

## Module 4

### Elements of Nonviolent Communication

In this section, we continue with more Elements of NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION. Let's explore these elements:

#### i) The Power of Empathy

*“Three-fourths of the miseries and misunderstandings in the world will disappear, if we step into the shoes of our adversaries and understand their standpoint. We will then agree with our adversaries quickly or think of them charitably.”*

■ Mahatma Gandhi

Nonviolent communication enables us to make empathetic connections. We should be conscious of the power of empathy. Here is an important quote of Swami Vivekananda which inspires us to empathetic: *“One-sidedness is the bane of the world. The more sides you can develop the more souls you have, and you can see the universe through all souls.”*

For instance, when we are in a conflict with a friend, instead of just blaming her/him for the situation, we should try to put ourselves in the shoes of that friend and then make our points. In fact, we should practice more deeply. We should go beyond just putting ourselves into the other's shoes at the surface level; instead we should practice to deeply understand the other's position from all dimensions before embarking on our arguments.

By empathising with others, we can touch the humanness of others. Connecting empathetically with others is an important objective of nonviolent communication. It entails not just connecting with one self or other individuals but with all including nature and other living beings. The need for empathetic connection is beautifully stressed in this quote of Chief Seattle, *“Man did not weave the web of life, and he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself. All things are bound together. All things connect.”* Lack of empathy is roadblock to proper communication and can result in conflicts.

In general, it can be said that empathy begets empathy. If you practice, you can expect others also to be empathetic to you and this can be a chain. We can say that positive and empathetic behaviour can spread if it is practiced with right earnest.

Studies have shown that empathetic individuals tend to experience greater subjective well-being. Another study shows that the need to feel good and be a moral person can be a great motivator to act empathetically.

In his book, "The Empathetic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis", Jeremy Rifkin American economic and social theorist notes that human nature is fundamentally empathetic rather than selfish and competitive. Rifkins points out, "If we can harness empathetic sensibilities and establish a new global ethic to harmonize the many relationships that make up to life-sustaining forces of the planet, we will have moved beyond the detached, self-interested and utilitarian philosophical assumptions."

Myrha Walden (Soka Gakai International) talks on the significance of empathetic communication. Walden says: "When someone receives our suffering quietly, openheartedly and without judgment, we are able to open ourselves to our pain. We experience it fully, release it, and in so doing, we heal. Clarity emerges, and we gain access to inner wisdom."

To conclude let us recollect the Talisman of Mahatma Gandhi which motivates us to enhance our levels of empathy:

*"I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man [woman] whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him [her]. Will he [she] gain anything by it? Will it restore him [her] to a control over his [her] own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to swaraj [freedom] for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and yourself melt away."*

Source: Mahatma Gandhi - The Last Phase, Vol. II (1958), p.65

## **ii. Strong belief in the power of compassion**

*"A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty." — **Albert Einstein***

A basic premise of nonviolent communication is all human beings are capable of being compassionate. When we reach out to others with compassion, we can expect others to be compassionate with us.

We all know that developing social connections are an underlying drive of human behaviour. Also, majority of us desire meaningful interactions through these social connections. But to establish such connections, we should develop the capacities to

express care and concern for others and also to identify with them. It is in this context, by being compassionate; we can promote kind and loving behaviour with others. Also, when we are compassionate towards others- fellow beings, nature and all other living beings, we will be less stressful and will feel better. It is an important dimension to our well-being. His Holiness, the Dalai Lama has rightly said, “If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.”

Studies have suggested that when we practice compassion in groups, we can promote greater cooperation. So friends, as a nonviolent communicator, make it a habit to be compassionate in your communication efforts.

### **iii. Connecting with needs of others**

Human needs are universal. The manner we feel is mostly based whether our needs are met or unmet. Much of our action are guided on how are needs are met or they remain unmet.

Here it would be pertinent to mention that Mahatma Gandhi had said that there is enough in the Earth for everyone's needs but not for our greed. It is only when our aim to meet our excessive greed becomes the objective than most of the conflicts begins.

Often we associate 'needs' to something negative. But this should not be the case as we mentioned that human needs are universal. Conscious attempts need to be made to connect with the feelings, perspectives and needs of others. But when we start analysing the 'needs' without being judgemental and at a basic level, we would not be looking at it as a negative entity.

Many of the problems or conflicts arise because we are not ready to understand the needs of the others; what was the particular need of the person concern because of which s/he is behaving in such a manner. For instance, let us say there is a marital discord. If both the husband and wife start critically understand and pin-point that particular need of each other because of which they are acting in a different way, much of the dispute would get over.

So, in a nutshell, we should try to pin-point not only our own needs but when we are dealing with others, try to understand their needs. This will help us engage with others in a positive manner.

#### **iv. Practicing active and deep listening skills**

Practicing active and deep listening skills is critical for nonviolent communication. Every time we enter into a conversation, we should carefully listen to the other; try to understand the message they want to convey – both verbal and nonverbal communication; and try to learn from others. As active listeners, we should practice to summarize on what we have grasped from the other speakers; it will enhance our understanding. We also should try to pay serious attention to our responses and what we say during the conversation or dialogue.

Conscious attempts need to be made to sincerely listen to others. In our daily lives, we can easily feel when the other person is listening to us with sincerity and is engaging. We can easily understand that the other person is 'present'. It gives us the space for conversation and even if there are differences of views, it keeps the door open for further engagement.

Thich Nhat Hanh explains the concept of deep listening which is important for all of us to imbibe as part of our nonviolent communication ecosystem. "Deep listening is the kind of listening that can help relieve the suffering of another person. You can call it compassionate listening. You listen with only one purpose: to help him or her to empty his heart. Even if he says things that are full of wrong perceptions, full of bitterness, you are still capable of continuing to listen with compassion. Because you know that listening like that, you give that person a chance to suffer less. If you want to help him to correct his perception, you wait for another time. For now, you don't interrupt. You don't argue. If you do, he loses his chance. You just listen with compassion and help him to suffer less. One hour like that can bring transformation and healing."

Thais Mazur and Wendy Wood in their book, "Do Not Harm: Mindful Engagement for a World in Crisis" talk on the importance of deep listening: "Deep listening includes both the mind and the body as instruments of listening-physical awareness, cognitive reflection, and emotional attunement. This is represented in varying degrees of emotional, psychological, and even spiritual components giving us the ability to listen closely to subtleties, and to the possibilities at hand."

They further point out: "If we sit with others and listen, not just with our ears but also with our bodies and whole being, we find that the words we thought we ought to say or planned on saying, may have changed. A new set of words begin to formulate a different way of communicating our knowledge is blended with our insights in the moment."

## **v. Expressing gratitude**

We must practice to express gratitude to whatever we have and whatever anyone does for us. This is an important ingredient of nonviolent communication and it makes us more aware. When we learn to express gratitude, we are actually moving away from narrow-minded approaches; we are moving towards a positive where we start looking at things from wider perspectives.

Gratitude means feeling thankful or returning the kindness or generosity received from others. As the world finds itself in turmoil and violence of different kinds, each and every individual strive to explore ways to remain happy and live peacefully. Different studies have shown that by expressing gratitude and making this as our habit makes us feel better. Gratitude breathes positivity into whatever we are trying to do and it helps us to improve the quality of our lives.

Underlining the significance of gratitude in nonviolent communication, Marshall Rosenberg had aptly said, “The more you become a connoisseur of gratitude, the less you are a victim of resentment, depression and despair. Gratitude will act as an elixir that will gradually dissolve the hard shell of your ego, your need to possess and control, and transform you into a generous being. . .”

Friends, when you start expressing gratitude as part of your daily habits, you will realize that we are becoming less fearful. And when we become less fearful, we tend to be less violent. Also by being in the habit of thanksgiving, we will start enjoying the differences between people and we make deeper connections.

Friends, we would suggest you maintain a daily ‘GRATITUDE JOURNAL’ where you, while retiring to bed, note down the situations and people who have helped you during the course of the day in some way or the other. Once this becomes part of your habit, you will see the differences it makes to your connections.

‘Module 3 & 4’ encapsulated the different elements of nonviolent communication. It must be underlined that all the elements are interconnected and intertwined. Each of the elements is important to make our communication ecosystem healthy.

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