

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Spiritual Longing: An Interview with Sharon Salzberg

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The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

MM: Well, it's always such a pleasure to talk to my friend, Sharon Salzberg.

She's a wise and wonderful teacher and someone I've admired for many, many years. I'm looking forward to talking to Sharon today about political unrest and spiritual longing. So many of us are struggling with this sense of enemies, this sense of ongoing antagonism in the world. First, Sharon, welcome!

SS: Thank you so much.

MM: Sharon, you've written about enemies and how to be compassionate with one's enemies, to be skillful with one's enemies. A lot of people these days are asking, "How can I be my spiritual clearest in this atmosphere of political polarity and hatred?" So, I want to ask you, how is it possible to be in resistance to political tyranny, or injustice, without being in internal conflict?

SS: It's not easy. I think if you take a model like Martin Luther King, Jr., as an example, you get a sense of human greatness which we're all capable of, at least in chunks. One of the great confusions we have and therefore one of the most important efforts in explorations is understanding that to have loving kindness, to have compassion, does not mean the same thing as giving in, or not caring, or just being a doormat which people often fear it would be. People have said many times, *I don't know about developing a loving heart, because then I'll just let people step all over me, or other people will be hurt or abused and I may not take a stand.* But one can be very, very strong and not be motivated by a sense of hatred. It's different for us and it's very challenging, but I absolutely believe it's possible.

MM: In this moment, do you find yourself being tested spiritually? You've been practicing for so many years. Do you find your own optimism being shaken at all?

SS: I'm not sure my spiritual practice was ever connected to optimism.

(Both laugh heartily.)

SS: I find myself getting frightened and I find myself getting angry. And what I've learned is connected to what they say in Tibetan Buddhism in the sense that at the heart of anger is a sense of helplessness. In Tibetan Buddhism they say that when we feel weak, anger is what we pick up, and it's what makes us strong. There is a strength in the energy of it for sure. It's a kind of brittle strength, often, not the feeling, anger, but *lost* in anger, *overcome* by anger, *defined* by anger, making choices out of anger. When we're at that state, then we're often in tunnel vision and our sense of options is very, very limited. If you think about the last time you were really angry at yourself, it's not a time when you're also thinking, *Hey, I did those five great things and in the morning I did that stupid thing.* Those five great things are gone. The choices that we make when governed by anger are not necessarily at all the most effective or creative choices. So, what we want is that energy. We certainly want the energy of protest.

When I find myself getting lost in anger these days, I remind myself to translate it into action. Knowing myself, it won't be across the board action; it will be things I'm very passionate about, like voting and voting rights. I suspect that I would try to take my fear and my anger, all those difficult emotions – I would want to translate them into something like that.

MM: And, is that what you would recommend people do these days when they are feeling powerless, overwhelmed or clueless about how to respond to all of these political problems?

SS: I would. As you know, I'm usually a pretty "switched on" person, but these days, at this point, I watch cable news and don't really read the newspaper, but I refer often to Facebook or Twitter if I want to know something. Someone sent me a Buddhist statue from China that had been sprued for over 600 years, and they were draining this reservoir and the Buddha started appearing as the water went down. A giant, beautiful big dynasty Buddha. I thought that was an auspicious sign for me. I needed that. (Both laugh.) Sometimes it's good to tune in to what's going on. I know I have to find a different balance than my normal balance and I know that outrage can be an addiction and getting upset about something and never doing anything is not that useful. I know for me it will have parameters and it will have boundaries.

MM: Let's talk a little about the connection between spiritual discontent, or the flame of discontent and longing that comes up in moments like this, moments of adversity and making spiritual progress and doing spiritual practice. Isn't there a dimension of this where people recognize the gap between who they are and who they might be, what they want and what actually IS? Is it true that the flame of discontent actually feeds spiritual practice?

SS: Well, it can. In the legend of the Buddha's life when they talk about him being twenty-nine years old having lived an indulgent pampered life for all those twenty-nine years, and the legend of him leaving the palace grounds and seeing the older person, a sick person, a corpse and a mendicant, someone who left home to seek the spiritual truth, seeing these things and asking his charioteer, "Does that happen to everyone? And am I going to get old too and die?" And the charioteer said, "Yes."

By dawn the next day the Buddha had left home and went on his search, the bodhisattva seeking enlightenment. In Buddhism, we often talk of the heavenly messengers. Suffering can be a heavenly messenger. Complacency is probably our greatest threat and that can happen when we're having a fine time. We forget that the bottom can fall out at any time or that other people are not having such a fine time. Having things shaken up is often a way of waking up. To the point when we're feeling devastated, then I don't think we have the energy to take that longing where we can go, which is a sub sense of unification.

MM: Yes. In spiritual life, as a teacher, have you noticed idealism can be an issue for students who don't really want to look at the uglier part of life? Have you seen those who may use spirituality and even practice as an escape?

SS: Definitely, it's like the old classic spiritual bypass, the idea: *it's all perfect*. Well no, I'm really close to getting the Medicare program before I turn sixty-five. (They both laugh.) It's not that perfect, really.

MM: Right. And so those people need to sort of turn toward the dark to make more space for uncomfortable feelings, is that the first step?

SS: That could certainly be. There is a level where, no doubt, one would see it as a dream, it's got that kind of dreamy perfection in that level. But if that leaves you without compassion for the distinct individual realities people are facing, then it is very lopsided. It's the development of compassion that is really important in that scenario.

MM: And what about the question of fear, Sharon, and the courage that's required in the face of fear? How do you define the difference between spiritual courage and bravado or machismo which we've got way too much of already?

SS: I think that bravado is more like covering over the fear that one is feeling rather than understanding it, when one wants to run faster than the fear. What I'm seeing the fear as is what you were mentioning earlier. What I'm seeing is that it's important for me to just sit and BE with my own fear. Be able to tolerate it, acknowledge it and hang out with it. In hanging out with it, I understand it so much more completely. And there are many kinds of fear, many levels of fear. There is useful fear, there are things to be afraid of. Maybe not afraid of everything we think we are afraid of, but there are useful kinds of fear, like nameless anxiety or our very own conditioning. What I've seen with my own fear from sitting with it is that unlike the world's statement, which is also true, that we're afraid of the unknown, I'm not really afraid of the unknown. I am somewhat, but I'm really afraid of what I do know, which can be really bad. It's the stories I'm telling myself that really get me going. But even in the midst of that, if I can recognize that pattern and remind myself, *I don't really know*, then I relax and there is space.

MM: Right.

SS: Then I feel at ease. That's been a huge and important lesson for me.

MM: That's a great thing for folks to remember in this particular moment too. Let's just talk a little bit about what keeps a seeker going on the path. What is the role of longing, do you think, Sharon, on the seeker's path? How do we use it as fuel to keep going?

SS: I think it's actually a combination of longing and what might be the tiniest amount of confidence that the longing can get satisfied. Because otherwise, the path isn't as easy. It implies a certain amount of intentionality. It might imply choice where we're not making up certain things, putting our energy in other places, having to make certain decisions in order to feel you are actually living your values, rather than just thinking about them in an admiring way. There's a lot to it. So, I don't think we actually do it without that glimmer of possibility. If anything, what might happen is that we think other people can do it, or it was fine for the Buddha 2600 years ago sitting under a tree. Or, we might think, *when my life gets easier I can do it*. We might say, "Me too, I somehow have this possibility, I have this ability," which may very appropriate; it's not unflowering at this point, but it can flower. I think that's actually a big part of it.

MM: Did your teachers view that sense of confidence?

SS: Very much so. And I think even before that, when I was just going to college at Buffalo, New York. I applied to this independent study program and was asked to go to India for a year to study meditation. I think about that moment when I thought, *What? You want me to do that?* I

could have stayed in college, I could have read books, could have done whatever everyone else was doing. I could've just hung out. I did go to Woodstock, I will say.

MM: You did? I never knew that.

SS: I did. I'm an authentic, bona fide "hippie." Something inside me said exactly that, I wanted to know what "this" could mean for me. Certainly my teachers nourished and brought that out in me.

MM: Just one last question and it touches on what I asked earlier. Do you consider yourself an optimist?

SS: No. Sometimes, through a long-time acquaintance with the Buddha's teaching, and maybe in writing it is said, you tell me, let's start by looking at the problem. Then we will see what the resolution might be, so let's start by looking at the suffering. Let's start by looking at the difficulty and that's where the most authentic recognition of a solution will be birthed. I do tend to do that. It's only when I'm really afraid that I spiral out, into the devastation that I can describe to you if you like. I know that can happen, but it's really useless. I know it's easy to see that. I also know that being motivated by strong anger is exhausting and I don't think in the end it's that skillful. Taking that and translating it into some action, even if it seems very small, I think, is the right thing.

MM: Beautiful. Sharon, thank you as always. It's been great to talk to you and I know the people listening to this will be inspired as well. Thanks for that and I can't wait to read your new book that comes out in June?

SS: Yes, June 6.

MM: Fantastic! I'll post about it and I can't wait to read it.

SS: Thank you.

MM: Thank you, my dear. We'll talk soon.