

Guide to Walking Meditation

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Principles and Benefits

Meditation is a process of developing greater awareness so that we can make changes to our consciousness, be more deeply fulfilled and have a greater understanding of life.

Obviously there are some differences between walking meditation and that of sitting or lying down. For one thing we keep our eyes open ☺.

In walking meditation we try to keep our awareness involved with the experience of walking to make it our focus. This also implies that we are not withdrawing our attention from the outside world to the same extent as when our focus is more on breath control. Further, as we will be walking outside we will be aware of the wind, the sun, the sounds of nature and our external environment to a far greater extent than when we meditate inside.

One of the biggest differences is that many people find it easier to be more aware of their bodies whilst walking than when keeping still. It is thus an excellent way to develop our ability to take awareness into our ordinary lives. Once we have learned how to do walking meditation, each spell of walking – however short – can be used as a meditation practice, even in the noise and bustle of a big city.

The Practice

Standing in Tadasana – Mountain pose

We will start the Walking Meditation by not walking but standing in Tadasana.

Use these first few moments to check yourself out. Go through your whole body observing what it takes to stand still. Make yourself comfortable with small movements or adjustments to your posture. Relax your mind. Use this time as a transition between whatever you have been doing or thinking about and entering a period of meditation that is just for you.

Walking

We will start to walk at a steady walking pace. We are not going to be changing the way we walk, but simply being aware of it. This awareness will be at four levels called “the four foundations of mindfulness”. We use these to anchor our minds and prevent distraction:

1. Our physical sensations;
2. Our feelings;
3. Our mental and emotional states, and
4. Objects of consciousness.

There is a sort of logical sequence through these levels, but as we progress we will be working with all four together.

Physical sensations

As you walk focus your attention on your body, experience the sensations, not think about them:

- The contact your feet are making with the ground;
- Note how the muscles and joints of your legs feel. Focus on relaxing your muscles and getting your joints to work smoothly;
- Recognise your belly as your ‘centre’ rather than ‘down there’;
- Observe your breathing. This is where you get your strength from. You can also use it to control your heart beat to make sure your muscles get the oxygen they need. Try to breath deeply and slowly;
- Relax your shoulders and let them passively move with the rhythm of your walking and transmit this to your arms;
- Let your arms swing naturally with the rhythm of your walking
- Become aware of your neck, and the muscles that support your head. Any tension can lead to head aches and tiredness, so relax. Notice the angle of your head. As you relax the muscles in the back of your neck, your chin will slightly tuck in and your skull becomes the point of balance. Experiment with the angle of your head. You may notice that as you tuck your chin closer to your chest, your experience becomes darker, more emotional and inward focused. If you lift your chin and hold it in the air you might notice that your experience becomes lighter and you are more aware of the outside world;
- Finally, relax you jaw and eyes – let them become softly focused, gently looking ahead, not staring at anything or letting yourself be caught up in what is happening around you, just passively observing it.

Feelings

In the context of Walking Meditation, the word ‘feelings’ has a specialized meaning, it refers to a basic sense for example liking/disliking, comfort/discomfort or pleasure/displeasure. They can also be neutral. Feelings are gut level responses that often stand between sensations and emotions. In paying attention to feelings, the important thing is to simply notice them without clinging to them or pushing them away. Just let them drift by without following them or averting your gaze from them.

In practicing mindfulness, we are trying to be more aware of how our experience moves from sensation to feeling to emotion, so that we have more choice over what emotions we experience. Of course the aim of meditation is to cultivate positive emotions and to eradicate negative ones.

Thoughts and Emotions

As you walk along be aware of the emotions that you are experiencing. If our minds are busy, then our thoughts will not be connected to the meditation practice but thinking about all sorts of other things. When our minds are calm, our thoughts are more likely to be connected with the actual experience and with the meditation practice itself. Practicing mindfulness helps us to ‘be in the moment’. This is one of the reasons why we start with Tadasana as it acts as a doorway from our normal lives into the meditation practice. Our emotions can change during the practice and indeed change quite quickly. We may experience boredom or irritation initially. Then we may start to develop curiosity and interest as we begin to notice our bodies relaxing and then joy as the practice becomes more fulfilling. By being ‘in the moment’ we can fill our minds with the

richness of the experience of walking and leave less room for daydreaming and fantasy. Once we become more sensitized to the effects of our inner and outer actions, we gain the incredible power of realising that we have choice over our emotions and thoughts - freedom.

Objects of Consciousness

The fourth foundation of mindfulness relates to dharmas or objects of consciousness. This is analysing our thoughts and emotions to see if they are what we want to encourage or to discourage. This is important because the more we are able to do this, the more we can alter our experience.

Let us look at a simple example. You are in a Yoga class and the teacher points out that your shoulders are tense. You realise they are right and that your neck and other parts of your body are tense too. You relax your shoulders and neck, you feel more at ease and start to enjoy the class more. It was being able to recognise tension as tension and knowing that this was something you did not want that allowed you to make the change. Also implicit in this example is that you recognised the absence of the positive state of relaxation and then knew how to bring it about. As we practice we will get better at recognising and reducing undesired mental/emotional states and cultivating desired ones.

Balancing inner and outer experience

Our awareness of the world is obviously dependent upon our senses which are part of our bodies. We start with gaining a thorough 'grounding' of the awareness of our bodies, feelings and emotions before we move the focus to the outside world, otherwise we are likely to get distracted. We now move on to trying to balance our awareness of the inner and outer worlds.

With sufficient practice, the very distinction between inner and outer ceases to have much meaning and there is simply undifferentiated experience with no sense of self. We will then realise that we are indeed part of a larger whole not separate from it. This is a very fulfilling state to achieve. It feels like a huge burden has been laid down – the burden of self.

Ending the practice

When you begin to end the practice, come to a natural and comfortable stop, do not do it abruptly. Stand once again in Tadasana and observe your physical sensations, feelings and emotions. Compare the experience with the one at the start of the practice. Be sure to give yourself a few moments to assimilate the effects of the practice before moving on to another activity. If you immediately rush off to do something else the effect is jarring.

It is quite common for us to be far more sensitive and aware than before, try to take this into whatever you do next.

Learning the practice a little at a time

There is a lot to be aware of whilst practicing walking meditation. The more we do it, the greater awareness we will develop and the closer we will get to understanding and fulfilment.

"The journey of a thousand miles begins beneath one's feet"

Lao Tzu