

From "Coming to our Senses: Healing ourselves + the world through mindfulness" by Jon Kabat-Zinn

## WALKING MEDITATIONS



Walking meditation is another door into the same room as sitting, lying down, or standing meditation. The spirit and orientation are the same, the scaffolding slightly different because we are moving. But ultimately, it is the same practice, only you are walking. But, and this is a big difference with regular walking, you are not going anywhere. Formal walking meditation is not about getting somewhere on foot. Instead, you are being with each step, fully here, where you actually are. You are not trying to get anywhere, even to the next step. There is no arriving, other than continually arriving in the present moment.

With walking, we have the opportunity to be in our bodies in a somewhat different way than when sitting or lying down. We can bring our attention to our feet and feel the contact of the foot with the floor or ground with every step, as if we were kissing the earth and the earth were kissing right back. We have already touched on the miracle of this, and the complete reciprocity of the touching. There are a myriad of sensations, proprioceptive and otherwise, one might include in the field of awareness.

Walking is a controlled falling forward, a process it took us a long time to master, and one that we often take completely for granted, forgetting just how wondrous and wonderful it is. So when the mind goes off, as it

will do in walking meditation just as with any other practice, we take note of where it has gone, of what is presently on our mind, and then gently escort it back to this moment, this breath, and this step in the same ways we have already touched upon.

Since you are not going anywhere, it is best to minimize opportunities for self-distraction by walking slowly back and forth in a lane, over and over again. The lane doesn't have to be long. Ten paces one way, ten paces the other way would be fine. In any event, it is not a sightseeing tour of your environment. You keep your eyes soft and the gaze out in front of you. You do not have to look at your feet. They mysteriously know where they are, and awareness can inhabit them and be in touch with every part of the step cycle moment by moment by moment as well as with the whole of the body walking and breathing.

Walking meditation can be practiced at any number of different speeds, and that gives it lots of applications in daily living. In fact, we can easily go from mindful walking to mindful running, a wonderful practice in its own right. There, of course, we abandon the lane, as we can certainly do for long-distance and faster formal walks. But when we introduce formal mindful walking in MBSR, it is done extremely slowly, to damp down on our impulse to move quickly, as well as to refine our intimacy with the sensory dimensions of the experience of walking and how they are connected with the whole of the body walking and with the breath, to say nothing about having a better sense of what is going on in the mind.

We begin by standing and bringing awareness to the body as a whole standing at one end of the lane you have chosen for yourself. The field of awareness can include the entire nowscape. At a certain point, again, quite mysterious, we become aware of an impulse in the mind to initiate the process of walking by lifting one foot. So we become aware of the lifting, but not before we have let the impulse to lift the foot register, even as we saw in the raisin-eating meditation, when the instructions included being aware of the impulse to swallow before actually committing to the swallowing.

Beginning with lifting just one heel, we then bring awareness to moving that foot and leg forward, and then to the placing of the foot on the ground, usually first with the heel. As the whole of this now forward foot



comes down on the floor or ground, we note the shifting of the weight from the back foot through to the forward foot, and then we note the lifting of the back foot, heel first and later the rest of it as the weight of the body comes fully onto the forward foot, and the cycle continues: moving, placing, shifting—lifting, moving, placing, shifting—lifting, moving, placing, shifting. . . .

For each aspect of the walking, we can be in touch with the full spectrum of sensations in the body associated with walking: the lifting of the heel of the back foot, the swing of the leg as it moves forward, the placing of the heel on the ground or floor, the shifting of the weight squarely onto the forward foot, and with the seamless integration of all these elements, the continuity of walking, if ever so slowly. We can coordinate these various aspects of the walking cycle with the breath, or simply observe how the breath moves as the body moves. Of course, that will depend in large measure on how slowly or quickly you are walking. In the slow walking, we take small steps. It is just regular walking, only slow. No need to exaggerate or stylize the movements of walking, even if the impulse arises. We are just talking about ordinary walking, only slower, only mindful.

One way to play with the breath if you would like to experiment with coordinating the breath and the step cycle is to breathe in as the back heel comes off, and then breathe out without moving anything else; we pause during this out-breath. Then, on the next in-breath, the back foot lifts completely and swings forward. On the out-breath, we bring the heel of that foot, now the forward foot, down to make contact. On the next in-breath, as the back heel comes up, the forward foot goes all the way down and the weight shifts onto that foot. On the out-breath, we pause again. On the next in-breath, we bring the back foot forward, and so we continue, moment by moment, breath by breath, and step by step. If that is too constrained, contrived, or taxing for you, you can just let the breath move as it will.

Then there are your hands. What to do with them? How about just being aware of them? You can let your arms dangle straight down, or you can hold your hands behind your back, or in front of you, either down low or

up nearer the chest. Let them find a way to be at rest, and at peace, and a part of the whole of the body, and of the experience of the body walking.

Keep in mind that all these instructions are merely scaffolding, and there are a number of different methods you could experiment with in walking meditation. Ultimately, as with all the other formal practices, there is no single right way, and you can experiment with what feels most effective for you in terms of being with walking. The practice is simply walking and knowing that you are walking, and knowing, discerning, the full spectrum within the body of what walking actually is. In other words, being here for the walking, in the walking, being with every step, and not getting out ahead of yourself.

As they like to say in the Zen tradition, when walking, just walk. That is a lot easier said than done, just as it is for sitting. For again, you will find, we all find, that the mind will do what it will and thus, the body could be walking with the mind totally preoccupied with something else. The challenge in mindful walking is to keep mind and body together in the present moment with just what is happening. What is happening, as in all moments, is extremely complex. But in walking, we attempt to keep the sensations associated with walking center stage in the field of awareness, and keep reestablishing it there (here) when it is diverted off someplace else. In this way, it is no different from any other mindfulness practice, and the field of awareness can be collimated or expanded to whatever degree one cares to, from noting the sensations in the feet from moment to moment, to choiceless awareness of the vast spaciousness of the nowscape, even as you are walking.

We haven't come to the formal instructions for it yet, but in quick preview, you can even practice lovingkindness while walking, invoking step by step the people you wish to include in the field of lovingkindness. With each step, you can invoke one person over and over again. Or you might invoke a sequence of people, one for each step, and then cycle through the sequence: may this person be happy; may that person be happy. May this person be free from harm; may that person be free from harm. You will get the idea after going over that chapter. This works best if you are walking slowly and mindfully, fully in your body.