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Thich Nhat Hanh on Walking Meditation

BY THICH NHAT HANH | APRIL 5, 2018



The practice of mindful walking, says Thich Nhat Hanh, is a profound and pleasurable way to deepen our connection with our body and the earth. We breathe, take a mindful step, and come back to our true home. Read on and learn how to.



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Many of us walk for the sole purpose of getting from one place to another. Now suppose we are walking to a sacred place. We would walk quietly and take each gentle step with reverence. I propose that we walk this way every time we walk on the earth. The earth is sacred and we touch her with each step. We should be very respectful, because we are walking on our mother. If we walk like that, then every step will be grounding, every step will be nourishing.

We can train ourselves to walk with reverence. Wherever we walk, whether it's the railway station or the supermarket, we are walking on the earth and so we are in a holy sanctuary. If we remember to walk like that, we can be nourished and find solidity with each step.

To walk in this way, we have to notice each step. Each step made in mindfulness can bring us back to the here and the now. Go slowly. Mindfulness lights our way. We don't rush. With each breath we may take just one step. We may have run all our life, but now we don't have to run anymore. This is the time to stop running. To be grounded in the earth is to feel its solidity with each step and know that we are right where we are supposed to be.

Each mindful breath, each mindful step, reminds us that we are alive on this beautiful planet. We don't need anything else. It is wonderful enough just to be alive, to breathe in, and to make one step. We have arrived at where real life is available—the present moment. If we breathe and walk in this way, we become as solid as a mountain.

There are those of us who have a comfortable house, but we don't feel that we are home. We don't want for anything, and yet we don't feel home. All of us are looking for our solid ground, our true home. The earth is our true home and it is always there, beneath us and around us. Breathe, take a mindful step, and arrive. We are already at home.

Uniting Body and Mind

We can't be grounded in our body if our mind is somewhere else. We each have a body that has been given us by the earth. This body is a wonder. In our daily lives, we may spend many hours forgetting the body. We get lost in our computer or in our worries, fear, or busyness. Walking meditation makes us whole again. Only when we are connected with our body are we truly alive. Healing is not possible without that connection. So walk and breathe in such a way that you can connect with your body deeply.

Walking meditation unites our body and our mind. We combine our breathing with our steps. When we breathe in, we may take two or three steps. When we breathe out, we may take three, four, or five steps. We pay attention to what is comfortable for our body.

Our breathing has the function of helping our body and mind to calm down. As we walk, we can say, Breathing in, I calm my body. Breathing out, I bring peace into my body. Calming the breath calms the body and reduces any pain and tension.

Walking meditation is first and foremost a practice to bring body and mind together peacefully.

When we walk like this, with our breath, we bring our body and our mind back together. Our body and our mind are two aspects of the same reality. If we remove our mind from our body, our body is dead. If we take our body out of our mind, our mind is dead. Don't think that one can be if the other is not.

Walking meditation is first and foremost a practice to bring body and mind together peacefully. No matter what we do, the place to start is to calm down, because when our mind and our body have calmed down, we see more clearly. When we see our anger or sadness clearly, it dissipates. We begin to feel more compassion for ourselves and others. We can only feel this when body and mind are united.

Walking meditation should not be work. It is very pleasant, especially in the early morning when the air is still very fresh. When we walk mindfully, we see the beauty and the wonder of the earth around us, and we wake up. We see that we are living a very wonderful moment. If our mind is caught and preoccupied with our worries and suffering, we miss these things. We can value each step we take, and each step brings us happiness. When we look again at the earth and the sky, we see that the earth is a wonderful reality.



Walking meditation with Thich Nhat Hanh during a Day of Mindfulness at Deer Park Monastery. Photo by Don Farber.

We Are Not Separate From the Earth

We think that the earth is the earth and we are something outside of the earth. But in fact we

are inside of the earth. Imagine that the earth is the tree and we are a leaf. The earth is not the environment, something outside of us that we need to care for. The earth is us. Just as your parents, ancestors, and teachers are inside you, the earth is in you. Taking care of the earth, we take care of ourselves.

When we see that the earth is not just the environment, that the earth is in us, at that moment you can have real communion with the earth. But if we see the earth as only the environment, with ourselves in the center, then we only want to do something for the earth in order for us to survive. But it is not enough to take care of the earth. That is a dualistic way of seeing.

We have to practice looking at our planet not just as matter, but as a living and sentient being. The universe, the sun, and the stars have contributed many elements to the earth, and when we look into the earth we see that it's a very beautiful flower containing the presence of the whole universe. When we look into our own bodily formation, we are made of the same elements as the planet. It has made us. The earth and the universe are inside of us.

When we take mindful steps on the earth, our body and mind unite, and we unite with the earth. The earth gave birth to us and the earth will receive us again. Nothing is lost. Nothing is born. Nothing dies. We don't need to wait until after our body has disintegrated to go back to Mother Earth. We are going back to Mother Earth at every moment. Whenever we breathe, whenever we step, we are returning to the earth. Even when we scratch ourselves, skin cells will fall and return to the earth.

Breathing in, I know Mother Earth is in me. Breathing out, I know Mother Earth is in me.

Earth includes the life sphere and the atmosphere. So you don't have to wait until you die to go back to Mother Earth, because you are already in Mother Earth. We have to return to take refuge in our beautiful planet. I know that earth is my home. I don't need to die in order to go back to Mother Earth. I am in Mother Earth right now, and Mother Earth is in me.

You may like to try this exercise while you walk: Breathing in, I know Mother Earth is in me. Breathing out, I know Mother Earth is in me.

Paul Tillich, the German theologian, said, “God is not a person but not less than a person.” This is true of the earth as well. It is more than a person. It has given birth to millions of species, including human beings. Many ancient cultures believed there was a deity that inhabited the sun, and they worshiped the sun. But when I do walking meditation and touching the earth, I do not have that kind of dualistic view. I am not worshiping the earth as a separate deity outside of myself.

I think of the earth as a bodhisattva, a great and compassionate being. A bodhisattva is a being who has awakening, understanding, and love. Any living being who has awakening, peace, understanding, and love can be called a bodhisattva, but a bodhisattva doesn't have to be a human being. When we look into a tree, we see the tree is fresh, it nourishes life, and it offers shade and beauty. It's a place of refuge for so many birds and other creatures. A bodhisattva is not something that is up in the clouds far away from us. Bodhisattvas are all around us. A young person who has love, who has freshness, who has understanding, who offers us a lot of happiness, is a bodhisattva. The pine standing in the garden gives us joy, offers us oxygen, and makes life more beautiful.

When we say that earth is a beautiful bodhisattva, this is not our imagination. It is a fact that the earth is giving life and she is very beautiful. The bodhisattva is not a separate spirit inhabiting the earth; we should transcend that idea. There are not two separate things—the earth, which is a material thing, and the spirit of the earth, a nonmaterial thing that inhabits the earth.

Our planet earth is itself a true, great bodhisattva. It embodies so many great virtues. The earth is solid—it can carry so many things. It is patient—it takes its time moving glaciers and carving rocks. The earth doesn't discriminate. We can throw fragrant flowers on the earth, or we can throw urine and excrement on the earth, and the earth purifies it. The earth has a great capacity to endure, and it offers so much to nourish us—water, shelter, food, and air to breathe.

When we recognize the virtues, the talent, the beauty of the earth bodhisattva, love is born. You love the earth and the earth loves you. You would do anything for the well-being of the earth. And the earth will do anything for your well-being. That is the natural outcome of the

real loving relationship. The earth is not just your environment, to be taken care of or worshiped; you are each other. Every mindful step can manifest that love.

With each step the earth heals us, and with each step we heal the earth.

Part of love is responsibility. In Buddhism, we speak of meditation as an act of awakening. To awaken is to be awake to something. We need to be awake to the fact that the earth is in danger and living species on earth are also in danger. When we walk mindfully, each step reminds us of our responsibility. We have to protect the earth with the same commitment we have to protect our family and ourselves. The earth can nourish and heal us but it suffers as well. With each step the earth heals us, and with each step we heal the earth.

When we walk mindfully on the face of the earth, we are grounded in her generosity and we cannot help but be grateful. All of the earth's qualities of patience, stability, creativity, love, and nondiscrimination are available to us when we walk reverently, aware of our connection.

Let the Buddha Walk

I have a student named Sister Tri Hai who spent a long time in prison. She was a peace activist I knew since she was in middle school. She came to the United States to study English literature before going back to Vietnam and becoming a nun. When she was out in the streets advocating for peaceful change, she was arrested and put in prison.

During the day, the prison guards didn't like her to sit in meditation. When they see someone sitting in a prison cell solidly and stably, it feels a bit threatening. So she waited until the lights had gone out, and she would sit like a person who has freedom. In outer appearance she was caught in the prison. But inside she was completely free. When you sit like that, the walls are not there. You're in touch with the whole universe. You have more freedom than people outside who are imprisoning themselves in their agitation.

Sister Tri Hai also practiced walking meditation in her prison cell. It was very small—after seven steps she had to turn around and come back. Sitting and walking mindfully gave her space inside. She taught other prisoners in her cell how to sit and how to breathe so they

would suffer less. They were in a cold cell, but through their walking meditation, they were grounded in the solid beauty of the earth.

Those of us who can walk on the earth, who can walk in freedom, should do it. If we rush from one place to another, without practicing walking meditation, it is such a waste. What is walking for? Walking is for nothing. It's just for walking. That is our ultimate aim—walking in the spring breeze. We have to walk so that we have happiness, so that we can be a free person. We have to let go of everything, and not seek or long or search for anything. There is enough for us to be happy.

All the Buddhist stories tell us that the Buddha had a lot of happiness when he sat, when he walked, when he ate. We have some experience of this. We know there are moments when we're walking or sitting that we are so happy. We also know that there are times, because of illness or physical disability or because our mind is caught elsewhere, when we cannot walk freely like the Buddha. There are those of us who do not have the use of our legs. There are those of us who are in prison, like Sister Tri Hai, and only have a few feet of space. But we can all invite the Buddha to walk for us. When we have difficulty, we can leave that difficulty behind and let the Buddha walk for us. In a while the solidity of the earth can help us return to ourselves.

If we sit mindfully, if we walk mindfully and reverently on the earth, we will generate the energies of mindfulness, of peace, and of compassion in both body and mind.

We are made of body and mind. Our body can radiate the energy of peace and compassion. Our mind also has energy. The energy of the mind can be powerful. If the energy of the mind is filled with fear and anger, it can be very destructive. But if we sit mindfully, if we walk mindfully and reverently on the earth, we will generate the energies of mindfulness, of peace, and of compassion in both body and mind. This kind of energy can heal and transform.

If you walk reverently on the earth with two other people, soaking in the earth's solidity, you will all three radiate and benefit from the energy of peace and compassion. If three hundred people sit or walk like this, each one generates the energy of mindfulness, peace, and

compassion, and everyone in the group receives that healing energy. The energy of peace and mindfulness does not come from elsewhere. It comes from us. It comes from our capacity to breathe, to walk, to sit mindfully and recognize the wonders of life.

When you walk reverently and solidly on this earth and I do the same, we send out waves of compassion and peace. It is this compassion that will heal ourselves, each other, and this beautiful green earth.

Meditation: Walking on the Earth

Walk slowly, in a relaxed way. When you practice this way, your steps are those of the most secure person on earth. Feel the gravity that makes every step attach to the earth. With each step, you are grounded on the earth.

One way to practice walking meditation is to breathe in and take one step, and focus all your attention on the sole of your foot. If you have not arrived fully, 100 percent in the here and the now, don't take the next step. I'm sure you can take a step like that because there is buddhanature in you. Buddhanature is the capacity of being aware of what is going on. It is what allows you to recognize what you are doing in the current moment and to say to yourself, I am alive, I am taking a step. Anyone can do this. There is a buddha in every one of us, and we should allow the buddha to walk.

While walking, practice conscious breathing by counting steps. Notice each breath and the number of steps you take as you breathe in and as you breathe out. Don't try to control your breathing. Allow your lungs as much time and air as they need, and simply notice how many steps you take as your lungs fill up and how many you take as they empty, mindful of both your breath and your steps. The link is the counting.

When you walk uphill or downhill, the number of steps per breath will change. Always follow the needs of your lungs. You may notice that your exhalation is longer than your inhalation. You might find that you take three steps during your in-breath and four steps during your out-breath, or two steps, then three steps. If this is comfortable for you, please enjoy practicing this way. You can also try making the in-breath and the out-breath the same length, so that you take three steps with your in-breath and three with your out-breath. Keep walking and you will find the natural connection between your breath and your steps.

Don't forget to practice smiling. Your half-smile will bring calm and delight to your steps and your breath, and help sustain your attention. After practicing for half an hour or an hour, you will find that your breath, your steps, your counting, and your half-smile all blend together in a marvelous balance of mindfulness. Each step grounds us in the solidity of the earth. With each step we fully arrive in the present moment.

Walking Meditation Poem

I take refuge in Mother Earth.

Every breath, every step

manifests our love.

Every breath brings happiness.

Every step brings happiness.

I see the whole cosmos in the earth.



The banner features a yellow background. On the left is a book cover for 'How to Meditate' by Buddhist Practices for Your Heart & Mind, with a woman in a red top. The text on the right reads 'Lion's Roar SPECIAL EDITIONS' and 'The essential guide to Buddhist meditation'. A red button with white text says 'LEARN MORE'.



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ABOUT THICH NHAT HANH

Thich Nhat Hanh is a renowned Zen Master and poet, and founder of the Engaged Buddhist movement. He is the author of over a hundred books which have sold millions of copies worldwide. His most recent books are *Inside the Now* and *No Mud, No Lotus*. Thich Nhat Hanh lives at Plum Village practice center in France.

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