

Walking Meditation: Stillness in Motion

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In Thailand, it's common that when an ajaan arrives at a monastery he's never been to before and wants to check out how serious the monks are about practicing, he looks at the walking meditation paths. If they're well swept and obviously well worn by walking, he takes it as a good sign. One of the reasons, of course, is that if you look at the place where someone sits you can't see how worn it is through the sitting, whereas walking wears a rut in the path. But the other reason is that walking meditation is an essential part of the practice that people tend to underestimate. By and large we emphasize the sitting and see the walking simply as an opportunity to get a change of pace from the sitting, to get up and stretch our legs a bit.

But that's not the only purpose for the walking. In the Canon, when the Buddha talks about the benefits of walking meditation, some of them are health benefits, but in terms of the mind, he says that the concentration developed while walking is not easily destroyed. This is an important point to ponder. When we sit quietly, we're trying to get the mind still, and we try to keep the body still as a way of helping the mind along. But you also want to be able to keep the mind still in the midst of movement, in the midst of activity. That's where walking meditation comes in.

When you get up from your sitting meditation to walk, try to maintain the same center you had while sitting. You might think of it as a bowl full of oil that you're carrying with you as you get up from the seat and walk over to the path and continue walking. You don't want to spill a drop. That requires a readjustment in where you keep your focus. Normally, when you open your eyes, the first tendency is for your awareness to go flowing out the eyes, out into the world of your visual sphere. You lose some of your sense of being inside the body.

So remind yourself not to lose that sense. Maintain it even as you open your eyes. You may find that this can knock you off balance the first time you try it, for it means finding a different kind of balance from what you're used to. But it's important that you develop this new sense of balance, this sense of being fully inside your body, fully in the breath, even while walking, even while moving, even while negotiating with the surroundings in which you walk, because eventually you want to get to the point where you can maintain that same sense

of center in the midst of all your activities—talking, working, eating, whatever—wherever you are. And this is a good first step in that direction. Walking meditation is a means of connecting your sitting meditation with mindfulness throughout daily life.

If, when you get on your walking path, you find that your center has slipped, immediately bring it back. Then walk to the end of the path at a normal pace—or slightly slower, if you find it helps your concentration—but don't walk at an abnormally slow pace or you won't get the practice you need in bringing centered mindfulness to your normal activities. Don't glance around at the trees or the other sights around you. Keep your eyes downcast, focused on the path several steps in front of you. You can hold your hands in front of the body or in back, the important point being that you don't swing your arms around. When you get to the end of the path, stop for a brief second to reestablish mindfulness in case it slipped away while you were walking, and then turn, stop for a second, and walk back in the other direction. Always try to turn in the same direction, either clockwise or counter-clockwise, to the right or to the left, so that you don't have to keep deciding which way you're going to turn at the end of the path.

Aside from that, try to maintain the same sense of center you had while sitting with your eyes closed. In other words, focus on the breath. Even though you're walking and looking ahead to make sure you don't trip over things, you want to maintain the sense of being centered in the breath as much as possible. Don't let the looking and the walking pull you away from your center. This requires practice, maintaining a center in the midst of movement.

This is important for two main reasons. One, as I said just now, is that it gets you used to maintaining your center in other activities as well, so that even when you're engaged in complex activities, even when you're thinking about things, you can still have a sense of inhabiting the body, being centered within the breath. You may have so many other things going on that you can't keep track of when the breath is coming in or going out, but you should be able to maintain a sensitivity to the energy tone in the body—where it's relaxed, where it's tight, what you can do to keep it relaxed and comfortable in all situations. You're inhabiting the body. You're not going off entirely into some other thought world. This keeps you grounded. It gives you a place to return to as soon as you've done whatever work needs to be done in that thought world. Otherwise, you hop trains, from one train of thought to the next train of thought, like a hobo, and you end up in Lincoln, Nebraska. Whereas, if you're grounded here, as soon as the thought world has done its work, you're back here with the breath again. That way you can stay grounded in the midst of your different activities. You don't get lost in the course of the day.

The other reason why it's important to develop this ability to stay centered in the midst of activity, is that while you're doing walking meditation, you begin to observe how the mind slips out. It's often the case that you gain insight into the movements of the mind a lot more easily while you're walking than while you're sitting, because when you're sitting, everything is supposed to be totally still. You don't have to pay attention to anything else at all. You can clamp down on everything and get very, very centered, very, very still. But while you're walking, you still have to watch; you still have to move; there are decisions to be made even in the simple matter of walking. Where you're going to place your eyes, where you're going to step, noticing how close you are to the end of the path: simple things, but they're movements of the mind. And when the mind moves that way, it's easy for other intentions to sneak into the movement to divert it to their own ends. If you're not careful, they'll pull you away. But if you get used to looking for them, you gain a sense of how the mind tends to flow out.

Luang Pu Dune talks about this in his short definitions of the four noble truths. The mind that goes flowing out, he says is a cause of stress. It's good to be able to catch that flowing out in action, to see the current, to see how and why it moves, and to get practice in not flowing along with it. Ajaan Lee also talks about this in his discussion of mind as a frame of reference. You start, he says, with a sense of awareness that's still and bright. Then a current flows out from that awareness and goes to sense objects. Sometimes it's looking for something to get angry about, sometimes for something to get greedy about. The reason we don't notice what's happening is that we tend to go with the flow. But if you put yourself in the same position as when you're doing walking meditation—that you're going to stay still even though other things have to move—you can develop the skill needed to stay still while the current of the mind is flowing out, and you don't go with it. You watch it go for a little ways, and because you're not inhabiting it, it just falls short of its mark and dies.

So you get to see the mind in action and yet not get carried away by the action. This way it's a lot easier not to go along with everything that comes flowing through the mind. You get a stronger sense of the observer that can watch the movements of the mind as events, not as worlds to inhabit. If you got into those worlds, they'd turn into all kinds of stories and take you to a dark place on the outskirts of Bangkok, shoot you, and dump you out of the car. But when you see them simply as events, you don't get involved unless you see clearly that they really are useful. This puts you in a much better position not to get carried away by things.

The same ability to watch movement but not move along with it, helps you analyze your own concentration. The Canon talks about developing an ability to step back a bit from your concentration after you've mastered it. In the first

stages of concentration practice, the Buddha recommends learning how to indulge in the concentration, enjoy it, immerse yourself in it, really get absorbed. In other words, you fully plant your mind in the object and become one with it. While you're doing that, you can't think analytically about what you're doing at all. You're totally focused on the one object, the one perception. You may adjust it a little here, a little there, but when you've done enough adjusting, you allow yourself to get immersed in it. While you're in that state, you can't do much analyzing of any sort. But then the Buddha talks about stepping back a bit. The image he gives is of a person sitting, looking at someone who's lying down, or of a person standing, looking at someone who's sitting. You're above the other person a bit, and you can observe what the other person looks like, what he or she is doing.

In the same way, you can learn how to observe the mind while it's still. You aren't so totally implanted in the object, but at the same time you don't totally leave concentration. The reason you can do this is because you've developed the skill through walking meditation for the observer to be still even though there's a little bit of movement in the mind. This way you can observe your state of concentration.

The Buddha recommends lots of ways you can observe it. Look for whatever you can recognize as form, feeling, perception, thought construct, or consciousness within the concentration, and then contemplate its behavior. One simple way is contemplating the activity of perception. To what extent does the perception you're using as a marker for your concentration create stress or disturbance for the mind? Learn to observe that perception, the label you place on things, as an act of the mind. There's an element of intention behind it. Or, many times, there's a whole frame of reference for that particular perception, a whole world of background. But if you can see the perception as an activity with a beginning, a middle, and an end, you see that the perception is one thing, the actual object of the perception is something else.

One of the classic analogies the Buddha gives is of a mirage. You see a tree in the mirage, even though the actual tree is much farther away than the image of the tree in the mirage. The tree in the mirage is one thing; the actual tree is something else. They're connected but separate. When you can see the distinction between the perception and the actual object, you can start seeing the perception in motion and see what kind of effect it has as part of a causal chain. That way, you can see which kinds of perceptions are helpful, which ones are not.

Ajaan Lee points this out in his breath meditation instructions. The way you perceive the breath in the first jhana is going to be different from the way you perceive it in the second, the third, or the fourth. In the fourth jhana, you

perceive the breath as a still energy field. What you've done is to tune in to a still energy field that's already there in the body. The way you can tune in is through this perception. What do you have in your current range of awareness that's breath energy but still? If you can't focus on that just yet, focus on the perception of breathing in, breathing out, trying to get the right length of breath, the right quality of breath. That will help you to ** get centered and to settle down. But there will come a point where the understanding of the breath that got you into concentration gets in the way of your moving to more subtle levels of concentration. So you need alternative ways of perceiving breath in the body.

Instead of focusing on the in-and-out breath, try focusing on the subtle breath energies that flow through the blood vessels, flow through the nerves. They're a very subtle form of the in-and-out breath. Then there's a more subtle energy that goes very fast. As soon as you start thinking of breathing in, it's already gone around the body, throughout the body, from head to toe. And then there's another level of energy, the still breath, something that's always there, regardless of whether there's an in-breath or an out-breath. Ajaan Lee mentions one of the energy centers where you can access this—where the diaphragm connects to the rib cage right under your lungs—but there are other spots where you can first access it as well. The in-breath and out-breath can impinge on this still energy, can squeeze it, but if you decide not to let the in-and-out breathing interfere with that sense of still energy, you can then let that sense of stillness suffuse the whole body. You move to a deeper level of concentration, where everything feels wide open, still, and free.

You've done this by focusing on your perceptions as events, testing their results, and then changing them to give better results. As you grow more proficient at this, you can start observing the entire process, to see how perceptions shape your experience as a whole. That's one way of developing a sense of disenchantment and disengagement, seeing how what you thought were the raw data of experience are already shaped by perception. This is one way to develop insight in the course of practicing concentration.

This all depends on that ability to observe the mind in action and yet not get caught up in the action. And this is why walking meditation is so important, because it helps give you practice in perfecting that ability.

So don't think of the walking simply as something you do when you get too tired to sit, or as something where you simply go through the motions until you're ready to sit again. It's not a meditation break; it's an essential part of the meditation. It develops an added skill, the skill to be centered in the body not only while the body is still, but also while the body is moving. Walking meditation teaches you to be still in the midst of movement, to get a stronger

sense of the mind as the observer that doesn't move along with the things it observes.

Remember that chant about respect for concentration. It doesn't apply only to sitting concentration. It also applies to walking meditation as an essential skill in your concentration practice. To develop respect for these things, as the Buddha said, puts you in the presence of nibbana.