

Kimberly Brown

*In It Together: Kindness through Crisis*

Part 1: “When Others Make You Crazy”

May 1, 2021



Hi, I'm Kimberly Brown, I'm a meditation teacher in New York City and the author of the book *Steady, Calm, and Brave: 25 Practices for Resilience and Wisdom in a Crisis*. I published this book last year to support us through the difficulties of the pandemic. So I'm delighted to offer this four-week dharma series with Tricycle, “In It Together: Kindness Through Crisis,” at a time when many of us are feeling tired, frustrated, and can not wait for this pandemic to end.

My teaching and my work emphasizes the power and wisdom of practicing *metta* (lovingkindness) and other compassion practices, both for ourselves and each other. I've been a Buddhist student for many years with the Insight and Tibetan traditions, but when I first came to the dharma, I really was not interested in developing lovingkindness. It felt awkward and silly to give kindness to myself, to repeat phrases like “May I be happy” or “May we all be peaceful.” I just wasn't used to it. But over time, I learned—and I hope that you will too—that cultivating love creates a more balanced mind. Instead of being caught in habitual judgement, criticism, and fear, practicing *metta* rewires these responses—our tendencies to grab and cling to anxiety and negativity—so we can open to the joys, to how much we have, and to our own beautiful hearts. When we have a balanced mind we don't get so easily discouraged. So we can bring our wisdom and compassion to support ourselves and each other too without falling into despair. It's true there are many problems in the world, and it's also true we have many blessings and the ability to create solutions. So it's important that we hold both and not become too negative and think nothing is possible, or become too positive and afraid to look at our difficulties. Both extremes are unwise and unskillful.

Throughout this series, we'll discuss what it means to bring kindness to ourselves when we're upset or lonely or bored, and how to bring kindness to others, even those who frustrate or anger us. Each week will also include a guided meditation, and I encourage you to take the time to practice with me, because it's not possible to gain real insight or to rewire our habitual responses unless we take the time to practice, to get still. Then we can work with our minds and our hearts in contemplation.

In this first week, we're going to explore how we can cultivate kindness when other people are making us crazy—when family, neighbors, or friends are frustrating, annoying, or upsetting to us.

In this past year, many of our relationships have been strained. A lot of us are working at home, kids are not in school—and we're with partners, children, roommates all the time. This can cause conflict and annoyance. Also, because it's such a stressful moment—with social distancing and economic uncertainty—many of us simply feel more irritable and impatient both with ourselves and with each other. So there might be some people in your life right now—maybe you live with them, maybe you don't—who you feel angry or frustrated with. And that's

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okay.

If you're upset with someone, you're suffering—from your difficult feelings like anger and frustration. And it's likely that the other person is suffering too—from whatever struggles they might be having. Kindness is a form of skillful means—*upekkha* in Pali or *upaya* in Sanskrit—to orient your thoughts, words, and actions to alleviate that suffering and to prevent causing more suffering.

Kindness doesn't mean just being nice or pretending like you care. Cultivating kindness means opening your heart, with patience and attention, to your painful feelings—and to other peoples' painful feelings. So when you're upset with someone else, it's important to acknowledge it. Pay attention to it. Feel it in your body. You could even say to yourself, “I'm upset right now, I'm struggling.” Sometimes we don't really know what we're feeling. I was recently telling my husband about something a family member did and he said, “Kim, you're angry.” I shouted back at him, “NO, I'M NOT ANGRY!” Then I had to laugh because of course I was angry. The point here is that someone else may truly be frustrating or did something hurtful, you're responsible for your feelings. Your feelings are your feelings and only you can take care of them.

After you've taken care of yourself, then you can choose to remember that other people are who they are. They have their own feelings and views, and it's not up to us to make them do or say what we want them to. Now, this doesn't mean we let people harm us. If they're dangerous or causing hurt, then we might choose to distance ourselves. But if they're simply frustrating, or won't listen to us, or we're angry with them about a disagreement, then we can use our wisdom to understand that what they do and how they do it aren't up to us. And we can do this by recognizing that just like us, they want to be happy and not suffer. All of us, even the worst among us, want to be happy—to have love, a peaceful mind, and contentment—even if we don't know how to make that happen. So, when we've taken care of our feelings, our body and mind, then we can extend our kindness to the difficult person too.

Extending our hearts, being patient, offering kindness—it doesn't mean to forget or to just ignore how you've been treated or what happened with your friend or family member. What it does is help us see our own emotions and reactions clearly. Then we can see the situation clearly, so we then have a choice in how we want to respond. Instead of reacting thoughtlessly, out of habit, we can use our wisdom and choose what we want to do. We might choose to talk to this person, or recognize our part in the problem. Whatever we choose will come from a clear and steady mind.

So let's do a meditation together with an intention to cultivate kindness for yourself and for this other person. Take a minute to find a comfortable seat. You don't have to watch this screen while we're practicing. I'm going to give you a moment. You can sit in a chair or lie on the

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floor or a bed or a couch—what’s most important is to not look at your phone and to get still, to stop moving or looking around.

Get still, get quiet, and take your time to settle into your seat. Take a few conscious breaths, inhaling and exhaling at your own pace. Don’t force your breathing. Go ahead and start to notice your body. Bring your attention to your feet, your seat. Relaxing your belly, your shoulder blades, the back of your head. You can close your eyes, or if you’re sleepy keep them open with a soft unfocused gaze. Feeling your feet, your seat, your belly. Allowing sound to enter your ears. Just give yourself permission to relax, to be here at this moment.

Bringing your attention to your heart center, the center of your chest, I’d like you to make a connection with yourself. You make this connection by imagining you’re looking in the mirror or imagining yourself as a child, or just getting a sense of your presence right here, with you. And say this phrase silently to yourself, “May I be peaceful and happy.” “May I be peaceful and happy.” “May I be peaceful and happy.” Just taking a few seconds to silently repeat this phrase to yourself as though you are giving it as a gift to you. “May I be peaceful and happy.”

You can let go of this connection with yourself and this phrase. Gently feeling your feet on the floor, your seat, relaxing your shoulders, relaxing the back of your head. Bring your attention back to the heart center, where I’d like you to connect with this difficult person, this person who is frustrating you. You can imagine them as a child or as you know them; just get a sense that they are here with you. And giving them this phrase silently, “I release you from my demands and expectations of you.” “I release you from my demands and expectations of you.” “I release you from my demands and expectations of you.” Just taking a few seconds to silently give this gift of kindness to this person. “I release you from my demands and expectations of you.” You might get caught in anger or a story about them and swept away from this practice. That’s okay. Just notice what’s happening, and choose to begin again. Reconnect with the person and start over, repeating silently, “I release you from my demands and expectations of you.”

You can keep this connection with this person, now including yourself too, the two of you. Silently giving this gift. “May we be peaceful and happy.” “May we be peaceful and happy.” “May we be peaceful and happy.” Just taking a moment to say this silently a few times. You can let go of these phrases, just noticing the breath. Relaxing your belly, allowing sound to enter your ears.

Before we conclude this meditation, take a moment to appreciate your time and your good heart. You can silently say “thank you” to yourself. I encourage you to practice this each day at the same time, maybe ten minutes in the morning or ten minutes before bed. Another time that it’s good to practice this is when you feel tempted to yell or criticize this person or complain about them to someone else, before you do that, take a pause to do this meditation. Very briefly, so you don’t react out of anger or upset. Instead, you choose out of your clear mind and heart.

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Next week, we’ll discuss how social isolation has affected so many of us, we’ll learn to cultivate kindness to our feelings of loneliness. Thank you for today’s practice. I rejoice in your good hearts and wisdom.