

*Life As It Is*

“Planting the Seeds of Happy Relationships”

Episode #39 with Kimberly Brown

February 19, 2025



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**Kimberly Brown:** Many years ago, I told my friend Denise that I was going to learn to be a loving person long before I even knew about Buddhism, and she said, “Oh my God, Kim, that's crazy. I hardly have enough for my mother. How are you going to just be so loving?” And the longer I practice, the more that I have come to believe, realize, and experience that all I have, really, is love, all I can do is give it. And I feel this is true of all people. This is all, at heart, what we have to give, what we can leave with others, and what our capacity is. It is boundless, which is what they say in the Buddhist tradition. And so to be able to practice with a phrase like, “May I be open to all the love in my heart,” it gives us some feeling, acknowledgment, it's tapping into, “Oh, it's here. It's right here. I do have all this love in my heart.”

**James Shaheen:** Hello, I'm James Shaheen, and this is *Life As It Is*. I'm here with my co-host Sharon Salzberg, and you just heard Kimberly Brown. Kim is a meditation teacher and author based in New York City. In her new book, *Happy Relationships: 25 Buddhist Practices to Transform Your Connections with Your Partner, Family, and Friends*, she lays out a practical guide to help us cultivate and maintain healthy relationships with the people who matter most to us. In our conversation with Kim, we talk about how mindfulness can help us navigate conflict in relationships, the power of changing how we pay attention to the people around us, and why she believes happy relationships are possible for everyone. Plus, Kim leads us in a guided meditation. So here's our conversation with Kimberly Brown.

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**James Shaheen:** So I'm here with meditation teacher Kim Brown and my co-host Sharon Salzberg. Hi Kim, hi Sharon, it's great to be with you today.

**Kimberly Brown:** Hi, James and Sharon.

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**Sharon Salzberg:** Hi.

**James Shaheen:** So Kim, we're here to talk about your new book, *Happy Relationships: 25 Buddhist Practices to Transform Your Connections with Your Partner, Family, and Friends*. So, to start, can you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to write it? I could certainly use it.

**Kimberly Brown:** Thanks. Yes. You know, it's funny, with this book, I didn't want to write it because I really felt that I would jinx myself if I did, and I had written a book about grief and another book about just keeping your mind steady, and that all seems relatively easy and useful, but when I contemplated writing about my relationships, which are the most valuable things in my life, and I think for all of us that ask people, the most valuable aspects of life are our relationships with other people, I somehow felt that if I wrote about how we can be happy in relationships, that this would somehow be hubris and that it would negatively affect my relationships. So I really wrestled with it for a long time.

The original title was *Joyful Relationships*. That I couldn't write. I had to change the title; happy just seemed more realistic. And I mention this in the book that I finally said to my husband, “I'm afraid if I write this, I'll ruin our relationship and other relationships, and it's all going to end,” and he said, “Well, yeah, they are all going to end, whether you write this book or not.” And it just brought me back to the dharma and the reason that I'm sharing these practices and that I've learned from such great teachers that we have this life, it's brief, it keeps changing, and it will end, and that's OK, too. They can still be happy.

**James Shaheen:** So, Kim, you begin the book by saying that happy relationships are possible for everyone. That's a big claim. Can you walk us through that claim? How so?

**Kimberly Brown:** Absolutely. I think first we have to understand what it means to be happy. I was always taught it meant that I get what I want, and if I make you, Sharon or James, happy,



that means I give you what you want. But happiness can also, or more realistically, mean a sense of contentment, a sense of wisdom about what we have and what we don't have, a sense of appreciation and gratitude. All of those can actually be real happiness.

So if we base or define happiness in this way, then all relationships can be happy, even those that are really difficult. Part of that is letting go of the expectation that people will be a different way. For me, most of my students and almost everyone I talk to who wants to learn to meditate, they want to do so because they're struggling with a relationship. And so this is a way that even maybe the external relationship hasn't changed, but within oneself, we're relating differently to this other person and our dynamic in a more contented way.

**Sharon Salzberg:** Kim, one of the things you say is that our happiness isn't dependent on everything in our lives being perfect, which may be true, but it can be difficult to actually accept that imperfection. Can you say more about this and how do we actually let go of our attachment to perfection?

**Kimberly Brown:** Oh, Sharon, isn't that the hardest part? You know, it really is. So I think first of all, many years ago, I trained to be a psychoanalyst, and I had a really nice, smart supervisor. She once said to me, “Kim, you're not getting it. Life is not circumstantial.” And I thought, “What does she mean? Of course it is.” Well, it's many years later and fifteen years into dharma training and being part of the Buddhist community, and this is true. We don't have to set up things in our life and get them just perfect, including the people, in order to feel contentment and appreciation for them.

This doesn't mean, and I hope this is clear in the book, that I respond perfectly every time, because a big part of life and relationships is being able to repair ruptures, and ruptures are going to come, so including that as part of the not-perfectness and recognizing that we can create a happiness through the reconnection, through keeping the wisdom of our love for the other person

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even when we're angry or even when they're drunk. In that way, not only do circumstances not have to be perfect, but we don't either.

**James Shaheen:** So Kim, you write that what makes relationships happy isn't an absence of conflict or difficult feelings but our ability to navigate them with openness, gentleness, and mindfulness. So how can mindfulness help us navigate conflict in relationships?

**Kimberly Brown:** Yeah. Beautiful. Thank you for that. When you were talking, I can't help but think, I told this story in the book that I had a boyfriend in my thirties. He was really a smart, nice man. We had shared the same values and interests, and we never fought ever. We never had an argument. If we disagreed about something, we would quickly say, “OK, well, that's fine,” and move on. I thought it was the perfect relationship because we never had conflict. And in the end, what we also didn't have was any intimacy.

So this idea of being mindful, even though you're still having a conflict, is being mindful of one, what you're feeling, what's actually happening inside of yourself so that you can choose or have a little bit more choice in how you respond.

In my experience, we're all going to have conflicts. We're going to just scream and get mad at each other. What really matters is not that we have those feelings. Feelings are fine. It's how we respond to these feelings in ourselves, and often that's with angry words or harmful behavior or hostility. And so we can have our conflict and use the mindfulness: OK, what's really happening here? What's happening in me? What's happening in between us right now? And just be able to sit with that and understand it. And then we connect with ourselves and are able to choose how we want to respond in a wise and also compassionate way.

**James Shaheen:** You know, you say that mindfulness can help us see people for who they really are rather than our projections or imaginations of them. Can you say more about this dynamic? I ask also because the process of meeting somebody and falling in love is very loaded with

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projection. As time goes on, the layers get peeled away, and sometimes we can have difficulty accepting or actually being even willing to see who that person is or even who we are. So can you say more about this?

**Kimberly Brown:** When you talk about falling in love, so much comes up for me or for a person when you meet another person. What's familiar about them is often what's familiar to us, what we've known in our life, other people in our life, and sometimes it's really nice: “Oh, you remind me of my first grade teacher, and she was so kind to me, and let's be friends.” But sometimes the reminder is of someone who is really unkind to you, and then that projection is less than ideal.

So it seems, or it did to me at first, like, “Oh, life will be so bland if I see it for what it is, people will be not anything special or not special.” But using mindfulness, using Buddhist tools to really see life clearly means not only seeing a person for all of their good things and their bad things and all of their complexity; it also inspires a compassion because they're struggling and you're struggling and I'm struggling, and through that compassion to be able to hold things about them that are really annoying or really ugly. You know, we all have them.

I mentioned that a lot of students come to me, and they're struggling with family, friends, partners, and part of the struggle is, and I hear this over and over again, “Why can't they X, why can't they just Y,” and they can't because they are who they are, or they can't *right now* because they are who they are. And when you can see someone clearly, and of course, including yourself, that sort of insight, but when you see someone clearly, then you can stop being disappointed by them. You can stop expecting them to be different than they are. And that's going to change perhaps your relationship. It might shift a little bit. Maybe you stop lending them money, whatever it might be. But now you're dealing with the reality of life, both its beauty and its sadness, and you can respond, I think, more appropriately when you can see people a little more clearly.

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**Sharon Salzberg:** Well, you also say something that made me very happy, which is that all happy relationships depend on our capacity to generate *metta*, or loving-kindness. How so?

**Kimberly Brown:** Well, first of all, I just have to thank you, Sharon, because people don't know this but Sharon taught me more or less all I needed to know or all I've known about metta. So thank you. And the reason that, of course, it's in my book and why I say this is it's the most important thing in relationships is because metta is an actual quality we have in ourselves and it's the quality to wish ourselves to be happy and to wish other people to be happy. And if we can orient our life in this way to really want James and Sharon to be happy, well, then the way I treat James and Sharon will come out of that. That will be my intention and my direction to create the happiness of these other people and also my own. And so to have relationships in which my guiding principle is “I wish for you to be happy,” it informs how I'm going to speak, how I'm going to act, how I'm even going to think about these other people. And it really transforms the relationship.

**Sharon Salzberg:** You also say in the book that there's a version of loving-kindness practice called “Let Yourself Love,” and I was very interested in that, so I wonder if you could tell us some more about that practice.

**Kimberly Brown:** Yes, I was actually, or I'm planning on, on using that one in our closing brief meditation.

**Sharon Salzberg:** Oh good.

**Kimberly Brown:** Because I feel that for me, in my life, I have really been taught to withhold and be very careful with my love and my loving-kindness, as though I only have a small quantity and I can give some to you, James, and some to you, Sharon, but I don't have enough for everybody.



And in fact, many years ago, I told my friend Denise that I was going to learn to be a loving person long before I even knew about Buddhism, and she said, “Oh my God, Kim, that's crazy. I hardly have enough for my mother. How are you going to just be so loving?” That's how many of us regard it, so that's how I have regarded it too. And the longer I practice, the longer I study meditation and Buddhism and I'm on this path, the more that I have come to believe, realize, and experience that all I have, really, is love and that all I can do is give it. And I feel this is true of all people. This is all at heart what we have to give, what we can leave with others and what our capacity is. And it is boundless, which is what they say in the Buddhist tradition. So until you can experience that, it seems like, “Well, no, I don't have enough.” You're like my friend Denise. And so to be able to practice with a phrase like, “May I be open to all the love in my heart,” it gives us some feeling, acknowledgment, it's tapping into, “Oh, it's here. It's right here. I do have all this love in my heart.” And it's been my experience in teaching people meditation that very quickly these feelings, this love, it's right there. It's like just a couple inches below the surface. And it just takes a minute, you know, a minute, I'm exaggerating, but it just takes a little bit of time to be quiet, and people can access it.

**Sharon Salzberg:** Throughout the book, you write about your own family and your own relationships. We've just heard a little bit about one relationship. So I'm wondering if you can tell us a bit about your own family history and how it shaped your understanding of both healthy and unhealthy relationships.

**Kimberly Brown:** Yeah. I was abandoned at birth, and I was adopted. I was in, it wasn't an orphanage, but it was sort of an orphanage for a couple of months, and then I was adopted. My adoptive parents really struggled in life. My dad had a lot of anger and anxiety, and my mom was an alcoholic. They did their best, and it was a really chaotic upbringing that I had. I wasn't physically abused or anything like that, except it was just a really unpredictable and unreliable childhood. What I do feel lucky about is that I have always had the ability to make friends. I maybe learned that out of circumstances, or it's just something inherent in me, I'm not sure, but

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very quickly at very young, three or four years old, I made friends, and that continued throughout my life. And so when I was a kid, a lot of my friends, you know, I went to dinner, I stayed at other people's homes, other families took me on vacation. When I look back as an adult at my young self and these people, I can't help but think it was amazing how they did that, and I'm so grateful to them. And I'm sure they could see all the difficulty in my family, and it was one of the reasons they helped me out. But it was through these friendships that I really learned how to love and I learned what a healthy quote-unquote family looks like.

Then, in my adult life, I mention in the book that I really struggled with intimate relationships, with having boyfriends, and that was really hard for me given my history and difficulty with intimacy. I really learned how to heal in that way, in a certain way, with certain close friends, who, some had kids when we were adults and some were married, some were divorced, but we came together in a family sort of way. Spending time with them, vacations and holidays, and having a closeness really helped me heal and start to become more comfortable with relationships. Later, I met someone and actually married, which I wasn't sure I would want to do because of that past family history.

**James Shaheen:** You know, Kim, you do talk about earlier relationships where there was no intimacy, and you write that one of the first steps in transforming our relationships is changing how we pay attention. Can you say more about this and how we can learn to pay attention to what we already have?

**Kimberly Brown:** Yeah. So this relates to that idea of happiness, of getting what I want, that'll make me happy. And if we predicate happiness on getting what we want, what we're saying is we don't have what we want. We need more, or something's missing, right? And that means we're not paying attention, because I think nearly anybody who's going to listen to this podcast very likely has so much. I mean, the idea that I can go and turn my water on any time of day and have drinkable water, I can have a shower at 2 a.m. and I don't have to boil copper pots to do that, plus all the other things, the people in our life, maybe our pets, our jobs, you know, the fact that I can



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call an ambulance, these are in some ways miraculous, but in any case most of us are not paying close attention that we have these things and that we have these people in our life who, you know, sometimes they're annoying and difficult, but I think most of the time what we overlook is their importance. Part of paying attention is to see all of this that we have and also see what we don't have, and in terms of relationships, being able to pay attention to who I am and what's between us without just looking for the critical and what you think is not there.

**Sharon Salzberg:** You also suggest that it can be important to create a refuge in relationships. So what does a refuge look like in the context of a partnership or a family?

**Kimberly Brown:** Yeah, refuge. When I first came to Buddhism, that idea was so meaningful to me, refuge. You could define it as a place of safety and belonging, and in the Buddhist tradition, it's very important to recognize that you have a place of refuge, both within the community of other Buddhists and people on this path, but also within oneself, a safe place, that you're a safe person. You can do that by developing familiarity with yourself through meditation and just getting to know yourself and have compassion. And then within a relationship, you're doing something similar. You are saying, together, we are going to support one another to feel safe” and to feel that you belong here and there's not a sense that you have to do something to deserve it or a sense that you have to fix something wrong with you before you're here, but rather a sense of both of us together are going to provide safety and support for our best qualities, our love, our kindness, our compassion, and we're going to share it with each other in this place.

**James Shaheen:** Kim, you also explore how we can work with anger, and you discuss the importance of welcoming our anger so it can be transformed. Obviously we're all familiar with anger in relationships. So can you say more about how we can actually work with our anger productively so that it doesn't harden into hostility or resentment or all-out war?

**Kimberly Brown:** Yeah, so first of all, whoever's listening, I know it's not easy. Years ago when I first started practicing meditation, I felt like teachers forgot that anger is very powerful. So it's

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sometimes not so easy to transform it. I understand that. But it is possible, and what's interesting to me in Buddhism, the way anger is dealt with is you take care of yourself. You know, if you're in an argument with someone, if there's anger between you, well, you take care of your own anger. And that's because it is so powerful, and it can develop into hostility or unkindness or malice. And so being able to simply sit with your anger and befriend it, again, that sounds sort of simplistic, but the feeling of anger is something most of us don't want. I think no one really wants it. And so when it comes up, we're usually throwing it in different ways on different people, you know, yelling, difficult thoughts, anxiousness in the body. And so to transform our relationship to our own anger is to be able to be with it, be mindful of it, not react out of it. And then when we feel more calm—you know, people hear this and think, “Oh, Kim, you're telling me just swallow it.” I'm not saying that at all. What I'm saying is have your anger, be with it, recognize what's there. It's usually going to inform you of something that's distressing to you. And now use your words to communicate in a more constructive way of what's upsetting and what you feel is wrong or angry or hurt you. And in this way, it gives our relationships, it gives the other people a way to respond to our feelings and not defend themselves against our anger. And that can really be connecting.

**James Shaheen:** You mention as a primary antidote to anger patience, which is very much a part of Buddhist teachings. I think, for instance, of Shantideva. What about patience in this context?

**Kimberly Brown:** Yeah. The first time I heard that was with a teacher named Venerable Robina Courtin many years ago, and I felt so mad that she said that was the antidote. It was really funny, you know, patience, because I thought she would say, I don't know, love, sweetness, something. With patience, first of all, I think to define it a little bit differently, it doesn't mean to grip your seat really tightly during turbulence and just wish and wait until it's over. It means to actually lessen your grip a little bit and feel that turbulence and recognize that it's here and soften your heart to it and recognize it's really hard for you and see what it is you're feeling with the

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knowledge that it's all going to change. You know, everything's moving. You're not always going to feel the way that you feel.

So with anger, what I believe is most useful is to be patient, and why this helps with the anger is because what you're doing is you're saying, “It's OK for you to be here, anger. I know you're going to come and go. It's not wrong for me to have you. It's another experience that I can open my heart to.” And that way it doesn't harden. At least for me, when I get angry with someone I love, the danger for me is it's going to get really solid. It's going to be a story that is so true: “You're the jerk. You always do that. Why? What's wrong with you?” And that story will get very, very hard like a crystal, and I'll keep adding to it and adding to it. But if I can sort of see, “Oh, that's my story and it's so painful and I'm just going to sit with all these really hard feelings,” well, then that anger, it's not so tight, and I can feel, “Oh, I'm hurt, I'm sad, I'm disappointed,” and that patience becomes like a warm blanket, almost, like a soothing quality rather than like another thing I'm gripping and just trying to wait out this really hard time.

**James Shaheen:** Maybe this is a question that either you or Sharon can answer, or both of you, because when I think of patience, I also think of acceptance, because often when I'm angry with the other, I think they should be otherwise. I think things should be otherwise, and acceptance sort of occurs to me. For instance, on the subway this morning, it was packed, and all of a sudden I realized I was angry with everybody. Why would it be otherwise? I feel like it shouldn't be this way, but it is. So what is the role of acceptance here? And Sharon, you might want to say something too.

**Kimberly Brown:** Sharon, I would love to hear what you think.

**Sharon Salzberg:** Well, acceptance, I think, is a very difficult word, and it takes some scrutiny and some investigation. I think it actually begins with interest, which is another antidote to dislike or anger, which seeks to separate us. Interest has us open, like, “What's cooking, where you at?” So I think if we can be interested in our own experience, for one thing, let alone the



other person or people, then we can see the building blocks of the anger or the resentment, and that is very interesting to understand really what's happening within us because it's not the same, to accept something in this context, it's not the same as saying it's fine. You know, maybe someone's acting out on the subway or they're behaving really inappropriately and you're not saying, “I'm a Buddhist, I'm going to accept this the way it is.” But understanding that, first of all, there's a distinction between what we feel and how we act, and we may not want that first rush of rage to be the guiding principle in what we say or do or shoving somebody aside or whatever action, which will be consequential. But if we can take an interest in our own feelings, understand how much is perhaps projection and how much is really a kind of moral compass pointing out inappropriate behavior, then we can act in a way that isn't, as Kim was saying earlier, so hot and can actually be more effective, because we see more options when we're not caught in that immediate reaction. What do you say, Kim?

**Kimberly Brown:** Yeah, I think what you just said too, it made me think about attention and interest. You know, Sharon was saying interest and curiosity, you know, what's going on here? And that's just another way of directing our attention in a particular way. I was also thinking, James, me and a lot of my students hate that word, acceptance, because it feels like, “Oh, I'm just agreeing. I approve of everything, even immoral things,” or something, you know. And one way that I've worked with it is to say this is the way things are *right now*. This is the way things are right now, you know, which is helpful to me in situations like you've just described in the subway.

**James Shaheen:** I guess a certain amount of discernment is needed. What is it that I can change, and what are those things that I cannot change? And if I cannot change, then acceptance starts to help a bit. But aside from things in the world not being exactly the way I want them to be, resentment can build because a person feels that they are not heard or acknowledged. And you talk about this, Kim. So how can we learn to counter and actually let go of that kind of resentment?



**Kimberly Brown:** Yeah, that's a really tough one. Just last week, I was in an argument with someone in my family, and I sat down after I talked to them, and I just got very still and a part of me said, “I just want her to hear me.” When that came up, immediately I said, “Well, I hear you.” And there was this moment of understanding, of recognition. So I think in these times with situations with family, when you don't feel heard, you don't feel understood, there are two things. One, it's possible that right now the two of you are having a struggle, and you'll be able to come together at a different time and hear each other after you calm yourself and et cetera. But there are also times when there's someone in your life who can't do that. There are very likely people in your life that you love who have limitations, that at least right now, they can't really take you in. They can't really hear you, or your feelings are too hard for them, however that might be for them. And so a big part of the practice is to be able to hear yourself, to be able to be with those feelings, be able to understand that and to recognize, James talked about discernment a moment ago, who can hear that and who can't.

You know, I feel like in part because of my history, I used to just insist the people who couldn't hear me hear me. It was like standing with my, you know, to bang my head on a wall. At a certain point as I healed, I realized, “Oh, I have to turn to the people who can hear me and find those people and stop trying to get something from someone who can't do it.”

**Sharon Salzberg:** I think a lot depends on the particular context and the particular relationship too, because I think there's also a fine distinction between wanting to be heard and wanting to be agreed with, and for us to be able to see our own motives in any moment is always an interesting mindfulness exercise, like, what do I really want out of this conversation? Do I want to be seen as right, or do I want a resolution? Do I want to feel the person is actually listening, or do I want complete agreement with everything I'm putting forth? And that's an interesting thing. And I really appreciate what you said, Kim, about not everyone is capable. It reminds me of when one of my colleagues would often say about how everyone's just doing the best that they can. And I would think, “No, they're not, not really.” I mean, I'm a New Yorker for one thing. And then I



read, I don't know the totally accurate version of Maya Angelou's quotation, but the popular version is something like “When you know better, you do better.” And in those words, I thought, “Oh yeah, I can get that. You know, I think that that makes sense.” It doesn't mean you like it. That's why the word accept is so difficult. It doesn't mean you like the dynamic or that you approve of it or that you want it to further on. It's something very other than that. It's kind of a state of peace within oneself.

**Kimberly Brown:** Yeah, and the idea of right and wrong, to let go of that can really help, Sharon. Like you said, you know, it's the motivation, like, “I just want you to know you're wrong.” I've been there many times. But to take it out of that at all, neither of us are right. Neither of us are wrong. We are both trying to connect and recognize each other for who we are.

**Sharon Salzberg:** Listening to you reminds me very much of listening to Bob Thurman, who was a scholar and practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism. He would often use the word “realistic.” I used to sit there and listen when we were teaching together and think, “That's boring. Why get up earlier in the morning to practice being realistic?” But I really, of course, appreciated what he was trying to say, which was that when we're being realistic or aligned with the truth of things, the ups and the downs and the joys and the sorrows and whatever may be happening, we're recognizing it, we're open to that reality, and so being realistic because it's being aligned with the truth is the basis of everything, every kind of transformation that we want. And as you've written, it's very realistic in a lot of ways. And I want to go on to one specific example, which is that one challenging dynamic in any relationship is creating and maintaining healthy boundaries. Can you say more about that?

**Kimberly Brown:** Yeah, it's interesting. That's another big question that I get from students, boundaries. How do I make boundaries? And again, it's something to consider what it means. It seems we use that word a lot in our culture in the last decade or so, and often it means saying no to someone. That's a boundary. And sometimes it can be very punitive: “Until you are X, I won't do Y.” And I think what we mean when we say healthy boundaries, one, it's what you were just

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talking about being realistic, accepting who someone is. I had a Zen teacher, and he used to use the word allowing. Allow, just allow. And part of these boundaries is seeing people clearly—What can they give you? What can't they?—and to be able to feel comfortable saying no.

There was a non-Buddhist teacher, Byron Katie, and she often says, “I love you, and no.” And that is almost the opposite of what I was taught about love and giving. It's like, “I love you, but I can't,” and now I have to defend myself and explain why I can't do this, blah, blah, blah, or it's your fault. But I can love you, by which I mean allow you to be who you are, wish you well, hope for your happiness, contribute to it as I can, *and* say no, and impart that what we're doing is equalizing self and other, that idea from Shantideva that before we can transform and just completely give everything away, first we have to equalize ourself and other people. That means all of us here deserve love and kindness. I don't deserve love and kindness more than you, and you don't deserve love and kindness more than me. We all do. And I think part of boundary setting is being able to say, “Well, I deserve to not be yelled at, and I can say no,” and respecting others when they say, “I deserve to not be yelled at, and I can say no too.” And those become the healthy boundaries, just recognizing, using our wisdom, to see what is harmful to us and what's harmful to other people, and saying, “I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to let that happen either.” It's rough because there's so much shame and guilt about a lot of our relationships and what we owe each other, and to really love is not a transactional thing. It's a quality of mutual support, and there's not a question of, “Well, I'm loving James and Sharon, what are you going to do for me?” It's my pleasure to love James and Sharon, and that's what it does for me. So that's part, also, I think, of setting the boundary.

**Sharon Salzberg:** So it's setting a boundary motivated by a sense of love and kindness and compassion.

**Kimberly Brown:** Yeah, what you could say is truth, getting back to realistic.

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**James Shaheen:** You say that the single most common struggle people tell you about is wanting a family member to be anyone other than who they are. You also mentioned earlier that your mother was an alcoholic, and loving her for who she is must have come into play there too. Can you tell us about this? Not necessarily your relationship with your mother, but learning to love someone for precisely who they are.

**Kimberly Brown:** Yeah. I mean, it's a real heartache to watch someone you love make bad decisions. You know, you mentioned my mom as an alcoholic. Anybody with a compulsive behavior would be one. People that make bad decisions that are harming themselves and others that are super angry, that are unsteady. It's really painful to see that and watch that.

Oftentimes with people we care about, there is a sense of, “I have to help them. I have to change them. Why won't they change? What can I do to change it?” With my mom, I did that right up to the last year of her life. You know, I either was trying to get her to do X, Y, and Z, something healthy, or I was hating her because she couldn't do something healthy. I had been studying Buddhism in the last years of her life, and the practice of equanimity was something I was studying, this idea to keep a balanced mind, to recognize what you can control and what you can't control, like you mentioned on the subway. And I didn't really understand it, I didn't really think it would be a useful thing to have equanimity because I thought I would just be saying, “Well, everything's OK.” But that last year of my mom's life, during that time, she was in physical rehabilitation facilities where she would really start to get healthy and well, and then she would check herself out and have a crash, and it kept going. At a certain point I was able to say, “Wow, I love you, and I can't make decisions for you,” which is a common Buddhist equanimity phrase, and I had such a sense of relief, although it was also heartbreaking because the truth of the situation was it was terrible and sad. I was able to say, “This isn't up to me. I can be here in whatever way I can be here.”

This has helped me in many relationships, and I've seen it help a lot of people, to be able just to step back and say, “It's not up to me.” It doesn't mean that I will run away from you or I won't





help you. In fact, when I took bodhisattva vows in the Tibetan tradition years ago, our teacher at the time said to us, “These are unbreakable vows. They're not like if I said I won't drink, and then I drank and the vow's broken. There's no way to break them, except if you say, ‘I will never help this person again. They're such a terrible person. I give up on them.’” And so we're not talking about that. And that's what sometimes people hear with equanimity and allowing people to be who they are. It's more that you're going to hold them in your heart. You're going to hold the possibility of change for them, because people can change. You know, all of us have seen people transform, but we're saying, “It's not up to me. I love you, and I'm here as you make these bad decisions that I can see with my wisdom are not going to turn out well.”

**James Shaheen:** That relief that you felt, that sounds a bit like a transformation. Did that reverberate through all of your relationships?

**Kimberly Brown:** It has, James, and not even just with close personal relationships but relationships to people in the world, political figures, et cetera. And not that I'm constantly in this state of equanimity, but that I can tap into that sense of, “Kim, it's not up to you. Let go of that tightness.” Sharon writes about constriction in her last book. You can feel it, like, “I want you to be different.” Instead, I'm going to let go of that, because that's not up to me. I can see that your actions are harmful for sure, and I'm going to do whatever in my capability can provide benefit. But you're your own situation, and I can just be here and wish for all of us to be happy and not struggle and not to harm.

**Sharon Salzberg:** I think this is also connected to one of the analogies you use throughout the book, which is planting seeds. It's like doing what we can do in this moment in responsiveness or through practice or whatever. So what does it look like to plant the seeds of happy relationships?

**Kimberly Brown:** Well, the first step really is being kind to yourself. Those are the first seeds, you know, that idea that, first, may I be open to all the love in my heart. Second, may I use that kindness and love for myself and my feelings. And those are the seeds. Those seeds start to ripen

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and start to direct what I say, what I do, and create this connection coming from this place of kindness, of caring, of love, of connection. Those seeds just keep ripening. It's like, I'm trying to think of a plant that grows and then has many seeds, like a tomato plant. A tomato plant grows, and then dozens more seeds come out of that plant. And that seems to be the quality to me of planting these seeds of love, of kindness, of patience, wisdom, and they start to ripen throughout all of these relationships as patience, kindness, love, connection, and metta.

**James Shaheen:** So Kim, we're winding down here. It's been a wonderful conversation. Do you have anything else to add?

**Kimberly Brown:** Well, yes, I just want to encourage everyone to know that you can do it. Even if your mom has been for fifty years the most difficult person in your life, you can shift your relationship to her, even if she never changes. But you can feel more ease and more comfortable and more love.

**James Shaheen:** Kimberly Brown, thanks so much for joining us. It's been a great pleasure. For our listeners, please be sure to pick up a copy of *Happy Relationships*, available now. We like to close these podcasts with a short guided meditation, so I'm going to hand this over to Kim.

**Kimberly Brown:** Thank you, James and Sharon. So I'd just like you to take a moment, you can close your eyes if you'd like, or just lower your gaze and put a hand on your heart and a hand on your belly, and just be. Pay attention to your presence, your breath, your body. Maybe just imagine somebody that you've cared about, that's really been kind to you. They don't have to be a perfect person, but imagine somebody who's loved you pretty nicely and easily. Imagine they're here with you, and hear them say to you, “May you be open to all the love in your heart.” Maybe they say your name, “James, Sharon, may you be open to all the love in your heart.” Hear them repeat this to you just a couple of times. Hearing them say this one more time to you, “May you be open to all the love in your heart.” Connecting to yourself now, maybe keeping this loving person with you, feeling your own presence, again, keeping your hand on your heart and your

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hand on your belly, saying to yourself, “May I be open to all the love in my heart. May I be open to all the love in my heart. May I be open to all the love in my heart.” Just repeat this to yourself just for less than a minute. “May I be open to all the love in my heart.” And let's just take a minute to, or less than a minute, just to include all living beings, *sabbe satta*. May all beings, may everyone, may we be open to all the love in our hearts. May everyone be open to all the love in our hearts. Thank you, everyone. Peace, peace, peace.

**James Shaheen:** Thank you so much, Kim. And thank you, Sharon, as always.

**Sharon Salzberg:** Thank you.

**James Shaheen:** You've been listening to *Life As It Is* with Kimberly Brown. Tricycle is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to making Buddhist teachings and practices broadly available. We are pleased to offer our podcasts freely. If you would like to support the podcast, please consider subscribing to Tricycle or making a donation at [tricycle.org/donate](https://tricycle.org/donate). We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at [feedback@tricycle.org](mailto:feedback@tricycle.org) to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow *Tricycle Talks* wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* and *Life As It Is* are produced by Sarah Fleming and The Podglomerate. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!