

THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. SUNDAY

**“Martin Luther King, Jr.  
and Thich Nhat Hanh”**

By

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**READING**     *from An Open Letter from Thich Nhat Hanh  
to Martin Luther King, Jr., June 1, 1965*

Today, I want to talk about two of my favorite people — The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Thich Nhat Hanh.

First an introduction. Then a Reading

On June 11, 1963, early on in the American involvement in the Vietnam War, a Buddhist monk named Thich Quang Duc got the attention of the world by setting himself on fire in a busy street in Saigon, while sitting perfectly still in a full lotus position as if he were deep in meditation. And he was. Quang Duc died.

Some of you who are old enough may remember this astonishing act. I certainly do. It was in 1963. I was 15. It made a big impression on me. And, as intended, while riveting and at the same time repulsing our attention, it helped to galvanize the American conscience, and consciousness, of the growing conflict in Vietnam.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk and activist, whose so-called “Engaged Buddhism” had inspired Thich Quang Duc’s self-immolation, was teaching at the time at Columbia University in New York City. In 1965, after another self-immolation by a Buddhist monk in Vietnam, Thich Nhat Hanh wrote an open letter to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., seeking to explain or to interpret, these self-immolations and, at the same time, urging Dr. King to speak out against the American involvement in the Vietnam War. Nhat Hanh dated his letter June 1, 1965. This, in part, is what Thich Nhat Hanh said to Dr. King:

The self-burning of Vietnamese Buddhist monks . . . is somehow difficult for the Western . . . conscience to understand. The Press [speaks] of suicide, but in the essence, it is not. . . . What the monks said in the letters they left before burning themselves aimed only at alarming, at moving the hearts of the oppressors, and at calling the attention of the world to the suffering endured then by the Vietnamese. To burn oneself by fire is to prove that what one is saying is of the utmost importance. There is nothing more painful than burning oneself. To say something while experiencing this kind of pain is to say it with the utmost of courage, frankness, determination and sincerity. . . .

The monk who burns himself has lost neither courage nor hope; nor does he desire non-existence. On the contrary, he is very courageous and hopeful. . . . Like the Buddha in one of his former lives — as told in a story of Jataka — who gave himself to a hungry lion which was about to devour her own cubs, the monk believes he is practicing the doctrine of highest compassion by sacrificing himself in order to call the attention of, and to seek help from, the people of the world. . . .

Now in the confrontation of the big powers occurring in our country, hundreds and perhaps thousands of Vietnamese peasants and children lose their lives every day, and our land is unmercifully and tragically torn by a war which is already twenty years old. I am sure that since you [remember: Thich Nhat Hanh is addressing Martin Luther King] have been engaged in one of the hardest struggles for equality and human rights, you are among those who understand fully, and who share with all their hearts, the indescribable suffering of the Vietnamese people. The world’s greatest humanists would not remain silent. You yourself can not remain silent. . . . In writing to you, as a Buddhist, I profess my faith in love, in communion, and in the World’s humanists, whose thoughts and attitude[s] should be the guide for all human-kind. . . .

**MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. SUNDAY**  
**“Martin Luther King, Jr. and Thich Nhat Hanh”**

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is often memorialized, both in marble and in words, as a man of courageous action, but he is also clearly one of the world’s greatest thinkers and synthesizers, especially in formulating the principles of non-violent action. As such, King is indebted, as most thinkers are, to an illustrious line of others who influenced him. Let me point to several of them and their interdependence. Most scholars of non-violent action point to the one-time Unitarian Henry David Thoreau and his celebrated essay on “Civil Disobedience” as being among the key documents in the modern history of non-violence. Indeed, Mahatma Gandhi, who King deeply admired, was among those greatly influenced by this important essay by Thoreau. Gandhi was also heavily influenced by Leo Tolstoy. Gandhi said that it was Tolstoy’s writings on Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” that opened him up to a better understanding of Jesus and Christianity. Tolstoy, in turn, acknowledged being greatly indebted not only to Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount,” but to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Universalist minister and pacifist Adin Ballou, with whom Tolstoy had corresponded.

Interestingly, Martin Luther King reportedly first heard about Mahatma Gandhi and his “Satyagraha” (his “truth force” or non-violent action) at a Unitarian church while attending Crozer Theological Seminary in Boston. After earning his doctorate at Boston University, King then went to India and talked with Gandhi’s followers, in his own words, “not as a tourist, but as a pilgrim.” King eventually had a statue of Gandhi installed at his Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta.

In addition to Thoreau, Tolstoy, Jesus, and Gandhi, Martin Luther King was also heavily influenced — I was delighted to discover this past summer — by the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh.

**II**

Next to the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, at the age of 81, is probably the best known and most respected Buddhist master in the world today. Born in central Vietnam in 1926, Nhat Hanh was ordained a Buddhist monk at the age of sixteen.

In 1961, Nhat Hanh came to the United States to study and to teach comparative religion at Columbia and Princeton Universities. In 1963, however, Nhat Hanh’s monk-colleagues in Vietnam invited him to come home to join them in their work to stop the US-Vietnam War.

After returning to Vietnam, in 1964, Nhat Hanh founded something called the School of Youth for Social Service, which the American press likened to the “Peace Corps” since it involved sending teams of young people out into the countryside to establish schools and health clinics, and later to rebuild villages that had been bombed.

Also while back in Vietnam, Thich Nhat Hanh helped lead one of the great non-violent resistance movements in recent history based on Gandhian principles. For this purpose, Nhat Hanh founded the Tiep Hien Order, which aimed to respond, in Nhat Hanh’s words, “to the burgeoning hatred, intolerance and suffering [that are] forged in the crucible of war and devastation that [is] the daily experience [of the Vietnamese people].”<sup>1</sup>

The Tiep Hien Order’s struggle for peace involved maintaining the strictest neutrality, which meant not taking sides with either the Communists or the non-Communists — which typically left both sides annoyed, and sometimes furious. For Nhat Hanh and his followers, neither of the warring parties in Vietnam actually spoke for the people of Vietnam. According to Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese people felt that they had been effectively excluded from participation in the determination of their own country’s future.<sup>2</sup> Taking inspiration from Gandhi, Nhat Hanh’s group developed a range of non-violent forms of struggle, including fasting and using literature and the arts as ways to challenge oppression.

Thich Nhat Hanh’s commitment to non-violence was thoroughgoing, and was based on the realization, as Gandhi had insisted, that “The means and the ends are one.” What does this mean — “The means and the ends are one”? As one scholar, Dr. Robert Tattam, explains it, this means that

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<sup>1</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing: Commentaries on the Tiep Hien Precepts* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1987), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993), p. 50.

The practice of non-violence for Nhat Hanh was not a matter of prefabricated technique. The point was to have 'the substance of nonviolence and compassion in yourself. Then everything you do will be in the direction of nonviolence' (p. 45). [As Nhat Hanh says,] 'To practice Ahimsa [or nonviolence], first of all, we have to practice it within ourselves' (p. 65).

Or as Robert Hattam puts it, "To work for peace means to quell the violence inside us first."<sup>3</sup> This is the basis, then, for Thich Nhat Hanh's celebrated "mindfulness" training.

Let me say a little more about this. For Nhat Hanh, violence begins when we divide reality into two camps – the good guys and the bad guys – and we place ourselves, typically, in the good guys camp. Thich Nhat Hanh says we have to stop this kind of thinking. To extinguish our own violence, Nhat Hanh is saying, we need to stop dismissing people as our "enemies," even those who act reprehensively and violently. As Nhat Hanh puts it, "If we work for peace out of anger, then we will never succeed. Peace is not [just] an end. It can never come about through non-peaceful means."<sup>4</sup> In other words, peace is the way – as well as the end.

### III

For Thich Nhat Hanh's non-violent movement, the Tiep Hien Order, the struggle to actually be heard among the ceaselessly warring and corrupt factions in Vietnam in the mid-1960s, was one of their most significant issues. They simply were not being heard. This anguish about their invisibility is what eventually led Thich Quang Duc to set himself on fire in Saigon in June of 1963. Reporting from the scene, David Halberstam, then a reporter from *The New York Times*, wrote:

I was to see that sight again, but once was enough. Flames were coming from a human being; his body was slowly withering and shriveling up, his head blackening and charring. In the air was the smell of burning human flesh; human beings burn surprisingly quickly. Behind me I could hear the sobbing of the Vietnamese who were now gathering. I was too shocked to cry, too confused to take notes or ask questions, too bewildered to even think.

As he burned he never moved a muscle, never uttered a sound, his outward composure in sharp contrast to the wailing people around him.<sup>5</sup>

In the coming months and years, twenty-nine other Buddhist monks and nuns – and three Americans (two Quakers and one Roman Catholic) – joined Thich Quang Duc in self-immolation in seeking to end the war.

It was at this point, in June of 1965, that Thich Nhat Hanh, the preeminent leader of the Tiep Hien Order, wrote his open letter to Martin Luther King, seeking to explain these self-immolations. Moreover, as we heard a few minutes ago, Nhat Hanh also went on to challenge King not to remain silent, but to come out and to take a stand against the War in Vietnam.

The next year, in 1966, when Nhat Hanh was making one of his many diplomatic lobbying trips to the United States in trying to stop the war, he finally met with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. Again Thich Nhat Hanh urged King not to remain silent, but to come out against the War. It was an important meeting for Dr. King. Nhat Hanh went on to

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<sup>3</sup> Hattam, Robert, "Buddhism as a Resource for Reconciliation Pedagogies," School of Education, University of South Australia. Hattam, in turn, quotes from Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change*, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>5</sup> Halberstam, David, cited by Bishop, Derek, "Thich Quang Duc – Monk Fire Protest – Self-Immolation Photographs – Not Acts Of Integral Thinking – Vietnam War Atrocities – Pentagon Papers - Daniel Ellsberg - US Propaganda - Spiritual Transfiguration," at [www.singingmountain.org/thich-quang-duc.html](http://www.singingmountain.org/thich-quang-duc.html).

meet with Thomas Merton, Daniel Berrigan, Senators Fullbright and Kennedy, Secretary of Defense McNamara, and others in his persistent efforts to end the war.<sup>6</sup>

Some months after King's meeting with Thich Nhat Hanh, on April 4th, 1967 — exactly one year before he was killed — King finally came out against the war in Vietnam, giving one of his most eloquent, powerful, and prophetic speeches (and my personal favorite). He spoke at the storied Riverside Church in New York City. His speech was entitled, "Beyond Vietnam." It was sponsored by an organization called Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam.

Silent no more, and against the most fervent wishes of many of his closest advisors and allies, Martin Luther King came out powerfully against the War in Vietnam. "A prophet cannot choose his causes," he said. As a result of his opposition to the war, King faced tremendous opposition not only (as expected) from the political and military establishment, but also from within the civil rights movement. Why? Because people understandably feared that King's opposition to the war would only divert his attention from the ongoing civil rights movement and from the newer War on Poverty. Similarly, but even more ferociously, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* blasted King for coming out against the war, while President Johnson, J. Edgar Hoover, and others in the federal government quietly let out the dogs — that is, unleash the wire-tappers and "dirty tricks" persons.

#### IV

In King's astonishing "Beyond Vietnam" speech at Riverside Church in New York City, King carefully articulated his reasons for opposing the United States' involvement in the war. But then King goes on — "beyond Vietnam" — to describe the larger, deeper patterns he sees, tying together oppression at home and oppression overseas. "There is something seductively tempting," he says,

about stopping there [with this discussion of Vietnam] and sending us all off on what in some circles has become a popular crusade against the war in Vietnam. I say we must enter that struggle, but I wish to go on now to say something even more disturbing.

"The war in Vietnam," King continued prophetically,

is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit, and if we ignore this sobering reality we will find ourselves organizing Clergy and Laymen Concerned committees for the next generation. They will be concerned about Guatemala and Peru. They will be concerned about Thailand and Cambodia. They will be concerned about Mozambique and South Africa. We will be marching for these and a dozen other names, and attending rallies without end, unless there is a significant and profound change in American life and policy. Such thoughts take us beyond Vietnam, but not beyond our calling as children of the living God.

King went on presciently, "In 1957 a sensitive American official overseas said that it seemed to him that our nation was on the wrong side of a world revolution." "It is with [this] in mind," King continued,

that the words of the late John F. Kennedy come back to haunt us. Five years ago he said, "Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable."

Think about that. Again, Kennedy said: "Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable."

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<sup>6</sup> After meeting King, Nhat Hanh was to write: "The moment I met Martin Luther King, Jr., I knew that I was in the presence of a holy man." Cited by Krivchenia, Hilary Landau, in "Passion and Compassion: Jesus and the Buddha," Unitarian Universalist Church of West Lafayette, Indiana, March 24, 2002, p. 6.

King went on:

Increasingly, by choice or by accident, this is the role our nation has taken — the role of those who make peaceful revolution impossible by refusing to give up the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investment.

“I am convinced,” King continued,

that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a “thing-oriented” society to a “person-oriented” society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, [then] the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

What we need, King insisted, is a “true revolution of values.”

[A] true revolution of value[s] will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on Life’s highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. . . . It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs re-structuring.

A true revolution of values [King declared] will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual Capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say: “This is not just.”

. . . A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war [as in Iraq]: “This way of settling differences is not just.” This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation’s homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice, and love.

[Indeed, King lamented,] a nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.<sup>7</sup>

## V

Exactly one year later, Martin Luther King was dead. From the mountaintop, he had perhaps seen and named too much — for his time, if not for ours.

One more thing, though.

Just three months before this amazing — and obviously still monumentally relevant — speech at Riverside Church, King nominated his friend and colleague Thich Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize of 1967. He wrote to the Nobel Institute (in part):

Because no honor is more respected than the Nobel Peace Prize, conferring the Prize on Nhat Hanh would itself be a most generous act of peace. It would remind all nations that [people] of good will stand ready to lead warring elements out of an abyss of hatred and destruction. It would re-awaken [people] to the teach-

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<sup>7</sup> King, Martin Luther, “Beyond Vietnam,” available on-line and in various other places.

ing of beauty and love found in peace. [And] It would help to revive hopes for a new order of justice and harmony.

As it turned out, despite King's eloquent efforts, no peace prize was awarded in 1967.

But let us, today,  
carry on  
the hopes and dreams  
    for the revolution in values needed  
    to one day establish  
a new order of justice and harmony  
grounded  
    in the beauty and compassion  
    forever found  
    in the ways of peace and in love.