



Sharon Salzberg: I see people are saying “Hello” from all over the world, so I also want to thank Tricycle magazine so much for facilitating this. I’m in Barre, Massachusetts. The Insight Meditation Society, which is next door, is temporarily closed down and I have a house here. I had a startled moment when I realized I’m the target person. I thought, “I’m a senior citizen. Look at that,” and I have asthma as a preexisting condition, and I was very sick last year. So I thought, “I really need to try to take care of myself,” and also for the sake of others. Being up here and without a lot of tech support at the moment, I didn’t know how I was going to be able to connect with people, with all of you, and reach out and have a way of sharing in this moment, and Tricycle was the first group that came through, and so here we are. So it’s fantastic. Why don’t we sit together for just a minute or two and then we’ll begin more formally.

Thank you. I realized just now before I do this again I should look for one of my meditation bells so that I can ring it at the end of the session! So, here we are. It’s a completely crazy, intense time, and needless to say, you all know it’s a time of a lot of uncertainty, anxiety, and fear. It’s also a time where I think those of us who can practice meditation need to avail ourselves of those tools, because we are so connected.

Ironically, when we are in an ordinary time, the hidden truth that is very present for us is interconnection, and often when I talk about interconnection as a reality, I say, “It’s not just a spiritual understanding. Science shows us this. Economics shows us this. Certainly environmental consciousness shows us this,” and then I usually say, “Even epidemiology shows us this.” What happens over there doesn’t nicely stay over there. It influences what happens here and what we do, where we put our energy, what we care about. It matters, because that too will ripple out. The truth is that it’s an interconnected universe. We should always be aware of that because it’s true, and it’s also the basis of tremendous compassion and lovingkindness, because like it or not, we are in this together. This is the reality of life.

I often think of this image that Bob [Robert] Thurman has used. I would say Professor of Buddhist Studies at Columbia University, but he just retired. When he talked about being on a New York City subway car, and he said, “Now, these Martians come and they zap the subway car so that those of you who are in the subway car are going to be together forever.” What happens? Somebody is hungry; you try to feed them. Somebody’s freaking out; you try to calm them down. Not because you necessarily like them or you approve of them, but because our lives are intertwined. That’s the nature of things, so guess what? Here we are, and even in social isolation or the kind of physical separation many people are wisely practicing right now, it’s



about connection to others and how we all influence one another. May that worldview prevail so that we live with a honest consequence of that, which is compassion and love for one another. Not necessarily liking, but a kind of love that just recognizes that intertwined nature of us all.

I think it's so important to recognize that there are tools to help us go through the hardship. If we use these tools we may feel anxious but won't completely freak out—freaking out will just have us make bad decisions or isolate further in ways that are not at all helpful. I remember in early February, I was in California and staying in a hotel in Marion County. There was a blackout, there were rolling power outages happening. So I'm sitting there in the dark and I found a flashlight in my bag, pulled it out, and turned it on. Then I thought, "Well, there's no wifi, so I can't use my laptop, and I don't want to wear down my iPhone and run out of battery and then have nothing." So I turned that off, and I went to open the door, and then I had the thought, "It's an electronic lock. I don't know if I can get in again, so maybe I shouldn't go out." So there I am sitting alone in the dark in my hotel room and I thought, "Oh, I know how to do this. I can sit here and be. I can practice in solitude. I can come back to myself. I can use my breath. I can use my body and mind to really be here," and so I had, two hours of a meditation session, which was very unusual.

I also think about a time I was part of leading a retreat for people who'd been affected by gun violence. Some of those people were teachers at schools where there had been school shootings. One of them had to go back to work the next day after the retreat, and there was a drill, and so of course that produced tremendous anxiety, and she said she had a panic attack. She was doubled over in a closet when she said to her friend—she's fresh off this retreat, right—She said to her friend, "Oh, I have tools," and she began to use her breath as a way of getting more present and more balanced.

So here we are. You know, it's a time when inevitably one would experience a lot of anxiety. There's certainly a great deal of uncertainty, and we have to meet the moment in compassion for ourselves and for others. So I rejoice in the fact that I have some tools and that we have tools that we put into practice.

One of the first things I think is a recognition of the breath. Keep breathing in the midst of getting frozen, which is a common reaction to stress. We stop breathing. We have to take a breath, which returns us to ourselves, returns us to this moment. It creates space, and space is really what we're talking about. Not that the situation is going to suddenly seem great if we create space, but we will recognize we have resources within and with one another in order to



meet the moment in a better way. A lot of that has to do with creating a space so that options or clearer thinking may arise, or remembering other assets that we have may arise. So we're trying to just create some space, even as there's tremendous intensity and pressure going on outside of us.

I mean, look at how quickly things are moving. It feels like the days of just “wash your hands a lot” are nostalgic. Like, “Wait a minute.” Because there is so much to sort out at a fast pace, given how quickly things are changing, and we want to practice a few things. One is presence, space, grounding, and that will lead to clarity. It will lead to remembering our deepest values, the things we care about more than anything. Compassion. Including compassion for ourselves—it's so easy to belittle yourself. You're not feeling the right thing or, you should be calmer or <laughs> you should not have this or not have that. Really have tremendous compassion for yourself, and out of that we can have a much greater degree of compassion for others, truly. We want to create enough space or return to enough spaciousness within so that rather than being overwhelmed or panicked we can utilize the energy that is happening remember how connected we all are, and work to be the best selves we can be, to continue to grow, to give, to receive. All of that is important so that we can really honor the interconnection that is the truth. Interconnection is not just nice talk, it's not sentimental or foolish. Qualities like lovingkindness are empowered by the fact that interconnection is the truth of our lives. Can we start with being kind to ourselves and use that as the platform for extending kindness and understanding to others? Because we're not so separate really.

Okay, back to tools. We're going to do a meditation together utilizing the breath. If you practice every day, formally, that dedicated period—even five or ten minutes—becomes the basis for your time off the cushion. When you're in conversation, when you're looking at too much news, when you can't get off the internet, when you're starting to feel overwhelmed, you remember, “Okay. I'm going to breathe,” and you can also build in reminders. It's almost like ritualizing that.

A well-known reminder is from Thich Nhat Hanh when he said, “Don't pick up your phone on the first ring. Let it ring three times and breathe.” Well, that can be highly theoretical and a nice story we tell ourselves, but if you've practiced every day then you will be so much more likely to remember when the phone rings, “Oh, right.” It doesn't have to be the phone. You can build in some reminders before pressing “Send” on the email. Before I do this, before I do that. Just to remember to breathe. When I first was practicing meditation these were the first instructions I



received. “Sit down and feel your breath.” Now, for some people the breath doesn’t work, but it could be easily replaced with some other awareness of the body. The idea is to practice with an object of awareness that’s near at hand, readily available, and portable, as they say. Something you have something you can access right away in times of greater stress. So let’s stay with the breath every day.

We also have movement. We can do walking meditation. You can even do it in a little New York studio apartment, just walk a few steps back and forth, it will keep your energy moving and help you feel more embodied. I’ve taught walking meditation to more than one person who could not feel their feet against the ground until they looked down, and so we want to be so connected within ourselves that we can more readily connect to those around us, even virtually, however that’s going to manifest.

Remember compassion. Remember that you want to practice compassion for yourself and others, and remember that it’s a *practice*. When you get into states of the anxiety, distress, or anger you don’t have to call them bad or wrong, you can call them painful, because that’s what they are. Let that be the basis of how you relate to yourself. Have a sense of warmth and kindness toward yourself, because that is going to be the way that we actually make progress, that we actually can exercise more groundedness, more clarity. We don’t make progress by being harsh to ourselves ourselves, or by and getting down on ourselves. It’s through that kindness that is really going to make a difference.

There’s a story from my time in the hospital last year I tell to make this point. When I got up to walk for the first time in the hospital it was with a walker. I was walking around the corridor, as one does, and I had a physical therapist with me, and she said to me at one point, “It’s not a race, you know. You’re going to get a lot further if you just stop now and then and give yourself a break and then go on.” That became my mantra. “It’s not a race, you know. You’ll get a lot farther if you just stop now and then, give yourself a break and then go on.” It’s not just useful for physical activity, we can apply that to everything we’re doing, <laughs> you know, emotional states. Watch for that cascade. Give yourself a break. It’s okay, and not only is it okay, it’s useful. You’re going to get a lot further just from that, right?

So again, it’s a pause, it’s space. When we return to ourselves we find tremendous resource within ourselves, and so these tools exist and they need to be utilized. That’s always been true. It’s so easy to think of meditation as a kind of theoretical exercise or something to admire from afar. There’ve been many times when, for example, if I’ve been doing a book signing, and



people come up to me and say something like, “I’m buying your book for my cousin, because I could never do it, but they’ll get a lot out of it.” I would say, “What’s this, ‘I could never do it’ thing? I’m happy for your cousin and I’m happy for me, but, we can marginalize ourselves from possibility, from growth, from potential, from opportunity.” We need to stop doing that. If you see yourself deferring or holding something in the abstract rather than practicing it, breathing life into it, see if you can make that shift. It’s like, “Let’s practice together even if we’re apart. Let’s draw support from bringing something to life and utilizing the tools and at least making the experiment.” If you’ve never meditated before it doesn’t matter. The important thing is to make the experiment, and to really do it with some sincerity and just see what might unfold, okay?

So we’re going to practice together now for about twenty minutes, and I’m going to guide you through it. See if you can sit comfortably. One of the key principles of meditation practice is balance, and that balance is said to be reflected in our posture right away. You want to sit up straight but not with stiffness or rigidity.

See if you can feel your way into what feels like a balanced posture for you. I’m assuming none of you are driving or in some dangerous situation, so then you can close your eyes or not. However you feel most at ease.

You can start by listening to sound, whether it’s the sound of my voice or other sounds. It’s a way of relaxing deep inside, allowing our experience to come and go. 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. Let them come; let them go. And bring your attention to the feeling of your body sitting, whatever sensations you discover.

Bring your attention to your hands, and see if you can shift from the more conceptual level, like fingers to the world of direct sensation, picking up pulsing, throbbing, pressure, whatever it might be. You don’t have to name these things, but feel them.

And bring your attention to the feeling of your breath. Just the normal, natural breath, wherever you feel it most distinctly. That may be the nostrils, the chest, or the abdomen. Bring your attention there and just rest. See if you can feel one breath. Without looking at what’s already gone by, without leaning forward for even the very next breath, just this one.

If images or sensations or emotions come but they’re not very strong, if you can stay connected to the feeling of the breath, just let them flow on by. You’re breathing. It’s just one breath.



If you like, you can support the awareness of the breath with a very quiet mental notation. “In,” “Out,” or, “Rising,” “Falling,” but very quiet, if you use it at all. So the word is just supporting the awareness of the actual sensations of the breath.

If you find you get lost in thought, overwhelmed by something, or you fall asleep, truly don't worry about it. The most important moment in the practice is actually the moment that comes next, when we realize we've just lost it. We've been gone, and we can practice gently letting go, and with great kindness toward ourselves we practice coming back, bringing our attention back to that chosen object, to the feeling of the breath. We say that the healing is in the return, not in never having gotten lost to begin with. So let's return. It's okay. Even if you have to do that like a billion times in the next few minutes it's okay.

It's so instructive to listen to the voice that you use with yourself when you realize you've been distracted. If it's harshly critical or annoyed, see if you can just soften that for a moment and say, “Okay. Let's begin again.” This is where the resilience training comes from in meditation. It's letting go and starting over. That's the muscle group we're actually strengthening right there.

When you feel ready you can open your eyes and lift your gaze and we'll end the session.

Thank you all. I'm going to just say a couple of things and then we'll open it up for questions. Again, you can type them in and I can see the screen and I'll do my best. It's dark, but there are bunch of cups that you might notice on the shelf. Many of you have also heard me tell the story; that we moved into the center, the Insight Meditation Society, in 1976, and within a month we received two letters that were addressed not to the Insight Meditation Society.

The first was addressed to the *Instant* Meditation Society, and I thought that was just so funny, because isn't that typical? We want instant gratification and everything has to happen instantly, and if it doesn't it's not worth it. But the second envelope became my favorite, and that one, instead of being addressed to the Insight Meditation Society, was addressed to the *Hindsight* Meditation Society. I loved that. I thought, “Wow, isn't that true?” There've been so many times when in my meditative life I thought, “Nothing's happening,” only to find out later, looking back, “Oh, something was happening.” I was putting building blocks in place that I didn't even realize. In my life of service or connection, there have been so many times where I thought, “Nothing's happening,” and sometimes when I look back I think, “Oh, look at that. I planted a seed that was actually important even though it didn't seem to bring results at the moment,” so I



loved the Hindsight Meditation Society. As the years have gone on for the Insight Meditation Society, every time we have a significant anniversary, I've asked the administration, "Couldn't we make cups and hats and T-shirts that say the 'Hindsight Meditation Society?'" and every time they say, "No."

So this last time, which was our 45th anniversary, people made me some cups just as a joke gift, which are what's up there. They all say the Hindsight Meditation Society, so let's remember that too. We will understand so much more looking back at this time and we need to put the building blocks in place that we want to be able to look back on with appreciation.

The other thing is—and this is partly in response to some of the questions I see are coming up on the chat—it doesn't have to be the breath that is that central object. The power in that practice is in collecting our attention around something, then when our attention wanders, be let go and come back. That's what's really important. It could be a mantra, it could be a phrase, could be an image, could be a sound. It could even could be lovingkindness, which I hope we get to do together in some future time like this. I don't mean time in the epic sense, I mean <laughs> some other week when I can do this through Tricycle. So the breath is often chosen because, as one of my early teachers would say, it's very portable. So I think there's something worth thinking about, even if it's not your only object, to have some object that is very portable. So when you are in some highly pressured situation when you're at work, or even if you're not going to work, when there's lot of stimulus coming at you, you can breathe or you can tune into something in your body. You can listen to sounds, something like that, so that it's very readily available, near at hand. So it can be any object and that would be fine. If the breath isn't working, and it well might not for all kinds of different reasons, you might try seeing if there's something else happening in your body.

In Burma, they often use a technique where you move your attention through these different sense stores, so you start out with seeing. Even if your eyes are closed, you might have some visual imagery of some kind or nothing. It doesn't matter. There's no right answer, but it's the keenness of attention, so it's seeing, hearing, and then you kind of flash on your whole posture. So that's sitting. Let's say you're sitting. Seeing, hearing, sitting, and then touching, which means some touch points, right, where your body's already in contact, like your hands are touching or your hands are touching your knee. Just the area about the size of a quarter. Maybe you have a few of them in the rotation, so it would be like seeing, hearing, sitting, touch, touch, touch, touch, and that can replace the breath.



The interesting thing about even a simple exercise is that a lot will get revealed to us, and that gives us the opportunity to shift patterns. So I often talk about my very earliest practice when, as I said, this was the first technique that I was offered. “Sit down and feel your breath,” and it was very difficult, much to my surprise. I thought, as many of you’ve heard me say, “That’s stupid. That’s so simplistic.” But it wasn’t that easy. One of the reasons it wasn’t that easy was I began to see that as soon as this breath was happening I was mentally leaning forward to get ready for the next fifty. I realized that that kind of hypervigilance was my mental set very often. It wasn’t just because I was sitting in India on the floor in a funny posture. I was very frightened, I was very wary. I was very guarded. I don’t know what might happen next. A lot had already happened to me in my life, and I felt like I needed to be ready for what happened next so for me balance, which is the key to the meditative process.

Balance looked like settle back. Let the breath come to you. I used to say to myself, “You’re breathing anyway. All you need to do is feel it.” Because I’d have so much performance anxiety. It’s like I’d never done it before. Just settle back. Let the breath come to you. You’re breathing anyway. All you need to do is feel it, and so I think that’s likely the kind of experience a lot of people are having right now, and so that’s a good thing to remember too, and you’ll see yourself out of balance. That’s natural. That’s probably inevitable, and just come back. Look at that power to return, to rebalance. It’s extraordinary, and we need to exercise it.

So somebody’s asking, “How do we know if we’re meditating correctly?” It’s a interesting question. It’s not in the metric we often might use. Like, “I was only with three breaths yesterday before my mind started wander. Today I should be with eight. Tomorrow I should be with 15.” It’s much more subtle than that. It’s in things like how am I speaking to myself when I need to return, how do I speak to myself when I make a mistake. What I would suggest, if you can do it, is that you choose a period of time, let’s say two weeks or even a month, that you’re going to practice. It needs to be a reasonable period, not “I’m going to sit eight hours a day,” if you’re not really going to sit eight hours a day. We’ll go back to 10 minutes.

The last time I talked to a neuroscientist about it, which was about two years ago, so I’m not totally sure those are the up-to-the-minute findings, but they were saying seven to nine minutes a day will actually change your brain, and so in these times one can understand that you don’t want such amygdala highjack. You don’t want to be overcome by fight or flight so quickly. We want more balance. We want more spaciousness. Seven to nine minutes a day. It’s not a lot, but again it needs to actually happen, and so make that kind of commitment for what seems like a



reasonable period of time to you. A week, two weeks, whatever it is, and don't constantly be assessing, "Is it working? How am I doing?" because then you're not really doing it. You're just assessing it, which would be a very <laughs> strong tendency for all of us. So the point to look at the end of that period, whatever you've chosen, if you want to assess and evaluate, which makes sense, look at your life. That's where it's going to show. Even if you don't have some amazing breakthrough and blissful experience when you're sitting, it will show in your life, which is where we want it. How are you speaking to yourself? How are you meeting a stranger? How are you meeting period of adversity? What's happening? How quickly are you rebounding from having been overwhelmed? Things like that. So it's much trickier because it's not a nice metric that we would like, but it's what's important and I think very reassuring.

Tricycle: Sharon, we do have one question about struggling to accept the spontaneous joy and happiness which comes from my practice when I know that so many people are so less fortunate than I am right now, and some guilt about feeling so anxious when there's less reason for fear than more vulnerable people right now.

Well, in terms of the latter, guilt about feeling anxious, I mean, I think a basic rule-- this is my next cup-- <laughs> or T-shirt, if someone wants to do it, is it's twofold. Well, it's basically we feel what we feel. We're actually not in control of what arises in our minds, and if I look back at my years and years of practice, especially the earlier chunk, let's say 10 years, first 10 years, I can remember this teacher saying this to me, and then that teacher saying that to me some years later, which was really all the same message, and it's maybe encapsulated best by this one teacher, this man named [Anagarika] Munindra, where he said to me something like, "Why are you so upset about this thought that comes up in your mind? Did you invite it? Did you say at 3:15, 'I'd like to be filled with anxiety or self-hatred?' No. But when conditions come together for something to arise, it will arise." Can we affect those conditions? Definitely. But we can't have absolute control, and we expend so much energy blaming ourselves and thinking it shouldn't have been there and we should have a better therapist or, "Why don't I meditate twice as long?" or whatever, but we feel, and it's much better to relate to those feelings with a sense of awareness and compassion than with anything. It's actually going to bring us further, and we'll make more progress in affecting those conditions if we can remember that. We're not in control of what will arise. We have to use our energy in terms of how we relate to it. If you blame yourself, it's just going to intensify something that is already difficult, so next cup order I'll tell the Insight Meditation Society, <laughs> we feel what we feel, and in terms of happiness, that's a very interesting question, or joy, because in general people tend to feel guilty about joy or



happiness, as though it were a selfish thing, as though it was the same as being self-preoccupied or being happy-go-lucky and just superficial or endlessly seeking pleasure, but it's really not that. I think of happiness as a sense of inner resource and all of us know that we need that, and ultimately we should know, it's not wrong to cultivate that and to nurture that, because how else do we meet adversity?

When I wrote a book about 10 years ago called *Real Happiness*, it was the first time I had a word like happiness in the title of a book, and I thought, "Oh, a lot of people are going to get down on this." And they did, they'd say, "Haven't you seen that bumper sticker that says, 'If you're not depressed you're not paying attention'?" and I'd say, "Yes, I have seen it, and I understand that point of view. We can be incredibly conflict avoidant, and in ordinary times avoid pain wherever we can. But what about when we are depressed and we feel shattered and we feel broken and we're overwhelmed? That's not a state where we can actually care about others. Certainly not care for others, which would take much more energy, but not even care about others," and so it's not a healthy state. To have happiness can actually uplift us, and that's the fuel for sustaining attention to others and actually reaching out in some way, so it's a positive thing.

Somebody's asking about how to practice patience when we're in social <laughs> isolation. Here too, I mean, I think in some ways it's the framing. To begin with, it's like this is a practice period. It's not easy, and the point is not that you're going to reach some summit where suddenly you're perfectly patient after that breakthrough, but we're going to keep having to return. We're going to lose it, then we're going to remember, "Oh, what do I really care about here?" Come back. Come back. Take a breath. Remember to pause before you answer someone, for example, and that will actually cultivate the muscle of patience, right. When caring and compassion start to feel heavy, hard and draining, how can we keep going? Well, that could be a moment for sort of respite, to take care of yourself. Doing lovingkindness practice for yourself, "May I be happy. May I be peaceful." is one of the most generous things we can do, and it actually makes a difference. That doesn't mean, I mean, you may have responsibilities, things that you have to do, and so we do them, but to some extent we really need to turn the attention towards ourselves and have that sense of nurturing, because it's not selfish. It's actually going to give us the strength to continue to care.

Okay. Last question. "How can I reduce worry?" First of all I think, again, we feel what we feel. I think a lot of that is inevitable, but I'd also look toward catastrophizing thoughts, because in the end we don't know, and I think of my friend Sylvia Boorstein, who talks about herself as a

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recovering catastrophizer, and she also says, interestingly enough, that in a real situation she's strong. It's the imagined or anticipated situations that she loses it, and just look at your thoughts. Are you building a worldview where nothing will ever go right, and this is happening and that's going to happen? Because that's not going to help. So as much as possible, if you see those kinds of thoughts, see if you can remind yourself that we don't know and that the most important thing is to stay connected and to stay caring.

I want to thank you all. I know Tricycle has several of these booked and I hope to be able to come back and do another or several more. We also have a course that I did for Tricycle that is coming out I think on the 23rd of March, although there's some leeway there, and I also know that Tricycle has a very generous scholarship option, and so I know this is going to be a really wonky time for a lot of people financially, economically, as well as everything else, and so please don't hesitate at all if that would be helpful for you and you want to sign up for the course, to actually do that. So thank you.

Moderator: Yes, hi. I'll just pop in for a minute and thank you so much, Sharon, for offering this. It's been wonderful to hear from you and practice with you today, and glad to hear from everyone in the world who's tuning in. This has been a really fun hour, and just reiterate that, yeah, Sharon's course is starting next week. It's a great opportunity to continue the conversation. It's called "The Whole Path," and I'll put a link to it below, and as she said, yeah, scholarships are available. So please don't hesitate to ask for that if it would be helpful. We want everyone to be able to join, and I'll just thank everyone again for coming. We have another online group practice this Thursday evening at 7:00 P.M. eastern time with Mindy Newman, who's a meditation teacher and psychotherapist, and then next Tuesday, 1:00 P.M. eastern time, with Zen teacher and author Koshin Paley Ellison. Those are all going to be posted online. You're also all registered for those too, so you can just pop in, and we're at tricycle.org/live with the recordings and all the information to sign up, so thank you all. Be well, and may you all be happy and safe and healthy. Thank you so much.