

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Balance and Equanimity in Daily Life: An Interview with Sharon Salzberg

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The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

Welcome to the Seekers Forum Guest Interview series. Today, Mark speaks with Sharon Salzberg. Sharon Salzberg is one of the foremost teachers of mindfulness meditation in this country. A teacher of Buddhism since 1971, Sharon has been leading classes and retreats worldwide for the past 40 years and is a co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. Her many books include New York Times Best Seller “Real Happiness and Faith, Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience.” Mark talked with Sharon about the path of equanimity and loving kindness and how it can stabilize and enlighten the view in everyday life. Now, here’s Mark.

MM: Welcome Sharon, it’s so good to talk to you. I wanted to start by talking about something that you said in your wonderful video, Street LovingKindness, which I was just watching. You say, *Rush hour: No need to rush. Slow down. Stop. See.* That really touched me because so many of us move through our lives feeling like time is running out. Could you talk a little about the connection between our approach to time and the lack of wellbeing that a lot of folks feel?

SS: Well, yes, we are jamming. All of us, I think, and it’s true. We have mobile devices now so that we are just “ON” or we have the potential to be “ON” every waking moment of our lives. This means that there is a lot of input, a lot of stimulation, and it needs a very conscious decision just to step back and say, “I need a moment, I need a break.” When we do, of course, it’s really phenomenal because we can see, we can open, we can get connected to so much that is going by, running by, and we have a very different feeling of contact and connection.

MM: Is it that people are afraid of missing something? Is that why we feel we need to be plugged in all the time?

SS: I have a friend, Linda Stone, who has become known as a thought leader, and I’m not really sure what a thought leader is, but she coined a phrase that is in my book, “Real Happiness,” the phrase *continuous partial attention*. She really laid out the feet of what you are just saying. We are afraid of missing something, something that might be in email, or what about Twitter? We go on Twitter, then what about Facebook? Then, we go on Facebook. Back again to email, then Twitter, then Facebook and back again. This is kind of crazy.

MM: What do you recommend? Do you recommend that people turn their devices off for part of the day? What is a good practice?

SS: Yes. Anything that would be along the nature of getting a break would be good. One of my Tibetan teachers high up in the Himalayas talked about “short moments, many, many times.” It’s actually a very, very powerful practice. It’s hard to understand and we might say, “Oh, nothing’s going to happen in a moment, because I have so much to do, there’s so much pressure and so much momentum around me,” but actually “short moments, many times” of stepping back, coming back to ourselves, breathing, getting

connected, remembering what we care about more than anything, these are very powerful moments and they do make a difference.

MM: Hmmm. And it doesn't mean we have to turn off half the day, it just means we have to take five minutes in an hour.

SS: That's right, even two minutes every hour. Usually what people do is they ritualize it in some way so there's a signal that says, "This is where I relax." They don't pick up the phone on the first ring, they let it ring three times and breathe. This is where this idea comes from. When you write an email, just write it and don't hit the "send" button right away. Take a few breaths and read it again, then decide if you actually want to send it or not. There are so many options for our moment and it's not hard to do. It's very hard to remember in the work environment, a lot of pressure, whatever that might be, to remember and know that it's valuable. To remember—that is what's hard.

MM: Something was said on the Katie Couric show that you just did, a show I was just watching comes to mind about the idea of multi-tasking being a fallacy, that we can't actually multi-task.

SS: Science shows that, actually, we think we're multitasking but what's happening is that our attention is flipping very quickly back and forth between different activities or different kinds of stimulation. Our subjective experience tells us that we're multi-tasking but we're not. Research shows that we're less effective, we're getting less done and we're not doing things as well. The myth, of course, is that we're going to get a whole lot more done and we're going to get everything done in a really excellent fashion and of course, none of those two things are true.

MM: Right. And of course, being plugged in all the time just feeds that sense of wanting to have five balls in the air at every moment.

SS: Yes, it's just the sign of the times. It feels like that's a natural way of being, an inevitable way of being, and yet it's not really that way.

MM: Are you able, in your personal life, to just shut off the social media piece? (Sharon and Mark both laugh) Are you able to get quiet in the midst of your very busy life?

SS: (Sharon is still laughing) Well, this is very funny because there is a retreat group in New York that was doing a voluntary renunciation month and they asked me to join in, to give up some amount of social media. I said something like, "Ask me later." I then told them the Gandhi story where a mother and child go to see Gandhi. The mother tells Gandhi, "Please tell my son to quit eating sweets and so much sugar." Gandhi said, "Please come back in a week." Which they did and the mother said, "Why did you have us return in a week?" Gandhi said, "I had to stop myself. I couldn't really give him advice that I wasn't following."

So, it's a little bit like that for me and social media. I have to become increasingly conscious just of the time, and, the amount of time.

MM: How does meditation change our relationship to time, Sharon?

SS: I think it's all about contact and connection. Time certainly goes very, very quickly because we're missing so much. We may feel hollow or empty in that disconnection and we don't have that sense of fulfillment of an experience fully lived, very often, and so in some ways, being more mindful and conscious really slows down time. We get much more sense of fulfillment, and then in other ways we realize how much we are bound by time. It's like the tyranny of time and it doesn't have to be that way. It's like holding on to something and experiencing it longer isn't necessarily going to make it a better experience. We plot out activities, but we can't usually make something stay.

MM: So in other words, if we're present, then time falls away and our experience deepens.

SS: Yes.

MM: You read a column for NPR which was wonderful, a column on "Being." And one of your columns was called, "Everything We Do Matters." Can you say what you meant by that?

SS: I think everything does matter and at the same time, we live in a nihilistic era where it feels like our actions are inconsequential, especially if you're trying to make a difference, you're trying to make it a better world or help somebody, or have there be less suffering. It can feel like there is nothing coming from these efforts. The elements are intractable, the institutions are immovable. If we really pay attention, we're in the realm of the unknown a lot, we can't always know how our actions will ripple out and the effects they might have, but, it all matters. It's important that we do the good that's in front of us and NOT say, "I couldn't possibly make a difference."

MM: And what about looking at it another way. Some people tend to think things matter more than they do. The small things, the worries, the fears. Don't we invest more importance to trivial things than they're worth sometimes?

SS: Totally. That's why in the Buddhist teaching they talk about the Buddha in the middle way. It's not only the middle way. Commonly, it's known as the middle way between a life of over indulgence as one extreme and a life of brutalizing yourself at the other extreme. Buddha cut right through both of those and said neither of these is the way of liberation. What is needed is the middle way. But it's actually a middle between those two extremes we just talked about. One is like nothing matters and it's all a nihilistic blur. The other thing is that everything matters, the other extreme, where we have to hold on to this "grading" and that "this" is forever and all of "that," which is an extreme view, that kind of attachment clinging.

MM: I just had a flash when you were saying that. I wonder if we're paying attention in the moment, not obsessing, maybe that's one way to give things their proper due without exaggerating their importance, if we're actually paying attention IN THE MOMENT.

SS: Yes, totally. Sometimes people think the middle way, the middle path sounds mediocre, that it's rather bland and a little bit of each extreme, but it's a whole other approach. It's very much in what you were just saying, seeing the truth in the present moment.

MM: What about loving kindness in balance. Is there a relationship between an open heart and equilibrium?

SS: Yes, because hearts break, as we know. When we care with attachment we have all the ups and downs, it's like giving a gift with strings attached, or giving a gift needing to be thanked in a certain way. We just can't control that. Whereas, if we have equilibrium, we have some balance of mind, which means perspective, it doesn't mean coldness or indifference. It really means space, some spaciousness, some perspective. Then we give a gift and the joy is in the giving, it's in the integrity of the act. Certainly, we'd like to be thanked, we'd like someone to say, "That's the best book I've ever gotten, thank you," but we can't control that and we recognize we can't control that and so we have a measure of balance and peace no matter what. People think equilibrium or equanimity will take away from an open heart but it's really the biggest foundation for an open heart. We can keep going through adversity, it doesn't become about ourselves, our own ego, our own satisfaction, but it's really a tremendous strength.

MM: I know you're writing a book right now about love. Are you saying that without equilibrium and self-awareness love can't really be effective?

SS: I don't know that love can't be effective. I think love is very hard to sustain. Even though the word "balance" isn't that exciting of a word, it's not what we usually associate with love, but I think there's a kind of balance within love, a movement toward balance really helps love be whatever it is. Love for friend, love for oneself, love for a lover, love for a child—love that comes into greater flowering because, of all things, we certainly have a lot of fears and assumptions around love.

In the book, I tell a story about a friend of mine that had gone through serious illness and coming out the other side she was taking a look at everything in her life. One of the things she realized was that, in her marriage, she was the kind of person that could be sitting in the car with her husband and even though she would be boiling hot, the most she could say to her husband was, "Are you warm dear?" (Mark and Sharon laugh)

She realized on her trajectory of healing, in all ways and all levels, that had to change and she realized that it was way out of balance. For her, coming into a greater balance meant being true, in her own integrity for her at that time.

MM: Right. So what that says to me, in her illness she realized that her self-care and self-love were a big part of the picture and she couldn't have a healthy relationship unless she took care of herself as well.

SS: That's right. And she needed to learn that she had a voice, that she could actually know what she wanted and express it.

MM: Talk to me about intention and flexibility. How can we be firm without being hard? How can you have a strong intention and still be flexible?

SS: One manifestation of intention is aspiration. We can have a really big aspiration, but often our aspiration, our dream and our view, is muted or small. But, we can aspire toward deep happiness or toward love. This can be really big and yet the day-to-day, moment-to-moment experience we have is really a process. Seeing what IS, being able to adjust. Sometimes people use their aspiration, their intentions, at whatever level, as a kind of prison for themselves and think, *Well, I failed today. Not good enough.* It's not really meant to be that way at all. It's much more a sense of joy and discovery and the flexibility to keep moving, keep shifting, keep changing, which means keeping aware because there's no other way to do that.

MM: There is a difference between goals and aspirations as well, and a difference between goals and intentions. If you're fixed on a goal, I think maybe it's harder to be flexible than if you're fixed in the intention to be happy, to be wise, to move toward the greater good. That's very different than *I'm going to get that on that day.* A lot of folks get locked into fixated hope which can lead to a lot of rigidity and suffering, can't it?

SS: Oh, yes, it always does. I think that's the nature of it and you can tell that you're holding on too tightly, you have too many expectations—because you suffer.

MM: I'm curious about mindfulness versus self-consciousness. How can we be mindful without being overly self-conscious? What's the middle way in that practice?

SS: One of the characteristics which isn't always so prevalent in the discussions about mindfulness is really the non-judgmental aspect of it. We're not just aware that we're reaching for a teacup for example, but we're paying attention in a way that our ordinary habits of mind don't have so much sway. Let's say there's a certain uncomfortableness in your body sensations, for example, and your tendency right away is to begin projecting into the future with the thoughts *what's this going to feel like in a week, what's this going to feel like in a month?* Not only do you have the present moment's worth of discomfort, there is also all the anticipated discomfort and we suffer so much more from that. It's really seeing that there's another way of relating. Not just being with, knowing that "this" is happening in the moment, or "that's" happening in the moment, but it can be an entirely different way of relating to our experience. I think self-consciousness, part of it, is a little bit of judgment as in, "Everyone's looking at me."

MM: And that's different than mindfulness.

SS: Yes.

MM: My last question. Does the word 'spirituality' ever interfere with mindfulness and simple presence do you think?

SS: The word spirituality, maybe because people don't like the word?

MM: Or, they aggrandize the word. They think they're being spiritual and they're actually forgetting to be kind. That kind of thing. How else does the word spirituality interfere with presence and mindfulness, do you think?

SS: My first assumption, for a lot of people, is that we live in a cynical age and the idea of spirituality is a real turnoff. They associate mindfulness with something kind of woo-woo and ungrounded which it really isn't. More in the way that you're talking about, it's hard to remember in the meditative process, that the goal really isn't to have certain kinds of experiences, to feel all floaty and warm, to have altered states of consciousness, because that fits into our normal inquisitiveness where we think we can stop meditating for one month because we think we've already had the great experience. It also suits our desires. When a friend asks, "How's your meditating going?" it's more exciting to say, first it was peaceful, then it was blissful, then it was ecstatic, instead of: first my knee hurt, then my back hurt, then I was bored, then I was restless.

From the point of mindfulness, they are both equally valid experiences. The point is to use any experience as a vehicle for greater understanding because of the different relationship we have with it. Of course, no one would like to have to tell that to a friend. It's hard to understand, hard to believe, hard to remember that the whole process isn't about having any one particular kind of experience. I love what you said. In a way, it's all about being kind, having different strengths in our life, our regular day-to-day life, which definitely happens.

MM: I love how you talk about enlightenment. Not as this grand, top of the mountain thing, but that every time we realize, for instance, during meditation, that our mind is wandering, that's a moment of enlightenment.

SS: Every moment of mindfulness is a moment of enlightenment because we're not adding, grasping aversion or delusion to our experience in the moment. The mind free of grasping aversion or delusion is a pretty good definition of enlightenment.

MM: Great. Thank you Sharon, it's so good to talk to you. Good luck with the new book. I know everyone can't wait to see your new book on love.

SS: Thank you.