

Meditative Story Transcript – Sharon Salzberg (Soul Curriculum)

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ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: Welcome to Soul Curriculum, a special episode of Meditative Story.

One of the reasons I love being part of Meditative Story is that it can really help deepen our understanding of ourselves. Think about it this way. Yes we go into other people's stories, but doing so holds a mirror up to our own lives, and our own transformative experiences.

And so in this episode, we're inviting back a storyteller who very recently shared their Meditative Story with us.

We're going to wind our way back through her story, and with her alongside me right here, we'll talk about the key themes in a way that I hope may just open up something special in you.

If you remember Sharon Salzberg's story, that's great. If not, that's no big deal. Nowadays, Sharon leads workshops and retreats at the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts, hosts the Metta Hour podcast, and is the author of the book *Real Change* and many others. One of her first, simply called *Loving Kindness* is one of my all time faves. In her Meditative Story, she shared her journey to India in search of the ways to mindfulness and healing. There, she found that the healing wouldn't come easy. Those early days would lead to years of practice towards patience and self-compassion.

And with that: the body relaxed. The body breathing. Your senses open. Your mind open. Meeting the world.

GUNATILLAKE: Hi, Sharon, how are you doing?

SHARON SALZBERG: I'm doing well. It's so nice to be speaking with you.

GUNATILLAKE: I know it's great to be speaking again. And where are you at the moment? Are you in New York, or have you been traveling?

SALZBERG: Uh, I'm in Barre, Massachusetts in my house, which is just through the forest little ways from the Insight Meditation Society.

GUNATILLAKE: Great. I've been to Barre maybe twice before and yeah, just really loved my time out there. And you know, you've been in the podcast game with the Metta Hour podcast for several years now. Over the years, you've taught and shared meditation on a range of different platforms. How do you find the podcast medium as a way to teach and share?

SALZBERG: Well, I enjoy the podcast and that I'm getting to ask the questions. So, and of course I learn a lot, and I get to have a variety of different guests from different arenas.

GUNATILLAKE: Sure. And sometimes it makes me think like, would the Buddha be a podcaster if they were around today, or would they be more of a TikTok person? What do you think?

SALZBERG: Well, I don't go on TikTok. So I can't really answer that. I think you probably showed me the first app I'd ever seen. And I probably had to say to you, "what's an app?"

GUNATILLAKE: But I think there's something about, you know, the importance of stories in the world of podcast, but also like historically I think meditation and stories have been intertwined in the Buddhist tradition of people would come to see him, give their particular situation, and he would give advice, but that was all presented through narrative. That's why, what we're gonna do today is dig a bit deeper into the themes that you've explored in your story, if that's okay.

SALZBERG: Mm-hmm sure.

GUNATILLAKE: Not everyone loves hearing the sound of their own voice, but with your forgiveness, we'll take a listen to some of the highlights of the story.

SALZBERG: Sounds delightful.

GUNATILLAKE: In this moment of your story, you were going through a time of deep need for healing and, practically by accident, you came onto a mind-shifting idea during college that jump started your entire journey towards meditation. Let's listen.

SALZBERG: I'm sitting in a college classroom in Buffalo, New York. It's my sophomore year, and I'm in an Asian philosophy class.

Much of the course focuses on the tenets of Buddhism. The professor paces at the front of the room, and tells us: "The Buddha taught that suffering is natural and universal."

He says this as if it's the most obvious thing in the world. I look around, the rest of the class seem unfazed. But I'm suddenly very attentive. I have not been holding the idea that suffering is universal. I tend to think it's just me.

My childhood is difficult. My mother dies when I'm 9. By then my father is gone too. He has a breakdown. He's in psychiatric hospitals. So I'm left in the care of grandparents who don't really tell me what's going on. My world is full of secrets.

I'm sure every other family is perfect, like the ones on TV. I feel deficient. I feel alone, afraid, frozen. I'm always waiting for the other person to take action, to get the prize.

So when I hear the professor say that suffering is universal — that it's even a natural part of life, it wakes me up. It starts to change the way I see myself. I begin to wonder what's going on behind the closed doors in all those other houses. For the first time, a new thought crosses my mind: I might be normal.

GUNATILLAKE: I love this moment of awareness in your philosophy class in Buffalo. I think it really felt like in your story, a call to action that I think in my experience, I've always found that people get into meditation for one of two reasons.

SALZBERG: Mm-hmm

GUNATILLAKE: I call them sort of crisis or curiosity. And, you know, crisis can be relatively minor, like not being able to sleep or all the way up to more full blown experiences like dealing with trauma. And curiosity, I think for me means, you know, interest in how the mind works and the feeling of when someone realizes that they don't have to be pushed around by their inner stuff and can actually do something about it.

SALZBERG: Well I have also found that there are some number of people, especially these days, because these approaches and these methods are so much more accessible that just have a kind of passion to understand life in a deeper way. And it's not particularly a crisis or some kind of suffering. Like I was highly, highly motivated, and you sort had to be. In order to actually come upon a methodology or a series of techniques, something you could actually put into practice.

And I appreciated that, that my fellow travelers, the people I was there with, the people I met there, they were very similar, you know. They had a lot going on in their lives and their childhoods. There was a lot of difficulty, a lot of confusion, and there we were, seeking another way or seeking a deeper truth. It was the major statement of inclusion for me. It was like, this is not just you. This is everybody. So I felt, like, so much more on the inside than on the outside for the first time in my entire life.

GUNATILLAKE: And I guess thinking about today and how when these sort of calls to action come along, sometimes it can be hard to hear them. How do other people today maybe listen more to those in a call to action and give them the space and the energy they need.

SALZBERG: Well, I think for a lot of people these days, there's just a kind of despair, you know, which leads more to indolence or apathy or giving up than thinking, "I'm gonna develop all these inner strengths, and I'm gonna meet the moment in a different way." It's the encouraging part. It's the inspiration part that I think can be a huge challenge. And to

some degree it's that much harder to do all alone. It's much easier to do with a greater sense of community.

GUNATILLAKE: And I think that that emphasis you placed around community, I think is really important and how doing it together makes it easier, right? And more rewarding.

SALZBERG: I always think about the work that I got to do in communities of survivors of gun violence, where I went to Parkland, Florida, very soon after the school shooting there in Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. And I taught, and there was one young woman in the class who had already graduated from high school. She was just a little bit older than the students who were there, but she had strong ties in the community. And she said in the class, you know, I feel really weird because I'm having this really great experience with you and with these practices. And I know the only reason I'm getting to have it is because that truly horrible thing happened. I don't know how to get over that in order to be with this. And, and I said, "I don't think we get over things. I think we learn to hold them both at once."

And I said, you know, in the Buddhist context, we call it equanimity, which does not mean indifference or not caring. It means a really large, spacious, almost, like, holding, environment that can contain everything. And we talked about the yin yang symbol where, you know, there's this sort of light curvy part and right in the center, there's this smaller dark circle. And there's a dark curvy part. And right in the center, there's a smaller light circle and finding the darkness in the light and the light and the darkness.

GUNATILLAKE: I've heard you speak about how through having more spaciousness we can move past being indifferent or reactive. How did the high school student respond to this?

SALZBERG: I did some virtual panels and things and she was on one of them. And I said, "Remember when we had that conversation?" About equanimity and the yin yang symbol. And she said, "Not only do I remember it," she said, "that's like my North Star." She said, "I think of it every single day of my life." And I think that's part of how we grow and change is that we can hold many things at once. We have the genuine recognition of the incredible suffering. And we have the reclaiming of joy, you know, in community, in helping one another in learning things, you know, having a sense of meaning. And sometimes we just undertake these practices together.

GUNATILLAKE: I love that. Sharon, next we'll listen to the moment when you hit one of your first stumbling blocks. You're a few days into your meditation retreat in India. You are practicing consistently for the first time, but no matter how hard you try, you just can't tap into that elusive peace you're so eager to find. Something I'm sure many of our listeners relate to. Certainly I do.

SALZBERG: A few days into the retreat, our teacher tells us: “This session, we’re going to sit with determination. We’re not going to move.” And I move within seconds. This is impossible for me. I’m doing it all wrong. I can’t concentrate. I’m so frustrated. I need this to work to fix me. And I only have a few days left in the retreat to get it right. I actually say to myself, “The next time your mind wanders you should just bash your head against the wall.” I’m just so disappointed with myself.

Just then the lunch bell rings. I get in line, and someone behind me asks this other guy: “How was your morning?” An American voice replies in the calmest way possible:

“Oh I couldn’t focus at all in my meditation. But this afternoon will probably be better.”

I’m horrified. I think, “What’s wrong with him? He’s so cavalier.” I spin around, full of judgment, and this is how I meet Joseph Goldstein.

Joseph seems to radiate equanimity and balance. Of course the difference between Joseph and me is that he’s been meditating for four years, and I’ve been meditating for maybe four days. So when Joseph says, “Yeah, it was a hard morning. But that’s OK. Some difficulty is normal.” And this is exactly what I’m here to learn. I’m just so desperate to figure it out fast — to beat down my sorrow. And he’s like, “Give yourself a break.”

GUNATILLAKE: I must confess I’m a bit of a geek when it comes to 20th century, Burmese meditation techniques, and a lot of those schools are pretty hardcore, and they don’t talk a lot about kindness, at least initially they don’t. And in that moment when Joseph sort of says, you know, just give yourself a break. Did that change what it was like in the depth of your practice?

SALZBERG: Yeah. It changed things. It kind of opened up some spaciousness. My accusation of him, you know, was that he didn’t take this stuff seriously. When I realized what was actually going on, it was not a lack of seriousness or doubting the practice in some way, but it was perspective. Like we have mornings of strong concentration, or we have mornings of wretched concentration, and that’s the way it’s gonna be, and how we are with each of those is more significant than just the very lack of concentration.

GUNATILLAKE: I think sometimes people forget that it’s true whether you are new to your practice or if you’ve been practicing for a while.

SALZBERG: It’s not the extent of the effort. It’s more the quality of the effort. We get really quite mean to ourselves sometimes, the way we speak to ourselves, I even go back to that sort of micro example. Like you’re sitting, you place your attention on the

feeling of the breath, you find you're far, far away from that breath. Where are you, and how do you speak to yourself? And that is the moment when many of us would just jump on that train of self judgment, and we tear ourselves apart, and then we emerge, and we feel horrible rather than saying, oh, gone, let me let go and start over, which is what we need to do.

GUNATILLAKE: And could you say a little bit about the balance between strong determination with kindness at the same?

SALZBERG: Yeah. I mean, I think it takes something; it takes a lot really, you know, it takes a lot of commitment. It's the cultivation of resilience being able to go back again and again, and again, and again. As I teach these days and people are trying to have a daily practice or regular practice at any rate, that's not easy.

I think kindness is sort of like this sneaky ingredient and, you know, we learn it one way or another, even if we don't realize what we're learning, because it's the only way to really do it. Otherwise it is so tempting, you know, your attention wanders, you freak out, and you compare yourself to everyone else in your imagination, you call yourself a failure, and you're so bad at this.

And all of which, like if you get lost in that, it extends the period of the distraction. Sometimes considerably. It's actually not an effective way to do the practice. And I found that such a huge life lesson. It was so important, because really when I think about an ordinary day in my life, I mean, how many times a day do I need to begin again?

It's a lot, you know?

GUNATILLAKE: Sure.

SALZBERG: And going down a certain road, I need a course correction or something happens and I need to change. We do that over and over and over again. And that's what we're really learning in the meditation.

GUNATILLAKE: There is a real wisdom in realizing that a mindfulness practice doesn't get rid of distraction or comparison or other thought patterns which we may want less of in our lives. Patterns like distraction and comparison are just part of the show. What I have found is that my practice does give me the tools to be cool with them, to not give these thoughts too much energy so they don't take over.

Alright, Sharon, let's move on to this next moment from your Meditative Story. This time during your practices, you feel something new surface in you that seems to work against you. But you also learn a valuable lesson: it's normal, and you can learn to give it space.

SALZBERG: One morning during meditation, I feel a tide of anger rising inside me. It feels in my body like a rush of energy. This is the first time in my life I've been deeply introspective, so of course when I sit still and look inside, I unearth fear and anger. I don't know yet that fear and anger are the same emotion in different forms. So it just consumes me. And then I get mad at myself for feeling angry. I think, "What kind of person meditates in this beautiful place and comes away angry?! What the hell is wrong with me?"

After the meditation, I storm up to my teacher, Goenka, and say, "I never used to be an angry person before I started meditating!" — thereby laying blame exactly where I feel it belongs: on him.

And he looks at me, and he starts laughing. It's not what I expect. But it doesn't make me angrier. It just sort of lets the air out of my hot angry balloon. It makes me feel normal.

The laughter seems his way of saying, "Of course, you feel anger. It is part of the process. There's nothing wrong with it. There's nothing wrong with you. The question is: What do you do with that anger? How do you act?"

It will take a while before I learn that the skillful response to feeling anger is to feel it. And then even to take an interest in it. I don't have to let it carry me into action that I may regret.

GUNATILLAKE: Sharon I remember a time when I was there as well, where I dunno whether you're familiar with the term rage quitting, which is when I think comes on video games where you get so angry at the video game that you throw the control of the other side of the room. And I once rage quit. I once rage quit a retreat, because I was just getting so wound up, and I look back on this time now and how I wish I had Goenke laughing at me. But I loved that moment where you talked about how you were surprised that Goenke's laughter didn't upset you. And that was quite a really telling observation I think.

SALZBERG: Yeah. I mean, I think it was pretty funny actually. And I think we can sense the difference between somebody laughing at us in a cutting sort of way, or almost including us in the laugh. It's like a kind of hug in a way, which it really felt like.

GUNATILLAKE: I've always found that my favorite teachers were the ones that were able to point me to the funny side or to be quite playful or even irreverent sometimes and...

SALZBERG: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

GUNATILLAKE: The importance of humor, that's always been very powerful for me. And it sort of challenges the idea of what wisdom looks like. It doesn't have to look like a particular thing. So as a teacher, how do you encourage your students to discover their own wisdom rather than telling them the answer?

SALZBERG: Well, because, you know, I think so much emphasis is on supporting people and doing the practice. It's like, that's sort of the ethic, right? From the beginning, you know, it's not just an academic classroom, for example, or reading a text, it's people's lived experience. That's the point. We look at a Buddha statue, not because the Buddha was a super human being, but because he was a human being. And we look at the Buddha as an example of a human being with boundless compassion and infinite wisdom and realize, oh, that's my potential too. So we really look at the Buddha to see ourselves. And that's the larger context in which we practice.

The word in the Theravada tradition, the schools of Buddhism in which I trained was *Kalyāṇa-mittatā*. In the Pali language, it means spiritual friend, you know, and that's the way you relate to a teacher as a friend, as a spiritual friend. They say the Buddha was like the best friend you could ever have. And, you know, I remember my teacher Munindra once saying to me, "the Buddha's enlightenment solved the Buddha's problem. Now you solve yours." And it felt almost like it not almost like, it felt like the first time in my life that someone was looking at me and in effect saying, you can do it, you can solve your problem.

GUNATILLAKE: I love how that potential to solve our own problems lives within all of us. But I also love how teachers can be thought of, less like great masters, and more like friends that help guide us down that path. I like the idea of embodying that belief every time I see a statue or painting of the Buddha.

Later in your story, Sharon, you are back home years after that first trip to India. You've grown so much into wisdom, into kindness, but it's a surprising circumstance that makes you realize that. Let's listen.

SALZBERG: One day, after a week, I'm in an upstairs bathroom at our retreat center. And I'm rushing. As I get ready, I whirl around, and I suddenly knock this big glass jar of bath salts onto the tile floor. The jar shatters. And in this moment, the thought that comes up in my mind is:

"You're really a klutz — but I love you."

The problem of incessant self criticism is not just mine alone, of course. So many people suffer from it. Over time, we start suggesting to other people that they give their inner critic a name.

I name my own inner critic Lucy — after the character in the Peanuts comic strip. I had seen a cartoon where Lucy is talking to Charlie Brown. She says to him, "You know, Charlie Brown, what your problem is? The problem with you is that you're you."

I respond to the thought with: "Hi Lucy. Chill, Lucy. Just chill out."

I'm now aware of Lucy. And I know that my awareness is stronger than she is.

Nearly 50 years later, I'm still on this path. The North Star of awareness and kindness I found so long ago is deliberate and clear. Be patient, be kind, including to myself.

GUNATILLAKE: Sharon, you know, the moment with the bath salts, I think for me, feels really important. The idea that you really don't necessarily see the fruits of your practice in real time, you see them in moments like that. And there's one way you could expand on the importance of that idea for our listeners to be and how important it's to be aware of that.

SALZBERG: I think it's very difficult for a lot of people. I've seen that because it is frustrating. We tend to wanna see the results very quickly or immediately. And I remember this friend took me out to lunch once in New York City. And he said he'd been practicing loving kindness meditation for about three years. And he said, you know, "My experience is not that different than it was three years ago when I started, but I'm like a different person. I'm different with myself. I'm different with my family. I'm different with my community. I'm different ethically." And then he looked at me and he said, "Is that enough?" I said, "Yeah, I kind of think it's enough." But it's hard when you're sitting there, and you're still sleepy or your leg hurts or whatever it is to understand what's happening in a way that often we can't see until we're living our lives again, which is actually where it counts the most.

I've also found that people say to me, "I couldn't see the change in myself right away, but the people around me did," you know, my kids said to me, please don't stop. You're much better, you know, things like that. So that can also be the thing that happens, you know, first other people see it and then we see it. We just really need to know where to look.

GUNATILLAKE: And I love your practice of calling your inner critic. Lucy. My wife's called Lucy, so I can't, can't do that would, that would get awkward. But, when you do that, like, what does that look like in practice? Do you sit down, do you sort of talk out loud?

Like how might other people do that?

SALZBERG: You know, we really encourage people to find their name for their inner critic, if it's a persistent and not that helpful voice, you know, because it all will come down to how we are relating to that voice. And it's just easier to have a sense of relationship with that characterization of that voice. Like, "how am I gonna be when I hear that Lucy voice" is one option of completely diving into it, like, "you're right, Lucy, you're always right. I'm not worth anything." Another option is freaking out: "I've been meditating all these years, and Lucy's still here. What a loser am I?" You know, and then there is kind of the way of mindfulness, which would be not falling into either of those two extremes, but more like, "Oh, hi Lucy. I see you." And that's why you just test the degree in which you can be present with that voice and not fall into either of those two extremes.

GUNATILLAKE: I love that the process begins with the act of naming our inner critic. It's so simple but so powerful. Doing that can really make space when stuff is kicking off, can't it? Our inner critics don't have to be in charge, as much as they'd like to.

GUNATILLAKE: Well, thank you, Sharon so much. Obviously for your Meditative Story in itself, but also for the opportunity to dig into the themes a little bit more.

SALZBERG: Thank you.

GUNATILLAKE: And with that, I'm going to sign off and hope you enjoyed this episode. Email us at hello@meditativestory.com to share your thoughts about the episode.