

On Faith & Applying Buddhist Teachings to Clinical Practice

An Interview with Sharon Salzberg

Interview by Matt Laughlin



BIOGRAPHY

One of America's leading spiritual teachers and authors, Sharon Salzberg has been a student of Buddhism since 1971, and leading meditation retreats worldwide since 1974. She teaches both intensive awareness practice (*vipassana* or insight meditation) and the profound cultivation of lovingkindness and compassion (the Brahma Viharas). She is a co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts and The Barre Center for Buddhist Studies.

Sharon's latest book is *The Force of Kindness*, published by Sounds True. She is also the author of *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*, published by Riverhead Books; *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness* and *A Heart as Wide as the World*, both published by Shambhala Publications; and co-author with Joseph Goldstein of *Insight Meditation, a Step-by-Step Course on How to Meditate* (audio), from Sounds True. She has edited *Voices of Insight*, an anthology of writings by vipassana teachers in the West, also published by Shambhala.

Sharon has played a crucial role in bringing Asian meditation practices to the West. The ancient Buddhist practices of *vipassana* (mindfulness) and *metta* (lovingkindness) are the foundations of her work. "Each of us has a genuine capacity for love, forgiveness, wisdom and compassion. Meditation awakens these qualities so that we can discover for ourselves the unique happiness that is our birthright." For more information about Sharon, please visit: www.SharonSalzberg.com.

UH (*UnifiedHealth*[™]): Thanks again for generously giving of your time and energy for this interview, especially amidst your full teaching and writing schedule. In preparation for speaking with you, I was grateful for the opportunity to read your book, *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*. It really seems to me as though this book reflects the essence of so many of your well-known teachings on lovingkindness and meditation. In your writings about your personal understanding of faith since you were a young girl, a particular aspect of your experience stood out to me. Some months after you left New York and arrived in India in 1971 you recall, "With a surge of conviction, I thought, *But I am here, and I can learn to be truly free.*" Later in your book, you describe an even deeper understanding of this inner resolution, saying:

"There under the bodhi tree", I asked myself what I most wanted this inner journey to yield. The answer welled up from my heart: 'I'm practicing so that I can have the love of the Buddha, so I can love

other people the way the Buddha did.' That morning, I fell fully in love with a new vision of what my life might look like.

Would you speak about the significance of this quality of faith – as you describe, this inner setting of the compass or setting of one's heart? You also quote Paul Tillich, a German-American theologian, as referring to this aspiring quality of faith as one's "ultimate concern." Throughout your book, I was struck by your resolution to "develop the love of the Buddha," and felt compelled to start by asking you to say more about this aspect of faith.

SS (Sharon Salzberg): When I was writing *Faith; Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*, people would ask me what I was working on, and when I told them I was writing a book about faith, I would often be met with alarm, amusement or even anger. So often people seem to associate the word faith with dogmatic beliefs, with unquestioning allegiance; with being silenced and unable to ask questions about what is being presented to them. This is not

how the word faith is used in Buddhist teaching. In Pali, the language of the original Buddhist texts, *saddha* is the word for faith, and it means *to offer one's heart, to give one's heart*. This has a very different sense than blind belief, or being unable to question. It's really more about both commitment and opening. Faith is said to develop when we cultivate greater self-respect, and the confidence to question and seek answers for ourselves.

I did write that a sense of faith is one's 'ultimate concern' because I think we too often tend to have a limited faith, or a limited sense of aspiration. Aspiration influences so much of our ability to take a risk or to leave what is convenient and familiar to go into a more expansive sense of what is possible. If our sense of aspiration is really blunted or small, it's a feeling of "Well, I can't do anything much," or "I can't contribute anything significant, nothing I do could be meaningful," and so on. This is something we begin to challenge.

UH You wrote about how at 17 years old, you had a very limited sense of what was possible for yourself, following a childhood of great loss, including the loss of both of your parents at a young age. And then you took a college course that began to challenge this limited sense of aspiration...

SS That's right. I took a course in Asian philosophy, which turned out to be a course in Buddhism. Hearing the Buddhist teaching was a dramatic turning point for me for two reasons. One was the Buddha's very open, unafraid and unashamed acknowl-

edgment that there is pain and suffering in life. This acknowledgement was very important in my own life, as my own personal suffering had left me feeling isolated and cut off. To hear that the Buddha said right out loud, "There is suffering in life," was in itself quite liberating.

The second reason that course was so significant for me was what seemed to be the Buddha's completely open invitation to do something about that suffering. The Buddhist teaching seemed to say that everybody has the capacity to learn, to understand their lives and not just live mechanically, but to have greater love and compassion. Whatever we may go through personally, that capacity is something that can never be destroyed. It may be covered over or hard to reach, or something we don't trust, but as a capacity it is always there. And the teachings said that there are tools; tools of living like ethics and giving, and tools of meditation, which can change your life if you actually put them into practice. That provided a tremendous sense of inclusion for me, rather than my feeling excluded from a sense of possibility. It was just breathtaking to hear this.

UH It reminds me of the classic saying attributed to the Buddha about how rare or precious a human life is, rarer still to hear of enlightenment, let alone put into practice teachings and pursue enlightenment.

SS Yes, definitely. It is one thing to hold something in the abstract; to say "Oh, isn't that great, the Buddha got enlightened under a tree 2,500 years ago." (Laughter) "Too bad I live in New York City or



wherever I might live, where it is too noisy to go far in meditation.” This is where faith comes in; rather than staying on the sidelines, to step directly into an endeavor or a prospect or an approach to life and to ask “What might this mean for me?” It is a vibrant kind of faith, a spirit or an attitude that says, “I am going to check this out for myself.”

That’s what I did. I went to India to study Buddhist meditation. And when I was there, sitting under that tree - the bodhi tree said to be the offspring of the tree the Buddha was sitting under when he became enlightened - I had a tremendous sense of our shared, innate capacity. It came through in the form of love, lovingkindness. I felt that I too could develop - as we all can - into greater and greater love and compassion. In many ways, that became the core value of my exploration.

UH Your ultimate concern?

SS Yes, my ultimate concern.

UH That reminds me about what you describe in your book as ‘bright faith,’ something you distinguish from what you called ‘verified faith.’ Would you comment on what you mean when you speak of moving from a sense of bright faith to verified faith?

SS Bright faith is talked about as the first stage or aspect of faith that we experience. It is likened to the feeling of someone being in a closed, dark room, feeling confined and cut off, when for some reason the door swings open and there is a huge contrast to what we felt before. There is a sense of being freed from all that constraint and limitation. You may not know exactly what is on the other side of the door, but suddenly it’s like, “Oh, wow! It’s a big world and many things are possible.” That relief and exhilaration and joy are very strong feelings, so much so that they are likened to falling in love. Bright faith is a huge kind of expansiveness that can be very intoxicating.

Bright faith most often comes from an encounter with something external. We may meet a person who is inspiring, or we could be reading something, hearing music, seeing art, or possibly being in an extraordinary place in nature. Bright faith is very beautiful and often essential as a beginning to a journey of faith. Yet, from the Buddhist point of view it is considered just the first stage of faith and it has certain vulnerabilities. One vulnerability is because it tends to be provoked by something outside of ourselves, and is not necessarily so centered in our own experience of what is true. We might meet a teacher and be quite inspired and determined to follow the

path they describe; then we meet another, perhaps more charismatic figure and we think, “This is the one I am going to follow!” (Laughter) It can be rather fickle and unsteady in that way.

And because it provides such an extraordinary feeling, we may not want to do anything to threaten our proximity to the external source of that amazing feeling. That’s when some people may be afraid to question or express their doubt or uncertainty. They may find certain things around a teacher, for instance, that make them somewhat uneasy but don’t want to address these concerns and perhaps threaten this wonderful feeling. If this happens, if one becomes afraid to question, what we call bright faith degenerates into what is commonly called blind faith. In this sense, it can be a dangerous phase.

So while we appreciate, delight in and are even awed by bright faith, it needs to develop further and mature. The next stage of faith is called verified faith. We are no longer counting on that proximity to an external object or person. Our sense of faith is really grounded in our own seeing of what is true, our own understanding and our own experience. Because it is done through investigation and seeing for ourselves, by putting some tools into practice, in a funny way, the transition from bright faith to verified faith is developed through doubt.

UH You often speak from the Buddhist perspective of two kinds of doubt.

SS Yes. One is a very positive, useful, even essential doubt where we have confidence in our right and ability to see what is true for ourselves. So we examine and we question and we wonder. We don’t take things for granted and we’re not gullible. This kind of doubt allows us to take some risks and come closer to a process, to examine it fully from within. We assess, but based on an authentic experience of something.

The other kind of doubt is more of a hindrance. It is referred to as skeptical doubt, a stance of stepping out of a process and not really asking questions. It is dismissive, taking a cynical point of view where we’re not putting something into practice to see for ourselves if it’s true, we’re merely stepping away and judging. That kind of doubt doesn’t further us, it doesn’t allow us to really experience many things.

Often a lack of confidence in oneself masquerades as skeptical doubt, “I will never be able to see what is true, therefore I am not even going to try.” Skeptical doubt could also manifest as restlessness, where we step away from a process in indecision. It leaves us stuck and unable to take the very next step, which is the one we need to take.

UH You share a moving excerpt of a young man confined to a wheelchair attending an event about this woman who miraculously was able to walk again. Next to him sits his hard-working father. And the reader gets a sense of this young man so hopeful for a healing, juxtaposed next to his loving father, who seems hopeful, yet in a different way. You write that you had the feeling this father's "love for his son was completely independent of any particular outcome, so that he could be guided by faith instead of fear." Would you describe what a faith, independent of any investment in an outcome, looks like?

SS Distinctions in language are often very precise in the Buddhist tradition. There is a distinction that is made between what we might customarily call hope and what we call faith. The distinction doesn't mean the goal is to be hopeless; instead, it points to how when we use the word hope very often we really mean attachment. It may be a wish to be in control, a need to have a certain outcome, accompanied by a sense of desolation when that outcome doesn't appear, or doesn't appear according to our timetable. It can be a very narrow focus and in turn, may miss a bigger picture. When the word hope is used in this way it really means attachment, not a sense of aspiration or energy. We all know the problem with that kind of attachment. We can't successfully hold on to people, to outcomes and so on. It doesn't mean we don't want anything; of course we do. But, we have to understand what we're investing in that outcome. If somebody doesn't get well, do we abandon them

because our own sense of powerlessness or helplessness is ruling the day?

An alternative to attachment is often described as lovingkindness. In this sense, lovingkindness is a connection likened to the practice of generosity; generosity of the spirit rather than, perhaps, material generosity. Lovingkindness is like a freely given gift, which is not the same as saying "I will love you as long as you fulfill these conditions," or "I will love myself as long as I never make a mistake." The word for lovingkindness in the Pali language is *metta*. Translated literally it means friendship; developing friendship with ourselves and with all of life. This isn't to say that attachment should be scorned or judged. But when we really examine it, we see its limitations and pain; we can see its fragility or brittleness. You know, how long is it going to be before we make a mistake? (Laughter)

UH Yeah, they're sort of inevitable!

SS In contrast, *metta* is considered to be more of a steady state, rather than going up and down and being broken with all of life's inevitable changes in conditions.

UH I was especially moved reading about the time you spent with one of your dearest teachers, Nyoshaul Khen Rinpoche, or 'Khenpo,' some weeks before his passing. It seems that experience brought about a deeper understanding of faith. Would you comment on what that time revealed to you?



SS I have this feeling that I seem to be learning the same lessons again and again, hopefully at a deeper level all the time. There were many things about Khenpo that were extraordinary. One was this sense of aspiration or faith we have been talking about. He more or less said to us, (this is a paraphrase,) ‘Why is your sense of aspiration so small, so meager? Why do you think you can only accomplish so little? Why not aspire to be a fully liberated being for the sake of all beings?’ He conveyed just an immense sense of possibility. Ultimately, a spiritual teacher lives to serve the student; the whole relationship is not meant to be about the ego of the teacher, but about the development and the liberation of the students. The teacher serves as a mirror for the best part of us, that sense of aspiration and capacity within. I relied on Khenpo to keep reflecting the best in me, and all that I might become. When he died, I was confronted with the knowledge that my faith had to come from within me.

UH As you know, most of our readers are health-care professionals. In the context of what we’re discussing today, what would you offer with regard to the meaning of health and healing? In other words, based on your experience and understanding of Buddhist teachings, how might a clinician best support their clients in their aim to heal?

SS I think of something much like what is conveyed by a great teacher like Khenpo. A combination of mirroring a possibility or aspiration, together with a kind of calm or patience, which I sometimes call surrender. That is a tricky word because surrender doesn’t mean subjugation, but instead, allowing a

process to unfold; understanding the need for patience and trust in the rhythms of healing, allowing conditions to emerge. I believe that both a tremendous aspiration and a sense of calm can be conveyed to patients or clients from a clinician, much like a teacher conveys both to a student.

If I were to go see a meditation teacher or a therapist or someone I am seeking help from while in a state of distress, ideally I would want them to respond with a combination of a lot of tenderness and compassion, an empathetic response to my pain, and also with a sense of a bigger perspective, a spaciousness, something that is not completely defined by that pain. If I told my sad story to a person and this person were dismissive, cold or uncaring I would feel really bad. But if they broke down sobbing on the floor I would feel really bad, too.

I want a deep vision and awareness from those helping me. I want the caring and I want something vast and open, whether that bigger perspective is about not being in control or not doing things as quickly, or having patience or expanding a sense of what is possible. I think that is what a great teacher like Khenpo gives their students, or what a great clinician gives their patients or clients.

UH Can you suggest any practical tools clinicians might utilize in practice and/or make available to their clients?

SS One thing is concentration – in terms of a fullness of attention. That is something that I think we can all experience. Many times when I am in conversation with somebody, I realize I am only half there, and half thinking about the phone call I have to make or the next person I need to talk to. And I



realize it wouldn't take much to gather my attention and be fully present. Developing more concentration is a primary meditation tool. It doesn't mean that our attention stays fixed, but that we know how to return more easily from being distracted. The gift of whole-hearted attention is a tremendous thing we can offer people, certainly something that clinicians can offer patients. Many people would describe lovingkindness as resting on that whole-hearted attention, because that is what people feel when they're truly listened to.

Then there are also qualities like mindfulness and awareness, which within the Buddhist tradition would mean being aware without an instant reactivity of either holding on or pushing away. It would mean listening to somebody without overriding preconceptions and judgments. This allows us to be more present with things as they are and as they are emerging – seeing more clearly what is going on.

There is also insight, remembering for example, that everything changes all of the time. This implies both a chance to make new beginnings and also needing to let go. Bringing that into one's awareness and having that as a concept within which we are working with others is very useful.

Finally, in the healing professions, a basic sense of

connection is very helpful because life is changing all the time and conditions are changing all the time. There is pleasure and pain for everybody in life, and there is getting what we want and losing it; there is birth and death. This is true for everybody, and when someone else is having difficulty it means something about us, as well, and our lives. So a basic sense of connection is very relevant to clinical practice. All these practices go back to my own experience at 17 or 18 years of age in college, and realizing that this doesn't have to be just a theoretical pursuit. There really are tools, and if one chooses, one can explore them. We can use them and see what happens from that exploration.

UH Thank you, Sharon.

SS Thank you.

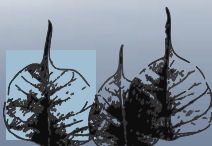


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