



## **THE ART OF LISTENING**

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### **ABSTRACT**

“The Art of Listening” explores our ability to listen deeply and compassionately. In the modern world this is not a skill that is encouraged. We rarely listen, and others do not listen to us, mostly because we have not been taught how to do so. The necessary training lies through finding calm and stillness within, so that we can listen to the other rather than to our preconceived judgements. When we are fully present and listen to the other, especially our children, our energy can transform them and heal their deep hurts and neglect. We learn about full presence through meditation, which is the practice of being with our true nature. Then it becomes easy to fully be with others. The Fourth Precept of the Buddha about deep listening and compassionate speech provides a guideline. It directs us to examine our positive and negative seeds of experience, and encourages us to water the seeds of self-awareness, compassion and mindfulness that are there within us. That is the practice that enables us to become internally strong.

### **Introduction**

In the journey of meditation we train in different wisdom traditions, all of which lead us to practice mindfulness as our integrity of truth. There are two ways in which we can regard the training received from our teachers. We can treat the training as a jacket, or coat, that we put on and take off whenever it is convenient to do so, or we can feel that the teachings are an internal part of ourselves, that we never discard. From the teachings as a coat of convenience, only posture and illusion emerge through our behavior. From the internal viewpoint, there is the flowering of personal transformation and the power to transform others. By listening inside to the truth of the teachings received, and putting them into practice in our daily lives, we nurture within ourselves the consciousness of Buddha, the energy of Christ, the energy of Krishna and of the Creator.

There are a number of things we can do to root the nurturing process in our beings. In this essay I write about a Precept from the teachings of the Buddha, which will

enable us to catch the consciousness of all the great masters and teachers that lie dormant within us. It is about learning to listen deeply, and also how to speak lovingly from a foundation of internal compassion. It is about training ourselves to enact the Fourth Precept of the Buddha. Before I state this Precept, allow me to talk to you about what is involved.

When was the last time anybody really listened to you? Maybe it was your dog or your cat because no matter what you say to them they are certain to love you. Even your pet fish is certain to love you, and be totally present when you talk to her. Yet, when was the last time that anyone really listened to what you wanted to say? Often when we speak to someone, we know they are formulating rebuttals while we speak, or they are thinking about laundry lists, telephone calls or shopping trips. That person is not truly present with us. Examine the other side of the coin – when was the last time that you really listened to someone else? We often have strong perceptions of the other, and it is our *perceptions* that we listen to, not the other communicating to us. Our listening is often filled with judgements and assumptions, which are what we take away from the conversation because we have not listened deeply to the person. To truly listen requires that we find a way to drop our perceptions and judgements, in order that we can be truly present. Then we may be able to understand the other very deeply, and be of great support and service because of our capacity to listen deeply and compassionately. It does take training, and this is through meditation, so that we learn how to be still and calm within. When we experience stillness in meditation we refrain from judging what is presented to us. We choose to occupy heart consciousness and not distort what is said. When we do not have stillness, we twist what we hear, and thread it through and around our prejudices and judgements. That is why we need to practice meditation - so we may learn how to be still and present for the other. In this way we are not trapped in our fears, prejudices and projections.

In our busy modern world, the art of listening is a skill that is not encouraged. We do not listen, and others do not listen to us, mostly because we have not been taught how to do so. I remember a time several years ago when I was dealing with a number of personal issues that were quite painful. When friends asked me, “How are you, Ian?” I would start to tell them how I was. I was having an awful time and was a real mess, but

my friends did not know how to listen. They were uncomfortable and also non-supportive. I would say, “Well, you wanted to know how I am, so I am telling you” – but they did not know how to listen.

I think back to times with my children when they had really important things to say to me, and I was too busy. I did not stop to give them my full presence. I did not really listen. Many years later, now that they are all grown up, I have said to them individually, “ I remember the time you said such and such to me and I did not really listen to you.” They are always astonished: “You remember that, Dad?” It touches them very deeply that I can now be clear about occasions when I did not listen to them. It also touches me deeply. But it is not just our children that we do not listen to – we do not listen to our partners, our colleagues or our friends. There are important aspects of deep and compassionate listening that we are not very skilled at doing. Training is required, basic steps are needed, so that we can become skillful and train ourselves to really listen. If we listen deeply and can be present for someone when they speak to us, we can alleviate and transform their suffering and our own - just by listening from the stillness and consciousness of our hearts.

Here is a story. It is about a child who had very rich and successful parents. His mother was a prominent lawyer, his father, the CEO of a large engineering company. The young boy had his eleventh birthday coming up. His father came home from work and told his son that he had an airline ticket for his birthday, so he could fly down to Disneyworld in Florida to meet one of his colleagues, who would take him out for the day. Wouldn't that be great fun? The boy said, “I don't want that daddy”. His mother came in from the living room and said she had all the latest Super Mario video games, that he could play in his room for as long as he liked. The boy said, “I don't want that, mummy.” The parents looked surprised and finally asked their child, “What is it that you want?” The little boy said, “I want you.” All he wanted was the full presence of his mother and father, not expensive gifts or trips, simply the presence of his mother, the presence of his father.

If we are insightful as parents we may realize that our *presence* is the greatest gift we can give to our children. To love our children is to be present, because it opens everyone's experience to the wonder and joy of being. Everything is available through

our true and full presence. We begin to know about full presence through meditation, which is the practice of being with our true nature, then it becomes easy to fully be with others. Being present, listening deeply from a compassionate heart, speaking lovingly - as a daily practice – this is what the Fourth Precept of the Buddha is about.

### **The Fourth Precept of the Buddha**

*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.*

Our consciousness is a vast universal territory, incorporating patterns from the collective consciousness, from our habit energies, addictions from our ancestors and life experiences, as well as containing all the patterns of an enlightened mind. In this cosmic smorgsbord, so much is contradictory and at odds. Without guidelines, we would suffer continually from confusion and conflict. The guidelines come from teachers and masters who have suffered greatly, awakened, and from their experience and love for humanity, have offered insights to cultivate an awakened mind. The Fourth Precept of the Buddha is such a guideline. Precepts help us to know our own mind, to see habit energies and addictions for what they are, and guide us to become aware of the awakened mind that exists as seeds within our consciousness. They help us cultivate these seeds.

Our intent *to cultivate loving speech and deep listening* clearly implies that these qualities already exist within us. *to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of their suffering* is something we can all do with a simple word or helping hand. *Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering* reflects the range of our consciousness. Words can spring from the deep levels of our awakened mind, or from our habit energies and addictive patterns. The Fourth Precept of the Buddha guides us to draw on the former rather than the latter, and if we can practice it wholeheartedly, we can do so much to relieve suffering and conflict in the world. *I vow to learn to speak*

*truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy and hope*, encourages us to reflect on our perceptions. They are often incorrect. We may think we speak the truth, but we have to be equally determined to check out the correctness of our perceptions. It is often wise to surround our perceptions with a simple mantra – “Are You Sure!” ***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*** – we often condemn and blame others without understanding them. Yet the more we understand, the less we blame. The Fourth Precept guides us to refrain from wanting to impress people with ***news that I do not know to be certain***.

***I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that can cause the family or the community to break***. The habit energies around our speech are very powerful, and generate discord and dislocation in our families and communities, whether the community is an office, factory, or the U.N. General Assembly. ***I will make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small***, asks us to examine our interpersonal conflicts, and provides encouragement to take the first steps in a form of “unilateral disarmament.” This is with the words and attitudes we use to create conflict. We must strive to develop new habits of speech, and expand our understanding for the person we are out of sorts with. The directive is to generate compassion and love for those not yet reconciled with. The Buddha said on many occasions that,

*Hatred can never put an end to Hatred; Only Love can put an end to Hatred.*

We must understand, and learn the full significance of this powerful guideline from the Buddha. It is about what we do with our speech and with the quality of our presence. What we usually do is not enough, and is often very unwise. To enter the practice of listening deeply, we have to nourish and water the seeds of silence and compassion in our hearts. That often takes training, for we have many hurts and angers inside ourselves that make it difficult to deeply listen to others. So we must learn to take care of our sorrows and pain, and this is what the practice of meditation is for.

I remember my Buddhist teacher, Thay Nhat Hanh, stating very clearly that while we have the right to be angry, the right to feel overwhelmed by strong emotions, we do not have the right to not practice. We contain all the positive and negative seeds of

experience within us. We learn how to take care of the negative seeds by watering the positive seeds that are also there. There is anger, grief, alienation and despair within each one of us, yet sometimes we forget that we also have seeds of self-awareness, compassion, understanding and mindfulness. They are also there.

For instance, when anger is triggered, and rises up into our consciousness and starts to take over our speech, thoughts and actions, it is very dangerous – both for ourselves and for the others we inevitably project it onto. On those occasions when anger threatens to overwhelm us, that is when we must call upon the seeds of mindfulness, self-awareness, and compassion, so that we can take care of our anger. We can do this by surrounding our anger with mindfulness and being aware that it would be wise to perhaps do walking meditation, or to hug a tree in the forest and ask mother earth to help us develop strength and insight. This is to generate calm first of all, then compassion for the person who has triggered an internal wound, and to see deeply into the nature of that wound so that it heals. That is taking care of our anger, and seeing deeply into ourselves. The energy of mindfulness penetrates the energy of anger and diffuses it. In his address to the Gorbachev “State of the World Forum” in San Francisco several years ago, Thay Nhat Hanh commented very simply that.

*where there is suffering, mindfulness responds with the energy of compassion.*

Something, however, has to be in place before this will work. The seed of mindfulness, the seed of self-awareness, the seed of compassion, must have had some prior attention and cultivation.

I remember a time quite recently when I became very angry. A dear friend had been verbally attacked at a Directors’ meeting of an organization I am associated with. The attack on her was mostly due to the fact that the real object of attack (me) was not present! As I learned of how my friend had been treated, I became very angry. But rather than follow the impulse to act on the anger, I did walking and sitting meditation to calm myself down, and then began to examine the anger inside me. At first, I had reacted to what I perceived to be a cowardly injustice done to a friend. As I looked more deeply, I saw that the roots of this reaction lay in injustices done to me, and further investigation lead me to see clearly my lack of forgiveness for people in my past who had been unjust and cowardly, (or so it had seemed at the time!). I had work to do –

work which lay in walking a mile in other people's shoes, understanding their situation and finding a drop of the nectar of compassion for them. But if I had not been taught what to do about anger and distress, I could have very easily set in motion a chain reaction of anger and suffering. I am very grateful to my teachers for giving me the tools of meditation to use in situations like this.

If we have not practiced meditation, then the positive seeds within us have not been watered, and they are not strong enough to make any difference to the anger that overwhelms us. This means that not to practice is irresponsible and unwise, for there are so many occasions when we need to summon up the positive seeds within us. If we have not bothered to strengthen the seeds of compassion and mindfulness within us, through meditation, then we do not have the tools to deal with anger, despair and other deep hurts. It is essential to put in the mileage with daily meditative practice, particularly when we are feeling good and well. That is the time to commit ourselves to the fidelity of practice, so that we build a strong seed of mindfulness within us, a strong seed of compassion within us. This is how we become internally strong. Without this strength we cannot listen deeply to another's pain, for that could feed our own pain. If we cannot listen, we are of little use to the friend who desperately needs us to listen to them from a compassionate heart. We do not suddenly have the skills to deeply listen, we need to build them up through our meditative practice. That is why Thay Nhat Hanh is so clear and firm when he talks to his students about their not having the right to not practice. When we realize that there is so much at stake within ourselves, within our loved ones and friends, within the planet and world, his message becomes absolutely clear. With practice, we equip ourselves for the task of transformation – of ourselves, our loved ones and the world. Rather than succumb to the energy of suffering, we can retrain ourselves, in meditative practice, to know what to do about the energy of suffering ignited by anger, despair and other negative seeds.

To become still we must learn how to stop. This is where the seed of mindfulness takes us, preparing us to be fully present. This is always the first stage of meditation, whatever the tradition. Unless we stop, we cannot enter the stillness of the heart and see clearly what we must understand about ourselves and about others. In meditation we nourish all the wonderful and positive elements within us, so that we gain internal

strength and spiritual maturity, enabling us to deal effectively with the addictions and negative energies that are also there. This first stage of stopping is very important. If, for example, I am listening to a dear friend, and her sorrow ignites my own pain and hidden wounds, I must have the self-awareness to stop, then say to her, “Sorrow is rising up in me and I must take care of it. Can we postpone our talk until I have the strength to truly support you?” That is when you return to your practice of meditation, so that your listening can be deep and your speech, loving. The ability to discern your own capacity to be present is a vital part of stopping. The importance of stopping, and being mindful is revealed in a wonderful story about the Buddha.

There was a bandit who lived on the edge of a village. Everyone in the surrounding region was terrified of him as he would kill and rob people. Consequently, no one traveled the road in front of his house. This man had a necklace of thumbs from all the people that he had killed. At the time of the story he had 998 thumbs. He decided that when the person called the Buddha walked on his road, he would kill him. This would give him 1000 thumbs on his necklace. One day the Buddha and his monks were approaching this village. All of the Buddha’s followers tried to discourage the Buddha from walking by this man’s home, but the Buddha would not listen to them. As he passed in front of the murderer’s home, the man came out and told the Buddha to stop. The Buddha responded saying, “I have stopped,” and kept on walking. The man called after him again to stop. Once more the Buddha said that he had stopped, and continued walking. By now the man was absolutely furious and ran in front of the Buddha with his sword raised high in the air ready to kill the Buddha. He yelled at the Buddha, “I told you to stop! You tell me you have stopped and then you keep walking. I’m telling you to stop or else I will kill you with this sword.” The Buddha quietly responded, “I have stopped. I have stopped being angry. I have stopped hating. I have stopped being jealous. I have stopped cravings. I have stopped.” The Buddha paused for a moment and then said to the man, “When are you going to stop?” With that, the man was flooded with insight and realization about the being standing in front of him, totally unafraid of his raised sword. He prostrated on the ground before the Buddha, and asked the Buddha to teach him. The Buddha asked the man to stand up and responded that he would indeed teach him. In a few short years of diligent effort this man reached full enlightenment.

When we speak to people, our words and energy have the power to lift them up or crash them down. Very often in our conversations and communications we choose to crash them down, which flies in the face of all the implications of the Buddha's Fourth Precept. We may feel smug and powerful for a moment, but our behavior does not allow us to touch that consciousness which brings happiness. When we cannot listen deeply, we cannot speak kindly. Sometime in the next week write down how many times you thought or spoke ill of somebody on that day. You may be surprised at the list you have. We will come to the second part of this exercise later in this chapter. For now, you may realize that when you think ill of somebody, or speak ill of them, it takes an enormous amount of energy to keep the judgements, perceptions and negativity going. While you continue to fuel the prejudiced feelings within you, perhaps you may realize that doing so prevents you being present, which is the only location where life is fully available. When we are present, we discover that our natural flow of life is to be compassionate and loving. That is where we are when we rest in our true nature. It takes no energy to be compassionate, it takes no energy to be loving. It does take a lot of energy to bad mouth people with what we think, say and do. When we wound people, they proceed to hurt others, for this energy demands to be shared. But so does the energy of love and compassion demand to be shared. We can choose. So what is it to be? We can stop the prejudice within us from translating into harmful action. We can choose to journey to the consciousness of the heart. We can choose to speak mindfully and express ourselves in a way that does not cause division and harm. Listening Deeply, Speaking Compassionately – this could be *the* mantra for the new millennium!

It is unfortunate that we have so many bad examples around us. Our elected representatives do not usually speak mindfully, or listen deeply to anyone. They are mindful only of public opinion polls and their re-election. The icons from the sports, entertainment, and media domains present posture and hype rather than truth, and we know that most of them lie. The violence and indifference that is portrayed in the media deeply affects our children, so it is necessary to cultivate a different example. Can we not set an example for our children by speaking the truth, by coming from the heart, by demonstrating the positive effects of deep listening and compassionate speech?

We arrive at the consciousness of the heart through meditation. Every time we meditate and are mindful, we leave our head and ego behind for a moment and journey to the embrace of the heart. We put our frenetic activities aside, we become present, and cease running away from our true nature. We do this as we learn to stop. That is the basic practice of meditation, and it takes us to the freedom of being fully alive in the present moment. In the moment of being present, meditation nourishes us beautifully, for we gain strength from all the positive elements within us that are being cultivated. As we nurture these elements, their energy becomes stronger and allows us to more readily dissipate the energies of our afflictions and sufferings. In the stillness of meditation we see deeply into our habits and patterns; and when our practice of mindfulness is strong, we can deal with them. At the same time, we appreciate more and more how much we enjoy life by being present.

From that place we can listen and speak. When we learn to do this with our children, friends and others that may be in some form of distress, we can heal them. Through deep listening we can understand our dear friend, who so appreciates that she has someone willing to be with her, listening to her in heart consciousness. This beautiful form of compassionate communication heals the other, and relieves their suffering. Yet we must also be practical, rather than expecting that we can just sit down and do it without prior training in meditation. Thay Nhat Hanh talks about this in his dharma talk *Protecting Our Children*, which was given on August 7, 1998 in Plum Village:

*We need to train for a long time in order to be able to do this. Even if the other person accuses you, even if the other person is full of wrong perceptions, even if the other person accuses you unjustly, is always reproaching you, you keep your compassion alive, and you are able to stay by them, silently, calmly. Your business is to listen, even if there is no truth, no justice in what they are saying. If you can listen like that for an hour that is already a wonderful help to the other person. You are the best kind of psychotherapist, because you have the capacity to listen with compassion, just to listen. You don't have to say anything. Even if the other person says very foolish things, if all his perceptions are wrong, even if she accuses you, you always follow your breath and keep calm, because you are playing the role of Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, listening in order to relieve the suffering. This is something that anyone can do. If you practice mindful breathing, sitting meditation, walking meditation for a week, you will be able to acquire the capacity to listen deeply to the other person. And with the practice of deep listening goes the practice of loving speech.*

The capacity to listen deeply is a powerful energy of healing. Just listen - often you will have no advice or solutions to offer, but know that your deep listening heals. I remember being in Glasgow, Scotland, a number of years ago and spending time with my son Alexander, who had become deeply mired in Glasgow's drug world. I stayed with him in his home which I called "Punk Palace." It was inhabited by a loose collection of punks and drug dealers who referred to themselves as "The Tribe" - all of whom were lost and wounded young people. I had very few answers for them, yet I listened. I was the only parent to have visited them, let alone live with them, yet I listened to what they had to say. The simple act of listening deeply, as they poured out their problems and issues, was healing. When asked to give advice I would talk to them about responsibility and power. If they wanted power over their lives they had to take responsibility for themselves. Listening deeply to each one of these young people was enriching for me, as it had an energy I was not previously aware of. By stopping, and using my breath to stay calm, I listened to them with the compassion of my heart, rather than with the judgements that could be found in my head. It provided a connection to a different energy - one of heart and compassion. They had rarely experienced real communication, so their lifestyle of drugs, alcohol and insecurity was an escape from the hell of feeling disconnected. Mindful listening helped them to feel a connection to the energy of compassion within themselves.

When we listen from the heart, and speak from the heart we share an energy that is deeply healing. Most of the time we talk - yip yap, yip yap, yip yap, yah de dah, yah de dah - endlessly from the head. It is all about nothing and is surprisingly popular. The television series, "Seinfeld," is as its star, Jerry Seinfeld points out, "Just about absolutely nothing!" There is no depth to it, and that is what we have become entrained to expect in our lives. Therefore we must retrain ourselves to speak volumes from the heart, rather than talk nothing from the head. I distinguish speaking from talking in terms of location of consciousness. We speak from the heart and talk from the head, so we clearly know the source of consciousness of television "Talk Shows!" Speaking is when we choose to stop, take mindful steps into the heart, and communicate the energy of healing and transformation. It is so powerful. The Buddha caught on to it twenty six hundred years ago. The Fourth Precept of the Buddha provides ethical guidelines to monitor the quality

of how we listen and speak. We have a very sound basis for the practice of mindfulness, shaped into a Precept for daily living. This ancient Precept is as relevant to the present day as it was in the Buddha's time.

Two friends, Don and Martha Rosenthal, have fashioned what I have been writing about into a design for listening and speaking, which serves as a practical blueprint for handling conflict and tensions between individuals. They call it Open Hearted Listening and teach it in seminars across North America. They title their seminar *The Noble Adventure*. They have devised a protocol that can be used very successfully between couples, business partners, parents and children, and between siblings. I will provide an encapsulated version of their training, which is in the spirit of the Fourth Precept of the Buddha.

Let us say I am working on a project with a colleague. Catherine is her name. We have a contract between us about Open Hearted Listening, that if either one of us feels that they would like the other to listen to them with an open heart, then the other agrees. We have different ways of approaching the project, and my approach causes great irritation and frustration for Catherine. I do not turn up to work on time, I often appear to be in a dream world, forget things and seem not to pay attention to what Catherine is contributing to the project. (We will see that most of our perceptions about the other are wrong, but we allow ourselves to get frustrated and angry through the perceptions we hold dear. Open Hearted Listening provides a forum for our perceptions to be put to one side.) Because of our contract with one another, when Catherine is frustrated and upset with me and asks if I will listen to her with an open heart, I consent.

We set a time and place to meet. My job as the listener is to place myself in my heart, and I do this with meditation. I then listen to whatever Catherine has to say. I do not interrupt or defend myself, or say she is right or wrong. I just listen. If I find I cannot maintain my calm with breath, that my own scars are being triggered by what is said, I am then of no use to my colleague. So I will say, "Catherine I am having trouble staying in heart consciousness, could we postpone this until such time as I can center myself?" And then we would set another time and I would apply myself to cultivating the seeds of mindfulness within myself. It is essential that I remain in the energy of compassion, the territory of the heart, for this process to work. When I can do this, I can then be fully

present for Catherine. It often happens that half way through this process Catherine may realize for herself: “My goodness, Ian is listening to me with undivided attention!” My listening to her from the consciousness of my heart creates an energy, that lifts the energy of stress and frustration that Catherine is feeling towards me, whatever her perceptions may have been. The first part of this process is for me to listen deeply to whatever Catherine says to me. It matters not whether I think she is right or wrong. I do not intervene to defend myself – I listen. This is the first part – to deeply listen. The second part is to mirror back to Catherine everything she has said to me. “Yes Catherine, I hear you about your frustration that I come to work late, that I do not appear to listen to you, or be aware of your contributions to the project, etc.” I am not allowed to take any shortcuts to make myself look better. I fully mirror back to Catherine her comments to me. The third step, and a very important one, is to validate how Catherine is feeling. I would say calmly and gently, something like, “Catherine, given what you have said to me, I do understand how angry and frustrated you must be feeling.” By this time the energy of deep listening and compassionate speech has worked its magic – for it touches the seeds of compassion and understanding in both of us. At this point we become very grateful to have one another as colleagues on this project, and once again we can become friends. As we talk and share more, I can state how much I appreciate her contribution to the project, that my lateness is because I am doing my best to see clearly some of the problems in the project design by doing walking meditation along the river. That this gives me insight into our work together, but not the insight that I should have told her about it! And so on with the threads of reconnection.

This type of exercise is very effective not only with colleagues, it works wonderfully well between couples, between parents and children, and siblings. It is based on deep, compassionate listening and loving speech. It is very healing and it transforms. Half way through the first part of the process, when the listener is truly present, the speaker will know they are being heard and often run out of things to say. The energy of compassion lifts the energy of distress and heals suffering. People are so desperate to be heard and listened to. Yet, with our attitudes, self-righteousness and busy activities, we silence our children, we silence our partners, and lose so much in the process. Open Hearted Listening is one way of making the Buddha’s Fourth Precept

alive and well in the modern world. It is a retraining – to listen deeply, to acknowledge how the other must be feeling, and to find a deep strength within. What it calls for is an ability to meditate and return to the heart, because once you are in that consciousness you are strong.

When you are in your head, you can be pushed and pulled around by your judgements, expectations and by the confrontations and opinions of others. When you are in your heart you are in your true nature and strength. I have the strength to listen to whatever Catherine says to me, because I know it is important to deeply listen to her. When I do that, I feel alive and new. We come to a new understanding, and whatever the distress was, it has been transformed, because there is now no energy of anger and frustration to sustain it. The problems and crises we face with one another are largely due to the fact that we do not listen to one another, nor do we locate in the heart to be present with one another. We can alter this through meditation, and by exercises like Open Hearted Listening. Meditation, and the cultivation of mindfulness, is not an idle thing. It is part of our fidelity to daily practice - to reinforce the positive elements within us, to make them strong, so that when we need to call on the energy of mindfulness, it powerfully penetrates and diffuses the energies of distress.

The daily practice and cultivation of mindfulness produces a wonderful charge of aliveness that stays with you throughout every moment. It is the place where you are strong, deeply embedded in your true nature and in the natural flow of being compassionate and loving, of being a responsible leader, totally and completely happy. To move in the opposite direction is hard work! It is energetically draining to assassinate the characters of your family, friends and co-workers. It takes an enormous amount of energy to maintain such nastiness and negativity. It takes no energy to be in the heart, for that is a well that constantly fills up. The Buddha is talking about how we naturally are, and provides us with a map to return there. We are designed to naturally listen, and speak, through love and compassion, yet we have lost the capacity to do so. Thus we must retrain ourselves. When somebody irritates you and makes you angry, rather than bad mouth them, meditate and look deeply into them. See what is worrying them, what are their circumstances, where are they coming from. We must learn to understand one another, walk a mile in the other's shoes and come to a deeper understanding and

connection. How we speak and how we listen depends on the consciousness that we occupy. If we choose to occupy the consciousness of the heart, what we say transforms others. If we listen from the consciousness of the heart, that act alone heals others. The Buddha was definitely on to something big!

I would like you to complete the exercise initiated earlier in this chapter. Note the number of times in one day that you thought, and spoke, ill of someone. Write down each instance - the name of the person, and then the thought, word or act that was full of your own prejudices and negativity. Then reflect on each one of these instances; on how it might have been if you had stopped your prejudices for a moment, seen deeply into the other and had listened and spoken differently – along the lines of the Fourth Precept. In your own mind, take a moment to water the seeds of understanding and compassion, and visualize each situation with a different response you would now choose to make. And then you may perhaps be moved to make amends.

We do have the ability to put ourselves in a different flow, where life is a joy, a creative dance. The alternative is heavy sledding, with our worst fears, prejudices and scars as travelling companions. The Buddha recognized all of this, and his Fourth Precept is a means for us to catch the water of life from the waves of our existential reality. I give the final words of this chapter to my Buddhist teacher, Thay Nhat Hanh, whose example is a constant source of inspiration for me. It is from his discussion of *Cultivating Our Bodhisattva Qualities*, in the Fall 1998 edition of *The Mindfulness Bell*:

*“We invoke your name, Avalokiteshvara. We aspire to learn your way of listening in order to help relieve the suffering in the world. You know how to listen in order to understand. We invoke your name in order to practice listening with all our attention and open heartedness. We will sit and listen without judging or reacting. We will sit and listen in order to understand. We will sit and listen so attentively that we will be able to hear what the other person is saying and also what is being left unsaid. We know that just by listening deeply we already alleviate a great deal of pain and suffering in the other person.....Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva represents great love, great compassion and deep listening. When you manifest these qualities, you become the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. Avalokiteshvara vows to listen deeply in order to help relieve the suffering in the world. To listen deeply, you must be one hundred percent present. Listening with all your attention, you release the past and the future, and focus entirely on the other person.”*