

Effective Recharging with Hawaiian “Forest Bathing”

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Image: wix.com

People of all ages are enjoying nature again in the cities and all over the countryside: jogging, inline skating, cycling, nordic walking or simply strolling around and relaxing. After the winter and the never-ending Corona lockdowns with a lot of distance and little social closeness, we are starved for sun, air, exercise and social contacts outdoors.

Spending time and exercising in nature have fortunately always been possible in Austria, despite all the restrictions. Many of us have only now become really aware of the value of mother nature for body, mind and soul. What everyone intuitively knows has already been scientifically researched: spending time in the great outdoors, exercising, taking in fresh air and sunshine is healthy and strengthens our psyche and immune system.¹

This article is specifically about the positive effects of the forest and how you can use them most effectively for your own mental and physical health.

Figures and facts prove that the forest is a "climatic health resort" for us humans: 1 cubic meter of air above industrial cities contains a staggering 500,000 soot particles, whereas 1 cubic meter of forest air contains only 500 soot particles. When looking at a single tree, for example a 100-year-old oak, it filters around 11 tons of dust and pollutants from the air every year! Furthermore, this single, old oak is able to meet the annual oxygen demand of 11 people by processing around 5000 kg of CO² into organic substances each year and releasing around 4500 kg of oxygen in the process.² This means that the air around trees is not only cleaner, but also gives us humans the opportunity to literally “recharge” to the fullest—to breathe pure, oxygen-rich air with every breath and to supply our cells with this important elixir of life.

What happens when our cells don't receive enough oxygen and nutrients? In 2015, scientists at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz observed for the first time that the DNA in such cells undergoes dramatic changes; it becomes compacted and can no longer be read. Cell activity is then greatly reduced and, if further undersupplied, this could lead to cell death. The "starved" state of the cells is typical for some of the most common diseases such as heart attack, stroke and cancer.³

¹ <https://www.zeit.de/zeit-wissen/2018/03/waldbaden-natur-heilung-gesundheit-japan>

² <https://www.planet-schule.de/.../waldfunktionen/luftreiniger.html>

³ <https://www.uni-mainz.de/presse/73469.php>

All these facts make us unmistakably aware of the essential necessity of trees and extensive forests for our health. But what generations of people have taken for granted— living in healthy nature and close to intact forests—has become a luxury for modern city dwellers. In megacities with a lot of concrete, exhaust fumes and little greenery, there are also many so-called civilization stressors: traffic stress, constant accessibility and sensory overload, human density and loneliness, family stressors and work overload, to name just a few examples. In Japan, there is even a special term for sudden death from (years of) overwork: “Karoshi”⁴, whose direct cause of death is heart failure, cerebral hemorrhage or stroke. Japan's authorities recognize about 150 cases of karoshi each year, the diagnosis of which entitles survivors to pensions.

Is it a coincidence that particularly in Japan, there is another, special term and active scientific research for the healing “ forest bathing”, called “Shinrin Yoku”? As early as the beginning of the 1980s, research into the health aspects of forest bathing began in Japan on a broad scientific basis.⁵ In 2006, the first center for “forest therapy” was opened and medical doctors can specialize in “forest medicine” at Japanese universities.

According to the majority of studies and meta-studies⁶, forest bathing has the following effects, among others:

- Improved immune defense by increasing the natural killer cells
- Lowering blood pressure
- Stress reduction
- Increase in well-being
- Lowering resting pulse
- Lowering blood sugar levels
- Helpful in chronic heart failure

More studies are being published all the time and scientific interest in the subject is growing not only in Japan but also in the USA and Europe. A new trend towards “healing forests” with their own forest bathing trails and forest bathing course leaders can also be seen in Austria and Germany. The Austrian biologist Clemens Arvay attributes the healing effect of the forest (air) bath to the “biophilia effect”.⁷ He explains in his book: “Forest air is like a healing drink to inhale” because the plants “release a cocktail of bioactive substances into the forest air”, which in turn strengthen the immune system.

So how does this forest bathing work - can't you just jog or hike in the forest? Of course, doing sports in the forest can also be healthy, but the specialty of Shinrin Yoku is, that it is neither about accomplishment nor physical exercise, but simply about the healing effect of mindful “being” in the forest, absorbing the forest with all our senses. It is more or less about “nature-based mindfulness”, which turns out to be a particularly healing combination.⁸

⁴ <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/karriere/ueberarbeitung-in-japan-schuften-bis-zum-tod-1.148349>

⁵ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?term=%22forest+bathing%22+or+%22forest+therapy%22>

⁶ Ohtsuka et al., 1998; Li, 2010; Park et al., 2010; Mao et al., 2010; Barton & Pretty, 2010; Li et al., 2008, 2011, 2016;

⁷ Arvay, C.G.: Der Biophilia-Effekt: Heilung aus dem Wald; Ullstein, 7. Edition 2016

⁸ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6747393/>

In practical terms, this means strolling around in the forest, pausing and resting, moving gently (e.g.: with yoga), becoming still, meditating and perceiving the forest - as in childhood - openly, curiously and playfully with all senses. A particularly important aspect of being able to absorb the healing power of the trees is conscious breathing.

At this point Hawaii and my Huna training⁹ on the islands come into play: For the ancient Hawaiians, forest bathing as we know it today corresponded to their very natural way of life, and their healers used the power of the forest in many different ways. "HA", Hawaiian for "breath" and also "life" was of essential importance, and therefore they also practiced various breathing techniques.

One of these highly effective breathing techniques is: "Pikopiko"¹⁰, the travelling breath, in which one focuses the attention during inhalation on one "Piko" = (body) center, for example the crown of one's head and during exhalation on another Piko/center, for example the navel. This breathing technique stimulates the energy flow in the body according to the Huna principle Makia ("Energy flows where attention goes"), increases circulation, stimulates the lymph system and has a calming, balancing effect. There are many different variations of Pikopiko breathing, which I also teach in my Huna seminars. Through my immersion into the healing powers of the forest, I have developed another easy-to-implement Pikopiko variation: Pikopiko Nahele (Nahele is Hawaiian for forest). It is ideally suited to enhance the forest bathing experience, and I can highly recommend it from my own experience:

Pikopiko Nahele: Hawaiian breathing technique for effective forest bathing

While standing, sitting or lying in a forest of your choice, be aware that you are nourishing the trees with your exhalation and that they are giving you oxygen, energy and bioactive substances for your health.

1. Now take a few (slow, deep) breaths as follows and try to feel or perceive the respective area of your focus well:
 - Inhale with the attention on a tree. (Pause)
 - Exhale with the attention on your navel. (Pause)
2. Now expand your focus to all the trees in your sight and take more breaths:
 - Inhale with focus on all the trees in your sight.
 - Exhale with the focus on your navel.
3. Close with a feeling of love ("Aloha") and gratitude ("Mahalo") for the abundance of nature and give thanks in your own language or in Hawaiian with "Aloha mahalo"!

You don't have to be trained in Huna, nor do you have to "believe" in certain forms of energy, simply applying this technique consciously, mindfully and feeling its effect in your own body is completely sufficient. And as with everything: practice makes perfect!

⁹ bei Dr. Serge Kahili King, Big Island, Hawai'i; siehe: <https://www.suncoaching.net/>

¹⁰ Pikopiko: <https://www.huna.net/HBM/Books/techbundle1.html>