

Ten Love Letters to the Earth

By Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh

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.

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 mountain top, 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.

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.

Our 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 help-ful 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.

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."

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