



Monks bring balm for America's wounds as Washington cheers peace odyssey

Buddhist monks had walked 2,300 miles from Texas, braving snow and often barefoot – their arrival in the capital was greeted by thousands



[David Smith](#) in Washington

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Bhante Saranapala gazed down at more than a hundred Buddhist monks wearing burnt-orange, saffron and maroon robes, most sporting woolly hats, a few clutching flowers.

“These monks are awesome!” roared Saranapala, who is [known as the “Urban Buddhist Monk”](#), prompting a cheer from the big crowd. “Their determination should be greatly appreciated. Walking from Texas to Washington DC, 2,300 miles; it requires strong determination!”

The Lincoln Memorial has witnessed much over the past century – Black opera singer Marian Anderson, Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” speech, [Richard Nixon’s late-night chat](#) with the anti-war demonstrators – but rarely a scene as colourful as on Wednesday.

For 19 monks and Aloka, a rescue dog from India, it was an important stop on a 2,300-mile [“Walk for Peace”](#), a self-described spiritual journey across nine states that had been cheered on by crowds of thousands.

The odyssey had begun in Texas 108 days ago, and saw them brave frigid temperatures and a paralysing winter storm, sometimes with bare feet, to raise “awareness of peace, loving-kindness, and compassion across America and the world”.

About 100 monks and nuns joined them in America’s political capital determined to stay away from politics, although among the thousands who gathered at the Lincoln Memorial was someone waving a Palestinian flag and another who held a big sign that said: “Peaceful resistance.”



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The monks walked more than 2,000 miles to ‘raise awareness of peace, loving kindness, and compassion across America and the world’. Photograph: Jim Lo Scalzo/EPA

The gathering took place within view of the [recently renamed](#) Donald J Trump Institute of Peace and close by the [also recently renamed](#) Trump Kennedy Center. But above the monks were more enduring Washington touchstones such as the 19ft-tall seated statue of Lincoln, carved from Georgia marble, and the aspiration inscribed into the memorial to “bind up the nation’s wounds”.

The monks had come with balm for America’s current wounds and found the weather obliging as the capital emerged from a recent cold snap, though plenty of ice and snow lingered. As the monks took their places below the memorial, a song boomed from loudspeakers: “Spreading peace, love and harmony all the way to [Washington DC](#).”

Several made speeches as birds and the occasional plane flew overhead. [Tencho Gyatso](#), a niece of the Dalai Lama, the highest spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, read a letter paying tribute to the monks: “Their commitment, including enduring physical hardship and challenging weather conditions over a journey of more than 2,000 miles, has drawn attention both within the United States and internationally,” he wrote.

“The message of peace and mutual understanding conveyed through their conduct, marked by humility and calm presence, has resonated with many people as they encountered along the route ... May their walk help sow the seeds of greater peace, understanding and compassion in the United States and beyond.”



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Venerable Bhikkhu Pannakara, the group's leader, speaks near the Lincoln Memorial. Photograph: Evelyn Hockstein/Reuters

Bhikkhu Bodhi, a monk originally from Brooklyn, described the walk as one of the most important events of the 21st century and said: "It seems to me that this walk for peace has brought out the greatest quality of the American character, which is the recognition stated in the words of Abraham Lincoln in his Gettysburg address that this is a nation founded upon the principle that – he said all men are created equal. We have to revise that and say all people are created people.

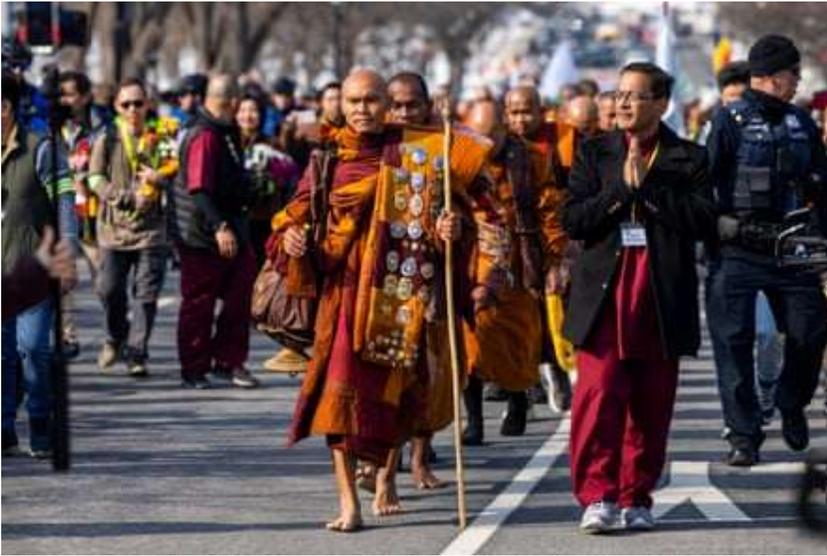
"And this walk has shown that no matter what race you might belong to, whatever ethnicity you might come from, whatever religious faith you might adhere to, whatever the color of your skin might be, we all celebrate peace."

Peace walks are a cherished tradition in Theravada [Buddhism](#). Some of the monks have walked barefoot or in socks during parts of the journey to feel the ground directly and help them be present in the moment.

But the effort has had its perils. In November, outside Houston, the group was walking on the side of a highway when their escort vehicle was hit by a truck. Two monks were injured; Venerable Maha Dam Phommasan had his leg amputated.

Phommasan, abbot of a temple in Snellville, Georgia, rejoined the monks near Washington and addressed the crowd at the Lincoln Memorial from his wheelchair.

The peace walk garnered interest from millions of people on social media, with many sharing messages of support.



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Some monks have walked barefoot or in socks during parts of the journey. Photograph: Jim Lo Scalzo/EPA

On Wednesday, King's son, Martin Luther King III, posted on X that the walk is "a powerful reminder that peace is practiced step by step. In a divided time, this is what it looks like to stand up for the best of who we are. Love demands endurance. Peace is strength."

Some in the crowd at the Lincoln Memorial held roses or signs that included "Warriors of peace welcome", "Equal rights for all humans" and "Every heart needs an Aloka". They joined in a chant of "Today is going to be my peaceful day" led by Bhikkhu Pannakara, spiritual leader of the Walk for Peace.

Jacquelyn Gray, 64, who works in construction logistics, said: "I've been following them since the day they left and I was impressed that somebody would be so committed to something. I know as well as anybody else that they aren't gonna get here and, magically, peace will cover the planet, but I admire their commitment to this cause."

Katharine Naujoks, 57, a high school science teacher, said: "The world needs a bit of communalism and camaraderie and peace and goodwill. A lot of people are looking for that. I want to be a part of this positive experience."

Reflecting on the monks' epic walk, which will end in nearby Annapolis, Maryland on Thursday, Naujoks added: "It's quite amazing, the fact that they had to come in through the coldest time in Virginia, Maryland and DC. We're not usually that cold, so it's amazing to me. It just shows that it's an important thing. It's important to them and it's important for everybody else around here."

Could Washington politicians learn something from them? "That would be lovely," she said.

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