

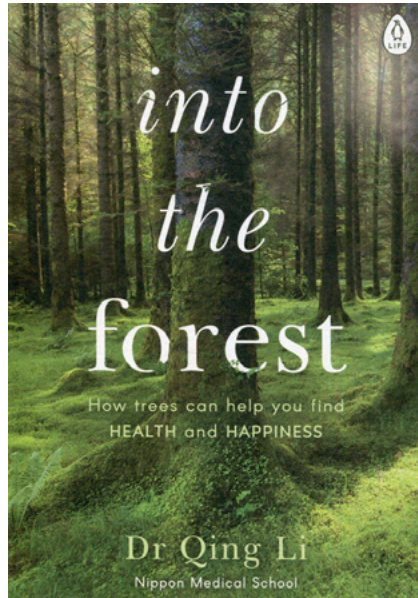
## Into the Forest: How Trees can help you find Health and Happiness

Quig Li

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Dr Qing Li, one of the world’s leading experts on forest bathing, is associate professor at the Nippon Medical School in Tokyo. In *Into the Forest*, Immunologist and Forest Medicine expert Dr Qing Li examines the unprecedented benefits of the world’s largest natural health resource: the great outdoors. Humans are increasingly becoming an indoor species – we now spend 90 per cent of our life indoors. And, on average, we dedicate eight hours a day to staring at screens. Our increasingly sedentary lifestyle is creating significant adverse consequences for our health.

Applying cutting-edge research and emerging science, Dr Li explores the inherent connection between nature and improved wellbeing. This practical guide will help you overcome some of life’s most problematic health issues, by reducing blood pressure; lowering stress; improving cardiovascular and metabolic health; lowering blood-sugar levels; improving concentration and memory; lifting depression; improving pain thresholds; improving energy; increasing anti-cancer protein production; improving energy levels; and boosting the immune system.

From mindful strolls in your local park to listening to the wind, from watching the sunset to walking barefoot in the grass, Dr Li reveals the life-improving advantages of spending time around trees, for a healthier and happier you.

Forest bathing is basically bathing the senses in the forest atmosphere. This is not exercise, or hiking, or jogging. It is simply being in nature, connecting with it through our sense of sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. Indoors, we tend to use only two senses, our eyes and our ears. Outside, we can smell the flowers, taste the fresh air, look at the changing colours of the trees, hear the birds singing and feel the breeze on our skin. And when we open up our senses, we begin to connect fully with the natural world.

We are part of the natural world. Our rhythms are the rhythms of nature. As we walk slowly through the forest, seeing, listening, smelling, tasting and touching, we bring our rhythms into step with nature. Our nervous system can reset itself; our bodies and minds can go back to where they ought to be. No longer are we out of kilter with nature but once again in tune with it, we are refreshed and restored.

As we were many millennia ago, Japan is a forest civilization. The Japanese culture, philosophy and religion are carved out of the forests that blanket almost 70% of the country – not to mention all manner of everyday items, from houses and shrines to walking sticks and spoons. It may be one of the most densely populated countries but it is also the greenest, with a huge diversity of trees. Only Finland and Sweden have a similar cover of forest but they are far less densely populated. Apart from the multitude of flowering cherries from Japan, their most famous tree is *Cryptomeria* (Japanese cedar) and for Irish foresters, it has to be the Japanese larch.

By 2050, 75% of the world's population will live in cities. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has designated stress the health epidemic of the twenty first century. Finding ways of managing stress – not just for our own health but for the health of our communities, at home and in the workplace – is set to become the most significant health challenge of the future.

It is no secret that high levels of stress are directly linked to anger and irritability. Our modern day lives are exhausting – we are pulled in so many different directions at once. So, I wonder how you start the day after a night of not quite enough sleep. Is it standing at the kitchen counter with a cup of coffee? Is it rushing to catch a train or to get the children to school? Are there a million and one things you have to do as soon as you get into work – things which ought to have been done yesterday? How does that all make you feel – happy and relaxed, full of energy and enthusiasm for life? No indeed! Here are some of the emotions you have probably experienced: confusion; sadness; terror; guilt; lack of vigour; and exhaustion.

It is only walking in a forest environment that creates a positive effect on your vigour and fatigue. To achieve this benefit, you don't have to spend a lot of time in the

forest; two hours is sufficient. Interestingly, women's moods appear to be influenced to a greater degree by forest bathing than men's moods.

As more and more of us have migrated to the city, fewer and fewer of our children have the access to nature that we or their grandparents took for granted. Our children do not know the wide variety of experiences that were so commonplace up until recently and which are disappearing fast; think of blackberry picking, and do we ever hear of raiding orchards anymore? Nature is hugely beneficial for children's mental and physical development. If we take our children to the forest, they will become the adults who will protect it.

Dr Qing Li concludes with a list of forty of the world's most beautiful and beneficial forests to visit. Ireland has just one representative on this list: Killarney National Park. Whatever else we may think of this author, we must agree that he has discerning taste!

*John Mc Loughlin*