Walking Practice
Excerpts From a Four Postures Sesshin Teisho
by Karin Sensei

This morning we will continue our investigation of the four postures, which is the theme of this October sesshin. We have talked about sitting, standing and lying. Of course, these are all postures where the body is more or less at rest. For the most part however, we do not sit away our lives.…we live them, as nurses and therapists, teachers and students, wives and husbands. We do yoga, we dance, we run…and we walk. Everyday, we walk. Even in a retreat dedicated to seated meditation, walking is very very important. If anything, walking is a little undervalued in Zen, but it’s a great form of meditation, and those of us who may find it hard to sit still for long periods of time, it’s a core practice.

Many people find that their mind can settle to some degree after a round of sitting, but that when they get up, suddenly they are flooded with thoughts as if each sensation of movement sets off a ripple, and each ripple sets off another. So one of the values of this week I hope is to deepen the concentration and awareness to the degree that we can transition from one posture to another, and to take one step after another and have the practice continue uninterrupted. One suggestion, and it’s a very important one, is to slow it down. That’s why we are doing some of our walking practice at our own pace. Slow it down so that you don’t lose it. Key into your breath and practice meticulous mindfulness of each sensation without rushing ahead, without pushing into the next moment. Instead of visualizing the movement or talking through it, which is another way to stay conceptual, just feel the actual body sensation and try to be very specific and clear about it. You can use the mind as a flood light or a laser. This is a laser time, a time to try to get intimate, up-close with the actual sensation of walking.

Walking has huge significance for us in Zen, echos, reverberations and meanings. It is often used to express our coming forth and actualizing the truth which we experience. We sometimes say that the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. We can’t make the journey without that first step. And of course, it’s always the first step. In Zen, we remind ourselves over and over again, that although we may experience some insight and have entered the Way, we are not yet genuine unless we can act from that understanding. The phrase used to express this is that we must “take a step” from the top of that hundred foot pole. We have to engage the world of the ten thousand things, we have to express in words, in actions, in relationship and as complete human beings.

A koan we will consider today is from Entangling Vines, a Rinzai text1.
A monk questioned Yunmen, “What is the place where all buddhas attain complete liberation?” Yunmen replied, “East mountain walks on the water.”

Zen Master Dogen refers to this when he writes in the Mountains and Rivers Sutra:

We should understand that the teaching of “the East mountain moving over the water” is the very bones and marrow of the ancient sages. All waters are actualized at the foot of the East Mountain; thus, the mountains ride the clouds and wander through the heavens. The mountains are the peaks of the waters, and in both rising and descending their walk is “over the water.” The toes of the mountains walk across the waters, causing the waters to dance; as a result, walking extends freely in the ten directions and “practice and verification are not nonexistent.”

Of course, it’s easy to get bogged down in the poetic but often arcane language of Dogen— but instead just try to intuitively feel his meaning. The mountains are the peaks of the waters, and in both rising and descending their walk is “over the water.” The toes of the mountains walk across the waters, causing the waters to dance; as a result, walking extends freely in the ten directions.

Can you see that the mountains and the water are not two? That they move together, walking, dancing, extending freely? You sit like a mountain... and then that mountain rises and walks, solid, rooted, and yet the mountain walks over water, in water...water which is always new, fluid and changing second by second.

The point is that if we just sit there like East Mountain, stuck in some state of non-differentiation, nothing-nothing-nothing, not gaining, not losing, not grasping, not rejecting, we are like the living dead; we are stuck in a ghost cave—there is no vitality. We have to take a step—take a step in order to function, to act, to engage, and that is where we find our full liberation. Otherwise, our insight is ephemeral, like mist. Even the deepest experience passes, and becomes a memory. Then it’s just a memory of an awakening experience, it’s not functioning enlightenment.

There is a story about the Korean master, Seung Sahn. He always told his students to do “just one thing.” Just sit. Just eat. Just talk, just walk. But then they came upon him one morning drinking coffee and reading a paper. “What are you doing? Isn’t that two things?” But he said, no, it’s just one thing—drinking coffee/reading paper—one thing!” This one thing is just this whole moment in its entirety. We serve ourselves some soup and move on, tucking our napkin and spoon in our pocket as we move. We cut carrots, and without thinking, move our hand to catch the one that’s rolling away. As we pass someone in on the stairs, the thought of their name comes into our minds. We label, a tiny train of thought erupts, and then we just move on, and it falls away and the little thought train dies away. Once that particular work of the brain is done, moving smoothly to the next thing just as a stream moves around a little rock in the path. Samadhi does not have to be broken by our activity, even our thought activity. This is one of the big lessons of walking meditation.

Another is that walking practice makes us aware how much time we spend in the future, rushing out of our present life. One teacher calls this “leaning into” the next moment. It’s about not actually being right where we are, but planning for the next moment even practicing for it mentally. If not in the future, then replaying something that already happened. Maybe making it over, revising it so it feels better. Another time when this happens a lot is eating, you are chewing and already you are planning your next bite and scooping it up, and so you lose track of actually eating your bite. Bringing careful attention to what you are actually doing right now requires that you give up your fascination with the future and with the past. It initially can feel like a loss, sometimes takes conscious effort, but then the present expands exponentially and becomes vast and spacious, and we often experience a great sense of wellbeing.

There is a story about the Korean master, Seung Sahn.
Listen, what I tell you is true…
The old stories of every people teach us that we walked out of the sky into this middle place, into this flesh and its dream, but a bright thread remains inside us, unraveled from the woven light of stars, and on the last day, when the dream expires, we climb the highest mountain in the world and step beyond the last step and walk into the sky again where our thread is received into the weave of light and darkness, our glory restored at last to the tapestry of stars.

The most straightforward way to see this poem is about the end of our life as a human being with a human body. But in another sense, birth and death are every second, right now, always right now. Every step we take is a step into the huge mystery of not knowing. We die to everything and step forward holding nothing, into a vast potential. We don’t know what will happen, not really. When we are in this moment, our dreams expire, we find ourselves made up of light and darkness, of stars and sky. Read it again with that mind.

Suzuki Roshi used to say:
*Burn yourself completely, like a good bonfire.*

Every step burns the past away. Step into what is unborn. Walk in the flow of birth and death, death and birth. We carry so much with us don’t we? Regrets, remorse, old hurts, doubts and fears… so many memories. Such a huge load we take up over and over again. What if we let it all rest? Really let the past go? What if we let our dreams and hopes expire?

Take a step with empty hands, not holding on any more. Take a step and walk in the sky, and live. Just live.

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The Four Postures Sesshin by Richard Miklic

In October 2011, the Zen Center of Denver held a four-day sesshin that offered a new perspective on the silent, deeply focused form of meditation that is fundamental to Zen practice. Participants in this sesshin had an opportunity to do Zen meditation not just on the cushion, and in brief periods of kinhin between rounds, but in all four of the postures (standing, sitting, walking, and lying down) mentioned in the original Pali sutra on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (the Satipatthana sutra).

The first practice consisted of 25 minutes of slow walking meditation, at the end of the late morning block just before the main meal. Participants were assigned individual paths within the zendo where they walked slowly up and down in the kinhin posture. However, unlike kinhin, this extended walking was truly an independent practice, lasting as long as a round of zazen. It was also more of an individual practice, with each participant setting their own pace and meditating in their assigned location, instead of moving as a group and following the person ahead of them.

The main practice was a one-hour session that was added in the middle of the afternoon. In the afternoon, participants spent 15 minutes walking slowly up and down the paths that had been assigned to them in the zendo, followed by 5 minutes standing at their mats, 15 minutes lying down beside their mats in the Buddha pose, and then 15 minutes sitting in the usual manner. Each posture was practiced in the same silent, deeply focused manner as traditional Zen sitting. The final practice was a body scan, guided by the tanto, which
followed the exercise session at the end of the day.

I must admit that I had some doubts about adding these new practices to sesshin. Although they intrigued me, I wondered whether they would be a distraction for the participants, diluting the taut, concentrated atmosphere that develops during long periods of silent sitting. But that’s not what happened. The new and traditional practices merged seamlessly and actually seemed to support and reinforce each other, intensifying rather than diminishing the deep silence and stillness of sesshin. The main four postures practice was especially strong, and the atmosphere in the zendo during the 15 minutes of sitting at the end was as taut and concentrated as I have experienced it.

By Cathy Wright
I vow not to do harm  
but to cherish all beings

May I greet each moment with a Breath and a Smile

and if in the second moment  
the breath dissolves into an argument  
or into the pain of loneliness  
at least I know what I circle back to.

I cherish the snow that fell last winter.  
It fell thick and heavy and fleshe out a small snow-shoe hare  
that wasn’t even there  
until  
he moved!

Silently he moved, jumped out of view  
and left the snow  
to melt into  
spring  
that ran down the mountain  
and into  
the gullies  
that led to  
the kitchen  
faucet  
which  
washed  
the last  
plate, cup, and spoon.  
I cherish the snow, the water, that comes from it,  
the flowers that grow from it, the dishes that get clean from it.  
Thank you, Snow
Print Making Art by Melanie Ritter

Calendar Highlights

New Year’s Day (center closed) January 1
Unsui Meeting (fka MWW) January 14
Samu January 21
Sangha Workday January 29
Sesshin Applic. Deadline February 3
Board of Directors February 6
Weekend Sesshin February 17-19
Zazenkai February 19
Samu March 10
Zazenkai March 18
Sesshin Applic. Deadline March 23

2011 Rohatsu Sesshin

This year’s Rohatsu Sesshin featured the last stage of the Buddha’s life. We were left wondering how we will pass on from this life. Danan Roshi and Ken Sensei delivered strong teishos stimulating the urgency to deepen and strengthen our practice. Nine bows to both as we ended the series of stories based on the book, *The Buddha: His Life Retold* by Robert Allen Mitchell.

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