

Being and Body - Mindful Walking



Why walk Mindfully?

Modern life tends to be fast, and for many, mostly indoors. Walking mindfully allows us to connect with and receive the richness of the world around us, and grounds us in the rhythm of organic time: day and night, seasons and tides. It takes time to walk, one foot after the other. The steady rhythm of our walking strengthens mindfulness naturally, and reminds our nervous system of a more patient, steadier way of life.

Most of the time walking is utilitarian: we go from point A to B. Our mind is focused on our destination, what we

aim to do when we get there, or our mind is on other concerns. Even when out for a stroll in the park or nature, we can find our attention captured by thoughts, engrossed in conversation, or lost in planning. How often do we miss hearing the birdsong, or seeing a tree in bloom, because we are absorbed in something else?

A Taste for Walking

Most of us learn how to walk in the first year or two of life. Yet once the muscles and proprioceptive system learn how to do this peculiar trick of moving as an upright biped, walking becomes a largely unconscious process. In a certain sense, to walk mindfully is to relearn how to walk: how to move the body through space in full awareness.

The key to mindful walking is allowing the attention to rest on the sensations and coordinated rhythm of walking. In the beginning, it's helpful to practice mindful walking in a structured way. (See Instructions overleaf.)

It can take time to develop a taste for the simple pleasure of mindful walking. Yet once we discover how to walk mindfully, it can become a great support for living, allowing us to set aside the thoughts, concerns and dramas of life. Instead, we can relax into the easy, rhythmic movement of limbs and torso wherever we go.

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Instructions for Mindful Walking

Here are some of the basics to get started.

- 1 Choose a flat, open path of 10-20 paces. Stand still, taking a few moments to feel your body. Can you relax into the simplicity of standing? Nothing to do, nowhere to go. Get a feel for this kind of natural, easy presence. Breath.
- 2 Walk at a pace that is slower than normal; choose a pace that allows you to feel the direct sensations of your feet and legs moving. Make sure it's comfortable.
- 3 Feel the changing sensations in your feet as you walk. With each step, feel the steady contact with the earth or ground.
- 4 Keep your attention mostly inward, without looking around too much. When you notice your mind engaged in thoughts or stories, allow it to return to the sensations of walking.
- 5 When you reach the end of your walking path, stop and stand still again. Take a few moments to feel the body standing neutrally.
- 6 When you're ready to turn around, include the movements of turning in your awareness. Take another break to stand before beginning to walk in the other direction.
- 7 Try this for a period of 10-15 minutes, increasing the time as you like.

Refinements

As you practice, try labelling, or using mental noting to help your attention stay connected with the sensations of walking. You might try using just one word per stride, like "stepping" or "right" then "left." If your pace is slower, you could break each step down into two or more parts, "lifting, moving, placing."

You can also experiment with varying your pace:

- 1 Walk slowly or quickly, depending on how you feel and what helps you stay present.
- 2 When tired or groggy, faster walking can help bring energy and alertness.
- 3 When agitated or overstimulated, a steady, even pace may settle and soothe.

Finally, vary where you place your attention. At first, place your attention wherever it's easiest to feel the sensations of walking. The soles of the feet are the most common place to begin. Then, try feeling the changing sensations in each leg and your lower body as you move. Finally, you might explore the sensations of the whole body as you walk. Connect with the syncopated rhythm between leg, hip, shoulder and arm as the body counter-balances its weight.

As you become more familiar with staying aware of the body moving, you can practice this informally during your day whenever you are walking.