

Dear Friends,

We hope that you are staying warm and finding some stillness and rest during this holiday season. We send you all our love and best wishes for Christmas and the New Year as well. May you and your loved ones be safe and happy. May we all remember also that the most precious gift that we can offer to our loved ones is our true presence.



It has been nearly three weeks since we were together in the mountains of Deer Park Monastery. How time flies yet so many beautiful memories remain from our hike together. We would like to share with you that the Peace Walk event was a big success! We managed to raise \$50K thanks most of all to our friends' generous donations during registration. We were surprised and delighted to receive donations beyond the \$20 registration fee from most of our friends who attended the event. What a great way to kick off our fundraising effort for the new Monks' residence. We send a deep bow of gratitude to all of you, near and far, for your kind heart.

You can tell an event is successful when countless people ask whether we could do this type of event every year. "Brother, Brother, can we organize a hike like this every year? Maybe even twice a year? Can we, can we?". These elderly Aunties begged me during our gathering with one hand tugging at my shirt and a big grin of happiness on their faces. Many of them have known Deer Park and supported the monastery since its inception in the early 2000s. These elders came with their full gear of walking sticks and hiking shoes, many could barely walk up

the hill without assistance, yet they could not miss such an event to support the monks' fundraising efforts. It was hard not to feel their love and support knowing that some of them had to drive more than two hours to be there that morning.

Our monastery has never organized such an event to raise funds while at the same time offering people the opportunity to be in nature, with family and friends, as well as building and nourishing our community. For some it was their first large public gathering since the pandemic, their first time to leave home and join an event with so many other people.



There were about 400 people gathered (500 registered), young and old, across three generations, from numerous ethnic and racial backgrounds, all gathered together at the parking lot outside of the Ocean of Peace Meditation Hall. After several days of clouds and rain, the sky had cleared and the sun was shining down on the "great hidden mountain". Most people were wearing their Vietnamese cone hats they had just received at check-in. Brother Minh An, with guitar slung over his shoulder, and Brother Minh Nhan, on drums, began the gathering with some sing-along songs. The joy and happiness was palpable.



There was a group of elderly aunties gathered towards the front, all with a walking stick in hand, smiling like children. The organizers prepared three different hiking routes for different capacities to ensure that the elderly, those with physical challenges, and families with babies and toddlers, could all participate. For many people, this was a chance to introduce their friends and family to the monastery for the first time. After a short introduction and sharing from Brother Phap Luu, each group took turns departing, following their guides in total silence, taking time at the beginning of the hike to focus on their mindful breath and steps. By beginning the hike in silence, the community had the chance to come into deep contact with the natural beauty of Deer Park's vibrant and diverse landscape. The chaparral bushes radiated shades of green as hawks and blue jays swooped overhead. With each step we touched life unfolding around us, in our animal and plant friends, and also in the silent steps of all our friends walking along our side.

Halfway up the mountain, my group, the Coyotes, stopped for a breath and some water and to enjoy in silence the surroundings and the view across and below the mountain. As we turned our gaze over the valley, we saw a sinuous line of cone hats weaving its way through the bushes along the ridge of the mountain. They were the Bobcat group that routed its way up the western ridge, named Sunset Ridge, overlooking the city of Escondido towards the ocean. The second group, the Rabbit group, had just made its way slowly up Yen Tu mesa. It was a legendary moment to see our ridges surrounding our monastery lined with pointed cone hats. For the first time, we could appreciate the immense space across our monastery valley thanks to the tiny appearance of our friends hiking along the distant trails.



As everyone returned from their route, we were treated to homemade salty pink lemonade offered by a young monastery friend, Tra-mi, a kind of natural replenishing electrolyte drink that quenched our bodies after the strenuous hike. We then gathered in the hall for a short presentation on the history of Deer Park and the various retreats and offerings that the community organizes throughout the year. We concluded with a light picnic lunch around the meditation hall. A few local Sanghas and lay friends brought sandwiches (Vietnamese *bánh mì*) made early that morning in their homes. Six hundred sandwiches were distributed by the monks and nuns in front of the meditation hall. People were asked before coming to bring a mat to sit on the ground, a chance to enjoy a picnic with friends and family. They were encouraged to sit with others in groups and make new friends.

There are certain things of the spirit that cannot be measured. How can we quantify the love and care we felt on this special day, as friends old and new came to support us in an atmosphere of friendship and celebration? Fundraising has finite numbers but generosity of the heart is immeasurable and eternal. The Peace Walk event was such a happening, a moment in the piggy bank of our memory that will continue to nourish so many of us for years to come. Deer Park is a concrete expression of everyone's love and care for the future, for our descendants and for our place in the wonderful web of life.

We are deeply grateful for your continued practice, support and generosity of spirit, without which Deer Park could not be. In 2023 we hope to reach our fundraising goal in the spirit of togetherness and community we have seen during the Peace Walk. We look forward to seeing local sanghas organize events in creative ways that enrich their practice. And we look forward to seeing you again at events already in the planning stage. We are working on a *Dana Day of Practice* in the city next Spring, and a *Music Festival* here at Deer Park in April. Please check the Deer Park website to keep track of these opportunities and find information and resources to share with your sanghas.

With your help, Deer Park will be around as a refuge and an oasis of peace, community, and mindfulness for many generations to come. Please take care and may your holidays be truly holy days.

In gratitude, Brother Phap Dung



**The project will provide an additional residence for the increasing number of Monks in Solidity Hamlet**

The cost of the project is \$800,000

The monastery hopes to complete the building in 2023

To find information on the project or make a donation please visit:

<https://deerparkmonastery.org/donate/>

