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Walking Meditation: Being Present and Being Pilgrim on the Camino de Santiago

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Abstract: The Camino de Santiago has witnessed an unprecedented number of walkers in recent years. Traditionalists feel that the Camino is suffering from excess—too many visitors and too much strain on the infrastructure, accompanied by an ignorance of what it means to be an “authentic” pilgrim. Contemporary pilgrims often use ancillary services to transport their bags, approaching the Camino as an athletic event or a holiday excursion. For scholars and people of faith, these superficial attitudes to the ancient pilgrimage route are disturbing. How can serious pilgrims make peace with those who have neither the historical nor the religious background to understand the magnitude of their endeavor? Vietnamese Zen master and peace activist Thich Nhat Hahn offers us the practice of walking meditation as a means of being present. I believe that pilgrims can benefit from studying the principles of walking meditation as it is observed in the Buddhist tradition. Pilgrims of all faiths and backgrounds can make use of Thich Nhat Hahn’s practice to enhance their experience. Travelers who incorporate the custom of walking meditation may find common ground. Certainly, those who choose to do walking meditation while on pilgrimage will be more mindful of their journey.

Keywords: Santiago de Compostela; the Camino Francés; Thich Nhat Hahn; walking meditation; mindfulness; labyrinths; Ram Dass; Kevin Codd

In 2003 Father Kevin Codd, an American priest serving as rector-president at The American College of Louvain, Belgium, set out on a much anticipated pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. His 800 km route was the heavily traveled Camino Francés, starting in Saint Jean Pied-de-Port. Father Codd’s narrative touches on both the deeply religious and the physically painful aspects of his thirty-five day journey. He juxtaposes accounts of spiritual reflection and Christian community with graphic descriptions of how he cares for the blisters and other infirmities that result from strenuous hiking day after day. He completely loses his fatherly demeanor, however, when after weeks of hiking and a mere 100 km from Santiago, he begins to encounter the detested *sin mochilas*; that is, those walking without backpacks. These day trippers, in his mind, are pilgrim wannabes, and their very presence effectively disrupts Codd’s carefully cultivated pilgrimage experience. Father Codd’s account of his pilgrimage, *To the Field of Stars*, was published in 2008 and has served as a guide and a source of inspiration for a decade. The phenomenon of those walking *sin mochilas* that he observed has exploded in recent years, making the irritation that he experienced as uncomfortable and as persistent as the blisters. Father Codd’s own words describe this sort of unpleasant encounter best:

The first hour of the morning, the most precious one of any day, is made less so by a squawking family of pseudo-pilgrims who walk along at my pace so that I cannot escape their annoying company. They yak and yammer and laugh bawdily and generally disturb the peace without let-up. Only one or two of the bunch wears a *mochila*, which makes me suspicious of their authenticity as pilgrims. As we climb up the highway and round a bend, a white car, the despicable *coche de apoyo*, is waiting for them, ready to take even more off their backs . . . As they drop their minor-league loads . . . , I would like to be enough of a

Superman to tip their *coche de apoyo* over the bank of the road and have it tumble into the gully below, forcing them to walk as true pilgrims; lacking for the moment the superpowers required for the accomplishment of such a feat, I merely pass by silently and unnoticed and move far enough ahead of them to never have to encounter their big mouths and lazy butts again (Codd 2008, pp. 188–89).

If the presence of such careless and unaware travelers can push a Catholic priest to the brink of contemplating violence, what might be the impact on a pilgrim with far less spiritual training? While the reasons for undertaking the Camino de Santiago are as numerous as the pilgrims themselves, it is with mind to transformation that many follow the route of Saint James, even if that transformation is not conceived in specifically Catholic terms. In order to determine how best to alleviate the tension between those pilgrims seeking a transformative experience and those simply out for some hiking, it may be relevant to examine some of the contrasts between those two groups and then to seek a commonality between them. I have not included those biking the Camino or those traveling by car or bus in this reflection in order to focus on the tension that appears to be arising during encounters between walkers, both on the Camino itself and in the increasingly crowded *albergues* (hostels) where the walkers lay down their packs for the evening. My focus here will not be on the already much-discussed pilgrimage versus tourism, but rather on the act of walking itself. I will reflect on the *how* of walking, and in doing so, I hope to propose an attention to the process of placing one foot in front of the other that will be of benefit to both religious pilgrims and those who undertake the Camino for other reasons. The revered Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn has written several volumes on the practice of walking meditation as a means of cultivating mindfulness. His reflections on this practice are offered to us in a beautifully simple format that is easily put into practice. That walking is central to Thich Nhat Hahn's practice of Buddhism and cultivation of mindfulness is made evident in the title of the recent film on his teachings: *Walk with Me* (Francis and Pugh 2017). The opening scene of this film cultivates a feeling of calm presence as Thich Nhat Hahn leads a group on a slow walking meditation through some tranquil woods. The only sounds the spectator hears are birds chirping and the slow movement of footsteps across the terrain. The incorporation of this sort of contemplative practice associated with walking meditation as part of one's engagement with the Camino could prove to be valuable in helping to avoid negative encounters between pilgrims.

As a prelude to examining how walking meditation might soften interactions between pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago, it is instructive to make note of diverse representations of what it means to walk the Camino and the potential those representations have for generating negative interactions. The popularization of the Camino is attributable to a great extent to media portrayals of the experience, including the celebrated film *The Way* (Sheen and Estevez 2012), starring Martin Sheen. That film, fortunately, does not downplay the serious physicality of undertaking an 800 km journey on foot. Rather, the disservice is done by portrayals such as the one offered by Mario Batali and Gwyneth Paltrow in the television series *Spain: On the Road Again* (Pinsky 2009), where walking the Camino is shown to be a casual saunter with no gear or packs; instead, they stroll and chat unencumbered, never breaking a sweat and therefore never needing the water bottles they do not carry. At the end of the day, they are rewarded with an elegant, multi-course meal instead of the simple pilgrims' fare they might have shared with those staying in the *albergues*. We will soon see if the upcoming series on BBC Two, *The Pilgrimage*, is able to offer a more realistic portrayal of celebrities on the Camino. The three-part series will show a group of celebrities and some clergy on a 15 day walk, carrying their own packs and staying in traditional *albergues*. According to BBC religious editor Fatima Salaria, "The series will show how a group of well-known faces, taken out of their comfort zone, discover what their faith means to them as they walk in the footsteps of ancient pilgrims" (Kavanagh 2017). However realistic or "Reality TVesque" the BBC production turns out to be, it is almost certain to inspire even more people to undertake the pilgrimage, thereby exacerbating the problems of overcrowding and the ensuing tensions.

The explosion of tour operators offering supported walks on the Camino combined with the extensive literature about the pilgrimage have led to an impression that the Camino is easy to access

and navigate. I have encountered groups of adults and teens on such tours; they walk only the distance they want, carrying as much or as little as they choose, meeting up with their transport van or bus at several stops along the way so that they can choose to ride to the next destination if they are too tired. Even then, however, some travelers get in over their heads, and when it is discovered along the way that things are not quite so easy or not quite up to their expectations, people understandably become frustrated.

Even the uber-fit thru-hikers and those seeking to check off a “bucket list” adventure take issue with the Camino when their expectations are not met. Adventure writer Francis Tapon found the physical challenge of the Camino to be none too strenuous; in fact, he describes it as “flat, easy hiking nearly everywhere, with occasional gentle climbs/descents.” There were other challenges, however, that clearly got him out of sorts, as he describes in a website entry entitled “The Camino Sucks.” Although he describes himself as being a native speaker of Spanish, he is clearly put off by the scarcity of English speakers, writing, “Many non-Spanish speaking pilgrims were stunned and frustrated that despite attracting pilgrims from all over the world, the locals have made hardly any effort to learn the international language: English.” Tapon is clearly unaware that many locals are indeed bilingual, speaking their native languages of Gallego and Euskara as well as that important international language, Spanish, the official language of approximately twenty different countries. Among the additional reasons he lists for his judgement that the Camino is a substandard hike include the “cacophony of sounds” (like cars and trucks), the “monotonous scenery,” the “unfriendly commercialism,” and the distracting “amenities.” Of this latter item he writes, “With endless bars, restaurants, hotels, vending machines, tour groups, you’re hardly removed from the ‘real world.’ This defeats much of the purpose of living primitively in a search for a deeper meaning or understanding of life” (Tapon 2006). Tapon’s comments here show that he is completely out of touch with what a pilgrim might be seeking beyond the pure physical challenge in the wilderness. Having the opportunity to share and create community with other pilgrims across linguistic and cultural barriers is often cited as a treasured aspect of the Camino for spiritual and other pilgrims. These positive encounters with fellow pilgrims arise specifically thanks to the numerous “amenities” decried by Tapon, such as restaurants, inns, and bars.

Clearly, many adventure travelers have serious problems with the Camino. On a website called *The Trek*, dedicated primarily to thru-hikers on the Pacific Crest and Appalachian trails, an author who identifies himself by the name “Digger” takes particular issue with the customary afternoon siesta in Spain, so much so that he would like to see a significant shift in culture. In what is one of the most culturally unaware statements I have ever read, he explains:

For an outsider, siesta sounds like a cute cultural tradition, different from our pressurized American lives. In reality, it’s hindering economic growth and it’s bad for the Spanish worker. Typically, a pilgrims’ day begins around 7 a.m. and the walking finishes between 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. Just when the pilgrim (sic) finishes their walk, they may need to visit a pharmacy, an outfitter, or a bank. No can do! Those businesses close each day for four to five hours for siesta. This deprives the pilgrims of some supplies, and also costs these businesses an opportunity to extract crucial tourist money, at a time when they are most free to spend it. Siesta is bad for the Spanish worker because it lengthens the day and makes their meal times awkward. There is a constant struggle between tradition and viability in the economy of Western Europe (Digger 2016).

These relatively trivial complaints about the Camino and the lack of awareness about the culture of both the Camino itself and the areas through which the Camino passes could be alleviated by simply bringing some mindful awareness to the practice of walking as it unfolds in these spaces. First coming to international attention as an activist for peace and reconciliation between North and South when his homeland Vietnam was being ravaged by war, Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hahn is one of several important teachers to bring Eastern teachings to the West. Perhaps because of his experience with war, he draws direct connections between the act of walking and peace itself. In one of his many volumes

on the practice of walking meditation, he writes, “What is most important is to find peace and to share it with others. To have peace, you can begin by walking peacefully. Everything depends on your steps” (Nhat Hahn 1996, p. 5). As Thich Nhat Hahn’s teachings have been applied to issues as large as peace and reconciliation during wartime, they most certainly could prove to be valuable in helping pilgrims from divergent traditions find common ground.

Professor Chris Arthur offers an example of how we might begin to move beyond contemporary Western strife through the application of Thich Nhat Hahn’s teachings. He first establishes the act of walking as one of those unique attributes that define us as human. He writes, “Walking shares with birth, our first smile, first word, first passionate kiss, with our mating and dying, a sense of communion with the ancient and totemic, a feeling of participation in something primal, which holds the promise of meaning beyond the horizons of our own lonely individual existences” (Arthur 1994, p. 1). Shortly into his essay, however, Arthur’s memory of a specific instance of walking evokes something more ominous. He recalls a time on 12 June 1980, when with the intent of setting out on a hike in the Mourne Mountains located in the area of Ulster in Northern Ireland, he instead gets caught up in a processional march of the loyalist Orange Order. 12 July in Ulster is a major public holiday commemorating specific moments of Protestant hegemony. In addition to those in traditional garb, he notes the presence of “young men in paramilitary attire . . . beating out some synchronized aboriginal rhythm of hatred and defiance . . . ” (Arthur 1994, p. 4). A procession that in another context might be construed as festive or perhaps even a tourist attraction is, at that particular moment in time in Northern Ireland, a “deadly serious” demonstration. While attempting to reach his friend’s house so they can head off on their hike, Arthur gets caught in the procession despite his resistance and is forced to walk along with the marchers. As he tries to outpace the marchers in order to reach his friend’s home more quickly, a stern procession leader wielding a sword barks the order, “Keep in step!” These words and Arthur’s inability to extract himself from the march until he reached his destination, formed a memory with which he grappled for years as he sought to make meaning of it. He observes that, as disturbing as it may be, it is much easier for humans to allow ourselves to be led by “unreflective drumbeat values” rather than holding our steps in awareness and understanding where they are taking us.

Arthur posits walking mindfully as done in the Buddhist practice of walking meditation as an antidote to being pushed to march in step. He writes, “Marching together we have raised and felled empires, safeguarded freedoms, abused the innocent . . . Society prefers us to keep in step, to march according to the music of a particular religion, political ideal, or race. Tragedy is born when societies see each other as being threateningly out of step and take their own tunes and rhythms to be those which should command universal consent” (Arthur 1994, p. 5). Evoking Thich Nhat Hahn’s teachings as a means for countering the militaristic performance of marching, Arthur moves beyond the observation of society’s insistence to “keep in step” to propose walking together as a means of seeking peace, invoking the practice of walking meditation. He writes, “A monk whose experience gelled amidst the violence of Vietnam has much to say to those caught up in Northern Ireland’s littler tragedy. Even if the idea of walking together harmoniously seems quite unrealizable in practice, there is no reason not to make a beginning, or to believe that such beginnings may already be in place, however tentatively. It is not always possible to tell when a great journey has started” (Arthur 1994, p. 6). Arthur’s observations bring to mind here the saying attributed another great teacher and the founder of Taoism, Lao-Tzu: “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” Surely we can bring these lessons to our practice as pilgrims on the Camino: by taking a single step while being fully present in the moment, we may all learn to be more accepting and less judgmental of those with whom we share the Way.

Arthur Paul Boers, a minister and professor of pastoral theology, is another Western writer who draws inspiration from Thich Nhat Hahn and seeks to re-establish the practice of contemplative walking in Christianity. Citing Thich Nhat Hahn’s assertion that walking on earth is a parallel miracle to that of walking on water (Boers 2007, p. 146), Boers goes on to provide a comprehensive account of the role and importance, both metaphorically and literally, of feet and walking as mentioned in the Bible. Indeed, Boers understands Christian pilgrimage to be the manifestation of walking mindfully

within that faith tradition (Boers 2007, p. 152). He questions the frenetic pace of contemporary life, wondering if “we are out of step with the life that God longs for us to have” (Boers 2007, p. 150)? As he undertakes the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela and writes about the experience as a spiritual discipline, he stresses the physical, mental, and spiritual value of the act of walking itself. He describes meeting God on foot in the act of “prayer walking” and expresses his “joy of encountering God’s good earth so directly” (Boers 2007, p. 152).

Western teachers have a tradition of looking to the east and finding answers in the practice of walking. The quote “We’re all just walking each other home” is attributed to spiritual teacher and icon Ram Dass, author of *Be Here Now*. In a recent interview, Ram Dass was asked to shed light on this oft repeated saying. He explained, “In ‘walking each other home,’ I’m talking about how we as individuals—individual persons or individual countries with all the separation that we experience—through moving toward inner consciousness, can become one. That’s a shift in consciousness. If we can find a way to walk each other home, we could reach a point where there is no more conflict between egos and nations” (Crumm 2013). It is instructive to observe here that, like other teachers previously quoted, Ram Dass identifies the commonality in finding peace between individuals and forging peace between nations. What is necessary is to take the first step.

Another way of considering this purposeful, contemplative walking with a mind toward peace already lies within the Western tradition of the labyrinth, present in Christian practice since the early Middle Ages, as one can still observe in the cathedral in Chartres, France, as well as in the many turf labyrinths in England. In reference to the Chartres labyrinth, John James affirms that “the labyrinth portrays man’s path to God, not after death, but now, while here on earth” (James 1990, p. 87). Labyrinth walking is also found in the practice of Western medicine, as is made evident in the numerous meditation labyrinths found on hospital grounds across the United States. In my community, the Medical University of South Carolina has recently developed its own labyrinth “to give individuals a place to contemplate, relax and find peace” (Medical University of South Carolina Office of Health Promotion n.d.). The website proposes using the labyrinth to recover balance, quite the mind, deal with grief, and as a path to stress reduction and self-reflection. Perhaps installing temporary or permanent labyrinths in spots along the Camino would inspire pilgrims of all types to walk with awareness, and in doing so they might find a way to walk harmoniously with each other. Artist and labyrinth scholar Cindy Pavlinac explains how this might come about: “Each labyrinth walk begins with the first step across the threshold into the pathway, inviting a new beginning, an opportunity to discover fresh perspectives on one’s story. The practice of repeated labyrinth walking can build an environment in which to loosen habitual pathways and offer a safe arena in which to reroute undesired ruts into a better course, to rewrite episodes in one’s life, piecing together a more compassionate narrative” (Pavlinac 2017, p. 80). Seeking a “more compassionate narrative”—about ourselves as well as about our fellow pilgrims—is a laudable goal and one that we as pilgrims should strive to put into practice. Walking the labyrinth and walking meditation invite us to do just that.

Might we imagine that, if persuaded to walk mindfully either through the practice of walking meditation or by walking a labyrinth, adventure writer Francis Tapon could become more aware of the commonalities shared by pilgrims rather than the languages that separate them? Might the thru-hiker known as “Digger” come to embrace the practice of siesta as an important cultural tradition, recognizing it as one from which he too, perhaps, might benefit? Could Father Kevin Codd, so patient and loving at other moments, learn to accept the *sin mochilas* and wish them well? And could the *sin mochilas*, including Mario Batali and Gwyneth Paltrow, gain some curiosity about those pilgrims who insist on lugging everything they require on their backs for a journey of almost 800 km? Would this newfound curiosity spark conversations and help those who carry nothing to be more reflective, aware pilgrims? How might we undertake promoting the mindful practice of walking meditation on the Camino to foster peace, understanding, and respect? Everything seems to indicate that what matters most is taking that first step. Perhaps also, installing temporary and permanent labyrinths

along the Camino, especially in sites that tend to be crowded or where tensions may rise, would inspire pilgrims of all sorts to slow down and look inward.

The life and practice of Thich Nhat Hahn are synonymous with walking peacefully. The books he has authored bear such titles as *Peace is Every Step: the Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* and *Happiness: Essential Mindfulness Practices*. Inspiring people to seek peace and reconciliation since his days as a peace activist during the Vietnam War, his teachings seem both valuable and urgently needed given the strife and turmoil in contemporary society. A problem as small as that of irritated and disgruntled pilgrims could definitely be softened and perhaps resolved altogether if we were to put these teachings into practice. In offering instruction on how to walk, Thich Nhat Hahn writes, “Walk upright, with calm, dignity, and joy, as though you were an emperor. Place your foot on the Earth the way an emperor places his seal on a royal decree. A decree can bring happiness or misery. Your steps can do the same. If your steps are peaceful, the world will have peace. If you can make one peaceful step, then peace is possible.” So much power resides in each step we take, and so much possibility. It is up to each of us, then, to decide to walk mindfully and peacefully. By taking the time to turn inward and reflect, it is likely that we will be more inclined toward compassion when we once again turn outward to engage with others. By being aware and fully present, we will undoubtedly be better pilgrims.

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