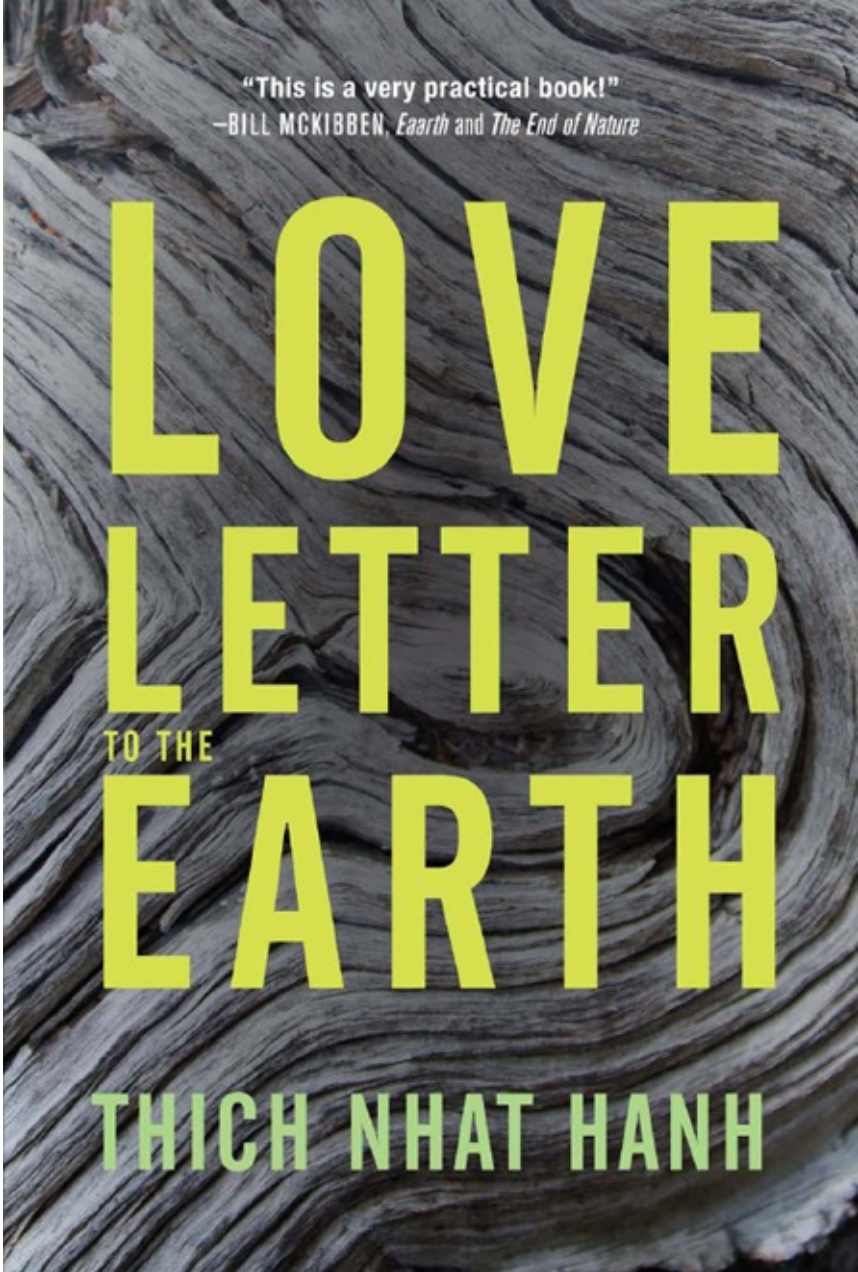


"This is a very practical book!"
—BILL MCKIBBEN, *Eaarth* and *The End of Nature*

LOVE LETTER TO THE EARTH

THICH NHAT HANH



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CHAPTER 1

WE ARE THE EARTH

AT THIS VERY MOMENT, the Earth is above you, below you, all around you, and even inside you. The Earth is everywhere. You may be used to thinking of the Earth as only the ground beneath your feet. But the water, the sea, the sky, and everything around us comes from the Earth. Everything outside us and everything inside us comes from the Earth. We often forget that the planet we are living on has given us all the elements that make up our bodies. The water in our flesh, our bones, and all the microscopic cells inside our bodies all come from the Earth and are part of the Earth. The Earth is not just the environment we live in. We are the Earth and we are always carrying her within us.

Realizing this, we can see that the Earth is truly alive. We are a living, breathing manifestation of this beautiful and generous planet. Knowing this, we can begin to transform our relationship to the Earth. We can begin to walk differently and to care for her differently. We will fall completely in love with the Earth. When we are in love with someone or something, there is no separation between ourselves and the person or thing we love. We do whatever we can for them and this brings us great joy and nourishment. That is the relationship each of us can have with the Earth. That is the relationship each of us must have with the Earth if the Earth is to survive, and if we are to survive as well.

THE EARTH CONTAINS THE WHOLE COSMOS

If we think about the Earth as just the environment around us, we experience ourselves and the Earth as separate entities. We may see the planet only in terms of what it can do for us. We need to recognize that the planet and the people on it are ultimately one and the same. When we look deeply at the Earth, we see that she is a formation made up of non-Earth elements: the sun, the stars, and the whole universe. Certain elements, such as carbon, silicon, and iron, formed long ago in the heart of far-off supernovas. Distant stars contributed their light.

When we look into a flower, we can see that it's made of many different elements, so we also call it a formation. A flower is made of many non-flower elements. The entire universe can be seen in a flower. If we look deeply into the flower, we can see the sun, the soil, the rain, and the gardener. Similarly, when we look deeply into the Earth, we can see the presence of the whole

cosmos.

A lot of our fear, hatred, anger, and feelings of separation and alienation come from the idea that we are separate from the planet. We see ourselves as the center of the universe and are concerned primarily with our own personal survival. If we care about the health and well-being of the planet, we do so for our own sake. We want the air to be clean enough for us to breathe. We want the water to be clear enough so that we have something to drink. But we need to do more than use recycled products or donate money to environmental groups. We have to change our whole relationship with the Earth.

We tend to think of the Earth as inanimate matter because we've become alienated from it. We are even alienated from our own bodies. We spend many hours every day forgetting that we even have a body. We get so caught up in our work and our problems that we forget that we are more than just our minds. Many of us are sick because we forget to pay attention to our bodies. We've also forgotten the Earth—that she is part of us and that we are part of her. Because we're not taking care of the Earth, we have both become sick.

When we look deeply at a blade of grass or at a tree, we can see that it's not mere matter. It has its own kind of intelligence. For example, a seed knows how to grow into a plant with roots, leaves, flowers, and fruit. A pine tree is not just matter; it possesses a sense of knowing. A dust particle is not just matter; each of its atoms has intelligence and is a living reality.

This understanding of the deeper nondualistic nature of things is called *advaya jñāna* in Sanskrit. This means the wisdom of nondiscrimination. This is a way of seeing that goes beyond concepts. Classical science is based on the belief that there is an objective reality that exists even if the mind does not. But in the Buddhist tradition, we say there is mind and there are objects of mind, and that they manifest at the same time. We can't separate them. Objects of mind are created by the mind itself. The way we perceive the world around us depends entirely on our way of looking at it.

If we understand the Earth as a living, breathing organism, we can heal ourselves and heal the Earth as well. When our physical body is sick, we need to stop, rest, and pay attention to it. We have to stop our thinking, return to our in-breath and out-breath, and come home to our body. If we can see our body as a wonder, we also have the opportunity to see the Earth as a wonder, and healing can begin for the body of the Earth. When we go home and take care of ourselves, we heal not only our own bodies and minds, but we help the Earth as well.

The Earth is a beautiful planet; it has a multitude of life forms, vegetation, sounds, and colors. In the sky we can see the light of Venus and faraway stars. Looking at ourselves we see that we, too, are beautiful. Our mind is the consciousness of the cosmos. The cosmos has given rise to the beautiful human species. With powerful telescopes, people have been able to observe the cosmos in all its splendor. We have had glimpses of faraway galaxies. We have seen stars whose images take hundreds of millions of years to reach the Earth. The radiant and elegant cosmos that we can observe is in fact our own consciousness itself and not something outside of it.

THE EARTH IS A WONDER

When you contemplate the planet Earth, you see that she has many virtues. The first virtue is stability. She is steadfast when faced with challenges and continues to offer perseverance, equanimity, and forbearance in the face of many human-created calamities.

The second virtue is that of creativity. The Earth is an inexhaustible source of creativity. She has given birth to so many beautiful species, including humans. Although there are many talented musicians and composers among us, the most wonderful music of all is composed by the Earth herself. There are those of us who are excellent artists and painters. But the Earth has created the most beautiful landscapes. If we look deeply, we can discover a multitude of the infinite wonders that appear on the Earth. Even the best scientist can't match the beautiful petal of a cherry blossom or the delicateness of an orchid.

The third virtue is nondiscrimination. Nondiscrimination means that the Earth does not judge. We humans have done many careless things that have harmed the Earth and yet she does not punish us. She brings us to life and she welcomes us back to her when we die.

If you look deeply and feel this connection to the Earth, you will also begin to feel admiration, love, and respect. When you realize the Earth is so much more than simply the environment, you will be moved to protect her as you would yourself. There is no difference between you and her. In that kind of communion, you no longer feel alienated.

OUR LIVING, BREATHING MOTHER

In his book, *The Lives of a Cell*, biologist Thomas Lewis describes our planet as a living organism. After some reflection, he arrives at the insight that the whole planet is like a giant living cell whose parts are all linked in symbiosis.

He describes the miraculous achievement of the atmosphere as the world's biggest membrane. Lewis finds it so astonishing that the Earth is alive. He is struck by the amazing beauty and exuberance of the Earth in contrast to the barren, cratered moon and other planets. He likens the Earth to an organized, self-contained being, a "live creature, full of information and marvelously skilled in handling the sun."

We too can see that the Earth is a living being and not an inanimate object. She is not inert matter. We often call our planet Mother Earth. Seeing the Earth as our mother helps us to realize her true nature. The Earth is not a person, yet she is indeed a mother who has given birth to millions of different species, including the human species.

Our Mother Earth has brought us to life and provided all the conditions for our survival. Over the eons, she has developed an environment from which humans can manifest and thrive. She created a protective atmosphere, with air we can breathe, abundant food for us to eat, and clear water for us to drink. She is constantly nourishing and protecting us. We can see that she is our mother and the mother of all beings.

We are a child of the Earth and our planet is a very generous mother who embraces us and provides us with everything we need. And when one day we cease to exist in this form, we will go back to the Earth, our mother, only to be transformed so that we may manifest again in a different form in the future.

But don't think that Mother Earth is outside of you. Looking deeply you can find Mother Earth within you, just as your biological mother who gave birth to you is also within you. She is in each of your cells.

THE SUN

If the Earth is our true mother, then the sun is also our true parent. Together they make life on Earth possible. The sun's energy enables life forms to exist on our planet. The sun offers light and warmth for plants to grow. Without the sun, there would be no life at all.

Countless civilizations have paid homage to the sun. In the Buddhist tradition, there are many who praise Amitabha, the Buddha of Limitless Light, and they believe his Pure Land lies to the west. We can call this Buddha Mahavairocana Tathagatha, the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life. We can say that the sun is a true Buddha, because he shines his light upon the Earth, providing warmth, light, energy, and life every minute of the day to all

species on the planet. The sun is not only to be found in the sky; the sun is on Earth and in each one of us. Each of us has the sunshine within us. Without the sun, life on Earth wouldn't be possible; living beings couldn't exist. We can think of the sun and the Earth as our true parents, and as the true parents of our biological father and mother, and of all our ancestors. The Buddha, Mohammed, Jesus Christ, and all our wonderful teachers are children of this planet. We are all children of the Earth and the sun. Just as we carry the DNA of our biological mother and father within us, we carry the sun and the Earth in each of our cells.

THE HIGHEST FORM OF PRAYER

We can feel a tremendous sense of awe and wonder at the immense energy of the universe, and we may be tempted to believe it was created by a human-like God. Impressed by the powerful forces of nature, we often imagine there is a god behind the raging storms, a god of thunder, a god of rain, or a god controlling the rise and fall of the tides. It's easy to think that this highly creative force could have a human form.

However, I don't think God is an old man with a white beard sitting in the sky. God is not outside of creation. I think God is on Earth, inside every living being. What we call "the divine," is none other than the energy of awakening, of peace, of understanding, and of love, which is to be found not only in every human being, but in every species on Earth. In Buddhism, we say every sentient being has the ability to be awakened, and to understand deeply. We call this Buddha nature. The deer, the dog, the cat, the squirrel, and the bird all have Buddha nature. But what about inanimate species: the pine tree in our front yard, the grass, or the flowers? As part of our living Mother Earth, these species also have Buddha nature. This is a very powerful awareness which can bring us so much joy. Every blade of grass, every tree, every plant, every creature large or small are children of the planet Earth and have Buddha nature. The Earth herself has Buddha nature, therefore all her children must have Buddha nature, too. As we are all endowed with Buddha nature, everyone has the capacity to live happily and with a sense of responsibility toward our mother, the Earth.

In the Bible, Jesus said, "I am in the Father, and the Father is in me" (John 14:11). The Buddha also taught that we are all part of each other. We aren't separate entities. The father and son aren't entirely the same but they aren't completely different either. One is in the other. When we look into our own bodily formation, we see Mother Earth inside us, and so the whole universe is inside us, too. Once we have this insight of interbeing, we can have real

communication with the Earth. This is the highest possible form of prayer.

To worship the Earth is not to deify her or believe she is any more sacred than ourselves. To worship the Earth is to love her, to take care of her, and to take refuge in her. When we suffer, the Earth embraces us, accepts us, and restores our energy, making us strong and stable again. The relief that we seek is right under our feet and all around us. Much of our suffering can be healed if we realize this. If we understand our deep connection and relationship with the Earth, we will have enough love, strength, and awakening so that we both can thrive.

When we suffer we need love and understanding. We ourselves don't have enough of these qualities, so when we suffer we try to find them outside ourselves. This is very natural. We hope someone else or something else can give us the love and understanding we need. Someone with love and understanding embodies goodness, truth, and beauty. We know that we possess some goodness, truth, and beauty, but maybe not enough to bring us happiness. We don't know how to help these virtues grow in order to gain true insight and wisdom.

The Earth has all the virtues we seek, including strength, stability, patience, and compassion. She embraces everyone. We don't need blind faith to see this. We don't need to address our prayers or express our gratitude to a remote or abstract deity with whom it may be difficult or impossible to be in touch. We can address our prayers and express our gratitude directly to the Earth. The Earth is right here. She supports us in very concrete and tangible ways. No one can deny that the water that sustains us, the air that we breathe, and the food that nourishes us are gifts of the Earth.



THE MOST BEAUTIFUL BODHISATTVA

A *bodhisattva* is a living being who has happiness, awakening, understanding, and love. Any being that manifests these qualities can be called a bodhisattva. Bodhisattvas are all around us. Anyone who cultivates love and offers a lot of happiness to others is a bodhisattva.

Bodhisattvas aren't necessarily human beings. In the Jataka Tales, the Buddha was called a bodhisattva, and he sometimes manifested as a deer, a monkey, a tree, or even a rock. These manifestations can also be called bodhisattvas. A tree can be content, happy, and fresh, offering oxygen, shade, refuge, and beauty. A tree can nourish life. It can be a place of sanctuary for many creatures.

When we look at our planet, we know that the Earth is the most beautiful bodhisattva of all. She is the mother of many great beings. How could mere matter do all the wonderful things the Earth does? Don't search for a bodhisattva in your imagination. The bodhisattva you are looking for is right at your feet. Mother Earth is not an abstract or vague idea. Mother Earth is *real*—she is a living reality that you can touch, taste, smell, hear, and see. She has given us life. And when we die, we'll go back to her and she'll bring us to life again and again. There are people who pray to be reborn in a place where

there is no suffering. Yet they don't know whether such a place really exists or not. Astronomers have been able to look at many distant galaxies using powerful telescopes, but they haven't found anything as beautiful as this planet Earth. Where else would you want to go when Mother Earth is so beautiful and always ready to embrace you and welcome you home?

I left Earth three times

and found no other place to go.

Please take care of Spaceship Earth.

—Walter Schirra, 1998. Astronaut on Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo space flights

We can call the Earth the bodhisattva who purifies and refreshes the Earth. We can throw fragrant flowers on the Earth; we can also throw urine or excrement on the Earth, and the Earth doesn't discriminate. She accepts everything, whether pure or impure, and transforms it, no matter how long it takes.

The Earth is the mother of so many buddhas, bodhisattvas, and saints. She is the mother of us all. Although she's not a bodhisattva in human form, she has the capacity to give us birth, to carry, nourish, and heal us. She has stability, patience, and perseverance. The Lotus Sutra mentions the Earth Store Bodhisattva, Kshitigarbha. He has the qualities of the Earth: perseverance, solidity, and a great determination. He made the vow to go to the darkest places to rescue beings in the most desperate situations of injustice and conflict. He never relents in his determination to go where he is most needed—to prisons, to war zones, and to the hell realms.

Mother Earth Bodhisattva has the capacity to produce, create, embrace, and bring forth wonderful creations including buddhas, bodhisattvas, saints, and holy ones—people who have many skills and talents, and so many other species. When we drink water, we know that this water comes as a gift from the Earth. When we breathe, we know that the air is a gift of our Mother. When we eat, we know that our food is also a gift of Mother Earth. With this awareness, reverence for our planet becomes something very natural.

Sometimes when there are natural disasters, hurricanes, or tsunamis, people blame the Earth and say she is unkind and vengeful. Yet when the Earth provides rain, rivers, and good soil we praise her, recognizing and grateful for all that she has given us, and we say that she is kind. However, the idea of kind and unkind are a pair of opposites that originate in our own minds. The Earth is neither kind nor unkind. She is there in all her stability

and solidity, nourishing us with equanimity and without judgment or discrimination. If we look deeply, we can look at her without judgment and discrimination as well.

THE EARTH IS A SOLID PLACE OF REFUGE

When we feel that we're fragile, not stable or solid, we can come back to ourselves and take refuge in the Earth. With each step we can feel her solidity beneath our feet. When we're truly in touch with the Earth, we can feel her supportive embrace and her stability. We use all our body and our mind to go back to the Earth and surrender ourselves to her. With each breath we release all our agitation, our fragility, and our suffering. Just being aware of her benevolent presence can already bring relief.

On the verge of the Buddha's enlightenment, he touched the Earth with his hand and asked her to bear witness to his awakening. Flowers sprang up in celebration at the very place where his hand touched the ground. At that moment, the Buddha's mind became so free and so clear that he saw millions of flowers everywhere smiling at him.

We can be like the Buddha, and in difficult moments touch the Earth as our witness. We can take refuge in the Earth as our original mother. We can say, "I touch the pure and refreshing Earth." Whatever nationality or culture we belong to, whatever religion we follow, whether we're Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Jews, or atheists, we can all see that Mother Earth is a great bodhisattva. When we see her in this way, with all her many virtues, we will walk more gently on her and treat her and all her children more gently. We will want to protect her and not harm her or any of the myriad forms of life she has given birth to. We will stop wreaking destruction and violence on Mother Earth. We will resolve the question of what we mistakenly call "the environmental problem." The Earth is not just the environment. The Earth is *us*. Everything depends on whether we have this insight or not.

When you're able to see the Earth for the bodhisattva that she is, you will want to bow down and touch the Earth with reverence and respect. Then love and care will be born in your heart. This awakening is enlightenment. Don't look for enlightenment elsewhere. This awakening, this enlightenment, will bring about a great transformation in you, and you'll have more happiness, more love, and more understanding than from any other practice. Enlightenment, liberation, peace, and joy aren't dreams for the future; they're a reality available to us in the present moment.

THE TIME IS NOW

We can't wait any longer to restore our relationship with the Earth because right now the Earth and everyone on Earth is in real danger. When a society is overcome by greed and pride, there is violence and unnecessary devastation. When we perpetrate violence toward our own and other species, we're being violent toward ourselves at the same time. When we know how to protect all beings, we will be protecting ourselves. A spiritual revolution is needed if we're going to confront the environmental challenges that face us.

Many of us are lost. We work too hard, our lives are too busy; we lose ourselves in consumption and distraction of all kinds and have become increasingly lost, lonely, or sick. Many of us live very isolated lives. We're no longer in touch with ourselves, our family, our ancestors, the Earth, or the wonders of life around us. We have become alienated and feel lonely. This alienation is a kind of illness that has become an epidemic. So many of us feel empty inside and are searching for something to fill the vacuum. We try to fill the void by taking pills or intoxicants or by consuming things. Yet our addiction to consumerism, to buying and consuming things we don't need, is causing so much stress, so much suffering, both to ourselves and to the Earth. Our craving for fame, wealth, and power is insatiable, and this puts a heavy strain on our own bodies and on the planet. We don't realize that it's not fame, wealth, or power that will make us happy, but our level of mindful awareness.

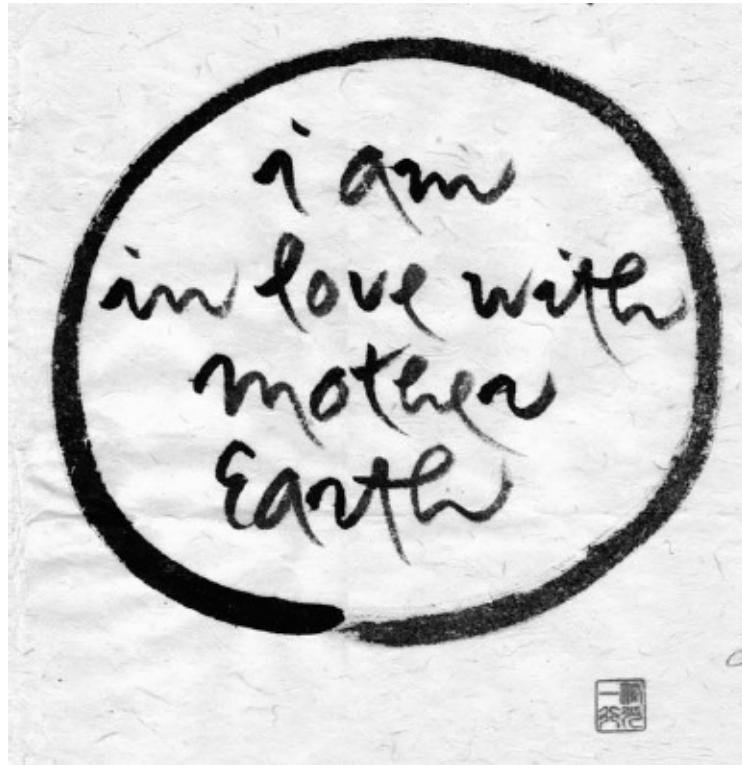
FALLING IN LOVE

Real change will happen only when we fall in love with our planet. Only love can show us how to live in harmony with nature and with each other and save us from the devastating effects of environmental destruction and climate change. When we recognize the virtues and talents of the Earth, we feel connected to her and love is born in our hearts. We want to be connected. That is the meaning of love: to be at one. When you love someone, you want to take care of that person as you would take care of yourself. When we love like this, it's reciprocal. We will do anything for the benefit of the Earth and we can trust that she, in turn, will do everything in her power for our well-being.

Every morning when I wake up and get dressed, I leave my hut and take a walk. Usually the sky is still dark and I walk gently, aware of nature all around me and the fading stars. One time, after walking, I came back to my hut and wrote this sentence: "I am in love with Mother Earth." I was as excited as a young man who has fallen in love. My heart was beating with

excitement.

When I think of the Earth and my ability to walk on it, I think, “I’m going to go out into nature, enjoying everything beautiful, enjoying all its wonders.” My heart is filled with joy. The Earth gives me so much. I’m so in love with her. It’s a wonderful love; there’s no betrayal. We entrust our heart to the Earth and she entrusts herself to us, with her whole being.



When we contemplate the whole globe as one great dewdrop, striped and dotted with continents and islands, flying through space with other stars all singing and shining together as one, the whole universe appears as an infinite storm of beauty.

—John Muir, *Travels in Alaska*, 1915

CHAPTER 2

HEALING STEPS

THERE ARE MANY KINDS of medicine, but most medicine only eases the suffering in our bodies and minds temporarily. It doesn't heal the source of our illness. Mindfulness, however, is a truly healing balm that can help put an end to our sense of alienation and help us heal both ourselves and our planet. If we can ground ourselves, become one with the Earth and treat her with care, she will nourish us and heal our bodies and minds. Our physical and mental sicknesses will be cured, and we will have well-being in body and spirit.

THE FOUNDATION OF HAPPINESS

Mindfulness is a nonjudgmental awareness of all that is happening inside us and around us. It takes us back to the foundation of happiness, which is being present in the here and now. Mindfulness is always mindfulness of something. We can be mindful of our breath, our footsteps, our thoughts, and our actions. Mindfulness requires that we bring all our attention to whatever we're doing, whether walking or breathing, brushing our teeth, or eating a snack. When we concentrate on our breath and the steps we're making, we can see the beauty of the Earth around us more clearly. We can take each breath and each step with awareness and gratitude.

We need to know how to generate joy and happiness in our daily lives as well as how to recognize and deal with our pain and suffering. The practice of mindfulness helps us to deeply enjoy every moment of life that's given us to live. If we practice mindful breathing and mindful walking, we can connect with the wonders of our body; when we can connect with our body, we can connect with the Earth; and when we connect with the Earth, we can connect with the whole cosmos. The practice of mindfulness helps us to touch Mother Earth inside our bodies. The healing of our bodies and minds must go together with the healing of the Earth. This kind of enlightenment is crucial for a collective awakening. To be mindful is an act of awakening. We need to wake up to the fact that the Earth is in danger and that all living species are in danger, too.

Mindfulness and a deep awareness of the Earth can also help us to handle pain, difficult feelings, and emotions. It can help us heal our own suffering and increase our capacity to be aware of the suffering of others. With awareness of the Earth's generosity, we can generate a pleasant feeling. Knowing how to create moments of joy and happiness is crucial for our healing. It's important to be able to see the wonders of life around us, to

recognize all the conditions for happiness that already exist. Then, with the energy of mindfulness, we can recognize and embrace our feelings of anger, fear, and despair and transform them. We don't allow ourselves to become overwhelmed by these unpleasant emotions.

When we practice mindfulness, we naturally become more attuned to the planet. When we're able to listen to ourselves and each other with mindfulness and compassion, we increase our ability to listen to our planet. Practicing compassionate listening to the Earth, we hear that the planet desperately needs us to reconnect with her, and with each other. There is no difference between healing ourselves and healing the Earth.

Whenever we do something in mindfulness, we connect more deeply with our planet. Getting in touch with the Earth is what will heal our suffering, our depression, our sickness. When we eat a piece of bread mindfully, we see the Earth, the sun, the clouds, the rain, and the stars in our bread. Without these elements, the bread wouldn't exist. We see that the entire cosmos has come together in this one piece of bread.

ENJOYING OUR TIME HERE

Many people shorten their time on this beautiful planet by consuming such things as alcohol, cigarettes, toxic media, or too much food in order to cover up what they're feeling. This kind of behavior damages our health. We can instead lengthen and enrich our lives by encouraging ourselves to be aware of every moment.

We're living on this planet Earth together. The Earth is like a giant bird and we're going on a wonderful trip. The Earth is supporting us and transporting us, traveling around the sun at a speed of over 100,000 kilometers an hour. We should put on our seat belts. We should enjoy every moment. In each of these moments, we can be in touch with the wonders of life. We don't need to run away from or cover up our painful feelings or try to forget unpleasant memories. We don't need something to help us to forget. We only need to know how to remember; we need to know how to create moments of joy and happiness, how to water what is nourishing within us, and how to become aware of the wonders of life around us.

When I'm mindful, I enjoy everything more, from my first sip of tea to my first step outside. I'm fully present in the here and now, not carried away by my sorrows, my fears, my projects, the past, or the future. I'm here, available to life. Then life is available to me. Every moment can be a happy moment. You can set an example for others by being mindful and generating

awareness and happiness. This will help others be able to do the same for themselves.

In order to enjoy our time together on this flight toward the future, we have to put on our seat belts of mindfulness that will keep us right here in the present so that we can experience life deeply each moment. Mindfulness can anchor us in the present moment so we don't lose ourselves in the future or in the past. Every one of us comes equipped with this seat belt, but we don't always use it. Now is the time to fasten it.

Every second of life is filled with precious jewels. Those jewels are our awareness of the sky, the Earth, the trees, the hills, the river, the ocean, and all the miracles around us. We don't want to kill time. We want to profit as much as we can from the time that is given us to live. Each morning when we wake up to life we see that we have a gift of twenty-four brand new hours. If we have mindfulness, concentration, and insight, we can live those twenty-four hours fully and joyfully. In twenty-four hours, we can generate the energy of understanding and compassion that will benefit us, our planet, and each person we come into contact with.

When I wake up, I take a moment to enjoy washing my face. In the winter the water in my hut is very cold, so I only open the faucet a little bit, allowing the water to flow out drop by drop. I put my hand under the faucet and really get in touch with the feeling of cool water. It helps me to wake up. It's very refreshing! I take some of these drops of water and gently lift them up to my eyes and feel the refreshment in my eyes. I enjoy it so much. I'm not in a hurry to finish. I enjoy opening the faucet; I enjoy feeling the water on my face. I don't think at all. I just enjoy being alive. I take the time to really be aware of the pleasure I feel from the drops of water. Mindfulness, concentration, and insight help me to see that this water has come from very far away: from high up in the mountains and from deep down in the Earth. The water comes from so far, all the way to my bathroom. Seeing this, I feel happy right away. With mindfulness, every moment I'm alive is a jewel, every moment can become a moment of happiness and joy.

BREATHING WITH THE PLANET

The foundation of all mindfulness practice is awareness of the breath. There is no mindfulness without awareness of our in-breath and out-breath. Mindful breathing unites the body and mind and helps us to become aware of what is going on inside us and around us. In our daily life, we often forget that mind and body are connected. Our bodies are here but our minds are not.

Sometimes we lose ourselves in a book, a film, the Internet or an electronic game, and we're carried off, far away from our body and the reality of where we are. Then, when we lift our head out of the book or look up from the screen, we may be confronted with feelings of anxiety, guilt, fear, or irritation. We rarely go back to our inner peace, to our inner island of calm and clarity, to be in touch with Mother Earth.

We can get so caught up in our plans, fears, agitations, and dreams that we aren't living in our bodies anymore and we're not in touch with our real mother, the Earth, either. We can't see the miraculous beauty and magnificence that our planet offers to us. We are living more and more in the world of our minds and becoming increasingly alienated from the physical world. Returning to our breathing brings body and mind back together and reminds us of the miracle of the present moment. Our planet is right here, powerful, generous, and supportive at every moment. Once we recognize these qualities in the Earth, we can take refuge in her in our difficult moments, making it easier for us to embrace our fear and suffering and to transform it.

Awareness of the in-breath and out-breath first of all calms us down. By paying attention to your breathing, without judgment, you bring peace back to your body, and release the pain and tension. You can say,

Breathing in, I calm my body.

Breathing out, my body is at peace.

Breathing in, I take refuge in Mother Earth.

Breathing out, I release all my suffering to the Earth.

When our minds and bodies have calmed down, we begin to see more clearly. When we see more clearly, we feel more connected to ourselves and to the Earth and we have more understanding. Where there is clarity and understanding, love can bloom because true love is based on understanding.

We may think of the Earth's problems, or our own personal problems, as overwhelming and we may feel helpless. But just by paying attention to our breathing, we can bring about a clarity that will give us insight into what we can do to help ourselves and to help our world.

There are people who have asthma and other lung conditions that make it very difficult for them to breathe. But if our lungs are healthy and our nose is not blocked, we can breathe easily. We should appreciate this ability and savor each breath as a miracle. Each breath contains nitrogen, oxygen, and

water vapor as well as other trace elements, so each breath that we inhale contains the Earth. With each breath, we're reminded that we are part of this beautiful life-giving planet.

DOING NOTHING IS DOING SOMETHING

To meditate is not to run away from life but to take the time to look deeply into ourselves or into a situation. Meditation is an opportunity to take care of our body and our mind. That is why it's so important. We allow ourselves the time to calm our thinking, to sit, to walk, to breathe—not doing anything, just going back to ourselves and what is around us. We allow ourselves time to release the tension in our body and our mind. Then we can take time to look deeply into ourselves and into the situation we are in.

If we feel helpless or overwhelmed, if we have anger, fear, or despair, then no matter what we do to heal ourselves or our planet, it will not succeed. Meditating is the most basic, crucial thing we can do. To meditate is to give ourselves a chance to free ourselves from despair, to touch non-fear, and to nurture our compassion. With the insight and fearlessness born from meditation, we will be able to help not only ourselves, but also other species, and our planet.

When you practice sitting meditation, the first thing you do is to bring peace to your breath and to your body. Pay attention to your in-breath and out-breath. Your breathing will naturally become more peaceful and smooth and it will also become very pleasant. Sit solely for the joy and nourishment of sitting.

Stop thinking and just be with your breathing. Breathing mindfully brings your mind home to your body. Bring your awareness to your body, relax your body and release any tension that is there. Your body is a miracle. When you can touch the wonder of your body, you have the opportunity to touch Mother Earth within you as a wonder, too, and healing begins straight away—we don't need to wait ten years for healing to take place. Many of us have become sick because we're alienated from our body and from the body of the Earth. So the practice is to go home to Mother Earth to get the healing and nourishment we so desperately need. Mother Earth is always ready to embrace us and help nourish and heal us. And as we heal, we're helping the Earth to heal at the same time.

We tend to think that we have to *do* something to heal the Earth. But sitting with mindfulness and concentration is doing something. We don't have to fight in order to feel the benefits of sitting. Just allow yourself to sit quietly.

Allow yourself to be yourself. Don't do anything. Just allow the sitting and the breathing to take place. Don't strive; relaxation will come. When you are completely relaxed, healing will take place on its own. There's no healing without relaxation. And relaxation means doing nothing. There is only breathing and sitting. Don't try to force your breathing. Just allow it to follow its natural rhythm. We just enjoy our in- and out-breath. Healing begins when you aren't trying to do anything. This is the practice of non-practice.

If we know how to take refuge in Mother Earth, we can experience healing through sitting, walking, or simply by breathing. We can feel her solidity under our feet; we can see her majesty in high mountain peaks and lakes, in the vast blue sky, winding rivers, and deep oceans. If we truly believe in the planet's power to heal herself, we know she can also heal us. We don't have to do anything at all. Just surrender ourselves to Mother Earth and she will do everything for us. We are the Earth. The Earth is us. We can allow this process to happen by itself.

As we sit, we may become aware that outside, up in the sky, there are so many stars. We may not be able to see them, but they are there nevertheless. We are sitting on an amazingly beautiful planet, which is revolving in our galaxy, the Milky Way, a river containing trillions of stars. If we're able to have this awareness when we sit, then what else do we need to sit for? We see all the wonders of the universe and of our planet Earth very clearly. When we sit with this kind of awareness, we can embrace the whole world, from the past to the future. When we sit like that, our happiness is boundless.

THE GIFT OF FOOD

The food we eat is a gift from the Earth. When you take a bite of bread or a sip of tea, do it with awareness. Your mind shouldn't be somewhere else, thinking about your job or planning for the future. Looking deeply into the bread, see the golden wheat fields and the beautiful countryside around them; see the labor of the farmer, the miller, and the baker. The bread doesn't come from nothing. It comes from the grains, the rain, the sun, the soil, and the hard work of many people. The whole universe has brought this piece of bread to you. When you stop thinking and bring your mind home to the present moment, you can look deeply into the piece of bread and see this. A few seconds is all it takes to generate mindfulness and concentration, which lead to the insight that the piece of bread in your hands is a real miracle, containing the whole universe; you see that the bread is an ambassador of the cosmos. Without mindfulness, we can still derive some nourishment from the bread, but when we're truly, deeply in touch with the bread, we're nourished

by the entire universe. We receive the body of the cosmos in every mouthful of food we eat.

To sit with friends and practice mindful eating together can bring a lot of joy. When you chew, be aware that the whole universe is miraculously coming together wonderfully in your mouth. Don't ingest your worries, your anxiety, or your plans. Open your eyes, look at the people around you, and smile. Be present with the food and the people sitting around the table with you. See that you are one with the universe and that you and your friends are supporting each other. Everyone will profit from the collective energy of mindfulness, peace, and brotherhood and will be nourished in a way that enables healing and transformation to take place.

When you've finished eating, take a few moments to see that your bowl or plate is empty and your hunger is satisfied. We're filled with gratitude when we realize how fortunate we are to have nourishing food to eat, supporting us on the path of understanding and love.

THESE STEPS WILL SAVE YOUR LIFE

Mindful walking is a wonderful practice to help us receive nourishment and healing from the Earth. When you open the door and go out into the fresh air, you get in touch with the air and the ground and all the elements around you. Each mindful step taken with awareness is a step taken in freedom. Every step is an opportunity to celebrate the miracle of life. Every step can put us in touch with body and mind. Both body and mind have to be there when we take a step. We have to be fully present. Every step placed softly, gently, and mindfully on Mother Earth can bring us a lot of healing and happiness.

When we walk, we know we're not stepping on something inanimate. The ground we're walking on is not inert matter. In every speck of dust or grain of sand there are countless bodhisattvas. When we walk mindfully, we can be in contact through our feet with the Great Bodhisattva Mother Earth.

Understanding the Earth in this way, we can walk on the planet with as much respect and reverence as we would walk when in a house of worship or in any sacred space. We can bring our full awareness to each step. Steps like these have the power to save our lives. They can rescue us from the state of alienation we're living in and bring us back to a place of true refuge, reconnecting us with ourselves and with the Earth. Walking with one hundred percent of your body and mind can free you from anger, fear, and despair. While walking, you can say,

With each step, I come home to the Earth.

With each step, I return to my source.

With each step, I take refuge in Mother Earth.

Each step can express your love for the Earth. As you walk, you can say,

I love the Earth. I am in love with the Earth.

Walking mindfully means walking with full awareness of this love. Filled with love and understanding, we can become deeply aware of every single thing on this planet. We notice that the leaves on the trees are a startling light green in spring, a vibrant green in summer, a rich yellow, orange, and red in autumn, and then in winter, when the branches are bare, the tree continues to stand tall, so strong and beautiful, harboring life deep inside. Mother Earth receives the fallen leaves and breaks them down to create new nourishment for the tree so that it can continue to grow.

When you walk, don't think about anything else. Most of us have a radio constantly playing in our head tuned to the station Radio NST, Radio Nonstop Thinking. Most of this thinking is unproductive thinking. The more we think, the less available we are to what is around us. Therefore we have to learn to turn off the radio and stop our thinking in order to fully enjoy the present moment.

When walking you just walk, giving one hundred percent of your awareness and attention to your walking. In this way, you will be present for the ground beneath your feet, for the plants in front of you, the clouds above you, and the people around you.

When we walk, we're not walking alone. Our parents and ancestors are walking with us. They're present in every cell of our bodies. So each step that brings us healing and happiness also brings healing and happiness to our parents and ancestors. Every mindful step has the power to transform us and all our ancestors within us, including our animal, plant, and mineral ancestors. We don't walk for ourselves alone. When we walk, we walk for our family and for the whole world.

When we walk mindfully, gathering nourishment from the Earth, we have the opportunity to practice inclusiveness. With each step, we can vow to protect all species on Earth. With each step, we can say,

I know the Earth is my Mother, a great living being.

I vow to protect the Earth, and the Earth protects me.

Every step taken in mindfulness brings us one step closer to healing ourselves and our planet.

MINDFUL LISTENING

The Sanskrit word *sravaka* usually means “disciple.” Literally it means “hearer.” A *sravaka* is one who learns by listening to teachings. Each of us can be someone who knows how to listen deeply. We can practice listening deeply to ourselves, to others, and to the Earth. When we practice mindful listening, we listen in order to understand and to relieve suffering. We all have suffering within that we need to take care of and not run away from. We listen in such a way that we’re able to gain wisdom and cultivate compassion. But before being able to listen to others, we need to know how to listen to ourselves first. We need to restore communication with ourselves and not to run away from ourselves or try to cover up unpleasant or uncomfortable feelings inside us.

In fact we have to be there for ourselves in order to understand our suffering and our difficulties. The first thing we should do is to recognize and admit that we suffer. If we can acknowledge the fact that we’re suffering, then we have a chance to transform that suffering. The second step is to have the courage to look deeply into it, to listen to it and to embrace it, in order to understand the nature of our suffering. Many of us do everything we can to avoid going back to ourselves, because we’re afraid that if we come home and touch the suffering inside it will overwhelm us. That’s why we need to train ourselves in the practice of mindfulness, of breathing, of sitting, and of walking, because doing all these things in mindfulness we generate an energy that can help us be strong. Without mindfulness, we can be overwhelmed. But with mindfulness we can be active, we have a chance to do something.

We have a chance to understand our suffering and to see the way out. When we understand our suffering, it transforms.

We can speak of the “art of suffering.” We can learn to make good use of our suffering in order to create happiness. We can learn a lot from our suffering. We know that understanding our suffering gives rise to compassion for ourselves; compassion is essential for our happiness.

When we know how to listen to our own suffering with compassion then we can listen to someone else with the same compassion, to help the other person to suffer less as well. But we can’t help others if we haven’t recognized the suffering in ourselves first. That’s why listening deeply to our own suffering is crucial. Then compassion will arise in us and we will suffer

less and be able to help others more.

When we see that another person is suffering, compassion is born in our hearts and we want to do whatever is in our power to help the other person suffer less. Because we see and understand their suffering, we don't blame them for their behavior. We only want to help them and bring them relief. We can do this by listening deeply with compassion and without judgment.

RESTORING BALANCE

Once we know how to listen deeply, with mindfulness, we're able to listen to the Earth and hear her suffering. The Earth is out of balance; as a species we have not given back to the Earth as much as we have taken from it. We have exploited the Earth's natural resources and polluted her environment. When we upset the balance of Mother Earth, it leads to a lot of suffering. Listening deeply we will see what she needs in order to regain her natural balance.

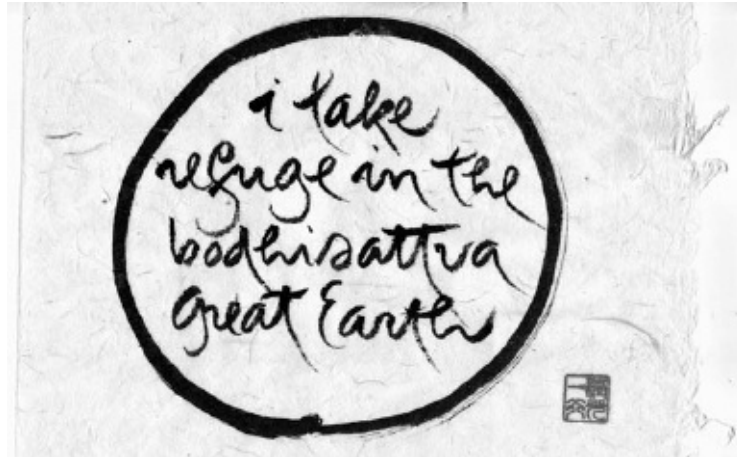
The Earth has already experienced a lot of suffering in the past from which she has managed to recover. She has experienced natural disasters such as collisions with other planets, meteorites, and asteroids as well as severe periods of drought, forest fires, and earthquakes, and yet she has been able to restore herself after all these events. Now we are putting so much strain on the Earth, by polluting the atmosphere, warming the planet, and poisoning the oceans, that she can't heal on her own.

The Earth has lost her equilibrium. The fact that we have lost connection with Earth's natural rhythm is the cause of many modern sicknesses. Some people believe that God is punishing the planet but in fact we all have to accept responsibility for what is happening to the Earth. We have to see our role in this process and know what to do in order to protect our Mother Earth. We can't just rely on her to take care of us; we also need to take care of her.

Unless we restore the Earth's balance, we will continue to cause a lot of destruction and it will be difficult for life on Earth to continue. We need to realize that the conditions that will help to restore the necessary balance don't come from outside us; they come from inside us, from our own mindfulness, our own level of awareness. Our own awakened consciousness is what can heal the Earth.

There is a revolution that needs to happen and it starts from inside each one of us. When we change the way we see the world, when we realize that we and the Earth are one and we begin to live with mindfulness, our own suffering will start to ease. When we're no longer overwhelmed by our own

suffering, we will have the compassion and understanding to treat the Earth with love and respect. Restoring balance to ourselves, we can begin the work of restoring balance to the Earth. There is no difference between concern for the planet and concern for ourselves and our own well-being. There is no difference between healing the planet and healing ourselves.



Suddenly, from behind the rim of the moon, in long, slow-motion moments of immense majesty, there emerges a sparkling blue and white jewel, a light, delicate sky-blue sphere laced with slowly swirling veils of white, rising gradually like a small pearl in a thick sea of black mystery. It takes more than a moment to fully realize this is Earth ... home.

—Edgar Mitchell, Apollo 14 Astronaut (1971)

CHAPTER 3

WELCOME HOME

IN 1969, FOR THE first time ever, people saw images of the Earth taken by astronauts orbiting the moon. This was the first time we could see the totality of our planet. Seen from space, we could see the Earth as one living system. We could see how beautiful but also how fragile the Earth was and her atmosphere too—just a tiny thin layer protecting us all. To the astronauts, the Earth appeared as a dynamic, alive, and constantly glowing jewel. When I first saw those pictures, I was amazed. I thought, “Dear Earth, I didn’t know that you are so beautiful. I see you in me. I see me myself in you.”

The physicist Albert Einstein, looking deeply into the natural world, was moved by the great harmony, elegance, and beauty of the cosmos. It produced in him a feeling of great admiration and love, which he described as a cosmic religious feeling. Einstein didn’t believe in religion or a God as such, yet looking into the nature of the cosmos he expressed a religious sentiment which transcended the need for a personal God, and avoided dogma and theology.

TAKING REFUGE, TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

Many people think that heaven is somewhere else and they want to go there when they die. Yet they have no proof that such a place really exists. We shouldn’t let ourselves be lured by the idea of a faraway paradise. The Earth is real. The Earth is here. She is a wonderful phenomenon, present right here and now. In fact, the Earth is the most beautiful place in the heavens. We have to come back to take refuge in Mother Earth. The Kingdom of God is on Earth. Each step taken in mindfulness can put us in touch with the Kingdom of God. When we come back to the present moment, and we are in touch with ourselves. When our minds are calm, our senses open, we can see the wonders of life all around us. We can see that we’re truly walking in the Kingdom of God. Each day as we walk on the planet we can say,

I take refuge in the Earth.

I love the Earth.

I am in love with Mother Earth.

I HAVE ARRIVED

To take refuge in the Earth is to come back to our true home. There are those of us who live in very comfortable houses. You may have a roof over your

head, a comfortable bed to sleep in, sufficient food to eat, and yet still not feel at home. All of us are looking for our true home, the place where we feel safe and sheltered. If we practice mindful breathing and with each breath we get in touch with the Earth, then we will know we're already home. While practicing mindful walking, we have a chance to enter into deep communion with the planet Earth and we may realize that Earth is our home. One breath, one step is all we need to feel at home and feel comfortable in the here and the now. When we can come back to ourselves like this and take refuge in our inner island, we become a home for ourselves and we become a refuge for others at the same time.

The shortest and deepest teaching I can offer is this: "I have arrived. I am home." Breathing in, you know you have already arrived. Breathing out, you know you are home. With each breath, you can bring your body and your mind back to the present moment. You don't have to run after anything else anymore. The Earth is right here already. You feel completely satisfied with the present moment. Nothing is missing. With each step you can say,



I have arrived.

I am home.

RETURNING TO THE EARTH

Many of us wonder what will happen to us when we die. Some of us think

that after the disintegration of this body we will rise up to heaven or up to the clouds. Many of us believe we will go to a distant paradise after we die, and we imagine it must be a wonderful place, without suffering.

But we know that we *need* our suffering. We understand the goodness of suffering. We can make good use of our suffering by looking deeply into it, recognizing and embracing it. In this way our suffering will transform and increase our understanding, love, and compassion. Our suffering is the compost that enables beautiful flowers to grow. We don't need to find an imaginary place where there is no pain or suffering and where we can finally be happy. We can accept the Earth as our homeland. She is a living reality we can touch, see, and experience directly in the here and now.

Looking deeply like this, we can overcome the fear of death. We're born from the Earth and will return to the Earth; nothing is lost. As the eighteenth century French scientist Antoine Lavoisier discovered: nothing is created, nothing is destroyed; everything is in transformation. Energy can be changed from one form to another, but it can't be created or destroyed.

We don't need to go anywhere else when we die. We're already carrying the bodhisattva Mother Earth inside us. When we truly have the insight that we and the Earth are one, and not two separate entities, all fear dissolves. When we realize that the Earth gave birth to us and that the Earth will receive us again at the end of our lives, only to bring us forth again as a different manifestation, we arrive at a state of non-fear. We know that nothing is lost; nothing is gained. Nothing is born; nothing dies. We're no longer caught in the idea that we are a separate self. We will no longer ask the question, "What will happen to me after my body has disintegrated? Where will I go? Will I still exist or not?"

We don't have to wait until we die to return to Mother Earth. In fact, we're in the process of going back to Mother Earth right now. Thousands of cells in our bodies are dying each moment, and new ones are being born. Whenever we breathe, whenever we walk, we are returning to the Earth. Whenever we scratch ourselves, dead skin cells fall. We're constantly dying and being born again. There is a continual cycle of input and output taking place all the time. We are returning to Mother Earth at each moment as a natural part of our life process.

What do we mean when we say someone "dies"? We use the word "die" but that isn't really the right word. In our usual way of thinking, to die means that from being someone, we suddenly become no one at all. It means we pass from the realm of being into the realm of nonbeing. But looking deeply, we

can see that it's impossible to die. Matter can be transformed into energy, and energy can be transformed into matter. But nothing is lost. Nothing dies. There is only transformation.

Think of a cloud. Before it appeared as a cloud, it must have been something else. The cloud couldn't have come from nothingness. The cloud is just a manifestation, a continuation. Before the cloud appeared in the sky, it existed in another form—as mist, ocean, rain, or river. If we look deeply into the nature of a cloud, we see that a cloud can't die and pass from a state of being into nonbeing. A cloud can become rain or snow or ice, but it can't become nothing. So if the sky is clear, it doesn't mean that the cloud has died. It continues on in other forms.

When we look at a cloud, we have the tendency to say that the cloud exists. Existence is a perception. Tomorrow, if we don't see the cloud, we might say the cloud is no longer there; the cloud doesn't exist anymore. But there is moisture in the air we're breathing. And that moisture may eventually form part of a cloud. We don't see the moisture in the air, but we know it's there and that a cloud is hiding in it. When we no longer see something, we may think it doesn't exist. We think that something only exists when we can see it and that it doesn't exist when we can't. But the true nature of a cloud is that of no-birth and no-death. Superficially there is birth and death. This is the conventional truth. But looking deeply, in the ultimate dimension, we see that there's no birth and no death. That is the ultimate truth.

If a cloud can't die, how can we die? One of the Buddha's first insights was that of interdependent co-arising. Everything arises in dependence on everything else. There's no beginning or ending; there's no creation or destruction of anything at all. This is equally true of the universe. Billions and billions of conditions have come together for us to manifest in this form. When different conditions arise, we will manifest in a different form. If you look around in autumn, you notice that there are dead leaves covering the ground. I don't think the falling leaves suffer. They are just going back to Mother Earth in order to be reborn again. So all of us are like a leaf. We spend some time on the tree enjoying the sunshine, the rain, the wind, and at the same time we nourish the tree. The leaf spends many months on the tree, absorbing carbon dioxide and sunshine, producing oxygen, and enjoying itself. In the meantime, it creates food for the tree and helps the tree to grow.

Imagine the Earth is the tree and that we are a leaf. We think that the Earth is the Earth and that we are something outside of the Earth. But in fact we are inside the Earth. We may think that some day we'll die and we'll go back to

the Earth. But we don't need to die in order to go back to Mother Earth. I am in Mother Earth right now and Mother Earth is in me. We can say,

Breathing in, I know Mother Earth is in me.

Breathing out, I know that I am in Mother Earth.

When we look into a kaleidoscope, we see a beautiful symmetrical image. And whenever we turn the kaleidoscope, the image disappears. Can we describe it as a birth or a death? Or is the image only a manifestation? After this manifestation there is another manifestation that is equally beautiful. Nothing is lost at all. In our current form, we are a beautiful manifestation that Mother Earth has helped to create. When this manifestation is over, we will manifest in another way. There is no birth and no death. Being a cloud may be wonderful, but being rain falling to the Earth is wonderful as well.

You may like to lie on the ground and get in touch with Mother Earth. You can say,

Mother Earth, I am in you.

I am dying and being born in every moment.

You are always there.

We are being born and we are dying in every moment. Contemplating dying is actually very helpful and even pleasant, because it helps us see our true nature of no-birth and no-death, and reminds us we have nothing to fear. The Earth is always available to teach us this. Touching our nature of no-birth and no-death, we stop being a victim of anxiety and fear, and joy becomes possible straight away.

Is the Earth afraid of dying? The planet is not afraid of dying at all. She knows that she is the cosmos. Just as we are made of non-human elements and the flower is full of non-flower elements, the Earth is made of non-Earth elements. Like us, the Earth contains air, fire, and water, as well as the sun and particles from distant stars in faraway galaxies. In fact, we can see that the Earth is made exclusively of non-Earth elements. The whole cosmos has come together in order to produce the wonder that is this planet. Like us, it might change form, but it can never die.

OUR LEGACY

Every moment that we're alive in this body, in this human manifestation, we're emitting energy. This energy can be transformed but it can't die; it remains in the world forever. The Sanskrit word for this is *karma*, which

means action. Karma is the action of our thoughts, speech, and body. A thought is an action because it already has energy and it has the power to affect things. When we produce a thought of compassion, understanding, and love, that thought has the power to heal our body, our mind, and the world. If we produce a thought of hatred, anger, or despair, that thought has an effect not only on ourselves but on the world; it can destroy us and lead to the destruction of many other lives.

Suppose a nation produces a collective thought of anger and fear and decides to go to war. The whole country is then producing fear and anger. That collective fear and anger can cause much real destruction and suffering. Karma is very powerful. The thoughts and feelings we send out into the world have a powerful effect. Every thought we produce, everything we say and do, is an action. These actions continue forever. They can transform, but like the cloud, they will not disappear. We have to recognize the power of our karma and make a firm determination to be mindful of our thoughts, speech, and actions in order to heal ourselves and the Earth.

CHAPTER 4

AMPLIFYING OUR POWER

WHILE THE ENERGY OF our thoughts, speech, and actions is powerful, this energy is infinitely more powerful when we join together with others. When we come together as a group, with a common purpose and commitment to mindful action, we produce an energy of collective concentration far superior to our own individual concentration. This energy further helps us to cultivate compassion and understanding. If we practice mindful sitting, walking, speaking, and listening together as a group, then everyone can feel the collective energy and everyone can receive nourishment and healing.

This collective energy can lead to collective insight and to a collective awakening.

Our collective compassion, mindfulness, and concentration nourishes us, but it also can help to reestablish the Earth's equilibrium and restore balance. Together, we can bring about real transformation for ourselves and for the world.

COLLECTIVE NOURISHMENT

When we offer our peaceful energy to others, we're nourished by the peaceful energy they reflect back. The collective energy strengthens and nourishes us, helping us to continue on our path of awareness. This is why we need to create a community of practice. If we practice on our own, we won't be able to generate sufficient collective energy or receive sufficient nourishment, thereby depriving ourselves not only of this essential spiritual food but also depriving others of our peaceful and compassionate energy.

If you can sit in meditation on your own, quietly and peacefully, that is wonderful. Even if nobody else knows you are meditating, the energy you produce is still beneficial. The beautiful, peaceful energy you create will go out into the world. But if you sit with others, if you walk and work with others, the energy you create is amplified, and you will have a lot more energy for your own healing and the healing of the world. It's too much for one person to do alone! Don't deprive the world of this essential spiritual food.

We need to gather regularly as a Sangha in order to practice together and support each other. A few dozen people practicing mindfulness together can create a very powerful collective energy. When a few hundred or even a thousand people or more come together to practice mindfulness and concentration, this can produce the powerful energies of joy and compassion,

which can heal ourselves and the world.

Many thousands of us have participated in collective walking meditation and mass sitting meditation in some of the world's busiest cities. We have walked mindfully and peacefully around the Hoan Kiem Lake in Hanoi. We have left footprints of peace and freedom on the ancient streets and piazzas of Rome. Thousands of us have sat in silence and stillness in London's busy Trafalgar Square and in Zucotti Park in New York City. Everyone who participates and everyone who witnesses this collective practice has a chance to get in touch with the energy of peace, freedom, healing, and joy. The collective energy generated on such occasions is a gift that we can offer ourselves, one another, the city, and the world.

CULTIVATING JOY

When we practice mindfulness we're doing something for the whole of the Earth and all its inhabitants. We're giving back to the Earth and providing it with necessary nourishment. Our collective awareness produces joy; and joy is a food that we need and that the Earth needs to survive.

We may think of joy as something that happens spontaneously. Few people realize that it needs to be cultivated and practiced in order to grow. When we sit in mindfulness with others, it's easier to sit. When we walk mindfully with others, it's easier to walk. The collective energy can help us when we're tired or when our mind wanders. The collective energy can bring us back to ourselves. That's why it's so important to practice with others. At first we may worry that we aren't doing sitting or walking meditation properly and we may hesitate to practice with others for fear of being judged. But we all know how to sit and how to breathe. That's all we have to do. After only a few moments of concentrating on our breathing we can bring peace and calm to our body and mind and body. We only need to pay attention to our in-breath and out-breath. Focus on that. That's all it takes to begin to calm the agitation in your mind and body. You only need to dwell peacefully in your in-breath and out-breath for a short while and you will begin to restore stability and peace within yourself. The concentration of those around you will also support you as you begin to practice. Do this a little bit each day, alone or with others. When you train like this, it becomes easier and easier to return to your mindful breathing. The more you train yourself, the more easily you touch the depths of your consciousness, and the more easily you can generate the energy of compassion. Each one of us can do this.

Joining or creating a like-minded community is very helpful for our

practice. The practice of the group helps us maintain and strengthen our own practice. We can't heal ourselves or heal the Earth on our own.

When we practice together as a community, our practice of mindfulness becomes more joyful, more relaxed, and steady. We are bells of mindfulness for each other, supporting and reminding each other along the path of practice. With the support of the community, we can cultivate peace and joy in ourselves, which we can then offer to those around us. We cultivate our solidity and freedom, our understanding and compassion. We practice looking deeply to gain the sort of insight that can free us from suffering, fear, discrimination, and misunderstanding.

We bring ourselves back to the present moment, to be in touch with Mother Earth, and to see that we already have enough conditions to be happy; happiness is possible right in the present moment. The encouragement and support of a Sangha, a community of practice, can help us enormously. When we practice together, mindfulness becomes easy and natural.

CITIZENS OF THE EARTH

We tend to think of human beings as falling into two groups: those who are similar to us and those who are different. We allow political boundaries to obscure our interconnectedness. What we often refer to as patriotism is actually a barrier that prevents us from seeing that we're all children of the same mother. Every country calls its nation a motherland or a fatherland. Every country tries to show how it loves its mother. But in doing so, each country is contributing to the destruction of our larger mother, our collective mother, the Earth. In focusing on our human-made boundaries, we forget that we are co-responsible for the whole planet.

When we see that we are all children of the same mother, we will naturally want to cultivate and strengthen our sense of being part of one large family. When we speak of protecting our planet, we often speak of finding new technologies. But without real community, technology may be even more destructive than constructive. Real community, built with our practice of mindfulness, enables us to act together. When we can communicate with ourselves and with the Earth, we can communicate with others more easily.

Every one of us, regardless of nationality or religious faith, can experience a feeling of admiration and love when we see the beauty of the Earth and the beauty of the cosmos. This feeling of love and admiration has the power to unite the citizens of the Earth and remove all separation and discrimination. Caring about the environment is not an obligation, but a matter of personal

and collective happiness and survival. We will survive and thrive together with our Mother Earth, or we will not survive at all.

CHAPTER 5

PRACTICES FOR FALLING IN LOVE WITH THE EARTH

WE CAN BEGIN FALLING in love with the Earth right now. It doesn't take a lot of preparation. Each time we practice mindfulness as we go about our day, our practice gets deeper and we're able to generate more love and compassion, which in turn leads to greater understanding and insight.

Mindfulness is the continuous practice of touching deeply every moment of daily life. To be mindful is to be truly present with your body and your mind, to bring harmony to your intentions and actions, and to be in harmony with those around you.

We don't need to make a separate time for this outside of our daily activities. We can practice mindfulness in every moment of the day, in the kitchen, the toilet, in our bedroom, and as we're going from one place to another. We can carry mindfulness with us as we wash the dishes, take a morning shower, or drive the car.

We can do the same things we always do—walking, sitting, working, eating, and so on—with mindful awareness of what we're doing. When we're eating, we know that we're eating. When we open a door, we know that we're opening a door. Our mind is with our actions.

MINDFUL BREATHING

Our breathing is a stable solid ground that we can take refuge in. No matter what is going on inside us—thoughts, emotions, or perceptions—our breathing is always with us, like a faithful friend. Whenever we're carried away by our thinking, when we're overwhelmed by strong emotions, or when our minds are restless and dispersed, we can return to our breathing. We bring our body and mind together and we collect, calm, and anchor our mind.

We're aware of the air coming in and going out of our body. With awareness of our breath, our breathing naturally becomes light, calm, and peaceful. At any time of the day or night, whether we're walking, driving, working in the garden, or sitting at the computer, we can return to the peaceful refuge of our own breath. We may like to say silently,

Breathing in, I know I'm breathing in.

Breathing out, I know I'm breathing out.

To increase your mindfulness and concentration, you gently and easily follow your in-breath and out-breath all the way through. Just sitting and following

your breathing can already bring a lot of joy and healing.

The best way to reunite with your body is through your breath. Awareness of your breathing brings your mind back to your body. Be with your body and remember that you have a body. Release any tension and bring calm to your body. This is the first step in restoring wellness. Bringing your mind home to your body, you become established in the here and the now, and you have a chance to live your life and experience each moment deeply. When you're in touch with your body, you're in touch with life, the cosmos, and planet Earth.

SITTING MEDITATION

Sitting here is like sitting under the Bodhi tree.

*My body is mindfulness itself,
entirely free from distraction.*

When you sit down, be aware that you are sitting on the Earth. Practice following your breathing in and out. Feel your spine tall, straight, and relaxed like a tree. Feel yourself rooted in the Earth and your body as the connection between sky and ground. Just notice your breath. Thoughts come and go like clouds. Don't hold on to them or follow them, just let them pass by. Allow your body to completely relax. Don't struggle. Allow your mind to settle.

We don't do sitting meditation in order to become a Buddha or even to become enlightened. We sit to be happy. That's all. We sit merely to be there. We sit to be aware that the wonderful world is right there inside us, above us, below us, and all around us. If we can sit like that, happiness becomes a reality.

We may sit for fifteen, thirty, or forty-five minutes. But even if we only sit for a few minutes we have to enjoy it and we have to profit from every single moment of sitting. How many people in the world have the chance to start their day so peacefully, sitting calmly and quietly in the early morning? We also have many opportunities throughout the day to sit mindfully, whether we're at home, at school, at work, in the car, or on the train. Being peaceful and happy in our sitting, we can say,

Peace while sitting.

Joy while breathing.

Peace is the sitting.

Joy is the breathing.

This is an art.

DRINKING AND EATING MINDFULLY

Something as simple and ordinary as drinking a cup of tea can bring us great joy and help us feel our connection to the Earth. The way we drink our tea can transform our lives if we truly devote our attention to it.

Sometimes we hurry through our daily tasks, looking forward to the time when we can stop and have a cup of tea. But when we're finally sitting with the cup in our hands, our mind is still running off into the future, and we can't enjoy what we're doing; we lose the pleasure of drinking our tea. We need to keep our awareness alive and value each moment of our daily life. We may think our other tasks are less pleasant than drinking tea. But if we do them with awareness, we may find that they're actually very enjoyable.

Drinking a cup of tea is a pleasure we can give ourselves every day. To enjoy our tea, we have to be fully present and know clearly and deeply that we are drinking tea.

When you lift your cup, you may like to breathe in and become truly present. When you are fully established in the present moment, you are free from the past and the future, from your thoughts, worries, and projects. In that state of freedom, you drink your tea. There is happiness, peace, and a feeling of connection with all of life. Looking deeply into your tea, you see that you are drinking fragrant plants that are the gift of Mother Earth. You see the labor of the tea pickers; you see the luscious tea fields and plantations in Sri Lanka, China, and Vietnam. You know that you are drinking a cloud; you are drinking the rain. The tea contains the whole universe.

Before eating, we may like to take a moment to reflect on our food. In the Five Contemplations we vow to eat in a way that preserves our compassion and reduces the suffering of living beings. Someone without compassion can't be happy, because they're cut off from others and can't relate to the world. We need to have compassion, too, for the Earth, our mother. When we eat, we think about all the people, plants, animals, and minerals that have contributed to producing the food on our plate—the earthworms enriching the soil, the farmer working the land, the people who harvested the crops—but we also remember the many species that have already died and vanished from the Earth because of our ways of eating and consuming.

Before eating, we breathe together and look at the food, appreciating the people who prepared the meal and all the conditions that have brought this

meal to us. We know that this food is the body of Mother Earth and the body of the whole cosmos. We vow to eat in a way that preserves our health and well-being and the health and well-being of our planet. Looking deeply like this, we become filled with gratitude, which we naturally want to express. We can do this by reciting the Five Contemplations.

THE FIVE CONTEMPLATIONS

1. This food is a gift of the Earth, the sky, the universe, numerous living beings, and much hard work.
2. May we eat with mindfulness and gratitude so as to be worthy to receive it.
3. May we transform our unwholesome mental formations, especially our greed, and learn to eat with moderation.
4. May we keep our compassion alive by eating in such a way that we reduce the suffering of living beings, preserve our planet, and reverse the process of global warming.
5. We accept this food so we can nurture our brotherhood and sisterhood, strengthen our Sangha, and nourish our ideal of serving all living beings.

WALKING MEDITATION

When we do walking meditation, we can take each step in gratitude and joy because we know that we're walking on Mother Earth. We can walk with gentle steps, in reverence to the Earth who gave us birth and of whom we are a part. We are aware that the Earth we're walking on is sacred. With every step we touch the Earth Bodhisattva, so each step should be loving and peaceful. We should be very respectful because we know we're walking on our mother. If we walk like this, every step will be healing, every step will be nourishing. Walk with reverence. That is something we can train ourselves to do. Wherever we walk, in the railway station or the supermarket, we're walking on Mother Earth, so wherever we are becomes a holy sanctuary.

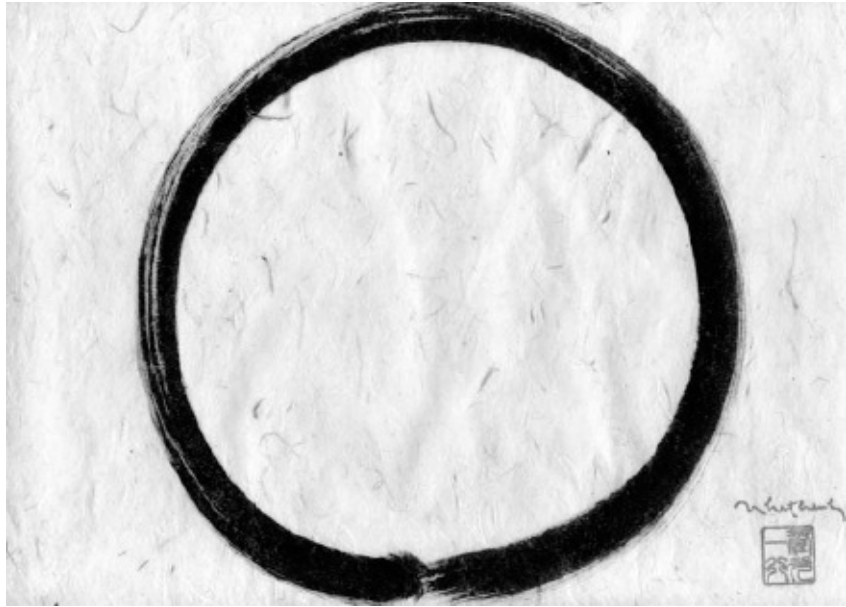
Each step contains insight. Each step has happiness. Each step has love—love and compassion for the Earth and all beings as well as for ourselves. We can try slow walking. Breathe in and take one step, breathe out and take another step. Why do we walk like that? To be in touch with the great Earth, to be in touch with the world around us. When we're in touch, when we're fully aware of the wonder of walking on the Earth, each step nourishes and

heals us. Thirty steps taken with this kind of insight are thirty opportunities to nourish and heal ourselves. So when you walk, invest one hundred percent of your being in your walking. Don't pretend you're walking mindfully when in reality you're planning your grocery shopping or your next meeting. Walk with your whole body and mind. Don't think. If you want to talk to others, you can stop in order to do so. We don't want to speak on the phone or eat while we're walking because we want to enjoy every step. We also want to be fully present for the person we're speaking to or the food we're eating. We can sit down somewhere to make our phone call in peace, to eat our food, or drink our juice in mindfulness. Every step has to have mindfulness. Every step must bring peace to our body and mind. Every step must bring about the insight of our connection to the Earth.

When we do walking meditation, we unite our body and our mind. We combine our breathing with our steps. Match your steps to your breath in a way that is comfortable for you. When you breathe in, you may take one, two, three, or four steps during that in-breath. And when you breathe out you may want to take a few more steps than you did with your in-breath.

For example, breathing in we take two steps, and breathing out we take three steps. If we take three steps while breathing in, then we may take four or five steps while breathing out. Find your own count that fits your natural breathing. Breathing in four steps, breathing out six. In five, out eight. When we can walk and breathe like that, without thinking, it's very pleasant.

Walking meditation is a way of waking up to the wonderful moment we are living in. If our mind is caught, preoccupied with our worries and our suffering, or if we distract ourselves with other things while walking, we can't practice mindfulness; we can't enjoy the present moment. We're missing out on life. But if we're awake, then we'll see this is a wonderful moment that life has given us, the only moment in which life is available. We can value each step we take, and each step can bring us happiness because we're in touch with life, with the source of happiness, and with our beloved planet.



CHAPTER 6

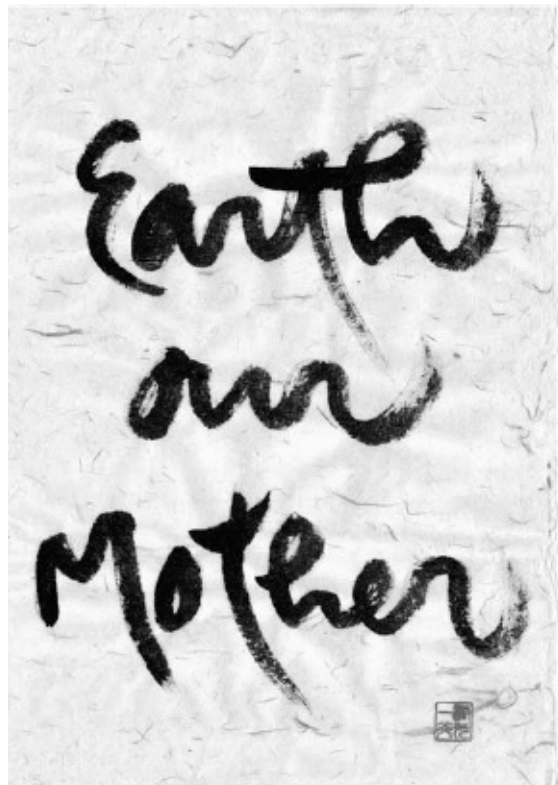
TEN LOVE LETTERS TO THE EARTH

THE FOLLOWING MEDITATIONS ARE love letters to the Earth. They are contemplations that can help create an intimate conversation, a living dialogue, with our planet. Above all, they are a practice of looking deeply.

For us to survive, both as individuals and as a species, we need a revolution in consciousness. It can start with our collective awakening. Looking deeply, with mindfulness and concentration, we can see that we are the Earth and, with this insight, love and understanding will be born.

The following conversations can enrich your practice of walking meditation, sitting meditation, and mindful eating. You may like to contemplate them when you're sitting quietly by a lake, looking at the night sky, or walking in the woods. They can deepen your practice of mindfulness while you're gardening or cooking, walking down the street, traveling by train, or sitting on a plane. You can let them slowly penetrate into your consciousness where they can bring about insight, deep healing, and transformation.

You may like to find a quiet place to sit where you can read them alone. Or you may like to read them out loud together with others. You may even like to write your own love letter to Mother Earth. There's no limit to where or how any one of us can have an intimate conversation with the Earth.



I

BELOVED MOTHER OF ALL THINGS

Dear Mother Earth,

I bow my head before you as I look deeply and recognize that you are present in me and that I'm a part of you. I was born from you and you are always present, offering me everything I need for my nourishment and growth. My mother, my father, and all my ancestors are also your children. We breathe your fresh air. We drink your clear water. We eat your nourishing food. Your herbs heal us when we're sick.

You are the mother of all beings. I call you by the human name Mother and yet I know your mothering nature is more vast and ancient than humankind. We are just one young species of your many children. All the millions of other species who live—or have lived—on Earth are also your children. You aren't a person, but I know you are not less than a person either. You are a living breathing being in the form of a planet.

Each species has its own language, yet as our Mother you can understand us all. That is why you can hear me today as I open my heart to you and offer you my prayer.

Dear Mother, wherever there is soil, water, rock or air, you are there, nourishing me and giving me life. You are present in every cell of my body. My physical body is your physical body, and just as the sun and stars are present in you, they are also present in me. You are not outside of me and I am not outside of you. You are more than just my environment. You are nothing less than myself.

I promise to keep the awareness alive that you are always in me, and I am always in you. I promise to be aware that your health and well-being is my own health and well-being. I know I need to keep this awareness alive in me for us both to be peaceful, happy, healthy, and strong.

Sometimes I forget. Lost in the confusions and worries of daily life, I forget that my body is your body, and sometimes even forget that I have a body at all. Unaware of the presence of my body and the beautiful planet around me and within me, I'm unable to cherish and celebrate the precious

gift of life you have given me. Dear Mother, my deep wish is to wake up to the miracle of life. I promise to train myself to be present for myself, my life, and for you in every moment. I know that my true presence is the best gift I can offer to you, the one I love.

II

YOUR WONDER, BEAUTY AND CREATIVITY

Dear Mother Earth,

Each morning when I wake up you offer me twenty-four brand new hours to cherish and enjoy your beauty. You gave birth to every miraculous form of life. Your children include the clear lake, the green pine, the pink cloud, the snowcapped mountaintop, the fragrant forest, the white crane, the golden deer, the extraordinary caterpillar, and every brilliant mathematician, skilled artisan, and gifted architect. You are the greatest mathematician, the most accomplished artisan, and the most talented architect of all. The simple branch of cherry blossoms, the shell of a snail, and the wing of a bat all bear witness to this amazing truth. My deep wish is to live in such a way that I am awake to each of your wonders and nourished by your beauty. I cherish your precious creativity and I smile to this gift of life.

We humans have talented artists, but how can our paintings compare to your masterpiece of the four seasons? How could we ever paint such a compelling dawn or create a more radiant dusk? We have great composers, but how can our music compare to your celestial harmony with the sun and planets—or to the sound of the rising tide? We have great heroes and heroines who have endured wars, hardship, and dangerous voyages, but how can their bravery compare to your great forbearance and patience along your hazardous journey of eons? We have many great love stories, but who among us has love as immense as your own, embracing all beings without discrimination?

Dear Mother, you have given birth to countless buddhas, saints, and enlightened beings. Shakyamuni Buddha is a child of yours. Jesus Christ is the son of God, and yet he is also the son of Man, a child of the Earth, your child. Mother Mary is also a daughter of the Earth. The Prophet Mohammed is also your child. Moses is your child. So too are all the bodhisattvas. You are also mother to eminent thinkers and scientists who have made great discoveries, investigating and understanding not only our own solar system and Milky Way, but even the most distant galaxies. It's through these talented children that you are deepening your communication with the cosmos. Knowing that you have given birth to so many great beings, I know that you

aren't mere inert matter, but living spirit. It's because you're endowed with the capacity of awakening that all your children are too. Each one of us carries within ourself the seed of awakening, the ability to live in harmony with our deepest wisdom—the wisdom of interbeing.

But there are times when we have not done so well. There are times when we have not loved you enough; times when we have forgotten your true nature; and times when we have discriminated and treated you as something other than ourself. There have even been times when, through ignorance and unskillfulness, we have underestimated, exploited, wounded, and polluted you. That is why I make the deep vow today, with gratitude and love in my heart, to cherish and protect your beauty, and to embody your wondrous consciousness in my own life. I vow to follow in the footsteps of those who have gone before me, to live with awakening and compassion, and so be worthy of calling myself your child.

III

WALKING TENDERLY ON MOTHER EARTH

Dear Mother Earth,

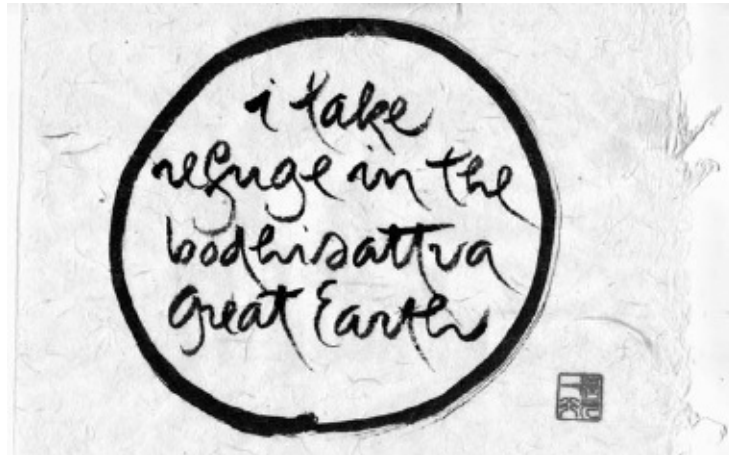
Every time I step upon the Earth, I will train myself to see that I am walking on you, my Mother. Every time I place my feet on the Earth I have a chance to be in touch with you and with all your wonders. With every step I can touch the fact that you aren't just beneath me, dear Mother, but you are also within me. Each mindful and gentle step can nourish me, heal me, and bring me into contact with myself and with you in the present moment.

Walking in mindfulness I can express my love, respect, and care for you, our precious Earth. I will touch the truth that mind and body are not two separate entities. I will train myself to look deeply to see your true nature: you are my loving mother, a *living* being, a *great* being—an immense, beautiful, and precious wonder. You are not only matter, you are also mind, you are also consciousness. Just as the beautiful pine or tender grain of corn possess an innate sense of knowing, so, too, do you. Within you, dear Mother Earth, there are the elements of Earth, water, air and fire; and there is also time, space, and consciousness. Our nature is your nature, which is also the nature of the cosmos.

I want to walk gently, with steps of love and with great respect. I shall walk with my own body and mind united in oneness. I know I can walk in such a way that every step is a pleasure, every step is nourishing, and every step is healing—not only for my body and mind, but also for you, dear Mother Earth. You are the most beautiful planet in our entire solar system. I do not want to run away from you, dear Mother, nor to hurry. I know I can find happiness right here with you. I do not need to rush to find more conditions for happiness in the future. At every step I can take refuge in you. At every step I can enjoy your beauties, your delicate veil of atmosphere and the miracle of gravity. I can stop my thinking. I can walk relaxingly and effortlessly. Walking in this spirit I can experience awakening. I can awaken to the fact that I am alive, and that life is a precious miracle. I can awaken to the fact that I am never alone and can never die. You are always there within me and around me at every step, nourishing me, embracing me, and carrying

me far into the future.

Dear Mother, you wish that we live with more awareness and gratitude, and we can do this by generating the energies of mindfulness, peace, stability, and compassion in our daily lives. Therefore I make the promise today to return your love and fulfill this wish by investing every step I take on you with love and tenderness. I am walking not merely on matter, but on spirit.



IV

YOUR STABILITY, PATIENCE, AND INCLUSIVENESS

Dear Mother Earth,

You are this infinitely beautiful blue planet, fragrant, cool, and kind. Your immeasurable patience and endurance makes you a great bodhisattva. Even though we've made many mistakes, you always forgive us. Every time we return to you, you are ready to open your arms and embrace us.

Whenever I am unstable, every time I lose touch with myself, or am lost in forgetfulness, sadness, hatred, or despair, I know I can come back to you. Touching you, I can find a refuge; I can reestablish my peace and regain my joy and self-confidence. You love, protect, and nurture all of us without discrimination.

You have an immense capacity to embrace, handle, and transform everything that is cast at you, whether it be great asteroids, refuse and filth, poisonous fumes, or radioactive waste. Time helps you to do this, and your history has shown that you always succeed, even if it takes millions of years. You were able to reestablish equilibrium after the devastating collision that created the moon and have endured at least five mass extinctions, reviving yourself every time. You have an extraordinary capacity to renew, transform, and heal yourself—and also us, your children.

I have faith in your great power of healing. My faith comes from my own observation and experience, not from something others have told me to believe. That's why I know I can take refuge in you. As I walk, sit, and breathe, I can surrender myself to you, trust wholly in you, and allow you to heal me. I know I don't have to do anything at all. I can simply relax, release all the tension in my body, and all the fears and worries in my mind. Whether I'm sitting or walking, lying down or standing, I allow myself to take refuge in you, and allow myself to be held and healed by you. I entrust myself to you, Mother Earth. Each one of us needs a place of refuge, but we may not know how to find it or how to get there. Looking deeply today, I can see that my true home, my true place of refuge is you, my beloved planet. I take refuge in you, Mother Earth. I do not have to go anywhere to find you; you are already in me and I am already in you.

Dear Mother, each time I sit in stillness on your Earth, I will be aware that because you are in me, I can embody your wonderful qualities: of solidity, perseverance, patience, and forbearance; of depth, endurance, and stability; of great courage, non-fear, and inexhaustible creativity. I vow to practice wholeheartedly to realize these qualities, knowing that you have already sown these potentials as seeds in the soil of my heart and mind.

V

HEAVEN ON EARTH

Dear Mother Earth,

There are those of us who walk the Earth searching for a promised land, not realizing that you are the wondrous place we've been looking for our whole lives. You already are a wonderful and beautiful Kingdom of Heaven—the most beautiful planet in the solar system; the most beautiful place in the heavens. You are the Pure Land where countless buddhas and bodhisattvas of the past manifested, realized enlightenment, and taught the Dharma.

I do not need to imagine a Pure Land of the Buddha to the west or a Kingdom of God above where I will go when I die. Heaven is here on Earth. The Kingdom of God is here and now. I don't need to die to be in the Kingdom of God. In fact, I need to be very much alive. I can touch the Kingdom of God with every step. When I touch the present moment deeply in the historical dimension, I touch the kingdom; I touch the Pure Land; I touch the ultimate; and I touch eternity. In deep contact with the Earth and wonders of life, I touch my true nature. The exquisite orchid flower, the ray of sunshine, and even my own miraculous body—if they do not belong to the Kingdom of God, what does? Contemplating the Earth deeply, whether a floating cloud or a falling leaf, I can see the no-birth, no-death nature of reality. With you, dear Mother, we are carried into eternity. We have never been born and we will never die. Once we have realized this, we can then appreciate and enjoy life fully, no longer afraid of aging or death, nor caught in complexes about ourselves, nor yearning for things to be different than they are. We already are, and we already have, what we are looking for.

The Kingdom of Heaven exists, not outside of us, but within our very own hearts. Whether we're able to touch the Kingdom of God or not at every step, depends on our way of looking, our way of listening, our way of walking. If my mind is calm and peaceful, then the very ground I'm walking on becomes a paradise.

There are those who say that in their heaven there is no suffering. But if there is no suffering, how can there be happiness? We need compost to grow flowers, and mud to grow lotuses. We need difficulties in order to arrive at

realizations about them; enlightenment is always enlightenment about something.

Dear Mother, I promise to cultivate this way of looking. I promise to enjoy the practice of dwelling peacefully with mindfulness in the here and the now, so I can touch the Pure Land, the Kingdom of God, day and night. I promise that with every step I will touch eternity. With every step I will touch heaven here on Earth.



VI

OUR JOURNEY OF EONS

Dear Mother Earth,

Do you remember when you and Father Sun first formed from the dust of exploded stars and interstellar gas? You didn't yet wear the silken cloak of freshness that you do today. At that time, Mother, more than four and half billion years ago, your robe was made of molten rock. Soon it cooled to form a hard crust. Although Father's light was far less than it is today, your thin atmosphere captured the heat and kept your oceans from freezing. In those first few hundred million years, you overcame many great difficulties to create an environment capable of sustaining life. You released great heat, fires, and gases from your volcanoes. Steam was expelled from your crust to become vapor in your atmosphere and the water in your great oceans. Your gravity helped anchor the life-sustaining sky, and your magnetic field prevented it from being stripped away by solar winds and cosmic rays.

But even before forming the atmosphere, you endured a collision with a great heavenly body, almost the size of Mars. Part of the impacting planet became you; the rest of it, along with some of your mantle and crust, became the moon. Dear Mother, the moon is a part of you, as beautiful as an angel. She is a kind sister to you, always following you, helping you slow down and keep your balance, and creating tidal rhythms on your body.

Our entire solar system is one family, revolving around Father Sun in a joyful and harmonious dance. First there is Mercury, metallic and cratered, closest to the sun. Next is Venus with her intense heat, high-pressure atmosphere, and volcanoes. Then there is you, beloved Mother Earth, the most beautiful of all. Beyond us orbits the Red Planet, cold and desolate Mars; and after the asteroid belt there comes the gas giant Jupiter, by far the largest planet of all, attended by an assembly of diverse moons. Beyond Jupiter orbits Saturn, the spectacularly ringed planet, followed by Uranus, tilted on his side after a collision, and, finally, distant blue Neptune with his turbulent storms and high winds.

Contemplating this splendor, I can see that you, Mother Earth, are the most precious flower in our solar system, a true jewel of the cosmos.

It took you a billion years to begin to manifest the first living beings. Complex molecules, perhaps brought to you from outer space, started to come together in self-replicating structures, slowly becoming more and more like living cells. Light particles from distant stars, millions of light years away, came to visit and stay a while. Small cells gradually became larger cells; unicellular organisms evolved into multicellular organisms. Life developed from deep within the oceans, multiplying and prospering, steadily improving the atmosphere. Slowly, the ozone layer could form, preventing harmful radiation from reaching your surface, and allowing life on land to prosper. It was only then, as the miracle of photosynthesis unfurled, that you began to wear the exquisite green mantle you do today.

But all phenomena are impermanent and ever-changing. Life over vast areas of the Earth has already been destroyed more than five times, including sixty-five million years ago, when the impact of a giant asteroid caused the mass extinction of dinosaurs and three quarters of all other species. Dear Mother, I am in awe of your capacity to be patient and creative, despite all the harsh conditions you have endured. I promise to remember our extraordinary journey of eons and to live my days with the awareness that we are all your children, and that we are all made of stars. I promise to do my part, contributing my own energy of joy and harmony to the glorious symphony of life.

VII

YOUR ULTIMATE REALITY: NO DEATH, NO FEAR

Dear Mother Earth,

You were born from the dust of distant supernovas and ancient stars. Your manifestation is but a continuation and when you cease to exist in this current form you too will continue in another. Your true nature is the ultimate dimension of reality—the nature of no-coming and no-going, no-birth and no-death. This is also our true nature. If we're able to touch this we can experience the peace and freedom of non-fear.

And yet, because of our limited view, we still wonder what will happen to us when our physical form disintegrates. When we die, we merely return to you. You have given birth to us in the past, and we know that you will continue to give birth to us time and time again in the future. We know we can never die. Each time we manifest, we're fresh and new; each time we return to the Earth, you receive and embrace us with great compassion. We promise to train ourselves to look deeply, to see and touch this truth—that our lifespan is your lifespan, and your lifespan is limitless.

We know that the ultimate and the historical—the noumenal and the phenomenal—are two dimensions of the same reality. Touching the historical dimension—a leaf, a flower, a pebble, a beam of light, a mountain, a river, a bird, or our own body—we can touch the ultimate. When we deeply touch the one, we touch the all. This is interbeing.

Dear Mother, we vow to see you as our body, and to see the sun as our heart. We will train ourselves to recognize you and the sun in every cell of our body. We will find you both, Mother Earth and Father Sun, in each tender leaf, in each flash of lightning, in each drop of water. Diligently, we will practice to see the ultimate and realize our own true nature. We will practice to see that we have never been born and we will never die.

We know that in the ultimate dimension there is no birth and no death, no being and no nonbeing, no suffering and no happiness, and no good and no evil. We will train ourselves to look deeply into the world of signs and appearances with the insight of interbeing, in order to see that if there were no

death, there could be no birth; without suffering, there could be no happiness; without the mud, the lotus can't grow. We know that happiness and suffering, birth and death, lean on each other. These pairs of opposites are only concepts. When we transcend these dualistic views of reality, we're freed from all anxiety and fear.

Touching the ultimate we're happy and at ease—we're in our element, free from all notions and concepts. We're as free as a bird soaring in the sky, as free as a deer leaping through the woods. Living deeply in mindfulness, we touch our true nature of interdependence and interbeing. We know we are one with you and with the whole cosmos. The ultimate reality transcends all notions and concepts. It can't be described as personal or impersonal, material or spiritual, nor as the object or subject of mind. Ultimate reality is always shining and shining on itself. We don't need to look for the ultimate outside of ourselves. We touch the ultimate in the very here and now.

VIII

FATHER SUN, MY HEART

Dear Father Sun,

Your infinite light is the nourishing source of all species. You are our sun, our source of limitless light and life. Your light shines upon Mother Earth offering us warmth and beauty, helping Mother Earth to nourish us and make life possible for all species. Looking deeply into Mother Earth, I see you in Mother Earth. You aren't only in the sky but you are also ever-present in Mother Earth and in me.

Every morning, you manifest from the East, a glorious rosy orb shining radiantly in the ten directions. You are the kindest of fathers with a great ability to understand and be compassionate, and yet at the same time you are incredibly bold and courageous. The light particles you radiate travel over 150 million kilometers from your immensely hot crown to reach us here on Earth in just over eight minutes. Every second you offer a small portion of yourself to the Earth in the form of light energy. You are present in every leaf, every flower, and every living cell. But day by day, your great physical mass of fusing plasma, 330,000 times the size of our Earth, is slowly diminishing. Within the next ten billion years most of it will transform into energy, radiating throughout the cosmos, and even though you will no longer be visible in your present form, you will be continued in every photon you have emitted. Nothing will be lost, only transformed.

Dear Father, your creative synergy with Mother Earth makes life possible. Mother's slight tilt in her orbit offers us the four extraordinary seasons. Her miracle of photosynthesis harnesses your energy and creates oxygen for the atmosphere to protect us from your blazing ultraviolet radiation. Over the eons, Mother has skillfully harvested and stored your sunlight to sustain her children and enhance her beauty. Birds can enjoy soaring through the sky and deer can enjoy darting through the woods because of your creative harmony with Mother Earth. Each species can delight in its element thanks to your nourishing light and the miraculous canopy of the atmosphere embracing, protecting, and nurturing us all.

There is a heart inside of each and every one of us. If our heart were to

stop beating, then we would die instantly. But when we look up toward the sky, we know that you, Father Sun, are also our heart. You aren't just outside of this tiny body of ours, you are within every cell of our body, and the body of Mother Earth.

Dear Father, you are an integral part of the whole cosmos and our solar system. If you were to disappear, then our life, as well as that of Mother Earth, would also end. I aspire to look deeply to see you, Father Sun, as my heart, and to see the interrelationship, the interbeing nature between Father Sun, Mother Earth, myself, and all beings. I aspire to practice to love Mother Earth, Father Sun, and for human beings to love one another with the radiant insight of nonduality and interbeing in order to help us transcend all kinds of discrimination, fear, jealousy, resentment, hatred, and despair.

IX

HOMO CONSCIUS

Dear Mother Earth,

We have given ourselves the name *homo sapiens*. The precursors of our species began to appear only a few million years ago, in the form of apes such as *orrorin tugenensis* who could stand, leaving their hands free to do many things. As they learned to use tools and communicate, their brains grew and developed, and over six million years they gradually evolved into *homo sapiens*. As agriculture and societies emerged, we acquired new capacities unique to our species. We became self-aware and began to question our place in the cosmos. Yet we also developed traits in discord with our true nature. Because of our ignorance and suffering, we have acted with cruelty, meanness, and violence. But we also have the ability, with spiritual practice, to be compassionate and helpful toward not only our own species but also other species—to become buddhas, saints, and bodhisattvas. All humans, without exception, have this potential to become awakened beings able to protect you, our Mother, and preserve your beauty.

Whether we're human, animal, plant, or mineral, each of us has the nature of awakening because we are all your offspring. Yet we humans are often proud of our mind consciousness. We are proud of our powerful telescopes and ability to observe distant galaxies. But few of us realize that our consciousness is your own; you are deepening your understanding of the cosmos through us. Proud of our capacity to be aware of ourselves and the cosmos, we overlook the fact that our mind consciousness is limited by our habitual tendency to discriminate and conceptualize. We differentiate between birth and death, being and nonbeing, inside and outside, individual and collective. Nonetheless, there are humans who have looked deeply, cultivated their mind of awareness, and overcome these habitual tendencies, to attain the wisdom of nondiscrimination. They have been able to touch the ultimate dimension within them and around them. They have been able to continue you on the path of evolution, guiding others toward the insight of nonduality, transforming all separation, discrimination, fear, hatred, and despair.

Dear Mother, thanks to the precious gift of awareness, we can recognize

our own presence and realize our true place in you and in the cosmos. We humans are no longer naive in thinking ourselves the masters of the universe. We know that in terms of the universe we are tiny and insignificant, and yet our minds are capable of encompassing numberless worlds. We know that our beautiful planet Earth is not the center of the universe, and yet we can still see it as one of the universe's many wondrous manifestations. We have developed science and technology, and discovered reality's true nature of no-birth and no-death, of neither being nor nonbeing, neither increasing nor decreasing, neither the same nor different. We realize that the one contains the all, that the greatest is contained within the smallest, and that each particle of dust contains the whole cosmos. We are learning to love you and our Father more, and to love one another in the light of this insight of interbeing. We know that this nondualistic way of seeing things can help us to transcend all discrimination, fear, jealousy, hatred, and despair.

Shakyamuni Buddha was a child of yours who attained full awakening at the foot of the Bodhi tree. After his long journey of seeking, he realized that the Earth is our true and only home, and that heaven, the whole cosmos, and the ultimate dimension can be touched right here with you. Dear Mother, we promise to remain with you throughout countless lifetimes, offering you our talent, strength, and health so that many more bodhisattvas can continue to rise up from your soil.

X

CAN YOU COUNT ON US?

Dear Mother Earth,

The human species is but one of your many children. Unfortunately, many of us have been blinded by greed, pride, and delusion, and only a few of us have been able to recognize you as our Mother. Not realizing this, we have done you great harm, compromising both your health and your beauty. Our deluded minds push us to exploit you and create more and more discord, putting you and all your forms of life under stress and strain. Looking deeply, we also recognize that you have enough patience, endurance and energy to embrace and transform all the damage we have caused, even if it takes you hundreds of millions of years.

When greed and pride overtake our basic survival needs, the result is always violence and unnecessary devastation. We know that whenever one species develops too rapidly, exceeding its natural limit, there is great loss and damage, and the lives of other species are endangered. For equilibrium to be restored, causes and conditions naturally arise to bring about the destruction and annihilation of that species. Often these causes and conditions originate from within the destructive species itself. We have learned that when we perpetrate violence toward our own and other species, we are violent toward ourselves. When we know how to protect all beings, we are protecting ourselves.

We understand that all things are impermanent and without a separate self-nature. You and Father Sun, like everything else in the cosmos, are constantly changing, and you are only made of non-you elements. That is why we know that, in the ultimate dimension, you transcend birth and death, being and nonbeing. Nonetheless, we need to protect you and restore balance, so that you can continue for a long time in this beautiful and precious form, not just for our children and their children but for five hundred million years and beyond. We want to protect you so you can remain a glorious jewel within our solar system for eons to come.

We know that you want us to live in such a way that in each moment of our daily lives we can cherish life and generate the energies of mindfulness,

peace, solidity, compassion, and love. We vow to fulfill your wish and respond to your love. We have the deep conviction that generating these wholesome energies, we will help reduce the suffering on Earth and contribute to alleviating the suffering caused by violence, war, hunger, and illness. In alleviating our suffering, we alleviate yours.

Dear Mother, there have been times when we suffered greatly as a result of natural disasters. We know that whenever we suffer, you suffer through us. The floods, tornadoes, earthquakes, and tsunamis aren't punishments or manifestations of your anger, but are phenomena that must occur on occasion, so that balance can be restored. The same is true of a shooting star. For balance in nature to be achieved, at times some species have to endure loss. In those moments, we have turned to you, dear Mother, and asked whether or not we could count on you, on your stability and compassion. You didn't answer us right away. Then, beholding us with great compassion, you replied, "Yes, of course, you can count on your Mother. I will always be there for you." But then you said, "Dear children, you must ask yourselves, can your Mother Earth count on *you*?"

Dear Mother, today, we offer you our solemn reply, "Yes, Mother, you can count on us."

AFTERWORD

TOWARD A COSMIC RELIGION

WE CAN BUILD A deep spiritual practice based, not on dogmas or beliefs in things we can't verify, but entirely on evidence. To say the the Earth is a great being is not just an idea; each of us can see this for ourselves. Each of us can see that the Earth has the qualities of endurance, stability, and inclusiveness. We can observe the Earth embracing everyone and everything without discrimination. When we say that the Earth has given birth to many great beings, including buddhas, bodhisattvas, and saints, we are not exaggerating. The Buddha, Jesus Christ, Moses, and Mohammed are all children of the Earth. How can we describe the Earth as mere matter when she has given birth to so many great beings?

When we say the Earth has created life, we know it's only possible because she contains within herself the whole cosmos. Just as the Earth is not only the Earth, so too are we not only human. We have the Earth and the whole cosmos within us. We are made of the sun. We are made of stars. Touching this true nature of reality, we can transcend the dualistic view that the cosmos is something greater than ourselves or different from ourselves. Getting deeply in touch with the phenomenal realm, the historical dimension, we can realize our true nature of no-birth and no-death. We can transcend all fear and touch eternity.

Every advance in our understanding of ourselves, our nature, and our place in the cosmos, deepens our reverence and love. To understand and to love are two fundamental desires. Understanding has some kind of connection with love. Understanding can take us in the direction of love. When we understand and become aware of the great harmony, elegance, and beauty of the cosmos, we may feel great admiration and love. *This* is the most basic kind of religious feeling: it is based on evidence and our own experience. Humanity needs a kind of spirituality that we can all practice together. Dogmatism and fanaticism have been the cause of great separation and war. Misunderstanding and irreverence have been the cause of enormous injustice and destruction. In the twenty-first century it should be possible for us to come together and offer ourselves the kind of religion that can help unite all peoples and all nations, and remove all separation and discrimination. If existing religions and philosophies, as well as science, can make an effort to go in this direction, it will be possible to establish a cosmic religion based not on myth, belief, or dogma, but on evidence and the insight of interbeing. And *that* would be a giant leap for humankind.

THE OLD MENDICANT

Being rock, being gas, being mist, being Mind,
being the mesons traveling among the galaxies
at the speed of light,
you have come here, my beloved.

And your blue eyes shine, so beautiful, so deep.

You have taken the path traced for you
from the non-beginning and the never-ending.

You say that on your way here
you have gone through
many millions of births and deaths.

Innumerable times you have been transformed
into fire storms in outer space.

You have used your own body
to measure the age of the mountains and rivers.

You have manifested yourself
as trees, grass, butterflies, single-celled beings,
and as chrysanthemums.

But the eyes with which you look at me this morning
tell me that you have never died.

Your smile invites me into the game
whose beginning no one knows,
the game of hide-and-seek.

O green caterpillar, you are solemnly using your body
to measure the length of the rose branch that grew
last Summer.

Everyone says that you, my beloved, were just born
this Spring.

Tell me, how long have you been around?
Why wait until this moment to reveal yourself to me,
carrying with you that smile which is so silent and
so deep?
O caterpillar, suns, moons, and stars flow out
each time I exhale.
Who knows that the infinitely large must be found in your
tiny body?
Upon each point on your body,
thousands of Buddha fields have been established.
With each stretch of your body, you measure time
from the non-beginning to the never-ending.
The great mendicant of old is still there on Vulture Peak,
contemplating the ever-splendid sunset.
Gautama, how strange!
Who said that the Udumbara flower blooms only
once every 3,000 years?
The sound of the rising tide—you cannot help hearing it
if you have an attentive ear.

Thich Nhat Hanh

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