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An Interview with Amos Clifford: Your Guide to Forest Bathing

A Zen practitioner and psychotherapist explains the increasingly popular practice of shinrin-yoku

Interview with Amos Clifford by Jeff Goldberg | APR 22, 2022



Photo courtesy Amos Clifford

In honor of Earth Day 2022, Tricycle is bringing together leading Buddhist teachers, writers, and environmentalists—including Joanna Macy, Roshi Joan Halifax, David Loy, Paul Hawken and Tara Brach—for a donation-based weeklong virtual event series exploring what the dharma has to offer in a time of environmental crisis. [Learn more here.](#)

Shinrin-yoku, which means “forest bathing” in Japanese, is neither an ancient esoteric practice nor a swim in a woodland stream. The term was coined in 1982 by the Director of the Japanese Forestry Agency as part of a public relations campaign to encourage more people to visit the country’s national forests. In the 40 years since then, shinrin-yoku has attracted the attention of medical researchers whose studies have shown that a walk in the woods is not only pleasurable but improves cardiovascular health by lowering blood pressure and pulse rate, boosts the immune system, and brings down levels of the stress hormone cortisol.

Shinrin-yoku also inspired the “forest therapy” methods developed by Amos Clifford, who has used them to help thousands experience the emotional and physical rewards of spending time in intimate communion with nature. Clifford, 67, began his career as a wilderness guide and trained as a psychotherapist before founding the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides and Programs. A Zen Buddhist practitioner for the past twenty years, Clifford is also one of the originators of the Sky Creek Dharma Center in Chico, California. He now lives in Prescott, Arizona, where I reached him at home to talk about shinrin-yoku, forest therapy, and the intriguing connections to Buddhist practice.

— Jeff Goldberg

What’s the difference between forest bathing and hiking? Forest bathing is more about being here than about getting there. If I was taking you on a hike, we’d probably cover three or four miles over the course of a couple of hours. If you came on a forest bathing walk with me, we’d go about 200 yards.

It’s like you’re immersing yourself in a small tub of forest. That’s right. We’re bathing our senses in the ambiance of the forest, using all of the senses. Before we begin a walk, we have the people we’re guiding take a sensory inventory. Notice your skin, how the forest is touching you, notice what you’re hearing, notice the tastes and the smells, notice how your body feels in this place.

Then what do you do? Then, we begin walking very slowly through the forest. It’s a little like *kinhin*, Zen walking meditation. It takes practice. Until you’re used to it, walking slowly can be uncomfortable. It’s easy to speed up and start walking at a hiking pace. To help people slow down and focus, we ask them to pay attention to what’s in motion in the forest—trees moving in the breezes, birds flying by, the ever-changing movement of a stream. Paying attention to what’s in motion gives our minds something to engage with, like counting your breath in sitting meditation.

Do you walk in silence? Some of the time. We do the sensory inventory and what’s in motion parts in silence, and at the end of the walk we all find a “sit spot” and sit in silence for 20 minutes. But as we walk, we invite people to share what they’re experiencing, and when it’s over, we gather for tea and talk. Sometimes we make “trail tea” out of herbs we’ve gathered along the way.

You mentioned *kinhin* and sitting meditation. Are there other similarities between forest bathing and Buddhist practice? As forest therapy, I think it’s important to keep the work we do secular. There’s no direct affiliation with a spiritual tradition, and we don’t frame it as a spiritual practice. But one obvious parallel strikes me. Where was the Buddha at the moment of his enlightenment? He was under a tree. It’s not just the setting for the story, the bodhi tree is an essential element of the story. And when the Buddha was awakened, he called upon the earth to be his witness. Enlightenment happens in relationship to more than the human realm; it encompasses all of nature.

You’ve written that forest bathing also has much in common with Shinto. How so? When you’re in Japan, you really see it. You walk by these trees that are Shinto shrines, with ropes around them and prayers hanging from the ropes. There’s a shrine with a beautiful tree right across the street from the busiest train station in downtown Tokyo. In Shinto tradition, trees, rivers, mountains, and even stones have their own spirit, a sentient seed inside. Younger trees have a spirit called a *kodama*. When they get older, they may be inhabited by an actual god called a *kami*. Shintoism embodies the kind of authentic relationship with the more-than-human realm that I’m talking about.

With all the research that’s been done on the health benefits of shinrin-yoku, what’s been the most surprising scientific finding to you? It’s all interesting. Blood pressure improves, heart rate variability improves. The studies showing that chemicals released by trees called phytoncides stimulate the immune system are really interesting, but I don’t feel surprised by any of it. The science just confirms what we already know. When we take our time and slow down and walk in the forest, or sit near the base of a waterfall, it’s good for us.

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Are the health benefits what draws people to forest bathing? In my experience, nobody comes to reduce their blood pressure or improve their heart rate variability.

Why do they come then? They don’t necessarily know. As guides and therapists, we know they’re coming for whatever reasons they have and what they discover will be between them and the forest. Our job is to optimize the conditions for them to make that discovery.

Do they know about the science? Have they done their homework? Every now and then a guide will say some people showed up in their bathing suits because they thought they were going swimming in the forest. So no, not everyone does their homework.

Recently, Canadian doctors were authorized to prescribe passes to the National Forests for their patients. Japan has also integrated shinrin-yoku into their healthcare system.

Do you think forest bathing could become integrated into the American healthcare system? It could happen here. When I first started the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides and Programs in 2012, I met with some people at Kaiser Permanente in Oakland to see if they’d consider coverage for forest therapy in their healthcare plans. I was really fired up thinking what it would be like if we could mobilize the largest healthcare network in the country to connect people with nature.

What did Kaiser say? They said, “Well, we might be interested when you’ve trained guides in every market that we serve nationwide.” I was, like, okay, I’m going to train a thousand guides. Now, we’ve trained over 1,600 guides in 65 countries.

Are you covered by Kaiser now? Not yet.

Do people have deeply emotional experiences on your walks, flashes of *satori*? They wouldn’t describe it as *satori*, but they can have very intense experiences.

What kinds of experiences? They may experience awe, they may experience grief, they may experience a sense of deepened curiosity about the world around them, they may experience disorientation. Often people will break down in tears. Their experiences can be very different. My goal is to open their senses and open their hearts. I know nature can do that—and when people have those kinds of intense experiences, I feel like their hearts have opened, and that nature and I have succeeded.



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