

Directing the Mind Towards Practices in Diversity

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Oppression is a difficult concept to embrace, and it is a difficult experience to explain. Oppression is an intense form of suffering that often elicits seemingly immediate reactions from individuals whether they are the targets of oppression or are the instigators of oppression. For people who are directly wounded by the violence of racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, or other forms of oppression, the pain may be so great that it is difficult to examine the pain mindfully on a moment-to-moment basis. For people who perpetrate oppression or who are not the direct targets of oppression, the pain may not be acknowledged, seen, or even understood.

And yet, it exists. And it separates us from each other—in ways that harm the quality of life of all human beings. So, what to do? How do we consciously move towards the suffering, from wherever we are at?

The intention in developing these trainings is to break down the concept and experience of oppression into some salient components. The invitation offered is to begin by transforming a piece of oppression, rather than being intimidated by the vastness of its suffering. The concept of “practice” presents itself as an incremental and cumulative process. The practice of diversity is also such a process. The hope is that this process can invite us into taking important steps in transforming our experience with oppression in deep and meaningful ways.

The practice of these trainings is an opportunity to begin the journey towards narrowing the experience of separation. As humans, we all participate in the harmful behaviors that these trainings are addressing. We all have been the perpetrator and victim, at one time or another. These trainings are for all of us, not just for any particular group or community. And in our conjoint practice are the vision, hope, and possibility of both cultivating non-perpetration of oppression and increasing compassion in how we live our lives and understand each other.

Entering into the trainings can be done in many different ways. They can be used in contemplative meditation practice and as themes for inquiry in individual practice. If used in an organization, group, or community, they can serve as

guided meditations and intentions, or as the beginning of mindful conversations. Related to this is the possibility to use one or more of these trainings as guiding principles during critical discussion, conflict resolution, mediation, or other respectful dialogue.

The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings of Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist Master, were an invaluable inspiration and nourishment of these trainings in diversity. The first mind training in diversity is a variation of Thich Nhat Hanh's Third Mindfulness Training in the Freedom of Thought. Since beliefs and views often make up culture and identity, this felt like the best place to begin the trainings. Thich Nhat Hanh has written: "Many of today's problems did not exist at the time of the Buddha. Therefore, we have to look deeply together in order to develop the insights that will help us and our children find better ways to live wholesome, happy, and healing lives." This encouragement and suggestion becomes especially important with issues of diversity.

Trainings of the Mind in Diversity

1. Aware of the suffering caused by imposing one's own opinions or cultural beliefs upon another human being, I undertake the training to refrain from forcing others, in any way—through authority, threat, financial incentive, or education—to adopt my own belief system. I commit to respecting every human being's right to be different, while working towards the elimination of suffering of all beings.
2. Aware of the suffering caused by invalidating or denying another person's experience, I undertake the training to refrain from making assumptions, or judging harshly any beliefs and attitudes that are different from my own or not understandable to me. I commit to being open-minded towards other points of view, and I commit to meeting each perceived difference in another person with the willingness to learn more about their world view and individual circumstances.

3. Aware of the suffering caused by the violence of treating someone as inferior or superior to one's own self, I undertake the training to refrain from diminishing or idealizing the worth, integrity, and happiness of any human being. Recognizing that my true nature is not separate from others, I commit to treating each person that comes into my consciousness, with the same lovingkindness, care, and equanimity that I would bestow upon a beloved benefactor or dear friend.
4. Aware of the suffering caused by intentional and unintentional acts of rejection, exclusion, avoidance, or indifference towards people who are culturally, physically, sexually, or economically different from me, I undertake the training to refrain from isolating myself to people of similar backgrounds as myself and from being only with people who make me feel comfortable. I commit to searching out ways to diversify my relationships and to increase my sensitivity towards people of different cultures, ethnicities, sexual orientations, ages, physical abilities, genders, and economic means.
5. Aware of the suffering caused by the often unseen nature of privilege, and the ability of privilege to benefit a select population over others, I undertake the training to refrain from exploiting any person or group, including economically, sexually, intellectually, or culturally. I commit to examine with wisdom and clear comprehension the ways that I have privilege in order to determine skillful ways of using privilege for the benefit of all beings, and I commit to the practice of generosity in all aspects of my life and towards all human beings, regardless of cultural, ethnic, racial, sexual, age, physical or economic differences.
6. Aware of the suffering caused to myself and others by fear and anger during conflict or disagreement, I undertake the training to refrain from reacting defensively, using harmful speech because I feel injured, or using language or cognitive argument to justify my sense of rightness. I commit to communicate and express myself mindfully, speaking truthfully from my heart with patience and compassion. I commit to practice genuine and deep listening to all sides of a dispute, and to remain in contact with my highest intentions of recognizing the humanity within all people.

7. Aware of the suffering caused by the ignorance of misinformation and the lack of information that aggravate fixed views, stereotypes, the stigmatizing of a human being as “other,” and the marginalization of cultural groups, I undertake the training to educate myself about other cultural attitudes, world views, ethnic traditions, and life experiences outside of my own. I commit to be curious with humility and openness, to recognize with compassion the experience of suffering in all beings, and to practice sympathetic joy when encountering the many different cultural expressions of happiness and celebration around the world.

8. Aware of the suffering caused by the cumulative harm that a collective of people can impose on individuals and other groups, I undertake the training to refrain from consciously validating or participating in group processes, dynamics, activities, decisions, or actions which perpetuate the suffering that these trainings describe on a familial, social, institutional, governmental, societal, cultural, or global level. I commit to exploring, examining and eliminating the ways that I consciously and unconsciously ally myself with forces that cause harm and oppression, and commit myself to working for the benefit and peace of all.

A version of these trainings is included in [Friends on the Path: Living Spiritual Communities](#), by Thich Nhat Hanh, compiled by Jack Lawlor, Parallax Press, 2002.