



Sharon Salzberg: Thank you. Thank you so much. You're such a support and help, really. I'm so tech-challenged. This has been a challenging time for me. It's a challenging time for everyone and that's the least of our issues. But it's something I see in myself. "Oh no, this isn't working!" and "How to do that? What do you mean?" And I want to thank Tricycle for bringing us together. I think they were actually the very first people to ask, which is beautiful. Okay, so we're going to start with just a couple of minutes of sitting together.

Close your eyes, or not, however you feel most at ease. Just settle your attention into your body, onto your breath perhaps. There's nothing we need to figure out in the next two minutes, so it's pretty good.

[Two minutes of silent meditation.]

Thank you, we've had a chance to do some practice together here. So as many of you know, I wrote a book just recently. It hasn't come out yet. It was supposed to come out June 2nd, but it's now coming out September 1st. It's a book called *Real Change*. Because it was postponed, that's given me the opportunity to write a brand new preface for the book. I'm not going to write it yet, because things are changing so much every day. But it's a particular kind of introspection I'm doing right now. It's always funny when you've created something just before an enormous incident that affects everybody, and you kind of look at it and you think, "Does this make sense anymore?"

I was recording some of the guided meditations online, just yesterday actually, and in the classical sequence of the lovingkindness practice, there's a time when we offer lovingkindness to someone known as a neutral person or somebody we don't particularly like or dislike. The suggestion is usually that it be somebody that we tend to run into now and then, because we can see if and how the relationship and the sense of connection develops over time. A common example of a neutral person is a checkout person in the supermarket, because they are the kinds of people that in ordinary times we look right through, we overlook, we ignore, we take them for granted. I was reading this out loud and I thought, "Oh, wait a minute, you know, these are our heroes now."

This is a whole different thing. I can't change the book, but I can write this new preface and it's been this interesting reflection, in effect I'm asking "What's still true? What doesn't change? What am I relying on right now? What can we rely on that has some stability in this time of tremendous upheaval?" That actually reminds me of the term *dharma*, or *dhamma* in Pali.



Dhamma in Pali, dharma in Sanskrit, which is commonly translated as the Buddha's teaching, or sometimes the laws of nature, the truth of things and it has a meaning of "that which sustains us." That which supports us. Because it's not dependent on circumstances, on change not happening, while most of the things we rely on are kind of like that, right? Like, "I'm going to keep this forever, it's never going to decay." "This relationship is never going to change," or "The world as I knew it, I can stop looking at, because it's never gonna be different." The dharma: what doesn't change.

I thought of that pretty well-known phrase from the Buddha, where he said, "Hatred will never cease by hatred. Hatred will only cease by love. This is an eternal law." I've always seen that statement and looked at that last part of it, "This is an eternal law." And I thought, that's kind of an odd thing to say, since so much of the emphasis of the teachings is on change. All sides of change, the beautiful renewing, opening side of change, and the kind of poignant side of how everything's fleeting, and we can't hold on, and the difficulties of that. And yet, this is an eternal law. What an interesting thing to say. And there are times, I think, for all of us, and certainly for me, where I kind of wished it were other than that. You know, that hatred could cease by more hatred, because it was more in your hands, but hatred will never cease by hatred. Hatred will only cease by love. This is an eternal law.

So this is why I spend time reflecting on "What isn't so dependent on circumstance?" "Hatred will never cease by hatred, hatred will only cease by love" is one thing, and elements of practice I realized I am relying on more than ever. Both the doing of it and the attendant context or teachings. Sometimes it's hard to believe, it's hard to trust, and that's why it's an experiment. It's really a question of putting things into practice, seeing for ourselves, "Does this actually make sense? Is this being of benefit? Is this changing the situation in which I may have no external control over right now? What can I control or effect? What can I influence right now? What's the dynamic that evolves?" I think I talked about this last time we were together.

I think often of the stress dynamic, which really is a *dynamic*. There's a situation, the circumstance, the source of stress. And then there is the resource with which it's met, because it is actually a dynamic. And for me, the resource is primarily borne out of my meditation practice, and a sense of connection to others. Those aren't separate, actually, those are very intertwined in different ways. So the thing about meditation practice is that it's a practice. It's like strength training. I read on Twitter somewhere, somebody very amusingly wrote, "I've thought for years that if I only had the time I could clean my house. Turns out that wasn't the problem." Which I actually relate to very strongly! It takes time, it takes intentionality. It doesn't take a huge amount



of time. Neuroscientists will say it takes seven to nine minutes a day, but you have to do it for it to have some effect. It's not like thinking fondly of it or, you know, telling someone else to do it or whatever. It's the doing of it that actually makes a difference. Part of what's cultivated in the process of meditation is this quality called equanimity. And that's another one of those things that I feel we can rely on, that actually that makes a difference.

Equanimity is a term that's very difficult to understand, it's confusing in all of its forms. My first meditation teacher was S. N. Goenka, and it was a 10 day course in India in 1971. He was always saying, "Be equanimous." And we used to whisper to one another. "Is that a word? What does that mean? I don't know that word." So that's a particular form of the word equanimity, but they're all a little bit strange because to us, often, equanimity sounds like indifference, callousness, or removing ourselves from the situation. Or even that kind of sullenness that can be very subtle, the hostility of like, "It doesn't matter to me." But equanimity doesn't mean any of that. The literal translation from the Pali is "balance." It's the balance that's born of wisdom.

It means perspective, not coldness, not iciness, and not disdain for our experience, it's almost like the holding environment for our thoughts and feelings and reactions. In situations, the holding environment itself can take on the flavor and the nature of more spaciousness, more ease of heart, more interest. So there's more learning that can come out of it. And when there's space, when there's a sense of spaciousness, there's also the place for creativity, for options which we might not see when we have a kind of inner lockdown, where we're just lost, we're consumed by something that's arising, or by our reaction to it.

So it's not *distance* really, it's spaciousness, equanimity. Within that field of greater equanimity, all kinds of things will come up. You know, life is still life. And meditation is like a little replica of those, say 10 minutes a day. It's not suddenly going to be only bliss and peace, it's life unfolding. And that's fine, because we're developing the tools to meet what's going on in a different way.

So it's almost like a definition of mindfulness, which would imply that we're not either getting completely consumed by what's happening and defined by it, or on the other side, we're not adding shame, dread, denial, and pushing away. Sometimes we describe mindfulness as the place in the middle. Not getting completely lost, not pushing away. In that place in the middle, that's where the opportunity arises to understand much more deeply what might be true, and what we might choose in response. So it's actually a very alive and vital state. It's not flat and somehow removed from what's going on, but it's holding what's going on in a different way.



The meditative process is almost like training a muscle. Anything might arise, and our work is to try to be with it as best we can in a different way. When we falter or we get consumed or reactive, we remember "Oh right, I can practice letting go. I can practice beginning again, this is also true. This is also a possibility."

I'm going to look something up. Because I'm not a scientist and I don't always get this totally right. I was thinking about my friend Jud [Judson] Brewer, who's a psychiatrist and an addiction specialist, and works a lot with anxiety and such things. He's also got some wonderful resources online right now. So we were having a conversation once, and he was saying that in terms of some of his studies of meditation he was looking at a brain region called the posterior cingulate cortex or PCC. He was looking at the experience of non-meditators, brand new meditators, and more experienced meditators, in terms of this particular brain region. He said that when people feel guilty this region is activated. Again, it's not a question of what we feel or what we don't feel, but when we're really more sucked in, like we're more lost in guilt, that region is activated. When we have tremendous craving—remember, he's an addiction psychiatrist—so when we have craving for different substances, we're more lost in those, and we take that craving more to heart, that region is activated. When we're ruminating, that region is activated. When we're anxious, that region is activated.

He was saying that the subjective experience of having that particular brain region really activated is one of *contraction*. So being lost in anxiety, in guilt, in craving, in rumination, has us feeling contracted, closed in, imprisoned, limited, and doesn't it? I mean, we can say that just from observation.

And in contrast, when that particular brain region isn't so activated, when we're not lost in anxiety, guilt, craving, and rumination, the sense is one of expansiveness and openness. When we have lovingkindness, it's the same thing. When we have insight or clarity, it's the same thing. It's a sense of expansiveness of openness.

In that openness or expansiveness, we do have a choice as to how we might want to respond or be with something. So talking about Jud also reminds me that he's the only contemporary scientist who's tested my brain. In the very early days of research, a team of people came here to the Insight Meditation Society, but it was way before so much neuroscience research. They gave us Rorschachs tests and other different kinds of tests. And that was very interesting. It was published in a book called *Transformations of Consciousness*. It was some teachers, some staff



people, some meditators—they also tested my teacher Dipa Ma, which was very interesting. But in current times, I was visiting Jud, who is now at Brown University. At the time he was at Yale and he was trying to develop this cap with electrodes in it, because that would be a way to have much more readily available tests. You can't carry around an fMRI machine, and it's expensive too. So he was working on this cap and I was staying with him.

The night before I said to him, "Do you think you can test equanimity?" Equanimity, remember, is a state of perspective and of spaciousness. Many things may happen, but the way we relate to them can be more equanimous than not, and that's part of our work. So we were having this discussion and the next day I went into his lab. He had me try on the cap on—it was like my hair, and gel, and the electrodes—it was a whole thing and they couldn't get it to work for about 45 minutes.

At one point I said, "Jud, I think my brain broke your cap." And he said, "I hope not. That's like a \$60,000 cap!" But it was just some software glitch, and they finally got it working. So Jud had said to me in that period, "Once we start, we can't stop and start again. So if you say you're done or you don't want to go any further, or you need a break, that's actually going to be the end because we can't rewire you and redo the whole thing." So what he asked me to do was to meditate for one to three minutes. There was no particular direction, there are so many methods which gave me options, but he said "Just choose what you want to do each time." So I would meditate one to three minutes, and then he asked me to describe my experience to him.

So maybe I'd say, "Well, I was very sleepy." And then he would say to me, "When in the period of time did you get sleepy? Was it the beginning? Was it the middle? Was it the end?" And so I would place my experience on this timeline, so it was like a kind of map of that short period of meditation. Then he'd spin his computer around, I could see what my brain waves had looked like in that one to three minutes and it was kind of awe-inspiring because it totally matched my description of my experience.

And then time went by and because I was continually meditating, with just these interruptions to describe my experience, I was feeling calmer as a general state, and I was interested in what was going on. And it got to the point where during one of those one to three minute intervals, I had a lot of restless thinking. I thought, "Well, you know, it's really too bad. They had that 45 minute period in the beginning, it was actually a complete waste. And I'd sort of like to stop at this point, but I can't really stop because it would be the end of the experiment, and it's so unfortunate."



But I felt like I wasn't sucked into those thoughts and I also wasn't battling them. I was just watching the play of thoughts, and then we ended that little interval and he asked me what was your experience? So I told him, and we kind of timed it out according to the map, and then he spun that computer around. And instead of my brain waves being a little jagged and upset in some way, you could see the ripples, but it was kind of calm. And he said to me, "Remember when you asked if we could study equanimity?" he said, "That's equanimity."

So it's really one of the tenets of mindfulness: anything can arise. You don't have to blame yourself or think you're doing badly. But what we're working with is how we're relating to it and kind of that holding environment. That really is our superpower. To be able to approach things differently.

So why don't we practice together now. Seating yourself comfortably, eyes open or closed. You can settle your attention into your body, onto your breath. This is just the normal natural breath, wherever you feel it most distinctly. And the operative word is rest. We're going to rest our attention. Maybe it's at the nostrils or the chest or the abdomen.

Just let the breath be natural. Let it come to you. Let it arrive in your awareness. If you like you can use a quiet mental notation of "in, out," or "rising, falling," to help support the awareness of the breath, but very quiet. So your attention is really going towards feeling the breath, one breath at a time. Just one breath.

If images or sounds or sensations or emotion should arise, 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 something comes up and is very strong—thought, emotion, sensation—spend a few moments just recognizing, "Oh, this is what's happening right now." See if you can do that in that middle way, just recognizing without getting consumed by it, without pushing it away. It's like "Oh, this is what's happening right now."

Then see if you can let go and bring your attention back to the feeling of the breath. And for those perhaps many times you're just gone, way lost in thought, or you fall asleep, don't worry about it. Remember, the most important moment is the next moment after we've been gone, after we've been lost, which is the moment we can practice letting go and beginning again. No matter how many times you have to do that, it's fine.



Let's do some lovingkindness practice together. Instead of centering your attention on the feeling of the breath, you're going to gently repeat certain phrases over and over again. The spirit of the phrases are offering or gift-giving—blessing. We offer these phrases to ourselves and to others, ultimately to all beings everywhere, beginning with ourselves. The phrases are things like, "May I be safe, be happy, be healthy, live with ease."

People commonly say to me, "Well, who am I asking?" I say we're not asking anybody, we're gift-giving, we're offering. Like you hand someone a birthday card and say "May you have a great year."

"May I be safe, be happy, be healthy, live with ease." The skill set is actually the same. You'll find your attention wandering, it's okay. See if you can let go and just come back to the phrases. Repeat the phrases over and over again, with enough space and enough silence so that it's a rhythm that's pleasing to us. You don't have to try to force a certain emotion or feeling. The power of the practice is in that gathering. "May I be safe, be happy, be healthy, live with ease."

See if you can think of a benefactor—that's someone who's helped you. Maybe they've helped you directly or you've never met them. They've inspired you from afar. The texts say this is the one who when you think of them, you smile. Is there someone who lifts your spirits, they have you smile just thinking of them? Maybe it's an adult, maybe it's a child, maybe it's a pet. So if someone like that comes to mind, bring them here. You can get an image of them or say their name to yourself. Get a feeling for their presence and offer the phrases of lovingkindness to them even if the words aren't perfect. They're the conduit of the heart's energy, they're serving us. "May you be safe, be happy, be healthy, live with ease."

Now we're gonna have a party, just a gathering, to see who comes to mind. Friends, family, those you know are doing well right now, those who are not doing so well right now. As a collective, offer the phrases of lovingkindness to them. "May you be safe, happy, healthy, live with ease."

And then all beings everywhere, all people, all creatures, all those in existence near and far, known and unknown. "May all beings be safe, happy, healthy, and live with ease."

When you feel you're ready, you can open your eyes, and we'll end the meditation session. Thank you so much for that. And we have time for a few questions.



Moderator: Thank you so much, Sharon for that. That was wonderful. I love the image of the mental metta party, it was really beautiful. So on that topic, we do have a question from someone about the metta practice.

What are your thoughts about dropping the phrases once you feel sensations in your heart, and staying with the sensations?

Metta by the way, is another Pali word which means lovingkindness, or friendship. I think it's fine to drop the phrases, or they'll kind of recede anyway. You don't have to feel like you've got to say these phrases. They say that in any moment, one of three things may be predominant when doing lovingkindness practice. One is the phrase. One is the sense of the recipient, which may be a visual image or it may just be a sense of them. And the other is a feeling. A feeling of warmth, it could be almost a physical sensation, or it's just a sense of connection. And the reason I tend to emphasize the phrases so much is because first of all, not everyone has a great facility in visualization. Although that's something we bring in. If you start to feel that you're just saying these rote phrases, you could be saying anything, then it's probably good to have a much more acute sense of the recipient. So you might try to emphasize that for a few moments.

The feelings are not always there. So that's not a sign of success or failure. Because believe me, I have put in a lot of hours doing this practice feeling nothing, and thinking nothing was happening, only to look back later and think, "Oh, isn't that interesting? Something was happening." Like everyone probably wants, I wanted that great burst of enormous love, and it may not be like that. But there's a very steady shift that that's actually happening. It's very profound. Although it can be subtle in our worldview. Our sense of inclusion, sense of who matters and who counts, the way we view ourselves. It's happening, even without that feeling.

So that's why I tend to emphasize the phrases, because it's something you go back to. But by no means do you have to insist on them, you know. If something else is more predominant, that's totally fine.

I'm struggling with the tension between having this period of isolation feel like good timing in terms of my own instincts to withdraw for a while, but at the same time, it's a time when so much is needed in the world. I'm struggling with that tension.

I think that's very real and something a lot of people are struggling with. I think that no matter what our physical circumstances are, it's really important to foster a deeper sense of connection all the time. I mean, one of our problems, and one of the reasons that things are so bad, are the profound states of disconnection between people. It's one of the reasons lovingkindness practices



feel very important to me at this time, because even if you're not seeing people face to face, there is an ever deepening sense of connection to others. And it's tricky because we rely a lot on social cues and, and so on. But I think it's very important to do something like lovingkindness practice and to whatever extent you can actually connect with others in what might seem like very small ways. I think that's a very good thing.

A friend of mine who's in New York City told me that he's gotten the phone numbers of some older people in his building, and he calls them just to say, "Hello, how are you doing?" And other people in New York City tell me that they've gotten to know their neighbors—they never knew them. They've lived in the same building for how many years. They don't have parties and they're not physically getting together, but they've exchanged phone numbers and said, "Well, if you need anything, if something happens, let me know," or something like that. So there might be ways that are also important to see if you can connect. It doesn't mean that you have to in any way violate that sense of privacy or solitude, which is kind of an interesting feature of this time. For sure. And underneath that, I think really is a commitment, which I certainly feel, to practices like lovingkindness.

Regarding feelings of frustration with governments, and other people who are handling a lot of elements of this crisis, and trying to send metta to people in those positions, but with difficulty: how do you suggest holding this for people who seem to be exacerbating the difficult time we collectively are in?

Yes, that's always a very interesting question. And it's a powerful question. I think the lovingkindness takes another flavor, oddly enough, which is a kind of compassion. Not in any way denying that actions are consequential and some people are causing a lot of suffering for a lot of people, and that's dreadful. So I wouldn't ever want to deny that and say, "Well, you know, it's okay." It's not okay. And yet, if we are consumed with someone else's actions—there's just a balance there. If we're consumed or obsessed with the actions of someone else, then we are the ones who are really going to suffer all the more. So it's about being able to hold a very clear sense of right and wrong, according to our views, our principles, and our values, but also commitment to rectify those wrongs.

People are empowered because they've been put in power. I've long had a commitment to things like voter registration, for example. I know a lot of people who are involved in meditation practice or spiritual work, but they're not necessarily engaged. So I think that it's really important to reevaluate that and look at that, but not from a place of hatred, because it will only end up destroying us.



Interestingly enough, in my forthcoming book *Real Change*, I have a whole chapter on moving from anger to courage. Not that anger is bad or wrong, it can be a very intelligent response to things we see when people are being harmed. But if we get overcome by it and defined by it, we're going to be the ones that suffer and our actions will be all the less effective. We actually can't do that much when we're just stewing. Again, this isn't to say you should denounce what you're feeling, we feel what we feel. But getting overwhelmed by something or cultivating it as the means of response is going to be consequential.

I decided when I was writing the book that I wanted to use this Gandhi quote. So, the quote was something like "To be lost in anger is like drinking a cup of poison, hoping it'll kill the other guy." And so I looked it up because I wanted to use it in the book. As you know, we have to source it. So I saw that it wasn't attributed to Gandhi at all. But I did see it attributed to Nelson Mandela, and Oprah Winfrey, and the Big Book of A.A., and all these other people. So I actually have no idea who said it originally. It's just great wisdom. Because think about that. So we find that balance as best we can, between observing what we feel and honoring it, realizing there can be a lot of intelligence and a lot of energy in there, and not just diving right in and getting overwhelmed by it, because it's not going to be helpful to ourselves or to others in the end.

This time period has brought up a life review and feelings of judgment towards one's past, maybe a lot of poor choices or issues of not being loving or compassionate enough. So how do we reconcile these feelings now?

Well, you know, interestingly, in the Buddhist psychology, there's a distinction that can be made between what we call remorse and what we call guilt. Remorse is not a pleasant state, it's a very painful state. But it's kind of a rightful state. It's a helpful state. Because maybe we have caused harm, or we've created disharmony, or we've been reckless, or something like that. And if we can see that, and feel the pain of that, and let go of it in the sense of forgiving ourselves and moving on with the determination to be different, that's actually a useful state. Whereas guilt is described as more corrosive, a kind of self hatred, where we just stay stuck. We go over and over that incident as though that's all we were capable of. And that's not true. So it's considered unskillful or unhelpful, it's not onward leading in any way.

So if you feel yourself falling from remorse into guilt, you can remind yourself everything changes, everyone changes. We act from the wisdom or the capacity we are exercising at the time. It can be different. Let me take this time, this recollection, and resolve to be different.