Monday walking instructions

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So I loved. Thank you, Matthew, for how you introduced it all and a number of things. Maybe, kind of to build on, this idea of not over-interpreting and under-interpreting is similar to that. Another middle way is not over-expecting or under-expecting, not over-aiming and under-aiming.

To expect that you can just now be mindful forever, just sit down, just start your walk, and it's going to be like easy sailing—nonstop mindfulness—and if it's not, something is wrong with you, and you somehow have to figure out how to keep it tight and effortful to kind of really keep it mindful all the time, is probably taking you in the wrong direction. Matthew evoked the idea of ringing the bell at the beginning. Maybe the middle way of how long you can be aware is how long the bell rings. Can you be awake for the duration of the bell ring?

I use the word awake intentionally, because awake is a kind of—it's not quite—you can't quite point to what exactly you do when you're awake. The feeling of being awake maybe includes feeling and sensing the sound of the bell. I mean, if you can really just hear the sound until it disappears, you're not thinking—not that thinking is keeping you really connected to the sound. It's your ears and the body, and being absorbed, perceiving it.

But there's also maybe a very simple knowing: knowing that you're still hearing it, knowing that you're not hearing it. Both the feeling and sense and the knowing and whatever is going on is the whole. It maybe is kind of like the lights are turned on. You're awake. The wake-awake is turned on.

So maybe listen to the bell and just be awake for the duration of the bell ringing. With my poor hearing, I don't hear it anymore, and that was probably too long to be awake. Maybe a shorter period of time that's more reasonable is one inhale, one exhale. That's all. That's as far as you're going to go.

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Just be awake, to feel and be absorbed. One step. The next step. Nothing bigger than that. No higher aim. No higher expectation.

And it works like this. There's a simile in the *suttas* for developing this awareness practice that we're doing. It begins with rain falling on a mountaintop, and the drops start first. The drops absorb into the dry soil. What a great—how long does it take for the drops to absorb into the dry soil?

At some point, the soil is wet enough that the drops don't disappear as quickly. They stay, and they begin flowing down the slope a little bit. Then the drops start meeting each other, and then they meet each other, and it becomes little streamlets. It becomes little pools. Pools overflow and become little creeks. The creeks overflow and become lakes, and the lakes overflow and become the Ganges River flowing across the plains of India until the Ganges comes to the ocean.

It all starts with one little drop on top of the mountain, absorbed into the soil. And one drop is one drop of awareness, one drop of being awake. How long does it take for that one drop to get absorbed into that which is dry inside of you, that which has been desiccated, abandoned, ignored, not paid attention to? The length of time it takes for a moment of awareness to be absorbed is like the sound of the bell gets absorbed through the hearing.

And the idea is to have these drops until this magic special time that you can't know what's going to be, when your soil is all wet enough that the drops begin accumulating and growing. The moments of awareness start coming together, flowing together, and there's more of a continuity of the practice over time. But you have to start with those little drops. That's what you do the first day, and keep it really simple. Just be very happy with one step, one breath, inhale, or even shorter than that—just one drop of being awake.

Ah. Okay, to this, to this. But your job is to let it absorb, receive it, take it in, appreciate it. Every moment of awareness has some duration. It might be very, very short, but make room for that duration. Make room for the duration of the sound of the bell, the duration of one step, or the individual sensations in one step.

So walking meditation is a very important part of mindfulness retreats. One reason is that it's beginning to expand the idea of cultivating awareness into all our activities. There's usually a strong association that the core of the practice is sitting, but that doesn't have to be the case. We want to expand it outward, and here we're training ourselves to bring it into the simple, very human activity of walking that many of us do anyway.

Then we expand it into eating, using the bathroom, going to our room, and laying down to

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sleep. We expand outward until those drops are now really feeling the soil every opportunity we have through the day. Walking is important also because different attentional faculties, different faculties within us, are active when we walk than when we're sitting. If we sat all the time, we'd probably fall asleep and get dull. If we walked all the time, we might actually not settle very much. It might be very nice in concentrating, but something stays energized.

Going back and forth, this alternation of going back and forth, the two support each other really well. But it only works if you do it, and so you have to kind of do the walking long enough during a walking period to somehow get the benefits of it. So you bring it to sitting, and then back and forth like that.

So how we do walking meditation: the places we do it here at IRC are, we have a walking hall here next door, and we walk the short distance back and forth so that more people can be in there. You're welcome to walk in the hallways, maybe just one per hallway, so people can get by you a little bit to the side. People do walking meditation in the big community room downstairs. There's that wonderful carpet rug that's down there. People love to take off their shoes and walk on that. People do yoga on it.

That's one of the most precious real estate at IRC. You can do it a little bit to the side, maybe in the dining room. You can do it on the deck, especially under the awnings. We have a whole—it's called the Forest Deck—this big outdoor deck there that's quite beautiful and wonderful to do walking meditation on. On the driveways, parking lot. If you do walk on the trails, as we said yesterday, be careful about bringing dirt—the wet dirt—into the building.

So anywhere you'd like. There are a few people who like doing it in their bedrooms. It's not that long, but it keeps them kind of nicely contained and quiet, and they don't get stimulated by a lot. Some people walk quietly back and forth there.

The pace for your walking meditation is really something that you should choose, by choosing what seems to keep you nicely engaged, nicely awake, nicely present for it. There's a pace where it's kind of more natural to be aware, and a pace where it's maybe more difficult to be aware. Some people, if they walk too fast, the thinking mind kind of gets going. If you walk too slow, it might be that's too effortful, and that might stir up the thinking mind. So exactly how slow and fast you go is maybe variable, depending on how long you've been walking.

Some people will slow down during the course of their walking period. Some people have suddenly a lot of emotions and energy sitting, and they find that walking really fast is the only thing that keeps them present. They power walk back and forth. Some people just barely walk at all. You even wonder if they're walking because it's so slow.

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In the early days of *vipassanā* here in America, there was competitive walking, which was to see who could walk the slowest. Don't do that. Don't compete. But find a pace, and I encourage people to find a pace that brings you a sense of ease. So what was that speed? If it's relatively fast, you don't want to do it in the walking hall. Then go outside somehow, be away from people, but have some sense of ease.

I think it's nice in the beginning to just have a very broad, wide, panoramic kind of awareness. Awareness, consciousness—it's kind of very broad. An image I give for myself is: I'm a passenger in a car rather than the driver. So I just sit back, and it's like the car's standing still, and the environment—that's the road, the landscape—is just coming towards me and towards me.

So I just kind of let everything just be there in this wide awareness, relax into it, and then at some point lower the awareness gently into the feet and legs. The individual drops of awareness have to do with the contact of the soles of the feet against the ground, the lifting of the foot, the swinging of it, the shifting weight. There are all these little kinds of sensations that are shifting and changing. There's something that can be quite captivating about kind of riding the shifting, changing sensations of the feet and legs, your body as you walk.

There's something about things that move in a rhythmic way that can kind of help the mind relax. Like the waves on the beach, washing up and down and up and down on the sand, and you can watch it forever. That's very different than if the mind has to fixate on a single point. Then that's stressful for the mind, strain. So we have this gentle rhythm in walking, of the steps or the body sensations shifting and changing and returning, the next one kind of in the rhythm of walking.

As you do, we walk about twenty or thirty paces and then turn around. There are other ways of doing it, but the idea is to keep it really simple so that you understand the route quickly. So you don't have to make any more decisions about, "Turn left here, right here, avoid that whatever person is there," or something. You just know the route. That part of the mind can be quiet.

When you come to the end of your path, if you're going slow enough, it's nice to stop fully, take stock, reconnect, and then turn around, and then stop, and then start again. There's something about the full stop as you turn around that is a kind of a safety check that your thinking hasn't taken over and you're thinking continuously about something important. So stop and then start over again and let go of those thoughts. If there's a lot of thinking, you can even stop in the middle of your, what, twenty paces and just take stock and be present, close your eyes and feel what's going on, recognize what's going on. That full acknowledgement

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of what's happening might make it easier to start up again with the walking.

And finally, there's a way of using thoughts to help you stay present rather than have your thoughts take you away. That is to very simply have a one-word, very relaxed saying called a mental note. It's basically a way of saying, "Hey, you, right here, stay here." It could be as simple as, "Stepping, stepping," with a step, as a loving, gentle kind of reminder: "Be awake. Be awake with a step. Be awake here. This drop of rain here."

Sometimes people walk slow. They do "lifting" for the foot and "placing." So it's smaller drops, just the lifting. Sometimes, classically, it's "lifting, moving, and placing." So you have a very relaxed, soft mental note: "Stay here. Lifting, moving, placing."

Some people protest because it seems like their thinking mind is activated; it's too coarse. But if they really pay careful attention, it might be better than the alternative. If the alternative is to, in a relaxed, wonderful, pleasant way, wander into wonderful daydreams—which feels good, it feels like you're relaxed—but you're not really present. So this very relaxed mental note.

So may your day be wonderful, unless that's an over-interpretation. It's a little bit late now, so some of you are supposed to be in the kitchen now. I think they'll accommodate you with a shorter time for the work today. Thank you all.

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