

The Flowing Trail By Fran Ludwig

The morning is clear and the air warm for February—mid-thirties and not yet 9:00 in the morning. The aging snow is coarse and crunchy, having melted and frozen several times already. I strap crampons onto my boots and strike out on my daily morning constitutional—crunch, crunch, crunch.

A morning walk has long been an essential element of my daily routine: wake up, brush teeth, do exercises, dress, meditate, start a fire in the wood stove, eat breakfast, go for a walk. Then I can start my day.

It's hard to explain why that walk in the woods feels so essential—just as necessary as sleeping or eating. But as soon as I step outside, I can feel my body relax, become more open, expansive, receptive.

My mind relaxes, too. Unconstrained by other tasks, thoughts are liberated to arise and move about freely. Some that have been knocking around just beneath the surface of awareness begin to float up. Sometimes they encounter other thoughts, and an idea is born, or an answer to some problem presents itself.

My senses come alive. The air feels crisp and cool against my cheeks. My hands are comfortingly warm in their thick woolen mittens. The morning sun is a little higher in the sky, and the slanting rays of morning light cast shorter, sharper shadows through the trees. A titmouse sounds its 3-note winter call in the distance. The loud, raucous staccato of a pileated woodpecker brings a surge of joy and a smile to my face.

My crampons confidently grip the packed, icy snow, my steps settling into a steady rhythmic drumbeat as the trail rises up and disappears beneath my feet. After a while, I begin to notice that I can find no one who is doing the walking—there is only walking—crunch, crunch, crunch. And the trail, steadily advancing toward me, now appears to be flowing. It's winding its way forward through the trees like a river, flowing at the exact pace of the walking. I think of the koan: "As I walk across the bridge, the bridge flows." That koan never made sense to me before—but right here is the flowing, and the walking. "I walk along the trail, and the trail flows."

The trail flows through the brown tangle of growth beneath the power lines, emerging from the woods on the far side. Entering the forest again, the path is flowing, the old stone wall is flowing, the forest is flowing—all to the steady drumbeat of footsteps.

Crunch–crunch–crunch. Everything effortlessly arising in what is now just vast awareness.

In the mature hardwood forest by the reservoir I stop and look up, leaning back as far as I can. The tall, sinewy trunks of oak and hickory rise confidently to the sky. I rise too, in a muscular bonding that feels solid and strong; yet alive and completely at ease. My arms reach up and out becoming branches, and my fingers lengthen into ever finer twigs and twiglets, responding freely to each breath of breeze.

I notice that I am utterly free. I am the tall, solid, sinewy tree. I am the breeze and the branches; the twigs and the twiglets. I am the walking, I am the flowing. And I am the openness in which all this arises.

There is a flash of recognition. Ah–yes! I know who this is. This is who I truly am. This is who I have always been. Always already right here. Not hard to find, but impossible to avoid.

Now I'm ready to start my day.

(An [audio version](#) is also available)