REAL CHANGE

MINDFULNESS to
HEAL OURSELVES and
the WORLD

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Author of New York Times bestseller Real Happiness

"Inspiring, loving and empowering. The perfect medicine for these difficult times"

—JACK KORNFIELD, author of A Path With A Heart

BOOK CLUB GUIDE

sharonsalzberg.com
ABOUT THE BOOK

In her eleventh book, Sharon Salzberg teaches us that meditation is not a replacement for taking action, but rather a way to practice generosity with ourselves and summon the courage to break through boundaries, reconnect to a movement that’s bigger than ourselves, and have the energy to stay active.

Consulting with veteran activists and social change agents in a variety of fields, Sharon collects and shares their wisdom and offers the best practical advice to foster transformation in both ourselves and in society. Real Change guides us to embody the fundamental principles of mindfulness practice toward greater clarity and confidence, so that we can create a better world.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

This study guide will help you explore the intersection between the activity of making change in the world, and the clarity and compassion that arises from mindfulness and lovingkindness practice. While reading through the book, take your time. Each chapter is rich with wisdom and insight. Use moments in the book to pause, reflect and breathe. Notice how the teachings feel in not only your mind, but your physical body as well.

We have provided you with recordings of Sharon, leading selected meditations from the book. You can repeat the meditations several times between book club meetings. Bring your reflections and questions to your Book Club and discuss them together, or journal about them.

We are excited to be on the journey towards Real Change with you!
Book Club Meeting #1

CHAPTER ONE / TWO / THREE

Guided Meditation: Exploring Our Storylines: (link)

Guided Meditation: Practice: Difficult Thoughts & Emotions: (link)

Listen to Sharon’s Metta Minute offered to the children in ICE detention centers here (link)
"Meditation and even lovingkindness practices are commonly thought of as personal, inward-focused practices, but they can very much be social practices, as well. When we get in touch with our own pain or the pain of others, meditation is not just a salve; it can provide the impetus to make change."

**Reflection Questions:**

1. On page 13, Sharon shares that tools learned in her meditation practice, and her own values, served as her North Star as she worked to process the political turmoil of 2018. She uses ‘respect for myself and others, a commitment to balance and a belief in the healing power of love’ as examples. What personal values serve as your own North Star?

2. **Soft & Strong:** How did Sharon’s image of strength like water, rather than a closed fist, make you feel?

3. After you practice the meditation on **Gathering Our Energy** (page 27), ask yourself this question from Sharon, ‘What kind of world do you most deeply believe in?’
1. What does having agency mean to you?

2. On page 43, Sharon writes, “We bring alive a vision by taking that crucial first step toward making it real—sometimes out of inspiration, sometimes out of outrage, sometimes faltering, and sometimes with resolve. To step forward toward a life of caring and engagement, we challenge our conditioning, the fear, the believing of ourselves or others as unworthy, the incorporating of limiting stories we have been told about ourselves and about life. We take on what is holding us back—and there is a lot that can hold us back—starting with feeling we are not worthy.” Reflect on times in your life when your conditioning, your belief in yourself or another, was challenged. Who or what lifted you up in those moments? How did you take on what was holding you back?

3. Sharon writes about her own journey of healing, and how her own journey to find relief from her own suffering created a foundation for her lifetime of work and service to others. She speaks of the power of going past the limitations crafted by cynicism or hopelessness, into the center of change, and giving life to what we care about. Pause with that reflection. What does it feel like to imagine yourself giving life to what you care about?

4. Where to put our energy? The chapter concludes with the question of where to focus our action. Sharon quotes Lin-Manuel Miranda, “You cannot let all the world’s tragedies into your heart. You will drown. But the ones you do let in should count. Let them manifest action.” Howard Zinn suggests that when people do enough things, however small, then change takes place.

Listen to the practice on Exploring Our Story Lines (link). We do this practice to develop a different relationship to the stories others tell about us, and the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and what we are capable of. We suggest doing this practice a few times between book club sessions.
CHAPTER THREE
Awakening to the Fire

‘Anger is like a forest fire that burns up it’s own support. This means anger can destroy its host, which is us.’ (pg. 64)

Anger has the power to jolt us awake and also burn us out.

Reflection Questions:

1. Honoring the Message of Anger: On page 71, Sharon writes, “The challenge lies in honoring the message of anger without letting it consume us. Not because it is wrong to feel anger but because it might well burn us up.” Have you felt burnt up by your anger in life? Do you believe it is possible to forge a new relationship with anger, relying on it’s conveyance of strength rather than it’s reactive quality?

2. In Buddhist psychology, they talk about transforming anger into discerning wisdom. To do this, we honor the message of anger and develop mindfulness of anger. The mere act of paying attention to anger can actually dissolve it’s toxicity, and reduce the feeling of being overwhelmed by it. Rather than repeatedly resisting anger, can we open ourselves up to the idea of practicing generosity with ourselves? Can we simply allow ourselves to feel? Can we free ourselves from the habitual mind-set of meeting anger with a closed fist?

3. A Bigger Perspective: On Page 81, Sharon writes, “Sometimes we find ourselves confronting a seemingly intractable problem. We’re overwhelmed and don’t know what to do to make it all okay…until, after a time, we realize we need to do the one small thing that’s in front of us, or nothing will ever change. We sit and remember we are worth something—that all of us are—and we use that realization to give us courage and determination.” Consider the one small thing that you can do today. Practice the meditation from the book: Difficult Thoughts and Emotions (link) provided. Recommit to doing one small thing today.

※ In exploring the book, you also practiced two meditations. What were your experiences of these meditations?
※ Is the exploration of anger presented in the book counter to your cultural conditioning?
※ If it feels right, share the one small thing you did and how it felt. What did it awaken within you?
Book Club Meeting #2
CHAPTER FOUR / FIVE / SIX

Guided Meditation: Lovingkindness Toward Ourselves (link)

Video: How Mindfulness Empowers Us: (link)
CHAPTER FOUR
Grief to Resilience

“While I believe it’s true that some things just hurt, I also believe that we don’t need extra suffering, and therein lies our work.”

Reflection Questions:

1. Grief to Resilience—It’s inevitable that simply by living a life, there will be times of adversity and certainly disruption. On page 92, Sharon writes, “To grieve, whether for a person or our hopes and dreams, is to watch reality, once so solid-seeming, become molten.” She then asks the question, “what happens if we recognize the love inside the grief?” Discuss this question with your group or journal about it.

2. In the introduction to the book, Sharon writes that she has learned that deep acceptance is not inertness. On page 93, Dahr Jamil shares that he found it is possible to reach a place of acceptance and inner peace while enduring grief and suffering. What does that mean to you? Have you experienced this in your own life?

3. Being courageously dedicated to the long haul, we recognize that creating change requires enduring energy. Sharon teaches that resilience accretes over time and that we can develop a habit of responding to or being with pain without freaking out.

4. On page 99, Sharon writes that, “this acknowledgement of the need to truly touch our sadness, pain and loss is where real change is born, where we begin to build resilience. As we respond to our own pain with presence and compassion, the energy we have for responding to the pain of others increases dramatically, as does our sense of connection and care.” What practices support you in responding to your own pain with presence and compassion?

5. Mediation practice supports us in having a more direct relationship to our experiences. Practice the Lovingkindness Toward Ourselves (link) recorded meditation.

6. Life has not forgotten you. Create—with your words, images, food or the way you pay attention to strangers or a new way of relating to your body or those you work with and for. Listen. Write or share about your experiences.
CHAPTER FIVE

Coming Home To Ourselves

1. Explore your Habitual Habits for Relieving Stress. On page 124, Sharon’s offers a written reflection exercise. After doing the exercise, ask yourself what you do to find resilience. How do you feel about it? Discuss with your group.

2. In acknowledging the importance of self-care, it is useful to have a small group of individuals who will hold you accountable for your self-care plan. These friends will respond when you are in burnout / fatigue / triggered mode and have your back when you say no.

3. Can you think of a small group of your friends who might act as your self-care supports? Can you do the same for them?

4. On page 132, Sharon writes, “To retain our vitality, it’s important to be able to switch focus from negative realities of the world to the positive ones, to regain our capacity for joy, positivity, and connection.” It’s uplifting to see that many changemakers do now include taking care of themselves as a vital part of their mission in the world. In addition to establishing a self-care plan, Sharon offers the suggestion to titrate. You can’t do it all at once. You can’t absorb all that pain. For the sake of our own resilience, we need to strengthen our capacity to accept and absorb joy. Discuss what this means to you and how it might apply to your life.

5. On page 145, Sharon writes about empathetic distress, where our discomfort ironically takes center stage. We collapse and don’t have the energy to move forward. Have you experienced something like this in your life? What practices will support you in cultivating compassion and avoiding future burnout?

6. Make a conscious effort to include the positive.
CHAPTER SIX
Interconnectedness

“This is the truth of our existence: because we live in an interconnected universe, everything is contingent, intertwined, interrelated.”

Reflection questions

1. Do we only feel at home when anchored in a specific identity? Has that identity largely been imposed upon us by the stories that others tell about us, or is it something we ourselves enlist for courage and self-respect?

2. How do we hold that sense of identity? (pg 157)

3. On page 165, Sharon writes that clarity of perception is the root of understanding each other. It’s also the root of compassionate action. What is compassionate action?

4. Discussion point: Loneliness is perceived social isolation, feeling that you don’t have the level of social contact you would like. Do you see this playing out in our society and in your personal life?

5. Many studies are finding that people who have qualities of wisdom—empathy, compassion, self-reflection—are much less likely to feel lonely. All of these qualities are increasingly being recognized as benefits derived from mindfulness and mindfulness meditation practices.

6. How Do We Change? Can you relate to the feeling of contraction and disconnection from others that Sharon describes on page 176? Can you recall a time in your life when rather than contracting, you opened up to a sense of interconnection? What did it feel like to expand rather than contract?

7. What does fighting, not hating, mean to you?

Practice Lovingkindness Meditation for Ourselves and Others read by Sharon (link)
Book Club Meeting #3
CHAPTERS SEVEN & EIGHT

Guided Meditation: Cultivating Equanimity (link)
1. Mindfulness meditation can help dissolve the grip of habits like stereotyping and attribution bias, leading to a cleaner, clearer view of what we are encountering, and of various possible resolutions. A principle of mindfulness training is that clearly seeing our assumptions will deconstruct them. Have you experienced this in your mindfulness practice?

2. Discussion or journal points: Consider Sharon’s teachings on *Causes & Conditions* and *What We Aren’t Seeing*. Discuss “network looking” (page 205) as a group.
1. On page 233, Sharon shares a teaching from the Buddha about *Crossing the Flood of Suffering*. Not lingering and not hurrying. Discuss this balance and what acceptance means to you.

2. Practice the recorded *Equanimity Meditation* (link) together as a group.

3. Sharon closes the book by writing, “I’ve learned that the path of connecting in hard places is made a lot easier by the company of others who are also trying.” Take a moment to acknowledge the book club members, their efforts and insights. Close the club with each member speaking how they want to move forward and bring *Real Change* in the world.