

### **Metta Meditation:**

Begin the meditation by focusing on yourself (“I”). Next offer it to someone you love, then to some “neutral” person followed by someone difficult in your life (“you”). End the meditation by offering it to all beings everywhere. (“We”)

On the final line of the meditation you might add other characteristics you know would be helpful for yourself or the other person, e.g., impatience, sorrow, grief.

May I (you/we) be peaceful, happy and light in body and spirit.

May I (you/we) be healthy and safe.

May (you/we) be free from anger, fear, anxiety and.....

### **Homage to Thay:**

Dear Thay, may our continued study and practice of mindfulness, including mindfulness of uncomfortable topics, benefit ourselves which includes you, our beloved teacher, and all people, animals, plants and minerals.

### **Dharma Talk:**

This year, our Sangha is focusing on the practice of mindfulness in its various forms using as our resources the Buddha’s discourse on “*Knowing a Better Way to Live Alone*,” Thich Naht Hanh’s teachings and our own experiences and understandings.

This month the focus of our study and practice is “Cultivating Mindfulness in Relationships.” Relationships in a broad sense—intimate relationships, friendships, family relationships as well as our relationships in work places, with strangers and with people who are difficult for us.

Tonight we will look at how mindfulness can help us with the suffering caused by sexual harassment. We’ve chosen this topic for three reasons.

First, it is a suffering that has been given a lot of attention in the world recently and our teacher has taught us by his example and in dharma talks not to turn away from societal suffering.

Second, we are learning that sexual harassment has caused suffering in a few Sanghas in the Plum Village tradition. The North American Dharma teachers are now looking deeply at actions to take to help Sanghas create and maintain safe spaces of refuge and transformation.

Third, we have recently received complaints of sexual harassment in our Sangha. It is regrettable and upsetting but because our Sangha exists within the larger societal context, it is not surprising. So even though this is an uncomfortable topic to explore, we'll look at how our mindfulness practice can help us with the suffering caused by sexual harassment.

Thay tells us, [“We should not be afraid of suffering. We should be afraid of only one thing and that is not knowing how to deal with our suffering.”](#)

Sexual harassment *comes from* suffering and *causes* suffering. How do we deal with it?

What is sexual harassment?

Sexual harassment is not mutual and is unwelcome. It is rude, demeaning behavior; it is sometimes about the abuse of power.

Sexual harassment can be visual. For example lewd drawings, photographs or gestures, sexist jokes and cartoons, or wearing a t-shirt with a sexually explicit picture or graphic.

Sexual harassment can be verbal. Lewd or sexually suggestive comments, remarks, sounds, wolf whistles. Calling someone degrading names, calling a woman “sugar” or “sweetie.” Comments about a person’s body, spreading sexual rumors, telling or emailing lewd or sexually suggestive jokes.

Sexual harassment can be physical. Any form of unwelcome advances, invasion of personal space, touching, grabbing, pinching, kissing or pressing or rubbing

up against someone. Following someone or blocking their way. Making sexual propositions. Unwanted hugging. Inappropriate gifts such as lingerie.

It will help us to look at specific examples of sexual harassment. I will share one personal example and then share the experience of three other women.

When I moved to Austin in 1968, I applied for a teaching position in one of the East Austin elementary schools. When I went for my interview with the principal, he invited me to sit in a chair across from his chair. I was wearing a mini-skirt and during the whole interview he kept trying to look up my skirt. I tried to pull the hem down, to make the skirt longer. I thought about leaning toward my thighs so he'd have to look at my face, but I didn't.

Another example of sexual harassment:

"I remember the first time I saw a male teacher looking down my shirt. When I complained, I was told to button more buttons."

A minister reports her experience:

At a convention of ministers someone said to a group of us, referring to me, "Isn't she the sexiest little preacher woman you've ever seen boys?"

This, from a business person:

A colleague came in and greeted my male peers with a handshake. I extend my hand and he grabbed me, saying "I'm a hugger."

In order to transform any suffering—and sexual harassment both *comes from* and *causes* suffering—Thay offers this insight,

"When another person makes you suffer, it is because he suffers deeply within himself, and his suffering is spilling over. He does not need punishment; he needs help. That's the message he is sending."

We can say it this way, as well:

When another person makes you suffer, it is because she suffers deeply within herself, and her suffering is spilling over. She does not need punishment; she needs help. That's the message she is sending.

The habitual human way to try to get rid of suffering is to blame it on someone else or to blame it on yourself. In either case you make somebody wrong. We're told by evolutionary biologists that our brains are wired to see that my needs and wants are more important than others' needs and wants— and that others are the cause of my difficulties.

But this is what our teacher says about blaming:

“When you plant lettuce, if it does not grow well, you don't blame the lettuce. You look for *reasons* it is not doing well. It may need fertilizer or more water or less sun. You never blame the lettuce.

Yet if we have problems with our friends or family, we blame the other person. But if we know how to take care of them, they will grow well, like the lettuce. Blaming has no positive effect at all, nor does trying to persuade using reason and argument. That is my experience. No blame, no reasoning, no argument—just understanding. If you understand, and you *show* that you understand, you can love and the situation will change.”

So we know a few things that don't get rid of suffering, including suffering involved in sexual harassment: blaming, reasoning, arguing.

We can add two more that don't work: revenge and retaliation.

MLK Jr.: “The old law of an eye for an eye leaves everyone blind.”

And one other way to “deal” with suffering, including the suffering involved with sexual harassment that doesn't work: Stuff it. Push it aside. Ignore it. Ask someone else to deal with it for you.

So because none of those strategies stop sexual harassment or any other kind of pain, there is only one way to transform suffering and that is through

understanding. *You* have to look deeply into the nature of your suffering in order to get an insight about how you can get out of your suffering. Then *you* have to *act* on that insight.

Thay says,

“If you do not know how to make *use* of suffering, if you do not know how to *learn* from the suffering, then you can be overwhelmed by it and it becomes something destructive. That is why contemplating on suffering is a very important practice in Buddhism. Contemplating suffering, you will know how that suffering has come to be, because everything is born from conditions.”

This is what Sr. Jina, one of Thay’s first European nuns, says in the latest edition of “*The Mindfulness Bell*” about “everything is born from conditions.”

“We all have the seed of anger; we all have the seed of discrimination, happiness, greed and generosity. But some of the seeds are stronger in us than in others and that is because of causes and conditions. When we see this, we will understand that someone who causes harm needs our help. We do our best to find ways to help them; however, this does not mean we condone their actions.”

There are always reasons why we suffer or why we cause suffering—*external* reasons like an abusive childhood or harmful environment and *internal* reasons like feeling angry, fearful or unworthy. Even if we never unearth the actual reasons for the suffering, just the awareness that all suffering has multiple causes and conditions will help us transform our suffering and cultivate understanding for others who suffer. It’s the Buddha’s Second Noble Truth.

So. It looks like we have to give up our impulse, our habit, our desire to blame, excuse, reason, argue, or to get revenge, push away, or hide from our suffering. Instead, if we want to end suffering—our own and that of others— we must train

ourselves to understand the multiple conditions and causes of suffering—including the suffering experienced with sexual harassment.

Let's look at ways we can train ourselves in understanding suffering.

All but the most enlightened of us look for appreciation; we want to belong, to be valued, preferably admired. We all look for respect, recognition, acceptance, confirmation— love. For some of us, even *negative* attention is better than no attention at all so we seek attention in inappropriate ways.

In our search for admiration, recognition and love, those of us who have it might use our power. Often at the expense of others. Some of us use our victim stories to get the love we seek.

As students of the Buddha, we acknowledge that, like all humans, we yearn for inclusion, attention, appreciation. Just like the sexual harasser, I want attention. Just like me, the one who is sexually harassed wants to be valued.

This “Just Like Me” practice is simple but powerful. You see someone act in some harsh way and instead of responding with a harsh judgment, you say to yourself, “Just like me that person wants recognition and appreciation. Just like me that person wants to be happy and free from suffering.”

Seeing this truth of interconnectedness—our teacher calls it “interbeing”—allows you to realize that if another person hurts, you hurt. If you hurt, others hurt. If another person is not healed, you are not healed and if you aren't healed, they aren't.

You realize that it will help you and all of us —the whole of human existence—to cultivate understanding, loving kindness and compassion.

First for yourself. You train yourself not to run away from yourself. You train yourself to receive *whatever* person, event, action, words or situation presents itself to you.

Rumi, the 13th century Sufi mystic, says it this way in his famous poem, “*The Guest House*”:

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.  
A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor.  
Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of it's furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.  
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.  
Be *grateful* for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.

You work with all the messy as well as delightful parts of yourself.

It may sound incongruous but *genuine* kindness and compassion comes from seeing your own limitations: you want to be generous and you notice that you're not generous. You want to be kind and you aren't kind. You see how you hate certain people, how certain people trigger you, how you feel superior to certain people.

So you find yourself not perfect. You see that life is not always going to congratulate you, confirm you, admire you. Life is not always going to be convenient. Things will not always go the way you plan, the way you want them to go. You notice that you can't smooth out all the rough edges—your's or others'. You see that you will not always get stroked for your good compassionate, kind, understanding actions.

You see all this clearly and true.... your imperfections, your limitations, the messiness and frustrations and disappointments in life....

But instead of beating yourself up about it, you realize that that's what *all* people are up against. You experience directly how challenging it is to be a human being. And so you *naturally* begin to feel some genuine compassion for yourself and for all of us—even for the sexual harasser who you thought was your enemy when you first began training yourself in understanding.

But Thay says: *To love our enemy is impossible. The moment we understand our enemy, we feel compassion towards him or her and he or she is no longer our enemy.*

As we soften and expand our hearts, and come to understand the causes and conditions of the suffering in sexual harassment, what action must we take?

Let's ask 3 specific questions imbedded in that question.

1. What is the responsibility of those who experience sexual harassment?
2. What is the responsibility of men?
3. What responsibility do the members and leaders of our Sangha have?

Let's begin by looking at the first question:

What is the responsibility of those who are sexually harassed?

Women. Rich and famous women but more often, not rich and not famous women. Young women, black, brown and white girls. Lesbians. Gay men. Transgender people. Men and women with disabilities. Native Americans. Just this week we heard about international aid workers being sexually harassed and a member of a band being harassed by another member who is also an olympic gold medalist.

Our teacher Thich Nhat Hanh and the venerable Pema Chodron of the Shambala tradition offer us their insights:

First, our teacher: “We have learned that if our heart is big, and if we have a lot of peace and joy and love then it would not be difficult at all for us to bear some injustice that people inflict on us. But if we are full of pain, suffering, anger, hatred, then it will be very difficult for us to accept the injustice people inflict on us.”

Pema Chodron:

“Do you really want things to *heal* or do you just want to make someone wrong? Do you just want to get *revenge* on someone who hurt you or do you want things to *heal*? That’s the question. Revenge never heals anything. And blaming others never heals anything. But what happens when someone speaks to you from the heart? Everyone responds to some kind of kindness, some kind of openness, some kind of curiosity better than they do to hatred.”

They and Pema Chodron are being very compassionate here. And practical. They are saying that because none of us can avoid injustice and cruelty—the First Noble Truth— we must *prepare* ourselves for it. A big heart, filled with compassion and kindness for yourself and all beings, free from anger and hatred will help protect you from suffering, will help prevent suffering, will help transform suffering.

But a big, kind, compassionate, open heart does not excuse us from taking action. Not responding to injustice is no more effective than blame, revenge, arguing. Not acting empowers the harasser and doesn’t stop the harassment.

Your compassion must be the *foundation* of your action. Your strong, firm, vigorous action must come from a place of kindness, understanding and compassion.

When the principal of the school kept looking up my skirt at my interview, I did nothing. It is not hard to imagine that seeing that he could get by with it, he did the same to other young women.

If I had been self assured, kind and forceful enough what might I have done?

[Dear Reader, what is your answer?]

Remember this example of sexual harassment that I shared earlier:

A colleague came in and greeted my male peers with a handshake. I extend my hand and he grabbed me, saying “I’m a hugger.”

Using firmness based on compassion what might she do?

[Please reflect on possible responses. ]

At a convention of ministers someone said to a group of us, referring to me, “Isn’t she the sexiest little preacher woman you’ve ever seen boys?”

How, using her big heart, self confidence and strength might she respond?

[Please reflect on what *you* might do if you were in this position.]

Our second question is: What is the responsibility of men?

We’ll begin with portions from a blog that Andrea sent me that was written by a man:

“It is easy to think “That’s not me. I don’t harass anyone.” But I can think of a few times when I’ve said nothing in the face of a sexist joke or comment, or I made them myself. So many harmful philosophies and practices have been socialized into us that we may not even know the stuff we’re doing is contributing to a misogynistic culture, and just because we are nice men ...does not mean we are exempt. We must examine our implicit and explicit biases. We need to confront one another and point out jokes and actions that are sexist. We need to do our own research and read up on all these issues and not burden our women friends with the emotional and other labor to enlighten us.”

Because the “rules” of social interactions keep changing—the Buddha warned us about impermanence!—it may be difficult for men to know what is and is not sexual harassment.

Here are some questions men have asked:

Is it sexual harassment if I ask someone in the Sangha for a date?

Can I tell a woman she looks beautiful?

Can I tell a joke that is really funny but just mildly sexual?

When a woman tells me no, how do I know if she really means it?

and

Do I have a responsibility to call out a buddy who makes crude comments about women?

[Please reflect on your responses to these questions]

Here are 4 ways men might help bring about change:

### 1. See Something Say Something

If you see a colleague being sexually harassed, or hear comments about women that are demeaning or derogatory, say something. Being an ally for women experiencing sexual harassment goes beyond just speaking up in their presence. Call out others no matter how “small” a particular thing may seem. Shut down the “locker room talk.”

### 2. Ask Women

One of the many positive outcomes of so many women publicly sharing their sexual harassment stories is that men are realizing the ubiquity of this issue. Go the next step by asking the women in your lives—friends, daughters, wives, mothers—to tell their stories. Really listen, but be respectful if women don’t want to talk about what happened.

### 3. Examine Yourself

If someone tells you that they are uncomfortable with something you said or did, listen. Examine your own life and the ways in which you might have participated—knowingly or unknowingly in misogynistic behavior.

### 4. Be an Advocate

If you are surprised that so many women have experienced sexual harassment, other men and boys probably are too. Talk with them. Have a conversation with your sons, sons-in-law, father, brothers and male friends about how they can break free from stereotypes that give men permission to dehumanize women. If

you are friends with a man who regularly talks about or treats women as sexual objects, work up the courage to talk with him about it.

When you choose to be silent, you end up being an accomplice.

What else might you do?

Finally, our third question:

What responsibility do the leaders of our Sangha and in fact, all of us in the Sangha have?

Each of us must do our part to create an environment in our Sangha that is safe and respectful for everyone. In most companies and organizations this includes developing a formal policy for preventing and reporting sexual harassment.

Gale and I had a little conversation about this. We concluded that at this point our Sangha doesn't need a formal policy, but we do need a process.

And...we have one—a three-part, 2,550 year old gem of a process.

One part of our process requires each of us to cultivate our own daily personal meditation and mindfulness practice in order to get to know ourselves and all beings; in order to cultivate understanding, compassion and kindness; in order to uncover the Buddha within.

Our ancient process also includes studying and practicing the Dharma—teachings that have been tested for more than two and a half millennia; teachings from the Buddha explained and expanded on and modernized by our teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh. I invite us to *continue* to explore the Dharma together, including the teachings on interbeing, deep listening, mindful speech, compassion, loving-kindness and right action as ways to transform our suffering.

I invite us to see how the 4 Noble Truths, the 5 Mindfulness Trainings and others of the Buddha's teachings can be resources for dealing specifically with sexual harassment.

The third part of our process, which supports our daily personal practice and our study of the teachings, is the Sangha. Plum Blossom Sangha exists to offer a place of refuge where you can safely share the delights in your life as well as whatever suffering you experience—suffering encountered outside the Sangha or within. Our Sangha has an ordained core of experienced practitioners—Gale, Rhonda, Erin, Curt and I—who are available, individually or together, to each of you. We promise to investigate any painful, inappropriate or uncomfortable experience you encounter *in the Sangha* and, if needed, we will take action. We have. And we will.

So in our sexual harassment process we are guided, supported and protected by the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

May our beautiful Sangha continue having conversations about love, happiness, and delight; may we continue laughing and singing together. And may we continue addressing important uncomfortable topics like sexual harassment.

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