

Oren Jay Sofer

*The Buddha's Communication Toolbox*

Week Four: How to Hold Your Own While Still Hearing Others

June 24, 2019



Welcome to the last week of the Buddha's Communication Toolbox. My name is Oren Jay Sofer, and this week we'll look at the other side of the communication equation. Last week we looked at listening and confirming that the message sent was the message received. This week we'll look at how to share our own truth in terms of how to speak authentically, openly, and clearly without blame, judgment, or reactivity. How do we do this?

The first thing is to understand the way most of us have been conditioned when things aren't going the way we would like. Let's take a classic situation. You're living with somebody else and you've got different preferences and styles around how neat and tidy you like your living situation. It's kind of the 'odd couple' situation. If I'm on the side of the equation that likes things cleaner than my housemate, then the perception in my mind is that my housemate is messy, a slob, and inconsiderate. I might think, "What's wrong with you? You're selfish." Does this sound familiar?

What if the tables are turned and I'm on the other side of the equation? I'm the one who doesn't mind if I leave the dishes in the sink for a couple days or if there's a few things on the floor, I'm just relaxing. When it comes to my housemate, who wants everything tidy and clean, I think, "Why are you so uptight? Why are you so anal? Stop being so controlling, you're such a neat freak, you're obsessive compulsive."

Notice that whatever side of the equation I'm on, what's happening for me becomes about you and what's wrong with you. The other classic situation is in an intimate relationship if one person wants more connection and time together than the other person. Their partner becomes aloof, cold, distant, and disconnected. But if the tables are turned then you're needy, dependent, and clingy. This how most of us have been conditioned. If our needs aren't being met or something doesn't work for us, we blame the other person. It becomes about what's wrong with the other.

If you consider that you want somebody to do something differently for you, if you want them to change their behavior in some way, or if you'd like them to consider you and your own needs, how useful is the strategy of blaming them and telling them everything that's wrong with them? It's counterproductive. How often have you told someone what's wrong with them and blamed them, and then had them respond to you by saying, "Thank you so much for enlightening me."

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Now I'm so happy to do things the way you would like." It doesn't work that way. When people blame us we get defensive. We tend to react because we want to be seen. We want acceptance. We want to be seen and understood for our intentions.

The shift here is to recognize that the less blame and criticism in our words, the easier it is for others to hear and understand us. We want to learn to find a way to express what's going on for us in a way that other people can hear. This is not only about our words, it's actually also about the perceptions in our own mind. Are we viewing things through a lens of blame and reactive judgment, or are we able to take responsibility for our own emotions and feelings? More importantly, can we look through the lens of the deeper needs or values that we have and then share that?

One of the most useful tools that I have found for this is the framework of Nonviolent Communication, or NVC for short. NVC was founded by a man named Dr. Marshall Rosenberg who grew up in Detroit in the 30s and 40s. He lived through the first race riots of Detroit where several dozen people were killed just within a few blocks of his house. He couldn't leave his home for a number of days when he was a little boy and this had a huge impact on him. It left him with this question—why do some people resort to violence when their needs aren't met while others are able to stay connected to compassion and see the shared humanity in one another?

What he found through his work and research as a psychologist was that one thing that makes the key difference is the way in which we think and speak. When we think and speak in a blaming way, when we view the world through the lens of should and shouldn't, right and wrong, and good and evil, then those who are bad, wrong, or evil deserve to be punished, and therefore, violence becomes enjoyable. When we view things through the lens of basic human needs—that these actions don't meet my needs for safety and expectations for a world in which everyone is cared for and has enough—then we're much more likely to find solutions that take other people's needs into account. If we can see someone's behavior, choices, or strategies and still see their humanity, then we can separate their actions from the person. As we explored last week, we can see their actions as an attempt to meet some deeper underlying need, even though it may be destructive, unwise, or causing harm.

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How does this translate into our ability to speak up and to say what's going on for us? Nonviolent Communication is a way of working with our own perceptions. It's like a map or template to transform that energy of blame into sharing our experience in a way that's easier for others to understand, and that makes it easier for us to hear one another and work together.

The template that I want to share with you focuses on four components of our experience. We can get clear on what those are inside and then speak from our heart. One of the most common misuses of Nonviolent Communication is to use it as a rigid form and speak in ways that are really artificial, robotic, and don't actually lead to connection. I relate to it more as a mental training of transforming our consciousness so we can get to the place where our heart is open, where we're clear and truthful about what's happening for us, and can speak openly and clearly without the blame or the judgment about our own direct experience.

How do we do this? The first step is to be able to make a clear observation. How do we say what is actually happening in our environment that we're responding to? This is about distinguishing the data from our judgments, interpretations, and evaluations, and it's the same tool that we use in mindfulness practice. In meditation, we're learning to take a very clear and refined awareness that is as free as possible from bias and distortion so we can see the actual data of our experience.

Can we apply that clear mindful awareness to the relationships in our life? Going back to the roommate situation, where we say "The kitchen is a mess." Let's review this in line with the Buddha's guidelines on right speech. Is that actually true? Am I safeguarding the truth when I say the kitchen is a mess? If I were safeguarding the truth I might say, "To me, the kitchen is a mess." Or, "The kitchen is messier than I would like it." Now I'm actually more in line with the truth because I'm owning that subjective interpretation. Messy is an evaluation. What's messy to me might not be messy to you. If I want to make a clear observation I need to try to name the actual data. "There's a number of dishes in the sink or on the counter that have been there for three days." That's what's actually happening.

The key point here is that if I start with a judgment or an evaluation then the other person is likely to react. They're likely to get defensive because they might not share that interpretation or judgment. But if I just name the data and make a clear observation, then there's nothing to argue with. Making an observation helps give the other person a reference point in time and space. It

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says, “This thing that happened is what I'd like to talk about.” This is a training. We tend to view things internally through the lens of our evaluations. Can we start to get more clear about what it is we're actually responding to in our environment?

This is also about our own empowerment. If I'm living in the world of “The kitchen is messy” I don't know what I'm reacting to. I'm just reacting to my own interpretation. It's important to know what actually happened that isn't working for me that I want to comment on. Making a clear observation is the first step.

The next step is being able to identify how I feel about what's actually going on for me. Our emotions are where our life energy is. Our emotions are signals that give us information about our relationship to our environment, to other people, and to the world around us. Can we get clear about how we're actually feeling? This is another place that we tend to get entangled into blaming other people.

“I feel ignored, I feel attacked, I feel blamed, I feel judged.” What do all those words have in common? They're all stories about what the other person is doing to me. They're all judgments. “I feel blamed, you're blaming me. I feel judged, you're judging me. I feel ignored, you're ignoring me.” They don't actually speak about my direct emotional experience. They signal that I'm feeling something, but they don't say what I'm actually feeling. If I tell you, “I feel really judged, I feel really attacked,” and that's not your experience, we're arguing now.

The shift here is to ask yourself how you feel on the inside. What are the actual emotions that are happening for you? If I feel attacked, I might be feeling confused. I might be feeling shocked or surprised. I might be feeling angry. I might be feeling scared. I might be feeling hurt, any number of things. Now notice the difference between saying “I feel attacked” and “I felt really shocked, hurt, and confused.” There's nothing to argue with. There's no need to get defensive because I'm just speaking about my own experience. This is the second step: to identify how I actually feel.

The third step is the most crucial and empowering, and that is to link my feelings back to what matters for me. Our tendency, habit, and conditioning is to link our feelings to other people's actions, behaviors, or words. “I feel really hurt that you were late. I feel really angry that you didn't do what you were going to say.” We blame others for our feelings instead of recognizing

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that in reality no one can make us feel anything. Yes, we affect one another, but our emotional response is actually about the meaning that we assign to the events and the particular values or needs that we have in the moment.

We want to link those emotions back to what matters to us. I might feel hurt because I was really wanting some more gentleness and understanding, or I feel confused because I want more information about what's going on. I might feel shocked because I had a different expectation and I'd like to understand where you were coming from. We want to link our emotions back to our own needs and values, what actually matters to us, and what's important to us. This is the deeper level of motivating, driving forces in our life. We want to speak about the things that are shared, to say what matters to us in a way that the other person can hear and relate to.

The third step is identifying our core values: what matters to us and our needs. The first three components are observations, feelings, and needs, or what happened, how we feel about it, and why. This tells the person what's actually going on for us, how am I doing, what's alive, and what's moving in me.

The last step is about making a request. This is about inviting the other person to work together to see where to go from here. A request is just a guess or an idea. It's a strategy. It's saying, "Here's what I think would be helpful right now, would this work for you?" Sometimes a request is about building understanding, like we were looking at last week. We could say, "I would really love to know if you can understand where I'm coming from. Could you tell me what you're hearing?" Or, "I want to understand more about why you did that or said that or what's going on. Could you share with me what was happening for you?" It's about asking for information. We might be proposing some different solution or strategy, trying to find something that works for both of us. "Could we look at this and talk about how we might do it differently next time?"

These are the four components of Nonviolent Communication: an observation, a feeling, a need, and a request. I encourage you to use this not as a script, but as a template to understand your own experience. Use this template to get clear on what's actually happening for you and try to uproot that reactive energy of blame that wants to hold someone else responsible for the reactivity, pain, and experience that we're having, and instead take that power back. Instead of assuming that other people can make us feel things, say, "I'm feeling a certain way because there's something that matters to me. What is it that's important to me?" Really connect with

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that. Recognize that the things that matter to us matter because they're beautiful and we care about them. Values like respect, kindness, empathy, mutuality, balance, equity, justice, and living in a way that there's enough for everyone—these are the beautiful facets of our human heart. When we can share these in a positive way, saying, “This is what's important to me, this is how I like to live my life,” that becomes an invitation to understand one another and work together. It's not the energy of, “There's something wrong with you and you need to do it differently.”

Do that work of investigating by bringing these guidelines of the Buddha's teachings on right speech—can I be truthful, can I come from a place of kindness, and what's my purpose here? Use the template to identify your own feelings and needs, the observations that you're responding to, what it is that you'd like to ask for, and your ideas about where to go from here. Use that to get clear on what's true for you, and then speak from your heart. Be authentic, but come from that place of curiosity and care inside. See if you can approach the situation with a genuine desire to find something that works for both of you. How can I be truthful and kind? Hold that as your heart's intention and let your words be natural. If you do the internal work of transforming the blame by using this template, and you're really deeply connected with these intentions, the words will flow naturally.

This is a training. It takes time. We've all been conditioned to speak, think, and listen in certain ways, and we're using those all the time. What that means is that you can take any of the tools that we've explored over the course of this four week series. You can take the Buddha's guidelines on right speech, saying that which is true, kind, helpful, and timely. You can take these foundations for creating effective and meaningful conversations, learning how to lead with presence and come from curiosity and care. You can work with reflecting before you respond to build understanding. Or you can work with this template of Nonviolent Communication, getting clear internally on what happened, how you feel about it, what's important to you, and where do you want to go from here. Just work with those one at a time in your life every day, and practice it. Bring it into your conversations. Communication is at the core of our life and our relationships. If you make one change in your communication it will affect everything. It will affect all of your relationships for the better.

I hope the time we spent together has been useful for you. I hope that you can take something that you've learned here and put it into practice. The beautiful thing about working with

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communication is that when we make this a part of our spiritual practice, we have a lot more time to cultivate the beautiful qualities of mind, to shape our heart and our mind in the service of awakening. Then when we come back to our formal meditation practice, the mind is more peaceful and clear, replete and full of healthy, wholesome qualities so that our meditation practice can deepen more quickly and easily.

Thanks so much for joining me. I hope it's been useful. You have my wholehearted encouragement to take these tools into your life, to use them and share them with others. Be well. Thanks so much.