

The ACORN

A Gandhian Review

September 1989 Vol. IV, No. 2

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The Acorn, A Gandhian Review is a biannual publication devoted to the examination of various global issues of our time from the Gandhian standpoint of *Satyagraha*. *The Acorn* is published with the support of Eastern Illinois University.

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A year's subscription to *The Acorn* (2 issues) costs \$8.00. Address all subscription and other mail to *The Acorn*, Philosophy Department, Eastern Illinois University, Charleston, IL 61920.

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To the Reader:

Thich Nhat Hanh is a familiar name to most of our readers. We are fortunate to publish another talk by him in this issue. In one of his earlier talks, he spoke of "being peace"; now he tells us about "enjoying peace." To many these topics may sound strange; they may indeed seem conceptually muddled. How can one *be* peace or *enjoy* peace? If neither seems possible, it's probably because our conception of peace is fundamentally different from his. According to our prevalent peace-thinking, peace is a negative notion: the absence of violent conflict. In this sense, the value of peace is understood only negatively, through the mediation of the evil of violence. Peace is thought-mediated or, rather, fear-mediated; it is devoid of any positive quality. One consequence of this kind of thinking is that one is unable to recognize and enjoy the beauty of peace itself.

But must peace be negative? Must it be mediated by the unhappy thought of violence? Can't we appreciate the tranquillity of a calm sea without the thought of a stormy sea, and the serenity of a holy person without the thought of a violent one? Peace may be blissful! Peace may be sublime! Here we see peace positive, unmediated — altogether different from peace mediated. One may call it divine peace.

Nhat Hanh says: "To me, peace and happiness and joy and life go together." The kind of peace that goes together with happiness, joy and life must be peace unmediated. He tells us about a poet struck by the beautiful sight of a dahlia. The poet sings to the flower:

Standing quietly by the fence,
you smile your wondrous smile.
I am speechless, and my senses are filled
by the sounds of your beautiful song,
Beginningless and endless.
I bow deeply to you.

In this poem one finds peace, happiness, joy, and life all together: they are co-present. Clearly, peace unmediated is an ingredient of the poet's experience. The poet *enjoys* peace. In Zen parlance, one may say, the poet *is* peace. Though the flower sends its "wondrous smile" and "beautiful song" to everyone who passes by, however, none but the poet recognizes it. Why? Because none but the poet is mindful of the present. So Nhat Hanh tells us to be mindful of the present moment, free of our thousand thoughts. It is these thoughts of things absent that keep us blind and deaf to what is present. "Look deeply at the present moment." Be open to the present, to life itself. Life is nowhere except in the present. "[W]e can experience some degree of peace right in the present moment."

How different is Nhat Hanh's peace from that mediated peace which politicians, strategists, and just war theorists talk about! What kind of peace can be negotiated between two mortal enemies, or maintained by the threat of omnicidal weapons? Somehow we have lost our sense of unmediated peace, a divine gift. (Some even find peace boring, so they seek violence and war.) Peace unmediated was what all our spiritual teachers of the past, of both East and West, had in mind when they taught the way of peace. Not only Christian saints but also Taoist sages and Upanishadic seers knew the beauty of peace. Isn't it what Nhat Hanh is teaching? (H.P.K.)