

# NVC and AIKIDO: EMBODIED COMPASSIONATE COMMUNICATION

Would you address the connection of Non-Violent Communication (NVC) and Aikido?

The answer to this question begins by understanding that NVC is a language skill and does not encompass somatic training. Somatic attunement, however, can be put into words, and may result in expressing the fundamental concepts of NVC, but they are arrived at by different routes.

1. What are the somatic dynamics of empathy?

(somatic (5 senses) awareness of self and other with the following three questions)

2. How do you practice "somatic attunement?" (feel/sense three wisdom centers: Ask:

What does the head want? What does the heart want? What does the hara need?)

NB: NVC is a language skill set/training that seeks to accomplish the same objects, but does not train somatically, and for that reason is less effective under pressure. Pressure is key, because it is "felt," not just understood as words/language/concepts. Thus somatic attunement may be easier to learn and handier to practice. (Yet, we are standing on Marshall Rosenberg's shoulders.)

3. What are the obstacles to learning somatic attunement? judgments

emotional charges

passionate righteousness

righteous passions

difficulty accessing embodied feelings

4. How do we overcome these obstacles?

recognize our pre-disposed responses to pressure (push-back, cave, rigidify)

practice transforming pre-dispositions with grounding, centering and extension exercises.

5. How can empathy encompass conflicting interests?

Three centers, plus self and other will involve conflicting interests, or split attention.

When we remove ourselves from the bodily sensations, we distance ourselves from the situation to which those sensations are related. Disembodiment is a strategy that allows us to escape the pressure, feeling, or sensations of the present moment.

When I have an immobilizing experience, I try to find out where I am split. In searching for splits, we can use a map with three centers: head, heart and hara, or belly. Splits commonly occur at the neck, separating the head from the heart and the belly, or the solar plexus, separating the belly from the heart and the head.

I can identify the preferences of my head with the question, “What do I think I want?” I wait for a sensory response. Then I feel into my heart, “What does my heart feel like it really wants?” Splits that occur at the solar plexus are more difficult to discover. In Western culture, we are not accustomed to viewing the belly as an intelligent power source. If we are not aware of the opposition within ourselves, we may find it difficult to understand why we cannot manifest something even when we have a clear idea of it. From *The Intuitive Body: Aikido as a Clairsentient Practice*, by [Wendy Palmer](#), North Atlantic Books.

## **Embodied Compassionate Communication**

What is the relationship between Nonviolent Communication (NVC) and Embodied Compassionate Communication or Applied Aikido?

The answer to this question begins by understanding that NVC is a language skill and does not encompass somatic training. Its curriculum encourages us to communicate separate from judgments and stories the feelings of empathy for self and others, and then make requests or define choices and seek agreement about our unmet needs. Somatic attunement, or the awareness of our embodied feelings and intentions, can also be verbalized, which may result in expressing the fundamental concepts of NVC, but you get there by different routes, and you can feel the sincerity of embodied speech.

The most common difficulty people have with NVC is that it breaks down under pressure. When the heat's on and reactivity takes over, empathy doesn't happen naturally. We freeze, get defensive, and disconnect. My Aikido training taught that under pressure, attention goes up. Energy follows attention, and with increased pressure and insufficient training, we are in our heads, thinking and not feeling; riled up, not settled down. We train to settle down.

NVC is a language skill that seeks to accomplish the same objectives, but does not train somatically, and for that reason is less effective under

pressure. Pressure is key, because it is "felt," not just understood in words and concepts. Thus somatic attunement may be easier to learn and handier to practice. (Yet, we are standing on Marshall Rosenberg's shoulders.)

What are the obstacles to learning somatic attunement? Judgments (of self and others) take us into our left-brain, where concepts endure. Even emotions, especially those that can take on a passionate righteousness, can impair our ability to access embodied wisdom.

Being sensitive to **three embodied wisdom centers** (head/heart/hara) in one's self and other will involve conflicting interests, or split attention. When we remove ourselves from the bodily sensations, we distance ourselves from the situation to which those sensations are related.

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By Wendy Palmer from the Introduction to Tuning in to the Body  
(<http://communicationharmony.com/Courses/Introduction.aspx>)

Aikido taught me to feel the opposition. At times it felt harsh or frightening and I wanted to push back, cave in or run away. Accepting its nature was the only way I could feel my own pre-disposed response and adjust to harmonize without losing touch with my center and my core interests and needs. Aikido taught me that by connecting my center into the planet's core, so I could handle more pressure because the Earth had my back. If we can

relinquish our reactions to a prevailing interest in grounded connection, we can "reconcile the world." Morihei Ueshiba

## **Body-Wisdom for maintaining connection in conflicts**

It's easy to speak proper NVC talk socially, but it often doesn't work well under pressure. We have predisposed responses to pressure and they are embodied patterns. Unless we observe and learn from the embodied patterns, our verbal language skills will re-enact their conflict.

Somatic attunement to the pre-disposed responses inspires their transformation, especially when learned in the context of **center, ground and connection**. These basic elements of Aikido apply in the body-mind interface, where they enable grounding our language and communication skills in the body; where the tensions reside.

Under the pressure of conflict, the impulse to "check out" is immense. The circumstances are uncomfortable. We wish we were home, somewhere else. Any distraction will do. Yesterday, tomorrow, a dream or a wish. How do we ever stay present? pay attention?

But first we must decide what? What's going on in this job that's productive, effective, interesting? Give "thinking" a rest for a moment; it's challenging under pressure, and there may be a more fertile focus elsewhere for the challenged attention. A focus that's actually easier, once we get its relevance: and that will nourish, if not also evoke healthy relevant thinking from a refreshed brain.

Identify embodied predispositions to pressure. They are what's present; what's up, what's going on. The common ones are few in number, simple to see, they carry a wealth of potentially valuable information. But don't bend your mind about it; feel it. They are in your body, and in the bodies of each person before you. To feel your own, the place to begin is to drop attention into your body weight, the weight of your head, then your torso, each of which has a center of gravity. Notice inclining forward or back, right or left. Notice breath, its movements and its constraints.

Each center, including your belly has wisdom for your thirsty brain, each can speak of your embodied predispositions, and give you clues about the

others before you. Look past the "pressure" for a moment. Notice your body's response to pressure; that's more helpful, because as soon as you get it, it can change. Do you feel caved-in, pushing back, freezing up, or getting rigid? That's the big three. We all have our favorite, and can often find them all in different situations.

As you become more aware of your own embodied response, you'll find it hold clue to understanding the patterns of others. **It's not what the conflict is about, but it is *what fuels the conflict*.** When attention is brought here, energy will follow, and transformation becomes possible. It could rile things up and it might with your leadership settle things down, where parties may find space for more listening, more compassion, perhaps agreements and resolution.

Whatever the pre-disposition is, they all impair being centered and grounded. The awareness of where we begin is essential for initiating meaningful change.

### **Three distinct embodied languages.**

Having understood that the temptation to disconnect from the pressures of conflict into the future, the past or some imagined place can be avoided by feeling our always present embodied responses, we can now examine the somatic messages more closely. As with neighboring populations who speak different tongues, body-wisdom comes in several forms. Each speaks from a body segment, having a gravitational core and location in space. Our inner ear attunes us kinesthetically to its unique "sound."

Feel the weight of your **head**. Notice it's lean forward or back or to one side, and allow a shift toward center to release the effort in holding on. Feel the weight also of its contents, the distinctions and judgments within the thoughts. Everything has weight, even thoughts. You may notice the heaviest ones at first. Do you feel less "attached" to ideas when approaching them through sensing than when following the minds "train-of-thought?" Notice whether the ideas present in concepts, words or language? Let's see if the same thing is true in the other body-wisdom centers.

Bring your attention into your chest and focus on your breathing, and then settle into your **heart center**. Notice the weight of your torso and its lean

forward or back or to one side, allowing a shift toward center to release the effort in holding yourself up. What comes to us from this wisdom center may be less precise than what we found in our heads, and interpreting this language takes patience. I stay with sensations and then notice feelings before words or concepts arise. When they do, often they begin with words like "I feel..." rather than "I think, or I believe. By their nature, emotions also begin to change once they come up, especially when they form into words or sounds and are expressed. When they pass, they seem to be replaced by new ones, perhaps deeper feelings that lay beneath what moved on through expression. The language of empathy has two dimensions; feelings in self and feelings for others.

The third language is more subtle and even less accessible when the head is busy with distinctions and judgments and the heart is full of emotion. I settle thoughts and feelings down by aligning head and heart in a vertical plane, as if the simple act of balancing allows me to go deeper, where the "gut- feelings" at the core of my being lie obscured beneath ripples like the bottom of a deep pool. When the upper waters become still, feel your breath moving in your **belly**. The split between heart and "hara" is much greater in Western cultures, but everyone has a center of gravity there, and it contains the clues

to our basic needs for comfort, respect and nourishment. I hear its language as intuition or inclination. It seems to speak only when my head and my heart accept "not knowing."

When moving from center, all of me is inclined. Finding this "voice" which speaks not in words, and not the same "feelings" as with emotions, as a sense of mysterious security that builds trust in not knowing, and feels restful in my sometimes-heavy heart and busy mind. That third language, preverbal though it may be, often contains resolution to a conflicted head and heart. And the practice of finding and moving from center hold a promise of greater alignment and balance.

Under pressure and in conflict, attention inevitably rises up and feelings and thoughts take over again. But knowing these centers of body-wisdom, and accessing them in practice without pressure is the first step in learning to access them under pressures of conflict. Aikido taught me to settle down

when pressure riles me up by noticing my predisposition to push back against the pressure.

## **Centering Under Pressure**

For purposes of developing our thinking in stages, let's examine embodied centering separately. If I'm a person who pushes back under pressure, I likely often believe that my "center" is more forward than it really is. Our accustomed experience influences how we perceive.

I've seen enough conflict (personally and professionally) to suggest that most important to a contestant in a dispute is to remain standing when the smoke clears. Even more important than "winning the war" (whatever that may mean) is not to have been taken down or rolled over in the battle. So I'll suggest that staying or regaining one's balance might be a good metaphor for this interest.

Let's consider the value of physical balance, or at least the importance of feeling balanced or capable of regaining balance as an ideal. Centering is the ability to know when I'm forward, behind, right or left of my center. Do I "stick my neck out," and risk "falling on my face?" Do I risk being knocked backwards because I'm "on my heels" this time?

So how do I learn to identify my embodied pre-disposition objectively, enabling me to make course corrections before an overwhelming force is at hand.

Our inner-ears tell us this instantly, and enable us to make course corrections. The skill or ability to gain such awareness is basic and universal. It begins by noticing how much of my weight (or attention) lies before me and behind, to my right or left. If my field of attention (or body-weight) is greater in front, the practice is to concentrate attention or weight further back until I'm further back than forward, making smaller adjustments as I go.

## **Embodiment Practices**

## **1. Centering**

Stand comfortably, feet parallel and shoulder-width apart, with arms relaxed, with palms slightly open, as though feeling for the floor. Imagine a line in front of your toes, or stand in front of a line on the floor. Let your weight settle.

Step back with your right foot, just a comfortable distance, allowing it to open to the right, forming a triangular stance at right angle (or comfortably less) to your front foot. Continue facing forward. Notice your weight distribution in your feet. Shift your weight forward or back, only as far from the center as it was when you first noticed. Shift slowly back across the center to the place where you started.

Slowly shift forward and back each time crossing the center point equal distances in front and back, progressively reducing the distance from the center each time until finding stillness without rigidity. Rest here.

Now bring your back foot forward to the toe line and rest, feet parallel. Experience the same practice right to left. Then step back with your other foot in the same manner and repeat the sequence practiced above. Step forward to the toe line again, rest and notice what changes you feel. Arriving at center by shifting weight or attention will inform you of your pre-disposition and allow you to adjust naturally. This is both a basic and an advanced Aikido practice, and it can work magic.

## **2. Grounding**

Pressure, tension, conflict and excitement (even joy) tend to “rile us up.” Energy follows attention, and as our energy rises, the risks of over-thinking increase. Grounding practice reinforces our ability to settle down. And

staying grounded enables us to be more comfortable under increasing pressures, and find the calm in blending with force and cooperating with pressures.

From the starting position step with either foot, back and down. By adding the “down” element, we have a new practice, which challenges the initial practice of finding center. By “stepping down” I’m suggesting dropping

your attention and your weight, as if backing down off the bottom step of a ladder on to the ground. Feel the down.

Notice if stepping back and down leaves you in front of or behind your center-point, the place where your weight is equally distributed. Repeat the weight shifting, now with the added element of down. When you settle in the center, you should feel more connected to the Earth than you did in the first centering only practice. With your back foot, step forward again without losing this grounded feeling of connection to something beneath, and rest. Step back and down with your other leg and repeat the practice, settling increasingly into ground and center.

Increasing the pace of this exchange is a great way to feel more pressure (and excitement and joy) and challenge yourself to stay grounded and re-ground by slowing or stopping and beginning again.

*Friend, our closeness is this: Anywhere you put your foot Feel me in the firmness under you. Rumi*

### **3. Extending From Ground**

Your predisposed response to pressure (push-back, cave, freeze) is your accustomed reaction to pressure. Responding to pressure begins by feeling the predisposed response – it's there habitually – and then settling into center and grounding without contracting. Extension is the opposite of contracting, and it leads to opportunities for collective engagement or blending.

The magic of extending into pressure from ground and center is that it transforms not just the attitudes or feelings of reactive patterns, but how we think and speak. It's more than body-language, which may consist of communications without words. I am referring to transformed thinking and speaking. Blending contains opportunities to "take the conversation" into new and more constructive directions than the attitudes and ideas embodied in our reactive patterns. Extending from your grounded core and will

develop a soft, flexible strength, enabling you to “hold your ground” without being pushy or rigid.

Begin in a comfortable stance on your toe line. Step back/down with one foot, shifting your weight forward and back, slowly at first, this time allowing your movement to extend your arms forward as your pace increases. Palms face one another as channels of energy. Extend your arms forward from your belly as your weight transfers forward and release them down toward your hips as your weight transfer back. It’s like swinging, but it has the feeling of releasing down and projecting forward.

Releasing down is an extension. Shifting weight forward projects this out in front of you without muscular effort of lifting or pushing. Begin this practice slowly, then increase your pace gradually without losing ground and center as practiced in previous exercises. Slow down gradually and rest, feeling energy circulating in your body. Exchange feet and repeat with the other foot forward.

#### **4. Connecting with and speaking your embodied truth**

By saying earlier that Aikido’s potential embodied compassionate communication “stands on Marshall Rosenberg’s shoulders” I am not suggesting that applied Aikido is based on NVC. The non-verbal wisdom we learn in Aikido was present long before NVC got packaged as a language skill. Marshall encouraged me (and others) to develop embodied compassionate communication with teachings from Aikido, reminding me that empathy and unmet needs are universal objectives in conflict resolution. He acknowledged that NVC doesn’t teach intuition, an essential for exploring “unmet needs,” and when taught as a language skill, it may be employed to manipulate, without sincerity or integrity. NVC may be unreliable under pressure because pressure draws energy and attention upwards, into thinking, and away from the integrity of feelings that lie deep in my body.

Now imagine someone has got you by the wrists. They say some form of “You’re not good enough,” that you feel as pressure. When you hear your pressure statement, don’t speak your mind’s first response. You will likely hear one, but it will be more interesting to consider afterwards. Notice how your body feels, in particular where the pressure statement touches you. Can you feel it in your chest and shoulders? your belly? Is there a clue here

for responding empathically or intuitively instead of mentally. Settle into your center and meet the physical pressure with extension, an attitude of open generosity.

Get comfortable under the pressure and find your balance, grounding your body weight. Put words to the feelings in your own body, perhaps your attitude, and speak these thoughts. It may be simply, “I hear you.” Just listening is a gift to both parties in a dispute or argument. “I’m listening,” is the most common thing people say about the blend. It’s also the most important attitude to have when you feel pressure.

If your attention is drawn to your breath or your heart, you will naturally address the empathic response that you feel there, perhaps about yourself, or about the other person. “When I hear what you said, I feel sad, worried, etc.” That’s self-empathy. Empathy for the other may take the form of, “When I hear that, I can imagine that you might be angry.” Heart/breath wisdom is an emotional intelligence. This language may sound conceptual, but it is not linear, perhaps not rational. When you feel and respond to pressure from this place you can still address the “pressure statement,” but you will use words differently.

If your attention settles in your center/hara, you may express deeper needs or values. This language has shape and weight, emerging from the depths of your being. It might say something like, “I am here for you now, present,” or “Thank you for sharing, but I want to leave now.” It’s about appreciating truth, being in the moment, acceptance, compassion, and basic needs like light, heat, air, food, water and love. While your responses to pressure may sound like good “non-violent communication,” your words are formed from your somatic attunement, so their integrity and sincerity will not be in doubt.

You will begin to notice also when statements *from other people* are coming from the head, heart or hara. Is the content about story, emotions, or unmet needs? You will have more choice in deciding how to respond. Head, heart and hara may be aligned or not. You can decide whether to speak or respond with reasoned thinking, emotional wisdom, and intuition about unmet needs.

## **5. Finding Intuition Under Pressure**

Intuition is a form of deep wisdom that emerges from a place of not-knowing. Training intuition begins by convincing a jealous mind that it can benefit by relinquishing control to belly-wisdom. Confidence comes from the posture or the attitude, not from a concept, such as being right or reasonable. It is enhanced by training to access the place of center in the face of being distracted by feelings and thoughts or stories.

### **Step 1: Transform the Pressure**

Imagine holding a mood or attitude associated with how your pressure statement feels in your hands in front of you. Feel its weight, and feel the weight of your body. When you are ready to let it go, release it completely, into and through your own body weight, leaving your hands open to feel and receive something that returns as if when dropping a ball initiates a “bouncing back.” Notice its quality in your hands and arms as they receive the new sensations.

Name the mood or attitude you associate with the new sensations, and repeat the exercise as often as you wish. When you are ready to extend your practice into a new situation, let the quality/energy fill your body, expanding out in front of you, behind and above you. Let it move in your breath and arms. Extend this expanding energy into your next situation without giving up your ground or losing your balance.

### **Step 2: Responding Physically and Verbally**

When you are ready to practice with physical pressure, ask a friend to repeat the pressure statement while adding enough physical pressure holding your wrists (or pressing your sternum) to feel the push-back, cave-in or rigid response. Practice feeling increasing depth of connection with Earth’s core when you settle and deepen in order to receive the combined verbal and physical pressure.

Pay attention to your new complexion of feelings. Name the mood or attitude. Then think about putting your felt sense into words and respond to the pressure verbally.

It is unnecessary to pre-think solutions to a real conflict. Identifying and transforming our predisposition allows alternatives to emerge in a manner that is more timely and appropriate than predetermined strategies.

**Blending without losing integrity, is an attitude, not a technique.**

## **Appendix**

If belly-wisdom can affect conversation from the next room, as in the following story, I can imagine an even greater impact if we're involved in your responses to pressure situations.

A woman told me that after attending my workshop, that while she was doing dishes she was overhearing her teenage son argue with Dad about TV

and homework. She noticed her own sounds of shoving dishes around in the soapy water, clanking her own maternal wants at stake in the living room. She was all arms and shoulders, and felt the attitude that drove her own reasons that her son should get to work. She stopped, dried her hands, recalled the practice of dropped attention that came from stepping back and down into something beneath her feet in order to center her attention deeper into her body's core. She felt her hands release something she was holding, a position or an attitude, and when the release was complete, they seemed to fill with something new that bounced back from the planet below. Not having words for it yet, she just absorbed the feeling, resuming the dishes feeling weight in her feet fueling her movements from her body's core. The dishes had a different sound.

Wonder arose from her belly about what might deepen the dialogue when her son approached the fridge. She wondered aloud, "Do you know what your Dad's need is that's not being met here?" He wondered too, and then wandered back to ask. Dad said he was worried his son might fall behind in school if he didn't keep pushing. Then he asked what unmet needs prompted the son's resistance to his "suggestions." Son wanted responsibility to manage his own schedule, and wished to be trusted to know when he needed to work or rest. All were reassured that their respective needs were seen and respected. Then the family enjoyed their maturing over popcorn and a movie.

*"Aiki awareness enables me to notice what's in the way of the essence to essence connection between us, especially in our intimate relationships"*

*where we get triggered the most. Then I can drop deeper and share from that place physically, verbally, and energetically."* Sohini Huguenin