

The Art of Compassionate Communication: Deep Listening and Loving Speech in Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism

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ABSTRACT

Previous research had examined compassionate communication, Buddhist communication and nonviolent rhetoric, but the reciprocal relationship between deep listening and loving speech in Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism remained insufficiently articulated. This study examined how these practices translated mindfulness and compassion into relational ethical practice. A qualitative textual and thematic analysis was conducted using four selected works by Nhất Hạnh together with relevant scholarship on Buddhist communication, compassionate communication and Engaged Buddhism. The findings showed that mindfulness enabled awareness of suffering and reactive tendencies before they shaped communicative responses. Deep listening was interpreted as the predominantly receptive dimension of compassion because it involved attending to another person's suffering and perspective without requiring uncritical agreement. Loving speech was interpreted as the predominantly expressive dimension because it carried understanding into truthful, non-harmful and responsible expression. Their reciprocity formed a relational communicative ethic grounded in mindfulness, compassion and interbeing. The analysis further suggested that these practices may contribute to conditions favourable to understanding and reconciliation, while remaining distinct from the institutional and structural responses required in wider social conflicts. Deep listening and loving speech therefore linked contemplative cultivation with responsibility towards others.



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INTRODUCTION

Communication becomes ethically significant when disagreement, anger, fear, or suffering shapes an encounter. Under such conditions, listening and speaking do more than transmit information. They influence whether another person's experience is recognised, whether misunderstanding intensifies, and whether dialogue remains possible. Compassionate communication consequently involves more than sympathetic language or courtesy. It concerns the quality of attention brought to another person, recognition of suffering, and responsibility for the manner in which a response is formed.

Contemporary research increasingly treats compassionate communication as a multidimensional relational process. Julia et al. (2024), in a scoping review of 57 articles, identified seven recurring dimensions: cognitive, affective, behavioural/state, relational, self-compassion, mutuality, and individual-specific virtuous traits or values. Their review also revealed substantial variation in definitions and theoretical approaches, indicating that compassionate communication remains conceptually unsettled. Such findings invite closer attention to traditions in which compassion, awareness, intention, ethical conduct, and human relationships are already interconnected.

Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism provides a distinctive framework for such an enquiry. His teachings connect contemplative cultivation with responses to suffering in everyday and social life. Mindfulness is not confined to private observation, while compassion is not treated simply as an emotional disposition. Both acquire ethical significance through their influence on conduct and relationships. In *The Art of Communicating*, Nhất Hạnh (2013) places mindful awareness at the foundation of communication and emphasises the need to recognise suffering within oneself and others. *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching* situates ethical speech within the Noble Eightfold Path and relates mindfulness, understanding, compassion, and conduct to the transformation of suffering (Nhất Hạnh, 1998).

Deep listening and loving speech occupy a particularly important place within this approach. Deep listening involves receiving another person with sustained attention while recognising the judgements, emotions, and defensive reactions arising within the listener. Loving speech concerns expression shaped by truthfulness, awareness, compassion, and non-harm. In *Interbeing*, the Eighth and Ninth Mindfulness Trainings connect compassionate listening and truthful, loving speech with community, reconciliation and peace (Nhất Hạnh, 2020). *How to Listen* further presents listening as a deliberate practice involving mindfulness, concentration, insight, and compassion (Nhất Hạnh, 2024). Communication thus becomes a practical setting in which contemplative values enter human relationships.

Previous scholarship has established important foundations for examining these practices. Nguyen et al. (2021) analyse skilful communication through Buddhist teachings and Socially Engaged Buddhism, identifying mindfulness as a principal foundation and loving speech and deep listening as significant elements in creating and maintaining skilful communication. Phillips-Anderson and Phillips-Anderson (2017) approach Nhất Hạnh through rhetoric and nonviolence, showing how his understanding of nonviolence extends into language and examining interbeing, loving speech, and deep listening within communication directed even towards a perceived adversary. Together, these studies establish that deep listening and loving speech have already received scholarly attention within interpretations of Nhất Hạnh's communicative practice.

The wider movement from personal mindfulness towards social responsibility has also received scholarly attention. Somers (2022) distinguishes socially engaged Buddhist mindfulness from approaches centred primarily on individual psychological well-being and examines how contemplative cultivation can remain connected with ethical and collective concerns. Communication provides a particularly revealing context for that movement because internal reactions acquire relational consequences when they influence listening, speech, judgement, and responses to suffering. Recent scholarship also cautions against treating Engaged Buddhism as a fixed or homogeneous category. Hsu (2022) traces the historical and academic development of the term and shows that its meaning has been shaped by different cultural and scholarly contexts. The present analysis therefore uses Engaged Buddhism specifically in relation to Nhất Hạnh's formulation and the selected primary texts rather than as a general description of all socially active forms of Buddhism.

Existing studies have linked deep listening and loving speech within Buddhist communication and nonviolent rhetoric (Nguyen et al., 2021; Phillips-Anderson & Phillips-Anderson, 2017), but their reciprocal functions within a communicative encounter remain insufficiently specified. A distinction between deep listening as the predominantly receptive dimension of compassion and loving speech as its predominantly expressive dimension makes that relationship more precise. The distinction is an analytical lens rather than a claim that Nhất Hạnh used these labels himself. It also allows communication to be examined in relation to renewed listening, power, accountability and safety.

Interbeing deepens the significance of that reciprocity. Communication does not occur between wholly isolated individuals. Perceptions, emotions, memories, words, and responses arise within relationships and contribute to the conditions from which later interactions develop. Listening may reinforce an established image of another person or allow that image to be reconsidered. Speech may deepen hostility or preserve enough relational openness for further dialogue. Interbeing consequently directs attention beyond individual intention towards the relational consequences of communication.

The research examined how deep listening and loving speech function together as practices of compassionate communication within Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism. It asked how their relationship translates mindfulness and compassion from contemplative cultivation into interpersonal and socially engaged ethical practice. A qualitative textual and thematic analysis was undertaken using

selected writings by Nhất Hạnh, supported by relevant scholarship on compassionate communication, Buddhist communication, nonviolence, and Engaged Buddhism.

The contribution of the study is not the identification of deep listening and loving speech as important practices in Nhất Hạnh's thought, since previous scholarship has already established their relevance to skilful communication and nonviolent rhetoric (Nguyen et al., 2021; Phillips-Anderson & Phillips-Anderson, 2017). Its contribution lies in clarifying how the two practices perform different but interdependent ethical functions within a communicative encounter. Deep listening is interpreted as the predominantly receptive dimension of compassion because it concerns the disciplined reception of another person's suffering and perspective before immediate reaction determines the response. Loving speech is interpreted as the predominantly expressive dimension because it concerns the responsibility to allow what has been understood through awareness and listening to shape truthful, non-harmful and accountable expression. The value of this distinction lies in showing how listening and speech operate reciprocally: listening can revise the understanding from which speech arises, while the consequences of speech may require renewed listening. This analytical framework makes more explicit the movement from contemplative cultivation to relational ethical practice within Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study employed a qualitative textual and thematic research design to examine deep listening and loving speech within Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism. The object of analysis was the ethical and relational understanding of compassionate communication developed in selected writings by Nhất Hạnh. A textual approach was appropriate because the research concerned concepts, meanings and relationships expressed in written works rather than the measurement of communicative behaviour. No human participants or statistical sample were involved.

The primary corpus consisted of *The Art of Communicating* (Nhất Hạnh, 2013), *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching* (Nhất Hạnh, 1998), *Interbeing: The 14 Mindfulness Trainings of Engaged Buddhism* (Nhất Hạnh, 2020), and *How to Listen* (Nhất Hạnh, 2024). The four works were selected purposively because they collectively provide the material most directly relevant to the research question while representing complementary dimensions of Nhất Hạnh's communicative ethics. *The Art of Communicating* and *How to Listen* provide sustained treatments of communication and listening, while *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching* situates ethical speech within the wider framework of Buddhist practice. *Interbeing* connects compassionate listening and loving speech with the Mindfulness Trainings, reconciliation, community and socially engaged practice. The study therefore did not seek to survey Nhất Hạnh's complete published corpus, but to analyse a defined group of texts in which the concepts central to the research problem receive particularly direct treatment.

The four works constituted the primary textual corpus, but the analysis was purposive rather than an exhaustive line-by-line examination of every chapter. Analytical attention was directed to passages and named sections relevant to mindfulness, suffering, compassion, listening, speech, understanding, interbeing, conflict, non-harm and reconciliation. Relevant passages were identified through close reading and treated as units of interpretation. Sections not directly related to the research question were not given the same analytical emphasis. This approach allowed the study to retain the wider context of each selected work while concentrating detailed analysis on textual material directly relevant to compassionate communication.

The selected passages were analysed through an iterative, concept-guided thematic process. Initial attention was directed by concepts central to the research question, including mindfulness, suffering, compassion, listening, speech, understanding, interbeing, conflict, non-harm and reconciliation. The final thematic organisation was then developed and refined through repeated close reading and comparison of relevant passages across the four works. Five thematic categories were identified: mindfulness and the recognition of suffering as conditions of compassionate communication; deep listening as receptive attention; loving speech as ethically responsible expression; the reciprocal relationship between listening and speech through interbeing; and the implications of compassionate communication for conflict, reconciliation and social engagement. These categories served as interpretive groupings through which recurring relationships, differences and developments across the corpus were examined. Particular attention was given to the ways in which Nhất Hạnh links awareness of suffering with listening, connects understanding with the formation of speech, and situates communicative practice within interpersonal and socially engaged responses to suffering.

Relevant peer-reviewed scholarship on compassionate communication, Buddhist communication, nonviolence, interbeing and Engaged Buddhism was used as a secondary interpretive context. Secondary studies were compared with the textual findings to identify points of convergence, extension and difference, but they were not treated as substitutes for the primary texts. Interpretive claims concerning Nhất Hạnh's teachings remained grounded in the selected corpus.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From Mindfulness to Compassionate Communication

The textual analysis identified mindfulness as an ethical starting point of compassionate communication in Nhất Hạnh's writings. Communication begins before words are spoken, in awareness of the mental and emotional conditions from which listening and speech arise. In *The Art of Communicating*, Nhất Hạnh (2013) states that "The energy of mindfulness is a necessary ingredient in healthy communication" (p. 5). He describes mindfulness in this context as returning attention to the breath and body and becoming aware of what is occurring within and around oneself. Mindfulness can therefore create an interval in which anger, fear, judgement and defensiveness are noticed before they determine a communicative response. Its significance lies not simply in attention itself, but in changing the relationship between internal reaction and interpersonal action.

Such an understanding moves the ethical evaluation of communication beyond verbal accuracy. A statement may be factually correct yet intensify suffering when expressed through hostility or humiliation. Conversely, delaying a response may be appropriate when strong emotion would otherwise govern expression. Mindfulness does not require difficult emotions to disappear. It allows them to become objects of awareness rather than unquestioned authorities over speech. Communication thereby becomes connected with self-observation without remaining an exclusively inward practice.

Nguyen et al. (2021) similarly identify mindfulness as a principal foundation of skilful communication within Socially Engaged Buddhism and associate it with loving speech and deep listening. Their analysis supports the view that Buddhist communication cannot be reduced to verbal technique. Nhất Hạnh's writings suggest a further relational movement: awareness of one's own suffering and reactivity influences how another person is heard, while what is heard can alter the understanding from which a response develops. Mindfulness consequently operates between inner cultivation and interpersonal responsibility.

Lim (2021) further examines mindfulness in Nhất Hạnh's thought in relation to motivation, interbeing and self-transformation. Her analysis shows how sustained mindfulness practice can reshape motivation and perspective as awareness and insight develop. Although her focus is self-transformation rather than communication, the account supports an understanding of mindfulness as more than a static form of attention. It is a transformative practice that can alter the mental and motivational conditions from which responses to others emerge.

Compassion (*karuṇā*) gives mindful awareness an ethical direction. Awareness alone does not determine how another person will be treated. In *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, Nhất Hạnh (1998) places compassion within a path connecting understanding, ethical conduct, and contemplative cultivation. Applied to communication, compassion directs attention towards the suffering that may be carried through another person's words. Anger or accusation may contain fear, injury, grief, frustration, or misperception that remains obscured when attention is confined solely to the literal form of an utterance.

Compassionate communication does not, however, require uncritical agreement. Recognising suffering differs from accepting every interpretation through which it is expressed. A person may understand how another's perception developed while continuing to question its accuracy. Such a distinction preserves discernment while changing the immediate purpose of communication. Truth and compassion need not function as competing obligations. The ethical challenge is to communicate truth without making retaliation or humiliation necessary to its expression.

Julia et al. (2024) provide a useful contemporary comparison. Their scoping review of 57 articles found considerable variation in definitions of compassionate communication and identified cognitive, affective, behavioural and relational dimensions, among others. Nhất Hạnh's writings support a similarly multidimensional understanding but place greater emphasis on contemplative cultivation as the condition from which compassionate communication develops. Recognition of

suffering, awareness of reaction, receptivity to another person, and responsible expression appear not as isolated skills but as interconnected ethical capacities.

Empirical studies from healthcare settings provide supporting examples of how attention, empathy and compassionate responsiveness can acquire communicative significance in interpersonal practice. Bartels-Velthuis et al. (2020) examined an Interpersonal Mindfulness Program designed to cultivate mindful presence, empathy and compassion among healthcare professionals. In a small, non-randomised feasibility study, participants receiving the programme reported greater improvements in self-compassion and empathy than controls, although overall mindfulness did not improve significantly. Taylor et al. (2021), examining compassionate communication in radiographic practice, identified active listening, engagement, verbal and non-verbal communication, and rapport as important expressions of compassionate care. Öztürk and Kaçan (2022) likewise found a positive relationship between empathic skills and compassionate communication among nursing students. These studies arise from healthcare and educational contexts and do not test Nhất Hạnh's Buddhist framework directly. Their relevance is therefore illustrative rather than evidential: they show that attentive listening, empathy and responsive communication can play important relational roles in settings involving vulnerability and care.

Right Speech (*samyagvāc*) places these relationships within an explicitly Buddhist ethical framework. In *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, Nhất Hạnh (1998) connects ethical speech with attentive listening and the reduction of suffering. Speech is therefore not morally neutral simply because its content is accurate. Intention, awareness, truthfulness, and consequences also matter. This prevents loving speech from being reduced to politeness. Difficult truths and disagreement may still require expression, but the manner in which they are communicated remains ethically significant.

Deep Listening as Receptive Compassion

The textual analysis identified deep listening as the predominantly receptive dimension of compassionate communication in Thích Nhất Hạnh's thought. In *The Art of Communicating*, Nhất Hạnh (2013) states that "When we listen to someone with the intention of helping that person suffer less, this is deep listening" (p. 42). Compassion is therefore integral to the act of listening itself. The listener's immediate task is not to correct, rebut or secure agreement, but to receive another person's suffering with sufficient attention for understanding to develop. Nhất Hạnh further explains that judgement may arise during listening without having to govern the listener's response. Receptive compassion, as used here, therefore names the ethical function of deep listening in which mindfulness and compassion shape how another person's suffering and perspective are received before a response is formed.

In *How to Listen*, the sections "We Need to Train" and "Listening to Ourselves" explain how fear, anger and pain can obstruct listening, and emphasise attending to one's own emotions without judgement before listening to others (Nhất Hạnh, 2024). The difficulty of listening is not located solely in the behaviour of the speaker. Painful or challenging words may activate strong emotions within the listener, making immediate reaction appear necessary. Mindfulness enables such responses to be recognised without allowing them automatically to determine the encounter. Deep listening is active in precisely this sense: it requires the listener to remain present when habitual reactions might otherwise produce withdrawal, interruption, or retaliation.

Nguyen et al. (2021) place deep listening alongside mindfulness and loving speech within skilful communication in Socially Engaged Buddhism. Their account establishes its importance within a wider Buddhist communicative practice. Nhất Hạnh's writings allow the receptive function of listening to be specified further. Mindfulness helps distinguish what another person is communicating from the listener's reaction to it. Feeling accused, for example, is part of the listener's experience, but it is not necessarily identical with what the speaker is attempting to express. Such differentiation creates greater space for understanding before a response is formed.

The significance of such listening becomes particularly visible during conflict. Participants may gradually listen only for evidence confirming an established judgement of the other person. Accusation produces defence, defence is interpreted as further evidence of hostility, and the encounter becomes increasingly organised around reaction. Deep listening changes the immediate purpose of attention. Rather than listening principally to prepare a rebuttal, the listener attempts to understand the experience or suffering that makes the other person's words meaningful from that person's perspective. Conflict may remain, but its communicative pattern can begin to change.

Research outside Buddhist contexts provides useful comparative evidence. Bradshaw et al. (2022), in a qualitative study involving patients, carers, and clinicians in chronic and complex healthcare, identified three central themes in emotional support: deep listening, warmth and kindness, and social connection. Their findings indicate that being carefully heard carries relational significance beyond the simple exchange of information. Although the healthcare context differs substantially from Nhất Hạnh's contemplative framework, the study supports the broader importance of attentive listening within relationships involving vulnerability and suffering.

More directly relevant to disagreement, Moin et al. (2025) experimentally examined deep-listening training among 320 participants representing 86 countries. Participants who completed the training demonstrated stronger observable listening behaviours during conversations about issues on which they disagreed and reported greater interactional intimacy and self-insight than participants in the control condition. The study did not investigate Buddhist practice, but its findings are particularly relevant to the distinction between listening and agreement. High-quality listening remained possible in the presence of opposing views, supporting the proposition that receptivity need not require the abandonment of disagreement.

Interbeing deepens this ethical responsibility. Uçok-Sayrak (2014) examines Nhất Hạnh's concept of interbeing in relation to otherness, reciprocity, moral responsibility, and communication ethics. Relationality, in this account, does not require another person's difference to disappear. Deep listening gives practical expression to that principle by allowing another person's experience to challenge what the listener believes is already known. Genuine receptivity consequently includes the possibility that listening may transform the listener by exposing an overlooked injury, an incomplete perception, or a limitation in an established interpretation.

Deep listening does not require a person to remain in an unsafe encounter or to suspend moral judgement. Compassion can seek understanding while preserving appropriate boundaries and accountability.

Deep listening thus gives compassion a predominantly receptive form while preserving discernment and accountability. What is heard may call for acknowledgement, clarification or a considered response, bringing the analysis to the corresponding expressive function of loving speech.

Loving Speech as Ethical Expression

The textual analysis identified loving speech as the predominantly expressive dimension of compassionate communication in Thích Nhất Hạnh's thought. Whereas deep listening concerns how another person and their suffering are received, loving speech concerns how mindful and compassionate understanding enters expression. Nhất Hạnh (2013) states that "what you say, what you write, should convey only compassion and understanding" (p. 51). He further connects loving speech with Right Speech, making clear that compassionate expression is not simply a matter of pleasant tone but an ethical practice concerned with how words affect oneself and others. Expressive compassion, as used here, therefore names the function through which understanding acquired through mindfulness and listening is carried into speech in a truthful, responsible and non-harmful form.

Right Speech (*samyagvāc*) provides an important Buddhist foundation for this interpretation. In *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, Nhất Hạnh (1998) states that "Deep listening is at the foundation of Right Speech" (p. 86), adding that without mindful listening, speech remains confined to one's own ideas rather than responding to the other person. He further describes compassionate listening as a practice that can bring healing and restore communication. Right Speech therefore depends not only on the ethical quality of expression but also on the receptivity that precedes it. This textual relationship strengthens the distinction developed here between receptive and expressive compassion: deep listening informs the understanding from which loving speech arises, while speech gives that understanding an ethically responsible form.

This becomes especially important when difficult truths or disagreement must be expressed. Compassionate communication does not require silence in the presence of pain, wrongdoing, or conflicting views. Avoiding necessary communication may preserve temporary harmony while allowing misunderstanding or resentment to deepen. The ethical question concerns how difficulty enters the encounter. A response may identify harm, reject an interpretation, or establish a boundary without making humiliation or verbal aggression part of its expression.

Mindfulness supports this discernment by creating awareness of the conditions preceding speech. Anger and fear can produce a sense that immediate expression is necessary, yet recognition of

emotion does not require its instantaneous conversion into language. Mindfulness allows the speaker to notice an internal reaction, examine the perception accompanying it, and consider whether the proposed response is likely to clarify suffering or reproduce it. Loving speech is therefore not the suppression of difficult emotion, but an effort to prevent unexamined emotion from determining the form of communication.

Nguyen et al. (2021) likewise identify loving speech as an important element of skilful communication within Socially Engaged Buddhism and place it alongside mindfulness and deep listening. Their account supports the interpretation of loving speech as part of a wider ethical discipline rather than an isolated communication technique. The textual findings developed here clarify its expressive function: compassion becomes communicatively meaningful when awareness of suffering influences how truth, disagreement, or correction is expressed.

The relational character of speech also means that good intention alone is insufficient. A speaker may intend to communicate compassionately while the listener experiences the words as dismissive, accusatory, or paternalistic. Deep listening remains necessary because the response of another person may reveal consequences the speaker did not anticipate. Ethical expression consequently requires openness to revision rather than confidence that benevolent intention alone settles the character of communication.

Misperception makes such openness especially important. Fear, memory, expectation, and incomplete information may shape how another person's words are interpreted. Mindfulness makes these perceptions available for examination, while listening allows the other person's experience to enter that examination. Loving speech can then express one's own understanding without presenting it automatically as the complete reality of the encounter. Communication becomes more capable of clarification because perception as well as expression remains open to change.

Loving speech should therefore be distinguished from strategic politeness. Polite language can still be manipulative, while direct speech can remain compassionate when it is truthful, necessary, and expressed without contempt. Tone matters, but it is only one element. Intention, understanding, truthfulness, timing, and relational consequence all contribute to the ethical character of expression.

Listening and Speech as a Relational Ethic

Deep listening and loving speech acquire their fuller ethical significance when understood as mutually responsive practices rather than separate communication techniques. Listening allows another person's experience to modify the understanding from which speech arises, while speech gives that understanding an expressive form and may create new conditions for further listening. Neither practice is sufficient in isolation: listening without responsible expression may leave misunderstanding or necessary clarification unaddressed, while speech without sufficient listening may respond more closely to the speaker's assumptions than to another person's actual experience. Receptive and expressive compassion therefore operate reciprocally within a continuing communicative process.

The Eighth Mindfulness Training, "True Community and Communication," provides a direct textual basis for this relationship. It connects compassionate listening and loving speech with maintaining communication, responding to conflict and cultivating community (Nhất Hạnh, 2020). Read alongside the Ninth Mindfulness Training, "Truthful and Loving Speech," it indicates that listening and speaking are not treated as separate techniques but as interdependent ethical responsibilities within relationship. Reception and expression can therefore be distinguished analytically while remaining closely connected in practice.

Interbeing gives philosophical depth to that responsibility. Communication does not occur between wholly self-contained individuals. Perceptions, emotions, memories, and responses arise within relationships shaped by earlier experiences and wider conditions. Speech enters those conditions and modifies them, while listening influences how subsequent communication becomes possible. Communicative acts therefore acquire significance not only through individual intention but also through the relational effects they produce.

Ucok-Sayrak (2014) develops this dimension by examining interbeing in relation to otherness, reciprocity, agency, and moral responsibility within communication ethics. Her analysis is particularly important because relationality does not require difference between self and other to disappear. Another person remains someone whose experience cannot be reduced fully to the listener's assumptions. Deep listening respects that difference by allowing another perspective to challenge what the listener believes

is already known. Loving speech carries the same responsibility into expression by remaining attentive to the person towards whom the response is directed.

Waistell and Scherer (2017) offer a complementary interpretation of Nhất Hạnh's relational thought. Their analysis examines how his metaphorical discourse connects mindfulness with awareness of physical interdependence and mutual care. Recognition of interconnectedness, in their account, acquires ethical significance because awareness of interdependence encourages responsibility towards others. Lim (2019) similarly examines interbeing in Nhất Hạnh's thought through the relationship between individual and collective consciousness, showing how awareness and transformation cannot be understood solely at the level of the isolated individual. Together, these interpretations support the relational orientation developed here while allowing communication to be identified as one practical site where interdependence becomes ethically consequential. Deep listening and loving speech give that responsibility communicative form by connecting awareness of relationship with the ways another person is received and answered.

Reciprocity should not, however, be confused with symmetry. Relationships may involve unequal power, unequal responsibility for harm or unequal capacities to participate safely in communication. Research on conflict mediation likewise demonstrates that dialogue does not remove power differences merely by bringing participants into communication. In her study of workplace mediation, van Bijnen (2019) shows that power is negotiated within dialogical interaction and can shift through participants' and mediators' communicative practices. Although this setting differs from Nhất Hạnh's Buddhist framework, it reinforces the need to treat power as a condition of communication rather than assume equality between participants. Interbeing therefore does not imply that every participant contributes equally to suffering or conflict, nor does compassionate communication require someone to remain within an unsafe encounter. Relational responsibility can coexist with accountability, moral judgement and appropriate boundaries.

Compassionate communication also cannot control another person's response. Deep listening does not guarantee that the other person will listen in return, and loving speech cannot ensure that carefully expressed truth will be received constructively. Participants enter communication with different histories, expectations, interests, and perceptions. The ethical significance of Nhất Hạnh's approach lies instead in cultivating responsibility for the manner in which one participates in an encounter without assuming control over its outcome.

The relationship between listening and speech is also more dynamic than a simple sequence in which one listens first and speaks afterwards. An acknowledgement may enable another person to disclose more of an experience. New information may require an earlier interpretation to be revised. A question may simultaneously express concern and invite further listening. Reception and expression therefore remain distinguishable in their predominant functions but overlap continuously in actual communication.

The interaction between receptive and expressive compassion thus connects personal cultivation with interpersonal responsibility. Mindfulness becomes relationally significant when reactions influence how another person is heard or addressed, while interbeing clarifies why these communicative effects matter beyond the isolated individual.

Implications for Reconciliation and Social Engagement

The analysis primarily establishes deep listening and loving speech as interpersonal practices of compassionate communication. Their relevance to reconciliation and social engagement is better understood as an implication of this relational ethic than as a direct finding about large-scale social conflict. In Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism, however, these practices are not confined to private interaction, since communication is connected with the alleviation of suffering, the restoration of relationship and the cultivation of peace. The discussion that follows therefore considers how the interpersonal ethic developed in the selected texts may extend towards contexts of reconciliation and social engagement, while recognising that such contexts involve structural, institutional and historical conditions that communication alone cannot resolve.

In *Interbeing*, Nhất Hạnh (2020) connects compassionate listening and loving speech with the alleviation of suffering, reconciliation, and peace. Communication matters in such contexts because conflict is shaped not only by incompatible positions but also by perceptions, memories, emotions, and narratives through which people understand one another. Where mistrust has become established, accusation may invite defence, while defensive responses can reinforce the belief that suffering is being

ignored. Deep listening and loving speech address this communicative dimension of conflict without suggesting that communication alone can remove its underlying causes.

Deep listening may create space for experiences that an adversarial interpretation has excluded. Its purpose is not to eliminate disagreement but to allow suffering and perspective to become more intelligible before the other person is reduced to a fixed image. Loving speech performs a complementary function by enabling clarification, disagreement or acknowledgement of harm without making humiliation part of the response. In contexts where reconciliation is possible, such communicative practices may help sustain conditions in which perceptions can be reconsidered and dialogue can continue without automatically reproducing hostility. They should not, however, be understood as sufficient conditions for reconciliation itself.

Somers (2022) provides a relevant wider context by distinguishing socially engaged Buddhist mindfulness from approaches concerned primarily with individual psychological well-being. His analysis places mindfulness within an orientation towards ethical and collective concerns and gives particular attention to Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism. Communication provides one concrete expression of such engagement. Awareness of anger, fear, and habitual reaction becomes socially significant when it influences how people listen, speak, judge, and respond to suffering.

Tho et al. (2021) extend the discussion of Socially Engaged Buddhism into the context of humanitarian action during armed conflict. Focusing particularly on the form of Engaged Buddhism associated with Nhất Hạnh, they identify correspondences between Buddhist ethical principles and the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. Their analysis demonstrates that socially engaged Buddhist practice can operate within contexts where suffering is shaped by organised conflict and institutional responsibilities. This broader setting also reinforces the need to distinguish interpersonal compassionate communication from the wider ethical and practical responses required in situations of collective violence.

Phillips-Anderson and Phillips-Anderson (2017) extend this relevance to explicitly adversarial relationships through their analysis of Nhất Hạnh's rhetoric of nonviolence. They show how his approach challenges forms of communication that reduce another person to an enemy identity and demonstrate that nonviolence extends into language itself. Deep listening resists such reduction by remaining attentive to experiences that complicate an established image of the other. Loving speech similarly allows firm disagreement without treating dehumanisation as necessary to moral seriousness.

Mishra et al. (2024) provide a complementary perspective by examining Thích Nhất Hạnh within a broader framework of peace leadership. Their analysis emphasises nonviolent and inclusive responses to conflict, the relationship between inner and outer peace, and the importance of recognising the humanity of opponents. These themes support the wider relevance of Nhất Hạnh's relational ethics to conflict settings while remaining consistent with the present study's more limited claim that compassionate communication may contribute to conditions favourable to reconciliation rather than guarantee reconciliation itself.

Compassion and accountability are therefore not mutually exclusive. Listening to the suffering or perceptions of someone who has caused harm does not erase responsibility for that harm, just as speaking without hatred does not require silence about wrongdoing. Understanding differs from approval. Compassionate communication can preserve that distinction by allowing suffering to be recognised while leaving room for judgement, accountability, and appropriate boundaries.

Its limitations are equally important. Deep listening cannot by itself remedy economic inequality, institutional discrimination, unequal power, legal injustice, or other structural forms of suffering. Loving speech cannot guarantee that individuals, institutions, or conflicting groups will respond constructively. Collective conflicts involve histories, material interests, institutions, social identities, and power relations that exceed the possibilities of interpersonal dialogue. Compassionate communication should therefore be understood as one ethical component of social engagement rather than as a substitute for structural responses.

Recognising these limits does not make communication socially insignificant. Collective relationships are also shaped by language, representation, public narratives, and perceptions of opponents. Communication can reinforce fear and hostility or create limited opportunities for more accurate understanding. The contribution of deep listening and loving speech lies in addressing this relational dimension while remaining connected with wider forms of ethical and social action.

Compassionate communication can therefore be understood as one relational component of socially engaged ethical practice rather than as a complete response to conflict or injustice. Deep listening and loving speech may help create conditions in which suffering is heard, perceptions remain open to reconsideration and disagreement can be expressed without unnecessary additional harm. Their contribution is communicative and relational, while reconciliation itself remains contingent upon wider interpersonal, institutional and structural conditions.

CONCLUSION

Deep listening and loving speech can be understood as interdependent practices of compassionate communication in Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism. Mindfulness enables recognition of suffering and habitual reactions, while compassion directs attention towards how others are received and addressed. Deep listening gives compassion a predominantly receptive form, while loving speech brings understanding into truthful and responsible expression. Listening can revise the understanding from which speech arises, and the effects of speech can prompt further listening.

The distinction between receptive and expressive compassion clarifies communication as a continuing process of mutual influence. Grounded in interbeing, it connects contemplative cultivation with responsibility for relationships without assuming equal power or equal responsibility for harm. Understanding another person does not require agreement, and compassionate expression can accommodate difficult truths, accountability and appropriate boundaries. The analysis further suggests that deep listening and loving speech may contribute to conditions favourable to reconciliation, while reconciliation itself depends upon wider interpersonal, institutional and structural conditions.

The interpretation is limited to four selected works and does not establish how these practices operate in particular social settings. Further research could examine their possibilities and limitations in communities or institutions affected by unequal power and sustained conflict. Such enquiry would help assess how relational ethics can inform social engagement alongside measures addressing the material causes of suffering.

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