

## WALKING AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Dharma Talk: Unitarian Church,  
Ottawa, April 26/09

When we think of Buddhism or Buddhist monks, there are few more iconic images than that of the Buddha himself or a robed monastic, legs crossed, hands folded, back straight and eyes staring straight ahead. This seems to epitomize the calm and stable state of Nirvana. Yet, from the time Siddhartha Shakyamuni fled his palace, 2500 years ago, slipping off into the forests unnoticed, up until his death some forty years later, a different activity also characterized his life. He walked. Day after day, with the exception of the brief annual “rains” retreats, when it was unsafe to travel about, Shakyamuni and his disciples traveled the roads and pathways of North India.

As our many texts or sutras tell us, he would regularly pause in a village, at a nobleman’s residence or in a public park, to speak to whomever was present. He would deliver Dharma, that is the Way. He would share with them the truths and practices he had used to uncover it for himself. From that time great Dharma masters, most monks and lay people alike have taken his example and lived more or less a homeless existence. Walking, in its many forms, is as much a part of Buddhist practice as sitting meditation.

Interestingly, the teaching of the Buddhas is called Dharma, meaning the Way or Path. It is less often called the Truth, the Vision or the Supreme Knowledge. It is a path, a road less traveled. It is not a fact or theory or statement you are commanded to accept, it is a journey, a well-worn route we are each invited to take for ourselves, follow it as others have and will, to an experienced comprehension of the nature of our suffering and its removal.

Walking practices have been an integral part of Dharma practice since Shakyamuni wandered the dusty roads of Northern India. The image of a walking teacher pervades all of Buddhism. One bodhisattva or buddha-to-be, Jizo, or Earth

Storehouse Bodhisattva, is characterized as a pilgrim, dedicated to wandering the six realms of conditioned existence on foot in pilgrim clothes to present the Dharma to all unawakened beings. In the Tendai tradition, part of the basic training for a priest is to complete an all-day, 17 mile walk, usually around the temple property. Every school has tales of great teachers walking as practice, walking to collect a meal, walking to important Buddhist sites and universities to retrieve authentic teaching, walking to escape the distractions of lay life, walking to bring the teachings to suffering individuals everywhere.

In the Red Maple Sangha, my home community, we draw on these traditions to encourage practitioners to explore how to deepen their awareness through walking. Indoor walking is part of every practice period. Our first Saturday of each month concludes with a one-hour silent walk down one of our neighbouring country roads. At least once a year we practice an extended walk or pilgrimage along the K and P Trail in Renfrew.

What kinds of walking practices might Buddhists perform? Walking or foot practices take several forms, typically in one of three categories:

- Shorter Enclosing Walks, or
- Longer Walks, or
- Symbolic Travels

### **Category One: Shorter Enclosing Walks**

This includes slow indoor walking meditation or shrine circling.

### **Category Two: Longer Walks**

This includes begging rounds, pilgrimages, kaihogyo and the flying monk practices

### **Category Three: Symbolic Travels**

This is primarily mandala practice.

Before we look at these in a little more detail, it would be helpful to recall that walking is part of the continuum of Buddhist meditational practices, not separate from it. As such, walking is done for the same reasons and using the same techniques. When we practice any meditation technique, our purpose is to open ourselves, in body and mind, to our present moment experience. We let go of tendencies to compress our attention around habitual narratives of the mind. We recognize that, as the Buddha taught, it is our clinging to these misleading stories about who we are and what the world is, that keeps us trapped in the grip of endless suffering, a life of deep dissatisfaction. Meditation, whatever its form, serves to relieve us of this clinging, allowing us to experience insight into the way things are and, every bit as importantly, to reveal the deep compassion for all beings that is our true nature.

The common elements of any meditative practice are

- an attention to proper posture,
- allowing the body to either sit or move in a natural manner,
- relaxed and naturally full breathing and
- open attention.
- working with the musculature to release tensions and compressions,
- working with the spine to allow it to do its own work of supporting our physical selves as it is designed to do.

Mentally, we

- ground our attention in full and complete breathing;
- direct our mental energy to opening up to whatever physical and mental activity may arise;
- mixing or balancing the opening up of attention (what is called insight or vipassana meditation); and
- alternating with various concentrative meditations (what is called samadhi meditation). These samadhi practices can include visualizations, devotional recitations or performance of specific ritual actions.

When we walk, we treat it as identical to sitting practice, so that it has its own postural forms and may include visualization or recitation actions. Most common would be the use of chanting while

walking. Short recitations, such as the famous “nembutsu” - “namo amida bu” - Praise to the Supreme Buddha, Amitabha - can be used. During longer walks one might recite from memory, the full text of some important sutra or teaching text, such as the Shorter Heart Sutra. One would carry a mala or wrist rosary, that would enable one to count certain prescribed repetitions of the phrase. One of my teachers used to remind that there is no interruption of practice when one moves from sitting to walking practice - it is all one practice.

Let's now consider the different forms of walking practice.

### **Category One: Shorter Enclosing Walks**

#### **1. Walking meditation**

Sometimes called *kinhin*, this is walking a slow, defined, often oval or rectangular pattern as a way of relieving sitting practice. It is practiced in most styles or schools. Some use it as a relief for long periods of sitting meditation. Some use it as a distinct practice in itself, and some teachers have used it as their main practice mode. It may be done indoors or out. Typically the course is a 10-20 foot loop or line. Groups will walk directly behind each other, with barely a step between, so as to ensure sharp concentration. The pace can be very slow, moderately fast or even rather quick.

In this form we are instructed to maintain an open awareness of breath and body. Hands are held up, left holding right, grasping each other over the heart. We step along using a careful witnessing process. As we begin, we attend to the lifting of the heel, then the front of the foot. We notice the swing forward and the heel plant. We notice the shifting of weight onto the arch and ball and side to side. The walking is often synchronized with breath. As we walk we maintain balance and posture, being careful to maintain a harmonious rhythm with each other.

One modern teacher, the Vietnamese master, Thich Nhat Hahn, has promoted a variation to this practice which is designed for more active outdoor walking. In this case, one aligns the stride to the breath in a fixed count. One would coordinate each step with a three or four count of the breath. He stresses that we should maintain this count all the way through a walk to ensure full concentration on

body and breath, without sight-seeing distractions, which would degenerate into idle thinking. His walks tend to be morning walks and extend over a 45 minute period. We'll try some of this style later.

## 2. Shrine or Site Circling

From earliest times there has been a practice of walking and chanting while circling a *stupa*, a ceremonial mound or relic site. This form of ritual practice can also be seen in other cultures much older than Buddhism. The Buddha discouraged any images of himself and seems to have requested that his body not be used for relics or relic worship after his death. Nonetheless, in the decades and centuries after his death his disciples did, in fact, preserve items and introduced these burial mounds and the circum-ambulation practices to go with them.

One such relic is the Buddha's tooth which is said to be preserved in the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy in Sri Lanka. Every year there is a *Perahera*, huge festival and parade that leads Buddhist lay and monastic practitioners through the streets of Kandy over several days and nights. Every few years the procession includes the tooth itself, mounted on the largest, most elaborate elephant transporter who fronts the procession.

It is a common site in most Buddhist temple sites for both lay and monastic members to walk around such a sacred site, chanting whatever appropriate verses are associated with the site. In some the focal point is a Buddha relic, however, as with religious sites in many other traditions, Buddhist circling can be associated with a great teacher or even a great natural feature. In Nepal, the site of the Buddha's awakening and the sacred bo tree, under which he sat, have been preserved and have become places where ritual circle walking takes place all through the year. In Japan, it is common to chant while encircling the burial sites for Kobo Daishi, the legendary National Teacher or Dengyo Daishi, the founder of the Tendai school. Likewise, special trees, mountains, or historic buildings or bodies of water can inspire circling.

### **Category Two : Longer Walks**

Buddhist practice has also produced its own version of longer walking practices common to most other religious traditions. First let's consider the walking

practice closest to the example set by the Buddha himself, begging rounds.

### 3. Begging Rounds:

A single-file walk around a temple community or village to collect daily food has been part of monastic life in most Asian Buddhist countries for centuries. Shakyamuni himself established this routine in the Vinaya, the rules for monastic behaviour. It expressed his teaching that monks should be "homeless ones", relying on the generosity of the villages they visited to provide daily food.

The practice has been preserved in many Buddhist countries. For example, in Japan the *takuhatsu* is a begging round where monks exchange sutra chanting for food from homes or businesses. In Sri Lanka the monks will rise at dawn and travel through their local communities with their bowls. In this *pindacara* practice, They receive and eat whatever is donated, and must do so before noon. The Vinaya instructs them that there are no meals after noon. This walk can be quite a long one, depending on the relationship of the temple to the village. I recall when I stayed as a lay visitor in a small Sri Lankan temple, the monks had a long walk up and down the mountain on which they lived and several miles into their village. Other locations may benefit from having the temple right in the village.

One must understand this walk as more than blank time to go out for a meal or that monks are taking advantage of working people. Buddhism is not primarily a book-based religion, that is, learning from books is secondary to personal experience. Consequently, one learns about practice by following, observing one's teacher in ordinary and extra-ordinary circumstances. Thereby, one sees the living teaching, out of the lived life we call Dharma. From the perspective of the layperson, giving to a monk is considered *dana*, the virtuous act of giving, encouraged by the Buddha. It is said to generate great merit for the donor and helps them along their own path to Awakening.

The hours spent walking from the temple and back are well used for chanting, silent recitation and performing mindfulness practice not so different from the indoor walking described earlier. I find it quite provocative to imagine what lessons the Buddha would have taught over the hours and days that he and his disciples walked back and forth,

across the roadways of North India. For example, there is a famous story, which has the quality of truth, about the Buddha and his followers coming across Anguimila, a famous murderous madman, while they walked the roads. It is reported that lay and monastic followers recognized the madman, a gigantic person of wild appearance, and fled, urging Shakyamuni to do the same. Demonstrating the virtues of non-judgment and equanimity that he taught, Shakyamuni kept his pace and route, directly at Anguimila. When they met, the madman, used to terrorizing all he met, tried to frighten the Buddha off the road. Shakyamuni was unaffected and called out to the madman, saying he was not concerned about his reputation since he recognized that, like all human, the murderer also suffered and would die. He offered the madman to abandon his ways and to everyone's astonishment, the madman did so. It is reported Anguimila later became a wise and exemplary student himself.

I wonder how many times this kind of living lesson was repeated along the dusty roads. We have the idea that the Buddha taught through lectures and addresses given in groves and courtyards. It seems to me that so much more of his most direct and practical teaching came from how he acted in the face of the challenges of a walking practice.

#### 4. Pilgrimages

Extended linear or circular walks, called *henro* in Japan, have been encouraged since Shakyamuni's own time. In the Mahapara-nirvana Sutra he lists preferred sites to visit and encourages this practice. These re-visit the central places of the faith - his birthplace, the site of his Awakening, of his first lecture and his death. Hundreds of additional sites now exist around the world, added to express important events and figures of different schools of Buddhism. Pilgrimage is not unique to Buddhism and it demonstrates most of the characteristics seen in religions the world around.

In brief, pilgrimage can take two forms, a shorter localized one, where the pilgrim or pilgrims as a group will visit a regional site, often associated with an important regional figure, or a longer one, associated with some national figure like Kobo Daishi. The most imposing long pilgrimage is the Shikoku, which circles the entire island of Shikoku, some 1500 km. It follows the coastline, visiting 80-

plus temples along the way.

Like the famous Christian Campostello in Spain or the Haj to the Muslim's holy City, Mecca, the Shikoku in Japan offers pilgrims what we refer to as a "liminal" experience. A 'limin' is a threshold in a doorway. When we take part in pilgrimage, we pass through four stages of a liminal experience.

- First, we let go of all the trappings, concerns and burdens of our life up to that point. All pilgrims enter the path with little more than what they can carry in a small pack.
- Secondly we begin the path, we set out, we affirm an intention, which might be a shrine or temple, or even just a hillside. This is the time of reflection and self-examination.
- Thirdly, once the goal is reached, we begin the return. This involves set a new intention for life after the pilgrimage. It may mean a vow-taking, it may mean some dramatic change in behaviour, including a faith choice. It is the correction of life.
- Finally, we cross back over the threshold and return to our transformed lives.

Pilgrimage is a kind of cleansing or purificatory process, whereupon the pilgrim uses the physical actions of the walk, the landscape and often the social interaction along the route to redefine and reorient their life. In Buddhist, and I observe in most other faiths, pilgrimage is always seen as a shared experience. The walker is never alone. Even when the road seems solitary, there is always the presence of the founder of the walk and the long history of past and future walkers. In Shikoku, it is said that its founder, Kobo Daishi, still walks the route constantly, giving comfort and companionship to every pilgrim.

#### 5. Kaihogyo

Kaihogyo, on the other hand is unique, and unique to one school, the Tendai, the most prominent public form of Buddhism in Japan. Kaihogyo is a central practice within the Tendai monastic community. Its can be a short focused walk around a temple or, on Mt. Hiei in Japan, can be up to 1000 days of daily 40km walks around a temple route. For some it may even become the main practice of their spiritual lives.

The gyo-ja, the walker, rises in the middle of the night, performs purifications and dons the typical pilgrim costume, white jacket, white leggings - white, the colour of death in Japan - slips into straw sandals and sets off in the dark. He will race through the course over the next 14 hours, pausing for prostrations, chants and very briefly for food. In its most extreme form, the kaihogyo takes the gyo-ja to the very boundary of life and death, where he must recognize the delicacy of life and choose to return and dedicate his life to the service of all beings. So serious is this practice that gyo-ja carry a rope and knife with which they vow to take their lives rather than fail to complete the practice. So determined are these monks, they have been dubbed The Marathon Monks, and are an inspiration to the faith and all who meet them.

## 6. Flying Monks

In Tibet there has been a similarly arduous practice which has given cause for people to ascribe the power of flight or levitation to certain monks. The practice, like the kaihogyo, involves intense development of both breathing and concentrative capacities and is undertaken only by the most dedicated of students. Unlike pilgrimage, there are no specific routes; and, like the kaihogyo, it is performed individually.

Students learn, over several years, to enter a deep concentrative state and follow a course which may cover several hundred miles, non-stop. They learn to use a long, leaping stride which they can sustain over the entire distance. They travel at night and through remote areas, so there are as few distractions as possible. It is this light and floating pace which has given rise to the flying legends. One observer noted that they need to sustain intense concentration to maintain the practice and were they to be interrupted, might suffer serious physical consequences.

### **Category Three: Symbolic Travels**

Of course there are symbolic elements in all the previously described practices. However, there are practices where the travel itself is symbolic, involving little or no actual walking. These are included in what are referred to within Buddhist teaching as Esoteric practices. Often for us, esoteric has meant secret and even magic-based. In East

Asia, Esoteric practices have tended to mean symbolic rituals, which are secret, in that they are not written, but have involved wide participation by the congregation. It was considered a great accomplishment to be initiated in these practices and it was common for an emperor or nobleman to learn and practice these for themselves, for their families and, as the saying goes, for the benefit of the nation. It is taught in Esoteric Buddhism that we have access to the deepest truths of the universe through certain practices of body, speech and mind. The performance of specified rituals of speech, as mantras or recitations, body, using hand-postures or mudras and by means of complex visualizations, we can experience these truths. Furthermore, the rituals, because they tap into the fundamental process of the universe, can have a beneficial effect on natural phenomena. For that reason they were favoured to protect people and nations from illness, plague and natural disaster.

Mandala are symbolic representations of cosmic reality, and can be two or three dimensional. We usually think of mandala as brightly coloured displays with strange shapes and geometric patterns - quaint posters or screensavers. Paradoxically, Westerners have seen them as mazes or puzzles to confuse or dazzle the mind. In truth, for Buddhist practice, mandala are actually maps of spiritual and mental spaces.

As a walking practice, this practice involves walking physically around the mandala, through it where the mandala is large enough or exploring it mentally where the paths are visualized. There are some similarities between this practice and modern uses of labyrinths. There are hundreds of mandala in every tradition. In the Shingon and Tendai traditions, the mandala of the Two Worlds - the Womb World and the Diamond World - become the major maps for the performance of certain ritual practices. These practices involve mental movement through a complicated landscape, peopled by hundreds of spiritual beings. In one East Asian school, the Pure Land, the practice of pilgrimage and the use of mandala merged. We see the creation of symbolic maps which actually describe real landscapes. Thus, the practitioner physically walks through a symbolic realm that exists within the real physical landscape near a temple. There is a union of symbolic and physical.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, walking practices take many different forms throughout the Buddhist world. Some are simple and easily performed. Others are demanding, even life-threatening, and can become a way of life in themselves.

Shakyamuni, 2500 years ago, we are invited to practice by taking our bodies out onto the path and walk the Way.

*Ray Innen Parchelo*  
*Akashaloka*  
*April 2009*

There is much more to be said about walking practices.

- We may explore the reasons why people choose one practice over another.
- We may compare these with similar forms in other faiths.
- Some writers describe walking in terms of its expression of a symbolic matrix.
- Others see it as demonstrating a populist, devotional thread in Buddhism, a reaction to the over-formalization of priestly forms.
- For me, I am curious about the transfer of Buddhism in the West where walking practices are historically devalued as relics of the most decadent times of Christian history. There has been an historical skewing of how the West views Buddhist practice, and sitting meditation is seen as the highest, even the only practice. I wonder how we in the West can redefine and reinvent these noble and crucial practices so as to widen the forms of Buddhist practice available to Western seekers.

Even our superficial survey today should dispel that distortion and encourage us to expand our understanding of the Buddhist Way. Like