

Walking in Nature

“Walking in Nature” is a practice where we allow sensory input and ignore the conceptual overlay. Although it's a practice that is perhaps most useful when walking in Nature, it can literally be done anywhere. But doing it in Nature is easier in the beginning.

Let's say we're walking down a country road and we see trees, birds, the road, dust, the breeze in the trees, and clouds in the sky. Our tendency is to see all of that in our visual field and immediately tell ourselves a story about it. We tell ourselves: “Oh, what a beautiful day. Oh, there's a bird. It's a cardinal. I know what a cardinal is. I've seen them before. What else can I see that's more interesting?” And the dialogue goes on and on.

We reduce the enormous complexity of the visual field with its beauty and harmony into a radio announcer's play-by-play analysis of what we're seeing. Our direct, full color experience is reduced to a string of words that we tell ourselves in our head. We believe that the words are necessary, but the words will always be a poor shadow of the live experience.

All words are concepts. A concept – any concept – is never the reality. At best, it may refer to something real, but often, it doesn't even do that. Often when we conceptualize, we exclude much of what is happening and focus only on the part that we're interested in. When we conceptualize, we also tend to add things to the experience that weren't there in the first place based on our individual preferences and conditioning. And then, we label the experience and believe that the label *is* what was experienced.

For example, while walking down the same road, we momentarily focus on the bird. We label it a cardinal. We've seen cardinals before. They often come to the bird feeder on the back porch. So do racoons. Racoons are really a nuisance because they steal the bird food. Racoons are like miniature bears... etc. And, so our minds spin off on mental narratives unrelated to the dusty road we are walking down.

So, the practice is really walking down the same road and noticing the verbal stream, which is happening in our heads almost non-stop. Even while these commentary thoughts are happening, we can disregard them. If they occasionally take us for a ride, we can notice that too and come back to simple noticing. We can notice our tendency to label everything. We can notice that just because we correctly label a tree “an oak tree” doesn't mean that we have really seen that particular tree, its size, its relation to other trees, its health, its grandeur, or its scars from storms long past.

We can allow the mental noise to happen but resist its seductive quality and not allow it to take us for a ride. We don't have the ability to stop the mind from commenting but we do have the choice of whether to give any importance to the conceptualizing. Any importance that we give the commenting mind energizes the thought pattern. If we try to make it stop, we energize it. If we believe that it enhances our experience of reality, we also energize it. But, if we just let it be without trying to manage it one way or another, its intrusion into our actual experience will lessen over time.

Often, in spiritual circles, the thinking mind is made out to be the villain. It is not. The thinking mind is obviously useful and beautiful and essential in many practical areas of our everyday lives. So, we can give up the frustrating and pointless effort to try to make our minds stop thinking. The only thing that would want to do that is a thought. This leads to one thought fighting against another. Peace will not result.

We can notice that we are not in control of our mind. If we were, we could stop thinking anytime we chose; we could also avoid thinking about anything we didn't want to think about; and we could count to one thousand without losing track of our count. We can't do those things. If we are willing to acknowledge that we are not in control of everything that we think, we may become receptive to the inquiry, “I wonder if

they are even my thoughts?” If we begin to realize that thoughts *arise* into our conscious mind rather than *originating* in our conscious mind, we can begin to place less importance on our non-functional thoughts. By non-functional, I mean all the repetitive, petty, rationalizing, reactionary, justifying, self-limiting thoughts that we may experience on a daily basis – in other words, 95% of our mental activity.

When our non-functional thoughts begin to diminish in intensity due to our lack of opposing them or indulging in them, we find that there is more clarity, more energy and more creativity to engage with Life as it happens. It also widens our field of vision, so to speak. We become freer to choose what to focus on and also freer to step back and witness the entire scene.

So, we can be walking down the same road and not feel the necessity to label anything. We don't have to say, “Oh, that cloud looks like a giraffe,” or, “Oh, it's hotter than I'd like it to be today.” We don't have to take a position with regard to anything we encounter. We become free to enjoy whatever shows up. We don't need to add a layer onto Life to improve it. Our comparing, labeling and analysis doesn't add to the experience. It only locks us more deeply into our deeply entrenched mental patterns.

Any label reduces the grandeur of our visual field into a little conceptual box. Even to say “it's a beautiful day” reduces the enormity of the sky, the breeze in the trees, the clouds and the Sun. Without the labels we can experience what we see directly and much more intimately.

Of course, labels are essential when we communicate with others. When you go into the ice cream store, it is helpful to say, “I would like the strawberry ice cream,” while knowing that the label doesn't taste nearly as good as the ice cream itself. If the label was equivalent to the ice cream, you could eat the menu and be satisfied.

So far, I've been talking about the visual field, but clearly the same logic holds true for the auditory field as well. The auditory field is what we hear in our ears: birdsong, the breeze in the trees, etc. Again, we don't have to reduce the sound vibrations into a verbal description.

So, this “Walking in Nature” practice is being in the world without constantly reducing what we see and hear into a concept. We can allow the sensory input, as is. We can experience the sounds without interpretation. We can allow whatever befalls our visual field to be noticed without the commentary of conceptual thought.

Again, I am not saying that thought never has a place in our lives. Of course, it does. However, what we are talking about here is a practice that can reduce the random mental noise that has no benefit, and which can squander vast amounts of energy in useless activity.

This is the practice. Just allow sensory input. For example, we can feel the gravel road under our feet and the sweat on our brow. We can notice these sensations without reducing them into a sentence. We can be in the world and allow all the experiences to come in without judgment, preference, and labelling. We don't need to create the story about how, “I like this but not that,” or, “that reminds me of what happened back in 1982.”

We just take in the visual and auditory fields – as is.

The practice of “Walking in Nature” is effective because it's non-conceptual and gets us out of our thinking mind. The thinking mind is great for some things. It's a great tool. It's just not a very good master in terms of finding what ultimate reality is about.

This practice will bring us closer to a direct experience of reality. It will help reduce the dominance of our conceptualizing mind.

We also don't need to wait until we're out in nature; we can do this practice anytime we don't need our functional mind. It could be when we're taking the dog for a walk or walking across the parking lot or while we are eating lunch.

Noticing direct sensory input is a valuable practice to bring us closer to the direct experience of reality – something that our thinking mind will never reach or even understand.

This is the practice. It's simple. And it's another way we can approach the Divine.

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