

Walking Meditation

In his instructions for mindfulness, delineated in the Satipatthana Sutta (MN 10), the Buddha begins by explaining that, as we set out to develop the skill of mindfulness, we should find a quiet, secluded place to practice. Then he gives us the instructions for mindfulness of breathing, for cultivating an easeful breath and an easeful, pleasurable abiding in the body.

Then, in the next sets of instructions, the Buddha explains that the meditator, developing his skill, continues to practice this mindfulness in all his postures: walking, standing, sitting, lying down. He continues to be mindful of breath and body in all his activities, all the situations of his daily life.

In practicing walking meditation, we learn to maintain our mindfulness of breath and body. We learn to maintain the qualities of jhana: ease and pleasure.

Walking meditation is a training method for being mindful of the breath and the body within the context of our lives. On silent retreats, students practice walking meditation in an effort to help build concentration – walking meditation also offers a much-needed respite for the body between periods of sitting meditation. But outside the retreat setting, walking meditation serves primarily to prepare us for being connected to the breath and the qualities of jhana as we engage in the affairs of our lives, our work, relationships, all the endeavors of our householder lives.

The style for walking meditation, which we'll describe here, is designed to help us maintain mindfulness of the breath and body in our daily lives.

In this formal training method, we find a reasonably quiet environment – it can be anywhere in our living space – some place where we'll be able to practice in an undistracted

manner for a few minutes. We decide on a short path, a lane, on which we'll walk – it's suggested the lane be 15 – 20 steps in length, but it's certainly okay if we can't find a path of that length in our living quarters; even if we're able to walk back and forth for a only few steps, the practice will be beneficial in preparing us for being mindful as we go out into the world.

We choose a lane – it should be a straight, or relatively straight track – and we walk back and forth in that lane. In fact, in the suttas the practice is sometimes referred to as “back and forth walking.”

One of the advantages of back and forth walking is that we don't have to think about where we're going; that kind of thinking is taken out of the equation. Again, it's a training form.

Walking back and forth, we practice mindfulness of breathing. We make an effort to keep the mind on the breath. It's generally suggested, in practicing walking meditation, that we focus on the breath at a spot somewhere in the middle of the body, perhaps in the area of the abdomen. (Of course, we should always put our focus on a place where the breath is comfortable.) By keeping the mind on the breath in the middle section of the body, we establish a center in the body. We establish a center of gravity. We're more able to remain grounded, connected to the earth.

Many practitioners find it challenging, when practicing walking meditation, to keep their attention on the breath in the abdomen or somewhere else in the midsection. They find it more difficult, for instance, than trying to keep the focus on the nostrils. But with practice, most people find they're able to be mindful of the breath in the middle of the body. Their focus might not be quite as precise as it is in sitting meditation, but they're able to maintain an awareness of the breath. The credo, “good enough,” is useful to adopt in working with the breath when we're not on the “meditation cushion.”

In any event, it's always important to remember that in practicing the dharma, we don't choose to follow a particular course of action because it's the "easiest" thing to do. That's not the criteria that guides our decisions; instead, we decide what to do based on what will lead us to true happiness.

In many ways, the practice of formal walking meditation is similar to the practice of formal sitting meditation.

It's important, in walking meditation, to see to it that the attitude in the mind is skillful, informed by compassion, lovingkindness, appreciation. As we walk back and forth, we notice what the mind is like. We remain connected to an intention to practice wholeheartedly. We keep the mind bright.

Walking, we practice directed thought. We use internal verbal fabrication to direct our attention to the breath, to keep it there. We use directed thought throughout the walking meditation, in an effort to keep the mind on the spot where we're feeling the breath. We keep reminding ourselves to stay there. We remember the breath.

In practicing walking meditation in this style, we walk back and forth in a natural fashion. Which is to say, we walk the way we'd walk if we were in the world, moving from place to place, going through our daily routines. After all, our purpose in walking meditation is to train ourselves to be mindful, present, at ease, when we're in the world. We can hold our hands at our sides, or in front of us, or behind us. We can even put them in our pockets. We keep our eyes open. And we walk as if we were walking along the sidewalk. Having said that, we want make an effort to walk in an easeful, unfettered manner. Perhaps we could say, we want to walk, in

walking meditation, the way we'd like to walk, when we're in the world, when we're walking along the sidewalk.

In walking meditation, we generally don't practice the step of "evaluation" with the same precision that we practice it in sitting meditation. In walking meditation, and in the world, our objective isn't so much to "cultivate" an easeful, pleasurable breath, but rather to "maintain" the qualities of ease and pleasure that we've cultivated in our sitting practice.

Accordingly, our capacity to have an easeful breath when we're in "all postures" will be dependent on the degree to which we've developed an easeful, pleasurable breath in formal sitting meditation practice.

In walking meditation, in maintaining the easeful breath, the dharma student attempts to "call up" the easeful, pleasurable breath. She attempts to connect with the qualities of ease, pleasure, tranquility that she's developed, over time, in her breath meditation practice. In engaging in that process, as she walks, she might ask: "How can I breathe in a way that's most comfortable, most easeful?" or "What does the breath feel like when it's easeful, pleasurable?"

The breath may not feel as easeful as it's felt in sitting meditation, but the skilled meditator, practicing walking meditation, gradually learns to find a quality of ease in her breath.

In the same fashion, the dharma student, as she's walking, learns to enlarge her awareness, let her mindfulness encompass her entire body. She learns to call up the quality of easeful breath energy, moving, flowing, suffusing her body. As she hones her skill in walking meditation, she learns to maintain a pleasant abiding in her body.

In practicing mindfulness of breathing, our goal is to be mindful of the breath and body, connected to the qualities of ease and pleasure, as we move through the world, as we meet the

circumstances of our lives. And what we've found is that if we practice some walking meditation every day it will greatly enhance our ability to keep the breath in mind when we're in throes of everyday life. Even if we practice for just a few minutes every day, it will have a notable benefit.

It's important to practice sitting meditation every day – sitting meditation will, for most students, comprise the lion's share of their formal practice – but walking meditation prepares us for the movements of our lives in ways that sitting meditation doesn't. Sitting meditation is a tightly circumscribed method. We're not moving. Our eyes, generally, are closed. Our environment, by design, is secluded, removed from distraction. In walking meditation, we're practicing in a modality that's much more comparable to the modalities we'll find ourselves in in the course of our daily affairs. We're moving. Our eyes are open.

In fact, the breath feels different when we're walking, moving; even if we feel the breath in the area of the belly in sitting meditation, it feels somewhat different when we're focusing on the belly when we're moving.

All said, it's extremely beneficial to practice feeling the breath in walking meditation.

If we practice back and forth walking every day, for a few minutes, we put ourselves in good position for what's to come. We're well-prepared. We're ready for the world.