

*Bodhi Leaf Publication No. 137*

# **The Benefits of Walking Meditation**

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*Sayadaw U Silananda*



**BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY**

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by

**Sayādaw U Sīlanand**

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# The Benefits of Walking Meditation



A

t our meditation retreats, yogis practise mindfulness in four different postures. They practise mindfulness when walking, when standing, when sitting, and when lying down. They must sustain mindfulness at all times in whatever position they are in. The primary posture for mindfulness meditation is sitting with legs crossed, but because the human body cannot tolerate this position for many hours without changing, we alternate periods of sitting meditation with periods of walking meditation. Since walking meditation is very important, I would like to discuss its nature, its significance, and the benefits derived from its practice.

The practice of mindfulness meditation can be compared to boiling water. If one wants to boil water, one puts the water in a kettle, puts the kettle on a stove, and then turns the heat on. But if the heat is turned off, even for an instant, the water will not boil, even though the heat is turned on again later. If one continues to turn the heat on and off again, the water

will never boil. In the same way, if there are gaps between the moments of mindfulness, one cannot gain momentum, and so one cannot attain concentration. That is why yogis at our retreats are instructed to practise mindfulness all the time that they are awake, from the moment they wake up in the morning until they fall asleep at night. Consequently, walking meditation is integral to the continuous development of mindfulness.

Unfortunately, I have heard people criticise walking meditation, claiming that they cannot derive any benefits or good results from it. But it was the Buddha himself who first taught walking meditation. In the Great Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness, the Buddha taught walking meditation two times. In the section called 'Postures', he said that a monk knows "I am walking" when he is walking, knows "I am standing" when he is standing, knows "I am sitting" when he is sitting, and knows "I am lying down" when he is lying down. In another section called 'Clear Comprehension', the Buddha said, "A monk applies clear comprehension in going forward and in going back." Clear comprehension means the correct understanding of what one observes. To correctly understand what is observed, a yogi must gain concentration, and in order to gain concentration, he must apply mindfulness. Therefore, when the

Buddha said, “Monks, apply clear comprehension,” we must understand that not only clear comprehension must be applied, but also mindfulness and concentration. Thus the Buddha was instructing meditators to apply mindfulness, concentration, and clear comprehension while walking, while “going forward and back.” Walking meditation is thus an important part of this process.

Although it is not recorded in this sutta that the Buddha gave detailed and specific instructions for walking meditation, we believe that he must have given such instructions at some time. Those instructions must have been learned by the Buddha’s disciples and passed on through successive generations. In addition, teachers of ancient times must have formulated instructions based on their own practice. At the present time, we have a very detailed set of instructions on how to practise walking meditation.

Let us now talk specifically about the practice of walking meditation. If you are a complete beginner, the teacher may instruct you to be mindful of only one thing during walking meditation: to be mindful of the act of stepping while you make a note silently in the mind, “stepping, stepping, stepping,” or “left, right, left, right.” You may walk at a slower speed than normal during this practice.

After a few hours, or after a day or two of meditation, you may be instructed to be mindful of two occurrences: (i) stepping, and (ii) putting down the foot, while making the mental note “stepping, putting down.” You will try to be mindful of two stages in the step: “stepping, putting down; stepping, putting down.” Later, you may be instructed to be mindful of three stages: (i) lifting the foot; (ii) moving or pushing the foot forward; and (iii) putting the foot down. Still later, you would be instructed to be mindful of four stages in each step: (i) lifting the foot; (ii) moving it forward; (iii) putting it down; and (iv) touching or pressing the foot on the ground. You would be instructed to be completely mindful and to make a mental note of these four stages of the foot’s movement: “lifting, moving forward, putting down, pressing the ground.”

At first yogis may find it difficult to slow down, but as they are instructed to pay close attention to all of the movements involved, and as they actually pay closer and closer attention, they will automatically slow down. They do not have to slow down deliberately, but as they pay closer attention, slowing down comes to them automatically. When driving on the freeway, one may be driving at sixty or seventy or even eighty miles per hour. Driving at that speed, one will not be able to read some of the signs on the road.

If one wants to read those signs, it is necessary to slow down. Nobody has to say, "Slow down!" but the driver will automatically slow down in order to see the signs. In the same way, if yogis want to pay closer attention to the movements of lifting, moving forward, putting down, and pressing the ground, they will automatically slow down. Only when they slow down can they be truly mindful and fully aware of these movements.

Although yogis pay close attention and slow down, they may not see all of the movements and stages clearly. The stages may not yet be well-defined in the mind, and they may seem to constitute only one continuous movement. As concentration grows stronger, yogis will observe more and more clearly these different stages in one step. The four stages at least will be easier to distinguish; yogis will know distinctly that the lifting movement is not mixed with the moving forward movement, and they will know that the moving forward movement is not mixed with either the lifting movement or the putting down movement. They will understand all movements clearly and distinctly. Whatever they are mindful and aware of will be very clear in their minds.

As yogis carry on the practice, they will observe much more. When they lift their foot, they will experience the lightness of the foot. When they push



the foot forward, they will notice the movement from one place to another. When they put the foot down, they will feel the heaviness of the foot, because the foot becomes heavier and heavier as it descends. When they put the foot on the ground, they will feel the touch of the heel of the foot on the ground. Therefore, along with observing lifting, moving forward, putting down, and pressing the ground, yogis will also perceive the lightness of the rising foot, the motion of the foot, the heaviness of the descending foot, and then the touching of the foot, which is the hardness or softness of the foot on the ground. When yogis perceive these processes, they are perceiving the four essential elements (in Pali *dhātu*). The four essential elements are: the element of earth, the element of water, the element of fire, and the element of air. By paying close attention to these four stages of walking meditation, the four elements in their true essence are perceived, not merely as concepts, but as actual processes, as ultimate realities.

Let us go into a little more detail about the characteristics of the elements in walking meditation. In the first movement, that is, the lifting of the foot, yogis perceive lightness, and when they perceive lightness, they virtually perceive the fire element. One aspect of the fire element is that of making things lighter, and as things become lighter, they rise. In the

perception of the lightness in the upward movement of the foot, yogis perceive the essence of the fire element. But in the lifting of the foot there is also, besides lightness, movement. Movement is one aspect of the air element. But lightness, the fire element, is dominant, so we can say that in the stage of lifting the fire element is primary, and the air element is secondary. These two elements are perceived by yogis when they pay close attention to the lifting of the foot.

The next stage is moving the foot forward. In moving the foot forward, the dominant element is the air element, because motion is one of the primary characteristics of the air element. So, when they pay close attention to the moving forward of the foot in walking meditation, yogis are virtually perceiving the essence of the air element.

The next stage is the movement of putting the foot down. When yogis put their foot down, there is a kind of heaviness in the foot. Heaviness is a characteristic of the water element, as is trickling and oozing. When liquid is heavy, it oozes. So when yogis perceive the heaviness of the foot, they virtually perceive the water element.

In pressing the foot on the ground, yogis will perceive the hardness or softness of the foot on the ground. This pertains to the nature of the earth

element. By paying close attention to the pressing of the foot against the ground, yogis virtually perceive the nature of the earth element.

Thus we see that in just one step, yogis can perceive many processes. They can perceive the four elements and the nature of the four elements. Only those who practise can ever hope to see these things.

As yogis continue to practise walking meditation, they will come to realise that, with every movement, there is also the noting mind, the awareness of the movement. There is the lifting movement and also the mind that is aware of that lifting. In the next moment, there is the moving forward movement and also the mind that is aware of the movement. Moreover, yogis will realise that both the movement and the awareness arise and disappear in that moment. In the next moment, there is the putting down movement and so also the awareness of the movement, and both arise and disappear in that moment of putting the foot down on the ground. The same process occurs with the pressing of the foot: there is the pressing and the awareness of pressing. In this way, yogis understand that along with the movement of the foot, there are also the moments of awareness. The moments of awareness are called, in Pali, *nāma*, mind, and the movement of the foot is called *rūpa*, matter. So yogis will perceive mind and matter rising and disappearing

at every moment. At one moment there is the lifting of the foot and the awareness of the lifting, and at the next moment there is the movement forward and the awareness of that movement, and so on. These can be understood as a pair, mind and matter, which arise and disappear at every moment. Thus yogis advance to the perception of the pair-wise occurrence of mind and matter at every moment of observation, that is, if they pay close attention.

Another thing that yogis will discover is the role of intention in effecting each movement. They will realise that they lift their foot because they want to, move the foot forward because they want to, put it down because they want to, press the foot against the ground because they want to. That is, they realise that an intention precedes every movement. After the intention to lift, lifting occurs. They come to understand the conditionality of all of these occurrences—these movements never occur by themselves, without conditions. These movements are not created by any deity or any authority, and these movements never happen without a cause. There is a cause or condition for every movement, and that condition is the intention preceding each movement. This is another discovery yogis make when they pay close attention.

When yogis understand the conditionality of all

movements, and that these movements are not created by any authority or any god, then they will understand that they are created by intention. They will understand that intention is the condition for the movement to occur. Thus the relationship of conditioning and conditioned, of cause and effect, is understood. On the basis of this understanding, yogis can remove doubt about *nāma* and *rūpa* by understanding that *nāma* and *rūpa* do not arise without conditions.

With the clear understanding of the conditionality of things, and with the transcendence of doubt about *nāma* and *rūpa*, a yogi is said to reach the stage of a 'lesser *sotāpanna*'. A *sotāpanna* is a 'stream-enterer', a person who has reached the first stage of enlightenment. A 'lesser *sotāpanna*' is not a true stream-enterer but is said to be assured of rebirth in a happy realm of existence, such as in the realms of human beings and devas. That is, a lesser *sotāpanna* cannot be reborn in one of the four woeful states, in one of the hells or animal realms. This state of lesser *sotāpanna* can be reached just by practising walking meditation, just by paying close attention to the movements involved in a step. This is the great benefit of practising walking meditation. This stage is not easy to reach, but once yogis reach it, they can be assured that they will be reborn in a happy state,

unless, of course, they fall from that stage.

When yogis comprehend mind and matter arising and disappearing at every moment, then they will come to comprehend the impermanence of the processes of lifting the foot, and they will also comprehend the impermanence of the awareness of that lifting. The occurrence of disappearing after arising is a mark or characteristic by which we understand that something is impermanent. If we want to determine whether something is impermanent or permanent, we must try to see, through the power of meditation, whether or not that thing is subject to the process of coming into being and then disappearing. If our meditation is powerful enough to enable us to see the arising and disappearing of phenomena, then we can decide that the phenomena observed are impermanent. In this way, yogis observe that there is the lifting movement and awareness of that movement, and then that sequence disappears, giving way to the pushing forward movement and the awareness of pushing forward. These movements simply arise and disappear, arise and disappear, and this process yogis can comprehend by themselves—they do not have to accept this on trust from any external authority, nor do they have to believe in the report of another person.

When yogis comprehend that mind and matter arise

and disappear, they understand that mind and matter are impermanent. When they see that they are impermanent, they next understand that they are unsatisfactory because they are always oppressed by constant arising and disappearing. After comprehending impermanence and the unsatisfactory nature of things, they observe that there can be no mastery over these things; that is, yogis realise that there is no self or soul within that can order them to be permanent. Things just arise and disappear according to natural law. By comprehending this, yogis comprehend the third characteristic of conditioned phenomena, the characteristic of *anattā*, the characteristic that things have no self. One of the meanings of *anattā* is no mastery—meaning that nothing, no entity, no soul, no power, has mastery over the nature of things. Thus, by this time, yogis have comprehended the three characteristics of all conditioned phenomena: impermanence, suffering, and the non-self nature of things—in Pali *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*.

Yogis can comprehend these three characteristics by observing closely the mere lifting of the foot and the awareness of the lifting of the foot. By paying close attention to the movements, they see things arising and disappearing, and consequently they see for themselves the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and non-

self nature of all conditioned phenomena.

Now let us examine in more detail the movements of walking meditation. Suppose one were to take a moving picture of the lifting of the foot. Suppose further that the lifting of the foot takes one second, and let us say that the camera can take thirty-six frames per second. After taking the picture, if we were to look at the separate frames, we would realise that within what we thought was one lifting movement, there are actually thirty-six movements. The image in each frame is slightly different from the images in the other frames, though the difference will usually be so slight that we can barely notice it. But what if the camera could take one thousand frames per second? Then there would be one thousand movements in just one lifting movement, although the movements would be almost impossible to differentiate. If the camera could take one million frames per second—which may be impossible now but someday may happen—then there would be one million movements in what we thought to be only one movement.

Our effort in walking meditation is to see our movements as closely as the camera sees them, frame by frame. We also want to observe the awareness and intention preceding each movement. We can also appreciate the power of the Buddha's wisdom and insight, by which he actually saw all of the



movements. When we use the word 'see' or 'observe' to refer to our own situation, we mean that we see directly and also by inference; we may not be able to see directly all of the millions of movements as did the Buddha.

Before yogis begin practising walking meditation, they may have thought that a step is just one movement. After meditation on that movement, they observe that there are at least four movements, and if they go deeper, they will understand that even one of these four movements consists of millions of tiny movements. They see *nāma* and *rūpa*, mind and matter, arising and disappearing, as impermanent. By our ordinary perception, we are not able to see the impermanence of things because impermanence is hidden by the illusion of continuity. We think that we see only one continuous movement, but if we look closely we will see that the illusion of continuity can be broken. It can be broken by the direct observation of physical phenomena bit by bit, segment by segment, as they originate and disintegrate. The value of meditation lies in our ability to remove the cloak of continuity in order to discover the real nature of impermanence. Yogis can discover the nature of impermanence directly through their own effort.

After realising that things are composed of segments, that they occur in bits, and after observing

these segments one by one, yogis will realise that there is really nothing in this world to be attached to, nothing to crave for. If we see that something which we once thought beautiful has holes, that it is decaying and disintegrating, we will lose interest in it. For example, we may see a beautiful painting on a canvas. We think of the paint and canvas conceptually as a whole, solid thing. But if we were to put the painting under a powerful microscope, we would see that the picture is not solid—it has many holes and spaces. After seeing the picture as composed largely of spaces, we would lose interest in it and we would cease being attached to it. Modern physicists know this idea well. They have observed, with powerful instruments, that matter is just a vibration of particles and energy constantly changing—there is nothing substantial to it at all. By the realisation of this endless impermanence, yogis understand that there is really nothing to crave for, nothing to hold on to in the entire world of phenomena.

Now we can understand the reasons for practising meditation. We practise meditation because we want to remove attachment and craving for objects. It is by comprehending the three characteristics of existence—impermanence, suffering, and the non-self nature of things—that we remove craving. We want to remove craving because we do not want to suffer. As long as

there is craving and attachment, there will always be suffering. If we do not want to suffer, we must remove craving and attachment. We must comprehend that all things are just mind and matter arising and disappearing, that things are insubstantial. Once we realise this, we will be able to remove attachment to things. As long as we do not realise this, however much we read books or attend talks or talk about removing attachment, we will not be able to get rid of attachment. It is necessary to have the direct experience that all conditioned things are marked by the three characteristics.

Hence we must pay close attention when we are walking, just as we do when we are sitting or lying down. I am not trying to say that walking meditation alone can give us ultimate realisation and the ability to remove attachment entirely, but it is nevertheless as valid a practice as sitting meditation or any other kind of *vipassanā* (insight) meditation. Walking meditation is conducive to spiritual development. It is as powerful as mindfulness of breathing or mindfulness of the rising and falling of the abdomen. It is an efficient tool to help us remove mental defilements. Walking meditation can help us gain insight into the nature of things, and we should practise it as diligently as we practise sitting meditation or any other kind of meditation. By the practice of *vipassanā*

meditation in all postures, including the walking posture, may you and all yogis be able to attain total purification in this very life!

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