



The Buddhist monks – and their dog – captivating Americans while walking across the country for peace

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Buddhist monks on a "Walk for Peace" walk through Trilith in Fayetteville, Ga., on Monday, Dec. 29, 2025, from Texas to Washington, D.C. (Arvin Temkar/Atlanta Journal-Constitution via AP) (2025 Atlanta Journal Constitution)

A procession of Buddhist monks, accompanied by their rescue dog, is currently traversing the southern United States, drawing widespread attention and inspiring local communities along their journey. Clad in their distinctive saffron and ochre robes, the monks are undertaking a meditative walk for peace, a practice more commonly observed in South Asian nations. Their pilgrimage

appears to offer a welcome reprieve from the political divisions, conflict, and societal trauma currently affecting the US.

The spiritual trek commenced on 26 October 2025, originating from a Vietnamese Buddhist temple in Texas. It is scheduled to culminate in Washington, D.C., by mid-February, where the group intends to petition Congress for the recognition of Buddha's day of birth and enlightenment as a federal holiday. Beyond this legislative aim, their primary focus remains fostering connections with individuals encountered throughout their route.

"My hope is, when this walk ends, the people we met will continue practicing mindfulness and find peace," said the Venerable Bhikkhu Pannakara, the group's soft-spoken leader who is making the trek barefoot. He teaches about mindfulness, forgiveness and healing at every stop.

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Preferring to sleep each night in tents pitched outdoors, the [monks](#) have been surprised to see their message transcend ideologies, drawing huge crowds into churchyards, city halls and town squares across six states. Documenting their journey on social media, they — and their dog, Aloka — have racked up millions of followers online. On Saturday, thousands thronged in [Columbia, South Carolina](#), where the monks chanted on the steps of the State House and received a proclamation from the city's mayor, Daniel Rickenmann.



Buddhist monks participate in the, "Walk For Peace," Thursday, Jan. 8, 2026, in Saluda, S.C. (AP Photo/Allison Joyce) (Copyright 2026 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.)

At their stop Thursday in Saluda, [South Carolina](#), Audrie Pearce joined the crowd lining Main Street. She had driven four hours from her village of Little River, and teared up as Pannakara handed her a flower.

"There's something traumatic and heart-wrenching happening in our country every day," said Pearce, who describes herself as spiritual, but not religious. "I looked into their eyes and I saw peace. They're putting their bodies through such physical torture and yet they radiate peace."

Hailing from Theravada Buddhist monasteries across the globe, the 19 monks began their 2,300 mile (3,700 kilometer) trek at the Huong Dao Vipassana Bhavana Center in [Fort Worth](#).

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Their journey has not been without peril. On Nov. 19, as the monks were walking along U.S. Highway 90 near [Dayton, Texas](#), their escort vehicle was hit by a

distracted truck driver, injuring two monks. One of them lost his leg, reducing the group to 18.

This is Pannakara's first trek in the U.S., but he's walked across several South Asian countries, including a 112-day journey across [India](#) in 2022 where he first encountered Aloka, an Indian Pariah dog whose name means divine light in Sanskrit.

Then a stray, the dog followed him and other monks from [Kolkata](#) in eastern [India](#) all the way to the [Nepal](#) border. At one point, he fell critically ill and Pannakara scooped him up in his arms and cared for him until he recovered. Now, Aloka inspires him to keep going when he feels like giving up.



Audrie Pearce greets Buddhist monks who are participating in the, "Walk For Peace," Thursday, Jan. 8, 2026, in Saluda, S.C. (AP Photo/Allison Joyce) (Copyright 2026 The Associated Press. All rights [...More](#)

"I named him light because I want him to find the light of wisdom," Pannakara said.

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The monk's feet are now heavily bandaged because he's stepped on rocks, nails and glass along the way. His practice of mindfulness keeps him joyful despite the pain from these injuries, he said.

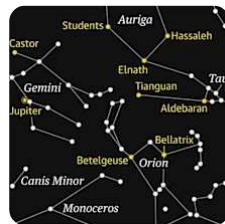
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and pounding pavement day after day has been brutal.

"In India, we can do shortcuts through paddy fields and farms, but we can't do that here because there are a lot of private properties," Pannakara said. "But what's made it beautiful is how people have welcomed and hosted us in spite of not knowing who we are and what we believe."



Supporters pray with Buddhist monks who are participating in the, "Walk For Peace," Thursday, Jan. 8, 2026, in Saluda, S.C. (AP Photo/Allison Joyce) (Copyright 2026 The Associated Press. All rights [...More](#)

In Opelika, [Alabama](#), the Rev. Patrick Hitchman-Craig hosted the monks on Christmas night at his United Methodist congregation.

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He expected to see a small crowd, but about 1,000 people showed up, creating the feel of a block party. The monks seemed like the Magi, he said, appearing on Christ's birthday.

"Anyone who is working for peace in the world in a way that is public and sacrificial is standing close to the heart of Jesus, whether or not they share our tradition," said Hitchman-Craig. "I was blown away by the number of people and the diversity of who showed up."

After their night on the church lawn, the monks arrived the next afternoon at the Collins Farm in Cusseta, [Alabama](#). Judy Collins Allen, whose father and brother run the farm, said about 200 people came to meet the monks — the biggest gathering she's ever witnessed there.

"There was a calm, warmth and sense of community among people who had not met each other before and that was so special," she said.



Bhikkhu Pannakara leads other buddhist monks in the, "Walk For Peace," Thursday, Jan. 8, 2026, in Saluda, S.C. (AP Photo/Allison Joyce) (Copyright 2026 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.)

Long Si Dong, a spokesperson for the [Fort Worth](#) temple, said the monks, when they arrive in Washington, plan to seek recognition of Vesak, the day which marks the birth and enlightenment of the [Buddha](#), as a national holiday.

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"Doing so would acknowledge Vesak as a day of reflection, compassion and unity for all people regardless of faith," he said.

But Pannakara emphasized that their main goal is to help people achieve peace in their lives. The trek is also a separate endeavor from a \$200 million campaign to build towering monuments on the temple's 14-acre property to house the [Buddha](#)'s teachings engraved in stone, according to Dong.

The monks practice and teach Vipassana meditation, an ancient Indian technique taught by the Buddha himself as core for attaining enlightenment. It focuses on the mind-body connection – observing breath and physical sensations to understand reality, impermanence and suffering. Some of the monks, including Pannakara, walk barefoot to feel the ground directly and be present in the moment.

Pannakara has told the gathered crowds that they don't aim to convert people to Buddhism.

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Brooke Schedneck, professor of religion at Rhodes College in [Memphis, Tennessee](#), said the tradition of a peace walk in Theravada Buddhism began in the 1990s when the Venerable Maha Ghosananda, a Cambodian monk, led marches across war-torn areas riddled with landmines to foster national healing after civil war and genocide in his country.



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Buddhist monks who are participating in the, "Walk For Peace," are seen with their dog, Aloka, Thursday, Jan. 8, 2026, in Saluda, S.C. (AP Photo/Allison Joyce) (Copyright 2026 The Associated P...[More](#)

"These walks really inspire people and inspire faith," Schedneck said. "The core intention is to have others watch and be inspired, not so much through words, but through how they are willing to make this sacrifice by walking and being visible."

On Thursday, Becki Gable drove nearly 400 miles (about 640 kilometers) from Cullman, Alabama, to catch up with them in Saluda. Raised Methodist, Gable said she wanted some release from the pain of losing her daughter and parents.

"I just felt in my heart that this would help me have peace," she said. "Maybe I could move a little bit forward in my life."

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Gable says she has already taken one of Pannakara's teachings to heart. She's promised herself that each morning, as soon as she awakes, she'd take a piece of paper and write five words on it, just as the monk prescribed.

"Today is my peaceful day."

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