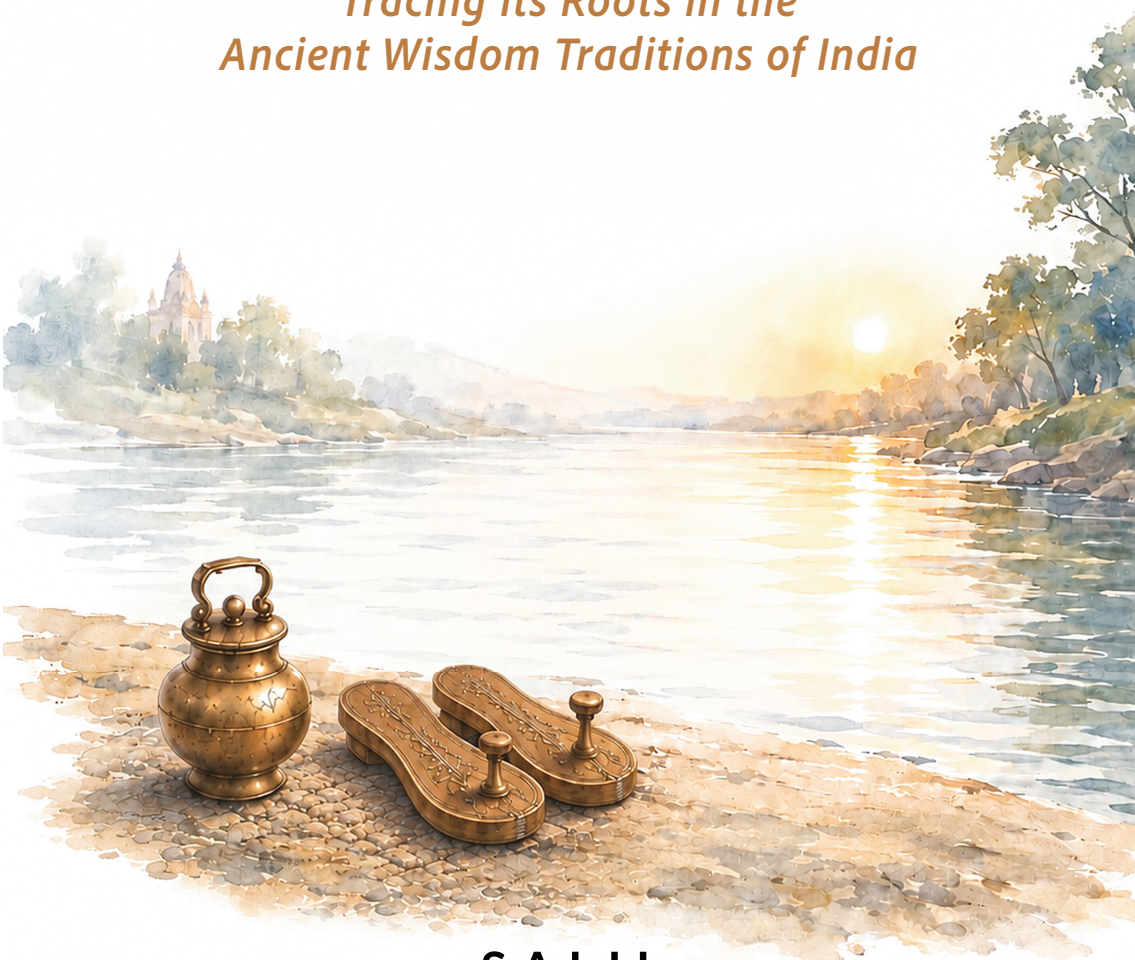
Spiritual Heart of Nonviolent Communication

Tracing Its Roots in the Ancient Wisdom Traditions of India

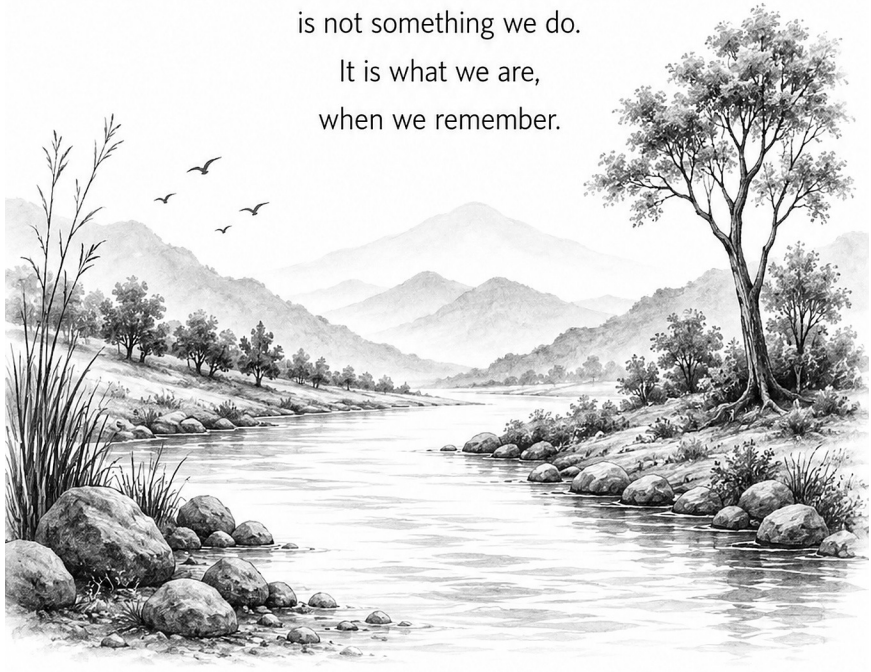


SALIL

SPIRITUAL HEART
OF
NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION

Tracing Its Roots in the Ancient Wisdom Traditions of India

The river does not carry water.
The river is water, moving.
In the same way, compassion
is not something we do.
It is what we are,
when we remember.



This book explores the independent convergence of Nonviolent Communication with ancient Indian philosophical wisdom. The author does not claim that one tradition is the source or superior expression of the other, but rather that they represent parallel arrivals at similar truths about human consciousness, presence, and compassionate communication.

The Sanskrit terms and philosophical concepts referenced throughout this book are drawn from the living traditions of India, including Vedantic, Yogic, and Tantric schools of thought. These terms are used here not as property to be owned, but as wisdom to be honored and shared. The author acknowledges the centuries of teachers, rishis, and scholars who have preserved and transmitted these teachings, and offers this book as a humble contribution to their continuation.

• • •

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OFFERINGS FROM SANGHA

saṅgha

A sangha is not quite a community, and not quite an audience. It is the company of those walking the same path, whose practice steadies yours when your own falters, and who carry you along the stretches you could not have walked alone.

The words that follow came from mine. They were not solicited as reviews. They were written in reply to excerpts from this book, and to short posts drawn from its chapters, which I shared on Global Home, the forum of trainers and practitioners of Nonviolent Communication hosted by the Center for Nonviolent Communication, while the manuscript was still being compiled, and in the letters and messages that followed. They speak to a work in progress rather than to the finished book and are reproduced here with the kind permission of their authors, lightly edited for length. The views are their own and do not represent the Center for Nonviolent Communication.

"This book stands out as the most potent, concise, and insightful writing on the spirituality of NVC that I have come across."

Sura Hart, CNVC Certified Trainer and author, USA

"I read excerpts from this book on the online forum of NVC Certified Trainers. I found them exquisite, as it is quite rare, in that context, that I encounter anyone who speaks about nonviolence in a way that so often points to the same deep spiritual principles that I recognise within NVC. I am really grateful for those moments of companionship."

Miki Kashtan, CNVC Certified Trainer and author, Spain

"I feel deeply moved and inspired by your words. They stirred goosebumps and tears, as my whole being responded to your inspiring invitation to fully embody the spiritual underpinnings of this very practical pathway Marshall has gifted the world."

Jocelyn Kennedy, CNVC Certified Trainer, New Zealand

"I am in awe, in a really good way. I sense so much connection and tenderness. I really appreciate that you share from your tradition."

Paula Rossi, CNVC Certified Trainer, Austria

"I love this, Salil. To me it is poetry. The judgment is no longer just a judgment; it is a doorway."

Sharon Rudnitzky, NVC teacher and practitioner, USA

"'Compassion is not something we do. It is what we are, when we remember.' This is so beautiful, Salil. And this is exactly why I practice NVC: to remember who I truly am, to go home."

Julia Shen, CNVC Certified Trainer, Canada

"Thank you for putting this into these words. It deeply resonates with me and my experience."

Irmtraud Kauschat, CNVC Certified Trainer, Germany

"My heart softened and my ears pricked up when I read your description of the 'zero step'. You have so eloquently expressed what we in the Alexander Technique call 'inhibition'. I love how you use words to support the experiential, and I am learning from you."

Penny Spawforth, CNVC Certified Trainer, UK

"I loved this. Delighted to see this named, as it gives me a sense of explicitly honoring the spiritual dimension of NVC. Very meaningful."

Majida Jean McElhaney, CNVC Certified Trainer, New Zealand

"A wonderful exploration and explanation of a spiritual perspective of NVC. It is the NVC topic I contemplate the most. I feel confident in your ability to share the wisdom in an accessible and enjoyable way."

Erik Peltz, NVC teacher and practitioner, Global

"I felt so deeply inspired by the tenderness, clarity, and spaciousness in the way you expressed it. Your words touched something very alive in me."

Chiara Cicognani, CNVC Certified Trainer, Italy

"A tender companion to Marshall's view of judgment as an expression of unmet need. When I silently say, ah, something in me is homesick, I notice my heart softens, and there is less urge to fix or analyze."

Xuan Simon, CNVC Certified Trainer, USA

"Reading your book is a recognition of the Ground and an integration of both the traditional spiritual teachings and NVC as a spiritual practice – so beautiful, a piece of art! It is one of the deepest books I have read combining the two. NVC gains a deeper perspective through your spiritual lens."

Kristiina Krank, CNVC Certified Trainer, Sweden

"I am grateful to Salil for deepening the meaning of the Zero Step that I have shared for many years."

Bren Hardt, CNVC Certified Trainer, USA



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FOREWORD



RONNIE HAUSHEER

CNVC CERTIFIED TRAINER

It is a pleasure and an honor for me to write the foreword to Spiritual Heart of Nonviolent Communication. When I first saw the title, I was curious about how it might deepen my understanding of the spirituality of Nonviolent Communication.

Having studied NVC for over twenty years, I have been touched by the profundity of Marshall Rosenberg's work. Yet I have often found it difficult to find words that could convey the depth of its essence to my students.

Many around me described Nonviolent Communication as a tool, or a collection of tools that helps people build more meaningful relationships. I came to describe it instead as a way of living. A practice rooted in values such as congruency, honesty, presence, love, empathy, and compassion. A way of meeting life, especially in moments of conflict.

Through the practice of observation, feeling, need, and request, we are invited to go beyond words. We begin to meet ourselves and others with greater understanding and acceptance. And yet, within me, there remained a longing to express the deeper spiritual ground that I sensed beneath it all.

In reading (and rereading) Salil's book, I found a narrative that gently and gracefully connects these dots. He illuminates how Marshall Rosenberg, through his own sincere inquiry, arrived at the same essential truths that have been explored for centuries within the Indian spiritual traditions.

By expressing these teachings in simple and accessible language, Salil brings them into dialogue with Nonviolent Communication in a way that feels both natural and profound. Something that had not been conscious in me quietly slid into place.

It is my hope that this book finds its way into the hands of all students of Nonviolent Communication. I imagine that Marshall would be deeply pleased with this meaningful contribution to the field.

Ronnie Hausheer

CNVC Certified Trainer

A NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before you step into this book, I want to make something clear.

The wisdom in these pages is not mine alone. It belongs to millennia of sages, teachers and seekers who sat with the deepest questions a human being can ask and shared what they found. They took care not to claim it as their own. The great teachers of India often said they were only passing on what they had heard in meditation, understanding themselves as receivers and transmitters, not originators.

There is a beautiful parallel in the world of music. An instrument is not truly created by the one who builds it. The wood has its own grain, its own resonance, its own nature. The craftsman's work is to listen to what the wood already knows, and shape it so the knowing can be heard. The music was always in the wood; the craftsman only lets himself be guided by it, giving it a form through which it can play itself.

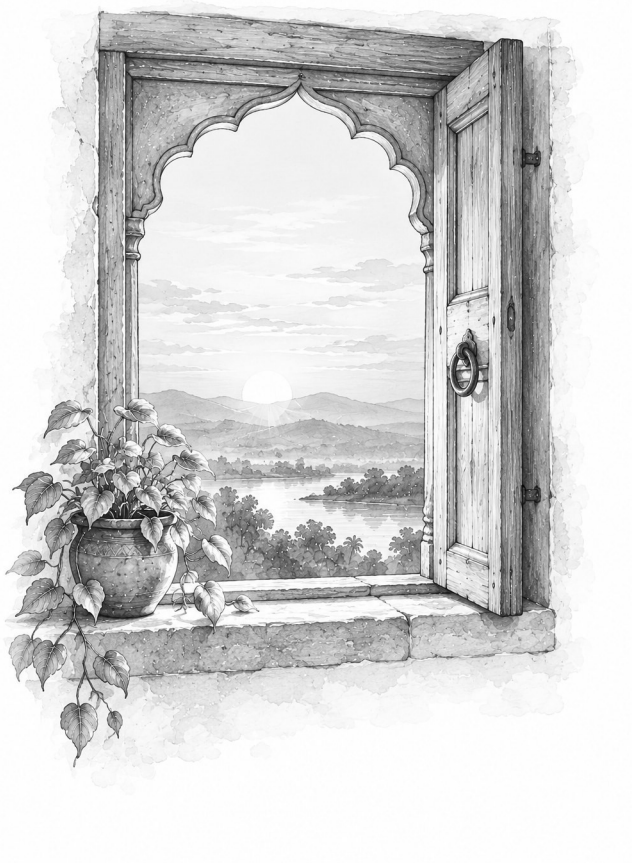
What I have attempted here is closer to that kind of work. I have gathered, arranged and expressed what I heard and read over the years, bringing together two bodies of wisdom, the ancient teachings of India and Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication, to show how they illuminate each other. Where illumination happens, it is not mine. I am simply holding the lamp; the light belongs to what it is held up to.

In finding words and giving shape to these ideas, I have taken time to reflect on my own, and sat in dialogue with forms of assistance both human and beyond, that helped me find clearer expression.

If you find something true in these pages, it was true before I arrived at it. If something here opens you, that opening was always there, waiting. I am only a channel for it, not the source.

With gratitude,

Salil



PREFACE



ONE RIVER MANY NAMES

Ekam Sat | Ékam Sat

Truth is one.

Human beings have always been curious about the questions of life. What is the nature of the self? What does it mean to truly connect with another person? Why do we cause harm to those we love, and what would it take to stop?

These questions are not modern. They are as old as language itself. Every civilization, every wisdom tradition, every great teacher who ever lived has turned toward them and brought back something true, something partial, something expressed in the only language they had available.

This searching is not a sign of our failure. It is a sign of our longing. And longing, the traditions tell us, is itself sacred. It is the movement of life toward its own depth.

In the twentieth century, a psychologist named **Marshall Rosenberg** did something remarkable with this ancient longing. Growing up in Detroit, seeing violence firsthand, he spent his life asking two questions with extraordinary focus and care:

What disconnects us from our compassionate nature, leading us to behave violently and exploitatively?

And conversely, what allows some people to stay connected to their compassionate nature under even the most trying circumstances?

His answer was **Nonviolent Communication**. What Marshall achieved was not simply the creation of a communication method. It was an act of distillation. Out of decades of study, of practice, and of direct encounter with human suffering in its many forms, he arrived at insights that wisdom traditions across the world had also arrived at, often in far more complex and demanding forms, and he rendered them into something any person could begin working with today. A framework of four elements: observe without judgment, feel without pretending, identify needs without demand, and request without coercion.

Four steps. A process a child could learn in an afternoon. And yet practitioners who have sat with it for years will tell you, quietly, that it is one of the most demanding inner practices they have ever undertaken. Not because the steps are complicated, but because what they ask of us is nothing less than the dissolution of the defended self.

This is the genius of what Marshall gave us. The simplicity is not a simplification. It is the kind of clarity that only comes from someone who has looked very deeply, for a long time, and found the essential thing beneath the complexity.

The Indian traditions have a phrase for what I found when I came to Marshall's work: *Ekam Sat*. Truth is one; the wise speak of it in many ways. The same river flows through different landscapes and carries different names in each of them. What I discovered, placing these two bodies of wisdom side by side, was not a new river. It was the same water, moving. Not that Marshall had borrowed from the Indian teachings, but that he had arrived, independently, at the same ground through his own sincere searching.

I did not come to this recognition as a scholar setting two texts side by

side. I grew up in India, surrounded by these traditions without ever quite being able to enter them. I heard the terms spoken by teachers, found them named in books I sometimes opened and often set them back down, understanding less than I wanted to. The language was there. The access was not. When I met Marshall's work, what I found was not recognition so much as a key. His four steps gave me, for the first time, a way to hold what I had only ever heard in passing. My attempt in the chapters that follow is to trace that clarity back toward the tradition it helped me finally enter, the one I had grown up near but had never quite been able to call my own, until now.

This book is that journey. An offering to anyone who, like me, grew up in the shadow of a tradition they could not reach, and found, unexpectedly, that someone else's clarity could become the way back in.

What I want to do in these pages is not to suggest that NVC simply restates what the Indian traditions already knew. That would be to diminish what Marshall achieved. What I want to do is something more like holding two lights close to each other and watching how together they illuminate more than either could alone. The Indian traditions offer a rich interior map, a language for the depths that NVC points toward but does not always name. And NVC offers something the ancient teachings sometimes lack: a practical, accessible, immediately applicable way of living these truths in the middle of an ordinary day, in the middle of a difficult conversation, in the middle of a life.

Together, I believe they offer something genuinely powerful. An understanding not just of what to do, but of why it works. Not just of the practice, but of the ground from which the practice grows.

This matters for a simple reason: when we understand what we are actually doing, we do it with more depth, more patience, and more trust in the process. When you know that the moment you truly touch your own need, for love, for belonging, for meaning, you are touching something universal and timeless, it changes the way you sit with that need. It becomes less personal and more vast. Less urgent and more

sacred.

The book begins with a chapter numbered zero, and it is numbered that way for a reason. Before the four elements, before anything can be practiced, something has to happen that is not itself a step: a pause, in which somebody arrives. The traditions of India built their whole day around that pause. Marshall's students found it sitting quietly in front of step one. It is where we start, because everything else here depends on it.

From there, the chapters move through the elements of NVC: observation, feeling, need, and request. They also move through the deeper practices beneath them, into the territories where the practice is tested and completed. Each chapter ends with a contemplative practice, an invitation to bring what you have read into direct experience. The practices are not separate exercises. They build on one another, so that by the end of the book you are not carrying a collection of techniques but walking one path.

The book moves in four parts. **The Ground** lays down the foundations: the witness, the feeling body, the universal need, the open hand. **The Fire** enters the difficult territory where the practice is truly tested: anger, judgment, hard truths, and failures. **The Meeting** turns outward to another human being: empathy, gratitude, protection, and the freedom hidden in daily acts. And **The Path** arrives at the ground beneath every step: *Ahimsa*, the recognition that life is one; a concluding chapter, begin again; and a final chapter that rests in the wholeness beneath the practice itself.

You do not need to know Indian philosophy to read this book. You do not need to be an experienced NVC practitioner either, though some familiarity with the basics will help. All you really need is what you already have: a sincere desire to live with more honesty, more kindness, and more presence than yesterday.

That wish itself, quiet and persistent, pointing you toward this page at this moment, is where the path begins.

A NOTE FOR READERS NEW TO NVC

If you already know Nonviolent Communication well, feel free to skip ahead; the chapters that follow will meet you exactly where you are.

If this is your first encounter with it, spend a few minutes here. Nothing in this section is difficult, and none of it is a test. It is only the shape of the practice, laid out plainly, so that you walk into the rest of this book oriented rather than lost.

. . .

What it is for

Nonviolent Communication was developed by Marshall Rosenberg, an American psychologist who spent his life on a single question: what allows human beings to stay connected to their own compassion, and what makes them lose it?

It is usually described as a communication method, and it is one, but that description is slightly misleading. NVC is not primarily a way of speaking. It is a way of paying attention, which then changes how you speak. Marshall was blunt about its purpose: it exists to create a quality of connection in which people give to each other willingly, out of care rather than fear, guilt, shame or obligation. Everything else in the practice is in service of that.

This matters because NVC is often mistaken for a technique for getting what you want, phrased pleasantly. It is not. If you use it to win, it stops working, and the other person will feel the difference long before they can name it.

. . .

What gets in the way

Marshall gave a name to the ordinary ways of speaking that quietly break connection. He called it life-alienating communication, and most

of us learned it so early that it sounds like plain description rather than a choice.

There is **moralistic judgment**, which says what a person *is* rather than what happened: lazy, selfish, difficult, too sensitive. There is **comparison**, which measures one life against another and leaves everybody diminished. There is **denial of responsibility**, the language of *I had to*, *they made me*, *it's policy*, in which nobody is choosing anything. And there is **demand**, which is any request carrying a punishment, however subtle, for the answer no.

These four are not moral failings. They are habits, and everyone has them, including everyone who teaches this practice. Noticing them is most of the work.

. . .

The four movements

NVC is built around four components. The four chapters of Part One of this book are each built around one of them.

Observation. Saying what actually happened, the words spoken, the action taken, the way a camera would record it before any interpretation gets added. Not *you're always late*, but *you arrived twenty minutes after we agreed to meet*. This sounds trivial and is surprisingly hard. Most sentences we think of as descriptions turn out, on inspection, to be verdicts.

Feeling. Naming what is actually alive in the body right now: sad, glad, afraid, tired, relieved, lonely. There is a trap here worth learning early. *I feel that you don't care about me* is not a feeling; it is a thought about another person with the word *feel* attached to it. *I feel hurt* is a feeling. The test is simple: if you can replace *I feel* with *I think*, it was never a feeling.

Need. Underneath every feeling is something you care about, and NVC

calls it a need: for respect, for rest, for connection, for meaning, for safety, for contribution. Needs are universal. Everyone has them, in every culture and every century, which is why they are the one place where two people in conflict are never actually opposed.

A need is not the same as the thing you want done about it. *I need to matter* is a need. *I need you to call me back tonight* is a strategy for meeting it, and there are many others. Nearly every argument people have is a collision of strategies, mistaken for a collision of needs.

Request. Asking clearly for something specific that would help, and staying genuinely willing to hear no. Ask for what you do want rather than what you don't. Ask for an action rather than an attitude. And keep it small enough that a person could actually do it. The difference between a request and a demand is almost never in the words; it is in what happens in you when the answer is no.

Put together: *when I see the dishes still in the sink after dinner, I feel frustrated, because I need some shared care for our space. Would you be willing to wash them before we sit down tonight?*

. . .

The three directions

Most people meet NVC as a way of expressing themselves. That is only a third of it.

Expressing honestly is the direction described above: saying what I observed, what I feel, what I need, and what I would like, without judgment of you.

Receiving empathically is the same four components, turned toward another person. Instead of stating my own, I listen for theirs, often by guessing out loud: *are you feeling frustrated because you were hoping for some support here?* The guess does not need to be correct. What matters is that the other person feels somebody genuinely trying to understand

rather than waiting to reply. Marshall considered this half at least as important as the first, and most of us find it much harder.

Self-empathy is the same attention offered to yourself, particularly in the moments when you have got it wrong. It is what makes the other two sustainable, and its absence is why many people burn out on this practice within a year.

. . .

Giraffe and jackal

If you spend time in NVC circles you will hear these words, so it is worth knowing where they come from. Marshall taught with two hand puppets. The jackal spoke in judgment, blame and demand. The giraffe, which he chose because it has the largest heart of any land animal and can see a long way, spoke in feelings and needs.

The puppets were a teaching device and were never meant as a division of humanity into two types. Everyone speaks both languages. The point was only to make audible what is usually invisible.

. . .

What NVC is not

It is **not a formula**. The four components are scaffolding for a quality of attention, not a script to be recited, and a person reciting them while inwardly judging you will fool nobody.

It is **not about being nice**. NVC can be extremely direct. Honesty that costs something is central to it, and there is a whole chapter in this book about that.

It is **not the absence of boundaries**. Saying a clear no, and protecting what needs protecting, are part of the practice rather than exceptions to it. There is a chapter about that too.

It **does not require the other person to know it**. This surprises people. You do not need agreement, or a shared vocabulary, or anyone's cooperation. The practice is entirely available to one person acting alone.

And it is **not quick**. The four components can be explained in ten minutes. Living them takes most of a lifetime, which is one of the reasons this book exists.

. . .

What to expect

At first it will feel awkward, mechanical, and slightly false. Everyone reports this. You are learning to notice things you have successfully avoided noticing for decades, and the noticing arrives before the fluency does.

It will also, quite often, feel like it is not working. You will use it carefully and the other person will still be angry. This is not failure. NVC is not a method for controlling outcomes, and a practice whose purpose is connection cannot promise compliance.

. . .

About this book

This book does not set out to teach NVC. It assumes only what you have just read.

What it does instead is go underneath. Each chapter takes one aspect of the practice and traces it to something the wisdom traditions of India arrived at independently, centuries earlier, by another road. The four components are the doorway. What lies beyond them is a great deal older than any of us.

If you would like to learn the practice itself properly, Marshall's own book, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, is the place to begin.





THE ZERO STEP

The moments before the day, and the pause before the word

Sandhya | Sándhya

The junction; the moments belonging to neither night nor day, kept for arriving

In the villages of India, the day does not begin with light. It begins in the dark, and it begins with sound.

Somewhere before four, a bell rings, not loudly, not to summon anyone. One stroke from the small temple at the edge of the fields, then silence. A few minutes later, another bell sounds somewhere farther away, because somebody else has also risen. Then comes water: a brass vessel set down on stone, a door opening onto a cold courtyard, the soft rhythm of someone sweeping though nothing is yet dirty. Perhaps sweeping is one of the ways a person tells a place, and themselves, *I have arrived.*

There is no hurry in any of this, though these are not people with time to spare. Fields wait. Animals wait. Water has to be carried. By noon, the day will ask almost everything of them. And yet they have risen early enough to give themselves something before the day begins. A lamp is lit, though dawn is coming anyway. It is a small act, marking the movement from one state to another.

And then, all the preparing stops.

The person sits down.

For a while, they do nothing.

From the outside, this may seem strange. Why rise early, wash, sweep, light a lamp, prepare, and then simply sit? Perhaps the mistake is in assuming that those minutes are meant to accomplish something. They are not. They are there to arrive: to arrive before entering the day.

The moments themselves have a name: ***sandhya***.

The word means junction, joining place: a seam between states, belonging completely to neither. In the Indian tradition, these thresholds have long been regarded as especially significant moments: places where one thing has ended, another has not yet begun, and something different becomes possible.

Perhaps this is because a threshold offers something that the middle of things rarely does. The night has loosened its hold, but the day has not yet begun to pull. Nobody has handed you the list. Nobody is asking you to be anything yet. For a brief moment, there is a little less momentum, a little less identity, and a little more room to notice yourself before the world begins making its demands.

A whole civilization developed practices around this recognition, not only in the fullness of the day, but in the spaces between one state and another. And the more I have thought about this, the more I have wondered whether the same wisdom is present in something even more intimate: ***in a breath***.

Follow a single breath in. Notice how the in-breath completes itself, and how, for a moment, the out-breath has not yet begun. There is a tiny interval in which nothing is being taken in, and nothing is being released. Most of the time we never notice it. It is too ordinary, too familiar, too much a part of us to attract attention. Yet it has been there for as long as we have been alive.

Yoga gave one aspect of this pause the name ***kumbhaka***, the holding or suspension of the breath. But perhaps the most interesting thing about this pause is that we do not have to manufacture it. It is already happening.

And suddenly, the connection with *sandhya* becomes less mysterious. The pause at the edge of the day and the pause within the breath are not the same thing, but they reveal something similar. At the meeting place between two movements, we are briefly less carried by either one. There is a moment in which we can notice what is here before the next movement takes us with it.

There is another threshold we cross all day long. This one has consequences far beyond the changing of light or the rhythm of breath: the moment between what happens to us and what we do with it.

Someone says something. We hear it. Something moves inside us. And then we speak.

Usually, these moments seem to happen as one continuous event. A criticism reaches us, and our defense is already forming. Someone disagrees with us, and we are preparing our answer while they are still speaking. A familiar tone of voice reaches our ears, and suddenly we are no longer entirely in this conversation; we are inside an old one.

We call this responding. But often, we are not responding at all. We are continuing. A familiar pattern has taken over, and the distance between what reached us and what came out of us was so small that there was no one standing in it.

Yet there is a space there, sometimes no more than the length of a breath. Sometimes, when we are deeply triggered, it can seem not to exist at all. But it is there, whether or not we notice it. And if we learn to notice it, we may discover something important: the pause is not an absence of action. It is the place from which a different kind of action becomes possible.

This is where, for me, two apparently unrelated traditions begin to meet.

For thousands of years, Indian contemplative traditions have paid attention to thresholds: the spaces between one state and another. And for many years, Marshall Rosenberg studied a very different kind of threshold: what happens in the space between human beings when something is said, heard, felt and answered.

His work eventually became Nonviolent Communication, with its four familiar movements of Observation, Feelings, Needs and Requests. These movements offer a way of slowing down the confusion that so easily enters human interaction: separating what happened from the story we tell about it; what we feel from what we think; what matters to us from the strategies we pursue; and what we want from what we try to make another person do.

But there is something that comes before all four.

Before we observe clearly, we first arrive. Before we notice what we feel, we first become available to ourselves. Before we can hear the need beneath a reaction, we first create enough space not to be swept away by the reaction. And before we can make a request, we first come into some relationship with the person who is making the request: ourselves.

This is what my teacher and mentor **Jim Manske** called the ***Zero Step.***

Jim and Jori Manske did not present it as another technique to add to NVC. Jim credited the idea to **Mel Schneider**, who, in a practice group, wrote the familiar NVC components on a whiteboard and then placed a zero above them.

Not Step One.

Step Zero.

I find something deeply moving about that little zero. It recognizes something easy to overlook when we become interested in learning skills: before the first thing we do, there is a condition that makes doing possible.

We can observe skillfully and still not be present. We can name feelings

accurately and still act from an old reaction. We can identify needs beautifully and still try to control another person. We can make impeccable requests and still be disconnected from what is alive in us.

The Zero Step does not solve any of these problems. It simply asks us to pause long enough to notice that they are there: to arrive before acting, to become curious about what is happening inside us, and from that place, to have some choice about how we meet what is happening outside us.

It is important to say what the Zero Step is not. It is not necessarily peaceful. We do not have to become calm before we can pause; we may enter the pause angry, frightened, confused, hurt, or desperate to be understood. The point is not to get rid of those states before we act, but to know that they are present.

There is an enormous difference between I am angry, therefore I must say this and I am angry, and I can notice what this anger is telling me before I decide what I want to say. The first is momentum. The second contains choice.

And choice is what the pause gives back to us.

That does not mean the choice will always be one we later feel proud of. The Zero Step is not a guarantee of wise behavior. Sometimes, after pausing, we may still choose to say something difficult, say no, or set a boundary. What changes is our relationship with the action: we are no longer quite as compelled by it and have become a participant in our own response.

. . .

Perhaps this is also why I am drawn to the word zero. India gave the world the concept of zero, not simply as nothing, but as a place that gives other numbers somewhere to stand. The Zero Step has a similar quality. Nothing is added to what follows; there is no fifth component of NVC hidden here, no additional technique to master. Instead, a space is

created in which the other components can become meaningful.

Observation needs presence. Feelings need attention. Needs need curiosity. Requests need choice.

Without the space to arrive, even a sophisticated communication practice can become another set of words we perform while our old patterns continue underneath them.

The Zero Step, then, is not really a step at all. It is the ground on which the other steps can happen. And because it is not a technique, there is no way to become perfect at it.

We will forget. We will remember too late, noticing only after the words have already left our mouths. This is not a failure of the practice. In some ways, the forgetting is part of the practice, because every time we notice that we have left ourselves, we have already begun to return.

The next opportunity is never far away: the next conversation, the next email, the next difficult moment, or simply the next breath. That is one of the gifts of the breath: it keeps offering us another threshold without asking us to deserve it.

The next time you notice a response forming inside you, perhaps resist the temptation to improve it, suppress it, or immediately turn it into an NVC sentence. Instead, notice that something has happened in you. Feel the movement of the breath. Let yourself become aware, however briefly, of what you are feeling and what matters to you.

You might ask yourself quietly:

What is happening in me? What matters to me here? How would I like to meet this moment?

The questions are not a formula. They are ways of remembering that there is a person here before there is a response. Sometimes the answer will be to speak, sometimes to listen, sometimes to ask for a little time, sometimes to say nothing at all.

The pause does not tell us what to do.

It gives us a chance to discover that we have a choice.

And perhaps that is enough.

. . .

The chapters that follow will take us into the practices of connection: observation, feelings, needs and requests, and the many ways these come alive in listening, empathy, honesty and the other practices of being human with one another.

But before we begin learning any of them, I want to linger here a little longer, because the deepest invitation of the Zero Step may be simpler than communication: to notice the places where we move without arriving.

Reaching for the phone before we have felt ourselves wake. Saying yes before we have discovered whether there is a yes inside us. Answering before we have heard the question. Defending before we know what has actually been said. Moving on before we have noticed that something in us needs to be acknowledged.

This is not an invitation to live a slower life, nor a call to eliminate reaction. It is an invitation to live with just a little more arrival: to remember, every now and then, that we are here.

The village is still dark. Somewhere a bell has sounded, a lamp has been lit, and someone has sat down before the day begins asking anything of them. For a few moments, there is nowhere else to go. Nothing to fix. Nothing to prove.

The day is waiting, but it has not yet begun.

And perhaps that is where we can begin too.

. . .

A Practice: The Zero Step

Choose one threshold in your day. Only one small seam where you move from one thing to the next: perhaps the moment before you open the door at the end of the day, before you answer the phone, or when your hand reaches for the light switch, the kettle, the keyboard, or the child who is calling you.

When you reach it, do not do the next thing yet. Let one breath go by. You are not trying to calm down, become wise, or prepare an answer. You are only arriving.

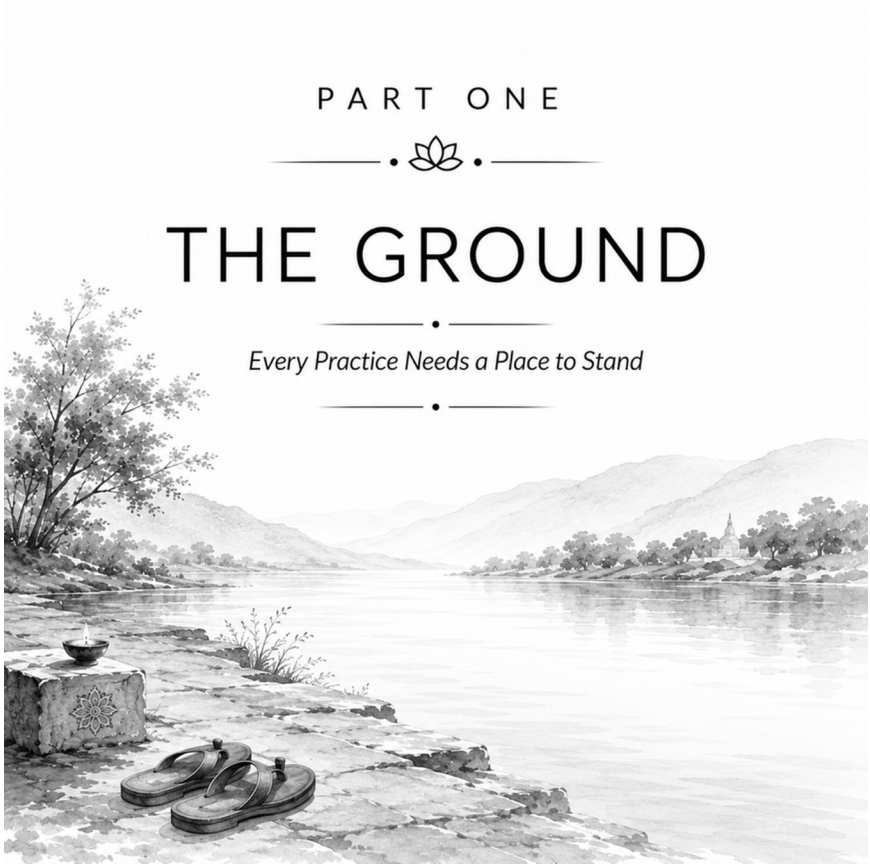
Notice what is here: the weight of your feet, the temperature of the air, the movement of your breath, whatever is already moving in you before you decide anything about it. Then go on and do the next thing.

That is the whole practice.

You will forget most days, passing through the threshold without noticing, and remembering only afterwards. That is not failure.

That is the practice beginning.

The bell does not summon anyone. It only marks that the day has not started yet.



The four movements that make everything else possible.

Chapter Zero showed us the Pause. What comes next is what fills it.

Every relationship, every rupture, every reconciliation moves through the same small sequence, so quietly that most of us never notice it happening. Something happens. Something stirs in the body. Something in us cares about what happened. And then, if we are lucky enough to remember, we ask for what would help.

Observation. Feeling. Need. Request. The Indian traditions never used these four words, but they spent thousands of years circling the same ground: how to see without adding a story to what you saw, how to let a feeling speak instead of silencing it, how to recognize the want beneath the want, and how to ask for what you need without a demand hiding

inside the asking.

The next four chapters take up one movement each: the witness who watches without judging, the body that will not lie to you, the heart that turns out to be larger than any single want, and the surrender that makes a request different from a demand.

This is the ground. Everything that follows: the fire, the meeting, the path, is built on what you find here.



THE WITNESS

Observation without evaluation, and the practice of pure awareness

Sakshi | Sákshi

The witness; the awareness that sees without being captured by what it sees

Everything in the morning practice of the Indian traditions moves toward a single moment: the person sits down, and stops. The washing is finished. The lamp is lit. The preparations are complete, and now nothing at all is being done.

That looks like the end of the preparation. It is actually the reason for it. When a person stops adding to the day, something becomes possible: there is a little space in which we don't have to do anything yet. And what we find in that space is not something we have created. It was already there, underneath everything we were adding. It is there now, while you read this sentence, whether or not anybody rose early enough to notice.

There was a time in my life when I believed that what I thought about a situation was the situation. That the story I told about an event was the event. That the meaning I immediately assigned to what someone said or did was its real and final meaning. I suspect you know this experience. It

is the ordinary human condition: we live inside our own interpretations, and we mistake those interpretations for reality.

Marshall Rosenberg began his teaching on NVC with what he considered one of its most fundamental practices: the ability to observe without evaluation. To see what actually happened, the words spoken, the action taken, the silence that fell, without immediately covering it with judgment, analysis, or story. When observation and evaluation become mixed together, people are likely to hear criticism. And when people hear criticism, they stop listening and start defending. Connection becomes difficult. We are alone in our interpretations again.

This sounds simple. Observe without evaluating. But try it for five minutes and you will discover how quickly the mind adds something to whatever it sees. It asks: What does this mean? Is this good or bad? What should I do? Who is at fault? The distance between seeing and judging is so small, and we cross it so quickly, that we rarely notice the leap. The judgment arrives with the perception, dressed in its clothes and speaking in its voice, and we take it for reality.

The Indian traditions had been exploring this territory for centuries. They noticed that the ordinary mind does not simply see; it immediately interprets, compares, remembers, predicts, judges. Every perception seems to arrive with something already attached to it. The yogic tradition gave a name to these movements of the mind: *Chitta Vritti*. *Chitta* can be understood as the mind-field, and *vritti* as the movements or fluctuations that arise within it: the endless ripples of thought, opinion, memory, and story.

Patanjali, writing the foundational text of yoga, described the practice of yoga as the settling of these movements. Not their destruction. Not the attempt to stop thinking. A quieting, so that something underneath the movement can be seen more clearly.

And then, almost immediately, he tells us what happens when the movement settles: the seer rests in its own nature. When it does not settle, the seer takes the shape of what is moving.

Three short ideas, and much of the map is there. There is something that sees. There is what moves across what is seen. And most of the time, we become so identified with the movement that we forget there is a difference between the two.

What lies behind this movement is what the traditions came to call *Sakshi*, the witness. And here the tradition offers something that changes the practice completely: the witness is not something we have to build. It is not a skill we have to acquire. It is already here. It is the awareness that notices what is happening before we decide what it means.

The *Sakshi* is not cold or detached. It can hold fear without becoming fear, notice anger without being driven by it, experience grief without being completely swallowed by it. It is perhaps the most intimate thing about us, so close that we overlook it entirely, because we are always looking through it rather than at it.

The word itself carries something of the teaching. *Sakshi* is the ordinary word for a witness: someone who was present and can say, "I saw this." The tradition took that simple idea and turned it inward. What if there is something in us that can be present to our experience in the same way, not judging it, not changing it, simply seeing?

Sit with what that implies, because it took me a long time to feel rather than merely understand. Something in you has been present for everything you have lived through. The moments you are proud of and the moments nobody else ever saw. The small cruelties and the private failures and the ordinary Tuesday afternoons you have entirely forgotten. Something was there for all of it.

And it did not hand down a verdict.

It was present at your worst moment and did not turn away. It did not conclude that you were a bad person because you had done something you regretted. It simply saw. And it is seeing now.

The traditions were not asking people to leave their lives behind. They

were asking them to recognize something already true: that you are more than what is passing through you. You are like the sky, not the cloud passing through it. The cloud is real. The storm is real. But neither is the whole sky.

This raises an obvious difficulty. If the witness is what does the looking, how could you ever look at it? Turn around to find it and you find only more things being seen: a sensation, an idea about awareness, a pleasant feeling of spaciousness. Every one of those is another cloud. The witness does not appear as an object in its own field of vision.

So the Upanishads offered an instruction that sounds like almost nothing at all: *neti*, *neti*. Not this, not this. Whatever you find, that is not it, because you found it. The sensation can be noticed. The thought can be noticed. The idea of who you are can be noticed. Let each one be seen and released. You do not have to arrive at the witness. You simply begin to notice that whatever you can observe is not the observer itself.

This is where the connection with NVC becomes interesting.

When Marshall invites us to observe without evaluation, he is asking us to do something that is deeply consistent with this way of seeing. He is asking us to notice what happened without immediately becoming captured by our interpretation of what happened. The NVC practice does not create the witness. It gives us a practical doorway into noticing it.

And the doorway is very ordinary.

Something happens.

We notice what happened.

We notice what we are adding to it. And, for a moment, we do not have to believe everything our mind is telling us about it.

I remember sitting in a difficult conversation with someone I loved, a conversation that had turned into an argument I did not want to be having. She said something that landed in me like a stone. My chest

tightened. My thoughts raced. And somewhere beneath the tightening and the racing, I found something that NVC had begun to train in me: a small, quiet capacity to notice.

I am having a strong reaction.

Something just happened.

I can feel it landing in me.

That noticing, just that, without the full story of what it meant and what she had done and what this said about our relationship, created a pause. A tiny gap between what had happened and what I did next. In that gap, something became possible that would not otherwise have been possible: a choice about how to go ahead. Not a mechanical choice, not a strategic calculation, but something more like the choice available to a person who is awake rather than one who is dreaming.

I had not made that pause. It opened on its own, the way it sometimes does, and for once I happened to be standing in it.

The traditions speak of this gap as one of the most precious things a human being can come to know. Not the gap as emptiness, but the gap as freedom. It is the freedom that belongs to the witness: awareness that is present but not completely captured, awake but not driven.

Over time, and with practice, what begins as a fragile, intermittent noticing can become more familiar. The witnessing awareness becomes less an occasional refuge and more a steady background to experience. You are still fully in your life, fully feeling, fully engaged, fully alive to the texture of each moment. But you are not only your reactions. You are also the one who can see the reactions arising. And that seeing, that steady watching presence, becomes the ground on which everything else in this book can stand.

There is a way of misunderstanding all of this, and I want to name it here, because I lived inside the misunderstanding for a while and because the language invites it.

It is possible to hear "step back and watch" as "step away and stop feeling." We can turn the witness into a kind of balcony above our own lives, a safe place from which nothing quite reaches us. But this is not the *Sakshi*. It is something the defended self can create when experience becomes too much to hold. It has an unmistakable quality: it is cold, effortful, and slightly absent from the moment.

The witness is the opposite of this. It is not distance. It does not make experience thinner or hold it at arm's length. It allows experience to be fully felt without requiring us to become completely identified with it. The sky does not protect itself from the storm. It simply allows the storm to be exactly as large as it is without believing that the storm is the whole sky.

This matters practically, and immediately. You cannot empathize if you are completely captured by your own reaction. You cannot hear another person's pain if you are busy defending yourself against it. You cannot touch your own need honestly if your mind has already wrapped it in a story about who is to blame. The witness is not a luxury in this practice, and it is not a retreat from it. It is what makes contact possible.

And when it is present, the first thing it shows you is almost never a thought.

. . .

A Practice: Resting in Observation

Choose a recent interaction that left you unsettled. Something manageable, not the most difficult one. Sit quietly for a few moments and bring the scene to mind.

Now, as precisely as you can, describe what actually happened in words so specific that a video camera could have captured it. Not "she was dismissive," but "she looked away while I was speaking and then changed the subject." Not "he attacked me," but "he raised his voice and said, 'That is always your

problem.'"

Notice what happens as you do this. Notice whether the charge of the memory shifts, even slightly, when you speak only about what was seen and heard rather than about what it meant. You have not denied the meaning. You have simply set it aside for a moment so that you can look at what is actually there.

Now rest for a moment in the awareness that is doing this looking. Not in the memory, and not in the analysis. Simply notice the quiet presence that is aware of both.

Do not try to find it. If you find something, that is one more thing being seen; let it go. You are not looking for a special experience. You are simply noticing that seeing is happening, and that it has been happening all along.

Even for thirty seconds.

This is the witness. This is where the practice begins. And it is the first of the four things that live in the pause:

I am here.

• • •

And having arrived, having stopped adding to what is already happening, something else becomes possible. We can begin to notice what is moving inside us.

It is not speaking in sentences. It is closer than that, and older, and it has been trying to tell us something for most of our lives.

END OF SAMPLE

Thank you for reading

You have read the opening of the book, Chapter Zero and Chapter One.

The journey continues through the body's wisdom, the universal heart, anger, the enemy image, honest speech, empathy as presence, gratitude, protective love, freedom, and wholeness.

Spiritual Heart of Nonviolent Communication
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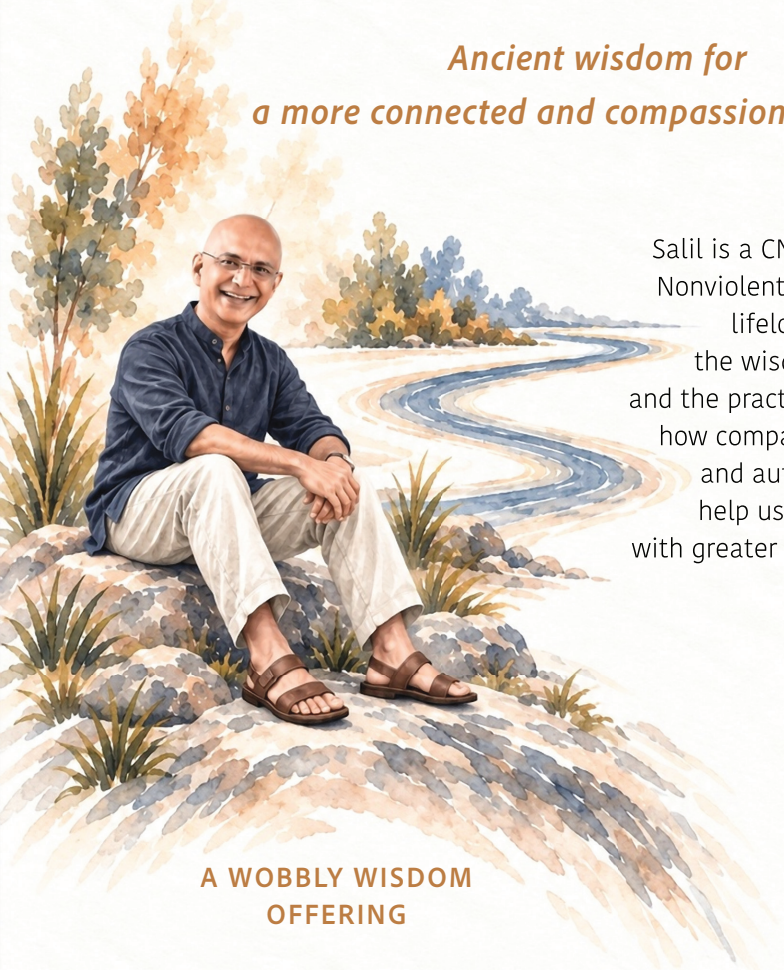
—AN ANCIENT INDIAN BLESSING



This book explores the meeting point of two profound streams of wisdom — the ancient spiritual traditions of India and the transformative practice of Nonviolent Communication.

Through personal stories, practical reflections, and timeless insights, it reveals NVC not just as a communication tool but as a spiritual path — one that softens us into our shared humanity and invites a more compassionate world.

Ancient wisdom for a more connected and compassionate world.



Salil is a CNVC Certified Trainer of Nonviolent Communication and a lifelong learner. Inspired by the wisdom traditions of India and the practice of NVC he explores how compassion, self-awareness, and authentic connection can help us navigate life's journey with greater ease, humility, and joy.

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