

SnowFlower Sangha Fall Regional Retreat

Frequently Asked Questions

SnowFlower Sangha is a Buddhist community based in Madison, Wisconsin and that practices in the tradition of the Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. We have sponsored a fall retreat annually for 25+ years. This is one of a series of retreats and Days of Mindfulness offered by similar sanghas, or Mindfulness communities, throughout the upper Midwest.

Some frequently-asked questions about this retreat follow.

I've never meditated before. Is it OK for me to attend the retreat?

Absolutely. Thich Nhat Hanh teaches a simple form of sitting meditation in which we first center ourselves in our bodies, and then maintain our attention on the breath as we breathe in and out. When our mind wanders (as all minds do!), we gently, and without judgment, return our attention to our breath, a process we repeat over and over, as necessary. In this way, meditation is a practice that trains us to be present to what is true for us in each moment. Meditation sessions are 20-30 minutes long, spaced throughout the day. You can meditate on a cushion or bench (please bring your own) or on chairs (which are provided at the retreat center).

We also practice walking meditation as a group. Instructions for this simple practice will be provided at the retreat.

Besides meditating, another reason we retreat is to be together as a community. Being in community can bring us joy, and it is an element of the practice of "Engaged Buddhism" as taught by Thich Nhat Hanh. For both meditation and being in community, the primary "task" is to simply show up and be as fully present as possible.

I'm concerned that I won't know what to do.

No worries. An orientation session is offered before the retreat officially begins during the registration and social hour, and we give instructions throughout the retreat for those who have not previously attended this kind of retreat.

Do I need to be a Buddhist or a member of SnowFlower Sangha to attend the retreat?

No. Anybody who wants to practice Mindfulness or is curious about our form of Buddhism is warmly invited to attend. You also are warmly invited if you practice in another Buddhist or contemplative tradition. There is no expectation that you will become either a Buddhist or a member of SnowFlower Sangha.

Do I need to maintain silence for the entire retreat?

The wonderful and rare stillness and relaxation that we often find in retreat is deepened by our practice of what is called Noble Silence. That is, we don't speak socially. We do that so that we can deepen our practice of mindfully stilling ourselves. However, you are encouraged to make eye contact and bow and smile to other retreatants. There are times during the retreat in which we speak mindfully, such as group discussions and a tea ceremony. Of course, if you have an emergency or a question, you may certainly ask one of the retreat managers.

Are scholarships available?

Yes. We urge you to contact us if you hesitate to attend the retreat because of cost. Scholarships are available for those in need. For more information, contact Pam Moran at scholarships@snowflower.org.

Can I make phone calls or check my e-mail while I'm at the retreat?

The invitation is to retreat from everyday life so that we can still ourselves, so we ask that you refrain from checking your e-mail, texting or making phone calls unless it is absolutely necessary. If it is necessary, we ask that you do this away from others out of respect for the experience of fellow retreatants. Retreat managers also offer their phone numbers at the retreat should you wish to share them with loved ones in case of an emergency.

What is the food like at the retreat?

We provide tasty vegetarian meals starting with a Friday night hearty snack before the retreat begins, and ending with lunch on Sunday. The food is prepared by a well-known Madison restaurant owner and, over the years, it has consistently received rave reviews from retreat attendees. We provide vegan options at every meal, and meal contents are listed for those who have other restrictions or needs.

Can I have a single room?

Unfortunately, no. The rooms and beds are comfortable and clean, but between 2 and 6 people share a room. We make every effort to keep couples together, but we can't guarantee that.

What should I bring to the retreat?

The retreat center is in a beautiful natural area in southwestern Wisconsin with many hiking trails. In addition to warm, comfortable, loose-fitting clothes for indoors, bring clothes and shoes that are appropriate for being outside and strolling through meadows and woods in October in Wisconsin. Also, bring toiletries, bedding and towels. You will be informed (in a confirmation letter) of what size sheets you'll need as this depends on your room assignment.

Also, bring a cushion or bench if you use them for meditation. Chairs will be available if you prefer.

I registered, but something came up and I have to cancel. Can I get a refund?

We are happy to provide full refunds up until the time when we have to confirm our food order. For a brief time after this date we are usually able to provide partial refunds. See the current flyer for the date of this year's deadline.

Is there an opportunity to take the Five Mindfulness Trainings?

Yes, the opportunity to take, or simply find out about the Five Mindfulness Trainings will be foreshadowed early in the retreat. You will be guided through this process by the Dharma teacher and the retreat managers.