

THE FOURTH PRECEPT: DEEP LISTENING AND LOVING SPEECH

by [Thich Nhat Hanh](#)

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I vow to cultivate loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of their suffering. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I vow to learn to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy, and hope. I am determined not to spread news that I do not know to be certain and not to criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that can cause the family or the community to break. I will make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.

There is a saying in Vietnamese, "It doesn't cost anything to have loving speech." We only need to choose our words carefully, and we can make other people happy. To use words mindfully, with loving kindness, is to practice generosity. Therefore this precept is linked directly to the Second Precept. We can make many people happy just by practicing loving speech. Again, we see the interbeing nature of the Five Precepts. Many people think they will be able to practice generosity only after they have accumulated a small fortune. I know young people who dream of getting rich so they can bring happiness to others: "I want to become a doctor or the president of a big company so I can make a lot of money and help many people." They do not realize that it is often more difficult to practice generosity after you are wealthy. If you are motivated by loving kindness and compassion, there are many ways to bring happiness to others right now, starting with kind speech. The way you speak to others can offer them joy, happiness, self-confidence, hope, trust, and enlightenment. Mindful speaking is a deep practice.

Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva is a person who has learned the art of listening and speaking deeply in order to help people let go of their fear, misery, and despair. He is the model of this practice, and the door he opens is called the "universal door." If we practice listening and speaking according to Avalokitesvara, we too will be able to open the universal door and bring joy, peace, and happiness to many people and alleviate their suffering.

*The universal door manifests itself
in the voice of the rolling tide.
Hearing and practicing it, we become a child,
born from the heart of a lotus,
fresh, pure, and happy,
capable of speaking and listening
in accord with the universal door.
With only one drop of the water
of compassion
from the branch of the willow,
spring returns to the great Earth.*

I learned this beautiful poem when I studied the *Lotus Sutra* at age sixteen. When you hear "the voice of the rolling tide," which is Avalokitesvara's practice, symbolizing the universal door, you are transformed into a child born in the heart of a lotus. With only one drop of the water of compassion from the willow branch of the bodhisattva, spring returns to our dry Earth. The dry Earth means the world of suffering and misery. The drop of compassionate water is the practice of loving kindness, symbolized by the water on the willow branch.

Avalokitesvara is described by the Chinese, Vietnamese, Koreans, and Japanese as the person holding the willow branch. He dips the branch into the water of compassion of his heart, and wherever he sprinkles that water, everything is reborn. When he sprinkles it on dry, dead branches, they turn green. Dead branches also symbolize suffering and despair, and green vegetation symbolizes the return of peace and happiness. With only one drop of that water, spring returns to our great Earth.

In the "Universal Door" chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, Avalokitesvara's voice is described in five ways: the wondrous voice, the voice of the world regarded, the *brahma* voice, the voice of the rising tide, and the voice of world surpassing. We should always keep these five voices in mind.

First, there is the wondrous voice. This is the kind of speaking that will open the universal door and make everything possible again. This voice is pleasant to hear. It is refreshing and brings calm, comfort, and healing to our soul. Its essence is compassion.

Second, there is the voice of the world regarded. The meaning of the word Avalokitesvara is "the one who looks deeply into the world and hears the cries of the world." This voice relieves our suffering and suppressed feelings, because it is the voice of someone who understands us deeply -- our anguish, despair, and fear. When we feel understood, we suffer much less.

Third, here is the brahma voice. Brahma means noble -- not just the ordinary voice of people, but the noble speech that springs forth from the willingness to bring happiness and remove suffering. Love, compassion, joy, and impartiality are the *Four Brahmaviharas*, noble dwellings of buddhas and bodhisattvas. If we want to live with buddhas and bodhisattvas, we can dwell in these mansions.

During the time of the Buddha, the aim of the practice of many people was to be born and to live together with Brahma. It was similar to the Christian practice of wanting to go to Heaven to be with God. "In my Father's house there are many mansions," and you want to live in one of these mansions. For those who wanted to be with Brahma, the Buddha said, "Practice the four noble dwellings: love, compassion, joy, and impartiality." If we want to share one teaching of the Buddha with our Christian friends, it would be the same: "God is love, compassion, joy, and impartiality." If you want to be with God, practice these four dwellings. If you don't practice these four, no matter how much you pray or talk about being with God, going to Heaven will not be possible.

Fourth, the voice of the rising tide is the voice of the Buddhadharma. It is a powerful voice, the kind of voice that silences all wrong views and speculations. It is the lion's roar that brings absolute silence to the mountain and brings about transformation and healing.

Fifth, the voice of the world surpassing is the voice with which nothing can be compared. This voice does not aim at fame, profit, or a competitive edge. It is the thundering silence that shatters all notions and concepts. The wondrous voice, the voice of the world regarded, the brahma voice, the voice of the rising tide, and the voice of the world surpassing are the voices we are to be mindful of. If we contemplate these five kinds of voices, we assist Avalokitesvara in opening the universal door, the door of real listening and real speaking. Because he lives a mindful life, always contemplating the world, and because he is the world regarnder, Avalokitesvara notices a lot of suffering. He knows that much suffering is born from unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others; therefore he practices mindful, loving speech and listening deeply. Avalokitesvara can be described as the one who teaches us the best way to practice the Fourth Precept.

"Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech, and the inability to listen to others, I vow to cultivate loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of their suffering." This is exactly the universal door practiced by Avalokitesvara.

Never in the history of humankind have we had so many means of communication -- television, telecommunications, telephones, fax machines, wireless radios, hot lines, and red lines -- but we still remain islands. There is so little communication between the members of one family, between the individuals in society, and between nations. We suffer from so many wars and conflicts. We surely have not cultivated the arts of listening and speaking. We do not know how to listen to each other. We have little ability to hold an intelligent or meaningful conversation. The universal door of communication has to be opened again. When we cannot communicate, we get sick, and as our sickness increases, we suffer and spill our suffering on other people. We purchase the services of psychotherapists to listen to our suffering, but if psychotherapists do not practice the universal door, they will not succeed. Psychotherapists are human beings who are subject to suffering like the rest of us. They might have problems with their spouses, children, friends, and society. They also have internal formations. They may have a lot of suffering that cannot be communicated to even the most beloved person in their life. How can they sit there and listen to our suffering, and understand our suffering? Psychotherapists have to practice the universal door, the Fourth Precept -- deep listening and mindful speech.

Unless we look deeply into ourselves, this practice will not be easy. If there is a lot of suffering in you, it is difficult to listen to other people or to say nice things to them. First you have to look deeply into the nature of your anger, despair, and suffering to free yourself, so you can be available to others. Suppose your husband said something unkind on Monday and it hurt you. He used unmindful speech and does not have the ability to listen. If you reply right away out of your anger and suffering, you risk hurting him and making his suffering deeper. What should you do? If you suppress your anger or remain silent, that can hurt you, because if you try to suppress the anger in you, you are suppressing yourself. You will suffer later, and your suffering will bring more suffering to your partner.

The best immediate practice is to breathe in and out in order to calm your anger, to calm the pain: "Breathing in, I know that I am angry. Breathing out, I calm my feeling of anger." Just by breathing deeply on your anger, you will calm it. You are being mindful of your anger, not suppressing it. When you are calm enough, you may be able to use mindful speech. In a loving and mindful way, you can say, "Darling, I would like you to know that I am angry. What you just said hurt me a lot, and I want you to know that." Just saying that, mindfully and calmly, will give you some relief. Breathing mindfully to calm your anger, you will be able to tell the other person that you are suffering. During that moment, you are living your anger, touching it with the energy of mindfulness. You are not denying it at all.

When I speak about this to psychotherapists, I have some difficulty. When I say that anger makes us suffer, they take it to mean that anger is something negative to be removed. But I always say that anger is an organic thing, like love. Anger can become love. Our compost can become a rose. If we know how to take care of our compost, we can transform it into a rose. Should we call the garbage negative or positive? It can be positive, if we know how to handle it. Anger is the same. It can be negative when we do not know how to handle it, but if we know how to handle our anger, it can be very positive. We do not need to throw anything away.

After you breathe in and out a number of times to recover your calmness, even if your anger is still there, you are mindful of it, and you can tell the other person that you are angry. You can also tell him that you would like to look deeply into it, and you would like him to look deeply into it also. Then you can make an appointment for Friday evening to look at it together. One person looking at the roots of your suffering is good, two people looking at it is better, and two people looking together is best.

I propose Friday evening for two reasons. First, you are still angry, and if you begin discussing it now, it may be too risky. You might say things that will make the situation worse. From now until Friday evening, you can practice looking deeply into the nature of your anger, and the other person can also. While driving the car, he might ask himself, "What is so serious? Why did she get so upset? There must be a reason." While driving, you will also have a chance to look deeply into it. Before Friday night, one or both of you may see the root of the problem and be able to tell the other and apologize. Then on Friday night, you can have a cup of tea together and enjoy each other. If you make an appointment, you will both have time to calm down and look deeply. This is the practice of meditation. Meditation is to calm ourselves and to look deeply into the nature of our suffering. When Friday night comes, if the suffering has not been transformed, you will be able to practice the art of Avalokitesvara. You sit together and practice deep listening -- one person expressing herself, while the other person listens deeply. When you speak, you tell the deepest kind of truth, and you practice loving speech. Only by using that kind of speech will there be a chance for the other person to understand and accept. While listening, you know that only with deep listening can you relieve the suffering of the other person. If you listen with just half an ear, you cannot do it. Your presence must be deep and real. Your listening must be of a good quality in order to relieve the other person of his suffering. This is the practice of the Fourth Precept. The second reason for waiting until Friday is that when you neutralize that feeling on Friday evening, you have Saturday and Sunday to enjoy being together.

Suppose you have some kind of internal formation regarding a member of your family or community, and you don't feel joyful being with that person. You can talk to her about simple things, but you don't feel comfortable talking with her about anything deep. Then one day, while doing housework, you notice that the other person is not doing anything at all, is not sharing the work that needs to be done, and you begin to feel uneasy. "Why am I doing so much and she isn't doing anything? She should be working." Because of this comparison, you lose your happiness. But instead of telling the other person, "Please, Sister, come and help with the work," you say to yourself, "She is an adult. Why should I have to say something to her? She should be more responsible!" You think that way because you already have some internal formation about the other person. The shortest way is always the direct way. "B" can go to "A" and say, "Sister, please come and help." But you do not do that. You keep it to yourself and blame the other person.

The next time the same thing happens, your feeling is even more intense. Your internal formation grows little by little, until you suffer so much that you need to talk about it with a third person. You are looking for sympathy in order to share the suffering. So, instead of talking directly to "A," you talk to "C." You look for "C" because you think that "C" is an ally who will agree that "A" is not behaving well at all.

If you are "C," what should you do? If you already have some internal formations concerning "A," you will probably be glad to hear that someone else feels the same. Talking to each other may make you feel better. You

are becoming allies -- ``B'' and ``C'' against ``A.'' Suddenly ``B'' and ``C'' feel close to each other, and both of you feel some distance from ``A.'' ``A'' will notice that.

``A'' may be very nice. She would be capable of responding directly to ``B'' if ``B'' could express her feelings to her. But ``A'' does not know about ``B's'' resentment. She just feels some kind of cooling down between herself and ``B,'' without knowing why. She notices that ``B'' and ``C'' are becoming close, while both of them look at her coldly. So she thinks, ``If they don't want me, I don't need them.'' She steps farther back from them, and the situation worsens. A triangle has been set up.

If I were ``C,'' first of all, I would listen to ``B'' attentively, understanding that ``B'' needs to share her suffering. Knowing that the direct way is the shortest way, I would encourage ``B'' to speak directly to ``A.'' If ``B'' is unable to do this, I would offer to speak to ``A'' on ``B's'' behalf, either with ``B'' present, or alone. But, most important, I would not transmit to anyone else what ``B'' tells me in confidence. If I am not mindful, I may tell others what I now know about ``B's'' feelings, and soon the family or the community will be a mess. If I do these things -- encourage ``B'' to speak directly with ``A'' or speak with ``A'' on ``B's'' behalf, and not tell anyone else what ``B'' has told me -- I will be able to break the triangle. This may help solve the problem, and bring peace and joy back into the family, the community, and the society.

If, in the community, you see that someone is having difficulty with someone else, you have to help right away. The longer things drag on, the more difficult they are to solve. The best way to help is to practice mindful speech and deep listening. The Fourth Precept can bring peace, understanding, and happiness to people. The universal door is a wonderful door. You will be reborn in a lotus flower and help others, including your family, your community, and your society, be born there also.

Speech can be constructive or destructive. Mindful speaking can bring real happiness; unmindful speech can kill. When someone tells us something that makes us healthy and happy, that is the greatest gift he or she can give. Sometimes, someone says something to us that is so cruel and distressing that we want to go and commit suicide; we lose all hope, all our *joie de vivre*.

People kill because of speech. When you fanatically advocate an ideology, saying that this way of thinking or organizing society is the best, then if anyone stands in your way, you have to suppress or eliminate him. This is very much linked with the First Precept -- that kind of speech can kill not only one person, but many. When you believe in something that strongly, you can put millions of people into gas chambers. When you use speech to promote an ideology, urging people to kill in order to protect and promote your ideology, you can kill many millions. The First and Fourth of the Five Wonderful Precepts inter-are.

The Fourth Precept is also linked to the Second Precept, on stealing. Just as there is a ``sex industry,'' there is also a ``lying industry.'' Many people have to lie in order to succeed as politicians, or salespersons. A corporate director of communications told me that if he were allowed to tell the truth about his company's products, people would not buy them. He says positive things about the products that he knows are not true, and he refrains from speaking about the negative effects of the products. He knows he is lying, and he feels terrible about it. So many people are caught in similar situations. In politics also, people lie to get votes. That is why we can speak of a ``lying industry.''

This precept is also linked with the Third Precept. When someone says, ``I love you,'' it may be a lie. It may just be an expression of desire. And so much advertising is linked with sex.

In the Buddhist tradition, the Fourth Precept is always described as refraining from these four actions:

1. Not telling the truth. If it's black, you say it's white.
2. Exaggerating. You make something up, or describe something as more beautiful than it actually is, or as ugly when it is not so ugly.
3. Forked tongue. You go to one person and say one thing and then you go to another person and say the opposite.
4. Filthy language. You insult or abuse people.

"I vow to learn to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy, and hope." This must be practiced with children. If you tell children they are good-for-nothing, they will suffer in the future. Always emphasize the positive, hopeful things with your children, and also with your spouse.

"I am determined not to spread news that I do not know to be certain and not to criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that can cause the family or the community to break. I will make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small."

Reconciliation is a deep practice that we can do with our listening and our mindful speech. To reconcile means to bring peace and happiness to nations, people, and members of our family. This is the work of a bodhisattva. In order to reconcile, you have to possess the art of deep listening, and you also have to master the art of loving speech. You have to refrain from aligning yourself with one party so that you are able to understand both parties. This is a difficult practice.

During the war in Vietnam, we tried to practice this. We tried not to align ourselves with either of the warring parties, the communists or the anticommunists. You will be able to help only if you stand above the conflict and see both the good and the bad aspects of both sides. Doing this, you put yourself in a dangerous situation, because you may be hated by both sides. One side suspects that you are an instrument of the other side, and the other side suspects you are an instrument of the first side. You may be killed by both sides at the same time. That is exactly what many Buddhists in Vietnam suffered during the war. We did not align ourselves with the communists, but we did not align ourselves with the pro-American side either. We just wanted to be ourselves. We did not want any killing; we only wanted reconciliation. One side said that you cannot reconcile with the pro-Americans. The other side said that you cannot reconcile with the communists. If we had listened to both sides it would have been impossible to reconcile with anyone.

We trained social workers to go into the rural areas to help with health, economic, and educational problems, and we were suspected by both sides. Our work of reconciliation was not just the work of speaking, but also of acting. We tried to help the peasants find hope. We helped many refugees settle in new villages. We helped sponsor more than ten thousand orphans. We helped the peasants rebuild their destroyed villages. The work of reconciliation is not just diplomatic; it is concrete. At the same time, we were voicing the peace in our hearts. We said the people in one family must look upon each other as brothers and sisters and accept each other. They should not kill each other because of any ideology. That message was not at all popular in the situation of war. My writings were censored by both sides. My poetry was seized by both sides. My friends printed one of my poetry books underground because the Saigon government would not allow its publication. Then the communist side attacked it on the radio saying that it was harmful to the struggle, probably motivated by the CIA. Nationalist policemen went into bookshops and confiscated the poems. In Hue, one kind policeman went into a Buddhist bookshop and said that this book should not be displayed; it should be hidden and given out only when someone asked for it. We were suppressed not only in our attempts to voice our concerns and propose ways to settle the problems between brothers and sisters, we were also suppressed in our attempts to help people. Many of our social workers were killed and kidnapped by both sides. Each side suspected we were working for the other side. Some of our workers were assassinated by fanatic Catholics who suspected us of working for the communists, and some of our workers were taken away by the communist side. Our workers were quite popular in the countryside. They were very dedicated young men and women, including many young monks and nuns. They did not have salaries; they just wanted to serve and to practice Buddhism. In the situation of war, they brought their loving kindness, compassion, and good work, and received a small stipend to live. They went to the countryside without hoping for anything in return.

I remember a young man named An who specialized in helping peasants learn modern methods of raising chickens. He taught them disease prevention techniques. He was asked by a farmer, "How much do you earn from the government each month?" An said, "We don't earn anything from the government. In fact we are not from the government, we are from the temple. We are sent by the Buddhist temple to help you." An did not tell the farmer, who was not so sophisticated, that he was associated with the School of Youth for Social Service, founded by the Department of Social Work of the Unified Buddhist Church. That was too complicated, so he only said that he was sent by the temple.

"Why have you come here from the temple?"

An said, "We are performing merit." This is a very popular term in Buddhism.

The farmer was surprised. He said, "I have learned that in order to perform merit people go to the temple. Now why are you performing merit here?"

The young man said, "You know, my Uncle, during these times the people suffer so much that even the Buddha has to come out here to help. We students of the Buddha are performing merit right here, where you suffer." That statement became the ground of our philosophy of social service, engaged Buddhism. The Buddha has to be in society. He cannot remain in the temple any longer, because people are suffering too much.

In a few years, we became very popular in the countryside of Vietnam. We did not have a lot of money, but because we worked in the way of performing merit, we were loved by the people. The communist side knew that and did not want us to be there, so they came to us during the night and asked us who had given us permission to work there. Our workers said that we did not have permission from either the government or the communist side. We were just performing merit here. One time the communists gave the order for our social workers to evacuate an area, saying, "We will not be responsible for your safety if you stay beyond twenty-four hours." Another time, some fanatics came from the government, unofficially, and asked our social workers if they were really social workers from the Buddhist community. Then they brought five of the students to the riverbank, and, after checking once more to be sure that they were Buddhist social workers, said, "We are sorry, but we have to kill you." They shot all five of them. We were suppressed by both sides during the night. They knew that if they suppressed us during the day, the peasants in the countryside would disapprove.

One grenade thrown into my room was deflected by a curtain. Another night, many grenades were thrown into our School's dormitories, killing two young workers, and injuring many others. One young man was paralyzed, and later treated in Germany. One young lady got more than 1,000 pieces of shrapnel in her body. She lost a lot of blood, and was saved by a Japanese friend who was helping us. Later, we were able to bring her to Japan for surgery. They tried to remove the small metal pieces, but 300 pieces that could not be taken out were left in her body.

One day when I was in Paris as representative of the Vietnamese Buddhist Peace Delegation, to be present at the Paris Peace Talks, I received a phone message from Saigon telling me that four social workers had just been shot and killed. I cried. It was I who had asked them to come and be trained as social workers. A friend who was there with me, said, "Thầy, you are a kind of general leading a nonviolent army, and when your army is working for love and reconciliation, there surely will be casualties. There is no need to cry."

I said, "I am not a general. I am a human being. I need to cry." I wrote a play six months later about the deaths of these students, entitled, *The Path of Return Continues the Journey*. [see *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993)]

The work of reconciliation is not diplomatic work alone. It is not because you travel and meet with dozens of foreign ministers that you do the work of reconciliation. You have to use your body, your time, and your life to do the work of reconciliation. You do it in many ways, and you can be suppressed by the people you are trying to help. You have to listen and understand the suffering of one side, and then go and listen to the suffering of the other side. Then you will be able to tell each side, in turn, about the suffering being endured by the other side. That kind of work is crucial, and it takes courage. We need many people who have the capacity of listening, in South Africa, in the Middle East, in Eastern Europe, and elsewhere.

The Fourth Precept is a bodhisattva precept. We need deep study to be able to practice it well, within ourselves, our families, our communities, our society, and the world.

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The fourth precept encourages us to practice loving speech and deep listening. Right speech is one of the limbs of the Noble Eightfold Path, which leads us out of suffering. To tell the truth is vital—but it is not enough. We must train ourselves to tell the truth in such a way as to bring love and joy into the world, and not to harm others. The other side of right speech is deep listening. Without deep listening, loving speech is not possible. We have to listen in order to understand the suffering and aspirations of another person. Once we have understood, we can help them with compassion. Ou