

Life As It Is

“Opening to Freedom”

Episode #18 with Sharon Salzberg

April 26, 2023



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James Shaheen: Hello and welcome to *Life As It Is*. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. In today’s episode, I’m joined by meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg. Sharon is normally my co-host on this series, so it’s a special treat to be interviewing her today. A world-renowned meditation teacher, Sharon is the founding teacher at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. In her new book, *Real Life: The Journey from Isolation to Openness and Freedom*, she weaves together Buddhist psychology, her own experiences, and insights from a variety of contemplative traditions to examine how we can live with greater creativity, connection, and joy. Through exploring the forces that keep us trapped in constriction, she lays out a path toward what she calls “real life,” or a life of spaciousness and freedom. In today’s episode of *Life As It Is*, I sit down with Sharon to talk about what it means to live a real life, how we can break free of our habitual patterns, and how expansiveness makes love more available to us.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg. Sharon is normally my cohost, so it's a special treat to be interviewing her today. Hi, Sharon. It's great to be with you.

Sharon Salzberg: It's great to be with you.

James Shaheen: Well, we're here to talk about your new book, *Real Life: The Journey from Isolation to Openness and Freedom*. I'd like to ask you what we always ask our guests: Can you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?

Sharon Salzberg: Sure. Well, *Real Life* is part of the *Real* series. I seem to have a number of books with the word "real" in the title, which I wasn't too sure about. But actually, it was partly

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listening to Bob Thurman speak and some of the things that I began to just appreciate how when we're real, we're in line with the truth of things. When we're unreal or we're seeing the world in a distorted fashion, it's like the equivalent of insisting change is not happening or secrets are or not dragging us down, something like that. And so I appreciate that concept a lot. So this particular book came into being while I was here in Barre, Massachusetts in relatively strong isolation during the pandemic. I watched this show on YouTube, I think it's still up on YouTube, called *Saturday Night Seder*, which I just loved. It was one of the first productions, I think, ever made where the writers were not in the same room together and recorded on Zoom and so on, and amazing world class singers and incredibly funny, incredibly moving, I learned a lot. And it reminded me that symbolically, taking it totally out of geopolitics, but symbolically, the word Egypt means a narrow place, a constrained, confined place, and so the journey is one from being confined, being constrained to one of openness and freedom. And I thought, oh, that's a great arc for a book. I really liked that because I get to explore when do we tend to feel the most constrained, and what do we do about it? Fear, our shame, things like that. When do we tend to feel the most open and expansive? Well, lovingkindness and gratitude and things like that. How do we get there? What do we take with us on the journey? These were all things that were all great to explore.

James Shaheen: Yeah, when I was listening to you just now, it sounds like often, and I think everyone can identify with this, we live in a kind of quiet denial of our lives. And in the book, you remark that there are times that we feel like we're merely bystanders to our own lives. What does it mean to be a bystander to our own life?

Sharon Salzberg: Well, the quotation that people tend to use a lot is from James Joyce, who said, "Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body." We can live a short distance from our bodies, from our emotions, from our responses to everything in life. It kind of loses its texture and its flavor, and we're just getting by, we're just living, living out a day. And then there's the

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big surprise at the end that we have to let go of it all and die. And so rather than that, to have a powerful sense of living fully and living in accordance with our own North Star, whatever that might be, the guiding principle we would really like to wrap our lives around so that whatever happens to us, we have something that we're relying on. something that we're guided by. It might be something as simple as lovingkindness as a principle so that we want to make every conversation we have, say, at work, with a colleague, with a client, something that is expressive of that force of lovingkindness, regardless of whatever else is happening in the workplace. And so we have a sense of meaning in our lives.

James Shaheen: You also write that we sometimes are at a distance from our own sense of agency, that we have a diminished sense of agency, and you say, and I'll quote you, “we are seized by the conviction that our words or our actions couldn't possibly be meaningful, that we don't count as much as others do, that we should just shrink back and dwell in the long-occupied constraining box we are accustomed to—so familiar even if cramped and confining.” Can you say more about this? Why do we tend to shrink back into our familiar patterns when they're so constraining?

Sharon Salzberg: Well, sometimes, this is something that I tend to explore in the book as well, at times those patterns were useful for a while. It was smart in a lot of circumstances for a lot of people to, in effect, leave your body and not acutely feel everything that was happening to that body. But you don't necessarily want these to be your steady state. What was useful or appropriate or even a tremendous survival skill when you were younger, perhaps, and genuinely helpless without a lot of agency may not serve you at all. And yet, it's the ready habit. It's the thing that comes up right away. And so even within some of our most corrosive habits is often some kind of jewel that if we can capture, we're not so beholden to the rest of it. So with anger, for example, the jewel is said to be a kind of incisive intelligence, like being willing to name what's wrong. And I think in a lot of ways, sometimes as a community, we kind of count on the

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angry person, like everyone else in the room is studiously avoiding looking at, say, the hole in the carpet, and that person is saying, "Look at that hole in the carpet," so there's a jewel there. But when it's constant, chronic dissatisfaction, never seeing the good, only seeing what's wrong, wears a person down, and it's not effective, it's not helpful anymore. And so we can look at all of those habits, not to condemn ourselves for them or feel we're dreadful people because we still have fear, we still have greed or whatever, but to understand that they're not serving us, they're not serving anyone around that we care about. So let's try to notice them quickly and be with them in a different way so that they don't overtake us.

James Shaheen: As you're talking, I'm thinking about the phenomenon of, say, a person being released from prison and finding freedom utterly disorienting, and when reading this part of the book, I had to ask myself, well, do we really want to be free? Or is it safer to resort to those old habits? So I find that very interesting. There is a certain fear of freedom, too. Is that fair to say?

Sharon Salzberg: I think it's very fair to say. It's very interesting that you point that out. I think it's safer in a way in that it's more familiar. But is it really safe? And that's what we get to do as people practicing introspection, whether it's meditation, or journaling, or some form of therapy, that we get to look. We are fed, most of us, so many distortions and so many myths. Is it really true that endless fixation on vengefulness makes us stronger? Really? Let's take a look. Is it really true that love and kindness are like the stupidest things in the world? You know, really? Let's take a look at that.

James Shaheen: Right. You explore ways that our early conditioning can train us to believe that very little happiness is available to us. And I think everyone has experienced this, this sense that this is hopeless. So why is this, and how does a path to liberation counteract this conditioning?

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Sharon Salzberg: Well, I think path to liberation, for the most part, is based on an underlying idea that, as human beings, not because we've done something special to deserve it or we have to earn it in some way but just innately we have potential to grow, to change, to learn, to connect, to care. And certainly within the Buddhist tradition it's taught us that potential, that capacity is never ever destroyed. It may be and usually is quite covered over and hard to find and hard to trust, but it's absolutely there. And so it's a whole worldview and a view about ourselves that encourages us to practice, to experiment, to explore, to question things for ourselves. And it's very different than the inertness and leaden qualities. It's maybe why one of the quotations from the Buddha is "One who is heedful or one who is mindful is on the path to the deathless. One who is mindless or heedless is as if dead already." We just go around in this dreamlike existence. We don't even notice until we do.

James Shaheen: And when we do, we're touching on I think what you refer to as real life as opposed to being a bystander to our own lives. Can you say a little bit more about real life? Because I think everyone has a sneaking suspicion or sense that there is a real life to live and that they're not living it, there's this separation, and then sometimes we are living it, and there's sort of a sense of flow. Just say a little bit more about what you mean by real life.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, I think it can be pretty simple. It's a sense of connection, a sense of belonging, and it might be momentary, which has to be OK. It's not like myself in my early practice, I thought, "OK, it's kind of hard now, but I'll have a great breakthrough experience, and after that, it will be smooth sailing forevermore." I don't think it's really like that now. We go up and down and we fall down and we get up and things like that. But in those moments when we are really present, it doesn't have to be something glorious happening. We have a sense of connection. We have a sense of care. We're not lost in assumption, we're not lost in our projection into the future. You know that story I tell often about teaching with Joseph Goldstein and sitting in a kitchen somewhere, having a cup of tea with him, and somebody came into the

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kitchen in some distress and said to Joseph, "I just had this really terrible experience," and Joseph said, "Well, what happened?" And the man said, "Well, I felt all this tension in my jaw, and I realized what an incredibly uptight person I am and how I always have been and I always will be." Joseph said, "You mean you felt a lot of tension in your jaw?" And he said, "Yes, and I've never been able to get close to people, it's never going to change." And I was watching them go back and forth and back and forth, and whatever the man said, Joseph would say, "Well, you mean you felt a lot of tension in your jaw?"

James Shaheen: I've been on that end of the conversation.

Sharon Salzberg: And so finally, Joseph said something like, "Why are you adding a miserable self image to a painful experience? It's painful enough to feel the tension in your jaw, but now you're going to be alone for the rest of your life, which is just like a concept. It's just an idea." And so we live in that world, and is it exciting to be with attention to your jaw? Not so much. But that's real. That is actually happening. That's in the moment. Maybe we'd have a little more compassion for ourselves rather than all that proliferation and projection if we just engaged in a different way.

James Shaheen: In terms of getting to real life or finding ourselves living a real life, you draw on the symbolism of the Passover seder to describe the journey to real life from confinement to openness and freedom, and you talk specifically about the shared suffering to the aspiration for a better world in the Passover story. Can you walk us through this journey within the context of the Passover seder? I found that very interesting.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, I think one way of understanding the story of the seder is it's everybody's story, really. It's not just Jews in that time and that place. It's everybody's story of coming to try to deal with affliction, deal with conditions that we cannot so readily immediately

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change. And yet we want the energy to keep trying. We want to make that journey externally often as well as internally. And so realizing what will truly help us be resilient, what will help us have energy to see a possibility. I've often said I feel like we live in a time of kind of blunted aspiration. We don't dare to imagine being actually happy or feeling free, a lot of compromises, a lot of settling. And we don't necessarily have a vision of what our lives might look like. And so That's important. It's not the same as greed. And people often confuse the two, like, Well, I shouldn't want to be happy, because That's greed or craving or something like that. But it's not necessarily. It could be the greatest wisdom. And it depends on where it's coming from, what it's combined with, things like that. It could be greed in that, if you insist, well, like in my early practice, where I had This idea that good practice meant sitting bathed in brilliant white light, and I didn't have any white light. I had some really great experiences, even some really great and painful experiences, but they were important. But nothing was good enough because it wasn't white light. That's greed. But having a vision of a life of not being so burdened by the past or caught up in just old habit, having a world where you see possibility, where you remember change, where you can be kind to yourself, as well as to others, that's a pretty good aspiration.

James Shaen: You know, it's funny, the old Chinese argument between the two schools, sudden enlightenment and gradual enlightenment, and I think that there are times when sort of serendipitously, you drop into what feels like real life or what you're describing. That just happens. But it's also incremental. It's a series of choices we can make. In fact, you write that “the journey becomes more about what choices will lead me to greater integration and wholeness than anything else.” So on a daily basis, throughout 24 hours, we can make decisions, what points toward peace, or what you refer to as a greater integration and wholeness, or not, and it can build a kind of momentum toward real life. Does that make sense?

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah, it makes a lot of sense. I think one of the implications of what you just said is that the grid by which we evaluate or look at forces in our own minds or we look at others

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doesn't become good and bad or right and wrong or good and evil. It's what leads to suffering or what leads to the end of suffering. So what's skillful and what's not skillful? I was just talking to somebody about self-compassion and how stupid we can think it is and often do. People say that to me all the time: That's just being lazy. That's losing a sense of excellence. That's losing all standards and principles and the only way to really get ahead and do well is to push and be incredibly down on yourself when you fail in some way. But really, no, this actually isn't true. And apparently, there's a good deal of science and research being accumulated, or I'm told by researchers, that kind of harsh punitive environment, either internally or externally, will spike people's performance but briefly, then you crash, that the best way to sustain an effort, change a habit, learn something new is actually self-compassion. It's like you blew it, give yourself a break, lessons learned, start over. That's how we actually get things done. And that's not something most of us have been taught.

James Shaheen: Well, whatever the truth about that is, being down on myself and being my own worst taskmaster is an unpleasant place to be. In fact, it pretty much describes the confinement in what you refer to as contraction. So you mentioned earlier that the word traditionally translated as Egypt, *mitzrayim*, literally means narrow straits. So often we find ourselves in places of constriction or narrow-mindedness, something I also associate with being hard on oneself and defining yourself so narrowly. Can you say more about what you've learned about contraction, especially the dangers of staying in this narrow place?

Sharon Salzberg: I think, going back to my favorite grid, those habits of harsh self-judgment and really being punitive and being rigid about characterizations of others, like they are that way and they always will be or I am this way and I always will be, it's not skillful. It's not going to be onward-leading. It's not a force for making a wholesome change. And what we're looking for is change. You know, I have the habit of not listening to people, and they know it, and I want to change that. But is haranguing myself for 48 hours every time I notice that going to actually be

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an effective way of changing it? No. Sorry to say, because it comes so easily, I'm so used to it, but it doesn't work. And we do feel confined. An example I sometimes use is the teaching where you feel like you're locked in this tiny little dark room with no way out, and something happens so that that door swings open, and you don't know exactly what's on the other side, but you know it's a bigger world. Suddenly, there's a sense of possibility, of options, this creativity where there never was before.

James Shaheen: This obsession that the culture seems to have with self-improvement, “I don't want to be this way anymore, therefore, I won't be,” that doesn't work. But rather, I do do these things, but there are other options, too. That's why you're mentioning options. And the door sometimes swings open because we give up. We say, “OK, I'm also this.”

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah, yeah. And also their ways of working with all those states, which, ironically, in a way, don't start with trying to beat them to death.

James Shaheen: Yeah, the ego doesn't go down without a fight. You get the same force back that you put into it. So in contrast to contraction, you describe expansion as “the potential for openness, spaciousness, clarity, and freedom that exists within each of us.” Can you say more about what happens when we move from contraction to expansion? I think you're touching on that when you talk about the door opening.

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah. And I think one example is when a person or culture makes certain assumptions about us. They tell a certain story about who we are, and we believe it. It's like we take it up totally, and we're defined by the way others seem to see us, and then something happens so that you don't feel so invested in that, you kind of step away from that. You think, Who am I actually? What do I care about? Is that story true? Maybe it's not true. I told a story about myself, as you know, for many years, that I could not give a talk publicly, I just couldn't

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speak publicly. I thought I would look stupid and my mind would go blank and I'd just be sitting there, and so my poor colleagues, especially Joseph, had to give all the evening talks at every retreat we taught because I was terrified. But that's like a story. And when I could step away from the story, I could say, what do I think people are gathering for? Is it true that I can't fulfill that? No, because I decided people were gathering for a sense of connection more than a brilliant, erudite, flawless rendition of something. OK, they're not here to sit in judgment of me. We're just here together. And then I could do things I never dreamt I could do. And so when we step away from these old narratives, and we take a fresh look about what brings happiness, what increases suffering, how alone we actually are, how connected we are, in truth, who we are, everything shifts.

James Shaheen: So you write that expansiveness, and I'm going to quote the book again, "leaves room for our fundamentally loving hearts to uncoil and lead us onward." Can you say more about how expansiveness makes love more available to us?

Sharon Salzberg: Well, I think it would go back in a way to that sense of capacity that, at least according to the Buddhist tradition, we all have a capacity for love or connection or care. It doesn't mean we like everybody by any means. It doesn't even mean we like anybody. But that kind of fundamental sense of realizing our lives are connected. And often there is a kind of, if not strict lovingkindness, there's a kind of compassion that grows when we recognize, wow, everyone is so vulnerable. It's not like we all have the same measure of suffering because we don't, but just the sheer insecurity of life, the vulnerability, the fragility is something we all share. And it's a poignancy to life. And we all don't have control, because for everyone, conditions need to come together for something to arise. It's like you can look at your friend who's suffering mightily, and you can have a really good insight about what they need to do to be in a better place, and you cannot make it so. You just can't. Would that we could, but we can't. And so there's a kind of poignancy we come to that looking at anybody you realize, “Wow, look at how

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some people define happiness, which is just dominating others. Look at how disconnected some people are. I encounter them for the three minutes that we're in conversation, they live inside that energy bubble. It doesn't look like a very attractive place to live.” And it can be a tough, tough life too, for so many people. And yet people get through. We survive. Often, it's a combination of awe at the human ability to get through and in some cases to get through with compassion and care for others and also just the poignancy of life. It just shifts what our priorities are and the ways we see things and what we care about.

James Shaheen: You mentioned the phrase "to get through" a few times, and yes, often we do need to get through. But I really liked the anecdote you told about Joseph and his notion of an inner Wyoming. Why don't you say something about that? Because it seems to me that always available to us, there is this freedom or spaciousness available.

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah, well, that is the perfect story because it shows both sides. Joseph and I were visiting some friends in Houston, and we'd all gone out to this restaurant to pick up food to bring back to the house to eat, and we're just chatting to the kid who's working behind the counter. He said to Joseph that he had never been outside of Houston. And his complete dream in life is to someday get to Wyoming. And so Joseph said, "What does that mean to you? What do you think you'll find there?" And he described this place where there's a big, open sky and feeling free and you can breathe free and you're unconfined or unconstrained, so much openness. And Joseph said to him, "There's an inner Wyoming too, you know," and the kid said, "That's freaky," and he walked away. So I think we see both sides that for some there's a conviction that it's there and we can access it, and for others, it's like, “What are you talking about? That's so strange.”

James Shaheen: So throughout the book, you explore the ways we yearn for something beyond traditional successes and accomplishments. So interestingly, you write that it's not the yearning

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that causes the trouble. Instead, it's our tendency to search in the wrong places. So can you say more about this yearning for happiness and how it can actually support us in our journey to a real life?

Sharon Salzberg: Well, this comes back to another Buddhist idea very much related to this inner capacity that everybody really wants to be happy, and happy not in a superficial sense but in a deeper sense. We all want a feeling of being at home somewhere in this life, whether it's the body, the mind, with our families, with friends, the planet, somewhere, a sense of belonging, and no artifice, no pretense of being better than we are, or more eloquent than we really feel, just as we are. And we all long for that, but we're not, generally speaking, looking in the right places. So the problem, as somebody once put it, is bad aim. We think the problem is wanting to be happy, and that's what I was saying earlier, that people often say that's craving, that's greed, but it's not. It's science. It's looking at life and seeing, wow, if I'm generous, I actually feel a kind of joy that's different when I'm enslaved to my fearful thoughts. They're different. There's different paths, they have different consequences, the giving or the withholding. And we can observe that. So it's through the force of attention that we get to see oh, yeah, there are actually ways we can craft our lives. It's like our lives themselves become our own creative medium for a great deal more happiness.

James Shaheen: When I was reading about looking for happiness in the wrong places and that the yearning itself was perfectly legitimate, I was thinking, Jung, I think, described the problem drinker as somebody in a misguided search for spiritual fulfillment. And it's very interesting, that you're mistaking the things that actually harm you for those that would liberate you.

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah, I mean, I think there's some views of something like drinking or any sort of addictive tendency which would be exactly that. It's a spiritual yearning of some kind that's gone awry because of the object that's being sought.

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James Shaheen: So though we might yearn for a deeper sense of happiness, we often get caught by our patterns and conditioning, as we were just talking about, and more specifically, you describe the three hindrances of Buddhist psychology as patterns that hinder our ability to live fully and respond to the world around us in meaningful ways. Can you walk us through these three hindrances, though, because I find it very helpful to categorize these misguided paths that we take. So we can start with grasping. What are the typical behaviors associated with grasping? And how can it narrow our sense of where happiness can be found?

Sharon Salzberg: Well, I should say, first of all, that it's not the sheer arising of these states that's the problem. It's when we're seduced by them, when we take them to heart, and especially when we act motivated by them. Then we're in trouble. But the sheer arising is just what's happening. Feeling we should have been able to stop that or that we're bad or wrong because I still feel grasping, I still feel hatred, or whatever. Again, it's not skillful. It's not onward leading. You can't control what comes up in your mind, which is something one of my early teachers, Munindra, said to me very often. I guess I needed to hear it very often. He basically said to me, "Why are you so upset about this thought which has come up in your mind? Did you invite it? Did you say, at 3:15 I'd like to be filled with self-hatred, please? No. When conditions come together for something to arise, it will arise. But that doesn't mean you feel passive because how we relate to that force that has come up in our minds, thought, feeling, whatever it is, is everything."

That's sort of the point of the path. So grasping would have forms of infatuation, clinging, craving, always looking for the next thing that will permanently satisfy us, an ability to kind of see a bigger picture. Like I was once teaching in New York at Tibet House, which is really an art gallery. I use this as an outloud example of greed or grasping because I could see some beautiful wall hanging just on the wall some distance away. I couldn't see the price, but I could see the hanging. This is like an outloud depiction of greed. I said, "I really like that. I really like that a

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lot. I want it. I have to own it. OK, I'm going to buy it.” And then I thought, “Well, in order to buy it, in order to be able to own it, I probably have to move,” because at that point, I was living in a sublet where I wasn't allowed to hang anything on the walls. So I thought, “OK, I need another apartment.” I had a tiny little apartment, and I said, “OK, while I'm moving, I'm going to get a bigger apartment. And in a bigger apartment, I'm going to get these special lights for my new wall hanging. It's going to have a place of its own, it's going to be really special.” And then I thought, “Well, in order to be able to afford even more rent in New York, I'm going to have to travel constantly in order to earn enough money to be able to afford the bigger apartment. So I will never be in my apartment, I will never see my wall hanging, but I will own it.” So when we're caught in that state, do we look at what we're compromising in order to get the thing that we think we need? Are we looking at what we're giving up? Are we deciding is it worth it? Are we holding onto it like if the light shines on the wrong way or something like that? We completely freak out because it's not fixed. But nothing is fixed. Everything is changing.

James Shaheen: That's funny. It's like the *papancha* of desire or grasping. You start planning this whole life. You talked about what you would have to compromise, say, or to consider what you'd have to compromise to get it. But also, what are we compensating for? You write that we never feel we're enough or we don't have enough, and to work with this feeling you suggest we can ask, “What do I really need here?” Can you say more about that practice?

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah, I wonder if, you know how so many things really exist on a spectrum, if we're all a little bit like hoarders in some way. Maybe we don't have piles of phone books in our apartment, but there's a lot of stuff. It's almost like totems against change, totems against death. Let's get another one of those, and then I will feel fulfilled, and I'll feel whole. But really, we can feel whole without it, and it's better not needing that new experience, not needing that new accolade, not needing that new object. Because once we feel we need it, we're kind of sunk.

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James Shaheen: So after craving or grasping, we have aversion, which you describe as a punishing attitude toward ourselves and others. Can you walk us through the forms that aversion can take, as well as the dangers they may bring?

Sharon Salzberg: Well, they say in some schools of Buddhist psychology that anger and fear are the same mind state: they're both aversion. They're both like striking out against what's happening, trying to declare it to be untrue. So anger is the outflowing, expressive, energized form; fear and all its manifestations are the kind of held in, frozen, imploding form of striking out, that wanting to separate from what's happening. And again, it's not that these states are bad, but if you look at anger as one example, and the example I use a lot in the book is shame as a form of anger at oneself, real lacerating self-hatred: Is it onward-leading? Look how exhausting it is, look at how humiliating it is. Do we really feel the energy to seek change, to make amends, or to maybe see, "Oh, yeah, I blew it, how can I go on in a better way?" Well, no, we're devastated. We feel like we're the worst person who ever lived, and it's not just the act, what we said or what we did or what we refrained from seeing or doing, it's like our whole being is restless in that state. As someone said to me, whom I quote in the book, the brain filled with shame cannot learn. So we really try to look at anger, in all its forms, fear in all its forms, and not to condemn it or to judge it but to see, well, how much of that kind of pattern leads to more suffering and how much leads to the end of suffering? We have a chance here.

James Shaheen: You know, it's interesting you mentioned shame, because you say that we cannot learn when we feel shame, when we're stuck in it. Recently, I was in a social situation, and I kind of misrepresented myself, not necessarily even intentionally, but I said things that weren't really consistent with who I am. And I felt a kind of shame afterwards, like why were you being disingenuous or misrepresenting yourself? Why are you playing a role that really doesn't suit you? When I was reading this, I realized, if I'm stuck in shame, I can't learn what it means not to be living a real life, in other words. The learning there was what happens when

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you're out of alignment with who you are? What is the result of that? Does it move me closer to real life or further from it? But I noticed the effect of it was to distance myself from others around me and to lose the connection. Can you say something about our ability to learn and how being stuck in shame for even minor things like I just described. It was really minor. It was just sort of disingenuous, and then a lot of shame can come from something very small.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, it does come often from something very small, and it also comes from things that are kind of cultural artifacts, like should I really have been ashamed of living in a tiny little apartment like that? Why should we adopt that attitude that society says you have to have a certain amount? I mean, why is it humiliating when you don't? It could be something you want to work out of, or maybe you made other choices. I had to learn a new way of languaging everything because in Buddhist psychology, which is much more familiar to me as a system, the polarities are between what we call regret or remorse, which is positive, painful but positive, and guilt. So remorse would be seeing that what you did or what you said caused harm, feeling the pain of it, moving on in a way with a resolve to try to do better or change and in a way letting it go, not in terms of lessons learned but in terms of berating yourself, you just let go of it. And guilt would be kind of being stuck there. I'm so bad. I'm so terrible. And it's not onward leading. In Western psychology, the polarities are between guilt, which is positive, apparently, in saying that act was really reckless, it was really breaking harmony, that act, that speech, that withholding, not saying anything at that time, was really incorrect. But shame would be like "I am the worst person ever." So it's like your whole being is now in the spotlight, not the act, which you may regret and want to change the habit of. Like I'm just worthless, I shouldn't even show my face. So I had to kind of learn that way of languaging. And you could see why that complete denigration of yourself doesn't leave you any energy to try to be different. You just want to go back to bed.

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James Shaheen: So the final hindrance is delusion, which you describe as a sense of numbness, disembodiment, and resistance to seeing things as they truly are. Can you say more about how we can work with our patterns of delusion?

Sharon Salzberg: I should also emphasize, we work with all the patterns. It's not just a question of recognizing them and feeling sad. All of these states are completely workable, and we learn a different relationship to them, which is the first and foundational step, instead of falling into them on the one side or hating them on the other. That's almost the definition of mindfulness. It's the place in the middle where we can see what's going on but in a balanced way and is learning happening and is kindness happening and is more spaciousness? So everything is workable. It's not like this kind of inevitable, forever problem.

So delusion is my favorite of the three because it's my thing. They do say that we all have a mix of grasping, aversion, and delusion, but sometimes people's personality structure really favors one over the other, so my thing is delusion. Before I get into grasping, before I get into aversion, or even fear, which I have a lot of, I'll just space out. I'll go numb. It's my favorite place to be. It's comforting in some way. And it's also not inevitably onward leading because when we're lost in delusion, we're kind of counting on other people to define life for us, to define reality for us, and what's good and what's not because we're just lost in space. So that's very confining, too, and then it also leads to, when it's deep and combined in some way with fear, then we want to hold on to anything that seems like it'll give us a sense of security or knowing. And so that's where fundamentalism is said to come from from the Buddhist perspective.

James Shaheen: With regard to delusion, you write, "We lose confidence in our own perception of the truth. We feel confused. And if things keep going, we might start getting awfully used to letting others lay claim to the truth." It's like when you're in that state, you might ask someone what you should do, and what you should do would really depend on something on your internal state. You lose your internal compass. So these are all patterns, grasping, anger, delusion, and

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you suggested that one way of working with these patterns is learning to sit with them in meditation, surrounding them with spaciousness and ease. And that's not necessarily intuitive because obviously, these patterns emerge because it seems like being in full flight from reality is the way to go. Can you say more about what meditation has taught you about looking directly at difficult feelings and being with them rather than these fruitless attempts to escape them?

Sharon Salzberg: Well, I think it starts with an understanding and direct knowledge that those attempts are fruitless. They're not bad, and they're not cowardly or some character flaw, but they're not going to work. They just come back. They come back in some other form. They ambush us in some way. It's just not going to work. And so we practice looking directly at them, taking an interest in them, rather than having a judgment about them, like what does it feel like in my body? Usually, say it's desire or craving, we're so caught up in the object, like, let's say you want a new car. All your energy, and fantasizing is going toward should I get that kind of upholstery or that kind of upholstery? Should I get that way of playing music or that way playing music? It's very rare that we kind of pivot our attention back and almost say to ourselves, What does it feel like to want something so badly? What's that craving made of? Because sometimes we see they're compounds. These are strong feelings. They're complex. We look at craving, and sometimes we find a lot of loneliness. It's not really craving only. We look at anger, and we see a lot of sadness or fear or hopelessness. But unless we make the pivot, we're not going to learn about the very nature of those forces.

And so that's part of being mindful is making that pivot. Not what am I angry about and what am I going to do, but what is anger? What does it feel like in my body? We name it, if we can. Apparently, there's a whole school of current psychology in the West where they call it "Name it to tame it," and we pay attention to it. We take an interest in it. We remember, as we start to put ourselves down, like, no, that's not the point. These are painful states; they're not bad states. We can have some compassion for ourselves in the face of them. And lo and behold, you

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find things begin to shift. Even though that very state has come up, even though it may come up a lot, you're so different with it that everything changes from that.

James Shaheen: That's nice. You also wrote a book called *Real Love*, and throughout the book, you explore the different meanings of love and the ways that love can support us in moving to greater spaciousness and ease. Can you say more about how you've come to understand love? It's such a packed word.

Sharon Salzberg: It is such a packed word. When I had written the proposal for *Real Love* and it was being looked at by different publishers, somebody said to me, "The love market is saturated." What they meant by that was the romance market was saturated: how to find a relationship, how to sustain a relationship, how to end a relationship. But that's not what it's about. It's really more like the fulfillment of that sense of belonging, which comes to connection. It could be actually looking at the supermarket clerk you normally look through and feeling, "OK, here we are. We're two people in this moment in time, and there's a genuine sense of connection," or really listening to somebody instead of just being distracted and thinking about your email, paying attention to yourself, not just the repetitive consuming list of all your faults and all your flaws again and again and again and again, but what else? What's the good within, what's the good I'm capable of? Broadening our sense of who we are, but truthfully so, not like make-believe.

James Shaheen: Yeah, you use the phrase embodied knowing of connection.

Sharon Salzberg: I think it is connection. It's so available and so forgotten, both at the same time.

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James Shaheen: You also draw from the Pali canon, the word that means heat or radiance. Can you say more about the sense of radiance or brightness and how it can support us?

Sharon Salzberg: In *Real Life*, there's a whole section about *tejas* or the inner radiance. It's that inner capacity, and a kind of poetic way of saying it is that it's illuminating. It's like a light within. And that part of the book is nestled within, the section begins with a study done many, many years ago, where every resident of a nursing home was given a plant, and half the residents were told, "This is yours to nurture, to water, to put in and out of the sunlight. You have to take care of it." And the other half of the residents were also given a plant but they were told, "The nursing staff will take care of it. You just enjoy it." And then those two populations were compared. It turned out that the population that was told, "You need to respond to the plant, you need to be aware of it, you need to take care of it," were living longer and having fewer ailments and so on and were oriented. It's long been considered a study in control of your environment and choices and things like that. I heard about it, and right away, I thought that it's a study in lovingkindness as well, about responsiveness, paying attention, being present with even a plant. And then I go on to write about how some plants are very hardy. They can basically survive if you neglect them, but they actually do much better if you pay attention to them because then they don't just survive; they flourish. And then I go on to talk about the light within and how it's kind of the same thing, ignoring it, not wanting to nurture it, not paying attention to it. It will survive nonetheless, but it could also flourish.

James Shaheen: You draw from psychiatrist Viktor Frankl's notion of tragic optimism. Can you say more about tragic optimism and how it can counter spiritual bypassing or toxic positivity? I like toxic positivity. I think it's pretty funny.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, I think more and more people are aware of John Welwood's great phrase about spiritual bypassing, where we're not looking directly at the pain and the difficulty and the

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conflict and the sorrow, but we're kind of upleveling to "It's all going to be OK, we're all one, the universe is perfect," or whatever it might be. And so it's like we're abandoning whole parts of our experience, and we're not really being whole. It's both untrue, it's kind of hypocritical, and it's unkind often, because it's something that people do to one another: "Why are you so caught in duality? You should be dwelling in the light," or something like that. And so rather than getting lost—and it's very easy to get lost in those places. They seem far more attractive than looking at our pain, for example. But something that really strikes me about that kind of upleveling is that we're left very alone. When we're looking at our pain, we have the possibility of finding one another. We don't want to drown in our pain because it is not helpful. But to face it and to understand it's never just us, we do find one another. And so we want to avoid that kind of upleveling, if possible, and genuinely be with everything that comes our way, the joys and the difficulties. And so I like that sense of tragic optimism where we're taking it all in and we're admitting it all and acknowledging it all and saying, OK, I don't want to get consumed by the pain, and yet let's not try to leave it as not worth experiencing in some way.

James Shaheen: Yeah, you also quote the poet Wendell Berry, "Be joyful, though you have considered all the facts."

Sharon Salzberg: Well, that came to me when you and I were doing a podcast with somebody and he quoted that and I thought, "Yes, this is what I need."

James Shaheen: One practice that can support us in developing tragic optimism is cultivating awe. Can you say more about how awe can change the ways we pay attention?

Sharon Salzberg: Well, I think what we actually cultivate is interest or curiosity, and that leads to the emergence of a state of awe. I don't think of awe in the way it's normally defined as "I felt so small, I felt so insignificant, I felt so nothing as I looked at the grandeur of the trees or

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whatever," but I think it is a kind of belonging sense, and yet it's not humiliating but humbling: my fretting all day was really essentially nothing. I don't need to do that. I can open to look at this. Life is so much bigger. And it leads to my potential being so much bigger. Our mutual friend Eileen had a saying. It was something like the smaller the stakes, the bigger the drama, like in an organization where people are arguing over basically nothing, they really argue a lot. They argue more when it's nothing. You realize, “Oh, I don't need to do that. Look at how big life is.”

James Shaheen: That's funny. There's a line in an Iris Murdoch book, I can't remember, but she says something like why are the battles in academia so fierce and brutal? And she said it's because the stakes are so small. I don't know if it's fair to describe academic stakes as small. It was about professors. So you and I have focused a lot on this podcast when speaking with others on loneliness and isolation, and you have an interesting take on this. You write that loneliness can be a kind of bardo or an in-between place, traditionally the place between death and rebirth, a place where we feel stranded or erased. Can you say more about the bardo of loneliness? And how is this different from solitude?

Sharon Salzberg: I think it's very different than solitude. I think we both, maybe we all know people who live in a fair amount of solitude, but they seem very connected in a larger way to others, to maybe all beings, to humanity, to life, to the planet, something like that. And always, even before the pandemic, when I would read about an epidemic of loneliness, or I'd read about different clinical conditions where social connection might be healing for us, I kept thinking, well, it can't only be a numbers game, like I only have three friends, I need fifteen. It must be some inner sense because of those people I know who seemed to have a tremendous sense of connection to life, and they care so much about others. And something about loneliness, I mean, it could be that it's a bardo, it's an in-between state, but we can move out of it in a state of caring. I can remember the day I decided to leave New York and come up to Barre in 2020 was a day I

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was teaching in New York. I had just arrived back there after traveling in California. And as you know, things were starting to get really bad in New York in terms of the pandemic and lots of anxiety and lots of uncertainty and lots of illness. I was teaching in a place where the system is that you sit in the audience in the front row until you're formally introduced, and then the speaker gets up on stage. So I was sitting next to a woman who was extremely anxious, and she said, "You know, I didn't know if I should come," and it was really intense. And I said, "Well, there are these breathing techniques that actually can be very effective, which are described in different ways, but basically, if your out-breath is longer than your in-breath, then your sympathetic nervous system will give way to your parasympathetic nervous system and your whole being, your nervous system will kind of chill." So she wasn't interested in that. So I said, "Well, there's this practice of lovingkindness where you can just repeat these phrases, and you'll begin to see this growing connection to all beings everywhere." She wasn't interested in that. So I looked at her and I said, "Is there anyone you could help?" She lit up. She got completely radiant. And she said, "I do have this elderly neighbor, and maybe I can slip a note under her door and say, 'Do you need help getting groceries?' or something like that." And I thought, "Well, look at that. That is so interesting."

James Shaheen: So as we cultivate connection, which is what I think that is when you help someone, it really brings you back to others, you write that we can move into a space of clarity. Can you say more about this clarity? And how does this clarity change how we move through our daily lives?

Sharon Salzberg: Well, any act of generosity in a way returns us even in a flash, fleetingly, to that state of being whole because in the act of generosity, when it's actually generosity and not martyrdom or something like that, you're not thinking, "I have nothing, I'm no one, I'm so meager, I'm so defective, I'm so deficient, I'm so bereft, I have nothing." You're returned in that moment to that kind of wholeness, and you can make the offering, whether it's a material

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offering, or you're smiling at somebody, or you're thanking them, or you're listening, whatever it is. And so those acts are not just for others. They really change us the more that we can dwell on them. It's the same when we offer lovingkindness to somebody. Whether we know them or not, we're returned to that inner sense of wholeness, and that's very important.

James Shaheen: Could you read a passage from the book on this journey to expansion?

Sharon Salzberg: “In a way, this journey from a narrow place to expansion and freedom lies outside of time and space. We can traverse that seemingly daunting distance with a thought. We can travel that length without accruing any mileage at all, with remembering right now what we really care about, or recollecting right now the source of our deepest happiness, or coming back right now to our essential selves. We can explore the terrain of awe, or gratitude, or self-respect, or love. We needn't be fooled by the layers of fear and craving and shame and confusion covering over that light. We can remind ourselves the light is never more than partially covered, and while it may feel remote, it is accessible, always. Because it is always accessible, we are here, now.”

James Shaheen: Well, Sharon, thank you so much for joining us and being the interviewee on your own cohosted podcast. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of Sharon's new book, *Real Life*. We like to close these podcasts with a short guided meditation, so I'll hand it over to you, Sharon.

Sharon Salzberg: Thank you so much. Now I'm sitting here thinking, "What can I interview James about?" That would be fun. Let's sit together for a few moments. You can sit comfortably. Close your eyes or not, however you feel most at ease. Let's just take a deep breath. Let it out. Allow your breath to become natural. You can listen to sounds, whether the sounds of my voice

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or other sounds, as a way of relaxing deep inside, allowing us to receive the experience, and unless you are responsible for responding to the sound in some way, let it wash through you.

Bring your attention to the feeling of your body sitting, whatever sensations you discover. See if you can feel the earth supporting you. See if you can feel space touching you. When we think of touching space, usually we think of poking the air with a finger, but really space is already touching us. It's always touching us. We just need to receive it.

Bring your attention to the feeling of the breath, just the normal natural breath. Find the place where the breath is clearest for you or strongest for you. Bring your attention there and just rest. See if you can feel one breath. If your attention starts to wander or you fall asleep, truly don't worry about it. See if you can let go gently and just return your attention to the feeling of the breath. When you feel ready, you can open your eyes or lift your gaze. We'll end the meditation.

James Shaheen: Again, thank you Sharon.

Sharon Salzberg: Thank you so much.

James Shaheen: Always fun talking to you. You've been listening to *Life As It Is* with Sharon Salzberg. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow *Tricycle Talks* wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* and *Life As It Is* are produced by As It Should Be Productions and Sarah Fleming. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!