

Plum Village  
June 1, 2014

This afternoon, I was sitting under the giant linden tree in Upper Hamlet, Plum Village, France. A Vietnamese monk sitting next to me asked me, in his newly learned English, what is my work? I said I used to be a lawyer, and now I give trainings in something called Nonviolent Communication. "NVC", he exclaimed! "I want to learn NVC!" My heart skipped a beat from the delight of hearing he had a connection to NVC! I asked him, "where did you hear about NVC"? He replied, "here, at Plum village." Then he smiled at me and said, "How do you feel and what do you need?" And then, his voice rising and his smile growing, he added, "I want to learn it, my friends say it would be good for me to learn NVC to express myself."

"How do you feel right now, " I asked him? He smiled, and said, "shy, I am not used to being around many lay people and different people. I am from a small temple in Vietnam. And everyone was Vietnamese. Here, People from so many cultures and so many different perspectives, and women, I am not used to being around women! I don't know how to talk."

"So, do you feel frustrated because you want to connect, and you have a hard time finding the words?"

"Yes, ". A bigger smile and a sigh." Yes, thank you. "More smiles, we sat silently for a few moments, surrounded by people from all over the world, arriving in this remote corner of France for a 21 day retreat with Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh.

He began again, "And I want to know, what do you Americans think about Vietnam and China and Russia. I only know what the communists taught us and I want to know how you think about things."

So we spoke again about these things, about fear and shame and insecurity in the world.

And he said again. I want to learn NVC..

I said I would teach a class here on our free day, Lazy Day.

I will be there, he smiled back.

To my great delight, a few days later, one of the monks who was organizing the retreat informed me that Nonviolent communication (NVC) would be part of the official program as an "Affinity (Interest) Group" during the retreat. I would have the opportunity to lead these sessions, in addition to the "unofficial sessions I was offering. Over the next three weeks at Plum Village, I was privileged to lead 5 workshops and numerous private and small group coaching sessions and questions and answers, touching hundreds of people.

Some highlights:

### **Making good use of the Mud**

One metaphor that Thich Nhat Hanh uses to help us understand that suffering and happiness arise and exist together, is the lotus and the mud. Without mud, there is no lotus. Take away the mud and the lotus cannot appear or grow We explored this teaching at the first NVC session by looking at some of our own mud to find the precious jewel inside.

I presented an exercise I first practiced with Marshall Rosenberg, the founder of Nonviolent Communication ( NVC). We call to mind something that we ourselves have done that we now regret. Something we may now be calling a mistake. This is our “mud.” We want to use this to learn more about ourselves, about what is so important to us, that it got buried in this mud. If we are angry at ourselves of this, we want to heal from this anger. What is the life energy, the prized value, the “Human Need” that lays buried in our judging this a mistake, in our regret?

This is our lotus.

In the NVC session at Plum Village, people worked in pairs to help each other find the hidden lotus inside the very actions we were now regretting. Why did I speak harshly to a loved one? Maybe because I was so frustrated because her well being is so important to me. Or because I am so longing for a relationship where everyone has their voice, for this mutual flow of sharing, and I haven't found the way to get my voice heard.

We then did the practice developed by NVC trainer Robert Gonzales, resting in meditation in the beauty of the precious lotus jewel, the life energy, that for which our hearts yearn.

The next day, during talking periods amidst periods of silence, a steady stream of people approached me to tell me how the workshop and exercises had removed a veil of themselves to themselves, revealing what is really important to them. This was supported by hearing their partners in the small groups repeat back to them, in a listening exercise, what they had heard the other person say was important to them.

A little later that day, listening to the Dharma talk by Thich Nhat Hanh (Thay) , my understanding of what the NVC practice is doing was touched, watered and deepened. Thay said that as human beings we have needs, and we evaluate things according to whether our needs are meet or unmet. This world of duality, of appearances, of self referencing, is necessary. And it is not True Nature. For example, to us, poison oak and poison ivy are bad because they hurt us. In the realm of true Nature, true reality, they are as magnificent as anything else. This is a teaching from the Abidharma, Buddhist psychology. With mindfulness and deep looking, it is possible for our minds, our mind consciousness, to touch the underlying consciousness of everything, of what he calls the “store consciousness”, where everything is stored in an unconditioned state. NVC, as a mindfulness practice, can also take us to touch this mind, this consciousness, of non-discrimination. We touch the beautiful universal life needs that underlay all actions; indeed, Marshall Rosenberg taught us that all our actions are in service of, doors to, these needs. We just need to practice looking for them and inclining our consciousness to them.

We continued to cultivate this “ Needs Consciousness” in exercises throughout the retreat, healing anger toward ourselves and others.

*More to come!*