

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, 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.

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