



The HEART of NATURE

“My days in the wilderness will live with me always. Everything there is so alive and familiar. The very stones seem talkative and brotherly. One fancies a heart like our own must be beating in every crystal and cell. No wonder when we consider that we all have the same Father and Mother.” —John Muir: *My Life with Nature**



Wild creatures attract us because we have a natural affinity for those sharing the gift of life. Communing with fellow living beings helps us discover the richness of our own souls.

One evening at the Sacramento Wildlife Refuge in Northern California I observed five swans resting on a large pond. Because sundown was not far off, I stayed to see if the swans would fly off the water. Instead, hundreds of swans flew in from every direction and landed on the pond. As the sky turned violet over the Coast Range, flock after flock gracefully fell from the sky. Slowing their descent with outstretched wings, the swans seemed suspended in midair as they drifted downward. Long after the sun had set and the scene had disappeared in total blackness, I continued to hear the splashing and “*woo-ho, woo-ho*” of arriving flocks.

* Excerpts from Joseph Cornell, *John Muir: My Life with Nature* (Nevada City: Dawn Publications, 2000).

During magical encounters with nature, one is like a cell fed by osmosis—absorbing the immediate environment. During osmosis a cell not only receives from its environment but gives something of itself in return. In the case of human beings, we give back joy of communion and gratitude. As Meister Eckhart said, “What a man takes in by contemplation . . . he pours out in love.”

The pioneering Japanese environmentalist, Tanaka Shozo, said, “The care of rivers is not a question of rivers but of the human heart.” Through love, we begin to feel ourselves connected to everything around us. Our actions toward other beings become more caring, because we understand that, in harming another, we are harming a part of ourself.



To create a society that truly loves and reveres the natural world, we must offer its citizens life-changing experiences in nature. One moment of entering deeply into nature can inspire in people new attitudes and priorities in life.

A friend of mine as a child was so enchanted by the stars that she'd stare for hours into the night sky. She told me, “I couldn't understand why people weren't all outside gazing up at the sky in wonderment. Didn't they see the stars?” For children, the world is magical because everything is alive.

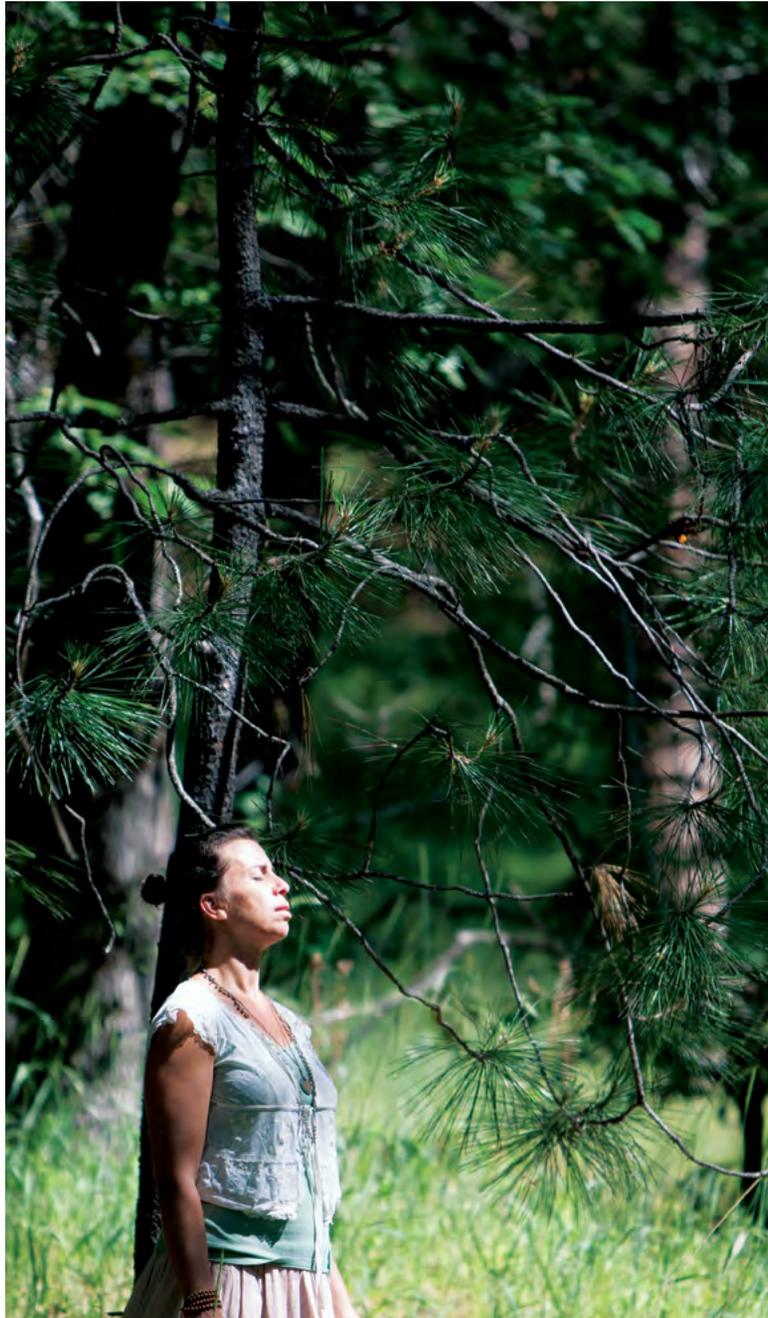
In his book *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos*, Brian Swimme writes, “The Indians of South America teach that to become human ‘one must make room in oneself for the immensities of the universe.’”*

Imagine yourself gazing at a mountain lake that's particularly stunning. When you are deeply attentive, everything becomes alive and vibrant. Then, suddenly, worries about the past or future steal your attention away from the present moment. As

soon as your mind wanders, your connection with the aliveness and beauty of your surroundings vanishes. To merge with the sea of life, empty the mind of distractions, so that the great sea can race in and fill you.

In the following pages, you will find innovative exercises that will help you experience a joyous connection with the natural world.

*Brian Swimme, *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).



FOREST BATHING

“I hear the wind among the trees
playing celestial symphonies.”

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

When we walk through a forest, nature’s benevolence flows into us as sunshine flows into trees. Beneath soaring pines and giant, spreading oaks, one’s thoughts naturally become expansive and harmonious.

Forest Bathing, or *Shinrin-yoku*, is the Japanese practice of going to the forest to receive mental and physical healing. I first learned about Forest Bathing years ago in the Japanese Alps.

Forest plants emit essential wood oils and airborne chemicals to protect themselves from insects and decay. Studies show that forest aromas benefit humans as well. Researchers have discovered that “forest bathing” reduces stress, lowers blood sugar, increases concentration, strengthens the immune system, builds up vitality, and even has anti-cancer benefits.

All cultures recognize that trees uplift the human spirit. To ancient people, trees were channels for the gods; forests were humankind’s first temples and sanctuaries.

Trees, living high in the sky, receive 95 percent of their sustenance from the atmosphere. Drawing nourishment from the sun and sky, trees express a divine benevolence. Buddhist scriptures speak of the unlimited kindness of trees: how they give generously, and offer protection and shelter to all beings.

The Sharing Nature FOREST BATHING EXERCISE

Begin your walk in the forest by finding a magical portal between two trees. Pass through the doorway, keeping your senses alert.



- * Feel the presence of the trees around you,
- * Follow their trunks high into the sky,
- * Observe their spreading branches.
- * Listen to the voices of the birds, and of the trees.
- * See and feel the wind flowing through the forest.
- * Smell and breathe in the healing woodland fragrances.

RECIPROCAL BREATHING



Gaze into the sky . . . and locate the sun. Observe the surrounding trees absorbing the sun's light energy, making plant sugar, and discharging oxygen through photosynthesis.

An average-sized tree releases enough oxygen each day to sustain four people. Breathe deeply; fill your lungs with life-giving oxygen, given to you by your forest friends. As you exhale, gratefully return the favor, offering carbon dioxide to the nearby trees.

On the underside of a leaf are the largest number of tiny openings (stomata) through which air enters and exits a tree. Reach out and gently hold a leaf, bringing your nose close to the leaf's underside. Inhale the oxygen released by the tree and then exhale carbon dioxide into the leaf. As you breathe in and out, be aware of how interconnected you are with the forest, and of the reciprocal relationship all beings have with one another.

*“Between a human and a tree is the breath.
We are each other's air.” (Margaret Bates)*

Continue walking and feel yourself united with all that is. Use the words of George Washington Carver to open your heart to all creation:

“All flowers talk to me and so do hundreds of little things in the woods. I learn what I know by watching and loving everything.”

BECOME PART OF THE FOREST



If you could live in this forest by becoming a tree, what kind of tree would you choose?

Find a good place to stand—and face the sun.

Close your eyes. Feel yourself rooted firmly in the earth—and living high in the sky. Feel the rays of the sun warming you. Bathe in the sunlight and open air.

Visualize your body as a leaf. Feel the sun's rays flowing into you,

turning light into life. A large, healthy oak may have 250,000 leaves. Extend your arms and imagine you are all the leaves on a tree—each leaf receiving the light of the sun.

Listen to the sounds of the forest—close by—and far away.

Open your eyes. See the many varied expressions of forest life surrounding you: the trees—bushes—birds—rocks—grasses and flowers.

All these things live with you in cooperation and harmony. Delight in the benevolence and unity all Life shares.



FIND A BEAUTIFUL PLACE in the forest and reflect on the following thought:

“All terrestrial things are essentially celestial.”

—*John Muir*

This insight is especially true for trees. In what ways do trees and forests inspire you? What noble qualities do you feel trees express?

A few words ABOUT FOREST BATHING

All plants have phytoncides: active substances with antimicrobial properties that kill or inhibit the growth of bacteria, microscopic fungi, and proto-



zoa. Some trees release into the atmosphere volatile phytoncides that are capable of producing an effect at a distance. Studies have shown that the air in coniferous forests, and particularly in young pine forests, is practically sterile and free of harmful microflora.

In 1982 the director of the Japanese Forest Agency hypothesized that “bathing” in a phytoncide-rich environment would promote better health.

He proposed the idea of forest bathing for relaxing the mind and for stress management.



In 2004 the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries initiated scientific studies to prove the therapeutic effects forests have on human health. Their studies showed positive results for numerous areas of physical health.

In Japan today there are forty-two approved Forestry Therapy Bases offering mental and physical healing. At some sites, forest therapy patients stay for two nights; they receive a medical checkup on arrival, spend their free time walking in the woods, and have another checkup before leaving. Patients are able to see significant improvements on their final exam. Many Japanese companies include forest therapy in their employee health-care benefits and wellness programs.

To receive the greatest benefit from their time in the forest, people are encouraged to stimulate and use all their senses.

For more information about Forest Bathing, contact the International Society of Nature and Forest Medicine at the following address: www.infom.org/resources.