

Module 6

Nurturing Emotional Bridge-Building through Nonviolent Communication Literacy for Global Peace

Mr. Natwar Thakkar was one of the pioneers of the Gandhian movement in the North-East India. He started working in Nagaland to promote Gandhian constructive work since 1955. This was at the height of Naga insurgency that he took the courage to travel to Nagaland to do the work of emotional bridge-building with the rest of the country.

The Nagaland Gandhi Ashram which he set up has been a vibrant centre of Gandhian activities in the region and promotes Gandhian constructive work. His efforts have been to promote emotional bridge-building between the people of the region and the rest of the country.

In this dialogue he shares his views on the essence of Gandhian nonviolent communication for emotional bridge-building and enhancement of relationship. He says this is crucial for promotion of a culture of peace and nonviolence.

Mr Thakkar passed away in October 2018.

This dialogue was conducted by Dr Vedabhyas Kundu, Programme Officer of Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti, New Delhi. Dr Kundu specializes in nonviolent communication & media and information literacy for peace and nonviolence.

Vedabhyas Kundu: Every day as we turn our newspapers, television channel or browse the Internet, we find horrific stories of people killing each other, conflicts and different forms of violence debasing our society. Mostly conflicts start when we think ourselves to be superior and develop feelings of contempt towards our fellow human beings. The former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in 2001 had said, “We have entered the third millennium through a gate of fire. New threats make no distinction between races, nations or regions. A new insecurity has entered every mind, regardless of wealth or status....In the early beginnings of the 21st century – a century already violently disabused of any hopes that progress towards global peace and prosperity is inevitable — this new reality can no longer be ignored. It must be confronted....The 20th century was perhaps the deadliest in human history, devastated by innumerable conflicts, untold suffering, and unimaginable crimes. Time after time, a group or a nation inflicted extreme violence on another, often driven by irrational hatred and suspicion, or unbounded arrogance and thirst for power and resources...”

Further, American political scientist Samuel Huntington (1997) in his book, “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order” says, “People are always

tempted to divide people into us and them, the in-group and the other, our civilization and those barbarians.” In the backdrop of deep fissures engineered by people themselves and the environment of intolerance, racism and xenophobia, the challenge today is to work assiduously to plug these fissures and make sincere attempts to stop the culture of intolerance and hatred. As Kofi Anan had stated further in his speech, “Peace must be made real and tangible in the daily existence of every individual in need. Peace must be sought, above all, because it is the condition for every member of the human family to live a life of dignity and security.”

The 1980 Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Perez Esquivel from Argentina in his acceptance speech had also stressed that to build a society in which peace is the foundation of life: ‘We must reach out our hands, fraternally, without hatred and rancour, for reconciliation and peace, with unfaltering determination in the defense of truth and justice. We know we cannot plant seeds with closed fists’.

Esquivel’s thrust on the need for people to reach out for a peaceful society underlines the importance of different strategies human society has to constantly use to nurture solidarity among communities and individuals. Communication is one of the most important elements for people to reach out for a peaceful society. It has the ability to play a dual role – while it can contribute to make peace real and tangible; if used in the wrong way it can aggravate conflicts and spread hatred. It is for people on how they use tools of communication.

Natwar Thakkar: You have rightly stressed on the dual nature of communication. Though the media tries to do a fairly good job, more than often it attempts to sensationalize violence which can accentuate cases of conflicts. The media is also accused of furthering what Huntington says, attempts to divide people into us and them. Throughout history we will find how different forms of communication have been used to accentuate divisiveness and intolerance. In this context, Mahatma Gandhi’s stress on the need to exercise self-restraint and critically ponder on what messages one is trying to take to the masses should be a guiding post for all communicators today. Gandhi had said, “To be true to my faith, therefore, I may not write in anger or malice. I may not write idly. I may not write merely to excite passion. The reader can have no idea of the restraint I have to exercise from week to week in the choice of topics and my vocabulary. It is training for me. It enables me to peep into myself and make discoveries of my weaknesses. Often my vanity dictates a smart expression or my anger a harsh adjective. It is a terrible ordeal but a fine exercise to remove these weeds.”

The need for communicators today is to challenge the attempts to divide people on the basis of class, religion and race. While communicating they need to imbibe what Mahatma Gandhi had so eloquently stressed, “I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be

blown about my house as freely as possible.” He had further noted, “Nothing can be farther from my thought than that we should become exclusive or erect barriers.” So right from a young age we need to teach children to use communication to promote human values which contributes to a spirit of solidarity. The communication education to my mind should integrate the values of pluralism, mutual respect and inclusivity. It should not be a vehicle to sensationalize or incite passion but a lesson to practice self-restraint and principles of nonviolence in all aspects.

My experience of working in Nagaland suggests that the role of communication should be for emotional bridge-building, connecting and facilitating dialogue amongst people from diverse cultural communities together. Emotions play a significant role in the process of communication. Majority of the time we are not aware of what emotional impact our speech has on others. So it is crucial that we try to develop our emotional vocabulary.

Our communicative abilities should be able to further compassion and empathy while developing deep understanding of each other’s concerns. If we are compassionate and empathetic, we will be able to understand other people’s views and we will be able to connect with them. By being compassionate and empathetic, we can promote emotional bridge-building. This can help in narrowing differences and help in nurturing relationships.

Vedabhyas Kundu: The role of emotional bridge-building which you have described as an important function of communication needs to be promoted among all sections of the population. Emotional bridge building can result in meaningful dialogues. Our efforts should be to draw people and groups who may have differences to be engaged in dialogues. American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer John Dewey (1859-1952) had pertinently said that those who have not had the kinds of experience that deepen understanding of neighborhood and neighbours will be unable to maintain regard for people from distant lands. We need to develop a habit of continuously engaging with others and reaching out to them with mutual respect.

On the importance of dialogue, peace scholar, Daisaku Ikeda (2007) notes, “Through dialogue, we can arrive at a deeper mutual understanding. Dialogue starts by clearly recognizing the positions and interests of the respective parties and then clearly identifying the obstacles to progress, patiently working to remove and resolve each of these.” He further says, “I firmly believe that the true value of dialogue is not to be found solely in the results it produces but, more significantly, in the process of dialogue itself, as two human spirits engage with and elevate each other to a higher realm.... Dialogue is what opens the eye of the human spirit and liberates people from the curse of narrow-minded prejudices and hatreds.”

Further, in his Peace Proposal 2005, Ikeda further writes, “The numerous problems we confront are caused by human beings, which means that they must have a human solution. However long the effort takes, so long as we do not abandon the work of unknitting the tangled threads of these interrelated issues, we can be certain of finding a way forward. The core of such efforts must be to bring forth the full potential of dialogue.”

But in today’s world we increasingly see that many of us abandon the spirit of dialogue and conversation, they are in a hurry and are intolerant. They are not ready to listen to others and this results in friction and conflicts. It is worrying. Instead of communication playing the role of emotional bridge building, there is communication of hatred and intolerance.

Natwar Thakkar: Definitely when communication is used to spread hatred and there is little space for dialogue, it is worrisome. Instead of playing the role of emotional bridge-builder, communication starts contributing to divisiveness. Breakdown in communication leads to the rise of differences and even conflicts. I sincerely believe that continuous dialogue is important to keep the channels of communication open. Mahatma Gandhi was an exponent of this art. Way back in 1939, he had told a correspondent that the object of a satyagrahi was *‘not avoidance of all relationship with the opposing power’* but the *‘transformation of the relationship’*. Gandhian Scholar B R Nanda (2002) in his book, “In Search of Gandhi” has beautifully encapsulated this, “In India, through a quarter of a century, Gandhi corresponded with all the Viceroy- Chelmsford, Reading, Irwin, Willingdon and Linlithgow- keeping his lines of communication open even while he engaged them in non-violent battle.” This is the true essence of dialogue that even when there are serious differences of views we do not snap communication but make all efforts to keep the channels of communication open. The importance of dialogues for peace has been beautifully put by a great follower of Gandhi, Nelson Mandela who said, “We inhibit the peace and negotiated resolutions of conflicts not only by the extent to which we demonize one another. We do so also by the degree to which we separate, on the one hand, the processes of politics and international affairs, and on the other hand, the moral relations between ourselves as human beings...talking to one another and discussion must be the prelude to the resolution of conflicts.” So let’s keep on talking to each other even in situations where there seems to be breakdown in communication; let’s solve our problems through discussions and not through violence and antagonism. Let’s use our power of communication to be emotional bridge-builder.

Vedabhyas Kundu: I think when you talk on the importance of keeping the channels of communication open, it is essential that we learn the importance of listening. In fact we need to exercise the habit of deep and insightful listening. Without developing critical listening abilities it may not be possible to ensure that the channels of communication remain open. More than often, in this post-modern world

when most of us are running to outdo others and feel that our views are more important, we seem to forget the habit of listening. What is important is to learn to respect others views and pay attention to what they want to say. Rather than being judgmental, we need to develop empathy and be receptive when others are trying to put their views across. Overall, I think critical listening abilities, capacities to engage with dialogue even with one's opponents and emotional bridge building in our communication efforts should be the fulcrum of our training to be effective communicator.

Daisaku Ikeda in his speech on "Interaction of Civilizations Leads to a Flourishing Culture of Humanity" in 1987 suggested three principles and guidelines for communication: (1) exchange among civilizations as a source of value creation; (2) a spirit of open dialogue; and (3) the creation of a culture of peace through education.... However, the challenge today to what Daisaku Ikeda reflected on principles of communication, has been aptly encapsulated by Victor Ordonez, former Director of UNESCO Basic Education Division, who had said, "We can create experts in information technologies, yet it seems we are unable to improve the capacity for listening, for tolerance, for respecting diversity, for making the most of people's potential for the social good, or for the spreading of fundamental ethics, without which neither skills nor knowledge will be of any benefit to us. (UNICEF, 1995)

Natwar Thakkar: To possibly address the challenges which Mr. Victor Ordonez reflected, I would suggest that we promote nonviolent communication literacy amongst all section of the population across the world. This should not just be in schools and colleges, but nonviolent communication literacy should start right from families and percolate to our societies. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization defines literacy as the "ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society". Communication literacy, according to me entails deep and critical knowledge of communication. It also entails critical understanding of how we communicate, the way we communicate and the expressions we use to communicate. It includes both verbal and non verbal forms of communication. It is also the ability to discern between what is wrong and what is right. Being self-aware of what message we are using is part of communication literacy.

To me nonviolent communication literacy would mean how our communication efforts should be nonviolent; how our ability and capacity to communicate not only with ourselves but with our family and society be nonviolent in all aspects and overall how the entire process of communication whether between individuals, groups,

communities and the world at large should be nonviolent in nature. This would entail deep understanding of the art and science of nonviolence and its centrality in all our daily actions. It's not just verbal and non-verbal communication, nonviolent communication literacy would also include whether our thoughts and ideas are nonviolent or not. This would also mean how we can rid of our preconceived notions of individuals or groups with whom we want to communicate and stop evaluating them to suit our own ideas. More than often we are attuned to think in terms of moralistic judgments which may be our own constructions. By developing deep understanding of the art and science of nonviolence and integrating it in our communication practices we could get over with biased and moralistic judgments; this in turn could contribute to emotional bridge building.

By being nonviolent communication literate, an individual/group/community will be able to self-introspect whether the message they want to share has elements of violence and whether such a message will hurt others. Nonviolent communication literacy would automatically help in strengthening and deepening relationships. When we are able to emotionally build bridges with others we will be able to empathize with their views.

Nonviolent communication literacy also includes mastering the art of listening. His Holiness, The Dalai Lama has rightly said, "When you talk you are only repeating what you already know; but when you listen you may learn something new." Essentially we should learn to listen with a sincere intention to understand, open and focused on what the other person is trying to tell.

The way we use language and words while writing and conversations is an important aspect of nonviolent communication literacy. We had discussed above, the Gandhian approach to communication clearly emphasized on the importance of restraint and that which did not incite passion. His approach also stressed on the importance of brevity and the need to think before speaking. He had said, "My hesitancy in speech, which was once in annoyance, is now a pleasure. Its greatest benefit has been that it has taught me the economy of words. I have naturally formed the habit of restraining my thoughts. And I can now give myself the certificate that a thoughtless word hardly ever escapes my tongue or pen. I do not recollect ever having had to regret anything in my speech or writing. I have thus been spared many a mishap and waste of time." (*The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*)

So by studying and practicing deeply the ideas of great leaders like Gandhi, King and Mandela one can start grasping on how to use nonviolent communication in our daily lives and aim to become nonviolent communication literate. Nonviolence according to Mahatma Gandhi is 'infinitely greater and superior to brute force'. He had said, "Nonviolence is like radium in its action. An infinitesimal quantity of it embedded in a malignant growth acts continuously, silently and ceaselessly till it has

transformed the whole mass of the diseased tissue into a healthy one. Similarly, even a little of true nonviolence acts in a silent, subtle, unseen way and leavens the whole society.” So if our communication ecosystem is nonviolent in nature, it would act like radium contributing to resolution of many contentious issues.

I am also reminded of this powerful idea of Martin Luther King, “Nonviolence says that within human nature there are amazing potentialities of goodness.... I think we all must realize that there is within human nature a sort of dualism, something within all of us which justified Plato in saying that the human personality like a charioteer with two strong horses each wants to go in different directions.... There is this tension and this struggle within human nature between the high and the low.... we must recognize that just as there is a capacity for evil, there is a capacity for goodness. Just as a Hitler can lead man to the darkest and lowest depths, a Gandhi can lead, men to the highest heights of nonviolence and goodness. We must always see these possibilities within human nature; the nonviolent discipline goes on with this belief that even the most difficult person, even the person who is committed to the old order with all his might, can be transformed.....”

King had also said, “Nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral questions of our time; the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to oppression and violence. Mankind must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation.”

So I firmly believe that by practicing nonviolent communication, there can be amazing opportunities to promote goodness in our world which keeps on getting struck with conflicts. It is an essential part of efforts to evolve a culture of peace and nonviolence not just in our homes but in the entire world. This is also an antidote to all acts of revenge, aggression and retaliation as all these arises from breakdown in communication or our reliance in violence in communication.

Overall I firmly believe that nonviolent communication literacy opens new spaces for dialogues and engagement, mutual respect and tolerance. This will definitely contribute towards a humanistic society.

Vedabhyas: We definitely have a lot to learn from peace apostles like the Mahatma, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Daisaku Ikeda and others. King always used positive language in his writings and speeches. By using positive language and refraining from negatives, we can uplift the level of our dialogues. For instance if we analyze this powerful quote of King, *“If you can't fly then run, if you can't run then walk, if you can't walk then crawl, but whatever you do you have to keep moving forward,”* it evokes great positivity. Similarly all other dialogues and speeches of King underline the use of positive language. Nonviolent communication literacy also entails how we can speak from our heart and our critical abilities to connect with all

those with whom we are communicating. If we are truthful, honest, sincere and authentic it would not be difficult for us to communicate with others. These can also be a powerful strategy to prevent and resolve conflicts. The lives of Gandhi, King and Mandela and their communication approaches definitely need to be deeply understood to become a nonviolent communicator.

Natwar Thakkar: I believe when we are trying to promote nonviolent communication literacy, we are trying to facilitate relationships based on truthfulness, honesty, genuineness and empathy. Nonviolent communication also entails the elements of gratitude and forgiveness. All these ideas are important factors to promote love and peace amongst human beings. For Gandhi, truthfulness was of great importance, he had said, "There can be no room for untruth in my writings, because it is my unshakable belief that there is no religion other than truth and because I am capable of rejecting aught obtained at the cost of truth."

On the essence of love in our communication, he had further said, "Little quarrels of millions of families in their daily lives disappear before the exercise of force...two brother quarrels; one of them repents and reawakens the love that was lying dormant in him; the two again begin to live in peace." I totally agree that nonviolent communication is an important tool to resolve conflicts and help in reconciliation. Mahatma Gandhi had rightly said: "It is the acid test of nonviolence that in a nonviolent conflict there is rancor left behind, and in the end the enemies are converted into friends." Nonviolent communication has the ability to convert those with opposing views and in conflicts to become friends.

Similarly, His Holiness the Dalai Lama has rightly said, "Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them humanity cannot survive."

Another important aspect of Gandhian nonviolent communication is the power of gratitude. This quote of Buddha sums up the importance of gratitude and why we should be thankful, "*Let us rise up and be thankful, for if we didn't learn a lot today, at least we learned a little, and if we didn't learn a little, at least we didn't get sick, and if we got sick, at least we didn't die; so, let us all be thankful.*" For Mahatma Gandhi, appreciation was an important element of his ahimsa or nonviolence. The Mahatma's grandson, Arun Gandhi in his book, "The Gift of Anger" says, "Bapuji was masterful at appreciating the world around him. He looked for the good in everybody." This is true essence of nonviolent communication to look for good in everybody and respond accordingly.

Hence to me nonviolent communication literacy is essentially to rekindle the dormant values of compassion, love, empathy and rediscovering our authentic self. It is an important tool to nurture gratitude and appreciation. By practicing it we can learn to

forgive others. It is also a channel for conflict resolution, enhance tolerance and promote reconciliation.

To conclude I would like to share these beautiful thoughts of Buddha which is the central idea of our dialogue, ***“Words have both the power to destroy and heal. When words are both true and kind, they can change our world.”***

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