



WALKING TOWARDS *your true self*

The changing autumn landscape offers us all a natural space for mindfulness, says yoga teacher Divya Kohli

ON THE CUSP of last autumn, a close friend told me, 'I'm taking a long walk'. A year later, she's still walking. Having turned 40, she quite literally decided to pack up her city life, handing in her notice at the office where she'd worked 9-5 for so many years, giving away her belongings and becoming a person 'with no fixed abode.' Condensing her entire life into one backpack (with a rolled yoga mat attached to the bottom), off she went, leaving London and the life she'd known behind, to walk through the English countryside. This was, for her, the ultimate act of living moment to moment.

For many of us, especially those living in cities and towns, there is a yearning to live or be more in nature. Although I know many who already live in rural areas or have achieved the country-life idyll, no one is immune to the effects of the modern age which seem to accelerate without pause, plugging us into technology, 24/7.

The friend who 'went for a long walk' took that yearning to the far end of the spectrum. Before leaving London, she had a regular meditation practice. Now she says, 'As I walk, I'm in mindfulness, rather than trying to be mindful. The places and sights are wonderful, but it's walking in nature that has made me feel connected.'

With summer behind us and the shift of season towards cooler temperatures and longer dark nights, our relationship with nature can be further deprived. We are likely to spend less time in the elements and more time indoors, on our devices and reliant on human-made comforts.

If Scott Fitzgerald said, 'Life starts all over again when it gets crisp in the fall,' and the 20th-century novelist's sentiment perhaps applies more than ever in our fast-paced times. But we can still reconnect to natural ways of being if we seek them, and autumn's changes - the turning of leaves from summer-infused greens to burnt coppers and golds - quietly invites us to notice what is around us, encouraging mindfulness. We are biologically programmed to find trees, plants, water and the elements interesting, so when we are ➤



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out in nature, we are more likely to be absorbed in what we are experiencing through our senses. Being in the natural world offers respite for busy or ruminating minds, and refreshes our perspective.

Ample studies have shown that being in nature, or even simply viewing scenes of nature, lessens anxiety, anger and fear and increases positive emotions. It can change human physiology, reducing the production of stress hormones in the body, muscle tension, blood pressure and heart rate.

There is even a form of therapy – ecotherapy – that creates healing and growth through interaction with nature and Mother Earth. It has been developed by psychologists who’ve seen the effects of nature-based methods enhance wellbeing and as a response to the growing numbers of people suffering from depression failing to respond to medical intervention. In Japan, they have a term and practice for getting lost in a forest, Shinrin-Yoku (‘forest bathing’) and it’s used to help sufferers of chronic stress.

Walking as a meditative practice is a concept as old as mankind, so too is the idea of nature as a healer. Spiritual teachers, writers, meditators and the holistic-minded have long known what science and recent investigations now attest to: the powerful effects of walking and of being in nature.

The physiological and health benefits of walking are well-documented. This basic human movement is a helpful form of exercise when done regularly and for a period of time. Walking, like being in nature, has also been shown to reduce stress levels in the body and boost pleasant feelings.

And combining walking and nature together concentrates the wellbeing benefits. In a ground-breaking study by the mental health charity MIND, participants were asked to engage in exercise indoors and then in ‘green exercise’ (movement in nature): 90% reported that the combination of nature and exercise was the biggest positive determinant in how they felt; 71% reported feeling less depressed after a green walk; while 22% reported feeling

‘more’ depressed after walking through an indoor shopping centre. Additionally, 90% reported an increase in self-esteem after taking a rural walk, while walking through a tree-rich area has been found to aid memory learning and improve both short-term memory and concentration.

Walking can also have profounder effects. It can be a meditation in movement and create the feeling of coming back to one’s true self. There are spiritual traditions, such as Buddhism practised in certain areas of north Thailand, where walking meditation is a mainstay of spiritual practice. And the good news is that this deeper dimension of walking is accessible to all – practicing buddhist or not.

When we bring deliberate attention to what we feel and experience as we walk, we are naturally being mindful. Being with each step and noticing what arises – a feeling in the body, awareness of the breath or what we capture through our senses – transforms the walk from mere movement or exercise into an act of meditative awareness. Renowned spiritual teacher Thich Nhat Hanh summed this up succinctly when he said, ‘Walking is a way to deepen our connection with our body and the earth. We breathe, take a mindful step, and come back to our true home.’

Getting outdoors and into nature can take many forms, depending on the time and access you have. Taking a long walk in the countryside is wonderful, but so is incorporating mindful walking into your daily life, be that in your lunch hour, after or before work or on weekends. Find a park, area of green or garden and awaken your senses in a natural environment. The benefits can be felt in as little as 5–10 minutes.

So this autumn, take advantage of the season to reconnect to your authentic self and to nature with a mindful walk. And the true beauty? Unlike my seeking friend, you don’t even need to pack up your belongings and leave your current life behind to find it.

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TIPS FOR A MINDFUL STROLL IN NATURE

- Set aside time for your mindful walk: this could be for part of, or the whole of the walk
- Find an outdoor environment with nature
- Just before you begin to walk, notice how you feel – how does the earth feel underfoot, what quality does the air have?
- As you take a step, notice how your body feels, paying attention to how your feet, legs and arms feel with every movement
- Feel the contact of your foot as it touches and lifts off the ground, and notice the movement of your body as you move from one step to the next
- Notice the tone and texture of your breathing. Where do you feel it in your body?
- When you get lost in a thought, story or emotion or your mind simply wanders to past or future, use a next step as an opportunity to come back to being present and bring your focus back to the sights, sounds and experience around you
- With openness, curiosity, non-judging and non-striving attitude, notice the detail of what the senses capture and any associated feeling that arises in the mind or body, without lingering on it
- Allow your senses to take in what they see, with softly open eyes
- Notice what you hear, both nearby and in the distance
- Pick up on scent or aroma and any taste as you walk
- When coming to the close of your mindful walk, choose a place to stand still and notice what you see around you, how you feel in your body and reflect on how you are right now, in the moment.

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