

Walking as a Creative Superpower!

As a writer I spend many hours of each day in front of a screen, I counterbalance the mental and physical stress that this causes by interspersing periods of writing with periods of walking meditation, and this has the added benefit of keeping me fit and healthy while I work on a book, and it also improves my writing as following a period of walking meditation I return to my desk refreshed and buzzing with ideas.

Walking can boost your creativity and be an important aspect of self-care during the creative process. For centuries writers, artists, musicians, mathematicians, and scientists have instinctively known, what scientific research now confirms, that walking helps with problem solving and generating creative solutions. In his book, *In Praise of Walking*, Professor Shane O'Mara says, "If we want to encourage freer forms of creative cognition, we need to get people up from their desks away from their screens, and get them moving." We can, he says, create a more creative state by being in motion.¹

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche went so far as to say that 'Only thoughts reached by walking have value.'² When we walk the earth supports us and heaven inspires us. Many writers find that they get their best ideas when out walking and write better after a period of walking. Walking boosts your brain power because it increases blood flow to the brain, which in turn has cognitive benefits. This explains why many of us find that we can solve a problem and generate creative solutions on a walk.

For Virginia Woolf walking and writing were inseparable. She made up her books as she walked along. William Wordsworth composed his poem 'Tintern Abbey' while rambling. Since antiquity it has been recognised that a good walk is an excellent way to think problems

¹ O'Mara, Shane, *In Praise of Walking*, (Penguin Random House, UK, 2019), 157.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, http://www.inp.uw.edu.pl/mdsie/Political_Thought/twilight-of-the-idols-friedrich-neitzsche.pdf.

through. The school of peripatetic philosophy in ancient Greece was famous for conducting its teaching largely on foot, and the root of its name means ‘walking up and down’

About a fifty years ago, the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote that ‘Every day I walk myself into a state of well-being and walk away from illness. I have walked myself into my best thoughts, and I know of no thought so burdensome that one cannot walk away from it.’³

From a young age I learnt that walking was a wonderful way to relieve stress. During my childhood and adolescence my late father had severe mental health problems, which meant his behaviour was irrational, unpredictable, and frightening, consequently I always felt safer outside of the house rather than inside. Walking outside became a place of refuge for me. I was fortunate that from the age of eight years old we lived opposite three-square miles of parkland. During my childhood I got to know every inch of that park by heart. Sometimes with friends, sometimes on my own, I climbed trees, I slid down mudbanks, I picked bluebells, I kicked through autumn leaves, and was delighted when snow fell. Although I was a townie, the park allowed me to connect with nature and was somewhere that I felt safe and at home.

Nowadays, I find that walking clears my head, it helps me to generate ideas, and it frees up my imagination. I walk to stay healthy, to relieve stress, to process the events of daily life, to ponder upon themes I am writing about, to be out in the fresh air and to connect with nature. Walking is a natural mood booster. Virginia Woolf wrote in her diaries how she was able to walk herself calm and serene again. ⁴ Faye Smith in her article, *Benefits of Walking: 7 reasons why it’s extremely good for your health*, states that “When researchers

³ Søren Kierkegaard, from a letter to his favourite niece, Henriette Lund, in 1847. <https://www.tolstoytherapy.com/kierkegaard-on-how-if-one-just-keeps-on/>

⁴ Harris, Alexandra, *A Walk of One’s Own: Virginia Woolf on Foot*, 2015, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b067wnnd>.

asked people with depression to walk for 30 minutes three times a week for 16 weeks, they found it had similar mood-boosting effects to antidepressant medication.”⁵

Walking is medicine! Walking can improve your sleep, lower your risk of experiencing diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, strokes and obesity. Walking is great for your heart and lungs because it gives you a cardiovascular workout, it strengthens the primary muscles of your lower limbs and helps to maintain healthy bone density. ⁶

A large part of creative thinking is the ability to create something new by combining ideas in a surprising and novel way. The creative person perceives the world in new ways, finds hidden patterns, and makes connections between seemingly unrelated phenomena. One of the ways that walking boosts our creativity is that while our bodies are involved in the rhythmic, hypnotic action of putting one foot in front of the other, our minds are free to roam. Over the duration of a walk our mind might flit from the past to the future, and like a butterfly it will land on one subject, perhaps the beauty of a flower, or noticing clouds rushing across a blue sky, and then onto another subject, such as the state of the world today, or what we are going to eat for dinner.

The Mindful Approach to Creative Walking

The simplest way of taking advantage of the amazing creative potential and health benefits of walking is just to make some time each day to get outside in the fresh air and walk. When I'm outside I like to walk at a brisk pace, although not so fast that I am unable to take in the world around me. Especially after long periods of being at my desk writing, it's great to be outside, to feast my eyes on the beauty of the changing seasons, to feel a cool breeze, or warm

⁵ Smith, Faye, *Benefits of Walking: 7 reasons why it's extremely good for your health*, 2020, <https://www.womanandhome.com/health-and-wellbeing/health-benefits-of-walking-385528/>

⁶ Smith, Faye, *Benefits of Walking: 7 reasons why it's extremely good for your health*, 2020, <https://www.womanandhome.com/health-and-wellbeing/health-benefits-of-walking-385528/>

sunshine on my face, to let my imagination run wild as I read meaning into the faces of passing strangers.

Some people like to count their steps with a pedometer. Personally, I prefer to approach walking in the same way that I approach a yoga session, gently monitoring and observing my bodily sensations, and the thoughts and feelings that are passing through my mind.

So, we've established that walking is a phenomenal way to boost creativity and that it also improves our health and sense of wellbeing. However, I would like to encourage you to walk for the pure joy of walking rather than walking to achieve a specific outcome. Keep this in mind as you read the following descriptions outlining the different approaches to creative walking used in this book.

Below are two foundational walking meditations. They will give you an experience of using walking meditation to boost your creativity and will help you to establish an inspiring, mindful walking habit. It would be a good idea to familiarise yourself with these two meditations before going on to try the chakra-inspired walking meditations contained within each of the chakra chapters of this book.

Exercise: Formal Walking Meditation

When I am in the middle of writing a book I use this formal walking meditation every day, and sometimes a few times during the day. I usually follow the walking meditation with a writing meditation. I find it a great way of getting my ideas flowing, generating ideas, and finding creative solutions to problems. It also has the added benefit of keeping me fit whilst I'm writing (so much so, that I actually lost a few pounds of weight whilst writing this book!).

A formal walking meditation involves walking meditatively on a specific circuit for a specified amount of time. Your walking circuit could be inside or outside and might involve walking from one side of a room to the other and back again or walking in a circle. Choose somewhere you feel safe and will not be disturbed, such as a room in your house, a hallway, your garden, a local park, an unused room at your gym, or a corridor at work. I'm fortunate to have the house to myself during the day, so my walking circuit runs across the length of my kitchen, through my writing room, and across my sitting room, and then I retrace my steps back to the kitchen again.

It's a good idea to set a timer and commit to walking for a specific amount of time. Ten minutes is ideal, but you can do more if you wish.

Start the meditation by becoming aware of how it feels to walk, noticing the contact between your feet and the ground beneath you, and any sensations you feel in the feet. Keep a background awareness of how your whole body feels as you walk. Maintain a gentle awareness of the natural flow of your breath. Take enjoyment from the act of walking.

You can choose to walk with a specific meditative focus, or you can walk without a specific focus. Here's some guidance on that.

Walking with Focus

If you have a specific creative dilemma that you are hoping to solve, then you can focus on this as you walk. Notice any ideas that come into your head in response to the chosen theme. Feel free to explore these ideas and see where they lead you. Be gently vigilant, and if you notice your attention getting hijacked by everyday preoccupations, concerns, and worries, just gently but firmly lead it back to the subject. Enjoy exploring any ideas that surface in response to your chosen theme.

Walking without a Focus

Alternatively, you can choose to walk and simply allow your mind to wander freely. Gently divide your attention between an awareness of how it feels to be walking, an awareness of your surroundings, and notice the thoughts and feelings that pass through your mind. Do not direct your attention to a particular focus, simply allow your mind to wander where it will. Watch and observe your mind as it flits from subject to subject, perhaps going over a problem, thinking about the future, or reliving events from the past. If you find yourself becoming carried away with the drama of your thoughts, shift your focus back to an awareness of how it feels to be walking, noticing the contact that your feet make with the earth with every step.

When your timer goes, at the end of your walking meditation, you might want to jot down any ideas, inspiration, or insights that came to you. Or, if you have time, follow this formal walking meditation with a writing meditation.

Exercise: Informal Walking Meditation

An informal walking meditation can be done either indoors or out, any time that you have to walk somewhere. It can be done in your house, office; or walking from your car to home or workplace. It can be done in the city, the country, a park, or a shopping mall. Do remember to stay safe and be aware of any hazards as you walk.

You begin the meditation by slightly slowing your walking down, but not so slow that you draw attention to yourself. Notice how it feels to be walking, especially the contact between your feet and the earth beneath you. Maintain a gentle awareness of your natural breathing as you walk. Take a sensual enjoyment in your surroundings, noticing the sights, sounds, and aromas.

You can choose to walk with a specific meditative focus, or you can walk without a specific focus. For guidance on this see the instructions for the previous Formal Walking Meditation.

At the end of your walk, you might want to jot down any inspiration, ideas, or insights that surfaced during your meditation. Or if you have time, follow this informal walking meditation with a writing meditation.

In the chakra chapters you'll find a chakra-inspired walking meditation for each of the chakras. Also, check out the resources list at the end of the book for some suggestions for excellent books on walking meditation.

The above excerpt is from the *Chakras for Creativity* book, by Jilly Shipway

Walking Meditation Recommended Reading

Nhat Hanh, Thich, *The Long Road Turns to Joy: A Guide to walking Meditation*, (Unified Buddhist Church, USA, 1996).

Nhat Hanh, Thich, *How to Walk*, (Parallax Press, California, 2015).

Anh-Huong, Nguyen, and Nhat Hanh, Thich, *Walking meditation*, (Sounds True Inc., 2006).

Salzberg, Sharon, and, Goldstein, Joseph, *Insight Meditation Workbook*, (Sounds True, Boulder, CO, 2001).