

Sharon Salzberg
Week 1, *Real Happiness at Work*
February 3rd, 2014
“Mindfulness & Concentration”

Hi. My name is Sharon Salzberg. In this month-long retreat we're going to go through the format that I laid out in my new book, "Real Happiness At Work," where we're going to look at the different elements that help keep us grounded, clear, and a whole lot happier; as well as ways of bringing a greater depth of meaning and clearer communication, more kindness and so on into our work life. It's a way of seeing our practice as being completely seamless, so that it's not something we're doing in these little pockets of time—maybe Saturday morning, or something like that—when we feel really cutoff from and unsupported by it for the rest of the week.

We're going to really see if we can bring our deepest values and practical ways of bringing them to life—and the sometimes very, very difficult experiences people have at work—bring it all together so that we do feel that quality of support and resourcefulness. The first session here in the first two chapters of the book are about, basically about, mindfulness and concentration. In the context of the book, I tend to call mindfulness “balance,” because it's not only the awareness quality of the mindfulness—the attention which is so often talked about—but it's the fact that we're paying attention in a certain way, which inherently means a kind of balance.

So I don't just mean balance in the sweeping sense it's usually used, like work-life balance; although some of that we'll talk about as well, but really the kind of moment-to-moment balance and rebalancing that we are capable of. We get super projection into the future. We're just going on and on and on: “well if this happens then I have to do that,” which isn't useful creative planning; it's just rumination and anxiety.

Or we are condemning our experience—we're condemning our experience thinking, “Oh, it should have been this, it should have been that. I should have been able to control this.” When in fact, when we really look with some balance, we say, “Oh, there were a lot of factors that fed into that process, into that experience. Maybe some I could affect and others were completely outside of my control.” So it's the balanced part of mindfulness that allows us to have insight.

You know, something happens and we're struggling against it right away. If something happens and we're struggling against it right away, there's not going to be a lot of learning going on. And at the same time, if we are completely submerged in our experience—no space, no centeredness—there's not going to be a lot of learning going on. So balance is like the secret ingredient in mindfulness.

In those first two chapters, I talk about that balance. I actually begin there. And then concentration—the ability to focus, to be present, to be aware, to be alert without being

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so swept up in distraction. We say that mindfulness helps refine our awareness, our attention, so all the things that normally clutter it—holding on, pushing away, all kinds of things—will be calmed down some, so that we can see more clearly. And concentration stabilizes our attention—the fact that we're normally quite distracted, fragmented, all over the place. The process of concentration is a process of gathering. We gather all that kind of wild attention, all those sort of reckless, speculative thoughts and we bring all of that together.

The larger sense of distractedness we experience in our lives is fragmentation and it's the way we—for example, with work—we can have so much real identification with our jobs that we forget we are not our jobs; that our lives are bigger than that. Or we might feel, people often say, "I'm like one person at work and a different person at home." We don't have a sense of integration, or wholeness—and what we do in the process, just of developing some concentration as we gather all of that energy together, all of that kind of wild attention together—is we also weave ourselves together and we have a sense of integration. We have a sense of having a home in our own being.

So those two pairs: the mindfulness based on balance which allows us to unclutter, to refine, to see more clearly, to be in touch with our experience as it actually is without so many add-ons and projections and so on; and the stability of attention that is concentration where our presence is very full, it's very complete. Those two together make for a very different kind of day. They become not just practices, but traits. It becomes how we are over and over again—not perfectly, perhaps. All of us slip off into either distractedness or overreaction, but inherent to both practices—both trainings—is the understanding that we can always begin again. No matter what happens—however long it's been, however far from our aspiration we may have gone—we can always, always begin again. And so that is at the very heart of this month, and the very heart of our sense of having a path in our lives.

One very classic foundational exercise in deepening concentration and building the platform for greater mindfulness is the practice of resting our attention on the feeling of the breath. So why don't we do that right now. The basic theme of the practice of the training is that we choose an object and rest our attention on it gently. We find, probably in not too long, our attention has wandered. We see if we can let go and come back. So it's that process. It's what one of my teachers called exercising the letting go muscle. We let go; we come back. No judgment, no condemnation. You don't have to feel that you're a failure. You just simply let go and—with great kindness towards yourself—come back.

So that object, that chosen object, really could be anything. It doesn't have to be the feeling of the breath. It could be a sound, it could be an image, it could be really anything. Very commonly the breath is chosen precisely for the reason that it's very portable. We practice—maybe sit for five minutes a day at home or ten minutes a day at

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home—and you practice having awareness rest on the feeling of the breath. That's the way you come back to yourself and back to the moment.

And then you're at work and there's this contentious meeting going on and tempers are starting to flare. People are starting to freak out. You don't have to open up the closet door and pull out all this equipment and sit down, cross your legs and look funny. All you need to do is rest your attention on the feeling of the breath and you're going to have to close your eyes, right? Nobody has to know you're doing it so it's perfectly private, free—independent of all conditions—just come back to yourself through that means.

So we'll practice together now. You can sit comfortably, close your eyes or not; however you feel most at ease. Sometimes we start actually by listening to sound—there may be sounds on the street, sounds around you. And, of course, we like certain sounds and we don't like others, but we don't have to chase after them to hold on or push away. Just let it come, let it go.

And bring your attention to the feeling of your body sitting, whatever sensations you discover.

Bring your attention to your hands. See if you can make the shift from the more conceptual level to the world of direct sensation—picking up, pulsing, throbbing, pressure, whatever it might be. We don't have to name these things but feel them.

And bring your attention to the feeling of your breath, the actual sensations of your breath, wherever you feel it most distinctly. Maybe it's at the nostrils or the chest or the abdomen. Find that place, and bring your attention there and just rest. See if you can feel one breath.

If you like, you can use a quiet mental notation of “in, out” or “rising, falling” to help support the awareness of your breath; but very quiet so that you're really feeling the breath—one breath at a time.

And, if images or sounds or sensations or emotions should arise—but they're not all that strong—if you can stay connected to the feeling of your breath, just let them flow on by. You're breathing.

But if something should be strong enough to pull you away—you get lost in thought, spun out in a fantasy or you fall asleep—don't worry about it. We say the most important moment of the whole process is the moment when you realize you've been gone. You've

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already been lost, you've already been far away, disconnected from the breath. You realize that. See if you can let go and just start over. Shepherd your attention back to the feeling of the breath. And when you feel ready, you can open your eyes.

I would like to emphasize the idea of meditation practice as a training. It's really like a skills training. Sometimes we tend to think of it more as an experience—like “I'm going to calm down” or “I'm going to release some stress” or “I'm going to have this nice little interlude of peace.” And it is all of that; that's very true. But, in addition to that—in addition to it being simply an experience—it's a mental training so that we have a kind of resourcefulness.

We have the ability to begin again more easily. We have a way of coming back to ourselves. We have a way of saying, “Okay, this is my direct experience and this is all the stuff I'm tending to add on to it.” And to be more mindful and return to that direct experience, instead of being lost in all of those—all of that conceptual overlay—which can be very confusing. All of that projection, like “what's this going to feel like in 15 years” or “this must mean this” when, in fact, maybe it doesn't mean that. Maybe that's just a story we're used to.

And so it's really a skills training. It's something that we do—not just for the experience, but for the way it equips us to have a different life—which is the whole point. And if you're trying to understand if your meditation practice is actually functioning well, if you're getting any benefit from it, we say: “Don't look at that say 20-minute period where you're practicing formally, look at your life; look at how you are with your colleagues, with your competitors, with a supervisor, with somebody who's reporting to you. Look at where you are at in terms of presence; how you are with yourself when you make a mistake; how readily you can begin again and have the energy for that kind of renewal.”

And so it's really a tremendous tableau of our entire life that becomes the landscape of expression for the meditation practice. So what I would suggest is that you try to formally practice. It's that dedicated period of 10 minutes, 15 minutes, 20 minutes a day that will really be what allows you to bring the practice into your life most easily. And so I would say 20 minutes is probably perfect, if you can do it. If you can only do five minutes on a certain day, do those five. It doesn't have to be in the morning. You have to check it out. See what is easiest for you: morning, evening, alone, with friends, whatever it might be.

But feel creative and find those circumstances that will support you in helping you make it real. And then I'll see you next week.