

Buddhism and Nonviolent Communication: An Effective Practice for Peace

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*Speak or act with a peaceful mind and happiness follows like a never departing shadow.
The Buddha from The Dhammapada*

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is an effective discipline that utilizes language to connect compassionately, whose theory and practice parallels several foundational Buddhist principles. This paper explores how complementary NVC skill sets can be employed by Buddhists to enhance the development of Right Speech. NVC emphasizes numerous factors that align with Buddhism including intentionality, curiosity, clarity of observation, empathy in relationship, interdependence, basic goodness, nonviolence, non-attachment, an emphasis on contributing to the well-being of others and a balanced pursuit of one's own well-being. These key features of NVC are examined in their suggested application from the perspective of Skillful Means, Right Speech, the Three Jewels, the Four Noble Truths and the Six Paramitas. Examples of the effectiveness of NVC are drawn from its numerous practitioners including the founder, Marshall Rosenberg, who has demonstrated success with this model in situations as diverse as family counseling, educational consulting and international negotiations. The Buddhist path provides practitioners with the opportunity to work with modern methodologies by adapting forms congruent with its basic values. It is recommended that Buddhist practitioners may contribute substantially to the relief of global suffering by learning and utilizing many of the suggested language technologies of NVC.

Intention

The intention of the practitioner of NVC is foremost to its success. Rosenberg describes the core of the work when he shares his intention behind creating NVC as an interpersonal skill:

“I developed NVC as a way to train my attention – to shine the light of consciousness – on places that have the potential to yield what I am seeking. What I want in my life is compassion, a flow between myself and others based on a mutual giving from the heart.” (2003).

His simple statement reflects trust in the effectiveness of generosity and compassion in the human relationship. Underlying his words is an assumption of the interdependence between human beings and our ability to contribute to each other's happiness. Holding the sole intention to give and receive with compassion is fundamental to each of the four core components of the where attention is trained in NVC. These include observations, feelings, needs and requests.

Clear Observations

The ability of the NVC practitioner to clearly observe a situation is essential. Often in the practice it is necessary to translate this observation into a verbal description that is without judgment or personal prejudice. Communication often breaks down with misperceptions and errors in language patterns that are habitual distortions of the truth. A common example of a language error is when someone states, “I feel you are so unfair”. First, this statement reflects a conceptual idea and not a true feeling. Second, it is a generalization that has no specific function. Third, it labels the other person in a way that will typically create more distance than compassionate connection. A clear observation that is understandable might be, “I noticed in our last class you called on two boys that raised their hands and did not call on me when I was the only girl who raised her hand”. A key to being received and understood by another person in a potentially conflictual situation is to provide information that is without personal bias, interpretation or evaluation. Removing this bias in our speech is a way to step out of an ego-centered perspective. It also trains our attention on the bare qualities of our observations. It is a step toward making better contact with others through creating a shared understanding of what *is*.

Empathetic Feelings

In NVC focus is placed on empathetically identifying and understanding feelings in oneself and others. Feelings are recognized as states based in body sensations and are expressions of vulnerability. They typically denote when our needs are met or unmet and include many nuances of joy, peace, curiosity, gratitude, satisfaction, confidence, inspiration, affection, grief, fear, anger, shame, confusion, loneliness, frustration and overwhelm. The power of identifying internal feelings states increases self-awareness and helps us to discern better as we have the opportunity to clearly separate feelings from observations. Understanding that as adults we are responsible for our feelings and that situations are not the cause of our feelings is fundamental to NVC. Paying attention to body sensations and feelings makes our emotions workable and underscores their impermanence. Without this self-awareness we are more likely to *believe* our feelings and to act on them in ways that are harmful to others and ourselves. In naming our more difficult feelings NVC allows us to touch them and more readily let them go.

Genuine curiosity towards the feelings of others and helping others to identify their feelings is a signal that we are interested in connecting to their experience. Nonjudgmental *feeling with* the passion of others is the basis of compassion. We never assume we know what others are feeling but rather offer a heart felt guess in our inquiry. We might say, “I noticed you just now raised your voice louder than usual and I am wondering if you are feeling angry?” instead of “you are so angry”. When we inquire about a feeling, following a clear observation, we are much more likely to be met with honesty and lessened resistance. Even if we guess wrong our generosity to focus on the other person offers them the opportunity to clarify what they are experiencing. They might say something like “no, I’m actually scared I might fail this class” or “yes, I’m very upset you didn’t call on me”. Either way, we are getting closer to understanding their suffering so we may better offer empathy with a clear reflection. Repeating what they have just expressed lets the other person know we have heard them correctly and that we have no judgment regarding our awareness of their internal state. We could say, “I am hearing you are scared and concerned about passing this class” or “I hear you were feeling upset when I called on two boys and did not call on you, the only girl who raised her hand”.

Interdependent Needs

Feeling states are driven by the sense that needs are met or unmet. The feeling of confusion is often driven by the need for clarity. Difficult feelings are typically driven by perceptions that needs are not met and happy feelings are typically driven by perceptions that needs are met. When people feel lonely they may have a need for community. When someone feels tranquil the need for harmony may be satisfied. The purpose of feelings in this context is not to identify with them but rather to appreciate their utility in signaling a need that we may then choose to satisfy or not. Needs are a reflection that all of life is an interdependent web where exchange is vital to existence. A need is defined by the fact that everyone universally shares this need. Needs in NVC are listed in basic categories that include physical needs, choice, integrity, interdependence, contribution, spirituality and celebration (Rosenberg, 2003). Buddhists can understand the universality of this concept when we reflect on some of the indispensable needs provided by the three jewels of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Within Sangha we find our needs met for acceptance, contribution, support, warmth and honesty. The Dharma meets our need for truth and clarity. The jewel of the Buddha fulfills our need for guidance and inspiration.

If we were to guess the underlying needs of the young woman in our earlier example we might ask “I’m wondering if you are feeling angry because you are needing equality?” She might say yes or she might say, “No, I need to participate in class. I really want to learn this material.” Either way, she has gotten closer to compassionately connecting with her own needs and you have gotten closer to compassionately connecting with her. It is important to make an inquiry regarding both the feelings *and* the needs that appear to be driving the emotions. This creates a deeper understanding of feelings that may be particularly difficult for you or the other person to accept. Focusing attention on the underlying need points in the direction of the shared humanity of the two people in conflict. The individual identification with personal pain and separateness begins to dissolve and the two people can become collaborators in finding solutions to the difficulty.

In order to clearly reflect the feelings and needs of another person we must set aside our own feelings and needs and focus intently on the experience of the other person. This requires that we pay precise attention to our own internal capacity to accomplish this in the moment. If we recognize we are not capable of calming our own emotional state enough to respond clearly we may choose to excuse ourselves and offer to return after an interval of time. When we are able to commit our attention to the other person we continue to offer our willingness to listen and reflect feelings and needs until there is a sense that the other person has “emptied their cup”. This metaphor suggests that they have fully expressed themselves and recognize your understanding. It is only in this relatively empty state that a person is then capable of receiving and accurately reflecting your feelings and concerns. When we assist others to clarify their internal feelings and needs we contribute to their welfare and capacity to receive us as well.

Requests Without Attachment

In sharing our feelings and needs it is important to request the willingness of the other person to listen. If we are the teacher in the earlier example, after hearing fully from the student we might ask, “I’m feeling concern and have a need to contribute to your learning, would you be willing to tell me what you just heard me say?” By asking the student to repeat what we said we are requesting her participation. If she responds positively, our question will then help us assess if our communication was effective. We must be willing to trust that however the student responds, we are receiving important information about the other person or ourselves. We must be willing to accept her response without expectations. If the student is unwilling and we have an emotional reaction we can assume that

we asked the question with an agenda and our request was actually a demand. Our non-attachment to her response keeps us open to further inquiry that might help us better understand her feelings and needs. It will also allow us to reflect on our actions including the clarity and openness of our request. Were we using language she understands? Did we have a tone in our voice that was angry? Were we truly making the request from our heart or were we performing the task perfunctorily? A request that comes with expectations is a form of violence. While we may gain temporary results through coercion the long-term effects negates the needs of both teacher and student to freely give and receive.

Requests are the way we seek exchange with the environment and enrich our lives. In NVC they usually follow the expression of observations, feelings and needs. Without the information provided by an observation, the context of our request may not be correctly understood. Expressing our feelings and needs when making a request generously offers the listener the contents of our heart. We make ourselves vulnerable in sharing our humanity by building a compassionate bridge of understanding through universally experienced feelings and needs. When the teacher genuinely expresses concern and the desire to contribute, the student is more likely to understand and trust the intention behind a request.

Effective requests are specific, positive and doable. In the above example the teacher made a simple request that asked for something that the student could readily understand and was free to choose. Had the teacher asked accusingly, “Why don’t you quit your lazy study habits so I will want to call on you?” the student would likely fight back or shut down in shame. If we look closely at this last example, the teachers’ response was judgmental and the question was actually a request for an explanation and not a specific behavior the student could readily execute. Beginning a request in the negative, the teacher may never discover the special needs of the student or help design a study plan that would meet her needs for learning and participation. Requests that are vague or confusing often leave both parties feeling frustrated and alienated from one another. We often make requests about what we don’t want rather than what we actually do want. Let’s imagine the student responded by stating, “Don’t patronize me”. While the student may believe she has made it clear what she wants, a judgment was expressed and the teacher was not offered any concrete action steps that would help the student.

Needs and requests between people intersect in all our exchanges and our job is to trust that a compassionate and honest approach will eventually lead to satisfaction for both individuals. The next step for the teacher may be to patiently start over by utilizing the NVC sequence of reflecting observations, inquiring about feelings and needs, and making a request. The teacher could say, “When you said you don’t want to be patronized, I was wondering if you feel angry and need respect. Is that true?” When we make this simple request it is important to remember that we are not assuming responsibility for the other persons’ feelings or meeting their needs. Our intention is solely to clarify what is true for them in the moment and to create a sense of understanding between each other.

Trusting our Inherent Goodness

Trusting the NVC process means accepting that our purpose is not to change people in order to get our way. It also assumes that the purpose of our empathy is not to manipulate but to create relationship that enriches both people. This balanced approach to the pursuit of our own happiness recognizes our basic interdependence and mitigates the problems created when we approach others from an egocentric point of view. NVC is built on principles that people are essentially generous, compassionate and interested in contributing to the welfare of others. It also assumes that our feelings and needs are purposeful in that they may be utilized to help inform our decisions. If we identify feeling distraught, what need are we not attending to? If we recognize the need for peace, what requests do we make of whom? Would we like to create a space in the day when the children play quietly? Or is the request

internal? NVC skills can be applied to our interior dialogue to create greater self-acceptance and confidence in our choices. Does a part of us want to be more diligent in our meditation practice and another part concerned about doing a good job at work and at home? By clearly observing our internal states and deeply listening to our self-talk we notice how empathy and a nonjudgmental attitude towards our feelings and needs creates an open space for creative solutions to arise. We begin to find that we can make doable, concrete requests of ourselves and follow through on our commitments.

The Four Noble Truths

As Buddhists we can better understand both the philosophy and practice recommended in NVC if we look at it through the lens of the Four Noble Truths. These include the awareness of the truth of suffering, awareness of the arising of suffering, understanding the cessation of suffering is possible and learning the path to the cessation of suffering.

Awareness of Suffering

NVC is designed to alleviate the suffering we experience in our interactions with others and in our self-dialogue. It recognizes the many confusions and errors in our speech that contribute to misunderstandings, conflict and difficult emotions. NVC recognizes that many of these patterns are culturally, socially and personally embedded in faulty observations, habitual language and misdirected attention. It shines the light on these painful artifacts of human relationship so we may better understand the nature of our interpersonal suffering. NVC also understands we have introjected these harmful language patterns into our interior dialogue and increase personal suffering with distorted observations, self-blame and unformed goals that translate into ineffective self-requests. In helping us to identify difficult feelings and unmet needs, NVC assists us to delve deeper to the roots of our suffering in ignorance, passion or aggression. Clear awareness of our erroneous thought patterns and distressing emotions is the first step toward holding them with compassion and transparency.

The Arising of Suffering

Clearly understanding the cause of our suffering helps us alleviate habitual patterns of ego that separate us from intimately knowing one another. Inquiry in NVC is designed to help us get beneath defensive language and posturing that is the mark of self-clinging and alienation. Empathetic contact involves the willingness to reveal our personal vulnerabilities and caring for others. The basis of empathy is that we are not separate entities but interdependent without a self to defend, protect or divide us from others. While interconnected we remain responsible for our consciousness and the suffering that arises when we perceive reality through the veil of our addiction to the self. We mistakenly confuse strategies to get our needs met with our true needs for enlightenment, truth and community. When strategies are confused with needs they are considered tragic expressions of needs and include all our attempts to buy, seduce, control, ignore, manipulate and force our way in the world. Genuine contact with others opens us to loosening boundaries we have falsely created leading toward greater satisfaction in relationship.

The Cessation of Suffering

Freedom from suffering is based in the example of the Buddha, our recognition of the truth of his teachings and following his example in cultivating the qualities of the Eightfold Noble Path. These eight are then the cause of awakening and include Right View, Right Thinking, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Diligence, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration (Nhat Hanh, 1999). NVC strives to make our speech clear and empathetic and by doing so eliminates the cause of future misunderstandings. The cessation of suffering begins to occur for those on the path with small incremental moments of awakening when we are open to the experience of nonduality. Opportunities for stirring this experience are available in relationship when we are able to freely open our hearts and mind. Compassion based in the experience of nonduality has the greatest scope of understanding and effectiveness. Buddhism and NVC recognize the seeds of compassion in every human heart.

The Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering

The Buddhist path of study, contemplation and meditation empowers its practitioners to realize the vast nature of mind and thus alleviate suffering. To an enlightened master there is no conflict between self and other: self and other do not exist. The path of a Bodhisattva in the Mahayana and Vajrayana tradition is of one who has this realization and chooses to continue to work for the benefit of all beings. The Bodhisattva may be considered a symbol for all Buddhists who understand their engagement in the world is a dimension of the Buddhist path. Study and meditation inform a contemplative approach to living that includes our interactions with others. NVC requires that we continually reflect on our speech and listen deeply to the messages we receive from others. Nonattachment to outcome in our human relationships offers freedom to others and encourages us to practice letting go on a daily basis. We recognize our misunderstandings and frustrations are based on a limited view and work towards an all-encompassing view. At the same time, our path is not passive. NVC encourages us to find our voice and offers tools for speaking up when there is injustice, prejudice and violence. Based in language skills that bring forward our inherent compassion, apathy and anger dissolve, and mutual understanding is cultivated.

The development of NVC is a life long process. Commitment to the six Paramitas on the Buddhist path lays a strong foundation for an effective NVC practice. As we have seen in our examples, Dana, or generosity, is at the core of opening our heart and loosening our resistance in communication. Our vow not to harm, Shila, helps us keep watch over words in a disciplined manner so as not to coerce, confuse, label or violate others. Kshanti, or patience, is essential as we learn compassion-based skills and continually listen and communicate until understanding and harmony is generated. With Virya we diligently create the energy and enthusiasm to continue in our efforts. We practice the components of NVC as if we were learning to play the notes on a piano, with faith that over time our effort will become the *effortless effort* of a Zen concertmaster. Dhyana, the practice of meditation, including concentration and contemplation, provides us presence of mind in our everyday exchanges with others. Prajna becomes wisdom in action, something we continue to seek and discover as we build skillful means, compassion and experience over time.

In Right Speech, one of the practices of the Eight Fold Noble path, there are four parameters: telling the truth, not creating discord between others, not speaking cruelly and not exaggerating (Nhat Hanh, 1999). We can see how NVC embraces all of these concepts. Acute attention is paid to describing reality as truthfully as possible in observations and reporting internal states. In inquiring about the experience of our dialogue partners we are careful to not make assumptions and always ask if our guesses about feelings and needs are correct. NVC counters creating discord (speaking with a forked tongue) by encouraging a straight path to working through conflict. It offers tools for speaking directly

to those with whom we have differences and for asserting our needs nonviolently. Cruel, evaluative, judgmental, critical and labeling language is avoided in NVC. This includes accusatory language that labels or interprets the behavior of others. It emphasizes deep listening and personal sharing to get below defensive language that pits people against each other. In avoiding judgmental language that conveys we are right and the other person is wrong, NVC provides a framework for mutual understanding. NVC requires that we not exaggerate the truth in requiring us to carefully consider our choice of words in how we describe situations, internal states, and make requests. Statements like “you always...” or “you never...” elaborate the truth and are habitually used as vehicles to drive home a righteous stance with underlying anger in our tone. Using mindfulness to calm our emotions and speaking with greater precision we avoid escalating conflict with dramatic embellishments.

Relationship is the Quick Path

Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche is known to have said, “relationship is the quick path” in reference to the power of leveraging the human encounter to transform consciousness. We receive immediate feedback on the state of our mind through our interactions. Right Speech enfolded out of Right View and Right Thought and has an interactive effect on the development of our view of reality and how we think about it. People employ language in archaic ways that include the use of judgmental and evaluative terms that create an *enemy image* in the mind (Rosenberg, 2008). When we refer to others as bad, stingy, selfish, mean, lazy or rigid we solidify a hostile attitude in our mind that limits our perception and likely invite defense or humiliation in the mind of the other person. When we berate ourselves with negative terminology we make us the enemy and limit our capacity to compassionately learn from our own mistakes. We can also see how enemy images create an instantaneous emotional response that further escalates confused and distorted thinking.

Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche encourages us to develop a *mindful gap* in our awareness by learning to hold still with the emotion and not react. Then we can separate ourselves into experiencer and observer of the emotion and we avoid becoming overwhelmed. The space we create offers an opportunity to *clearly see* a broader view of the entire situation and *let go* of our mental and energetic fixation (Dzogchen Ponlop, 2008). While NVC does not specify these three steps of mindful gap, clearly seeing and letting go, its invitation to clearly delineate observations, feelings, needs and requests suggests a similar process of mental clarity regarding emotions. In its recommendation for deep inner listening we may understand NVC as a contemplative, interpersonal practice on the quick path.

NVC Dialogue in Action

Returning to the example of teacher and student, let’s go back to the first remark of the student and imagine the teacher has mastered the NVC vocabulary.

Student: I feel you are so unfair. (*Notice the common use of “I feel...” is followed by a concept instead of a true feeling. The word “so” is a common exaggeration.*)

Teacher: When you say “unfair”, I’m curious if you are feeling angry and needing equal treatment. (*He says this in the spirit of kindness and not to correct her.*)

Student: No, you just don’t get it.

Teacher: When you say, “I don’t get it”, are you feeling frustrated and need to be understood?

Student: Yes, I’m frustrated and sick of being ignored because I am a girl.

Teacher: I appreciated you letting me know you are frustrated. (*He shows appreciation for her willingness to share openly and repeats her feeling so she knows she is heard.*) When you say,

“ignored as a girl”, I’m wondering if you need attention to your learning process and equal treatment?
(Often more than one need is present.)

Student: Yes, I want to be called on when I raise my hand.

Teacher: I hear you want to be taken seriously as a person and called on when you raise your hand.
(Repeating a statement is not necessarily agreeing with someone as the intent is to make sure the other person knows they are heard.) Is there anything else that you are feeling? *(The teacher asks about anything else to make sure the student has emptied her cup and is in a receptive place to hear his concerns.)*

Student: No, thanks for listening.

Teacher: I appreciate your willingness to come and tell me about your concerns and I would like to contribute more to your learning. Would you be willing to hear my concern? *(He embeds his observation, feeling, need and request in these two sentences.)*

Student: Sure.

Teacher: When you raised your hand in class and I didn’t call on you, I was feeling reluctant because you failed the last oral exam and I needed assurance you had studied enough to answer correctly. Would you be willing to tell me what you just heard me say?

Student: That I’m a failure and you don’t want to embarrass me.

Teacher: When you say “failure” I’m curious if you are feeling sad and scared and needing support in your studies? *(Instead of repeating his earlier statement he switches to identifying her feelings and needs when he hears the painfully expressed label “failure”.)*

Student: Yes, my mother is sick and as the oldest girl I need to take care of my baby brother and sisters because she is in the hospital. There’s no time to study.

Teacher: *(Allowing time for silence to connect to his heart.)* When you tell me about your mother I feel sad for you and your whole family. When I hear caring in your voice I’m guessing you also have a need to contribute to the welfare of your family. Is that true?

Student: Yes.

Teacher: Would you be willing to explore with me ways to work with this challenging situation so you can continue your studies?

Student: *(crying)* I would like that.

As we can see in this example it is not necessary for both people in the dialogue to know NVC to intervene effectively. When working with others who are angry, upset or resist our efforts it is common to discover fear and sadness beneath their initial reaction when we continue to probe compassionately. When others says no to our request it is a signal to investigate deeper into their feelings instead of focusing on our own reaction to their response. This is a time to utilize mindfulness as we notice our reactive emotion, and in that gap, see clearly and let the feeling go. We are then able to bring our full attention back to the other person.

Conclusion

NVC provides us a powerful methodology to take the dharma into personal and socially engaged situations. Marshall Rosenberg has examples of working in situations of tribal and ethnic warfare and has been successful in reconciling many groups and individuals, including Serbs and Bosnians who experienced extreme violence between each others’ families. In 2008, an educational workshop in NVC was taking place in Thailand a week before the Bangkok airport was shut down. While participants came seeking nonviolent tools for many reasons, individuals loyal to either the red shirts or yellow shirts came knowing they would have the opportunity to work side by side in the training.

Much to everyone's relief at this volatile time, in demonstrating the methods of NVC, the teachers were able to facilitate compassionate communication regardless of the issues that arose.

While the practice may appear simple, most individuals do not find it easy. As Buddhists we can understand the degree of mindful attention and maturity on the path that is necessary to master the skills. It is also common, for those recently introduced to the approach, to experience significant moments of connection and reconciliation when utilizing NVC in relationship. Beginners often find simply holding the intention of compassionate connection enough to create greater understanding in approaching others with their requests.

This paper touches on essential elements of NVC as it relates to the role of Buddhism in alleviating suffering in the world. It also explores how Buddhist teachings and mindfulness practice may enhance the effective use of NVC. I feel optimistic that these methods have much to contribute to global understanding and peace. May this work increase clarity and compassion in the mindstream of all sentient beings.

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