World, Real Happiness- The power of Meditation: A 28-Day Program, which was on the New York Times Best Seller list in 2011, and the follow-up Real Happiness at Work.*

Elise: Sharon, welcome to the programme. It's such an honour to have you here. We had a conversation about five or six years ago now for this programme. And this conversation comes at a time in the world that is incredibly turbulent and a time that you've actually released a new book called Real Change: Mindfulness to Heal Ourselves and the World.

I think there couldn't be a more relevant book right now. So, I'm really looking forward to this conversation. Thank you.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, thank you so much for having me.

Elise: I also want to share with you, on the record for people that don't know of your work, which I find hard to imagine, that you are really a treasure in the world. You're someone that has had such a huge level of service in terms of your work in the field of meditation and mindfulness. But I wanted to thank you personally because I feel like you've been my mentor from afar through your teaching.

Sharon Salzberg: Thank you for saying that.

Elise: So just to begin with, we had an extensive conversation that went more through your story and also specifics of meditation. But today I wanted to focus on the themes within your book. Would you, though, be able to share to begin how mindfulness and meditation has actually been of service to healing yourself and also supporting you in the incredible service that you've contributed to the world?

Sharon Salzberg: Sure. Well, I went to India to learn meditation. This was 1970, and if I was going to describe myself in one word at that point in my life, I was 18 years old and I would say fragmented. My family life, my childhood had been very disrupted and chaotic and traumatic. And as for many people, mine was a family system where this was just never spoken about. And so, I had all these feelings roiling around within me and didn't know where to put them. And it was only when I went to college that I took an Asian philosophy course. And it was in the context of that course that two very major things happened. One was I heard the Buddhist statement that life has suffering in it, that this is just part of life.

It felt almost like the first time in my life that I didn't feel kind of weird and, you know, marginalised and different so, so terribly different from everybody else. I thought, "oh, this is a part of life and it's a way of saying I belong." I actually had a place of belonging and belonging is a big theme in my life and in my work and the other thing I heard in the context of this class was that there were tools that were actual direct, practical methods that, if you used them, could help you be

happier. And I instinctively knew the being happier was not a selfish thing.

You know, it wasn't like just lying around like, “oh, I'm happier. It's fine for me, you know, forget everyone else,” It would give me the energy to connect to others in a different way. And so, I was going to college in this town in upstate New York, and I looked around looking for somewhere where I could actually learn how to meditate. I wasn't that interested in the philosophical overlay or some identification of myself, you know, of a certain kind of affiliation or rejecting anything else. I just didn't see it anywhere.

And so, I created this independent study project for the university and I said I'd like to go to India for a year and study meditation, and they said okay. So off I went and I actually began meditating in January of 1971. And I'll say that. I relied on my meditation practice, and I still rely on my meditation practice for the same benefits, which was, first of all, easing that sense of fragmentation and giving me a much more cohesive sense of being more centred.

The way I describe it these days is having a place of rest, not avoiding thoughts and feelings and reactions and all of that, but having a little bit of space so that I'm not necessarily just so enmeshed, to have a place of rest. It also gave me the ability to be aware of all different kinds of feelings and experiences in a different way, to be with painful things in a different way, beautiful and wonderful things in a different way. And to really have a kind of spaciousness to hold them all in in a more relaxed, open and accepting way.

Elise: You know, I was thinking before this conversation around your story and with my having trained in Psychiatry and working in Psychology, reflecting on your story that you just referenced and talk about in your book, the level of trauma in your childhood with multiple losses and the loss of your mom at a very early age and then your father.

What came up was how fascinating, and what was it about you that led you to then go on from that sort of soil to be able to flourish in such a strong way and spill that over to doing such incredible service in the world? What do you think?

I was really just genuinely curious about what that is, because there are so many stories where that is not the case and someone with your background with that deck of cards would not have been able to carve out this path. When you look back were there things about you, or do you feel like the tools you learnt supported you? How do you make sense of it?

Sharon Salzberg: Well, the completely magical moment, I think, was the moment I decided to go to India. Because there would have been nothing easier than to feel kind of distant and abstract and think, well, that'll be a nice thing to do to study, maybe I'll read some more books about it. Maybe I'll read some more books about it .Maybe I'll go to graduate school and study it. Maybe I'll do a thesis on it. But instead, it was such a passion. Like I've got to learn how to do this, which is the completely magical moment for anybody, to step off the sidelines right into the centre of possibility. And where that came from, I don't have a clue.

You know I look back at that moment, and I think how did I do that? I was 18. I had grown up in New York City, I was going to college in upstate New York, this town called Buffalo. I had never even been to California when I decided to go to India. And there it was. So that was extraordinary. And then I think I had the tools.

They're actually skills training. You know, in presence, in balance and connection, and I had wonderful teachers, a variety of them, who were very encouraging about my using them, you know, anybody using them. And I was reassured by the fact that you didn't have to subscribe to a belief system or join anything, that it was really a question of training attention in a different way, which anybody might want to do.

Elise: Just before we continue on, could you just define your perspective on what mindfulness is? I know it's a very basic question, but everyone's got a slightly different take on it.

Sharon Salzberg: No, it's a very important question because, of course, the word can mean many different things. So, there's not just a single meaning. I usually describe mindfulness as a quality of awareness or attention. So that our perception of what's happening in the present moment, isn't so distorted by bias or some old conditioning. So, for example, if we have physical pain, if we have heartache, if we have disappointment, very commonly, we immediately start anticipating the future, like what's going to feel like tomorrow, what's going to be like next week, what's going to feel like next year?

Then not only do we have to deal with the genuine discomfort that is happening now, we have now piled on, you know, years' worth of discomfort and we can't deal with it all at once. And so, we feel defeated. Or we may have some feeling like I shouldn't feel this: I shouldn't allow myself to feel this particular emotion- anger, sadness, whatever it might be: I have meditated all these years. I shouldn't be here or I should know better: I should be in control or whatever. So then when that feeling arises, we have shame and, you know, anger about it and all these other things, or I say, you know, particularly in these times and/or we fall into the future in a way that's really anxiety driven, like, I don't know, what about the first time I fly ? Maybe I wont have what I need, and I'm going to have to go into the city and I haven't been in the city. What's going to happen? And so, we create a lot of speculation about things that have not happened and may never happen, and we feel really frightened by it. We may have many habits of basically adding on something to an experience that makes it more difficult or more distant.

So, one of the things I was thinking earlier when you asked the first question was mindfulness teaches us and has taught me how to be with some very painful emotions in a different

way. So, let's say anger would be a good example of this. If we can be with the anger, not judging ourselves and not condemning ourselves, like I shouldn't feel this, this has to go away, but also not like consumed by it, like this vengeful thing, you know but we actually look at the anger itself like, what does it feel like? What does it feel like in my body and we take an interest in it? It's like watching the anger movie. What do we see? Usually, we see it's not just one thing, it's a pretty complex feeling in moments of sadness, the moments of fear, almost certainly there are moments of helplessness in there. And I find that if I can sit and just be with the experience as it's unfolding and come to that place of helplessness, that gives me a clue, like I have to take action.

I have to do even one small thing, one thing that seems so completely insufficient. But I have to do it because that will undo the sense of helplessness that is so much at the bottom of that. And so, it's not like we never respond, or we never have a feeling about something, but we may not be in such a rush.

The other thing that mindfulness does is really help us to remember to take in the joy. Which can be difficult, you know, either we're so distracted, that we hardly notice what's going on or we have impossible standards. You know, I often tell the story, I don't think it's in this particular book, but of a friend of mine taking me to Washington, DC. one year. There's an area in Washington, DC where there are many, many cherry trees planted, and they all bloom at once, and that's called cherry blossom season. So, it's like a big tourist attraction. And so, my friend brought me there and I was just in awe.

I thought, wow, this is so beautiful, like so many trees and all these delicate pink blossoms and they're all blooming at once. And then my friend said, “oh, no, it's past the peak.” And I thought, oh, no, I'm having a bad experience like this isn't good enough. You know, so how many times does that happen? We tell ourselves the story is not good enough.

Someone else tells us it’s not good enough. And I think this is very prevalent in our time.

I think this is very prevalent in our time. There’s so much pain, there's so much struggle, there's so much suffering that we feel guilty about taking in the joy, it just doesn't feel right. It feels like it's selfish and self-centred. But really, we have to think, how do we have energy to go on, you know, not only to help ourselves, but help others if we're depleted or exhausted, overwhelmed and if we are just despairing, it's not going to happen. And so, the things that help replenish us and give us joy and give us energy are really very important. Mindfulness really helps with that as well.

Elise: Thank you. Yes. I think that's so helpful to hear both those sides, because it's not just about, you know, sitting in the misery and exploring the misery, but it's actually supporting us to notice the beauty and the miracle and the extraordinariness of so many different moments that just pass us by.

I wanted to explore anger more because there was a whole chapter about it in your book. Obviously in the context of change and making a difference in the world and change for ourselves, anger is a really important topic because it's anger that can propel us to take action if we know how to use it properly. You wrote about anger in the book saying that in Buddhist psychology, they talk about transforming anger into discerning wisdom. Can you speak a little bit about this and you touched on what to do with anger, but I'd love to explore it a little bit further?

Sharon Slazberg: Well, we know that anger in an ordinary situation at a meeting, you know, at some gathering, sometimes it's the angriest person in the room that demands everybody look at some problem. You know, if you're in a room with a hole in the carpet- I’m obviously just making this up- everyone else may be kind of studiously looking the other way anywhere but the hole.

And that person says, look at that, that's just not right. There's a hole in the carpet and so anger can have that edge, which is very useful of cutting through social nicety and cutting through expectation and conventional behaviour and so on. And so, the question really becomes, can we utilise anger, can we use the energy of anger without getting subsumed in it, overcome by it?

Because if we do, it's so damaging to us, being lost in anger. It also tends to have a kind of tunnel vision quality. Like, if you think about the last time you were really angry at yourself and just bring it up right now, it's not a time where we think, "you know what, I did those five great things this morning." You know, it's more like "I said, that stupid thing, and that's all that I am." So we want the energy, and we are limited if we get lost in tunnel vision and there's a kind of burning or contraction that can be very damaging.

So, when I was working on this book, I had the thought that I wanted to use that quote by Gandhi, which goes something like… and it's a fine point because we're not talking about feeling anger being a problem, because we feel what we feel. We're talking about being lost in it, overcome by it.

And so, I thought I want to use that quote by Gandhi, who said something like "Being lost in anger is like drinking poison, thinking it's going to kill the other guy." I needed the exact quote and so on, I looked it up, I kept researching it and I never saw it once attributed to Gandhi. I saw it attributed to Oprah Winfrey and the Buddha and the big book of AA and Carrie Fisher and Nelson Mandela. I have no idea who said it, but it's kind of the point you know, like not to disparage what we're feeling or deny it, but to realise that if we wrap ourselves in it and it becomes more of a constant, it's going to deplete us and exhaust us and really damage us, actually.

And so, we have to try to find our way through to a different relationship, to the anger, as with everything, so that we can capture the energy and in fact, going back to your earlier question, for many years, my favourite definition of

mindfulness came from an article that was in The New York Times newspaper about a very, very early program bringing mindfulness into the classroom in the States.

This was a program in Oakland California. And it was a fourth-grade classroom, so that meant that children were about nine or 10 years old. And the journalist asked one of the kids, “what is mindfulness?” and he said “Mindfulness means not hitting someone in the mouth. That's what mindfulness is.” I thought that is a great definition of mindfulness because what it implies is you're feeling angry when you're starting to feel angry- not after you've sent the email, you know, but you're so in touch, and you're aware of what you're feeling and also implies a certain balanced relationship to the anger, because if we just get consumed by it every time it comes up, we're likely to hit a lot of people in the mouth because life can be really frustrating. But at the same time, if you hate what you're feeling and you're ashamed of it and you try to deny it and you try to repress it, you just get tighter and tighter and tighter until you explode. So, it actually doesn't work.

We talk about mindfulness as the place in the middle. We’re fully connected to what's happening, neither lost in it nor pushing it away. Then again, space seems to be my theme tonight with you. You know, some space is created. And I like to think, for example, of that kid in that opening of space thinking, “you know, I hit someone in the mouth last week, didn't work out that well. Let me try this.” It's like you don't get inert or a passive, but, options arise that you might not have seen before.

Elise: Thank you. I'm just thinking about this anger, lwhen you feel anger, and I was quite comforted to hear the Dalai Lama talking about how angry he sometimes got or gets, and that's really reassuring. But when when you get struck by anger, that sort of feeling, and obviously in America right now, we won't go into politics, but I'm sure that's not an uncommon feeling for a lot of people, what can people actually do?

Could you give people a couple of pointers who are listening around what to experiment with.

Sharon Salzberg: Yes, I mean, I would say a few things, one is breathe, remember to breathe. You know, because that will give you that place of stillness or rest. And then you can pay attention, feel the anger in your body, it's like a storm moving through you and just wait with it, you know, be with it. Keep it company. See what happens, because the chapter that you're referring to in my book is something like moving from anger to courage. We want that energy. But we don't want the contraction and the and the really intense suffering that it causes us in that same way. So, breathe, feel it in your body, hang out with it, you know, because it will reveal something to you.

Elise: Okay, thank you. There is this theme in your book around acceptance and change, and I love this quote, I'm just going to read this quote on this topic. “So, living and working with wisdom and compassion is a combination of accepting what arises before us as conditioned, therefore not subject to our singular, wilful control, and also seeing it as changing constantly, therefore always suggestive of possibility.” And you referred to Soren Kierkegaard, the great philosopher, as expressing these two poles as the necessary and the possible.

First of all, could you explain what you mean in this quote by the “conditions”? I understand, but for the listeners, expand a bit on that and then expand on this balance that we need to maintain in order to see change and manifest our visions in between this accepting the necessary and moving towards what's possible.

Sharon Salzburg: You know, I really hesitated about using the word acceptance. I finally did, obviously, because it's a common word. But for a long time, I was trying to replace it in my own speaking with just acknowledge, you know, acknowledgement. This is how it is. And the more we dance around that or try to deny it or, poke holes in it in some way, it's not real….you know just to say this is how it is.

And sometimes what we are acknowledging in that way is tremendous suffering and difficulty, we're saying, ok this is how it is. But we don't have to reify or solidify it like this is how it will always be, you know, this is the sum total of what life can offer and in fact, if we can connect in that sort of more genuine fashion with the suffering, then I think even more of a sense of possibility can arise. Learning how to hold both is not easy. But that's sort of the point.

I tell the story also in the book about this young woman, Samantha, who I had been connecting to - some of the people in Florida in this area called Parkland's, where there had been a school shooting in 2018 where 17 people were killed, students and teachers and so on staff. And she was an alumnus of that school. Her mother was is a teacher there, who was there that day, and wasn't harmed, but obviously the whole town was incredibly traumatised, and Samantha got very involved in working with young students for a protest march and having their voices heard and things like that.

And I went down there to teach also in 2018 and we had this very moving day together, and at one-point Samantha raised her hand and said, “I feel really weird, I just feel really strange being here because I'm having an incredible day, you know, learning about mindfulness and being with you and it's so amazing. But I know the only reason it happened was because that horrible thing happened. I don't know how to get over it in order to appreciate this.” And I said I don't know that we ever get over it or we learn to hold them both at once, because both are true, and we need them both. So when my book came out, which was September 1st, a delayed publication from June, which was the publisher's decision, and I had a series of panels which are now on YouTube, one from people from Parkland and Samantha was on the panel. So, I said to her, “Samantha, do you remember that conversation that we had a few years ago,” and she said, “Not only do I remember it,
I think of it every single day. I like being able to hold them both.” In Buddhist terminology we would call that

equanimity doesn't have to be called equanimity, which is kind of a strange word, but it is that sense of being in touch with them both. It may have to start with this is how it is.

You know, this is how things are actually unfolding for people, or me or both. And there's some sense of what could be and if we don't have any sense of what could be, and we were just mired in the difficulty, we will get despairing. But if we only have a sense of the possible without a real honest acknowledgement of what is the we're just kind of floating above somewhere, you know, and it's completely ungrounded. So, we really do need both.

Elise: I love within this topic as well, this thing about the conditions. And there was another chapter in your book about interconnection and systems thinking and the fact that so much is out of our control because we've arrived in this moment because of so many different conditions and causes.

And I love that aspect of the teachings and then supported by the other concept of impermanence and everything is constantly changing. I often think about that in terms of personality. Do you think that from your decades and lifetime of teaching in your own practice as well, that the personality changes? This is a bit deep and maybe beyond that?

Sharon Salzberg: No, no, no, no, no. It's quite interesting.

Elise: Yes because coming again, from a kind of Psychotherapy psychiatry perspective, versus kind of a meditation and integrating the two. What is your perspective on that, do you think?

Sharon Salzberg: What would you say from a psychotherapeutic perspective? I'm curious.

Elise: Well, I must say, I love the quote that I heard that I'm going to stuff up from Ram Dass, which was something along the lines of "after all these years of meditating, I still have all the same neuroses. I just look at them and laugh," or something along those lines. So, I just wonder. Yes, I'm dodging question and throwing it back to you.

Sharon Salzberg: I think it's good. I think it's a combination, you know, because I think what Ram Dass said is the most essential thing because we don't have absolute control and how we relate to what arises in our minds is much more important in the end than what arises in our minds, because it's so different, you know. Something may come up, and we don't have to take it to heart and build a whole future around it or a whole sense of who we really are, like: I'm such an angry person and always will be. Things can come up, and it's almost like I mean, it's about the images. It's like clouds moving through the sky. And maybe it's a really threatening looking cloud, but it's just a cloud moving to the sky so you're not frightened of it. You're not upset about it. It's just like there it is, you know, and with a great deal of love and compassion for yourself in the face of it.

Because, you know, if you do take it to heart and you identify with it and you get all involved in it it's going to be very painful. But "there it goes," so I mean, that's the first order of work now. Don't blame yourself for what you're feeling or thinking and, you know, given that the personality is kind of made up of that: tendencies, responses, reactions and so on, but work on relating differently. Forgive yourself for what you couldn't control, which is the arising.

And again, you know, it's not that we can't affect conditioning, we can, but affect and control are two different things, and so demanding, you know: I'll never be frightened again: I've grieved long enough: It's over now: I'll never fall asleep meditating again. It's not going to work. That doesn't mean we can't affect conditions like maybe don't eat five meals before you sit down to meditate, you know, it'll help. But you can't insist never again, because conditions may

come together in some way that you will get sleepy when you meditate. So how we deal with it is the most important thing. Once we're not so super identified and involved, things maybe don't have such a fertile ground to land in. And so that's why I say personality might change.

You know tendencies become less predominant and maybe they arise less frequently and or you're old enough to seek alternatives, like practising generosity or thanking people or, you know, things that may not come naturally to you, but with practice, the do come more naturally to you. But the most essential teaching, I think, is really what Ram Dass was saying. Because that's what's real, we can work with whatever comes up and be with it differently and the amount of time we spend blaming ourselves, “I shouldn't feel that I shouldn't have that.” It's not useful.

Elise: Yes. I think you've spent your lifetime talking, teaching and exploring this whole area of also loving kindness and compassion, And I think personally it’s been probably the greatest door opener to change and possibility.

There's an area where you talk about this in your book a little bit, but I really want to explore this as we move to the closing of our conversation- around thoughts. And I'm just always amazed by the fact that thoughts, like we should go to university for thoughts and thinking, because it's something that this automatic thought that rules our life, that causes so much suffering, potentially, that no one really tells us how to be with, and through mindfulness there’s this incredible possibility of being with thoughts in a new way that can offer so much freedom.

I wanted to read out a quote from your book and I think it connects to the real change piece. I think and I know for myself, that there's a lot of people that want to make a difference and take a risk, maybe they're in a career that they're doing for money, but they don't love and they've got a longing and they want to make a difference, but they've got

the thought, “Who am I to do that? Or, “I couldn't possibly do this or that or whatever.”

So, thoughts can be so imprisoning and limiting and also stop us from making a real difference. You write, “As a habit, certain thought patterns arise that we tend to get lost in, overcome by, defined by, even as we resent or fear them. We can retrain our whole mental attitude by first learning to recognise these patterns and perhaps even calmly naming them.” Then you go on.” Once we recognise them, we can remind ourselves that they are just visiting, that they are not essentially who we are. We can't stop them from visiting, but we can let them go.”

I'd love you to speak more about this idea of thoughts are not essentially who we are.

Sharon Salzberg: Yes, well I mean, thoughts are experiences that we identify with very, very strongly, like if we certainly identify with the body, say if you hit your elbow and it hurts, you say, “Wow, my elbow really hurts.” But you don't usually say “I am a sore elbow,” you know, but with certain thought patterns, we dive right in there.

That's who I really am. That's essentially me. And we forget that everything is arising and passing away. And I think it is especially interesting in the realm of action because we can be so limited by certain thoughts. “I can't do anything. Whatever I can offer is so small, it could never be enough. It's so insignificant, I just won't do anything at all. I don't know how to do it. I don't know how to say it.”

So, I'll just hold back so many things. And, in fact, I often tell the story about when I was leaving India, I went to India theoretically for a year, stayed a little longer, came back, finished college, and went back to India. And when I was leaving the second time, I thought I was leaving for a very short period to come back to the States, get a new visa and do things and go right back to India for the rest of my life, which is what I was sure going to happen.

I went to see one of my teachers, this woman named Deepa Ma, who was living in Calcutta at the time, just to see her and say goodbye and get her blessing for my very short trip back to the United States. And she said to me, “When you go back, you'll be teaching.” And I said, “No I won’t.” and she said, “Yes you will.” I thought it was ludicrous that I could ever do something like that. And then she said actually two things that were very significant. She said, “You really understand suffering. That's why you should teach.” And, you know, I had that really terrible childhood, but it never occurred to me that it could be utilised in some way that would be helpful for people. And then she said 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, walked down these four flights of stairs thinking, “No, I won't. That's ridiculous, I'm not going to teach.” Then I came back to the States and as things unfolded, I began teaching. Then one day I woke up and I thought, “Oh, she was right.”

You know, so what if it is that thought, “I can't do it, can't make it happen.” We need to be able to see it as a thought. Not all thoughts are ridiculous. Some are quite worthy, but we don't even know because they come up and we’re gone. We get sucked in and so we're not trying to dismiss thinking or make it go away or the narrative possibility of the mind, these are all very important, but we want some perspective and some ability to be empowered, so that we're not just led around. You know, we all know that feeling like you walk into a room and you think, “Why did I come in here?” It's like we had some thought, “I need a pen… I need a cup of tea,” or whatever you know, and we're in there and can’t remember, and so, we want to be aware enough to see things quickly and we want to be able to have that kind of choice and especially in that realm of action, trying to make a difference in this world. One of the things I appreciate the most about my book is that I get to talk to so many people who are working in the world to try to make it a better world.

And you can see how easy it is to be discouraged or to be impatient, to think it has to happen on my timetable and it's just not cooperating. Or all the ambiguity we live through, not quite knowing if something's going to work, but feeling this is the right thing to do so I need to do it anyway. Or ways in which we may have a certain set of values, for example and this came out in the anger chapter of my book a lot you know, maybe we have a certain set of values, but we don't have agreements amongst the people, or colleagues, that we will treat one another in a certain way.

You know, so there's the mission of the organisation, but the actual relationships are not that great. You know, there's so many issues, and so to be able to be willing to work through them and to not have a sense of devastation when you don't have an immediate win or when trouble arises, it takes a lot it takes a lot of perspective., it takes a lot of flexibility of mind; it takes an ability to begin again. You know, when we feel it's fallen apart to have resilience. And all of that is based in a way, on how we can deal with our thoughts.

Elise: Yes. How do you see mindfulness as helping us to learn how to begin again and how does that translate into our everyday life, even in the realm of, let's say, emotions like losing it, just having a moment where you've just lost it? If you've reacted to someone, like maybe it's a partner, it's your kid, it's your colleague.

Sharon Salzberg: Yes I mean, we will lose it, and I think I'm laughing because this last week, I've been doing a lot of teaching online because I was supposed to be travelling and everything got cancelled. And so, to try to make up for it, you know, I've been doing a lot of teaching, not even book centred so much, but just teaching. And people keep asking me, "How can I stay mindful all day long? How can I maintain this level of concentration when I'm not on retreat? How can I keep having faith?" And each time I say it's not going to happen that way, you know, we're going to lose it.

We're going to get reactive; we're going to get overwhelmed; we're going to fall down. But then we can begin again. And that's the point. So, again, you know, we need reasonable expectations to be kind to ourselves, but also, I think beginning again, this is lesson 101 in meditation. And 101 doesn't mean we conquer it, we never come back there. I think it is the fundamental teaching and for me, I'd say it was maybe the most significant exercise.

So, a very common way of meditating, if you're using meditation as your mindfulness training, is to begin with, to sit down, choose an object of awareness, which could be a sound, could be an image, could be the feeling of the breath, could be lovingkindness phrases, could be anything really. And we rest our attention on that object, and lo and behold, our attention wanders. We go to the past, we go to the future, to judgement, to speculation. We're all over the place and then we realise that so the instruction is seeing if you can let go gently and just return. No blame, you don't have to call yourself a failure. You don't have to castigate yourself just come back and let go and come back. It's what one of my teachers, called exercising the letting go muscle. See if you can let go and start over.

So that's the first day. It's the first lesson. And we do it over and over and over again and I realised a long time ago that that had big life implications. Every day we fall down in some way and have to pick ourselves up or let others help us up, or we need a course correction. You know, going in a certain direction is not really working. We have to admit it, and be able to start over in some way. And so that skill, maybe more than anything else I've learnt in meditation has been really valuable.

Elise: Yes. I'm just laughing as you speak because I'm thinking about being in lockdown with two young kids and work and a partner who's also got a business and the fact that it's been like a hundred times a day thing for me at the moment, you know, that I lose it. And I feel so bad about myself because I sometimes feel, “oh, what a fraud I am.” You know, I'm

teaching people to meditate and then I'm losing it at my partner or whatever.

But I think I'm getting better at catching myself in the "losing it" process and at least being able to speak it and say, "I've just lost it so I need to get out of here." I'm still having those emotions, of course, but at least I think I'm getting a little bit better at managing them.

Can I ask you, you've spent a long time teaching, loving kindness, and we spent quite a long time in our last conversation exploring that, but can you speak to the difference between loving kindness and compassion from a Buddhist perspective?

Sharon Salzberg: Yes, of course, they're very close, loving kindness and compassion and in conventional language, we use them interchangeably. In fact, I can't remember which book of mine, but I wrote some book where the editor assigned to me from the publishing house came to me and said "I brought up the term lovingkindness at this meeting and everybody laughed. Could you please call it compassion?"

And I was like, "They're different, you know?" But of course, we use them in the same. And there are many situations or contexts in which compassion is more readily understood. So, lovingkindness is an odd term, I know that. And I've thought about that because you may not hear it say in casual conversation, if you go to a cafe and you're overhearing the people to the next table, they're probably not using a term like lovingkindness.

And I've had scholars and translators say to me, just call it love, that's what you mean, and sometimes I do, but lovingkindness may be a little awkward because of its oddness, you know, love is complicated, you know, what do we actually mean when we say love? Sometimes we frankly mean a medium of exchange, like I will love you as long as,…or I will love myself, as long as I never make a mistake. And that's not what we really mean by that quality.

The sense of loving kindness isn't even necessarily an emotion or a feeling. It's a kind of sensibility, it’s a deep, deep knowing that our lives are interconnected, that they have something to do with one another, and that the construct of self and other and us and them, which can be a useful construct, is just a construct. Look at our world today: it should be ever more apparent that we are interdependent. What happens over there, doesn’t nicely stay over there, but it comes over here and what we do, it matters because our actions, too, will ripple out along these lines of connection. And so, it's very much that sensibility that everybody's lives are interdependent, that everybody wants to be happy, not in a superficial sense.

Everybody wants a sense of belonging. Everybody wants a sense of having a home somewhere in this body, in this mind on this planet. And it's because of the force of ignorance that we make so many mistakes, but we all do want to be happy. So, the word I use most commonly for lovingkindness is connection. It's just a strong sense of connection.

And then compassion has a slightly different flavour. They’re very close, but instead of recognising say that all beings want to be happy to elicit a sense of loving kindness, compassion is more based on the recognition that everybody is vulnerable. Not that we share the same degree of pain we don't, but that insecurity, that vulnerability, you know, the uncertainty of life, it's universal. And so that's a certain feeling of like, “Oh, maybe we should take care of one another,” or “We're in this together,” you know, we should we should help one another.

Compassion is defined in Buddhist psychology as the trembling or the quivering of the heart in response to seeing pain or suffering. So, it's a movement of the heart and it's a movement toward, to see if we can be of help. It begins with the recognition of suffering or fragility or vulnerability.

It's a movement toward not into, by the way, to burn up ourselves. It's a movement toward, to see if we can be of help, right. So it has certain implications, of some kind of balance. Maybe it's compassion for ourselves as well as for someone else or wisdom like there are limits to what we actually can do, you know, yes, it's a very rich and intricate exploration, but it just has a poignancy, which is a little different than the sense of just connection to others.

Elise: In the traditional teachings, there's so many different practices that you can do to cultivate different qualities, whether it's mindfulness and attention, so that you can develop insight or if it's like practising loving kindness and compassion to actually build that quality in ourselves. Do you see traditionally the loving kindness and compassion meditations, in terms of what you would actually do as a practice different from one another, or are they the same? Are you practising the same thing or are you thinking differently about your intention when you're actually trying to generate one of these?

Sharon Salzberg: No, I think the intention is the same, but with the style you have a choice basically. Because we practise loving kindness or compassion practices there are a whole range of practices, not by resting our attention on the feeling of the breath. We practise these meditations, often by the silent repetition of certain phrases like “may you happy, may you be peaceful.” So, the feeling tone is generosity. It's like generosity of the spirit. We’re gift giving, we're offering “may you be happy, may you be peaceful,” and we're offering a quality of attention that isn't saying, “Well, you know, you really should move closer because you're always late to work.” You know, whatever may be conditioned.

Elise: Yes. It's not conditioned on certain things.

Sharon Salzberg: Yes. So the phrases classically one might use to elicit that sense of lovingkindness are a little different than the phrases you might use to elicit that sense of compassion. Or more commonly, what we do these days is we just do loving

kindness in terms of the phrases and the style, but we might particularly choose a friend who's struggling right now who is really having a hard time as the recipient of the loving kindness. And so it will automatically change into a kind of compassion meditation because we will sense their struggle and their difficulty and so on. Or if you choose, you can actually do different sets of phrases, but it depends on your mind, too. Like, I think for me, I did that once in Burma, but I was there for three months in a very intensive practice so I could do each one very thoroughly. These days, I really more combine them.

Elise: And what would you say- I was Ieading a group recently, and a common thing comes up with lovingkindness that, you know, “I don't know what I'm supposed to be feeling.” When you're doing the practice and you're saying, bring to mind loved ones and then people that are less connected to you and then maybe, you know, people who you don't even know that, you know who might be suffering and you just kind of saying these phrases, but you're not feeling anything. What would you say to that? Is that Okay?

Sharon Salzberg: I do believe it's Okay. If you feel you're just being totally rote, you know, then I would try to change the relationship to the phrases so you feel your energy your intention is really gathering fully. You may try to bring up a sharper sense of the recipient visually or just through some sense of them. It's a challenging practice for a lot of people because, you may not feel much when you're actually doing it. But you will find your’re different in your life.

First of all, you have to know where to look for the difference and you have to be patient enough for it to have time, so, in terms of one thing you said, if you're going through the classical arc of lovingkindness practice, you actually make the offering of loving kindness first to yourself and then, as you said to a variety of different beings you have different relationships with. The reason I say beings is because recently I've been using a puppy as a benefactor. You know,

it doesn't have to be a human being, but you go through these varieties of different types of relationships, until you come to all beings everywhere.

So, one very classical category is a neutral person, someone you don't like or dislike. Someone you just feel kind of neutral toward or indifferent to, really, and the instruction is to try to pick someone that you tend to see now and then. Because that will be the place where you actually can gauge has anything shifted. You may not feel it when you're sitting there meditating, even if you use that person as a recipient every single day, you may not feel it, but the next time you see them, you will likely feel it and you can watch it develop.

So, for 45 years, probably, my colleagues and I have been saying, like the checkout person in the grocery store, they're the perfect person we usually discount. We look right through them, we ignore them. We're just indifferent to them.

So, I was reading a meditation out loud as being recorded by this journalist, and that was the meditation they chose. So, in the midst of it I thought, whoops let's look at that, you know, oh, you know, now we call them essential workers and how do we think we get to eat? Unless you grow your own food.

We are part of this interdependent network. And what's happening in that meditation is that we're actually paying attention to people we usually ignore. And that's why it works. And you will see it work.

I was teaching with a friend last night and he was telling the story of sitting it must have been, I don't know 30 years ago at the Insight Meditation Society and I was teaching love and kindness, and he chose as his neutral person, this clerk in a video store, you know, we used to go rent videos, rent video stores. He didn’t think anything much happened, but then he went he went home and he decided he wanted to see a video. So, he went to the store and he said he took one look at this guy and he just started crying.

He had a hide in the back of the store to compose himself. You know, it's like something happens, but we only tend to see it you know, in life. And so, it can be frustrating, but it's also gratifying because that's what we wanted. I think you have to see if it's completely mechanical, see if you can be more attentive to the phrases maybe switch benefactors, somebody else, you know, get a stronger sense of who it is. You can do that reflection. “Everybody wants to be happy just like me.” Everybody is struggling in some way, you know, because life is so fragile and then just keep proceeding.

Elise: Yes. Thank you so much.

I have one final question for you, and I think it's related to the topic of suffering and it's something that I've grappled with that I'd love for your perspective on. You touched on in your book as well. So, the first noble truth is around the fact that you alluded to that there is suffering and you were speaking about how that can be comforting in a way to know that you are part of this reality.

And then the second noble truth that there is a cause for the suffering and that that can be sort of craving, I’m not sure of th exact way of defining it but grasping, desire. In the context of wanting to take action and make things happen in the world, we have desires and longings.

So, when we hear this idea that craving, desire, grasping is the cause of our suffering, yet we need this forward-moving momentum of desire to do things in the world. Can you help me make sense of this? Because then the third noble truth is, if you want to be free of suffering, just let go of the craving and the desire. That's quite an intimidating requirement - so the question is about discernment. Can you speak to the discernment in what we're talking about?

Sharon Salzberg: Yes I mean, I think, language is a problem. English is a problem in trying to express some of these things. In Pali or Sanskrit - Pali is a kind of colloquial version of Sanskrit - it

would actually be different words, you know. What we call desire they might call intentionality, which we need, you know. If you find that you are obsessing about everything wrong in your life, which we usually to, you might have an intentional swing over to include what you have to be grateful for. That doesn't mean you're denouncing yourself for the other things and you're not violently yanking your mind away, you know, or trying to deny the painful elements, but you want a fuller picture, you want more balance. So, you think, "You know what? I never spend any time thinking about that. I spend all my time thinking about this other. Let me see what happens, when I open to intentionally move my attention to what I have to be grateful for."

So we need intentionality and we certainly, as you say, need an action. One of the very powerful and important symbols for me my entire life has been the Statue of Liberty. And somebody pointed out to me that the colour of the cover of my book is the same colour as the Statue of Liberty, which made me so happy.

Elise: You write about that in your book. There were quite a few references.

Sharon Salzberg: Yes, exactly. What I hadn't really thought of, you know, she's a symbol of compassion, of welcome, of belonging, like even the you that no one else wants, you have a place here. It's so important for me in my life.

What I hadn't really thought about until I was working on this book is that she's a woman on the move. She has a leg up. She's in mid stride. She's taking action. So that intentionality, that sense of agency is very, very important.

That's different than what's referred to as attachment or craving or greed. And it's actually a different word in Sanskrit, you know, so we say desire for both. So, but the thing with attachment or craving is that it's natural to want things, of course, we want things. But by the time we're lost in what I call attachment, there's a certain fixation that it

needs to be a certain way. “I'll never be happy unless it is this precise way,” - and usually it's too small. Our aspiration becomes very, very specific, like everything has to work out in this exact way, in this exact timetable.

You know, and we cling to it and that only causes suffering because, of course, life is very mutable. I was doing another interview earlier today with somebody who's compiling a book about Ram Dass, and she mentioned him as well, and she asked me if I remembered where I was when I heard that Ram Dass had a stroke, which was, you know, so severe. And I said, I do remember I was right here.

And I pulled a friend, a very close friend of Ram Dass who was on retreat next door at the Insight Meditation, so I pulled her out of the retreat, and I told her and then we just did a kind of vigil. I said, you know, it's natural as a human being, I want him to be well, I want him to survive, I want him to be able-bodied again. I want him to be as eloquent as he was before. It's natural. But when that gets sort of fixated and narrowed, then it becomes like insistence, you know.

And then the question comes up, well, what happens if it doesn't work where’s the love? You know, are you feeling betrayed because his body did not come back the way you thought it must. You know, in a way, do you abandon him? Or are you saying my friendship with him tells me to accompany him wherever this journey takes him. Naturally, I want it to take him to a certain place, but what if it doesn't? Is that Okay? And that's what I mean by too narrow, you know, it's like “He's got to be walking again.” Well didn't happen, actually.

Elise: Yes.

Sharon Salzberg: You know, so attachment to try to understand it myself and explain it to others, I sometimes would just replace it with the word control.

Elise: OK, yes, that's helpful. And maybe and just to bring it down to the listeners, to something practical. If people are working on something that they feel is really meaningful, that they want a particular outcome for and they're doing good in the world, it's the relationship that you're having with that which can be the problem. Or like in this context of the second noble truth, the cause of suffering, it's the relationship.

Sharon Salzberg: It's such a complex topic. Of course, we want that goal fulfilled, and we work toward having that goal fulfilled. But sometimes we get fixed, you know, and it's like maybe another ancillary 15 great things are happening and we don't even notice them. Or we know what it's like in a meeting when somebody has a very fixed idea of how things should work out and maybe 40 other possibilities are presented, but they can't even hear them. It's got to be this way. It's got to be this one way.

And I know it's complicated because when we do work in the world, there are metrics, and there's evaluation and there's ways that we really want to get that work accomplished, but sometimes it's so fixed and it's so narrow that we don't appreciate that maybe it didn't precisely work out for 15 children to get educated. And those results we won't see tomorrow, but we will see them.

Elise: Yes. Just a final word for the listeners. So, for people that might be embarking on meditation do you have any kind of final words that could hold them and support them along the road of this, but this inevitably bumpy journey?

Sharon Salzberg: I'm the kind of person who's very supported by structure, so I'm helped when I make a reasonable commitment to a structure, like I'm going to try this out because it's like an experiment.

I'm going to try this out five to ten minutes a day, whatever seems right to you every day for a week, two weeks, three weeks, a month, you know, not longer than a month because it's just the experimental phase, you know, and try it out.

Don't make some awesome commitment, like I have to sit 18 hours a day, you know, that's not going to happen. Very short. But see if you can bring it to life consistently and check it out, was that worth doing? And then maybe I'll do more, maybe I won't - whatever it might be.

Elise: Wonderful. Thank you so very much. It's been such a nourishing conversation. And thank you for your many books that the listeners will be able to find. There's so many and this is just one of many that's been wonderful to read. I wish well. I wish you good health. I wish you flourishing and lots more time on the planet to be doing the amazing work that you're doing.

Sharon Salzberg: Thanks so much. And back at you. All of those very things. Thank you so much. **