

Sharon Salzberg

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[00:00:29] **Debbie Sorensen:** That was Sharon Salzberg on psychologists off the clock. We are four experts in psychology here to bring you cutting edge and science based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships, work, and health.

I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen, a clinical psychologist practicing in Mile High, Denver, Colorado, and author of Act for Burnout, Act Daily Journal, and the Act Daily Card Deck.

[00:01:00] **Emily Edlynn:** From America's Heartland, I'm Dr. Emily Edlynn a clinical psychologist based in Chicago, Illinois, and author of Autonomy Supportive Parenting.

[00:01:09] **Michael Herold:** Calling in from Vienna, Austria. I'm Michael Herold, ACT coach, confidence trainer, and author of an upcoming book on being a better conversationalist and making friends.

[00:01:17] **Jill Stoddard:** And from coastal New England, I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard, author of Be Mighty, The Big Book of Act Metaphors, and Impostor No More.

[00:01:24] **Emily Edlynn:** We hope you take what you learned here to build a rich and meaningful life.

[00:01:28] **Michael Herold:** Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off The Clock.

[00:01:37] **Debbie Sorensen:** Hi, eveRyone. Happy New Year. This is Debbie, and I'm here today with Jill to introduce my episode today, which is with Sharon Salzberg. I'm very excited about this interview because Sharon is really a leading voice in Buddhism in America and Who's been a teacher to me personally. I've learned a lot from her and I really loved having this conversation with her where we talked about some of her work and mindfulness

and some of her ideas from her many books and her many, many years and decades of experience practicing mindfulness and teaching mindfulness skills.

It was truly It's an honor for me to have the conversation with her.

What were your thoughts about the conversation?

[00:02:22] **Jill Stoddard:** Well, I was so excited to listen to this episode. It felt like such an honor to have THE Sharon Salzberg on our podcast. And I love that this is the first episode of the new year at a time where we're often thinking about Incorporating wellness practices into our lives. And, you know, I think sometimes we get into this should, right?

Like I should drink more water. I should exercise more. I should meditate. Um, and that's the least motivating thing in the entire world. And what I really loved about this episode, well, first I want to give you my favorite quote. And she said, mindfulness is a quality and it's trainable. And I don't know that I often think of mindfulness as a quality.

I think it's something we, because of the way it's been packaged in, in the West anyway, we think of it as more of a practice, but it is a quality and it's something we can train. And she identified a number of different, like, tools and skills. So some of the things that jumped out at me were about naming your inner critic, about the importance of showing up to the small moments in order for them to really kind of count and be experienced with joy or awe, um, to look for the helpers.

And so I thought, wow. So, isn't this good news that the things that we've been doing, you know, in our own lives, in our practices, talking about on the podcast, are the very things that Sharon Salzberg is suggesting that we do To embody more mindfulness as a quality, and especially, these are things that are simple, like they're not that hard to do, and they can be applied immediately, and I think when it comes to meditation and mindfulness, and the shoulds and whatnot, that people get, um, a little bit resistant, you know, there, there's this idea that we have to sit on a cushion for an hour every day to get the benefits of meditation or mindfulness.

And, you know, I think Sharon really sets our minds at ease here where there are many ways to train the quality of mindfulness, um, that don't have to look like those formal practices, and I just I really appreciated that. I appreciated how she describes the benefits of mindfulness In a realistic way, you know, she is not here to sell this as some panacea for ultimate happiness

[00:04:43] **Debbie Sorensen:** yeah, I think that Sharon to me has exactly what you're saying about listening to her kind of soothes something. And I think I've had that experience too. I came into the idea of mindfulness and meditation and that kind of thing really through the backdoor of psychology, which obviously mindfulness based approaches draw a lot from Eastern philosophy and from, um, Practices like Buddhism and so it's clear that there's that relationship between the two, but I found that sometimes I have a little bit of resistance when it comes to things like mindfulness and I think in part it's how it's, um, presented to me, which I think sometimes I do find a little bit aversive in some ways within Western culture and the way it's kind of pervade there. And to me when I discovered Sharon's work and and my friend Julie kind of connected me with some of her classes that she's doing and then I started reading some of her books and I've learned so much from her. To me, I think that she's kind of helped me reset that because she's so down to earth and so real and she's not someone who has that.

I don't know. I just feel like she's, it's her humility that makes me feel like I can really relate to her and it's made me much more open to her ideas. And I think this kind of shines through in the interview too, which is that she doesn't feel like this. big figure up on a separate plane of existence.

She's just like a person like us who's living her life and who has found this to be a helpful concept. And so it really helped me be more. Yeah,

[00:06:18] **Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, like as opposed to being this like militant meditation, you know, I'm trying to think of another M word for the alliteration, but you know, instead of being like all militant about like, this is, this is what you must do, and this is the way you must do it. And you have to do it this many days for this many hours or else it doesn't count.

Like there really wasn't that feeling. And I just, I agree. Like, I felt like just listening to this interview sort of soothed my nervous system. Um. And one of my favorite things, if you listen to the end, she gives a very specific suggestion for a practice that she made up because she was struggling to meditate and be mindful.

And she came up with a sort of simplified way to do it. And I thought, Oh my gosh, I can't wait to practice this next time I'm in Shavasana at yoga, because that's a place where my mind is often wondering. You know, so I love it when our guests give us nuggets that we can just actively take out and start applying right away with, with a fair amount of ease.

And I think she did a great job of that.

[00:07:17] **Debbie Sorensen:** absolutely. I love that technique. It's been helpful to me personally since I learned about it. I cite it in my burnout book because I, I found it so helpful when I get stuck. It's like, okay, simple.

[00:07:29] **Jill Stoddard:** do this.

[00:07:29] **Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah. Well, Again, Happy New Year, everyone. And please enjoy this conversation. I'm so honored to have today's guest on this show.

Sharon Salzberg is a central figure in the field of meditation, a world renowned teacher of Buddhism, and a New York Times best selling author. Sharon first encountered Buddhism in 1969 in an Asian philosophy course at the State University of New York, Buffalo.

The course sparked an interest that took her to India in 1970, which was followed by several years of intensive study with highly respected meditation teachers. In 1976, she established, together with Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, The Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts, which now ranks as one of the most prominent and active meditation centers in the Western world.

Today, she leads and teaches a variety of offerings around the world. She's 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 writing can be found in major publications and on a variety of radio programs, and Sharon's podcast, The Metta Hour, features interviews with thought leaders from the mindfulness movement and beyond. Sharon, welcome, and thank you so much for joining me on Psychologists Off the Clock today.

[00:08:49] **Sharon Salzberg:** Well, thank you so much.

[00:08:51] **Debbie Sorensen:** It's a real pleasure to have you here.

I've learned a ton from you, and I was thinking as I was preparing for our conversation. I don't even know where to begin because there are so many different directions we could take our conversation today. But what I want to do is start with a concept from one of your recent books. It's called Real Life, The Journey from Isolation to Openness and Freedom.

It's a concept that really resonated for me as a psychologist who's interested in Human well being and flourishing and human suffering .And it's this concept of constriction, which I think you sometimes call contraction versus expansion or living expansively.

And so I was wondering if you could start by talking a little bit about what you mean when you write about living in this sort of constricted way. What is that?

[00:09:44] **Sharon Salzberg:** Uh, thank you. Well, what it doesn't mean is being determined or one pointed or, uh, having strong intentionality, which we sometimes take it to mean. It's more a feeling of being trapped those times when we see very few options or we, or maybe no options, or we go into a meeting and we are so fixed on a certain resolution to a problem that maybe 50 other possibilities are presented, can't hear them.

Or we're holding on to an image of a person and they may have changed, or we may have changed. We're holding on to an image of ourselves and we can't quite open. And so I think an important point is that the constriction doesn't come from a particular feeling arises. Like we feel what we feel and we have to allow ourselves the dignity of certain feelings.

It may be jealousy. It may be, uh, anger. It may be the kinds of things we normally associate with the idea of constriction, but it's not so much the, the arrival of those States, but it's diving into them, being immersed in them, being identified with them that produces this feeling of being trapped. So it's not a judgmental exercise to realize I'm in pain.

You know, like, feel so isolated. I feel so trapped. I feel so. Uh, that my life is small, it's narrow, that's constriction. And what's amazing is that there are ways of, of, even in the arising of difficult or challenging emotions, not falling into that.

[00:11:21] **Debbie Sorensen:** Right, I think that's a really important distinction. It's not having particular emotions per se, because those will come and go, but somehow it kind of narrows your life in some kind of way that keeps you stuck. It keeps you, Blocked or trapped, I think is it, I love that term for it. Do you have any examples that come to mind that maybe people could relate to just day to day, maybe from your own life or from people you've talked to of what that could look like just as a few examples?

[00:11:50] **Sharon Salzberg:** Sure. Well, it's like, um, one of my meditation teachers, this Tibetan teacher named Sanyu Rinpoche, he, he has a saying, it's not the thought that's the problem, it's the glue.

[00:12:01] **Debbie Sorensen:** Hmm. Hmm.

[00:12:10] **Sharon Salzberg:** We determine our future because of it.

And we act on it. In some way, that's the problem. Not the arising, even the deep, intense arising of certain kind of challenging feelings. So, uh, using myself as an example, I, um, began my teaching career because one of my teachers told me to teach, which I thought was ludicrous, but nonetheless, uh, she was right.

And I was wrong when she told me it was going to happen. And, uh, the first, Actually intensive retreat, Joseph Goldstein and I taught together in his country was in 1974. That was a month long retreat. And the way we, uh, schedule those retreats when it's an intensive immersion like that is people practice throughout the day and we have teacher contact and questions and answers.

And there's one lecture at night. So I was absolutely terrified of public speaking. And I could not give any of those lectures. So 30 day course, Joseph had to speak 30 nights and the story in my mind was I can't do it. I'm going to, my mind's going to go blank.

I'm going to be sitting there saying nothing. I'm going to look like an idiot, you know, and all

[00:13:26] **Debbie Sorensen:** All the usual things the

mind does in a situation like that, right?

[00:13:30] **Sharon Salzberg:** So all these people were going up to Joseph and saying, why won't you let her speak? Why don't you let her have a voice? And he'd say, I'd love a night off. Go talk to her. I could not do it because it wasn't even the arising of the fear, but the way I held it, you know, this is utterly true.

This is all that will ever be. You know, I'm the only one who feels something like this. So it was kind of like the add ons that changed my relationship to it. And once I could see that, which was a long time, you know, but once I could see that in a loving way, you know, kind way toward myself, then when those thoughts could arise, I could release them.

[00:14:15] **Debbie Sorensen:** Um, Um,

[00:14:16] **Sharon Salzberg:** and that was the difference. Or sometimes we say to people, if you have a really kind of like nasty inner critic, if you have a voice inside that just like is on you, you know, and one of the things we suggest is give it a name or give it a wardrobe. Give it a persona because again, everything is going to depend on how you relate to it.

So I've named my own inner critic, Lucy with apologies to any Lucy's for listening based on the character from the peanuts comic strip. Because once, uh, I moved into this house of friends had rented for several of us to do a retreat in. And I went into the bedroom that was going to be mine. And I saw someone had left a cartoon on the desk from the Peanuts comic strip, and in the first frame, Lucy is talking to Charlie Brown, and she says, Charlie Brown, you know what your problem is? The problem with you is that you're you. And then in the next frame, poor Charlie Brown says, well, what in the world can I do about that? And then Lucy says, I don't pretend to be able to give advice, I merely point out the problem.

So I name my inner critic Lucy, because that voice had been so familiar to me in my earlier life and something really wonderful happened for me very soon after I saw the cartoon And my first thought was it's never gonna happen again And I responded with hi Lucy my favorite form and that was chill out Lucy just chill not like Lucy You're right.

You're always right or I can't believe Lucy's still here. I've been meditating all these years I've tried so hard and so I'm terrible but like hi, I see you And in that relationship, you know, if there's any, anything truthful, Lucy's having to say, you can, find it, or you can just say, that is a very old voice, you know, enjoy this wonderful thing that's just happened.

You don't have to buy into that.

[00:16:18] **Debbie Sorensen:** Right. She doesn't have to constrict your life. And if you listen to her, she sure does.

[00:16:22] **Sharon Salzberg:** she does.

[00:16:24] **Debbie Sorensen:** And another piece about constriction that I think is really important, it's actually related to one of the three hindrances within Buddhism that I know you talk about or, and write about, um, and it has to do with craving and grasping and attachment and clinging, and I've been thinking

about this a lot as relates to consumerism, and I'm trying to clean out my basement, which is not my favorite thing to do, it's not a task I enjoy, and I just think Why do I have all this stuff?

You know, what void was trying to fill with this and, you know, then I find myself having a hard time letting some of it go. Some of it's trash and I can just dump it, but some of it I, you know, it's just hard to let go of. And so I was just wondering if you could say maybe a little bit about that piece because I think that's part of living constrictively sometimes is when we get into that grasping.

do you have any

[00:17:12] **Sharon Salzberg:** Sure. I mean, uh, uh, yes, I understand the issue very well. Um, and it's, kind of interesting too, because the worst is like, if you ever have to move and you pack up all this stuff and you put it in storage and two years later you open up that box and you think, why in the world did I save like these old newspapers or

like what, Um, I mean, there are many levels to that. Sometimes it's interesting and provocative to just sit with the desire, sit with the grasping, I need this, I need this, I need it all. And just pay attention to it because these feelings tend to be very complex. Like, how much fear is in there? How much loneliness is in there?

You know, and just to, to be there again in a nonjudgmental way to sort of discern just the different strands that are making up that feeling. Um, and then actually things like practicing generosity, uh, which would be maybe giving that stuff away, but watching the whole time, like the impulse to give and then the fear and the apprehension, like, what if I need it?

You know, I haven't read it in four years, but it's very close to the top of the pile of books I'm going to read and I can't give it away. What if I give it away? And it's the one thing I need to read. That's going to like fulfill my life forever. Nobody should know what, you know, and just like watch that whole process.

How does it feel when you hold back, when you hesitate, when you withdraw and then how does it feel when you actually give it, um, You know, there are lots of ways of kind of playing with that energy and, or, uh, get an assistant who insists on cleaning out your closets, such things, which I happen to have, we call her Hurricane Lily, because she comes through and it's different after she's gone.

Uh, but it's seeing, of course, you know, we're trained to that. It's not even necessarily a personal dilemma, you know, look at the culture and, and that sort of incessant dissatisfaction that's. Really almost breeding us, you know, to, to get more and not have enough. And it also brings up. Interesting to me, uh, lately, you know, something I've really been, been pondering the issue of perfectionism. How often do we long for the perfect thing, whatever it is. And of course, in a world of change, nothing, even if it's perfect for a moment stays that way, I mean, how often have you gotten a new car or something like that, and within 10 minutes, there's some boo boo, like, I mean, it's just. Nothing is perfect, but we have that sense of like, if only, you know, if only I get that other thing.

And, and it's such a cultural norm that it takes a lot to kind of step away from that and say, really, do I really need five of those?

[00:20:11] **Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah, I kept finding all these notebooks that are empty and I think I always, there's always a new notebook and why, why do I need these notebooks that are sitting here on the shelf and they're not full and why am I buying another one if I have five already?

And. Or more than five, I'm sure, if you actually counted them, but I won't admit.

Um, but yeah, I think, and then there's always a new one coming out, and so it's, it's never going to get you there, right? It's like the treadmill of it, because there will be a new car on the market next year,

[00:20:40] **Sharon Salzberg:** Yeah.

[00:20:41] **Debbie Sorensen:** your neighbor is going to get one that's nicer than yours,

[00:20:44] **Sharon Salzberg:** Yeah. The color I wanted and I couldn't get.

[00:20:47] **Debbie Sorensen:** right? And so then, and there's a lot more, I'm sure, that is in your book and that we could unpack around constriction, but I want to kind of move into the, other side of things, which is living more expansively, which I think is what your book then captures so well, which is this idea of getting out of that trap and getting out of that constrictive place of living.

So could you tell us a little bit about what that might look like? What is living expansively like as a counterpoint to that?

[00:21:14] **Sharon Salzberg:** I think it's, it's got different elements. It's got fun. It's got, uh, some audacity to it sometimes and, and sometimes it's just like baby steps, you know, it's making an experiment. It's sort of seeing your life as your creative medium. And so

it's being willing to just try things out. So you know, one example would be a practice of gratitude and it is a practice. As some people say, if you say, write down three things you're grateful for at the end of the day. It's a very healing exercise. And, uh, in general, there's a sort of feeling like gratitude is for suckers,

[00:21:54] **Debbie Sorensen:** Thank you.

[00:21:54] **Sharon Salzberg:** that if you practice gratitude, you can be in some terrible oppressive situation and you're going to be grateful for the crumbs coming your way.

And you're never going to take a stand on principle or what you really deserve or anything. And so I've asked researchers, uh, about that. Um, and you know, I hear things like, well, it's really the opposite. Like if you practice gratitude, you have some energy. So if you seek change, you're kind of alive. You have some sense of wherewithal or resource within, it's not like your maximum depletion and exhaustion and feeling overcome, like why not have that energy?

And then someone said to me, and besides people who practice gratitude have a strong desire to pay it forward. So they want to see other people get a break. They want to see other people get some relief, some dignity, whatever it might be, and so there's more impetus to try to help and make change. And so, uh, and I would say also for me, gratitude doesn't come naturally, you know, in the sense of automatically it's, if I come to the end of the day, I'm much more conditioned to think about what I could complain about, you know, like I didn't show up in the way I had hoped or this person disappointed me. And my traveling days, it was always an airline. And now there's always some tech thing. And, uh, that's just where my mind goes. So it takes not force or coercion, but intentionality.

Say anything else happened today, you know, and that just opens up my world. Um, it's being able to look at those thoughts and feelings. Like I could never speak publicly, you know, I look stupid, uh, and say, is that true? Or, you know, back to perfectionism for a moment. Uh, one of my favorite stories is about this time.

This friend brought me to, um, this place in Washington, DC, where there's this big concentration of cherry trees and they all bloom at once it's cherry blossom season, which is this big tourist thing. And, um, she brought me there years ago and I just thought it was so gorgeous. And all these delicate pink blossoms and so many of them.

And, and then my friend said, Oh no, it's past the peak. And I thought, Oh no, I'm having a bad experience.

[00:24:20] **Debbie Sorensen:** Okay.

[00:24:20] **Sharon Salzberg:** This isn't good enough. So sometimes when I have that kind of restrictive inhibiting thought, I kind of say, who says according to whom and things just open up. And I also remind myself, um, unlike kind of the world's pronouncement that we're afraid of the unknown, which of course is true. I realize I get really afraid when I think I do know that's all the stories I tell myself and that even in the midst of an arc of anxiety, if I say, you don't know, the world opens up and also remembering things like, um, you know, we can feel so alone. And yet the truth is that we live in an interconnected universe.

And one of my favorite things to ask someone if I go into a place of work, you know, an organization or a company. Is how many other people need to be doing their job well for you to do your job well, because it's true. And, uh, for people who, for whom that doesn't resonate, I say, well, do you commute to work? And do you ever think of that train engineer or, you know, the car mechanic or anybody. And for people from that does not resonate, like, did you eat today? And if you did not grow all your own food, think of that, that, you know, a piece of broccoli didn't just appear in your plate. Thank you. That we live in an interconnected universe and, uh, that kind of terrible feeling of being so cut off is common, but it's not reflective of the truth.

And so aiming my mind toward, not fantasy, you know, or superficiality, but something that's really, uh, true, but not territory I dwell in a lot, really, again, it just opens up the world for me.

[00:26:18] **Debbie Sorensen:** Well, in one of your chapters that I really loved in your book, Real Life, was about, um, awe and how we can tap into awe in our lives, because I think that is another way, I mean, there's even just in that word, it feels expansive, just my associations with awe, it's kind of that very expansive, transcendent state.

And I'm wondering if you could speak a little bit about how we might be able to tap into, I mean, there are those big life experiences where awe happens, the biggies. But can we get more awe into our real lives day to day, do you think? Yeah,

[00:26:55] **Sharon Salzberg:** Oh, I think absolutely, like I, I had made certain, I think, incorrect assumptions when I was starting to write that chapter, which is that, and it's partly because of, uh, the only research I was familiar with in terms of awe, is people going off to the Redwood forest and seeing these majestic giant trees and feeling awe.

Um, so I just assumed that, uh, that was basically when people felt awe wasn't in some natural setting that was overwhelming or, and it turns out, uh, in contrast to that, for me personally, I'd say I mostly feel awe at goodness, you know, I hear about, or see somebody doing something and it could be in a neighborhood.

Doesn't feel like a famous person, you know, but, and I feel the sense of awe. Um. And it turns out that that's actually more prevalent than feeling awe in, in the Redwood forest, which I had no idea of, you know, until I was actually researching that chapter. I think that the quality of awe is going to depend on our paying attention because you could be in that Redwood forest or you could be you know, next to some saintly person in your neighborhood, uh, but you're distracted, you know, or you're, uh, sometimes we're consumed with the negative. I mean, evolutionary biologists will say that that's kind of wired in, you know, we're trained to look for threat to danger. Uh, it takes, again, that kind of intentionality. And then just paying attention. Um, you know, I think of, uh, I'm too old to have seen Mr. Rogers, you know, on TV, but um, you know, that very famous, uh, story where he was, I guess, nine years old or something and there was some terrible, terrible thing happening in the world and he was very distraught and his mother said, look for the helpers.

Like, that's a real thing. It's not avoiding the pain. But it's just creating a fuller picture. There is this terrible thing and we need to deal with it. And look at this, look what people are doing toward the good, you know? And so,

[00:29:09] **Debbie Sorensen:** Silence.

[00:29:09] **Sharon Salzberg:** but we have to be open to looking at it.

[00:29:13] **Debbie Sorensen:** I was reading this chapter and kind of, I had read this book when it first came out and I was refreshing my memory and I noticed

that sometimes, so I have two children, daughters, they're nine and 11 right now and everyone's, you know, mostly we're just going through our day and I'm telling them to brush their teeth and get to bed and all the usual stuff.

But every once in a while I look at them with a sense of. Wow, you know, they're just amazing. And it's, I'm not saying it's all the time, but I do have to shift into a particular point of view to capture that, but I'll just, you know, they're doing normal kids stuff, and I just, kind of blows me away a little bit, but it is true that you don't capture that moment all the time, and you're definitely not going to capture it if you don't pay attention, because it's very easy to overlook it.

It's nothing fancy. It's just kids being kids, but there is something really... Just it does capture that sense of awe every now and then. It's just the ordinary, you know.

[00:30:09] **Sharon Salzberg:** Yeah. And even just, you know, with friendships being open to surprises, like we may not know everything about somebody, but after a while that, that seeming familiarity has us say, walk into that conversation or that encounter. With an image of them that we have now perhaps solidified, and we're not really kind of listening, you know, but if we really listen, sometimes there's, there's some big surprises.

[00:30:37] **Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah, well and I want to talk a little bit about mindfulness and mindfulness practice and how that, I mean we've been alluding to this along the way. This could be, you know, we could spend all day hearing your thoughts on this because you are truly one of the experts on this and actually your book, Real Happiness, I think has become my go to for clients I work with who want to start to practice mindfulness.

It's just such a good fundamental. Text for for getting started with the basics before we dive into that though I was wondering if you could give a few of your thoughts and again this we could probably talk all day about this But how mindfulness can be helpful for people who are trapped people who are struggling?

Just in terms of what you've seen in all these years that you've been practicing yourself

[00:31:27] **Sharon Salzberg:** mindfulness is a very, uh, powerful quality and it's, um, trainable, you know, it's, it's, it's a lot about paying attention, which we can certainly train and, uh, paying attention in a certain way. So we're kind of

taking an interest in our experience rather than immediately judging it, you know, like I've got to get rid of this, or why didn't I get rid of this long ago, or I need more of that, or just like being with it so that we can understand it more fully.

So, um, some of it has to do with really coming alive in ordinary experience, you know, so if you think about how often we multitask, like we're drinking a cup of tea and checking our email and on zoom and reading the news in the corner, so we're not really. Feeling the warmth of the teacup. We're not tasting it.

We're not smelling it. It's a very unsatisfying experience. And then we get into this sort of addictive spiral instead of realizing that not paying attention has a role in our dissatisfaction. We blame the tea. Oh, no, I shouldn't have used a tea bag. I need to use loose tea. I need to get a tea ball. I need to do this.

I need a thermometer. And, but if we drink that carefully prepared cup of tea, the same way we drank the other one. It's not going to be very satisfying. So it's not that we're never going to multitask again, cause that's not the world, but we can take moments where we actually fully experience what's happening.

And that includes internally, our breath, our body, our emotions. You know, I used to use the example, I still use the example in part of, you know, being very upset, being kind of mad about something, not even realizing it, going off to the computer, typing out an email and pressing send. And then maybe two hours later going, whoops, I guess I said that with some hostility.

So the example I used to use, like in the early days of email, uh, if you were using AOL, which I did and do, uh, and your recipient was also on that platform and maybe some others, I don't know. There was this magic button you could press called *unsubscribe*, and it was like something in your computer reached out to theirs and pulled back the message. And it's like it never was, but life doesn't give us that many *unsubscribe* messages and buttons anymore, and neither does AOL. So, you know, uh, to know what we're feeling as we're feeling it. To be that present is... Is really powerful. So that's one whole part of mindfulness. Another whole part of mindfulness has to do with insight or wisdom.

You know, it's like when I talk about myself and fear, for example, uh, my understanding of my largely being afraid when I thought I did know, and I was telling those stories to myself, it came just through observation, you know, I'd pay attention to the fear. With mindfulness, which means almost like pivoting your awareness.

Not what am I afraid of? And what am I going to do about it? But what is fear? What does it feel like in my body? What's in there, you know, rolling around in it. That's where that insight comes from or the many things like gratitude, like compassion. Maybe we've been taught our whole lives are stupid. You've got vengeance. And you look at like the billionth hour, you're going over that grudge and you think not that strong, it's kind of obsessed, you know? And so we get to see for ourselves very directly kind of the nature of our experience when we're practicing mindfulness. So it's really just quality of awareness of what's happening in the moment.

Without the intrusion of a lot of bias, like old fears or projection into the future or the addition of isolation, all those things may arise, but they don't take over so we can come back to, Oh, this is what's happening right now.

[00:35:51] **Debbie Sorensen:** I love it. It's so simple and yet so profound and actually, I want to read a quote that I read of yours if that's okay. It was from. Thank you. The SIT article that you wrote for O Magazine, which is terrific, and we can link to it. I found it on your website, so we can link

to it on our show notes. Okay, so here's the quote. I have found that the daily benefits of meditation are less dramatic than I had imagined. Yes, I have undergone profound and subtle changes in how I think and how I see myself in the world. I've learned that I don't have to be limited to who I thought I was as a child, or what I thought I was capable of yesterday, or even an hour ago.

My meditation practice has freed me from the old conditioned definition of myself as someone unworthy of love. But in contrast to my initial fantasies, I haven't acquired a steady state of glorious bliss. Meditation hasn't made me happy, loving, and peaceful every single moment of the day. I still have good times and bad, joys and sorrow, but I can roll with the punches more, with less sense of disappointment and personal failure, because I have seen how everything changes all the time.

And I think one of the things I appreciate about you as a teacher, Sharon, is how you are so real about that. I think sometimes people have a misperception that they need to get rid of all those negative thoughts or the mind's chatter or those particular emotions to be able to be in that state of mindfulness, and I think you're a living example of how that's probably not realistic for most mere mortals, right?

[00:37:25] **Sharon Salzberg:** Yeah. Thank you. Well, I think that's what, you know, when people ask me sometimes, how do I get started in a meditation

practice? And I usually say, you know, I mean, the mechanics, which we can go into in a minute are not that complicated, but I think it's good to have some amount of understanding about what to expect and what not to expect.

Cause, uh, we can certainly torment ourselves here too, you know, and bring all that self judgment and unrealistic expectation and perfectionism into this. And we don't have to, you know, so like when I first came back from India in 1974, if I'd be at a party or some social situation, it was, uh, introduced as a meditation teacher. It wouldn't be uncommon for someone to kind of go, Ooh, that's weird. You know, or, you know, people used to ask me, did you meet the Beatles over there? And I'd say, no, I didn't. But years gone by, you know, there's research, there's science, there's a lot of relanguaging, you know, so that it's very clear that these practices don't have to be tied to a belief system or a particular faith tradition. And, uh, you know, people say four years ago when I was in social situations, you know, we're often, uh, hearing, I was a meditation teacher say. I tried that once. I failed at it. aNd then I, of course, I'd say, well, we don't believe you can ever fail at it.

Why do you think you failed at it? And it would be exactly like the kind of thing you're describing. I couldn't keep thoughts from arising. I couldn't stop the chatter. I couldn't keep anxiety at bay. I couldn't keep sleepiness at bay. And remember, we're not talking about annihilating any part of our experience.

We're talking about developing a different relationship to it. And that's across the board. Like some people, Have the tendency when something is really pleasant and joyous, having a hard time taking it in. We feel we don't deserve it, or, you know, there's too much suffering and there is a lot of suffering, no doubt.

But are we going to really be helped by shutting down that part of our experience? And we have a very often very conditioned, distorted relationship to painful things. Like we call them bad. We feel we've lost control. We're ashamed. And that doesn't help either. Right. That's all like extra suffering. And we can have a very distorted relationship to neutral experience.

That's when we, you know, we don't find something strikingly pleasant or strikingly unpleasant. We kind of snooze or we go numb or something. And mindfulness is actually remaking our relationship to all of those things. So we can experience pleasure differently and more directly and be buoyed up by it and pain.

With more compassion rather than so much judgment. We can actually wake up and connect to those neutral experiences. So it's not about having a certain thing

disappear. It's not about only being blissful. It's just not. And, um, it doesn't have to be because our lives change anyway.

[00:40:36] **Debbie Sorensen:** That's right, yeah, I hear that a lot in my clinical practice, which is, you know, I, draw a lot from mindfulness and acceptance based approaches to therapy, and I think that sense of not doing it right or that it needs to happen a particular way, it does sometimes keep people from getting the benefits of it.

I, I was actually wondering if you could walk through one of my favorite of your techniques, which is the breath, not breath. Um, and I think that was the contribution that you made in, did it first come out in your real happiness book, which is, again, it's kind of a step by step guide to beginner meditators.

Um, but I just have found that technique really helpful. Can you walk us through?

[00:41:23] **Sharon Salzberg:** Sure. I made it up. I'm

[00:41:26] **Debbie Sorensen:** There you go. You made it up.

I

love it.

[00:41:29] **Sharon Salzberg:** Um, so I went to India as a college student. I was 18 years old. I'd had a very troubled, traumatic childhood. I had not at that point, never been in therapy. You know, I'd never really done any introspection much, but I knew I was very, very unhappy, which is what led me to in the Asian philosophy class, kind of lighting up when I heard about meditation, like, Oh, it's something you could try and it might really help you be happier.

And I was going to India with independent study credit. Um, and I ended up doing, my first meditation experience was in the context of an intensive 10 day retreat.

[00:42:13] **Debbie Sorensen:** That's really plunging into the deep end, isn't it

From nothing to a 10 day retreat. Wow.

[00:42:19] **Sharon Salzberg:** Yeah, it was intense, been wonderful and, but I was so judgmental because this was the first time I was really so directly and intimately looking within.

So I'm somewhat famous amongst my, uh, friends from that period for having once marched up to SN Goenka, who is my teacher, my first teacher. And looking me in the eye and saying, I never used to be an angry person before I started meditating, thereby laying blame exactly where I felt it belonged, which was on him.

Like, clearly it was all his fault. I was seeing all this anger and needless to say, I'd been hugely angry, but I hadn't really been in touch with it. So I had a lot of trouble dealing with, um, kind of the revelation of different states within me. So, uh, we're also not so much with Goenka, but with other teachers there, um, using the tool of mental loading so that if you were settling your attention on the feeling of the breath, you might note in, out, in, out, or breath, breath. And then if something else arose that was very strong, like a strong emotion, strong sensation, and the word came easily, you would say, oh, joy, sorrow, mentally, you know, so, that was all too much for me. So I decided I was just going to use two notes. One was breath. The other was not breath. And that was really important for me because it could be the most beautiful thought in the world. And it's simply not the breath. So instead of thinking, I'm free, I'm going to live in India for the rest of my life, being enlightened, it's not the breath. And it could have been the most dreadful thought or difficult emotion. It was just not the breath. Wasn't the sign that I was a terrible person and always would be.

It was like, it's not the breath. So it's breath, not breath, breath, not breath. And it was, it was really a great practice for me.

[00:44:18] **Debbie Sorensen:** I've found it really helpful too, and I think people often wonder what do they do if they're do a mindfulness practice and their mind wanders off, they get distracted, and there's all kinds of things, it's, it's really that noticing, but to just simply say, not breath, I found that helpful because my mind will be, you know, on planet Mars, by the time I noticed it's wandered off, and I just say, Oh, not breath, and then I just go back to the breath, and so I think it's helpful for beginners, but really for anyone who catches it's, it's just a nice technique when you catch yourself wandering off. If you're doing a breathing mindfulness, which is often a good starting place, it's just, you know, our breath is with us, we can just start there, but it's so much harder than it sounds and it just can help to bring you right back there.

[00:45:05] **Sharon Salzberg:** And it's good. I think also because it points to what is hard to even believe, which is that the critical moment in that kind of practice happens after your mind has wandered. It's not, you know, you're not trying to prevent your attention from wandering, which you actually cannot do, but it will have wandered or you've fallen asleep or whatever.

And then comes a moment when you have the chance to be really different. So instead of judging yourself and belittling yourself and going on a long, long, long train of I'm so terrible, I'm so bad, which leaves us exhausted and demoralized, you realize not the breath. So sometimes we say the practice in general is like a practice of recovery.

You know, the poetic way of saying it is that the healing is in the return, not in never having wandered to begin with. So realizing, you know, I can let go and start over. As in some ways been, I think, one of the most precious gifts meditation has given me in all these years. Just like, yeah, I can start over.

Cause I think how many times a day in life do we kind of need to start over in some way? Like we need a course correction or we fall down, we have to pick ourselves up or let someone else help us up. We start over or we realize I blew that one, you know, let me recover from that or whatever it is.

[00:46:29] **Debbie Sorensen:** So I believe we're going to release this conversation in January. I think it might be our very first episode in the new year. And so I'm thinking of people who maybe are new to mindfulness practice and want to try it. Or maybe they want to get into a more regular mindfulness practice in the new year.

Um, and of course asking for a friend here, but sometimes I think, right. Sometimes it, it feels like in this busy life we're living that it's. We might feel like we're too busy to make this practice of sitting practicing mindfulness in that formal way hard. So what would you say to someone who's, has a busy life and, and wants to do a little bit more mindfulness or is having trouble maybe making it a regular habit?

Do you have any words of wisdom for us?

I mean, I

mean them, right? Asking

[00:47:21] **Sharon Salzberg:** you know, there are lots of ways of approaching it, you know, um, and some of it is seeing what helps support you, you know, which could be, uh, I'll tell, talk about that in a minute, but, um, in general, we sort of can see mindfulness in two ways. One is a formal dedicated period of practice sitting or lying down or walking, whatever your posture is for that period of time, your goal.

Is to deepen qualities of awareness and compassion and so on. Not to also figure out your vacation plan. You know, that may come up, but that's not why you're sitting down. It's really to deepen those qualities. And also mindfulness is, um, what one of my teachers described as short moments, many times that's deciding, you know what, I'm just going to drink this cup of tea and really experience it.

Nothing that will be so long it'll undo your to do list, you know, but, uh, maybe the most famous example of that came from the Vietnamese teacher, 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. And I once was teaching in a financial firm in New York and I said that and I looked up and I saw the complete panic on everyone's faces and said, maybe for you twice, just let it ring twice and breathe.

Or, you know, I know people who work in the corporate world who build in one minute before a major meeting or something just to breathe, to remember their intentions, something like that. So there are ways, and those are fun, you know, to kind of sprinkle mindfulness throughout. So in terms of the dedicated period.

Uh, I have a friend, Mishi Jha, who's a neuroscientist at the University of Miami. She researches mindfulness in high stress professions, the military, high performance athletes, first responders. And she said to me, uh, 12 minutes a day, three to five times a week will make a significant difference. And cause we're friends.

I've always teased her and I said, I don't know if it's that healthy to go for the bare minimum, you know. Um, and she said recently we were doing a thing together and, and, uh, she said, you know, what their goal was, was to look for the smallest effective dose, like it was aspirin or something, you know, and because these people were so stressed out, uh, and, you know, it doesn't have to be that brief and it's also true and everyone knows this, if you've only got three minutes, one day do the three minutes. Instead of just blowing it off. So self knowledge has a role here. I also say to her three to five times a week doesn't really work for me because for me, it would be Monday and I'll think I'll start on

Wednesday. It'd be Wednesday. I think I'll do it three times on Saturday and I'll never do it. But every day is every day.

Every day is actually easier for me. And I'm always taken with, I was also recently talking to Ritchie Davidson, who's a neuroscientist at university, Wisconsin, Madison, who's one of the, really the pioneers of researching meditation. He said five minutes a day. And, you know, there are issues with that for some people, the first five minutes of the most difficult five minutes, because you just have this torrent of like, what's that sound?

I think that's my refrigerator. Does it need to be repaired? Do they still have repairment for refrigerators? I don't know. Maybe I need to, you know, just like, and even just that is like de stressing. It's like discharge of all this tension, but you're not getting a chance to go deeper. You know, so I'll hold to the 12 minutes if you can do it.

Uh, every day, if you can do it, and it doesn't have to be forever. You can see what's real for you, like realistic. I'm going to try this every day for 12 minutes a day for two weeks and then evaluate, but when you evaluate, don't look at that 12 minutes a day, look at your life because those 12 minutes a day or 20 minutes a day, they may not change much. But you will find you're different. You're different with how you treat yourself when you've made a mistake, how you meet a stranger, how you can let go and start over and real kinds of things in life, it could be a month, you know, whatever you feel comfortable, uh, in, in really putting the time, putting in the effort, it could be three to five times a week if that works for you.

The thing I was going to say earlier is that for a lot of people, not feeling so alone is, is very helpful. So I, for example, have a, a group I'm still a part of. It's a group of five people. It must be like, I don't know, eight years ago, 10 years ago, we were at one friend's apartment and he said, if he woke up in the morning and he turned right, he was at his desk.

If he turned left, he was at his meditation cushion. So we formed this group. We called it the turned left group. So every day when we've practiced, we email the other four people and the subject line is always turned left. And if you want, you can say something like fell asleep or it's raining today or nothing, you know, because it's the subject line that's really important.

And, uh, that kind of thing people find really supportive. I found it really supportive.

[00:52:53] **Debbie Sorensen:** Having a community and, and it sounds like, I mean, the, the main idea here is if, if all you've got is, you know, starting small, start small. Try it out. Make it a routine. Hopefully, you'll get past the point to where you see some of the reinforcing qualities, the benefits of it, and, just test it out a little bit if you're new to it and try to make it a little bit of a routine with whatever you've got. And then you also, I think, kind of alluded to that there's the formal practice. There's the sitting for 12 minutes, an hour, whatever you have, and, but then there's also some less formal ways to bring mindfulness into your life. Could you speak a bit about that?

[00:53:36] **Sharon Salzberg:** Yeah. Those are, those are like what I, these days I call sprinkling, you know, it's like, uh, that's like not picking up your phone on the first ring, you know, letting it ring three times, or it could be an activity, uh, cause they're illuminating like one friend. Uh, of mine decided, and usually if it's an activity, it needs to be kind of brief, maybe something you do many times a day.

So he decided he was going to make brushing his teeth and meditation. And the first thing he noticed was, he had like such a death grip on that toothbrush. It might as well have been a jackhammer about to leap out of his hand and cut off his head. And that was interesting to me. Thought, I wonder if I use kind of inappropriate force with a lot of things in the turn that he did, you know, which is kind of stressful.

[00:54:24] **Debbie Sorensen:** an interesting thing to notice,

[00:54:25] **Sharon Salzberg:** Yeah. Yeah. So who knows what we're going to notice? Uh, but it's usually awareness of the body because it's the easiest for us. It's the most concrete. And if there's a strong emotional state associated, you know, then, then we'll notice that. And, and that gives us our opportunity or, uh, you can also use that, let's say sitting formal sitting period as a way of investigating.

So for example, I have a friend who describes herself as the kind of person who can pretty well never say no. So in her meditation, she consciously brought up those kinds of scenarios where maybe she'd be at work and someone would ask her to do something. It wasn't really her job to do it, but she was afraid to say no.

And, and she learned the feeling happening in her body. in those moments through playing out the scenario. And she felt like this kind of panic come up in her stomach. They won't like me anymore. Long before the thought came, they,

maybe they won't like me anymore. If I, so that became her basis in life, say at work, where she was asked that very kind of question.

And she'd feel that particular sensation come up. And that was her signal to say, I'll have to get back to you on that. And with some space, she could say no. So there are lots of ways we can use the interplay of the formal practice and just life.

[00:55:55] **Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah, yeah, I love that. And for people who want, again, kind of a, maybe if you're new to mindfulness practice, or if you just want some really helpful strategies, check out Real Happiness because it really is the best. Just, you know, you do a really good job of step by step, a starting place, and some of the benefits.

And just, I find it really helpful for the nuts and bolts. And it's in a really digestible way, which I think is important. I think another thing that I find extremely helpful in your particular approach is how much you're work is centered not just on individual benefits of mindfulness and of these practices, but also on the greater good of the world.

And I, I do see, I'm sure you see this too, some critiques out there around how mindfulness has been translated to the Western world and wellness culture when it's focused entirely on individual well being. And your book, um, that's called Real Change, Mindfulness to Heal Ourselves and the World, I think is a really helpful Guide to this because I think that you aren't just using these these practices.

They clearly have some personal benefits But it's also, you know, we live in a world where there's so many problems and so much pain and suffering That there's almost a sense of we can't just keep this in a little bubble for ourselves So I'm curious to hear some of your thoughts. I just really appreciate that because I think it's very important.

Some of your thoughts on that concept within Buddhism of right action and how mindfulness can support right action and, and, and sort of that connection there between the two.

[00:57:43] **Sharon Salzberg:** Well, it's a very intricate relationship, you know, I, for me, some of it got highlighted because some years ago I started, most of our teaching is just open to whoever appears, you know, but I started working more, uh, specifically with groups of people we'd call caregivers, you know, people who either in their personal lives or their professional lives are really.

on the front lines of suffering and, uh, burning out in massive numbers, you know, and, and doing good, which is my off place, you know, um, uh, it started with this group for about four years of domestic violence, shelter workers, people working front lines and staff in the shelters and moved from there to internationally humanitarian aid workers and medical professional kinds of people, you know, as well as people who in the home are taking care of somebody and One of the things I saw was that, um, I mean, this was in the same climate as the growth of more interest in empathy training, which is really important because without empathy, we live and we see it, you know, in a really cold, cruel world.

But I realized these people have plenty of empathy, you know, you know, that's often why they did what they did, but they were burning out for some other reason. And I realized that had more to do with, sometimes it's a lack of caring for themselves. Relative to how much they cared for others, or it was an imbalance between their caring, their compassion, and just, you know, the reality of limits, like we cannot save people.

And, uh, it's not our world to control. We do everything we can. And, you know, there needs to be kind of letting go. Like once it was with a group of people teaching and I said, if I were in charge of the universe, it would be a lot better world. And someone challenged me and I said, are you sure? And I thought about it and I said, I am really sure. It would be a lot better. Well, but guess what? No one's putting me in charge of this universe, you know? So there's a poignancy to that, but also needs to, there's a wisdom to that. We need to figure that in. So, you know, I did a fair amount of work and do a fair amount of work whenever I can with caregivers.

And I thought, who does that remind me of? And I thought, oh, activists. That's who it reminds me of. People who are really trying to seek system change or, uh, you know, change in some neighborhood or. Or whatever it is. And I realized it's often probably the same dynamic and, um, that these practices might be really helpful in making a more sustained effort, not burning out so much.

And I would say it works the other direction as well, because, um, the thing I've seen so much with people who meditate is that there is a change in their heartfulness and the common common story I would hear would be. I was taking a walk, and somebody came up to me and asked me for a dollar, and I gave them a dollar because that's my practice. It's the first time I ever looked a person like that in the eye and realized that is a human being. You know, that I've seen again and again as a result of mindfulness, but that doesn't necessarily

lead one to think, I wonder if the housing policy is in this city, so that there's so many people living on the streets, or I wonder, you know. Uh, and so. That understanding is also important as we open our hearts. That we need to question, we need to look at systems, we need to look at causes and conditions. And not just stay on the surface of something. And so, um, I think it's really a mutual benefit.

[01:01:34] **Debbie Sorensen:** I think this is so important when we, it's partly capacity and taking care of ourselves, but I also think that to really look at some of the horrors of the world. It is painful, and we have to be able to hold that pain, and I think that is one of the great gifts of mindfulness is being able to not to look the other way, or avoid and just stay in our little comfort zone if we're privileged enough to have a comfort zone, but to actually delve into that.

What are your thoughts about Where to focus our attention, because there's so much pain in the world, you know, I can probably name 10 things that I would love to be able to fix, right? Just off the top of my head, just things in the news this morning that I would love to

[01:02:21] **Sharon Salzberg:** Well, I want to fix

[01:02:22] **Debbie Sorensen:** fix. Right? Um, but I mean to me it's overwhelming sometimes, it just feels like there's too much. What do we do to be able to do something but to not be overwhelmed by the sheer amount of suffering in the world?

[01:02:38] **Sharon Salzberg:** Well, we will get overwhelmed sometimes just like we

[01:02:41] **Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah.

[01:02:42] **Sharon Salzberg:** will get lost sometimes, but, um, I think we have to be somewhat realistic here too. I'm trying to think of the exact quote from Lin Manuel Miranda, who said something like, uh, which I quote in, I think it's, uh, real life and probably real change as well.

[01:02:59] **Debbie Sorensen:** I was actually hoping you'd, respond with this quote because it's

perfect.

[01:03:02] **Sharon Salzberg:** well, you might have the exact quote in front of you, oh yeah, you can look it up.

[01:03:06] **Debbie Sorensen:** Okay. You cannot let all the world's tragedies into your heart. You'll drown. But the ones you do let in should count. Let them manifest to action. .

Thank you very much.

[01:03:17] **Sharon Salzberg:** Yeah, I really, uh, I appreciate that quotation so much. Um, and, uh, just have this feeling about it because it's very hard, as you say, you know, uh, so truthfully, it's very hard to open to suffering, but there's also a skill in that because you don't want to drown and just feel overwhelmed because no one is served by that.

Right. You were just devastated and you don't have the energy to try to make a difference, even in a small way. So I usually, uh, think about Lin Manuel Miranda and think about how important it is to do even one small thing in my own life. It may not be on the world stage, but, uh, not to neglect that because of the feeling of helplessness is going to be for me.

The most difficult to bear and it's inevitable with sort of these massive amounts of suffering, but pay attention, you know, to your own energy. It's not selfish. It's not wrong. That's what's hard to believe is that we need to kind of balance. We need to see where might I want to invest in my time, my energy.

Um, and what do I have to just recognize and as much compassion as I can have, but sort of reminds me of doom scrolling. I didn't even know what that was. until I was interviewed For it, um, by, um, the New York times, actually, the journalist said, one of your colleagues has recommended you for this, this interview.

So I asked him what is doom scrolling and he explained it to me and I said, Oh yeah, I do that, you know, like, uh, and it's clearly, it's exhausting. It's like, you know, you're reading the same story in effect, maybe essential to read it once. Or twice, it just recognizes this is happening in the world. This is actually going on, but then you're reading it again and again and again and again and again, you're not learning anything new and you're just kind of retraumatizing yourself and you're exhausted. So we, you know, we talked about having boundaries and being mindful and how it's affecting you and all that. And then the article came out and I was in it, which is, of course, isn't always the case. And then I spoke to my colleague and she was not in it. And I said, did you recommend me? Cause

you knew I was doing it. And you don't, and she said, no, no, I was just too busy, you know, so you just think about that. Is anyone served or is it just sort of repetitive, almost infatuation with, with a bad feeling that we need to break because it's, it's not serving anybody.

[01:06:06] **Debbie Sorensen:** I remind myself of that sometimes that I don't want to bury my head in the sand. I do want to do what I can and to be aware but At a certain point sometimes i'm just maxed out and I remind myself it actually doesn't help the world for me to read another article after i've already read several on this topic and I can go watch a comedy show or just go to bed or read a book instead because it's not helping anyone

and yet it's having this it's just there's a point where just Take such a toll on me.

Yeah, I'd like to ask one more question. I know we're about out of time here I've kept you too long probably and we you know, I'm sure we could go on longer But the last question is we we talk a lot about emotions on this podcast as a psychologist it's one of my favorite topics, but I appreciate your thoughts about the role of anger in this, in, in taking action and in making real change and using mindfulness for the greater good.

Um, could you just talk a little bit about how we can transform anger? I think your chapter is called something about transforming anger into courage. What are your thoughts on that? Because that's a really, I love that concept.

[01:07:16] **Sharon Salzberg:** Well, it's interesting. You know, one of my, um, early encounters with a wonderful activist, uh, we were, we were just put on the same panel together. Um, and, uh, she was somebody who worked, uh, strongly against violence against women. And she talked about her first exposure to sort of seeing. Some of the extent of it and how incredibly enraged she became.

And that led to this whole career move. And she said, but you know what, I don't know how to turn it off. And she said, it really appears in our organization. Like there's so much backbiting and there's so much, and she said, I've, I've got to do something with it. And that was really illuminating for me. Um, to sort of see, Oh, we need to modulate that, you know, it's like gives you energy, but it also can be devastating.

And in the Buddhist psychology, they say anger is like a forest fire, which burns up its own support, which means it can devastate the host, right? Your body, your mind, your relationships, you know, everything. But that doesn't mean you

don't want to. do things, you know, or be assertive and, and strong. And so, uh, one of the questions would be, can you sit and look at your anger?

Not what you're angry about, not what you feel needs to be done, but what does it feel like to be angry? And, and you sort of watch the anger movie. And that's the place where I have seen so often within my anger is a sense of helplessness. And if I can get there and then channel that to something, Then it feels like the energy of the anger, which can be very positive because it's energy, uh, is not necessarily associated with that kind of burning.

And, um, one of the qualities of anger, they say, if we're lost and again, it's not feeling it, but it's being consumed by it is, um, a kind of delusion and that we lose a lot of information. The story I usually tell goes back to the early days of email when, you know, if you heard that sound that made you had mail, you'd be so excited. So I was, uh, at home in Massachusetts and working on, uh, my desktop computer. And, um, I heard that sound. I got so excited. There was an email. And so I got off the project I was working on, looked at the email and this person said, I don't understand the problem. anger and, uh, so I wrote back and again, you know, making that distinction between feeling it and being overcome by it.

And I said, one of the problems with anger is that when we're lost in it, we just put people in a box. And then I got off and went back to my project and something went terribly wrong in the relationship between my computer and my printer and I got really angry.

[01:10:22] **Debbie Sorensen:** Hmm.

[01:10:23] **Sharon Salzberg:** So I was down on my hands and knees like pulling out plugs and putting in other plugs.

And the first person I was really angry at was, we didn't even have the phrase IT then, our computer assistant who was on vacation in Hawaii. And I was furious. I thought, how can he not be here when I need him and his project? And actually forgetting in that moment, the reason he was on vacation is because I thought he needed a vacation. And I had gone, as one had to in those days, to the airport with my frequent flyer miles to get him a ticket. God, that information was just not there. And the other person I was really angry at was myself. Why can't you fix anything? You don't have to do anything. You're so impractical. Let me tell him I fixed it, but I hardly even noticed that.

So I got back on my chair and I was working on the project and I heard that sound again. And I went over and it was my original email person and he said, I don't understand what you mean when you say when we're lost in anger, we put people in a box. And so I said, this is what just happened, you know? So it's not even the most effective or powerful place to make action from because we're, we're so, uh, narrow, you know, in those moments, but you don't want to lose the energy ever. And so our task in mindfulness is to capture that energy and commitment and not be lost in the swirling, you know, narrowing, uh, burning of it. And we can

[01:11:50] **Debbie Sorensen:** Okay. Yeah, that's great. Yeah, it's like taking some wisdom from it and using it to fuel action, but also not getting so caught in it that it just consumes you or that you could just get really stuck. Because sometimes you get so stuck in anger that action shuts down or the, or at least effective action shuts down and so that's really wonderful.

It's a great example because I think it works similarly for a number of emotions so thank you, Sharon. I am so grateful for you spending your, your time, your valuable time with us today and just sharing some of your wisdom and it's truly been a really special hour for me and I love just the opportunity.

So thank you. We will link to your website and your books and A couple of other resources related to you your work on our show notes for today So folks who are listening can check that out and um, thank you

[01:12:48] **Sharon Salzberg:** Thank you so much. It's great to be with you. thank you for listening to Psychologists Off the Clock. If you enjoy our podcast, you can help us out by leaving a review or contributing on Patreon.

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com.

Hello? Hello. Okay, that sounded really normal.

save that for a blooper.

Can't even say the word. Hello. Okay. Hello? Oh, geez. Okay.