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Walking meditation and daily activity



Dhamma talk by Venerable Chanmyay Sayadaw Ashin Janakabhivamsa
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We have the three aspects of our practice: sitting, walking and daily activities. All three are equally important in gaining deep concentration and attaining clear insight into phenomena, but the most important factor in making progress in *vipassanā* meditation is the noting of consciousness of mental states. Meditation is training of the mind, mental development or mental culture, so therefore, observe and note each and every thought.

The second important factor is awareness of activities in our daily routine, because much of the time we have to perform repeated actions and movements. If we do not observe in detail these routine activities, there will be many gaps between one moment of mindfulness and the next, and when there is not continuous attentiveness, the concentration weakens.

Walking meditation

Now, I want to deal with some points of walking meditation. In the walking meditation, for about the first ten minutes, note 'left, right, left, right' whilst observing each step very attentively and precisely. Thereafter, observe three parts of the step, the movements of lifting, pushing and dropping the foot. When lifting the foot, observe the lifting movement and at that same moment, make a mental note 'lifting'.

When pushing the foot forward, observing the pushing movement and note it as 'pushing', and as the foot drops, observe the dropping movement attentively and precisely, at the same time making a mental note 'dropping'.

Sometimes the mind stays with the word or mental labelling and does not go to the actual movement of the foot. This is not right, since the aim is to perceive the actual movement of the foot. Labelling or mental noting only helps the mind to focus on the object precisely and follow it closely. The noting mind should see and label the actual movement of the foot, while labelling 'lifting, pushing, dropping', in this way walking slowly and observing 'lifting, pushing, dropping' for about thirty minutes.

For some meditators, the labelling or mental noting sometimes hinders their awareness of the object, in which case, they should just be aware of the actual movement of lifting, pushing and dropping. Without labelling or mental noting, however, the meditator may not be attentive enough so awareness is shallow and superficial. The mind doesn't grip the object but often goes out and wanders. More effort must then be put into observing the movement of the foot, so that awareness becomes attentive and deep. If it is possible to label the object, do so, but being aware of the object is the most important thing.

After some thirty minutes, begin to note 'intention' before lifting. An intention precedes every movement, and it is intention that causes the foot to lift, push forward and drop down. There is intention before lifting, before pushing forward and before dropping. First of all, observe or note only one intention, before lifting, in this way noting 'intending, lifting, pushing, dropping' for about twenty minutes in one hour of walking.

At the beginning of the practice, the walking meditation is better than sitting, because the object of meditation, the movement of the foot, is very distinct to the mind, and it is possible to observe objects closely and precisely. For this reason every sitting meditation should be preceded by walking meditation, so that a degree of deep concentration is attained.

That concentration should be carried over in the process of settling down for sitting meditation. When walking to the meditation seat, continue to note each movement of the foot, 'lifting, pushing, dropping' or 'intending, lifting, pushing, dropping'. When the seat is reached, note 'standing, standing' and when intending to sit, note 'intending, intending, intending' and then sit down very slowly, so that it is possible to observe the individual movements of changing the posture, noting 'sitting, sitting, sitting'. As the body bends, note 'bending, bending' and when the body touches the floor or the seat, note 'touching, touching'. When arranging the clothes, or legs and hands, note 'arranging, arranging', observing all actions just as they occur. Then there will be good concentration in that sitting with few wandering thoughts.

In the same way, when finishing sitting meditation and getting up to walk, then again, at that time, carry over the concentration attained in the sitting until the walking path is reached, being aware of each movement of the foot, 'lifting, pushing, dropping' or 'left, right, left, right'.

In the beginning of every walking meditation, at first observe 'left, right', 'left right', for about five or ten minutes so that the body's circulation is restored, because in the sitting meditation it is slowed. Only then, note three or four parts, 'lifting, pushing, dropping' and then 'intending, lifting, pushing, dropping'.

Since most of the meditators are experienced in the practice, they want to note more objects in the walking, such as 'intending, lifting, pushing, dropping, touching, pressing'. When dropping the foot to touch the floor or carpet, observe it as touching, but to ensure the touching sensations are distinct, put it down flat, not the heel first and the toe later. Sometimes on attaining deep concentration in the walking, when the foot is placed this way, meditators may experience something on the sole. So meditators can increase the objects noted, in this way 'intending, lifting, pushing, dropping, touching, pressing', 'intending, lifting, pushing, dropping, touching, pressing'. Also, it is possible to note one movement twice, so 'lifting, lifting', 'pushing, pushing', 'dropping, dropping', 'touching, touching', 'pressing, pressing', or divide the lifting of the foot into two parts. On lifting the heel, observe it as 'lifting' and on raising the toe, note 'raising', in this way observing 'lifting, raising, pushing, dropping, touching, pressing'.

After practising in this way for about four or five days, it may be possible to note intention before every movement, thus 'intending, lifting', 'intending, raising', 'intending, pushing', 'intending, dropping', 'touching', 'intending, pressing'. However, before touching, there is no intention, just 'touching'. When about to lift the back foot, press the front foot a little bit, noting at that time 'pressing', then 'intending, pressing', 'intending, lifting', 'intending, raising', 'intending, pushing', 'intending, dropping', 'touching', 'intending, pressing' and so on.

Meditators will know themselves whether they are able to concentrate the mind on such detailed movements of the foot. If noting can be done easily and comfortably, they

should continue this way, but if it is a strain to observe more objects, they should return to the usual number of objects. So, in this way, observe 'intending, lifting', 'intending, raising', 'intending, pushing', 'intending, dropping', 'touching', 'intending, pressing' and so on. For the time being, most meditators will be able to observe not more than three or four parts, meaning 'lifting, pushing, dropping' or 'intending, lifting, pushing, dropping'.

It is very important to note intention before movement of the foot and before all actions and movements in the daily routine. Every physical action and movement is preceded by intention, but only by slowing down all actions and movements, is it possible to catch and note this intention. In ordinary activities, for example, when about to stretch the arm, note the intention to stretch, 'intending', and then 'stretching, stretching, stretching' as the movement is slowly performed. So too, experiencing an itching sensation on the head, while sitting. Though the sensation is noted as 'itching, itching, itching' it may not subside but become unbearably irritating, so the meditator may want to scratch. This may be done, but mindfully - wanting to move the arm, there is intention, so note 'intending, intending', then slowly, very slowly, lift the arm, noting 'lifting, lifting, lifting', and when the hand reaches the itching point, note, 'touching, touching', then 'intending to scratch' and then 'scratching, scratching'. When the itching has gone, note the wish to put the hand down, 'intending, intending', then 'lowering, lowering' and so on.

Whatever is done must be done very slowly, while observing every individual movement of the action. These movements are *vayodhatu*, the wind or air element, which must be thoroughly realised as it is, a material unit and its motion or vibration. This movement has the three characteristics of impermanence, suffering and impersonal nature. By being aware of the individual movements of the stretching of the arm or bending of the arm, very attentively and precisely, it is possible to experience their impermanence, suffering and the impersonality as they arise and pass away, one after another.

By realising each individual movement very precisely, there is removed from the movement, that idea of self, of 'me' or 'mine' which is the cause of all negative mental states or defilements. By noting as intention before each individual movement in walking and carrying out daily activities, the meditator will come to realise, through their experiential knowledge, that it is nothing but the intention that causes the lifting movement of the foot or the stretching or bending arm, nothing but intention that pushes the foot forward or causes it to drop down and so on. There is no person, being or self who lifts the foot, pushes it forward or drops it down.

This is the insight knowledge, *vipassanā ñāṇa*, that penetrates into the movement of the foot and realises it, as it is. *Vipassanā ñāṇa* can lead the meditator, even during walking meditation, to enlightenment. Any *maggāñāṇa*, or *phalañāṇa*, path knowledge or fruition knowledge, can be attained through the practice of walking meditation.

At the time the Buddha, now eighty years old, was lying on his death bed in the Kushinagara Park, there came a mendicant named Supada requesting that the Venerable Ānanda allow him to see the Buddha. Supada asked the Buddha questions which were not relevant to the cessation of suffering, to the attainment of *nibbāna*, and the Buddha responded 'Supada, this is not the time for me to answer those questions. I will teach you the way that leads you to the cessation of suffering. Listen carefully'. Supada listened to the Buddha explain the Noble Eightfold Path, the way leading to the cessation of suffering.

In the Noble Eightfold Path there is a mental factor, mindfulness, *sati*. The Buddha said, 'Supada, this mindfulness, together with the other seven factors, is the way

which will lead to the cessation of suffering, so develop that mindfulness'. Then the Buddha taught him how to be mindful of whatever arises in this body and mind, just as it occurs. Supada was pleased with what the Buddha taught him, and bowing to the Buddha and retired to a secluded corner of the Park, and there he did not sit but walked up and down, observing each movement of the step, precisely and attentively. The Scripture doesn't mention how he observed the movement of the foot, but says he practised walking meditation. I think he would have observed the movement of the foot, just as we are in this retreat, because every action or movement is the physical phenomenon which must be thoroughly realised as having the three characteristics of impermanence, suffering and impersonal nature, *anicca, dukkha and anattā*.

In a few hours, Supada experienced three characteristics of the movement of the foot and clearly realised impermanence, suffering and the impersonal nature of phenomena. Gradually, his insight knowledge matured and he passed through all the stages of insight knowledge and attained the first *magga, sotāpattimagga*, path knowledge, the second, *sakadāgāmiimagga* and the third, *anāgāmiimagga*. Finally, he attained *arahatamagga*, the fourth path knowledge and reached *arahantship*. He returned to the Buddha and reported what he had attained. Supada was the last disciple of the Buddha to become an *arahant*, and just by walking meditation.

So take this walking meditation seriously and observe each movement precisely and attentively, and realise the impermanence, suffering and impersonal nature of physical phenomena and progress in insight knowledge.

Daily activities

Awareness of daily activities is an important factor in making progress in meditation, as the Buddha teaches us in a separate chapter about clear comprehension in the *Mahāsatipatṭhāna sutta*. This is the discourse that sets out the technique of mindfulness meditation. The chapter *sampajañña pabba* is translated as 'the chapter on clear comprehension' by Pali scholars, though it may be, I think, translated as 'full awareness of all actions and movements in the daily routine'.

There the Buddha begins:

*Abhikante patikante sampajāna kārī hoti
Alokite vilokite sampajāna kārī hoti
Samiñjite passarite sampajāna kārī hoti ...*

This translates as: When walking forward or when walking backward, observe it as it is. When stretching out or bending the arm or leg, observe it as it is. When looking straight ahead or looking to the side, observe it as it is. When holding robes and alms bowl, observe it as it is, or for lay meditators we might say, when dressing or preparing to dress, observe each action and movement as it is.

The Buddha even teaches us to be aware of all actions and movements in the toilet or bathroom, because any action made without mindfulness makes the mind defiled. If an action is not performed mindfully and observed, that action causes a defilement to enter the mind. So, for example, dropping the hand without being attentive to the act, may mean it contacts something, causing discomfort or even injury, and *dosa*, anger or aversion, arises. If the hand is put down slowly, attentively noting, 'putting down, putting down, putting down', then there will not be such suffering by accident.

When eating, suppose chewing bread, observe the actions of chewing noting 'chewing, chewing, chewing' with attention to the movements of the lips, teeth, tongue and not to the food itself. Mindful of these movements, the meditator may not be aware of the taste of the food, or know it as sour, salty, sweet or hot. Then there is no attachment to the

food, nor any desire for it, nor anger about it, because attention is to the movement of the mouth and the noting of 'chewing, chewing, chewing, chewing, chewing'.

Gradually the meditator comes to realise, with a deeper concentration, that these movements naturally arise and pass away one after another, and in this way, knows the impermanence of the chewing movement. At that moment, there is neither desire, *lobha*, nor anger, *dosa*, nor any other mental defilement, because the meditator is mindful of it, aware of it. In this way, everything can be observed in more and more detail, by gradually slowing down all actions and movements. Unless the actions of the daily routine are slowed, the attention cannot catch the individual movement, precisely, and realise its arising and passing away, its impermanence.

The Venerable Ānanda himself attained arahantship by being aware of daily activities. When the Buddha was alive, Venerable Ānanda had attained just the first path knowledge, the first stage of enlightenment. Three months after the Buddha's passing away, the senior *mahāthera* wanted to hold a Council or *saṅgāya sāṅgīti*, and they wished the Venerable Ānanda to participate. However, such a Council must comprise only arahants, and Venerable Ānanda had not yet attained arahantship, so he was requested to do so before the Council commenced. The Venerable Ānanda strove hard, being aware of all mental states and physical processes.

Practising walking meditation one night, and attaining deep concentration, he went to his room to rest, mindfully, being aware of all actions and movements. On reaching his bed, he stood observing the standing posture and sat down, being mindful of all actions in the sitting movement. He wished to lie down for a time, because he felt stiffening in the whole body because of the long hours of walking. Very gradually and mindfully he lay down, slowly lifting his foot from the ground, his body now in the reclined position. Before his head touched the pillow and as soon as his feet had lifted off the ground, he attained the three higher stages of insight knowledge, by experiencing the arising and passing away of all mental states and physical processes, and at the moment his head touched the pillow, he attained arahantship. The next morning he participated in the Third Council for Scriptures.

Venerable Ānanda attained the three higher stages of insight knowledge by being mindful of daily activities in more and more detail, attentively and precisely. This is why awareness of daily activities is the second most important factor for gaining concentration and making progress in insight. Take it all seriously, being aware of each action and movement, in more and more detail, slowing down all actions and movements, as much as possible.

May all of you rightly understand the technique of walking meditation and awareness of daily activities. Strive hard and attain the cessation of suffering.

