

## Freedom in the Name of Peace: The Story of Thich Nhat Hanh

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Thich Nhat Hanh was a proponent of peace and nonviolence at a time when speaking of such things was illegal in the country of Vietnam. Hanh spoke and wrote against war in Vietnam and the violence perpetrated by all sides, making him unpopular among US military leaders, the NLF, and the North Vietnamese army alike. However, Hanh's unwavering support of peace made him a hero to the Vietnamese peasantry who felt the ravages of war more keenly than any other group. Although Hanh's stance in Vietnam caused him to be exiled from his country of birth, his efforts in Vietnam caused non-violent activist Martin Luther King, Jr. to nominate him for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967. To this day, Hanh is still a proponent of peace and the Buddhist philosophy of compassion.

The setting for Hanh's struggle for both peace and freedom was the Vietnam War, pitting the US-supported Diem regime of South Vietnam against the communist North Vietnamese army and the people's National Liberation Front. This political war against communism was greatly protested by Buddhist monks and organizations throughout the country, as was the Diem regime itself. One example is the much-publicized self-immolation of monk Quang-Duc, which took place in Saigon on June 11, 1963.<sup>1</sup> Although this event caused shockwaves in the West, Hanh refused to disrespect Quang-Duc and other self-immolators. He said immolation was not fanaticism but a sign of courage and inner serenity, and those who burned themselves aimed 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... To say something while experiencing this kind of pain is to say it with the utmost courage, frankness, determination and sincerity."<sup>2</sup>

Hanh explained that Buddhists believe life is eternal and not confined to a physical body, so burning oneself can be seen as an act of creative protest in the name of one's cause.

To understand the enormous influence of Buddhism and its leaders on the Vietnamese masses, one must understand the history of Buddhism in Vietnam. When Chinese characters were introduced into the country, Zen monks were the first to learn their meanings, causing monks to be among the most highly educated in the Vietnamese population.<sup>3</sup> Their ability to read texts of various subjects won the monks a great deal of respect among the masses. Popular religion in Vietnam combines both Zen practice and that of the "Pure Land" sect which focuses on mental concentration and recitation of Amitabha ("immeasurable light") Buddha's name. The "Pure Land" sect has five precepts which include abstention from killing, theft, wrongful sex, lying, wrongful speech, and intoxicants. By accumulating merit and performing good deeds, a practitioner can reach the "Pure Land" of absolute joy.<sup>4</sup> Zen practitioners don't necessarily harbor belief in hell, rebirth or karma

but rather focus on their own personal experiences and the teachings of past masters. The goal is to achieve *satori* or insight. Villages in Vietnam host both a common house where a local protector deity is worshipped and a pagoda where Buddha is worshipped.<sup>5</sup> Many do not see a conflict in claiming to be Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian all at once.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to the reverence shown to Buddhism, Catholicism was seen as a foreign religion, introduced to the country by unwelcome European invaders like the French.<sup>7</sup> Fanatic missionaries were known to devalue traditional Vietnamese customs and beliefs while Buddhists sought to incorporate them into their practice.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, Thich Nhat Hanh believed in seeking harmony between varying belief systems in Vietnam, namely Buddhism, Confucianism, and Catholicism.<sup>9</sup>

It was easier for the Vietnamese to incorporate various Asian religions into one belief system than it was to incorporate Catholicism, since the Church was openly opposed to the traditional worship of sages and ancestors.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, embracing Christianity was seen as embracing French imperialism, especially with the propagation of both the Bible and the French language over indigenous Vietnamese culture.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, both Buddhist and Confucian forces joined in the Royalist Resistance force against the French from 1885 to 1898.<sup>12</sup> When Buddhists joined this resistance movement, monks became associated with the politics of freedom, an association Thich Nhat Hanh found natural during the Vietnam War.<sup>13</sup> He would also emphasize the importance of the Buddhist youth movement, initiated in 1940, to the assimilation of Buddhism

into national politics in Vietnam.<sup>14</sup> This movement's publication *Giai Thoat* (Liberation) was dedicated to applying Buddhist principles to the struggle for revolutionary change.<sup>15</sup>

Revolution against French colonialism broke out in 1945, and the Viet Minh took power. Ho Chi Minh was a popular leader in Vietnam, but he brought with him many who had opposed the French and had taken refuge in communist countries like China and the Soviet Union. This caused the new regime to be immediately unpopular among those Western nations opposed to communism. Furthermore, all non-communists were illuminated from the ranks of the Ho Chi Minh government while the new minister of propaganda promoted strictly communist doctrines. Since Buddhists in Vietnam had a long history of opposition to Western imperialism but very little history of resistance to communism, Ho's government was not initially cause for mass dissent.<sup>16</sup> However, Thich Nhat Hanh was outspoken about the fact that he in no way supported the ruthlessness perpetrated by the Ho Chi Minh government in disposing of non-Communists, who he believed were potential allies.<sup>17</sup> This was a main theme in his philosophy of peace: he said peace might have been possible had the focus in Vietnam not been on communism but rather on national unity against imperialism. He would later say that if such a government were to surface without the support of the NLF, the NLF would lose popularity among the peasantry.<sup>18</sup>

French troops returned to Vietnam in 1946 with the attack on Haiphong. This initiated the Indochina War and the return of exiled emperor Bao Dai, a western-supported puppet leader. The

war lasted until the 1954 UN partition of Vietnam at the Geneva Conference, two months after the French retreated from Vietnamese troops at Dien Bien Phu.<sup>19</sup> The UN partition was meant to be temporary, but the free elections scheduled for 1956 never took place.<sup>20</sup> Instead, Premier Diem, with American support, ousted Bao Dai and became president, preventing the democratic elections.<sup>21</sup>

The split between Buddhists/Confucians and Catholics wasn't helped by the Diem regime's support of Catholicism, Ngo Dinh Diem himself being a Catholic whose brother, Ngo Dinh Thuc, was a powerful Archbishop.<sup>22</sup> Hanh noted the unfortunate symbiotic relationship between the Church and the Diem regime, both of whom used the other for their own empowerment. This caused the peasantry to recall its fight against Western imperialism and associate both Diem and the Church with this foe, along with the new addition of Diem's US ally.<sup>23</sup>

Diem's Catholic government attempted to outlaw the celebration of the Buddha's Anniversary (called *Wesak*), but the attempt proved unsuccessful due to the law's unpopularity among the Buddhist masses.<sup>24</sup> The different sects of Buddhism within Vietnam had been strengthened and unified at a national congress in Hue in 1951 at which leaders from throughout the country came together to form the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association. Hanh claimed this made Vietnamese Buddhism a national religion, and the persecution of Buddhists by the Diem regime caused Buddhists to come together in opposition to the regime in the name of both religion and nationalism.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, Vietnamese intellectuals opposed the oppressive Diem regime whether or not they believed in communism, and the NLF was formed in South Vietnam in 1960 to oppose Diem. Hanh explained that peasants in Vietnam did not understand the meaning of Communism, but they did understand the concepts of both peace and nationalism. They saw the NLF as the only nationalistic force in the war, and so they supported this group above the others. Hanh argued that if a political party were to surface, opposing both Diem and communism but promoting peace and independence, the masses of Vietnam would be in support. Buddhist leaders sought to create exactly such a society.

Hanh also argued that the early US support for the French caused mistrust among the colonized peasant population, and America's later support of the Diem regime caused the peasantry to more thoroughly support the NLF, not because of its communist stance but because of its nationalism.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, President Johnson misled the American people by claiming that the US entered Vietnam in order to protect the South from Northern invasions.<sup>27</sup> Hanh believed the US created further violence in Vietnam by feeding, clothing and arming the North Vietnamese army, as well as providing gasoline essential for its success in battle.

In the face of US entrance into Vietnam, religious leaders were hesitant to declare themselves anti-communist because it implied they sought to profit from the war. Hanh said in 1967, "In the past ten years, anti-communism has become Vietnam's most profitable business."<sup>28</sup> Landlords evicted Vietnamese tenants in order to gain greater profit from higher-paying

American renters, and construction workers and taxi drivers also increased their prices to levels unreachable by the average population.<sup>29</sup> Hanh said this left poor Vietnamese “without access to these American funds” in an “increasingly desperate plight.”<sup>30</sup> Such poverty caused urban prostitution to increase dramatically as a way for women and families to make ends meet. Moreover, since the US insisted at the time that “all aid and commerce must be with the US and certain other approved nations,” Vietnam was prevented from “developing a viable economy of its own.” This provoked even more widespread poverty and was a cause for the one million Vietnamese living in refugee camps by the end of 1966. Hanh said of these camps, “Hunger is so terrible that there are places where a young girl will sell her body for a piece of bread.”<sup>31</sup>

Hanh thought the US presence in Vietnam was illogical at best, and pointed to the futility of US bombing in North Vietnam in order to encourage “negotiation,” believing as he did that violence could only breed further violence.<sup>32</sup> He explained that the strategic hamlets imposed by the US and North Vietnamese were also violent because peasants were herded into new areas against their will, “forced to leave villages that had been the homes of their families for generations,” causing them to “leave behind not only the graves of their ancestors but many relics and mementos, including family altars, which perished in the same flames that consumed the village.”<sup>33</sup>

Hanh blamed much violence on the ignorance of the American troops, saying during the war that Americans “do not have any background in the culture, folklore, and the way of living of the Vietnamese people.”<sup>34</sup> He said,

“The Americans can never conceivably win a military victory in Vietnam” because “the Viet Cong, who are the American’s ‘enemy,’ look exactly like the other Vietnamese who are their ‘friends.’” From the perspective of the peasantry, Americans made an apparently indiscriminating attack on villages while NLF violence at least appeared to be directed at a proposed enemy.<sup>35</sup> “What they see is a large force of white Westerners doing their best to kill their fellow countrymen, many of whom previously fought against the French.”<sup>36</sup> In the volume *Nonviolence in Theory and Practice*, Hanh elaborates on the doctrine of understanding, saying “our inability to understand one another is the main source of human suffering.” He says the Buddha would assert that “in order to understand, you have to be one with what you want to understand.”<sup>37</sup> This oneness of all things was a central tenant to Thich Nhat Hanh’s philosophy.

Even as US troops showed a remarkable capacity for violence, Hanh pointed out that villagers, making up the mass of the Vietnamese population, feared retribution from all sides in the war. For example, the Viet Cong threatened dire consequences for those who refused to dig hideouts, while the government made threats to all those who cooperated with the NLF. Hanh asked one group of peasants, “Whom would you follow: the government or the National Liberation Front?” They replied, “We follow the one who can end the war and guarantee that we can live.” He said at the time, “The peasants are not concerned about ideology... With their property already destroyed, they do not fear that the Communists will take their property.”<sup>38</sup>

When the Vietnamese people began agitating for peace, the US intentionally

directed its power against such efforts.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, the Saigon government considered talk of peace either communism or “neutrality,” the latter being outlawed by legal decree in 1964.<sup>40</sup> Hanh was appalled that it was illegal in Vietnam to speak of peace, and he said the only way for there to be friendship between the US and Vietnam was for the former to provide “a road to peace and independence that does not demand a still greater price in blood and in suffering.”<sup>41</sup>

“If the Vietnamese people were free to express their will about the ending of the war,” he asserted, “then the war itself, along with the presence of American troops, would lose its *raison d’être*.”<sup>42</sup> Hanh believed “the only way out (of war) is to find a way for the Vietnamese peasant to combine patriotism and peace, which is not the way of the National Liberation Front.”<sup>43</sup> According to Hanh, the war couldn’t be ended by those who supported either side, but only by those who sought peace as the main goal.<sup>44</sup>

Hanh’s personal theory for peace in Vietnam was fivefold and included the creation of a temporary government with the help of the UN in order to establish free elections; the end of bombing attacks and ground offensives by the US, the NLF and the North Vietnamese; the withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam; the withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops from South Vietnam; and the eventual reunification of the country.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, as one who had experienced the dark sides of both colonialism and communism, Hanh thought a democratic government was also necessary for peace.<sup>46</sup> He said, “In reality peace can be achieved only if the Vietnamese people are represented in a government of democracy and freedom.” However, he admitted that

the struggle for peace in Vietnam was often fought under the guise of masked terms seeking “a constituent assembly and free elections” or “the struggle for representative government.” This was due to the illegal nature of the peace movement, and Hanh, along with many others, hoped these political gains would in turn encourage peace.<sup>47</sup>

A popular revolution finally overthrew the Diem regime on November 1, 1963.<sup>48</sup> Hanh noticed that the revolution against Diem brought vitality to the Vietnamese people as they realized the strength of their power to dispose of an unpopular government.<sup>49</sup> He realized the importance of a people’s sense of self-worth in achieving freedom. However, the war didn’t end with Diem. Hanh said in 1967, “The war has reached such a state of tragic absurdity that there literally can be no religious conscience that does not speak out against it.”<sup>50</sup>

Hanh maintained a philosophy of peace during the long, deadly, and unpopular war, and he was a testament to the potential gain of fighting injustice despite threats of imprisonment and exile. Despite overwhelming tragedy, his mission of peace was marked by many acts of courage and small victories throughout the war. For example, he supported the 1963 Overseas Vietnamese Buddhist Association’s Remonstrance to the UN exposing human rights violations against Buddhists by Diem. Starting in 1964, Hanh frequently visited remote villages, aiding people suffering from war and natural disaster.<sup>51</sup> He also met with Pope Paul VI in an appeal to promote interfaith dialogue in the name of peace,<sup>52</sup> believing both Buddhists and Catholics in Vietnam had a common interests in peace and national independence.<sup>53</sup>

Hanh also joined other Vietnamese peace activists in the creation of the 1965 anthology *Dialogues* in which the authors wrote letters to proponents of peace in foreign countries.<sup>54</sup> While other Vietnamese authors in *Dialogue* wrote to the likes of Jean Paul Sartre and Henry Miller, Hanh wrote his letter to Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>55</sup> He said to King of the Vietnam War, "The world's greatest humanists would not remain silent. You yourself can not remain silent."<sup>56</sup> King subsequently spoke out against the US presence in Vietnam and later nominated Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize. He said in his nomination speech, "Here is an apostle of peace and non-violence, cruelly separated from his own people while they are oppressed by a vicious war which has grown to threaten the sanity and security of the entire world."<sup>57</sup>

Hanh taught at the School of Youth for Social Service at Van Hanh Buddhist University. Hoping Buddhist leaders and organizations could play a direct role in the industrialization of Vietnam, the group introduced training programs and cooperative community development projects to the peasantry.<sup>58</sup> Hanh's students at Van Hanh later created a resolution in March 1966 appealing to all religious leaders in Vietnam to "stand up and call for an immediate end of the massacre in Vietnam." Soon thereafter, students at the University of Saigon called for the end of what they called a "war of extermination."<sup>59</sup> The Worker's Union also called it a "war of extermination" and called for the war's end in its Declaration of Conscience in May 1966, citing also the Vietnamese people's "right to self-determination."<sup>60</sup>

Hanh's popularity and determination invited controversy and dislike among proponents of war on

both sides of the conflict. He was disliked and mistrusted by both North Vietnamese government officials and NLF soldiers when he and other members of the clergy brought relief to villagers after wartime violence.<sup>61</sup> Again, when he published his very popular book of peace poetry *Let Us Raise Our Hands to Pray for the Appearance of the White Dove*, he met fierce opposition from both the Northern Vietnamese government and the NLF. He was not alone. In his book *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, Hanh mentions the violent suppression in February 1965 of South Vietnamese intellectuals who petitioned for peace between the NLF and the Vietnamese government.<sup>62</sup> He also notes the suppression of subsequent peace movements initiated by monks and American activists; both groups were put down with the help of secretive North Vietnamese propaganda.<sup>63</sup>

Nonetheless, Hanh was of the belief that everyone possessed Buddha nature, and the well-being of humanity depended on Buddhists fulfilling their responsibilities to the world.<sup>64</sup> He said of the war, "In such circumstances priests and nuns cannot go on preaching morality; the war has destroyed not only human lives but all human values as well... Its shame is not just the shame of the Vietnamese, but of the whole world."<sup>65</sup>

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In learning Hanh's story, I came to many realizations about his philosophy of peace and the ways in which it applies to all people faced with violence. For example, when the Diem regime attempted to outlaw the *Wesak* celebration in Vietnam, rather than engaging in violent riots, Buddhists throughout the country decided to hold the largest *Wesak* celebration in history.

Under enormous pressure, Diem had to back down and allow future celebrations to take place. This is a great example of effective nonviolent protest. Later, when Hanh discussed his belief in the need for Buddhist organizations to promote cooperative community development programs, I realized the potential of cooperative organizations in any community. In my own home town, I've noticed the effectiveness of "buying cooperatives" in making groceries more affordable and housing cooperatives in making rent cheaper. I believe these groups are related to Hanh's vision of cooperative peace that works for an entire community.

As an American, I also found myself thinking deeply about Hanh's analysis of the US presence in Vietnam. He said US troops perpetuated violence through their ignorance of Vietnamese culture. I realized this misstep could cause violence anywhere. (Are not fights between any two individuals of different races, religions, or opinions also the result of ignorance of another's point of view?) Hanh went on to explain that with the introduction of large numbers of American troops into Vietnam came the introduction of the US dollar into the Vietnamese economy. This caused poor Vietnamese to suffer as they were unable to obtain goods and services when Vietnamese profiteers greatly increased prices to cater to the new American market. From my perspective, this is but one example of the way globalization and the spread of capitalism in the modern world has negatively affected third-world nations, a problem that goes unchecked and unresolved in the present day.

In a related section on the US, Hanh mentioned that strategic hamlets were promoted as a means to "protect" Southern Vietnamese peasants from

their so-called "enemies," when in fact they were used to isolate potential NLF suspects. This gave me insight into the power of propaganda in the promotion of violence. As Hanh repeatedly mentioned, the Vietnamese peasantry distrusted of the US due and its association with imperialistic power and dictatorial rule, and I came to realize that such behavior on the part of the US (or any country, or any party for that matter) can cause long-lasting mistrust on the part of those harmed. As Hanh said at the time, "The prestige of the United States is based upon its spiritual tradition of democracy and freedom, and grows only as the US remains faithful to that tradition."<sup>66</sup>

My favorite part of the book *Vietnam* was when Hanh boldly stated, "If one looks deeper one realizes that what has developed in Vietnam is an international, ideological war between the United States and the People's Republic of China. This is true even though China has no troops in Vietnam. These two great powers are demonstrating their fears of each other."<sup>67</sup> Of course this causes the reader to infer that fear itself breeds violence, which is, I think, not just a tenant of Thich Nhat Hanh's personal belief system but also a tenant of many Buddhists, religious thinkers, and peaceniks across the board.

I believe that Hanh's emphasis on the interconnectedness of all life and his belief in the concept of compassion for oneself and others allowed him to remain peaceful throughout the Vietnam War. He incorporated these beliefs, obtained from his training in Buddhist philosophy, into his own personality. As an answer to all violence, Hanh says it's important to accept rather than deny the anger within oneself. He says one must show the

same nonviolence toward oneself that one intends to show to the outside world. "In Buddhism we do not consider anger, hatred, or greed as enemies we have to fight, to destroy, to

annihilate. If we annihilate anger, we annihilate ourselves." Most importantly, "If you cannot be compassionate to yourself, you will not be able to be compassionate to others (HG 329)."<sup>68</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam*, 1.
2. Nhat Hanh, *Enemy*.
3. Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam*, 7.
4. *Ibid*, 6.
5. *Ibid*, 5.
6. *Ibid*, 12.
7. *Ibid*, 14.
8. *Ibid*, 15.
9. *Ibid*, 10.
10. *Ibid*, 16.
11. *Ibid*, 20.
12. *Ibid*, 21.
13. *Ibid*, 22.
14. *Ibid*, 42.
15. *Ibid*, 43.
16. *Ibid*, 32.
17. *Ibid*, 54.
18. *Ibid*, 85.
19. *Ibid*, 43.
20. *Ibid*, 53.
21. *Ibid*, 54.
22. *Ibid*, 26.
23. *Ibid*, 60-1.
24. *Ibid*, 27.
25. *Ibid*, 45.
26. *Ibid*, 52.
27. *Ibid*, 79.
28. *Ibid*, 68.
29. *Ibid*, 73.
30. *Ibid*, 74.
31. *Ibid*, 75.
32. *Ibid*, 80.
33. *Ibid*, 72.
34. *Ibid*, 64.
35. *Ibid*, 66.
36. *Ibid*, 68.
37. Holmes & Gan, 237.
38. Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam*, 65.
39. *Ibid*, 82.
40. *Ibid*, 86.
41. *Ibid*, 85.
42. *Ibid*, 77.
43. *Ibid*, 81.
44. *Ibid*, 92.
45. *Ibid*, 83-4.
46. *Ibid*, 87.
47. *Ibid*, 90.
48. *Ibid*, 45.
49. *Ibid*, 82.
50. *Ibid*, 30.
51. *Ibid*, 65.
52. *Ibid*, 31.
53. *Ibid*, 86.
54. *Ibid*, 88.
55. *Ibid*, 89.
56. Nhat Hanh, *Enemy*.
57. King, *Nobel*.
58. Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam*, 48.
59. *Ibid*, 89.
60. *Ibid*, 90.
61. *Ibid*, 65.
62. *Ibid*, 77.
63. *Ibid*, 78-9.
64. *Ibid*, 10.
65. *Ibid*, 76.
66. *Ibid*, 93.
67. *Ibid*, 92.
68. Holmes & Gan, 329.



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