

Thinking Through

Philosophy, Mythology, Spirituality, and Transformational Wisdom



Monday, February 6, 2017

Forest Bathing

In the new age of multitasking it's radical to monotask. Stripping away all distractions and focusing on a single thing seems quaint, dated, or even seditious. We pay a lot of lip service to mindfulness and being in the now, but we rarely do it.



In Japan a new practice is taking shape called *shinrin-yoku* or forest bathing – a slow, meandering walk in nature without plan or purpose. A growing body of evidence shows that contemplative immersion in any natural environment produces significant shifts in body chemistry and consciousness. In a series of controlled experiments, people who practiced *shinrin-yoku* for as little as fifteen minutes experienced lower concentrations of cortisol, a lower pulse rate, lower blood pressure, greater parasympathetic nerve activity, and lower sympathetic nerve activity than their counterparts in city environments. In plain English, they felt better – a lot better.

The term *shinrin-yoku* was first coined by the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries in 1982. Initially researchers supposed that the benefits of *shinrin-yoku* came from ingesting (through the breath) volatile substances called phytoncides, the essential oils of wood such as a-Pinene and limonene. But determining causation for the measurable, beneficial effects of *shinrin-yoku* is not as easy as experiencing them – just get outside. Besides, not all of us have easy access to woodland forests. Some of us live in the desert, or by the sea. Trees aren't essential for *shinrin-yoku*. Any kind of natural setting will do.

There's no doubt that human life has changed dramatically in the last century. For hundreds of thousands of years we lived mostly outside without the benefit of electric light. Up until quite recently, the vast majority of us were engaged in hunting or agriculture of one kind or another – working long hours under an open sky in close contact with nature and the cycles of the seasons. When electric light, central heating, and air conditioning brought us all inside our lives changed forever. We lost touch with the natural world. We no longer know the names of the stars, let alone the plants and animals. Then came screens: first television, then computers, and now all manner of hand-held devices. For all the benefits of these wonderful machines, there's a cost – physically, mentally, and spiritually.

So how do you do *shinrin-yoku*? The first thing to realize is that this is not hiking. Hiking is goal oriented. You set a destination, choose a path, and measure success by distance traveled. Some hikers even talk about "bagging peaks" as if they were possessions to be carried home and stored on a trophy shelf. *Shinrin-yoku*, on the other hand, has nothing to do with conquest and acquisition.

Here are a few guidelines to keep in mind when you head out to *shinrin-yoku*.

1. Leave your phone/camera in the car.
2. Move slowly, stop often, watch, listen, and breathe.
3. Go alone.
4. If you go with others, make an agreement to refrain from talking until it's over.
5. Include some sitting. Feel your way to a special spot, sit down, and just be.

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About Me



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Why no cameras or phones? Because the whole point of shinrin-yoku is to shift consciousness from one modality to another. We all love our screens, and every time we look at one there's a release of endorphins. That's why it feels good. In shinrin-yoku we set aside this habit for a little while. Also, as much as I love photography, it distracts from the focus of shinrin-yoku. We don't want to spend our time thinking about how best to record this wonderful experience. Making art is important, but let's leave that for another time. For now, just be in the experience. In shinrin-yoku, the less you do, the more you'll be.

When we move slowly, mindfully, and without a destination in mind, we come out of our busy-mind and into the present moment. The wind comes alive – we hear it in the trees, we feel it on our skin, we see it in the waving meadow grasses. And through its scent we come to know something of the wider world – the loamy earth, the salt of the sea, the rain on distant mountains, and the warmth of coming spring. These are the things we usually miss, and they're right under our nose.

Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh teaches walking meditation – slow and mindful walking, matching the steps with the breath, not talking, not thinking, just feeling the loving support of the earth with your bare feet. When we walk mindfully we give ourselves the opportunity to get back in touch with our body. We are not walking for outer purpose – to get to the store, to get to the office, to get back to the car – we are walking just to walk. We are free. We simply enjoy the wash of gratitude and beauty that comes over us as we awaken to the unbroken intimacy we share with our Earth Mother. We feel a deep sense of wellness and belonging rise up from our core. We know we are home in the world. We are no longer strangers here. The boundaries dissolve.

In his 1836 book *Nature* Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote about such a moment:

“Crossing a bare common in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. In the woods, too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life is always a child. In the woods is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, – no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, – my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, master of servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.”

Even before we first crawled down from the trees in the African savannah a million years ago and began walking upright, we have always been at home in the wild world. Why would now be any different? We are made of the stuff of the world. The earth is our mother, our brother, our sister, and our father. We have walked a long way. But we are always home.

Posted by © Peter Bolland at 9:55 AM



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