FREE FORUM with TERRENCE McNALLY - A WORLD THAT JUST MIGHT WORK

SHARON SALZBERG – FAITH: TRUSTING YOUR OWN DEEPEST EXPEREINCE

Transcript – Recorded 07-16-2002

TMc: Hello, I'm Terry McNally. Thank you for joining us on Free Forum.

Faith. It's been the subject of recent magazine cover stories and television documentaries, it's a word loaded with promise and controversy, the source of great comfort and painful disillusionment.

Faith. No matter comforting it might be, what is there to have faith in these days? When society is beset by terrorist threats, government abuses, corporate corruption, Recession, lives of rapid desperation, uncertainty and accelerating change? Where do we place our faith in a world like that? Or is faith today naïve? Or perhaps worse, a form of denial?

What does faith mean to you? And what role does it play in your life?

Here on Free Forum we explore the lives, the work and the ideas of individuals that I suspect hold pieces of the puzzle of a world that just might work. We look at new, innovative and provocative models in business, environment, health, science, politics and media, all based on the fact that I believe we can do better and I want to find out how.

Sharon Salzberg is one of America's leading spiritual teachers and writers. A contributing editor to *O*, the Oprah Magazine, Sharon has been teaching meditation for almost 30 years. And it the author of *Loving Kindness: the Revolutionary Art of Happiness*, and *A Heart as Wide as the World*. Co-author with Joseph Goldstein of *Insight Meditation: a Step by Step Course on How to Meditate*. We'll tough on a lot of that and we'll focus on her newest book, *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*.

Sharon Salzberg, it's my pleasure to welcome you today to Free Forum.

SS: Thank you.

TMc: So, faith. My first question, as it always is on Free Forum, is: what was your personal path to the work that you do today and the ideas that you're focused on today. And when I say that, I invite you to go back as far as you want.

SS: Way back. (laughter)

TMc: Really. Some people have ended up spending most of the hour on that, because it works. Childhood dreams, models, turning points, mentors. And so, why meditation? Why writing? Why faith? All the way. You weave it and I'll watch the clock.

SS: Okay, great. Well, I had a very difficult childhood, a very painful childhood. My mother died when I was young, when I was 9. My father had already left. And a lot of

the… the situation I found myself in, really, was that the pain and the difficulty and the torment were shrouded in a kind of silence. Nobody wanted to talk about it. There was no vehicle, really, for bringing my feelings out… my confusion, my pain, my uncertainty out. And so I think that's one of the ways I became interested in silence. All the different kinds of silence. The denying kind of silence that covers over and doesn't allow free expression; being silenced, in effect. And then the kind of silence that's liberating, that allows us to clear away the clouds of confusion and clutter – the things that normally distract us – and allow us to go deeper. The silence that allows us to go deeper and really see much more clearly.

So that was a part of it. And also, I think, being in that kind of situation, as many children or adults know, one is always trying to see the deeper truth. Because what is happening on the surface is not really resonant with what is happening inside or in a family dynamic or something like that. So I certainly did develop a tendency to try to look deeper and look deeper. Like, "What really is the truth of this situation?" All of which led to meditation.

TMc: Now, when you say the second one. Because the first one makes very good sense: a child sort of not talking about it, not knowing about it, in an environment where no one is. The looking deeper, at what age did you find you were doing that?

SS: You know, I think… it was funny. In writing the book on faith, I looked back a lot, because it is such a personal book. And I couldn't find a beginning point to that moment. You know, "When was I looking for the deeper truth? When was I trying to discern what was going on under the surface?" But certainly by the time I went to college, which was when I was 16, I was looking for a way out of the suffering. And that led me right to meditation.

TMc: At what age?

SS: I went to India when I was 18.

TMc: Ahhh… that's quite a big deal. Now one thing I'm going to ask you right in the middle of this… because we'll weave this story a little further… When you went to India at 18, was that a… how much was that a spiritual quest, how much was it, you know… it was a good time to go to India. You know, somebody else went to Cambodia, and somebody else went to Belize.

SS: (laughter) For me it was completely a spiritual quest. On the surface what happened was, I was going to school at SUNY Buffalo and they had a program where you could apply, you could create an independent study project and then go off to another culture for a year. My joke is usually, it being Buffalo, New York, many people went and not that many people came back. (laughter)

And that's where the faith comes in. I had a deep intuition that if I could only learn how to meditate, I could do something about the confusion and pain that I was experiencing inside. I look back at that and I think, "How did I know that?" Why didn't I go into therapy, which would have been a very logical and reasonable thing to do.

But something inside me said, "If you learn how to meditate, you can put the pieces of your life together in a different way. And not only will there be some peace of mind, but there'll be some clarity of mind. Some of that tremendous confusion will go away." And so, when the opportunity came, through the school, to actually create an independent study project, I created this project to go to India and study meditation. And off I went.

TMc: Wow. You're listening to Free Forum, I'm your host Terry McNally and speaking with Sharon Salzberg, co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society, and Author of Loving Kindness, and the just published, Faith; Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience. Okay, so you're 18. Your college sets it up that you can go and meditate. How, by the age of 18… and if you don't mind telling us what year that was. I know we're in the ballpark together, but I'm a bit older. How likely was it that a 17 or 18 year old even came to meditation?

SS: Well, it was 1970 when I left, and it was something that I think… When you talk about, did I go to India, in effect, because it was part of the times… it *was* part of the times. It was something that was in people's consciousness, it was a possibility, the world was full of possibility then, in some way. Many people were going. What I couldn't find in this country at the time was somebody to really give me practical instruction, which was what I was looking for. I wasn't looking for a dogma or a set of beliefs or a new identification of myself as a Buddhist, or anything like that.

TMc: Or even a guru.

SS: Or even a guru. I wasn't looking for a devotional path, so to speak. But I was looking for a very practical set of techniques and tools that would help me transform my mind. That's not to say it didn't exist here, but I couldn't find it. And so off I went to India.

TMc: How did you get your first introduction to it, though?

SS: To Buddhism?

TMc: No… yeah, to Buddhism… or meditation?

SS: As a student at the University of New York at Buffalo, there was a course in Asian philosophy which I took, and it had a Buddhism component. And it was a tremendous moment for me. There were many elements of it that were very striking, very important for me. One was… for one thing, given my background, the Buddha's comment about the amount of suffering, the degree of suffering that there is in existence, in life… and that facing the truth of that is the… the acknowledgement of that is the beginning to the end of suffering. That you can't come to the end of suffering without acknowledging the degree and the intensity of suffering that does exist. And that was phenomenal for me. Just to hear it spoken out loud and acknowledged in that way.

And then there's another aspect of the Buddha's teaching which was very important, which was that no one seemed to be left out of his vision of possibility. It wasn't that liberation or compassion or wisdom or a better life were for a select few, the lucky who are somewhere over there, and the rest of us were kind of on the sidelines or left out.

TMc: The chosen, as at least 2 of the most prominent religions in America say.

SS: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And I had spent much of my life up to that point feeling like I was on the sidelines, that I was left out, that I was excluded.

TMc: The un-chosen.

SS: Yeah, I was the un-chosen, very much so! (laughter) Again and again. So to have a path offered, to have a way, a vision of life offered, that left no one out. Where no one was excluded. Where everybody was included. Where every single person, no matter who they were, no matter what their background, no matter what they'd suffered, had the same potential. And that was acknowledged and fully spoken about, it was enormous for me.

TMc: It's even interesting… I'm thinking as you say that… that so many religions… or maybe I'm making a generalization that isn't true… but I'm thinking that the Buddha was a nobleman, right?

SS: Yeah, yeah, he was a prince.

TMc: And some religions, the leading figure is not by any means, is any outsider and so on. And that a nobleman, a prince, would see it as inclusive, is….

SS: That's right, that's right.

TMc: You've mentioned, what is it, "All life is suffering?" Is that the… what's the term? It's the First Noble Truth. So I figure we might as well put out the Four Noble Truths.

SS: Sure. Maybe not so much that all life is suffering, but all life *includes* suffering. And that there's a cause to that suffering. There's an end to that suffering. And that there's a path to the end of that suffering. Those are the Four Noble Truths.

TMc: And the path is meditation? Or not necessarily?

SS: Meditation is a component of it. The path is really about self-transformation. It's about living in a way that's consonant with the truth of inter-connectedness. That our actions matter. That what we do matters. That we have to care about other beings and our lives need to reflect that. And it's a path of going deep within and

uncovering our great potential, learning how to nurture it, learning how to bring it forth.

So there are lots of different components of that. Meditation is key.

TMc: Okay. I'm going to ask you another piece of this that's very personal, which is that… as you say, you lost both parents at quite a young age. So, was there a religion in your life at that point, at 17 or 18, when you discovered meditation? I think of… I know that there are even books and movies about the Christian family or the Jewish family whose child turns to the East. You know, "What mishigas (sic) is this?" In your case, were you freer to choose your own path because you were more on your own? And another question is, did you have siblings?

SS: I didn't have siblings, no. And I was raised by my grandparents, my grandmother particularly. And I suppose I was freer because I was on my own. I did come from a Jewish background. I wasn't, by the time I was in college, practicing very much. So at that point my existence was pretty secular.

TMc: So pick up the track again. Now you go to India and you expect to be there a year for an independent study?

SS: That's right, that's right. (laughter)

TMc: And how long were you there?

SS: I was there for 3 years.

TMc: You know who tells a similar story is Wade Davis. Do you know Wade, he's an anthropologist, an Explorer in Residence at *National Geographic*. I think his junior year at Harvard he followed his anthropology thing and was gone for 4 or 5 years. Probably just about the same year you left.

SS: That's probably right.

TMc: So you go there for a year and then what happens?

SS: Well, just before I left Buffalo, actually it was interesting. A Tibetan llama, Chogyam Trungpa Rimpoche, came through Buffalo and gave a speech. At the end of the speech he asked for written questions. So I wrote out the question, saying "I'm about to leave in a few days to go to India, to study Buddhist meditation. Can you suggest where I should go?"

This huge pile of paper was in front of him at the end, all these different questions, and of course I happened to be one of the first pieces of paper he picks out of the pile. He reads it out loud and he's silent for a moment and then he says, "I think you had perhaps best follow the pretense of accident."

And that was it. There was no guidebook, no map, no set of directories of great teachers to look for. Just, "I think you had best perhaps best follow the pretense of

accident." And that's just what it was like. I went to India and went to one place that didn't quite work….

TMc: And so his 'no guidance' was actually guidance.

SS: It was total guidance. It was very profound guidance. I think what I learned from that, in retrospect, was that the power of one's intention is very important. That even though there were lots of missteps and mistakes and things didn't quite work, I just had to keep going. I had to keep honoring that initial intention, which was very strong.

TMc: And so what happened? Give us a little… I want to hear a little bit of… because what we're picturing here is an 18 year old from New York, taking the 'pretense of accident'… did you find a teacher? Did you settle in one place? Did you wander? I know you ended up outside of India as well, in Burma, for a time. So how did that happen? And then we'll move on.

SS: I wandered through India for about 3 months, because again, I wasn't interested in Buddhism, per se, as a doctrine. I was interested in very practical, intensive instruction. So I couldn't quite find the situation. And then life is just life. I'd find a great teacher without a translator. Or someone would travel or….

TMc: I'm thinking in 3 months you could've found it in the U.S., you know?

SS: (laughter) Yeah. Buffalo, even.

TMc: Probably. If you're willing to look for 3 months.

SS: And then somebody suggested that I go to an international yoga conference. I went there. The low point of that conference was when the yogis and the swamis up on the stage were pushing and shoving each other, trying to grab the mike, to be the first one to speak. So that was very demoralizing. But somebody there at that conference mentioned they were on their way to Bodgaya (sic) – which is the town where the Buddha became enlightened – to do an intensive 10 day meditation retreat. I thought, "That sounds like what I'm looking for." So I went there.

TMc: And so, was there instruction in that 10 days?

SS: Yes, that was exactly what I was looking for.

TMc: So you not only found the place, but you found the instruction.

SS: Yeah, yeah.

TMc: Okay, you're listening to Free Forum, I'm Terry McNally, and I'm speaking with Sharon Salzberg, co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society – which I see served a

need that you were having trouble filling when you were young, very practical – and author of Loving Kindness and the just published, Faith; Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience, and you can learn more at www.loving-kindness.org. Okay, so you have a 10 day thing, with instruction, and at that point… you know… you've done your assignment….

SS: (laughter) Finished!

TMc: Write it up and go home!

SS: No, I mean, it was difficult. The process of meditation in itself was quite difficult. It was challenging. A lot of the pain and the fear and the anguish I had held inside started to surface….

TMc: In that 10 day period.

SS: In that 10 day period. I started hastily pushing it away again. It's a process, a tremendous learning process. Unlike many things that we insist on being instant gratification, meditation really is not. It takes time. In fact, you mentioned the Insight Meditation Society, which is the center I co-founded in Massachusetts. Soon after we began it, we received a letter, which was quite remarkable for how it was addressed. Instead of being addressed to the Insight Meditation Society, it was addressed to the *Instant* Meditation Society. (laughter) Which I thought was, "All right…," you know, it's very typical.

TMc: If only you'd thought of it. You'd be rich today!

SS: That would be popular…. But I could see that there was tremendous faith and conviction that this was what I needed to be doing. And at the same time it was clear it wasn't going to happen overnight.

TMc: So you continued to study in India. And when did you go to Burma? Was it in the same trip?

SS: I went to Burma more in the '80's. When I left Asia in '74, I resettled back in the States, but always went back to Burma or Nepal or someplace, to study.

TMc: How is it that you were led to Burma? Or Nepal? Have you basically followed Rimpoche's guidance the whole…?

SS: Yes. I followed 'the pretense of accident'. I mean, sometimes it's tremendously mysterious, in many ways, one's spiritual life. Things aren't necessarily linear. It's not determined. You don't make a decision, "Well, gee, today I think I'll go off and study with a Tibetan teacher!" There are meetings, there are connections, there are relationships. Again, I think if one holds true to a very strong intention, then we will be led forth in 'a pretense of accident'.

TMc: As you said that I thought of: "Intention, plus Intuition." The two of them together. So when did you start to write?

SS: (laughter) I started to write… my first book, *Loving Kindness*, came out in 1995. Most of my colleagues had written books beforehand, and people used to say to me all of the time, "When are you going to write a book? When are you going to write a book?" And actually it's interesting, because as a child I always wanted to be a writer, that was my dream. And I never did it.

Then finally… I had been teaching this particular practice, this particular kind of meditation, called Loving Kindness, for so long, that I did begin to write. It's funny, if you look at the back of that book, on the blurbs, people will say things like, "Sharon Salzberg has *finally* given us the fruit of her 25 years of practice." Or somebody said, "We've waited a long time for this book." So it was a slow process.

TMc: Now, it's interesting to see… when I asked that I thought you were going to say earlier. '95 is not that long ago at all. So writing came fairly late. How did it happen that you and your colleagues opened the Insight Meditation Center? And when was that, that was '76?

SS: Yeah, we moved in in '76, February of '76. We had been traveling – Joseph Goldstein, Jack Cornfield and I – had been traveling around the United States for a while, a year and a half or so, teaching these different retreats in a kind of haphazard fashion. Somebody would write us a letter and say, "I can get together some friends and a cook. Will you come teach?" We would appear, we would teach. At the end of that retreat we'd never know if there'd be another retreat, until the next letter would arrive. And yet momentum began to build. Somebody finally suggested to us that we consider starting a center of our own. They said for one thing it would be like a sacred site in this country. It would be a repository of the very great energy that gets built up when people practice together. It wouldn't then be dispersed, because we'd moved on. And so we began looking. To the regret of many people most of the interest at that time was on the East Coast. And we ended up in New England. So every winter somebody mentions that, "You couldn't have done Hawaii? You couldn't have done Santa Barbara?" (laughter)

TMc: So the 3 of you started this center. Now you began, in a way, with a 10 day silent meditation. That kind of lengthy and rigorous thing is a big part of this, correct?

SS: Yeah, I mean it's a form. It's not the only way to start and it's not the only way to continue, either. The most important thing, really, in terms of a meditative point of view, is how one lives. It's bringing the meditation into one's life. In terms of one's values, centeredness, sense of connection to yourself and to others. So that's the most important thing. All of these other aspects are just tools to support that. So for some people, doing an intensive retreat of that length is a phenomenal tool. Because you can't give up just because you're discouraged. You're sitting in a room full of people, far from home, usually. And so you work through a lot of things. And the

environment's very supportive, it's very caring. So it's a wonderful tool, it's a wonderful means of pursuing one's practice. But the most important thing is the doing of… and in fact one of my teachers once said, "The most important moment of your meditation experience is the moment you sit down to do it." Because right in that moment you're saying something about caring about yourself. You're saying something about your values. You're saying something about your sense of possibility, which really is your faith. And so the fact that you sit down to do it is a tremendous thing.

TMc: That's interesting. I didn't begin meditating as early as I began doing yoga, but I do remember when I had done yoga daily for about 6 months… I was actually very lucky and soon after I began, ran into an ashram and got lots of instruction right off the bat… but I remember after I'd been doing it on my own for about 6 months, that that was that realization where I thought, "Wow, every day I do something that shows I care about myself."

SS: That's right, that's right. Yeah! That's great. It's the same thing.

TMc: So you started the center, the 3 of you. And you've been teaching now, I think I said, for 30 years. And you taught Loving Kindness – Metta – for much of that time, yes?

SS: Yes, yes.

TMc: The same very simple thing. What is it to teach something that in some sense seems so simple?

SS: It's… difficult, actually. (laughter) I think we have a great yearning for complexity. We think somehow complexity is more interesting, is more profound, than simplicity. They say that sometimes when the Buddha himself was teaching, that he would speak so simply that even a 7 year old could understand him. Perhaps, partly as a result of that, it is also said that he had many fully enlightened 7 year old disciples. Sometimes what I think we all need to do is find that 7 year old inside of us, which is willing to be simple and curious and open-hearted and open-eyed about everything in life. And that's not so easy.

TMc: Just before we move on, tell them just a little but what the Loving Kindness meditation is. And let me share for myself. I suspect that many will be surprised at this particular practice; the Metta, the Loving Kindness. Because I myself… it's a meditation that I do, I've actually sat with you one day doing it… I had associated Buddhism and mindfulness with loss of ego, okay. And though it's not quite the same thing, I was pleasantly surprised when I encountered a meditation that started by encouraging me to love myself! That was the first thing. I went, "Oh, wait! I can be here! That's meditation?" Not only that, Metta… we'll let Sharon explain it better… but, for me, it's the easiest for me to stick to, because rather than just focusing on something as still and unchanging as my breath, or a mantra, I find that Metta is

almost dynamic and participatory by comparison. You explain it and it will be even clearer why it *really* works for a doer like me.

SS: (laughter) Well, I think one reason is that a practice like Loving Kindness forms the bridge between our internal spiritual work and our expression of it into the world. It's a reminder that the work we do within is never for ourselves alone. It could never just be for ourselves. It's about joining the great inter-connected fabric of life. That's why, perhaps, it resonates so much with you.

The practice of Loving Kindness – Metta is the word in Pali (sic) (Pali being the language of the original Buddhist text), it literally translates as 'friendship' – it means developing the art of friendship toward one's self. And that means all aspects of ourselves, not just the parts we like and we proudly present to the world, but also those parts of ourselves that are a little bit hidden from our view. Or certainly the view of others. Those parts of ourselves we have a great deal of difficulty with or we might be afraid of. Ultimately it means the art of friendship toward all of life. It's the boundlessness of life. It's a vision of life where we have a sense of complete belonging, because we all belong to one another, to life itself. And we have to take care of one another.

My friend and colleague Robert Thurman, in New York City, has a wonderful and very New York City example, where he says, "Imagine you're in a subway car and this group of Martians come and they zap the subway car so that you and the people in that car are going to be together *forever*." He said, "What do you do? There's no way out. You are joined. You are together. If somebody is freaking out, you calm them down, you comfort them. If somebody's hungry, you feed them. Because you are together forever." And in fact that is the truth of things. So that's the nature of Metta practice. It's the recognition and the nurturing of that view of life.

It's a very simple practice, I should say. We do it by repeating certain phrases, wishing well for ourselves and for others, and learning how to let go of distractions. Of things that take us away from that primary intention. Learning how to open our hearts and to be more present. To pay attention, in effect, in a different way.

TMc: Yeah. Let me just share that for me, as… taught by someone else… but as… actually, I will say that the first contact I had with Metta was from reading *Loving Kindness*. I was on vacation and took that book and began doing it from a book. So I recommend, if this sounds appealing to you… and as someone who's a real… you know, I'm an 'active mind' person, and a bit of a workaholic… that if this can work for me, it can work for anybody. That you hold first yourself, then someone who you would consider a benefactor, then someone who you just love – often a child is wonderful for that – then someone with whom… I'm not sure of the order. Is it difficult or neutral next?

SS: Neutral.

TMc: Neutral, someone neutral. The person who packed your stuff at Trader Joe's. Then someone who is difficult. Or perhaps someone would even say an enemy, right? And then, finally all, all beings. And with each of them you wish them, as she said,

you repeat these phrases: “May you be first safe, may you be happy….” So with each one of these entities you go through, until I feel that I’ve really given them safety and really evoked for them happiness. Then health. “May you be healthy. May you be free. May you have ease of life.” And then, “May you love yourself.”

And so for me, I go through those things and it’s like… I not only evoke all of those states, but I evoke my love for those people. And by the end of it, it’s a wonderful feeling. And as I say, for me, easier than the kinds of meditations where it was simply hold… you know, pay attention to your breath.

SS: Right, right.

TMc: We’re at the halfway point. You’re listening to Free Forum, I’m Terry McNally speaking with Sharon Salzberg, co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society, in Massachusetts, and Author of the book we were just talking about, Loving Kindness, which really explains Metta and kind of looks at it from many different angles, and I, as I did, I read it as I began to practice, and I’d read a chapter and continue to practice and so on, and then the just published Faith; Trusting Your own Deepest Experience you can learn more at www.loving-kindness.org... Um, let’s… let’s focus on faith for the rest of it. What do you mean by faith and why did you write this book?

SS: I think faith in the Buddhist tradition is the common translation of a word, sada (sic), which means offering our hearts. So what I mean by faith is the ability to step forward. It’s the state of participation. It’s a way of offering our hearts, of joining. I think the essence of faith is connection, being able to connect to ourselves and the truth of our present experience. Being able to connect to a sense of possibility, no matter what’s happening.

I wrote the book because we live in very anxious times, first of all. Of course, I started the book a long time ago; times have gotten even more anxious, needless to say. And because I feel like the word is so confusing. In some way I wanted to help redeem the word or reclaim the word. People think of faith often and they think of, you know, just adhering to a doctrine or a dogma. They think of faith as blind surrender, not being able to question. Often people think of faith as a very painful state, faith as a commodity that they were taught in childhood, that you had to have the right kind or enough or else you would be condemned, maybe forevermore.

TMc: So in those cases, faith is either belief or even allegiance.

SS: That’s right, yeah. And there was so much emotion swirling around the very word. And yet I felt, given my own experience, that there was a quality of faith that is none of those things. It’s not adherence to a belief system. It’s not allegiance to a doctrine. It’s not an unquestioning, unthinking state, but is something very vital, very alive, that can be liberating for us. So I wanted to help people… I wanted to have the conversation about faith. I wanted to have people talking about faith and thinking about faith and I think that’s really why I wrote the book.

TMc: And I would imagine, since you continued to teach and you continued to have days here and there… have you had that conversation ongoing since you began the book? And is the book partly your own journal or report back from these conversations?

SS: I think it is, in a lot of ways. I continue to have the conversation. And of course, as I said, times have changed. Maybe we can't afford to be cynical anymore. We really need, desperately almost, to be looking for a deeper sense of meaning. As you said in the beginning of the show, look at how much we've been disappointed or even betrayed by the people, the objects, in which we've held faith.

TMc: Yes, in other words, it seems to me there's many meanings of faith. And obviously the capital 'F' faith has often been associated with one's faith. Having faith, having a faith, that sort of thing. This doesn't seem to be what you're exactly talking about.

SS: No.

TMc: And the small letter faith, I think, yeah, there's one which is … it seems the way your kind of trying to, as you say, redeem it, which is, "Faith as possibility. Faith as trust." I noticed a lot: "Faith as trust." Versus faith in those people. Relying on institutions and entities who I think are doing a real good job of letting us down.

You live in New York City. How did the terrorist attack of September 11th influence this book? At what stage in the book did it happen?

SS: I had almost finished one draft when September 11th happened. I wasn't there. I live part-time in Massachusetts, part-time in New York City and I was actually in Massachusetts, en route to New York, the morning of September 11th. I was just about to leave, because I had a class scheduled that night.

TMc: But you weren't flying from Logan? Or you were?

SS: I was driving. And I couldn't get in for another week or so, because all the bridges and tunnels were closed. I got in, and I started teaching, about 8 days later. And stayed there until the end of October.

TMc: So you were teaching folks in the City of New York in the fall of 2001.

SS: Yeah, oh yeah. Which was extremely profound.

In terms of the book, it was amazing because… the whole process of writing the book, many times I had to relearn faith in myself and faith in… the importance of the conversation about faith. Because I think faith, as you were just saying, has to do with trust. But it also has to do with having a vision of life. Like Loving Kindness does. In that when we have an ability to offer our hearts, we have an ability to move forward instead of withdraw. When we realize that we are a part of the whole of life, that's

faith. Realizing that we are a part of the whole of life seems to be the necessary understanding, I think, for us at this time.

So in one way I was even more inspired to write the book. On the other hand, I was in this state of great turmoil and despair myself. My first thought was, "Throw the book out." You know, it was useless. That I had written it on the wrong level. The thought that kept coming to my mind was, "Our metaphors have changed." And that the book was written on the wrong level.

For example, I have… the last chapter of the book is a story that was extremely important for me, about the death of one of my teachers, a Tibetan teacher named (?) Rimpoche, that I was very, very close to. After September 11th, I kept watching the thought come up in my mind, "Well, he got to die in bed!"

TMc: "And he was just one!"

SS: Yeah! Yeah, I thought, "He got to die in bed. That's not so bad!" But as time went on, I… and especially teaching in New York City, as I was… I felt more strongly than ever that what we needed was this conversation about faith. For one thing, the word was being used as, really, a synonym for fanaticism.

TMc: Yeah, let's talk about that for a second. Were the terrorists acting out of faith? And let me just say that faith, I would think, is essential for a suicide bomber. Some kind of… a certain kind of faith or why would you take that action?

SS: Yeah, well, in my effort to reclaim the word… (laughter)… I wouldn't call that faith. I would call that fanaticism. Certainly in a conventional use of the word faith, one might say that. And perhaps they did. But I would never say that. I would say that the kind of faith that I'm talking about, anyway, involves inclusivity rather than exclusivity. It involves joining in the fabric of life rather than pulling away and feeling separate. It means recognizing our oneness with all and not our differences, you know, as….

TMc: Were those distinctions as clear to you prior to September 11th and people talking about fanaticism as faith?

SS: I don't know if they were as clear to me. I think what happened was that I've always considered doubt as an intrinsic part of faith. I think faith is only strengthened by questioning and testing and probing. And I think we see the results of a system that doesn't allow it when we see fanaticism.

TMc: You're listening to Free Forum, I'm your host Terry McNally speaking with Sharon Salzberg, co-founder of Insight Meditation Society, Author of Loving Kindness which is a book on the Metta practice and the just published which we are talking about now, Faith; Trusting Your own Deepest Experience. You can learn more at www.loving-kindness.org. This idea that you're talking about, that faith is inclusive, that faith is possibility, that faith is about connection… are there some people that

say, “That’s not faith!” In other words, I almost wonder, have you had that reaction? Where they’re saying, “That’s something else.”

SS: Well, *Tricycle Magazine*, which is a British journal, had a conference on Buddhism in America at the World Trade Center, interestingly enough, in the summer.

TMc: Wow. Prior….

SS: Prior. So that was very poignant, as well, having just been there, in effect. And I gave… I shared a keynote with Stephen Bachelor, who’s a friend, (a) Buddhist writer, who’s written a book called *Buddhism Without Beliefs*. In fact, I said to him, “Stephen, how about if I talk about doubt and you talk about faith. Just so we’re not typecast.” (laughter) And he said, “No, no. I’d rather not.” So I spoke about faith and he spoke about doubt. Which are very intertwined, as I said. You know, I really don’t think of doubt as being the opposite of faith. I think the opposite of faith is despair, which is a very different thing.

TMc: Okay, yeah. In other words, one of the questions that I had thought about, Sharon, was this one of… because you say that questioning is a part of faith, that it’s essential and it’s consistent and so on. I would wonder if most people, if they found themselves questioning all the time, would think that they lacked faith. Would feel that they’d lost faith.

SS: I think that that’s probably true. You know, when I was with Stephen at the conference, he said to me, “Why don’t you just say trust? The word faith is going to bring up so much reaction.”

TMc: I have to say, as I looked at… even in the section where it was, “faith will bring the ability to trust.” You say it a few times and I had the same question, which is: why aren’t you calling it trust?

SS: I said at the time that that might be a little too easy. There’s something in me… (laughter) …I don’t know if it’s some mischievous part, but I think the reaction is also part of our learning. To see the ways we relate to the word and the kind of associations it brings up and the dislike we might have. Because I think there’s a richness in the word faith that strikes very, very deep when we come to understand it in a different way. Which has to do with trusting our own deepest experience.

And I think that’s where the questioning comes in as well. That a faith that is just blind, you know, is kind of… in Buddhism, as I say in the book, it’s called bright faith. It’s the first stage of faith, where it’s like falling in love. We fall in love with a person who’s a teacher, or a sense of possibility, or even a place – a sacred site – that just enlarges our vision of who we could be. It’s this enormous rush, it’s so very pleasant, that we might not want to threaten it in any way. By questioning, by doubting, by examining. In Buddhist teaching, bright faith is considered just the first phase of faith.

TMc: Infatuation.

SS: It's like infatuation. Exactly. It would *never* be considered the final state.

TMc: Interesting, because when I think of the experience… I'm generalizing, but things that I've heard, and certainly, in… I was brought up Catholic and of course I've dealt with "Born Again Christians" and so on… that it seems to me that what some of that might be, as I listen to you, is that moment of realization. That moment of initial faith and then the idea to want to hold onto that.

SS: That's right, that's right.

TMc: And that that's what you're constantly going for. I just say it's quite interesting what you're saying. Because, obviously, if you use the metaphor as you did, of relationship, that in a relationship if you think it's always going to feel….

SS: That's right, that's right.

TMc: That's right, if you thought it always was going to feel like the moment you fell in love, you'd say, "I must not love her."

SS: That's right, that's right. Exactly. And so one of the things, again, I appreciated about the Buddhist tradition is the emphasis on putting things into practice. You know, the Buddha said, "Do not believe anything, just because I say it. Put it into practice. See for yourself if it's true." So following that moment of exhilarating intoxication, or the infatuation, we have to put things into practice. We have to say, "Does this really make my life better? Does this really serve my community? Does this really make a difference?" If we don't do that, we're completely dependent on that external source for our sense of what is true. And then we're very vulnerable, you know, disquieting information may come by when we don't want to look at it. Because it might threaten the connection. Or we don't want to take a step away, to take care of something else, because we may not be able to come back. I mean, it's too fragile, it's too dependent.

TMc: It's interesting, because I know that even one of the reasons that I thought, "Well, gee, faith and Buddhism." Brought up Catholic and having gone to Catholic school and having read a fair amount of religious stuff over the years, the idea of, "There are some that believe that the core is faith and some believe that the core is works and some that believe that the core is grace." It almost seems like Buddhism would be the one that doesn't care about faith. Because if it's not in the works and not in the grace of living, then it's not worth it. Or it's not happening.

SS: You know, I think it comes down to… I once had a dialogue with a psychiatrist in New York City, and we were discussing the nature of the psychotherapeutic relationship and what might be the most healing component of that? And he said that despite technique and strategy and methodology, if you got any good psychiatrist or

psychotherapist and "you put them up against the wall" is the way he put it, and you asked them, "What's the most healing aspect of the relationship?" they would say love.

And I said, "Well, I agree with that, of course." But you know those experiences where you just see these words come blurting out of your mouth sometimes and you think, where did that come from? I heard come blurting out of my mouth, "I really agree with what you say about love, but for all we know, the most healing thing about the psychotherapeutic relationship is the fact that someone shows up for their appointment."

And that's the faith. That's the faith that gets us out of bed….

TMc: That's the same thing you said about… for those of you who tuned in late, she said the same thing early in the interview about meditation. That the most important moment in your meditation practice is when you sit down to do it.

SS: That's right. Exactly.

TMc: What's interesting is in both those cases you're making that a connection to faith. In other words, that you show up, that you don't put it off today, or that you go to that therapist….

SS: That's right. I mean, I could have stayed in Buffalo, you know, and read books on Buddhism forever. And think, "Well ,isn't that great. This man who lived supposedly 2500 years ago, was born a prince, left home, made an investigation into the nature of life, got fully enlightened… wow!" But something in me ignited a movement, so I had to say, "What does that mean about *me*?" That's why I think of faith… and actually traditionally it's taught that faith is a verb… is the offering of our hearts. It means that we don't stay on the sidelines and think, "Wow, that's great! Somebody else got enlightened!" We move forward. We join up.

TMc: Let me ask another… you said faith as a verb to move toward. Is faith also a calling?

SS: You mean…?

TMc: I mean, in other words, when you sit down… or when you went to India, is faith… you say it's a possibility. Is it also a calling? That's it's faith that pulls you toward your life, your destiny?

SS: I think it is, in that sense. That's the voice of intuition. Which is a reflection of that deeper sense of calling. When I think about 'the pretense of accident' and some of the accidents (laughter) along the way, it's amazing to know that I persevered.

TMc: Now one of the things that you connect… and it makes sense of course… is meditation and prayer and faith. Because your practice has been meditation. What does that have to do with faith? You say that, "Meditation and prayer have the power

to make faith clearer and stronger." Let me ask you 2 questions. How so? And what is the difference between meditation and prayer?

SS: People use the word prayer in so many different ways. There's petitionary prayer and there's, you know… I think that the power of prayer is that it allows us to reach beyond the narrow circumstances we find ourselves in, to envision a different possibility. It's like, if we're confined in a little box and we aim our hearts right outside of that box, into a bigger universe. It also, like meditation, allows us to let go of our incessant effort to control everything all of the time. (laughter) Which is not necessarily a bad thing. So what people mean by prayer can be a lot of different things, but I think at the heart of it is that….

TMc: Let me just say, as you did here with faith, you said, "Now this is the way it's said… this is what it means to a lot of people. This is what I think it means." You could do the same thing with prayer.

SS: Yeah, yeah. And I think every time we open up, every time we move forward, every time we recognize that we're moving into the unknown, we're strengthening faith. And that all has to do with meditation and the power of the practice of prayer. When we meditate we come, as you know, right up against the fact that we're not in control of the nature of the mind or the body. You could sit down with the greatest will in the world and say, "Well, I thought about it really carefully and I've weighed all the pros and cons and I've decided I'm never going to fall asleep when I meditate again." And then 20 minutes later your head could be down, you could be completely zonked.

The nature of life is that… life itself is that it's made up of conditions coming together in certain configurations, certain forms, at certain moments, and then they dissolve and things change. And so when the conditions arise for one to fall asleep, you're going to fall asleep, no matter *what* you've decided.

Which doesn't mean we're passive, or there's nothing we can do. But that idea of being absolutely, utterly in control, so that we can decide, we can determine… it's just not the truth of things. The more we struggle to have it be so, the more we suffer. When we can recognize we're going into the unknown and go, then that's faith. You know, it's faith with wisdom.

TMc: So these are subtle terms, because belief… which I think a lot of people associate with faith… belief might… it might be that if I have certain beliefs I *do* have a sense of control. And what you're saying is that faith is *not* really about belief and that it's *not* about control, it's about possibility. So you show up in the face of knowing you don't have control. And that's an act of faith.

SS: That's right. Boy, it sounds hard. (laughter) But powerful.

TMc: You're listening to Free Forum. I'm Terry McNally, speaking with Sharon Salzberg, Author of Loving Kindness, and the book were talking about now Faith; Trusting You Own Deepest Experience. You can learn more at www.loving-

kindness.org. Let me ask you about a couple of things you say faith can do. You say we can be free of our daily circumstances. "With faith we can be free of our daily circumstances." I have 2 questions. 1: How? And 2: Is that denial? In other words, if we are free of our daily circumstances, aren't there a lot of people that do that in a lot of ways so they don't have to be in their life? How is this different?

SS: People do do that in a lot of ways. I did that in a lot of ways, certainly. I was quite good at that. But I think if we can hold a sense of faith with wisdom, faith is intelligent, it's liberating, it's seeing things clearly and yet not being confined. It's not the discarding of our circumstances, trying to pretend that things will necessarily work out the way we want them to. Another distinction that can be made, as you did between faith and belief, is between faith and hope.

Certainly in the Buddhist tradition… and Buddhism is very precise about language, so that's where some of this is coming from… the kind of hope that they're talking about is really a fixated hope. It's like attachment. Like, "Well, things are bad today, but tomorrow they're going to be great. I know it." We don't know that, in fact. Tomorrow they might be worse. But something in us we can have confidence in. And that is our ability to be aware, our ability to love. We can be… we can have faith, we can have confidence in the nature of the truth of things. That we are connected, we're all connected no matter what. No matter how alone we feel. No matter how ripped apart from the thread of society of life we feel, we're not. We can hold conviction in those wisdoms, we can have faith in those wisdoms.

And so it's not denial. It's not saying, "Well, tomorrow when I wake up, I will have won the lottery," necessarily. (laughter) That this is going to happen and that's going to happen. May it be so, you know, that would be great. But maybe it's not going to happen.

TMc: Be more specific, again, of your distinction between faith and hope. In other words: faith is…; hope is…. Because I didn't quite… I didn't hold it as you said it.

SS: Okay, hope in the particular sense that I'm using it, which we call fixated hope, is attachment. It's the decision things are going to be the way I want them to be. They've got to be the way I want them to be. Whereas faith is resting in the truth that we don't know that. We don't know how things are going to be.

TMc: And yet we….

SS: And yet we have the strength, we have the inner strength, we have the ability to continue to move forward. To remain connected to others, rather than isolated.

TMc: I just want to play with this again a little bit. In my own life, as I hold things, I believe hope is essential. And yet as you describe it there, fixated hope, it sounded like a trap, sort of, rather than an essential. So what's the hope that I feel is so important?

SS: No, I think hope is always having a sense of possibility. And it is essential. You know, the opposite of what I'm talking about… I'm not promoting hopelessness by any means. That's why it's tricky with language.

TMc: I think I just figured out something, which is when you said faith is a verb. Hope may not be as much a verb.

SS: That's true.

TMc: Hope springs eternal. Hope that… with a sense of hope you can go forward. Faith is a little more verb than that.

SS: Verby! (laughter)

TMc: It's more action oriented. Faith is the will, the action, that hope allows you to take. And if there's a subtle distinction between trust, what is it? You said before you chose faith rather than trust, because it would be more provocative, maybe. But what do you think, if there's a subtle difference there?

SS: I think the subtle difference would be trust is something that we… you know, we trust that the sun will rise because it did yesterday. It's something that's more provable. Faith really brings us to the edge of the unknown and we go for it anyway.

TMc: Okay. We're getting close to the end. Basically a couple of minutes. The thing that I started out the show with, saying, "Wait, why should we have faith? Look where it's gotten us." I'm sure you've encountered a lot of people over the last year or so that have asked that question. What do you say?

SS: I would say look where the lack of faith has gotten us. Look where feeling separate has gotten us. Look at where not showing up has gotten us. Not recognizing the intrinsic connection that is the truth of things. I mean, look where it's gotten us! That ancient animosities are just going round and round and round, it seems, without ceasing. That people will betray the trust, that others have held in them, so callously.

TMc: Now were talking not just about terrorists, but about CEOs….

SS: Yeah, about CEOs. Definitely about CEOs. And that we hurt each other and….

TMc: Take advantage of each other and abuse each other.

SS: Yeah, I mean I think it's time for faith. It's time for a whole other meaning of faith, a whole other sense of faith.

TMc: In that way that it's a verb. That faith would call us to ask more of ourselves. And to ask more of our leaders. And so on.

SS: That's right, because it's possible.

TMc: Right. If there were nothing better possible, then you self-medicate and go on. And hope that greed serves you as much as it did them. But if there is faith and if there is possibility, then act and show up and demand more.

SS: Yes, that's right. That's exactly right.

TMc: Well, Sharon. Thank you so much. This hour flew by.

SS: It was great to be here. It was great to see you.

TMc: Yeah.