



## Walking Practice

*Including for  
differently abled bodies*

We have been walking since a year or so after we were born. But, how often do we really experience walking? Moving our bodies with consciousness?

Here, I'll offer a couple ways to approach walking. These can be a way to focus the mind, to connect to the earth, to our breath, to the world. You can practice mindfulness in public without anyone knowing. If you are in a wheelchair, unsteady on your feet, paraplegic or have limited sensation due to chemo therapy or other medical conditions, modify this practice liberally as suits you. *The essence:* to bring awareness to moving your body in the world. Toward the end, I'll write about an alternate seated walking practice.

Here are two common approaches to walking practice. Try them out. See how each feels different. You can do conscious walking inside or outside. Outside can be a feast for the senses (seeing light, smelling smells, hearing sounds, feeling the sensation of wind, rain, sun on our skin).

When you first explore this practice, try a quiet place where you won't be disturbed; it might be those 3 feet in your bathroom. Stand still for a minute. Take a bit of a twist to look back over your right shoulder, really moving all the way from the hips. And then over the left shoulder. Stand tall like a tree, like a mountain. You can choose what to do with your arms: allow them to hang loosely at your sides, fold them behind your back, or hold them one on top of the other over your belly. Notice your body. Take a minute to feel the sensations. Simply notice, honor them, allow them to be there, and include awareness of the breath. Your gaze can rest softly downcast on the ground a few feet in front of you.

Slowly, shift weight into one side of the body, feeling long through the spine and the crown of the head, and rooted down through the *weighted* foot. The *empty* foot is lifted as we breathe in, and as we breathe out, we place the foot. Inhale, lifting. Exhale, placing. Inhale, lifting. Exhale, placing. Over and over. You can set out an area for this kind of walking; the edges of a room, those 3' in the bathroom I mentioned. Or pick some landmarks if walking outside. Make sure you've chosen a place where you feel safe.

You could set a timer and simply allow yourself to experience walking until the timer goes off. You could focus attention on a particular aspect of walking to focus your mind as it cartwheels all over the place. Trust me, it will.

Focus options:

- the soles of the feet
- the texture of the ground
- the movement in your joints
- the sensation of your spine
- sensations on the skin
- experience of the breath

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This is enough; a simple way to increase awareness of something you do everyday. Some people enjoy adding words in their mind or a sentiment as encouraged by Thich Nhat Han, Breathing in “I have arrived”; Breathing out “I am home.” Breathing in “In the here”; Breathing out “In the now.”



In a second approach to walking, begin in the same way as above, with awareness and attention in the body. Then set out a stretch of about 10-30 paces. Walking can be slow to moderate pace, natural. Simply walk the path you have laid out, aware you are walking, and then pause. **Really pause.** Allow your eyes to rest for a second on some object. And after a reasonable pause, turn around and return in the opposite direction.

Continue to walk back and forth for 5-30 minutes. Experiment with pace and distance. You can refer back to the prompts noted above (sensation of soles of the feet, joints etc.) to focus your mind on different aspects of walking.

Walking with intention and awareness can feel a bit awkward in the beginning. It can feel a little like a being zombie or a robot. Over time, a grace and ease can come, as if dancing with every step. Once you are more familiar and comfortable with the practice, you can do it anywhere: to cross from the fridge to the sink in your kitchen, from one room in your home to another, those 3 feet in the bathroom, across the street.



Years ago, I was conducting a day long retreat out at Monroe Corrections complex. One of the men had been crushed by a truck early in life, walked with a limp and suffered chronic pain. He asked about alternatives as we interspersed walking periods with sitting all day. I asked him to try sitting on a chair, alleviating the pressure on his body, and walking in air, lifting one foot with an inhale, placing the foot with an exhale. With every period of walking, he sat and walked in air, lifting one foot, placing the foot. Lifting the other foot, placing the foot. At the end of the day, he approached me, his eyes tearing up at the corners, “Thank YOU! Today,” he said, “For the first time in 30 years, today I walked without pain!”

However you move in the world, adapt this practice as suits you with an emphasis on intimately experiencing your body’s movement. Explore a fresh, vital learning to walk or move all over again.

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