

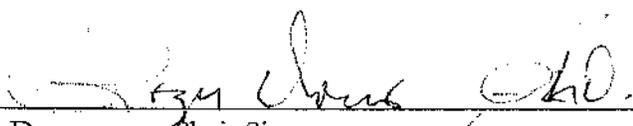
Mindful Counseling:  
Nonviolent Communication as a Mahayana Skillful Means

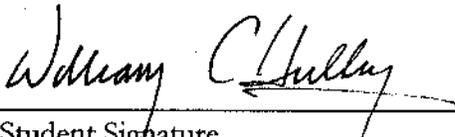
This paper submitted by William C. Hulley

As a Master's Thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Master of Divinity degree

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Faculty Signature 11/30/06  
Date

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Department Chair Signature 11/30/06  
Date

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Student Signature 11-27-06  
Date

Department of Religious Studies  
Naropa University  
Boulder, Colorado

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### *Scope*

In this paper, I describe a Mahayana counseling approach based on Marshall Rosenberg's

Nonviolent Communication process steps, including:

- Definitions of counseling and suffering that establish the basis for an approach I call Mindful Counseling,
- A normative model of Nonviolent Communication that describes its view, practice and result,
- A demonstration that this model is practically congruent with Mahayana view,
- A description of several ways in which Nonviolent Communication is used within Mindful Counseling.

My focus is twofold: providing a rationale for offering Nonviolent Communication as a basis for a Mahayana counseling method – which I call *Mindful Counseling* in this paper – and suggesting ways in which it might be used to help relieve client suffering. Because this is a new area of study<sup>1</sup> my emphasis is on establishing a theoretical ground for Buddhist chaplains who want to use Mindful Counseling. While I do attempt to demonstrate utility by providing several examples of techniques and their intended results, an in-depth examination of the method in practice, along with other research, remains to be done; this is the subject of the last section of this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> As I suggest in the literature review, Buddhist chaplaincy and Nonviolent Communications as a counseling approach are relatively new areas of research interest.

## *Basis*

Mindful Counseling is based on my work as a chaplain at the Boulder Shambhala Center in Boulder, Colorado in 2005 and 2006. During this time, I studied and practiced Nonviolent Communication<sup>2</sup> as a counseling technique in a wide range of situations. Based on my experience and feedback from clients, I believe that a Mahayana-influenced application of Nonviolent Communication helps clients to alleviate their suffering. I developed the normative model and Mahayana interpretation of Nonviolent Communication presented in this paper to provide a theoretical basis for this belief.

## *Form*

This study is divided into Ground, Path and Result sections:

- Ground: Overview and Rationale,
- Path: Methodology, Literature Review, Normative Model and Mahayana Interpretation,
- Result: Mindful Counseling and Future Directions.

In the first section I lay out the basis for this work. I then describe my methodology, sources I used in my research, a normative model of Nonviolent Communication and a Mahayana interpretation of that model. In the final section I illustrate ways in which Nonviolent Communication can be used as a mindful counseling practice and suggest directions for

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<sup>2</sup> I attended my first Nonviolent Communication workshop, led by Marshall Rosenberg, approximately five years ago, and have studied it as a personal practice since then. Before my internship, I had not worked with Nonviolent Communication as a counseling approach.

further study. I also provide a bibliography that includes cited and useful works along with books that those interested in using Mindful Counseling will likely find helpful.

### *A Note on Terminology*

I use the term *chaplain* interchangeably with *counselor*. I also use the terms *counseling*, *therapy* and *psychotherapy* interchangeably, primarily in the literature review and, to some extent, in the sections describing the counseling approach. Rather than use third person pronouns, which I find to be awkward, I attempt to use “he” and “she” equally when referring to clients and counselors. Nonviolent Communication is a service mark of the Center for Nonviolent Communication (CNVC) and Marshall Rosenberg. As the Center requests, I use the term and its abbreviation – NVC – when referring to the materials and ideas of Dr. Rosenberg and CNVC certified trainers. I use Mindful Counseling to describe the Mahayana-influenced approach to Nonviolent Communication that I describe in this paper.

### Rationale: Roots, Counseling and Buddhism

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#### *The Roots of Mindful Counseling*

I serve as a chaplain for a Buddhist community center. Many of the people with whom I work are confronting death or violence, struggling with drugs or alcohol, beginning or ending relationships or feeling overwhelmed by changes in their spiritual, sexual or professional identity. Others ask that I join them in celebration, meditation or a quest for community. Our interaction may be no longer than a phone call or it might unfold over weeks or months. But whether our connection is mournful or joyful, short or long, many of the people with whom I

talk have a difficult time expressing emotion, are trapped in judgment, self-criticism, blame and punishment or spend much of their time living in the past or for the future. Moreover, no matter the reason for our initial contact, their suffering<sup>3</sup> surfaces in all but the most superficial interaction.

I also noticed that I heard, at the heart of every conversation, a (mostly unarticulated) request, such as for meaning, appreciation, community or empathy. Having had a little training in Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication process, hearing these requests encouraged me to consider Nonviolent Communication might be helpful for my clients. Being a meditation practitioner, I also wondered if mindfulness practice might "amplify" Nonviolent Communication in helpful ways. My curiosity about these two questions led me first to experiment with Nonviolent Communication as a mindfulness practice and eventually to use it as a counseling approach with my clients.

As I did so, I found myself asking whether Nonviolent Communication was really congruent with the Mahayana view upon which my training as a chaplain is based, and if so, how. To answer these questions, I decided to examine Nonviolent Communication through the lens of Tibetan and Zen Mahayana teachings. This exploration, and the counseling approach that came out of it, is the inspiration for this paper.

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<sup>3</sup> Suffering is defined, in a Mahayana sense, later in this paper. For now the everyday interpretation of the word applies.

## *What is Counseling?*

The literature of pastoral counseling usually talks about what it *is not* or describes it as a practice of teaching and advice giving. (Corsini, Wedding 1995, 3) None of the definitions I found adequately described what seemed to be happening in my interactions with clients, leaving me to ask, “What is counseling from a Mahayana perspective?” Combining what I found in the pastoral counseling literature<sup>4</sup> with my understanding of Mahayana practice, I developed this working definition:

Pastoral counselors assist clients by helping them relate to their world as-it-is rather than how they think it should be. They do so by combining simple presence with various skillful means derived from their spiritual training and contemporary psychotherapeutic practice.

Pastoral counseling, as defined here, lies between basic attendance<sup>5</sup> and psychotherapy. Chaplains often do more than basic attendance; for example, they may serve as a mirror in which a client discovers something about their view of reality or act as guides to specific spiritual practices. On the other hand, they don’t “do” therapy. Rather than diagnosing or treating in the therapeutic sense they use psychotherapeutic techniques to help people relate to, and experience, their life as it is. Pastoral counseling might be best described as the practice of the “awakening of one heart by another, of sincerity by sincerity. Although words

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<sup>4</sup> Wicks, Parson, Capps (1993), as an example, is representative of mainstream pastoral counseling thought.

<sup>5</sup> Basic attendance is the nondirective practice of being present to the experience of the other. *The Seduction of Madness* (Podvoll (1990)) is a wonderful book-length description of the practice.

can express it, and can point to it, they cannot substitute for it. It is the authentic expression that occurs when concern with all that is inessential drops away.” (Brazier 1995, 13) This is the sense of the term *counseling* that guides my work with clients and the one that informs my use of Nonviolent Communication as a Mahayana counseling technique.

### *Does Buddhism Matter?*

I present Mindful Counseling as a Mahayana approach, but it seems reasonable to ask if there is anything particularly *Buddhist* about it. On one level the answer is probably not. My experience as a chaplain suggests that relieving suffering is less about the right theoretical or spiritual stance than one’s ability and willingness to help the client be open to their life in the present moment. However, for the people with whom I work, the spiritual basis of my chaplaincy often matters a great deal; it is rare for me to encounter a client that does not want to talk about how “being a Buddhist” influences “being a chaplain.” Whether the label has any ultimate meaning, I am a *Buddhist* counselor because they see me as such.

Moreover, whatever effort theorists have invested in framing counseling as pure science,<sup>6</sup> counseling within the context of chaplaincy is, plain and simple, a spiritual endeavor. Even when my counseling work does not concern explicitly spiritual issues, it is based on a Buddhist worldview that may be quite different from the one that my client holds. To say

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<sup>6</sup> “Scientific clinical psychology is the only legitimate and acceptable form of clinical psychology.” from *Manifesto for a science of clinical psychology*, <http://psy.ed.asu.edu/~horan/ced522readings/mcfall/manifesto/manifest.htm> (accessed on 9.24.06)

“Buddhism matters” is to be aware of the implications of this difference and take them into account when serving as a counselor.

## Approach

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In this section I describe the methods I used to develop an understanding of the relationship between Mahayana Buddhism and counseling, describe a normative model of Nonviolent Communication, show that the model is congruent with Mahayana theory and describe its use in Mahayana pastoral counseling.

### *Context: The Literature of Counseling, Nonviolent Communication and Buddhism*

The counseling approach described in this paper integrates Nonviolent Communication, contemporary psychotherapeutic and mindfulness practices and is grounded in my understanding of Western Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. The literature in each of these areas is very rich; to choose references for this paper, I used a combination of the following criteria:

- Does the author *directly* address the one of these areas: Nonviolent Communication, the integration of mindfulness practice and counseling or the influence of Zen or Tibetan Buddhism on counseling?
- Would most chaplains or therapists accept the work as a secular reference for counseling as practiced in a pastoral (rather than clinical) setting?
- Would the work be accepted as representative of the Tibetan and Zen Mahayana view in the lineages that inform my spiritual identity and practice?

These criteria exclude, for example, potentially useful writing on focusing,<sup>7</sup> empathic communication<sup>8</sup> and Christian pastoral counseling while allowing me to focus on works that played a key role in formulating Mindful Counseling, influenced my identity as a chaplain or might serve the reader wishing to explore the integration of Nonviolent Communication, mindfulness practice and counseling. Future research on Mindful Counseling could fruitfully investigate some of the connections that I discovered, but could not address, in this work.

### *Developing a Model of Nonviolent Communication*

To the extent that there is a common understanding of Nonviolent Communication, it is based on a single book, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*. (Rosenberg 2003a) Those writing about Nonviolent Communication do so as practitioners rather than theorists; no one has, to date, published a normative or clinical model of Nonviolent Communication. Since I needed such a model to determine the congruence between Nonviolent Communication and Mahayana theory and practice, I developed the one presented here. In doing so, I was less interested in capturing the nuances of Nonviolent Communication or producing a formal grammar<sup>9</sup> than I was in constructing a description of Nonviolent Communication view, practice and result that most practitioners would recognize as a reasonable prototype.

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<sup>7</sup> See Eugene T. Gendlin (1996) *Focusing-oriented psychotherapy: a manual of the experiential method*. New York: Guilford

<sup>8</sup> For example, Ivan J. Miller (1989) *The therapeutic empathic communication (TEC) process*. [American Journal of Psychotherapy](#). v. 63, n. 4, pp. 531-545

<sup>9</sup> I think that this is an area for fruitful research, as it will provide a basis for using Nonviolent Communication more broadly in psychotherapy.

I constructed the model in three steps: developing a list of potential concepts from Rosenberg (2003a), checking for their appearance in other Nonviolent Communication literature and finally, estimating their importance by the pervasiveness of their use in the literature. For example, while the concept that “the unconscious influences perception” is discussed, as in Le Compte (2000), it does not appear frequently enough in other work to warrant being included. On the other hand, the idea that “language shapes perception,” appears in all of Rosenberg’s writing, along with Connor, Killian (2005), Bryson (2004) and Hart, Hodson (2004), so it does. The resulting model is normative in the sense that the view, process and result are based on the ideas most often found in the work of the best-known practitioners of Nonviolent Communication.

### *Establishing the Congruence of Nonviolent Communication with Mahayana*

In this section, I focus on demonstrating that the basic assumptions of Nonviolent Communication, the primary practices and the intended result are practically congruent with Mahayana theory as expressed in contemporary Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. I open with a definition of suffering, which is important to the understanding of Nonviolent Communication as a Mahayana practice. I attempt to show that Nonviolent Communication theory and practice are generally in harmony with the Mahayana presentations on suffering, emptiness<sup>10</sup> and Buddhature. The result, a description of a Mahayana-influenced Nonviolent

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<sup>10</sup> Emptiness in the Mahayana teachings means, most simply, that all things lack any sort of inherent existence. Another way of saying this is that all things are dependent on other things; no thing is permanent, endless or unchanging.

Communication model, is the ground of a series of techniques – called Mindful Counseling – for working with clients in the context of Buddhist chaplaincy.

### *Describing the Practice of Mindful Counseling*

In this section, I describe what Mindful Counseling looks like in practice, suggesting three ways in which Nonviolent Communication process steps can be used as pastoral counseling practices:<sup>11</sup> awakening the Buddhanature, demonstrating the role of rigid cognitive strategies in suffering and inculcating mindfulness as a daily practice. The description of each method, which is drawn from my experience as a chaplain applying the Mahayana model of Nonviolent Communication, includes a definition of intention, method of action and expected result. My intent is to demonstrate Mindful Counseling in practice rather than to offer an exhaustive or clinically precise presentation of specific techniques.

### *Describing the Result of Mindful Counseling*

In this, the final section, I demonstrate that Mindful Counseling meets the definition of Mahayana counseling, focusing on the ways that it can help the client come into the present moment, discover some of the sources of their suffering and awaken the wisdom and compassion of Buddhanature. I emphasize that the client finds relief from suffering, not in her attempts to overcome or ignore it, but in developing an authentic relationship with the situations in which it arises. Finally, I propose that the client already has everything she

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<sup>11</sup> Clinicians will recognize these as *interventions*, a term I avoid due to its violent connotations.

needs in her quest to make this connection; Mindful Counseling is merely a skillful means for helping her discover this fact in her own experience. When she does, suffering is naturally reduced.

## The Literature

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In this section, I describe the literature on pastoral counseling, Nonviolent Communication and the integration of psychotherapy that I reviewed or used in developing Mindful Counseling. I include a brief description of the most important work and provide a summary of those authors who have had the most influence on my work.

### *Nonviolent Communication*

There is little formal research on Nonviolent Communication. Developed by Marshall Rosenberg in the 1960s, it is most often used in classroom and mediation rather than clinical settings. The Nonviolent Communication literature, reflecting this focus, consists mostly of experiential descriptions and practice manuals. Generally the literature is by practitioners, for practitioners, and written in non-clinical language.

The foundation text for Nonviolent Communication is Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (Rosenberg (2003a)). It is an instruction manual, describing the basic view of Nonviolent Communication, the process steps and their use in everyday situations. This text is supported by a workbook, Leu (2003), which describes a thirteen-week study program and provides information on leading Nonviolent Communication

practice groups. In 2005, Rosenberg released *Speak Peace in a World of Conflict* (Rosenberg (2005a)), drawing on his work in conflict mediation. The book describes the Nonviolent Communication process and its spiritual basis, and discusses empathy, anger and using Nonviolent Communication in difficult situations.

Rosenberg has also published a series of shorter guides to specific uses of Nonviolent Communication such as working with anger. (Rosenberg (2005b)) Each of the guides reviews the basic principles of Nonviolent Communication and describes its use in a particular context. One of these, Rosenberg (2004a), collects a series of interviews in which Rosenberg describes the spiritual basis of Nonviolent Communication. The material includes useful clarifications on the Nonviolent Communication concepts of feelings, needs, requests and empathy.

Nonviolent Communication is often taught through video and audiotape demonstration courses. Rosenberg (2004b) is the most referenced introductory course on Nonviolent Communication. Rosenberg (2006) covers more advanced topics such as mediation, reconciliation and the role of Nonviolent Communication in social change. The audio and video courses reprise the structure of Rosenberg's written material and are interesting because they present "live" examples in a way that cannot be duplicated in written form.

Nonviolent Communication as a classroom practice is described in Hart, Hodson (2004). The book is divided into two parts: an overview of relationships from a Nonviolent Communication perspective and how to "give and receive" in ways that meet student and

teacher needs. There is a strong emphasis on building safety and trust in the classroom as the foundation for the learning environment.

Three recent books, Le Compte (2000), Connor and Killian (2005) and Bryson (2004) focus on clarifying empathy, the process steps of Nonviolent Communication and the role of self in compassion, respectively. Le Compte (2000) integrates Nonviolent Communication with the psychodynamic concepts of unconscious process and projection. Connor and Killian is divided into two sections: an explanation of the basic tenets of Nonviolent Communication and a series of dialogues showing Nonviolent Communication in action. The book includes an excellent set of exercises and practice examples, along with an interview with Rosenberg. Bryson (2005) focuses on Nonviolent Communication as an individuation process. Each of these authors deepens Rosenberg's original work in helpful ways.

Rosenberg, Molho (1998) describes the use of Nonviolent Communication in a hospital setting and provides an overview of the basic process concepts and practices. Kashtan (2002) and Dreiling (2002) describe the use of Nonviolent Communication in educational settings. Kashtan (2002) focuses on Nonviolent Communication for educators. Dreiling (2002) describes using Nonviolent Communication to create a course on labor relations and the global economy. Hart, Hodson (2005) is a guide to using Nonviolent Communication as a parent or teacher, adapting the general principles of Nonviolent Communication for specific situations.

## *Buddhism, Meditation and Psychotherapy*

The first writers to explore<sup>12</sup> the intersection of Western psychotherapy, Buddhism and meditation were probably D.T. Suzuki, Eric Fromm, Richard De Martino and Alan Watts. *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* (Suzuki, Fromm, De Martino (1960)) came out of a 1957 workshop that the authors led in Mexico. Using distinctly different approaches, each author concludes that psychotherapy and meditation practice are complimentary approaches to alleviating human suffering. *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* was followed by Watts (1961), *Psychotherapy East and West*. Like Suzuki, et al, he argues for an integration of Western and Eastern approaches in the treatment of suffering.

The contemporary discussion about integrating Buddhism, meditation and psychotherapy has generally remained in the groove carved by these two books, though there are a few dissenting voices.<sup>13</sup> Most of the current work rediscovers previously explored territory, focuses on a particular issue such as pain or depression or introduces the reader to Buddhism using psychological concepts<sup>14</sup>. For this paper, I selected books that I think best represent the integration of Buddhism and therapy or are most relevant to developing a workable Mahayana counseling approach.

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<sup>12</sup> In the West, that is. Japanese theorists began discussing the parallels between psychotherapy and teaching meditation in the early twentieth century.

<sup>13</sup> For example, “[Psychotherapists] do not in the ultimate sense transcend the ego structure. They really seem focused on developing a functional ego structure with which you can cope effectively and adequately with the existing culture..” (Kornfield, Dass, Miyuki (1998))

<sup>14</sup> Respective examples of each include *Buddhism and Psychotherapy Across Cultures*, Mark Unno, ed; *The Zen Path Through Depression*, Philip Martin; and *The Psychology of Buddhist Tantra*, Rob Preece. See Epstein (2006) for a good review of recent releases.

Masis (2002) offers a good overview of the field, dividing the debate on the integration of Buddhism and therapy into three streams. In the first, writers concerned that Buddhist teachers and students are ignoring their psychological wounds argue for an integration of psychotherapy and meditation practice. The second group, composed largely of therapist-practitioners, encourages the use of meditation as a psychotherapeutic intervention. The third, most conservative, group sees meditation as valuable training for therapists but is generally wary of the integration of meditation and therapy. The counseling approach I describe in this paper is most closely aligned with the work of the first two groups of authors.

There has been a similar discussion about Buddhism and therapy taking place outside the United States, mostly in Japan. Unfortunately, English translations of Japanese literature are limited. A good overview is available in Young-Eisendrath, Muramoto (2002), a collection of papers that explore Buddhism and therapy from Zen, Jung and Freudian perspectives. The papers by Onda (2002), describing the work of Enryó Inoue, and Payne (2002), a comparison of Buddhism and psychotherapy, are particularly helpful overviews of Japanese thinking. Proponents and critics of each stream of the integration debate are included in other papers.

In the United States and Great Britain, authors such as John Welwood and Mark Epstein are continuing to explore the integration of Buddhism and psychotherapy. Epstein (1995), Epstein (1998) and Epstein (2001) examine the psychotherapeutic implications of the four noble truths and the potential role of meditation practice in the therapeutic encounter. Welwood (1983) has been influential in redefining the client-counselor relationship in Buddhist terms.

Welwood (2000) follows in the tradition of Suzuki and Watts to suggest an integration of psychotherapy and spiritual practice. Esptein and Welwood are probably the authors cited most frequently by others in the field.<sup>15</sup> Other representative authors include Anthony Molino, Gay Watson, David Brazier and Barry Magid, all of whom support the integration of meditation practice and therapy.

Molino (1998) explores the overlap of psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism, seeing them as the “two ‘defining’ voices of contemporary culture.” Watson (1998) makes a strong argument for Buddhism as an “inspiration for contemporary psychotherapy” in a presentation heavily influenced by Heidegger, Lacan and Nagarjuna. Brazier (1996) describes a counseling framework that sees therapy as a Mahayana practice and gives mindfulness practice a central place in the therapeutic encounter. *Ordinary Mind* (Magid (2005)) describes the “common conceptual framework” of character change in Zen and psychoanalysis, focusing on the centrality of mindfulness practice.

Alongside these explicitly Buddhist discussions, there is a fourth stream – represented by Jon Kabat-Zinn and Stephen Hayes – that uses meditation as a clinical intervention. Kabat-Zinn (1990) teaches meditation as a pain management practice and Kabat-Zinn (1994) describes it as a way to manage everyday stress. Kabat-Zinn also produced a series of guided audio meditations to accompany his books.

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<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.amazon.com/Awakening-Heart-John-Welwood/dp/0394721829> for a list of citations of Welwood’s work by other authors. (accessed on 9.15.06)

Stephen Hayes developed Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) to help clients free themselves from suffering arising “from the illusions of language.” (Hayes, Smith 2005, 6)

ACT is rooted in mindfulness practices but Hayes believes that “new [secular] means are needed to augment those that evolved in another, slower millennium.” The foundation texts of ACT are Hayes, Strosahl, Wilson (1999); Hayes, Strosahl (2004); and Hayes, Follette, Linehan (2004). These works cover ACT theory and practice and its place in the broader field of cognitive-behavioral therapies. Hayes, Smith (2005) is a useful layperson’s guide to ACT in the form of a self-help manual.

Other secular approaches to mindfulness psychotherapy are described in Baer (2006), Orsillo, Roemer (2005) and Germer, Siegel, Fulton (2005). The first describes four major categories of mindfulness-based therapy and their clinical effectiveness. Orsillo, Roemer (2005) provides an overview of mindfulness-based treatment applications for anxiety. Germer, Siegel, Fulton (2005) presents a theoretical and practical justification for the use of mindfulness practice in therapy, focusing on the therapeutic relationship and specific applications. These books, along with those on ACT, represent a growing focus on evidence-based mindfulness treatments for a variety of disorders including anger, anxiety, depressive relapse, eating disorders, psychosis and borderline personality disorders. (Baer 2006, xvii)

Descriptions of mindfulness-based treatments that have been used with children and adults, in medical and clinical settings and in individual and group settings are also available. (Hayes, Strosahl (2005))

## *Mahayana View*

As I have noted, a comprehensive survey of the relevant Mahayana literature is untenable. Taking to heart Padmasiri De Silva's conclusion that "the criteria for judging the truth of a theory do not rest on mere tradition, the use of logic or speculative reason. It has to be tested by experience; experience of course is not mere sense experience but also intuition and insight" (De Silva 2000, 13) I depended upon writers that reflect my experience in the lineages of Dōgen Kigen Roshi and Chōgyam Trungpa Rinpoche. This says more about my limited capacity to integrate all of potentially helpful teachings than it does about a particular teacher or lineage that I might have included in my research.

Among Dōgen's many translators and commentators, I found the work of Taizan Maezumi Roshi, John Daido Looi Roshi, Francis Dojun Cook and Masao Abe to be most helpful. Dōgen's view of Buddhanature and the centrality of practice as described in Abe (1992) and Cook (1978) heavily influenced my view of human nature and the integration of meditation and counseling. Maezumi (2001) contributed to my understanding to the role of personal responsibility. I turned to Looi (1996) when I am caught by the seeming paradox of Mahayana emptiness and the very real human experience of emotions and needs.

Unlike Dōgen, Chōgyam Trungpa Rinpoche's teachings, though widely available, have not yet spawned a commentarial literature. For this paper I depended most heavily on Trungpa (2005), a collection of his talks on psychology and meditation, Trungpa (2001) on the importance of actualizing the Mahayana teachings through practice and Trungpa (1981) on

the means of making a relationship with suffering. Ray (2000) was my primary authority on questions of Mahayana theory and practice.

### *Pastoral Counseling*

As might be expected in a new field, there is no extant English literature of Buddhist pastoral counseling or chaplaincy. A Library of Congress search reveals seven books, five in Japanese, mentioning either topic; the two English language books are histories of particular Buddhist sects. A search of *American Journal of Pastoral Counseling*, *Pastoral Psychology* and *Journal of Counseling Psychology* along with the database *Academic Search Premier*, *PsychINFO*, *SocINDEX* and *PsycARTICLE*<sup>16</sup> reveals only eleven articles since 1975 that mention Buddhism and only one, on Christian forms of meditation, that mentions it in any depth (Driskill (1989)).

Most of the literature of pastoral counseling is based on particular expressions of Judeo-Christian theology and practice and little of it met my inclusion criteria. Of the books and papers I reviewed, Wicks, Parsons, Capps (2003), a comprehensive survey of Christian pastoral counseling, was the most helpful. I referred to it most often in developing the working definition of pastoral counseling I use in this paper.

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<sup>16</sup>*Academic Search Premier* covers 3,600 peer-reviewed titles; *PsychINFO*, 2,000,000 citations; *PsychARTICLE*, 56 peer-reviewed titles. (accessed on 4.15.06)

### *Summary – Major Influences from the Literature*

In the Nonviolent Communication literature, the writing of Rosenberg, Le Compte and Connor and Killian have been most helpful for developing the normative model of Nonviolent Communication. Welwood, Brazier and Watson make clear the value of mindfulness meditation for clients and counselors. The Kabat-Zinn and Hayes presentations of mindfulness as an “everyday” practice influenced my understanding of Nonviolent Communication as a mindfulness practice. The commentaries on Dōgen by Maezumi, Abe, Cook and Loori, the teachings of Trungpa and exposition of Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism by Ray provided the basis for reframing Nonviolent Communication as a Mahayana counseling practice. Wicks, et al. was my primary reference for Christian pastoral counseling.

### *A Normative Model of Nonviolent Communication*

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In this section I develop a normative model of Nonviolent Communication view, practice and result that is based the work of Marshall Rosenberg and other prominent practitioners in the field. The view is described in a series of assertions about reality, human nature, language, action and responsibility, the practice in terms of the Nonviolent Communication process steps and the result as the freedom to give and receive without fear.

*View: The Ground of Nonviolent Communication*

In the West, we commonly believe<sup>17</sup> that human existence is rooted in chaos, scarcity and violence: “Violence simply appears to be the nature of things. It’s what works. It seems inevitable, the last, and often the first resort in conflicts.” (Wink 1999, 48) This view, though rarely articulated, deeply influences how we view ourselves and others, what we see when we look at the world around us and the range of actions we believe possible. (Rosenberg 2005, 18) Given how deeply we hold it, is not surprising that we see scarcity, competition and conflict as the natural order of things and expect to live in a world of endemic violence and coercive behavior.

Nonviolent Communication asks us to consider a very different view of reality, one in which we are an expression of Divine Energy<sup>18</sup> and the world is an abundant realm in which our needs can be met without war, cruelty or bloodshed. In it, we find that:

- The world is abundant rather than limited,
- Human nature is giving and compassionate rather than selfish and indifferent,
- Direct personal experience has greater validity than any description of it,
- Violence is a learned behavior rather than innate human quality,
- Language shapes, rather than merely describes, the world we perceive,
- Unrecognized subjective perceptions artificially limit the range of potential action,

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<sup>17</sup> In this paper, Western culture and ideas are taken to be “common.” They are not, however universal, as evidenced by the very different worldviews of most Aboriginal societies.

<sup>18</sup> Rosenberg uses the terms Divine Energy, Divine and God interchangeably, especially in Rosenberg (2004a).

- Valid needs are at the root of every action,
- Needs are the universal expressions of the human condition rather than preferences,
- Feelings are an accurate indication of whether or not needs are being met,
- We are individually responsible for the choices we make in meeting our needs.

Nonviolent Communication asserts that when we experience reality from this perspective, we see the world and ourselves through a lens of compassion, express our natural capacity to give and receive and assume that others are able to do the same. It asks us to rethink basic ideas we have about the nature of reality and human existence, most importantly that we privilege direct experience over evaluations of that experience or thoughts about past or future that arise in connection with it. Taking this view brings us into the present moment and reveals that the world and we are something different than we normally imagine. In this section, I examine each of these assertions in more detail and describe the practice and fruit that comes of working with them.

### The World is Abundant

We are taught to believe that whatever we need isn't, and won't be, readily available. (Bryson 2004, 265) Because the "fact" of scarcity is so much a part of our cultural ethos, it is normally impossible for us to consider the possibility of abundance. (Rosenberg 2003a, 172) But this is really just an idea that we have been taught. In fact, "we've been given this great and abundant world for creating a world of joy and nurturing." (Rosenberg 2004, 10)

The assumption of scarcity is reinforced by our education, media and economic system, so much so that we assume it to be irrefutable. Nonviolent Communication suggests that seeing scarcity in another way, as a concept, will help us to realize how often our needs can be satisfied without competing for, or consuming, material resources. Nonviolent Communication also argues that working from an presumption of abundance unleashes our ability to create a world in which abundance is a fact.

### The Essence of Human Nature

We are taught that humans are “naturally incapable of peaceful coexistence” (Wink 1999, 47) and “deprived of original holiness.”<sup>19</sup> In contrast, Nonviolent Communication suggests that we “are Divine Energy, that we have such power to make life wonderful, and that there is nothing we like better than to do just that.” (Rosenberg 2004a, 31) When we connect with this nature, we “enjoy giving and receiving in a compassionate manner.” (Rosenberg 2003a, 1) Moreover, this essence is untainted by any sort of permanent or inherent evil quality.

This assumption about human nature echoes the first; as the world is abundant, so are human beings naturally compassionate and unmarked by inherent evil. The common idea that humans are inherently flawed in some way “contributes to a kind of thinking that attributes wrongness in one’s adversaries, and a corresponding inability to think of oneself in terms of vulnerability.” (Rosenberg 2003a, 18) To be able to think of oneself and others as unmarked

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<sup>19</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, <http://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism/pls2c1p7.htm> (accessed on 9.24.06)

by evil makes it possible to distinguish between humans and their actions, even when the latter cause great harm. Consequently we are more likely to see others as allies rather than adversaries and more accepting of our needs as valid expressions of our true nature.

## The Primacy of Experience

Cognitive skills are highly valued in our society, often to the detriment of direct experience.

Nonviolent Communication concludes that direct experience is more valid than any description or evaluation of it:

Experience is, for me, the highest authority<sup>20</sup>. The touchstone of validity is my own experience. No other person's ideas, and none of my own ideas, are as authoritative as my experience. It is to experience that I must return again and again, to discover a closer approximation to truth as it is in the process of becoming in me. Neither the Bible nor the prophets – neither Freud nor research – neither the revelations of God nor man – can take precedence over my own direct experience." (Rogers 1961, 23)

Cognition, especially in the form of evaluation, is not to be ignored but is of limited use in determining our true needs and those of others. Cognitive labeling is *always* evaluative; the structure of our language prevents it from being anything else. This limitation is apparent even in the labels that we consider to be neutral, such as “cook” or “bank teller”. (Rosenberg 2003a, 28) Labeling replaces experience with designations and obscures the dynamism, richness and complexity of people and situations. Learning to work out of our experience rather than our evaluation frees our creative capacity – which is as rich and complex as experience itself – to respond more accurately to the situations in which we find ourselves.

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<sup>20</sup> For a brief biography of Rogers, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl\\_Rogers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl_Rogers) (accessed on 9.20.06)

## Violence is Learned Rather Than Innate

If humans are naturally good rather than evil, then violence must be an acquired behavior rather than an innate human quality. (Rosenberg 2005a, 17) Seeing our nature in this way reminds us that our violent thoughts, words and actions are culturally determined, if deeply engrained, strategies for getting our needs met rather than inherent to our nature. If violence is culturally determined rather than innate, we must have the capacity to choose other means for meeting our needs.

Seeing violence as a choice allows us to recognize that human beings are not their actions. This distinction is critical to understanding that humans are not inherently evil even when they act in ways that cause immense suffering. It offers the possibility of a world in which nonviolence, rather than violence, is the normal response to conflict, even when force must be used to prevent harm. It also helps us to see the crucial difference between nonviolence and passivity; the former is an act of compassion, the latter one of submission. Nonviolent Communication never suggests that we must submit to violence to avoid using force if force is what it takes to avoid harm, only that our need to do so can always be met without judgment or punishment. (Rosenberg 2003a, 162)

## Language Shapes Perceptions

Our habit of mediating experience through language shapes our perception of, and reactions to, reality. (Connor, Killian 2005, 25). Nonviolent Communication asks us to consider how the language we commonly use creates artificial distinctions such as right/wrong,

abundance/scarcity and friend/enemy. (Rosenberg 2003a, 15) We also believe that our particular use of language<sup>21</sup> is privileged over others, which further reinforces our sense that the way we make distinctions is more right than the way that others do.

As many who have studied the role of language<sup>22</sup> in shaping perception have noted, how we communicate determines what we notice – and don't – in the world around us. Ignoring this fact allows us to avoid taking responsibility for our choices: if we see only “terrorists” when we encounter people entering a mosque, we are unlikely to worry much about the violence inherent in repressing religious expression. Discovering that our everyday language distorts our perceptions forces us to consider the relative nature of our judgments and frees us to learn to use language in new ways. As we do, we are more likely to be tolerant of the views of others, stumble upon opportunities to cooperate and become aware of our interdependent nature.

### Subjective Perceptions Influence Action

We are unconsciously and habitually influenced by language processes that affect our choice making by distorting our perceptions.<sup>23</sup> “The language we use and the thoughts we have inform the kind of actions we take.” (Connor, Killian 2005, 25) Nonviolent Communication

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<sup>21</sup> For an introduction to the ideology of language see, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/language\\_ideology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/language_ideology) (accessed on 11.10.06)

<sup>22</sup> See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/semantics> (accessed on 11.10.06)

<sup>23</sup> See Hayes, Strosahl, Wilson (1999) for a good explanation of this process.

reminds us that to respond creatively to what we are truly needing, we must learn to recognize and discard the cognitive filters that limit our range of choices.

This range is influenced by our culture, language and society. Note that these things are just that, influences. They are not the sole, nor even most important, determinants of our actions. Nonviolent Communication makes clear that we cannot assign responsibility for what we do to what we have been taught or the world in which we live. Accepting this idea weakens our reliance on externally determined categories, rules and labels and helps us gain access to, and take responsibility for, the needs that are at the root of our actions.

### Human Needs are Universal

However different our preferences might be, we share a basic set of inherent needs<sup>24</sup>, “that, as humans, we like to experience and express.” (Connor Killian 2005, 15) Our needs are a priori reasonable expressions of human nature. This definition makes clear that needs are quite distinct from strategies, the plans we devise to get our needs met. We all experience needs in a common way even if we each express their presence differently. We also learn that our awareness of a particular need may be high or low in any given moment; we can always choose to forgo meeting some needs in service of others.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Nonviolent Communication has much in common with Maslow’s theory of needs. For an introduction to Maslow, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow\\_hierarchy\\_of\\_needs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow_hierarchy_of_needs) (accessed on 9.25.06)

<sup>25</sup> For example, I might forego food (as in a hunger strike) thereby consciously choosing – in the service of other needs – not to meet my need for nourishment.

Assuming that needs are universal expressions of the human condition makes clear our common nature and moderates the tendency to see our needs as more or less important than the needs of others. Seeing this commonality sparks our natural empathy, “if everyone needs just what I need, I can imagine what they might be feeling when that need arises.” It also helps us to distinguish between what we need and the strategies that we each use to get our needs met. When this difference is clear, it becomes easier to work with others to co-create strategies that meet everyone’s needs in a given situation.

### **Actions Are Always in the Service of Needs**

Every human action is in the service of meeting basic, universal human needs. (Rosenberg 2005, 66) Our actions may be evaluated as destructive or life serving, tragic or heroic, self-serving or compassionate but all are “expressions of our own values and needs” (Rosenberg 2003a, 16). This says more than “every action has a reason,” it suggests that every action has a reason grounded in the most basic expression of our human nature.

Understanding that actions are in service of needs, we begin choosing what we do based upon our experience rather than our opinions and we are able to see that others are trying to do the same. We are able to recognize the difference between the needs of others and the sometimes poor, even incredibly harmful, choices they make in trying to meet them. We discover that directly connecting with our needs is more likely to lead to choosing actions that meet them in a nonviolent way.

## Feelings Are Based on the State of Needs

We commonly assign responsibility for our feeling state to the thoughts and actions of other people or events that we cannot control. (Rosenberg 2005a, 35) In truth, our feelings arise in accordance with the state of our needs; at most, outside forces stimulate awareness of the state of “met” or “unmet” we are experiencing in the present moment.

Discovering that what others do in the present moment influences but does not determine what we are actually feeling locates control of our life within, rather than outside, our person. Further, accepting that feelings are directly rooted in what we are needing rather than our cognitive judgments – however influential – creates a connection with them that short circuits our normal dependence upon evaluation. This connection plays a key role in our ability to remain in the present moment of experience and see, without judgment, what others and we truly need.

## Personal Responsibility

Most of the time, we believe that we should not be held responsible for our choices because others compel them. Nonviolent Communication asserts that “we don’t do anything that isn’t coming out of choice.” (Rosenberg 2005, 66) In the same light, it is clear that we are not responsible for the choices that others make. Nonviolent Communication asks us to see that language, culture, society, personal history and the actions of others may influence our experience but do not relieve us of the responsibility for seeing our needs and the strategies we choose for getting them met.

The idea of personal responsibility makes clear that, whatever else is influencing us, we are ultimately in charge of our own lives, our needs and our choices. Taking responsibility for ourselves diminishes the probability that we will use coercion to get our needs met or submit to others who choose it as a strategy. Nonviolent Communication presumes that all human needs are worthwhile: we needn't feel guilty or shameful about our needs even though we do need to own them. Accepting this, we diminish the power of societal norms based on scarcity, competition and compulsion and are more able to act out of our true nature, which is compassionate and giving.

#### Summary: Nonviolent Communication View

Our dependence upon the language-mediated experience of reality severely limits our ability to perceive human nature and reality for what they are: expressions of Divine Energy. Further, the language we use encourages us to choose actions based on a view of the world as chaotic, competitive and violent. (Le Compte 2000, 44) The result is that we fail to see the commonality of human needs, believe that we are competing for scarce resources and are justified in choosing violent strategies in our interactions with others. (Connor, Killian 2005, 28).

Focusing on practically differentiating between experience, which is inexpressible, and the cognitively processed result, as it is known through words, makes clear the limits of latter. Our true needs are found only in direct experience; thus we learn the difference between needs, as defined here, and strategies, plans of action that we devise to meet our needs.

(Connor, Killian 2005, 55). With this difference clear, we can take responsibility not only for meeting our needs but for the strategies we choose in doing so. (Bryson 2004, 95)

Each of the assertions described here asks us to reconsider our “common sense” understanding of the way the world works and suggests that our cognizing is not always the most useful interface with reality. Moreover, what we take to be certain truths about humanity (for example, that it is inherently evil) are actually concepts that we can choose to discard. Finally, they suggest that the assumption that our needs can be satisfied only if we are willing to engage in strategies of reward and punishment is, experientially, just not so. Accepting these assertions weakens the concepts that keeps us from the direct, present moment experience of reality, our feelings and our needs, and helps us act out of our true nature, which is divine, wise and compassionate.

*Practice: The Process Steps of Nonviolent Communication*

The process steps of Nonviolent Communication teach us how to experience this alternative to what we commonly assume to be reality. The process steps – making *observations*, determining *feelings* and *needs*, and making *requests* – are each in the form of a question:

- Observations: what is actually happening separate from our evaluative overlay?
- Feelings: what affective state arises when we observe what is happening?
- Needs: what needs are apparently connected to the feelings we are experiencing?
- Requests: what actions are we wanting that might meet our needs?

In this section, I will explore how each of these steps helps to “establish a flow of communication, back and forth, until compassion manifests naturally” (Rosenberg 2003a, 7).

### Separating Observations from Evaluations

We are subjective decision makers that see the world filtered through personal history, society and language. Nonviolent Communication suggests that our actions are not completely determined by any of these things<sup>26</sup> even if they are strongly influenced by all of them. But to make decisions that reflect what is actually happening in the world, we must learn to recognize, and to whatever extent we are able, to free ourselves of this filter. This is the task undertaken in the first process step: separating *observation* from *evaluation*.

Rosenberg defines *observation* as “the ability to call to [someone’s] attention to – concretely, specifically – what the person is doing that we like or don’t like, without mixing in an evaluation.” Since we cannot observe what someone else is thinking, statements about another’s mental state are not observations but evaluations. We pay attention, not to what we imagine someone is thinking, but to what we experience them doing. (Rosenberg 2005a, 31)

We can emphasize actual experience over cognitions about it by: (Rosenberg 2003a, 30)

- Separating facts from opinions and inferences,
- Distinguishing between prediction and certainty,

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<sup>26</sup> Rather, it makes the same argument as Benjamin Whorf: “We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way — an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language” (Whorf 1956, 212)

- Being specific about referents, time and place.

Nonviolent Communication observations are factual statements of who, when, where and most importantly, *what* is happening as we experience the world. Evaluation is not banished (it is seen as a useful tool) but is clearly distinguished from observation. This exposes the difference between experience and the thoughts and emotions<sup>27</sup> that experience might be stimulating. The practice of observation makes it clear when we are acting on our judgments about experience, rather than experience itself (Rosenberg 2003a, 15-24) and establishes a basis for choosing to act without judgment. In making and communicating observations, we also begin to reshape our perception of the world and the range of responses to it that we believe to be available to us under most circumstances.

### Experiencing Feelings

In Western culture, the word *feeling* is used to describe both affective and cognitive states. Unfortunately, the affective sense has also acquired a connotation as being a less than trustworthy state of being.<sup>28</sup> This being so, we tend to prefer thinking about feelings over experiencing them. The second process step of Nonviolent Communication, *experiencing feelings*, distinguishes between the affective and cognitive sense and privileges the former

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<sup>27</sup> There is an important distinction between feeling and emotion in Nonviolent Communication: feelings are direct affective experience while emotion is a mixture of a feeling and our thoughts about it.

<sup>28</sup> *Feeling, seeing and right political action* is an example.  
[http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/alexander\\_technique/107614](http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/alexander_technique/107614) (accessed on 9.25.06)

over the latter. In essence, it asks us to observe our inner state with the same awareness as the first step suggests we pay attention to the outer.

This introduces the idea that feelings are experienced somatically and quite distinctly from thoughts. (Connor Killian 2005, 30) The experience of this distinction leads to the discovery that feeling is the key to uncovering our needs. (Rosenberg 2003a, 42) To experience feelings directly, we must learn to:

- Distinguish between thoughts (cognitive) and feelings (affective),
- Experience and name feelings accurately but non-judgmentally,
- Accept feelings to be internally rather than externally caused.

Calling attention to the difference between feelings as affect and feelings as cognition emphasizes the relative nature of cognitive evaluation. Studying how our feelings manifest, we discover that using certain words in connection with the phrase “I feel” causes us to mistake thoughts about what we are feeling for the experience itself: (Rosenberg 2003a, 41)

- Words such as *that, like, as if,*
- The pronouns such as *I, you, he, she, they, it,*
- Names or nouns referring to people,
- Descriptions of what we think or believe,
- Descriptions of other people’s actions, thoughts or words.

Believing that feeling is a cognitive process leads us to assume that feeling is predicated on outside events rather than our internal state. Compare for example, “I feel abandoned when

you tell me that you want to spend the evening alone” to “I feel lonely.” In the first, “abandoned” is a judgment that may or may not be connected to our affective state and it suggests that our feelings are mostly contingent on external activity when they, in fact, are not. In the second, feeling is understood and experienced to be affective, self-referenced and without evaluation of self or other.

The difference between these two statements of feeling makes clear our current locus of control, gives us a way to test whether we are actually experiencing our feelings or just thinking about them and demonstrates how verbal expressions of feeling mixed with evaluation are likely to limit connection with others. (Rosenberg 2003a, 46) Taking responsibility for our actions is also more likely when we understand that our feeling state, upon which we base most of our choices, is largely independent of external causes. In choosing to experience our feelings rather than separate ourselves from them through cognition, we gain a more accurate understanding of the relationship between the external world, our needs and our affective state.

### Uncovering Needs

Needs are internal states of lack.<sup>29</sup> Our awareness of a need is not predicated upon specific actions by others or our preferences but on an affective sense, arising out of experience, that

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<sup>29</sup> Nonviolent Communication, like Maslow, offers an “I know it when I see it” definition of needs.

we might best label as “wanting.” Defined as such, needs are quite distinct from strategies<sup>30</sup>: actions that we take because we believe that they will meet a particular need. (Connor Killian 2005, 62) The confusion between needs and strategies is a fundamental stumbling block to meeting needs in satisfying ways. To reduce this confusion, we must distinguish between the awareness of needs, which is an affective experience, and the generation of strategies to meet needs, which is a cognitive activity. Accurately experiencing our needs requires us to:

- See the difference between needs as causes and strategies as responses,
- Stay with and name the experience of needing accurately,
- Accept needs to be internally, rather than, externally determined.

The ability to see the difference between experience and cognition is critical to naming needs in ways that we and others can understand, recognizing the underlying needs driving our strategies, accepting needs as internally resourced and taking responsibility for meeting them. The process of connecting with our needs requires an “emptying the mind and listening with the whole being” (Rosenberg 2003a, 91) and then naming what we encounter directly and simply. Through this experience,<sup>31</sup> we learn to recognize our real needs and maximize the chance that we can develop satisfying nonviolent strategies for meeting them.

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<sup>30</sup> There is a vast literature on wants and needs. In it, *needs* are often define as things that we must have to survive while *wants* are niceties of one kind or another; we can use *strategies* to satisfy either. Nonviolent Communication, has no notion of “wanting” as typically defined.

<sup>31</sup> What Rosenberg calls “seeing what is alive in us”

When we experience the difference between needs and strategies, it becomes possible for us to recognize that our needs are not really different from the needs of others even though our strategies might be. We realize that we cannot assign to others responsibility for meeting our needs or for the strategies we choose in meeting them. (Rosenberg 2004a, 54) Finally, we discover the strength of the link between feeling and needing and the weakness of the links between either of these and external causes.

### Making Requests

In our usual interactions, we assume that we are, in a very real sense, disconnected from the world around us. The first three steps reveals the source of this assumption – our cognitive filters – and how to overcome it, while the fourth, making *requests*, shows us how to reconnect: we ask others to participate voluntarily in the process of meeting our needs and we offer to do the same for them. This step highlights the opportunity for connection inherent in asking others for help in meeting our needs even though we cannot make them responsible for doing so. (Rosenberg 2003a, 67) Working with making requests also reveals how often we try to meet our needs by employing strategies of reward and punishment rather than invitation and cooperation.

Requests ask for positive, observable action, something that others can *do* rather than something they must stop doing. Limiting requests to observable actions insures that we can gauge the extent to which our request has been fulfilled, something not possible if we are requesting a change in thought, opinion or attitude. Asking for something to be done, rather

than not done, limits our ability to rely on negative or coercive language. Because any request – if it has been preceded by the other three process steps – is an acknowledgment of our interdependence, it is also a request for connection. This is true even if we apparently need “non-connection.” For example in asking, “Can you leave the apartment for an hour so I can have some time alone?” we are asking for the cooperation of another even as we are requesting to be by ourselves.

Requesting also helps us to see whether we are actually demanding, rather than asking, for help by suggesting we watch how we react when our appeal is met with some form of “no.” True requests are explicitly free of the presumption of reward or punishment, while demands are not. Our response to “no” gives us a sense of our willingness to be personally responsible for our needs and the extent to which we participate in reward/punishment thinking.

Making requests caps the Nonviolent Communication process. In the first three steps, we discover how to relate more directly and less judgmentally to our experience and to discern the needs that drive our desire to interact with others. In the fourth step, we learn to formulate strategies for meeting our needs that encourage non-coercive connection and to articulate those strategies in a way that makes clear that we are inviting the participation of others directly in our life.

#### Summary: Nonviolent Communication Practice

Nonviolent Communication practice changes the way we relate to the world, first by asking questions about our mode of perception, then offering an alternative and finally, by giving us

a way to behave based upon it. This process is grounded in the belief that the world is abundant and the human divine. It is expressed in steps that work with one or more aspects of this view. Though the practice seems to focus on connecting with our own needs and asking the cooperation of others, it also teaches us how to experience the joy of giving as often as we do the gift of receiving.

Process actions – observing, feeling, needing and requesting – help us to distinguish between direct experience and cognitions about experience. Discovering this distinction leads to a more direct connection with our needs and improves our ability to ask others, directly and simply, for help in meeting them. With practice, we recognize our dependence upon others, their role in helping us meet our needs and our natural ability “to establish relationships based on honesty and empathy that will eventually fulfill everyone’s needs.” (Rosenberg 2003a, 60) This recognition is the fruition of the process of clearly observing the world around us, experiencing our feelings, understanding and naming our needs and requesting assistance in fulfilling them.

For simplicity and brevity, I have presented Nonviolent Communication as a practice of improving one’s ability to stay in, and make requests out of, direct experience. Nonviolent Communication also asks us to see what others do and ask in the same light, as requests coming out of reasonable and wholesome needs based upon an underlying nature of Divine Energy. In the complete practice, everything we say and hear is a request for cooperation, all actions by self and other are in the service of valid needs and every interaction is an

opportunity for connection. The next section describes how this understanding develops with practice.

*Outcome: The Freedom to Give and Receive*

As Rosenberg notes, we live “in a world where we’re often judged harshly for identifying and revealing our needs, doing so can be very frightening.” (Rosenberg 2003a, 55) In the reality of “compelled compliance”, we are caught between the needs we do not believe that we can express and the demand that we assume responsibility for the feelings of others. Caught between, we adopt strategies we hope will “trick” others into meeting our unspeakable needs, including our need for autonomy, and assume that others are doing the same. The result is a state in which we feel constantly starved ourselves and yet pressured to find ways to feed others. Nonviolent Communication, through practice of the process steps, helps us to become aware of this state and its high cost. (Rosenberg 2003a, 58) As this awareness deepens, we begin to claim our needs and encourage others to do the same for themselves.

At this point we understand “what we are not responsible *for*” but “have yet to grasp that emotional liberation entails more than simply asserting our own needs” (Rosenberg 2003a, 59). We have yet to recognize that freedom and interdependence are not contradictory but complimentary and essential qualities of the human condition. As we experiment with cooperative strategies that meet our needs as well, or better, than our usual “me first” choices, we learn to be responsible for ourselves while remaining responsible to others. We gradually

open to the possibility that we do not need to use violence or competitive means to get our needs met or protect ourselves.

This openness allows us to listen and respond to others with the assumption that they want the same things we do, even if we are “speaking Nonviolent Communication” and they are not:

The use of Nonviolent Communication does not require that the persons with whom we are communicating be literate in Nonviolent Communication or even motivated to relate to us compassionately. If we stay with the principles of Nonviolent Communication, motivated solely to give and receive compassionately, and do everything we can to let others know this is our only motive, they will join us in the process and eventually we will be able to respond compassionately to one another.” (Rosenberg 2003a, 5)

This experience deepens our trust in the process and in ourselves. Recognizing that our ability to give and receive compassionately is independent of external conditions opens us to the realization that *everyone*, independent of their ability to express it, is capable of the same thing.

This knowing is the gateway to the deepest result of Nonviolent Communication practice, the expression of “our natural state of compassion when violence has subsided from our heart.” (Rosenberg 2003a, 2) We learn to stay connected with a state of freedom in which the world is a moment-by-moment opportunity to give and receive freely (Connor Killian 2005, 331) rather than a chaotic and violent jungle:

“It’s giving that comes from the heart willingly, where we are giving service to ourselves and others, not out of duty, obligation, not out of fear of punishment, not out of guilt or shame, but for what I consider is our nature, our nature to enjoy giving to one another.” (Rosenberg 2004a, 7)

In this state we naturally experience our essence, Divine Energy, and manifest the joy that comes from receiving the “gift of choice to create the world of our choosing” (Rosenberg 2004, 10). As this experience deepens, Nonviolent Communication becomes skillful way to serve others in addition to being more naturally who we are. (Rosenberg 2004, 9)

The fruition of Nonviolent Communication practice is gradual, beginning with the recognition of our enslavement in a system of language and culture that encourages isolation, competition and conflict and ending in the freedom from that system as expressed in compassionate giving and receiving. It is also cyclic: each moment of freedom is the basis for a deeper recognition of our compassionate nature. The confidence from this recognition opens into the next moment of connection, beginning the cycle anew. This result is non-cognitive and experiential; we come to know and express Divine Energy the only way possible, directly.

*Summary: View, Practice and Outcome in the Normative Model*

The world is a naturally abundant place in which humans find the deepest expression of their true nature through compassionate giving and receiving. This world is usually hidden from us because our perception is shaped in destructive ways by language that confuses the experience of reality with cognitions about that experience. When we connect more directly with our experience, our ability to give and receive becomes apparent, as does the joy that comes from

exercising it. As we come to appreciate and remain in this state, we express our essence – Divine Energy – naturally and continuously in ways that enrich life for others and ourselves.

Nonviolent Communication asks us to work with our observations, feelings, needs and requests. Each step helps us to distinguish the difference between experience and cognition and weakens the idea that expressing needs must create conflict, leading to an experience of our natural ability to give and receive. While the steps are presented as a linear process, each is actually interconnected with, and an expression of, all of the others.

The result of Nonviolent Communication is an experiential understanding of our compassionate nature. Gradually we recognize Nonviolent Communication practice to be a path of personal growth and service. This knowing, in which giving is natural and “violence is impossible” (Rosenberg 2004, 10) is the ultimate fruit of Nonviolent Communication:

“The need to enrich life is one of the most basic and powerful needs we all have. [...] I think that when we “are” that Divine Energy that there is nothing we like more – nothing in which we find more joy – than enriching life, than using our immense power to enrich life.” (Rosenberg 2004, 29)

### Nonviolent Communication as Mindful Counseling

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In this section, I describe the ways in which the normative model of Nonviolent Communication is practically consistent with the Mahayana view of suffering, its source and its alleviation. Working with three principle Mahayana teachings – the four noble truths, emptiness and Buddhature – I reframe Nonviolent Communication’s process steps as a

series of Mahayana counseling skillful means and show how they help the client connect with and express Buddhature. Finally, I describe the intended result of working with Nonviolent Communication in this way.

### *What is Suffering?*

While pastoral counselors serve in many ways, their primary task is the relief of human suffering.<sup>32</sup> What they do in this regard depends a great deal upon their understanding of suffering and our relationship to it. Mindful Counseling looks to the four noble truths and the belief in human nature as empty, wise and compassionate<sup>33</sup> for this understanding. The definition of suffering that comes out of this examination is a cornerstone of this approach.

The Buddha's first teaching was *life is suffering*. The Buddha suggested that suffering is not the actual experiences of pain, change and conditionality inherent in the human condition but what arises when we insist on trying to avoid, overwhelm or ignore these experiences. The more energetic our attempts to make reality – whatever its quality – into something other than it is, the greater our suffering. Conversely, we diminish suffering to the extent that we are able to experience without judgment the painful, impermanent and conditioned nature of our life rather than brace ourselves against it.

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<sup>32</sup> *Pastoral counseling: A national mental health resource*, <http://www.proaxis.com/~jjefff/bkltnmhr.html> (accessed 10.01.06)

<sup>33</sup> Human nature is empty of essence, yet has qualities; it is Buddhature. For a discussion, see Nagao (1991).

Unfortunately, as Steven Hayes has noted, most models of counseling barely acknowledge, let alone assume, these simple facts of existence. (Hayes, Stroschal, Wilson 1999, 4). A Mahayana counseling approach, taking into account this truth, focuses not on attacking or resisting suffering but on helping the client recognize its pervasive nature and source. It assumes that suffering is reduced by relating directly to its causes rather than trying to remove them.

The second noble truth is *the cause of suffering is attachment*. The Buddha suggested that we suffer because we want our lives to be different than they are. We try to push away those people and situations we do not like, freeze into place those that we do and ignore the rest; this is the nature of attachment. The problem is not, as we think, our experience “but rather our response to it: not with impermanence and finitude itself, but with our egocentric fear of it.” (Gay Watson 1998, 176) A Mahayana counseling approach helps the client to see attachment and the part it plays in our suffering rather than teaching us new ways to grasp, avoid or ignore. Mindful Counseling teaches the client to see how thinking about experience rather than being in it contributes to their suffering.

A counseling approach that only recognizes suffering and its source, however insightful, would be profoundly hopeless. The third noble truth, *attachment can be overcome*, responds to the existential hopelessness encountered in the realization of the second truth by suggesting that there are practical ways to reduce suffering. A Mahayana counseling approach suggests ways to free us of attachment and leads to a reduction of suffering. Mindful Counseling

introduces clients to the moments of direct experience when attachment is not present so that the client can discover for himself the connection between non-attachment and non-suffering.

The fourth noble truth is there *is a way to overcome attachment*. The fourth noble truth asserts that every human is capable of attaining freedom from suffering. In Mahayana, this truth is rooted in the dual understandings that all things are inherently empty and all beings have Buddhanature. Nothing, including the most terrible suffering, is unchanging or unending and no human, no matter how trapped in habitual patterns, is incapable of expressing Buddhanature. Mindful Counseling introduces the client to this nature so that she can experience the ways in which connecting with it weakens attachment.

Working with this understanding, a Mahayana counseling approach might define suffering and its alleviation in this way:

Human suffering is pervasive and, in a conventional sense, unavoidable. We suffer because, rather than accept our present moment experience as it is, we habitually try to hold on to, reject or ignore it. To suffer less, we need to free ourselves of these habits. The Mahayana teachings helps us to see that our habits are not fixed but temporary and adventitious and that we already possess that which is necessary to free ourselves of them.

Mahayana counseling's recognition of the role of habitual patterns and its confidence in Buddhanature form the basis for working with suffering. It asks the client to accept both the inevitability of suffering and the potential for finding relief from it on a moment-by-moment

basis. The ultimate aim of Mindful Counseling is to help the client do just this by remaining, as much as is possible, in the present moment awareness of reality.

*Ground: Is the Normative Model Consistent with Mahayana View?*

In this section, I will attempt to demonstrate that the normative model and process steps of Nonviolent Communication have much in common with the Mahayana view of relative reality, human nature, suffering and change. While Mahayana and Nonviolent Communication may not be in agreement on the ultimate basis of human nature or needs, these differences are not significant for the chaplain working in the relative reality of the counseling encounter.

**The World is Abundant**

Nonviolent Communication asks us to see the world as abundant and workable rather than constrained, a view that is echoed in Mahayana teachings such as the *Flower Ornament Sutra*<sup>34</sup> and Chögyam Trungpa's suggestion that we see the world in this fashion: "The world we live in is fabulous. It is utterly workable. [...] We should realize that there is no passion, aggression or ignorance existing in what we see" (Trungpa 2005, 17) Both Nonviolent Communication and Mahayana suggest that our belief that the world is other than this is

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<sup>34</sup> A key teaching of Zen, the *Flower Ornament Sutra* describes the interconnected abundance of reality for the Mahayana practitioner. See <http://www.thebuddhadharma.com/issues/2006/fall/phenomenal.html> for an overview. (accessed on 11.20.06)

rooted in our tendency to choose our perceptions according to our personal definitions of good and bad rather than in the world's true qualities.

### The Essence of Human Nature

Nonviolent Communication and Mahayana Buddhism share a common view of human nature as naturally compassionate. Chögyam Trungpa's reminder that "according to the Buddhist tradition, people inherently possess Buddhature; that is, they are basically and intrinsically good" (Trungpa 1983, 126) is not so different from Rosenberg's: "it is not just something you feel, but it is something we manifest, something we do, something we have." (Rosenberg 2004, 5) In both views, human nature expresses compassion and wisdom naturally; that we do not do so continuously is the result of conditioning rather than some inherent flaw.

Nonviolent Communication and Mahayana probably do not agree about the absolute nature of our essence— as Rosenberg's view of Divine Energy has a theistic quality – but both suggest that it is untouched by relative concepts such as good and evil; within the relative view of Mindful Counseling, this is the critical point.

### The Primacy of Experience

Mahayana and Nonviolent Communication both make clear the importance of direct experience, seeing that:

“whatever one does, whatever one tries to practice, is not aimed at achieving a higher state or at following some theory or ideal, but simply, without any object or ambition, trying to see what is here and now. One has to become aware of the present moment.” (Trungpa 1996, 61)

Without this present moment awareness, we filter experience through a welter of opinions, memories and judgments that separate us from the “complex tapestry [...] of feeling, knowing and sensing” that is a truer experience of reality. (Welwood 2000, 87) Nonviolent Communication, like Mahayana, aims to alert us to the possibility of responding to the world based on direct experience rather than our ideas about that experience.

### Violence is Learned Rather than Innate

Nonviolent Communication and Mahayana both see the tendency toward grasping, violence and ignorance as an acquired, if deeply engrained, habitual pattern. Both agree “violence comes because of how we are educated, not because of our nature.”<sup>35</sup> (Rosenberg 2005, 18)

The Buddhanature teachings make it especially clear that all of our habitual patterns are temporary, if long-held, obscurations of our essential nature. As Chan Master Hongren notes, “The pure mind of all beings is like this, merely covered up by the dark clouds of obsession with objects, arbitrary thoughts, psychological afflictions.” (Cleary 1996, 2)

### Language shapes perception

We have developed a habit of mistaking the label for the thing and then, working with the label-as-the-thing, create a false reality that separates us from our experience. (Ray 2000, 407) What we “see” is not the world around us but a world distorted by the connotations that we have learned to associate with the labels we use. Mahayana and Nonviolent

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<sup>35</sup> Referring here to the essential, rather than relative, aspects of human nature.

Communication are in agreement that this is a limitation rooted in the ways that language shapes our experience: “there are certain things that cannot be said but that must be experienced because, in a very real sense, their nature is experience.” (Fontana 1997, 31) Both suggest that we must understand how to pierce this barrier of labels and so connect more directly with reality.

### Subjective Perceptions Determine Action

Both Nonviolent Communication and Mahayana suggest that we compound the mistake of seeing the label-as-the-thing further by overlaying our cognized experience with distinctions such as *good* and *bad*. We then react to our categorizations, and two levels removed from our actual experience, become “prisoners our own mind and the ways it has construed reality.” (Welwood 2000, 106) Trapped in this mistake, our actions are stimulated, not by our direct experience, but by this construed, subjective and constructed reality. Mahayana and Nonviolent Communication further agree that acting on this “construed reality” is one of the roots of our suffering.

### Human Needs are Universal

Nonviolent Communication describes needs as primal experiences of lacking in a physiological sense. Mahayana agrees that humans share and experience a sense of lacking<sup>36</sup>; this sense is the basis of the first noble truth. Both see needs as universal and describe a

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<sup>36</sup> Mahayana would not agree, however, that “we enjoy experiencing and expressing” our needs as suggested by Connor, Killian 2005 or Rosenberg 2003a as our sense of lacking is the source of our suffering.

collection of needs common to all humans. The two are probably not in agreement, however, about the ultimate status of needs, with Nonviolent Communication suggesting that they are inherently real and Mahayana taking the opposite view. Within the context of Mahayana counseling, with its focus on relative reality, the ultimate status of needs is less important than the agreement that all humans have, and can directly experience, the same ones.

### Feelings Are Based on the State of Needs

Nonviolent Communication and Mahayana both suggest that our affective state is related to the status of our needs. Mahayana describes how feelings arise out of needs that are based upon our karmic<sup>37</sup> heritage. Feelings are affective states of pleasure, pain and indifference that “represent the inevitable fruition of past karma” (Ray 2000, 381). Similarly, Nonviolent Communication suggests that “being aware of what we are feeling, we can know if our needs are being met or not.” (Connor, Killian 2005, 55). Mahayana and Nonviolent Communication are also in agreement that the internal link between feelings and needs is much more important than external stimuli of any sort.

### Actions Are Always in the Service of Needs

As needs give rise to feelings, so feelings give rise to action. Mahayana suggests that the step between feelings and action can be divided into *thirst*: our response to feelings as the tendency to want to possess, destroy or ignore and *grasping*: the manifestation of that

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<sup>37</sup> Karma, as used here, is the sum of past actions and thoughts that serve as the source of our affective states. The implication is that “needs” is a synonym for this type of karma, at least in how feelings are generated.

tendency as action. While Nonviolent Communication and Mahayana may not agree about the ultimate value of action<sup>38</sup>, they do agree that there is value in choosing positive, or life-affirming, ways to meet needs in the relative realm.

### Personal responsibility

Mahayana and Nonviolent Communication both make clear that we are responsible for the choices we make. While it may be true that our needs are based on past karma and outside our immediate control, what we choose to do to satisfy them is not. (Ray 2000, 382) There is always a moment of choice; in Mahayana, this moment occurs between the steps of feeling and thirst, a gap between experiencing a feeling and acting upon it. (Ray 2000, 385) In Nonviolent Communication, the root cause of this moment is not defined, yet it is always apparent when we allow ourselves to experience our needs directly. Whatever the source, Mahayana and Nonviolent Communication are in agreement: we are completely responsible for what we do in that moment of choice. Nonviolent Communication and Mahayana also agree that responsibility is more than just accepting the reality of our situation; that we always have a choice reveals how little influence outside forces actually have on our suffering.

### Summary: Mahayana and Nonviolent Communication

There is little practical disagreement<sup>39</sup> between the Mahayana and Nonviolent Communication views regarding the expression of our true nature, the importance of direct experience or the

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<sup>38</sup> In Mahayana, any action arising out of relative concerns is ultimately pointless. In Nonviolent Communication, the work of writers such as Le Compte suggests otherwise.

role of needs in determining action. Both see the essence of human nature to be without flaw. Both suggest that cognition, however useful in certain ways, creates barriers to experiencing this nature. Both describe the links between needs, feelings and our activity in the world and suggest ways to become aware of these links. Finally, both make clear that we are responsible for the actions we take even as they remind us that our karmic heritage is fixed. These commonalities form the basis for seeing the Nonviolent Communication process steps as a skillful means in Mahayana counseling.

*Path: Nonviolent Communication as an Upaya in Counseling*

As I noted in the introduction to this section, Mahayana counseling recognizes the source of human suffering to be rooted in the way we relate to our present moment experience. It aspires to help us recognize our habitual method of relating to reality and to see that our situation is not hopeless, fixed or unworkable. Finally, it introduces us to the means – our Buddhanature – that is both the path to changing this relationship and the result of doing so.

Mindful Counseling expresses this aspiration in four ways: introducing the client to the present moment, awakening Buddhanature, working with relative reality and practicing mindfulness. Each is designed to give the client a way to recognize experientially the possibility, practice and result of relating directly to the experience of suffering.

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<sup>39</sup> From the point of view of the Mahayana counselor working to alleviate suffering in the present moment, the fact that the two agree within relative reality is what matters.

## Introducing the Client to the Limits of Cognitive Strategies

In my experience, clients almost always enter counseling with two ideas: suffering has an external cause that can be removed and the counselor will show them how to do so. They begin, in Mindful Counseling terms, with a request: *this is my problem; please help me to solve it*. The first task of the counselor is to help the client see that there is actually no way to “solve the problem,” at least in the sense that the client is thinking. The gap that is left in the wake of this realization provides the space for the second step: introducing the client to the idea “the problem” is really rooted in the ways that they separate themselves from their present moment experience rather than some external, controllable cause that counseling will help them to eliminate.

The client typically experiences these facts of the human condition with a deep sense of hopelessness. This is an intelligent reaction to the situation and a critical step in the Mindful Counseling process. To make progress, the client must realize that categorizing and solving problems, the strategy he typically relies upon in dealing with his suffering, has actually never worked. It is not until the client is in this space that he is ready to ask the real question: “If I can’t solve my problem, what can I do?”

To help the client see that the answer to this quandary is not sinking into the hopelessness, running in the opposite direction or pretending their feelings are not real, the counselor suggests that while the human condition may not be solvable, it is workable. She further

wonders aloud if life, however painful, might be free of suffering to the extent that it is actually experienced directly without judgment and in the present moment.

This suggestion, based upon the Mahayana assertion that our habitual patterns are not inherent but adventitious and our true nature not limited but spacious, compassionate and wise, is the heart teaching of Mindful Counseling. The Nonviolent Communication process of *observing experience, feeling feelings, discovering needs* and *making requests*, offered with a Mahayana view, is a technique for awakening this understanding in the client and helping them to experience it again and again. In this section, I describe three ways of doing so: acquainting the client with Buddhature, relative reality and her present moment experience.

### Awakening Buddhature

Buddhature, the intelligence and compassion that “shines through both pain and pleasure; in other words, though any kind of cognitive mind” (Trungpa 2001, 11) is the ground of Mindful Counseling. The Buddhature is the source of our ability to be “simple, direct, intelligent, sane and pragmatic” participants in our unfolding lives. Awakening the client to this nature through the practice of Nonviolent Communication is one of the aspirations of Mindful Counseling. The first two process steps, observing experience and experiencing feelings, are particularly useful in introducing the client to Buddhature since they focus on bringing her into direct contact with reality.

*Observing experience* introduces the client to Buddhature by creating momentary breaks in the stream of cognitive evaluations that he uses to manage his experience of external reality.

The client is taught to return, again and again to the present moment observation of the world around him; each detour into judgment or opinion is framed as an alert to return to this task. Each break, in the Mahayana view, gives the client a profound and unforgettable glimpse of his underlying nature. This glimpse disturbs the client's habitual groove for, as Chögyam Trungpa notes, "Buddhanature is not regarded as a peaceful state of mind" but one that brings about "more dissatisfaction, more questions, and more doubts [...] for we are no longer sucked into ego-oriented situations, but we are constantly woken up." (Trungpa 2001, 19) The client discovers that he not as he thinks himself to be but something else, something indescribably *complete*. This discovery, however fleeting, helps the client to see that suffering is not his natural state and reveals the ground on which he will find relief from it.

*Experiencing feelings* works in the much the same way but from the opposite direction, breaking into the stream of stories that the client tells herself to block the aliveness of somatic experience. For example, the client may be asked to describe her feelings in simple, concrete terms, as in "What am I feeling right now?" Exercises like this creates cognitive gaps that reveal Buddhanature as it is woven into the affective experience of feeling.

*Experiencing feelings* teaches the client to relate to somatic experience as an expression of Buddhanature that does not need to be managed in any way. This is quite different from the psychological approach, which tends to see feelings as a complex mixture of thoughts, stories and somatic experience to be decoded, avoided or remade. The client learns that feelings, however intensely experienced, are a reminder of her true nature. With time, she comes to see

that she is not the stories that she tells herself but the “unconditional sense of wholesome vitality underlying all the ups and downs of circumstance” hidden by them. (Welwood 2000, 183)

These examples demonstrate how Nonviolent Communication, used within the context of Mindful Counseling, can create gaps in the client’s mind stream so that Buddhature is directly experienced. From a Mahayana perspective, this experience is all that is required; Buddhature, once touched, will naturally make itself known. Each moment of awakening, however brief, becomes the ground from which client works to gain a deeper experience of her nature. As she does, the counselor begins to work with Mindful Counseling in a second, deeper way: showing how judgment, storytelling and strategizing, rather than life-as-experienced, is the root of suffering.

### *Working with Relative Reality*

Suffering is, from the Mahayana perspective, “nothing more than the observer judging, resisting, struggling with, and attempting to control experiences that seem painful, scary or threatening to it.” (Welwood 2000, 101) The client’s vast array of control tactics fall, in Mindful Counseling terms, into four broad categories: evaluating, storytelling, strategizing and resisting. Mindful Counseling can be used to help the client see how each of these tactics contributes to, rather than relieves, suffering.

*Observing experience* teaches the client to recognize the practical difference between the experience of the external world and an evaluation of that experience. For example, the client

may be taught to ask the question, “What is happening right now?” and answer with one or two words. Not being caught in “what do I think about it?” the client can connect with her actual experience rather than critiques or judgments of it. Returning to this question again and again makes clear that the client has the habit of burying experience under a mountain of opinions and brings up the question, “Why do I do that?” As the client begins to experience reality-as-it-is, the difference between thinking and experience becomes unavoidably clear.

*Experiencing feelings* helps the client to see her feelings are something different than the stories she might have about them. In *experiencing feelings*, the client is encouraged to bring awareness to somatic experience by describing changes in its intensity, location, duration and felt sense over time. This practice exposes another habitual pattern: using stories to block the direct experience of the energy of feeling. With practice, the client can distinguish the difference between affective and cognitive experience, see that the affective experience is not destructive and recognize the value of not blocking it.

*Discovering needs* can help the client to recognize the unavoidable facts of relative human existence and their dependence upon the belief that these facts can be manipulated, eliminated or ignored. In this step, the client learns to distinguish impersonal needs, such as nourishment, from particularized strategies, such as “a sixteen ounce steak cooked medium rare” by asking the question, “What am I needing right now?” Over time, the client discovers how he is strategizing particulars to avoid experiencing his relationship, as it is expressed in

needs, to the world. The awareness that he develops improves his ability to accept the world-as-it-is and gives him more flexible ways to meet his needs.

The first three process steps shed light on the client's habitual ways of avoiding the direct experience of the world-as-it-is, her relationship to it and the feelings this relationship generates. They also demonstrate – by revealing moments when the client relates directly to experience – that she is capable of doing something different and will not be destroyed when she does. This understanding are the gateway to true relative experience, that is experience unmediated by opinion, judgment and evaluation. The fourth process step, *making requests*, shows the client how to relate to this reality directly.

*Making requests* in the Nonviolent Communication sense leads the client to “begin to settle down to [the] situation, not looking for alternatives at all, but just being with that” which is the direct experience of reality. (Trungpa 2001, 20) In *making requests*, the client asks for nothing more than what her experience tells her she needs – while offering or threatening nothing in return – as she attempts to remain present to whatever happens next. Over time the client learns, whether or not a request is met positively, that she does not need the illusory protection of competitive, untruthful or violent strategies: she is capable of meeting reality directly and does so frequently. With this process step, the client moves out of observation and into relating, actively and directly, with her world.

## Practicing Mindfulness

In a sense, inculcating present moment awareness in the client is a part of every Mindful Counseling technique. Without the stability of mindfulness, the client will find it almost impossible to stay with experience rather than retreat into her opinions and stories about it. The first two uses of Nonviolent Communication in Mindful Counseling give the client what Chögyam Trungpa calls, “a short glimpse of clarity and peace – the open state of mind.” Mindful Counseling, using the Nonviolent Communication process steps explicitly as mindfulness practices, supports the experience of clarity and peace by showing the client “how [...] to use that as a kind of center from which we can expand.” (Trungpa 2000, 11) The client learns how to apply each process step in the present moment, approaching it purposefully, turning to it in all situations and accepting the result without judgment. As examples, I will present several ways to do work with mindfulness using *observing experience*.

Setting the intention – the willingness to return again and again to this moment – in *observing experience* is the ground of making it a mindful practice. When the client does so, she acknowledges that being present to her experience and not judging makes more sense than what she has been doing. The instruction is simple: pay attention to what is happening in this moment and make note of it. If you find yourself caught in the future or past, simply come back. In this exercise, adopting the position of impartial witness to, rather than victim or judge of, reality effectively transforms what was a barrier to experience – evaluation – into an alert that the client has momentarily departed from it. As the client takes this stance again and

again, purposeful application becomes more automatic, at least in a limited number of situations.

The client, seeing the benefits of mindful observation in some situations, becomes willing to experiment with a wider variety of experience, including some that seem painful or threatening. The client may still harbor the belief that some situations can be managed, as evidenced by the effort to pick and choose *when* to be mindful, so he is asked to watch when he chooses *not* to be mindful. Over time, he builds a “catalog” of situations in which he avoids the present moment; this becomes the basis for “mindful mindfulness” exercises in which the client is asked to stay present when he would normally be absent. Exercises like these help the client generalize the results of present moment practice and reveal particularly deep avoidance patterns. More importantly, the client’s naturally wakeful nature begins to assert itself with the result that he finds himself being present without consciously choosing to do so.

As the client’s practice of *observing experience* deepens, she realizes that the distinctions she maintains between different experiences of reality are just another collection of opinions, albeit ones that are very deeply held. At this point, the client might work with a question such as “Why do I believe this to be true?” on a mundane issue such as her choice of entree at a restaurant or her belief that she is intelligent or flighty. As she examines, again and again, how her opinions come to be, she gradually weakens the habit of valuing one over another. This dissolution, combined with the ability to see the difference between experience and

thoughts about experience, helps the client to understand the value of making decisions based on present moment rather than judgments about it.

### **Summary: The Skillful Means of Mindful Counseling**

The counseling techniques presented in this section are a means of helping the client develop a new relationship with her experience of reality, one in which suffering is diminished because she is able to tolerate that experience rather than retreating into cognizing it in some way. I have suggested that each of the process steps of Nonviolent Communication can be used in similar ways: creating moments in which the client's retreat into cognitive strategies becomes clear, bringing him into a more consistent relationship with the present moment or helping him to experience and express Buddhature. Each helps the client alleviate suffering by teaching her, in one way or another, to remain aware of her present moment experience of the world-as-it-is.

### ***Result: The Reduction of Suffering***

Mindful Counseling attempts to show the client that suffering arises, not out of his experience of the world, but out of the ways that he separates himself from it by attempting to grasp, push away or ignore it. Further, it gives the client a series of techniques to discover what part these habitual patterns play in his suffering. With practice, the client comes to understand the difference between experience and cognitions about experience and glimpses of the means – Buddhature – by which suffering can be alleviated.

In parallel with helping the client to see the relationship between her habitual way of relating to reality and her suffering, Mindful Counseling points the client to the moments when she is actually not relating in this way and asks her to notice, experientially, the difference.

Confident in the understanding that merely experiencing reality directly is enough to connect the client with Buddhanature, Mindful Counseling offers various ways in which the client can recognize and eventually learn to return to the gaps in which it appears. With practice, the client first experiences herself free of strategizing and then discovers how to work out of the space of this freedom.

Present moment mindfulness is not presented as a formal meditation practice.<sup>40</sup> Instead, the client is explores in various ways the *nowness* of their perceptions, thoughts and actions while asking if separating from the present moment is actually meeting their needs, even if separating seems to bring a temporary decrease in suffering. This exploration emphasizes the limits of choosing to separate from experience, helps the client experience the relationship between present moment awareness and Buddhanature and demonstrates that the present moment, even if painful, is actually free of suffering.

Nonviolent Communication, reframed as a Mindful Counseling technique, is built upon the Mahayana understanding of suffering and its relief, as described in the definition that I presented earlier:

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<sup>40</sup> Though I consider meditation instruction to be a key technique of Mindful Counseling, discussing it is outside the scope of this paper.

Human suffering is pervasive and, in a conventional sense, unavoidable. We suffer because, rather than accept our present moment experience as it is, we habitually try to hold on to, reject or ignore it. To suffer less, we need to free ourselves of these habits. The Mahayana teachings helps us to see that our habits are not fixed but temporary and adventitious and that we already possess that which is necessary to free ourselves of them.

Rooted in the Mahayana understanding of Buddhanature and emptiness, Mindful Counseling is confident that *every* client already has everything he or she needs. Thus, it does not offer strategies for avoiding, embracing or ignoring suffering, suggesting instead that our habit of doing these things is actually the source of, rather than way to, relieve suffering. To help the client see this and develop a more accurate relationship with reality, Mindful Counseling offers techniques for distinguishing the difference between cognition, perception and feeling, connecting with Buddhanature and staying in the present moment of relative reality.

### Future Directions: A Wish List of Research Projects

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In this section, I describe four directions in which the work described in this paper might be usefully extended: developing Mahayana counseling as a clinical practice, creating a formal model or “grammar” of Nonviolent Communication, creating Mindful Counseling techniques to address specific client needs or challenges and exploring the value of Mindful Counseling as a counselor training method. All arise out of the limitations of the work described in this paper, challenges I encountered as I worked with clients or I what I see to be the role of Mindful Counseling in the discussion between contemporary Buddhism and psychotherapy.

### *Developing a Clinical Practice of Buddhist Counseling*

While authors such as Welwood, Epstein and Brazier have done an excellent job exploring the intersection of Buddhism and counseling, there have been few attempts at defining a Buddhist-influenced clinical practice method other than *Zen Therapy* (Brazier 1995) or *Mindfulness and Psychotherapy* (Germer, Seigel, Fulton 2005). Today, Buddhist counselors looking for a rigorous treatment of mindfulness in clinical practice must turn to secular approaches such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy or Cognitive-Based Therapy. A collection of papers describing a distinctly Buddhist approach to the practical problems of counseling in the manner of Wicks, Parson, Capp (1993) is sorely needed.

### *Creating a Formal Grammar of Nonviolent Communication*

In the same way, it seems clear that this work would have benefited from a pre-existing and more complete statement of Nonviolent Communication's guiding principles, practices and results. As Steven Hayes has noted, advances in clinical practice "are severely limited when they are based solely on specific formally defined techniques" because technique alone doesn't give the practitioner a basis for confronting new problems or creating new techniques that are more than incremental extensions to the existing repertoire. (Hayes, Stroschal, Wilson 1999, 14) My attempt to reframe the Nonviolent Communication process steps as Mahayana techniques demonstrates the challenge of working without a robust theoretical model. The result, while suggesting the value of Nonviolent Communication as a Mahayana counseling approach, is of limited value in telling us *why* or the ways in which we might fruitfully extend the practice. A formal model of Nonviolent Communication, especially one that has been

subjected to a well-conceived Mahayana hermeneutical examination, would allow the creation of a broad range of practices whose mechanism of action could be predicted and tested, thereby greatly increasing the usefulness of Nonviolent Communication in Mahayana counseling.

### *Creating a Collection of Specific Mindful Counseling Techniques*

I have described just a few uses of Nonviolent Communication that I am already exploring in my counseling practice. Moreover, I have focused on the view and fruition of each technique rather than offer practice instructions. I wanted to be sure that the reader has a starting point for exploring why, for example, *observing experience*, creates a connection with Buddhanature without getting bogged down in the specific way in which I framed this process step for a particular client. This approach allowed me to demonstrate that the same process step are applicable to diverse client needs but has limited value as a “how to” guide. In the same way, I have not explored the applicability of Mindful Counseling to specific client struggles such as depression, grief or abuse. It seems that developing specific Mindful Counseling techniques –in ground, path and result form – and studying their usefulness in improving, for example, present moment awareness in grief work would be fruitful.

### *Developing Mindful Counseling as a Counselor Training Method*

Enko Else Heynekamp, in a review of counselor education practices, remarked, “it is striking that being present mindfully, without judging, without focusing on a specific object, either focusing on oneself, or something neutral, is not being taught in psychotherapy education as a

skill.” (Heynekamp 2002, 256) Surely, what is good for the client – present moment awareness and the ability to distinguish between experience and thoughts about experience – is also good for the counselor. I believe that an exploration of Mindful Counseling as a training method for counselors would be a fruitful endeavor.

### Summary: Nonviolent Communication as Skillful Means

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In writing this paper, I hoped to show that Marshall Rosenberg’s Nonviolent Communication process could serve as the framework for working with counseling clients as a Buddhist community chaplain. To do so, I presented Mahayana definitions of counseling and suffering, suggested a normative model of Nonviolent Communication, demonstrated that this model is practically congruent with the Mahayana understanding of human nature, change and suffering, and described how the Nonviolent Communication process steps might be used in a Mahayana approach to counseling. I also described several techniques – part of what I call Mindful Counseling – for helping clients develop an experiential awareness of Buddhature and the present moment, with the understanding that this awareness contributes to the relief of suffering. Finally I offered several suggestions for developing Nonviolent Communication as an integral part of Mahayana counseling.

I developed most of the ideas, including the techniques I describe, while working with clients as a volunteer chaplain at the Boulder Shambhala Center in 2005 and 2006. Mindful Counseling was co-created by my clients and me within the counseling encounter; it would not exist but for their willingness to confront the sources of their suffering. My research on

the integration of Buddhism and psychotherapeutic theory and practice, Mahayana counseling and the normative model arose out of my need to establish a theoretical basis for what we were already doing. My hope is that the result will serve as a starting point for others to develop skillful ways of working with clients in the context of Mahayana chaplaincy.

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