

Why an internet-famous Vietnamese monk is on a trek to India

by [RFA Vietnamese](#)

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Vietnamese monk Thich Minh Tue walks in Ubon Ratchathani Province, Thailand, January 1, one day after he arrived in Thailand from Laos. (RFA)

A Vietnamese monk who [became an internet hit](#) last year is going international.

Thich Minh Tue, 44, is on a 1,650-mile barefoot pilgrimage across Thailand and Myanmar to Buddhist sites in India—if authorities will let him. He left Vietnam in late November, walked across Laos, and [entered Thailand on December 31](#). Next he's bound for Bangkok.

His roadside journey—carrying just a rice cooker and a few other personal items while accompanied by a handful of supporters—is similar to his walk through Vietnam last year, which brought him fame as social media influencers documented his travels.

Who is Thich Minh Tue and why does he matter?

Le Anh Tu, who took the monk name Thich Minh Tue (“Thich” means “venerable”), became a household name in Vietnam last May when he was on a barefoot walk across that country.

Followers on and off social media were drawn to his humble attitude and ascetic practices. Sporting a shaved head and wearing a patched robe, Thich Minh Tue usually goes barefoot, which is common among monks. Thich Minh Tue isn’t officially a monk because he’s not recognized by the state-sanctioned Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, or community, but that doesn’t seem to matter to him or to his fans. He says he’s simply trying to live out the teachings of Buddha.

But the attention he was getting appeared to worry the authorities. In early June, law enforcement officials [raided his camp](#) in the middle of the night, detaining him and several of his followers. That prompted an [international call for his release](#).

How does Thich Minh Tue practice his religion?

Thich Minh Tue adheres to a form of Buddhism that requires followers to own only three sets of clothes, to subsist by collecting alms house to house, and to live a low-impact life in outdoor places like forests, mountains, or even in graveyards.

He began his religious journey six years ago and has since made several pilgrimages on foot between Vietnam’s southeastern city of Nha Trang and the northern border with China. It was only after his trip in May was covered on social media that he drew widespread attention.

Supporters say his modest ways stand in contrast to senior monks in Vietnam who encourage followers to give offerings while living in large pagodas and flaunting expensive watches and luxury cars.

How freely can people practice religion in Vietnam?

Freedom of religion is technically enshrined in Vietnam’s constitution but Thich Minh Tue does not belong to a Buddhist sect that is recognized by the state. Without recognition, religious groups are not allowed to organize in Vietnam—a policy some say demonstrates how protections for religion exist in name only.

In its 2024 annual report, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, said Vietnamese authorities “continue to monitor all religious activity closely, often harassing, detaining, or otherwise preventing unregistered faith communities from exercising their fundamental right to religious freedom.”

USCIRF recommended that the US Department of State designate Vietnam a Country of Particular Concern because its government engages in or tolerates “particularly severe” violations of religious freedom.

What prompted Thich Minh Tue to leave Vietnam?

Thich Minh Tue disappeared from public view for nearly a month after authorities raided his camp in June.

He resurfaced in July, and then in November, several letters purportedly written in his own hand began to circulate on social media.

[In one letter, Thich Minh Tue said](#) he would no longer adhere to a vow of poverty as he continued to study the Buddhist virtues. A newspaper report said he had announced he would no longer be begging for alms to prevent disruption to “security, order, and social and political safety.”

Supporters were quick to question whether he had been forced to write the letter under duress, or whether someone else had wrote it for him.

At about the same time, the Government Committee for Religious Affairs announced on its website that Thich Minh Tue had “voluntarily retired.”

Why is he walking to India?

But then in November, Thich Minh Tue announced that he wanted to go on a pilgrimage to visit religious sites in India, where Buddhism originated.

The question remains whether he will be allowed to return to Vietnam after the pilgrimage, a Thai observer told BenarNews.

The observer, who requested anonymity for security reasons, noted that Thich Minh Tue is being accompanied by Doan Van Bau, a former security official in the Vietnamese government who specialized in criminology and psychological operations.

“It is unclear whether he was assigned to escort the monk out of the spotlight in Vietnam and lessen his influence there,” he said.

A Thai police officer said Thich Minh Tue came into the country legally.

“He didn’t indicate plans to travel to Myanmar, only stating he was coming for a pilgrimage, and we haven’t found any violations,” said Kittipong Thanomsin of the

border town of Chong Mek.

“There are no concerns or need for special coordination, as we conduct regular checks as usual,” he told local media. “There has been no communication from Vietnam.” —Radio Free Asia

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