

Philip Ryan: Hi, this is Philip Ryan, Tricycle's web editor, and I'm talking to Sharon Salzberg about our first online retreat, which is on Kindness. Thanks for being here Sharon.

Sharon Salzberg: Oh it's a great pleasure.

Philip Ryan: People have been asking us this week for a practice to do between talks. Can you suggest something for people to do during the week?

Sharon Salzberg: Well I think one of the most interesting things about undertaking a path, like a path of kindness, is to, first of all, to see it as an experiment; it's like an experiment in consciousness. And so we stretch our awareness or we pay attention in different ways, and the whole time we're also looking within, to see how we feel, what the resistance is, what the fear might be, or where the joy is, what the upliftment is. And so I would suggest for a beginning exercise to try to express some kind of kindness, some manifestation of kindness, towards someone that you don't know, someone who's in effect a stranger. It might be a checkout person in the supermarket. It might be someone you encounter on a train, something like that. And it doesn't have to be extreme. You know? And you don't have to feel weird about it or look funny. But just this sense of maybe they're talking and you're wanting to check your email on your iPhone and you don't, and you actually pay attention to them. Or maybe you smile at somebody, or you give up your seat on the subway. Whatever it might be. It could be a very small action. It could really be mostly energetic, in that it's your attention; it's the quality of your presence that we're talking about. But to have someone that you don't know, or that you barely know-- if it is the checkout person in the supermarket, they've played a role in your life but you may not have a sense of their particular story or situation, and yet here they are. It's like a generic living-being that we get a chance to practice kindness with. And again, the critical thing, and the most interesting thing, is to keep paying attention to what's going on within you; your reactions, your feelings and so on.

Philip Ryan: All right, thank you for that. We have some questions that people have sent in.

Sharon Salzberg: Great.

Philip Ryan: And we'll see how many we get through. The first is: What, if any, is the difference between kindness and loving kindness?

Sharon Salzberg: It depends, of course, on how one uses the words. They could be used very much in the same way. Or I could imagine that there's a certain distinction, just in that I tend to think of kindness as the active attribute of loving kindness. Loving kindness is really a sense of inclusion. It's an acknowledgement of connection. You could almost see the source of kindness being loving kindness. It's a recognition that this other being counts, that their situation is not completely alienated from our own; their life has something to do with us. And then the manifestation of that would be the bringing to life, in some kind of action, of loving kindness. And so you're in the elevator with somebody and they start to talk to you, and there is that moment of excluding and thinking like, "Go away." It's too early in the morning, or something like that. And then there's that moment of releasing that and recognizing that this is a person who wants to be happy, just as we do; this is the moment of loving kindness. And then there's the activation of that into really listening and maybe responding to them; and then that would be the kindness.

Philip Ryan: Here's another. Does kindness have a shadow side, perhaps a cruel streak within us all?

Sharon Salzberg: Well I think that the question maybe becomes what's motivating us to act in a kind way, and is it truly a motivation of loving kindness or compassion, or is it something else? Sometimes the greatest cruelty is toward ourselves and feeling, "Well I don't deserve to have anything. I don't deserve to have my needs met." So what looks like kindness on the surface is really more martyrdom on our part, and it's not very wholesome and it's not very healthy. Or it might be that we can't allow ourselves to recognize the degrees of rage or fear or guilt we might feel within, and so we try to cover everything over with a very nice veneer and just pretend to be coming from a certain place. And at the same time our world gets smaller and smaller and smaller, because there's so much we can't admit to ourselves. And so a more wholesome, more truthful approach would be to recognize that we might feel anything; that we cannot control what thoughts and emotions and reactions arise within us, and we need to allow ourselves that and have a base, a balance and mindfulness to be able to look at all of that in honesty and in compassion. But we don't act from everything that arises. You know? We still have a certain vision of our life and where it's going and what we care about. And so we might be enraged, but we realize that lashing out is not going to help us; along with not helping the other person, it's not going to help us at all. And so we make choices about how we behave, which are very important choices to make. But that doesn't mean we don't have other kinds of feelings.

Philip Ryan: You spoke of kindness not being a small thing or a secondary thing. Is kindness then the main thing, the primary focus?

Sharon Salzberg: I think a true understanding of kindness could be seen as that, because it's kindness that's allied with wisdom. It's not in any way a kind of foolishness or weakness or silliness. But when kindness is born of wisdom, it's an amazing vision of what life is about and where happiness is, where strength is, and the truth about connection and inter-connection; rather than feeling so alone, and the kinds of delusions that we fall into about separation. So I would think that in that way, yes, one could say kindness is the main thing.

Philip Ryan: That's good to hear. What is the near enemy of kindness that we should be aware of?

Sharon Salzberg: I don't know that literally in the Buddhist psychology there's a near enemy. So I would think of the near enemy of loving kindness, which is attachment, and also the near enemy of compassion, which I'll talk about in a second. So the near enemy of loving kindness is attachment. There, of course, one can see that in an act of kindness where we do something generous, or we go the extra mile and help someone out, or something like that. But that we really do that with a certain level of expectation of being thanked or being immediately successful; like get better by next week or whatever it is. You must heal according to my timetable and according to my image. And there are lots of ways that those sorts of expectations or attachments can creep into an act of kindness, and that would function as a kind of near enemy. And then the near enemy of compassion is almost like a state of despair where we see the need, we see the suffering, we see the very difficult situation someone's in, but we're just exhausted, we're burnt out, we're overwhelmed. We don't feel we ourselves have anything to contribute, and so we just pull away. And that would also, I think, function very much as a near enemy of kindness. It's like it's a near enemy because we see the suffering, we see the need, we see what's actually going on, but maybe we've sneakily added a kind of attachment here as well. You know? Like I've got to fix it all perfectly. And when we recognize we can't, that sense of helplessness takes center stage and it just sort of overwhelms us.

Philip Ryan: How does one deal with overwhelming emotions when meditating? Does one go with it, or try to stop it? I bet you hear this one a lot.

Sharon Salzberg: I do. Well my mind stopped at the word 'overwhelming'. Like what makes it overwhelming, compared to intense or extremely powerful or very, very strong? That's sort of the key question. Well I think there are different levels to that. One is-- just on the level of understanding or insight-- is to know that we cannot stop these things from coming; that everything that arises in our experience comes from conditions coming together, and that, just as we can't say, "Well I've thought about it really strongly for a

long time and I've decided I'm never going to be afraid again" or "I've grieved enough, it's never going to come up." We can't do that, because when conditions come together those feelings will arise. And so the issue in meditation is not to somehow get to a place where we can control that, but rather to transform our relationship to what arises. And that's very important, because we expend a lot of energy in really blaming ourselves, and that could be energy better spent on working on having a different relationship with what's coming up. So that's part of what we need to bring to that situation, is that understanding. And then, of course, there's the basic understanding that everything changes; that as powerful as these emotions might be, and as frequently as they might come, they're still coming and going, and what we're relying on is the power of our awareness. So the key is balance. And that means we try and develop a relationship to those emotions so that we can recognize what's happening. We neither get consumed by them, nor are we attacking them, and hating ourselves for that having come up. So mindfulness is sometimes described as a place in the middle. And so we feel ourselves maybe falling into the emotion, and we need to kind of take a breath and step back a little bit. Sometimes naming it helps; actually placing a mental label on the emotion, like anger, rage, fear, whatever it might be. Just very gently to keep naming it will help create a little bit of space; so that we're more observing it than completely in it. We also look for those things we might be adding onto it. "I should have been able to stop it. Why is this still here? I thought I got rid of this long ago." You know? Whatever it might be. And to try to release those thoughts, and more come back to what the experience is actually in the moment. And then it becomes a process of taking an interest. We observe-- what's happening in my body? What is this emotion doing? What sensations is it creating? And then what's the nature of the emotion? Let's take a look at it. It's almost like you're saying, "Okay, now I'm a lab and I'm looking at anger, I'm looking at terror, I'm looking at guilt. What do I see?" And that's really fascinating, because we look at something like anger, in this way, we're actually taking an interest in it, and we see well it's not just one thing. There are moments of sadness and there are moments of fear and moments of helplessness; that it's really-- it's many different emotions coming and going. And so, from that vantage point, we have a much more truthful understanding of the nature of anger, and we also have a perspective on the nature of change. And so even though it's very challenging, it's also very powerful to use these emotions as a vehicle for insight.

Philip Ryan: Here's a question about being stuck. When I practice welcoming and fully experiencing whatever is present, most specifically in a formal sit, how do I know when it's time to let go and move on? Am I in, quote/unquote, tormented mind, or simply aware of my thoughts? And what specific tools can help me in letting go gently?

Sharon Salzberg: Well sometimes it's hard to evaluate in the moment, and you just have to kind of go with your intuition-- that's one thing-- and not to be anxious about doing it perfectly or doing it right. If you're doing it, I would bet you're doing it right. So it's okay. But in terms of specific tools, I've found things like using mental noting quite

helpful; for me. So, for example, if something comes up, like this big emotion, or a whole bunch of thinking, if I'm actually gently labeling, thinking, thinking, at a pace that-- it's not like rapid fire-- but keeps pointing my attention toward the direct experience of what's going on. For one thing, it's an instant feedback system, which can be very useful. So if you hear in your mind you're saying, "Thinking!," that's a clue that it's not likely just a warm-hearted acceptance of what's going on. And you can just say it again. It's like you recalibrate and you go, "Oh thinking." And that change in tone also helps change the relationship. So it could be things like that, that really help us; help guide us toward a state of greater balance. And then in terms of letting go, I think that's the critical moment in any practice. Because we will be distracted, we'll be lost, and we say, "Oh it's been quite some time since I last felt a breath, or did a phrase of loving kindness" or whatever the practice might be. And that is the critical moment. And we can watch that moment with great interest, and notice what it's like when we blame ourselves, and how much time that takes, and notice what it's like when we more gently let go. And we can always remind ourselves that nothing's been ruined and nothing's been lost. We need to really just begin again and begin again and begin again.

Philip Ryan: Here is a very serious question. I witnessed my brother's death just two years ago. I am an experienced meditator but now when I attempt to drop inward and be still, the visions of his dying are still very strong and hard to deal with. So being still in meditation is a huge challenge. How do I deal with the visions and images, and how may I once again find stillness in the meditative space?

Sharon Salzberg: Trauma is a very real thing, with very real consequences. And I think the process in meditation is not so very different perhaps than the process in some forms of therapy with trauma. And it might be that working with someone else, certainly for awhile-- and there's so many modalities now, in terms of trauma, that deal with the residue in the body and our nervous system, and just the tremendous kind of sorrow and fear we can carry in our bodies that are very useful. So I would suggest really checking out a therapeutic mode. And there are a lot, as I said, that have to do specifically with trauma. Because it's almost physiological. Like I wasn't in New York City on 9/11, in 2001, but I was in soon after, and I would go out to dinner with friends who had been here, and an ambulance or something with a siren would go by, and they would literally leap three feet into the air. You know? It's held in our bodies. And especially going through something as tragic as the death of someone that we love. And it's tragic, it's terribly painful, and we hold it. And yet, I think that the more we can utilize tools, like awareness and compassion, to work through some of what we are holding, and have these experiences move us toward greater compassion for the world-- obviously the freer we are, and the more we are able to be a vehicle for others, even with what we've gone through. You know? So when I say that some of the tools- some of the skills are really the same. It's like being able to be aware, but not immersed in a vision or an image or a memory or a feeling. To see it, and then being able to move your attention somewhere

else, so you get a break, and then going back, and then moving out. These are all things that we do in the meditation and that are also done in therapy. And kind of unwinding the physiological residue as well, so it's not such an immediate and total experience. And also, just in a general kind of way, it's like reweaving a sense of connection to the world and to life-- whether it's through Nature or through service or whatever it might be-- will be the backdrop for being able to release some of that.

Philip Ryan: Let's end with a little more lighthearted one. In December I always start thinking about my New Year's resolution. I have never had a resolution that I've kept to my satisfaction. Do you have any advice for those of us considering New Year's resolutions for 2010?

Sharon Salzberg: I'll offer one that Joseph Goldstein actually taught me. He didn't do it as a New Year's resolution, he did it as a just kind of life resolution. He said that because we believe and both practice and teach that a daily practice is so helpful. You know? All these things are nice ideas, and they're beautiful values and things like that. But one of the best ways of making them real is to have some kind of daily practice so that they are infusing our lives and our being, and then they're more readily available when we are in the subway, or we're in the grocery store, we're in a doctor's waiting room, or whatever it might be. So he made the resolve once that he wasn't going to go to sleep at night until he'd at least gotten into the sitting posture. So that's like a 30-second commitment. And I would suggest that. It's not like saying, "I'm going to sit two hours every day and half the weekend." It's not even a five-minute commitment. It's really like a 30-second commitment, that at some point during the day you're going to go within, and have that sense of connecting to oneself. And so try that.

Philip Ryan: Thirty seconds is good. Thirty seconds I think we can do. Okay. Thank you so much Sharon; and we'll look forward to Week Two.

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