

# THE HAWAII HERALD

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## COVER STORY

# GUIDED FOREST BATHING REVEALS NATURE'S HEALING SPIRIT

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*Special to the Hawai'i Herald*

**M**y journey to the forest began in the city — at a bus stop at the Ala Moana Shopping Center, to be exact. The No. 5 bus to Mānoa took me farther and farther away from stressed-out Christmas season shoppers and the brisk Saturday morning traffic to the quiet solitude of Mānoa Valley less than 30 minutes away.

The end of the bus line before looping back to the city is near the intersection of Mānoa Road and Kumuone Street. From there, it's a bit of a hike for about a half-mile, continuing upwards to the entrance of Lyon Arboretum, a 200-acre tropical rain forest managed by the University of Hawai'i. It's where certified forest therapy guide Phyllis Look told us to meet her for our "forest bathing" experience on a gorgeous Saturday morning in December, marked by clear skies, cool temperatures and fresh mountain air.

After checking in our group of six adults — three men and three women — and conducting a few formalities, Look invited us to follow her into her "office." We left the artificially built environment and descended even deeper into a more natural one. The forest awaited us, and as we approached it, time seemed to slow down as we left the stresses of the city behind us. Before continuing on, however, Look stopped at a rustic-looking open-air gazebo surrounded by trees, shrubs and assorted greenery.

practice is known in Japan as *shinrin-yoku*, or forest bathing. The term was coined in 1982 by Tomohide Akiyama, director of the Japanese Forest Agency. "You don't literally take a bath," Miyazaki writes, "but you do bathe in the environment of the forest, using all your senses to experience nature up close."

Throughout Look's guided forest therapy, she encouraged participants to take in their natural surroundings slowly, and to use all their senses — sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, as well as their intuition — to experience the forest in a calm and relaxed manner. At times during the slow and meditative walk, she picked up a natural object from the ground and held it out as a visual prompt, inviting participants to answer a question such as, "What do you hear?" A participant may take the object from her hand and respond with an answer (e.g., "I hear birds singing in the trees") before passing the object to another person in the group. In doing so, she had us "tuning into" the forest on a personal, highly focused level.

We began to notice things that may have escaped our attention earlier because we were in too much of a rush or too distracted by errant thoughts that tend to fill a typically busy day.

In the gazebo, Look asked us, "What do you feel?" Only minutes into the forest bathing experience, people were already professing feelings of tranquility.

"I feel peace," someone answered. Others responded in kind. And in this way, we began a journey not only into the forest, but into ourselves. Referring to humankind's long affiliation with the forest dating back millions of years, Look now beckoned us toward it.

"Let's go back home," she said. With Phyllis Look as our guide, we headed for the trees.

### Shinrin-Yoku

The healing effects of the forest are rooted in scientific inquiry, Look wanted us to understand. In his book, "Shinrin Yoku: The Japanese Art of Forest Bathing," Yoshifumi Miyazaki proposes that urbanization has resulted in an increase in stress levels for many people and that communing with nature reduces it, contributing to overall good physical and mental health. A research professor at Chiba University in Japan, Miyazaki has undertaken experiments to test the effects of forest therapy on blood



Forest therapy guide Phyllis Look, founder and owner of Forest Bathing Hawai'i, at Lyon Arboretum in Mānoa on her 65th birthday. (Photos by Kevin Kawamoto)

pressure, pulse rate, stress hormones and more.

"It is my belief that, in the modern world, forest therapy and other nature therapies are the most practical way to reduce our stress levels and increase relaxation," Miyazaki writes in his book. "At the end of the day, our bodies are adapted to nature. I believe that nature can be a considerable help in reducing the strain on healthcare services all over the world."

Another writer and avid forest walker, Sarah Ivens, wrote about her own experience in her book, "Forest Therapy: Seasonal Ways to Embrace Nature for a Happier You." In her book, she writes that while on the grounds of a temple in Kyōto, she was invited to "walk leisurely through the bamboo trees in silence, stopping to smell the moss or to feel the suppleness of the different-shaped leaves." As she walked through the forest, Ivens said her senses were "hugged by a falling confetti of cherry blossoms."



Ivens explained that she and her husband had been trying to conceive a child for 18 months. In the forest, she was able to let go of that constant stressor. "I could feel the anxiety, caused by months of worrying whether I would ever be able to conceive a child or not, drift away as I allowed myself to be washed in green. It was a powerful feeling, and one I decided to try to bring home with me. Thirteen months later, I gave birth to my son."



The sign at the entrance to Lyon Arboretum, at the end of Mānoa Road in Mānoa Valley.

"Welcome to my office," she said with a smile. We stood in a circle in the gazebo as Look explained what forest bathing is all about. For readers who may be wondering, no nudity is involved. The "bathing" involves basking in the healing, positive energy of the forest.

Look motioned at the natural world surrounding us. For much of human history, people lived in harmony with the natural world, intimately connected with the earth, plants and animals, which were essential to their survival.

"We evolved in this environment," she said. "We didn't evolve in cars and offices."

According to a book by Yoshifumi Miyazaki, the



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Ivens writes that while she is no “fitness buff,” she has tried to incorporate more forest therapy into her life ever since the Kyōto experience because the “mental and physical health benefits of being outdoors were too persuasive to ignore . . . and my family and I have worked hard to fit more nature into our lives.”

The idea of recognizing a spiritual or life force in the natural world is common to a number of cultures, including Hawai‘i’s. In Japan, the Shintō belief system proposes that *kami*, or divine spirits, can reside in natural settings such as trees, mountains and waterfalls. Indigenous cultures throughout the world share similar beliefs about forces in nature that can be summoned for help and healing.

For Look, becoming a certified forest therapy guide was something she decided to do after retiring from a long career in marketing. The philosophy and practice of forest bathing resonated with her own desire to age in a way that kept her physically active and nourished her in more ways than one, including nourishment from her relationship with nature. It was also a way she could help others share her love for the outdoors and discover the gifts the forest has to offer. Her marketing background has helped her successfully publicize her relatively new business through both traditional and social media channels.

Look trained with the Association of Nature & Forest Therapy Guides and Programs and became certified as a forest therapy guide, founding Forest Bathing Hawai‘i in March 2018. She has guided more than 100 walks since then and was recently recognized by the association with a 100-Walk Leader Badge. The Lyon Arboretum walk discussed earlier in this story was her 99<sup>th</sup> guided walk. The walk also happened to coincide with her 65<sup>th</sup> birthday, which she called a “happy milestone” to have reached that age. She hopes to be an example to others who are approaching or are in their conventional retirement years. She found a passion — or as the Japanese call it, *ikigai* (a life’s purpose) — that benefits her, other people and the natural environment.



**Phyllis Look showing a fresh *mamaki* leaf that can be steeped to make an herbal tea.**

much different way than when we first stepped into it, noticing small but significant details from the natural world and feeling cleansed and detoxified, as if our souls has just taken a bath.

At the end of the experience, we sat on the ground on individual mats and enjoyed snacks together as we talked about the preceding few hours. Look had found twigs, branches, leaves and other natural objects to serve as our placemats and natural décor. She served us fresh-cut fruit; cookies made from whole grains and other natural ingredients; and warm, soothing tea made from fresh *mamaki* leaves. The first cup of tea was offered to the forest. As we debriefed, no one seemed in any hur-

ry to leave, even though hours had already passed and people had things to do for the remainder of the day.

Prior to gathering for refreshments, Look had sent us out into nature on our own for 20 minutes of meditation and contemplation in solitude. She gave us a pen and we found something that we could write on, which was not difficult, considering the amount of leaves on the ground waiting to be swept up or which would decompose on their own eventually. She told us to write down something, a thought, that we wanted to take with us from the forest.

On my leaf, I wrote: “Could there be a more perfect day?” on one side of the leaf. On the other side, I wrote: “I feel at one with the forest.”

Look invited us to read our messages out loud if we wanted to — everyone did — and then placed them in the middle of the circle that we had formed around the refreshments. She invited us to take the message home with us, which I did, both on the leaf and as part of my awakened consciousness.

If you have never visited Lyon Arboretum, it is a hidden gem for those who enjoy the outdoors. It is home to thousands of tropical and subtropical plants and over seven miles of hiking trails. It has an elevation gradient that starts at 450 feet and rises to 1,850 feet above sea level. If they would like to, participants in the forest bathing experience can explore the arboretum at their leisure after the session

is over. Some forest bathers have been known to form friendships after the forest experience is over.

While Look provides a brief explanation of the storied history of the arboretum, which dates back well over a century as land use priorities shifted from era to era, the forest walk she leads is not a naturalist walk to study the vast assortment of flora and fauna. It is intended to appreciate and relate to this natural environment as a whole and not as a workshop in horticulture.

### Back to the City

The bus ride back home was uneventful until we reached the Ala Moana Shopping Center, which is about as close to the opposite of a calm, relaxing forest as you will find in Hawai‘i. Traffic was snarled. People seemed in a mad rush, some in a state of impatience and irritation, presumably finalizing their holiday shopping and feeling the crunch of time. I longed to be back in the forest as the bus navigated through bumper-to-bumper traffic and the occasional angry driver trying to get somewhere in a hurry, like everyone else.

But I didn’t let it get to me as much as I might have before going into the forest. In fact, in the weeks since my forest bathing experience, I have felt calmer and happier, as if I had taken some of the forest back with me to the city. I take time to notice things in nature more, using all of my senses. Now that I know the gifts the forest has to offer, I plan to seek out more opportunities to safely commune with nature again, and again, remembering Phyllis Look’s words as she led us into the forest: “Let’s go back home.” **HH**

*Forest Bathing Hawai‘i has two locations for guided walks: Lyon Arboretum and, for shorter walks in a garden, at Kahalu‘u Gallery and Gardens, which was designed by the late artist Hiroshi Tagami. Participants must be at least 16 years old. On Saturday, Jan. 18, there will be a special forest bathing walk through Lyon Arboretum with live Japanese translation. Look emphasizes that the content of walks may vary depending on a number of factors, including the location of the walk (Lyon Arboretum or Kahalu‘u), the weather, the number of participants and the abilities of the people on the tour.*

*The cost of the walks also varies. Visit the website, [forestbathinghi.com](http://forestbathinghi.com), or contact Look for pricing information. Tours can be booked at Forest Bathing Hawai‘i’s website and Phyllis Look can be contacted by e-mail at [forestbathinghi@gmail.com](mailto:forestbathinghi@gmail.com).*

*Kevin Y. Kawamoto is a longtime contributor to The Hawai‘i Herald.*



**Lyon Arboretum in Mānoa Valley is a 200-acre rain forest managed by the University of Hawai‘i. It is home to thousands of tropical and subtropical plants.**

Look’s personality and demeanor are ideal as a forest therapy guide. Her voice is gentle but confident as she extols the virtues of the forest. She exudes a calm energy and a psyche that is acutely attuned to nature and its often-unnoticed nuances. At one point during the walk, she pointed out an interesting natural phenomenon that she spotted and called to our attention. A single leaf was suspended in mid-air by a strand from a spider’s web. As the wind blew, the leaf twirled in the air, alternately reflecting both light and shadow as it moved like a propeller at different speeds.

That spinning leaf was simultaneously simple and complex, even kind of magical in the setting that we were in and with the mindset we had adopted as forest bathers. By the end of the forest bathing experience, many of us were relating to the forest in a

### Helpful Notes

Taking the bus to Lyon Arboretum is not an option for everyone. The city bus does not stop right in front of Lyon Arboretum. Bus riders get off at the last stop in a residential neighborhood and must walk up the remainder of Mānoa Road, which some may find strenuous if they are not avid walkers. Cars can drive up closer to the arboretum, where there is parking. Some people take taxis or ride-share vehicles to the arboretum. Visitors to the arboretum must check in at the main office and sign in. The guided walk does not go extensively into the forest, but it does require an ability to walk on sometimes uneven terrain.

If taking a guided tour is not within your budget, or if you prefer to study forest therapy on your own, there is a growing number of resources that you can consult to learn more about it. Search for “forest therapy” or “shinrin-yoku” on the Internet, or find books on the subject (such as the ones mentioned in this piece) at the bookstore or library. Of course, one should always be cautious about walking in the wilderness alone. Find safe places to walk and take the necessary and sensible precautions to avoid getting lost, injured without immediate help nearby or other problems.