

# Nonviolent Communication (NVC) and Buddhism

## *--Left and Right Hands of a Common Body—*

by Paul Shippee

I have been studying, practicing, teaching and facilitating NVC live groups since 2006. Why NVC?

I have been a serious practitioner of Buddhism for more than fifty years. During that time I began to notice that in Buddhist *sanghas* my needs for connection – warmth, affection, and honesty – were not often met or even recognized, but actually discouraged. These universal human needs are often dismissed, ignored and devalued as if people’s needs for warmth, friendliness and honesty are not *supposed* to be supported in Buddhist sanghas.

Over time I discovered that the reason was because feelings and universal human needs were being misunderstood as ego needs and selfish appeals for ego protection. In one of my Buddhist communities, cynicism and even insult were advocated as a way to discourage ego’s displays and attachments. To me, this seemed to feed right into the mainstream culture’s ethos of separation and threw the baby out with the bath water.

I believed that Buddhist communities would be the first place to honor and learn more about the inner life of the students. Some say that deep anxieties and self-esteem issues should properly be left to psychologists and psychotherapy. Yet friendliness toward oneself and compassion toward others are widely noted as the basic building blocks of Buddhist teachings and a healthy, sane life.

### **A Missing Link**

When I discovered Nonviolent Communication years ago, I experienced an immense relief that I had stumbled on an important missing link in our evolving American Buddhism as well as a critical developmental gap in my own existence. I came to Buddhism originally for help overcoming the alienation and anguish I felt in our American industrial culture, and despite my deep respect and affection for its practices, particularly meditation, I began to experience a deep longing to end the endemic separation, disconnection, secrecy and shame I often experienced in interpersonal relationships in the larger culture and within Buddhist sanghas.

The addition of Nonviolent Communication afforded me the antidote to these dilemmas and a skill-set to help others deepen both their experience of Buddhism and their daily lives. I found NVC to be good medicine for an emotion-phobic culture.

### **Love's Skill – The Practice of Nonviolent Communication**

What attracts me to NVC is its ability to teach how to connect, really connect with others; how to identify and overcome our shame and competitiveness, especially in difficult circumstances. Nonviolence makes conflict safe, said Dorothy Day. The NVC teaching and practice of taking responsibility for your feelings says the same thing.

Psychologist and longtime Buddhist practitioner, the late John Welwood stated the issue in this way,

“All psychological problems are at root spiritual issues – symptoms of disconnection from our deeper nature. Conventional psychotherapy rarely addresses this disconnect from our being that is at the root of all emotional distress. Spiritual practices, on the other hand, often bypass, and thus fail to transform, the conditioned patterns and unconscious identities that arise from our personal history.”<sup>1</sup>

Shall the fruits of American Buddhism remain locked up in a cool cynicism and separation that often fosters a cold study of egolessness, or shall it teach, embody and embrace warmth, affection, honesty, friendliness and love as the true heart of enlightenment along with emotional and spiritual liberation? If, like me, you believe that there might be a better way, read on to learn more about Nonviolent Communication.

### **Compassionate Communication**

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is a well-researched, practical and effective method of Compassionate Communication developed within Western psychology and psychotherapy over the past fifty years by the late Marshall Rosenberg, PhD. Marshall developed the NVC method of communication through a lifetime of conflict resolution and mediation work in hot spots all around the world.

Buddhism, on the other hand, is a relatively ancient system of philosophical wisdom and meditation practice developed in India 2,600 years ago by a prince named Siddhartha who abandoned materialistic life in an earnest search for liberation from confusion and suffering. What he discovered is a way of wisdom based in the experience of meditation.

When I asked Marshall privately if he liked Buddhism he thanked me for asking and told me that half of what he teaches in NVC he learned from Buddhism. This conversation confirmed what I had already suspected, that Nonviolent Communication, like Buddhism,

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<sup>1</sup> *Toward a Psychology of Awakening, by John Welwood, 2000. Shambhala*

is inspired by spiritual aspiration, discipline and the arc of human development. In my experience they fit each other like hand and glove.

### **Wisdom Comes Home**

Fortunately, in our lifetime, these two streams of wisdom and method have come together auspiciously in the West to offer knowledge and tools to those of us yearning for liberation from confusion, pain and distress. They also offer relief for those wishing to enjoy better interpersonal communication skills, and to those longing to experience and share natural warmth, happiness and love. Much of the basic knowledge, inspiration, skills and tools of NVC and Buddhism are similar. Buddhism calls these basic time-honored mental skills of mindfulness and awareness the iron hook that will pull you out of confusion, ignorance and suffering and lead you to liberation.

The work indicated here in both NVC and Buddhism is a common path of inner development often referred to as “waking up,” which generally means becoming aware of what’s going on in your body, speech, mind, and your conduct. It also means to expand your consciousness to include greater inner and outer mindfulness.

As a result, emotional awareness flowing from both NVC and Buddhism helps you understand yourself and get along with people better. As the 8<sup>th</sup> century Indian *mahasiddha*, Padmasambhava, famously said, “Although my view is as high as the sky, my conduct is as fine as flour.”

### **Emotional Awareness**

What is emotional awareness, you might ask? It refers to an inner process of training our mindful attention toward identifying and expressing what we are feeling in our mind and body in the moment. We have forgotten how to do this. It is a simple human skill, but not easy to recover. Like many outer skills, this inner discipline requires learning and training. It’s not taught in our schools.

Awareness then provides the open space to discover the wisdom hidden within difficult situations, afflictive emotions and feeling energies. With meditation it is our natural wisdom and insight that investigates and discovers the underlying root of our suffering and touches on needs that are met or unmet. The lost art of emotional awareness, then, is a tool or lever to open up our hidden inner life of feelings and needs.

### **Mind and Body**

Another aspect of waking up is discovering how to recover mind and body synchronization, as these experiences are often split in our Western culture. This psychological split is a serious and common social dis-ease that blocks compassion and often regards our feelings as separate and alienated, self-centered private property. As human beings we are evolved to discover and enjoy emotional, psychological, and spiritual development. These markers of wellbeing may be expressed as communication,

connection, integration, and a vulnerable sharing of our wholeness -one's body, speech, mind, and spirit- over the course of our lives. Many of us don't know this or don't believe it is possible.

### **Brain Wisdom**

But in fact, our brain circuits enjoy neuroplasticity and are by nature open to change. Despite this well-researched fact, we are often afraid of change and shy away from the natural arc of lifespan development. We shut down at some point and opt for a narrow, 'safe' and repressed version of life. Fortunately, many of us also have a deep yearning to understand the meaning of our life, and thus have a longing to experience true being, beyond only the materialistic comforts of a "having, or getting more" mode of living.

The Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, observed that, "A person isn't some private entity traveling unaffected through time and space as if sealed off from the rest of the world by a thick shell."

### **Giving From the Heart**

This phrase reminds us to ask: "How open do we want to be?" How connected to others, to ourselves and to nature? Opening up and giving from the heart can be difficult and is not easily understood in our modern culture. And, change is not easy for any of us. Learning to trust our natural warmth and peaceful heart is a big challenge. We have deeply held unconscious patterns of limiting and primitive beliefs about how things should be. We have outdated emotion-based reactions of one-upmanship, withdrawal, attack, and competitiveness --patterns of defense that no longer serve life as mature adults.

### **Change**

We may even think that change is not possible or that it is idealistic. For example, we might think it strange to understand and love ourselves. Asking "Do I love myself?" can feel embarrassing to many of us as it evokes a deeply buried shame response, a vulnerable feeling that we are strangers and disconnected within ourselves. But as shame researcher, Brene Brown, emphasizes: no vulnerability, no growth.

Alternatively, we may prefer to not change, to remain small and cling to a frozen identity, mistaking it for protection or an idea of perfection we no longer actually need. All such strategies resist change and allow our old patterns of defending, attacking and withdrawal to keep us isolated, separate and 'safe', in a false ego shell. It is a cocoon of protection that buries our demons, and shadows, beneath an attractive, distracting, and inauthentic surface.

### **Vertical and Horizontal**

A simple way to clarify the differences between NVC and Buddhism is to use the metaphor of a cross. Ancient Buddhism is a deep vertical teaching about how the world works, how human ignorance and other ego-clinging operates within us. It teaches us how to release ego fixations, soften our hearts and open our minds. The teachings are an invitation to unearth the wisdom and compassion that is actually our deep nature. It is described as vertical because it plumbs the hidden depths, and reaches up toward the highest achievements of human development.

By contrast, Nonviolent Communication may be considered a discipline with a horizontal reach. It seeks to extend our warmth, empathy, compassion, responsiveness and love outward, including to other peoples in sane and skillful ways to produce harmony in our world, reduce suffering in self and others, and enjoy intelligent and nourishing interactions in our world. Whereas meditation is a solitary practice, NVC is a relationship-based training. We do this in relationship with others by awakening to our true feelings and universal human needs. This gentle discipline fosters fearless connections with oneself and with others.

### **What Do You Want to Do?**

Does it make sense to combine the spacious depths of Buddhist practice with the deliberate warmth of NVC, extending inner emotional awareness outward? It depends. If you have the sense that something in your world is amiss, that there might be a better way to express yourself as a living being, then the opening is already there, as is the answer. You are ready to take the first step.

This involves identifying and expressing the transitory, subtle and juicy feelings presently cloaked in privacy or ignorance. Once identified, we can connect that dynamic energy with our basic and universal human needs which are not, if we look closely, selfish. They are adorned with the beauty and living energy of needs, the colors of survival, nurturing connections and skillful human interactions.

I invite you to join us as we explore these essential dimensions of human life in conversations and practice exercises that guide us in learning to see, appreciate and share what is truly most alive and most important in our lives.

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