

Sitting & Walking

June 14, 2021

When I was first ordained, I stayed at Wat Asokaram, Ajaan Lee's monastery. Every night they would have a two-hour service: about twenty minutes of chanting and the remainder of the two hours for the sit. And of course, being a neophyte, I found the hour and forty minutes very long. People gave me advice. One piece of advice was that before a long sit like that, you should do walking meditation. It helps get the breath energies in the body circulating around, the blood flowing well into the different parts of the body. Then, when you sat in meditation, you'd less likely be numb.

Other people stressed the point that this sit should be followed by another period of walking meditation. Ajaan Fuang said that the key to becoming a good meditator was not just to put in the hours for the group sit and then rest. You take what you've gained in the meditation and continue it. Don't throw the peace and quiet of having been meditating away. In this case, he'd say either continue sitting someplace else or do walking meditation.

So walking meditation is good for sitting meditation, and sitting meditation is good for walking meditation. They're both good for each other—and they develop different skills. Sitting meditation is more for deep concentration. Walking meditation is more for discernment. Ajaan Suwat would often mention that he got his best insights while doing walking meditation. But you have to know how to do it well.

There are a few rules for walking meditation that are different from sitting meditation, having to do with the big differences between the two: One, the body is moving and two, you're having to pay attention to the environment around you. As you're sitting here, the body is still and so with each breath you're dealing with the same territory, getting the breath energy to flow around or through the areas that are a little bit constricted because you're sitting. So it's the same problem again and again and again. You can get really good at figuring out how to get the breath energies to flow where the legs are folded, where one leg is on top of the other, and you can work more precisely on your posture. As far as you're concerned, the rest of the world could just not be there at all. There's no danger of running into anything as you're sitting here very still. But it's very different when you're walking.

So assume that you've been sitting and meditating, and it's time to get up and do some walking. What are the stages of moving into the new type of meditation?

One is to make up your mind that you're not going to leave the breath as you get up. You're going to try to maintain as full a bodily awareness as you can. The image that comes to mind is of carrying a bowl filled with water to the brim. You want to make sure you hold it carefully so that it doesn't spill. This requires extreme restraint of the senses because there is that tendency when you leave sitting meditation to just let the mind go back to its old ways, which means

wasting the stillness you gained from the meditation. So you try to gather your mind together, keep yourself focused, say, in the middle of the chest or wherever your favorite spot is in your body. Get up and make sure that you're going to maintain that center all the way from here to your walking meditation path.

Dividing the task up into sections like this is an important part of the meditation as you're walking. If you just think, "I'm going to do half an hour of walking meditation and that's it," the mind soon begins to wander. But if you tell yourself, "I'm going to keep my mind centered as I walk from here to over there and from there to the next spot and from there to the next spot." When you get to the path and it's, "From this end of the path to that end of the path, I'm going to keep my mind still." Divide your time up into little segments like this and then you can be more on top of yourself.

You get to the end of the path; you turn around. Make a habit of turning around in the same direction each time during a session so that you don't have to make the choice. It's automatic: Turn to the right or turn to the left. Then stand still just for a second. Establish your intention: You're going to keep your mind on an even keel, keep it centered from here to the other end of the path. Then walk at a fairly normal pace. In the beginning, you may want to go a little bit more slowly but don't make it exaggeratedly slow. What you're trying to do is to develop the habit of keeping yourself centered as you do other activities. And this is the simplest of activities.

As you keep your attention focused in one spot, you can't help but notice the movement of the body. So one of the questions you might ask yourself as you're moving along is, "How is the energy flowing as I move? Am I holding the body in a way that constricts the energy someplace? How do I release that constriction?"

In other words, you're doing some evaluation, just as you'd do while you're sitting. Get the breath comfortable and think of it spreading, but in this case, you're spreading through a moving body. So the grace of your movement is going to be important—to whatever extent you can make it graceful.

If you have physical difficulties, do the best you can to make the breath help in the movement of the body. And, of course, you'll have to take note as you're getting to the end of the path so that you don't walk past it or run into things.

This is where you have to watch out for a tendency that the mind has that corresponds to a Thai phrase, *suam roi*, which literally means to walk in the footsteps of somebody else. It's usually used to describe what criminals do to make sure that their footprints are not detected—they step in the footprints of somebody else. In the same way, your mind's defilements are going to step into the legitimate movements of your mind as you're surveying your environment, and you want to watch out for that. The thought of something may just slip in and at first it moves along with your regular movement of sending your attention outside to make sure that you're not going to run off the end of path. Then it picks up momentum and

just goes. You've got to watch out for that tendency for other things to slip in. And it's in their slipping in that you get to see them.

This is how walking meditation develops discernment. You begin to see how the mind lies to itself. You're innocently looking at the end of the path but another part of the mind says, "I have another agenda." As you ignore that, that's how the mind normally lies to itself. You've got to catch it as it's going out. And the trick is to watch it go out but not go out with it. You maintain your center here inside. Think of the lens of a camera where the focal point is not someplace outside of the lens but actually *in* the lens itself. That's where you want your main attention to be focused.

As for the thoughts that go shooting out, you can watch them go out but if you don't run with them, they can go only so far. When you can see them, you can be aware and watch them—the thought can go but you don't go with it. That's an important skill that shows that you can step outside of your thoughts. The thoughts can be there, but you don't have to be *in* them.

What usually happens is that the thoughts turn into a states of becoming: in other words, a world of experience in which you take on an identity. You're in the thought. But here you maintain your original becoming as a walking meditator, so you can watch the thought from the outside. That's how you gain the insight into how these becomings develop. You begin to see the steps.

This is why Ajaan Suwat said that this is a great opportunity for gaining discernment, because it's precisely in stepping back from your becomings and seeing the processes that you can get a handle on them. This is a way of not going for further becoming at the same time that you're not giving in to the desire just to destroy the becoming. You're seeing them just as processes and you can let them go—and that's the way out.

If you're planning on doing walking meditation for extended period of time, it's good to have something to sit down on at one end of the path—a chair or a bench—because there will come times when the mind begins to run off with its thoughts. It's getting a little bit out of control, and you need to stop, rest, and sit down so that you can reestablish a state of concentration where you don't have to be aware of your surroundings. You allow things to gather in again. You can do this standing if you want, but sometimes you find that the mind is running off because the body is tired, so give it a little rest. Then when it's rested, you can get up and continue walking.

Standing is also good for when an insight comes up and you want to be very careful to watch what happens after the insight. Think of Upasika Kee Nanayon's advice that when an insight comes, watch out for the mind's reaction to the insight, because sometimes you simply replace one defilement with another. When an insight arises, stop. Watch. Remind yourself that the purpose of the insight is to help you let go. That's it. If it's an insight related to something else not immediately relevant to what you're doing right now, just let it go. Let *that* be your lesson in letting go. Some insights will come and dress themselves up as very important

insights into the nature of reality or the world outside, but you want to keep reminding yourself: The big issue is what the mind is doing to itself, how it's talking to itself, how it's relating to itself right now. It's in this way that you begin to see how it's creating unnecessary suffering for itself—which is the whole point.

So walking meditation is good for sitting meditation. If nothing else gets your juices stirring. It gets the body moving again so that you don't suffer the effects of long periods of immobility. It also gives the mind a different type of meditation with different challenges. And as you learn how to meet these challenges, it gives you a new perspective on the mind.