

# Buddhist Anarchism and Nonviolent Communication

Here are some pieces that I wrote up for two episodes of the Anarchy Bang podcast. One episode was about buddhist anarchism and the other episode was about Nonviolent Communication & anarchism.

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## **Buddhist Anarchism**

It's hard to really know where to begin with Buddhism, given that there are so many different ways that people relate to the thing. Buddhism can be seen as a religion, a philosophy, an approach to psychology, a personal practice or a culture. And then there are the infinite different sects, traditions, branches and sub-branches within Buddhism. It all can very quickly become very overwhelming and confusing.

That all being said, the way that I like to begin to make sense of Buddhism is by studying some of the renowned lists within Buddhism. What better way to organize one's thoughts on something than to use lists? One list in particular stands out to me the most, it's called "the three marks of existence". Basically it lists the three qualities that mark life as we know it. The first quality is that change is constant and inevitable, that nothing lasts forever. The second is that everything is comprised of many different interacting components and forces acting on it, that nothing exists on it's own, in and of itself. Basically, "anti-essentialism" is how I like to look at it. And the third is that suffering exists, it's an experience that we all have.

This then goes into perhaps the most famous list within Buddhism, the Four Noble Truths. The first one is what I just mentioned, that whole "suffering" thing that we all have. The second is that there is a root cause to this suffering, and that is craving or clinging to our ideas of what we want. The third is that it is indeed possible to overcome this kind of attachment. And the fourth is the way to go about doing that, which is itself another list, the Noble Eightfold Path.

...And as much as I love the Noble Eightfold Path, I won't go into that list here.

So what does this all have to do with anarchism? Well, as I see it, that whole "suffering" condition that we all experience makes us all crazy, it makes us all desperate and frantic, even if we are able to put up a good front and present ourselves as being mature capable thinkers. Our lack of dealing with our own suffering head-on deprives us of our own personal power.

Buddhist practice is all about developing one's own personal power, self-mastery,

cultivating one's ability to choose and act on one's choices, rather than letting one's own old habits, old beliefs and emotional reactivity dictate one's life. It's also about getting more peace and contentment in one's life. You are not always going to get what you want, anarchists will always disappoint you, your dreams for an anarchist world will never happen, and if you do decide to embark on a Buddhist practice, you will probably fuck that up too. But the paradoxical beauty of Buddhism is that even with that all being the case, one can come to acceptance of all of that, and still keep on going. At least for as long as this life you are living now exists.

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## **Nonviolent Communication & Anarchism**

Nonviolent Communication (also known as "NVC" or "compassionate communication") is a set of conceptual tools and a general worldview that a number of anarchists have found useful and at times have adopted. Some have found it to be a how-to guide for living without hierarchy and domination, whereas others have found it to be a series of tips for approaching conflict in ways that are hopefully more productive.

NVC can be used as a way to do conflict resolution, which is what it is best known for, but it can also be used for meeting facilitation, counseling & therapy, and some would say for social change work itself. The crux of NVC is developing one's ability to make distinctions between objective observations vs. subjective interpretations, bodily-felt feelings vs. cognitive evaluations, and fundamental human needs vs. the infinite ways that needs can be met. The ultimate goal of NVC is for its practitioners to come to embody a way of being that the psychologist Carl Rogers said is most helpful in relationships: heartfelt authenticity, empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard. The idea is that through such qualities being present in a relationship, that relationship will eventually and inevitably become stronger, autonomy-respecting, collaborative and conducive to those involved realizing their own personal power. Anarchy, baby!

### **Some related readings**

The Basics of Nonviolent Communication

Key Assumptions and Intentions of Nonviolent Communication

Compassionate Anarchism

Can the Social Order Be Transformed through Personal Practice? The Case of Nonviolent Communication

Person-centered Therapy

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I will begin with a quote which has always been the touchstone for me and my anarchism, that famous quote from Gustav Landauer:

*“The State is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of behavior; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently toward one another... We are the State and we shall continue to be the State until we have created the institutions that form a real community.”*

With this in mind, I immediately ask: what are the different kinds of relationships that would comprise anarchy? What would these relationships look like?

The answers that I come up with is that these relationships would, generally-speaking, acknowledge and respect the autonomy of everybody involved while also enabling people to cooperate, collaborate and make decisions together as equals, with no one person or group of people bossing everyone else around. All of this stuff is easier said than done, which is why I eventually started to look for some guides and pointers for how to actually do this, practically-speaking.

This lead to me eventually discovering something called “Nonviolent Communication”, or “NVC” for short. NVC generally lives in the self-help/self-improvement world, and the demographic that is mainly drawn to NVC is middle-aged middle-class 1st world white women with liberal/progressive politics. In short, NVC is not at all something that originates from the anarchist scene, yet as soon as I started to study I immediately saw the connections and correlations with anarchism, and I got quite excited about that.

For about five years I was a zealous missionary for a kind of NVC-anarchist hybrid that I tried to develop and promote to anybody who would listen to me. For the next ten years after that I had more of a low-key involvement with NVC lasting until just last year when I decided to end my involvement with the NVC milieu altogether. My overall takeaway message from the whole thing is that while some maps, guides and conceptual schemas may be helpful for actualizing anarchy in the real-world, ultimately human beings with all of their complexities, foibles and psychoses go above and beyond anything that we can come up with.

To quote our anarchist daddy, Mikhail Bakunin: *“No theory, no ready-made system, no book that has ever been written will save the world. I cleave to no system. I am a true seeker.”*

This leaves me with a belief that Nonviolent Communication is something that can be useful and helpful for anarchists, if one cares to spend the time & energy to seriously

consider it. I do not think that NVC is something that anybody “should” do, and in fact I think that the moment that one looks at it that way the whole thing becomes completely worthless and a waste of time. But if the sincere interest and desire to learn NVC is there, then the time spent can be worthwhile. So let’s talk about Nonviolent Communication.