

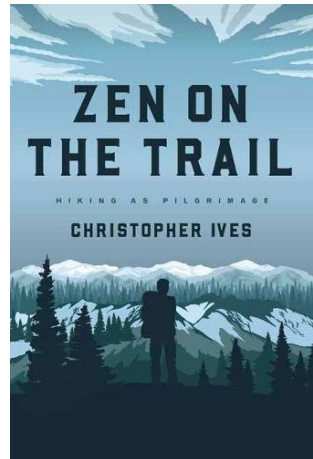
Being-Fully-Here Hiking

Christopher Ives, *Zen on the Trail: Hiking as Pilgrimage*, Wisdom Publications, Somerville MA, 2018, pb, 184pp

reviewed by Vidyādevī

Not I, not anyone else can travel that road for you.
You must travel it for yourself.
It is not far, it is within reach,
Perhaps you have been on it since you were born, and did not know.
Perhaps it is everywhere on water and on land.¹

A survey of the thousands of books on Buddhism available today would perhaps suggest that Dharma practice chiefly involves learning to sit quietly in a room, and the Buddha himself is said to have asserted that he was happier than a king because he could be perfectly happy sitting still for an entire week.² But the Buddha was a wanderer, and many of the men and women who became his disciples were also wanderers in search of the truth. ‘Dusty is the household life,’ they said, as they left home to live the holy life, ‘as pure as a polished shell’.³ As they wandered the forests of northern India, their way of life was guided by the Buddha, who gave them advice about how to overcome fear and live in harmony with the natural world, and a pattern of life evolved, including what one was to take on one’s wanderings (the monastic code specified eight requisites, including a razor and a water-strainer) and how food was to be acquired (one was to stand silently at the doors of householders and take what was offered). Provision was made too for gathering together every now and then to meditate and recite the teachings (the times determined by the phases of the moon). And not everyone kept wandering; some Dharmafarers lived and practised very happily together, like the Aniruddhas, who lived in harmony in their settled life ‘as milk and water blend’.⁴



The Buddha explained the benefits of walking meditation: ‘One becomes capable of journeys; one becomes capable of striving; one becomes healthy; what one has eaten, drunk, consumed, and tasted is properly digested; the concentration attained through walking meditation is long lasting’.⁵ In another text he is quoted as proposing a more altruistic motivation for wandering: ‘Go

ye now, O Bhikkhus, and wander, for the gain of the many, for the welfare of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, for the gain, and for the welfare of gods and men. Let not two of you go the same way ...'.⁶ And according to the *Dīgha Nikāya*'s account, at the very end of his life he spoke recommending pilgrimage to four places associated with that life: Lumbini, where he was born, Bodh Gaya, where he gained Enlightenment, Sarnath, where he taught the Dharma for the first time, and Kusinara, that very place, where he entered Parinirvana. 'And any who die while making the pilgrimage to these shrines with a devout heart will, at the breaking-up of the body after death, be reborn in a heavenly world'.⁷

Throughout Buddhist history we find new iterations of these traditions: the walking meditations of the forest monks of Sri Lanka and the Vietnamese tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh, the sacred pilgrimages of Tibetan Buddhists to Bodh Gaya and around Mount Kailash, the immense treks of Hsuan Tsang and others from China to India and back. Along that road, a distinction was made between pilgrim monks, whose intent was to visit the holy sites of India, and missionary monks, who would return to China bearing the teachings of the Dharma across the intervening mountains and deserts, as depicted in paintings in which the Dharma books are stacked in a neatly kitted out bamboo rucksack and the perspiring monk is often accompanied by a tiger protector. (The tigers are deeply symbolic, but we may be able to take them literally too. In the mid-seventeenth century an employee of the Dutch East India Company recorded in images and words sightings of 'many Mountebanks, who use several wild Beasts, especially Tygers, made tame by Degrees, on which, to the admiration of the Beholders, they sit and ride through many Cities and Villages, which walk along the Streets very softly, with a Branch in his Mouth, which holding wide open, is very fearful to look upon, besides his Tail, which he swings to and fro, yet hurts none').⁸

Thus the Buddhist tradition, like all traditions, engaged with the two ancient human impulses: to settle and to wander. Are we to unfold like a lotus or to tread the path like a pilgrim? Or are they really the same thing? What is the relationship between the path of the inner life and literally wandering in search of truth? Into the field of this enquiry comes *Zen on the Trail: Hiking as Pilgrimage*, by Christopher Ives. I was immediately intrigued by the title. It's unusual these days to find a book on this sort of subject that doesn't squeeze in 'mindfulness' somewhere. Pilgrimage has been an important part of my life and I've done a lot of hiking too, but I have thought of them as rather different things, so I was curious to explore the connections; and I know very little about Zen practice, so that would be new to me too.

As well as taking its place in the range of books about Buddhism, *Zen on the Trail* belongs to another genre. These days books about walking – American

writers Cheryl Strayed's *Wild* and Bill Bryson's *Walk in the Woods*, British writers Robert Macfarlane's *The Old Ways* and Raynor Winn's *The Salt Path* – are best-sellers. The appeal is understandable. Human beings have always wandered, for food and shelter, and something more. Fascinated by walkers and wanderers of all cultures, Bruce Chatwin (in *Songlines*, his book about the song-shaped paths of Australia) quotes a tramp he once treated to dinner in a smart restaurant (to the distress of respectable diners): 'It's like the tides was pulling you along the highway. I'm like the Arctic tern, guv'nor. That's a bird. A beautiful white bird what flies from the North Pole to the South Pole and back again'.⁹ But perhaps because we've become so very sedentary these days, that pull, that tide, though it has been described from the earliest days of Western culture, has surely never been stronger. Walk any of the camino paths that lead to Santiago de Compostela and you will hear the stories of people who have felt moved to make that journey, not very often by the rumour of a distant saint, as in medieval days, but usually prompted by a dramatic change in life precipitated by a bereavement, an illness, a separation, or by an unaccountable restlessness, or by a search for something unnameable. You can have the same conversation with a newcomer to any Dharma centre, and there the journey may indeed begin with guidance on how to sit on the meditation cushion. But how can we learn to walk with an attitude that will help us to find what we're seeking, whether or not we know what that is? This is where *Zen on the Trail* comes in.

It naturally takes the form of a journey: the author prepares to leave his home in Boston for a hiking trip in New Hampshire, then takes us with him on the trail, giving us as we walk with him all kinds of advice and exemplification to show us how to meet what we find, and then brings us back home. At one point we even sit by the path and learn a trailside meditation. Although the book is modest in size, it's as tightly packed with wisdom as any seasoned hiker's rucksack with gear. Liminality, ordeal, wilderness, ritual, mandalas, impermanence, mindful eating, conservation, imperturbability, mystery and awe, moving gracefully, stillness in moving, moving in stillness, empty sky mind, connecting with the sacred, interconnectedness, all of nature in a pigeon pecking crumbs, mountains as passing waves in the great ocean of the universe. Our excursion is made yet more vivid by wide-ranging quotations: 'Going out was really going in' (John Muir), 'Mountains belong to those who love them' (Dogen), 'Absolute attention is prayer' (Simone Weil), and so on, and so on. There's a pleasing emphasis on beauty: 'What people want from hiking and beauty is one thing.' One of the book's guiding spirits is Gary Snyder, whose idea of the ritualized hike is introduced. All kinds of Zen-inspired practices are suggested. I hadn't thought of doing this before, but I like the idea of bowing to one's home on leaving, to one's camping place, to whatever else inspires gratitude and respect, and I recognise the feeling. Similarities between hiking

and the tea ceremony are drawn out: respect, harmony, purity, tranquillity. Aesthetics and ethics are discussed, and *wu-wei* (effortless action), and the six perfections.

On my first reading of the book I sometimes felt that it was all ‘too much to ponder in the middle of the day’s exertions’, as the author admits he feels on attempting (while on the trail) to consider the koan of how to think about things *and* empty oneself of thought. But I realised that the answer to ‘overwhelm’ was the same as the one I try to remember when I’m out walking and feel that I’m missing the beauty around me (invariably because I’m preoccupied with something else): slow down and pay close attention. One of my favourite passages of the book is when the author takes a fancy to a place where he’s stopped for a rest and, although it’s only mid-afternoon, decides to make it his camping place for the night.

What Christopher Ives calls ‘be-fully-here hiking’, as distinct from ‘thru-hiking’, is one of the recurring themes of the book. Like him, I have noticed the tendency of long-distance hiking to become competitive and commercialized. Hikers/pilgrims vie with each other (subtly or blatantly) about speeds, distances, heaviness (or lightness) of rucksack, and they compete for accommodation. These days you can pay for your luggage to be taken to your next resting place, or shop for your hiking gear from a store that specializes in making everything as light as possible, with each item weighed to the last gram – all at a cost, of course. Pilgrimage has always been a seller’s market; Chaucer’s ‘pardoner’ rakes in a profit from the sale of spiritual goods while frankly admitting that he doesn’t care if the souls of his customers ‘go a-blackberrying’,¹⁰ and I suppose things have got ever more commercial since then. On the other hand, as Ives also notices, the collective life of the trail can be very generous: giving, which ‘provides an opportunity to let go’, often comes naturally to walkers. Ives urges us to ‘empty ourselves of drivenness’, making the shift from ‘ego-driven doing to spirit-filled being’. I’m sure he would appreciate another book I’ve loved reading recently, Nan Shepherd’s *The Living Mountain*, her exploration of what she calls ‘the essential nature’ of the Cairngorm mountains of Scotland, out of a desire to go into the mountains and not merely up them. As she observes, ‘Often the mountain gives itself most completely when I have no destination, when I reach nowhere in particular, but have gone out merely to be with the mountain as one visits a friend with no intention but to be with him’.¹¹ Written in the 1930s, the book was rediscovered recently; Robert Macfarlane writes in his introduction to the new edition, ‘For Shepherd there was a continual traffic between the outer landscapes of the world and the inner landscapes of the spirit. She knew that topography has long offered humans powerful allegories, keen ways of figuring ourselves to ourselves, strong means of shaping memories and giving form to thought. So it is that her book investigates the relationships that

exist between the material and the metaphorical “mountain”. She knew – as John Muir had written forty years earlier – that “going out ... was really going in”.¹²

Christopher Ives shows how a two-day walk like the one he describes can allow for truly ‘be-fully-here’ hiking, but (as I’m sure he would agree) longer walks have their moments too, the ethical perils of ‘thru-hiking’ notwithstanding. Among quite a few excursions of my own, I’m particularly thinking of the time twelve years ago when I set off from my home in England with two companions on a walk to Rome, very much in the spirit of Laurie Lee’s *As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning* rather than a pilgrimage of a religious sort. It took us three months to get to the Eternal City and I walked every step of the way, to my own astonishment as well, I’m sure, as that of anyone who knows me. (No, we didn’t walk round and round the ferry that took us across the English Channel – to answer a frequently asked question.) A long walk like that certainly has its ordeal aspect, though we were uneasily conscious of the luxury of knowing that we had put ourselves into that situation and could easily extricate ourselves from it – very different from the plight of the refugees of the world who are at this moment in a situation they almost certainly did not choose and from which they will be lucky to escape. Ives quotes Gary Snyder as observing that ‘you may never see home again’, and that’s clearly true in a metaphorical sense, (more on this later), but it has more bite for those without the mental or physical freedom to consider ‘Zen on the trail’. Medieval pilgrims used to make their wills and say their farewells because it was really quite likely that they would never return. Somewhere in Italy we saw a sign by a river which said that hundreds of pilgrims were washed away at that spot in the days before the building of the bridge we so easily crossed. And even if you got to your destination, you were still only halfway through the journey; you would have to walk all the way back, which pilgrims rarely do these days. (We didn’t – we ‘had to get back’.)

We took much less gear with us on our walk to Rome than the stuff Christopher Ives lists as his equipment for his two-day hike, although like him we were camping, (until we reached Switzerland, at which point we sent our tents home and entrusted ourselves to the fascinating experience of the hospitality of monasteries and convents on the ancient route), but I’m not boasting about our lighter loads out of thru-hiker competitiveness; it’s simply a reflection of the huge difference between walking the paths of Europe and braving the true wilderness of North America with its lurking danger of bears and wolves. Admittedly, and perhaps unusually, to the weight of our minimal kit we added three books each, (those were the days before iPads), our concession being to choose books that we could swap because we would all like to read them. I wish I’d been able to take a copy of *Zen on the Trail* – I know I

would have made more of the journey – but I did learn the hard way some of the things it teaches. For example, I completely concur that ‘hiking compels us to enter the raw physicality of what we’re doing’. It’s chastening to estimate, given my grand designs before departing of the deep reflections all those days on the way would allow, the ratio of time spent contemplating the great matter and time spent wondering how far it was and when we would next be stopping, and contemplating my sore feet, my hungry stomach, and so on, and so on. But I know very well that all of that, and coping with it, has been the lot, and the challenge, of pilgrims and wanderers in all times and all places.

And despite all of that, there’s something uniquely pleasing about walking through a whole landscape, about knowing you will be going as far as you can see, and far beyond. At times I really did feel that I was ‘being nature, not just walking through it’, as Christopher Ives says. Experience, even what would normally be very ordinary experience, acquires a vividness on such a journey. Even now, when I talk with my walking companions of those days, we remember so many tiny details more precisely and enjoyably than I can recall those of any other time of my life. Places you might not notice at all if you drove through them became special to us because they were themselves and we were there to see them – even if they were the umpteenth village with nowhere to get food, which I’m afraid was sometimes the case. But it would be churlish to say that and not mention the wonderful hospitality of the road, especially after we crossed the Alps and took to the old pilgrim route to Rome. One Sunday morning we were walking through an Italian village and had stopped to pass the time of day with a man who was understandably curious about our group, (it seemed that not many people ever passed that way), when a car screeched to a halt and the driver thrust into our hands a carrier bag containing (it transpired) a watermelon, a loaf of bread and a tub of ice cream; and then she rushed away. This was the most mysterious of many, many acts of kindness, the ancient hospitality to strangers found throughout the world. (We speculated that perhaps that morning’s sermon had enjoined generosity). We walked through famous places and anonymous ones and we ‘didn’t hurry the journey at all’ (as Cavafy advises in his wonderful poem ‘Ithaka’),¹³ but when we finally reached St Peter’s Square after all those hundreds of miles, as it wasn’t really a place of pilgrimage for us, we paused for a photograph and then celebrated in a pleasingly sensual way with ice cream – which we did not contemplate with newly enhanced mindfulness but ate with all speed as it melted rapidly on that blazing August day.

I’m in two minds about this, but perhaps *Zen on the Trail* could have said more about pilgrimage in the sense I understood it before I read the book: a special journey to the ‘very place where’ something in particular happened. Everyone surely has their own version of this. When I was 23 I drove on my

own across America, west to east. (I was delivering a car from San Francisco to Toronto and decided to go via Boston). I saw many wonders on the way, and some horrors too, and I revelled in the beauty of that vast country, but there was only one place I knew I must visit: Emily Dickinson's house in Amherst, Massachusetts – ironic, in view of that great poet's reluctance to leave home at all, but I had a moving sense of her inner journey as I stood in the room she rarely left, which I had crossed a continent to see. Another memorable experience was standing in the room where John Keats spent the last days of his life, just next to the Spanish Steps in Rome – the clatter of tourist footsteps outside and the hush of death within.

And, as the Buddha recommended, I have made the journey to the holy sites associated with his life. I remember Lumbini, where my sandals were stolen, and I can still feel the softness of the dust of the road as I walked back to my lodgings barefoot, feeling for once a bit like the wanderers of the Buddha's own time. (Though I've often had reason to be grateful for the great good fortune of the wonderfully comfortable footwear we can get these days, if we know how to choose it. One of the things I learned to my cost on the walk to Rome was that you need to know how to choose your boots. Even though it can also be true that, as one of Samuel Beckett's tramps in *Waiting For Godot* comments, 'There's a man all over for you, blaming on his boots the faults of his feet').¹⁴ I remember Kusinara, where I was moved to tears myself as I told our group the story of Ānanda, the Buddha's closest friend, who leant against the doorpost – perhaps the very one against which I stood – and wept at the passing of the Buddha, 'he who was so kind'.¹⁵ And then there was Bodh Gaya. In his memoirs Sangharakshita describes how, on his own first visit there, he was horrified by the commercial aspects of the place that dominated at that time, but his 'salvation' (as he says) was the arrival of Tibetan pilgrims who had walked all the way from Tibet. 'As they circumambulated the temple, as they prostrated themselves before the Diamond Throne, as they lit butter-lamps round the Bodhi-tree, they saw only the naked fact of the Buddha's Supreme Enlightenment, and through their eyes, even if not with my own, I could see it too'.¹⁶ My experience there wasn't quite like that, but I too remember how inspiring it was to sense the heart-responses of other pilgrims. My own response surprised me, though. I felt glad with all my heart to have the good fortune to be in 'that very place', but I was also quite sure that for me the place of practice was not there, special though the place was, but back home. In her insightful poem 'Going to Walden', Mary Oliver, resisting the pull of a pilgrimage to the famous site of Thoreau's cabin, says:

Going to Walden is not so easy a thing
As a green visit. It is the slow and difficult
Trick of living, and finding it where you are.¹⁷

For, as Mary Oliver observes in this poem, ‘How dull we grow from hurrying here and there!’ And as we know very well today, there are other reasons for refraining from hurrying here and there, or even taking our time on the journey. Out of care for our environment, we might do better to learn ‘pilgrimage at home’, as Christopher Ives calls it – our own version of what Emily Dickinson expresses when she writes ‘Some keep the Sabbath going to Church –/ I keep it, staying at home –’.¹⁸ If we are meditators, we could consider that every time we settle ourselves to sit in our place of meditation at home, we have made a journey, however literally short, of significance.

In the last section of *Zen on the Trail*, Ives opens up many more perspectives, in particular the imperative to be pilgrims in our own back yard – ‘the wilderness is right here’ – and the advice that we should ‘get to know our own bioregion’ (as Gary Snyder is quoted as saying). We ‘arrive where we started and know the place for the first time’.¹⁹ For, as Ives says, ‘the last act of pilgrimage is returning home and resuming your ordinary life’ and ‘experiencing the transformation of the journey’. To return to my thoughts at the beginning of this review, wandering and settling really do seem to be different dimensions of the same thing. There are micro-pilgrimages and macro-pilgrimages, as Ives observes, and ‘most people are too poor for grand journeys’. The planet cannot afford our grand journeys either. I am writing this in a year when millions of people have had to stay at home for months because of a pandemic while thousands are risking their lives, and some are dying, on the roads and the seas, as they flee war and famine in search of safety. More than ever it is clear that we can take neither our homes nor our freedom to wander for granted, and that we need to learn how to make the most of both when we can, and be generous with whatever we learn on the way, whether the way is inner, outer, or both. A book like this will help at a time when (in the UK and no doubt elsewhere) an effect of the pandemic lockdown is a renewed enthusiasm for walking, for the great outdoors, and even for one’s own back yard, as the circumstances allow more time to enjoy it than people usually have. For a time the only excursion from home allowed (apart from shopping for food) was to take one’s daily exercise, and one was not permitted to drive to a starting place, but had to start from home just like a pilgrim in the old days (though now bicycles are an option as well as travel on foot).

When we return from wherever our pilgrimage has taken us, we may be ‘no longer at ease ... in the old dispensation’.²⁰ ‘Home’ may no longer be quite the place we thought it was. But we may come to realise that we have found something along the way that we can give to others – the altruistic dimension of pilgrimage, one might call it. Sometimes this takes concrete form. The area where I live has a distinctive style of stone-work called the Herefordshire School of Romanesque Sculpture. These carvings, many of which can still be seen in

local churches and cathedrals, date from the twelfth century, a time when England was at war with itself but nonetheless local patrons of art were inspired to commission these lively works. But they were not invented here. If you walk the old ways of southern France and northern Spain you see very similar sculptures, because the ones in Herefordshire were commissioned by those who made the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela and returned to tell the tale with their notebooks of drawings. The benefits we bring back may not be so tangible. The final one of the ten ox-herding pictures of the Zen tradition depicts ‘entering the market place with bliss-bestowing hands’ – a reminder of living with kindness, ‘for the welfare of the many’, whether we are out on the trail or following it closer to home – the same thing, really. Christopher Ives’ parting advice is to ‘beware of quests for something in the past’, for ‘what we’re seeking, the sacred destination, our true home, has been inside us all along’.

By the end of *Zen on the Trail* I felt convinced (not that I really needed convincing) by the opening premise that ‘hiking itself can be a form of pilgrimage’, that any hike, or even a walk to the local shop, can be a pilgrimage, and it seems clear that conversely any pilgrimage, unattended to, can be just a hike. From a kaleidoscope of perspectives this book generously lavishes on the reader all kinds of ways we can learn to ‘turn an ordinary trip into a sacred journey’, and I am truly grateful to have read it.

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Zen on the Trail website: <https://zenonthetrail.com>

Wisdom Publications: <https://wisdomexperience.org/product/zen-trail/>

Sangharakshita Complete Works:

<https://www.windhorsepublications.com/sangharakshita-complete-works/>

¹ Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*, section 46.

² Sections 20–2 of the *Cūladukkhakkhandha Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya* 14 (i.94); see Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 1995, pp.188–9.

³ For example, *Raṭṭhapāla Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya* 82 (ii.56); see Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 1995, p.678.

⁴ See *Cūlagosīṅga Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya* 31 (i.207); Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Wisdom Publications, Boston 1995, pp.301–6.

- ⁵ *Cankama Sutta*, *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (iii.29); see Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2012, p.651.
- ⁶ See *Vinaya Pīṭaka* i.21 (*Mahāvagga* 1.11), in I. B. Horner (trans.), *The Book of the Discipline*, part 4, Pali Text Society, Oxford, 1996, p.28.
- ⁷ See the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* section 5.9, *Dīgha Nikāya* 16 (ii.143); M. Walshe (trans.), *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, Wisdom Publications, Boston 1995, p.264.
- ⁸ Heleanor Feltham, 'Encounter with a Tiger Traveling West', *Sino-Platonic Papers*, 231 (October 2012).
- ⁹ Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1987, p.276.
- ¹⁰ 'The Pardoner's Prologue' line 78, in Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*.
- ¹¹ Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, Canongate, Edinburgh, 2011, p.15.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p.xxi.
- ¹³ C.P. Cavafy, 'Ithaka', trans. Edmund Keeley.
- ¹⁴ Samuel Beckett, Act 1, *Waiting for Godot*, Faber and Faber, London, 1959, p.11.
- ¹⁵ See the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, *Dīgha Nikāya* 16 (ii.145); M. Walshe (trans.), *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 1995, p.265.
- ¹⁶ Sangharakshita, *The Rainbow Road from Tooting Broadway to Kalimpong*, in *Complete Works* vol. 20, pp.455–6.
- ¹⁷ Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1992, p.239.
- ¹⁸ Emily Dickinson, 'Some keep the Sabbath going to Church —', poem 324, *The Complete Poems*, Faber and Faber, London, 1982.
- ¹⁹ T.S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding', in *The Four Quartets*.
- ²⁰ T.S. Eliot, 'The Journey of the Magi'.