

Walking Meditation Instructions

Walking meditation is a contemplative practice where close attention is paid to the action of walking. It is not thinking or contemplating while walking (which is also delightful), but being mindful of the muscles of the body, the placement of the feet, balance, and motion. Walking meditation has a long tradition in Buddhism and can also be practiced while walking a labyrinth.

Steven Smith, the guiding teacher of the Hawai'i Insight Meditation Center, has provided us with this walking meditation instruction.

Walking Meditation Practice

In walking meditation, we become aware of the movement of each step. It is a way of using a natural part of life to increase mindfulness. Once you learn the practice, you can do it almost anywhere. It helps us feel fully present on the earth.

Find a place where you can walk back and forth, about ten to twenty steps in length. Keep the hands stationary, either behind the back, at the sides, or in front.

Feel the sensations of standing. Be aware of contact with the ground, of pressure and tension. Feel the entire energy field of the body, how it is all participating in this standing. Feel the hands hanging down...the shoulders weighted...the lower back, the pelvis...each having its own part in keeping the balance of the standing position.

Walking Meditation Instructions

Now bring your attention to the lower part of the body, from the hips downward, the primary foundation of standing. Staying aware, very slowly shift your weight from the left and back of your body to the right, noticing as you do how the sensations change as your balance shifts. Now hold your weight on the left for a moment, aware of the particular sensations in the leg... hips, thighs, legs, knees, calves, feet, toes, not particularly noticing or identifying those parts of the body, but letting the awareness fill the legs. Feel hardness, tension, tightness, heat, vibration, toughness, stiffness, whatever is there.

Now, keeping your weight on the left side, bring your awareness to the right and feel the relative lightness, emptiness, subtler sensations on the right leg. Now, with your awareness still on the right leg, slowly shift your weight to the right side. Let the awareness seep in right down to the bone, sensing the variations of hardness and softness, toughness, and fluidity, pressure, vibration, weight.

Now bring your awareness to the left side again, and move as if you are very slowly pouring water from a full vessel into an empty one. Notice all the changes as you shift your weight to the left side. With your eyes open just enough to hold your balance, very slowly peel your right foot off the ground and move it forward and place it on the ground. With your awareness on the right, shift your weight, bring awareness to the left, feel from the hips and buttocks down the sides, the whole range of sensations. Continue stepping slowly, keeping your awareness on the sensations. When you get to the end of the path, pause briefly and turn around. Center yourself, and be aware of the first step as you begin again.

Walking Meditation Instructions

You can do the walking meditation at different paces: brisk, normal, and very slow and meticulous. The idea is not to walk slowly; the idea is to move mindfully. As your mind begins to quiet, you will see how we notice more when we move slowly. More becomes clear, we get to feel the inter-relationship of mind and body.

If you like labeling, you can say to yourself "walking/walking" or "step/step," or "right/left." Not using the labeling as a cadence that becomes rote, but using it to encourage the awareness of the sensations of walking.

After some time, you can slow down a bit and actually feel more or less two sections of walking, the lift swing and the placing. So the label might be "lift" as you lift and swing, and then "place." It is a little slower, but not so slow that you lose your balance. Lifting , placing, stop. Feel the stopping, feel the turning. Lift and place, it is very simple, you are really just being with walking.

You are being really detailed, you are not assessing, you are not evaluating. It is a bare awareness, feeling the flow of sensations. When you lift, move, place, notice the shift of weight, the heel peeling off the toe, even the ground. Or you might notice the knee bending, the calf tensing, or the thigh being taut...sometimes you may notice the whole leg simultaneously, another time you might focus on tingling in the toe. Lifting, moving, placing.

Holding your visual field to a minimum--6,8,9 feet--is helpful for a period of time. Then, when you feel like you just can't take it anymore, open up your field of vision, look around, and just be aware of seeing and hearing for a while. It is important to keep a lightness of being.

Walking Meditation Instructions

If you feel flooded with thoughts, just stop for a moment and be aware of thoughts. Let the flood of thoughts come and go and then go back to the walking. You begin to see that nothing is a distraction, as long as you recognize what is there.

Think of it like this... you are starting off on a trek, and you just landed in Katmandu, You are going up to Mustang Valley...you are going to trek up one of these mountains, and there is the goal of reaching the top, there's the desire to get there, and then there's the realization that there is a whole process of getting there, and, along the way, more and more, there is the realization that the process is the goal. At first, you don't have your walking body...you have been busy and confined, muscles aren't loose, bones are a bit stiff...it takes a while for there to be a rhythm between mind and body, to get into that rhythm, to be carried by that rhythm, so that the experience becomes being carried by the mountain, and then the second winds come...and the body just feels in flow, it feels in harmony, it feels in sync with the mountain itself and the movements up and down.

It is the same way in meditation--first it's a stretch, and you feel a resistance, the push, the upward climb....but you can just take your time, keep learning how to settle back, lean back, and tune in to the process, until more and more, you feel carried by it itself, and it becomes restful.