

Forest Bathing

The No-Nonsense Guide to Shinrin Yoku

Jim Garlits



GO OUTSIDE. GET WILD.
RECONNECT WITH NATURE

 FOREST BATHING 

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JIM GARLITS

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Front Matter

Publisher Details

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Dedication

For Tony Pompa and Tiffany Meicher-Schneller, who allowed me to tag along on one of their “True North Expeditions” adventures in Shenandoah National Park and gave me the hike of my life. Your camaraderie was only matched by your technical skills on the trail. I feel privileged to call you my friends.

Introduction

A Buddhist monk walks up to a hot dog vendor and says “make me one with everything.” It is an old joke, but still funny enough to make us chuckle. Being out in nature is sort of like that hot dog transaction. It makes you feel like you are one with everything. When passing through the urban landscape of our modern existence, many of us feel like we are disconnected from the natural environment. Buildings tower over us. Cars and trucks whiz by on wide concrete ribbons. Billboards and advertisements scream at us from every available space. Many of us cocoon ourselves in our houses, and safely tucked away there, we stare at our screens. There is strong evidence, increasingly backed by science, that immersing ourselves in nature offers a host of benefits for our health and general well-being. The list of chronic and debilitating diseases and disorders that afflict most of us is dizzying. You may or may not be impressed with the upcoming list of ailments that nature therapy has successfully treated, or at least to which it has contributed positive outcomes. But I stuck them up front for a reason: You may be more likely to continue reading and actually head out into the forest if you see your own particular ailment listed, and read about the positive effect that nature therapy has had on it in others like you.

The title of this book, “Forest Bathing: The No Nonsense Guide to Shinrin Yoku” requires an explanation and simplification before we proceed. There are many names being used for the framework presented here. Nature therapy is the most benign and the most broad, perhaps the least scary or off-putting, too. There are many types of nature therapy, practiced and recommended by physicians, psychiatrists, psychologists, holistic medicine practitioners, public health officials and “guides.” I appreciate the science and research that has gone into study of nature’s effects on the human body and mind, especially of late, and specifically as introduced in Japan. For this reason, the practices included here are based heavily on what is called Shinrin Yoku, roughly translated into English as “forest bathing.” From here on out, I will refer to it comfortably as “forest bathing” or simply “bathing.” It will save some repetition. I also want to point out that I’m not a physician, nor am I a psychiatrist, a psychologist, a holistic or natural medicine practitioner, a public health official, an herbalist, a shaman, or a “guide.”

The premise of this book is that you don’t need an acronymed, business card carrying forest bathing guide to shuttle you to the woods to teach you the ultra-spiritual secret to summoning naiads and talking to rocks. The positive health and wellness benefits of forest bathing are not spiritual, though many people who practice them are

spiritual, and come from many different spiritual traditions. The health and wellness effects are the same for the Methodist, the Mormon, and the Muslim.

I have never been against stuffing a few bills into a shuttle driver's fist if he was willing to drop me off at a trailhead, but that is a service fairly bought and paid for. But you don't need to pay anyone to guide you into nature to learn forest bathing. Nature has always been there; guides, not so much. Some people pay others to do things for them that they don't want to do themselves, but nobody can go into the woods for you, and honestly getting there is the hardest part. So don't feel bad about paying someone to drive you to the woods if you need a lift, but don't give them a penny to guide you unless they're willing to carry all the heavy stuff, cook your food, make sure you don't get lost, splint your broken leg, and carry you back to the trailhead if you slide down a rock outcropping. That would be money well spent.

People who lived even a few generations ago didn't need an experience called forest bathing, because they were out in nature every day silently and ignorantly reaping its benefits. They lived their lives in the natural environment. They didn't know, and therefore didn't care, that trees use chemical messages to communicate with each other, or that we benefit from breathing in those chemicals messages, called phytoncides. They didn't know that trees share nutrients with each other through an intricate network of roots and fungal filaments, or that they can decide as a group whether to share nutrients with a tree of another species if they sense it is struggling and perceive a benefit in keeping it healthy. People simply walked, and breathed, and looked, and listened, and ate and got dirt on them like we all should.

I have to admit, being a forest bathing guide sounds like a great scheme for making money from people who need to get into the woods and just be there for a while. And I admit that there are a sprinkling of people in this world who have invested a lot of time and resources into building a curriculum to get people into the woods, this piece appealing to the tree-hugger, that one to the scientist, and a third to the PTSD afflicted veteran of the global war on terrorism. I have friends in all of those camps, but my argument to you is that you don't even need to know what is happening to reap most the benefits of forest bathing if you just follow a handful of easy to follow steps, just as you don't have to know the chemical makeup of beer or wine to enjoy its taste.

Seems sort of simplistic, doesn't it? Let me ask you this. Did anyone have to tell you when you were a kid lay on the ground and imagine shapes in the clouds? Or to go into a trance watching the red and orange glow in the coals on a campfire log? Nature often works its magic invisibly and unannounced. So, in many instances, our bodies react positively to the forest conditions without our even knowing it. We may sense some of the effects immediately. Others may follow on quickly or slowly, but the cumulative effects can last for days.

Why is forest bathing so important today? After the industrial revolution, we really lost our way when it comes to nature. We stopped viewing it as our "home" environment and started viewing nature as a spreadsheet of inexhaustible products to be extracted,

transformed, and sold at market. There was an immediate and robust counter-reaction. Americans gained a cursory knowledge of the what of nature therapy from the “naturalist quacks” of the nineteenth century and for a while people began returning to nature via the lodges and health spas that popped up especially on the coasts. That is when camping became popular. Most recently we have learned from those brilliant Japanese health officials and scientists who pioneered the concept of Shinrin Yoku) that contact with nature has a host of positive benefits. And I’m sure we haven’t yet learned the tenth of it all. But today, you can shoulder your way into the forest and bathe there just fine all by yourself, armed with this simple framework, a thermos of potable liquid, and a snack. Some people make the distinction between forest bathing and forest therapy. They say that if you’re wanting forest therapy, then you need a trained specialist to accompany you. I have reservations about that.

Sure, a lot of science went into verifying the obvious fact that being in nature has positive effects on the human body. But the sad fact is that some people took that as a cue to superimpose all sorts of mumbo-jumbo on top of something relatively simple and easy to learn. Nature does the work, but isn’t magic, it is just nature being nature. We human beings have always known intuitively that being in nature makes us feel good, unless we’re being stalked by a panther, mauled by a grizzly bear, or getting sucked dry by mosquitos. The good news is that you’re more likely to be hit by a bus than to be eaten by a bear, so it is statistically safer to be in the forest.

Why You Should Forest Bathe

There are some unfortunates who have so adapted themselves to city living that the thought of getting dirt underneath their fingernails or seeing a bug land on them is enough to send them into convulsions. Our ancestors were tougher than that. My great-great grandfather Christley Garlits lived around the same time as Daniel Boone and Davey Crocket, and was known well enough in his little patch of Appalachia as the person you called upon to rid yourself of a troublesome large predator that they named a creek after him. Didn't matter if it was a bear or a wolf or a catamount that still patrolled the hills. The idea of disappearing into the woods absolutely lit him up inside. It was his calling. Like many of the pioneers of the time, he knew the name of every tree and plant and herb in the forest, where and when they appeared, flowered, went to seed, what ails they cured, and what effects they produced. Our human bodies developed over millions of years in a natural environment that dictated the things that made us feel at home and at peace. Even for modern humanity, that place is not tame but wild.

Our human "fight or flight" mode is the sympathetic nervous system at work. We don't have to worry so much about it because the effects within us are automatic. Sure we can fine tune the system as Christley did to become the respected predator fighter of his territory, but I'm telling you this because the sympathetic nervous system is the one that lights up when we experience stress. Those moments are supposed to be few and far between. Our normal state is controlled by the parasympathetic nervous system that is in control when we "rest and digest." When we are in an urban environment with all of its noise, pollution, and stress, our sympathetic nervous system is dominant most of the time. It isn't normal or healthy to be in fight or flight mode most of the time. Christley, even when he was stalking a panther, was in "rest and digest" mode.

I will tell you that the more time you spend in nature, the more time you will want to spend in nature, because you'll feel the effects of your body having switched back into "rest and digest" mode again. And the more time you spend in nature, the more you will learn about it. So when I say that forest bathing isn't hiking or camping or fishing or hunting, I'm not saying that you can't go out and do those things at the same time as forest bathing. Let's make this distinction. You could be out in the wilderness on a weekend hiking trip, but the whole trip wouldn't be forest bathing. When you are forest bathing, you're pretty much staying in one place, perhaps meandering, checking out certain aspects of the place, and ideally it should last anywhere from half an hour to two hours. But there are no other expectations from the experience. A person who might not be able to climb to a mountaintop can still do forest bathing off of a quiet

trail in a neighborhood park. You are determined to focus on what you are doing without too many distractions.

The Benefits

When we're at work, or in traffic, sitting under artificial lighting, or walking through a giant parking lot, we're in fight or flight mode. Our bodies are churning out cortisol and epinephrine like we're about to go into battle. It is hard to turn off, because we are constantly bombarded with stimuli that activates fight or flight.

What happens when we disconnect from all of this stress, and head out for a walk in the woods? Our eyes are bathed with natural light, and teased with the greens and blues and browns that still tell our brains we're "home." The sounds of moving water, wind in the trees, and birds singing fall on our ears like a lullaby. The scent of the earth, trees, and plants awakens something inside us that, far from filling us with stress, in a matter of minutes make us feel deeply relaxed. Welcome to rest and digest mode, it's where you want to be, and nature therapy can put you and keep you there.

Unfortunately, we are increasingly disconnected from nature. Thoreau sounded an alarm in 1854 with the publication of "Walden." Fifty years later we find John Muir asking "Who has not felt the urge to throw a loaf of bread and a pound of tea in an old sack and jump over the back fence?" and it was a mere decade ago that Richard Louv took up the thread with his instant classic "Last Child in the Woods." That same year, Florence Williams tells us in "The Nature Fix," that the creators of the Mappiness iPhone application, which pings and geotags users twice a day to ask them if they are happy or unhappy, found that the app's users are reporting themselves as being profoundly happier when they're in nature than when they're in an urban setting.

The following benefits of nature therapy, listed in alphabetical order, were identified in the 2017 in-depth review of ten years of studies (2007 – 2017) by Margaret M. Hansen, Reo Jones and Kirsten Tocchini in "Shinrin-Yoku (Forest Bathing) and Nature Therapy: A State-of-the-Art Review" published under a Creative Commons license by the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, and I have added supplementary material to each category from various other sources. While this list appears relatively comprehensive, researchers are continuing to find more benefits from forest bathing. Do you suffer from any of these conditions, or know of anyone who does? Forest bathing might be a good tool for you and them as a care plan component.

Attention Deficit

The attention restoration effects of nature have been shown to benefit those with an existing attention deficit and those without. To cite one study, in 2004, the Amer-

ican Journal of Public Health released findings that strongly suggest that children professionally diagnosed with an attention deficit disorder had milder symptoms in proportion to the greenness of their environment. The widely respected popular magazine Psychology Today published findings suggesting that children with ADHD who spend time in nature can expect improved attention span, cognitive function, and impulse control. Research has shown that it works for adults, too.

Cancer

Dr. Qing Li's research into the relationship between breathing in tree phytoncides and our bodies production of natural killer cells (NK cells) has been instrumental in increasing the public's awareness of the positive effects of nature therapy on cancer patients. Kurt Beil cites a 2015 article by Kim, Jeong, Park, and Lee in the European Journal of Integrative Medicine following eleven breast cancer patients in Seoul, South Korea who participated in a two-week nature immersion study. Their blood was tested before, during, and after the trip to detect NK cell count. From the baseline readings to the end of the two-weeks in nature, NK cells increased nearly 40 percent, and the post-trip readings were still 13 percent above baseline. The findings are important because traditional cancer treatments tend to be immunosuppressive and decrease NK cell activity. The significant and prolonged increase brought about by immersion in nature is a testament to the healing it produces.

Chronic Stress

Forest bathing is believed to decrease chronic stress, and the data suggests a strong relationship. One study with participants diagnosed with stage-one hypertension but also concerned with acute and chronic stress saw participants in a forest therapy program that included meditation and relaxation exercises experience a marked decrease in salivary cortisol, a commonly measured stress hormone. While the meditation and relaxation may have contributed to this decrease, this was not the only such study. Health officials in Japan have been measuring salivary cortisol levels in forest bathers for decades, with consistently positive results. The above entry for cancer also mentioned corollary benefits the participants enjoyed due to improvements to what medical professionals call the allostatic load, which included lower blood pressure and cortisol levels and higher HRV, which resulted in a decrease in chronic inflammation and autonomic nervous system dysfunction.

Coronary Artery Disease (CAD)

After a week of daily 30 minute nature therapy sessions, cardiac function improved in study participants mentioned in the research article by Hansen, Jones, and Tocchini. In another study, released in 2015, Regina Grazuleviciene et al. reported, “In our study improvements observed in exercise tolerance and increased HR recovery after 7 days of 30 min walks in a park environment may be explained by the positive influence of forest-related activities on cardiovascular relaxation and recovery of homeostasis in CAD patients.”

Depression and Anxiety

In one study, nature therapy was 61 percent more effective in battling depression than standard hospital-based psychotherapy. In another, garden walking was used successfully to control depression symptoms in older adults. In a January 2007 article in Public Health, the researchers found that nearly five-hundred volunteers who took part in a twice-a-day forest walks and on a control day. The findings show that “hostility and depression scores decreased significantly, and liveliness scores increased significantly on the forest day compared with the control day. The main effect of environment was also observed with all outcomes except for hostility, and the forest environment was advantageous. Stress levels were shown to be related to the magnitude of the Shinrin Yoku effect.

Heart Rate Variability

In short, having high heart rate variability is a good thing, while low HRV is bad. Our autonomic nervous system is the regulator of our sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. It regulates how fast or slow your heart is beating at any given moment, based on the stresses placed upon it. A properly functioning body will exhibit a high level of heart rate variability, as a reaction to different levels of physical or mental stress. Many factors contribute to HRV, even posture, fitness level, and the presence of chronic diseases. Researchers have found that forest bathing contributes to a high HRV.

High Blood Pressure

Multiple studies show that blood pressure levels and heart rate decrease after only one session of forest therapy, and the effects even translate to settings where study participants are transplanting plants in a garden setting or living in urban areas with a higher tree density. During another one week in a nature setting, the group of study

participants also experienced reduced heart workload, which improved their cardiovascular health.

Post-Surgical Recovery

In a widely referenced study, post-operative patients in a Pennsylvania hospital from the early 1970's to early 80's were deliberately assigned rooms with window views of either a natural setting or a brick wall. Those with the view of the natural scene were consistently released earlier than those with the brick wall view. Notes in their caregiver records also showed fewer negative comments, and they needed less of the stronger classes of medication to control pain. The restorative effects of something as simple as a view of nature strongly suggest that immersion in such a setting will deliver similar results.

Sleep

In a study with participants suffering from insomnia and poor sleep patterns, one group used forest walking to induce relaxation and over a three-month period saw marked improvement in their sleep-wake cycles. They experienced increased sleep time at night after two-hour forest walks in the afternoon, and also reported lower levels of anxiety. There is also an intriguing correlation between sleep quality and simply placing essential oil from an evergreen tree such as pine or spruce in a cool mist aromatherapy humidifier in your bedroom. The phytoncides released into the air produce effects similar to sleeping in the forest.

Type 2 Diabetes

Blood glucose levels decreased in study participants who undertook multiple nature therapy sessions. One study reported in 1998 in the *International Journal of Biometerology* conducted over several years with ninety-seven non-insulin dependent diabetics periodically participating in Shinrin Yoku outings. Their blood glucose and A1C levels decreased after both short and long distance nature walks. The researchers concluded, "Since the forest environment causes changes in hormonal secretion and autonomic nervous functions, it is presumed that, in addition to the increased calorie consumption and improved insulin sensitivity, walking in a forest environment has other beneficial effects in decreasing blood glucose levels."

Of course, you don't have to suffer from any of these ailments to benefit from forest bathing. The fact that nature can combat the above chronic and debilitating conditions should underline strongly that there are multiple benefits for people of any age and

condition. Are you ready to move on to the “how” of forest bathing? I thought you’d never ask!

How to

Finding your place

There are resources available to help you find a great place to immerse yourself in nature. Are there places that are far enough away from civilization, where the sounds and annoyances of the city are remote enough that the quiet of the forest is actually quiet? Depending on where you live, you might have to travel a bit to find the perfect spot, or a handful of promising spots to choose from. This is where your research skills will kick in. Open a web browser and bring up a map program. There are several good ones that are easy to find, so I won't recommend one over the other. But in either map mode or satellite mode, look for the color green. That indicates wooded areas. Zoom out and in to the different map layers, because the way geographical information systems (maps) are laid out, different information will pop up at different zoom levels. If you zoom out to find all the green places near you, and hone in on a few of them, zoom in closer to see what words pop up. Is it private property? Your forest bathing probably isn't going to happen there. Does it say state forest, state park, national park, or nature preserve? You might be in business. Once you've narrowed it down to a few promising sites, open another web browser and type in the name of the forest that popped up on your map. They may have their own webpage that explains what trails are there, how long they are, how they're rated "easy, moderate, strenuous, etc." and you'll want at least in the beginning to stick to the easy and moderate trails. Look for user comments if they're available. They can tell you what experience others have had with the trails you are considering. Another good site for reviews is a website and mobile application called All Trails. It has advice, maps, and driving directions. Your forest bathing spot should be quiet and secluded, so if you're in a forest near a gun club, heavy construction, or a highway, your attention will gravitate to those sounds. Wooded environments with established and well cared for paths are best, but you can even forest bathe in a quiet residential park if you have no other option.

Practice

First, let me say "don't worry!" Everything we will cover in this section is but an aid to getting into the forest and using all your senses to enhance the experience. You're not going on a grueling fifteen-mile hike. The distances you'll walk during a forest bath are negligible. Distance isn't the point. Once you get there, the woods will do the real

work. Our bodies respond with little thought or will power involved. So, the object is to let what nature has to offer through our senses do the work. It is important to disconnect from technology to get the full benefit of forest bathing. If you're going into the woods with your eyes on a smartphone screen, earbuds in place, with no thought about where you are and what is happening, you won't get the full effect. Forest bathing is about getting into nature, being present, and engaging your senses.

Step One: Opening the Gate

When I was six years old, my family moved into a house on the city limits in a small Midwestern town. Our back yard melted into a large grassy field that a real estate company had plotted for development. They only built the first house, and the rest of the field slowly returned to nature as I grew up. At the far end of that sea of wild grass was a 22 acre tract of forest that beckoned to me from my bedroom window. I vividly remember the first time I crossed the field in my Chuck Taylor All Stars and cutoff jeans. Sweat matted my long blond mop of hair as I crossed the sunny field to the edge of "the woods," where the mixed hardwoods towered above me. Taking that first step into the woods is still as fresh in my mind as if it was yesterday. I was enveloped in a green wonderland of birdsong and cool air whispering through the swaying spring canopy. There were trails that wound along the hills and draws leading down to Helm Creek, and perched atop a nearby hill was a lonely glacial puddingstone that became my "thinking rock." Throughout my life, I've returned to that still undeveloped woods to sit atop my rock to reflect and ponder looming life decisions. I've shared the spot with my wife and each of my four children. I tell you this because you should deliberately try to have a similar experience when you enter into nature.

I have camped in some pretty interesting places, bathed in the forests, and hiked hundreds of trail miles since first entering through the tree-gates of the forest, but to this day I still pause for a moment to mark the stepping-off point of my nature escapades. I refer to it as opening the gate. Maybe something deep in our brains does this automatically, because it always feels natural to me, but I find it important to mark the moment. With forest bathing and other nature encounters, it goes hand-in-hand with the next step. To get the full effect of an outing, be deliberate about putting aside thoughts of bills, work stress, ruminations about things that are bothering you. Pause and picture yourself leaving them right there at the wood line, and don't let your mind wander back to get them.

Step Two: Grounding

Once you have entered the gates of the forest, it is good to find a spot not far from where you entered, a place that feels like “your place.” When I forest bathe in the woods behind my childhood home, that place is my “thinking rock” as I mentioned. It isn’t far from where I pass through the gates into my favorite forest space, and I have a strong connection to it that is nearly fifty years old. I’ve aged. The trees in the forest are thicker and taller. But my thinking rock will be there for thousands of years. It is good to stay in that general area for a while focusing on grounding yourself through your senses. If you take three minutes engaging each sense, you’ll be there for approximately fifteen minutes. I think that is ideal. Interact with the environment as nature engages your senses.

When I speak of grounding, I’m not talking about the practice of going barefoot so your feet are in contact with the ground and experiencing the effects of the earth’s natural electrical field. Scientists are still divided on the existence of positive benefits of that practice, though there is nothing wrong with taking your shoes and socks off in the woods, as long as you don’t run your foot through with a thorn. I’m talking about reeling your mind back into your body. There has been a lot of talk spilled recently about the practice of mindfulness. Entire books have been written on the topic, and while I don’t discount the research and results, I think that being deliberate about what you are doing in the forest will get you to the place where nature can take over and guide you to what you need at that moment. Simply be where you are. When you entered the forest, you left your baggage at the gate. Now that you’re immersed in nature, simply stop. Get out of your head and back into your body, because that is where your senses reside, and you’re going to be using all of them. Find a place to stand, and drop everything you might be carrying. Relax your arms and let them hang at your sides. Press your toes against the bottoms of your shoes and then relax them. Feel the gravity pushing down on you. Breathe deeply, in and out.

While mindfulness and meditation are great things in themselves, they aren’t the main goal of forest bathing, simply being present in your body and allowing your senses to kick in is the goal. If you can remember back to when you were little, and the nature experiences you may have had then, you’re on the right track. Put yourself in the state of mind of a child without a care in the world, who revels in new experiences and the ones that never get old. There is always a temptation to speed up our pace, especially for the beginner and specifically at the beginning of a forest bath. This is exacerbated by the world as it has become outside the forest. We’re always on the go, go, go. Our minds race from one thing to another, flitting like a bee from one blossom to another. In the forest, let the bees do that. Our object is to slow down, and it can be painful. If you catch yourself speeding up, or noticing that your mind is racing away from where you are, stop. Literally. Stand still. Ground yourself again in the forest. This is something we will always battle, but with practice, we can greatly lessen it by bringing our minds back into our bodies and making our bodies slow down and stop. It

is important to note here, again, that our mobile devices can completely derail forest bathing. Many of us (myself included) love to take pictures of the neat things we find in nature. Forest bathing is not the time for that. While I do bring my mobile device with me, primarily for instances where there might be a medical emergency or if I've wandered so far away from the trail that I become disoriented and need to bring up my GPS location on the map, forest bathing isn't the time to be taking pictures or answering phone calls or texts. Don't just put your phone in airplane mode, turn it off and stow it.

Activating the Senses

Now that you're in the forest, let the land and your five senses do the work. Be still and silent, and get your bearings in your surroundings. Clear your mind of everything except what is going on around you. There is such a marked difference between what a forest bathing individual normally experiences in the city and what he or she experiences in nature. As a powerful example, look around you for the biggest, most beautiful tree near you. Consider that over a hundred years ago, possibly more, a seed fell to the ground and before long, roots took hold and tiny leaves shot up, right in that spot. A seedling! As the sun passed by each day on its circuit, dappled sunlight played across the leaves and the tree's roots went down in search of water. The tree canopy high up didn't allow a lot of sunlight to hit the forest floor, so the seedling grew slowly but steadily. This was a good thing because the slower those central rings grew, the stronger the mature tree became. Seasons passed. Years marched by, spring buds popping, fall leaves dropping, winter snow falling to the ground from the crooks of its bare branches. Rings on rings on rings added to its girth. One year, a strong wind toppled one of the old trees near our seedling. With the old tree's canopy gone, sunlight poured onto the small tree's leaves, photosynthesis did its job and it grew taller and stronger, finally becoming part of the upper canopy! Tall and straight, strong from the center with roots intertwined with the other trees of its species, it became the perfect specimen that now stands before you. But even when the end comes for our tree, it won't be the end. Imagine if we come back in two hundred years. Our tree will be tall and thick and old. One day a strong wind or an ice storm will come, and just like the old tree that crashed to the forest floor that gave him the sunlight needed to grow to full height, now his own day has come to fall. The crash is louder than thunder! Down he goes. But it will take another two hundred years at the least to decompose, slowly reversing the process that got him to full height. The elements will do their work, and the bark will separate. The once steely wood, with its tight, perfect rings, will soften. Slowly it will turn to humus. Mushrooms will abound in the rich nutrients. Squirrels will scamper up and down the length of its rotting verticality. Deer will think nothing of bounding effortlessly over the decaying trunk. Two hundred more years will go by,

and in the rich soil near where he once stood proudly, a seed will fall, and before long, roots will take hold and tiny leaves will shoot up. The cycle will repeat itself until the end of time. And there you stand watching, one hour out of eons of time, under the coolness of that towering canopy. Take it in with all of your senses.

Hearing

What forest sounds are closest to you? The birds up in the trees chirping. The rustling leaves. The rush and tumble of a creek. What audible interactions are going on? One animal calling to another. Where is the answer coming from, or is it mostly quiet? Listen to the quiet, too. What is the most quiet sound that you can hear? Is it your own heart beating? Is it your own breath? You are part of the nature all around you, after all. The other creatures around you can hear or feel your breath. Which ones sense your presence? They're all around you. Are the sounds pleasant to you? Do they fill you with joy? Do they make you feel calm? Take time to really listen, and let the sounds of nature wash over you.

Sight

Sight is the easiest sense to deprive ourselves of. We have to plug our ears to stop hearing; plug our nose to stop smelling; it is nearly impossible to stop feeling (unless we've been hurt enough times that you are just done with it!), and to stop tasting we have to stop eating, and that'll never happen at least in my case. But to stop seeing, all we have to do is close our eyelids. Once you've entered the forest and found a good place to stop, hop off the trail a step or two and close your eyes. Your other senses will heighten, and that is okay. Go with it. Lose yourself in the deliciousness of everything else the forest is offering. Wait for a minute or two with your eyes closed. Orient yourself to whatever sensations draw your attention, then open your eyes again. What immediately catches your attention? Let your sight do what it does naturally. Is there motion? Follow it. Is there a flash of color? Drink it in. Does something particularly interesting catch your eye? Check it out. The varied hues of nature's blues, greens, and browns soothe us with no conscious effort on our part, so don't focus a lot of energy on "really seeing." You are really seeing. Let your eyes drink it in.

Smell

At any given time, the forest will offer up an abundance of scents. If it has been raining recently, you will be able to smell the spiciness of the various tree barks. In the spring, flowers will be in the forefront, as will wild onion and garlic, the smell of the earth itself, the heady decomposition of last autumn's leaves, and the fallen trees

slowly returning their nutrients to the soil. If you are near evergreens, you'll be able to pick up the easily recognizable scent of the alpha-pinenes and other turpenes that they produce. This is the origin of the natural killer (NK) cell production we discussed earlier. If the creeks and streams are running fresh, you'll smell the wet and faintly fishy scent. If it is still and warm, what scents are carried in the humidity? If the wind is blowing, what messages is it carrying? As you progress through the natural setting, the scents will change, with distance, elevation or descent, temperature, time of day. Continue to be aware of the smells that are present over the entirety of your forest bath. Scent is one of the most powerful sense triggers we have. You remember vividly what Christmas smelled like as a child. When you catch one of those scents even today, it has the power to take you right back to that place and time. The same will be true of your forest baths. If you have been outside a lot as you grew up, being in the forest now might bring back some of those memories. And you will remember the scents of your forest baths for years to come. Especially near waterfalls and running water, but in the outdoors in general, there are more negative ions in the air. They are the most beneficial for our health. When we breathe deeply in nature, the negative ions make us feel good, they energize us, they help our health. So even if you don't smell anything, keep breathing deeply of the forest air. It is working its magic invisibly.

Touch

Can you feel your own body? Is the wind blowing in your hair or evaporating your sweat? Is the sun shining on your skin? Focus on all of the sensations you are feeling. Are your fingers cold, or is your neck warm? As you are walking, did you stop to touch a slab of granite jutting from the earth? Did tall grass tickle the palm of your hand as you brushed over it? Is the air temperature changing as you walk into and out of shade, or go up and down hills? Don't be afraid to interact with nature, to "get dirt on your hands." Copious research tells us that contact with microbes builds our immune system, so go ahead and explore the forest floor. Most of the life in a forest dwells in the soil. Coming into contact with the soil microbe *Mycobacterium vaccae* is proven to boost serotonin levels in the brain. Peel back the bark on a fallen tree and see what is living there. Turn up some leaves or a rock. You can lather off later, while you're out in nature, let dirt do its thing.

Taste

You may be thinking, "Okay, I'll go forest bathing, but I'm not tasting the forest!" You might end up surprising yourself. I'm not going to suggest that you stick your tongue in the dirt or lick a toad. (You can if you want, but it isn't my thing). One easy way to experience taste while forest bathing is to breathe in deeply through your

mouth. Sure, that's a low-level taste experience, but there are times of the year when the air is so busy carrying pheromones, phytoncides, and other scents, the fragrance of earth and trees, that you truly can taste the air. Other ways to experience taste while forest bathing is if you find berries or fruit that you recognize, or if over time you learn more about which plants, fruits, nuts, and berries are edible. I always recommend that the forest bather bring a thermos of off-the-boil water with which to make tea, either from the plants and flowers found there, or even from the grocery store shelf. If you are so inclined, enjoy a beer or some wine, or keep it simple with a bottle of water, but please respect the forest rules if you're on public land.

Step Three: Interaction

Once you've exercised your senses, it's time to meander for a bit. If you've chosen the place for your forest bath carefully, you will find that well laid out trails can lead to some interesting and beautiful places. If you go off trail to explore, don't go so far that you lose the trail. This is especially important when you're a beginner, or if you don't know the area well. As you spend more time in a specific forest, you will learn the geography and topography with more and more visits. What are you to do while meandering? Think of it as active exploration, but keep your pace slow. This isn't a hike, it is a time to engage with the forest, so proceed slowly, continuing to make use of your five senses. When I talked about grounding earlier as the second of six steps in forest bathing, this may be the time when you decide to walk barefoot for a stretch. You can decide for yourself whether or not you derive any benefit from allowing your body's electrical field mesh with the earth's. If there is a creek, you might even decide to splash your feet in the water. One of the fondest memories I have with my wife and children when the kids were all still at home was the day we all put on old shoes and hiked a mile of the creek that ran through the city park. It was a warm spring day, and everything was in bloom. The trees were full of birds, the dragonflies were insistent on checking all of us out while their metallic blue-green bodies glinted in the sun, frogs were plopping their fat bodies into the water, and minnows chased themselves around our submerged ankles. If you decide to do this, you might want to bring an extra pair of shoes or at least dry socks. Maybe you will wet your hair under a waterfall or splash in a puddle (the child in you still wants to). Or crush a blossom between your palms and smell the scent on your hands. Near the end of your slow meandering, you'll want to look for a place to sit down and just let nature happen.

Step Four: Reception

Once you have found a place to sit down, it is time to slip into passive mode. We're switching from active exploration to passive reception. This is a good time to jot

down some of your observations from the outing, recording things that really spoke to you, but don't write a novel. When we entered the gates and found a place to ground ourselves, reeling ourselves back into our bodies and paying attention to our senses, we were actively soliciting the experience. The same when we began to meander and explore whatever caught our fancy. In reception mode, nature is active and we are passive. This can be tough for some people, but it is one of the best parts of forest bathing. We like to be in charge. But even Alphas take the time to rest and observe. It isn't a sign of weakness, but of strength. By sitting in one spot and in the stillness becoming receptive to whatever nature lets happen, we make some of our deepest connections. Wildlife that was wary of our presence and movement as we were exploring and meandering may become curious as to why we're now suddenly so still. This is the time for noticing things so small, or so unobtrusive that they escaped our notice when we were actively exploring. Now that we are passively bathing, the pressure is off. We've done our work, now it is time for nature to do its own work. You may notice a spider building a web, or a red ant and a black ant fighting a battle to the death. A critter you previously scared may become curious and come closer. You may notice repeating patterns in nature, such as the Fibonacci sequences in fiddleheads, or the bark patterns of different trees, even if you don't yet know their names. Plan to spend twenty to thirty minutes sitting in this spot.

Step Five: Nourishment

When you're done, it is time to break out the thermos and perhaps have a snack. I find that if you don't have any nut allergies, standard GORP (good ol' raisins and peanuts) always satisfies, as do other varieties of trail mix readily available at your local grocer. You can mix it up with dried fruit, or fresh mixed berries and seasonal fruit. Apples and oranges are always good choices, but make sure to pack out the peels and cores. If you learn how to forage safely, it isn't hard to find berries, nuts, and seeds in season right there in the forest, but safety is first. Don't be afraid to pack them in, and then pack them back out. The last thing the next forest bather needs is to find plastic wrappers, orange peels, water bottles, and apple cores in their forest sanctuary. But in my own forest bathing, I go a step further.

Several years ago, a friend who also loves nature and is into bush craft turned me on to the benefits of chaga, which is an edible fungus similar to mushrooms that grows on birch trees. Nutritionists consider it a superfood, but it has to be sustainably harvested. I will note places where I hike, and where foraging is allowed (ask permission before harvesting chaga in places where it isn't allowed, like public lands and preserves. I also have a supplier who sustainably harvests the corky growth. To get the beneficial elements out of the chaga, it has to be cut into chunks, and either boiled or tinctured. Most people boil it, as tincturing it is a complicated process involving alcohol and time. But I've found a middle ground that gets much more of the good stuff out. I

cover the chunks with about a gallon of water and put them in my Instant Pot for three hours. Then I let it cool, pour it into ice cube trays, and freeze it. One session makes enough ice cubes to allow me a glass of chaga tea every morning for about two months. I also bring chaga tea with me when I'm forest bathing, in a thermos. I put one ice cube for each cup of water, bring it to boil, and pour it into my thermos. If you decide to try this, you can add mint leaves, crushed pine needles, nettles, or any number of other goodies the forest is offering up to add a bit more flavor, but again, don't eat it if you don't know that it is safe for humans to eat. If you are by yourself, which in the beginning, I'm assuming you will be, you can eat and drink right there in the spot where you were practicing passive reception. If you're with someone else or with a group, you will probably all want to gather in a place large enough to hold all of you. I prefer staying in the forest to complete this step, though some people like to head closer to the spot where they entered. That is fine, but at the end of the outing, it is time to head back to where you began, and to "close the gate" so to speak.

Step Six: Closing the Gate

Closing the gate to your forest bath is as easy as leaving the forest and turning back to face the place where you entered. You left all of your baggage there, right? Many people find that this mental pile looks a lot smaller, or at least it appears less threatening than it did when they entered. Face the gates and call to mind three things about your forest bath for which you are grateful. Speak them out loud, if to nobody but yourself. Something as simple as, "I am so grateful that I was able to see the sun glinting off that hawk's feathers as it soared above me." Gratitude in itself is something that increases our well-being.

The cumulative experiences of being present in nature with all of your senses engaged will have filled you with calmness, increased your health, and put your autonomic nervous system firmly into "rest and digest" mode. Those benefits will stay with you for days. So until your next forest bath, enjoy the benefits. Making time to regularly forest bathe will only increase the benefits, so whether you can slip an outing into your schedule once a month, once a week, or even several times per week, try to make it a regular thing.

Beyond Forest Bathing

Once you have firmly established your forest bathing habits, you may want to take to an even higher level. What follows are some suggestions for going out with groups, for some interesting activities you can incorporate into Step Three: Interaction, a few of my own thoughts on bringing some of the benefits of the forest right into your home, and finally I address some practical matters.

Forest Bathing with Groups

As with any group activity, beginning can be awkward and make us feel self-conscious. If you feel this way, I suggest that you go out a few times by yourself using my method until you are comfortable with the flow of the experience. When dealing with others on the same forest bath, it truly can be like bathing. We are exposing some of the most private parts of ourselves to the scrutiny of others. But once you become more comfortable, and can keep yourself focused on the grounding, interaction, and passive reception required of good forest bathing, you might actually desire company and the joy of introducing others to the benefits. Keep in mind that the others may have other methods of bathing, do it in a different sequence, or incorporate practices with which you aren't familiar or comfortable. That isn't always a bad thing, because we are always capable of learning new things that add value to our lives. After all, you've nearly finished a book about forest bathing, right? I suggest that before everyone entering the gates, that you all explain briefly how you forest bathe, to see if everyone can get on the same wavelength. People may go to different places to ground themselves. Some may want to be alone, and others not mind company. The same is true for Interaction and Reception. But the Nourishment step is something that most everyone will want to get back together for. This is a great time to pass on something important you saw or learned, or to actively listen to what others have experienced.

Practices for Extended Forest Bathing

On a partly cloudy day, lay down on the ground, look up at the sky and watch the clouds. This is something we all did as children, and it is as comforting and fun as an adult as it was back then. The blue of the sky also has positive health benefits, and

if you're looking up through the branches of a tree, the waving leaves only add to the experience.

Pick a color and see how many of that colored thing you can find as you are meandering and interacting. You might be surprised how many things you see.

Walk barefoot on and off trail. Off trail is trickier and you have to be careful. Step tentatively with the ball of the foot first, gingerly, checking that there are no thorns or sharp rocks, then slowly and as silently allow the heel of the foot to follow. Make as little noise as possible. Keep your balance, and your attention on the destination you have chosen. The destination is not important, it is the journey. If you want, after you've reached your destination, and completed your task, turn back around and return from where you started.

Inspect a leaf. Pay attention to its design. Leaves from different trees are markedly different. Is the surface shiny or matte? Is the underside fuzzy or sticky? In what pattern are the veins configured? What shape is the end of the stem where it was attached to the tree? Does it have a distinctive smell?

In autumn, if you go forest bathing with someone else or in a group, have another person cover you with leaves, then cover them with leaves. You did it as a kid. Does it bring back memories?

If you are with a forest bathing group, try sitting in a circle with everyone facing outward. Pick a person to start, and have each person explaining what they see from where they are sitting.

For a real treat, try a sunrise forest bath in which you get to the spot where you practice passive reception before the sun rises. Watch the sky change colors and the sun lighting up the landscape as it rises.

When people think of forest bathing, they may think of spring and early summer outings when the weather is perfect, or when the hardwood leaves are at the peak of their autumn perfection, when the worst of the bugs aren't out yet or have gone dormant, and everything is peachy keen. But there is a wisdom and logic to going out forest bathing in all but the worst of weather conditions. There is a wonder in being caught in a rain shower. And you will learn to love your favorite spots in all of their varied seasonal dressing. The forest in winter with freshly fallen snow is a far cry from the throes of sexy spring, but equally beautiful. You see things in the bare trees that you never noticed before. Scents buried in the luxury of summer reveal themselves on the cold embrace of winter. Animals leave their tracks unapologetically. Birds of a different feather flock together, and make different kinds of rackets.

Spirituality

There are many spiritualties compatible with nature therapy, but I cannot recommend one to you over the others. As a Catholic myself, I'm inclined to direct my

gratitude for the beauty of nature to its Creator and perhaps recite one of the Psalms that celebrate creation's beauty before I finish my forest bath. Several years ago, when I was working in a busy factory, I decided to start praying the Catholic Church's "Liturgy of the Hours" which are the verses and readings that have traditionally been recited in monasteries by monks and women religious. They are based on a four week cycle of Psalms, and many of them show a profound gratitude to God for the beauty of creation. One that caught my attention early was a passage that said, "let the land and all its bears rejoice." At least, that is what I thought it said. In truth, it said "let the earth and all it bears rejoice." I was embarrassed when I discovered my error, but from then until now, whenever I read that verse, I see rejoicing bears, and chuckle. But forest bathing doesn't only bring down the heart rates of Church members. It brings it down for everyone. So if you're Catholic, forest bathe as a Catholic. If you're Buddhist, forest bathe as a Buddhist. If you're Muslim, or Hindu, or Shinto, atheist or agnostic, bathe as you are. If forest bathing meshes well with elements of your religion, feel free to incorporate them. You won't be the first to do so!

Bringing the Forest Home

Bring plants and small potted trees into your house. They clean the air and release chemicals like pheromones and phytoncides mentioned earlier that can make your indoor air healthier

Find a good, ethical, and sustainable supplier of essential oils. You can use diffusers and cool air aromatherapy humidifiers, or go old-school and place orange peels on simmer in the kitchen to release the scents of nature.

Bring the sounds of nature into your home sometimes. Instead of thrumming, throbbing music, look for nature soundtracks.

If you buy candles for indoor forest bathing, be choosy. Most candles made in the U.S. are made from petroleum products and frankly are unhealthy to burn in an enclosed area. Look for candles made with soy or sumac wax and fragranced with natural fragrances instead of those produced in a laboratory.

Bring in fresh cut flowers when they are in season, and boughs and wreaths in the wintertime. If you have south facing windows, or grow lights, keep an indoor herb garden for the scent and nutrition they provide.

Plant a garden and tend it, or put in raised beds, even if just to raise some cherry tomatoes and a few kitchen herbs, some onions and peppers to make salsa.

Put bird feeders in your yard outside your windows

Some Practical Matters

Before you leave to forest bathe, always let someone know where you are going, when you are leaving, and when you expect to return.

When I am out hiking or backpacking, I generally follow the Leave No Trace philosophy, but there are caveats, especially when forest bathing. It is never acceptable to litter. If you brought it in, pack it out with you. If you find trash while you are out, please be kind and pick it up so that others don't have to see it. It is part of being a good steward. If you find so much litter that you can't possibly collect it all yourself, let the land managers know.

Don't deface the landscape by carving your initials into trees or painting rocks. Follow the instructions posted on public lands. While the natural environment should not be a resource to be managed as if people were destructive outsiders, some people don't get that message.

Hunters, hikers, campers, and really anyone who enjoys the natural environment takes what he or she needs from the wild and puts it to use. Munching on a bit of spring onion or popping a few berries into your mouth is called wild harvesting, and it can be done in a non-intrusive and non-depleting way, but it is never acceptable to wild harvest for commercial gain on public property.

Epilogue

If this book has been helpful to you, I hope that you'll click on over to jimgarlits.com and let me know how your forest bathing adventures are going. I'd also like to give you another book! If you love being out in nature like me, I hope you'll hike vicariously with me as you turn the pages of "Tripping Into Trail Days: A short misadventure on the Appalachian Trail" I appreciate reader reviews, too. All the best to you!

A critique of his ideas & actions.



Jim Garlits
Forest Bathing
The No-Nonsense Guide to Shinrin Yoku
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