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Sebene Selassie: The pain of our own bodies, our hearts, our minds, or the pain in the world is not going away. So we're not going to outrun the pain. But we can learn to actually practice with mitigating that pain if that's possible. And then we learn to really care for ourselves and tend to our needs, and then also hopefully help others with their pain so that it doesn't turn into suffering and it doesn't become part of this loop of pushing away or grasping at what might make it end or eliminate all pain and ending up in addictions or in loops that will go on forever because it's not possible. And so I think right now we're really trying to, or I am trying to understand what's my role in helping mitigate the pain of the world so that we can ease the suffering that's happening.

James Shaheen: Hello, I'm James Shaheen, and this is *Life As It Is*. I'm here with my co-host Sharon Salzberg, and you just heard Sebene Selassie. Sebene is a writer and dharma teacher based in Brooklyn. Today she joins us to talk about Buddhist practices for facing suffering, with an emphasis on the power of loving-kindness meditation. As someone who has been living with cancer for nearly two decades, Sebene is no stranger to being with suffering, and her work focuses on how we can tap into a deeper sense of love and belonging in the face of violence and division. So in today's episode, Sharon and I will talk about what we mean by facing suffering, and then Seb will join us for a conversation on the practice of loving-kindness as an antidote to fear, what it looks like to center love right now, why we are often divided from ourselves and our bodies, and what we can learn from staying with paradoxes and contradictions. Plus, Sebene leads us in a guided meditation. So here's our conversation with Sebene Selassie.

James Shaheen: Hi, Sharon. It's great to be with you, as always.

Sharon Salzberg: Hey James.

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James Shaheen: So today we're here to talk about facing suffering or being with suffering and loving-kindness as an antidote to fear and isolation. So that's a tall order at a time like this, Sharon.

Sharon Salzberg: It certainly is. Well, really, suffering is such a prevalent theme in our lives anyway, and at certain times, of course, it's quite heightened.

James Shaheen: Right, so suffering is the center of Buddhist teachings, *dukkha*. So Sharon, to start off, could you give us a Buddhist definition of suffering?

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah, I think one famous quotation from the Buddha is when he said, “I teach one thing and one thing only, that is suffering and the end of suffering.” And suffering can mean many things. We take it to mean injury or a terribly painful incident or trauma or something like that, but as *dukkha* it also means insecurity, instability, this constant sense of the oppressiveness of life, like, didn't you ever wish, for example, that things could just pause for a moment?

James Shaheen: Like right now.

Sharon Salzberg: Like right now, and it's that movement. It's ceaseless. It just keeps happening. And so it can have very subtle meanings as well.

James Shaheen: Well, suffering and the end of suffering, that sounds like two things, and people often respond that way. And Bhikkhu Bodhi wrote something about this saying actually that's right, but he had some modifications. So if our listeners want to look up that particular quote that we've all used and repeated so often, Bhikkhu Bodhi has interesting things to say about parsing that phrase, not that it's two things, but that he taught lots of other things too.



Sharon Salzberg: One of the reasons I like that quotation is because it's also a way of seeing the world. It's like if we look at our own jealousy and fear and craving, instead of calling those things bad and wrong and terrible, we can understand them as states of suffering, right? And so the whole modality of how we view ourselves, how we view others, can be in the kind of spectrum of that force, that habit leads to suffering instead of being horrible and miserable and that, on the other side, those habits, those forces, those ways we can behave lead to the end of suffering.

James Shaheen: Yeah. The other day I heard somebody say, “To quote the Buddha, life is suffering.” And I didn't interject, but I wanted to say, well, there's also an end to suffering. Otherwise, it sounds so bleak. I'm curious, what are your students talking most about in terms of this right now?

Sharon Salzberg: Well, it is also lots of different levels because there is the personal suffering we might undergo any time we get a bad diagnosis or we're in physical pain or we experience loss or we're grieving, and these are very painful things. And then there's, of course, psychological suffering that could be perpetuated by ways we're conditioned or things we're facing. A lot of loneliness, shame, self-hatred, so that's all happening too. And I would say certainly in the US, for example, I'm hearing and seeing that a lot of people are in great fear, and they feel hopeless sometimes. There's a certain sense of exhaustion often at one's own mind-states, like people say to me, “I'm so tired of being angry, I don't know how it can go on.” And I think we have a real need for individual and collective resilience and to understand how we can sustain an effort to try to make this a better world and help even our neighbor, whatever it may be. And so there's this dance I'm seeing a lot between fear and almost a sense of despair sometimes, like, “There's nothing to be done. I could never make a difference,” things like that.

James Shaheen: Yeah, there's a sense of inevitability and hopelessness that is really the enemy



of positive change, really, and you mentioned fear, and that's one big source of suffering right now. It's true that the world is always changing, but sometimes that is more apparent than others, and there's a fear of what will happen next, fear of the unknown, and a classical antidote to fear in the Buddha's teachings is metta, or loving-kindness, which you certainly know a lot about. Some people refer to you as the metta queen.

Sharon Salzberg: Aw, shucks.

James Shaheen: So how does the Buddha position loving-kindness as an antidote to fear?

Sharon Salzberg: Well, I find that very interesting. They say the legend is that the Buddha first taught loving-kindness meditation as an antidote to fear when these monks went off to the forest somewhere to meditate. And as the legend goes, the forest was haunted. It was inhabited by tree spirits, and they didn't like the monks there, and so they tried to drive them away by ghoulish apparitions and horrible shrieking sounds. And sure enough, the monks became terrified and they ran away. They ran back to the Buddha and they said, “Oh Lord, Buddha, please send us to a different forest, change our circumstances.” And the Buddha said, “I'm going to teach you the only protection you're going to need.” And that was the actual first teaching of loving-kindness. And so the monks went back to that very same forest, and they didn't only recite in an empty kind of way the loving-kindness, they actually practiced it. And then as these stories all end so happily, the tree spirits became enchanted by the loving presence of the monks, and so they began offering them food, and they were very kind to them. And so that is the legend. But we can take from it the possibility that when we are afraid, deeply afraid, even, that we are empowered by a sense of connection rather than isolation, by compassion instead of hatred. So many times I think in society we think of something like loving-kindness or just kindness as stupid, like it makes you weak, it makes you gullible, you're just giving in. But really it's considered a state of power. It's a force and very powerful. I don't know that tree spirits will bow



down, that we'll always get what we want. It's not on that level, but from within ourselves we can find that which is whole. I often think and quote this passage I read about how they say that in Hiroshima, once the atom bomb dropped, there was even further devastation because this rumor spread that trees and grass and flowers would never grow again, like the laws of nature themselves had exploded along with the bomb, and that once that rumor was dispelled, the people, as terrible as things were, found a different ability to go on. And so I often think that even as we recognize suffering and we face what seems so wrong and hurtful, we also need to touch in on that which is whole, that which is not broken, and that would be the force of love. And so it makes sense to me that love can be an antidote to fear.

James Shaheen: Yeah. You also mentioned compassion. Can you say something about the distinction between compassion and loving-kindness? They're two brahmaviharas, or noble abodes, that we practice of four, the others being equanimity and sympathetic joy. So what is the difference? Often people use them interchangeably, compassion and loving-kindness.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, I think in English we do tend to use them interchangeably, and that just makes sense. Loving-kindness is a bit of an odd term for us. It's a little religious or something. But loving-kindness I see as a fundamental recognition of connection. It isn't necessarily liking somebody at all, but it's deeply knowing our lives have something to do with one another. And you can distinguish these different qualities in part by their challenges and in part by what is known as the proximate cause or the basis from which this brahmavihara or this state we're seeking to cultivate, maitri or metta. So the launching pad, not the only launching pad, but a common one for loving-kindness to arise, that sense of connection, would be recognition that everybody wants to be happy, we all want to be happy, and that it's because of the force of ignorance that we might continually make the mistake that can bring us suffering and bring suffering to others. But the bottom line is we all want to be happy.



James Shaheen: It's interesting. We look at loving-kindness as an antidote to fear and also a way of facing and being with suffering. And yet it seems to me that the resistance to loving-kindness practice, at least in my case this was true, is based on a kind of fear, a fear of being open and seemingly undefended. Have you noticed that in people? I remember when you finally got me to come to a metta retreat years ago.

I was having difficulty with somebody and I was feeling deep resentment toward this person, and I wrote to Sharon once and I said, “Gee, I dreamt he was hit by a car,” and rather than say anything in response, Sharon simply sent me the dates to her next metta retreat, and I ended up going, and I ended up becoming a convert.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, just to make the distinction between loving-kindness and compassion, which I think will also be somewhat in response to your question, Barbara Frederickson, the researcher at University of North Carolina, once described compassion as love that's looking at suffering. So you could say the proximal cause of compassion, which is a quivering of the heart in response to seeing pain or suffering, and it's a movement toward that person or situation to see if we can be of help. You could say the proximal cause or nearest arising condition or launching pad for compassion is not so much recognizing we all want to be happy but seeing our vulnerability that every one of us, whatever our status or life situation is right now, life is so fragile, it's so insecure that we can get one phone message and have a different life than we had before we picked up that phone. And so we share that. Compassion is not hierarchical, like I, who have everything together, am bestowing this kindness on you. It is really, it's almost like an equal playing field. It's recognizing we're all so vulnerable, and here we are together. And both those states, loving-kindness and compassion, are seen exactly the way you described as weakening—we're going to be too open. It's going to hurt too much. And some of it I think can only be answered or responded to in terms of experience. It's like, try it out. That's all projection, it's all concept. See what happens. Because mixed in there, even if unnamed, is equanimity,

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which means balance, balance between compassion for someone else and compassion for ourselves, balance between compassion or loving-kindness for someone and wisdom, like a realistic sense of limits. Like, I can't make this all go away for you. Would that I could, but life's not like that. And so all these qualities really weave together, and it doesn't really leave us overwhelmed actually.

James Shaheen: OK, so now we'll bring in Sebene Selassie, a Brooklyn-based dharma teacher and author. Sebene, thanks for joining us.

Sebene Selassie: Thank you for having me.

James Shaheen: How are you today?

Sebene Selassie: I'm doing OK. Yeah. I like Mondays. It's the moon's day, Monday, so I do a lot of my planning and settling and just orienting for the week so it doesn't feel like I have to get to work. I can ease into the week.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I just received your most recent newsletter, so I'll ask you a little bit about that too. And maybe at the end of the podcast, we can tell people how they can subscribe to your newsletter. So Sharon and I have been talking about the role of loving-kindness in navigating the current social and political climate particularly in helping us stay with suffering and painful experiences. This has been a big focus of some of your work lately. In fact, you recently retitled your newsletter “Remind Me to Love,” which I like so much. So can you tell us about that sentiment? What does it look like to center love right now?

Sebene Selassie: Oof. It's a big one. First of all, thank you for having me for this conversation. It feels like crucial times to be gathering and really reflecting in this way so that we're not



responding to what's happening just out of reactivity or fear or doubts or whatever may be swirling for us. But really, to me, that invitation to loving-kindness and to remember love is really starting with ourselves because I know that the past many years but especially what's going on right now has been very dysregulating for people, and we don't want dysregulated responses to reset the energies right now. So for me, a lot of that reminder to love that return to loving-kindness has to begin with self. So you mentioned pain and challenges, and many of us, of course, witness that around us with what's happening, but we also are experiencing it ourselves. I've gone through, I'm just coming out of four months of extreme physical pain and navigating that in the midst of everything else that's going on, and who knows how they might be related. But a lot of us are also having personal challenges as well. And so how do we really center self-care so that we are well in ourselves, and that loving-kindness then can extend outwards from a really authentic and powerful place, right? Because if we're running on empty, running on fumes, that's not beneficial for anyone, ourselves or others.

James Shaheen: You talk about something that somehow, maybe it's a bit of a stretch, but it seems related to centering love. In the newsletter I read this morning, you talk a lot about play. You link to a Brian Eno interview and Richard Powers's novel *Playground*, and Bertrand Russell's *In Praise of Idleness*. So what role can idleness and play have for us here at a time like this?

Sebene Selassie: They're so central. I can only speak from my own experience, but I'm very much affected by the culture around us. I think others might relate to this, but we have a really strong orientation toward work and productivity and outward manifestations of our energies that really move us away from an inner sense of wellness and wonder and awe and joy. Simple things, not huge, life-changing experiences of awe, but just simple pleasures of awe in what we're eating or smelling, what we're touching and tasting and hearing. And those simple invitations to return to our senses, to our experiences, are inherently playful in a way when we



really get in touch with it, and those of us who have a practice, which I'm sure many listeners do or have, who carve time to return to that, I think can sense into the inherent power of that idleness, of just being with experience to relearn joy, basically.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I'll have to send you an article if I can find it that we ran many years ago called “The Samadhi of Play” by a student of Tanaka Roshi. But it was very good. Sharon?

Sharon Salzberg: So in your recent newsletter, you quote a line from the writer Josie George, which is an amazing line: “You can't expect anyone to save a world they're not in love with.” Can you say some more about that?

Sebene Selassie: Yeah, I think it's really related to what I was just saying, this capacity to actually not be yanked around by all of what we witness and the horrors that we see, but to actually be in touch with the real experience of our lives. We do then fall in love, and we do return to our senses. I have some lemon water next to me, and I just drank it right before I started to speak, and that simple taste pleasure is so, I love it. Maybe some people don't like lemon water, but I really love it. And so that sensory experience and real knowing and loving of life is what makes us want to love and preserve life. So, that may be trained by these practices of paying attention, but then we can extend that out to the love that we feel when we see our best friend or our child or our spouse or our community or our neighborhood and the world. It really starts from our capacity to actually be present for it.

Sharon Salzberg: You actually reminded me of some of the elements of the Passover Seder where we eat horseradish, which symbolizes bitterness, the bitterness of life, and we eat the sweet stuff made of nuts and fruit and things like that, which symbolizes the sweetness. And then at one point in the ritual, you combine them both on a piece of matzah, and so you've got them both. So I'm curious about, aside from these particular elements of experiencing joy, what are



your current practices of loving-kindness, and how do they help you to be with pain and suffering?

Sebene Selassie: We're going to be here all day.

Sharon Salzberg: Oh, good.

Sebene Selassie: This particular period—I have stage four cancer, as many people know. So I've had many instances of challenges in my body, but this particular period is probably the most extended period of time where I've dealt with pain. And so centering care, which includes pain management of drugs and things that that helped me really manage, but also the care of giving myself space and time. So that's a big one. We can all feel so busy, like there's so much to do, but to actually consider and then cultivate ways of creating space for self-care and loving-kindness is really important. So it's not just the practices of, let's say, the phrases of loving-kindness meditation, which are very helpful and I've been practicing more lately, which I hadn't done for quite some time and really benefited, actually, Sharon, from being on retreat with you in, I guess November it was. And that kickstarted something for me with really taking the phrases back in and the practice back into my heart. But a lot of it for me is really structuring my life so that there can be the opportunity for loving-kindness.

So getting back to our current climate, because I know that's what's on a lot of people's hearts and minds, one of the things that I've been emphasizing in my newsletters is a practice that I've undertaken of no news before noon. So I don't sleep with my phone in my bedroom, so it's not the first thing I look at in the morning, and I don't let myself look at the news until noon, and I often make it to 1:00 p.m., which is it is right now, without having checked because I get on with my day. I do other things. And I've been saying, I would like to make a button that says “I'm not Obama,” because nobody is depending on me being aware of what executive orders have come



out or what's happening. I do not need to be briefed before 2:00 p.m. I can still stay informed, I can still understand what's going on. I can still stay engaged, but I'm really, it's a practice of loving-kindness to really take care of myself and my priorities and my mind and heart and body so that I can be more available for the world. So to me, that is a loving-kindness practice.

I think also because we center so much on the mind and heart and *citta*, for those of us who study dharma or practice buddhadharma, I really also like to emphasize loving care of the body and that as a loving-kindness practice. And so really attuning to the body and making that part of my practice this morning without the infiltration of outside information, but to really be well in my body so that I can be well for the world and the work that I want to do.

Sharon Salzberg: It's really beautiful. And you've also written about the importance of allowing yourself to cry, which was so touching and important as a message because it can be so countercultural. Can you tell us about that?

Sebene Selassie: Yeah, well, I was someone who grew up not really encouraged to cry, discouraged, so tears were not welcome in my home growing up, and I was a very emotional child. I had a lot to be upset about. There was a lot going on. So it was something that was very difficult for me. Although I tend to be quite emotional, there's a way in which I can really bottle it up, especially in the presence of others. So this is a really big practice for me to not only let myself cry, which I don't think I have a problem crying so much as crying when there are other people around. And I predictably chose partners who didn't really welcome my tears either, and so a lot of my time with others was spent bottling that up. And it's really been a practice for the past couple of years, since my divorce, actually, to allow myself to express that sadness when it arises with others, and it's still a practice. It's hard for me to do in certain situations. And I really, yeah, I want to make a T-shirt that says “Proud to be an old crybaby.”

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Sharon Salzberg: You've got a merch company going there.

Sebene Selassie: Yeah, I really should with these slogans: No news before noon. Old cry babies unite. I just want to say one more thing about tears is that I don't know a lot of the technical details, but I know that there's a lot that has come out recently in terms of the power of tears and the release of chemicals and toxins, the healing power of crying, that has largely gone unmentioned and unstudied for a long time.

James Shaheen: Interesting. There are studies, in other words, about the power or effect that crying can have on someone.

Sebene Selassie: Yeah. More and more.

James Shaheen: Oh, wow. Seb, you've written a lot about belonging or the lack of a sense of belonging. It's been a major theme in your work. We published a few things after you published your book. So what do you mean when you talk about belonging?

Sebene Selassie: Yes. So I'm speaking about belonging. I think when most people hear the word, they might think only of a social level of belonging, like fitting in. So I am speaking of that because that's often where people are, that's the pain point for people. That's when they start to sense a feeling of separateness. but the belonging that I'm turning us toward is something much deeper, I believe. And it's a sense of the nonseparateness or the interconnection and interdependence at the heart of existence. I have this phrase or saying that I say that we are not separate, and we are not the same. Sometimes when we look at this sense of true belonging or deeper belonging that points to this nonseparation, we can bypass the fact that we also are individual beings with our stories and our histories. And that's often where we feel the pain of separation is because of those differences. And so I'm pointing to the paradox of the two truths

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that is at the heart of a lot of Buddhist teaching, that there's an absolute reality of interconnection and then there's the relative reality of. Our individual lives. And so belonging is really an acceptance of this paradox and, for many of us, healing that sense of separation that comes from not understanding the truth of those two things.

James Shaheen: Maybe “I belong” is another T-shirt.

Sharon Salzberg: I am getting excited about this T-shirt line!

Sebene Selassie: Yeah, I wish I had like one iota of business sense so I could start a merch line, but I don't know. I don't think that's going to happen.

James Shaheen: So right now we're living in a time of great political division, and that can exacerbate a sense of isolation or a lack of belonging. So how do you think about belonging against the backdrop of this divisiveness?

Sebene Selassie: Yeah, I think that's some of the hardest work because it really requires not only a deep spiritual understanding but an opening of the heart to allow in what feels potentially harmful and dangerous. When we can open our hearts, it doesn't mean we lose our boundaries of protection. So it's a dance of understanding what it means to keep ourselves and our communities healthy and safe and well but not shut our hearts to the fact that we are connected to all of these people who we consider to be on an “other” side. I loved what one dharma teacher said once. He said that it's not about taking sides; it's about taking a stand. There's only one side, and that's belonging and connection. But how do we take a stand against harmful acts and people who are causing that harm?

James Shaheen: Yeah, Sharon and I were just talking about opening one's heart and at the same



time setting boundaries or finding that balance because it can be a scary thing to open your heart. Can you say something about the balance between setting a boundary and opening one's heart?

Sebene Selassie: I think I wrote about this in my book, which was published five years ago now, so it may seem quaint as an example, but at the time I was really struggling with George W. Bush and the second Iraq War, and I started doing loving-kindness meditation that I made up myself. I did this for quite a while. For many weeks, every morning I would imagine that I was George Bush, and I would imagine being in Barbara Bush's belly, coming out into his world, going to the schools he went to, developing the addictions he did, having the experiences he did and the community he was in. It was a perfunctory exercise. But at a certain point I really felt imbued with the feeling that, oh, I would be George Bush. If I lived George Bush's life, I would be George Bush. And again, this seems maybe like a quaint example now, but I think the first step to what you're describing in terms of opening your heart is to see the inevitability of who these other people are. We're trying to open ourselves to people who feel so foreign to us in their views and their perspectives and their actions especially, but they're just the products of their karma. And so to first understand that, I think, is really important because the othering begins when we think that there's something special or different about us. But all that is different is that we've had a different reality. In a lot of ways, we can be grateful for whatever traumas and difficulties we've had. We can be grateful for the reality that we even want to open our hearts, that we want to bring goodness to all, that we really want to practice these things, and that is compassion for ourselves and others when we do that.

James Shaheen: Sharon?

Sharon Salzberg: Well, I'm also thinking, my mind is going in many different directions, including this story, which I did tell Seb in that retreat in November about my goddaughter, who was about 7 years old at the time. Her mother took her on a trip to London, and it was right in the



period, the same exact time when there had been this London train bombing. And Willa, my goddaughter, their house in New York is very close to the World Trade Center, so this was the second time in her little young life that she had heard about or witnessed terrorism and the way people can be with one another. And so her mom sat her down and told her about the train bombing, and the first thing Willis said was, “Let's pray.” And they sat together. And then Willa said, being 7 years old, “I want to go first.” So she went first. And this was her prayer. It was something like, “May all the bad people find the love in their hearts.” And when I heard about it, I thought, what an incredible thing, because here are the rest of us thinking, *Are the subways safe? What about me?* And that is really the prayer, so to speak, of loving-kindness. It's like, May these people come to some kind of understanding, and that's better as a perspective. I think so much of the time people freak out at loving-kindness, like, how can I wish happiness or wish “May you be happy” for this person who's causing so much pain? Or the way people talk about it to me is often, “Why should I send loving-kindness to this person who doesn't feel like I should exist or people like me should exist?” And so it's like, what is the role of loving-kindness in the face of hatred? I'd love to hear your thoughts on that.

Sebene Selassie: That's beautiful. Thank you, Willa, for your 7-year-old wisdom. Yeah. I think it depends on our understanding of happiness, right? Because if we believe that happiness is just some sort of temporary state of delight, that's the opposite of unhappy, then yes, there might be happiness in delighting in the harm of others, but if we're talking about a deeper happiness, that is, a joy that doesn't have an opposite, it's really an open-hearted, grounded, all-encompassing feeling of that interconnection, then they would not be causing harm to others—not intentionally and not with any kind of glee. And so we have to get clear on what we're meaning by loving-kindness and wishing wellness and happiness for others because it's not that we're doing that to encourage the continued bad behavior. We're doing it because we know the truth of that deeper happiness would change these people fundamentally.



Sharon Salzberg: Yes. Or as my friend Bob Thurman once said, they'd be less of an asshole, Bob being Bob.

Sebene Selassie: For sure. And sometimes we just use words without really examining what we're talking about. And so I think people can get confused by it because they're applying it to their constantly changing emotions, and they're not really understanding these deeper profound not just changing states of experience but really a deeper knowing that is true happiness, true joy, true wisdom.

Sharon Salzberg: Sometimes what I say to people, which is really totally true for me, is that in these seemingly impossible situations where it may not make logical, conventional sense to offer loving-kindness, I remind myself, actually, they say the Buddha taught loving-kindness as the antidote to fear. Is this a dynamic, is this a relationship where I would suffer more from less fear? I don't think so. So here's an experiment. What would it be like to make that experiment with that understanding exactly as you're describing and maybe changing the words, but look at that, maybe less fear will actually make me feel stronger.

Sebene Selassie: Yes. Actually, I have a question for you, Sharon. I always think about this. I feel like, is that story of the monks coming to the Buddha after practicing in the forest freaked out by all the spirits and the Buddha offering loving-kindness as the antidote to fear, are there other places where fear is talked about? It's not on any of the gazillion lists.

Sharon Salzberg: No, it's not on the gazillion list. There is something in the Abhidhamma the, the psychology, where they talk about aversion as the hindrance, not anger, but aversion. And that includes fear. So anger and fear are considered the same mind-state, where anger is the outflowing expressive, energized form, and fear is the held in, frozen, imploding form of striking out against what's happening, wanting to separate from it, wanting to declare it to be untrue. So



they're often talked about as an equivalent state, which is very interesting given our current psychological understanding. And there's also the very fascinating realm of having loving-kindness for yourself when you're afraid and when you're enraged. And what's that like?

Sebene Selassie: Yeah that's really interesting, because I think I personally tend to internalize the fear, like you said, so I benefit a lot from loving-kindness. And I think in some ways it can be healthier to have the expressive energy of fear for yourself. It might not be great for other people, but I'm wondering what would be the practice for that? Because I think a lot of people are feeling that outward anger as an expression of fear.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, I think it makes sense, and I think we never want to condemn what we're feeling, which would be a kind of spiritual malpractice in a way, like, “I shouldn't have this, and I have to annihilate that, and that's what's making me bad,” but rather have a whole different approach. And I think we have to understand the difference between feeling anger and being overwhelmed or defined by anger. It's like, you and I had a conversation about Gavin Creel, the deceased Broadway star and performer, and when I listened to the livestream of his memorial service, they played some recordings of him in his own voice speaking about his meditation, and so, he started out by saying, “I'm a meditator, and the practice that I'm doing is called mental noting.” And he said, “What it is is you want to name what you're feeling before it names you,” in other words, before it defines you. But that's the point. It's not to feel you need to denounce what you're going through as intense and strong as it may be, but you want to have a little bit of space so that it's not defining you, it's not limiting you in terms of your choices and your actions. And we can do that. That's the whole basis of mindfulness.

James Shaheen: Seb, you were talking about imagining what it might be like to share George Bush's karma as a way of being able to wish him well or to experience loving-kindness for him, and I think Joseph Goldstein told me this, I can't remember, maybe it was you, Sharon, but when



I have great difficulty wishing somebody well who is usually just the target of my scorn or hate whatever I'm feeling, I think, Wouldn't I be better off if that person were happy? Wouldn't I be better off if that person were content? It could have been Joseph, it could have been Sharon. I don't know who said that, but that helped me tremendously. Wouldn't it be better if this person in power were happy or content whoever that person is? And I just found that tremendously helpful.

James Shaheen: We have a few questions left before we have to go. Sharon?

Sharon Salzberg: I'm really contemplating being able to have loving-kindness for oneself as we are experiencing some really painful, difficult emotions, and that also brings me back to what you were saying about how on top of being divided from one another, we're also often divided from ourselves and from our own bodies, which can lead us to numb out. And so there's that dynamic, and then being alienated from our body. You've talked about being in so much physical pain recently and how difficult it might be—this is not what you've talked about, but I'm extrapolating now how difficult it is to have loving-kindness for one's body and one's painful experience in some ways. So I'm wondering if you can talk about that.

Sebene Selassie: Yeah. This has been an obsession of mine since I realized how disconnected I was from my body. I often say mindfulness is a misnomer. It's a very good word in a lot of ways, the translation of *sati*, but it leads us to think that it's all about the mind. And we're already a culture that encourages that focus on the mind and the intellect, the rational, and we're rewarded for it, whether that's our proclivity or not. It happens to be mine. And so, I'm doubly dosed or unfortunately conditioned by society to like to be even more in my head. But all of us, because we go to school and because we're educated in that way to be in our heads, it can be really hard to include the body in our awareness in this, as we're developing this capacity for more presence to really bring it online in an embodied way so that we have somatic awareness, not only mental noting, as important as mental noting is because the mind is running things for most of us. And



so for me it's been a real practice of continuing to really bring my awareness down into the body and really starting from the feet to feel grounded and to feel sensations so that it's not just this kind of mental loops that I'm in and how powerful that is for real presence and a real understanding of what's running this system when I do shut down because I'm listening to certain people or having certain interactions. I can actually sense it in my body. It's not just a kind of thought loop that I'm in. And that takes a lot of practice to really connect to that. Just this morning I was, it's hard for me to reach my left foot because of what's going on in my hip right now, and so I have this special cream that a friend made for me, and in the mornings after I bathe, I put the cream on my feet, and it's really hard to put it on my left foot. So it becomes this really caring, loving practice of tending to this part of me that feels really far away right now. And just this morning I was doing that, and I was like, oh, wow. I've had this foot since I was a baby. When I was a baby, I could probably put my foot in my mouth. It's like I had a completely different sense of my body, but just having that kind of tender care toward our bodies as we start to sense more, bring it more online for me, it's provided so much capacity for actually being in my life in a different way to actually sense what's happening, the tightening of the stomach or the closing of the chest when something fearful or upsetting comes up. And so for me, this practice is a holistic one of embodied presence and embodied awareness.

Sharon Salzberg: There's an interesting bit of research that I need to investigate further, something about the more we have embodied awareness, the more we actually have a sense of empathy toward others, because there's this kind of empathy that is resonance. It's like we almost feel it in our body as we look at someone else's situation, and if we're cut off or numb, we won't necessarily be that sensitive. And so that's an interesting equation as well.

Sebene Selassie: That is really interesting and it makes me wonder because I know there's this idea of mirror neurons and how we are mirroring each other. Our neural network is not only in our brains, so there must be mirroring that's happening through the body as well as through the

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mind.

James Shaheen: Seb, I should mention that we do have a picture of you in the magazine dancing. It was a day in the life of a teacher, and you were the subject that quarter, and you talked about learning to dance quite late in life as a way of reconnecting with your body in a sort of joyful way.

Sebene Selassie: Yeah, that continues to be a morning practice of mine. So especially, like I mentioned, on Mondays, it's something that I like to do just to reconnect to that vital essence. I hope I dance every day. I don't always, but it's a practice too.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, this discussion of suffering is taking a somewhat unexpected turn. It's like now we're all going to dance!

James Shaheen: Well, I'm glad we memorialized that. OK, Seb, I have one more question. I just read your newsletter this morning. It was sent out late last night, I believe. But you write something I find very helpful. You write, “There is so much that is unacceptable in our world, and yet the first task of change is accepting things just as they are. It's a paradox and it's a ripe place for practice.” Can you say something about that?

Sebene Selassie: I mean, that's all of it, right? Because of course we can come to practice out of pain and wanting to end our suffering, but what we soon realize is that the equation that pain times resistance equals suffering is ultimately letting us know that pain is going to be there. So the pain of our own bodies, our hearts, our minds, or the pain in the world is not going away, not because we change things politically. It's just a fact of life, and there are many teachings that we could point to from the buddhadharma and just our common sense that can tell us that. So we're not going to outrun the pain, but we can learn to actually practice with mitigating that pain if



that's possible, like with my experience of physical pain., and then we learn to really care for ourselves and tend to our needs and then also hopefully help others with their pain so that it doesn't turn into suffering and it doesn't become part of this loop of pushing away or grasping at what might make it end or eliminate all pain and ending up in addictions or in loops that will go on forever because it's not possible. And so I think right now we're really trying to, or I, let's say, I am trying to do is understand what my role is in helping mitigate the pain of the world so that we can ease the suffering that's happening.

James Shaheen: OK, so Sebene Selassie, thanks so much for joining us. We like to close these podcasts with a short guided meditation, so I'll hand it over to you, Sebene.

Sebene Selassie: Oh, great, let's do a practice that helps us settle into our bodies. And so, finding a comfortable posture. It doesn't have to be anything too special, but just to make sure that your chest is not closed off. You might want to roll your shoulders up and back if you're sitting so that you have a sense of openness in the front of the body. You can take a deep breath in and out to just allow a sense of relaxation, maybe just beginning with an awareness of the body, so whatever part or location of the body that's speaking to you. You may be attuned to what's underneath you. That could be helpful for groundings. You might feel your feet on the floor, or if you're sitting on a chair or a seat, feeling that underneath you. Just noticing that sense of connection as you're grounding. If another part of the body is speaking to you, really sensing into that experience so that you're not just thinking about the body, but you're actually feeling it. So taking a moment on your own, whatever has drawn your attention, to have a sensory experience of the body for a moment. You might notice pulsing, pressure, temperature; you may notice movement. And if any of this is uncomfortable, painful, you might want to switch your focus to something that is more neutral or pleasant, even. And so the body becomes the anchor for awareness. So thoughts will arise. That's not a problem. It's not a mistake. That's what the mind does with this embodied awareness. We allow the body, the space of our being, to be the anchor.

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So coming back to any place that is calling for your attention, the feet, the hands, the seat. I often like to use the feet because they're farthest away from the head. And it's from here and sensing and feeling the body that I like to come to the breath as this constant, often calming anchor. So if that's familiar or comfortable for you, I like to follow the breath in the belly, but anywhere where you can really feel the breath enter and leave the body as a physical sensation, not an idea.

Sensing each inhale from beginning to end and each exhale noticing any pause in between. And again, if thoughts or maybe emotions arise, not needing to engage or problematize them, but simply using the breath and the body as an anchor to encourage this presence, this gathering, this centeredness. And from here as we close this short practice, perhaps offering one phrase of loving-kindness to ourselves. So whatever moves you in this moment for your heart, wishing yourself kindness or well-being, health or happiness, and allowing that well wish to fill your mind, your heart, your body, and ending by extending those well wishes out to all beings everywhere, without exception. May all beings be happy. May all beings be healthy. May all beings be at peace. May all beings be free.

James Shaheen: Thank you, Seb. That was wonderful.

Sebene Selassie: Thank you.

Sharon Salzberg: It was really beautiful. Thank you so much.

Sebene Selassie: Oh, it's so great to see you both.

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