

# Contemplation and the Mind that Seeks the Way

## Part Two

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A few months ago, in Part One of this article, we looked at what contemplation is and how to begin practising it whilst relaxing in a comfortable chair. Now that those of you who were interested in trying this for yourselves will have had a chance to do so, I'd like to look at how we can take the contemplative way of being into the area of walking and the active aspects of our life.

Many of us have busy lifestyles requiring high pressured mental and physical activity throughout the day. We regularly go shopping, clean our houses and often relax by going for a walk, in fact a great deal of our life is spent in motion. Much that is of value can come from such simple everyday activities as taking a quiet stroll in the countryside, going to a supermarket or even in how we move from room to room within our own homes. By following the simple practices described here my experience has been that we are more able to relax into the heart of training and, quite literally, step by step, come to see how the practice will flow out into every aspect of our lives in ways that both surprise, and reassures us, that the path of

training is always beneath our feet. As we walk on it gradually becomes easier to hear and be guided by that part of us which has always maintained its direct, unbroken link, with the Master in the Heart, the Source of all Existence.

A good place to begin your walking contemplation would be in a park, on a beach or a quiet side street. The walk can be as long or short as you wish to make it, even one or two minutes (like walking to your car), is of value. Those of you who may be in a wheelchair can easily adapt this by feeling your chair support you as its wheels connect with the ground.

When you arrive at the location pause for a moment, stand straight but relaxed, arms in their usual natural position by your side, (the hands are not held together as when walking between formal seated meditation periods). Lower the eyes as you would when meditating and bring the breath up the back on the inhalation and down the front on the exhalation, on that exhalation, gently release all that you are into the downward flow of breath. Give yourself to It, yield to It, then walk on. Feel how the ground supports you and how you can rely upon that support, then raise the eyes sufficiently so that you have visual awareness of cars, roads, people or anything else you need to be aware of for safety reasons. Note how, just as your feet remain connected to the ground so that inner connection with the Refuge will naturally maintain itself whilst you are doing this.

Our attitude of mind when walking is the same as for seated contemplation, so please refer to the previous article if you need to. As before, we can begin by just being still with ourselves whilst we are walking and then move on to reflecting

upon specifics, such as aspects of practice that are uppermost in our minds or anything we wish to understand more deeply. However, it is not necessary to have a topic for reflection as 'just walking' is a full and complete activity in and of itself.

Begin walking, and, for the first 5 or 6 steps, consciously feel the ground beneath your feet, then let your mind 'just be'. Walk at your own natural pace but bear in mind that this is not walking for cardiac exercise and that if your heartbeat is raised or you begin to work up a sweat then you will need to slow down. During contemplative walking stress should not be placed upon any part of the body. The heart and lungs will naturally harmonise and the senses will turn within as every part of us comes together so that we are both resting at ease within the hara (our internal meditation hall, situated in the lower abdomen), and in physical motion at the same time. Step by step as the steady pace of walking and the eternal flow of meditation merge as one, we begin to get a sense of how profound and natural 'just walking' is.

If the mind starts to race or drift or you become distracted by what is going on around you be gently indifferent to this, lower the eyes for a moment, reconnect with the ground beneath your feet and walk straight on in a steady calm way. Don't give too much importance to having been distracted, it is no more than a passing shadow. Reflect for a moment upon how the mind is the way that it is because we have not been kind to it and have used it in unwise ways. We can choose to go where distraction leads us or we can choose to trust in, and stay with, that universal unbroken connection with the Source. Just as it takes many steps to complete our walk so we will probably need

to make this choice many, many times and, like most things that are worthwhile, it will require patience and that we care enough about ourselves to make that effort.

If stress, fear or anxiety keep surfacing whilst you are walking, or indeed in any situation, then pause for a moment and relax the body. Pay particular attention to areas such as the hands, face or buttocks, where we can hold onto tension by clenching our muscles. Feel the ground beneath your feet and fully accept any remaining anxiety, let it into your vision and into your heart, then follow the breath up the back and down the front, releasing all that you are into it. We give every part of ourselves to the breath, not just the fear or anxiety, because this is an act of offering, not of mental manipulation, we are not trying to avoid, get rid of or turn away from anything. By releasing our whole being into the care of the Refuge we show the anxiousness within us that it does not stand alone and that we are glad to train with it.

When fear and anxiety arise they are like signposts. We can let them pull us away from that inner flow, in which case we soon become as a runaway horse whose thoughts and actions take them further and further away from where they need to be, or we can stand firm upon the ground, ask the universe to help us and offer that which feels cut off clear direction. Remember we do not need to resolve everything at once, we just need to turn towards the Refuge instead of away from it and take the next step.

We may go on feeling the pull of confusion and the stress this places upon our bodies and minds for some time, but change for the good will begin to take place the moment we turn to the

stillness and say ‘I plight my troth to thee’<sup>1</sup> and walk on in faith and trust in the practice. This is how we give that within us which is confused and lost, clear direction as to how not to be confused and lost. This is how we fragile beings with our everyday quirks and foibles can turn the mighty tide of karma.

When your walk is over, do not pause as you did at the beginning but seamlessly move on to the next activity of your day, then the next and the next. As you are walking through your home or across the office floor, periodically feel the ground beneath your feet and release yourself into the downward flow of breath. This connects us with the Refuge and helps us to be fully present in the moment, it calls home a mind that tends to wander and reassures us that we can go through our day without being pulled off centre. Trusting in the completeness of ‘just walking’, and discovering our ability to stay still within our own true place whilst we are in motion, is something that, in time, will naturally remain with us throughout all the different activities of our day. Irrespective of whether we are busy and engaging with others, or silent and alone. Day by day, as our connection with that unbroken link to the Source deepens (because we choose to turn to it), so the life of faith spreads out like an incoming tide that covers and reclaims the land that is our life. It becomes like the thread of a rosary that runs through every bead. Those beads may have many forms: work, play, formal, informal, healthy, sick, happy or sad, calm or stressed but that which is the same, (Buddha Nature) flows through them all, indeed it is the whole of them.

Contemplation enables us to be more comfortable within our ordinary flesh and blood bodies and minds, more accepting of both our vulnerability and our completeness. As we relax into our walk so we can relax into practice, one step leading to the next in an effortless way. To enter into the flow of ceaseless practice it helps to let go of ideas, or ideals, about how we think we should be or of what we think ‘being still’ means. There is nothing contrived or self-conscious about being still, it is free of tension, (even in the midst of tension), and is more about relaxing into the heart of faith and letting It surprise us, than about keeping oneself on a tight lead of self engendered effort. The inclination to worry about ‘am I being still or aren’t I’ and those awkward self-conscious spurts, that never last for long, can fall away as does the inclination to assess and judge our efforts. We can trust our feet to deal with the ground they walk on, whether it be steep or flat, rocky or smooth, our feet, legs and whole being naturally responds to the need of the moment. Gradually we come to trust that which lays within the depths of our humanity to respond in the same way, giving us direction and insight as It carries us forward on the spiritual journey that is our life.

Sometimes we do not want to reflect within because we fear that what is there may be more than we can cope with, or perhaps what we see is unacceptable to us in some way. Without really thinking about it we can label one meditation period as successful because we felt calm and peaceful, and another as a failure because fear or despair arose. This habit pattern, which really works against us, is often carried into daily life so that if

we feel stressed at work we automatically assume that we are not training and begin to doubt ourselves.

When we are out walking if we see a beautiful sunset then a pile of rubbish, we do not say my eyes were working well this morning because I saw something I liked but they were not working so well this afternoon because I saw a pile of litter. Just as our eyes show us what is there so does the awareness of meditation. It brings us information, we then need to reflect carefully upon what we do with that. Contemplation can help us with this.

To help find that constant thread, which never judges but simply points the way forward, try selecting a walk that will take you through different settings, perhaps through a tree lined park onto the busy main street of a town or through a shopping mall then down quieter side streets. Be aware of your reactions to the different environments, especially to thoughts of like and dislike (which reinforces the judgmental mind), or to feelings that you cannot meditate because of what is going on around you, or within you. Without believing in, or trying to push these thoughts away, just walk on. Reflect carefully upon what comes with them, this may be fear, despair, panic or just a sense of self judgement or hopelessness. Something within you needs help, it needs to be reassured that our unbroken link with the Source stands firm and true, anywhere at any time, in darkness or in light, even when we cannot feel it, it is still there.

Connect with the ground, bringing yourself fully into the moment, keep a steady pace, follow the breath, letting it call every part of you home to the hara. Trust that movement, that gathering within, and just go with it, letting all the distress and doubt be drawn into that tender flow. Give it all to the medi-

tation. My experience has been that the opinions, doubts and judgements may rattle around inside you for awhile but soon they will fade. See for yourself how feelings or perceptions that felt so strong and true, so influential in your life, become no more than colourless smoke which has no real substance and dissipates. We then understand that our ability to meditate is the same no matter whether we feel peaceful or deeply distressed, are active or at rest. Our feelings change, the outward conditions change, but there is a place within us that is not touched by any of it. That is the Refuge and that is the ground we connect with when we walk.

There can be more to walking contemplation than we realise. Many years ago, whilst on retreat at the monastery, I would walk through the grounds at Throssel and down the valley to the river. I had been through a great deal, many old painful memories had opened up and I needed time to digest and reflect upon it all. Whilst walking across the fields one day I realised that the ground beneath my feet knew how I was feeling. As I walked I felt love and a sense of deep sympathy flow up through my feet. I was incredibly grateful for it. At the bottom of the valley, by the little river, was a soft mossy bank where I would lay down and reflect upon the sound of the running water. Looking up into the overhanging boughs of the trees they also seemed to understand that here was a fragile being and their branches hung over me like tender protective arms, glad to give shelter. The little river sang to me and as the sound of the flowing water mingled with the inner flow of reflection they became one, washing away the pain, soothing and healing. There is an

old scripture which says, ‘when we are lonely, grieving or in pain, Buddha’s touch will call us back to life again’. That touch can come in many different ways and I know of none better than contemplating in the countryside or by the sea.

Some years ago, whilst recovering from surgery, I would walk along the seafront every morning. As the days passed a series of reflections came to mind, they arose naturally and then became a regular part of my morning walk.

It was the year of the heatwave and, as I felt the heat of the sun warm my face and arms, I lifted my head to receive its warmth and a swell of gratitude arose in me. I reflected on how the heat of the sun called forth the heat in my body and they met as one.

Breathing in the lovely salty air, feeling it flow into my lungs, I reflected upon how this air entered my body, bringing life-giving oxygen and how, as I exhaled, it mingled with the air of the universe.

Feeling my feet connecting with the ground as I walked, I thought how the physical mass of my body is one with the earth and how deeply connected I am with all that exists, in fact who can say where one begins and another ends.

Quietly walking along I paused to look out at the magnificence of Cardigan bay and a favourite quote from *How to Grow a Lotus Blossom* came to mind where Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett writes that the lotus was made so that we may gasp in wonder at its beauty.<sup>2</sup> When I look out to sea and the sound of the waves flows through me, I am looking at a giant altar and those morning walks showed me that we can look at a scene, an object or

a person in a way that pays Homage to the Buddha and that the wonder I feel is as true and pure an offering as any I have ever made. In those private moments much seems to happen, our body and mind relaxes deeply as we open and mix and mingle with the universe.

Sometimes, when I walk along the prom at Aberystwyth the Welsh hills are swallowed by the sea mist until they are no longer visible. This is how it is with us when we train. As we walk on, yielding, responding, letting ourselves be drawn deeper and deeper into the great mystery that is training, a profound transformation begins to take place that will gradually permeate our whole life. How we view ourselves and what it means for us to have a human life are seen differently. Old mental habit patterns based in the inclination to misuse our minds by thinking in terms of 'me' as the central reference point,...my success, my failure, my meditation, my suffering, are gently washed away as we relearn how to use our minds. As we cease to obstruct the natural union of heart and mind, layers of subtle stress and tension fall away and our life changes beyond measure.

Sometimes in the summer I like to look down from the prom at the people relaxing and enjoying themselves on the beach. The sounds of children playing, of dogs barking joyfully and of laughter hang in the air like the sound of the meditation gong. In responding to its call I turn within and there is only the limitless eternal meditation hall. There is no need to cut ourselves off from the world we live in, the roots of the bodhi tree spread far and wide and beneath its branches we sit together with all beings. There are many ways for a monk to spread their

mat and many ways for each of us to contribute to the world we live in.

Our weekly visit to the supermarket provides an opportunity to contemplate, to make offerings of gratitude and to find and stay with the steadfast rock of the Refuge in the midst of a busy environment. It can help us to see that the more mundane circumstances of our life offer many possibilities and to lay to rest the worry that we can only meditate within a quiet protected environment.

When I came to The Place of Peace eight years ago I had to do all of the things that anyone who runs a household does, including the weekly shopping. If I said I will do the shopping as fast as possible so that I can hurry back to the Temple where the ‘real training’ is done, then I am saying that the hour spent shopping is a wasted hour, and, over the course of a lifetime that’s a lot of my life that’s been written off. One day whilst in Somerfields I reflected upon how can I be true to my vows in the middle of this supermarket? Lowering my eyes I silently asked for help. Contemplation facilitates an enquiring mind that seeks out the way forward within all situations. Instead of seeing an obstacle we look for an opportunity, what is possible here, what is the best that can be done within this present set of circumstances? As I walked down the aisle I felt my feet connect with the ground and something still and strong rose up through me. Raising my eyes and looking around I saw that Somerfields was the Pure Land and it touched my heart.

The supermarket can be a nightmare of distraction or it can be our training ground depending on how we behave whilst

in it. If you tend to find it difficult to stay grounded when shopping then the following may be of help. All the contemplative practices described here have arisen naturally from within my own practice, some days I follow them, others I don't. Nothing is written in stone and I never impose anything upon my mind, these are simply ways in which training expresses itself for me and they may inspire you to find other ways that work better for you.

Approach the shop as you would when beginning walking meditation (as described earlier), keep a steady pace with feet connecting fully with the ground and do not rush. Having a list of the items you need helps. Most supermarkets begin with the fruit and veg. section. Approach a counter, pause for a moment and let your eyes rest upon a display of produce as they would rest upon the floor when you meditate and reflect for a moment upon the abundance of what this world has to offer us. One day when I entered the shop the fruit looked like piles of jewels, gladly offering themselves so that we may have life. It made me feel very humble and I stopped to say thank you and be still for awhile. Spending a few moments reflecting upon the fruit became a regular part of my shopping trip.

During the mealtime ceremony we raise the plate of food above our heads both to offer it to all beings and to acknowledge its Buddha Nature. In the store we can look at produce in a way that expresses gratitude and is, in essence, a visual bow, a small unseen (by others) ceremony. As far as other shoppers are concerned we are simply looking at the stock. Let the sight of the food enter into you, lower the eyes and reflect upon how all is

one, then ‘just be’. After a few moments, or even seconds, for none of this takes very long, continue with your shopping. Keep the eyes lowered but maintain full visual awareness of what is going on around you.

Yes a supermarket is noisy, there are often announcements, bright lights and lots going on but the Blood of the Buddhas flows there too, it’s just not so easy to see it at first. (The same is true of our karma). If you brace yourself against the ambience of the place, you will not be able to make it your training ground. Those of you who have attended Jukai will recall the circuitous path walked during the ceremony of following where the blood of the Buddha’s leads. That procession represents a lifetime of training and the circuitous route of walking up and down the supermarket aisles is part of that journey. As with resolving our karma it will not all be easy, situations that are challenging offer an opportunity to look deeper, let go and take another step into trusting the meditation.

Every now and then pause, maybe before or after you select an item, lower the eyes, bring the breath up the back on the inhalation and, on the downward exhalation, release yourself into the breath then continue with your shop. This will help the senses, especially our eyes, to stay connected to the rock of the Refuge, the flow of meditation and less likely to wander and become distracted.

The seeds of both contemplative activity and ceaseless practice are sown within the basics of our practice in what we call working meditation, where we are advised to keep body and mind together on the activity of the moment, in other words to help every part of us to be fully present in the here and now. We may have to work at this for awhile and keep giving our minds

clear direction. If we do this then it will gradually become easier to ‘just shop’, then we need neither fear nor resent all that is going on around us, it will not be a distraction nor will we come out feeling frazzled.

Continue shopping, feet steadily upon the ground. If you meet someone you know and they want to chat for a few moments relax and enjoy their company whilst remaining still in your own true place. Don’t become rigid or intense about any of this or it will work against you. Contemplation is not something we ‘do’ in a fixed hard way, it is more a letting go and an opening up to the endless possibilities life in this world offers us. It is about a deep listening and responding and choosing to live in a way that enables the life of faith to draw us ever closer to It’s heart.

Standing in the queue with your goods may offer a few moments to gather body and mind together and ‘just be’, if impatience arises that can be contemplated whilst we wait. People contribute in many different ways to our society and sometimes I use this as a time to reflect with gratitude upon the offerings made by the cashier and the shelf stackers, all of whom are cheerful hard workers who help to make it possible for myself and all the other shoppers to get the items we need.

When it is cold and wet and I see an employee outside in the car park collecting up the trolleys and repositioning them outside the store I like to sit quietly in the car for a few moments and let my eyes rest upon him in silent appreciation. In those private moments we walk together, I am him and he is me, we are the same. After reflecting upon this I drive home.

Reflecting is much more than just thinking about something. It can also be described as entering into or soaking in an

aspect of contemplation so that it reaches the very marrow of our being. It is like placing one circle exactly over another circle so that two become one.

Contemplation is sometimes referred to as a gentle meeting in the heart. Just as it is said that tenderness can have a revolutionary impact upon our minds so does this deeper meeting. When we encounter It we know that we need It, we recognize that what It offers cannot be self manufactured or found in any other place. In quiet and unobtrusive ways we seek to be fully available to Its call so that this meeting can take place again and again. In time we come to see that we are always at that meeting. It shows us that there is a way of training which is neither flamboyant and self-conscious nor tight and controlled. Just there is something within the depths of our humanity that we can entrust ourselves to.

Each morning we recite the Kesa verse and say, "I wish to unfold the Buddha's teaching" (note that it does not say teachings), because within the contemplative life there is, at root, only one activity and that is meditation, expressing Itself in endlessly different ways. Contemplation connects us with those ways and gives us clear direction as to how we can bring ourselves into harmony with them.

Contemplating becomes something we want to do, not to get something out of it (although the benefits are many), or to find an answer to a question but simply because it is our pleasure. We do not need a reason to contemplate any more than we need a reason to be with someone we love. Just as we feel comfortable in their company with no need to say or do anything in

particular, so we can rest at ease within that place where there is nothing from the first or, as an old Chinese scripture describes it so perfectly, “The land that is nowhere is our True Home”. Through walking contemplation, which is such a simple human everyday activity, we can be always becoming a citizen of that land; in our homes, at the office, whilst shopping or walking the dog, the path is always beneath our feet.

#### *Notes*

1. The term “I plight my troth to thee” is old English and is part of a marriage ceremony. It is used here to express commitment and a resolve to be true to the still small voice.
2. Within that wonder there is no emotionalism or excitement, it is of the stillness and is something that expresses itself in the most natural way. I never try to make it happen, (nor should you), or to recreate it, I am simply grateful for its arising.