

Forest bathing, or shinrin-yoku, can be defined as immersing oneself in a forest to mindfully engage with the surroundings in order to awaken the senses. Although the term was first coined in Japan in 1982, forest bathing can trace its roots back several centuries to other mindful activities also developed in Japan. The practice has well-documented health benefits and consequently has caught on around the world as an antidote to the stresses and anxieties found in the modern industrialized world.

FROM HAIKU TO SHINRIN-YOKU

A BRIEF HISTORY OF FOREST BATHING

Forest bathing is based on the Japanese term *shinrin-yoku* (森林浴), which was coined by Tomohide Akiyama of the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries in 1982, in part as a way beyond logging to garner value from the forest. In Japanese, the term comprises three kanji characters—the first

character is composed of three trees and means “forest,” the second character is two trees and refers to the interconnectedness of the forest, and the third character connotes the luxury of being fully engulfed in the abundance that surrounds you.

The essence of forest bathing, however, goes back a lot further than when the term was coined. As evidenced in haiku poems about nature and with the concept of *wabi-sabi*—the beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete—much of traditional Japanese culture is based in a deep understanding of and connection to nature. Ikebana, the Japanese art of arranging flowers, for example, dates back to the sixth century; it focuses on a personal and direct relationship with nature. According to one of Japan’s most influential modern ikebana practitioners, artist Toshiro Kawase, ikebana helps one realize that “the whole universe is contained within a single flower.”¹

The ancient people of Japan honored sacred spirits that they recognized in nature, manifesting in mountains, rocks, rivers, and trees. Shugend Buddhist priests, or Yamabushi, are mystics and warriors whose origins go back to at least the eighth century. These

hermitic seekers live in the mountains, pursuing spiritual powers gained through asceticism. Their traditional role was to help guide people to one’s true nature and to teach discipline and warrior ways. Yamabushi believe that the highest truth exists in nature. Shugend is a path to help people strip away excess, to understand themselves better through immersion in the power and strength of the natural world. Everything in nature is considered sacred and healing—be it a stone or a river—and practitioners use rituals to honor each of the elements: earth, air, water, and fire.

What religious ascetics have intrinsically known for two thousand years, modern researchers have confirmed with science and data. Japanese forestry administrator Tomohide Akiyama was aware of the pioneering studies of the immune-boosting effects of phytoncides, essential oils exuded by certain trees and plants, when he first proposed forest bathing in 1982. Since then, much research has focused on the stress-busting and mood-enhancing benefits of exposure to phytoncides in nature....

BY JULIA PLEVIN



Forest bathing is about the journey, not the destination, and about being mindfully engaged while in the woods.



FOREST BATHING AND MODERN LIFE

We're living in a pivotal moment in human history when the spiritual and the scientific worlds are merging. We're beginning to understand what happens on both a physical and subatomic level as we engage with nature. It's been scientifically shown that spending time immersed in nature reduces stress, lowers heart rate, lowers cortisol levels, decreases inflammation, boosts the immune system, improves mood, increases the ability to focus, jump-starts creativity, increases energy levels, and makes us more generous and compassionate.²

In a study spanning visitors to twenty-four forests, Japanese researchers showed that when people strolled through a forested area, their levels of the stress hormone, cortisol, plummeted almost 16 percent more than when they walked in an urban environment.³ The effects were quickly apparent: within minutes of beginning a walk in the woods, the subjects' blood pressures showed improvement. Results like these led Dr. Qing Li to declare "forest medicine" a new medical science that "could let you know how to be more active, more relaxed, and healthier with reduced stress and reduced risk of lifestyle-related disease and cancer by visiting forests."⁴

In forest therapy programs in Japan, groups are led through immersive nature walks, where they are invited to slow down and rediscover the world around them. They may be invited to smell fragrant leaves or listen to stories of where beloved foods, such as chestnuts, come from. There are breaks for healing bento lunches, meditation, and soaking in the negative ions from nearby waterfalls. These programs may also include nature yoga, wood-working, and soba noodle-making. Such courses are offered across the country, often in small towns accessible by high-speed rail. The Japanese version of forest bathing blurs the line between ecotourism and nature-focused healing.

With this influx of evidence on the health benefits of being in nature, the practice of forest bathing has begun to spread to other parts of the world, including Korea, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. Forest bathing is the antidote to modern life. This practice may have started in Japan, but it's evolving into a new way of living, which is actually the original way of living—in right relationship with the earth. □

*Julia Plevin is the founder of the popular Forest Bathing Club (more than 1,000 members), and has more than a decade of experience guiding groups of people into the forest to practice shinrin-yoku. This excerpt is from her book *The Healing Magic of Forest Bathing: Finding Calm, Creativity, and Connection in the Natural World* (Ten Speed Press, 2019), and is reproduced here with permission of the publisher.*

NOTES

1. Deborah Needleman, "The Rise of Modern Ikebana," *New York Times* (November 6, 2017), www.nytimes.com/2017/11/06/t-magazine/ikebana-japanese-flower-art.html.
2. Qing Li, "Effect of Forest Bathing Trips on Human Immune Function," *Environmental Health and Preventive Medicine* 15, No. 1 (2009): 9–17, accessed at: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2793341. This is just one of dozens of studies that has shown the health benefits of forest bathing.
3. Sarah Sekula, "Forest Bathing: A Walk in the Woods," *Orlando Magazine* (August 2017), accessed at: www.orlandomagazine.com/Orlando-Magazine/August-2017/Forest-Bathing-A-Walk-in-the-Woods.
4. "An Interview with Forest Medicine and Shinrin Yoku Researcher Dr. Qing Li," *Hiking Research* (November 23, 2012), accessed at: hikingresearch.wordpress.com/2012/11/23/an-interview-with-forest-medicine-and-shinrin-yoku-researcher-dr-qing-li.

