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The Walking Meditation

A Story

Suvimalee Karunaratna



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By

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The Walking Meditation

A Story

When I place my feet one after the other, first the left front foot, then the right hind foot, then the right front foot and then the left hind foot, I try to be mindful. I do this meditation when I walk in the festival procession held every year in Kandy in the month of Esala.

I heard about this walking meditation from a nun who preached a sermon at the temple where I am tethered. At first, when I started on this meditation, I was not very successful. I kept recalling various incidents in the past and fragments of conversation, but I persevered. When I place my foot forward, I make a determined effort to be mindful and I try to sense the feeling of contact with the road surface and the weight of my body pressing down on the foot. I also try to see whether I can feel anything underfoot—grains of sand, for instance, or whether it feels hot or cold, rough or smooth. This was difficult, for, as you know, my feet are by no means tender, but after some time...yes, I was able to feel these things and that gave

me a great deal of encouragement.

At the same time, I try to be mindful of my body elsewhere, as, for instance, the folds of the caparison flap against my legs and even the weight on top. Invariably, that isn't much, considering only two men usually sit there holding the flag of the temple I belong to; but I always go back to my feet.

I am also mindful of the mahout at my side with his goad. I never can fathom why my mahout thinks I understand only that silly "elephant language" he uses to talk to me, and not his own, as if it had some special mystique to it. He thinks it is this language and my training that make me obey him. He little realises that I obey him because I want to obey and that I have used that training and that language merely as tools to discipline myself.

When I was young, I used to love to be scrubbed, washed and got ready for the perahera, the annual festival procession. There was such a sense of anticipation among all the elephants brought to the Temple of the Tooth and the four main devales in Kandy from the outlying temples. Once, I remember, my mahout became angry with the organiser of our temple procession for giving him a torn caparison to put on me. He was greatly insulted and refused to dress me in it and squatted in a corner of the temple

courtyard chewing betel, muttering and grumbling to himself.

I watched the others being dressed. What an operation it was! One man had to get on top of the elephant that was being dressed and the heavy material of lined silk or batik had to be gathered into a bundle and thrown up to him. Then the man on top would drape it over the animal's wide back and adjust it and strap it in place. Then the ear covers and the trunk covers would be put on, the small box which contained batteries for the electric lights on the trunk cover and howdah would be strapped on to the neck, and so on and so forth. As I watched, indignation mounted in me too, that I had been given torn clothes to wear. Finally, when the mahout made a ball of the material and threw it away with curses and took me off, I had likewise worked myself up to a fine pitch of anger.

Now when I look back on that episode I smile to myself. I would not react like that now. The change came over me after I heard the nun giving a sermon at the temple. She said one gets hurt when one's ego-supporting delusion gets shattered. I had only a vague idea then of what those words meant. I have a better idea now.

As I was saying, in those days I loved to get all

dolled up and walk in the perahera. I loved the excitement in the air, the scent of flowers and incense all over the town, the streets agog with vendors with their bleating horns and happy hub-bub of chattering holiday crowds.

In the night the procession began with the rhythmic staccato drat-tattertat, tat-tertat, tattertat beating of kettle drums and the melodious wailing of oboes. The happy sound of anklets on the feet of the dancers and the silver spangles dangling from the rim of their metal headdresses fractured the air with an icy exhilaration. When I saw the bearers of flaring copra torches being lined up along the main road in front of our temple, and likewise the bearers of standards, banners, pennants and spears coming up, I used to feel such elation that I almost became dizzy.

In those days I used to have anklets tied round my feet too. I must have looked quite a giddy sight as I swayed my rump about, shook my head, flapped my ears and waved my tail and trunk as I walked. I was pleased no end to see the effect on the young bucks around me, whose eyes were always roaming around for such entertainment. At first the big one in front of me in the procession pretended not to notice me at all. He was standing next to Raja, the Maligawa Tusker, who carried the golden howdah in which is kept the casket containing the Buddha's tooth relic. He — that

is, the big one next to Raja — was very tall and lordly and handsome, with fearsome looking tusks, but he took great pains to ignore me, sometimes giving me even disdainful looks when I got up too close to him.

Once, out of sheer devilry, I gave his tail a playful tug with my trunk and received from him an instant response. He halted in his tracks, turned the fore part of his body in a slow, dignified awesome manner, and gave me such a glare that I immediately froze with fright. My mahout too gave me a sharp reprimand for my saucy behaviour and I felt thoroughly chastised, so much so that my ears began to burn with shame. So many years later, I see other saucy creatures swaying their backs about, their anklets tinkling away, all dressed up like tarts and I think how silly they look. I even want to go up to some and give them a good shaking. I wish they could see themselves the way I see them. But did I see myself then, the way I see them now? I am quietened by that thought and a feeling of amused tolerance comes over me.

To tell the story of the lordly big one who glared at me: some time later, he was brought to our temple. There were ample meadows around and he was allowed to graze there, tethered to a long chain and I was tethered close by. His demeanour towards me had changed. He was even kindly. When he looked in my direction, which he did very often, an

extraordinary heat coursed through my body, making my heart pound and my pulse beat fast. Once he came up quite close to me and this caused in me such turmoil that I actually thought I would swoon. Then he looked at me with such deep understanding, as if he knew exactly how I felt and rubbed me gently with his trunk. I cannot explain what I felt when his trunk touched me; it was as though electric flashes sparked all over me and shafts of lightning drove down deep into my groyne.

I was very happy to be in his company and the days went by fast, but one day his mahout came and took him away. I protested, I wailed, I nearly charged the mahout but no one took any notice of my tantrum, least of all he. I had to watch with tears of rage as he was led away. What infuriated me most was that he did not even turn his head once to look back at me. He left me, rather, as if he were in a great hurry to leave, seeming even somewhat abashed at my outburst. I thought I heard him exclaim something like "Aah, these silly women! How they do carry on!"

I moped for days after that. I was so depressed and such a feeling of rejection came over me that I felt desperately frustrated. My mahout was very good to me in those days of my dejection, as though he understood me perfectly well.

“That’s the way it is, old girl,” he would say to me in his own language, which I had no difficulty following. “That’s the way it is — attachment, separation and the result is dukkha—pain, grief, lamentation and despair.”

Sometime later as I worked out my grief in the day’s labour at a dam site, I became aware of something new inside of me. I felt very hungry and was always demanding more fodder — coconut palms or kitul palms — from my mahout. He brought me what I wanted readily enough. There was such an intense driving force in my hunger that my mahout, after watching me for a few minutes, squatted on his haunches, began to feel my belly, and soon located a bulge.

“Aha! So you are to be a mother, eh?” he cried, his tone carrying with it a note of jubilation.

I did not know quite what to say or do.

I think I must have blushed and looked pleased, but after the mahout went away, I slowly felt my belly with my trunk. It was definitely swollen and harder. Oh yes. How wonderful! Me a mother? The whole day I thought of my being a mother and what the baby would be like, whether it would be like him or me. A hundred times a day I asked myself “Me, a mother?” and each time the question gave me a pleasant start.

Thinking these thoughts, I grazed and grazed in the meadow and I hardly felt the time go by, because I was so consumed by thoughts and feelings of motherly love for my unborn babe and grandiose ideas of what he would be.

Then I began to crave for certain kinds of trees and leaves and fruit. As I foraged around, stuffing myself unceasingly, knowing I now had to eat for another as well, I indulged myself completely in the act of eating. The mahout was very considerate and brought me all kinds of different branches and leaves and even the monk in the temple came and fed me sugar cane, jaggery, wood apples and plantains. Even the villagers round and about heard of the news and came to see me, bringing with them all kinds of different delicacies. I was quite spoilt by their attentions and concern and the good will they lavished on me. How kind and generous they were!

I had no idea that the birth would cause me so much pain and discomfort. However, there was no dearth of well-meaning people around to give me moral support. I would have preferred if only my mahout was there. He was such a good midwife. After the birth, he brought some roots and leaves which he boiled and with which he fomented me all over. This took away all the tiredness from my body so that I felt very relaxed and content.

When I saw the helpless newborn baby, I felt a fierce love of protection for the funny puny thing with its fuzzy down all over him. I felt now as if I were the sole entity responsible for its birth, brought forth from my own womb where for so long it had gestated and been nourished by my body. As it tentatively felt me all over with its tiny trunk, searching and seeking out my teats to suckle, I felt such love for it, such sublime love, that my whole being was suffused with a gentle tingling warmth and the milk gushed out at his merest touch.

It was such a joy to watch him grow and become aware of the world around him. He would pay close attention to the smallest of creatures and I would be quite amused watching him. Even an ant crawling, a butterfly fluttering by or a bird calling on a branch above his head would enthral him. Then, there was such gallantry and chivalry in him too when he thought there was danger about that threatened our safety. Once when a faint glimmer of lightning crackled over the horizon, he dashed out a few yards from me and made such a snorting, trumpeting racket, such a stamping of feet and a pawing of the earth, such a show of bravado, that he looked really comic. I had to turn away so he could not see that I was laughing. But all I said was, "Come here. It's only thunder and lightning and soon it will pass. Come

under the shelter of this big tree and we will be safe from the rain.”

One year when the festival came around, he was old enough to take part in the perahera. I think he must have been the youngest elephant in it that year. The mahout kept him very close to me and I had to be very stern-faced and firm because he was so playful and frisky. Behind my facade, however, I was brimming over with pride and it was with the greatest of difficulty that I held it all in.

All the time as I walked, I kept looking to see if his father would be there. I wanted to show off to him this marvel, this wonderful creation of ours. Would he show surprise and interest...even joy? Then I saw him only a few paces ahead. As usual he stood next to Raja, the Maligawa Tusker, who carried the golden howdah with the holy Tooth Relic inside.

A young filly was trying to flirt with him, giving his tail sly tugs with her trunk. I froze all over and stonily watched what she was doing. I thought any minute he'll turn his lordly head and give her a stare, but to my astonishment I began to see that he was enjoying it. Once when we had paused for the dancers to complete their climactic sequence, he even turned around and swinging his trunk out, caught hers in his and swung it back and forth as though he were a

teenager in love for the first time. He looked so foolish that my temper began to rise. It was really too much for me to bear.

Before I knew what I was doing, I charged and gave her a hefty whack with my trunk. Instantly he turned and shouldered me aside with such a sudden powerful swinging movement that I was sent staggering back and was spun half-way round. It all happened very quickly and I had barely recovered my balance when I became aware of the mahout shouting, tugging at my ear and I found the goad a full three inches inside my shank. I screamed and trumpeted, more from the pain of mind than anything else, and this caused still more pandemonium. Mahouts shouted to their animals to get them under control and a wave of panic went through the standing crowds alongside the road like a snake suddenly uncoiling itself.

“Kapuri! Behave yourself!” the mahout shouted at me. Then he led me out of the procession, the little one trotting behind me, cowering against my hind legs.

“You are not in a fit condition to take part in the perahera any more. I shan’t bring you again!” he threatened. I felt so humiliated! Back in the temple grounds, I brooded for days. Inside me, I felt all bruised and shattered and there was a constant

constriction in my throat so I could scarcely eat. For a few days the mahout left me severely alone and the little one hovered about me, anxious, frightened and baffled, but I was hardly aware of his existence. I was so absorbed in my hurt.

After a few days, the mahout softened towards me. The anger left his tone and he was even kind. "You are like my old woman," he told me, sitting down on the ground under the shade of the broad leaved breadfruit tree where I was tethered. He squatted there chewing his betel leaf, now and then spitting out the red juice. He was a man of few words but I felt his sympathy. "She used to behave just like you," he confided. I waited to see if he would say anything more but that was all. I continued to pick at the leaves he had brought me and pretended I hadn't heard him, though his words consoled me. In due course, I recovered from my bruised ego.

The following year I was led away again to take part in the perahera. Throughout that night I kept my eyes peeled on the lookout for him. Usually he walked by the side of the majestic Maligawa Tusker, but I saw another in his place. I wondered where he could be and why he hadn't come.

The year after that, however, I saw my little one's father again. He was there by Raja, the Maligawa

Tusker, but what a change had come over him! I had to blink hard and look again to be doubly sure it was him I saw. He had become gaunt and grey and he held himself in a peculiar slouching fashion, his head sunk low. I then noticed the angry pink marks round his feet where his chains had cut into his flesh. In those places, the flesh looked raw and innumerable flies kept settling on the wounds. I felt sad to see him looking old and ill and in such obvious pain. Slowly, I moved up to him. I looked into his drawn face and sunken eyes and felt a pang of grief. "Is this him, this shadow, this ghost of that former giant?" I touched him, very tenderly with great sorrow in my heart and I rubbed my trunk all over his body as I had done in earlier years.

"I still love you, my lord master," I said. "I still love you. Do you love me?"

He responded by taking my trunk and curling his trunk round mine in a firm grip but the grip trembled and soon I felt the strength going out of it. Then I felt my mahout pulling me away.

Some days later, when I was in the temple compound, I overheard the monk calling out to the mahout from the verandah of the monastery that Skanda had died. I knew Skanda was his name. It gave me a start. I felt the mahout's gaze on me. I must

have looked quite stricken because he patted my trunk.

“There, there, now, old girl. Don’t take it so hard,” he said gruffly. He had seen that I had not been eating ever since I saw my little one’s father looking so sickly in the perahera and I think the mahout had realised why I was depressed. I cannot explain how I grieved for him — for what had become of him. When I thought of that last good-bye clasp he had given me, my grief knew no bounds.

“Come, eat this sugarcane I brought for you,” the mahout said in a matter of fact voice that somehow comforted me. “We’ve got plenty of work to do tomorrow morning.”

So I ate absentmindedly, without pleasure, just to please him, to show him that I appreciated his sympathy.

They took my little one away the following year. The monk had sold him to a rich landlord who lived in another area. They had taken him away when I was out at work in a patch of jungle where logging was in progress. I was so upset I thought I’d lose my reason. My loss kept whirling round and round in my head and then, when I thought nothing worse could happen to me, the mahout fell ill. He didn’t come for days and meanwhile another mahout was brought in his place. I

thought this was going to be a temporary arrangement, but as the days went by I realised the old mahout was never going to return. The awful thought came into my head that he might have died. As a matter of fact, he had, as I came to know later.

The new mahout was a raw recruit and very young. It was more as if I had to take him in hand and train him in his work. For instance, I would wait very patiently for his instructions, even if I knew well beforehand what they would be. When I was taken into the jungle where trees were being felled and I was required to drag away the trees or pile up the sawn logs neatly, I knew exactly what to do. It involved piling the pieces of timber one on top of the other and adjusting them, sometimes with the help of my leg, so they would be in a perfectly straight line. It required not only effort but concentration. Still, I had to wait for the mahout's fumbling instructions without jumping the gun, and that required much patience and self-control.

In time, we developed a rapport. He came to know what leaves and trees and fruits I liked best. Sometimes I'd tease him by not eating at all until he went and got me what I liked. Not that I really cared what I ate but I had to train him to look after me.

Training the young mahout took my mind off my

own misery and I made him feel he was getting good results out of me entirely from his own efforts. When he tethered me at the end of the day and went away. I was left to myself to brood and ruminate, reflect, contemplate and meditate. This was the twilight hour I like best. At this time various rituals were conducted at the temple. Refreshing drinks, flowers, incense and lighted oil lamps would be offered in honour of the Buddha or the Bodhi tree and many devotees would come and participate in them. After these poojas, I would listen very carefully to the monk's sermons. No one knew I was listening or that I could understand, yet I understood perfectly. While I munched on my kitul palm branches, breaking them on my knee, sometimes waving them this way and that to get the sand off. I was aware as well of the gentle swishing and munching sounds I was making in the silence while the devotees listened to the monk giving a sermon or sat in meditation.

Actually, it was the nun who taught us to meditate. The nun had been invited to the temple by the monk to teach meditation on full moon days, for meditation was not his forte, though he could expound other aspects of the Teaching. It was the nun who explained about the ego-supporting delusion which we call "I" and "me."

It is difficult for one such as I, with all my bulk, to

believe I am nothing. The anatta doctrine — that one does not have an ego as such — is beyond me. It is easy enough to understand dukkha, the unsatisfactoriness of existence, and anicca, change. My whole life has been a lesson in that. But she said one's understanding of these truths should go much deeper and that the "I" delusion is nothing but a host of wants resulting in clinging. When we rid ourselves of wants one by one, she said, like peeling off a plantain tree which has no core, we come to a nothingness at the centre.

I contemplate on this when I am given a plantain tree to munch. While I peel off and chew it skin by skin, I reflect and try to arrive at the "nothing" core with a start of realisation. Once the young mahout, watching me and seeing what I did, expressed surprise that I was taking so much pains to peel the bark off layer by layer, daintily with my trunk, instead of putting it all in my mouth. No doubt he thought I was cranky.

When I first heard the nun talk of non-self, it made no sense to me at all. In fact, it made me laugh. Once the mahout gave me an order. "Kapuri! Come, let's go!" he shouted.

I pretended not to hear him and went on chewing my kitul palm tree. "There is no such person as Kapuri

here," I said to myself, enjoying the joke as much as I did the kitul, turning over and over the juicy pulp in my mouth.

"Huh, so you are enjoying a joke by yourself, arh?" the mahout called out to me angrily. "Go on then. Pretend you don't hear me, but remember, if you let that training slip away from you, you lose the only thing worth having in this life."

Huh, look at him, that young whipper-snapper, coming to tell me about training! Anyway, it made my ears twitch and I soon turned towards him and began to follow him like a puppy.

The meditation on the breath as it touches the upper lip while one breathes in and out, which the nun taught, presented a problem to me; my anatomy is such that it didn't work at all, for you see, I have no upper lip. But I had no difficulty in doing the body meditation, first contemplating on top of my head and then slowly going further up to the crown, pressing down with my mental eye on the surface of my head till I got a sensation — any sensation — and then slowly working down to my forehead, the sides of the head, the shoulders, and so on all the way down.

I can do the meditation on the body better now because now I have many rheumatic aches and pains. Some time ago, I used to like to groan to excite and

alarm the mahout. He'd show great concern, touching my body here and there and examining me all over. Then I would indicate where it hurt me by lifting my leg slightly and making it limp and dangle in front of him. Then he'd touch the knee and press it and even if I felt no pain, I'd groan and make out as if I were in great agony. He would then run off to get me some suitable medicinal herbs, which he would boil and rub over me and then tie around my leg. I shouldn't tease him so much. He's really a good boy.

When I do the walking meditation also, I become aware of my rheumatic pains.

They may be ever so excruciatingly painful but when my concentration deepens the pain vanishes and then sometimes starts elsewhere. By doing this meditation constantly I have grown so adept at it that I can watch as the pain begins, becomes redder and redder on my mental screen, and then starts to wane. The nun said we must reflect on impermanence as we meditate, taking those feelings as our subjects. After all, what are we but a conglomeration of the physical elements that make up the body along with the mind, which consists of feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness? And they are never static, but only a continual arising and passing away from moment to moment.

And so, when I walk in the perahera and I place my feet, one after the other, I concentrate on the sensations I feel as my foot comes in contact with the road surface, whether hot or cold, whether rough or smooth; and when a pain arises in my knee, I shift my concentration there, till it passes off, then I go back to the act of placing my feet one after the other as I move forward. As I do so, I reflect on the transience of feelings — ever-changing like this whole conglomeration of changing phenomena that we are. Then I think that my thoughts, like my feet, also follow one after the other in a chain, a perpetual progression of karma-forming mental acts that keep us instinctively clinging to existence.

Then I see before me the golden how-dah with the shining casket inside it, strapped on to Raja's back. It glows with a thousand lights in the night and I feel as if the Buddha's all-compassionate eyes were radiating from it, penetrating me with infinite compassion, seeking out every corner of my being, filling me with light and warmth and loving kindness for all beings, who, like myself, are fleeting, changing phenomena whirling round and round, chained to the wheel of birth and rebirth. And as I walk on, the feeling of loving kindness in me deepens and suffuses my whole being. It radiates outward, encompassing all the other elephants in the perahera and the people on the

pavement, the whole town, and rising above the hill, it radiates in every direction, north, south, east, west and beyond the seas to all the world.

About the Author

Suvimalee Karunaratna was born in Sri Lanka in 1939, and received her early education in Washington D.C. and in Colombo. While living in Rangoon, Burma, where her father was posted as the Sri Lankan ambassador from 1957–61, she received meditation instructions from the late Ven. Mahasi Sayadaw and the late Ven. Webu Sayadaw. Her first volume of short stories was published in 1973, and several of her short stories have appeared in anthologies of modern writing from Sri Lanka as well as in literary journals. She has also written a film script, “The Journey,” commissioned by the Council for Communal Harmony through Media and televised over the national television network. She lives in Kandy with her husband, Dr. Nihal Karunaratna.

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