

## Exploring the Role of Nonviolent Intrapersonal Communication in Enhancing our Self-Concept for Evolution of Responsible Citizenship

Explorando el papel de la comunicación intrapersonal no violenta en la mejora de nuestro autoconcepto para la evolución de la ciudadanía responsable

Explorando o papel da comunicação intrapessoal não violenta no aprimoramento de nosso autoconceito para a evolução da cidadania responsável

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**Abstract:** In contemporary times, a large number of individuals- due to multitude of concerns and challenges- often find themselves engaging in toxic or violent intrapersonal communication. They have to face difficult situations, varieties of inner conflicts and suffer from stress. Besides, violent intrapersonal communication leads to a negative self-concept and lowering of self-esteem. It is within this background that introducing nonviolent intrapersonal communication- to be nurtured and practiced in our daily lives- becomes crucial. By practicing nonviolent intrapersonal communication, a toxic inner communication ecosystem is transformed into a healthy one. When elements of nonviolent intrapersonal communication- like self-compassion, loving kindness towards self, avoidance of being judgmental towards self- are assimilated, the negative self-concept changes into a positive one. This paper will precisely look at this dimension using open-ended self-reports of respondents who have been oriented towards practicing nonviolent intrapersonal communication. Further, the paper will gauge on how the positive self-concept, which evolves by the use of nonviolent intrapersonal communication, gives a direction toward altruistic action, an essential element of responsible citizenship. The overarching goal of the paper is to attempt to develop an intrinsic link between nonviolent intrapersonal communication and its role in the development of a positive self-concept which gives way to altruistic action.

**Keywords:** Nonviolent Communication, Intrapersonal Communication, Self-Concept, Nonviolence, Altruism, Responsible Citizenship.

**Resumen:** En la época contemporánea, un gran número de personas -debido a multitud de preocupaciones y retos- se encuentran a menudo inmersas en una comunicación intrapersonal tóxica o violenta. Tienen que enfrentarse a situaciones difíciles, a diversos conflictos internos y sufren estrés. Además, la comunicación intrapersonal violenta conduce a un autoconcepto negativo y a una disminución de la autoestima. En este contexto, resulta crucial introducir la comunicación intrapersonal no violenta, que debe cultivarse y practicarse en nuestra vida cotidiana. Al practicar la comunicación intrapersonal no violenta, un ecosistema de comunicación interior tóxico se transforma en uno saludable. Cuando se asimilan los elementos de la comunicación intrapersonal no violenta, como la autocompasión, la bondad amorosa hacia uno mismo y la evitación del juicio hacia uno mismo, el autoconcepto negativo se transforma en positivo. En este artículo se analizará esta dimensión utilizando autoinformes abiertos de encuestados que se han orientado hacia la práctica de la comunicación intrapersonal no violenta. Además, el documento medirá cómo el autoconcepto positivo, que evoluciona mediante el uso de la comunicación intrapersonal no violenta, orienta hacia la acción altruista, un elemento esencial de la ciudadanía responsable. El objetivo general del artículo es intentar establecer un vínculo intrínseco entre la comunicación intrapersonal no violenta y su papel en el desarrollo de un autoconcepto positivo que dé paso a la acción altruista.

**Palabras clave:** Comunicación Noviolenta, Comunicación Intrapersonal, Autoconcepto, Noviolencia, Altruismo, Ciudadanía Responsable.

**Resumo:** Nos tempos atuais, um grande número de indivíduos - devido a uma infinidade de preocupações e desafios - muitas vezes se vê envolvido em uma comunicação intrapessoal tóxica ou violenta. Eles têm de enfrentar situações difíceis, diversos conflitos internos e sofrem de estresse. Além disso, a comunicação intrapessoal violenta leva a um autoconceito negativo e à diminuição da autoestima. É nesse contexto que a introdução da comunicação intrapessoal não violenta - a ser cultivada e praticada em nossa vida diária - torna-se crucial. Ao praticar a comunicação intrapessoal não violenta, um ecossistema de comunicação interna tóxico é transformado em um ecossistema saudável. Quando os elementos da comunicação intrapessoal não violenta - como autocompaixão, bondade amorosa para consigo mesmo, evitar o julgamento de si mesmo - são assimilados, o autoconceito negativo se transforma em um positivo. Este artigo examinará precisamente essa dimensão usando autorrelatos abertos de entrevistados que foram orientados a praticar a comunicação intrapessoal não violenta. Além disso, o artigo avaliará como o autoconceito positivo, que evolui com o uso da comunicação intrapessoal não-violenta, orienta para a ação altruísta, um elemento essencial da cidadania responsável. O objetivo geral do artigo é tentar desenvolver um vínculo intrínseco entre a comunicação intrapessoal não violenta e seu papel no desenvolvimento de um autoconceito positivo que dá lugar à ação altruísta.

**Palavras-chave:** Comunicação Não-Violenta, Comunicação Intrapessoal, Autoconceito, Não-Violência, Altruismo, Cidadania Responsável.

## Background

In the course of the authors' work on nonviolent communication, there have been instances when individuals involved in different professions talk about how stress and difficult situations compel them to become violent in their self-talk and inner dialogues. At the surface level, no one is ready to characterize their intrapersonal communication, which is the primary form of our communication and occurs within each one of us, (Stacks and Sellers, 1989) as toxic or violent. Yet the authors deciphered on close discussions with many of these individuals that, while grappling with a multitude of conflicting issues and concerns, aiming to achieve many tasks within a short span of time, and while facing difficult situations at home and workplaces, intrapersonal communication starts becoming violent. This is due in large part to the inability to achieve 'unrealistic goals', and because we may have put before us or the inability to handle the difficult situations. Many of these individuals, during the close discussions in which they shared their experiences, pointed out how violent intrapersonal communication led to increased stress and even depression, lowering of self-esteem and self-concept. In fact individuals seem to get entrapped in a spiral of toxic intrapersonal communication due to these factors. An interesting dimension, which one of the individuals pointed out, was how her toxic intrapersonal communication was pushing her away from being a responsible individual, lowering her self-concept and how it was contributing to minimizing her altruistic work in the community. This laid the foundation of this study and this paper.

A deep reflection on our intrapersonal communication and its various forms reveals that it is not as straight-jacketed as many would think. For instance, if we are trying to instruct ourselves saying "come on, try again, you can do it", it can be described as our self-talk. It is essentially self-directed. Then we may be engaged in a dialogue with ourselves as a monologue, this is called an inner dialogue. Inner dialogues could also involve our imaginary dialogues with other people or groups of people. For example, if we are upset with our friend over some issue, we might get engaged in an imaginary inner dialogue with her/him on the issues we are likely to take up if we meet her/him. Further, our imagined interactions- daydreaming, listening to ourselves and emotional awareness- all form part of our intrapersonal communication.

As a "key source for understanding ourselves and our environment" (Barker and Edwards, 1980), we are both the sender and receiver in our intrapersonal communication (Cunningham, 1989). Even though we may think of our intrapersonal communication as a simple form of communication, a deeper reflection will underscore its complexities. Our inner conflicts, our emotional state, our thought process, the environment around us, the level of our self-awareness, the complexities of our self, our relationships; all of these factors determine the form and quality of our intrapersonal communication. For instance, Deveci and Nunn (2018) talk about how our needs trigger communication with ourselves and others and the role of emotions in all types of communication.

During the course different workshops, as part of their own work with individuals on intrapersonal communication, the authors found its significant role in our well-being which was highlighted through several case studies. For instance during one of the workshops, there was an individual with a stressful job. He had complicated inner conflicts on what to do, yet he was in self-denial on the type of toxic intrapersonal communication he engaged in. His inner communication ecosystem had become dysfunctional and he was full of negative emotions. The inability to improve on his dysfunctional intrapersonal communication made him miss out the signs of his state of burnout. During these workshops, it was revealed how toxic intrapersonal communication led people to pay scant attention to their self-care and were suffering from low self-esteem. This actually can be described as being violent to oneself.

This has been the background of the authors' work on promoting nonviolent intrapersonal communication. Here it would be apt to get a rudimentary insight on ahimsa or nonviolence as, without understanding and practicing the art and science of nonviolence, our intrapersonal communication cannot be nonviolent. Ahimsa or nonviolence is a holistic concept, it entails not only being nonviolent. According to Metta Center for Nonviolence:

Nonviolence is a force in human consciousness that Gandhi called a "living power" and a scientist today would likely call a form of "subtle energy". It can be engaged, with suitable training, by individuals or groups of individuals to exert positive changes on people and society towards others but also towards oneself. It is not right to hurt others or the self. (Metta Center for Nonviolence, <https://www.mettacenter.org/glossary>)"

Mahatma Gandhi had described nonviolence as complete a self-purification as was humanly possible (Harijan, 12-10-1935). In his *Autobiography or the Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Gandhi (1948) notes:

Identification with everything that lives is impossible without self-purification; without self-purification the observance of the law of ahimsa must remain an empty dream....Self-purification, therefore, must mean purification in all the walks of life. And purification being highly infectious, purification of oneself necessarily leads to the purification of one's surroundings. (p. 615)

The idea of nonviolence stems from the philosophy of human interdependence; which means we are all dependent on each other whether human beings, nature and all other living beings. In this context, Gandhi had said, "I do not believe...that an individual may gain spiritually and those who surround him suffer. I believe in advaita, I believe in the essential unity of man and, for that matter, of all that life's. Therefore, I believe that if one man gains spiritually, the whole world gains with him and, if one man falls, the whole world falls to that extent" (Young India, 4-12-1924).

Further, the cosmocentric approach to human nature which forms the basis of Gandhi's vision of nonviolence has been aptly described by Parekh (1997):

The cosmos was a well-coordinated whole whose various parts were all linked in a system of yajna, or interdependence and mutual service. It consisted of different orders of being ranging from the material to the human, each governed by its own laws and standing in a complex relationship with the rest. Human beings were an integral part of the cosmos and were tied to it by the deepest bonds. In Gandhi's favourite metaphor, the cosmos was not a pyramid of which the material

world was the base and the human beings the apex, but a series of ever-widening circles encompassing humankind, the sentient world, the material world, and the all including the cosmos. (p. 49).

Constant inner reflections on the essential nature of human interdependence coupled with emotive faculties like loving kindness towards self, self-compassion, self-empathy, gratitude towards self for being caring are important dimensions of practicing nonviolence towards self. It also means avoiding the violence or inner retributions that we give ourselves; instead the focus and actions should be on nurturing inner restorative practices which help in our well-being.

At this stage it would be pertinent to explain what really nonviolent intrapersonal communication is. Senior Gandhian, Natwar Thakkar, using the Gandhian praxis, has given an expansive explanation of nonviolent communication (cited in Kundu, 2018, and 2020) which underscores the importance of practicing nonviolence in all aspects of communication whether within us, in our homes, institutions and the society at large. He also notes that it entails nonviolence in all our verbal and nonverbal besides our thoughts and ideas.

Although there are no specific definitions of nonviolent intrapersonal communication, the authors, based on their own work with different groups, and using the framework of the ideas of nonviolence of Mahatma Gandhi, and others as discussed above, provide their explanation of the concept as: *Nonviolent intrapersonal communication entails our deep realization on the essential nature of human interdependence and our ability to practice loving kindness towards self, self-compassion, self-empathy, and how we can express gratitude towards one self.*

Thus, it transforms our dysfunctional inner communication ecosystem into an inner harmonious ecosystem, thereby strengthening our mind-body-spirit connection. Practicing nonviolent intrapersonal communication helps us to avoid inner retribution; instead it acts as a catalyst to practice inner restorative practices which is crucial for our well-being. It also helps us to avoid being judgmental with ourselves and connects with our own inner needs. By practicing self-restraint, it helps channeling our thoughts and ideas into positive action. In short, nonviolent intrapersonal communication enables us to tune inwards; it is an important potion for our growth as human beings and a significant pillar for our inner transformation.

As practicing nonviolent intrapersonal communication helps us to remain calm even in difficult situations, deftly handle our inner conflicts and while becoming mindful and focused, it helps in building our inner resilience. Building our resilience to face difficult situations is an important aspect of growth and enhancement of our personhood. Also, as Mahatma Gandhi stressed on the importance of self-purification for practicing nonviolence, practicing nonviolent intrapersonal communication and striving for one's self-purification can be thought of as a circle. If we work towards self-purification and tune inwards, our intrapersonal communication will be nonviolent; similarly use of nonviolent intrapersonal communication will aid in the process of self-purification.

With the above explanation, the authors tried to assimilate how nonviolent intrapersonal communication actually helps to enlarge our positive self-concept, which in turn fuels our altruistic action. Roy Baumeister (1999) describes self-concept as, "The individual's belief about himself or herself, including the

person's attributes and who and what the self is." Meanwhile, Fitts (1971) defines self-concept as, "The self as he sees, perceives, and experiences it. This is the individual's self-concept or perceived self." In short, we can describe our self-concept as an organized collection of our beliefs, views, judgments and self-perceptions about our self. There are many components, like social interactions, which contribute to the development of an individual's self-concept.

This paper will study this aspect of how nonviolent intrapersonal communication contributes to a positive self-concept. It will finally aim to highlight the inherent link between our nonviolent intrapersonal communications, our positive self-concept, which contributes to our altruistic action, and finally leads to responsible citizenship.

## **The Study**

A limited study of 20 individuals, with whom the authors have worked to orient them to different elements of nonviolent communication, was done using the methodology of open-ended self-report. The open-ended form of self-reports or self-descriptions gives the respondents the autonomy to use any construct or style to share their thoughts on the questions they are asked. As the respondents were previously exposed to nonviolent intrapersonal communication and they had started practicing it in different ways, the authors asked them how practicing it actually helped them to enhance their positive self-concept. Further they were asked to share their experiences, if any, of how through enhancement of their self-concept by practicing nonviolent intrapersonal communication they widened their altruistic action. Finally, they were asked to share their thoughts on the link between nonviolent intrapersonal communication, positive self-concept and responsible citizenship articulated through altruistic action. Also as part of the study, the authors used the methodology of expert interviews to gain greater insight to this inherent link. Experts from the field of mindfulness training and life skills education were chosen for the experts' interview. Here it may be noted that there is lack of adequate study in the area of nonviolent intrapersonal communication so it is difficult to compare the results with other such studies.

## **Results and Discussions**

The respondents felt that, when they use positive and affirmative words in their intrapersonal communication, the way they saw themselves and their self-beliefs got enhanced. They developed greater self-respect and self-esteem. They were able to construct positive self-labels which contributed to the enhancement of their self-worth. This overall contributed to the enhancement of their personhood.

An important pillar of Gandhian nonviolence is appreciation (Gandhi, 2017). When we are practicing nonviolent intrapersonal communication, we are promoting self-love and positive self-appreciation. This in turn promotes our positive self-concept. Some of the respondents drew attention to the fact of how, due to different stress factors, they were in the habit of unnecessary self-criticism. This led to lowering of their self-concept and self-esteem. However, when they

started appreciating the good things that were happening around them, they began to have a more positive opinion about themselves.

As nonviolent intrapersonal communication entails humanization of our inner communication ecosystem, it contributes to a positive attitudinal self-concept like “I am nurturing human values”. Respondents spoke about more specific experiences of attitudinal self-concepts like, “I am compassionate about the sufferings of the poorest of the poor”. Some of these respondents later went on to describe the actual actions they were taking to make a difference in the lives of the poor. For instance, one of the respondents spoke about the initiative he took of collecting food from friends and then distributing amongst the homeless.

Nonviolent communication is a holistic communication ecosystem which underlines the essence of human interdependence. It does not just entail our intrapersonal, interpersonal, group or mass communication, but its canvas includes our symbolic communication with nature and all other living beings (Kundu, 2022). Based on the philosophy of human interdependence, some of the respondents said that, through a process of inner reflections, they realized how vital the link between human-nature-other living beings was. “I love nature and will work for its conservation” were some self-reports of the respondents. They went on to describe how they were acting by planting trees and nurturing kitchen gardens in their houses. Work for nature was having a positive impact in their attitudes and behavior not only with others but was also helping them to become calmer and tune inwards. They felt it was an important step for self-purification.

As mentioned above social interactions are one of the components which constructs our self-concept. The respondents described how practicing nonviolent intrapersonal communication helped them practice nonviolence in their conversations with others. Such kind of self-descriptions are in line with Self Perception Theory (Bem, 1967), which talks about how we form our self-concept by observing our own behavior. Here the respondents talked about how they were able to refrain from the usual way they used language during conversations and how this helped them in emotional bridge-building. Some of the respondents described how their previous dysfunctional intrapersonal communication resulted in toxic communication with others and their inability to foster engagements.

One of the respondents described her negative approach to life when she frequently used toxic intrapersonal communication. Her transformation to finding positives in her life was the result of her practice of nonviolent intrapersonal communication. She described how she learnt to practice loving kindness to herself and become more self-compassionate. She pointed out how this contributed to her positive self-concept, which was enhanced by the changed perception of her family members and friends. “They all started complimenting me for my positive attitude towards life and this made me feel more positive and satisfied,” she added.

An important highlight of the open-ended self-reports was how the construction of positive self-concept through the practice of nonviolent intrapersonal communication helped in giving direction and shaping altruistic behavior amongst majority of the respondents. Altruism is generally associated with volunteer social actions that are offered selflessly to others for the greater good of the society. Quite a number of them took to volunteering for different

social concerns. One of the respondent talked about how practicing self-compassion and loving kindness towards himself made him more compassionate. While this strengthened his self-concept as a compassionate human being, he started doing volunteer work with people with disabilities. Similarly, another respondent, who was a team leader, talked about how imbibing techniques of nonviolent communication helped him resolve conflicts within his team constructively. Yet another respondent talked about how she helped others to handle difficult people and difficult conversations.

Further, the expert interviews reiterated much of what the respondents described in self-reports. For instance, Sohini Jana, a mindfulness and life coach, talking about the environment of evolution of self-concept said:

The environment around us shapes our social identity and becomes the primary point of cultivating our sense of self while locating the self in relation to others. The kind of environment we have in terms of the relationships that support our social identity determines how grounded, safe and secure we are in ourselves as well as in relationships with others and by that extension, with our environment. A healthy, nonviolent environment leads to the emergence of socially stable, individually and socially secure people who are able to contribute to constructive work in the society.

On the inherent link between nonviolent intrapersonal communication, self-concept and responsible and altruistic individuals, Jana pointed out:

Nonviolent intrapersonal communication helps one to develop healthy self-concept and self-esteem as well as a healthy sense of boundaries, thus resulting in individuals who are grounded, secure, and compassionate by nature. This results in the instinct to empathize and share, and look beyond the self to serve others thus leading to altruism. Though it would not be fair to generalize as there are not adequate studies that particularly testifies to this causation mechanism but theoretically nonviolent intrapersonal communication provides the fertile ground for possible development altruistic traits in individuals.

Healer and life coach, Anupama Jha opined that:

Those who feel oneness with everything and operate from the higher mind, they are the ones who are able to practice nonviolent intrapersonal communication. It is this deep consciousness on the feeling of oneness with everything which helps such individuals more responsible and take up altruistic action.

Jha beautifully explains the evolution of nonviolent intrapersonal communication and how it leads to positive self-concept. She points out that:

We all know that our thoughts arise in the mind and it is the primary form of communication. Thoughts that arise in the lower mind are those that are conditioned, limited and identified with ego. When we completely identify with our limited body and mind, we become the limited ego. Identification with the lower mind creates an opaque screen of concepts, labels, images, words, judgments and definitions that block all true relationships.

She further noted out that those who start thinking from their higher mind feel a certain oneness with the whole. In such a situation not only our intrapersonal communication but also our interpersonal communication becomes nonviolent. This dimension pointed out by Jha is significant in the link between nonviolent communication and our self-concept and self-esteem.



A significant point, which the respondents and the experts talked about, is how positive self-concept- which evolves out of the use nonviolent intrapersonal communication- aids in giving direction to altruistic action. As discussed above, several of the respondents took to volunteering for different causes, ranging from nature conservation to working for the homeless. At this stage it would be apt to link the directions toward altruistic action to the notion of responsible citizenship. A responsible citizen is one who actively engages with others and is ready to volunteer to meet the needs of others; hence altruism can be described as an important dimension of responsible citizenship behavior. Through altruistic action we are promoting human values in our society.

When some of the respondents talked about the direction toward altruistic action they got once they started practicing nonviolent intrapersonal communication, which was followed by nurturing nonviolence in their communication with others, it underscored its importance for strengthening humanity. In this context, for instance, Sorokin (1960), in his proposal on *The Reconstruction of Humanity*, underscores his commitment to altruism as a necessary element to save or cure humanity. Sorokin (1960) aptly notes, “No human group can survive without a minimum of altruistic conduct among its members” (p. 61).

Further, for Mahatma Gandhi, volunteer constructive work, which can be described as genuine altruism, was an integral part of India’s freedom struggle. While Gandhi’s nonviolent communication entailed reaching out to the heart of the masses, it was dynamic in nature as it aimed at mobilizing them for constructive work (Kundu, 2022). Stressing on the importance of constructive work in the tryst for complete independence, Gandhi (as cited in Kundu, 2022) notes:

Readers, whether workers and volunteers or not, should definitely realize that the constructive programme is the truthful and non-violent way of winning Poorna Swaraj. Its wholesale fulfillment is complete Independence. Imagine all the forty crores of people busying themselves with the whole of the constructive programme which is designed to build up the nation from the very bottom upward.

## Conclusion

Though limited in its sample of respondents, the study offered important insights on the intrinsic link between nonviolent intrapersonal communication, positive self-concept and altruistic action which is an important component of responsible citizenship. During the course of working on this paper, the authors could not find any authoritative work in the area of nonviolent intrapersonal communication, although there is enormous scope for more work in this field.

An important highlight has been how practicing nonviolent intrapersonal communication helps in managing inner conflicts, builds inner resilience and aids in shaping positive self-concept. At a time when a large number of people in different countries across the world are suffering from varieties of inner conflicts, face difficult situations leading to stress and depression, there is a definite need to encourage the practice of nonviolent communication which would also include intrapersonal communication.

Not only from the self-reports of the respondents and the views of the experts, the authors own work of training in nonviolent communication suggests the important need to encourage individuals to tune inwards in the backdrop of an environment of crass materialism and the race to achieve too many unrealistic goals and ambitions. This is where the essence of nurturing the elements of nonviolent communication becomes critical for sustaining humanity.

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## Notes

- 1 The research was done as part of the authors own initiative to promote nonviolent communication amongst different sections of the society. No finances were involved in doing this study. Materials related to nonviolent communication are available with the first author in lieu of his extensive work in this area. This work was done jointly by both the authors and is part of their larger work to work with people to nurture nonviolent communication at all levels. There are no conflicts of interest involved for both authors.