

Breathing in, I know that you are there  
Breathing out, I am so happy

Dear Most Venerables,

Dear Honorable Friends,

We are grateful to have this opportunity to come together as a beloved community, especially during these challenging times. It is imperative that we gather as a spiritual community to generate compassion and support for one another as we travel on this path of freedom and responsibility. As we care for our suffering and face the challenges confronting us, we remind ourselves that the way of understanding and compassion is the antidote to the fear, violence, and discrimination in this moment that we all have experienced personally, as a community, and as a nation.

How can we cultivate understanding and compassion? One way is through the Buddhist practice of śīla, or the ethical path of responsibility and accountability. Our teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, has reframed śīla as mindfulness training, or, put another way, as love in action. We train to love ourselves and love others by being mindful of our actions. We train to generate the energy of mindfulness that helps us be careful of our three karmic actions of body, speech, and mind in our daily life. When we are mindful of what is going on in our bodies, our feelings, our minds, and in the world, we can better avoid doing harm to ourselves and others. The mindfulness trainings protect us, our families, and our society. When we are mindful, we can see that by refraining from acting out of hatred or anger, we can reduce the harm done to ourselves and others.

The first training is to protect life, to decrease violence towards oneself and others. It is not just to not harm, but to actively promote and respect all forms of life—including respecting the diverse choices of others on how to live and be in the world. The second training is to practice social justice, generosity, not stealing, and not exploiting other living beings by means of social structures and policies that rob them of their livelihoods, whether these are explicit or implicit. The third training is the practice of responsible sexual behavior in order to protect individuals, couples, families, and children. Sexual energy without love and understanding has the potential to harm and exploit others.

The fourth training is the practice of deep listening and loving speech to restore communication and bring about reconciliation and mutual respect for each other's difference of view. How can we maintain openness and listen to others even when we disagree with what is being shared? How can we share our particular truth without imposing our views on others? This is the challenge of our media-dominated culture. The

fifth training is about mindful consumption, to refrain from bringing toxins into our body or mind.

As our world becomes more globalized and undeniably more interwoven, we must continue to gather together to discuss and find a global ethic that can help guide society and promote mutual understanding and respect of one another despite our differences in views, beliefs, and way of living. We are gathered today because we know that the way forward is not to retreat to our own safety and comforts and ignore what is happening to our communities, to others, and to our fellow Earth citizens, but rather because we are convinced that the path of understanding and compassion is the way forward—not just for humankind but for all species on this precious planet.

Sister Kinh Nghiem, May 4, 2021