

Practicing Peace: The Language of Liberation

by Christine King

Sitting on my cushion before sunrise, I listen to the Pacific Ocean breaking against the shore and seals barking the day awake. The seashore is a constant reminder of the emotions coursing through me. I observe my breath. Thoughts arise, thoughts pass, no attachment, no clinging. I am the embodiment of calm, a peaceful Bodhisattva, at one with my zafu during that special time of transition when it is neither day nor night, and the spirit world reveals itself.

And then day breaks and chaos takes over. The peaceful Pacific is replaced by the cacophony of cars that buzz outside my window, and my peace of mind evaporates. The dog needs walking, breakfast needs cooking, children need to get to school and parents to work. The phone rings and the world intrudes. I wonder what happened. It was all so simple and easy on the cushion. This is not a recent phenomena; rather, it's a dilemma that has dogged me for over 25 years whenever I have re-entered the world from meditation and attempted to continue being present with an open heart, moment-to-moment awareness.

It was my son who helped me bridge the gap between practice and life. As a teenager, he wrecked more than one car, experimented with all of the temptations that a California beach city offers, dropped out of school, quit his job, and bummed around the state—living in trees, churches and abandoned barns. In the midst of those events, I was an emotional wreck. I kept telling myself if only he would wake up, grow up and wise up, then I wouldn't suffer anymore. We tried therapy for several of his teen years, but eventually he would refuse to go after it became abundantly clear the therapists were biased toward my husband and me. In the midst of my despair, I was asked to attend an in-service training along with the other staff and faculty at the Santa Cruz Waldorf School. The training was called Nonviolent Communication™.

The weekend before the class, I stayed up half the night reading Dr. Marshall Rosenberg's book *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*. While most of the book resonated with my Buddhist training and beliefs, I wondered if I could apply those four simple communication steps: Observation, Feelings, Needs and Requests. It seemed so canned and mechanistic. Wouldn't others see through the fact that I was following a speaking formula? The trainer, Jean Morrison, was skilled and adept at using the language and made it seem so simple. But my judging mind was getting in the way. Jean used stuffed animal puppets. I told myself "she doesn't realize we use only natural toys in Waldorf Schools." I also kept thinking, "using mechanistic language would block true heart-to-heart communication." Yet desperate for any tool to help me better connect with my son, I persevered.

At first, I would practice NVC in the sauna at the gym, where people are surprisingly open about their lives. It took a lot of presence to remember the NVC components: a combination of both cerebral work (remembering the steps of the process), and heart work (as the process itself moves you from your intellectual mind to your heart). But I was getting results. People were responding, and I learned that what Marshall Rosenberg says is true: sometimes when someone speaks, it's just the tip of the iceberg. If we show empathy, they begin to reveal more of the iceberg. Before we know it, we're learning that this person never felt they were good enough in their parent's eyes and have spent their entire adult life trying to prove they are worthy. Witnessing this process,

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I learned something very important: I don't have to fix anything, give advice, console, agree, or even sympathize. The mere act of being present, getting in touch with feelings and needs, has tremendous possibility for spiritual growth and transformation. Thich Naht Hanh calls this "deep listening."

Recently, I had the opportunity to go even deeper with this work at several week-long NVC retreats. Many of the attendees had spiritual practices and a lot of silence was used during the training. In our morning empathy circles, I was privileged to once again witness transformation as individuals would share what appeared to be a conflict in their lives. Once we got down to the basic human needs (understanding, peace, cooperation, appreciation, love), we discovered the apparent discord was really just different strategies to fulfill the same need. When this understanding resonated with the speaker, something shifted, and there was an ah-ha cathartic moment. As I witnessed others touching their suffering, my pain diminished as well. I came to the realization that empathy has the power to heal both the speaker and the witnesses. Empathy is the practice of peace.

Nonviolent Communication is the "wise or mindful speech" I have been missing in my life. The deeper I experience and enjoy using the NVC process, the more it complements my sitting practice and the more I am able to be empty, be present, and connect empathically with my family and friends. One of the strongest connections I see between the two practices of meditation and the NVC process, is the idea of pure observation. If I can observe without moralistic judgment and evaluation, then I can see clearly into the nature of things. When I use my judging mind, I am no longer objective and there is disconnect. And when I am in touch with feelings and needs, there is connection. Emotions are impermanent, constantly changing, and thus freedom of choice arises at every moment. I have a choice to look for the need behind an emotion, or simply observe it, as it arises and subsides.

Meditation has given me the mental clarity to see that other people's anger and frustration has nothing to do with me. Through studying and practicing the NVC process, I have learned that their anger is an expression of unfulfilled needs. Through the practice of empathy, I can serve others in helping them to discover the cause of their suffering. I can join them in a dance of discovery and not be intimidated or upset by their anger. And I've learned there is really only one war that I have control over, the war that goes on inside of me every day. When I use self-empathy and stay aware of my feelings and needs, I am more at ease with myself and able to share that peace with others. Mahatmas Gandhi once said, "be the change you want to see in the world." This is what NVC offers.

My son is now 20 years old and living in La Paz, Mexico. When he realized I had no more demands or expectations for him to attend college or get a job, he took the first bus to San Diego and followed his heart to warmer climates. His Spanish is almost perfect now and he sends us hand-painted post cards. His voice on the telephone is joyful and contented. He's talking about coming home for the holidays and re-enrolling in the community college for the spring semester. Whatever he decides, it will be his decision to choose his path without guilt, demands, or expectations from me. I am deeply grateful to him for being the catalyst that helped me touch my own suffering and healing—and discover how to actively practice peace moment-to-moment.

Christine King, credentialed teacher and certified trainer with the Center for Nonviolent Communication, is passionate about meditation and NVC. She experiences the Nonviolent Communication (NVC) process as the bridge between her meditation practice and social action work. She is also pursuing the application of the NVC process to issues of addiction and mental illness. Christine has taught NVC in schools, jail, universities, adult school, and privately. She lives in Santa Cruz, California (USA) and has joined CNVC certified trainers Kelly Bryson and Jean Morrison to create the local center, **NVC Santa Cruz** (www.NVCSantaCruz.org). She can be reached at: cking@baymoon.com

For more information on Nonviolent Communication visit the PuddleDancer Press website at www.NonviolentCommunication.com
For more information about the Center for Nonviolent Communication please visit www.CNVC.org



About Nonviolent Communication

From the bedroom to the boardroom, from the classroom to the war zone, the Nonviolent Communication (NVC) process is changing lives every day. NVC provides an easy to grasp, effective method to get to the root of conflict, violence and pain peacefully. By examining the unmet needs behind what we do or say, the NVC process helps reduce hostility, heal pain, and strengthen professional or personal relationships.

The NVC process is now being taught in corporations, classrooms, prisons and mediation centers around the globe. And it is affecting cultural shifts as institutions, corporations and governments integrate NVC consciousness into their organizational structures and their approach to leadership.

International peacemaker, mediator, author and founder of the Center for Nonviolent Communication, Dr. Marshall Rosenberg spends more than **250** days each year teaching the NVC process, including some of the most impoverished, war-torn areas of the world. More than **180** certified trainers and hundreds more teach this life-enriching process in **35** countries to approximately **250,000** people each year.

About the Center for Nonviolent Communication

The Center for Nonviolent Communication (CNVC) is an international nonprofit peacemaking organization whose vision is a world where everyone's needs are met peacefully. CNVC is devoted to supporting the spread of Nonviolent Communication training and consciousness around the world.

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