

Peace Through Active Nonviolence
Martin Luther King Remembrance

a talk given by Joanne Friday

You may wonder what a Buddhist is doing here honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I have been a student of the Vietnamese Buddhist monk named Thich Nhat Hanh for 16 years.. He was a close friend of Dr. King and in 1967 he was nominated by him for the Nobel Peace Prize.

In nominating him Dr. King said:

“Thich Nhat Hanh’s ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood, to humanity.”

I am so honored for the opportunity to speak here today in this remembrance of Martin Luther King Jr. I am also so happy that it is called “Peace Through Active Nonviolence”

The practice of Engaged Buddhism is very similar to Dr. King’s practice of non-violence. Thich Nhat Hanh teaches us that compassion is a verb. Compassion without action is not very meaningful. We practice love in action. What Dr. King was practicing was also love in action as a spiritual path to liberation.

I was a teenager when the civil rights movement was happening. I was so amazed at the power of this one teacher. That he could inspire and motivate people who were being beaten and abused to respond with love and nonviolence and thus change the course of history. it was truly astonishing. What was it that he did? How did he do that?

He said the night before he was killed, “I’ve looked over, and I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land. So I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything, I’m not fearing any man”

The promised land was his vision of a world in which all beings are equal and treat each other with love and respect. He had been to the mountain top. He had seen the promised land and what he saw was the truth – that “we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality – tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. “ In our practice we refer to this as interbeing.

In 1956 at the First Annual Institute on Non-Violence and social change, he stated that “love might well be the salvation of our civilization...the end is reconciliation, the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community. ...It is love that will bring about miracles in the hearts of men.” And he was right. It did.

He was able to look deeply and not get caught in the surface of things. To see beyond our impulse to have an immediate knee jerk response to violence, and to understand the long term implications of our actions. He had experienced God’s unconditional love and his calling was to share that love with the world, even at the cost of his own life. He said “To return hate for hate does nothing but intensify the existence of evil in the universe. Someone must have sense enough and religion enough to cut off the chain of hate and evil, and this can only be done through love.” And he had sense enough and religion enough. He said, “ Nonviolence is absolute commitment to the way of love.”

But he did more than say it. On the night of January 30 1956, he was at a meeting and learned that his house had been bombed. He rushed home and found that Coretta and their baby Yolanda weren’t hurt, but there was

an angry mob of black men wanting a showdown with the police on the scene. King raised one hand to quiet the crowd and then said, "I want you to go home and put down your weapons. We cannot solve this problem through retaliatory violence. We must meet violence with non-violence. We must meet hate with love."

He embodied the practice of nonviolence. He practiced what he preached – Love, non-violence and fearlessness. He was a man whose house had been bombed, the two people he loved most were in danger and right in the midst of it he could maintain his equanimity and practice nonviolence.

He did not get caught in the surface of things . He did not just react to hatred with hatred, to injustice with injustice, to violence with violence. He looked beyond the surface to see that "mankind must evolve ... a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love."

He looked deeply enough to see that Jesus wasn't just talking to hear himself talk when he said "Love your neighbor as yourself. ..Love your enemy". He knew it was the only thing that would work. It's not unrealistic, naïve idealism. It is absolute pragmatism. He looked beyond the horrible events of the present – the hatred and violence to see that moving toward the promised land of respect and equality is the only way we will survive.

We have been conditioned to believe that revenge is the only answer. If someone hurts you, hurt him more. I would ask..."How's it working for us?" Look at the Middle East and the answer is obvious. We may win a battle, but if in doing so we have planted thousands of seeds of hatred and fear..the war is not over- only the present conflict has ceased. There will be no peace as long as we react to violence with violence.

That is true in our personal lives as well as in our national and international politics. If I am harboring hatred, anger and resentment, I am not at peace. Peace is not simply an absence of war or conflict. Peace is a deep personal practice of transformation. If I am not at peace, I cannot create peace on this planet.

Many look at responding to violence with love as being weak- as being a doormat. King said "Don't ever let anyone pull you so low as to hate them." Love is the ultimate position of strength.

In talking about the power of love, He said, "We shall match your ability to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force... You throw us in jail, ...bomb our homes,... beat us and we'll still love you. ... We will wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and one day we will win our freedom. We will not only win freedom for ourselves; we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process, and our victory will be double victory." And that's exactly what happened.

Dr. King did not put himself in the path of a bullet so that we would come together once a year and parrot his glorious words and think, 'what a shame,' what a tragedy that he is gone. NO. He put himself in the path of that bullet because he was the embodiment of what he preached – Love, justice, fearlessness, peace. He had a calling. He did not let his small self, his own fears, his own doubts, his own desires to see his children grow up, supercede his larger truth. He had been to the mountain top. He had seen the promised land and he knew that he would never die . His body may be gone, but he is alive and well in every cell of every being that was touched by him. His death was a mandate for all of us who were touched by him to change the way we live and the choices we make, to transform the hatred, anger and violence in our own hearts. To practice what he preached. To embody his teachings. To be peace. To be love.

Until everyone feels safe, no one is safe. Until everyone feels happy we all suffer. Until everyone feels loved

we all suffer. In the peace movement there is a slogan. If you want peace, work for justice. As long as our prosperity comes at the price of suffering, starvation and deprivation for others, there will not be peace on earth. As long as we refuse to acknowledge that other people's suffering is our business, and do what we can to alleviate it, there will not be peace on earth.

The highest tribute we could offer Dr. King is not to praise him, but to be his continuation -to embody the practice of peace and non-violence. To be the beloved community. As he proved....It is love that will bring about miracles in the hearts of men.

(bell)

May we do our best to take good care of ourselves and each other so that we can create the conditions to manifest peace on earth.