

# WALKING MEDITATION IN THE THAI FOREST TRADITION

***By Ajahn Nyanadhammo***

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## Introduction

In this discourse, I want to focus on the nuts and bolts of walking meditation. I shall address the how, when, where and why of this form of meditation. I intend this discourse to include both practical instructions of the technical aspects of walking meditation and instructions for creating the quality of mind that leads to concentration, insight and wisdom through the physical activity of walking meditation.

The Buddha stressed developing mindfulness in the four main postures of the body: standing, sitting, lying down and walking (DN 22, MN 10). He exhorted us to be mindful in all these postures, to create a clear awareness and recollection of what we are doing when we are in any particular posture.

When you read about the lives of the monks and nuns at the time of the Buddha, you see that many obtained the stages of Enlightenment while on the walking meditation path. Walking meditation is called *Cankama* in Pali. Walking meditation is an activity in which one can focus and concentrate the mind and develop investigative knowledge and wisdom as well.

Some people find that they are naturally drawn to doing walking meditation, because they find it easier and more natural than sitting meditation. When they sit they feel dull, or they're tense, or they are easily distracted. Their mind doesn't calm down. If this is the case with you, don't just persevere; try a change of posture and do something new. Do something different; experiment with standing meditation or try walking meditation. This new meditation posture may give you some other skilful means of applying the mind. All of the four postures of meditation are just techniques, methods for developing and training the mind.

Try and develop walking meditation; you may start to see the benefits of it. In the Forest Meditation Tradition in Northeast Thailand, there is a great emphasis on walking meditation. Many monks will walk for long hours as a way of developing concentration — sometimes as much as ten or fifteen hours a day!

The late Ajahn Singtong used to do so much walking meditation that he would make a rut in his walking path, and the novices would have to come and fill in the hollow. The sandy path that he used for walking meditation would actually become hollow because he would walk so many hours a day — sometimes up to fifteen or more hours a day! I know of another monk who walked meditation so much that he wouldn't bother to go into his hut at night. When he got really tired after walking meditation all day and late into the night, he would lay down right there on the meditation path and use his fist as a pillow. He would go to sleep with mindfulness, having made a determination to get up the moment he woke. As soon as he woke up, he would start walking again. He basically lived on his walking meditation path! That monk was quick to attain results in his practice.

Here, in the West, there is not such an emphasis on the practice of walking meditation. This is why I would like to describe the process and recommend it to you to compliment your sitting practice. These instructions

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will hopefully help you develop your repertoire of meditative techniques – in both formal meditation and in your daily life. As so much of life is taken up with the activity of walking, if you know how to apply awareness to that, then even simply walking about in your house can become a meditation exercise.

### The Five Benefits of Walking Meditation

The Buddha spoke of five benefits of walking meditation (AN, III, 29). In the order that he listed them in this *Sutta*, they are as follows: It develops endurance for walking long distances; it is good for striving; it is healthy; it is good for the digestion after a meal, and the concentration won from walking meditation lasts a long time.

***Good for Developing Endurance for Walking Distances.*** The first benefit of walking meditation is that it leads to endurance in walking distances. This was particularly important at the time of the Buddha when most people travelled by foot. The Buddha himself would regularly go wandering from place to place walking up to sixteen kilometres a day. So he recommended that walking meditation be used as a way of developing physical fitness and endurance, for walking distances.

Forest monks, these days still go wandering; it's called *Tudong*. They take their bowl and robes and walk seeking out secluded places to meditate. In preparation to go out wandering, they progressively increase the amount of walking meditation so as to develop their physical fitness and endurance. They increase the number of hours of walking meditation a day to at least five or six hours. If you are walking an average of four or five kilometres an hour and doing five hours of walking meditation a day, the number of kilometres builds up.

***Good for Striving.*** Striving, especially to overcome drowsiness, is the second benefit. While practising sitting meditation, meditators may find that they tend to slip into tranquil states, but if they are a bit too "tranquil", without awareness, then they may start nodding or even snoring. Time goes quickly, but they don't have any clarity or awareness even though it feels "peaceful". Without mindfulness and awareness, meditation can turn into dull "tranquillity" because it has been overcome by sloth and torpor. Developing walking meditation can counteract this tendency.

As an example, Ajahn Chah, used to recommend once a week that we stay up all night. We would sit and walk meditation throughout the night. One tends to get very drowsy by one or two in the morning, so Ajahn Chah would recommend doing walking meditation walking backwards as a way of overcoming drowsiness. You don't fall asleep walking backwards!

I remember once at Bodhinyana Monastery in Western Australia going out early one morning, around five o'clock, to do some walking meditation. I saw one of the laymen, who was staying for the Rains Retreat in the monastery putting forth great effort to overcome drowsiness. He was actually walking meditation up and down the top of the six-foot high wall in front of the monastery — very mindfully walking up and down on top of the wall! I was a little concerned that he might fall and hurt himself. However, he was actually putting great effort and care into being mindful of each step and, in the process of overcoming drowsiness by developing a highlighted sense of alertness, effort and zeal.

***Good for Health.*** The Buddha said that walking meditation leads to good health. This is the third benefit. We are all aware that walking is considered a very good form of exercise. We even hear of "power walking" these days. Well we are talking about "power meditation", developing walking meditation as both a physical and mental exercise. This way walking can be used ***both*** as a good form of exercise, and as a way to cultivate the mind. But to get both benefits, we have to bring awareness to the process of walking, instead of just walking and letting the mind wander off thinking of other things.

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***Good for Digestion.*** The fourth benefit of walking meditation is that it is good for the digestion. This is particularly important for monks who eat one meal a day. After a meal, the blood goes to the stomach and away from the brain. Thus one can feel drowsy. Forest Monks stress that after a meal one should do a few hours of walking meditation, because walking up and down helps the digestion. For lay meditators too if you have had a heavy meal, instead of going to bed, go out and do an hour of walking meditation. It will help with physical well being and be a chance to cultivate the mind.

***Good for Sustaining Concentration.*** The fifth important benefit of walking meditation is that the concentration that arises out of walking meditation sustains itself for a long time. The walking posture is actually quite a coarse meditative posture compared to sitting. While sitting, it's easy to maintain one's posture. We have our eyes closed so there are no visual sense stimuli, and we're not engaged in any bodily movement. So sitting, in comparison to walking, is a very refined posture in terms of the activities involved. Even standing is a more refined physical posture, because there is no movement taking place. The "Lion Posture", lying down on our right side, is even a more refined meditative posture again.

When we are walking there is a lot of sensory input. We are looking where we are going; thus there is visual input, and also there is sensory input from the movement of the body. Therefore if we can concentrate the mind while walking, and receiving all this sensory stimuli, then when we change from that posture to a more refined one, concentration becomes easier to maintain. That is, when we sit down the strength of mind and power of that concentration carries over easily to this more refined posture.

Whereas if one has developed concentration only in the sitting posture when one gets up from that position and begins coarse bodily movements like walking, it's harder to maintain that state of concentration. This is because one is moving from the refined to the coarse. So we see that walking meditation can help to develop strength and clarity of mind, and a concentration that can carry over into other less active meditation postures.

## Setting Up for Walking Meditation

### Finding a Suitable Place

How does one do walking meditation? Firstly, we find a quiet place with few distractions, suitable for a walking meditation path. The place where the Lord Buddha did walking meditation at Bodhgaya after his Enlightenment still exists to this day. His walking path was seventeen steps long. These days the Forest Monks tend to make their walking meditation paths much longer. They can be up to thirty steps long. The beginner may find thirty paces a bit too long for them because their mindfulness is not yet developed. By the time they get to the end of the path, the mind may have been "around the world and back". Remember, walking is a stimulating posture, and initially the mind tends to wander a lot. It is usually better for beginners to start off on a shorter path; fifteen paces would be a good length.

If you are going to walk meditation outside, find a secluded place where you won't be distracted or disturbed. It is good to find a walking path that is slightly enclosed. It can be a distraction to walk in an open area where there is a view, as you may find that the mind is drawn out to the scenery. An enclosed area is especially suitable for speculative personalities who like to think a lot; it helps to calm their minds down (Vsm, III, 103). If the path is closed in, it tends to bring the mind inwards, into one's self and towards peace.

### Preparing the Body and Mind

Once you have chosen a suitable path, stand at one end. Stand erect. Put the right hand over the left in front of you. Don't walk with your hands behind your back. I remember Tan Ajahn Tui, a meditation master who visited our monastery, commenting when he saw one of the guests walking up and down with their hands

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behind their back: "He's not walking meditation, he's going for a stroll". He made that remark because there was not enough clear determination to focus the mind on walking meditation, by placing the hands in front — to differentiate that from just walking.

The practice is to develop *Samadhi*, and that takes focussed effort. The Pali word *Samadhi* means focussing the mind, developing the mind to one-pointedness by gradual degrees of mindfulness and concentration. To focus the mind, one has to be diligent and determined. This firstly requires a degree of physical as well as mental composure. One begins composing oneself by clasping the hands in front. Composing the body helps to compose the mind. Having thus composed the body, one should then stand still and bring awareness and attention to the body. Then raise one's hands together in *Anjali*, a gesture of respect, and with one's eyes shut reflect for a few minutes on the qualities of the Buddha, the *Dhamma* and the *Sangha* (*Buddhanusatti*, *Dhammanusatti* and *Sanghanusatti*).

You can contemplate having taken refuge in the Buddha — on the Wise One, on He who Knows and Sees, the Awakened One, the Fully Enlightened One. Reflect in your heart on the qualities of the Buddha for a few minutes. Then recall the *Dhamma* — the Truth that you are striving to realise and cultivate on the walking meditation path. Finally, bring to mind the *Sangha* — especially those fully Enlightened ones who have realised the truth by cultivating meditation. Then bring the hands down in front of you and make a mental determination on how long you are going to walk meditation, be it half an hour, one hour, or more. However long you determine to walk for, stick to it. In this manner you are nurturing the mind at that initial stage of the meditation with zest, inspiration and confidence.

Also it's important to mention, when walking, to remember to keep the eyes cast down about a metre and a half in front. Don't be looking around distracted by this or that. Keep awareness on the feeling at the soles of the feet, and in this way, you develop more refined attention, and clear knowing.

### Choosing a Meditation Object and Getting Started

The Buddha taught forty different meditation objects (Vsm, III, 104) many of which can be used on the walking path. However some are more suitable than others. I'll discuss a number of these meditation objects here beginning with the most common: awareness of the walking posture itself.

### Awareness of the Walking Posture

In this method, while walking you place all your attention at the soles of the feet, on the sensations and feelings as they arise and pass away. (This is assuming that you may be walking bare footed, as most monks do. However you can do it with some shoes on, especially if they are light soled shoes.) As you begin walking these feelings will change. As the foot is lifted and comes down again into contact with the path, a new feeling arises. Place your awareness on that sensation, as it is felt through the sole of the foot. Again as the foot lifts, mentally note the new feeling as it arises. When you lift each foot and place it down, note the sensations felt. At each new step, certain new feelings are experienced and old feelings cease. This should be known with mindfulness. With each step there is a new feeling experienced — feeling arising, feeling passing away; feeling arising, feeling passing away.

In this method, we place mindfulness on the feeling of walking itself, on each step taken, on the *vedan* (pleasant, unpleasant or neutral sensations). We are aware of whatever type of *vedan* arises at the soles of the feet. When we stand, there is a sensation, a feeling, of the contact with the ground. This contact can produce pain, heat or other sensations. We place our mindful attention on those feelings, knowing them fully. When raising the foot to take a step, the feeling changes as soon as the foot loses contact with the ground. When we place that foot down, again a new feeling arises as the foot comes into contact with the ground. As we walk,

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feelings are constantly changing and arising anew. We mindfully note this arising and passing away of feeling as the soles of the feet lift off or touch onto the ground. In this way we are keeping our full attention just on the sensations of walking.

Have you ever really noticed before the feelings in the feet as you walk? They happen every time we walk, but we tend not to notice these subtle things in life. When we walk, our minds tend to be somewhere else. Walking meditation is a way of simplifying what we're doing when we're doing it. We're bringing the mind to the "here and now", being one with walking when walking. We are simplifying everything, quieting the mind by just knowing feeling as it's arising and passing away.

How fast should you walk? Find your own pace. Ajahn Chah, recommended walking naturally, not too slow or too fast. If you walk fast, you might find it very difficult to concentrate on the sensation of feeling arising and then passes away. You may need to slow down a bit. On the other hand some people may need actually to speed up. It depends on the person. You have to find your own pace, whatever works for you. You can begin slowly at first then gradually come to your normal walking pace.

If your mindfulness is weak (meaning your mind wanders a lot), then walk very slowly until you can stay in the present moment of each step. Start by establishing mindfulness at the beginning of the path. When you arrive in the middle of the path, then mentally ask yourself, "Where is my mind? Is it on the feeling at the soles of the feet? Am I knowing the contact here and now, at this present moment?" If the mind has wandered off, then bring it back to the sensations at the feet again and continue walking.

When you get to the end of the path, turn slowly around and re-establish your mindfulness again. Where is the mind? Does it know the feeling at the soles of the feet? Or has it wandered off? The mind tends to wander elsewhere chasing thoughts of: anxiety, fear, happiness, sorrow, worries, doubts, pleasures, frustrations and all the other myriad thoughts that can possibly arise. If mindfulness of the meditation object is not present, re-establish it first, and then start walking back. Re-establish the mind on the simple act of walking, and then begin to walk back to the other end of the path. When you get to the middle of the path, you should note, "I am now at the middle of the path" and check again to see if the mind is with the object. Then once you arrive at the end of the path mentally note, "Where is the mind?" In this way, you walk back and forth mindfully aware of the feelings arising and passing away. While walking, constantly re-establish your mindfulness — pulling the mind back, drawing the mind inward, becoming aware, knowing the feeling at each moment as it is arising and passing away.

As we sustain mindfulness on the sensations and feelings at the soles of the feet, we will notice that the mind gets less distracted. The mind is less inclined to go out to things that are happening around us. We become calmer. The mind will become tranquil. The mind settles down. Once the mind becomes tranquil and calm, then you'll find that the walking posture becomes too coarse an activity for this quality of mind. You just want to be still. So stop and stand and allow the mind to experience this calm tranquillity. This is known as *Passaddhi*; it is one of the factors of enlightenment.

If while walking the mind becomes very refined, you might even find that it's actually impossible to continue. Walking involves the mental volition to move, and your mind may be too involved in the meditation for that. So stop and stand on the walking meditation path and continue the practice in that position. Meditation is about the work of the mind, not necessarily about any particular posture. The posture is just a convenient means to enhance the work of the mind.

Concentration and tranquillity work together with mindfulness. Combined with the factors of energy, investigation of *Dhamma*, joy, and equanimity; these are the "Seven Factors of Enlightenment". When in meditation the mind is tranquil, then because of that tranquillity there will arise a sense of joy, rapture, and bliss. The Buddha said that the bliss of peace is the highest happiness, (MN, I, 454) and a concentrated mind

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experiences that peace. *This peace can be experienced in our lives.*

Having developed walking meditation in a formal context, then when we are walking around in our daily lives — going to the shops, walking from one room to the other or even walking to the bathroom — we can use this act of walking as meditation. We can be aware just of walking, simply being with that process. Our minds can be still and peaceful. This is a way of developing concentration and tranquillity in our daily lives.

### Taking a Sitting Meditation Object on to the Walking Path

If while sitting meditation the mind becomes calm, then when you do walking meditation you can use that same meditation object. However with some very subtle meditation objects, such as the breath, the mind must have attained a certain degree of stability and calmness first. If the mind is not yet calm enough and you try to start walking meditation focusing on the breath, it will be very difficult, as the breath is a very subtle object of attention. In this case, it is better to begin with a coarser object of meditation, such as the sensations of feeling's arising at the feet.

There are many meditation objects that can transfer well from the sitting to the walking posture, for example, the Four Divine Abidings of: Loving-kindness, Compassion, Appreciative Joy and Equanimity. As you pace back and forth develop the expansive thoughts based on loving-kindness, "May all beings be happy, may all beings be at peace, may all beings be free from all suffering". Use the walking posture as a complement to sitting; develop meditation on the same object but in a different posture and situation.

### "Searching for Buddho" -- Choosing a Mantra

If while doing walking meditation you find that you're getting drowsy, then you may need to activate the mind using a mantra, rather than calm it, so that it becomes more focussed and awake. Use a mantra like *Buddho*, repeating the word quietly to yourself over and over and over again. If the mind still wanders, then start saying *Buddho* very quickly, and walk up and down very fast. As you walk, recite *Buddho, Buddho, Buddho*. In this way, your mind can become very focussed very quickly.

When Tan Ajahn Mun, the famous forest meditation teacher, was among the hill tribes in North Thailand, they didn't know anything about meditation or meditation monks. However the hill tribe people are very inquisitive. When they saw him walking up and down on his path, they would follow him in a line. When he got to the end of the path and turned around, the whole village would be standing there!

They had noticed him walking back and forth with his eyes cast down and had assumed he was searching for something. They enquired, "What are you looking for, Venerable Sir? We can help you to find it." He skilfully replied, "I'm looking for *Buddho*, the Buddha in the heart. You can help me to find it by walking up and down on your own paths looking for the Buddha". And with this simple and beautiful instruction many of those villagers began meditating, and Tan Ajahn Mun said they obtained wonderful results.

### Contemplations: Investigating the Way Things Are

Investigation of *Dhamma* (*Dhammavicaya*) is one of the Factors of Enlightenment, and this type of contemplation on the teachings and the laws of nature can be employed while walking up and down the meditation path. This doesn't mean that one just thinks or speculates over any old thing. Rather, it is constant reflection and contemplation of the Truth (*Dhamma*).

*Investigating Change (Anicca)*. For example, one can contemplate Impermanence by observing the process of change, and seeing all things as subject to change. One develops the perception of the arising and passing

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away of experience. "Life" is a continual process of arising and passing away, and all conditioned experience is subject to this. By contemplation of this Truth, one sees the characteristics of existence. One sees that *all* things are subject to change. *All* things are not satisfactory. *All* things are not self. One can investigate these characteristics of nature on the walking meditation path.

Throughout the history of Buddhism, many monks and nuns have attained insight, wisdom and Enlightenment while on the walking meditation path; through the investigation of the Truth. In the Forest Monastic Tradition every aspect of our life is treated as an opportunity for meditation. Meditation is not just for when seated on our meditation cushions. All the processes of life are opportunities for us to investigate reality. We strive to know things as they are, that things arise and pass away — to understand reality as it actually is.

***Recollecting our Generosity and Virtue.*** The Buddha continually stressed the importance of generosity (It, 26) and virtue (SN V, 354). While on the walking path, one can develop the recollections of one's virtue or of one's generosity. Walk up and down and ask yourself, "Today, what acts of goodness have I done?"

A meditation teacher I stayed with, named Tan Ajahn Gunhah, often used to comment that one reason meditators cannot get peaceful is because they haven't done enough goodness during the day. Goodness is a cushion for tranquillity, a base for peace. If we've done acts of kindness during the day – having said a kind word, done a good deed, been generous or compassionate — then the mind will experience joy and rapture. Those acts of goodness, and the happiness they naturally bring, become the conditional factor for concentration and peace. The power of goodness and generosity leads to happiness, and it is that wholesome happiness which forms the foundation for concentration and wisdom.

The recollection of good deeds is a very good meditation subject when the mind is restless, agitated, angry, or frustrated. When the mind lacks peace, then recollect your past kind actions. This is not to try to build up one's ego, but it is actually a celebration of goodness and wholesomeness. Acts of goodness, virtue and generosity bring joy into the mind, and joy is a Factor of Enlightenment (SN, V, 68).

Recollect acts of generosity. Reflect on the benefits of giving. Recall one's virtue. Contemplate the purity of harmlessness, the purity of honesty, the purity of propriety in sexual relations, the purity of truthfulness, the purity of non-confusion of mind by avoiding intoxicants. All of these recollections can serve as meditation objects on the walking path.

***Recollecting the Nature of the Body.*** We can meditate on death and dying or on the non-beautiful nature of the body, on the *Asubha* contemplations — corpses in various stages of decay. We can visualise taking this body apart, just as a medical student would dissect a body. We "peel off" the skin and "see" what's underneath, — the layers of the flesh, the sinews, the bones, the organs. We can mentally remove each one of the organs from the body so it can be investigated and understood. What's the body made of? What are its component parts? Is this me? Is it permanent? Is it worthy of being called a self?

The body is just an aspect of nature, like a tree or a cloud – no different. The fundamental problem is the attachment to the body; where the mind clings to the view that this body is *my* body, delights in *my* body, delights in other people's bodies. This is *me*. This is *self*. *I* own this.

We can challenge this attachment to the body through contemplation and investigation. We take up the object of the bones of this body. We visualise a bone as we are walking meditation, seeing it bleach, break up and return to the earth element. Bone is calcium and is absorbed into the body through the consumption of vegetable and animal matter; it comes from earth. Chemicals come together to form bone, and eventually that bone will return to earth. Calcium just goes back to calcium; there is no quality of *my* calcium or someone else's. Earth just goes back to earth; the element returns to its natural form. This is not me; this is not mine; this is not worthy of being called a self. We meditate on and break down a bone to its elements and return

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them back to the earth. We re-establish it again and break it down again, and we carry on this process continuously until clear insight arises.

If you are meditating on the body in this way and you haven't yet completely broken down the object of meditation into the four elements (earth, air, fire and water) and then re-constituted it, the work of the meditation is not yet finished. The mental exercise is not yet complete; the work is not done. Keep at it. Continue walking. Walk up and down and investigate until you are able to establish the perception in the mind of seeing the *Asubha* in the *Subha* – to see the non-beautiful, the non-delightful, and the non-attractive in what is assumed to be beautiful, delightful and attractive. We break this body down and turn it back to its natural elements, in order to see it as it really is.

The training of the mind to investigate nature leads to wisdom. By repeating these exercises of breaking the body down into its four elements: earth, air, fire and water, the mind sees and understands that this is not me, not mine, not self. It sees that the four elements that constitute this body are just aspects of nature. It is the mind that attaches to the view that the body is self. So we challenge that attachment; we don't accept it blindly, because it is that attachment which causes all our suffering.

**Other contemplations.** Another meditation object the Buddha recommended was to reflect on peace, and the nature of peace (Vsm, 197). Yet another is to consider the qualities of Enlightenment. Alternatively one can walk up and down reflecting on the qualities of the Buddha, the qualities of the *Dhamma*, or the qualities of the *Sangha*. Or one can recollect heavenly beings, Devas, and the qualities needed to become a heavenly being (Vsm, III, 105).

**A Few Words of Caution About Contemplation.** There are so many meditation objects in the Buddhist repertoire of meditation. Your meditation object should be chosen carefully. Select a meditation object that stimulates the mind when the mind needs stimulating, or pacifies the mind when the mind needs calming. But a word of caution is needed when using these contemplations on the walking path that the mind doesn't go out into speculative thought and drift off. This is very easy to do. This is why we have to be very mindful and to note at the beginning of the path, the middle and the end of the path: "Am I really with my meditation object or am I thinking about something else?" If you are walking up and down on a meditation path for four hours, but there is only mindful awareness for one minute during that four hours. You have only meditated for one minute.

Remember it's not how much meditation we do, it's the quality of that meditation that counts. If while you are walking the mind is wandering off elsewhere, then you're not meditating. You're not meditating in the sense that the Buddha used the word meditation, as *Bhavana* or mental development (AN, III, 125 – 127). It's the **quality** of mind rather than the **quantity** of meditation that one does that is important.

## Conclusion

In this discussion on walking meditation, I hope to have given you something that will extend your repertoire of meditation techniques. Walking meditation is something that you can use in your daily life when you are active, as well as when you are doing formal meditation. Walking meditation, can be another mode for developing the mind. Walking meditation gives work for the mind to do. If you have problems with drowsiness, don't just sit there nodding; get up and put the mind to work. This is *Kammatthna* — the fundamental work of the mind.

In the Forest Tradition whenever a meditation teacher goes to a monastery, among the first places he heads to are the monks' meditation paths, to see how many footprints are on them. And if those meditation paths are well worn, then that is considered a sign of a good monastery.

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May your walking path be well worn.

### *Abbreviations*

*AN Anguttara Nikaya*

*DN Digha Nikaya*

*It Itivuttaka*

*MN Majjhima Nikaya*

*SN Samyutta Nikaya*

*Vsm Visuddhimagga*

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