

The Five Wonderful Mindfulness Trainings

(Commentary by Thich Nhat Hanh Follows)

(The Five Wonderful Mindfulness Trainings below are Zen Master Thich Nhat's Hanh's translation of the 5 basic precepts as taught by the Buddha Shakyamuni. The Buddha offered these precepts to both his ordained and lay followers so that they could have clear guidelines to lead mindful and joyful lives on the path to awakening. Thich Nhat Hanh has updated the precepts so that they are beautifully appropriate and relevant in today's society. In his book entitled "For a Future to be Possible", Thich Nhat Hanh describes in detail how the Five Wonderful Mindfulness Trainings can be used by anyone in today's world to create a more harmonious and peaceful life.)

The First Mindfulness Training:

Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I vow to cultivate compassion and learn ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life.

The Second Mindfulness Training:

Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing and oppression, I vow to cultivate loving kindness and learn ways to work for the well being of people, animals, plants and minerals. I vow to practice generosity by sharing my time, energy and material resources with those who are in real need. I am determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. I will respect the property of others, but I will prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth.

The Third Mindfulness Training:

Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I vow to cultivate responsibility and learn ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families and society. I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without love and a long-term commitment. To preserve the happiness of myself and others, I am determined to respect my commitments and the commitments of others. I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and to prevent couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct.

The Fourth Mindfulness Training:

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 community to break. I will make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.

The Fifth Mindfulness Training:

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I vow to cultivate good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking and consuming. I vow to ingest only items that preserve peace, well-being and joy in my body, in my consciousness, and in the collective body and consciousness of my family and society. I am determined not to use alcohol or any other intoxicant or to ingest foods or other items that contain toxins, such as certain TV programs, magazines, books, films and conversations. I am aware that to damage my body or my consciousness with these poisons is to betray my ancestors, my parents, my society and future generations. I will work to transform violence, fear, anger and confusion in myself and in society by practicing a diet for myself and for society. I understand that a proper diet is crucial for self-transformation and for the transformation of society.

THE FIRST PRECEPT: REVERENCE FOR LIFE

by Thich Nhat Hanh

"Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I undertake to cultivate compassion and learn ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life."

Life is precious. It is everywhere, inside us and all around us; it has so many forms.

The First Precept is born from the awareness that lives everywhere are being destroyed. We see the suffering caused by the destruction of life, and we undertake to cultivate compassion and use it as a source of energy for the protection of people, animals, plants, and minerals. The First Precept is a precept of compassion, *karuna* -- the ability to remove suffering and transform it. When we see suffering, compassion is born in us.

It is important for us to stay in touch with the suffering of the world. We need to nourish that awareness through many means -- sounds, images, direct contact, visits, and so on -- in order to keep compassion alive in us. But we must be careful not to take in too much. Any remedy must be taken in the proper dosage. We need to stay in touch with suffering only to the extent that we will not forget, so that compassion will flow within us and be a source of energy for our actions. If we use anger at injustice as the source for our energy, we may do something harmful, something that we will later regret. According to Buddhism, compassion is the only source of energy that is useful and safe. With compassion, your energy is born from insight; it is not blind energy.

We humans are made entirely of non-human elements, such as plants, minerals, earth, clouds, and sunshine. For our practice to be deep and true, we must include the ecosystem. If the environment is destroyed, humans will be destroyed, too. Protecting human life is not possible without also protecting the lives of animals, plants, and minerals. The *Diamond Sutra* teaches us that it is impossible to distinguish between sentient and non-sentient beings. This is one of many ancient Buddhist texts that teach deep ecology. Every Buddhist practitioner should be a protector of the environment. Minerals have their own lives, too. In Buddhist monasteries, we chant, "Both sentient and non-sentient beings will realize full enlightenment." The First Precept is the

practice of protecting all lives, including the lives of minerals.

"I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life."

We cannot support any act of killing; no killing can be justified. But not to kill is not enough. We must also learn ways to prevent others from killing. We cannot say, "I am not responsible. They did it. My hands are clean." If you were in Germany during the time of the Nazis, you could not say, "They did it. I did not." If, during the Gulf War, you did not say or do anything to try to stop the killing, you were not practicing this precept. Even if what you said or did failed to stop the war, what is important is that you tried, using your insight and compassion.

It is not just by not killing with your body that you observe the First Precept. If in your thinking you allow the killing to go on, you also break this precept. We must be determined not to condone killing, even in our minds. According to the Buddha, the mind is the base of all actions. It is most dangerous to kill in the mind. When you believe, for example, that yours is the only way for humankind and that everyone who follows another way is your enemy, millions of people could be killed because of that idea.

Thinking is at the base of everything. It is important for us to put an eye of awareness into each of our thoughts. Without a correct understanding of a situation or a person, our thoughts can be misleading and create confusion, despair, anger, or hatred. Our most important task is to develop correct insight. If we see deeply into the nature of interbeing, that all things "inter-are," we will stop blaming, arguing, and killing, and we will become friends with everyone. To practice nonviolence, we must first of all learn ways to deal peacefully with ourselves. If we create true harmony within ourselves, we will know how to deal with family, friends, and associates.

When we protest against a war, for example, we may assume that we are a peaceful person, a representative of peace, but this might not be true. If we look deeply, we will observe that the roots of war are in the unmindful ways we have been living. We have not sown enough seeds of peace and understanding in ourselves and others, therefore we are co-responsible: "Because I have been like this,

they are like that." A more holistic approach is the way of "interbeing": "This is like this, because that is like that." This is the way of understanding and love. With this insight, we can see clearly and help our government see clearly. Then we can go to a demonstration and say, "This war is unjust, destructive, and not worthy of our great nation." This is far more effective than angrily condemning others. Anger always accelerates the damage.

All of us, even pacifists, have pain inside. We feel angry and frustrated, and we need to find someone willing to listen to us who is capable of understanding our suffering. In Buddhist iconography, there is a bodhisattva named Avalokitesvara who has one thousand arms and one thousand hands, and has an eye in the palm of each hand. One thousand hands represent action, and the eye in each hand represents understanding. When you understand a situation or a person, any action you do will help and will not cause more suffering. When you have an eye in your hand, you will know how to practice true nonviolence.

To practice nonviolence, first of all we have to practice it within ourselves. In each of us, there is a certain amount of violence and a certain amount of nonviolence. Depending on our state of being, our response to things will be more or less nonviolent. Even if we take pride in being vegetarian, for example, we have to acknowledge that the water in which we boil our vegetables contains many tiny microorganisms. We cannot be completely nonviolent, but by being vegetarian, we are going in the direction of nonviolence. If we want to head north, we can use the North Star to guide us, but it is impossible to arrive at the North Star. Our effort is only to proceed in that direction.

Anyone can practice some nonviolence, even army generals. They may, for example, conduct their operations in ways that avoid killing innocent people. To help soldiers move in the nonviolent direction, we have to be in touch with them. If we divide reality into two camps -- the violent and the nonviolent -- and stand in one camp while attacking the other, the world will never have peace. We will always blame and condemn those we feel are responsible for wars and social injustice, without recognizing the degree of violence in ourselves. We must work on ourselves and also work with those we condemn if we want to have a real impact.

It never helps to draw a line and dismiss some people as enemies, even those who act violently. We have to approach them with love in our hearts and do our best to help them move in a direction of nonviolence. If we work for peace out of anger, we will never succeed. Peace is not an end. It can never come about through non-peaceful means.

Most important is to *become* nonviolence, so that when a situation presents itself, we will not create more suffering. To practice nonviolence, we need gentleness, loving kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity directed to our bodies, our feelings, and other people. With mindfulness -- the practice of peace -- we can begin by working to transform the wars in ourselves. There are techniques for doing this. Conscious breathing is one. Every time we feel upset, we can stop what we are doing, refrain from saying anything, and breathe in and out several times, aware of each in-breath and each out-breath. If we are still upset, we can go for walking meditation, mindful of each slow step and each breath we take. By cultivating peace within, we bring about peace in society. It depends on us. To practice peace in ourselves is to minimize the numbers of wars between this and that feeling, or this and that perception, and we can then have real peace with others as well, including the members of our own family.

I am often asked, "What if you are practicing nonviolence and someone breaks into your house and tries to kidnap your daughter or kill your husband? What should you do? Should you still act in a nonviolent way?" The answer depends on your state of being. If you are prepared, you may react calmly and intelligently, in the most nonviolent way possible. But to be ready to react with intelligence and nonviolence, you have to train yourself in advance. It may take ten years, or longer. If you wait until the time of crisis to ask the question, it will be too late. A this-or-that kind of answer would be superficial. At that crucial moment, even if you know that nonviolence is better than violence, if your understanding is only intellectual and not in your whole being, you will not act nonviolently. The fear and anger in you will prevent you from acting in the most nonviolent way.

We have to look deeply every day to practice this precept well. Every time we buy or consume something, we may be condoning some form of killing.

While practicing the protection of humans, animals, plants, and minerals, we know that we are protecting ourselves. We feel in permanent and loving touch with all species on Earth. We are protected by the mindfulness and the loving kindness of the Buddha and many generations of Sanghas who also practice this precept. This energy of loving kindness brings us the feeling of safety, health, and joy, and this becomes real the moment we make the decision to receive and practice the First Precept.

Feeling compassion is not enough. We have to learn to express it. That is why love must go together with

understanding. Understanding and insight show us how to act.

Our real enemy is forgetfulness. If we nourish mindfulness every day and water the seeds of peace in ourselves and those around us, we become alive, and we can help ourselves and others realize peace and compassion.

Life is so precious, yet in our daily lives we are usually carried away by our forgetfulness, anger, and worries, lost in the past, unable to touch life in the present moment. When we are truly alive, everything we do or touch is a miracle. To practice mindfulness is to return to life in the present moment. The practice of the First Precept is a celebration of reverence for life. When we appreciate and honor the beauty of life, we will do everything in our power to protect all life.

THE SECOND PRECEPT: GENEROSITY

by Thich Nhat Hanh

"Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, I undertake to cultivate loving kindness and learn ways to work for the well-being of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I undertake to practice generosity by sharing my time, energy, and material resources with those who are in real need. I am determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. I will respect the property of others, but I will prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth."

Exploitation, social injustice, and stealing come in many forms. Oppression is one form of stealing that causes much suffering both here and in the Third World. The moment we undertake to cultivate loving kindness, loving kindness is born in us, and we make every effort to stop exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression.

In the First Precept, we found the word "compassion." Here, we find the words "loving kindness." Compassion and loving kindness are the two aspects of love taught by the Buddha. Compassion, *karuna* in Sanskrit and Pali, is the intention and capacity to relieve the suffering of another person or living being. Loving kindness, *maitri* in Sanskrit, *metta* in Pali, is the intention and capacity to bring joy and happiness to another person or living being. It was predicted by Shakyamuni Buddha that the next Buddha will bear the name Maitreya, the Buddha of Love.

"Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, I undertake to cultivate loving kindness and learn ways to work for the well-being of people, animals, plants and minerals." Even with *maitri* as a source of energy in ourselves, we still need to learn to look deeply in order to find ways to express it. We do it as individuals, and we learn ways to do it as a nation. To promote the well-being of people, animals, plants, and minerals, we have to come together as a community and examine our situation, exercising our intelligence and our ability to look deeply so that we can discover appropriate ways to express our *maitri* in the midst of real problems.

Suppose you want to help those who are suffering under a dictatorship. In the past you may have tried sending in troops to overthrow their government, but you have learned that when doing that, you cause the deaths of many innocent people, and even then, you might not overthrow the dictator. If you practice looking more deeply, with loving kindness, to find a better way to help these people without causing suffering, you may realize that the best time to help is before the country falls into the hands of a dictator. If you offer the young people of that country the opportunity to learn your democratic ways of

governing by giving them scholarships to come to your country, that would be a good investment for peace in the future. If you had done that thirty years ago, the other country might be democratic now, and you would not have to bomb them or send in troops to "liberate" them. This is just one example of how looking deeply and learning can help us find ways to do things that are more in line with loving kindness. If we wait until the situation gets bad, it may be too late. If we practice the precepts together with politicians, soldiers, businessmen, lawyers, legislators, artists, writers, and teachers, we can find the best ways to practice compassion, loving kindness, and understanding.

It requires time to practice generosity. We may want to help those who are hungry, but we are caught in the problems of our own daily lives. Sometimes, one pill or a little rice could save the life of a child, but we do not take the time to help, because we think we do not have the time. In Ho Chi Minh City, for example, there are street children who call themselves "the dust of life." They are homeless, and they wander the streets by day and sleep under trees at night. They scavenge in garbage heaps to find things like plastic bags they can sell for one or two cents per pound. The nuns and monks in Ho Chi Minh City have opened their temples to these children, and if the children agree to stay four hours in the morning - learning to read and write and playing with the monks and nuns -- they are offered a vegetarian lunch. Then they can go to the Buddha hall for a nap. (In Vietnam, we always take naps after lunch; it is so hot. When the Americans came, they brought their practice of working eight hours, from nine to five. Many of us tried, but we could not do it. We desperately need our naps after lunch.)

Then at two o'clock, there is more teaching and playing with the children, and the children who stay for the afternoon receive dinner. The temple does not have a place for them to sleep overnight. In our community in France, we have been supporting these nuns and monks. It costs only twenty cents for a child to have both lunch and dinner, and it will keep him from being out on the streets, where he might steal cigarettes, smoke, use delinquent language, and learn the worst behavior. By

encouraging the children to go to the temple, we help prevent them from becoming delinquent and entering prison later on. It takes time to help these children, not much money. There are so many simple things like this we can do to help people, but because we cannot free ourselves from our situation and our lifestyle, we do nothing at all. We need to come together as a community, and, looking deeply, find ways to free ourselves so we can practice the Second Precept.

"I undertake to practice generosity by sharing my time, energy, and material resources with those who are in real need." This sentence is clear. The feeling of generosity and the capacity for being generous are not enough. We also need to express our generosity. We may feel that we don't have the time to make people happy - we say, "Time is money," but time is more than money. Life is for more than using time to make money. Time is for being alive, for sharing joy and happiness with others. The wealthy are often the least able to make others happy. Only those with time can do so.

I know a man named Bac Sieu in Thua Thien Province in Vietnam, who has been practicing generosity for fifty years; he is a living bodhisattva. With only a bicycle, he visits villages of thirteen provinces, bringing something for this family and something for that family. When I met him in 1965, I was a little too proud of our School of Youth for Social Service. We had begun to train three hundred workers, including monks and nuns, to go out to rural villages to help people rebuild homes and modernize local economies, health-care systems, and education. Eventually we had ten thousand workers throughout the country. As I was telling Bac Sieu about our projects, I was looking at his bicycle and thinking that with a bicycle he could help only a few people. But when the communists took over and closed our School, Bac Sieu continued, because his way of working was formless. Our orphanages, dispensaries, schools, and resettlement centers were all shut down or taken by the government. Thousands of our workers had to stop their work and hide. But Bac Sieu had nothing to take. He was a truly a bodhisattva, working for the well-being of others. I feel more humble now concerning the ways of practicing generosity.

The war created many thousands of orphans. Instead of raising money to build orphanages, we sought people in the West to sponsor a child. We found families in the villages to each take care of one orphan, then we sent \$6 every month to that family to feed the child and send him or her to school. Whenever possible, we tried to place the child in the family of an aunt, an uncle, or a grandparent. With just \$6, the child was fed and sent to school, and the rest of the children in the family

were also helped. Children benefit from growing up in a family. Being in an orphanage can be like being in the army -- children do not grow up naturally. If we look for and learn ways to practice generosity, we will improve all the time.

"I am determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. I will respect the property of others, but I will prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth." When you practice one precept deeply, you will discover that you are practicing all five. The First Precept is about taking life, which is a form of stealing -- stealing the most precious thing someone has, his or her life. When we meditate on the Second Precept, we see that stealing, in the forms of exploitation, social injustice, and oppression, are acts of killing -- killing slowly by exploitation, by maintaining social injustice, and by political and economic oppression. Therefore, the Second Precept has much to do with the precept of not killing. We see the "interbeing" nature of the first two precepts. This is true of all Five Precepts. Some people formally receive just one or two precepts. I didn't mind, because if you practice one or two precepts deeply, all Five Precepts will be observed.

The Second Precept is not to steal. Instead of stealing, exploiting, or oppressing, we practice generosity. In Buddhism, we say there are three kinds of gifts. The first is the gift of material resources. The second is to help people rely on themselves, to offer them the technology and know-how to stand on their own feet. Helping people with the Dharma so they can transform their fear, anger, and depression belongs to the second kind of gift. The third is the gift of non-fear. We are afraid of many things. We feel insecure, afraid of being alone, afraid of sickness and dying. To help people not be destroyed by their fears, we practice the third kind of gift-giving.

The Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara is someone who practices this extremely well. In the *Heart Sutra*, he teaches us the way to transform and transcend fear and ride on the waves of birth and death, smiling. He says that there is no production, no destruction, no being, no nonbeing, no increasing, and no decreasing. Hearing this helps us look deeply into the nature of reality to see that birth and death, being and nonbeing, coming and going, increasing and decreasing are all just ideas that we ascribe to reality, while reality transcends all concepts. When we realize the interbeing nature of all things -- that even birth and death are just concepts -- we transcend fear.

In 1991, I visited a friend in New York who was dying, Alfred Hassler. We had worked together in the peace movement for almost thirty years. Alfred

looked as though he had been waiting for me to come before dying, and he died only a few hours after our visit. I went with my closest colleague, Sister Chan Khong (True Emptiness).

Alfred was not awake when we arrived. His daughter Laura tried to wake him up, but she couldn't. So I asked Sister Chan Khong to sing Alfred the *Song of No Coming and No Going*: "These eyes are not me, I am not caught by these eyes. This body is not me, I am not caught by this body. I am life without boundaries. I have never been born, I will never die." The idea is taken from the *Samyutta Nikaya*. She sang so beautifully, and I saw streams of tears running down the faces of Alfred's wife and children. They were tears of understanding, and they were very healing.

Suddenly, Alfred came back to himself. Sister Chan Khong began to practice what she had learned from studying the sutra *The Teaching Given to the Sick*. She said, "Alfred, do you remember the times we worked together?" She evoked many happy memories we had shared together, and Alfred was able to remember each of them. Although he was obviously in pain, he smiled. This practice brought results right away. When a person is suffering from so much physical pain, we sometimes can alleviate his suffering by watering the seeds of happiness that are in him. A kind of balance is restored, and he will feel less pain.

All the while, I was practicing massage on his feet, and I asked him whether he felt my hand on his body. When you are dying, areas of your body become numb, and you feel as if you have lost those parts of your body. Doing massage in mindfulness, gently, gives the dying person the feeling that he is alive and being cared for. He knows that love is there. Alfred nodded, and his eyes seemed to say, "Yes, I feel your hands. I know my foot is there."

Sister Chan Khong asked, "Do you know we learned a lot from you when we lived and worked together? The work you began, many of us are continuing to do. Please don't worry about anything." She told him many things like that, and he seemed to suffer less. At one point, he opened his mouth and said,

"Wonderful, wonderful." Then, he sank back to sleep.

Before we left, we encouraged the family to continue these practices. The next day I learned that Alfred passed away just five hours after our visit. This was a kind of gift that belongs to the third category. If you can help people feel safe, less afraid of life, people, and death, you are practicing the third kind of gift.

During my meditation, I had a wonderful image -- the shape of a wave, its beginning and its end. When conditions are sufficient, we perceive the wave, and when conditions are no longer sufficient, we do not perceive the wave. Waves are only made of water. We cannot label the wave as existing or nonexisting. After what we call the death of the wave, nothing is gone, nothing is lost. The wave has been absorbed into other waves, and somehow, time will bring the wave back again. There is no increasing, decreasing, birth, or death. When we are dying, if we think that everyone else is alive and we are the only person dying, our feeling of loneliness may be unbearable. But if we are able to visualize hundreds of thousands of people dying with us, our dying may become serene and even joyful. "I am dying in community. Millions of living beings are also dying in this very moment. I see myself together with millions of other living beings; we die in the Sangha. At the same time, millions of beings are coming to life. All of us are doing this together. I have been born, I am dying. We participate in the whole event as a Sangha." That is what I saw in my meditation. In the *Heart Sutra*, Avalokitesvara shares this kind of insight and helps us transcend fear, sorrow, and pain. The gift of non-fear brings about a transformation in us.

The Second Precept is a deep practice. We speak of time, energy, and material resources, but time is not only for energy and material resources. Time is for being with others -- being with a dying person or with someone who is suffering. Being really present for even five minutes can be a very important gift. Time is not just to make money. It is to produce the gift of Dharma and the gift of non-fear.

THE THIRD PRECEPT: SEXUAL RESPONSIBILITY

by [Thich Nhat Hanh](#)

"Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I undertake to cultivate responsibility and learn ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families, and society. I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without love and a long-term commitment. To preserve the happiness of myself and others, I am determined to respect my commitments and the commitments of others. I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and to prevent couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct."

So many individuals, children, couples, and families have been destroyed by sexual misconduct. To practice the Third Precept is to heal ourselves and heal our society. This is mindful living.

The Fifth Precept -- not to consume alcohol, toxins, or drugs -- and the Third Precept are linked. Both concern destructive and destabilizing behavior. These precepts are the right medicine to heal us. We need only to observe ourselves and those around us to see the truth. Our stability and the stability of our families and society cannot be obtained without the practice of these two precepts. If you look at individuals and families who are unstable and unhappy, you will see that many of them do not practice these precepts. You can make the diagnosis by yourself and then know that the medicine is there. Practicing these precepts is the best way to restore stability in the family and in society. For many people, this precept is easy to practice, but for others, it is quite difficult. It is important for these people to come together and share their experiences.

In the Buddhist tradition, we speak of the oneness of body and mind. Whatever happens to the body also happens to the mind. The sanity of the body is the sanity of the mind; the violation of the body is the violation of the mind. When we are angry, we may think that we are angry in our feelings, not in our body, but that is not true. When we love someone, we want to be close to him or her physically, but when we are angry at someone, we don't want to touch or be touched by that person. We cannot say that body and mind are separate.

A sexual relationship is an act of communion between body and spirit. This is a very important encounter, not to be done in a casual manner. You know that in your soul there are certain areas -- memories, pain, and secrets -- that are private, that you would only share with the person you love and trust the most. You do not open your heart and show it to just anyone. In the imperial city, there is a zone you cannot approach called the Forbidden City; only the king and his family are permitted to circulate there. There is a place like that in your soul that you

do not allow anyone to approach except the one you trust and love the most.

The same is true of our body. Our bodies have areas that we do not want anyone to touch or approach unless he or she is the one we respect, trust, and love the most. When we are approached casually or carelessly, with an attitude that is less than tender, we feel insulted in our body and soul. Someone who approaches us with respect, tenderness, and utmost care is offering us deep communication, deep communion. It is only in that case that we will not feel hurt, misused, or abused, even a little. This cannot be attained unless there is true love and commitment. Casual sex cannot be described as love. Love is deep, beautiful, and whole.

True love contains respect. In my tradition, husband and wife are expected to respect each other like guests, and when you practice this kind of respect, your love and happiness will continue for a long time. In sexual relationships, respect is one of the most important elements. Sexual communion should be like a rite, a ritual performed in mindfulness with great respect, care, and love. If you are motivated by some desire, that is not love. Desire is not love. Love is something much more responsible. It has care in it.

We have to restore the meaning of the word "love." We have been using it in a careless way. When we say, "I love hamburgers," we are not talking about love. We are talking about our appetite, our desire for hamburgers. We should not dramatize our speech and misuse words like that. We make words like "love" sick that way. We have to make an effort to heal our language by using words carefully. The word "love" is a beautiful word. We have to restore its meaning.

"I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without love and a long-term commitment." If the word "love" is understood in the deepest way, why do we need to say "long-term commitment"? If love is real, we do not need long or short-term commitments, or even a wedding ceremony. True love includes the sense of responsibility, accepting

the other person as he is, with all his strengths and weaknesses. If we like only the best things in the person, that is not love. We have to accept his weaknesses and bring our patience, understanding, and energy to help him transform. Love is maitri, the capacity to bring joy and happiness, and karuna, the capacity to transform pain and suffering. This kind of love can only be good for people. It cannot be described as negative or destructive. It is safe. It guarantees everything.

Should we cross out the phrase "long-term commitment" or change it to "short-term commitment"? "Short-term commitment" means that we can be together for a few days and after that the relationship will end. That cannot be described as love. If we have that kind of relationship with another person, we cannot say that the relationship comes out of love and care. The expression "long-term commitment" helps people understand the word love. In the context of real love, commitment can only be long-term. "I want to love you. I want to help you. I want to care for you. I want you to be happy. I want to work for happiness. But just for a few days." Does this make sense?

You are afraid to make a commitment -- to the precepts, to your partner, to anything. You want freedom. But remember, you have to make a long-term commitment to love your son deeply and help him through the journey of life as long as you are alive. You cannot just say, "I don't love you anymore." When you have a good friend, you also make a long-term commitment. You need her. How much more so with someone who wants to share your life, your soul, and your body. The phrase "long-term commitment" cannot express the depth of love, but we have to say something so that people understand.

A long-term commitment between two people is only a beginning. We also need the support of friends and other people. That is why, in our society, we have a wedding ceremony. The two families join together with other friends to witness the fact that you have come together to live as a couple. The priest and the marriage license are just symbols. What is important is that your commitment is witnessed by many friends and both of your families. Now you will be supported by them. A long-term commitment is stronger and more long-lasting if made in the context of a Sangha.

Your strong feelings for each other are very important, but they are not enough to sustain your happiness. Without other elements, what you describe as love may turn into something sour rather soon. The support of friends and family coming together weaves a kind of web. The strength of your feelings is only one of the strands of that web.

Supported by many elements, the couple will be solid, like a tree. If a tree wants to be strong, it needs a number of roots sent deep into the soil. If a tree has only one root, it may be blown over by the wind. The life of a couple also needs to be supported by many elements -- families, friends, ideals, practice, and Sangha.

In Plum Village, the practice community where I live in France, every time we have a wedding ceremony, we invite the whole community to celebrate and bring support to the couple. After the ceremony, on every full moon day, the couple recites the Five Awarenesses together, remembering that friends everywhere are supporting their relationship to be stable, long-lasting, and happy. Whether or not your relationship is bound by law, it will be stronger and more long-lasting if made in the presence of a Sangha -- friends who love you and want to support you in the spirit of understanding and loving kindness.

Love can be a kind of sickness. In the West and in Asia, we have the word "lovesick." What makes us sick is attachment. Although it is a sweet internal formation, this kind of love with attachment is like a drug. It makes us feel wonderful, but once we are addicted, we cannot have peace. We cannot study, do our daily work, or sleep. We only think of the object of our love. We are sick with love. This kind of love is linked to our willingness to possess and monopolize. We want the object of our love to be entirely ours and only for us. It is totalitarian. We do not want anyone to prevent us from a prison, where we lock up our beloved and create only suffering for him or her. The one who is loved is deprived of freedom -- of the right to be him or herself and enjoy life. This kind of love cannot be described as maitri or karuna. It is only the willingness to make use of the other person in order to satisfy our own needs.

When you have sexual energy that makes you feel unhappy, as though you are losing your inner peace, you should know how to practice so that you do not do things that will bring suffering to other people or yourself. We have to learn about this. In Asia, we say there are three sources of energy -- sexual, breath, and spirit. *Tinh*, sexual energy, is the first. When you have more sexual energy than you need, there will be an imbalance in your body and in your being. You need to know how to reestablish the balance, or you may act irresponsibly. According to Taoism and Buddhism, there are practices to help reestablish that balance, such as meditation or martial arts. You can learn the ways to channel your sexual energy into deep realizations in the domains of art and meditation.

The second source of energy is *khi*, breath energy. Life can be described as a process of burning. In

order to burn, every cell in our body needs nutrition and oxygen. In his *Fire Sermon*, the Buddha said, "The eyes are burning, the nose is burning, the body is burning." In our daily lives, we have to cultivate our energy by practicing proper breathing. We benefit from the air and its oxygen, so we have to be sure that non-polluted air is available to us. Some people cultivate their khi by refraining from smoking and talking a lot. When you speak, take the time to breathe. At Plum Village, every time we hear the bell of mindfulness, everyone stops what they are doing and breathes consciously three times. We practice this way to cultivate and preserve our khi energy.

The third source of energy is *than*, spirit energy. When you don't sleep at night, you lose some of this kind of energy. Your nervous system becomes exhausted and you cannot study or practice meditation well, or make good decisions. You don't have a clear mind because lack of sleep or from worrying too much. Worry and anxiety drain this source of energy.

So don't worry. Don't stay up too late. Keep your nervous system healthy. Prevent anxiety. These kinds of practices cultivate the third source of energy. You need this source of energy to practice meditation well. A spiritual breakthrough requires the power of your spirit energy, which comes about through concentration and knowing how to preserve this source of energy. When you have strong spirit energy, you only have to focus it on an object, and you will have a breakthrough. If you don't have *than*, the light of your concentration will not shine brightly, because the light emitted is very weak.

According to Asian medicine, the power of *than* is linked to the power of *tin*. When we expend our sexual energy, it takes time to restore it. In Chinese medicine, when you want to have a strong spirit and concentration, you are advised to refrain from having sexual relationships or overeating. You will be given herbs, roots, and medicine to enrich your source of *than*, and during the time you are taking this medicine, you are asked to refrain from sexual relationships. If your source of spirit is weak and you continue to have sexual relations, it is said that you cannot recover your spirit energy. Those who practice meditation should try to preserve their sexual energy, because they need it during meditation. If you are an artist, you may wish to practice channeling your sexual energy together with your spirit energy into your art.

During his struggle against the British, Gandhi undertook many hunger strikes, and he recommended to his friends who joined him on these fasts not to have sexual intercourse. When you fast for many days, if you have sexual relations, you may die; you have to preserve your energies.

Thich Tri Quang, my friend who fasted for one hundred days in the hospital in Saigon in 1966, knew very well that not having sexual intercourse was very basic. Of course, as a monk, he did not have any problem with that. He also knew that speaking is an energy drain, so he refrained from speaking. If he needed something, he said it in one or two words or wrote it down. Writing, speaking, or making too many movements draws from these three sources of energy. So, the best thing is to lie down on your back and practice deep breathing. This brings into you the vitality that you need to survive a hundred-day hunger strike. If you don't eat, you cannot replenish this energy. If you refrain from studying, doing research, or worrying, you can preserve these resources. These three sources of energy are linked to each other. By practicing one, you help the other. That is why *anapanasati*, the practice of conscious breathing, is so important for our spiritual life. It helps with all of our sources of energy.

Monks and nuns do not engage in sexual relationships because they want to devote their energy to having a breakthrough in meditation. They learn to channel their sexual energy to strengthen their spirit energy for the breakthrough. They also practice deep breathing to increase the spirit energy. Since they live alone, without a family, they can devote most of their time to meditation and teaching, helping the people who provide them with food, shelter, and so on.

They have contact with the population in the village in order to share the Dharma. Since they do not have a house or a family to care for, they have the time and space to do the things they like the most -- walking, sitting, breathing, and helping fellow monks, nuns, and laypeople -- and to realize what they want. Monks and nuns don't marry in order to preserve their time and energy for the practice.

"Responsibility" is the key word in the Third Precept. In a community of practice, if there is no sexual misconduct, if the community practices this precept well, there will be stability and peace. This precept should be practiced by everyone. You respect, support, and protect each other as Dharma brothers and sisters. If you don't practice this precept, you may become irresponsible and create trouble in the community at large. We have all seen this. If a teacher cannot refrain from sleeping with one of his or her students, he or she will destroy everything, possibly for several generations. We need mindfulness in order to have that sense of responsibility. We refrain from sexual misconduct because we are responsible for the well-being of so many people. If we are irresponsible, we can destroy everything. By practicing this precept, we keep the Sangha beautiful.

In sexual relationships, people can get wounded. Practicing this precept is to prevent ourselves and others from being wounded. Often we think it is the woman who receives the wound, but men also get deeply wounded. We have to be very careful, especially in short-term commitments. The practice of the Third Precept is a very strong way of restoring stability and peace in ourselves, our family, and our society. We should take the time to discuss problems relating to the practice of this precept, like loneliness, advertising, and even the sex industry.

The feeling of loneliness is universal in our society. There is no communication between ourselves and other people, even in the family, and our feeling of loneliness pushes us into having sexual relationship will make us feel less lonely, but it isn't true. When there is not enough communication with another person on the level of the heart and spirit, a sexual relationship will only widen the gap and destroy us both. Our relationship will be stormy, and we will make each other suffer. The belief that having a sexual relationship will help us feel lonely is a kind of superstition. We should not be fooled by it. In fact, we will feel more lonely afterwards. The union of the two bodies can only be positive when there is understanding and communion on the level of the heart and the spirit. Even between husband and wife, if the communion on the level of the heart and spirit does not exist, the coming together of the two bodies will only separate you further. When that is the case, I recommend that you refrain from having sexual relationships and first try to make a breakthrough in communication.

There are two Vietnamese words, *tin* and *nghia*, that are difficult to translate into English. They both mean something like love. In *tin*, you find elements of passion. It can be very deep, absorbing the whole of your being. *Nghia* is a kind of continuation of *tin*. With *Nghia* you feel much calmer, more understanding, more willing to sacrifice to make the other person happy, and more faithful. You are not as passionate as in *tin*, but your love is deeper and more solid. *Nghia* will keep you and the other person together for a long time. It is the result of living together and sharing difficulties and joy over time.

You begin with passion, but, living with each other, you encounter difficulties, and as you learn to deal with them, your love deepens. Although the passion diminishes, *nghia* increases all the time. *Nghia* is a deeper love, with more wisdom, more interbeing, more unity. You understand the other person better. You and that person become one reality. *Nghia* is like a fruit that is already ripe. It does not taste sour anymore; it is only sweet.

In *nghia*, you feel gratitude for the other person. "Thank you for having chosen me. Thank you for

being my husband or my wife. There are so many people in society, why have you chosen me? I am very thankful." That is the beginning of *nghia*, the sense of thankfulness for your having chosen me as your companion to share the best things in yourself, as well as your suffering and your happiness.

When we live together, we support each other. We begin to understand each other's feelings and difficulties. When the other person has shown his or her understanding of our problems, difficulties, and deep aspirations, we feel thankful for that understanding. When you feel understood by someone, you stop being unhappy. Happiness is, first of all, feeling understood. "I am grateful because you have proved that you understand me. While I was having difficulty and remained awake deep into the night, you took care of me. You showed me that my well-being is your own well-being. You did the impossible in order to bring about my well-being. You took care of me in a way that no one else in this world could have. For that I am grateful to you."

If the couple lives with each other for a long time, "until our hair becomes white and our teeth fall out," it is because of *nghia*, and not because of *tin*. *Tin* is passionate love. *Nghia* is the kind of love that has a lot of understanding and gratitude in it.

All love may begin by being passionate, especially for younger people. But in the process of living together, they have to learn and practice love, so that selfishness -- the tendency to possess -- will diminish, and the elements of understanding and gratitude will settle in, little by little, until their love becomes nourishing, protecting, and reassuring. With *nghia*, you are very sure that the other person will take care of you and will love you until your teeth fall out and your hair becomes white. Nothing will assure you that the person will be with you for a long time except *nghia*. *Nghia* is built by both of you in your daily life.

To meditate is to look into the nature of our love to see the kind of elements that are in it. We cannot call our love just *tin* or *nghia*, possessive love or altruistic love, because there may be elements of both in it. It may be ninety percent possessive love, three percent altruistic love, two percent gratitude, and so on. Look deeply into the nature of your love and find out. The happiness of the other person and your own happiness depend on the nature of your love. Of course you have love in you, but what is important is the nature of that love. If you realize that there is a lot of maitri and karuna in your love, that will be very reassuring. *Nghia* will be strong in it.

Children, if they observe deeply, will see that what keeps their parents together is *nghia* and not

passionate love. If their parents take good care of each other, look after each other with calmness, tenderness, and care, *nghia* is the foundation of that care. That is the kind of love we really need for our family and for our society.

In practicing the Third Precept, we should always look into the nature of our love in order to see and not be fooled by our feelings. Sometimes we feel that we have love for the other person, but maybe that love is only an attempt to satisfy our own egoistic needs. Maybe we have not looked deeply enough to see the needs of the other person, including the need to be safe, protected. If we have that kind of breakthrough, we will realize that the other person needs our protection, and therefore we cannot look upon him or her just as an object of our desire. The other person should not be looked upon as a kind of commercial item.

Sex is used in our society as a means for selling products. We also have the sex industry. If we don't look at the other person as a human being, with the capacity of becoming a Buddha, we risk transgressing this precept. Therefore the practice of looking deeply into the nature of our love has a lot to do with the practice of the Third Precept. *"I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and to prevent couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct."* Adults who were molested as children continue to suffer

very much. Everything they think, do, and say bears the mark of that wound. They want to transform themselves and heal their wound, and the best way to do this is to observe the Third Precept. Because of their own experience, they can say, "As a victim of sexual abuse, I undertake to protect all children and adults from sexual abuse." Our suffering becomes a kind of positive energy that will help us become a bodhisattva. We undertake to protect all children and other people. And we *also* undertake to help those who abuse children sexually, because they are sick and need our help. The ones who made us suffer become the object of our love and protection. We see that until the sick are protected and helped, children are going to continue to be abused sexually. We undertake to help these people so that they will not molest children any longer. At the same time, we undertake to help children. We take not only the side of children who are being molested, but the other side also. These molesters are sick, the products of an unstable society. They may be an uncle, an aunt, a grandparent, or a parent. They need to be observed, helped, and, if possible, healed. When we are determined to observe this precept, the energy that is born helps us to transform into a bodhisattva, and that transformation may heal us even before we begin to practice. The best way for anyone who was molested as a child to heal is to take this precept and undertake to protect children and adults who may be sick, who may be repeating the kind of destructive actions that will cause a child to be wounded for the rest of his or her life.

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.

THE FIFTH PRECEPT: DIET FOR A MINDFUL SOCIETY

by [Thich Nhat Hanh](#)

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I vow to cultivate good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking and consuming. I vow to ingest only items that preserve peace, well-being and joy in my body, in my consciousness, and in the collective body and consciousness of my family and society. I am determined not to use alcohol or any other intoxicant or to ingest foods or other items that contain toxins, such as certain TV programs, magazines, books, films and conversations. I am aware that to damage my body or my consciousness with these poisons is to betray my ancestors, my parents, my society and future generations. I will work to transform violence, fear, anger and confusion in myself and in society by practicing a diet for myself and for society. I understand that a proper diet is crucial for self-transformation and for the transformation of society.

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I vow to cultivate good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking, and consuming. I vow to ingest only items that preserve peace, well-being, and joy in my body, in my consciousness, and in the collective body and consciousness of my family and society. I am determined not to use alcohol or any other intoxicant or to ingest foods or other items that contain toxins, such as certain TV programs, magazines, books, films, and conversations. I am aware that to damage my body or my consciousness with these poisons is to betray my ancestors, my parents, my society, and future generations. I will work to transform violence, fear, anger, and confusion in myself and in society by practicing a diet for myself and for society. I understand that a proper diet is crucial for self-transformation and for the transformation of society.

Whenever we take a bath or a shower, we can look at our body and see that it is a gift from our parents and their parents. Even though many of us do not want to have much to do with our parents--they may have hurt us so much--when we look deeply, we see that we cannot drop all identification with them. As we wash each part of our body, we can ask ourselves, "To whom does this body belong? Who has transmitted this body to me? What has been transmitted?" Meditating this way, we will discover that there are three components: the transmitter, that which is transmitted, and the one who receives the transmission. The transmitter is our parents. We are the continuation of our parents and their ancestors. The object of transmission is our body itself. And the one who receives the transmission is us. If we continue to meditate on this, we will see clearly that the transmitter, the object transmitted, and the receiver are one. All three are present in our body. When we are deeply in touch with the present moment, we can see that all our ancestors and all future generations are present in us. Seeing this, we will know what to do and what not to do--for

ourselves, our ancestors, our children, and their children.

At first, when you look at your father, you probably do not see that you and your father are one. You may be angry at him for many things. But the moment you understand and love your father, you realize the emptiness of transmission. You realize that to love yourself is to love your father, and to love your father is to love yourself. To keep your body and your consciousness healthy is to do it for your ancestors, your parents, and future generations. You do it for your society and for everyone, not just yourself. The first thing you have to bear in mind is that you are not practicing this as a separate entity. Whatever you ingest, you are doing it for everyone. All of your ancestors and all future generations are ingesting it with you. That is the true meaning of the emptiness of the transmission. The Fifth Precept should be practiced in this spirit.

There are people who drink alcohol and get drunk, who destroy their bodies, their families, their society. They should refrain from drinking. But you who have been having a glass of wine every week during the last thirty years without doing any harm to yourself, why should you stop that? What is the use of practicing this precept if drinking alcohol does not harm you or other people? Although you have not harmed yourself during the last thirty years by drinking just one or two glasses of wine every week, the fact is that it may have an effect on your children, your grandchildren, and your society. We only need to look deeply in order to see it. You are practicing not for yourself alone, but for everyone. Your children might have a propensity for alcoholism and, seeing you drinking wine every week, one of them may become alcoholic in the future. If you abandon your two glasses of wine, it is to show your children, your friends, and your society that your life is not only for yourself. Your life is for your ancestors, future generations, and also your society. To stop drinking two glasses of wine every week is a

very deep practice, even if it has not brought you any harm. That is the insight of a bodhisattva who knows that everything she does is done for all her ancestors and future generations. The emptiness of transmission is the basis of the Fifth Precept. The use of drugs by so many young people should also be stopped with the same kind of insight.

In modern life, people think that their body belongs to them and they can do anything they want to it. "We have the right to live our own lives." When you make such a declaration, the law supports you. This is one of the manifestations of individualism. But, according to the teaching of emptiness, your body is not yours. Your body belongs to your ancestors, your parents, and future generations. It also belongs to society and to all the other living beings. All of them have come together to bring about the presence of this body--the trees, clouds, everything. Keeping your body healthy is to express gratitude to the whole cosmos, to all ancestors, and also not to betray the future generations. We practice this precept for the whole cosmos, the whole society. If we are healthy, everyone can benefit from it--not only everyone in the society of men and women, but everyone in the society of animals, plants, and minerals. This is a bodhisattva precept. When we practice the Five Precepts we are already on the path of a bodhisattva.

When we are able to get out of the shell of our small self and see that we are interrelated to everyone and everything, we see that our every act is linked with the whole of humankind, the whole cosmos. To keep yourself healthy is to be kind to your ancestors, your parents, the future generations, and also your society. Health is not only bodily health, but also mental health. The Fifth Precept is about health and healing.

"Aware of the suffering caused by un mindful consumption, I vow to cultivate good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society..." Because you are not doing it only for yourself, to stop drinking one or two glasses of wine a week is truly an act of a bodhisattva. You do it everyone. At a reception, when someone offers you a glass of wine, you can smile and decline, "No, thank you. I do not drink alcohol. I would be grateful if you would bring me a glass of juice or water." You do it gently, with a smile. This is very helpful. You set an example for many friends, including many children who are present. Although that can be done in a very polite, quiet way, it is truly the act of a bodhisattva, setting an example by your own life.

Everything a mother eats, drinks, worries about, or fears will have an effect on the fetus inside her. Even when the child inside is still tiny, everything is in it. If the young mother is not aware of the nature

of interbeing, she may cause damage to both herself and her child at the same time. If she drinks alcohol, she will destroy, to some extent, the brain cells in her fetus. Modern research has proven this.

Mindful consumption is the object of this precept. We are what we consume. If we look deeply into the items that we consume every day, we will come to know our own nature very well. We have to eat, drink, consume, but if we do it un mindfully, we may destroy our bodies and our consciousness, showing ingratitude toward our ancestors, our parents, and future generations.

When we eat mindfully we are in close touch with the food. The food we eat comes to us from nature, from living beings, and from the cosmos. To touch it with our mindfulness is to show our gratitude. Eating in mindfulness can be a great joy. We pick up our food with our fork, look at it for a second before putting it into our mouth, and then chew it carefully and mindfully, at least fifty times. If we practice this, we will be in touch with the entire cosmos.

Being in touch also means knowing whether toxins are present in the food. We can recognize food as healthy or not thanks to our mindfulness. Before eating, members of a family can practice breathing in and out and looking at the food on the table. One person can pronounce the name of each dish, "potatoes," "salad," and so on. Calling something by its name helps us touch it deeply and see its true nature. At the same time, mindfulness reveals to us the presence or absence of toxins in each dish. Children enjoy doing this if we show them how. Mindful eating is a good education. If you practice this way for some time, you will find that you will eat more carefully, and your practice of mindful eating will be an example for others. It is an art to eat in a way that brings mindfulness into our life.

We can have a careful diet for our body, and we can also have a careful diet for our consciousness, our mental health. We need to refrain from ingesting the kinds of intellectual "food" that bring toxins into our consciousness. Some TV programs, for example, educate us and help us to lead a healthier life, and we should make time to watch programs like these. But other programs bring us toxins, and we need to refrain from watching them. This can be a practice for everyone in the family.

We know that smoking cigarettes is not good for our health. We have worked hard to get the manufacturers to print a line on a pack of cigarettes: "WARNING, SMOKING MAY BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH." That is a strong statement, but it was necessary because advertisements to promote smoking are very convincing. They give young

people the idea that if they don't smoke, they are not really alive. These advertisements link smoking with nature, springtime, expensive cars, beautiful men and women, and high standards of living. One could believe that if you don't smoke or drink alcohol, you will not have any happiness at all in this life. This kind of advertising is dangerous; it penetrates into our unconscious. There are so many wonderful and healthy things to eat and drink. We have to show how this kind of propaganda misleads people.

The warning on cigarette packs is not enough. We have to stand up, write articles, and do whatever we can to step up campaigns against smoking and drinking alcohol. We are going in the right direction. At last it is possible to take an airplane flight without suffering from cigarette smoke. We have to make more effort in these directions.

I know that drinking wine runs deep in Western culture. In the ceremony of the Eucharist and the Passover seder, wine is an important element. But I have spoken to priests and rabbis about this, and they have told me it is possible to substitute grape juice for the wine. Even if we don't drink at all, we can still get killed on the streets by a drunk driver. To persuade one person to refrain from drinking is to make the world safer for us all.

Sometimes we don't need to eat or drink as much as we do, but it has become a kind of addiction. We feel so lonely. Loneliness is one of the afflictions of modern life. It is similar to the Third and Fourth Precepts--we feel lonely, so we engage in conversation, or even in a sexual relationship, hoping that the feeling of loneliness will go away. Drinking and eating can also be the result of loneliness. You want to drink or overeat in order to forget your loneliness, but what you eat may bring toxins into your body. When you are lonely, you open the refrigerator, watch TV, read magazines or novels, or pick up the telephone to talk. But unmindful consumption always makes things worse.

There may be a lot of violence, hatred, and fear in a film. If we spend one hour looking at that film, we will water the seeds of violence, hatred, and fear in us. We do that, and we let our children do that, too. Therefore we should have a family meeting to discuss an intelligent policy concerning television watching. We may have to label our TV sets the same way we have labelled cigarettes: "WARNING: WATCHING TELEVISION CAN BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH." That is the truth. Some children have joined gangs, and many more are very violent, partly because they have seen a lot of violence on television. We must have an intelligent policy concerning the use of television in our family.

We should arrange our schedules so that our family has time to benefit from the many healthy and beautiful programs on TV. We do not have to destroy our television set; we only have to use it with wisdom and mindfulness. This can be discussed among the family and the community. There are a number of things we can do, such as asking the TV stations to establish healthier programming, or suggesting to manufacturers to offer television sets that receive only stations that broadcast healthy, educational programs, like PBS. During the war in Vietnam, the American army dropped hundreds of thousands of radio sets in the jungles that could receive only one station, the one that made propaganda for the anticommunist side. This is not psychological warfare, but I think many families would welcome a TV set that would allow us to see only healthy programs. I hope you will write to TV manufacturers and TV stations to express your ideas about this.

We need to be protected because the toxins are overwhelming. They are destroying our society, our families, and ourselves. We have to use everything in our power to protect ourselves. Discussions on this subject will bring about important ideas, such as to how to protect ourselves from destructive television broadcasts. We also have to discuss in our families and communities which magazines that we and our children enjoy reading, and we should boycott those magazines that spill toxins into our society. Not only should we refrain from reading them, but we should also make an effort to warn people of the danger of reading and consuming these kinds of products. The same is true of books and conversations.

Because we are lonely, we want to have conversations, but our conversations can also bring about a lot of toxins. From time to time, after speaking with someone, we feel paralyzed by what we have just heard. Mindfulness will allow us to stop having the kinds of conversations that bring us more toxins.

Psychotherapists are those who listen deeply to the sufferings of their clients. If they do not know how to practice to neutralize and transform the pain and sorrow in themselves, they will not be able to remain fresh and healthy in order to sustain themselves for a long time.

The exercise I propose has three points: First, look deeply into your body and your consciousness and identify the kinds of toxins that are already in you. We each have to be our own doctor not only for our bodies, but also for our minds. After we identify these toxins, we can try to expel them. One way is to drink a lot of water. Another is to practice massage, to encourage the blood to come to the spot where

the toxins are, so the blood can wash them away. A third is to breathe deeply air that is fresh and clean. This brings more oxygen into the blood and helps it expel the toxins in our bodies. There are mechanisms in our bodies that try to neutralize and expel these substances, but our bodies may be too weak to do the job by themselves. While doing these things, we have to stop ingesting more toxins.

At the same time, we look into our consciousness to see what kinds of toxins are already in there. We have a lot of anger, despair, fear, hatred, craving, and jealousy--all these things were described by the Buddha as poisons. The Buddha spoke of the three basic poisons as anger, hatred, and delusion. There are many more than that, and we have to recognize their presence in us. Our happiness depends on our ability to transform them. We have not practiced, and so we have been carried away by our unmindful lifestyles. The quality of our life depends very much on the amount of peace and joy that can be found in our bodies and consciousness. If there are too many poisons in our bodies and consciousness, the peace and joy in us will not be strong enough to make us happy. So the first step is to identify and recognize the poisons that are already in us.

The second step of the practice is to be mindful of what we are ingesting into our bodies and consciousness. What kind of toxins am I putting into my body today? What films am I watching today? What book am I reading? What magazine am I looking at? What kind of conversations am I having? Try to recognize the toxins.

The third part of the practice is to prescribe for yourself a kind of diet. Aware of the fact that there are this many toxins in my body and consciousness, aware of the fact that I am ingesting this and that toxin into my body and consciousness every day, making myself sick and causing suffering to my beloved ones, I am determined to prescribe for myself a proper diet. I vow to ingest only items that preserve well-being, peace, and joy in my body and my consciousness. I am determined not to ingest more toxins into my body and consciousness.

Therefore, I will refrain from ingesting into my body and consciousness these things, and I will make a list of them. We know that there are many items that are nutritious, healthy, and delightful that we can consume every day. When we refrain from drinking alcohol, there are so many delicious and wholesome alternatives: fruit juices, teas, mineral waters. We don't have to deprive ourselves of the joys of living, not at all. There are many beautiful, informative, and entertaining programs on television. There are many excellent books and magazines to read. There are many wonderful people and many healthy subjects to talk about. By vowing to consume only items that

preserve our well-being, peace, and joy, and the well-being, peace, and joy of our family and society, we need not deprive ourselves of the joys of living. Practicing this third exercise brings us deep peace and joy.

Practicing a diet is the essence of this precept. Wars and bombs are the products of our consciousness individually and collectively. Our collective consciousness has so much violence, fear, craving, and hatred in it, it can manifest in wars and bombs. The bombs are the product of our fear. Because others have powerful bombs, we try to make bombs even more powerful. Then the other nations hear that we have powerful bombs, and they try to make even more powerful bombs. Removing the bombs is not enough. Even if we could transport all the bombs to a distant planet, we would still not be safe, because the roots of the wars and the bombs are still intact in our collective consciousness. Transforming the toxins in our collective consciousness is the true way to uproot war.

When we saw the video of Rodney King being beaten on the streets of Los Angeles, we did not understand why the five policemen had to beat a defenseless person like that again and again. We saw the violence, hatred, and fear in the policemen. But it is not the problem of the five policemen alone. Their act was the manifestation of our collective consciousness. They are not the only ones who are violent and full of hatred and fear. Most of us are like that. There is so much violence in all big cities, not only Los Angeles, but also San Francisco, New York, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Tokyo, Paris, and elsewhere. Every morning, when going to work, policemen say, "I have to be careful or I may be killed. I will be unable to return to my family." A policeman practices fear every day, and because of that, he may do things that are quite unwise. Sometimes there is no real danger, but because he suspects he may be shot, he takes his gun and shoots first. He may shoot a child playing with a toy gun. One week before Rodney King was beaten, a policewoman in Los Angeles was shot in the face and killed. It is natural that the police in the area became angry when they heard this, and they all went to the funeral to demonstrate their anger and hatred to society and to the administration for not providing them with enough safety. The government is not safe either--presidents and prime ministers get assassinated. Because society is like this, policemen and policewomen are like that. "This is, because that is. This is like this, because that is like that." A violent society creates violent policemen. A fearful society creates fearful policemen. Putting the policemen in jail does not solve the problem. We have to change the society from its roots, which is our collective consciousness, where the root-energies of fear, anger, greed, and hatred lie.

We cannot abolish war with angry demonstrations. We have to practice a diet for ourselves, our families, and our society. We have to do it with everyone else. In order to have healthy TV programs, we have to work with artists, writers, filmmakers, lawyers, and legislators. We have to step up the struggle. Meditation should not be a drug to make us oblivious to our real problems. It should produce awareness in us, and also in our families and in our society. Enlightenment has to be collective for us to achieve results. We have to stop the kinds of consuming that poison our collective consciousness.

I do not see any other way than the practice of these bodhisattva precepts. We have to practice them as a society in order to produce the dramatic changes we need. To practice as a society will be possible only if each of us vows to practice as a bodhisattva. The problem is great. It concerns our survival and the survival of our species and our planet. It is not a matter of enjoying one glass of wine. If you stop drinking your glass of wine, you do it for the whole society. We know that the Fifth Precept is exactly like the first one. When you practice non-killing and you know how to protect the lives of even small animals, you realize that eating less meat has to do with the practice of the precept. If you are not able to entirely stop eating meat, at least make an effort to reduce eating meat. If you reduce eating meat and drinking alcohol by fifty percent, you will already be performing a miracle; that alone can solve the problem of hunger in the Third World. Practicing the precepts is to make progress every day. That is why during the precept recitation ceremony, we always answer the question of whether we have made an effort to study and practice the precept by deep breathing. That is the best answer. Deep breathing means that I have made some effort, but I can do better.

The Fifth Precept can be like that, too. If you are unable to completely stop drinking, then stop four-fifths, or three-fourths. The difference between the First and the Fifth Precept is that alcohol is not the same as meat. Alcohol is addictive. One drop brings about another. That is why you are encouraged to stop even one glass of wine. One glass can bring about a second glass. Although the spirit is the same as the First Precept, you are strongly recommended not to take the first glass of wine. When you see that we are in great danger, refraining from the first glass of wine is a manifestation of your enlightenment. You do it for all of us. We have to set an example for our children and our friends. On French television they say, "One glass is all right, but three glasses will bring about destruction." (Un verre ça va; trois verres bonjour les dégâts.) They do not say that the first glass brings about the second, and the second brings about the third. They don't

say that, because they belong to a civilization of wine. Here in Plum Village, in the Bordeaux region of France, we are surrounded by wine. Many of our neighbors are surprised that we don't profit from being in this area, but we are a pocket of resistance. Please help us.

When I was a novice, I learned that from time to time we had to use alcohol in preparing medicines. There are many kinds of roots and herbs that have to be macerated in alcohol to have an effect. In these instances, alcohol is allowed. When the herbs have been prepared, we put the mixture in a pot and boil them. Then they no longer have an intoxicating effect. If you use some alcohol in cooking, the result may be the same. After the food is cooked, the alcohol in it will not have an intoxicating nature. We should not be narrow-minded about this.

No one can practice the precepts perfectly, including the Buddha. The vegetarian dishes that were offered to him were not entirely vegetarian. Boiled vegetables contain dead bacteria. We cannot practice the First Precept or any of the precepts perfectly. But because of the real danger in our society--alcoholism has destroyed so many families and has brought about much unhappiness--we have to do something. We have to live in a way that will eradicate that kind of damage. That is why even if you can be very healthy with one glass of wine every week, I still urge you with all my strength to abandon that glass of wine.

I would also like to say something about not using drugs. As alcohol has been the plague of one generation, drugs are the plague of another. One young girl in Australia told me that she did not know anyone in her age group who does not take drugs of one kind or another. Often young people who have taken drugs come to meditation centers to deal with the problem of facing life as it is. They are often talented and sensitive people--painters, poets and writers--and by becoming addicted to drugs they have, to a small or large extent, destroyed some brain cells. It means that they now have little stability or staying power, and are prone to sleeplessness and nightmares. We do what we can to encourage them to stay for a course of training in the meditation center, but because they are easily disillusioned, they tend to leave when things become difficult. Those who have been addicted to drugs need discipline. I am not sure that a meditation center like Plum Village is the best place to cure victims of drug addiction. I think that experts and specialists in this field are better equipped than we are. A meditation center should be able to receive educators and specialists in drug addiction as well as the victims of drug addiction for short courses in meditation to make its resources available where they are truly needed.

The practice that we offer is that of the Fifth Precept, to prevent someone from becoming involved with drugs in the first place. Parents especially need to know what spiritual food to give their children. So often, children feel spiritually starved by the wholly materialistic outlook of their parents. The parents are unable to transmit to the children the values of their spiritual heritage, and so the children try to find fulfillment in drugs. Drugs seem to be the only solution when teachers and parents are spiritually barren. Young people need to touch the feeling of deep-seated well-being within themselves without having to take drugs, and it is the task of educators to help them find spiritual nourishment and well-being. But if educators have not yet discovered for themselves a source of spiritual nourishment, how can they demonstrate to young people how that nourishment may be found?

The Fifth Precept tells us to find wholesome, spiritual nourishment, not only for ourselves but also for our children and future generations. Wholesome, spiritual nourishment can be found in the moon, the spring blossoms, or the eyes of a child. The most basic meditation practices of becoming aware of our bodies, our minds, and our world can lead us into a far more rich and fulfilling state than drugs could ever do. We can celebrate the joys that are available in the simplest pleasures.

The use of alcohol and drugs is causing great damage to our societies and families. Governments work hard to stop the traffic of drugs. They use airplanes, guns, and armies to do so. Most people know how destructive the use of drugs is but they cannot resist, because there is so much pain and loneliness inside them, and the use of alcohol and drugs helps them to forget for a while their deep malaise. Once people get addicted to alcohol and

drugs, they might do anything to get the drugs they need—lie, steal, rob, or even kill. To stop the drug traffic is not the best way to prevent people from using drugs. The best way is to practice the Fifth Precept and to help others practice.

Consuming mindfully is the intelligent way to stop ingesting toxins into our consciousness and prevent the malaise from becoming overwhelming. Learning the art of touching and ingesting refreshing, nourishing, and healing elements is the way to restore our balance and transform the pain and loneliness that are already in us. To do this, we have to practice together. The practice of mindful consuming should become a national policy. It should be considered true peace education. Parents, teachers, educators, physicians, therapists, lawyers, novelists, reporters, filmmakers, economists, and legislators have to practice together. There must be ways of organizing this kind of practice.

The practice of mindfulness helps us be aware of what is going on. Once we are able to see deeply the suffering and the roots of the suffering, we will be motivated to act, to practice. The energy we need is not fear or anger; it is the energy of understanding and compassion. There is no need to blame or condemn. Those who are destroying themselves, their families, and their society by intoxicating themselves are not doing it intentionally. Their pain and loneliness are overwhelming, and they want to escape. They need to be helped, not punished. Only understanding and compassion on a collective level can liberate us. The practice of the Five Wonderful Precepts is the practice of mindfulness and compassion. For a future to be possible for our children and their children, we have to practice.

THICH NHAT HANH is a Zen Buddhist monk, peace activist, scholar, and poet. He is the founder of the Van Hanh Buddhist University in Saigon, has taught at Columbia University and the Sorbonne, and now lives in southern France, where he gardens, works to help those in need, and travels internationally teaching "the art of mindful living." Martin Luther King, Jr., nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967, saying, "I do not personally know of anyone more worthy of the Nobel Peace Prize than this gentle monk from Vietnam."

Reproduced from *For a Future to Be Possible: Commentaries on the Five Wonderful Precepts* (1993) by Thich Nhat Hanh. Copyright 1993. Reprinted with permission of Parallax Press, PO Box 7355, Berkeley, CA 94707.