

Using Nonviolent Communication On A Buddhist-Graduated Nondual Spiritual Path

by Jerry Donoghue

The work I present in the Inner Empathy book and basic NVC courses resides in a much larger nondual context. For me, there is tremendous value in using the NVC model as a navigation tool to do nondual spiritual work on a graduated path. Below is my understanding of how the NVC needs fit into a graduated path inspired by the Buddha. The path I lay out uses the four refutations of Nagarjuna's tetralemma or fourfold path. Nagarjuna is one of the greatest Buddhist philosophers who founded the Madhyamaka school of Buddhism. He refutes the various positions we hold about ourselves and the world. I plugged needs-based language into his refutations to inspire understanding of how emptiness can be applied in very practical ways in our daily lives.

Even though our growth and development are more complex and uneven than these kinds of graduated presentations suggest, I find it a useful tool for understanding. So as you read through these levels, it is useful not to take them as absolute levels through which we neatly progress from one level to the next in linear fashion, or to interpret them to mean that, once we reach a certain level, we are forever exempt from returning to the lower level. I think development is much more chaotic than these linear notions suggest. However, even with these limitations, there is much value in laying out a template for understanding our experience and relationship to NVC needs.

The meaning of the word emptiness in this paper is to indicate the status of objects of our awareness. To say a table, a need, or a self is empty in nature or lacks inherent existence means that these objects don't exist independent of causes and conditions. In other words, they exist in interdependent forms. These objects have many other relationships with other things in order for them to appear to us in the form that they do—one of these relationships being our observing awareness itself. We use language to make them static and familiar. There is a certain convenience and functionality in using language this way. We can tell people we will eat at the table, and people won't eat off the floor. There are pitfalls as well. When we use static language over and over again, we begin to forget about the interdependency and start to assume that objects of our awareness inherently exist. Believing objects of our awareness inherently exist, have absolute status, or exist ultimately may not be that problematic for objects like tables, but when it comes to objects of our awareness like needs or a self, our experience in life can be limited and constricted. We shall see how the actualization emptiness in daily life with regard to needs and a self can actually create more functionality and liberation than if we hold them as inherently existent.

The Beginner's Experiences Of Needs

Many of us come to NVC and discover that our needs are not acknowledged but are what I call unconscious knowings. The basic work in NVC is becoming conscious of and connecting to our unconscious needs, hopes, desires, wants, values, expectations, and longings, as well as the feelings they evoke when satisfied or not. These needs very much shape our experience whether we are aware of them or not. For one reason or another, we repressed, denied, and otherwise lost touch with our needs as we grew up. We actively disowned some of them in order to meet others' needs. For example, we might have abandoned our desire to be listened to and heard when the needs of

our parents were being met in a way that did not include meeting our need. Or we suppressed one of our needs in order to meet one of our other important needs. For example, my need for creative expression might be suppressed after suffering a humiliating event with peers. So my need to protect myself from shame is more important than my need for creative expression. The net result of these dynamics is that many of our needs are unacknowledged and reside in us as unconscious knowings, which is explained below.

When attempting to apply the NVC model for the first time, many of us were shocked by our attempt to use it. Our attempts naturally disclosed how much we were disconnected from our feelings and/or needs, or we feared making requests. We experientially connected with how we never asked for what we wanted. It didn't matter how much personal growth work we have done, trying to use the model exposed our unconscious positions that are based in our unacknowledged needs. Increasing our feeling and need literacy naturally gave us a way to access important unconscious material.

The exploration at this level is about connecting to unconscious needs and bringing them into awareness. Our needs fall into a category I call unconscious knowings. This is something we know, but it remains out of our conscious awareness. When we or someone empathetically reflects back and guesses our feelings and needs, in that moment, we experience a deep self-connection. They might offer us three different needs as guesses, but one of them really resonates with us. We can feel a sense of relief, and there is a noticeable shift in our body and energy. Part of that experience, I would suggest, is a previously unconscious need (unconscious knowing) being made consciously known to us. Our reaction is one of recognition of the need in play, which supports this idea of many needs being unconscious knowings. We recognize what is already known that is outside conscious awareness.

At this level, the general movement is to bring needs into conscious awareness, which moves needs from being “real but unconscious” to the next level of needs being “real and conscious and trying to get them met.” Even though I am positioning this level as the basic level of our engagement with NVC, this is a very powerful and necessary level that many nondual aspirants bypass.

Many people who embark upon a spiritual path that includes transcending the “I” or ego often are not aware that the most powerful aspects of their sense of “I” exist outside of their conscious awareness in the form of these unconscious knowings or disowned needs. It is difficult to change the relationship we have with an “I” or see it as false when it is out the range of our awareness. Besides needs, these unconscious knowings take the form of unconscious beliefs and judgments about ourselves that really solidify our sense of “I” in the form of unconscious memories. Therefore, the act of experientially becoming aware of our unconscious knowings (needs/beliefs) is tremendously supportive for those interested in nondual wisdom paths that value inquiry of seeing the sense of self as false or fabricated. So this level of uncovering unconscious needs is important and becomes the foundation for the more refined work on this graduated path.

A more abstract philosophical way to express this is that Inner Empathy work is using NVC and psychological “parts work” to become aware of deep unconscious psychological “I” structures (beliefs, assumptions, unmet needs, trapped feelings), which are already held as subtle

unconscious reifications. Such awareness tends to have a de-reify effect and happens naturally when we have a certain quality of connection and experience such reifications as empty of inherent existence. For example, let's simplify a complex inner dynamic to illustrate: An adult holds deep inside an unconscious child part that suffered some traumatic event and formed the belief that "you can't trust people." This adult can experientially and empathetically connect with this child part by listening and being unconditionally present to its deep unmet needs and pain. Such quality of connection inspires self-correction mechanisms to take over. The child's construction of mistrust is seen as false or not useful in the adult's current life. A life-long unconsciously held position influencing how this person relates to others is de-reified. Since these unconscious reifications affect our lives in many ways and keep us attached to a solid sense of "I," experiencing them and their beliefs as empty has a certain liberating effect in the way experience flows through. Below is a detailed application of Nagarjuna's fourfold path on how people typically experience NVC needs.

1) Needs Are Real And Inherently Exist (There Is A Self): At this level of exploration, there is a concerted effort to practice identifying, connecting, and expressing needs that emerge within us. We slowly shake off our conditioning, which does not value the language of needs, and eagerly explore our needs. We learn the new language of needs and begin to relate to our experience in that way. We begin to feel more comfortable with the position that needs are real and exist and start holding them in conscious awareness. We connect with previously unconscious needs and begin to savor the self-connection as well as our connection to others, that this awareness brings.

Part of this learning that "needs are real" is that we consciously or unconsciously assume needs are grounded in and representative of some intrinsic reality. We give them absolute status and begin to speak about them in that way. Our sense of self or "I" begins to be embedded in the new needs language. Whereas our sense of self might have been partially formed by unfulfilled unconscious needs in the past, now our sense of self is more conscious, yet remains a sense of self or an identity.

As we gain practice, we begin to notice that some needs we express seem to have extra energy or deeper feelings associated with the need than the situation of context warrants. In other words, the emotional intensity is disproportionate to the situation. There might be a backlog of desires and wants, and these are expressed sometimes in desperate or intense ways. For example, a spouse wanting to be heard about something might be unconsciously superimposing old hurt and frustrations from childhood around being heard onto the present-time situation. This can be a challenge for people using the model because they may perfectly use the suggested NVC form, but their intense feelings cause them to abandon the important "intention of mutual connection" inherent in the NVC paradigm. Their requests end up having heavy demand energy behind them despite the inviting language.

So part of the learning process is coming to the experiential realization that "needs being real" can be experienced in both an attached and a nonattached way. We can experience, relate to our needs, and ask for them to be met in a way that is demanding or in a way that is holding them lightly. We quickly learn whether our self-requests or requests made to others to meet our needs are made with the heavy energy of demand or the lighter, non-attached "would like to have" when these requests are denied.

Some of this demanding energy I attribute to having wounds associated with unmet needs and/or having a backlog of unfulfilled core needs. If we make requests from our wounds, we are asking the other person to be responsible and resolve our wounds and the pain associated with them. This is also true for our backlog of unfulfilled needs. As we open up to our unconscious needs and make them conscious, many fall into the category of what I call empty bowls. We take these empty bowls and go around begging others to fill them, either in a covertly subtle or overtly demanding way. In other words, we automatically equate awareness of needs to external fulfillment, never realizing that we ourselves can fill our empty bowls.

At this level, we realize that in order to make requests that are truly requests, deeper work needs to be done. This is what we do in the Basic Inner Empathy work. Accessing and holding compassion for our disowned needs and parts that emerge in present-time contexts is one way to learn to hold needs lightly. Until we do this deeper work, the associated need most certainly will carry heavy demanding energy when it emerges.

Another pitfall to this level is the tendency to identify with our needs. For me, being strongly identified with the fulfillment of needs means that I define who I am by what I need. In other words, I think I am my needs. I form an identity around my needs. Demanding energy can arise from identifying with and linking our needs to unconscious core needs. A simple example of this is when someone doesn't meet our need for support, and we silently conclude that they don't value us. Our sense of worth, being loved, and accepted is subtly attached to and dependent upon many of the surface needs being met. Such identifications can be limiting and confound our understanding and relationship with needs. If we base a sense of self or "I" in a new language that is embedded in an assumed absolutistic context that needs are real, then we have simply created a better language trap for ourselves.

Even though NVC language is a relative process language, our internal psychological structures are formed and reside in our being in the absolutist dualistic language we were enculturated with in modern life. Our absolute deep psychological structures reveal themselves as we try to use process language in everyday life. There is bound to be a philosophic clash. People negotiate this clash in different ways. Some dismiss NVC as irrelevant because it does not support their comfort level and certitude of being identified with absolutist perspectives. Others stay on and struggle to learn, often experiencing confusion and tension. There is a certain awkwardness in trying to learn NVC from their absolutist perspective. In the beginning, we try to reduce the relative process language to the absolute.

Because we might have wounds or disowned needs undergirding our current expression of a particular need, which promotes strong identification, and because we might still be using an absolutist assumed ground to express our relative process language needs, a correction for this heavy identification is suggested in the exploration of the position that needs are unreal or don't really exist in any ultimate sense. This supports moving to learn to dis-identify with needs or to experience them as empty. This can be a scary and uncomfortable process for many people, so few take this journey. For some, to give up absolute status of needs means they create the conditions to experience the vulnerability of many deep core wounds or unmet needs.

2) Needs Are Unreal And, Don't Inherently Exist In Any Ultimate Sense (There Is No Self): At this level of exploration, we begin to entertain needs being relative “things we tell ourselves we need.” Rather than mentally associating needs with biological or psychological imperatives, we experience their empty nature. In other words, they are seen as socio-linguistic and psycho-linguistic constructions. This is a correction for the absolutist position of “needs are real and inherently exist.” Needs are viewed as concepts that ultimately have no inherent existence and are empty. There is the exploration that needs don't really exist in any absolute sense, but are relative expressions of things we want in this world as we live here. This treatment or regard for needs will support people in holding them lightly and expressing them in a more functional way.

This is a more difficult level of exploration for people who have experience using NVC in their lives. Why? Because many people enjoy the relief and freedom that comes from connecting with needs and having them fulfilled through requests. Also, much of the early NVC training is about persuading people to get in touch with their needs and actively promotes treating their needs as real and existent to bring into conscious awareness. It seems like a reversal to entertain the notion that needs are unreal or don't exist in any ultimate sense. To suggest that exploring the concept that needs are unreal or don't exist I would imagine is NVC heresy in some NVC circles.

I'm guessing some NVCers will confuse the position of “pretending like we don't have needs” with this liberating “needs are unreal, don't exist in any ultimate sense” position. So let me be clear that I don't want you to go back to pretending that needs/desires/preferences/values don't exist or to repress or disown them. Rather, I want you to consider changing your relationship with your needs! This exploration of the concept that “needs are unreal” is a correction to a relationship that seems to naturally form around the fulfillment of our needs: When we move from unconscious unfulfillment of needs to bringing them into to consciousness awareness and fulfillment, many of our needs take on a “have-to-have” energy and fulfillment is externally focused for reasons outlined above. When we don't do the deeper work at the core level and learn to dis-identify with core needs, we disempower ourselves and can become slaves to the fulfillment of our needs.

Often people are reluctant to explore this needs-are-unreal position because they are afraid of falling into nihilism. In other words, they believe they will lose their meaning and purpose in life if they don't have their needs inherently exist or give them absolute status. The exploration of “needs are unreal, don't exist” is about changing our linguistic relationship with our needs to be able to hold them lightly. We still can use the language of needs/feelings to make sense of our experience and to let others know what we want and value, but the attachment that comes with the position “needs are inherently real” naturally falls away. In my experience, the needs-based consciousness that holds needs lightly is a more efficient tool for navigating this world than the needs-based consciousness that is supported by a absolutist dualistic good/bad self-system that uses demanding energy of the “this is the way things are!” Holding needs lightly means the sense of self “I” is not so heavily burdened with self-worth/acceptance/love energy. The “have-to-have” energy is no longer dominating our expression of needs. There is a general nonattachment to getting needs exclusively met externally. In other words, the model begins to be used without the influence of the dualistic self-system. Experiencing needs as empty and using the NVC model this way honors its inherent nondualistic relative nature.

3) Needs Are Both Real and Unreal (There Is A Self and No Self): At this level, needs are seen as both real and unreal or exist and don't exist. Let me explain: As our relationship with our needs changes from "consciously real/exist" to "consciously unreal/don't exist," there is a tendency and potential to unwittingly get caught up in an extreme position. We can begin to misuse the "needs are unreal or don't exist" position by forming an ideal about needs being unreal that we try to live up to in daily life. We can easily begin to devalue our needs and speak about them as though they were insignificant or an illusion. Many people who study nondual wisdom find themselves in this predicament when they pronounce all the stuff of daily life as a dream and renounce this world as illusion in a derogatory way. They also will pronounce that the "I" is an illusion. Instead of the "I" being a coalescence of needs, they become identified with something other than the mundane reality of need fulfillment. They might announce frequently the mantra that there is no self, cherish and identify with that construction! They construct an ultimate reality outside of needs-based life and disassociate and deny the stuff of daily life in favor of this ideal, no-self state, (which ironically is can be seen as just another form of a self expressed in through negation).

In order to correct this tendency, the exploration of needs being both real and unreal is useful. Needs are real in the sense that they emerge in us in any given moment and are a part of our functional daily life (in Buddhism, this is called conventional reality). They are unreal in the sense that they can be "seen through" as something we tell ourselves we want, or they can be empty of inherent nature; they lack inherent existence (in Buddhism, this is called the ultimate reality). Just knowing that needs are both real and unreal seems to cause a shift toward experiencing a more functional relationship with them. Even though we know and accept that our sets of needs are constructed material, we can still enjoy them and use them as a real way to navigate daily life. Knowing that a flower is empty of inherent nature does not detract from experiencing its beauty.

This is the basis for the two-truth doctrine in Tibetan Buddhism. The ultimate reality exists conventionally. Translating this into NVC language: The ultimate reality exists when we see needs (conventional reality) as empty of inherent nature. Nirvana is samsara. So the ultimate reality is not some idealized state outside of whatever feelings, needs, values, and wants emerge in us in daily life. Instead, it is a shift in the relationship we have with our needs in daily life.

4) Needs Are Neither Real/Exist Nor Are They Unreal Or Nonexistent (There Is Neither A Self nor a Non-Self): As we begin to experience life with needs being both real and unreal, we can be seduced into making that a fixed position or an ideal to follow. In other words, we take the ultimate position that "the emptiness of needs and using needs as robust tools in daily life" and turn it into an ideal to be attained. To correct for that tendency, we can move to the forth level, that the ultimate reality of experiencing daily needs as empty is also empty or devoid of inherent nature. This is the emptiness of emptiness. Our minds are conditioned to make emptiness into something that can be gained or lost. So it is useful to remind ourselves that the emptiness we are seeking does not inherently exist. At this level, nondual awareness is "seen through" as empty. There is no witness awareness that observes needs and feelings arising; there is experience flowing through a mind/body system. This is best described in a verse in Longchenpa's "Treasury of Natural Perfection":

In total presence, the nature of mind is like the sky,
where there is no duality, no distinctions, no gradations,
there is no view nor meditation nor commitment to observe,
no diligent ideal conduct, no pristine awareness to unveil
no training in the stages and no path to tread,
no subtle realization, and no final union.

In the absence of judgment, nothing is 'sacred' or 'profane,'
only a one-taste matrix, like the Golden Isle;
the self-sprung nature of mind is like the clear sky,
its nature an absence beyond all expression.