

Walking Meditation Instructions

~ by *Tara Brach, PhD*

Meditation is a practice of presence that you can bring alive in all settings and activities. The formal training in walking meditation can be particularly valuable for helping you to cultivate an awareness of your embodied experience in each moment, allowing you to bring your body, heart, and mind together as you move through life.

Begin by choosing a place - an indoor or outside walking path about 10-30 paces long. Start by standing still and sensing the weight of your body at your feet, feeling your muscles supporting and stabilizing you. Your hands can be in whatever position is most comfortable - resting easily at your sides, folded gently in front of you, or at your back. In the stillness, remain relaxed and alert.

As you begin walking, start at a slower pace than usual, paying particular attention to the sensations in your feet and legs: heaviness, lightness, pressure, tingling, energy, even pain if it's present. For the walking practice, this play of sensations - rather than the breath or another anchor - is often the home base for our attention.

Be mindful of the sensations of lifting your feet and of placing them back down on the floor or earth. Sense each step fully as you walk in a relaxed and natural way to the end of your chosen path. When you arrive, stop and pause for a moment. Feel your whole body standing, allowing all your senses be awake, then slowly and mindfully – with intention - turn to face in the other direction. Before you begin walking, pause again to collect and center yourself. If it helps, you can even close your eyes during these standing pauses, often called “standing meditation.”

As you're walking, it's quite natural for your mind to wander. Whenever it does, you might mentally pause, perhaps noting inwardly the fact of thinking, or even where your mind went: planning, worrying, fantasizing, judging. Then, gently return your attention to the sensations of the next step. No matter how long you've spent lost in thought, you can always arrive right here, bringing presence and care to the moment-to-moment sensations of walking.

During the walking period you might alter your pace, seeking a speed that allows you to be most mindful of your experience. In this way, you'll move back and forth on your pathway, discovering that you are not really going anywhere, but are arriving again and again in the aliveness that is right here. As Thich Nhat Hanh teaches, “The miracle is not to walk on water. It is to walk on this earth with awareness.”

Common questions:

What do I do if a strong experience arises – the grip of fear, awe or wonder in natural beauty, a wave of grief? It's good to pause in these moments and acknowledge the experience that is calling your attention. Stand still and bring the wings of awareness - mindful presence and a gentle, kind heart - to whatever is here. You might mentally note with a soft whisper—fear, awe, sorrow. When the experience is no longer compelling, resume your walking practice with a clear, present attentiveness.

Can I follow my breath as I walk? What about listening to the sounds around me? Taking in the sights? Ultimately, the purpose of walking meditation is to calm the mind and cultivate an embodied awareness as you move. There are many styles or ways to practice. If coordinating the breath with your steps helps you to feel more collected, that's fine. If opening all your senses—including sounds, images, sensations throughout the body—allows you to be full present as you move, then that too is skillful.

Even if your primary anchor is sensations in the feet and legs, when other strong experiences arise—sounds, images, feelings—include them in mindfulness. If they are strong, allow them to be in the foreground until they are no longer compelling, then resume by again resting your attention on the sensations in the feet and legs.

My mind is so distracted, I can't keep my attention on sensations. What do I do? Just as with sitting meditation, we have strong conditioning to be lost in thought. Most importantly, please don't judge. If you've wandered and returned to bodily sensations 1,000 times, you will have engaged in a significant training of presence! Each time you return, try to notice the difference between being in thoughts, and being aware of the experience of walking.

That being said, there are ways to support quieting the mind. Some people find that mentally noting “lifting, placing” with their steps helps collect their attention. It's fine to experiment with this - with the breath, with opening all the senses. Discover whatever allows you to be most embodied, relaxed, and awake as you walk.

What if I want to go for a walk, rather than go back and forth on a short pathway? The purpose of walking a short pathway during formal practice is that it helps free you from the notion that you're trying to get somewhere else. But this doesn't mean you can't take this practice anywhere! When you go for a walk, begin with the intention to be awake in your senses rather than lost in thought. Choose an anchor you feel will best support you – sensations in the feet and legs, sensations through the whole body, sounds, or some combination. Then, when the mind wanders, gently come back again and again to the world of your senses. Enjoy!

www.tarabrach.com/