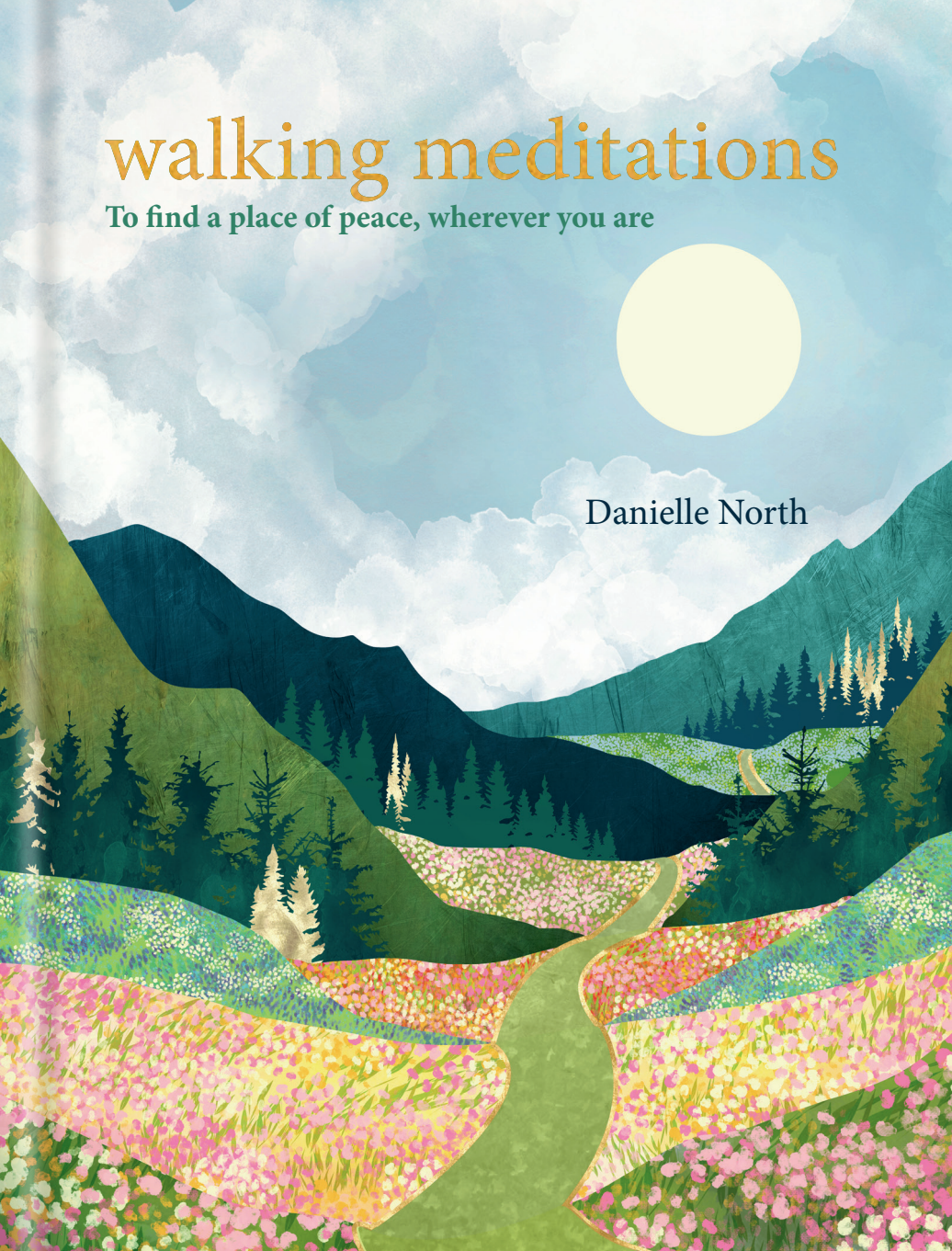
walking meditations

To find a place of peace, wherever you are



Danielle North

walking meditations

To my friends Pushan and Kasia.
May you continue to lovingly walk this path together for many lifetimes.

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

First published in Great Britain
in 2023 by Aster, an imprint of
Octopus Publishing Group Ltd
Carmelite House,
50 Victoria Embankment,
London EC4Y 0DZ
www.octopusbooks.co.uk

Text copyright © Danielle North 2023
Illustrations copyright © SpaceFrog Designs 2023

Distributed in the US by
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas,
4th and 5th Floors, New York,
NY 10104

Distributed in Canada by
Canadian Manda Group
664 Annette Street, Toronto,
Ontario, Canada M6S 2C8

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ISBN 978 1 78325 562 7

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.
Printed and bound in China.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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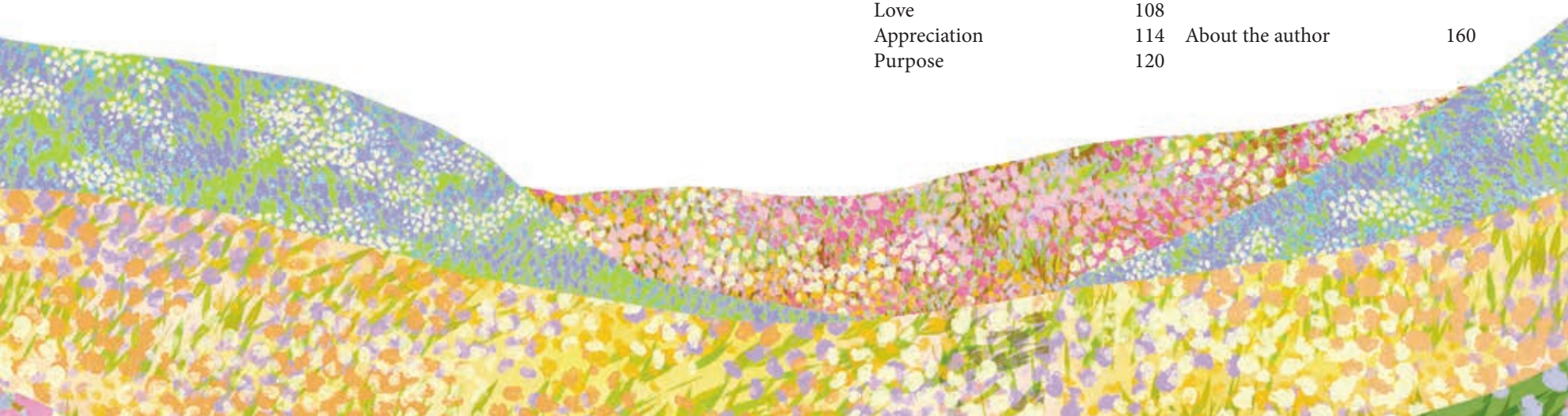
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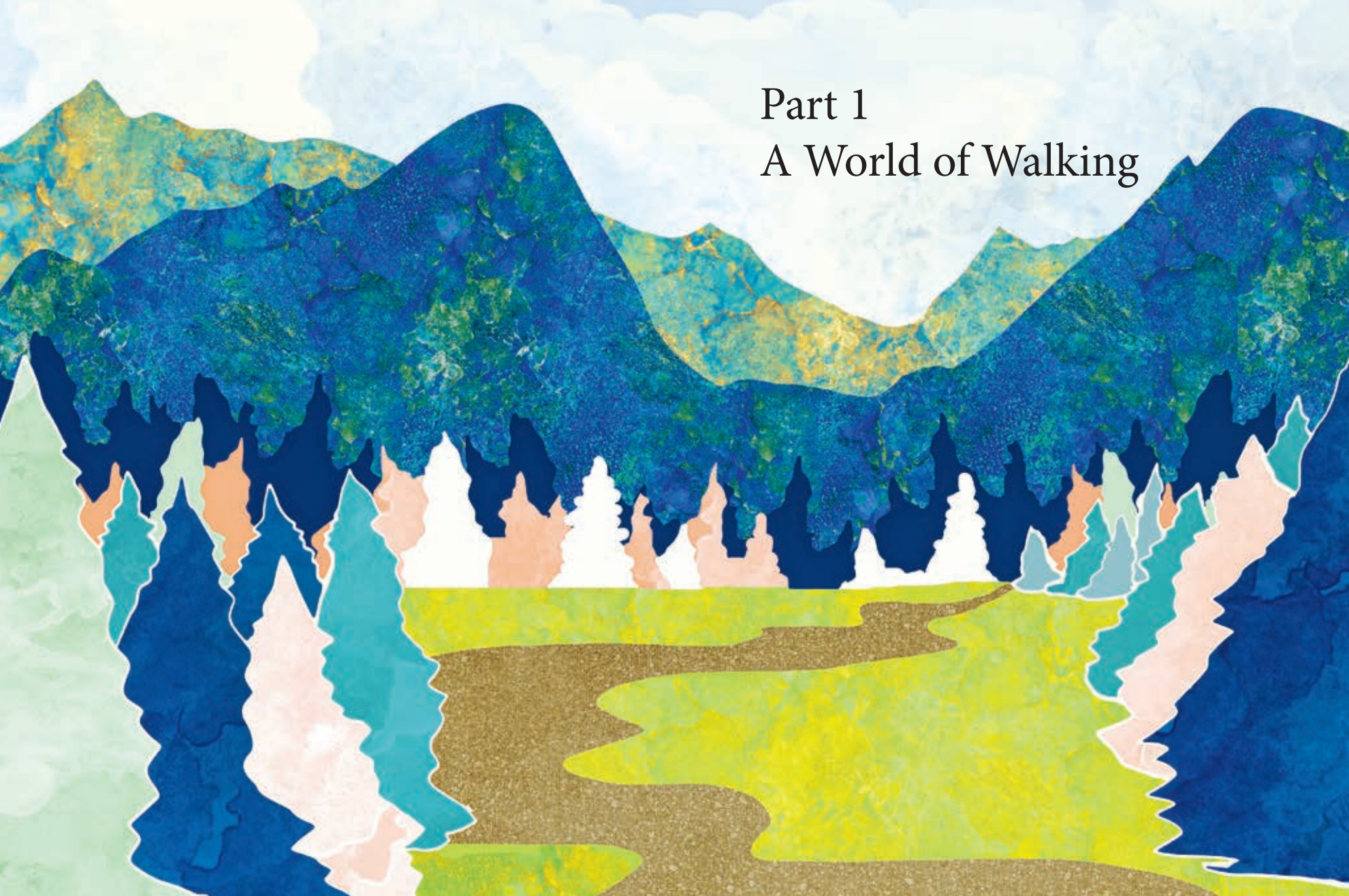
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Part 1
A World of Walking

The cosmos moves in cycles and rhythms on a scale way beyond our human understanding of size and time. We are part of this magnificent universe and moved in mysterious ways by it. Long ago, our ancestors would have been attuned to these natural rhythms, gazing at the vast night sky and using the planets and stars for guidance on how to live their lives. Today, it has become harder for us to attune even to earthly rhythms, such as the changes in the seasons, and so we give little or no thought to the bigger cycles occurring in space that are also guiding and supporting us.



One of the reasons we have lost touch with this bigger context is that modern living can be a bumpy experience. From birth through schooling, the world of work, parenting and beyond, few people escape the inevitable knocks and bruises to heart and soul along the way. The result of this is that we are often operating with our heads down and blinkers on, as we focus on getting through daily challenges or the next stressful situation that life seems to throw our way.

This is where walking comes in. When we have experienced challenges, difficulties or even trauma in our lives, the repetitive and steady rhythm of putting one foot in front of the other, connecting to the earth below and to our own selves, is a restorative and healing process. If you can walk in nature, or places that have spiritual significance (along ley lines, for example), these benefits are amplified.

Walks don't need to be long to be meaningful. A short, ten-minute walk, a 'scene-changer', can often be enough to break your state, helping to restore balance and regulate the central nervous system. Over time, the benefits of regular walking mean that you can re-pattern the brain to create new neural networks, so that walking becomes not only a habit, but also something that increases your feelings of well-being, peace and happiness.

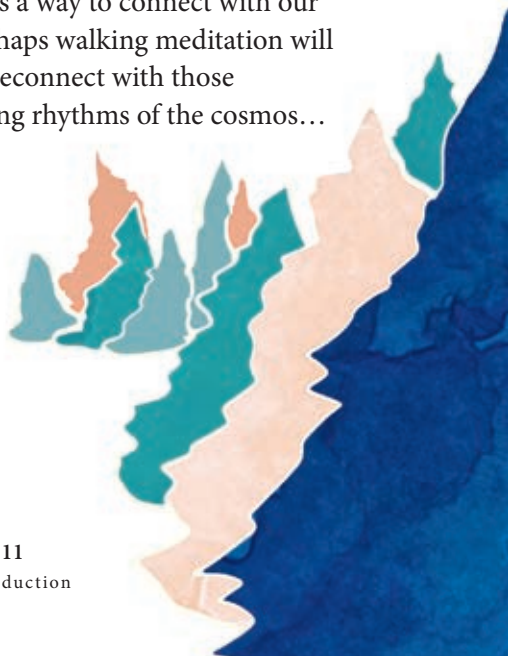
Longer walks, such as the Seasonal Meditations on pages 136–159, are a chance for us to get lost along the way, either by going off the beaten track and exploring new locations, or simply by getting lost within ourselves, in our own thoughts or experiences. When so much of life is lived according to a schedule, dealing with other people's demands, there is rarely space for surprises. Yet in the emptiness of space there are unknowns, insights and answers waiting to be discovered. There is also a section on Deeper Meditations (see pages 126–135), containing step-by-step walking meditations designed to take you even further and provide you with guidance if you are experiencing especially complex, powerful or difficult emotions.

This book has been written to guide you on a meditative journey when walking, combining the benefits of walking and meditation. It may be useful to download the audio version of this book, so that you can listen to the meditations as you walk. You may also want to think about a place where you can walk regularly; a location that is easy and convenient for you to reach from home or your workplace.

The meditations in this book are for anyone who wants to feel the benefits of meditation but finds the idea or experience of sitting still to meditate too challenging. They are also for those who already have a meditation practice and want to take it beyond sitting on a cushion daily or relying on a meditation app. Ultimately, the goal is to be able to cultivate the sensation and benefits of walking meditation as we go about our day-to-day activities, so we can feel less stressed and more peaceful every day.

For now, let's enjoy exploring the positive benefits of walking meditation together, using the rhythm of walking and focusing on breathing as a way to connect with our inner world. Over time, perhaps walking meditation will also help you find a way to reconnect with those mysterious and life-sustaining rhythms of the cosmos…

Galaxies of love,
Danielle x



Why walking works

Walking is one of the most accessible and pleasurable forms of exercise you can take throughout your life. If done regularly, it benefits both your physical and mental health. Walking alleviates depression; increases energy; improves your mood; reduces stress and anxiety; and enhances the quality of your sleep. These benefits are amplified when you walk in nature, and the nourishment gained from being outdoors also creates a deep feeling of calm within. As you disconnect from the stresses and strains of everyday life, you connect with the restorative power of nature and build a deeper connection with yourself.

Research into the Japanese practice of *Shinrin-yoku*, or 'forest bathing', shows that spending time among trees, being calm and breathing deeply, improves mood and reduces anxiety. The energy that sustains the earth also sustains you. In some traditions, this life-force energy is known as qi or chi (Chinese), ki (Japanese) or prana (Sanskrit). You may not be conscious that this life force is being activated as you walk in nature, but you will feel its benefits. This is the same energy that is cultivated when people sit in meditation. As people meditate, qi begins to rise, and so walking in nature is essentially a form of meditation.

If you use the meditations in this book over time and with awareness, you may be able to feel this life-force energy rising within you and even cultivate it. As your life force rises, so too does your own natural energy, motivation and zest for life, along with your ability to feel more grounded and clear-headed.

What is walking meditation?

Meditation continues to grow in popularity around the globe. Usually when people think of meditation, they picture someone sitting very still, in silence on a cushion, with their back straight and hands in their lap, and with a quiet, empty mind for a period of time. While this is a powerful way to develop concentration, tranquility and insight, for many of us with busy lives and even busier minds, meditating in this way simply feels out of reach.

Even those who manage to sit on a meditation cushion often think they are doing it wrong because they are unable to experience a quiet mind. In truth, the mind is rarely quiet, especially when we are learning to meditate, and the aim to begin with is simply to observe the breath rather than silence the mind. As our meditation practice develops, we become more able to detach from our thoughts and simply observe them. You can discover more about how to meditate in this way in my other books, *Sleep Meditations* and *Morning Meditations*.

Throughout this book you will learn how to practise meditating as you walk, which is essentially very simple. The meditations are inspired by the Zen walking meditation practice known as *Kinhin*. However, you don't need to be a Buddhist to practise this form of meditation. Walking meditation combines the ability to focus the mind with purposeful focused movement, so you can expand the natural stress-reducing benefits of walking without any additional effort.

How does walking meditation work?

Traditional walking meditation practice is done slowly and barefoot, with the gaze lowered. Your hands can be clasped lightly in front or behind you, or you can let your arms hang loosely by your sides. You walk a specific number of paces – for example, fifteen paces – along a set path. The aim is to coordinate your breathing with the steps you take, so walk nice and slowly. At the end of the path, you pause, turn around and walk the same number of paces back. As you return to your starting point, you pause again, then walk back along the path, and so on. During this meditation, the intention is to focus your attention on the sensations in your feet. And that is all: a complete and mindful connection with the soles of your feet. At the beginning, middle and end of the path, you can ask 'Where is my mind?' in order to bring your attention back to the sensations in the soles of your feet.

This approach to meditation works because the mind wants something on which to focus. If you give the mind a point of focus to concentrate on, you will know if it has wandered off and you can refocus without judgement. All you need to do is bring your attention back to the soles of your feet while maintaining a mindful walking pace. This is particularly beneficial if you are new to meditation, as it provides you with natural check-in points. Observing the mind in action is powerful because the more you practise this skill, the more you understand and experience that you have a mind, but you are not only your mind – you and your mind are separate entities.

Using this book while walking

Each meditation in this book has been written with a particular intention in mind. Some are deliberately short, for those days when you are snatching some time for yourself, but there are also deeper meditations for processing complex emotions (see pages 126–135) and extended meditations for times of seasonal transition (see pages 136–159).

You can incorporate the meditations in your day, and 'stack' them with existing routines, such as returning from the school run, on your lunch break or going to the gym. It won't always be possible to go barefoot for these meditations, but that's okay; you can still pay attention to the sensations in your feet through your shoes.

There may be moments when you want to sit and reflect. If time allows, this is to be encouraged, and you can either sit quietly with your thoughts or focus on your breathing. This can be particularly helpful with the longer meditations, as you can take this book with you and read the next section. For the shorter ones, spend a moment reading the meditation before you leave the house. Don't worry about trying to remember the meditation for the whole journey, as you can make it your own as you are walking. You can, of course, download the audio version of the book and listen to one of these as you walk instead.

If walking is difficult for you, you can read or listen to the meditations and take the journey in your imagination. If you are able to do this outside, that will further enhance the benefits.

Getting Started

Walking with awareness

Walking meditation is simply walking and breathing with awareness. If you want to get started in a simple way, here are seven ideas to help you to walk with awareness:

1. Observe as many different shades and tones of green as possible.
2. Walk where there is space. Deliberately find the space between people and things.
3. Look for, and if you can do so safely, touch as many different textures as you can.
4. Bring awareness to everything you can smell – what do you like and dislike?
5. Listen to the sound of your own breathing as you walk. No more, no less.
6. Observe what is natural and what is man-made.
7. Look for beauty, in everything. Even if it is not there.

Breathwork for walking

In walking meditation, you focus on coordinating your breathing with the rhythm of your steps. Since you were born, you have been breathing. It happens naturally without you thinking about it, approximately 1,000 times an hour, and for many of us, it happens with ease. So, given this is such a natural human process, why do we need to pay attention to it during our walking meditations?

Modern living can be stressful and prolonged periods of stress mean the sympathetic nervous system activates the fight-or-flight response with a sudden rush of hormones, including the stress hormone cortisol, into the body. You feel alert, your heartbeat and breathing quickens, and your body tenses up. When the stress has passed, the parasympathetic nervous system restores the body to a state of calm. For many of us, modern living activates the sympathetic nervous system and our cortisol levels become elevated for too long, creating a hormonal imbalance that makes it difficult to switch off.

By making conscious changes to your breathing patterns, the vagus nerve, which runs from the brain to the diaphragm, sends a signal to your brain to turn up your parasympathetic nervous system and turn down your sympathetic nervous system. When the parasympathetic system is activated, your breathing slows, your heart rate drops, your blood pressure lowers, and your body is put into a state of calm.

It's like a light switch that you can flick to change how you feel, and you do this simply by taking a deep breath or changing your breathing pattern. To help you reset your system, you can either use these simple breathing techniques as you walk – that will be your walking meditation – or you can practise them seated at home when you want to give your energy a boost.

Conscious breathing is a breath in through your nose, down into your belly and out through your mouth. The out-breath is like a soft sigh – imagine you are steaming up a bathroom mirror as you exhale. Continue breathing in this way for a few more steps, harmonizing your inhale and exhale with the pace of your steps.

Balanced breathing is a practice in which you only breathe through your nose. Close your mouth and inhale slowly through your nose (both nostrils) for a count of 4 and then exhale slowly through your nose for a count of 4. Connect the rhythm of your breathing to the rhythm of your walking. Repeat the cycle five times. It can help to use your right hand to count the breaths and your left hand to count the cycles. Keep your hands relaxed by your sides as you count, so you don't tense your body.

Spiral breathing is an opportunity to imagine your breath spiralling up and down your spine as you walk. Take a deep breath in and, as you inhale, allow your breath to spiral up your spine for a count of 6. As you exhale, let the breath naturally spiral back down your spine for a count of 6. If it helps, you can imagine the breath has a colour and watch this colour moving up and down your spine.

Step by step: Walking with your senses

Often when we are walking our attention is not grounded, as we're often listening to music or a podcast, speaking to friends or scrolling on our smartphone. Even when we walk in silence, it's easy to find the mind freewheeling with worries, doubts, frustrations or aspirations, desires and dreams. None of this is wrong, but to feel less stressed and more relaxed, try this practice of walking with the senses instead.

This practice works best when we disconnect from tech and walk alone (it's okay if there are other people around, though – for instance, in a busy street or supermarket). Here's how to do it:

Step 1 As you walk, slow down your pace.
Step 2 Relax your breathing.
Step 3 Observe what you can see in the foreground near you: textures, colours, patterns.
Step 4 Shift your attention to what you can see in the distance: textures, colours, patterns.
Step 5 Tune in to what you can hear, including sounds you like and sounds you don't like.
Step 6 Become aware of any smells and notice what you like and don't like.
Step 7 Notice if you can be with it all, just as it is.
Step 8 Breathing in and out as you walk.
Step 9 Now feel your centre, the core of you.
Step 10 Walk from your core, feeling strong and steady.

Ten-minute mood boost

If you are feeling depleted, this walking meditation can be done at home or while walking from one place to another; each part only takes a few minutes. If you are somewhere busy, start with Part 2, or practise just Part 2 if time is short. If you have more time, you can extend the number of rounds.

Part 1 Centre yourself

1. Start in a standing position.
2. Place your right hand over your heart.
3. Connect with your heart. Feel the steady beat of your heart.
4. Focus on your breathing.
5. Send your breath into the space beneath your hand.

Part 2 Breathe and feel

1. Release your hand and begin to walk slowly.
2. Breathe into your heart for a slow count of 5. Step by step.
3. Breathe out for a count of 5. Step by step.
4. Slowly and steadily for five rounds. Notice how you feel.
5. Make space for those feelings.

Part 3 Experience joy

1. Think of someone or something that brings you joy.
2. Notice how joy feels in your body.
3. Breathe joy into your heart. Breathe joy out into the world. 5 counts in and 5 counts out. Step by step. Slowly and steadily for five rounds.
4. Notice any shifts in your body and mind.

Going Deeper

The inner dimension

Much of our lives are spent with our attention and focus outside of ourselves, particularly when we are walking because we can do this on autopilot. When the mind has the freedom to wander to other matters, it can move in a myriad different directions at lightening speed, from creative thinking, to problem solving, to engaging with the world around us, or even to catastrophizing!

Meditation calls on us to make the journey into the world within. We all have an inner ocean, a vast landscape within us made up of our thoughts, feelings, values, attitudes and beliefs. This is also where our instincts, intuition and inner knowing reside. The walking meditations in this book are designed to help you discover your own inner dimensions, so you can know your true self and be kind to yourself and others along the way.

The art of contemplation

Even after all our attempts to understand the complexity of what it is to be human, we have only scratched the surface, and there are many hidden depths to be discovered, or rediscovered, that go beyond the logic of our minds. The art of contemplation allows us to go into these deeper places in our awareness, intuition and understanding of ourselves. Walking meditations are a route into this beautiful, deep, rich sea within.

Walking peacefully

Often, in our everyday lives, we are focused on getting somewhere. Take a moment and make a list of all the places you are trying to get to in a day, from physical locations like the train station and the supermarket, to aspirational ones such as achieving better health, a good relationship or a change of career. So much of our lives is focused on going somewhere, and when all our energy and focus is on the future and trying to be somewhere else, we can lose the feeling of peace that comes from being in the here and now.

To deepen your walking meditation practice and your ability to walk peacefully, rather than just incorporate it into a walk with a destination – perhaps a trip to the office or the gym – experiment with going on a walk that has no destination, so the purpose of the walk becomes the walk itself. As before, all you need to do is focus on walking and breathing (see page 20). Here's how to do it.

Step 1 Place one foot in front of the other and feel the sensation of your heel connecting to the ground.

Step 2 Become aware of your whole foot as it rolls forwards towards your toes and notice the heel lifting from the ground now as your other foot takes a step forwards.

Step 3 Breathe and notice, and stay in the present moment, knowing that there is nowhere else you need to be; you are just peacefully placing one foot in front of the other.

Effortless action

Having reached the guided meditations in the book, now is a good time to remember why we practice walking meditation at all. The main intention is to bring your practice beyond the walking meditation and into your daily life. To bring the peace you have cultivated in your walking meditations into your everyday life, so it will be useful in your work, relationships or parenting. Ultimately, the place of peace you find in your meditations becomes a continuous and connected space within you that is not separate. To do this, first it is necessary to practise, so use any opportunity you have to keep moving with consciousness, whether that is getting up from the sofa or taking a long hike in the mountains, until it no longer requires conscious thought and becomes effortless action.