

Episode #60 – How to Cope in a Changing World with Sharon Salzberg

Donna Ferris: [00:00:00] Welcome to Bounce Back Stronger, the podcast that explores ways to find peace and purpose after difficulty. I'm your host, Donna Ferris, and I'm incredibly honored to welcome, for the second time, international meditation teacher, author, and wellness influencer Sharon Salzberg.

A little bit about Sharon. Sharon Salzberg is a meditation pioneer, world-renowned teacher, and New York Times best-selling author. She is among the first to bring mindfulness and loving-kindness meditation to mainstream American culture nearly 50 years ago, inspiring generations of meditation teachers and wellness influencers.

Sharon is co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, MA. She is the author of 13 books, including the New York Times bestseller *Real Happiness*, now in its second edition, and her seminal work *Loving Kindness*. Sharon's podcast, The Metta Hour, has amassed 6 million downloads and features interviews with thought leaders [00:01:00] from the mindfulness movement and beyond.

Sharon, thank you so much for joining us on Bounce Back Stronger I'm so honored to have you on the podcast.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, thank you. It's great to see you. It's good to be with you.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, I feel calmer already.

Sharon Salzberg: Oh, no, a lot of expectation there.

Donna Ferris: Oh, no. When I reached out to you soon after the election, I let you know how really helpful your Instagram posts have been. I've shared them with the listeners and then in my newsletter. You just rang the right bell right after this because, at least for me, it's been a challenge.

And we have to feel the feelings and yet. still know that this, too, is part of reality. And so I really appreciate how you've led us and led me in particular.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, thank you. I think you summed it up really perfectly. We have to feel the feelings and yet. [00:02:00]

Donna Ferris: And yet.

Sharon Salzberg: And yet.

Donna Ferris: I think that's hard. I will say out front that this is my first election like this sober.

So I've numbed much of this stuff before and was still angry then. And this time it, you know, there's no place to hide.

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah, well, I'm sure you are feeling the feelings more intensely. And I think I always try to remember and talk about is that so many of those efforts we made or strategies we employed to not suffer more were kind of strategic and often very smart at the time, you know. Still, time goes on, and maybe the major amount of trauma was when we were children, but we're not children any longer. We have options that we never had when we were that young, or in some situations, even as an adult, where we just didn't see those options, we can [00:03:00] actually see more options. And so it's not to disparage any of those habits, or feel we were bad or weak for undertaking them, but they're done, for many of us. And, as difficult as circumstances can get, that is, for me, such an exhilarating notion that I can grow and I can change and can deal with things in a way that I never could before. And so it involves both parts of what you're saying, like not disparaging our efforts to numb out or disguise what's happening. Maybe that was really the thing to do, at the time, but no longer.

And how amazing is that?

Donna Ferris: Absolutely. I think one of the ways I've been turning this and we'll get to the question because I asked for questions from people that followed me on social media and in my newsletter and I got a lot, so I do want to share those.

But I think one of the turns I've been doing [00:04:00] is some of the outrage I've been feeling might lead to things that I needed to do anyway. And I might

never have done. Taking freedoms that I never would have allowed for myself and noticing things that I put up with for a very long time.

Those are the turns that I've been trying to make.

So let me get to the questions. I don't want to short, change anybody. So the first three, and I'm just going to lay them out, I'm going to read them all, and then they're around the topic of, I would call it negativity from others.

And these are kind of the the most emotional of the group. So I thought I would get them out of the way quickly because I think that's probably where a lot of us started, this journey. So the first is really simple, "How to react to negativity from others." The second is "A large segment of our society is traumatized and angry, but they are seemingly unaware of the etiology, which is the source of their anger.

How can you teach them to become more [00:05:00] resilient when they haven't identified the source of their angst and when they are satisfied with just being angry?" The last one, is "In the next four years many people will feel outrage and anger as different changes in our nation take place. As you say in your book, we don't want to be lost in a fiery world that never lets us know peace.

What are some suggestions for fine-tuning our resilience to avoid becoming victims of our reactions to changes that may cause grief, suffering, and indignity to many?"

Sharon Salzberg: Well, there are lots of angles, I think, in which to try to respond to that. For many of us, the kind of conventional or traditional way we have found strength is through anger. And that often has been important, but when we look at not just feeling anger because we feel what we feel and we need to honor every feeling, truly, but being overcome by anger, being defined by anger, having like a really bad [00:06:00] day over and over again because of our own anger, then it's, it's so damaging to us.

So first, I think it's really important to have that distinction, feeling something and being overcome by it, overcome by it means it's guiding our actions and our choices.

And if you look at, say, Buddhist psychology, when the Buddha talked about anger, there are actually positive parts to it, which is the energy, you know, we're not passive, we're not complacent. It has a kind of integrity. Often, we can draw boundaries, and it has sometimes a kind of courage to it. Like I think of

those meetings, where we're actually secretly counting on the angriest person in the room to say, look at that problem. And everyone else is carefully looking in another direction. They're saying, no, look at that, but the downsides of being overcome by anger are, first of all, the Buddhist psychology likens anger to a forest fire, which burns up its own [00:07:00] support, which means it can destroy the host, our nervous system, our health, our relationships, our wellbeing.

And we see that and also there's a way in which when we are lost, we're consumed, we're overwhelmed by anger, we don't see any options. It's like, right now if, you all just brought up a time you were immensely angry at yourself, just bring it back right now. It's not also a time where you think, you know, I did five great things same morning.

I said that stupid thing. Those five great things, they are gone. They're just wiped out. There's a lot of information that we lose when we're just, consumed by that kind of anger. So what we want to do is really capture the energy without being so lost in it, and burning up because of it.

And we can do that. That's not easy, but it's possible. And that's partly what we try to do in mindfulness meditation is be able to be with [00:08:00] feelings and still, not fall into either getting consumed by them or being ashamed of them and pushing them away. So avoiding both those extremes, and people do it in many ways, is like resilience training.

Donna Ferris: Yeah.

Sharon Salzberg: I have been more concerned about what I fear will be like the rise of hatred and the triumph of hateful behavior in this next era. I can't predict, but it's what I feel is likely to happen, and I think that it's not only dangerous, but it's dangerous to many kinds of people. It's like an awful environment in which to be. But learning not to be defined by other people's stories about us, learning to have a sense of community based not on hatred and the other, but, [00:09:00] on almost like the power of love and compassion - which isn't often heralded. We think of them as weak or giving in, or it doesn't have to be any of that; it can be a source of tremendous strength, and having tools, exploring different tools, so that we are meeting what's going on as best we can.

And so I think often of the stress dynamic, which I see really is a dynamic. There's the pressure, the circumstance, the negativity, the unfair situation, whatever it is. And then there's the resource with which it's met. And we know that from a less fevered time, just an ordinary day when maybe you haven't slept

well, you had a bad encounter at breakfast with somebody, you go off to work, you overhear a comment, and it just like pierces your heart.

It just goes right in there as compared to you had a beautiful night's sleep and you had a [00:10:00] loving breakfast with all these friends, and then you went to work and you overheard the same comment, and then you think, "Oh, the person's having a bad day," you know. So it's not like you cover it over or pretend they said a nice thing.

Maybe they didn't, but we meet it differently. And sometimes people hear that and think, well, that's just an excuse for not doing anything. You know, not trying to change a system, not trying to make a difference. But I always say, why try to make a difference from maximum depletion, exhaustion, and overwhelm?

So we build up that sense of resource, which has to do with community and it has to do with inner strengths as well.

Donna Ferris: When I hear that, I get it. . I think it's helpful for us to have a community with people that are, I don't want to say like-minded, but at least are trying to grow in the ways we are trying to grow.

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah.

Donna Ferris: Where we struggle, and I want to hear in some of [00:11:00] this question is what do we do with the people that aren't growing or are not seeking these same things. And I will tell two stories I've had two instances of hate one with my daughter who's transgender on the street and one with my other daughter from a young man who made, right in front of me, sexually harassing statements. And both felt empowered, So I'm like, how are we go out in the world with love? I think that is, what I want to do and I try to do, but how do you do that?

Sharon Salzberg: I don't want to be glib about it and say it's easy or that I have like all the answers and neither is true, but, and that's my fear, that hatred will kind of rise up and be even more normalized.

And, I would say protect your daughters, protect [00:12:00] yourself. One of the questions was kind of phrased, like, how do we teach people who don't understand the source of their. And I would let that one go. I don't think anyone's role is to teach someone else or somehow force them into the light.

It's very hard if you feel surrounded by a kind of toxicity. Even apart from maybe danger, you need to take care of yourself and try to protect those who feel vulnerable, who are vulnerable. But also, we don't need to reify somebody as all bad,

We don't need to make assumptions about people, even semi-conscious assumptions. So that must be the type of person for whom I have a kind of compassion, which is very hard to explain cause we don't use the word compassion necessarily in this strict [00:13:00] sense. We think if you're feeling compassion for someone, you're kind of feeling so bad for them that you're just not gonna have boundaries, or you're not gonna seek to protect whomever. But I think more like, somebody I was talking to as an example - who is Palestinian, living in the Middle East. And they said that they were, talking to a friend of theirs, and what this person said, "I'm trying to have compassion for those people who I feel are, are doing a lot of harm, you know, tremendous harm." And my friend then said, "You're crazy. Why have compassion for them? They're torturing us, and they're going to die happy that they're torturing us." And when she said that, I said, "Well, I would have compassion for the person who's going to die happy, having devoted [00:14:00] their lives to, hurting other people." "But," I said, "you and I are probably using the word compassion a little differently than your friend."

But the main thing I think is not to let that toxicity in because it can soak us and really kind of shatter us. And that's the whole learning, to stand on who you are. Even if not vocally, you don't have to engage in a fight, but to have that kind of refuge of really knowing who you are and knowing what you feel is right.

And I thought of this in less fevered times. So when, as the holidays were approaching, different years and people were uneasy about the family gathering, I always go back to this story from the Buddha, this cute little story where the Buddha did something that really angered this farmer, like he was trespassing on his land or something like that.

So the farmer came over and [00:15:00] started screaming at him and yelling at him and cursing him. And the Buddha said, "Oh, farmer, if you prepare a gift for someone and you hold it out in your hand and they refuse to take it, what happens to it?" And the farmer said, "Well, then it's going to remain with me."

And the Buddha said, "Just so. I'm refusing the gift of your yelling and screaming and cursing. It's going to remain with you." And I would say to people, you don't have to tell the story to that uncle or cousin, but hold the

image in your mind. This is yours. And then, in a way, it's almost like conserving our energy for what we can do.

Whether it's still engaging politically, locally, or for those people who have Congress people, not everyone does. Like if you live in D. C., you don't. But stay involved. To have a voice and to not feel silenced if you feel opposition to [00:16:00] something that is actually being enacted. Save your energy, but use it, use it wisely.

Like right after the election, Rebecca Solnit sent out a message, which was saying.

"The fact that we cannot save everything does not mean we cannot save anything. And everything we can save is worth saving."

Donna Ferris: Yeah, that's important. And I think it's hard not to fall into the sense of despair and the why bother.

Sharon Salzberg: It is hard. It is hard.

I mean, one of the words, again going back to the Buddhist teaching, one of the words that is often misunderstood, but is kind of a precious resource to cultivate in times of great distress is equanimity.

Donna Ferris: I knew you were going to say that. Yeah. It's the one I struggle with the most.

Sharon Salzberg: It's taken to mean indifference or coldness or [00:17:00] shallowness. I often think of like the stereotype of the teenager saying, whatever, you know. I don't know. Did they ever really say that? But, it doesn't mean that at all.

It really means a kind of balance and it's the balance born of wisdom. So that might be, I'm going to do everything I can and I'm not in control. I can't hurry a process. I can only do what I can, and it doesn't mean nothing happened. Nothing may have happened immediately that was gratifying, but it was important to me.

That I do what I can and it also means, and this was the context I was thinking of, being able to hold many things at once. It's like the darkness and the suffering and the turmoil and the possibility and the movement and the

possibility of renewal and change and the light. And we learn to hold them both at once.

And as you probably heard me talk about, one of the most poignant examples I had of that [00:18:00] was when I was in Parkland, Florida, not that long after the school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. And I was teaching, and everyone I was teaching had been somehow affected by the shooting. And, there was a young woman there named Samantha who was a little bit older than the kids in high school.

She'd already graduated from that school. Her mother is a teacher there and the whole community was really so powerfully impacted. So, at one point, Samantha raised her hand and said, "I feel really weird being here and having this experience, which is really incredible. And I know the only reason that it's happening is because that horrible thing happened. And I don't know how to get over that in order to appreciate this."

And I said, "I don't know that we ever get over it, but we learned to hold them both at once." And we talked about that yin yang symbol where there's that kind of light squiggly part with a circle of [00:19:00] darkness right in the middle, and the dark squiggly part in a circle of light right in the middle.

And I said "In, Buddhist psychology that's called equanimity." So then I saw Samantha again. Maybe six months later, eight months later or something. And I said, "Hey, Samantha, remember that conversation we had about equanimity."

And she said, "Not only do I remember it, but I think about it every single day of my life." She said, "That's my North star is to be able to hold it both at once."

And you see, in political terms or social terms or, anything that's relational, there are people who only see the darkness. And then you're in despair, and you can't do anything to help anybody else, or even yourself, because the despair is so strong.

And then there are the people who only insist on seeing the light, and they're just kind of bubbling around somewhere, actually disconnected to real experience. [00:20:00] And so we want to hold them both and that's our effort.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, it truly is. It's, it's hard not to, and especially as I know I am a wallower like I kind of get into deep, dark wallowing, and I kind of like it, it, it has been, really challenging to not stay there. And I'm working at it, and the gratitude practice has helped, but it took me a long time to find one thing on the

list. Even though I know there's tons of it. I'm incredibly lucky in my life. Even with all the things that have happened to me, so, I feel really ridiculous saying that it was hard to find anything, but it was where my head was.

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah, well, sometimes we make that effort. I mean, gratitude is another one of those words that's often misunderstood. And I've had so many people say to me, “Well, if you practice gratitude, you're just grateful for crumbs. And you let that [00:21:00] unjust or unfair situation stand because you're busy practicing gratitude.”

I also remember a conversation I had with David DeStena, a researcher at Northeastern University who studies and writes a lot about things like gratitude. And he said, well, it's not that way. Gratitude is an energizer. So if you have the courage to confront the suffering and face it head-on and you want to do something about it, you need energy because it's exhausting, really fatiguing, and you need energy, and gratitude can help you have energy.

And he said, “Not only that, people who practice gratitude want to pay it forward. They want to see someone else get a break. They want to see someone else get ahead. So it really sparks a generosity of the spirit.”

Donna Ferris: Yeah. It takes away the bitterness part, which can make you act out. I mean, it's hard.

I found that has helped, and the list has gotten longer to your point, and the energy has improved. [00:22:00] But it's a constant thing. And I think the equanimity, it's kind of like that thing, I'm like, oh crap, here it comes back again. And you know, it's the Pema Chodron thing.

If we haven't learned it, it's gonna keep coming back. I mean, she says it much better than that. But and it's that thing where I'm not done yet. I'm not done figuring that one out. I would prefer not to have, these types of things to continue to work on it, but it feels like I'm not done with that one at all.

Clearly.

We're kind of getting into the next questions, which is how to cope. From more calm to more direct. How to cope in a changing world? What process do you self-administer to bring yourself out of a slump? How to keep bitterness out of our hearts when the world seems to be filled with hate?

Sharon Salzberg: So I would study love. I would study the power of love because one hears it's stupid. It's weak. But I would actually study what love and [00:23:00] compassion can be and what they can mean to you.

I think that's very important. I mean, at the beginning of the pandemic, when I really asked myself over and over again. I was up here in Barre. I left New York thinking I'll go up to Barre for two weeks and ride it out. It'll be over, you know? So I came up on March 14th, 2020, with my snow boots, thinking I'll be there for two weeks. And so everything I had planned on was gone. This retreat center had to close, So I really asked myself deeply, "What do I trust? What do I believe in? What can I count on? What can I rely on?" And what came to me was the methods of meditation, which had really supported me, for many a year. And, the saying from the Buddha, which was later echoed by Martin Luther King Jr.,

When the Buddha said, "Hatred will never cease by hatred, hatred will only cease by love, this is an eternal law." So that's a very [00:24:00] uncomfortable saying in a lot of situations. And I think we really need to understand what love means and doesn't mean. How it doesn't have to mean liking somebody, it doesn't have to mean approving of them, it doesn't have to mean giving in in any way.

But we do maybe not want to live with so much bitterness, and antipathy, and fear. and all of that. Because in the freedom of our hearts, we can choose action from a better place. And so those were the two things that really came to me, and they did support me, and they do support me even when I get the questions. And feel it myself, like even here, you know, in this one situation.

And I usually come back to two things. One is, okay, what do I really believe love is, and I believe it's just more of a fundamental sense of connection that our lives have something to do with one another. And [00:25:00] that there's a we to be considered as well as self and other. And also, in the history of the Buddha's teaching, they say the Buddha taught loving kindness meditation as the antidote to fear.

I ask myself, is this the situation where getting more afraid is going to be useful? And it's never, yeah. So its like, "Oh, maybe not." So that was one thing. But I'd also realize, from an ordinary day, we don't feel under so much stress or distress. We see that taking things in smaller increments, like if you're anticipating the next four years, you know, or the next 18 years, depending on your view of what's going to happen. That's way too much, we can only deal with what we can deal with.

And so I'm even reminded of a time when, I was teaching with, a friend named Susan, here [00:26:00] at the retreat center. And Susan had started her own meditation practice maybe 15, 20 years before, and I was one of the teachers in that early retreat that she did. So this particular night, Susan was giving the talk, so I was just sitting there listening.

And Susan said, I did my first meditation retreat and I got so restless. It was just this unbearable feeling. So I went in to see Sharon. And I said to her, "Has anyone ever died of restlessness doing a meditation retreat?" So naturally I was really interested in what had I said, you know, 20 years before.

So she said, "I went in to see Sharon and I said, has anyone ever died of restlessness during a meditation retreat?" And she said, "Not from one moment at a time of it." And I thought that was a really good answer, you [00:27:00] know, and I don't want to be too reductionistic, but, sort of seeing what am I dealing with actually right now, the rest is anticipation. And we can't do it all at once ever, and that is devastating in itself to think like, all these years and well, we don't know. And the other thing is that we need boundaries. We all need boundaries. how much media we consume, where we get our information, the conversations we're willing to engage in. And it's not wrong to protect yourself. It's really right.

If you think about resilience, which I'm sure you do all the time, some of it is made up of being nourished and not feeling so utterly depleted or overwhelmed. And that might mean taking the joy and allowing yourself to do that. That's very hard for people in the face of a lot of suffering, even not one's own suffering.

You feel ashamed, or it's too selfish, but you've got [00:28:00] to think how people go on and sustain an effort to be different and represent something different. You need some juice, and it's got to come from somewhere. So that's part of it. Part of it is those boundaries.

Like I remember a couple of years ago, I was interviewed by the New York Times about doom scrolling. And the journalist said, a colleague of yours recommended you as a person to talk to about doomscrolling so I didn't know what the word meant. So I had to ask him. I said, what is doomscrolling, and he described it to me, you know, where you're like, say you're on your phone reading the news, and you're reading the same story again.

And again, and again, and again, and a barely different version, but you can't stop. It's like the same story again, and again, and again, and again. So he described it to me and I said, "Oh yeah, I do that." We talked about boundaries

and being mindful of how it makes you feel [00:29:00] and sort of, having intentionality.

Like I'm only gonna read this story once or maybe twice, and then that's it. I'm not gonna do it endlessly. And then when the article came out, I was in it, which doesn't always happen. Of course, you know, sometimes you're interviewed and they don't use it, but I was in it, so then I said to the colleague who'd recommended me, she was not in it. And I said, "Did you recommend me cause you know, I do it and you don't." And she said, "No, I was just too busy." It's not wrong to have boundaries and take care of yourself.

Donna Ferris: That's an important one for sure. I listened to a podcast, and it was an expert on self-control. Especially if we are trying to control ourselves because we are so emotional, maybe through what's happening. And watch [00:30:00] when you're doing that scrolling or those things towards the end of the day when you've probably used up a lot of that energy, and you're not in that place where you're able to handle it.

And I've learned this stuff from being sober. I always knew the five o'clock time was my worst time because that's when I always wanted to drink. I think that there's something in there about timing of day, knowing that you're already depleted because we are facing so much at once, and setting the boundary so you don't get there, on the doom scrolling or on the other things that bring you to that point.

Sharon Salzberg: And part of what I realized I am relying on is actually art, and, theater and writing and, and things that. Creativity. Like bell hooks was a friend of mine, and it was a great gift in my life. And, when I was working on this book, *Real* [00:31:00] *Change*, where I interviewed a lot of activists and people trying to make a difference in this world.

I was talking to her about it, and she said she didn't like the term social action very much. And she was very, very exacting in the use of language; the only person I know who could compare to Buddhist psychology where there are such fine distinctions between mind states.

But anyway, she said, "I don't like the term social action so much because for some people it might only imply marching or protesting. What about art? Like that's a revolutionary force." And so I've always remembered that.

There are things like that, that can nourish us and help us.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, I would agree. I think that, and there was so many, in my doom scrolling, there was so many good memes about that, right? Where are the artists go find your art, go,

Sharon Salzberg: Oh, that's interesting.

Donna Ferris: Express it in those [00:32:00] ways. Which I think are so helpful. I think of it as a translation of energy, right?

You have this energy of anger or outrage or sadness which is the root maybe of a lot of it. And how can you convert that into something that's helpful? Or at least it brings connection. The connection idea is a big one. I love the idea of the love and connection. Wouldn't it be another nice turn out of this is if a lot of people find their people and their connection? Through the pandemic we lost a lot of our connections.

Could this be a time for us to find those connections again?

So let's live in that one. There's a hopeful statement. There we go. Who knew? Who knew I could do that?

So maybe we go to the next bucket. is context. So I would call it context. There's two here. One is from somebody else and one is from me.

Do you have a historical perspective [00:33:00] on the type of polarization in our society today and how such nations or regions healed? And then for me, out of our last conversation, you dropped at the very end of our conversation, the story about Dipa Ma and how she impacted your life, which of course took me on a whole journey of its own, which I thank you for.

This made me think of Dipa Ma too and all she must have experienced and how she was able to kind of say, ah, and this is true too, you know? So I wonder what you would think she would say about all of what we're facing today and in the context of, you know, the entire human experience and what she went through.

Sharon Salzberg: Dipa Ma was one of my meditation teachers, and she was the person who told me to teach, much to my shock. And she was a woman who'd gone through a tremendous amount of personal suffering, with the loss of two of her [00:34:00] children and her husband who she loved quite a lot.

In fact, it was when her husband died that they had been living in Burma, and he was in the civil service. They were Bengali, but living in Burma. He just didn't feel well one afternoon, came home from work, and died very suddenly. And so she developed this heart condition, and she went to bed. Dipa was like a nickname for Deepa's mother.

So she still had Dipa, one child left to raise. So, she was so grief-stricken she couldn't get out of bed. And then the doctor came and he said, "You're actually going to die of a broken heart unless you do something about your mind. You should learn how to meditate." With a daughter still to raise, she got out of bed and went to the retreat center. They say she was so weak that the meditation hall was like up a flight of stairs, and she couldn't even walk up the stairs.

She had to crawl, but she did. And she emerged from that [00:35:00] meditation retreat. Somehow all that grief and all that sorrow got metabolized into compassion. And, she was just the most loving person I'd ever met, but strong, you know, like she was fierce too. But all based from this sense of love. And partly it was because she knew no one was exempt, from loss, from even devastating loss. And that life can turn on a dime for anybody. And so she was completely inclusive in that kind of caring. And, I think that it comes back to what I was saying about holding many things at once.

It's like the personal need for strength and resilience, and tending to those who are more vulnerable and also the kind of clear-eyed view of [00:36:00] systemic wrongs and, not to sort of take it as a personal, exclusively personal burden to kind of have resilience. It's not like that. But we obviously need resilience in order to do anything, or care for anybody.

And I'm thinking of that because I recently co-taught a retreat. My participation was via Zoom with this group of caregivers who had come together at the Garrison Institute. And so some people were caregivers in a personal sense, an ill spouse or parent, others more professionally - they were either teachers or therapists or, you know, nurses or something like that.

So somebody raised her hand in the last morning and she said she [00:37:00] worked in the health care system, obviously in some capacity, and she said, "You know, sometimes I hear the word burnout so often it starts to feel like That kind of personal burden, like somehow it's your fault. You're not doing enough meditation or yoga or walking in nature, or whatever it is, you know. But really, what's going on is moral injury."

And I thought that was very true. The first time I ever heard the term moral injury was from a hospice nurse. It's equated to a soul wound. It's like being in some place where you're often asked to perform something that goes against your own moral compass.

So this hospice nurse originally had said to me, she was trying to explain the term, and she said, it's like, sometimes you're with a dying person, and they're ready to let go. The medical establishment is [00:38:00] willing to let them go, but the family won't allow it. And they insist that you do this and you do that and intervene in this way.

She said, That's like a moral injury.” What this other woman said, “What's going on for me in the healthcare setting in my work, it is like a moral injury.” That goes back for me to what I said much earlier. It's like, you cannot address injustice if you're exhausted, and burnout is real and has real consequences.

And so it's not petty or selfish or beside the point to address that and take care of yourself and do what you can do for personal resilience and at the same time, don't pretend that it's your problem or that the system is just [00:39:00] fine, and nothing needs to change. And I think Dipa Ma was so fierce in some ways that she would've gotten that. Quite, quite well.

Donna Ferris: Yeah. She would've. I wish she was here, but I think she is. She is. Through you.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, thank you.

I wish I could, could show you my screensaver. I'm so bad at that.

It's her holding my head.

Donna Ferris: Aw.

Sharon Salzberg: I was 19 years old. And you only know it's me if you know it's me, cause it's just my head, you know. But it's just the look on her face. It's just like blessing me,

Donna Ferris: I don't know if it's, weird to say, but I feel like she's a bit of a spirit guide for me since we met, and then I read through her book and then I had the author of her book on as well. I think as women in this time we are feeling particularly in need of strength. I think she would be a good role model for a lot of people. Yeah, so we'll have to keep bringing her up. [00:40:00]

Well, I've come to the last bucket, which I'm sad, which is meditation advice. So two of them, one "What are some ways to happiness, simple things that we can do each day?"

Actually there's three here. I lied. Two – "Do you have a suggestion for an infrequent meditator who just dips her toe into practice when it's felt needed the most?" And then the last one, which I'm so glad, was asked, "Looking back, how have your practices changed over the years?" I love that one actually too.

We started off in kind of the deep dark, we're ending in the light, and how to be resilient.

Sharon Salzberg: I actually want to read you a poem, which someone also posted right after the election. Her name is Chelan Harkin and she posted this on Facebook without a title. So everyone always asks me, what's the title?

I said, I don't know, you know, but somebody sent it to me. And [00:41:00] what she wrote was:

"It's when the earth shakes and foundations crumble, that our light is called to rise up. It's when everything falls away and shakes us to the core and awakens all of our hidden ghosts that we dig deeper to find once inaccessible strength.

It's in times when division is fierce that we must reach for each other and hold each other much, much tighter. Do not fall away now, this is the time to rise. Your light is being summoned, your integrity is being tested, that it may stand more tall. When everything collapses, we must find within us that which is indomitable.

Rise and find the strength in your heart. Rise and find the strength in each other. Burn through your devastation, make it your fuel. Bring forth your light. Now is not the time to be afraid of the dark."

Donna Ferris: Perfect.

Sharon Salzberg: It was beautiful.

Donna Ferris: Yeah. [00:42:00] Burn. I like the burn line a lot. Because that's what it is. It's almost like burning karma, kind of, that idea. Which I didn't get until later in my training, but I really like the idea of it.

Sharon Salzberg: Okay. So meditation practice. It's not uncommon to only pick it up when things are really hard, but, I try, through the advice of my own teachers, not to fall into that because, it's almost like strength training. When you practice, when it's kind of boring or ordinary, and then the bottom falls out of something you've, you've done your reps, and you're more able to meet the moment, but it's common for that to happen.

I have a friend, I don't know if we've talked about her before. Her name is Amishi Jha. She's at the University of Miami. She's a neuroscientist, and she studies meditation, mindfulness, and loving-kindness. [00:43:00] She studies meditation in high-stress livelihoods like first responders, high-performance athletes, and military people.

What her lab has found is that formal practice of meditation, like you sit down to do it, 12 minutes at a time, three to five times a week, will actually change your life. And I always tease her, you know, like, I don't know if it's that healthy to go for the bare minimum. And she responds by saying that's what she was looking for.

In medicine, you're looking for the lowest effective dose. Like how much aspirin do I need to take? You know, and the minimum is whatever. So that's what she was looking for. And that's what she found. I also tell her that I'm the kind of person; in all honesty, three to five times a week doesn't work for me because it'll be Monday, and I'll think I'll start on Wednesday.

It'll be Wednesday, I'll think, I'll do it three times on Saturday and I'll never do it. But [00:44:00] every day actually works for me. So think for yourself, you know, is there a structure that you actually would find most helpful and see if you can make a commitment to it for two weeks, you know, or a month, not forever, but for some limited period of time. And I'm always astonished. Nobody says it has to be like eight hours a day in some pretzel-like pose, it's like a few minutes of dedication and doing it. And then what we do is practice what some teachers call short moments many times. Drinking a cup of tea, for example, is not an activity that's going to take forever, but like for once, don't multitask.

Just take a moment, feel the warmth of the teacup, smell the tea, taste the tea, or even, more briefly than that, probably the most famous [00:45:00] suggestion was from Thich Nhat Hanh who said, don't pick up your phone on the first ring, let it ring three times and breathe. Then you pick it up.

Also, in the beginning of the pandemic, I made a resolve, like, after writing an email not to just press send, to take a few breaths and read it again and decide, might this be, because it's such a strange form of communication, so terse, you know, like, might this be taken wrongly?

Maybe I should rephrase this. I'd often rewrite it, you know, in that moment. So, some activity, and it's fun too, you know. Kind of just take a breath before something. Some studies show that even if you forget formal practice, you know, that will make a difference in your life.

But here, too, I use my own self-reflection, like I'm so much more likely to take [00:46:00] a breath if I've also sat in the morning if I haven't. It's just like a story. Hey, you know, you can be mindful of whatever you're doing.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, I definitely find if I have not sat in the morning, I can look at the end of the day when I'm trying to do that gratitude thing, and I can see it.

I can see the difference for sure.

So maybe let's cover the question about how your practice has changed over the years. Is there anything you can think of there? I mean, it sounds like you've found many different ways to interject it as things have changed over time, but just curious if there's any other thought you might have around that one.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, I started, you know, my first teacher was SN Goenka. That was January 1971. So a good long time ago. And, he taught in the framework of an intensive 10-day retreat. So the first three days were just being with the breath at the nostrils, just the in and out breath. Then, the next seven days were [00:47:00] what we call these days a body scan. Moving your attention through your body and feeling sensations.

So that was my first practice for a very long time, and then, I explored other mindfulness practices, you know, walking meditation and mental noting, placing a label on the predominant experience. And then, in 1985, I went to Burma for three months of intensive practice, and that's where I really, explored in a very direct way, loving-kindness meditation, which is a different style than mindfulness meditation.

And that became my practice for about four years, and in that practice, you center your attention rather than on the breath or sensations on the silent

repetition of certain phrases like, may you be happy, may you be peaceful, as you call different people. Interestingly enough, beginning with yourself.

That [00:48:00] was my practice for about four years. It was the only practice I did. And then, after that, I went back to basically doing a mindfulness practice. You know, observing the breath, observing whatever may arise. But I did loving-kindness practice as I said, whenever I was waiting, and I counted every mode of transportation as waiting, so walking down the streets of New York silently, repeating the phrases, or being on an airplane, or, you know, subway, or something, I would use it in that way. Then the pandemic came, and I wasn't on airplanes anymore.

And I wasn't walking down the streets of New York or on subways. And so I brought loving-kindness back into my more formal everyday sitting, which is where it is now. I don't do only one technique when I sit every day. It just sort of depends on what it feels like.

Most compelling at the time, and I do [00:49:00] practice, a lot of that, just take a moment and just drink this cup of tea or walk from here to there, you know, and don't multitask at the same time.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, you brought that up a few times, the multitask thing, not doing so many things. We do so many things that we don't even know we're doing them.

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah, yeah.

Donna Ferris: That can bring a form of meditation itself, right? To just not do that.

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah. Yeah. And I mean, it's probably unrealistic for most people to never do that. But, we can have some intentionality because it is fun, to actually taste what you're eating or be aware of like, "Oh, look, the little purple flowers growing there."

Donna Ferris: Yeah. Yeah. I think that's a good one. And I think it's hard to do it when you're so absorbed in so many things, but if you can get there, it's really helpful. So we come to the end, which I [00:50:00] hate. What did I not ask?

Or what would you like to share before we go today?

Sharon Salzberg: I would love to keep talking about it because it's not easy, and yet I think there is a collective yearning to do good and not to be another force for harm in this world.

And I think we all help each other, as we are reminded of that.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, I think that's well said. It's hard not to return the same. And it's one of the self-control things from that discussion I heard in that podcast. Meeting these things with kindness and love is incredibly difficult, but it is rewarding as well.

Thank you so, so much for answering my email, which you always do, actually, and, being with me today. I think this was going to be a [00:51:00] gift for all.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, you're very, very welcome. Thank you.

Donna Ferris: Wasn't that amazing? If you want to learn more about Sharon's work, including her upcoming events, visit SharonSalzberg.com.

Thank you so much for listening. I hope this episode was helpful. If it was, please subscribe, drop a review, or share it with your friends and family.

That's the best way to get it in the hands of those who may benefit. And if my daughters, Sienna and Sylvie, are listening, I want you to know how proud I am of you. And I love you so much.

Bye now.