

While Walking . . . 11.12.03  
by Kim Cottrell

Breathing. The breath. A breath taken. One held. Exhalation. Expectant pause, eventually air pushes past nostrils, following passages toward empty lungs. For me, to “walk” implies considering the nuances of my breath, and *ultimately*, my life. But, even during walks when my attention is focuses elsewhere, comfort with my breathing somehow changes.

A favorite in-city walk is the Marquam Trail to the top of Council Crest. After leaving the shelter, the trail climbs, levels off, switches back, and then climbs further. Gently urging different ways of focusing on the breath and the self, the hill beckons. After dozens of walks up this particular hill, it’s apparent the differences in ease or difficulty can be attributed to the thoughts and voices in my head that won’t be shushed, relentlessly following me around.

Good or bad, pep-talk or judgment, the voices and their noise are mostly constant. Even now, after years of walking and hiking, with others and alone, the voices continue to rattle on loudly and obnoxiously for the first part of the walk. Eventually, further into my uphill commitment, the hinter, dark recesses of my brain open and they go . . . making space for something else, something less noisy.

Settling into a walk serves as my metaphor for settling into myself. Walking daily or many days in a week keeps the practice fresh. Deep listening, beginning with one foot, then the other, each step observed and noticed, finding my breath, scanning for what’s new and what isn’t. The next few minutes spent tending to areas needing further attention. Aches noted, my attention washes them in a soothing focus, surrounding and cloaking the area. Nothing gets asked, no changes are made, no judgments meted out—only noticing, listening, and more noticing. As if attention alone is the salve for sore muscles.

On this day, once again the Marquam trail finds me considering what is in front of me—clear blue sky, dappled sunlight through the trees. Over the years, my habit is to think of each walk as separate from the one(s) before. Not comparing the current one with one from last week or last year leaves me curiously observing the path under my feet.

By the time my focused attention has washed my entire self in a most intense scrutiny, something in the pattern of how I’m using myself shifts and I no longer walk exactly as I began. Repeatedly, my experiments with this strategy yield similar results. Despite setting out with thoughts and attention focused on a “problem,” after completing a full systems check to determine if there are other places that are also holding or hurting, nothing in my movement is the same as when I started. I’m in the groove of this day’s walk. Attention focused, I forget about time, work, and the voices in my head.

Without the voices, there’s a startling internal silence, welcome and unfamiliar in the same moment. This silence opens space for more breath, for me, for my life.