

# QUIET WALKING

The Exercise of Meditative Mini-Pilgrimage



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"After replying to the old man's greeting he showed no inclination to continue in talk, although they still walked side by side. There were no sounds but that of the booming wind upon the stretch of tawny herbage around them..." (Thomas Hardy 'The Return of the Native')

"Go placidly amid the noise and the haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence." (Desiderata)

"The wise person learns so much through silence" (White Eagle)





As both a runner and a walker I have come to feel that while running is good for the body, walking is good for the body, mind and soul. Others may feel differently, and Fred Rohé in his beautiful hippie evocation of "The Zen of Running" certainly champions the other option, but I find that while I enjoy running my focus has to be on pace and drive, but when walking, whether briskly or at an amble, there is time to take notice of all that is around; to luxuriate in the elements; to muse and ponder upon mundane things; or to lift the mind and spirit into the universe.



My brief flirtation with (though lasting respect for) Theravada Buddhism while I was in Thailand taught me that one way of practising *Samatha*, to calm, quieten and focus the mind, is the walking meditation, in which one walks slowly with awareness of one's natural, harmonious pace, or with concentration upon each movement – the rising, advancing and falling of each foot; the swing of each arm... the aim being to calm and direct the mind, to stop it wandering off into its myriad interests of which few, if any, relate to the purpose of the moment, the walk. Other faiths, too, have their processions, rhythmic steps, and pilgrimages which we will consider later.



But the calming and focussing of the mind to benefit our mental and spiritual aspects does not have to have religious connotations.

I make no judgement here, knowing how important a religious path or observance is to so many. My own spiritual path, which I have explored for the best part of seven decades, has shown me that spirituality, while bound up with religion, can be above and beyond it too.





So, while some may focus on the exercise of walking itself, and others may pray; or meditate on sacred writings; or follow a hallowed path or purpose while walking (and I have felt blessed doing all of these), none is essential to benefit from Quiet Walking.



Instead, calm and focus for the mind may be found in simply observing the variety of wild-flowers, the shapes of trees, the spectrum of green shades in their leaves, the strata and movement of clouds, the rolling of the land, the stark definition of a skyline, buzzards wheeling on a spring of air, the waterfall song of a skylark, even the touch of the elements, wind, rain and sun, or the texture of the earth beneath your feet. Just being fully aware of, and focussed on, any of these will stop your mind from planning, fretting or whatever else was getting in the way of its ability to clear and be tranquil.







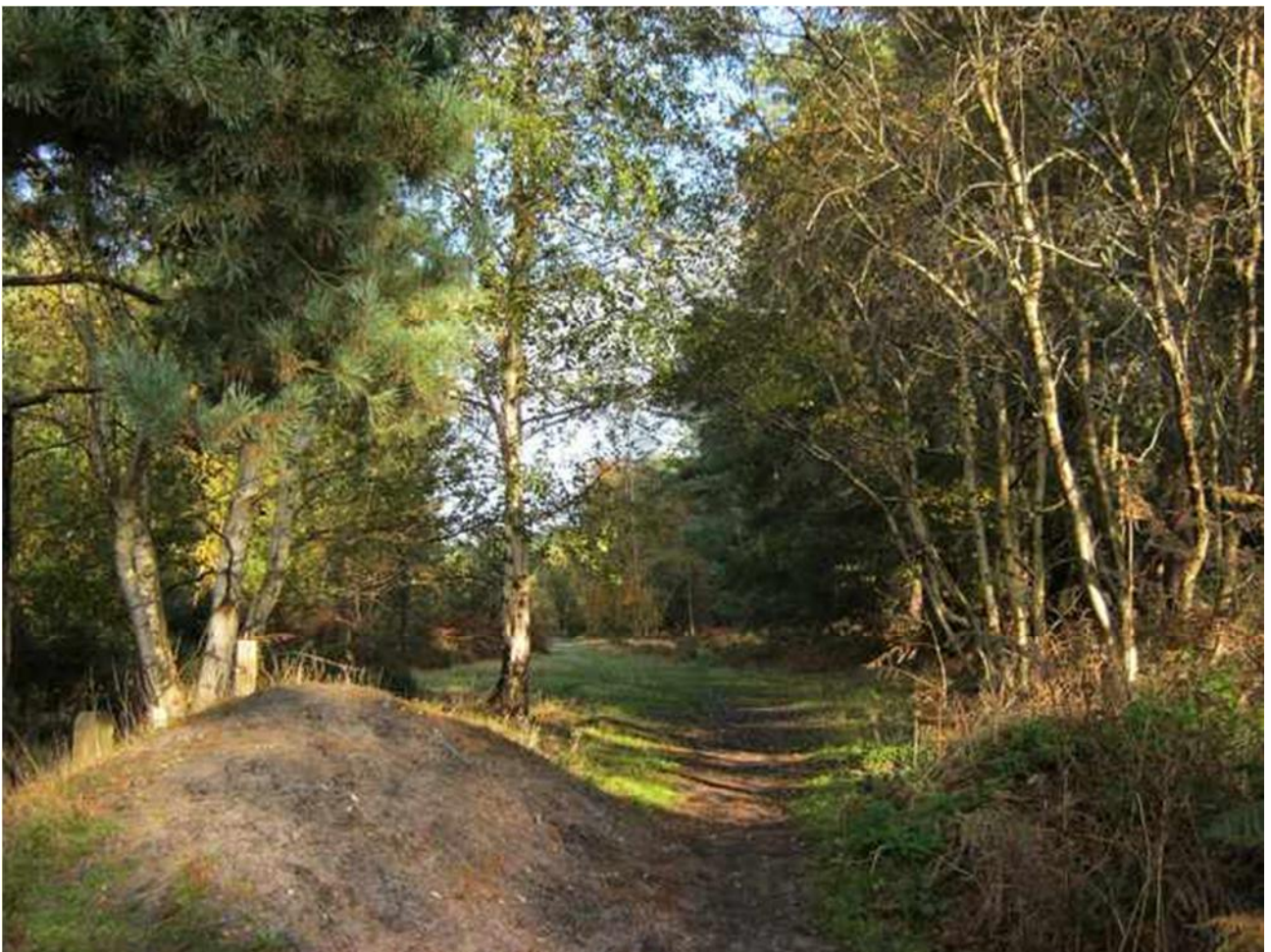


I mentioned my personal blessings in a previous paragraph. Please let me briefly enlarge on these: I remember a walk from the valley floor up to a remote hilltop church. Along the way sometimes a gaunt dead tree, or a choice of paths at a junction, or a change of direction, or a climb from shade towards the light, became symbolic of a life journey – each a point for reflective contemplation or aspirational prayer.



On another occasion I took a purposeful walk, alone and for most of the day, through a deep forest which led me to a scarp above an estuary. Dropping down to the marshy shoreline I followed an ancient causeway onto what was once a marsh island, Icanhoe, where Anglo-Saxon Botwulf established his minster. It is a place I have often visited to experience spirit of place. Throughout the walk, out there, and then back through another, more challenging, chunk of forest, I was reading the extraordinary, mind-blowing, Gnostic gospel known as "The Secret Book of John". Between readings I walked quietly, and pondered.









And again, by the invitation of friends, We spent a few days walking a short section of the Camino, the great pilgrim path, actually a merging of paths, the goal of which is Santiago de Compostella. This walk was not undertaken by us as a religious pilgrimage, although our friends are Christian, but all of us deeply sensed and reflected on the spiritual purpose of the path, which had been trodden into the stones and turf and which imbued the air through which we walked and would have been hard to avoid, not that we wanted to.





Some walks take weeks – certainly walking the Camino can. But time and distance need have little bearing on Quiet Walking.

A day among the peaks; a few hours lost in the forest; or twenty minutes in a city park – all are opportunities for Quiet Walking.







Quiet Walking does not have to be silent. If you see a hare hunkering down over its leverets in a cornfield, or a sky full of Svalbard geese, point it out to your walking companion – it is too good to miss! If the soft sighing of wind through a stand of pines provides the background to something you would like to hum, go ahead! Sing out loud at the wonder of the world around you! But between the sounds mark the silences, and in them practise your Quiet Walking.



As with time, pace has little relevance. To benefit your physical health it might be good to walk far and fast, however these terms are subjective and depend on your fitness, and your intention. For your mind and spirit, only Quiet Walking is required, at any pace and in any time or place.





Quiet Walking can be a solitary undertaking. Pondering silently, or conversing with your inner or higher self can powerfully stimulate your mental and spiritual well-being. But Quiet Walking need lose none of its benefit in companionship or a crowd; Where there are spaces between comments or conversations, just slip into Quiet Walking.



Quiet Walking evokes its own lasting memories. There can be times when each turn, rise or fall of a path takes on a significance, and when that train of significant moments develops into new insight or an uplifting of the soul or spirit. Places, shapes, sounds and elemental awareness can alone, or together, hallmark an instant of awareness, and that becomes a deep and real part of the life of the quiet walker who has experienced it.

I have an inner store of such occasions. Some are from decades ago, but they still return me instantly to the time, place and purpose of a moment of Quiet Walking.





“The world of spirit is reflected within the mirror of our own soul. We will give you an illustration. You may take a country walk and see very little; you may stay unaware of the beauties of nature. You have not reflected your surroundings. You may take that same walk and will perhaps become aware of the thousand little details apparent in the hedgerows and field, in the bird life, in the sunlight, in the shadow, and in the atmosphere. Many details you will note and absorb. You are not merely observant with the physical eye but with the spiritual eye also.

“Think of yourself in a different way still, taking that same walk. You have become more aware and sensitive

to the spiritual life behind the physical form, your sight again has greatly increased, you will not only see all the details of physical nature, but will also become aware of the pulsation or vibration of life and great beauty which permeates the physical manifestation. You will feel kinship with physical form, and your soul will reflect the spirit world, the spirit life"

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