

Shelter for the Heart and Mind by On Being

What follows is the transcript of an On Being interview between Krista Tippett and Sharon Salzberg. You can listen to the audio version of the interview [here](#).

Krista Tippett, host: How to keep walking forward, and even find renewal along the way, in this year of things blown apart? What sustains us? How to hold on to our sense of what is whole and true and undamaged, even in the face of loss? These questions of Sharon Salzberg anchor a virtual retreat I signed up for with her on one of this year's many bad days. It was called "Shelter for the Heart and Mind." And she has created some shelter for me, at once grounding and energizing, through all of the highs and lows that have followed. I've been in conversation with Sharon since this show began, and I invited her to come back to mull over the matter of being alive in 2020 with me and with you.

Sharon Salzberg is one of the most esteemed teachers of meditation in the world. And she's credited as one of the founding three who introduced Buddhist practices into mainstream Western culture in the 1970s; its psychological acuity, contemplative depths, and practical tools for living. Sharon helps far-flung people apply these in everyday life and at extreme edges of reality; she's had a sustained presence to the families of Parkland, Florida since the school shooting there. She is a master at revealing the interwovenness, and the how-to, of caring for the world while learning kindness towards ourselves. And how "equanimity" can be a form of strength.

[music: "Seven League Boots" by Zoë Keating]

Sharon Salzberg: Certainly, if I heard the word "equanimity" long ago, I'd have thought, "That's really bizarre. What does that mean?" And so many times we think it means indifference, but it really doesn't. It's such a huge capacity of our hearts to see what we're going through, to see what others are going through, and to just have this perspective of, there is change in life. And there is light in the darkness, and darkness in the light. And we're not avoiding pain, because some things just hurt. That's fundamental. But we're holding it in a way that — it's like the love is stronger than the pain, even. And then we can really be with things, in a very, very different way.

Tippett: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being.

Sharon Salzberg is the co-founder, together with Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. Sharon is also the author of many books, most recently: *Real Change: Mindfulness To Heal Ourselves and the World*.

Tippett: So you and I have spoken on the air a couple of times. And I know that this question I often ask about the spiritual background of someone's childhood — I know that we're in a time of what can feel like chaos and collapse and disorientation, and I also

know that your early life had a lot of those qualities.

One of the things that I've learned this year, including from Pauline Boss, the wonderful psychologist, is that when we experience great losses, and certainly, these collective losses, that it can take us back to our original losses, or to the landscape of loss in our life. And so I am curious if that's true for you, but what I also want to say is that experiencing you, as one has been able to do this year online, but teaching, which has really had, to me, the intimacy of the teaching — everything online hasn't — you feel like someone who has so lived into, is so settled into and grounded in her hard-won wisdom. So I think there's a question and an observation in there, and I'm curious about what that draws out of you.

Salzberg: Well, thank you so much for all of that. I don't know if I so much feel the echo of my early losses — I feel the echo of my early chaos.

Tippett: Your mother died when you were quite young.

Salzberg: She died when I was nine.

Tippett: And your father was essentially lost to you, it sounds like.

Salzberg: When I wrote that book, *Faith*, I looked back at my life. I went to college at the age of sixteen. And I realized that by then, I'd lived in five different family configurations, each of which had ended by something drastically terrible, like my mother dying or my father's suicide attempt, or things like that. And so it was pretty unremitting.

And it was actually that, of course, which sent me to India at the age of 18, because I just had to find something that — I think if I was gonna describe myself in one word, at 16, 17, 18, I'd say, "fragmented." And I just had to find something to weave myself together and have a place internally, where I could feel a sense of home. And the miracle of my life is that when I first heard about meditation, which was in college when I was 17, I didn't think, "That sounds mildly interesting." [laughs] "Maybe I'll study some about that." I thought, "I've got to learn how to do it. I've got to learn how to do it." And so I ended up going to India on an independent study program.

It's interesting you use the word "chaos," also, because it's partly that; it's partly the sense of people being unseen or uncared for that is, in a way, landing most deeply, in the sense of reawakening the sense of being traumatized.

Tippett: Right. Yes, and being sent back to oneself.

Salzberg: I also feel, because I am teaching so much or connected to so many people, I feel like the waves of, in the beginning maybe, tremendous anxiety and then grief and then anger, and now just exhaustion. But I really do believe, part by part, finding one another and not feeling so alone, and utilizing different tools, we can make it through.

Tippett: There are some sentences in your very new book, which — I think you had finished writing *Real Change* before the pandemic, but it's been published since. So you wrote a very powerful forward. And I think there are some sentences here that, to me, just really summarize a little bit of what you said, that really, I think, really brings into relief how this tradition and its practices and insights are so magnetic, but also so helpful to so many people, including people in and out of other traditions.

So you wrote, “We practice in order to cultivate a sense of agency, to understand that a range of responses is open to us. We practice to remember to breathe, to have the space in the midst of adversity to remember our values, what we really care about, and to find support in our inner strength and in one another.”

One of the things that I’ve heard you say across the years, and I think have never taken it in so gratefully, and it has never been so helpful before, “The healing is in the return ... Not in not getting lost in the beginning.” But that’s such a relief. That is such a liberation.

Salzberg:Well, I think it’s powerful because I actually think it’s true. When I started meditation, like most of us, I had a different idea of success [laughs] and what it would look like, and that it would be very much about accumulation. Like if I could be with 2 breaths in the beginning, without my mind wandering, then surely, by today, I should be with 8. And then, tomorrow, I should be with fifteen. And then, eventually, my mind won’t wander. And I found that the most unbelievable thing, that that wasn’t the point; that learning how to let go more gracefully was the point. Learning how to start over with some compassion for yourself, instead of judging yourself so harshly — that was the point. And it’s so funny, because really, it was like Lesson 101 for me, and it’s probably —

Tippett:Well, it’s a Lesson 101 in life, too, right?

Salzberg:And it’s the most precious thing. I use it every day. [laughs] Like, it’s still the most significant thing I’ve ever learned from meditation and that I use it every single day — because we do. We have to start over and do a course correction, or pick ourselves up if we’ve fallen down, every day.

Tippett:It’s frustrating, isn’t it, that this is true. But there’s something about accepting it, and even accepting it as a gift, that kind of does what you also are so clear about, is that we can’t change, often, the conditions or circumstances that are immediately in front of us, but we can change our relationship to our experience of them, and that that can change everything.

Salzberg:And I think it gives us the basis for trying to change the circumstance, but from a different place: not because we feel defective or deficient or desperate — that’s a lot of “d” words — but because we have that sense of compassion for ourselves and compassion for others, and we can move forward toward something, even without necessarily an immediate result.

And I think if we can have that basis of recognition — OK, this is the way things are right now, and I can see them; I don’t have to be afraid of what I’m facing; I can see them for what they are — then we can move forward in a different way.

Tippett:I want to ask you about just some really specific insights and pieces of teaching that have landed helpfully for me. One is this idea of “visiting forces.” [laughs] “It is because of visiting forces that we suffer.” Would you put that into context and draw what that is and what the implications of it are, for also living anytime, but certainly in our time?

Salzberg:That was a very important image for me, out of the Buddha’s teaching, where he said the mind — your mind, my mind — is naturally radiant and pure. “The mind is shining.” “It’s because of visiting forces that we suffer.” And there are a couple of things to that: one is that these forces are visiting — greed, hatred, jealousy, fear. They’re not inherently, intrinsically, who we are, but they visit. And they may visit a lot; they may visit

nearly incessantly, but they're still only visiting. And then the Buddha's statement, "It's because of visiting forces that we suffer": he didn't say it's because of visiting forces that we're terrible people or we're awful or we're not good enough or anything we might say to ourselves. It's because of visiting forces that we suffer.

And that's been so crucially important to me all along, since 1971, is that the grid, so to speak, by which we evaluate ourselves and others, is not good and bad or right and wrong — it's suffering, and the end of suffering. What increases suffering? What deepens it, for ourselves and for others? Certain forces, certain actions, certain habits of mind. And what leads us to the end of suffering? The sense of connection, instead of isolation, or clarity instead of confusion. And that's how it's all looked at. So it's not like you get mean to yourself, [laughs] or rejecting, when you see one of these forces.

So I just love the image, and right away, I could see myself happily sitting at home, minding my own business, and hear a knock at the door. So I get up, and I open it up, and there's fear. There's shame. There's jealousy. And I either fling open the door and say, "Welcome home. It's all yours," totally forgetting who actually lives here, or, as we often do, I try to shut the door and desperately pretend I never heard the knock, and somehow, the force comes in the window or down the chimney. It appears. And so I often think of almost the skill one learns in meditation practice as, what do you do when you open the door? And can you remember who lives there? Can you recognize, "OK, this is what's visiting"? "It is a visitor"? If I get lost in it or overcome by it, it will cause suffering — doesn't make me bad; it will cause suffering. How am I gonna relate to it?

And so there's presence, there's balance, there's compassion — there's even hospitality that's a part of it. In some traditions they have a teaching where they basically say, invite that visitor in for a meal. Don't let it have the run of the house, because that's dangerous, but you don't have to be so afraid. You don't have to be so ashamed of these things that arise. You actually couldn't stop them. And so use your energy for something you can do, which is: Deal differently. And you think about how many times, even just isolation, it's like, "It's only me. It's only me that feels this," and how cut off we get from others and how difficult that makes things. And if we can even just disentangle that, we would be a lot happier.

Tippett: You said also, somewhere, "Feel the pain of it, rather than the disgrace of it." And isn't that interesting, to realize that that's also where we go with these, is that it's disgraceful? "I shouldn't be feeling this way. And how small and silly I am to go there." And that just stops everything, doesn't it?

Salzberg: I just had a memory. I think the very first time I was gonna talk to you, for Speaking of Faith, or talk to whomever it was, and I was doing almost like a pre-interview. And I said something —

"Something I don't understand is why having less — say, having less financially or economically — should be a humiliating thing, and that to be in a certain status or whatever, we then add humiliation, like 'you're not good enough,' rather than, 'your life has taken this course. Or, 'There's a worldwide recession or depression, and you've lost your job. Yes, you don't have enough, but are you a lesser human being? No.'" And so that sense of disgrace or humiliation, which is, I think, a part of the culture's premium on being in control at all times, of all things, is —

Tippett: [laughs] Which was never in touch with reality.

Salzberg:No. I mean, look at now — we're in control of nothing. [laughs] It's like, wow.

[music: "Contrarian" by Blue Dot Sessions]

Tippett:I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today with Sharon Salzberg, the renowned teacher of Buddhist practices.

[music: "Contrarian" by Blue Dot Sessions]

Tippett:And really, what we're getting at here is something I so value, that I feel, actually, is not often enough pointed at, which is that incredible sophistication of Buddhist psychology. So the language of mindfulness gets thrown around, and of course, there are meditation practices, but there's also this incredible analysis of what it means to be human, and as you said, the how-to: how to connect, actually, the very complicated and messy reality of how we are, with our highest spiritual teachings and moral aspirations. And the hindrances — and there's other language in other traditions; I think, in some ways, maybe the Christianity I grew up with uses the language of sin — but would you just explain that and how we can work with that?

Salzberg:Well, something I always found kind of reassuring [laughs] about Buddhism or about the Buddha's teaching is that it starts with the problem. And some people, they find it a little disenchanting, because they would rather talk about the liberated state and the possibility of that than the fact that "I'm angry from morning till night," or whatever [laughs] one's experience is. But I always liked that. And I felt, from the first time that I heard that teaching, which was in January of 1971, "It's not just me." And that clearly had been a pattern in my life, thinking, "It's just me. It's just me that has a family that looks like this. It's just me that has all these secrets about my father. It's just me." And so when I heard that the Buddha talked about these mind states, I thought, "It's not just me. Look at that." And so it's the same kind of way of being liberated.

So there are these five states. They're called hindrances, not because they're bad to feel but because when we get lost in them, they tend to give us tunnel vision and cut off our options and really imprison us in some way. It's like the futility of misplaced hope or faith, when you think, "If I could only push against this enough, it's gonna go away" — with anger; "If I can only hold on tightly enough to this, it will never change" — with grasping. So they're almost adaptive states gone awry [laughs] or something. They're not bad, but —

Tippett:Well, they're kind of survival mechanisms, a lot of them. But they're how we lived, especially through our varied childhoods. They were strengths at some point, but then they don't serve us anymore, which is also something we all talk about if we ever go to therapy, right?

Salzberg:Yeah, that's right. I think that's really true. So you don't have to think about it as a disgusting habit or anything, [laughs] but it is something one may not want to be using every single time one faces adversity, because there are other options that will actually make us happier. So they're grasping — that's the first one; holding on, attachment — not attachment in the current Western psychological sense, but really clinging and almost refusing to let things or people, or ourselves, change.

And then aversion, which is the second one; it's anger or fear. And in the Buddhist psychology, those are considered the same mind state, just different forms, anger being the expressive, outflowing, energized form, and fear being the held in, frozen, imploding

form of striking out against what's happening, trying to declare it to be untrue.

And then there's sleepiness, which is really a kind of numbness. It's like, maybe when you face a challenge, your first instinct is, "I think I'll take a nap. I'll just wrap myself in this cloak of oblivion and not have to feel so much." And then there's the energetic opposite of that, which is restlessness, which is agitation, anxiety, guilt, interestingly enough, worry — things like that.

And then the last one is doubt. And that's really fascinating, because there are some kinds of doubt which are considered priceless. They're really important, like insisting on knowing for yourself what's true, not just believing somebody else, and questioning and wondering. And then there are other kinds of doubt, which are more like what we would call cynicism. It's like not even trying to find out or look at something more deeply; you just stand aside and scoff at it or something, and it's not that helpful. So those are the five hindrances, which we see again and again and again [laughs] in our own minds.

[music: "Unwind" by Niklas Aman]

Tippett:After a short break, more with Sharon Salzberg. My longer unedited conversation with her is well worth a listen. Find that, as always, in the On Being podcast feed — wherever podcasts are found.

[music: "Unwind" by Niklas Aman]

Tippett:I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today with Sharon Salzberg, a wise and calming presence in our world and a leading teacher of Buddhist insight, who's been helpful to me and many in this year of pandemic and rupture.

Tippett:You wrote this piece for the On Being blog a few years ago, called "What to Do When You're Paralyzed by Overwhelm." [Editor's note: This essay title was changed to "What to Do When You're Frozen by Overwhelm" to reflect more accurate and non-ableist language.] And actually, that thing continues to go around the world, that essay. Everything has eternal life online.

Salzberg:[laughs] It does.

Tippett:[laughs] And you actually confessed to — well, first of all, I want to read a beautiful paragraph from that. "The way the world bruises us, as we make our way through life, can weigh us down. Clouding our mind can also be the concerns of everyday life, the crises we anticipate, and those we are experiencing in the present." 2020 is that on steroids, right? Oh, this too: "On top of that" — oh, this too! — "there is the news blaring at us from manifold directions, and in the eyes of many, much of the news is bad. We all have staggered home, overwhelmed by the world, and slumped on the couch, unable or unwilling to do anything to correct this collapse."

You kind of owned, in that piece, that we talk about fight or flight, places our brain goes, but another posture related to those, another alternative the brain gives us, is just to freeze, and that that actually is a place you go.

Salzberg:Yeah, that's my favorite place to go. [laughs]

Tippett:Your favorite place? [laughs]

Salzberg: Well, not really, anymore. But when I was talking about the hindrances, and I talked about sleepiness or sluggishness, that would be a much stronger pattern for me, a much stronger habit for me than agitation, say, for example, or greed. It's not that prevalent. Obviously, I experience it, but I would say, if I have a primary go-to mode of avoiding what is, then it would be that kind of freezing. Or it's the same as sleepy, numb-out quality. So I was very happy when stress psychologists and researchers added that. I thought, oh, there's me. That's much more me than the others.

Tippett: That's interesting. You talked a minute ago about the visitors, and there's resonance with how you teach about living with these hindrances, seeing them, answering the door, as you said, which is a spiritual discipline and practice because it just doesn't come naturally. [laughs]

Salzberg: It doesn't. And there's not only a kind of humility in it, but there's such a teaching — which also doesn't come naturally, for many of us — about being kind to yourself. I think about — it was that last visit I had in California. I was doing this program somewhere, and there was a psychologist present in the room who said, "The brain filled with shame cannot learn."

And I resonated with that. And it's so complex, because here we are, in many ways in a great moral reckoning — with issues of race and so on, and inequality and injustice and how to navigate that terrain in a way that's actually gonna produce change, and not just spiraling down into a cycle of shame that may leave us inert. And so it's so intricate, really determining toward understanding and change and honesty about one's own frailties or mistakes or tendencies or whatever it might be, and understanding that shame might not actually be a corrective path; that being mired in shame, being overwhelmed by it, may not be a corrective path.

Tippett: That's another example of — it sounds like a moral move, and I think it's maybe a nod in the right direction, but in fact, it doesn't get us where we want to go.

There's someplace — I think this is something you said in the retreat, that I wrote down. You said, "The patterns inside me are like weather patterns." And that you've come to accept that "my inner world has its own inherent weather patterns, as does the external world. The recognition that I'm not in control and that gray days don't mean I've done anything wrong, that all of the ups and downs, lights and darks, are part of who I am, part of who we are." So I just feel like that's helpful in also not attaching too much significance to every bad day, which, I don't know, speaking for myself, but I think also, other people I know, this has been a year of a lot of bad days.

Salzberg: And we can be so harsh with ourselves. It's like, once I talked to a student, and she was saying, "I should be better. I should have more equanimity. I should be calmer. I don't know why I'm so upset." I said, "Well, I'd really like you to write down everything that's happened to you this year" — this was a long time ago — "everything that's happened to you this year." And she chose to draw it out instead of writing it. And I was like, "I want you to take a look at this. Your cat died. Your house burned down." [laughs] "You've had a hell of a year. This is hard. It's hard."

But I think it's true what you said, on every level, from the most immediate and direct to the biggest, biggest level. It's like when we talk about equanimity in Buddhism, it can sound really boring and something like indifference, but it's not. It's being able to hold everything, the dark and the light, and having a mind and a heart big enough and spacious enough to hold it all. And I recently had this experience, reflecting an earlier

experience I had, where I'd gone to Parkland, Florida, not too long after the school shooting, to teach. And someone in the room raised her hand, and she said, "I feel really weird, because I'm having an incredible experience about mindfulness and practicing meditation and being with you, and I know the only reason it's happening is because that horrible thing happened." And she said, "I don't know how to get over that to be with this." And I said, "I don't know if we ever get over it, so much as we learn to hold them both at once."

And I recently saw her — I was doing these panels, and she was on one of the panels — and I said, "Do you remember that conversation we had?" And she said, "Not only do I remember it, I think of it every single day, and that we can learn to hold it all at once." And she used the word "equanimity," because that's what I had used even though it's a little bit of an odd term for us. And she talked about the yin-yang symbol, where the dark is in the light and the light is also implicit in the dark. And that's really our task, is to somehow be able to hold it all, in a way that will allow us to not only survive, but go on in a way that we can stay connected and help others, as well.

Tippett:Something else that you've been teaching and writing about — there's a simple mantra that you keep repeating, which is, "Some things just hurt." And also, that we actually need energy — I don't think this is the same thing as what you just said, but it feels related, to me — that we need energy to be present, to be with the pain, to find the space in the pain. And that also means that we have to give ourselves a break and that we have to actually allow — not just allow and see as optional, but that we have to take renewal where we can find it.

Salzberg:We have to. Well, you and I are not on video and we're not in the same room, but somebody made me a set of cups that say, "Some things just hurt," which I really like a lot, because I think that is part of the same pattern. It's like there's so much thinking that one could buy into, that has us feel, "Well, I shouldn't be suffering. It's only because I have the wrong attitude. It's only because I'm not advanced enough. It's only because I'm thinking wrong that this hurts." And I just — I don't buy that at all. I think some things just hurt. And what an unjust thing to say to ourselves. "This shouldn't hurt?" Really?

But what we don't need is the extra suffering. It's the ways in which we feel like "this is the only thing I'll ever feel for the rest of my life, or "I'm the only one," or "I should've been able to stop this; this is all my fault." And those things, we don't need. And that's where a good bit of our work is, I think: to relinquish that, even though it may arise.

What I say sometimes is, if you have a very persistent inner critic that's really kind of nasty, not a useful one but really just brings you down, give it a name, give it a wardrobe, give it a persona, because everything is gonna depend on the relationship we develop.

I once — Joseph and I and some friends moved into this house that a friend had rented for us to do a retreat in together, and when I went into the bedroom that was mine, I saw someone had left a cartoon on the desk from the Peanuts comic strip. And in the first frame of the cartoon, Lucy is talking to Charlie Brown. And she says, "You know, Charlie Brown, the problem with you is that you're you." Because that Lucy voice had been so predominant in my earlier life. "If you really knew who you were, it would be such bad news — let alone if anyone else knew who you were." [laughs]

So what happened right after I'd seen the cartoon was that something great happened for me, and my very first thought was, "It's never gonna happen again." And I greeted it with, "Hi, Lucy." And then, "Chill out, Lucy. Just chill," which is different than "You're right,

Lucy. You're always right. I'm worthless." And it's also different than "I cannot believe I've been meditating all these years, and Lucy's still here, and I spent all that money in therapy, and I tried that new therapist, and Lucy's still here."

Tippett: Or getting mad at her or mad at yourself for even having the thought.

Salzberg: You realize your awareness is bigger than the visitor, and it's more where you can live, rather than being caught up in the presence of the visitor. So you allow her in, and the example would be, as I said before, allow her in and give her a meal.

I was teaching that once, and somebody didn't like it, so I said, "How about a cup of tea?" And they said, "How about a cup of tea to go?" I said, "OK! 'Here, Lucy, here's your tea.'"

[music: "Bangolet" by Blue Dot Sessions]

Tippett: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today, shelter for the heart and mind with Sharon Salzberg. Together with Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein, she co-founded the Insight Meditation Society, or IMS, in 1976. This is now seen as a founding moment in the introduction of Buddhist practices into Western culture — practices which have come to meet 21st-century people from education to medicine and even across many religious sensibilities.

[music: "Bangolet" by Blue Dot Sessions]

Tippett: The first time I came to IMS, which was a long time ago, before I had met you, and very much as a visitor and very new to understanding this tradition and these practices, I think there were a bunch of rabbis and Christian ministers on three-month silent retreats at the Insight Meditation Society. So that, also, is a reality of how this has penetrated the culture.

Salzberg: Well, I think it's really true. When I was at this Buddhist-Christian conference at Gethsemane Monastery —

Tippett: Thomas Merton's monastery.

Salzberg: Thomas Merton's monastery. And the Dalai Lama was there; he was one of the participants. It was a very small conference. And in the beginning it was, honestly, it was kind of dreary. [laughs] Everyone was extremely polite and gracious, but — very polite. And it actually all turned around when Norman Fisher, who's a Zen teacher, got up. And he's a really guileless kind of person, so he spoke with tremendous sincerity. And he said, "I just want to ask you a question. I don't understand what's inspiring about a crucifix." He said, "I look at the cross, and that's one thing. But when the figure of Christ is hanging off the cross," he said, "I don't find that inspiring. And I don't mean to offend anybody, but I just really want to know, what do you see? What are you thinking?"

And then the whole thing shifted, and then everybody, from every side, was talking about suffering, and suffering that has nowhere to go, suffering that can only look at a figure like that and have the thought, "He would understand." And suffering of losing your fellow priests in a massacre in some place, or suffering of losing your country, as a Tibetan. And all of a sudden, we were actually connecting. And it took that. It took coming back to, OK, what's real? It's like, suffering. Let's talk about it.

Tippett: I do want to touch a bit on — your new book is Real Change, and the connection

you're making, that I also feel is really organically revealing itself in a new way in this young century, between inner life and outer presence in the world. And you said somewhere — I was reading an interview you gave this year — “one of the weirdest results of meditation is a powerful sense of connection to others.”

Salzberg: Isn't that weird? [laughs]

Tippett: But it's everything, isn't it? It's really where you're going with this now, and I think where a lot of people are going with this.

Salzberg: It's weird, just because on the face of it, it's such a solitary activity. You might be all alone, you might be sitting with your eyes closed, but there's such a profound truth to interconnection that gets revealed. And it's not because we're superimposing the idea, like, “I have to see it that way.” But that's what we see. Because we feel like, “Oh, it's just me,” but really, what's the truth?

It's like I was talking to the head of a medical practice not too long ago, and he said, “You know who I'm really appreciating in a whole new way, is the cleaning staff.” And you think, well, yeah. Look at how many people we rely on. Or when I teach lovingkindness practice, one of the categories, classically, is a neutral person, somebody we don't like or dislike very much.

Tippett: So you'd send out wishes for happiness and health and [indistinct].

Salzberg: So we might be repeating phrases like, “May you be happy, may you be healthy,” just to acknowledge them and wish them well. And probably for 45 years, when we talk about that neutral person, my colleagues and I would say, “like the checkout person in the supermarket, the kind of person you usually look right through, you couldn't care less about.” I heard myself say that, and I go, whoops. Look at that. How do we think we get to eat?

Tippett: And I think you're saying, that's inner life, and it's outer life, all at the same time.

Salzberg: It's totally united. It's the way we get the sense of freedom to keep doing what we're doing. And we need — many of us need a kind of reflective or contemplative or introspective meditative component to that so that we can keep connecting to that truth, as well.

Tippett: I also experience, in new generations, a wisdom about this, and a perspective that I think 2020 has only deepened, which is that the work ahead of us — to create the world we want to live in, that we want to offer to future generations — that that's the work of the rest of our lifetimes. It's long. It's transformation that's needed. And then experience new generations of caregivers and social change agents to understand that they're going to need renewal to keep going.

One other thing, one final thing that I've taken from this retreat I've been on with you virtually is — I've spoken with you previously, including on the show, about enemies. And you just said it really clearly. As you know, we live in this moment where — “divided” doesn't do it. We have chasms between us. And there's a lot of enemy feeling and language and posturing. And you said, “Loving your enemies is science.” Yes, it's a teaching of lovingkindness, it's a spiritual teaching, but that it's actually the most pragmatic teaching.

Salzberg: Sometimes people feel, or they say, "If I hear something like 'generosity or kindness will help you feel more free, and free up that energy which you will need,' then I think that's selfish. That's bad, because then my motive is impure." And I usually say, "Well, that's not greed. That's science." If you devote your energy in a certain direction, you're gonna be depleted, very likely, and you're gonna feel more alone, and you're gonna suffer, and that's not the basis for trying to make a difference. And so, what can we do that's gonna actually have us feel some sense of renewal and some sense of possibility? Because things are so bad, in so many ways. But to remember, oh, people can find one another, and we can understand one another in a different way. How do we get back to that, just, conviction that it's possible? We do need energy for that. And so what is gonna have that energy come forward and be something that can serve us in some way?

And I remember my father saying something in one of his brief visits back, when he was so trashed mentally, and he said something like, "You can't let people affect you." And I was like, really? Is that the lesson that I'm supposed to absorb? But I did absorb it. And then you get to look at those things in your own mind, and all these things that you've believed, like, "vengefulness is really gonna make you strong." And you look at it and you think, well, that was a myth. Look how painful that state is, to be closed in that way and shut off to anything else. And things like, "compassion is stupid and make you too weak." And really? Look at that. Look at the state itself: it's not like that.

And so we get to discover all the things that are possible for us, and we see, you know what? I don't want to live a life that is based on "it's a dog eat dog world." And I don't want to feel that alone. I don't want to feel that frightened. And I have possibilities. There are choices, because if I can see those assumptions arise in my mind as they're arising, not seven years later but as it's happening, then I can say — it's just the same thing; it's probably all the same lesson; everything's like a fractal, in the dharma — you open the door, and there's the visitor, [laughs] and you say, "Oh, there you are. Have a cup of tea. Sit. I'm not going there again." And it's the gentlest thing. It's not angry at yourself, and it's not full of shame and trying to avoid what's going on. It's just saying, I don't need to go down there again.

Tippett: It's another form of strength that is good for us.

There was a section where you were teaching "Shelter for the Heart and Mind," which I wrote down, and it came out looking like a poem — like an eleven-line poem. I'm gonna read it to you. And it's simple, and yet, it's — I think it's in this category of what is really true.

I do the best I can
I try to learn from my mistakes,
and the world is the world
of constant change,
and pleasure and pain,
and being thanked and not being thanked
all of those things,
and so that's where equanimity comes in
as a kind of comprehension
of, this is the way things are.

Salzberg: Wow. That's great. [laughs] That's beautiful.

Tippett:[laughs] It's you.

Salzberg:[laughs] No, but it's you. [laughs]

Tippett:No, it was literally your words.

Salzberg:Wow. That's amazing.

Tippett:But when I wrote them out, I realized that it's like this complete meditation. You want to say any more about that? That feels like it in some ways sums up so much of what we've been talking about. I'll send you this so you can see it as a poem.

Salzberg:That's so beautiful. I'm so glad. I, as you know, from yourself and like many people, I never know what I'm gonna say, [laughs] so it just kind of emerges — which is how I learned to teach, because when we started, Joseph and I, I was too petrified to do any of the talks. [laughs]

But it was only through my later development of lovingkindness meditation, or even the recognition of it, that I realized, oh, we're just here, connecting. That's the nature of it. People aren't here to listen to me impart my incredible expertise about something. We're just connecting. That's the important thing. And it's just us. Here we are. And that's when I could begin to give talks. And so I don't usually use notes or something, it's just whatever emerges. And so [laughs] that's really beautiful, that I said that.

It comes down, so much of the time, to equanimity, which is really peace. And certainly, if I heard the word "equanimity" long ago, I'd have thought, "That's really bizarre. What does that mean?" And so many times, we think it means indifference, but it really doesn't. It's such a huge capacity of our hearts, to see what we're going through, to see what others are going through, and to just have this perspective of, there is change in life. And there is light in the darkness, and darkness in the light. And we're not avoiding pain, because some things just hurt. That's fundamental. But we're holding it in a way that — it's almost like when I said earlier, the awareness is stronger than the visitor — it's like the love is stronger than the pain, even. And the room we create, the environment we create, where all of this can come and go — it is, it's built of awareness. It's built of love. And it's built of the sense of community; that we're not so alone. And then we can really be with things, in a very, very different way.

[music: "These Times" by Blue Dot Sessions]

Tippet:Sharon Salzberg is co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. Find her upcoming virtual retreat offerings together with Joseph Goldstein, her co-founder and another wonderful teacher, at Dharma.org. That's D-H-A-R-M-A.org. Her newest book is *Real Change: Mindfulness To Heal Ourselves and the World*.

[music: "These Times" by Blue Dot Sessions]

The On Being Project is Chris Heagle, Lily Percy, Laurén Dørdal, Erin Colasacco, Eddie Gonzalez, Lilian Vo, Lucas Johnson, Suzette Burley, Zack Rose, Serri Graslie, Colleen Scheck, Christiane Wartell, Julie Siple, Gretchen Honnold, Jhaleh Akhavan, Pádraig Ó Tuama, and Ben Katt.

The On Being Project is located on Dakota land. Our lovely theme music is provided and composed by Zoë Keating. And the last voice that you hear singing at the end of our show

is Cameron Kinghorn.

On Being is an independent nonprofit production of The On Being Project. It is distributed to public radio stations by WNYC Studios. I created this show at American Public Media.

Our funding partners include:

The Fetzer Institute, helping to build the spiritual foundation for a loving world. Find them at fetzer.org.

Kalliopeia Foundation. Dedicated to reconnecting ecology, culture, and spirituality. Supporting organizations and initiatives that uphold a sacred relationship with life on Earth. Learn more at kalliopeia.org.

Humanity United, advancing human dignity at home and around the world. Find out more at humanityunited.org, part of the Omidyar Group.

The Osprey Foundation — a catalyst for empowered, healthy, and fulfilled lives.

And the Lilly Endowment, an Indianapolis-based, private family foundation dedicated to its founders' interests in religion, community development, and education.