

A woman with long dark hair, eyes closed, stands in a park-like setting. She is wearing a white tank top, a long white lace cardigan, white pants, and sandals. Her hands are clasped in front of her. The background consists of green trees and foliage.

Please Walk on the Grass

BY JILLIAN PRANSKY

MOST LIKELY YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW DOES OR HAS DONE YOGA. It's everywhere these days: in health clubs, movies, magazines, fashion, television, even the work place. The reason for yoga's growing popularity is not only that it provides tangible physical health benefits but it also helps people gain a deeper awareness of themselves and a feeling of peace with the world around them. You may have already heard the endless list of benefits yoga can offer. In short, it balances, strengthens, opens, purifies, and relaxes the body, nervous system and mind. But did you know that yoga doesn't have to be practiced in a yoga studio, or on a yoga mat, or even in yoga clothes?

Yoga, a Sanskrit word, means *union* or *to yoke* – uniting our mind, body, and spirit with each other and the universe. This experience of *union* is a deeply connected feeling also known as *peace*. In fact, there are many ancient yogic techniques that people use to experience this union other than laying down a yoga mat. Most spiritual masters recognize being out in nature as a means to cultivating this peace more effortlessly. In fact, walking in nature has long been a path of yoga – also known as Walking Meditation.

Walking Meditation is easy, takes little time, requires no formal training, and offers amazing health benefits. It is particularly valued for its ability to refresh your mind, give you an emotional boost, and help you feel more in sync with nature's cycles.

A fresh take on the ordinary

What I like most about walking meditation is it helps me see things anew. For instance, since September I've walked from my car into my son's school twice a day. I know the walk with my eyes closed. And in a way, they are closed, as I'm often in a rush, on my cell phone, or mentally reviewing my list of things to do. But every now and then, I park a bit further away than usual. I pause and take a few breaths in my car. Then, I consciously make an effort not to return a call as I get out and begin walking slowly towards school. I intentionally enjoy the fresh air and notice the seasonal conditions around me. When I walk slowly like this, I observe what's around me as if for the first time. The color of a house, a collection of rocks in a garden, the peeling bark of an old tree, and the crack in a sidewalk where a flower is sneaking up. Suddenly, my daily trotted territory becomes a brand new landscape. In a way, it's as if I'm on vacation – in a new land. I'm interested and engaged in my environment which naturally refreshes my mind and mood. I'm also relaxed. For as the mind rests in the present, enjoying the moment, it is released from the exhausting habitual rewinding, fast forwarding, and jumping from thought to thought that it is normally occupied by. I arrive to pick up my son truly ready to receive him, with a

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bright smile and a clear mind. So in the end, my walk is good for everyone.

Try it today! Set aside 10 or 20 minutes to walk. Pick a location outside such as a local park or a good walking neighborhood. Of course you can do it during your regular daily routine, too, if you just park a bit further away – such as on your way into the grocery store, work, picking up your kids, anywhere really.

It's about paying attention

There is really no right or wrong when it comes to walking meditation. Mindfulness is the main ingredient. Mindfulness is *the energy of being aware and awake to the present moment; the continuous practice of gently but clearly bringing your attention to each moment as it's happening.* When you walk with the awareness that you are actually walking, a consciousness of where you actually are, and an acknowledgment of the actual conditions around you, you are doing a Walking Meditation or a Mindful Walk.

As far as technique goes, your focus is on your steps and posture, breath and environment. Intentionally walk slowly, taking small, deliberate, balanced, graceful footsteps. But find a comfortable pace. Notice your breathing and allow it to be natural and as full as possible. Your posture should be relaxed but tall. Not rigid. Feel your feet meet the ground. And let your weight drain down into your legs and feet so you don't feel like you have to hold yourself up with your shoulders, as most of us habitually do. Shoulders release down and arms hang comfortably. I like holding my hands, fingers intertwined, in front of my belly. Head floats on your neck, light and buoyant. Your eyes are relaxed as you begin to take in your environment.

You don't need to focus on anything special – simply be mindful of the beauty of your surroundings. Notice the flowers and trees. Smell the freshness in the air. Listen to the song birds that have returned. Mentally relax as you internally greet the sounds and sight of those who pass by, children playing and dogs walking. Of course, feel open to offer a smile or a verbal hello.

World respected Zen Master and human rights activist Thich Nhat Hanh often teaches walking meditation to children as well as adults. He frequently instructs to be aware of how you your feet "touch the ground". He suggests mentally offering the ground peace and love with your steps. I also like to be aware of the ground underneath me and focus on how it supports me. Feeling the solid earth under each step, I can trust that it will hold me up. This helps me let go more – especially of my shoulders!

Remember, you don't have to worry about getting it right. And you don't have to walk so slow that people will wonder what you are doing. Just slowly enough that you can be fully present with your breath, your steps, and the nature around you.

When we slow down enough, any moment can be a potential to wake up; to bloom open and to fully experience ourselves, others, and our environment. ■

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While you can walk anywhere, any time, these are some great spots to take walking meditation:

Van Vleck House Gardens

21 Van Vleck Street, Montclair
Open daily 9 AM - 5 PM, free of charge.

My current favorite, this is a great place to walk if you want to be more secluded. Be sure to catch the blooming of the Chinese wisteria, usually around Mother's Day. www.vanvleck.org

Presby Iris Gardens

474 Upper Mountain Ave., Montclair
Open 10 AM to dusk.

Bloom season is around May 14 through June 4, with peak bloom occurring the last 10 days of May. Founded in 1927, this garden is listed in the New Jersey and National Registers of Historic Places. It is a living museum dedicated to cultivating and displaying a rich variety of irises and recording the history of the genus. www.presbyirisgardens.org

Verona Park

Bloomfield Ave. & Lakeside Ave., Verona

Verona Park traces its roots back to 1814 when a dam for a gristmill was built on the Peckman River forming what is now the 13-acre Verona Park Lake. It is a 54-acre park filled with gardens, paths, and lots of places to walk! www.veronaliving.com

City River Walk: For a bit of nature, water, and city – check out Hoboken. For 20 years I lived in Hoboken and have done many a walking meditation along the water's edge. Check out all the parks along the Hudson for some vibrant sights. You can even walk from Pier A all the way up to 14th Street along the water.

For more information about Walking Meditations, read *The Long Road Turns to Joy: A Guide to Walking Meditation* by Thich Nhat Hanh or visit: www.plumvillage.org