

Plum Village

“They call you a Bodhisattva”: Thich Nhat Hanh’s friendship with Dr. King

Excerpted from “At Home in the World: Stories from a Monk’s Life”

Thich Nhat Hanh (2016) pp.72-73

Martin Luther King Jr., Bodhisattva

I first wrote to Dr. King on June 1, 1965, explaining to him why some of us in Vietnam had immolated ourselves in protest against the war. I explained that it was not an act of suicide, or of despair; it was an act of love.



There are times when we have no other way than to burn ourselves in order to be heard, in order to get the message across. The people of Vietnam did not want the war, but there was no way for this voice to be heard. The warring parties controlled all the radio, television, and newspapers. To burn ourselves like that was not an act of violence. It was an act of compassion, an act of peace. The suffering of the monk who burns himself to convey a message of love and compassion—is of the same nature as the act of Jesus Christ dying on the cross, dying with no hate, no anger, only with compassion, leaving behind a compassionate call for peace, for brotherhood.

A year later, on June 1, 1966, I met the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. in person for the first time in Chicago. 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. Martin Luther King Jr. was young at that time, as was I. We both belonged to the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an organization working to help groups in conflict find peaceful resolution.

We had tea together in his room, and then we went down for a press conference. In the press conference, Dr. King spoke out for the first time against the Vietnam War. That was the day we combined our efforts to work for peace in Vietnam and to fight for civil rights in the US. 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. I told the press that his activities for civil rights and human rights were perfectly in accord with our efforts in Vietnam to stop the war.

In May 1967, one year later, I met Martin Luther King Jr. again in Geneva at a conference called Pacem in Terris—“Peace on Earth”—organized by the World Council of Churches. Dr. King was staying on the eleventh floor; I was on the fourth floor. He invited me up for breakfast. On my way, I was detained by the press, so I arrived late. He had kept the breakfast warm for me and had waited for me. I greeted him, “Dr. King, Dr. King!”

“Dr. Hanh, Dr. Hanh!” he replied.

We were able to continue our discussion on peace, freedom, and community, and what kind of steps America could take to end the war. And we agreed that without a community, we cannot go very far. Without a happy, harmonious community, we will not be able to realize our dream.

I said to him, “Martin, do you know something? In Vietnam they call you a bodhisattva, an enlightened being trying to awaken other living beings and help them move toward more compassion and understanding.” I’m glad I had the chance to tell him that, because just a few months later he was assassinated in Memphis.

I was in New York when I heard the news of his assassination; I was devastated. I could not eat; I could not sleep. I made a deep vow to continue building what he called “the beloved community,” not only for myself but for him also. I have done what I promised to Martin Luther King Jr. And I think that I have always felt his support.



Geneva, May 1967: Dr. King and Thich Nhat Hanh during the press conference after they’d had breakfast. The paper they are holding reads a full-page declaration, “They are our brothers whom we kill!”

Bring Inspiration to Your Inbox

Receive our newsletter, event announcements, and resources to support your mindfulness practice—with one simple signup!

Select your country

By clicking Subscribe, you agree that the International Plum Village Community may send you news, retreat information, and special offers to support your practice. You understand and agree that the International Plum Village Community, its affiliates and service providers may use your information in accordance with our [privacy policy](#). You may unsubscribe and update your preferences at any time.

Support our community.

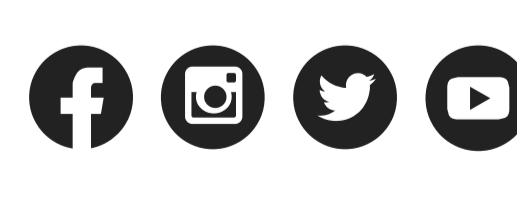
Plum Village is your home, too. Please help us take care of it and continue Thich Nhat Hanh’s dream – for all of us and generations to come.

→ [Support and Donate](#)

— Plum Village Practice Centers

<p>Plum Village France</p> <p>437 Chemin du Pey 24240 Thénac France</p>	<p>Healing Spring Monastery</p> <p>2 Rue Pascal Jardin 77510 Verdelot France</p>	<p>Maison de l’Inspir</p> <p>8 Rue des Fans 77510 Villeneuve-sur-Bellot France</p>
<p>AIAB</p> <p>Lotus Pond Temple Ngong Ping Lantau Island Hong Kong</p>	<p>EIAB</p> <p>Schaumburgweg 3 D-51545 Waldbröl Germany</p>	<p>Magnolia Grove Monastery</p> <p>123 Towles Rd Batesville Mississippi United States</p>
<p>Blue Cliff Monastery</p> <p>3 Mindfulness Road NY 12566 Pine Bush New York United States</p>	<p>Deer Park Monastery</p> <p>2499 Melru Lane 92026 Escondido California United States</p>	<p>Thai Plum Village</p> <p>Pong Ta Long 30130 Pak Chong District Nakhon Ratchasima Thailand</p>
<p>Stream Entering Monastery</p> <p>530 Porcupine Ridge Road VIC 3461 Porcupine Ridge Australia</p>	<p>Mountain Spring Monastery</p> <p>2657 Bells Line of Road 2758 Bilpin New South Wales Australia</p>	

— Follow Plum Village



— Initiatives

- [Wake Up](#)
- [Wake Up Schools](#)
- [Happy Farms](#)
- [Thich Nhat Hanh Foundation](#)

— Publishing

- [Parallax Press](#)
- [The Mindfulness Bell](#)
- [Plum Village App](#)
- [Podcasts](#)