

The Practice of Mindful Walking

“Do not underestimate the power that comes to you from feeling the simple movements of your body throughout the day.

*~ Joseph Goldstein, *Insight Meditation**

Mindful walking can be a formal practice that is just as potent as sitting meditation in cultivating awareness. It can also be a key to expanding awareness from formal meditation to living mindfully day to day. There are many ways to practice mindful walking. Below are some forms to explore.

Formal Mindful Walking Practice

Find a place where you can walk back and forth slowly for about 6 – 10 steps. Take a moment to close your eyes and feel your feet on the floor. You might even begin with a short body scan. As your awareness comes back into your feet, shift your weight back and forth from one foot to the other, feeling the pressure and lightness and whatever other sensations arise. Then begin to walk with small steps. As you move each foot, bring full awareness to the soles of your feet. After a while, you might expand your awareness to the stages of walking – lifting, stepping and placing one foot and then the other. Feel and engage fully with the experience of walking. When you get to the end of your walking path, pause briefly, turn around, and bring full awareness to your next steps. Walk at whatever speed keeps you most present.

As you walk, let the thoughts and images that arise remain in the background. If you find yourself lost in a thought or emotion, just stop and bring your awareness back to your breath or feet and then resume walking. Remember that the practice is not about stopping thoughts, but about noticing when you’ve been carried away and coming back to the present moment.

Informal Walking Practices

Integrating short moments of mindful walking throughout your day is a powerful way of strengthening the muscle of mindfulness. It is also a useful tool for slowing down a racing mind or body and can be used as a transition practice to help you let go of what just happened so that you can be more fully present for the next moment.

Any time you find yourself walking is a good time to practice mindfulness. For a casual walking practice, choose a place to walk where there won’t be too many distractions and starts and stops. Begin walking and focus all your attention on what you are doing, noticing sensations as they arise. You can bring your attention to the soles of your feet, legs or body as a whole. When you find yourself drifting away from your focus, simply notice where your mind has gone and return to the walking. If you are just learning this practice, you might choose to rest attention simply on feeling the sensations of the body in motion or, if you are walking in nature, you might focus on what you are seeing, hearing, smelling or feeling.

You can also practice bringing mindfulness to the walking you do as you go about your life. Notice how often you are actually present for the experience of walking and how often you are lost in thought. Commit to walking up or down stairs mindfully or walking through the halls at work with awareness that you are walking. Bringing present moment awareness to walking during routine tasks and errands short-circuits the automatic pilot mode and can make our routine experiences more interesting and leave us calmer, less exhausted and even happier, as reported in research on the connection between focus and happiness. You might choose one walking activity that you do every day and “staple” your mindfulness practice to it, such as being fully aware of the first 10 steps you take when you walk to get coffee, go to the rest room, walk into your building, etc.