

THE PATH IS MADE BY WALKING:

a wilderness meditation

by Joyce Resier Kornblatt

I have come to live in the village of Blackheath, on the edge of the Blue Mountains National Park. Two hours west of Sydney's urban sprawl, I've settled less than a mile now from six-hundred-thousand acres of eucalypt forests, gumtree woodlands, sandstone cliffs, rainforest gorges, swamps, heathlands, waterfalls, and the stumps of collapsed volcanoes. The Grose River has cut through the sandstone with breathtaking precision. Earthly time reveals itself in three layers here: the pale stone of pre-historic Gondwanaland exposed beneath a band of later dark mudstone, then the rust-coloured rock that emerged when Australia and Antarctica drifted apart and Gondwanaland vanished as a continent. What new layer will emerge when the planet shifts again, perhaps beneath my mortal feet?

Tourists flock to the lookout here at Govett's Leap. They emerge chattering from their rented cars and tour busses, and as soon as they arrive at the guardrail beyond which the Grose Valley escarpment opens, they often fall silent as pilgrims at the end of a long quest. It is how I felt when I first stood in this place, and within days my husband, Christopher, and I bought a home a walk away, packed up our rented Sydney house and moved to this highest point in the Blue Mountains. It will snow here this winter, a world's distance from Sydney's palm trees and beaches.

From the Govett's Leap lookout, a well-marked trail winds through the bush—the Australian word for forest—and circles back to the escarpment again. It's a mile and half, and mostly level, so it offers me a perfect track for walking meditation. If you've been on a Buddhist retreat, you know that meditation most usually alternates between periods of sitting and walking. This is not just to provide some relief from the seated version, but rather to

cultivate the appreciation of walking as a meditation in its own right. Walking without destination or agenda. Walking as a present-moment experience rather than a future-directed expediency or a past-driven reverie. “When you are ready to stop running,” Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh teaches--and he means internally as well as externally-- “you are ready for walking meditation.”

It is the running toward pleasure and away from pain that keeps us bound to delusion. When the Buddha sat down under the bodhi tree, determined not to rise until he had penetrated the nature of suffering and its cessation, he was confronted several times by Mara, the embodiment of desire-driven life. His answers to Mara’s temptations were steadfast, specific and repetitive: Buddha touched the earth with his hand. In this single gesture, classical readings of ancient texts suggest he summoned the land as witness to his many lifetimes of diligent practice. Contemporary Western readings offer further understandings: he signalled his intention to be free, he professed his allegiance to the land’s support, and he indicated his awareness of the solidity of the earth-element in himself. Palm to earth, he signified a spiritual path that is grounded, natural, and rooted in an interdependent relationship between a human being and her landscape. It is a gesture of power, gratitude and humility.

No surprise, then, that Buddhist meditation practice evolved both sitting and walking forms. Walking meditation brings the teachings into bright bodily awareness. The potential is huge: every step we take, Buddha’s reverent hand on the earth. Every step a breath dying into the next one’s birth. Every step the present moment, fully claimed and peacefully expressed. The calculating mind dissolves, the running ceases, and Mara is defeated. We can make this our aspiration each time we take a step.

I learned to practice walking this way decades ago, in a meditation hall and on the grounds just beyond it. The bell sounded and I marked out a few feet of space. I slowed my

steps down, so that each foot-lift and foot-fall became a series of observable micro-movements. The kind of surface my foot contacted—wooden floor or paved path or earthen road--informed my walking as surely as my walking registered itself on and changes the surface. Indoors or outdoors, night or day, cold or warm—all these circumstances conditioned the nature of my stepping and the qualities of the surface on to which I step. Walking, I came to know over the years, is a process in which an entire ecology participates, not something 'I' do. Mindful, I could experience the interdependent choreography into which 'I' am absorbed. Back and forth, back and forth, until the bell sounded again and I returned to my seat. Another layer of ego softened; a bit more recognition of the reality that Thich Naht Hanh calls, so beautifully, *interbeing*.

Here in the wilderness, no hall in sight and no one to ring a bell for me, I decide to bring walking meditation practice to the Grose Valley's Fairfax track. There is a literal path already here, laid out by the National Park Service, black-topped for the sake of wheelchairs and infant strollers. But the path I will come to know does not yet exist. "Seeker, there is no path," poet Antonio Machado says. "The path is made by walking." In Aboriginal spirituality, legendary totemic beings wandered over the continent in the Dreamtime, singing out the names of all they encountered -- birds, animals, plants, rocks, waterholes--and in this way sang the world into existence. These invisible songlines, the Dreaming, remain the guiding intuitive map, the for Australian aboriginals, informing their art and their ritual and their protective relationship with the environment. Often, they will go 'walkabout,' making a solitary pilgrimage over unseen but deeply known Dreaming tracks, honouring the ancestors who walked there before them, keeping the earth alive by singing the creation stories again and again. "Your steps are the most important thing," Thich Naht Hanh says. "They decide everything." I am setting out in that spirit.

The Fairfax track begins in sight of the escarpment and beside a grove of picnic tables. I offer a bow to begin my meditative walk. It's a weekday, no tourists now, and except for an elderly man sitting on a bench and eating a sandwich, not a person in sight. From this open vista, one step takes me into dense forest, giant eucalypts rising beside me on both sides of this footpath. At the base of the ancient trees, layers of growth: groundcovers, grasses, shrubs, sedges, wildflowers. I don't yet know the names of these species, and on a later walk with Christopher, he will offer me a catalogue of identifications, part Latinate and part Aboriginal, like a chant rolling off his tongue: tree-ferns, geebung, banksia, wattle, ti-tree, hakea, mountain devil, scribbly gum, xanthea, epicris, waratah, grevillia.

But on this solitary meditation journey, I'm simply aware of the variety of texture in leaf and stem and blossom, the life that exists before naming, and how it feels to pass through this living assemblage of wild growth for which I have only the most general terms. I who so love language am freed by its absence. Something more essential and unconstructed becomes possible. Not-knowing offers a spaciousness for surprise and immediacy. The world I cannot name presents itself to my senses in more vivid intricacy than my learned labelling might ever allow. In my body, an affectionate inclining toward the vegetation and what feels like a welcoming in response (do I imagine it or is it truly offered?), conferring a steadiness to my stepping. Whatever fear I expected to find in myself—a woman alone on a bushland track—dissolves before it has chance to take root.

And yet, at the outset, though I am mindful of breath and step, my mind is still busy: remembering, planning, imagining. These thought-forms keep me ungrounded as surely as if I were floating some inches from the earth. In his essay, "Walking," Thoreau reflects: "But it sometimes happens that I cannot easily shake off the village. The thought of some work will run in my head, and I am not where my body is; I am out of my senses. In my walks I

would fain return to my senses. What business have I in the woods, if I am thinking of something out of the woods?”

In walking meditation, noticing the distracted mind is encouraged, but judging it is not. I *do* have business in the woods, and my business is mindfulness. Soon enough the jangly inner conversation quiets, the jumble of mental images subsides, and I am more and more present to the eucalypt wilderness of which I am now, without question, a part. My footfalls grow gentler, more attuned to the slightest harm they might bring to insect or leaf. The asphalt itself is worthy of my careful contact. The ache from an old fracture in my leg brings forth a prayer of gratitude to the black-top, for the safety it offers a tingling ankle. The mind that takes anything for granted and experiences anything as ‘other’ is humbled now by the intimate gesture of a step.

Walking settles into a practice that is itself, rather than an action I as an agent am willing. Each step flows into the next and the track unfurls before me like a moving platform that carries me forward, so easeful now is my progression along the trail. As a rider on a train experiences what’s outside as moving, I have the sensation of the foliage coming toward me, rather than me going toward it. Halfway along the Fairfax Track, all sense of getting somewhere has faded, and with that, the experience of effort—even the wholesome effort of walking meditation—vanishes. Now it is as if nothing is moving at all—I am immersed in a stillness in which forms and sensations arise and fade, an emptiness full of the kaleidoscopic play I would ordinarily be labelling: leg, muscle, bone, bird, tree, flower, sky. In Buddhist practice, this is a bliss state, and though I know it will pass, the sense of perfection is a subtle perfume.

And it does pass, first gently and then dramatically. The next step presents me with a felled burned-out tree trunk. I stand still for awhile at its upended roots. I can feel my aversion to the fact of fire, to the conflagration that took down this tree and blackened others

threading through those that escaped the flames. This fire moved through here in 2006, and I remember now the fears that the village might be at risk. Since moving to Australia, I've learned that fire is a natural event in the wilderness, and a necessary one, but I acknowledge now that my embrace isn't big enough yet for that fact. The Gaia I was celebrating just a moment before was green and fertile, not a scorched tree-carcass reminding me much more brutally than a browned leaf that death which is often violent—what we name as violent—belongs in this world through which I walk.

This is the moment in life when we flee from pain or choose to stay with it. Thich Naht Hanh's teaching comes again like a choral refrain: "When you are ready to stop running, you are ready for walking meditation." Every moment I stay here, at this site of ruin, is a moment of readying myself for a brave and compassionate life. That fallen tree is everyone I have ever loved or known or heard about who has died a hard or sudden death. That fallen tree is my own mortal body, meeting its dying at some unknown future date. I'm weeping now, on my walking meditation. My steps have led me here, to this mourning place. I pick up a pebble from the ground, and in my own version of the Jewish tradition of leaving a stone on a grave, I place the pebble on the blackened bark of the dead gumtree's trunk.

Walking takes me on, to the George Phillips Lookout. This vista over the valley, a great bowl of sky in which the escarpment floats, brings release. Pain around my heart softens, and I'm not crying now. And just as my mind grasps at this consolation, a rescue helicopter pierces the still blueness with its growling motor and its metallic blades. An empty basket dangles from the helicopter's bottom, and I know someone is lost in these mountains, injured perhaps, in need of a rescue that will or will not come. For someone, right now, this wilderness sanctuary in the Blue Mountains is a dangerous place. For every one of us, we are the lost one and the injured one and the compassionate rescuer and the one who witnesses or turns away. Standing here on both my human feet, met and held by the concrete platform, I

am breathing into the truth of this human condition. My walking has made this path which I could not have imagined before I set out. *Nothing matters more than your steps—they decide everything.* This is clear to me now: the gravity of intention that each step requires, the quality of being that each footfall demonstrates. Walking meditation has brought me to the moral universe in which *the path is made by walking.* It is not just to delight that such a teaching points, though delight is genuine and sweet. It points as well to responsibility and grief and standing in the fire. To live in an uncontrived way, to walk for the sake of walking, asks that I meet fully anything that arises, that I meet it with love.

I continue on in that spirit. To the end of the Fairfax Track, where the helicopter continues to circle above the beautiful escarpment. To the entrance to the National Park, where more picnickers have gathered, and a tour bus pulls in, those on their journey waving to me on mine. To Govett's Leap Road, and the mile-long walk down the town's center to my sun-drenched cottage, where my husband has planted a young fig tree in our yard. Mindfully, I climb the five stairs to the front porch. The wood is soft pine, and there is some give each time I place my foot down. Walking meditation period is over. I unlock the door, I bow, and then I go inside.

--Joyce Kornblatt, PARABOLA MAGAZINE, Summer 2009