

Life As It Is

Episode #11 with Sumi Loundon Kim

“Tapping Into Our Collective Wisdom with Sumi Loundon Kim”

June 22, 2022



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James Shaheen: Hello and welcome to *Life As It Is*. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. For Buddhist chaplain Sumi Loundon Kim, sangha, or community, is the foundation of Buddhist practice. As a child, Kim grew up in a Soto Zen community in rural New Hampshire, and her immersive experience of Buddhism has informed her understanding of how we engage with the dharma. Kim later went on to found Mindful Families of Durham, a meditation community that supports parents, caregivers, and children. She currently serves as the Buddhist chaplain at Yale University, where she has been experimenting with alternative models of sangha. In today’s episode of *Life As It Is*, my co-host Sharon Salzberg and I sit down with Sumi to discuss how to tap into the collective wisdom of a sangha, the power of storytelling, and how spiritual friendship can support us in facing the crises of our world today.

James Shaheen: So I’m here with Buddhist chaplain and writer Sumi Loundon Kim and my co-host Sharon Salzberg. Hi, Sumi. Hi, Sharon.

Sumi Loundon Kim: Hi.

Sharon Salzberg: Hello.

James Shaheen: It’s great to be with you both. I should say that we all know each other so nobody wonders why we’re so casual with each other. So Sumi, we’re here to talk about your work in building sustainable and supportive Buddhist community models. So to start, can you share a little bit about your experience growing up in a Zen community? That’s one thing I didn’t know about you. So I’m very interested to hear.

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Sumi Loundon Kim: Oh, you didn't know that?

James Shaheen: No, I didn't know.

Sumi Loundon Kim: Yeah, so in the early 1970s, both my parents were involved in a Soto Zen community in rural Vermont, they relocated to rural New Hampshire across the river, and I was born into that in 1975. My first experiences with Buddhism were very immersive. It was really through shared space, shared time, a shared schedule, that I absorbed the early lessons of the path of the dharma. And I later realized it's somewhat unusual. A lot of other people I know come to the dharma through reading, through studying the philosophies of Buddhism, and through meditation practice. And so I keep coming back to this theme of sangha, of community, throughout my growing up and my college career, my grad school career, and now professional work because of these early beginnings in that Zen community. I lived there till I was about nine years old.

James Shaheen: Wow. So you sort of absorbed the teachings through the living model. Is that right in some ways?

Sumi Loundon Kim: Exactly. One thing that I came to learn about later is the two ways that people learn things, especially children. One is through implicit learning, and one is through explicit learning. I began to notice that my own children would phrase things certain ways, that their body posture and mannerisms would be certain ways, and I came to see “Oh, that's exactly the way I do that, or exactly the way my husband does that.” We never directly taught them that this is how you should walk, this is the type of things you would say, but somehow, they were living those out. And just in the course of studying how young people develop, I came to learn that what was happening is that they were learning implicitly, through nonverbal absorption, the

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ways and culture of my husband and me. We could contrast this with explicit learning where we tell the child this is what you need to do, or this is how you do this project, and so on. I think that while we have plenty of explicit learning in our dharma centers, I could see more room for implicit learning, where people can spend time together and begin to absorb the way we are in the dharma with each other. I think modeling from others is incredibly important. When I look back on the time that I lived and worked at Barre Center for Buddhist Studies and the time that I've spent at IMS up the hill, I can see that I was watching how the teachers interacted with the staff, how the staff interacted with each other, how yogis comported themselves. It's probably a little alarming to you, Sharon, to think, "People are looking at me and modeling themselves on how I behave?" But I think that especially because I was young, I was looking for how people embodied what they were practicing. And then thankfully, I was around really good people, and so I started to absorb a little bit of that comportment myself.

James Shaheen: So how did growing up in the community that you did inform your interest in how we can develop and strengthen sanghas?

Sumi Loundon Kim: Well, I saw for myself the benefit of living and spending time with other people who are practicing the same undertaking. In retrospect, I think that doing that together made what we were doing, while well outside the mainstream of American culture at that time, it made it normative. This is how we conduct ourselves. We pay attention. We think of others. We perform acts of service. And so when my kids were very young, I definitely wanted them to have a good grounding in mindfulness practices and some of the basic teachings from the Buddhist tradition. But I couldn't really see myself as a parent trying to fold that in. I mean, to some extent, I could. But it would all get wrapped up in everything else that I'm teaching them: pick up your clothes, wash the dishes, brush your teeth, be mindful. I didn't really want to do it that way. And so I started a family community basically for them. And it turned out to be a very popular idea for the people in that area of Durham, North Carolina. And so while those families

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didn't live together as I had growing up, we did meet once a week, and parents practiced meditation while children had time to learn mindfulness skills. And again, I think that all of us coming together even once a week for a few hours, the volume of people present made everything normative for the children, but also to some extent for the parents. And it really reinforced the learning by undertaking it together rather than as individual families or individuals ourselves.

Sharon Salzberg: Sumi, I've forgotten, because I perpetually forget, how old were you when you came to IMS to begin with?

Sumi Loundon Kim: 16.

Sharon Salzberg: And how old is your daughter now?

Sumi Loundon Kim: Oh, goodness, she's 16. I didn't realize that.

Sharon Salzberg: Whoa. That was just intuitive.

Sumi Loundon Kim: I love that. She's coming on the teen retreat, which I did 30 years ago.

Sharon Salzberg: Fabulous. That's so great. So when your children were preschoolers, you started Mindful Families of Durham, which is a meditation community that supports parents, caregivers, and children in their mindfulness practice. So what inspired you to form that community?

Sumi Loundon Kim: Basically, I wanted my children to learn mindfulness skills and core Buddhist teachings from other caring adults who were not me because they could learn it from

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me, but I had so many other things that I had to teach them—plus I was their chief chastiser, as many parents are. So I felt it would be beneficial for them to be able to receive it better if they were learning from other adults and also if they were with other children learning at the same time, which is something I benefited from. I lived in a community that had a lot of children, and we were all practicing meditation and Tai Chi and all doing cleaning and gardening and so on.

Sharon Salzberg: So at least at some point, when you were in Durham, you and your husband were house parents, right? I remember you making soup a lot.

Sumi Loundon Kim: Too much soup.

Sharon Salzberg: So I'm just thinking about how your children also maybe have an expanded idea of family and adulthood and community.

Sumi Loundon Kim: Great question. Actually, we did live in a dormitory of 400 students. At Duke University, we were faculty in residence. That was the title. And the kids did grow up with young adults all around them 24/7, sometimes for the better, often for the ill. They knew what pot smoke smelled like way too young. But yes, I think that living with other people probably has given them an expanded sense of community. And I do see a certain fluidity in them now in the way that they can enter a room and very naturally become present to everyone there and circulate. They have natural social skills. It's something I've seen with other children who grow up in community. It's like a first language, just how to be around other people together, how to move around the room, how to both share yourself but not overwhelm others. Lots of things like that.

Sharon Salzberg: What would you say the goals of Mindful Families were?

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Sumi Loundon Kim: And thankfully, still are. It's still around. I left them four years ago, and now it's in the hands of an extraordinarily capable group of parents. The community is built to introduce both secular mindfulness and Buddhist points of view and practices primarily to young families. So parents have children anywhere from the ages of, say, two to middle school. We've always struggled to find something for teenagers. It's somewhat like church but without the Christian part. So it meets on Sunday mornings, and there are Sunday school teachers. They're called sati, or mindfulness, schoolteachers. And the children are divided out into classes where they have a range of arts and crafts and learning something about mindfulness and story time and time to play together, while the parents go off, learn some meditation themselves, and enter into discussion groups. I think if you came on any given Sunday and you hadn't had children, you might be a little overwhelmed. The amount of noise and running around and toys on the floor and popcorn here and there. The environment is not at all like a dharma center. But we found that in order to accommodate children, we needed to kind of open up the space and have it be a little more welcoming for the energy of children. As a result, it's also fairly social. So there's this kind of meet-and-greet period where people can come in and chat with each other, grab a snack, grab a cup of coffee or tea, and then there's social time afterwards. There's always football or a soccer ball around.

Sharon Salzberg: Did it become virtual during the pandemic?

Sumi Loundon Kim: Yes, they did go virtual. And amazingly, they sustained it. I don't know how they did that.

Sharon Salzberg: Did anything surprise you about working with families as you created these communal spaces? Because it couldn't be the total replication of your childhood.

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Sumi Loundon Kim: Right, yes, it's not residential. I was surprised by two things. One is how needed that kind of programming was. When I started it. I remember posting on the neighborhood listserv, “Hey, does anybody want to blah, blah, blah?” thinking this is either going to bomb or be a great idea. And it took off. Within weeks, we had 12 families interested. So I was surprised by that. The other thing I was surprised by is I thought this will primarily be a children's program, and we'll throw something in for the parents. Over time, it became really clear to me that the main energy for the group and the main thing that was sustaining it was how much parents needed to come together with each other and really think about developing themselves. And that led me to become aware of the basic principle that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. If there are problems with the children, look at the parents. The parents needed to look at themselves. That sometimes is a bit of an ask, and you have to come around to that very carefully. Because a parent doesn't want to think, oh, the issues with my child start here. Most parents don't want to look at that: I'm bringing them for mindfulness so that you can fix them with it. But over time, particularly as they begin to learn meditation, I think that self-reflection does start to come in and they realize, “Oh, I've got some healing work to do myself.” And so then the project of being in that community really changes over to the point where parents would come, and if their kids couldn't make it, fine.

Sharon Salzberg: That's great. So would you say that your own approach to parenthood evolved through your work with Mindful Families?

Sumi Loundon Kim: Yes, completely. I myself went through that stage. Not that my kids had problems. They're really wonderful kids. But in the moments where I could lose my temper and get frustrated, I over time came to see it's not the child. And so that began a pretty thorough reorientation. But the beautiful thing is that the more that I worked on my relationship to myself, almost as if I were reparenting myself, the more I naturally became a better parent. I didn't have to use mindfulness to become a better parent in that kind of applicatory way. But instead, I really

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just needed to put the effort and energy into my own healing, my own journey, and then I would really get a two-for-one deal. I would not only get my own benefit, but it would very naturally benefit my children. And that's where metta practice became so, so important because once I could hear, as you often teach, Sharon, that inner critic, that voice, which is usually adopted from a harsher judgmental parent—I wouldn't say usually, but it can be; in my case it was—I realized I had to revise that voice. The way that I talk to myself is the way that I talk to my children. No wonder I'm harsh, no wonder I'm critical with my children. So I embarked much more seriously on *metta* practice for myself. That inner voice began to change. And then voila, the way that I talk to my children and also, importantly, to my spouse is so much softer, more forgiving. Still, we can set boundaries and expectations, but the way it's done in the tone of it is very different.

Sharon Salzberg: Just in case anybody is unfamiliar with the word *metta*, it translates as lovingkindness. So Sumi's talking about the particular methodology of meditation that really emphasizes the quality of lovingkindness.

James Shaheen: So Sumi, right now you're the Buddhist chaplain at Yale. Can you talk a little bit about creating spaces of community and belonging for college students? I ask in part because a lot of college students have to be showing up without a strong sense of community. Certainly, they didn't grow up with the sense of community that you did.

Sumi Loundon Kim: I was very curious to see what would happen coming out of the lockdown portion of the pandemic. So we had a year where pretty much everything was remote, including the Buddhist program. So we weren't able to meet in the beautiful Buddhist shrine room that's very central on campus. But when things started up in the fall of 2021, we could be back together, although masked, and I wasn't sure anybody would come back. But what happened instead is that the room filled to capacity cheek to cheek. There was a lot of interest. I think the reason for why people wanted to be in that meditation room was being driven by two things. One

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is they had been isolated for many, many months. And as a result of that isolation, they had a lot of time for introspection. Some of the students later shared very directly that they had oriented their life in one way around a career and materialism and professional success. And then after spending time alone and reflecting on things, they had come to see the vacuity of some of those pursuits and now wanted to pursue something spiritual and more meaningful. So many were driven by that extended period of internal reflection but also desperate for the company of others. And what space offers that very unusual combination of both being with others, as well as skills for going even deeper in oneself and providing that kind of structured self-reflection, but a Buddhist meditation space? It's perfect. So the room became full to capacity, and I noticed that the students were very excited to see each other.

I also, during the pandemic, did some further self-education and tried to learn some new ideas. One of the things I stumbled across was something you've probably heard of, which is polyvagal theory. And this is a revised understanding of how our nervous system might be structured. I like saying polyvagal theory because I feel like it makes me sound really smart. But it's not that hard to understand. So one of the propositions is that we have this set of nerves in the front of our body. They're called the ventral vagal nerves. And these nerves are our prosocial nervous system, which asks the question, "Am I safe?," scans the environment to look for safety, and gets the answer through the social cues of others: a friendly wave, a smile, a tilt of the head, eye contact. And so when our nervous system is around other people and is getting those signals, "Yes, I like you, I'm friendly, I don't pose a threat to you," then this ventral vagal nerve gets soothed and reassured and can be quite calm. And so as the students came back in to the meditation space, I thought, huh, here are all these ventral vagal nerves greeting each other, and wouldn't it be great if we drew on this idea and just gave people even more permission to introduce themselves to each other because typically, in a meditation space, people arrive, they beeline for the meditation cushion, they face forward toward the teacher or the altar, they listen, they meditate, and then they beeline back out with very little contact with the people around them.



Some of the students would enter the meditation space exactly in that way. I could see that they were a little uncertain, like, “Am I OK here? Are other people like me? I’m not Buddhist, is that OK?” So, this year, unlike previous years, I built in a meet-and-greet period right at the beginning of each time that we met. I said, “Please turn to your neighbor.” It sounded very churchy: “Please turn to your neighbor, say hello, share your name, what your major is, and so on.” And as soon as I gave people permission to do that, I could feel the energy of the room go way up. People were so happy to find, “Oh, I am welcome here.” And then we would, after a few minutes, come back to our session, and we would do the meditation. And I suspect that that few minutes of social time is actually conducive to better meditation practice because at the unconscious level, the person isn’t wondering, “Is the person behind me safe? Is the person to my right safe, to my left, in front of me?” They already knew. They already got that smile, that eye contact, that tilt of the head, that gave them the information, “Yes, I’m safe.” And when we feel safe, I suspect we relax more. And when we relax more, it’s easier to meditate. So I’m definitely going to do this from here on out.

James Shaheen: Right, it’s interesting. I mean, you talk about how social interaction can help deepen the practice. But how, when we go deeper in ourselves, does that make us more social? And I ask because these two things are often seen as very separate, so I’m very interested in how you see them supporting each other.

Sumi Loundon Kim: It’s a good question. Well, when we sit quietly, we’re becoming more attuned to how we’re feeling inside. But we’re also becoming more attuned to what is in our external environment. We become a little calmer, a little more receptive, and so then, as we come out of a meditation practice and we might turn to another for a small-group discussion, often I do small-group discussions, we’re listening better, tracking how we’re feeling, what’s happening in our body, what kinds of responses are being elicited as we listen to others. And so that intimacy and connection with ourselves, as well as awareness of others and awareness of the environment,

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is very conducive to a social interaction that is perhaps even more honest, even more compassionate and receptive than when we're arriving to a cafeteria where we're between classes and we have 10 things on our mind.

Sharon Salzberg: I'm curious, Sumi, do you ever actually talk about polyvagal theory because what I've seen in different situations is sometimes it's very reassuring. People can blame themselves so much for what they're going through even if they've gone through some terrible ordeal, you know, and you hear "I should be better, I should be more balanced, I should have more equanimity." And I've seen even in terrifically traumatized communities, sometimes people hear about the theory. I remember one woman who had blamed herself quite considerably in an astounding way, because she'd been through some terrible, terrible things. She turned to me after a lecture and she said, "It's just my nervous system." And it was like such a gift.

Sumi Loundon Kim: Yeah. I hope that everyone will try to learn a little bit. I know that Dan Harris just did a podcast with Deb Dana on her most recent book *Anchored: How to Befriend Your Nervous System Using Polyvagal Theory*, and I think this way of looking at how we're interacting with the world and how we're feeling, it helps depersonalize it a little bit, just as you pointed towards, Sharon: "Oh, I'm not doing something wrong, or I'm not inherently flawed or bad in some way." And so just getting some basics of polyvagal theory, which is a bigger term than what it really is all about, can be extraordinarily helpful. The author has some pretty practical exercises on how to regulate your nervous system that are quite a bit like mindfulness practices, to be honest. It was a strong overlay of the two.

James Shaheen: Sumi, you've also been experimenting with spiritual storytelling workshops. And I wonder if you could talk about that, what drew you to it, and how your students respond to that.

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Sumi Loundon Kim: I’m trying to think about what types of activities we can do when we gather together for an evening session that would help to foster meaningful relationships and intimacy. I have noticed when I’m in other religious spaces that the practice of witnessing in which a member just an average member of the community gets up and shares a personal story, how moving that can be, and also the stories of my teachers, like Sharon and others, how it brings points alive and humanizes things and makes some of the teachings feel much more accessible for me. So I wondered whether we could bring storytelling into Buddhist spaces and how we might do that and whether it would even work. So I asked the great internet God, Google, is there a program already out there and stumbled across the amazing work of a Catholic lay teacher named Celeste Mueller, who wrote an article, “Create Sacred Space with Stories: Storytelling as a Formation Tool and Spiritual Practice.” And it’s remarkably Buddhist in the way it works. It’s a workshop that she’s developed over 20 years. So I took the basics of how she does it, I amped up the meditation part of it, and I tried the first run of this workshop with the Yale students. I made a few strategic errors, so it didn’t go quite as well as I hoped it would. But the students did seem to enjoy writing a reflective moment and sharing that with their peers. I made some adjustments to the workshop and then offered it to the Wonderwall Sangha online a couple of weekends ago. And those numbers are much more experienced with meditation practice and with dharma practice. It was an online program, so that was a little bit different, and it went amazingly well. I couldn’t even believe how powerful the stories were and how much I fell in love with the person reading it, each person. It created a sense of intimacy that couldn’t even be gotten from a several-hour conversation with somebody. It was just wonderful. And several of the participants said, “I’m bringing this back to my sangha because this is an amazing way of getting to know each other and to learn from each other.” So I really hope we’ll incorporate more of this in building community.

James Shaheen: What were the stories like? People were reading stories about their practice or about their search?

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Sumi Loundon Kim: The premise is we have the participants do about maybe 20 minutes of guided meditation and then drop into that quieter space question: What memory of an event from my spiritual path would like to be shared? and just allow the deeper self, the higher self, the subconscious, whatever to see what bubbles up. And you're encouraged to take pretty much what first bubbles up, even if your ego says, "That's not important. Oh, that doesn't make me look good. I've had much more profound insights than that one." So you just take that first one, first thought best thought, and then take about 15 minutes to write out what you smell, what you heard, what you saw, what was said, how you felt, and then we do mindful sharing of each story. So some of the stories were often from people's youth. One woman shared how she had been on a retreat. I think it was in the 1970s. She was feeling pretty depressed. Someone said, "Why don't you take a walk along this forest path and just listen for the sound of the waterfall? You'll get to the really pretty spot, and you can just spend some time there." So she kept listening for the sound of the waterfall. She gets there, and she really takes in the beauty of the spot. She goes into great detail in her narrative. And she starts to feel much better. Something lifts from the burden that she was feeling. As she walks back to the practice center, in the middle of the trail that she had just walked was a paper bag with three apples in it. She's looking around. Who left it here? She couldn't find the owner. Was it accidental, deliberate? She decides to pick it up, she brings it back to the dharma hall before the evening session, and she hands each apple to three people that she feels most connected to. And that's the end of the story. It was just so sweet. You just had to listen.

James Shaheen: That sounds like a pretty amazing session. I mean, no wonder people are taking it back to their sanghas. Something else that you've been experimenting with are horizontal structures of community. I imagine that's a flatter organizational structure or a more decentralized authority. Can you say something about that?

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Sumi Loundon Kim: I am playing around with how time is spent between teachers and students. Previously, it had been very much me in the teacher spot or other teachers in the teacher spot, and then we share the best of what we know with the students and try to give them something. And that had some beneficial effect. Definitely, students are learning, but I could often feel like the energy of the room was sleepy. And I myself in that format found that I don't actually remember very much of what's taught and that I tended to remember lessons best when I was in conversation with other people. Sometimes it was something someone else said that would be striking and something I would learn. And often it would be that something popped out of my mouth that I didn't even know I thought. I'd be like, "Oh, that's pretty important," or "Oh, that's pretty good." Those things I remember because I have an ego. So I thought, could we find ways for students? Many of them are very interesting people. Could we find ways for students to talk about a subject together and co-teach and co-learn in a more lateral way than me, the expert, in a more hierarchical mode, teaching them, the novices? So I've been learning some workshop formats that are conducive to group sessions. One of them that the students absolutely loved was the fishbowl format. People are familiar with that. And another one is the open space. It's called Open Space Technology, but I think that's overinflated, so I call it the open space method. So these are group facilitation practices that can be used across a wide range of settings, but it works really well in Buddhist spaces as well. The students have responded tremendously to that. I think that while teachers have great wisdom, there is a place for collective wisdom. And I'm often surprised by how wise the people in the room are and they have a lot to offer each other and me as well.

James Shaheen: Have there been any issues with that, or has it simply worked smoothly?

Sumi Loundon Kim: It's worked very smoothly. There was one moment where I thought—with the open space method, the topics are chosen by the people in the room, and a good number of students wanted to do the topic of loss. And so students went to different corners of the room for

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the different topics, and I kind of kept my ear out for the students who were talking about loss. Sure enough, some people were crying. And that's when I realized that they didn't have enough experience in helping others with grief, unprocessed grief, so I saw the limit right there, like this is where a professional would be very helpful. So I went over to the group, and I gave each one of them my card and said, "Call me if you would like to work on this." So that was one little exception.

James Shaheen: Right. You also, I think, count among your influences, the writer and activist Parker Palmer. Would you like to say anything about that?

Sumi Loundon Kim: Yeah, I did some reading. Again, thank you pandemic for providing time for further learning. So Parker Palmer is an educator who came out with a book called *The Courage to Teach*, and it's remarkably Buddhist. In my view, anything that's brilliant is remarkably Buddhist, so I think that says something about our tradition. So he talks exactly as I've laid it out that traditional education is very hierarchical, where you have the expert transmitting knowledge about the subject to the neophyte. He then explores the limitations of that, the ways that that can inadvertently embody rigid power structures and not be of benefit either for the teacher or for the students. And so he proposes—this is 30 years ago—taking that top-down and turning it sideways so that instead, if you wanted to visualize it, you have students circle around the subject at hand being in the middle, and that the students looking at the subject in the middle with facilitation and guidance from the instructor (there is a role for the teacher) begin talking about the subject with each other and learning from each other. And the teacher participates as well. That's another way of learning. It might take a little bit longer, but it's far more memorable. And it's richer and more nuanced. I also think it probably builds relationships as well. So I do a lot more of that myself. I often outline some initial ideas on a topic, let's say it's on solitude, give them a few ideas to work with, break students out into small groups, and then have them work with each other on it. And that has felt very successful.

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James Shaheen: So I think that there are a few things as painful as watching a sangha unravel, we've seen this happen and people are left adrift. And sometimes that alienates them, and they don't want to come back to community, but many do want community and they want to rebuild. I was wondering if you had any thoughts on how new forms of sangha can evolve to meet the needs of those people, or all of us, really, because this is one big experiment in so many ways. It's a hard one, I know.

Sumi Loundon Kim: That is really hard. I also think it's a perennial struggle. It's not my area of expertise in some ways.

James Shaheen: But it does sound like you're trying new things that are really tightening communities and making them more welcoming places where these things are perhaps less likely to happen because people would feel the freedom or enough of a comfort level to speak up. Or if you're asking them to participate in the ways that they're participating, whether it's telling a story or being involved in selecting the topic. I mean, I know that the teachers and the professionals are going to know more than the students, and so there's a certain natural hierarchy there. But you seem to be wanting to offer some balance to that structure.

Sumi Loundon Kim: Oh, I see. I think you answered the question. I love that.

James Shaheen: Well, I thought of that only because I've been listening to you for the past hour, so this sort of comes to me. I was wondering if that's on target.

Sumi Loundon Kim: I think that is really on target. I'll just jump off of what you said there. That was fantastic. I came across an interview with Laurie Santos from Yale. This is a New York Times article from February of this year. She made this really interesting observation that there's

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lots of evidence that religious people are happier overall. And then she goes on to ask: Are they happier because of the beliefs of the system? Or is it the spaghetti suppers, the donating to charity, the participation in volunteer stuff? She says that the research shows, in as much as those two things can be divided out, that it's probably the doing stuff together that's the real generator of feelings of happiness. So I looked at that, and my eyes popped out and I thought, how could we implement this on the ground? So for the rest of the spring semester, I deliberately created stuff for people to do and handed that over to them. So for example, we needed to build a shoe rack. We needed to keep track of the library books being checked out. Lots of other small tasks. And even though it would have been considerably more efficient for me to just do it myself, I experimented with asking people to do various things, and they were very happy to, and just supporting them as they did it, usually imperfectly. But the end result was that when they walked into the entryway, they got to see my shoe rack. I built that shoe rack. Other people benefit from that shoe rack. And so they feel like the community is theirs. And so I now think that having people do stuff and do stuff together in Buddhist community could be a really powerful way of getting more participation. I just ran across something from Ravi Mishra, who is the next-next-generation. I like to think of myself as a next-generation, but he's clearly younger than me. So he might even be the next-next-next generation. This is from *Lion's Roar's* "The Next 40 Years." He suggests that the future of Buddhism is partly around cultivating fellowship. He shares that in the three years that he's been part of a particular Zen center, that he really only knows a handful of the people there. And he says that we really need to develop fellowship if Buddhism is to have a future. And funnily enough, he says, "By participating in potlucks, volunteering, even casual nights out together, we can foster genuine connection and community in our sanghas." So it might feel uncomfortable, I think, for some people, especially people who come from churches, where maybe they hadn't had a good experience to do some of these things. And sometimes people come to Buddhist spaces because it does offer a refuge of quiet and self-reflection, where you're not forced to have a lot of social contact, especially if you're not

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feeling well and you just really need to spend time with yourself. But I think there's room to do more of this in our communities to build community.

James Shaheen: That's wonderful.

Sharon Salzberg: Just as an aside, Sumi, did you know Parker Palmer and I do a webinar together about once a month?

Sumi Loundon Kim: Are you kidding?

James Shaheen: That's why you were smiling, Sharon. I was going to ask you because your face lit up when Sumi mentioned him.

Sharon Salzberg: Our running joke is that he keeps saying he's getting more Buddhist, and I keep saying I'm getting more Quaker. It's the Wellbeing Project, and it's all up online. It's really an organization that's attempting to serve international humanitarian aid workers. It's a very international community.

Sumi Loundon Kim: Oh my gosh, wow. I love that the two of you are together.

Sharon Salzberg: So when James and I were originally talking about this podcast, we saw it as a way to talk to people about how they're getting through these times and the pandemic and isolation or working outside the home in some kind of treacherous ways. How do you see sangha and spiritual friendship supporting us in facing the crises of our world today?

Sumi Loundon Kim: Yeah, that's a really important question. A lot of people I know who are working on the climate crisis, what they're noticing is that they need to work with the

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psychology of the reaction to the climate crisis in order to make any progress. And so people, for example, at the Yale School of the Environment are looking at how we deal with grief, despair, the ways in which people can get completely flooded and then shut down when they begin to learn the reality of what we're facing. The same happens for people working in areas of social justice and racial justice. The structures are so enormous and entangled that it can feel impossible. And so people lose any sense of agency and feel immobilized by that. And so here is where I think Kritee Kanko's work is so helpful. She posits that to meet the climate crisis and to begin to move the needle on that—that's her area of specialty, but this applies to all other threats and major challenges—we create islands of resilience. These islands of resilience are small communities of seven to eight people. They're friends. They're friendships. I wouldn't even use the word “communities.” It's a group of people. You get together once a week and have a meal together, meditate together, talk together, get to know each other. We might say that friendship is one-to-one, and communities are multiple friendships in which everybody knows each other. So these small islands of resilience. And that's where we may have some hope. We feel that I can't do this alone. But I can do it when I have seven other people near me. And together, collectively, we might be able to do something, support each other, be a refuge and a support when we do feel down, that we could actually make some progress little by little. And if each person is part of a small island of resilience and we have multiples of these, then I think the situation might feel more workable. So I think this is a very practical solution to addressing issues around grief and despair and becoming frozen in the face of these threats.

James Shaheen: Sumi Loundon Kim, thanks so much. It's been a pleasure. We like to close these podcasts with a short guided meditation, so I'm going to hand it over to you, Sumi, to lead that meditation.

Sumi Loundon Kim: Wow, what a wonderful way to end. I love it. Alright, everyone. I welcome you to lower your gaze or close your eyes. Bring some length along your spine. Draw

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your shoulders back and open up your breathing space. Take a nice full breath in, in through the nose and down into the belly. Fill up in through the lungs into the top of the throat, and exhale very slowly through the nose, extending your exhalation so that it's longer than the inhalation, thereby kickstarting a relaxation response. At your own pace, you can take another full deep breath in, down in the abdominal area up to the top of the throat. And then exhale slowly, slowly and allow your body to relax. Let your shoulders drop. Let your face relax, your heart, your belly. At the end of the exhalation, allow your breathing to resume its natural rise and fall, trusting that your body knows how much of an in-breath it needs and how much of an out-breath is needed. Gathering your attention inwards and placing it on the movements of your breathing. Feeling your body as it expands with the in-breath and contracts with the out-breath. Keeping it light and easy. Very simply coming back to yourself. To close the meditation, we'll take a gentle breath in through the nose and down into the belly, up through the ribs to the top of the throat. Exhaling slowly, I welcome you to open your eyes or lift your gaze. Thank you.

James Shaheen: Thank you so much, Sumi. My polyvagal nerve feels so much better. So thank you both. It was really wonderful, and it's great to see you both.

Sharon Salzberg: Thank you. And thank you, Sumi. It's great to be with you.

Sumi Loundon Kim: Oh my goodness, it's so great to spend time with you.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Life As It Is* with Sumi Loundon Kim. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. *Life As It Is* and *Tricycle Talks* are produced by As It Should Be Productions and Sarah Fleming. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!