

Walking Meditation Technique by Brian Ruhe

One of the purposes of walking meditation is to keep yourself awake. If you're sitting for a long time and getting sleepy, it's good to get up and walk. Walking meditation stirs up your energy and gets the body moving. You're still maintaining the direct thread of your mindfulness/ awareness practice by going from sitting into walking posture. There's no break. The object of your meditation is the movements of the body, particularly the feet touching the ground because that's the contact point of the body with the ground. You can also bring your awareness to the movement of the legs, the feeling of the whole body moving through space; even aches and pains in the body are good for getting your mind out of your thoughts and back to the body. The body is always in the present moment. You're not trying to follow the breath because the breath is too subtle of a sensation when you're walking.

In the Theravada Forest tradition we walk in a straight line back and forth. You can walk for 15 to 30 paces. At home you can just walk from wall to wall across your living room. Once you get to the end you stop, turn around and go back and forth. Your pace can be just a relaxed pace; you don't have to go too slow or too fast. And it's good to have your eyes downcast, looking about ten feet in front of you. If you contain your gaze you contain your thoughts, your mind. You don't want to be looking around, checking out other people or the scenery. Don't look down at your feet either, that's bad form. Keep your head up and your eyes down.

Your hands should be held together in front of you or behind you. People seem to concentrate a bit better with their hands together and they're not swaying around distracting you. As you're walking there's more distraction than sitting because your eyes are open and you're moving around. When the mind wanders off into thoughts, just ignore them, let them go and come back to the feet. The mind wanders, then back to the feet. Back to the feet. If it helps you can even use words to note the stepping process. You can say to yourself, "Step, step, step." Or "Right foot, left foot, right foot, left foot..." As in sitting breath meditation, words can act as a crutch to help you stay with the meditation object.

You can even change your speed depending on your state of mind. If you're agitated or upset about something, you can walk faster to burn off the energy. If you're lost and confused, you can walk very slowly, noting "heel, sole... heel, sole..." The advantage of walking on your own piece of real estate is that you don't have to worry about other people around you, or their speed. You're just going on your own path back and forth. Also you don't have to look around much to see where you're going. If you're walking along a path outside you constantly have to be looking around for your own safety. In walking meditation, you aren't going anywhere so you don't have to worry about the terrain. You're just pacing back and forth.

How long you walk for is up to you. You could do it for 10 or 15 minutes or longer. It is an antidote to sleepiness so even during the day, if you're getting sleepy sitting by your computer, you can just pace back and forth for a few minutes to wake yourself up. It compliments your sitting meditation and it's best to go back into the sitting meditation after the walk because you build up some energy in the walking so you can profit from that when you go back into sitting. You can sit for a longer period of time and your meditation can go deeper. Some days the walking meditation may seem very distracting and useless but when you sit back down your energy is better. Other days the simplicity of walking meditation can put the mind into neutral so you can become quite calm and it can be an opportunity for insight to arise.

In ordinary walking down the street, you can still practice some mindfulness during a time when we're usually not very mindful at all. When you're walking the mind tends to go all over the place. You can bring your attention to the right foot when it touches the ground, noting "Right, left, right, right, right. Right, left, right, right, right..." You skip the left foot most of the time because you're going too fast to note every step. Your gaze is up, looking around as you need to but you can still bring your attention to mindfulness of the body in this way even in a busy city.

Walking meditation is just another technique for your meditation tool box. I'm not saying that you should do walking meditation everyday. I don't think it is as important as breath or loving kindness meditation, which you should do everyday. You can just do it whenever you are sleepy or the body is feeling sore from sitting for so long. It's a pleasant relief from sitting meditation if you do a lot of meditation. On a retreat, you would want to alternate periods of maybe 45 minutes sitting, 10 minutes walking, etc.