Simple Steps to Meditation.

Walking along the Nine Creeks in the Misty Forest finds you in a truly magical collection of mountains, trees, creeks and running water. On this outing one walks the trails––winding and climbing; the creeks - murmuring and gurgling; the trees - high and low––at one with the poet Yu Yuelai who wrote these words during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). It is a place that has always been special for humans.

Walking the hills and tracks forces one to practise one of the main tenets of walking meditation – that of moving the feet. Buddhists are instructed to be mindful of four stages in each step: (i) lifting the foot; (ii) moving it forward; (iii) putting it down; and (iv) touching or pressing the foot on the ground.

And step by step, as I travelled these ways, I entered the meditative state of mind simply by putting one foot in front of the other, or as some practitioners suggest ‘stepping, stepping, stepping.’

Walking the meandering creeks and twisted paths, famous since the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279), one has to be aware of these actions because to put a foot wrong means a turned ankle or worse. By increasing our awareness of our bodies actions we also become increasingly aware of things outside of ourselves, objects we might trip over, other people we might walk into. We become more aware of these, and many of the other things outside of ourselves, than when we are just sitting––especially if we sit inside. These include the wind, the sun, the rain, and the sounds of nature and of humans and machines.

But as one finds the natural rhythm (and using a pair of trekking poles forces you into such a rhythm) you find that each and every footstep forms part of a natural mantra. And as the length of the walk progresses, it becomes easier to enter into the detached but aware state that walking meditation facilitates.

While walking long distances there will always be feelings associated with our bodies, from the niggling pain of a blister to the pleasant feeling of relaxation. There will also be feelings associated with the things we see and hear, and with all of the other sensory modalities that we experience––including those that are imagined.

In paying attention to feelings, the important thing is simply to notice them without either clinging to them or pushing them away. When we are unaware, it is very common for our minds to start grasping after experiences associated with pleasant feelings.

Many people say to me when I am out walking that I’ll “be able to have some thinking time––to sort things out,” but it always seems to me that when walking I actually have very little ‘thinking time.’ My mind becomes attuned to the mantra of walking, my eyes to the path ahead and my body to experiencing the sensations of physical activity. By experiencing our sensations, rather than thinking about them, we help to cut down on unproductive thinking and bring about more calmness.

Walking in places such as the Mystery Forest allows us to ‘be in the moment.’ That moment where we can fill our mind with the richness of the experience of walking, leaving less room for daydreaming and fantasy and becoming deeply aware of our present experience, which becomes far more fulfilling than any daydream.

This detached state then becomes an integral part of the ‘Art of Walking’. The Buddhist monk Thick Nhat Hanh tells us that “If we practise walking meditation, we walk just for walking, not to arrive. We have to be alive with each step, and if we are, each step brings real life back to us. The purpose is to be in the present moment and enjoy each step you make.”

Walking alone along these ancient byways is a pure exercise in walking meditation and each step becomes a prayer and each mile dharma.