

The Friendship of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Thich Nhat Hanh

At a Buddhist monastery in Batesville, Mississippi, there is a statue of two great men standing together: Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh and Dr. Martin Luther King Junior. They are holding a newspaper titled "Beloved Community", which are Dr. King's own words. The paper reads, "To build a community that lives in harmony and awareness is the most noble task," which is a distillation of both Thich Nhat Hanh's and Dr. King's ideas they shared together. Each had a model for what it was that they wanted to manifest. For Thich Nhat Hanh, this is the Buddha. For Martin Luther King Jr, it was Jesus Christ. The statue memorializes the spirit they recognized in each other and the unity of their message.

For those who don't know of him, Thich Nhat Hanh is a global spiritual leader, poet and peace activist, revered throughout the world for his powerful teachings and bestselling writings on mindfulness and peace. As a Buddhist monk in Vietnam during the war, he worked for non-violent efforts to promote peace in Vietnam without taking sides, and he was exiled for nearly 40 years. In 1966 he travelled to the U.S. and Europe to make the case for peace and to call for an end to hostilities in Vietnam. Martin Luther King Jr. called him "An Apostle of peace and nonviolence." Both men belonged to the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an organization working to help groups in conflict find peaceful resolution.

After writing letters for a year, the two men met in person on June 1, 1966 and there was an immediate recognition of kindred spirits. They combined their efforts to work for peace in Vietnam and to fight for civil rights in the US. They stood together as they talked about peace at a Chicago press conference that day. Thich Nhat Hanh says this about their meeting, "We agreed that the true enemy of man is not man. Our enemy is not outside of us. Our true enemy is the anger, hatred, and discrimination that is found in the hearts and minds of man. We have to identify the real enemy and seek nonviolent ways to remove it. Dr. King's activities for civil rights and human rights were perfectly in accord with our efforts in Vietnam to stop the war."

Martin Luther King Jr. spoke out opposing the Vietnam/American War against the advice of his own colleagues. He nominated Thich Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967 noting 'his ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood, to humanity.'

Thich Nhat Hanh was influenced by Dr. King's understanding of nonviolence '...not through his words. His enthusiasm, his sincerity, his presence made me believe in the path of nonviolent action'. He says about Dr. King, "From the first moment, I knew I was in the presence of a holy person. Not just his good work but his very being was a source of great inspiration for me. When those who represent a spiritual tradition embody the essence of their tradition, just the way they walk, sit, and smile speaks volumes about the tradition."

In May 1967, the two met again in Geneva at a conference called *Pacem in Terris*—"Peace on Earth"—organized by the World Council of Churches. They were able to continue their discussion on peace, freedom, and community, and what kind of steps America could take to end the war. They agreed that without a happy, harmonious community, they cannot go very far or realize their dream.

Just a few months later Thich Nhat Hanh was devastated when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis. He made a deep vow to continue building what Dr. King called 'the beloved community.'

Sources:

Thich Nhat Hanh. *At Home in the World: Stories and Essential Teachings from a Monk's Life*. Parallax Press, 2016

Sister Peace (Sister An Nghiem) and Peggy Rowe Ward "When Giants Meet: Thich Nhat Hanh and Martin Luther King Jr." *The Mindfulness Bell, A Publication of Plum Village* Issue 72 Summer 2016

<http://plumvillage.org/about/thich-nhat-hanh/biography/> 1/3/17