Joan Halifax: Buoyancy Rather than Burnout in Our Lives
by On Being

The following is the transcript of an interview between On Being's Krista Tippett and Roshi Joan Halifax

Krista Tippett, host: Roshi Joan Halifax has said, “I am not a ‘nice’ Buddhist. I’m much more interested in a kind of plain rice, get-down-in-the-street Buddhism.” She is a Zen teacher and a medical anthropologist who’s been formed by cultures from the Sahara Desert to the hallways of American prisons. She founded the project on Being with Dying, and now she’s taking on the problem of compassion fatigue, though she doesn’t like that phrase. Whatever you call it, for all of us overwhelmed by bad news and by the attention we want to pay to suffering in the world, Joan Halifax has wisdom.

[music: “Seven League Boots” by Zoë Keating]

Roshi Joan Halifax: I think what we’re seeing actually is not compassion fatigue, but empathic distress, where there’s a resonance, and yet we can’t do anything about it. When we are more stabilized, then we can face the world with more buoyancy, more capacity to address these very profound social and environmental issues. So that’s why I call these things “edge states,” because they really call us to our edge.

[music: “Seven League Boots” by Zoë Keating]

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

[music: “Seven League Boots” by Zoë Keating]

Ms. Tippett: Roshi Joan Halifax lives at the Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico, which she founded and where she is the abbot. Students from around the world come to Upaya to study the relationship between contemplative practice and social action. A thousand people soaked up Roshi Joan Halifax when I interviewed her in 2012, at the Hall of Philosophy at the Chautauqua Institution.

Ms. Tippett: So Joan, I’ve been reading things you’ve been writing the last few years since we spoke before, and I loved the title of this essay you wrote called “Seeing Inside,” which — I’m always looking for fresh language for the important, ordinary things we do, and that’s really fresh language about spiritual life, contemplation, reflection. And you trace that experience of yours back to a period as a young girl, that the beginnings of that experience, when a virus took away your eyesight — was that for a couple of years?

Ms. Halifax: Yeah, that blessing that comes from a catastrophe has been a theme in my life. So when I was four, I woke up, and I couldn’t see. And I have a very distinct physical

memory, which is the feeling of my hand against the wall of the hallway between my bedroom and my parents' bedroom. And it's just that sense of the tactile world — suddenly, it's about survival. And then I spent two years in this compromised situation, and it was a period of discovery, because when you're four, you don't really know any better. [laughs] It's all about discovery, so all of a sudden, the discovery field shifts from what normal discovery is for a four-year-old to discovering that I had an interior life. Four-year-olds should have that chance, but not in that way, if you know what I'm saying. I think it's really…

Ms. Tippett: It's actually an amazing time of life. Four-year-olds are actually asking all the big questions.

Ms. Halifax: And then to have those questions directed not so much toward the outside world, but to realize that I could internally imagine the world, because I had been sighted. And that was like — "Oh!"

You took your dreams for granted, as a child. You took your ability to kind of imagine worlds through listening to your parents tell stories or read stories. But suddenly, another level of your life opens up when you recognize that actually, you have a life that is inside.

So the essay I sent to Krista is one I wrote about two weeks ago. A little book is being produced of my photographs, because — when I got my vision back, my father and mother gave me a Kodak Brownie camera. Anybody have a camera like that?

Ms. Tippett: Rest in peace, Kodak, right? [laughs]

Ms. Halifax: Remember that, those little boxes with the little gray button on the side, the thumb button with the ridges? You remember that camera? And I started taking photographs, and it's been a lifelong joy for me. It's not about being a photographer, but it was about seeing inside.

Ms. Tippett: And then you've described discovering Buddhism and meditation in your 20s as another experience of learning to see inside, then, in a different way.

Ms. Halifax: You know, Krista, to link it back to this childhood opportunity I was given, my father was a businessman. My mother was a kind of — she liked to play golf. And my parents hired this amazing Afro-American woman to take care of me, and this woman's mother had been a slave. Just tells you how old I am [laughs]. And she was free. Her name was Lilla Robinson. She had three daughters. All her daughters ended up being preachers, so I was like a daughter too. She definitely — her values and spirit got inside of me. But she really infused me, as did my parents, with a sense of social justice and of responsibility for this world. It's like Teilhard de Chardin writes about — the more aware we become, the more responsible we recognize we are for what is and what will be. And this woman really gave me a big dose of that.

So I went to college at Sophie Newcomb in New Orleans, and suddenly, before me, was the civil rights movement. And it just was like this kind of earthquake, internal earthquake, where I knew that things — that the way that the person who had taken care of me when I was a child was treated — I knew it wasn't right, exactly. And I knew her circumstances weren't right. But when Dr. King and the whole movement became so present for me, I couldn't turn away from it.

And from that, of course, then the civil rights movement led to the antiwar movement,

and a lot of us got deeply involved in that world, and I was one of those people, among many thousands of others, and was very polarized. I lived in a right-and-wrong world. And it had actually caused me quite a bit of suffering, because I was right, and they were wrong.

And then I read D.T. Suzuki. I went to a talk in New York by Alan Watts. I walked in a peace march in 1966 on Fifth Avenue with Thich Nhat Hanh. And I went, "You know, I'm one of these."

Ms. Tippett: That's so interesting. I mean I've heard a lot of stories about the '60s and civil rights movement, and I've also talked to a lot of Buddhists who discovered Buddhism in the '60s and '70s, and I've never heard the two quite put together in that way. But I mean Thich Nhat Hanh is somebody who Martin Luther King, Jr. proposed for a Nobel Peace Prize.

Ms. Halifax: Exactly.

Ms. Tippett: There's a sentence you wrote about discovering Buddhism. You talked about "tasting stillness and knowing that it was medicine." Explain that.

Ms. Halifax: Of course, I don't remember writing that sentence, but…

[laughter]

Ms. Tippett: Do you think it's a good sentence?

Ms. Halifax: But actually, I could have said that. [laughs] No, it is really true. And of course, in Buddhism there are practices which are about actually stopping, or cessation, about taking a backward step, which is not a very popular concept in our world, but also about coming to a place where the heart and mind are genuinely reflective, where we're able to perceive reality in an unfiltered way. And you have this beautiful lake just to my right, and I imagine there are times when that lake is absolutely still, Lake Chautauqua is just completely still and reflects everything around it clearly. And there are times when the wind rustles the water, and the images in the lake become fractured, and you can't see things so clearly. So the practice, in essence, is about creating an internal experience of stillness, where you're able to perceive in a very vivid, clear, non-dual way.

[music: "The Ghosts Among Us" by itsnotyouitsme]

Ms. Tippett: Something else that you write about and that I — this is all about discovery, but your early — your 20s and 30s were really incredible times of discovery. I mean you drove three and a half weeks across the Sahara Desert to be with the Dogon people, who you studied. And one of the things you discovered with them, you started to see, was ritual, ritual as something that human beings need and that was also something that you hadn't learned in this culture, in American culture. Would you say something about that?

Ms. Halifax: I ended up at Columbia University, doing this cross-cultural work, and then went to Paris and worked in the Musée de l'Homme and then on to Africa and did this — oh, my poor parents, actually. [laughs] I would hate to have been a parent of someone like me. So driving across the Sahara Desert into Mali and putting my VW bus on a barge going down the Niger River, ending up in Mopti, and then driving into Bandiagara, where the Dogon lived. And I went there because a very renowned anthropologist, who was deceased when I got to Paris — Marcel Griaule — but his student, Germaine Dieterlen, had

studied the Dogon for many years. And Griaule had missed this opportunity, but Dieterlen, his student, had not, and that was to observe a rite of passage that happens once every 53 years, that goes over a seven-year period. And he had collected a huge amount of information about this, Krista, but had died before he could witness it, but Dieterlen hadn't, and she suggested I go. And so, indeed, I went.

And it was, again, one of these moments where you wake up to what isn't in your own world. And what I saw was not just an individual, like a pubescent child, a boy or girl going through a rite of passage, but what I saw was an entire society, an entire culture, going through a rite of passage where they died and were reborn — on the level of metaphor, but deep, physical enactment.

And I remember sitting in the Bandiagara cliffs, watching this extraordinary ceremony where the women who had been alive in a previous sigui — it's called sigui — led the procession, powerful and proud, who were obviously in their 60s or 70s or 80s — and this is a very tough world. And I just remember them pushing in this red-gold sand out in front of the gaggle as the ceremony unfolded. And I watched this. It went on for a long time, and it actually transpires in different villages. It goes over a seven-year period. But I watched it, and I had this — it was like another "aha."

And I realized, as I was sort of sitting there crouched in this crevice of a cliff, watching this transpire — what in my world, what in my country, allows us to mature? And then I reflected, and I said: Wars do. When a baby is born, usually no real rite of passage that sacralizes an individual's life. When an individual encounters their puberty, where our identity changes in a really extraordinary way, again, there's nothing to mark that change in the lives of most of our young people. Marriage is where we do mark change, but it's done, often, in a way where the whole village isn't there, in a sense.

Ms. Tippett: It's still very individualistic, the way we create that ritual.

Ms. Halifax: It is.

Ms. Tippett: I was thinking, in terms of war, I've talked to chaplains working with veterans coming back now, and they're actually trying to recover rituals, because, they say, when soldiers came back from war, there used to be rituals of re-entry.

Ms. Halifax: Exactly.

Ms. Tippett: And we're now learning the effects of dropping people back into a life which is a world away from where they've been. But it wasn't just them; it was everybody who participated in that.

Ms. Halifax: It's not just — I think that it's not just returning vets. I mean if we just segue over into that situation, entire communities, families, are deeply affected by the change in those people who return from wars. But now it's very complicated in our world. So I became very interested in the effects of rites of passage on how we actually mature ourselves and how we integrate into the various life phases or into the transitions through loss, through death, through geographical change, moving from one place to another, and so forth.

Ms. Tippett: I mean here's something else you said about being there with the Dogon people. You said, "Over the days, watching from the shade of sandstone and cliff crevices, I was overwhelmed with the sense of history that was not bound by time." And that's

another thing. We experience time as such a bully. And that, I guess, is another thing that rituals do for us — they release us from that trap of a sense of time as small and locked.

Ms. Halifax: Well, just imagine a ritual process for the whole culture that goes on over seven years. We're such, as you said, a time-driven, time-bullied culture. But also, what ritual does is it invokes in us a sense of timelessness. It drops us into the past, it brings up the present, it also projects into the future, but it is also deeper than chronological time. And that's the experience, the direct experience I had in being with the Dogon, that time disappeared when the sacred was unfolding in that culture.

[music: "Physical Liaison" by Clint Mansell]

Ms. Tippett: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today, at the Chautauqua Institution in New York with Zen abbot and medical anthropologist Joan Halifax. She was a distinguished visiting scholar at the Kluge Center of the Library of Congress in 2011, and she worked there with scientific research and spiritual teaching on the area of new urgency for her — in simple terms, you might call it the downside of compassion, how we can be defeated by our own impulse to care.

[music: "Physical Liaison" by Clint Mansell]

Ms. Tippett: So one of the interesting ways that you and others are coming at, actually, both spirituality and science and technology from a different direction is some work you did at the Library of Congress in recent years, which is really interesting. So I thought even just the title of the talk you gave about some of that research — I want to take this apart and go into this. So "Inside Compassion: Edge States, Contemplative Interventions, Neuroscience." [laughs]

Ms. Halifax: Oh, well… [laughs]

Ms. Tippett: Okay, so let's start with "edge states." What are edge states?

Ms. Halifax: So edge states are states where the individual's identity is challenged. And they would include, for example, things like pathological altruism.

Ms. Tippett: [laughs] You have to explain that.

Ms. Halifax: Altruism where we harm ourselves, physically or mentally, when we engage in care of others or vital exhaustion.

Ms. Tippett: Is that another way to say "the stress of caregiving"?

Ms. Halifax: Well, yes, but caregiving can be reappraised as a path and as a great opportunity. And in fact, there are some studies that show that caregiving can enhance our resilience not deplete us. And there are other studies that show the opposite. But I think that we are going to have to really reinvent or reappraise the path of caregiving.

Ms. Tippett: I mean because also, on this subject of dying, I mean the fact is, we also live longer and die more slowly. And the other side of that is, we create this culture in which many of us will be caregivers, not only, perhaps, for children, but for parents.

Ms. Halifax: It's true. And I just had a little back injury and have been the recipient of care, which, I have to say, as a caregiver, is really a hard thing to do. [laughs] When the tables

are turned, it's difficult.

Another edge state is what is commonly called burnout or vital exhaustion, and it's when a caregiver or someone at a university who's a teacher or wherever, is not able to actually establish correct agreements and boundaries with the institution for whom they're working and, as a result of that, become completely depleted.

Ms. Tippett: I don't know anyone like that. [laughs]

Ms. Halifax: No. [laughs] Not common at all. And another one is a secondary trauma or vicarious trauma, and that is just being exposed to people who are suffering. Say you're a person who works in the end-of-life care field. Or you're a person who is a chaplain in the military, where you're hearing these terrible stories of pain and suffering and violence and abuse, and it begins to get you, and so you suffer these effects vicariously that are similar to what people suffer when they come back from the war.

Ms. Tippett: And what I was thinking as I was reading this is, it touches on something that's happening even also to us, as citizens, to a different degree. It's come up here at Chautauqua this week. Compassionate people are overwhelmed now with the deluge of terrible news. The pictures are too present and too vivid. The news cycle is too relentless. I see pictures of children in faraway places that wreck me for a day. So the question that's in this room and, I think, is out there in the world and in this country right now is, how do we find the courage? How do we heal enough? How do we be present to that and not be overwhelmed by it?

Ms. Halifax: Well, I think this is one of the reasons why I identified these edge states, because when you realize — and the issue that you were bringing up, for example, about violence toward children, whether subtle or direct, and also, that we are subjected to these images through our media — bombarded is, I think, a more accurate statement. So we enter into what we would call a state of moral distress and futility. And the moral distress is something that — where we see that something else needs to happen — children need to be protected, we have to stop rape and violence toward women in the Congo — and we feel this profound moral conflict. And yet we can't do anything about it, and we enter into a state either of moral outrage, or we go into states of avoidance through addictive behaviors where we just don't want to deal with it, or we just go into another state of withdrawal, a kind of numbness, or into freeze.

Ms. Tippett: Tune out.

Ms. Halifax: And I think a lot of this world that is hooked up in the media right now — that's a good part of the globe — is going numb. And I don't really agree, Krista, with the term "compassion fatigue." I think what we're seeing actually is not compassion fatigue, but empathic distress, where there's a resonance, but we're not able to stabilize ourselves when we're exposed to this kind of suffering. When we are more stabilized, then we can face the world with more buoyancy. We have more resilience. We have got more capacity to actually address these very profound social and environmental issues. So that's why I call these things edge states, because they really call us to our edge.

Ms. Tippett: And then do you propose antidotes? I mean is contemplative intervention a way to talk about what we do?

Roshi Halifax: Well, I think there are many antidotes, actually. I think a setting like this, which is so physically beautiful and psycho-socially safe, is important. I think there are

houses of worship in many denominations here, so people can go and touch into the stillness and, as well, into the inspiration.

For me, the path of meditation has been critical, because I'm a very passionate person. And I have learned to actually downregulate and to become, in a way, more sensitive without being hyper-aroused, which would cause me to withdraw. And so working, for example, in my own experience with meditation, of training the mind so that I am sensitive to a place where I'm at my edge, and I can actually withdraw — but not completely — in order to ground myself, or I can work that edge skillfully.

Ms. Tippett: These are pieces of self-knowledge. I remember talking once to Ingrid Jordt, who's been a student and a practitioner in the Burmese Buddhist tradition. And she talked about a teacher of hers, who had also been a teacher to Aung San Suu Kyi, who talked about how the great virtues have near enemies. Do you know this teaching?

Ms. Halifax: Oh, yeah.

Ms. Tippett: And that a near enemy to compassion is sorrow. And that's that sorrow, that's me getting wrecked by the picture of the child in the newspaper so that I can't actually help them.

Ms. Halifax: Exactly. And the near enemies are very subtle. They're pity. They're consolation.

Ms. Tippett: Well, and sorrow feels like the appropriate reaction.

Ms. Halifax: Exactly, but the reason why I've objected, Krista, to this term "compassion fatigue," because compassion is not in that context of pity, for example. But compassion can also have a taste of sorrow in it, but it has many more features, which you're aware of, since you read my paper on it. [laughs]

[music: "The Path" by Zoë Keating]

Ms. Tippett: You can listen again and share this conversation with Joan Halifax through our website, onbeing.org. There, you'll also find a link to my 2005 interview with Joan Halifax, in a show we called "A Midwife to the Dying."

[music: "The Path" by Zoë Keating]

Coming up, Joan Halifax on the human opportunities of loss and grief, and her counsel if you're just a little bit curious about trying meditation.

I'm Krista Tippett. On Being continues in a moment.

[music: "The Path" by Zoë Keating]

Ms. Tippett: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today, my live conversation at the Chautauqua Institution in New York with Roshi Joan Halifax. She's a Zen teacher, medical anthropologist, and the embodiment of engaged Buddhism. We've been talking about her complex understanding of compassion in our personal lives and in our engagement with the world, how it can have destructive, as well as nourishing, effects.

Ms. Tippett: And then the other absolutely fascinating thing that comes into the discussion

of compassion these days — and lots of virtues, is neuroscience.

Ms. Halifax: Right.

Ms. Tippett: This work of Richard Davidson, who some of you may have heard of — he's at the University of Wisconsin — he started studying the brains of meditating Tibetan Buddhist monks, and they've learned many fascinating things. One of them that has actually infiltrated the rest of neuroscience is the idea of neuroplasticity. I think this is one of the most exciting discoveries of our time, that our brains change across the lifespan. They don't stop growing when we're 12 or 18 or 25.

Ms. Halifax: And they're trainable, very interesting.

Ms. Tippett: So tell me, specifically, how that new research and what's happening in neuroscience has flowed into all these things you've been working on and talking about for decades.

Ms. Halifax: Well, I think the theme of compassion has been important in Western culture, and it certainly is important in Eastern culture, but it's a kind of fuzzy word. And when Antoine Lutz and Richie and others have been finding out about certain structures of the brain lighting up, certain areas of the brain lighting up when people are in states of compassion — also, here's a very interesting one, that these 10,000-plus hour meditators, Tibetan adepts, they feel acutely, more acutely, an experience of another of suffering, but also, they let go of it much more quickly. It's not like meditators are in this state of kind of numb equanimity. In fact, they feel the deep press of suffering, but it's a much briefer impact on the neurosystem than the average individual, and that briefer impact means they let go of it much more quickly.

Ms. Tippett: And then what they're actively practicing is those positive compassion and actions.

Ms. Halifax: That's right. And then you have a whole range of features related to insight. For example, one of the features that the neuroscientists have discovered is an area of the brain that's associated with the capacity to actually distinguish self from other. In other words, if there's such great resonance when you're in the presence of suffering with the other, you go into empathic over-arousal. But when you're able — like if I'm sitting with a prisoner on death row, or I'm sitting with a person suffering from intractable pain, I can feel this resonance. I can sense into their suffering. But I also have, simultaneously, this insight: It's that person suffering, and this is me. I'm not experiencing it, in reality. It's true, but it's not — it's really not true.

Ms. Tippett: That's one of those things you have to learn as a parent to do, right?

Ms. Halifax: Well, I don't know, because I'm not that kind of a parent.

Ms. Tippett: Well, but I know that's something I've been aware of with a teenage daughter, that she didn't need me to be right inside it with her. But of course, I couldn't help but care.

Ms. Halifax: Yeah, so that's much more in the domain of compassion. The worst thing you can imagine is having a child in meltdown, and you're melting down with them.

Ms. Tippett: Yeah, right.

Ms. Halifax: And the worst thing you can imagine is, for example, sitting with a dying person who's going through a tremendously difficult experience, and then you start to freak out. I mean that's not where it wants to go.

Ms. Tippett: Is there a near enemy to grief? Or grief is not a virtue, is it? Well, it can be. I wanted to talk to you about grief, because it's a related experience to both compassion and dying. And you talk very much, which I think is a Buddhist approach to this — you talk about grief as a burden and a gift.

Ms. Halifax: Yes. From my point of view, the experience of grief is profoundly humanizing and that we need to create conditions where we are supported to grieve and where we're not told, "Why don't you just get over it?" or "It's time," or such as that. We, in our lives, experience one loss after another. And it can be loss of a breast, loss of a loved one, a child going into adulthood, which is a way of loss for many parents, loss of identity, loss of capacity. My own experience of aging is, there are capacities I had ten years ago, I no longer have, and I have to reflect upon those losses and, of course, the loss that all of us will face in anticipation of death. And it is something that brings great depth and meaning into our lives and also helps us to articulate, internally, our priorities, what is really important for us. So for me as a human being, and not identified as a Buddhist or a woman or a Western person, but as a simple human being, I value the experience of grief. I think it is — I think elephants grieve.

Ms. Tippett: We know they do.

Ms. Halifax: I think cetaceans grieve, and I think that we need to create, as I said, the conditions where the value of grief is acknowledged and supported within our own culture.

Ms. Tippett: You write about it. You say, "Grief can be seen as a natural human process giving rise to one's basic humanity" — which you've just described — "yet it can also be a potential trap, a no-exit, a source of chronic suffering." Do we need to be able to hold it properly in order to let it go or to live with it gracefully? Is that what you're saying?

Ms. Halifax: Again, this is coming back to the value of a contemplative practice. Within any tradition or non-tradition is that when you are in a state of deep internal stillness, you see the truth of change, the truth of impermanence that's constantly in flow, moment by moment. And so that becomes a kind of insight that liberates you from the futility of the kind of grief that disallows our own humanity to emerge.

[music: "Recurring" by Bonobo]

Ms. Tippett: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today, my conversation with Zen teacher and medical anthropologist Joan Halifax at the Chautauqua Institution in New York. The theme of our week was "Inspiration, Action, and Commitment." Over 1,000 people surrounded us in the open-air Hall of Philosophy, and a few came forward with questions.

[music: "Recurring" by Bonobo]

Audience Member 1: I was really struck by what you were saying about compassion fatigue. In my younger days, I was a social worker in domestic violence shelters. I did a lot of leftist political work and, at a certain point, realized that I was surrounded by people

who were dedicating their life to “no,” to fighting against something. And my husband and I had decided to get married, and we sat down and said, “What’s our ‘yes’? How are we going to commit to living ‘yes’ on a daily basis? Because if we stay here and do this, we will spend our whole life just fighting and saying no.”

And I wonder, sometimes, if part of what people refer to as compassion fatigue is the unwillingness or perhaps fear of doing the hard, daily, personal work to pay attention in one’s intimate relationships and in one’s neighborhood and in one’s community — because that’s constant. That never ends. But if all you’re thinking about is: I need to do something about that thing out there, that thing that I see on that television, the thing that I read in the newspaper, instead of: What’s happening in this house? What’s happening right here, and why don’t I start there? And once that sort of intention and mindfulness becomes almost instinctual, then the tendency to sort of fall into that empathic pit where you feel like you can’t get out in response to what’s going on in the world lessens, because you’re building up a capacity to hold complexity.

Ms. Halifax: So that was a question that had the whole answer in it. [laughs] That was wonderful.

Ms. Tippett: Well, she’s a redhead, you see.

Ms. Halifax: Yeah. [laughs] That was beautiful. What’s your name?

Audience Member 1: Asha.

Ms. Halifax: Asha, thank you. We agree. [laughs] Yeah. I mean there is — first of all, there’s the recognition. Then there was the intention, the commitment. And then there was the action. Then you made it real in your everyday life. And that’s where the rubber meets the road, exactly — in our everyday lives. So thank you.

Audience Member 2: It seems, at least in the great literature as we move from the age of Romanticism to the Age of Reason and rationality, that the concept of death changed greatly. And I’m wondering how much of that, if you’ve done any research, there really was a concept — before, let’s say, the 1800s — that death did bring a better place to folks and how that changed the way people actually approached life without that fear of death?

Ms. Halifax: I think with the secularization of our world that the notion of death — for example, in the Eastern world that I’ve been trained in, as the greatest opportunity for liberation, or, in the Christian world, as the path to go home to heaven, to God, to return, which was certainly part of the experience of the woman who took care of me as a child, for example. But with this massive secularization that we’re experiencing now, and skepticism, it has separated us from our own spirituality. And I’m not a very sectarian anything, if you know what I’m saying. Okay, I do Buddhist practices and so on and so forth, but I’m not a sectarian Buddhist.

What I am, though, is someone who wants to help people see inside. And there are many paths to that. Our churches provide a path, our synagogues provide a path, our great literature and art provides a path. But mostly, I believe that we’ve turned our vision to being so superficial and outward. And there’s a potential for a new kind of enlightenment in our time, and that is, I think, a yearning that many of us experience, as we see the world distancing itself from its own heart. So I don’t feel hopeless or futile. I’m very interested. I’m so glad I lived this long, because my superficial study of enlightenment, for example, in the Western world leads me to believe that we have tremendous potential to

realize in these coming decades.

I just don't want to say it's a downhill slope, in other words, [laughs] if you know what I mean.

No, I just think, if you look at complex dynamical systems, we're in a fascinating breakdown. And what we know about complex dynamical systems is that living systems — and we're in this robust living system. And we've seen eras. We can look back through history. We're in an era of great breakdown, environmentally and socially and psychologically, and when systems break down, the ones who have the resilience to actually repair themselves, they move to a higher order of organization. And I think that this is characterized by something the complexity theorists call robustness, that we can anticipate both a time of great robustness, which we're in, with tremendous potential to wake up and take responsibility, and, at the same time, we're in a lot of difficulties, and we need resilience to make our way through this change.

Audience Member 3: Okay, this question might ring as a little redundant, speaking of meditation. To many, I feel like it comes to mind a Buddhist meditating under a tree for 30 years or something. And speaking of the neurological benefits that it can have, I was wondering if you can recommend to somebody that's not that religious or spiritual — and I feel like spirituality is something that has to come on your own time — and to maybe just start off to get the benefits of meditation. Like, does it have to be sitting cross-legged? Does it have to be — what's the simplest way that you can do it and still get the benefits? Can it be ten minutes? Can it be 15? Does it have to be 20?

[laughter]

I just wanted to just have it broken down. As a younger member of this world, I would like to get my foot in the door, but I'm not ready for the whole shebang yet. [laughs]

[applause]

Ms. Tippett: An honest question.

Ms. Halifax: So our mutual friend Richie Davidson at the Keck Lab, has even developed an intervention, an internet intervention on compassion that is teeny-weeny, where they've seen effects. The truth is that — I mean the word "meditation" — in our training program in the end-of-life care field, we actually don't even use the word meditation, because it's so freighted. We call it reflective practices or contemplative interventions or whatever. So I feel that what's happened is, it's kind of — these practices in mental training have also gotten mixed up in the dark side of religion or the more difficult side of religion. But also, these practices have been secularized so that they no longer are hooked into the ethics which gave rise to them. And so what I feel is, we sort of have to meet somewhere in between. We have to have a view or a strong ethical base; at the same time, engage in the techniques that allow us to deepen concentration, to have insight, and to also develop more pro-social capacity.

And there are many programs out there that — the whole range of mindfulness-based stress reduction in Jon Kabat-Zinn's work. The work that Dorrie Fontaine, who's in our audience here and an old-time Chautauqua family member, participant, is doing at UVA, the training that we do of clinicians, where hundreds of clinicians, including, I think, some 40 of Dorrie's nurses and doctors, have been through our training program, which is completely secular. So what's happening in the West is fascinating in terms of these

approaches to training the mind being secularized, by the same token, so you can have a five-minute intervention, and it can really produce a nice effect. But we also know that dose makes a difference. And so try the five, then go to ten and then 20. Then you might find an hour, and then you might want to actually sort of take the plunge. But also, be very mindful of what is appropriate for you. Respect your boundaries. Be sure you're with a qualified person, because, I tell you, to stop in this world is to create the conditions where a lot of unusual experiences can rise up. So be very respectful of your situation and proceed with love and with care, as well as courage.

[music: "Pine View" by Goldmund]

Ms. Tippett: Joan Halifax is founding abbot of Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and she's the director of the project on Being with Dying. Her books include Being with Dying: Cultivating Compassion and Fearlessness in the Presence of Death.

I asked Joan Halifax to end our conversation at Chautauqua with a guided meditation on encountering grief — grief as something ordinary, part of life and humanity. We've posted the whole ten minutes of that on our website, onbeing.org. Here's a taste of how it begins:

Ms. Halifax: So I would like to invite you to put down whatever might be in your hand and to find a position that's comfortable and also that supports you. And listen to my words, and if they are resonant for you, if they are helpful, really let them enter into your experience. And bring your attention to the breath for just a moment. And let the breath sweep your mind, and notice whether it's a deep breath or shallow. And recall for a moment now a loss or losses that have really touched you, or the anticipation of loss. And now I'll offer some simple phrases. May I be open to the pain of grief. Notice whatever comes up, not rejecting it, not clinging to it. May I find the inner resources to really be present for my sorrow. May I accept my sadness, knowing that I am not my sadness. May I and all beings learn from and transform sorrow.

[music: "Pine View" by Goldmund]

Ms. Tippett: To listen again or share this show with Joan Halifax, go to onbeing.org. And follow everything we do through our weekly email newsletter. Just click the newsletter link on any page at onbeing.org

Staff: On Being is: Trent Gilliss, Chris Heagle, Lily Percy, Mariah Helgeson, Maia Tarrell, Marie Sambilay, Bethanie Mann, Selena Carlson, Malka Fenyvesi, Erinn Farrell, and Gisell Calderón.

Ms. Tippett: Special thanks this week to Maureen Rovegno, Joan Brown Campbell, and the Chautauqua Institution.

[music: "Her String" by Clown N Sunset Collective]

Our lovely theme music is composed by Zoë Keating. And the last voice you hear, singing our final credits in each show, is hip-hop artist Lizzo.

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