

The Magic of Forest Bathing + How To Incorporate It Into Your Self-Care Routine

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As a child I remember spending what seemed like endless summer days climbing trees and wading through streams. As I got older my love for the woods grew, and after three years of living in the mountains and working with at-risk teens, I settled in Western Massachusetts where I began studying yoga and meditation at the Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health.

During one of my many wanderings in the woods here, I came to sit in meditation against the trunk of an oak tree. My mind became so quiet and my sense of gratitude and peace so deep that it took me a few moments to realize that a black bear had walked up and was standing no more than 2 feet behind me. During that moment I meditated with the bear, and although all the survival instincts rose up within me, I maintained my seat and waited until the bear walked off into the forest and slipped into the brush.

It was one of the most powerful experiences of my life and a memory I will always hold dear.

Now as the director of the Kripalu Schools, with a family and a hectic schedule, I spend a lot of time poring over spreadsheets, on email, and otherwise sitting in an office behind a desk, but every day I make sure to step outside and take a walk with the trees. It's an incredibly simple practice that makes a huge difference in how I feel.

“The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness.” — John Muir





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In recent years, Richard Louv coined the term [Nature-Deficit Disorder](#) to better define the negative effects of being cut off from nature. Louv wrote the groundbreaking book [Last Child in the Woods](#), which, along with numerous other studies, details our decreasing connection with nature and time spent outdoors.

In fact, according to the Natural Wildlife Federation, the [average American child spends only 30 minutes outside each day](#)—compared with seven hours per day of screen time. Meanwhile, rates of childhood obesity, mood disorders, and ADHD have skyrocketed, and

many health professionals believe there is a connection.

This brings us to the 1980s in Japan, when the Japanese Forest Service developed a program they called [Shinrin-Yoku](#), which translates as [forest bathing](#). The program was developed based on an intuitive understanding that being in a healthy forest, full of mature, beautiful trees, good circulation of air, and tranquil scenery has a healing effect on the mind and body.

Studies have since shown that [forest bathing can lower blood pressure and heart rate](#), increase subjective feelings of well-being and relaxation, decrease anxiety and fatigue, and lower stress hormones such as cortisol and noradrenaline.

Although it may sound intimidating—especially if you’re a city dweller—forest bathing can be easy for urbanites. All it takes is a 20- or 30-minute walk in a grassy park with trees. If you aren’t sure how to get started, I recommend trying one of the following:

1. Go for a picnic.

Now that I am a father, one of my favorite things to do is to take my children into the woods for a walk. We listen to the wind; we throw stones in the lake; we sit under the trees and have snacks. This is also a great way to get your children in the habit of spending time outdoors. But this is a fun way to spend some time outdoors whether you have kids or not.

2. Take a short digital detox.

Try to resist the temptation to “capture” the moment with an Instagram or Facebook post. See if you can enjoy a beautiful sunset or the silhouette of a majestic tree without having to put a piece of technology between you and the moment.

3. Try sound meditation.

When we are outside, even in a city park, there are amazing sounds to listen to: wind in the trees, birds singing, running water, etc. A wonderful practice is to close your eyes and focus your attention on the sounds you can hear. Even a one-minute sound meditation can help calm the mind and the body.

Forest bathing is an activity that requires less of us. It’s about nondoing and practicing the art of being—and it’s really much easier than you might think. We live in an age of chronic stress, poor diet, and lack of exercise, which are contributing to the rise of lifestyle diseases—heart disease, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, obesity, colon cancer—which will grab hold of us if we continue this pattern.

As you go about your busy life, I urge you to find your “moment with the bear,” whether it’s a 20-minute stroll in a city park or an hour-long meditation at the summit of a mountain—and use forest bathing as a way to find healing and to reverse the effects of modern lifestyles on our health and well-being.

Related reads:

- [Why You Need To Try Japanese Forest Bathing](#)
- [What IS An Aura? \(And How Can You See Yours?\)](#)
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