2026 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 over 30 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.

What are the Five Mindfulness Trainings?

The Five Mindfulness Trainings are practical guides to help us live more fully in compassion and understanding. They are Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh's interpretation of the Buddha's five precepts to inspire positive action, including not killing, stealing or engaging in false speech. For Buddhists and non-Buddhists, they are designed to bring mindfulness into everyday life, and Thay (an honorific for teacher in Vietnamese) called them one of the most concrete ways to practice mindfulness. The purpose is not to follow the rules –—Thay considered them a path, not a rule book– but to increase happiness and reduce suffering, both for ourselves and others.

Is there an opportunity to receive the Five Mindfulness Trainings?

Yes, there will be an opportunity to receive the Five Mindfulness Trainings. Be sure to indicate on your interest on your registration form. Then we will guide you through the process.

Why would I want to receive the Five Mindfulness Trainings?

The Trainings offer a path towards a more ethical and mindful way of living, promoting personal well-being and contributing to a more compassionate world. Receiving them involves a formal commitment to practicing these guidelines, fostering a deeper connection to a community of practitioners and aligning with a tradition that spans generations.

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. Please do not hesitate to attend the retreat because of the cost. Scholarships are available for those in need. We have made it even easier this year, simply select the scholarship option on the registration form. If you can pay more than the scholarship amount, you can contribute to the SnowFlower Scholarship fund.

Can I write a check to pay instead of using PayPal?

Yes, you can write a check to cover your registration fee. Please make the check out to SnowFlower Sangha. Send it to SnowFlower Sangha, c/o Friends Meetinghouse, 1704 Roberts Ct, Madison, WI 53711

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.

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, Rajan Pradhan, 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?

No single rooms will be available this year.

Can I request a roommate?

Yes, to request a roommate, be sure you both fill in the "Roommate Request" field on the registration form. We make every effort to honor roommate requests, but we can't guarantee that.

What should I bring to the retreat?

Bring toiletries, bedding and towels. 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 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, October 15. Please email Katie David at Katie@snowflower.org if you need to cancel.

What mental health support will be available at the retreat?

This meditation retreat is not a physical or mental health treatment and does not provide physical or mental health treatment resources. If you are under treatment for a physical or mental condition, please consult your medical provider regarding the appropriateness of this experience for persons with your condition. If you are experiencing life trauma, emotional upheaval, or instability that might require individual support beyond our scheduled small group discussions, the retreat format may not be a good match at this time. Should you have questions, please contact the retreat organizers listed.