

River Sangha



... a mindfulness meditation community

September 2019

You are invited to join us for mindfulness meditation on Wednesday evenings from 7 - 8:30 p.m. at the library in Woodland Chapel, located at 582 High Street SE in Salem, Oregon (come up the back stairs). We welcome newcomers and people from all spiritual traditions, sexual orientations, and racial and cultural identities.

A Bright Star Fades Out



Toni Morrison: February 18, 1931 - August 5, 2019

At a time when hostile rhetoric is dividing the world and violent action is becoming an inappropriate response, I am heartened by the bravery of Morrison's words, "Oppressive language does more than represent violence; **it is violence**; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; **it limits knowledge** ... it must be rejected, altered and exposed."

As we hear and read the news, and when anger and frustration emerge in tragic ways, we must take heart and use her words to find a way to move toward peace and positive action.

"Words are weapons, often used by the strong against the weak."

Morrison is one of the most decorated authors in American history, having won a Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Awards' Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the National Humanities Medal, Kennedy Center honors, and the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993. She is best known for

her novels *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* but also well known for her nonfiction, essays, children's literature and plays.

In 2012 when Morrison was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, then-President Barack Obama said, "Toni Morrison's prose brings us that kind of moral and emotional intensity that few writers ever attempt ... Toni reaches us deeply, using a tone that is lyrical, precise, distinct, and inclusive. She believes that language 'arcs toward the place where meaning might lie.' The rest of us are lucky to be following along for the ride."

"Language alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names. Language alone is meditation."

Perhaps Obama said it best: "Toni Morrison was a national treasure. Her writing was not just beautiful but meaningful—a challenge to our conscience and a call to greater empathy ... What a gift to breathe the same air as her, if only for a while."

Great writers give us so much and we must mindfully receive, in a way that returns nourishment to the world and those around us. That is indeed what she would want. Morrison was a true soul friend for all the world. It is with genuine certainty that we honor her distinct and inclusive voice. Her strong and beautiful words continue to inspire generations of writers, thus assuring her legacy lives on. May we use her inspiration to continue the good fight.

— Vickie Stiteler

Her Gift to Change the World

On Diversity: "The peace I am thinking of is the dance of an open mind when it engages another equally open one." From [The Dancing Mind](#)

On Suffering: "To lessen suffering, to know the truth and tell it, to raise the bar of humane expectation." From [The Source of Self-Regard: Essays, Speeches, and Meditations](#)

On Anger: "Anger is poison to your mind and body ... One way to avoid this helpless feeling is to practice some sort of **daily meditation or mindfulness practice**." From interview with CBS radio host Don Swaim, September 15, 1987

On Healing: "This is precisely the time when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. **That is how civilizations heal**." From [The Nation Magazine, March 2015](#)

On death: "We die. That may be the meaning of life ... That may be the measure of our lives." From her [Nobel Prize speech](#) in 1993

On imagination: "If you can't imagine it, you can't have it." From a [1992 lecture in Portland Oregon](#)



The News: From Despair to Hope

A frequent topic of conversation lately is that the news is causing misery. Too much and too negative, it leads to feelings of anger and despair. We want to know what's happening in the world but feel overwhelmed. We can't understand why vulnerable individuals are marginalized and harmed by thoughtless words of others, but wonder how to make them feel safe. We know we can't condone the acts by staying silent or turning away, but even worse is the risk that we become jaded about the suffering in the world. We ultimately feel incapable of making a difference.

"I have noticed that people are dealing too much with the negative ... Why not try the other way ... and see positive things, to just touch those things and make them bloom?" – Thích Nhất Hạnh

How Much is Too Much

It's important to know and understand current events, but when it becomes harmful to us mentally and our productivity suffers, we need to reconsider. A recent study in the Journal of Psychology noted that negative news can worsen our worries on issues that are not even related to the news story. Repeated often enough, the negativity can make us feel unsafe.

News is unavoidable. It is nearly everywhere we look—newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and perhaps worst of all, social media and the internet. But though we can't avoid it, we can choose **not to seek it out**. And if we change the way we consume news, we can learn how to respond in a more mindful way, so we can become aware and engaged without sacrificing our mental well-being. Our focus should be on activities that make a thoughtful and measurable difference in our lives and the lives of others.

Spiritual Practice

Psychologist, writer and meditation teacher Tara Brach provides guidance. She believes that the first step is to start right where we are, not judging our reactions or thinking "I shouldn't feel this." Accepting that this is the "inner weather of the moment ... you can feel the fear or aversion with acceptance and kindness." She cautions that we should not presume that our acceptance and compassion amounts to



Nature is a Refuge from the News. Wizard Island Crater Lake National Park © VS

condoning an action, nor make us complacent. Instead, "true acceptance is a courageous willingness to face reality as it is right now, and compassion brings tenderness to the life of the moment."

Brach emphasizes the importance of self-care, counseling that we should respond actively when possible and stay in close touch with others who care. She offers two phrases that bolster confidence: "There is hope" and "We are not alone." [Learn more.](#)

As with all mindfulness practice, the key to experiencing the benefits of these news-based practices is to turn these tools into daily habits. From "[Start Here – Master the Lifelong Habit of Wellbeing](#)" by Eric Langshur and Nate Klemp, PhD.

Suffering

There is little doubt that the negativity of news and political discourse causes suffering. It's also true that suffering can make us stronger as we make new choices and find new paths. When suffering leads to transformation, then there is hope. People everywhere yearn for a fair, loving and peaceful world and we can achieve that with a collective response centered on compassion and understanding. Those who choose to practice mindfulness are facing unique challenges but working through suffering provides opportunity for growth.

When another person makes you suffer, it is because he suffers deeply within himself, and his suffering is spilling over. He does not need punishment; he needs help. – Thích Nhất Hạnh

The Middle Way

Our practice tells us that the mindful way forward is the **middle path**. With a focus on the present moment, we avoid the extremes, neither removing ourselves from the world nor getting lost in it. And when the suffering of the world enlightens our compassion, we must respond in ways that both heal and liberate. Using the shared caring of our sangha community is one way to make a difference. Strong connections with others ensure we will thrive and engage meaningfully. Life finds balance and is suddenly filled with possibility.

— Vickie Stiteler



How to Focus on Well-Being When The News Overwhelms: Build Your Tool Kit



1. **Breathe, Just Breathe:** Let deep, slow breaths ground you as you find your center and move from dark to light, from lethargy to energy, from despair to hope.
2. **Make Healthy Choices:** Search out positive and uplifting news. Subscribe to news that feels good and feeds your wellbeing. Try "[Daily Good: News That Inspires](#)."
3. **Control the Medium:** Read, rather than watch or listen to the news. This is an intentional way of controlling the content and pace.
4. **News Meditation:** Let your focus be your anchor. Withhold judgment, observe the feelings, thoughts, or emotions that arise, and allow yourself to consciously choose if you wish to continue.
5. **Water the Correct Seeds:** News can often water seeds of anger, fear, horror and grief. Don't let it. Focus your attention on those who are victimized or harmed by this news and hold them in the arms of your compassion with mindfulness.
6. **Rewire Your Brain:** Practice "Notice-Shift-Rewire." **Notice** the moment your attention moves to news or political discussion and observe any judgments. **Shift** your attention to the present moment and with an open mind, simply watch it come and go. Then **Rewire** by taking just 15 to 30 seconds to appreciate and savor the experience of viewing news from this more interesting, enlightening perspective. [Learn more](#).
7. **May the Forest Be With You:** Get out in nature. Research shows being in **nature**, or even viewing scenes of nature, reduces anger, fear, and stress and increases pleasant feelings.
8. **Move Along. Nothing to See Here** (Obi-Wan Kenobi): Take a Break. You don't have to be completely free of news. Just find a balance that restores equilibrium and then absorb it more mindfully.
9. **Resolve Any Fear of Becoming Apathetic or Jaded:** If you're concerned that a news break will make you less of a participant or too numb to care, use the time away for engaged action. Volunteer, get involved.
10. **Channel Socrates:** The idea is to expand your perspective by engaging in the **power of inquiry**. The goal isn't to reject what you read and hear but to keep an open mind and avoid the political intolerance that pervades the extremes on both sides. We often undervalue information that disagrees with our own viewpoint, while overvaluing that which supports our view. Shifting your perception can restore peace and harmony.
11. **Use a Gatha:** Matthew Williams (Order of Interbeing - Truly Holding Peace) recites a gatha before reading the news: "As I read the news, I vow to cultivate compassion for all those I read about and to take care of my own anger, grief, despair and fear." This reminds him to "bring a mindful, compassionate spirit to the news." Matt practices with the Lakeside Buddha Sangha in Chicago.
12. **Know When to Walk Away:** Avoid conversations that are likely to summon an emotional response.
13. **Time Is on Your Side:** No matter how frustrating or disheartening the news, keep in mind that this too shall pass.
14. **Use the Space:** In that space between the news and your response, you have the power to control your next step. Fill your time with activities that are mindful and bring joy to your life. Read a good book, meditate, take a walk, pet your dog/cat, call a friend.
15. **Walk the Talk:** Instead of making critical remarks about public figures or political beliefs, foster an atmosphere of respect with a compassionate, mindful and open heart.
16. **Compassionate Action Plan:** Set a healthy boundary to begin and end your news time before it overwhelms. Find a compassionate and thoughtful response and use your plan to heal both self and community.
17. **Focused Relaxation:** Read or watch the news, then use a relaxation technique to purge any anxious, unsettled feelings. Harvard Medical School offers [six techniques](#).
— Vickie Stiteler



Mindfulness Trainings

Five Mindfulness Trainings recitation will resume in October. Thank you for your participation this year. You can find the Trainings here if you wish to read them and reflect on your own.

Online Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings recitation, 3rd Tuesdays 7-8 pm; next recitation: September 17. The 14 Mindfulness Trainings are the deep precepts received from Thay, passed down from the Buddha to benefit our precious world. Using the Zoom platform is simple, just click on the link: https://zoom.us/j/516471433. Or smartphone one-tap: +19294362866,,516471433# Learn More.

Retreat Opportunities

Holding the World Together, with Dharma Teacher Alexa Singer-Telles in the tradition of Thích Nhất Hạnh. Celebrate the Autumn Equinox in a creative, mindful way. Sept 19-22, Trout Lake Abbey, Wash. Learn More.

Liberating the Heart, Dismantling Oppression with Arinna Weisman, Phoenix Soleil, Lyn Fine and Joshua Bee Alafia at the Dhamma Dena Meditation Center, Joshua Tree, Calif. on Sept 13 - 22. Based in mindfulness and lovingkindness as offered in Vipassana and Plum Village Communities; uncover and explore the social locations of class, gender, race, physical and mental ability, LGBTQ, religious/spiritual practice, elitism and citizenship, including how we understand the intersectionality of these dynamics. Learn More and Register.

Announcements

Symposium on Peace: International Day of Peace at St. Mark Lutheran Church (Downstairs Fellowship Hall), 790 Marion Street NE, Salem; September 21 at 6 pm; Includes presentations, music, and light snacks; featuring a proposal on Salem Peace Trail, by Randall Burton, River Sangha member, and 40-year peace practitioner and documentarian. Contact Pritam Rohila, PhD; asiapeace@comcast.net

Salem Peace Vigil - First Wednesday - Noon to 1 pm at Polly's corner: Liberty & Chemeketa; signs provided or bring peace and economic justice signs. Sponsored by the Salem Friends Meeting & Salem Fellowship of Reconciliation. Call 503-371-6109.

Silverton Peace Vigil - Last Monday from 5:30-7 pm at Town Square Park near Main and Fiske Streets. Sponsored by Silverton People for Peace. Call 503-873-1446.

JOYFULLY TOGETHER IN VIETNAM 2020: Save the Date: Loving Work Foundation



supports humanitarian programs to improve lives of disadvantaged Vietnamese children and families; global community-building and engaged service.

Loving Work Retreat - March 6-20: Participate in service-oriented work projects; begin in Hue and End in Hanoi.

Discovering the Homeland of Our Teacher - March 27-April 12: Practice in active monasteries, visit historic sites, engage with humanitarian aid projects. Begin in Hue - End in Hanoi. More.

Day of Mindfulness



Trappist Abbey Fountain @ VS

Please join us on Friday, September 20 at the Trappist Abbey near Lafayette. A day for stopping, calming, looking deeply, letting go. Learn More.

Resources

Books by Thích Nhất Hạnh
Books by Jerry Braza
Books by Toni Morrison

Books are also available on the River Sangha bookshelf at the Woodland Chapel library for checkout on the honor system.

Sangha Leaders

Dharma Teachers: Jerry Braza and Nisi Ségor
Sangha presenters: Jerry, Alice Phalan, Bob Muir, Cheryl Randall, Julie Frasier, Lisa Umscheid, Sharon Cooper, and Val Self
Stewardship Council Chair: Kirsten Bammes
Communications: Sharon
Finance: Val, Kirsten, and Alice
Mindfulness Trainings Recitation Facilitators: Alice and Sharon
Room Coordinator: Julie
Website: Nadene LeCheminant
Newsletter Editor: Vickie Stiteler

Find Us Here: Woodland Chapel Library 582 High Street SE, Salem, Oregon
And Online at Our Website.
Contact Us - for more information or

suggestions for future newsletters: RiverSangha@gmail.com
Support Us: Voluntary donations (dana) are welcome and can be offered on Wednesday evenings. It

supports the community, Woodland Chapel, Dharma teachers and scholarships. Dana, in Sanskrit, means generosity, which we offer in appreciation for the teachings.