

Zen and Nonviolent Communication

Jirka Lněnička

At the end of September, I attended one of many events happening nowadays at the Vrážné Zen Center, the main temple of the Czech Sangha, called “Zen and Nonviolent Communication.” For those of you who haven’t been to Vrážné yet, it is a great place to practice Zen and experience a lot of together action in a peaceful rural environment, a small village surrounded by forests and hills. The Czech sangha members, as well as practitioners from neighboring countries, love to come here to enjoy a break from the hustle and bustle of city life. They can meet up with their dharma friends, sit short or long retreats, listen to dharma talks, or take part in our sangha weekends, events for families with children, and weekends for dharma teachers—or just apply a little elbow grease, as this place is still growing and any kind of help is much appreciated. Usually, there are several “work weekends” around the year too that are fun and a great opportunity for the sangha to get to know each other better while working in the beautiful garden, getting the wood ready for winter, or helping with the reconstruction of the building.

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The Zen center is residential and there is a teacher living there, our great bodhisattva Jiří (George) Hazlbauer JDPSN. So people can visit most times of the year, including outside the major scheduled events, and enjoy everything this practicing place and its surroundings have to offer. Also, in 2020 the first three-month winter Kyol Che took place in Vrážné.

As a growing community place it is now attracting more and more people from outside of the Kwan Um School, who come to practice Zen, help with whatever is needed, but also to inspire and be inspired. In the past few years, new types of events have been held in Vrážné as well, and this is a brief report on one of them.

In September 2019 there was a weekend workshop, “Zen and Nonviolent Communication,” which was a combination of Zen practice (sitting, chanting, work practice, and kong-an interviews with Jiří Hazlbauer JDPSN), workshops on Nonviolent Communication (led by experienced NVC trainer and longtime Zen student Ondráš Přibyla), and three sessions of yoga (with a professional yoga instructor). For “NVC people” it was an introduction to Zen; for the Kwan Um sangha it was a wonderful opportunity to learn communication skills that they can use in their everyday lives. Both Zen and NVC, each in their own way, explore what is beyond words, and emphasize the need to see and hear clearly, without attachment to our ideas of what is happening—if we want to be able to function well moment to moment. Through role playing, sharing in pairs but also during walks, working in the garden, or simply chatting over a cup of coffee, we learned so much from each other—and about ourselves. As our trainer explained, Nonviolent Communication is often perceived as a set of techniques, but on a deeper level it actually boils down to the question *What am I?*, but

asked from a different perspective than we’re used to. Look inside, understand who you really are, and then say or do whatever it is that needs to be said or done. That clicked just right.

Historically speaking, Nonviolent Communication was developed by Marshall Rosenberg in the 1960s. It is based on the assumption that all people have the capacity for compassion and empathy, and we resort to harmful behavior or violence only when we cannot find more effective strategies to meet our needs. According to NVC, human needs are universal and not in conflict. Instead, it is at the level of strategy where we usually get stuck. For example, a parent and a teenager have the same need



for respect, but the behavior that they believe will help them meet this need may be quite different. The NVC approach is not just interpersonal, though; it also deals with social groups and systems. That is why it is often applied today in conflict mediation, education, psychotherapy, and other areas. But the premise remains the same: a change (at any level, personal or beyond) can occur only if we can get back to our and others' human needs, unattached to our preferred, often habitual, strategies and behaviors. This practice is quite similar, as I understand it, to "put down like and dislike" and "become one," but with more analytical language and a more humanist approach than Zen, which talks more about all sentient beings. (A very good book about Nonviolent Communication and its principles is Miki Kashtan's *Spinning Threads of Radical Aliveness: Transcending the Legacy of Separation in Our Individual Lives*.)

The weekend in Vrážné was a precious time for me and I am grateful I had the chance to attend. Like other participants, I appreciated the balance between the silent and speaking times, which enabled me to digest what I had learned from the interactions and let it sink in. As a teacher and therapist by profession, I often see clarity to be of the utmost importance, but sometimes I lack the skill to express myself clearly. So I find NVC very useful because it helps me to train in this skill.

Some of the NVC practitioners who joined us for the weekend, on the other hand, seemed to be looking for some kind of practice to help them develop a stronger center for dealing with difficult situations and conflicts—training not included in their NVC training and practice.

And all of us can certainly use more bodywork, since we sit in cars and on chairs for many hours every day. The yoga was fun (particularly the part that we did in pairs) and helped us relax and become more aware of what our (and other people's) bodies need, here and now.

In addition to the above mentioned gifts, the weekend highlighted another interesting thing for me, which I'd call cultural differences. Many aspects of our practice related to Korean Buddhism, which, as a longtime practitioner I no longer find unusual or hard to understand, are nevertheless often confusing or even discouraging to modern Europeans. I am always grateful when this happens, as it helps me grasp a little better what some people living in the twenty-first century and beginning with the Kwan Um style of Zen are struggling with. It allows me to look at our practice forms through the eyes of a beginner. It is a bit like hiring a new person to your company who has a lot of questions and makes you reconsider how much of what you do is actually helpful and how some of it is unnecessary, and what things might be due for a few changes. Even though it is tempting to smash this beginner's perspective with some kind of traditional argument, I always try to see it as a unique chance to reflect on questions such as What is the essence of our teaching?

What is the correct situation, relationship, and function? That is when these questions suddenly become very much alive in me.

Furthermore, the Zen and Nonviolent Communication weekend was a marvelous opportunity for me to once again realize some of the treasures of our teaching, and the one that stands out for me most is together action. From helping in the kitchen with meal preparation and cleanup to supporting each other during a challenging part of our walk with many trees and branches on the ground, it was much more than just a workshop weekend where people take part in what they paid for and then relax or party in their free time. (Don't get me wrong—I love parties!) But here we were the ones who made it happen, together, with all the fun and learning included. Once again I realized how important this form of learning and doing is, particularly when integrated with the spiritual teachings—and how rare this practice is in the world today, with so much suffering coming from thinking and acting as if people we are dealing with were our enemies. It is truly one of the greatest gifts our school can offer to this world.

My thanks to everyone who participated in this event, and a warm invitation to all of you to come to Vrážné Zen Center and join us for retreats and other events in which we can be, learn, and do things together. ♦

Jirka Lněnička started practicing with the Kwan Um School of Zen in 2005. He lived in Zen centers in the Czech Republic and Canada for a couple of years, and became a dharma teacher in 2017. He now lives in a small town near Brno, Czech Republic, and works as a certified Zen shiatsu practitioner. He also teaches English as a second language and translates—including translating or editing several books by KUSZ teachers into the Czech language. He is openly gay and hopes to use this karma for the benefit of all beings, including the LGBT+ community and the Kwan Um Sangha.

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Like Magic on Television

Robert Lockridge

In evening practice,
Like magic on television,
My dryness soaks in the liquid essence of your heart.
Later, bowing,
I pour it on the earth like rain.
The grass grows, moist and grateful.

Before retirement, Robert Lockridge worked in government finance as both a public employee and private sector consultant. He came to Zen through Alcoholics Anonymous in 2000, and is now a senior dharma teacher and vice abbot at the Orlando Zen Center.