

Oren Jay Sofer

*The Buddha's Communication Toolbox*

Week Three: The Basic Building Block of Conversation

June 17, 2019



Welcome to the third week of the Buddha's Communication Toolbox. I'm Oren Jay Sofer, and in this week we're going to look at how to build understanding in a conversation using the basic building block of communication.

What is happening in communication? As mentioned in one of the previous weeks, what happens if we really take a step back and consider why we communicate? Communication is about sending and receiving messages. We're trying to have some understanding occur between us, so when we say something, most of the time we want to be heard. We want someone to understand what's happening for us.

This is one of the bottlenecks in conversation, particularly when things are difficult or heated. Someone says something and instead of really listening and making sure that we're accurately hearing what the other person has said, the other person just says something back. The conversation ends up looking something like this: I say something and you don't really take it in or check that you're understanding, you just say something back. I say something back to you, then you say something back to me, and the layers get added on. One of the things that can happen if we don't actually make sure that we're understanding each other is the conversation becomes like a dropped phone call where we're both still talking but we haven't discovered that we're not actually hearing each other. Therefore, the basic block of communication is what I call "completing a cycle." It's checking that message sent was the message received.

There's a famous quote that's been attributed to George Bernard Shaw that really gets to the heart of this. He says, "The biggest problem with communication is the myth that it has occurred." He's pointing to this assumption that we're actually understanding one another. Sometimes we feel that we're understanding one another through nonverbal communication. Or perhaps the message is simple enough that we immediately understand, and that's great. But it can still be useful to give the other person some indication of what we're understanding to help them feel heard and give them confirmation that the message sent was the message received.

When we know that somebody actually understands us, something settles inside. There's a completion in our nervous system that says, "Great, you got it." If I share something with you and I ask you, "Do you understand?" and you say, "Yes," the only thing that I actually know is

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that you think you understood. I don't know what you've understood unless I ask you, "What did you understand?"

In this building block, the skill is finding a way to confirm that message sent was message received. This is partly about our listening, but it's also about having a certain tool or facility with our interaction and our communication that lets us complete a cycle. It allows us to send the message back and say, "Here's what I'm getting. Is this what you wanted me to hear?"

If we don't do this, there's a few risks. First, we run the risk that we're making certain assumptions about what the other person has said and we might be reacting to something that they didn't intend. It's fascinating when you start to look at this and realize that a lot of the challenges, difficulties, and suffering in our relationships comes from interpretations and conclusions that we've jumped to in our own mind that might not actually be there in the other person. We don't know unless we check it out. The other risk is that the other person might not actually feel completely heard or understood, and then they won't have the space to hear us.

There's a principle at the heart of this that other people are generally more willing to listen when they feel heard. If we are having a conversation and you share something with me, particularly if it's important to you, and I'm able to indicate to you that I really hear you and share what I'm understanding in a way that you trust, something settles. You feel complete, and now you have the space to hear what's going on for me. Without that confirmation and completion, what often happens is I start saying what's going on for me and you don't really want to hear it, because you're still holding your piece. You say "But what about this?" So how do we complete a cycle of communication?

The practice here is something that I call reflecting before we respond. Just check and confirm that the message sent was the message received. If we look back at the guidelines that the Buddha offered, a number of them are at play here. We're checking our level of honesty and truthfulness by really seeing if what I'm hearing is the same as what you're saying. There's a certain kind of truthfulness in that. We're also coming from a quality of kindness. There's generosity and care in wanting to make sure that I'm understanding you. We're connected with a sense of purpose by wanting to be helpful and beneficial. We're both thinking "I want to make sure that we are on the same page and that we're able to move this conversation forward. I'm genuinely trying to contribute."



There's also a very important component around timing here. Knowing when to offer a reflection, when to check if I'm understanding, and when to trust that we're on the same page. Knowing when it's an okay time to bring forward my piece and when you actually have space to listen. Even if you don't have space to listen, I also need to know when I should speak up for my own integrity, regardless of the conditions around me. You need to have your own internal meter around that.

All of the guidelines are at play in this one tool of completing a cycle of communication by reflecting before we respond. How do we do this? What am I really talking about here? What does this look like in practice? One of the ways that this is often taught that you're probably familiar with is active listening. I really want to distinguish what I'm talking about here from active listening as a communication technique. The problem with any technique is that it becomes forced and artificial, and doesn't lead to connection. It actually leads to disconnection. This needs to be natural and genuine. It needs to be coming from a genuine intention to understand and to connect with one another, as we looked at last week.

There are a few ways to confirm that we're hearing one another and to build understanding in a conversation one step at a time. The basic practice is offering a reflection. A reflection is a restatement of what we've heard from the other person. First indicate why by leading in with a short phrase that lets the other person know what it is that you're doing and what your intention is. For example, you could say, "Let me see if I'm following you," or "Here's what I'm getting. Let me know if we're on the same page." Or "It sounds like this," and then you say what you're hearing and check, "Have I got that right? I want to make sure we're on the same page. Let me just tell you what I'm hearing and you tell me if I'm missing anything." You can see there are many ways to say this and what's most important is to find your own authentic way of indicating to the other person "I want to make sure that I'm with you. Here's what I'm getting." That's the essence of it. If you say that, most people are more than happy to listen, because if it's genuine they understand that your intention is to understand what they're hearing too.

There are three simple, general ways to indicate that we understand the other person. First, you can offer a summary, just paraphrasing or summarizing what you are hearing. You might use the key points, or even some of the same words or phrases if they feel really important. If there are a lot of details and the person is really activated and upset about something, it can be helpful to use

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their words so that you're not interpreting, which can sometimes escalate the situation. It can lead to a response like, "No, that's not what I said." So try to catch a few key words or phrases. It's a way of encapsulating what the person has shared with us to just check that we've got all the details. This paraphrasing or summarizing is one way.

Another way of offering a reflection if there's a lot of emotions is by just staying on that level of emotions. You can reflect, "Here's what I'm hearing is going on for you and these emotions that are present." Offer a reflection for the emotions, the affective content you're hearing.

One of the most important and effective ways to offer a reflection is to listen for what matters to the person. What's most important to them? What's the objective, values, or the needs behind what they're saying? I'll say more about that in a moment. This is another way to offer a reflection.

When do we do this? Timing is really key in order to know the right context to offer a reflection. Because if we're doing this all the time, habitually or automatically, it can feel really forced and fail to actually lead to connection, particularly if we're using it as a technique rather than coming from an authentic place.

There are three general times that you want to do this. The first is if you're not clear. If you're not actually one hundred percent clear that you understand where they're coming from, it's really important to check. This prevents us making assumptions or drawing conclusions and becoming off base with each other in the conversation. If you're not clear, check. See if you're understanding them.

The second time you should do this is if you're starting to feel "full", as in the other person has shared a number of things and you're starting to lose track. If you're feeling overwhelmed or full, see if you can interject. Let the other person know, "I'm starting to lose track and I really want to stay with you. Can I just tell you what I'm hearing?" It's a way for your nervous system to digest what they're sharing. That's the second time to offer a reflection.

The third time is if you have a sense that it will contribute to the other person's experience of being heard. Our ability to offer understanding and empathy to one another, to see and understand them, is one of the greatest gifts that we can share as human beings. Having that

Oren Jay Sofer

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Week Three: The Basic Building Block of Conversation

June 17, 2019



experience of being mirrored and met is really precious and nourishing. If you have a sense that it is going to be meaningful for this person to hear a reflection and get something back of what they're saying, then that is another time that you can do this. The beautiful thing about this is if you're not sure, ask. Ask the other person and say, "What would be helpful right now? Would it be supportive to just have me tell you what I'm hearing is going on for you?" Or "Are you wanting to hear what I think about that?" If you're not sure ask.

At the core of this ability to offer a reflection, to check that we're hearing somebody, and complete a cycle of communication, is a particular perspective on human behavior. This perspective comes out of humanistic psychology including the work of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, but it's also very consistent with the Buddhist understanding of human behavior.

From the Buddhist perspective we say that all beings want to be happy. It's a very simple way of looking at life. The Buddhist perspective is that human beings are basically just seeking fulfillment and happiness. The problem is that because of ignorance, we go about doing that in ways that are not helpful and are actually damaging to ourselves, one another, and the planet. This is a misguided attempt for satisfaction and happiness.

The perspective in humanistic psychology is essentially the same. It's just described a little differently. Humanistic psychology says that everything we do as human beings we do to meet some basic fundamental need. Again, it's about human beings doing stuff because there's something that matters to us. We're seeking fulfillment. What that happiness or fulfillment looks like in any given situation or moment differs. Sometimes it's about meeting our basic physiological needs for sustenance and shelter. Sometimes it's about meeting our relational needs for connection, belonging, understanding, being seen, love, touch, or play. Sometimes it's about meeting our higher needs or what we could call our spiritual needs: our need for meaning, contribution, creativity, purpose, peace, transcendence, or communion. We have this potential as human beings to actually be in touch with something larger than ourselves.

I'm trained in nonviolent communication, or NVC for short, which is where some of these tools come from. We'll look a little bit more at NVC next week. The core premise in this practice is that all beings want to be happy. Everyone is just trying to meet their needs. This allows us to understand one another even when we disagree. Even when we disagree with the strategies and

Oren Jay Sofer

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Week Three: The Basic Building Block of Conversation

June 17, 2019



choices that people are making to meet their needs, we can still get at that deeper level that says, “What matters to you? What are the fundamental, universal needs that you’re trying to meet?”

I want to give you a brief example of the difference between our strategies and our needs: what we want, our needs, why we want it, and what we’re actually going for. A student was driving home from a workshop and they reached for a cigarette. Having heard these teachings, they paused and said, “If it’s true that I’m trying to meet some need here, what need am I trying to meet?” They said, “I want to relax. I want to take my mind off things. I want a break. Those are the needs I’m trying to meet by smoking a cigarette.” They realized in that moment, “I’ve got far better ways to relax and take a break than poisoning my lungs by smoking this cigarette.”

On a personal level this is the power of making this distinction between our strategies and our needs. We have a lot more agency and choice in our life when we’re aware of what it is that we’re fundamentally longing for and seeking through our actions. The question that always comes up is “What about non-attachment? What about craving as the cause of suffering?” This is a much larger, nuanced area. But I want to give you two of the core perspectives on how these fit together. Needs are a fact of human life. They’re not going to go away. It’s part of how we’re built. We have physiological needs, relational needs, and higher needs. The question is how are we relating to these deeper values and longings? This is the core of what matters to us as human beings.

Craving (Pali: *tanha*) and attachment (Pali: *upadana*) are not about having needs, they’re about our relationship to them. Is there that sense of grasping or demand, like “I need this?” When there’s that energy of contraction and demanding that we have to have our way in exactly the way we want it, and we won’t be okay if we don’t get it—that’s the cause of suffering. It’s not the need itself. It’s not the value or the longing. It’s what we do with it and how we relate to it.

This is one perspective, that it’s the relationship to our need that’s problematic. What we learn in the meditation and communication practice is how to be in touch with these core values and deeper, motivating longings in life without a sense of attachment, which invites us into a relationship of interdependence with one another and with life.

The other component here that we need to understand from experience is a sense of nonidentification. Intellectually, there’s the perspective that needs are not personal. I experience

Oren Jay Sofer

*The Buddha's Communication Toolbox*

Week Three: The Basic Building Block of Conversation

June 17, 2019



them intimately and directly, but because they're shared, I can relate to and connect to that particular core value or longing in my heart and see that these values are a connection that I have with all other human beings. Belonging, for example, is a need that not just I have, it's a need that all beings have. There's a way to move beyond the sense of personal identification to a much wider view, so that it's no longer my needs or your needs, but just the particular qualities and longings that are present in the field, without that sense of personal identification.

Let's come back to the sense of the core building block of communication: offering a reflection to confirm that the message sent was the message received. There's one more fundamental point here and that is there are no dogmas in communication practice. This is not some commandment: "Thou shalt always reflect before you respond." The aim here is to develop skill, choice, and flexibility in our communication. Most of the time our habit is to jump right in with what we want to say. Often, that's not helpful, it's not building understanding in the conversation. We want to develop the capacity to choose when to offer a reflection and to have that as a default option in our toolkit.

Depending on how we've been conditioned, on our social location, and on the gender that we have been socialized into, we may be much better at understanding others and not asserting our needs or vice versa. We may be socially conditioned to be really in touch with our own needs and not so available to connect with and understand others. Depending on where you are in your own conditioning, you may need to work more or less on one end of the spectrum. It's really important for me to name that and to recognize that we all have different strengths in communication.

On the other hand, if you're really good at understanding others, then maybe this isn't the tool that you need to practice. Maybe it's what we're going to look at next week, which is how to speak up for yourself and be authentic and real without blaming others.

This week we've explored this basic building block of communication, how to confirm that the message sent was the message received, and how to complete a cycle of communication by offering a reflection. We let the other person know, "I want to make sure we're on the same page," and then summarize by giving a short paraphrase of what you've heard, offering a reflection of the person's feeling or emotions. "Here's what I'm getting is happening. Is this accurate?" Or we can go to that slightly deeper level of what really matters. What's important to

Oren Jay Sofer

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Week Three: The Basic Building Block of Conversation

June 17, 2019



this person? What are they needing? We can open up that common ground by listening for what matters.

We'll be back next week for our fourth and last week of the Buddha's Communication Toolbox, where we'll look at how to say our bit. How do we speak authentically, openly, and honestly, without blame, judgement, or criticism?

I hope you can join me and look forward to seeing you then.