



Transcript: Sharon Salzburg

Katherine_Sharon

Katherine May: [00:00:00] Evening, it is absolutely lovely to see you all here already. And, uh, we have been backstage reading what you're reading at the moment in the chat. And I'm quite impressed, actually, the stuff that you're tackling is, uh, is definitely more sophisticated than what I've managed in the last few weeks. But it's so lovely to see you all, and a huge welcome to Sharon Salzberg, who is joining us tonight to talk about Finding your Way.

A very beautiful book. It's such a lovely looking books and welcome,

Sharon Salzburg: welcome, welcome. Thank you so much. It's lovely to see you.

Katherine May: Yeah, well I, I was, uh, I was so chuffed when you agreed to, to come and join us. Um, and the book that we're talking about tonight is just the perfect, I think that the package for the new year where maybe we are all feeling a little tired and little jaded, um, and it's a sort of antidote, I think, to.

the books that [00:01:00] very bossily tell us what to do. You're, you're very much in the business of gently urging us towards change rather than, uh, ordering us into, into line, aren't you?

Sharon Salzburg: That's funny, and it's very nice of you to say.

Katherine May: Um, I wanted to start, and oh, first of all, I'd love to invite everybody here tonight, please do ask questions if you have them.

Um, I know it can be mortifying to say them out loud, but, um, I, Sharon is such a wonderful educator and patient human being. So whether it's about the book or about

meditation, I know she's going to be delighted to answer your questions. Um, but I really want to start Sharon with a little, uh, a little history tour through your life, if you don't mind, because Sure, that's fine.

Well, it really struck me, you know, having read other of your books, it really struck me that this felt a little like a kind of best of, like a culmination of years of wisdom and a distillation of lots of [00:02:00] concepts that you've been working with for a long time into this book. really compact format that is very easily accessible.

Um, and while I was doing my research, I happened on this picture of, I think, 17 year old you in Tibet? No, is it Tibet? No, where were you?

Sharon Salzburg: India. It would be 18, but yeah, India.

Katherine May: So young and fawn like with this incredible black eyeliner on, that I just, exquisite picture. Um, tell me how you ended up there because that is, that's such a thing to have done at such a young age.

Yeah,

Sharon Salzburg: well, um, I, uh, went to college when I was 16. I'm a product of the New York City public school system. I think public school means something different here. It's much poshter in the UK. Yeah. Uh, where they, uh, would tend to have [00:03:00] people skip grades, you know, if they felt they had the ability to do that.

So I went to college when I was 16. And when I was, uh, in my second year, uh, I had to take a philosophy course of some kind. It was a requirement and I chose this Asian philosophy course. Honestly, looking back, it was partly just happenstance. I thought, Oh, that fits my schedule nicely. That's on Tuesday. Uh, and the course of course, completely changed my life and in several ways.

One was, as you know, many of your listeners know, and I've written about, uh, I had a very, uh, difficult, traumatic childhood and my family system was also one. Well, this was never really spoken about. And so I didn't know what to do with all of those feelings inside of me. And then. In this class, I heard about the Buddha's teaching, which he talked about suffering as being [00:04:00] a natural and inevitable part of life.

For most people, it's kind of depressing. It's like, but for me, it was hugely inviting. It was like, for once, I didn't feel so different. You know, I didn't feel so apart from everyone else. You know, my family didn't look like anybody else's that I knew of. There's all this sort of media make believe projection of what your life's supposed to look like.

And, um, and it, for me, it was a real moment of inclusion and belonging. And then I heard in the class, I mean, I kind of knew cause it was sort of in the air, you know, there were practices, methods, techniques that you could do if you wanted called meditation. And that would help you be a lot happier. So I was going to college in this, in the city called Buffalo, New York.

I looked around Buffalo. I did not see it anywhere. [00:05:00] And so the university had an independent study program. They said, if you create a project that we like, you can go away for a year, like your junior year. So I created a project. I said, I want to go to India and study meditation. And they said, okay. So, you know, I had grown up in New York city.

I was going to college in Buffalo, also in New York state. I'd never even been to California before. And suddenly I'm on my way to India, uh, which is an extraordinary moment. I look back at that moment. So often, like, first of all, I meet 18 year olds. I think that's really young, you know, but I also think that was crazy.

You know, like I was so frightened of person or so timid and what got over me, you know, to think, and, and, you know, as many people do. I had a tremendous tendency toward abstraction. Like I'd hear something inviting and I think. Maybe when I graduate, I'll pursue it, or maybe I'll study it [00:06:00] further, or more likely this will work for others, but not for me, you know, and yet I didn't do any of that.

I felt I've got to learn how to do this. And so I went to India. That's where you see this photos, you know,

and I was very, um, Kind of bent on not getting engaged in like comparative religion or the philosophy. I really wanted to learn the how to very direct kind of instruction and help. And I found it. It's just what I found. And so I ended up staying a little bit longer than my allotted year, go back to college.

I got, ended up with two years of independent study credit, went back to India. Uh, in order to continue practicing. And then I've came back finally in 1974. I

Katherine May: just, I almost think that you. have to be 18 to [00:07:00] believe that you can do that because within a couple of years like you're a little more world weary and made and like realistic about about what you can do there's something about being that age and just thinking okay well I can do everything I'm an adult now.

And I, like, having, I used to teach 18 year olds, that was, that was my job for a long, long time. First of all in school, and then in university. And, um, having spent a lot of time with 18 year olds, I, it's terrifying, that's a terrifying thought, honestly. But also, it, it

made me, it actually makes me think about the contrast between You know, people who are growing up now and people who are growing up when I was growing up and when you were growing up and how much more freedom we had because I was doing all kinds of things at 14 or 15 on my own, you know, getting on the train up to London, [00:08:00] exploring the world.

Um, that it feels like that's really changed. I don't know if you're under the same impression.

Sharon Salzburg: Uh, well, mostly I, I been, uh, I have a goddaughter who's in her early twenties, you know, uh, not having had any children of my own. So it's a lot through her and her sister that I kind of get a glimpse into, into that world.

And mostly I think about how much smarter they are than I was, or, you know, how much worldly wise they are compared to me. You know, it's like, um, many people I know will say, uh, It's only when they went to college in those days that they ever met anybody of another religion or, you know, they weren't chatting with someone at the other end of the world to online to get a view of like, oh, that's what it's like there.

Yeah, yeah.

Katherine May: I, there is a sense, I mean, you know, kids now are so [00:09:00] very online, they come into contact with so many different ideas. They, The ones that I know are almost like I reflect so much more liberal and accepting of diversity than, than anyone that I ever met when I was young. And, you know, like we had to maybe learn that we had to kind of teach ourselves to be accepting, whereas for them it's just totally fluid to do that and that that's kind of extraordinary.

And yet at the same time, there's this incredible reticence to, to do things independently and to explore. And, and the world seems a lot more dangerous to them, I think. Mm-Hmm. . Mm-Hmm. . Um, and I, yeah, I mean, I have an 11-year-old, so I, I'm watching that very closely. You know, he, he doesn't even want to go to the shops on his own.

If I give him a pound to buy some sweets, you know, . [00:10:00] Oh, no. No. I don't, I don't want to. Um, and I guess that's a true child of the pandemic, but also it seems like something more and I, I wonder how we get back to that age where kids can explore what you did again. Yeah. Good thing I've learned too much. So anyway, um, you, you then kind of, you spent a long time studying meditation and then came and then brought it back to America.

What was the, what was it like to do that? What was the kind of, what was the reception of that as a concept? How did people treat you?

Sharon Salzburg: Well, you know, I mean, there are lots of elements of my response to that. I didn't come back intentionally thinking Uh, I'm going to teach or, you know, or I mean, the practice had been hugely important for me, really transforming.

And so I had [00:11:00] endless respect for, for the practice of meditation and for the possibility and, you know, and for what it had done for me, but, uh, it was when I was coming back in 1974, I went to see one of my teachers, this woman named Deepa Ma, which is sort of a nickname, meaning Deepa's mother. Uh, at the time I thought I'm going to go back to the States very briefly.

I need a new visa. I need to see my family. I need to do a few things. Then I'm going to come back to India for the rest of my life, where I've been finally really happy, you know, and, uh, I went to see this woman. She was living in Calcutta, um, to kind of get her blessing for my very short journey back. to the States.

And, uh, she said to me, when you go back, you'll be teaching. And I said, no, I won't. And she said, yes, you will. I said, no, I won't. She said, yes, you will. And I said, no, I won't. That's ridiculous. I can't teach. Like how could I possibly [00:12:00] do something like that? And then she said two things that were really special.

She said, you really understand suffering. That's why you should teach, which she was a woman who'd gone through enormous suffering in her own personal life. The loss of two children, the loss of her husband. Um, and somehow that those experiences got metabolized in her to this tremendous compassion. So for her to say that to me, of course, was really special.

Uh, and also it was a new slant on the, you know, the adversity of my early childhood, you know, where I had never quite seen it in that light, you know, that also gave me an ability. And then she said to me, you can do anything you want to do, which you're thinking you can't do, if it's going to stop you. And I left her room.

She lived in what we would call a tenement room. I walked down these four flights of stairs thinking, no, I [00:13:00] won't. It's ridiculous. I'm not going to do that, you know? And, uh, and then I came back and, uh, my friend, Joseph Goldstein, whom I'd met in my first retreat in 1971. Had already been back maybe six months.

He was teaching out in Boulder, Colorado. I went to visit him. I got invited to stay on with him to teach another. This is at Naropa Institute, which had just opened its doors. I got invited to stay on. Then we got invited to teach a month long retreat. And then we

got invited, you know, and then one morning I woke up and I thought she was right, you know, that's my life.

So in those days. Meditation was, was, was largely seen as sort of esoteric and a little strange. Oh, there were people drawn to it and wanting to experience it. But often I'd be at a party or some social situation and people would say, what do you do? And I'd [00:14:00] say, I teach meditation. And they would kind of go, Oh, it's a little weird, isn't it?

You know, Or sometimes they say to me, did you meet the Beatles over there? They know, sadly, you know, they were there when I was in high school, you know, there was no research, there was no scientific exploration, there was no real effort at being clear that this does not mean joining a belief system. This is using the power of your own awareness, your own compassion, uh, to deepen your experience of who you are and your connection to others and.

Um, it has nothing to do with sort of joining, you know, assuming an identity. And it took a long time, I think, for, uh, certainly in, in America for that to become more prominent and then the wave started, you know, it's just like, uh, now it's just, um, you know, it's remarkable and. Amusing and shocking and [00:15:00] everything, you know, it's just like, you know, sometimes I'm being interviewed and somebody will talk, they'll refer to it as the mindfulness industry.

And I think it's industry. I don't know. Like is it industry?

Katherine May: Well, I think, I think sadly it can be, but yeah, that's, um, that's another one to talk about maybe. Yeah. And I, you know, it really struck me reading, like, not just your work, but your biography in the run up to this conversation, how every messy person we meet, every person who's had a messy life, is the repository of future wisdom.

You know, we so, you would have been so easy to write off as a kid. And yet, everything you've done since has drawn on all of that experience more than anything else, I think. That sense of acceptance that, that suffering is ordinary, um, and unavoidable. You know, we can't [00:16:00] make this stuff run perfectly. Um, but that you are not a, a sort of failure if you've, if you've

Sharon Salzburg: experienced that.

Yeah, I mean, it's so usually important. It's so, um, culturally, again, at least here, you know, culturally aberrant, you know, like, Uh, it takes a lot and it's so, life's so different

when we realize we can find one another. in times of adversity, we don't have to feel so alone.

Katherine May: So, unsurprisingly, for anyone who knows your work, the idea of loving kindness is woven throughout Finding Your Way.

Um, tell me when you first came upon that idea and, and what impact that had on you?

Sharon Salzberg: Well, I first, uh, my first meditation retreat altogether was January 1971 in India, in this town [00:17:00] called Bodh Gaya, which is The town that's risen up around the descendant of the tree, they say the Buddha was sitting under when he became enlightened.

So it's a very sacred site. And the teacher was SN Goenka. He had just come to India from Burma. Uh, and he taught this intensive 10 day meditation retreat, which was really about mindfulness and especially like mindfulness of the body, uh, mindfulness of the breath. And then at the very end, almost as a kind of ceremonial way of saying goodbye, he taught some loving kindness meditation.

And so it was like kind of right there in the beginning for me. And I thought, what is that one? You know, and, uh, instinctively I knew it was going to be very important for me. But I didn't really have a teacher to guide me, uh, more specifically in depth in a structured way. Um, it was only when I went to Burma for three months in 1985 and I did, uh, [00:18:00] uh, like an immersion course in loving kindness meditation that, um, that I really got that kind of guidance, but I had tried it, you know, on my own anyway.

But. Uh, and from that period in Burma for about four years, it was my only meditation practice, whether it was on retreat or just sitting is all I did. Then I was working with a Burmese teacher and I saw him, I think it was in Australia. Actually, we ran into each other again. And after, uh, having tried to get me to go back to mindfulness practice.

Unsuccessfully the year before, he finally managed to get me off, but it's always been a part of my life since then. And I think

Katherine May: it's had a huge impact on so many people. For those who are new to this, tell us the components of loving kindness. What are you practicing when you do that?

Sharon Salzberg: Well, in many mindfulness practices, we'll be basically trying to get closer to our actual experience, whatever it is, [00:19:00] with the breath, with the body, with the emotions.

So we're not so lost in an overlay of judgment and supposition and something like that. So in loving kindness practice, I call it more like a stretch, you know, like, uh, let's say you're the kind of person who at the end of the day, you're used to evaluating yourself. Like how'd I do today? And let's say you're the kind of person who pretty well only remembers the things you did wrong.

And the word you mispronounced and the way you didn't show up as fully as you would want it to. I was getting obsessed sometimes with that. So what we, what I mean by a stretch is like asking yourself like anything else happened today? You know, anything good? So it's like, let's spend a little time looking at what's positive or in the case of loving kindness, let's spend a little time offering ourselves A sense of caring [00:20:00] through, you know, those people who play some role in our lives, they perform some service.

We don't tend to look at them and recognize this as a human being with hopes and dreams. scary things and all kinds of stuff, you know, uh, they're like a function in our minds. And so we objectify them. We don't really see them. So in, in doing loving kindness practice, in effect, we're looking at them instead of through them.

So it really is like shifting the way we pay attention. It's, it's moving to a terrain that's not phony or pretentious, but maybe isn't something we visit that often. And we do that particular practice. The methodology is. often with the silent repetition of certain phrases. So, uh, it's a sense of gift giving or blessing, like may you be safe, may you be happy, may you be peaceful, uh, beginning with ourselves, interestingly enough.

And then moving through [00:21:00] various relationships.

Katherine May: I, a lot of my audience are neurodivergent or autistic, because I am. Um, and it, it really strikes me that that kind of self love and acceptance is so hard for communities like mine to come upon. Because actually, I'd love to hear from people in the, in the chat here, whether, whether they agree or whether, you know, it lands differently for them.

But I. It always strikes me when I hear you speaking about this, that those of us who grow up being pushed to the outside and told that all of our responses are wrong, you know, that we shouldn't be reacting like that, that we shouldn't be feeling like that, that the idea of just offering yourself the right to speak.

To peace, to wellness, to, you know, happiness. [00:22:00] It's very difficult to come by, actually. It's a very challenging thing to feel the right to have. And I think one of my reactions that I always notice coming up is, but I'm not, so I can't achieve this, you

know. There are, there are bits of you that scream back at that, which I think is what always tells me that it's so useful and important to do it.

What do you, how do you advise people to get through that, that sense of Full body resistance. I don't have the right to this.

Sharon Salzburg: Well, I think it's it's an amazing thing to witness, to view in oneself, because you know, you have the wisdom clearly, you know, to see where it comes from, that it's not inherent to your being.

That is something that has been imparted to you by others. And that's an arena that really fascinates me. It has for a long time, like the stories others tell about us and the way we can absorb them [00:23:00] and, and live through them. And so I think every time I feel that. Um, Kind of experience like I don't have the right to be happy or I can't let myself, you know, love myself.

I

Katherine May: don't have the resources to do

Sharon Salzburg: that. Yeah. Yeah. You know, then I try to understand that that's a sign that, um, I can almost see with a little more distance in that moment. Oh, that's the conditioning. That's the message, you know, rather than feeling it's like a, an absolute truth. Yeah. You know, that that's been given to me.

Like I wrote about that, you know, stories that others tell about us in a previous book, several previous books. And, um, and then I was in, uh, Kentucky, uh, speaking and somebody brought it up and somebody in the audience said, well, I don't believe that, you know, how can others tell stories about us? They don't really know us.

And I said in response, [00:24:00] yeah, that's the whole point, you know, like everything can tell a story about us. Like architecture can tell a story about us. You know, like I'm speaking to you from Barry, Massachusetts from my house and I'm next door through the woods from the insight meditation society, which I co founded in 1976.

And we've always had like an accessible entrance, but. You know, people in wheelchairs, for example, had to go down this little icy path in winter, you know, and go in the back door. And one year we just thought that's wrong. You know, like we have to build a, like a ramp in the front on the front entrance so that that can change.

And, and so they built it and it's really like. It's not really aesthetically pleasing, I will say, and it, it, uh, intrudes into the driveway, which is the very driveway that, um,

teachers, if they're teaching there, they will, they will drive [00:25:00] up and park, you know, right there. And I, uh, as a native New Yorker, some of your listeners will understand this.

Uh, I'm not a great driver. I learned how to drive when I was very, you know, people don't have cars in New York, generally speaking. So I've had to drive like my thirties, you know, and so I'm also a very timid driver. And then you have to back out down that driveway to get past this, you know, ramp that half of us is sticking out there.

And I think the staff was taking bets on how soon I was going to bash into it, you know, you know, but it's the right story to be telling, you know, it's totally correct to have done that. And we don't even realize sometimes how many messages we're getting and absorbing. So in some ways that resistance is not a bad thing to see.

You know, because we can understand where it comes from.

Katherine May: Yeah, I love the, I love the way you think about it as storytelling. And it, it seems to me that, you know, [00:26:00] particularly this idea of projecting it out to other people, to complete strangers, to the person that, that clips your ticket, um, is almost about rendering the world in three dimensions, or, or maybe adding an extra dimension to the world, instead of seeing it as flat.

You know, this, moving cast of characters coming past you who are not fully people because you, you don't know them. Um, and I, that's something, that's something that came to me quite late in life, I think. I, I almost remember the moment it landed in my 20s when I was in a room full of, I was at a gig, I was at a concert, um, And everybody was standing up and I was so irritated to be in this room, like it was so noisy and people kept pushing past me on the way to the bar and I couldn't see properly and I was just, I was mainly cross, right, like I used to, my husband loves these things and I hate them and I used to go along with them until I realised that I didn't, just didn't have to go anymore, it was fine.[00:27:00]

But I had this sudden shift of understanding that Everybody in the room had, the way it began, the way it seeded was like everyone in the room had chosen their clothes tonight. That's how it came to me, like every single person here had decided what to wear to this place and they'd worn it because they had thought about their evening because they thought it would be right for this moment and maybe they were all feeling the same discomfort that I was feeling on different levels or maybe Or maybe it meant something completely different to them, to what it meant to me.

And that they weren't here out of a sense of frustrated obligation. But they, you know, but they were there instead to, um, because they wanted to be, because they loved it,

because they loved this atmosphere. And it was like seeing a different reality. All of a sudden, like, everything got rendered into 3D.[00:28:00]

And I, I think it, I think it's related that, that sense that all these people have got every right to be here, you know, I'm not the, I'm just the only person feeling stuff in this room. Yeah,

Sharon Salzburg: yeah.

I remember seeing, I haven't seen it in a while, but it was on like YouTube and places like that for a while that somebody, a hospital put out this film where People are just milling around each other in the hospital lobby or going up the escalator or something like that. And, and they have thought bubbles.

There's no dialogue, but they're thought bubbles, you know? So it's like, uh, you're passing somebody in the hallway and they're thinking. Thank goodness the test result was good. And, uh, and you're thinking, uh, Oh no, I need surgery tomorrow. You know, and then, and then you just realise like the, the richness of the world and the complexity and how everybody's got something [00:29:00] going.

Yeah.

Katherine May: And how extraordinary that is actually, and how invisible it is too. Um, that is, yeah, it's amazing. Um, I. I just want to, to finish this little section of love and kindness, I just wanted to read out a quote that really hit me from your book, where you said, There's nothing special you need to do to deserve that kind of love and care.

You deserve it simply because you exist. It's just really beautifully put, so thank you for that.

I love absorbing that. So, Let's move on to think about personal growth, because actually, your work is really concerned with personal growth. And I think in real life, you've released two books in the last year, which is extraordinarily productive. Um, I can't even imagine. Um, but you know, you, this isn't about [00:30:00] Staying still, is it necessarily?

But it's not about pushing yourself into change either. Can you talk around that a little bit, about, about what growth means to

Sharon Salzburg: you? Yeah, well in, um, uh, in real life, the book that came out first, uh, in the last year, Um, I talk about, um, Oh yeah, thank you. This is the fruit of not being on an airplane all the time.

Um, I talk about, uh, you know, what's called a growth mindset, you know, and compared to like a fixed mindset. Um, and, uh, you know, with a fixed mindset, we kind of see our attributes, our characteristics, our qualities as fixed. And, you know, sometimes you try to defend them or, you know, whatever, but you don't, you don't have this sense of movement and [00:31:00] change and growth and potential.

And in the growth mindset, it's the opposite. You're not sort of dealing with a fixed set of cards you've been handed and that's it. You know, and as conditioned as we might be, we're always moving and changing, that's life itself. And, and so there's that potential always. And, you know, in, in the Buddhist teaching, which is sort of the context in which I learned meditation, um, that potential for change and growth and wisdom and love and connection is always there.

It could be, it's in there in everybody. It's part of being alive and. It's can be hidden. It usually is hidden and hard to find and covered over and hard to trust, but it's there no matter who you are, no matter what you've done, it's there. And so it's on that basis that we practice something like meditation.

It's

Katherine May: so interesting to talk about this at this point in time, because so [00:32:00] much that I see in the kind of personal development world, which I find very difficult actually, um, is. This is either, it kind of, it's so binary. It's like either you are perfect as you are, and if other people are rubbing up against you, then they're assholes, you know, like that's it, you know, like they're, everyone's bad except for me.

I don't change. I'm, I'm perfect. Um, I find that very grating. But at the other end of the scale is this sort of sense that everything about you and your personality is up for grabs if only you can find the correct level of discipline, you know. And then we, you know, we see these kind of celebrity schedules where they're getting up at three o'clock in the morning for the first workout of the day and then Drinking, you know, a protein shake and eating three cucumber slices is probably much more interesting than a cucumber slice.

But you know, like this sort of sense that the human body and soul can be [00:33:00] disciplined into perfection. Um, is it, is there a middle way? Like, can we escape this toxicity around personal growth?

Sharon Salzberg: Yes, there's a middle way and I think it's essential and even further extreme of that um, attitude of like perfection, you know, to be achieved is, uh, is the idea that if we only had the right attitude, we wouldn't suffer at all, you know, and that if we are sick or frightened or something's going wrong, it's in a way our fault.

We didn't get up early enough to do that other workout or, you know, our attitude is wrong. And, um, it's one of my bugaboos. This is one of my things, you know, like. Uh, so also in an earlier book called Real Change, uh, I wrote, um, and this apparently was something I said very often in the [00:34:00] height of the pandemic, teaching a tremendous amount online because somebody made me a mug, uh, a cup with the saying emblazoned on it.

So the saying is, I don't have the right one in this room right now. The saying was, um, something's just hurt. Nothing's just hurt. Things are hard to bear sometimes. But what we don't need is extra suffering, you know, is taking that hurt and then adding isolation like I'm the only one or a sense of permanence, this is all that I will ever feel or, you know, so many things that we might add to it.

But the idea that if only we were thinking right, we wouldn't get sick, you know, I mean, it's so, uh, cruel, really.

Katherine May: Yeah, yeah, that's definitely how I read it, this sort of sense of, you know, somebody whose body has not gone through what other bodies have gone through, um, for reasons that are entirely arbitrary.

[00:35:00] Um, they are the, somehow the people we turn to for leadership in, in wellness. That's, I mean, it's just deeply problematic, uh, and it, and it, it just doesn't work. It just creates these layers and layers of suffering where, where the people who need the help most are told that they're, that they're failing, that they've, I don't know, eaten the wrong things, that their mindset is wrong, that they, I don't know, have failed to process their trauma.

Yeah.

Sharon Salzburg: Yeah, exactly. No, definitely. I didn't know

Katherine May: it was so easy to get over traumatic. Um. Yeah. And I, which is why I loved you quoting Maya Angelou saying, um, do the best you can until you know better, then when you know better, do better. That kind of, that idea that we are all, that all that we can do is the best and, but [00:36:00] that we can incrementally learn within that process.

But it's, it's a lot slower, right?

Sharon Salzburg: Yeah. And complex, you know, like people with that attitude or with that belief system will say sometimes things like, you know, I wouldn't have gotten cancer if my thinking had been more straightforward. And I, you know, I don't want to

denigrate the power of one's mind, but you know, I, what I usually say is if, well, you know, you might check out if you also live near a toxic waste dump, you know, it's like, you know, the causes and conditions, it's so, uh, multi level and.

You know, things flowing together, and it's intricate, it's not so simplistic. And I think

Katherine May: what we hate most of all is the idea that there is no, that it's arbitrary. You know, that whatever we do, however well we live, some people will get

Sharon Salzburg: cancer. Yeah, yeah,

Katherine May: yeah. And [00:37:00] you know, coupled to that thought, the thought that people find the hardest, is that whatever we do, all of us will die at some point.

I mean, I, I I've heard this dissonance about how hard we find it to believe that our, that every one of our lives will end. Like that seems to be the truth away from all of our discourse and yet it is the, it's the one, it's the truth. Yeah. It's uh. Yeah, yeah, it's quite hard to, to fathom. Um, but you talk a lot in Finding Your Way about equanimity, which is a word I've practised saying before this conversation.

Incidentally, I wasn't, I wasn't fully confident I'd be able to pronounce it. Um, Talk to us about equanimity. It's a word that isn't used much anymore.

Sharon Salzburg: Well, my first teacher, S. N. Goenk, as I said, you know, used to go around saying, Be [00:38:00] equanimous, be equanimous, be equanimous. And we used to whisper to one another, Is that a word?

Like, do people say that? You know? So in any form, it's a little weird. It sounds to us, often in English, you know, as though meaning indifference, or coldness, or kind of like, um, You know, the, uh, the, the joke, like a teenager saying, whatever, you know, a little bit of hostility there, but you know, masking is, is not really caring.

Uh, it doesn't mean not caring. It means balance. And I used to think the word balance was stupid too, you know, and nothing desirable because balance in my mind meant mediocrity. Like nothing special, you know, just kind of in between. But as I've gotten older, you know, come to understand it more. I appreciate it more.

It doesn't mean coldness or hardness or, uh, being [00:39:00] mediocre. It's really a state of spaciousness, you know, and also a spaciousness that can hold many things at the same time. Which is not a skill one sees very often in this world at this time. You know, so the example I, I like to use is, um, this young woman that I met, uh, in Florida

one year, went to teach there, um, in this community that had suffered a school shooting.

And, uh, she was a little bit older than a student. She was a graduate, um, but her mother's a teacher in that school and the whole community was. Very affected. And, uh, so we had this day, this workshop, and she stood up. Her name is Samantha. And she stood up and she said, I feel really strange because I'm having an extraordinary day.

I'm having a wonderful day. And I know the only reason [00:40:00] it's happening. Cause that horrible thing happened and I don't know how to get over that in order to appreciate this. And I said, I don't know that we get over it ever, but we learned to hold them both at once. And we call that equanimity. And we went on to talk, you know, in the Chinese symbol of the yin yang, there's like that kind of white curvy part and a dark circle in the middle of it.

And the dark curvy part in the light circle in the middle of it. We talked about that and maybe I saw her six months later or a year later or something like that. And I said, Hey, Samantha, remember that conversation we had about equanimity? And she said, not only do I remember it, I think about it every single day of my life.

And she said, that's my North star. Yeah. You know, um, it doesn't mean flattening out what you're feeling and not feeling anything. It's really. Uh, it's that kind of spacious balance that can take in, Oh, this is what's happening right now. [00:41:00] And, you know, it doesn't mean we don't do anything either. Like people struggle as we all do.

with the language. And what I hear these days is people saying, well, we learned to respond and not react. Right. Yeah. Yeah. We, we do things, we care, we move forward, but maybe we're not driven, you know, by those old habits right away.

Katherine May: And it's, it's interesting. You raised language. Cause I wonder. What it's like for you to, over so many years now, to keep finding the language, to keep freshening up the language, you know, like how, how does, how is that experience for you?

Do you, do you try new formulae all the time? Or are you, are you comfortable using the same words? Like, do words go stale, I suppose, is the question I'm asking. I don't think

Sharon Salzburg: they go stale in some ways. Um. Uh, because my practice started, my reading started so long ago with very old fashioned translations.

I [00:42:00] think there were almost no books in English when, you know, I began, and of course there was no internet. So this is an example, um, uh, when I use the word

suffering. You know, that's a word, that's a translation of a word in Pali, the language of the original Buddhist text. The word is Dukkha, D U K K H A, and it doesn't just mean, Grave suffering or trauma or injury means insecurity, instability, that feeling we have in life is not quite right, you know, or discomfort.

Almost. Yeah. And so exactly. So very modern translated is actually translated as stress. Yeah. But are you suffering? You know, cause yeah, that's also how I began, but also it. I don't, I mean, far better scholars than I who are translating it as stress, but [00:43:00] it's, I don't like that. You know, so. No, no, that

Katherine May: feels a little too modern, doesn't it?

It feels Exactly. Like, there's something about the word stress, I think because of how we use it rather than the truth of it, but the, um, stress seems to be something about your response rather than the intrinsic nature of the, that the thing would cause suffering either way, almost. Exactly, yeah. Like stress suggests You respond to it badly, which takes us back to that whole kind of self improving place.

Yeah, no, I get that.

Sharon Salzburg: But I do think, you know, I look back sometimes at my career thus far, and I think part of it is almost trying to redeem words like love and faith. You know, I read a book on faith many years ago. Um, a lot of my friends would say, why are you writing a book on faith? You know, like, of course their experience of being part of a faith tradition might've been quite negative, you know, um, but, uh, [00:44:00] and many.

people said to me, don't call it faith, don't call it faith, call it trust, but I called it faith anyway.

Katherine May: Yeah, I think, but actually there's so many of those words that are being re evaluated and revived now and re approached. And, um, I mean, I interviewed Eke Temelkuran recently, the Turkish political She's a campaigner and writer and she prefers faith to hope now, you know, she's, a lot of people say, you know, how do you have the hope to, to bring about political change?

And she's like, no, no, no. Faith is the important thing. I don't hope it might happen. I believe it will absolutely happen. It's a much more important word for us to use. We have to fully believe that this can change and not just think that it might be able to, so that those little tonal shifts in language.

will always excite me.

Sharon Salzburg: Yeah, that's great. The little writer bells in

Katherine May: my brain ring. There's a, [00:45:00] there's a, just as a kind of, to begin to round up our conversation now, but I was really struck by the idea in your book of, uh, that at some point in our lives we will all need to learn to receive generosity. And that that is as important a practice as it is to learn to, to give generously.

Um, that's, that's actually deeply embedded in Buddhism, isn't it? Asking for arms, like monks, you know, putting up the begging bowl, for example, and the kind of humility that is embedded in asking for help. Um, how do we, it seems that we are There's such a lot of shame about needing in our society. How do we come to, to accept generosity and care?

Sharon Salzburg: I think partly by having the conversation, sometimes it's by having models. Um, you [00:46:00] know, uh, I've often written that the big model for that for me is. Ram Dass, who was at my very first meditation retreat as a student. And, you know, so I'd known him since January of 1971 and through the years. And, um, he was a person who was always at the forefront in my experience.

He was the first person I knew who was working with homeless people. He was the first person I knew who was working with prisoners. He was the first person I knew who was sitting with dying people. Um, and it was all in the light of giving, you know, and then he had a massive stroke and, and wasn't expected to live, but he did live and went on to teach and he lived in a wheelchair.

He had aphasia, big, big pauses sometimes in his language. And he'd been, I think the most eloquent person I knew before then, You know, um, he was teaching and he was out there [00:47:00] and, uh, we're. at a retreat together in Hawaii, you know, some years after his stroke. And he was saying, um, he said, the hardest thing for me of all, having the stroke has been allowing myself to receive.

And he said, harder than the physical pain, harder than living in a wheelchair, harder than the changes in my speech. And it's true. I mean, he'd always been, you know, having known him all those years. He couldn't even, my joke, well, it's true. You couldn't even really give him a birthday present. You know, like, uh, he said, so then I had the stroke and I had to allow people to help me and one of his famous books, he went on to say, you know, one of my famous books was called, how can I help now that I, now I feel like writing a book called, how can you help me?

Because he said it was the hardest thing and the most liberating. And I [00:48:00] realized that before it was almost like there was a barrier inside of him and the love and the care could go out, but not come in. And that barrier actually dissolved. And then it

was just like this free flow in both directions. And anybody who met him in those last years of his life would say.

He was kind of radiant, you know, and, and he had, and with all the, the difficulties and the challenges, he had, um, fulfilled something that he maybe always felt was possible, but out of reach.

Katherine May: It's, it feels to me almost like a kind of completion of our life's path to, to come that full circle. You know, we all begin life receiving care.

And then as we age, we come to see care as, as humiliating as the need to care [00:49:00] for care is humiliating. And then that, that final softening back into being taken care of is actually. It is one of the ultimate expressions about interconnection, actually. The way that care and life giving can, can flow freely between us.

I, I had a, um, I had a beautiful vision of that last week. I was in a cafe, um, sneaking off while my son was in a really boring shop. And, um, I, sitting next to me was a woman with a, who I assume was her mother, in a wheelchair next to her. And the woman looked like she was asleep. She, um, she was elderly, her eyes were closed, she was very still.

Um, and she was holding a teddy bear. She was cuddling this very well worn teddy bear, which immediately reminded me of my grandmother who was given a teddy bear in hospital in her last [00:50:00] days and loved it, was really comforted by it. And the woman was just feeding her mother sips of water. And the mother was just taking them and it was, it was childlike.

It was honestly childlike. But the pleasure in the daughter's face was such a beautiful thing to watch. It was so, I don't, it was radiant. It was radiant. It was, she was obviously. So glad to be able to give this to her mother. And as they, as they left, the woman got up and just stroked her hair down, and straightened her like you would a child, you know, like just, made you all comfortable and straightened her out and kissed her.

And I just thought, that is one of the most beautiful things I think I've ever, watched. It was, and the acceptance of that care was, was as beautiful as the giving of care. You know, there was, there was something so wonderful about seeing it.

Sharon Salzburg: Lovely. [00:51:00]

Katherine May: May we, may we all learn to accept care. Um, Sharon, this has been such a wonderful conversation.

What's next for you? How many books this year? And what are you

Sharon Salzburg: up to? Uh, no books as far as I know.

Yeah, no, somebody is creating a children's book out of my first book, Love and Kindness. I mean, they're writing it, but I'm, I'm consulting, but that's not coming out till next year. But this year, uh, what seems to be happening is, uh, some of my books were never made into audio versions, like Love and Kindness, my very first book was not, book I co wrote with Bob Thurman, um, called Love Your Enemies was not.

And, uh, and this one finding your way was not So, I seem to be on the audio path this year for this year. Thus far,

Katherine May: I've, I've never managed to record one of my own audio books. I, I've been booked to do it [00:52:00] three times now, and every time I, something's happened , so I'm, I'm fated to have one of the years, like you, one year when I just back to back record like a

Sharon Salzburg: 20 book, something.

That's very nice. I mean, uh, you know. At least commercial interests in the States often don't want the author to read they want. Oh, really? An actress or somebody to read, but I've always said no because, um, so much of what I do would be guided meditations in a book, for example, and I thought, you know, it has to be my voice.

So, so I read them. I love hearing authors read

Katherine May: their own book. I just think there are inflections in there that, that no one else can, can find and meanings that, that come out. You hear the

Sharon Salzburg: originator.

Katherine May: Mm hmm. Thank you so much for being here. Um, I hope everybody here enjoyed the conversation. I know I did.

Um, and, you know, hello if you're, oh look, someone's telling you you have the best voice, which I'm sure. Oh, that's so sweet.

Sharon Salzburg: So nice. [00:53:00]

Katherine May: Um, I hope if you're listening afterwards, you enjoyed it too. You're just as welcome here as the people who turn up on the night. Um, and I will see you all next month when we're talking to Maggie Smith.

about her fantastic memoir of getting divorced, *You Can Make This Place Beautiful*, um, which is, you know, I think a very, a very redemptive book as well as a heart rending one. Um, so good night all, and I will see you, oh, good afternoon to those of you that are not in England. It's very dark and late here, um, and I'll see you all very soon.

Take care.