

Instructions for Walking Meditation

by Gil Fronsdal, adapted from a talk on 12-01-03

Most people in the West associate meditation with sitting quietly. But traditional Buddhist teachings identify four meditation postures: sitting, walking, standing and lying down. All four are valid means of cultivating a calm and clear mindfulness of the present moment. The most common meditation posture after sitting is walking. In meditation centers and monasteries, indoor halls and outdoor paths are often built for walking meditation. On meditation retreats, regular walking meditation is an integral part of the schedule. In practice outside of retreats, some people will include walking as part of their daily meditation practice—for example, ten or twenty minutes of walking prior to sitting, or walking meditation instead of sitting.

Walking meditation brings a number of benefits in addition to the cultivation of mindfulness. It can be a helpful way of building concentration, perhaps in support of sitting practice. When we are tired or sluggish, walking can be invigorating. The sensations of walking can be more compelling than the more subtle sensations of breathing while sitting. Walking can be quite helpful after a meal, upon waking from sleep, or after a long period of sitting meditation. At times of strong emotions or stress, walking meditation may be more relaxing than sitting. An added benefit is that, when done for extended times, walking meditation can build strength and stamina.

People have a variety of attitudes toward walking meditation. Some take to it easily and find it a delight. For many others, an appreciation of this form of meditation takes some time; it is an “acquired taste.” Yet others see its benefits and do walking meditation even though they don’t have much taste for it.

To do formal walking meditation, find a pathway about 30 to 40 feet long, and simply walk back and forth. When you come to the end of your path, come to a full stop, turn around, stop again, and then start again. Keep your eyes cast down without looking at anything in particular. Some people find it useful to keep the eyelids half closed.

We stress walking back and forth on a single path instead of wandering about because otherwise part of the mind would have to negotiate the path. A certain mental effort is required to, say, avoid a chair or step over a rock. When you walk back and forth, pretty soon you know the route and the problem-solving part of the mind can be put to rest.

Walking in a circle is a technique that is sometimes used, but the disadvantage is that the continuity of a circle can conceal a wandering mind. Walking back and forth, the little interruption when you stop at the end of your path can help to catch your attention if it has wandered.

As you walk back and forth, find a pace that gives you a sense of ease. I generally advise walking more slowly than normal, but the pace can vary. Fast walking may bring a greater sense of ease when you are agitated. Or fast walking might be appropriate when you are sleepy. When the mind is calm and alert, slow walking may feel more natural. Your speed might change during a period of walking meditation. See if you can sense the pace that keeps you most intimate with and attentive to the physical experience of walking.

After you’ve found a pace of ease, let your attention settle into the body. I

sometimes find it restful to think of letting my body take me for a walk.

Once you feel connected to the body, let your attention settle into your feet and lower legs. In sitting meditation, it is common to use the alternating sensations of breathing in and out as an “anchor” keeping us in the present. In walking meditation, the focus is on the alternating stepping of the feet.

With your attention in the legs and feet, feel the sensations of each step. Feel the legs and feet tense as you lift the leg. Feel the movement of the leg as it swings through the air. Feel the contact of the foot with the ground. There is no “right” experience. Just see how the experience feels to you. Whenever you notice that the mind has wandered, bring it back to the sensations of the feet walking. Getting a sense of the rhythm of the steps may help maintain a continuity of awareness.

As an aid to staying present, you can use a quiet mental label for your steps as you walk. The label might be “stepping, stepping” or “left, right.” Labeling occupies the thinking mind with a rudimentary form of thought, so the mind is less likely to wander off. The labeling also points the mind towards what you want to observe. Noting “stepping” helps you to notice the feet. If after a while you notice that you are saying “right” for the left foot and “left” for the right foot, you know that your attention has wandered.

When walking more slowly, you might try breaking each step into phases and using the traditional labels “lifting, placing.” For very slow walking, you can use the labels “lifting, moving, placing.”

Try to dedicate your attention to the sensations of walking and let go of everything else. If powerful emotions or thoughts arise and call your attention away from the sensations of walking, it is often helpful to stop walking and attend to them. When they are no longer compelling, you can return to the walking meditation. You also might find that something beautiful or interesting catches your eye while walking. If you can’t let go of it, stop walking and do “looking” meditation. Continue walking when you have finished looking.

Some people find that their minds are more active or distractible during walking than during sitting meditation. This may be because walking is more active and the eyes are open. If so, don’t be discouraged and don’t think that walking is thus less useful. It may in fact be more useful to learn to practice with your more everyday mind.

You can train your mind to be present any time you walk. Some people choose specific activities in their daily routines to practice walking meditation, such as walking down a hallway at home or at work, or from their car to their place of work.

In our daily lives, we spend more time walking than sitting quietly with our eyes closed. Walking meditation can serve as a powerful bridge between meditation practice and daily life, helping us be more present, mindful and concentrated in ordinary activities. It can reconnect us to a simplicity of being and the wakefulness that comes from it.