

CONSCIOUS NATURE

PRAISE FOR

**Conscious Nature:
The Art & Neuroscience of
Meditating in Nature**

By Josh Lane

“Josh Lane has set the new gold standard for the how and why of mindfulness. This book will help you achieve balance using simple techniques that are easily integrated into your every day life. Josh offers tangible takeaways for personal nature connection, helping relieve stress and increase health. Backed by science and story, Josh’s writings are an easy, informative and fun read. This book is the perfect place to start your journey to true connection and happiness.”

- Nicole Apelian, Ph.D.

“*Conscious Nature* by Josh Lane is a real gift to humanity in a time when a book like this is so critically needed. Josh draws from a life dedicated to tracking and deep nature awareness. He reveals the secret doorways to entering wild places and knowing them intimately. He reminds us of who we are as a species and how we are adapted to move and think in the wilderness. This book, if studied well, has the capacity to transform lives, and connect people back to the state of mind that kept us joyful for thousands of generations.”

- Craig Foster, author of *Sea Change: Primal Joy and the Art of Underwater Tracking*

“The journey to regular nature connection is empowered in some surprising ways through Josh’s book, which powerfully motivates each of us through the contexts of science and storytelling. Josh is a genial guide and companion whom it’s easy to trust to achieve what

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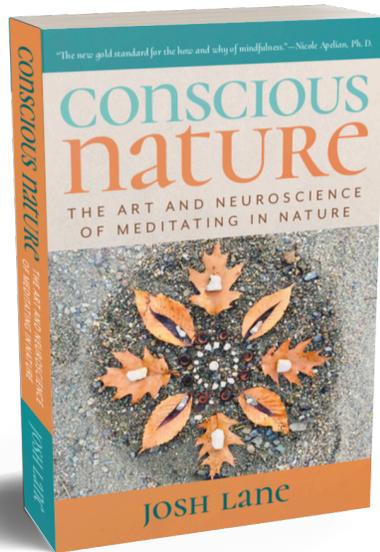
he calls the 'pure awareness that is our core.' Both veteran and novice outdoors-people will find intriguing and valuable ideas and methods."

-Jim Lowery, author of *Walk With the Animal* and *The Tracker's Field Guide*

"For those seeking practical ways to increase their connection to the natural world, look no further than 'Conscious Nature.' With easy-to-follow exercises to get yourself out of the house and into the woods, this book will help you to strengthen your relationship with the outdoors. It will also help you understand the science behind nature's impact on the brain. 'Conscious Nature' is a much needed antidote to our screen- and phone-filled world, and it made me want to put down the book and get outside right away!"

-Ben Weiss, LICSW

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Conscious Nature: The Art and Neuroscience of Meditating in Nature

By Josh Lane

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Nature, the original mindfulness teacher...

For most of human existence, people have lived close to the Earth, attuned to Nature's subtle signals. Our brains and bodies instinctively thirst for this intimate level of connection with Nature's cycles, whether we realize it or not.

The "Outer Nature" around us offers a doorway to discovering our deepest Nature Within. Meditating outdoors soothes the psyche and nourishes the senses, helping us realize our interdependence with the larger web of life.

Today, we need more than ever to reawaken our conscious relationship with the healing power of Nature, on all levels.

It's time for a reboot — and to once again invite the wisdom of the wild into our daily lives.

Through entertaining stories and over 36 engaging practices, expert outdoors mentor Josh Lane shares a pathway to exploring your own relationship with Nature for greater well-being and daily inspiration.

Drawing upon hard-learned lessons from his ten-year apprenticeship in the ancient art of wildlife tracking, combined with insights gleaned from the latest research in brain-based learning and neuroscience, Josh demonstrates step-by-step how to develop your own complete practice of outdoor meditation, so that you can experience a richly rewarding personal connection with the world of Nature.

Journey with Josh on- and off-trail through the thickets and vistas of the inner and outer landscapes in this fun and highly practical guide to meditating in Nature.

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Introduction

“The Force is an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us; it binds the galaxy together.”

— Obi Wan Kenobi, Jedi Master

Yup, we’re going full nerd here. Just wanted to get that clear from the start. You know, set the tone and all.

The fact is, as we connect with Nature, we are immersing in a sea of energy. The meditations I share in this book are designed to help you connect with this energy. Through these tools, you can grow a deeper awareness of the currents of life moving within and around you.

With this awareness, you can access greater peace, harmony, and more effectively harness the power of intention to support your life. Nature has lessons to offer that will help you to do this, and the practices shared here will help you learn from this most amazing teacher.

Meditating in Nature directly connects you with the vibrant life force that literally gives you each breath you take, and the very body you experience it with. By meditating outdoors regularly in a favorite spot, you’ll become attuned to the natural rhythms and cycles of your place in the world, no matter whether you’re in a city park, a backyard garden, or in the deepest wilderness.

The energy of Nature flows through all environments, available and awaiting your participatory attention. The calls of the birds and animals, the murmur of the wind in the trees, the trickle of quiet brooks and the roaring of mountain streams are all powerful living mantras that transform your awareness, when you mindfully attune to them.

Some of the awareness practices contained in this book have been passed down from long ago, used by people who literally depended on them for survival. Most were known by all of our ancestors at one time or another, though largely forgotten today.

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Certain of these skills and concepts have even been declared illegal at different places and times around the world for various reasons, often due to religious censure or political schemes.

Yet, these practices of awareness have helped us to become what we are, though in our Digital Era it's easy to forget our connection to the wellspring of Nature.

It's time now to remember these perceptual gifts, and consciously reawaken to our primal connection with the power of Nature. This infusion of ancient wisdom will give us the grounded foundation we need to move forward in balance with the cycles of life on this planet.

The Goal & Dedication of This Book

By attuning to the essence of Nature that is our foundation, we can enhance our lives in many ways.

In the pages of this book, I weave together ancient wisdom and modern research to show you exactly how the practices of Nature Awareness and Meditation work synergistically to heal us and help us be our best.

This book is dedicated to those adventurers who seek to remember and awaken their own vital connection with the Nature within and around us all.

This is the journey of *Conscious Nature* — to make what was once unknown, known; to open an understanding of that which was once hidden or overlooked. As the old Taoist saying goes, “Through practice, that which is hidden becomes subtle. Then, that which is subtle becomes obvious.”

In these pages, you will find stories and practices that guide you step-by-step into a deeper awareness through meditating in Nature.

You'll learn effective tools to release the stresses of modern life, tend your Being, and learn to read and participate in the language of Nature in a way you may have always longed for but not known how to achieve.

This longing comes from the ancient genetic inheritance of earth connection that fills your very bones; may the cup of Nature fill your thirst.

What Does it Mean to “Meditate in Nature”?

As we'll explore in the chapters ahead, meditation brings us a variety of benefits, ranging from stress reduction all the way through beneficial immune response and actual

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healing changes on a genetic level. On the most basic level, meditation is like a handy reset button that wipes away stress and gets us out of our usual thoughts and attitudes.

Meditation can also be grander in purpose; Mystery Schools from around the world have long used meditation as a route towards unification with the timeless and eternal. In fact, the word *yoga* means “union,” and its goal is the realization of the Self Within with the Grand Self that moves through all Being and beyond all form. If one takes the view that all of life is Sacred and connected to the Great Mystery, then all of Nature becomes a doorway to the Infinite.

Whether you are simply looking to reduce stress and support your well-being, or you’re seeking a sense of deeper meaning and a feeling of connection with all of Life, meditating in Nature can help you.

The Power of Concentration...

“Focus, Daniel San!”

— *Mr. Miyagi, in the film, The Karate Kid*

Mr. Miyagi said it best. The most basic element of meditation is *concentration*, focusing the mind on a quality or subject of attention for a period of time. This relaxed focus changes the pattern of electricity moving through your brain, synchronizing large neural regions and allowing the overtaxed mind to quickly restore its functions.

The relaxed brain more easily attunes to subtle signals from its environment, opening to the creative inspirations that bubble forth from the unconscious mind and instincts. Meditation tunes you into the language of the Nature around you, and propels your dive into the landscapes of the Nature within.

The Practices - A Quick Overview...

Many people think of meditation as sitting on a cushion and counting breaths, which certainly is a common focusing technique. However, you can enjoy meditation outdoors, too, in a variety of ways that enliven your senses and inspire your day.

On our journey into *Conscious Nature* we will explore many focal points for concentration, from the breath and heartbeat moving within you to the songs and calls of the birds vibrating around you. You’ll gain tools that help you deepen your awareness of your own *Being*, on every level. You’ll also learn how Nature provides instant feedback

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about your inner state, and discover that you are indeed constantly participating in the larger story unfolding on the land around you, whether you know it or not.

You'll also learn how to choose a Meditation Spot, a special place in Nature where you can use the practices in this book; think of it as your own outdoor meditation studio. These practices can be used in a backyard, local park, or favorite wilderness area. In fact, many of the techniques can be adapted and utilized just about anywhere you go; some of my favorite Nature experiences have been in the city.

The practices we will cover include both sitting meditations and dynamic moving meditations. Nature's outer appearance is ever shifting and transforming, yet the sages say that within our Core Nature is a place of stillness and repose. Thus, we learn by mimicking Nature in all its stages and transformations, finding out how these qualities of action and stillness move within ourselves, too.

A Path of Discovery...

In these pages, I share stories from my own journey into Nature's mysteries, gathered from over two decades of adventures and intensive explorations on the inner and outer landscapes.

Since the age of sixteen, my path has led me to various mentors and Wisdom Keepers, including a ten-year-plus apprenticeship in the ancient arts of wildlife tracking and deciphering Nature's language, in a lineage of trackers that reaches far back into the shifting sands of time.

Some things can only be learned experientially; fueled with the questions of my mentors, my best guide was the Nature surrounding my Meditation Spot, located under a red maple tree at the edge of a Western Massachusetts farm field that I visited and sat beneath every day for many years. Many of the stories in this book come from the 800-acre patchwork of forest and fields surrounding that tree. The stories from that place serve to illustrate a bundle of transformative principles and techniques that will help you as you set out on your own journey into the mysteries of Nature.

There at my Meditation Spot, I learned to still myself and blend into the flow of the woods, while at the same time expanding my senses to the natural patterns around me. I learned to decode the calls of the birds to deduce the location of hidden animals and distant people, and discovered how to avoid triggering the forest alarm system myself, so that I could observe animals in their natural state.

As I explored each day on my wanders to and from this spot, my ever-growing curiosity empowered my senses and enlivened my *sense of place*; over time, I came to

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know each forest patch and rivulet, to the point where I could find my way on the darkest night. I also learned to bring the deep level of mindfulness that I was cultivating at my Meditation Spot with me as I moved through the forest. This dynamic meditation allowed greater access to my intuition and instinct, leading to many memorable and mysterious encounters with animals and other aspects of Nature.

Ultimately, I discovered that these experiences in Nature transferred powerfully into my everyday modern life, offering me a deep sense of creative engagement with my work and the capacity to examine situations from many perspectives, infusing me with a sense of full aliveness brought about by my passion and curiosity.

Most importantly, I've found that meditating in Nature helps me feel connected to the flow of Life and to my highest creativity wherever I happen to be; when I feel connected this way, I know that I can better help those around me to enjoy a deep, conscious level of this connection, too.

A Transformative Journey

Mentoring and coaching others in this journey of awareness is one of my greatest joys and fascinations. Over the years, I've had the opportunity to share the art of mindfully connecting with Nature with clients from around the world, ranging from executives, busy professionals and parents, to real honest-to-goodness 16th-level ninjas. I've seen how the journey into Nature transforms each person in unique — but often predictable — ways.

Sensory connections engage and expand. Familiarity with the local patterns of Nature develops, as the senses take in the sinuous shapes of oak leaves here, and the raspy call of a jay there. Comfort in the outdoors and all its varied conditions gradually develops, along with an affinity and empathic connection with the land.

At the same time, an inner journey ensues as Nature's stillness offers a reprieve from the busyness of the daily grind. Stress begins to shed and a greater feeling of relaxation and poise comes to life. Simply put, a person sitting quietly under a tree suddenly has time to face his- or her-self, and to attune to the deeper longings and callings of the soul.

This is why the journey into Nature is transformative — as we connect with the Nature around us, we can't help but connect more fully to the Nature moving within us.

In this book, you'll learn proven techniques for supporting a positive engagement in Nature, and for tending the inner transformation that comes along with it.

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These are tools I use with my one-on-one coaching clients. I've included them here because they are invaluable for helping you forward when you bump up against your own walls and inertia.

You'll find techniques for honing your motivation, awakening an unbridled curiosity, developing a keen sense of place in the outdoors, and even for releasing old programs of thinking that no longer serve you because you've grown past them on your journey.

The Neuroscience of Meditating in Nature

Over the years of mentoring others through these transformations, I became curious as to what was happening in the brain while these changes occurred. *What kind of neural circuitry gets engaged as we connect with Nature? What internal mechanisms are at play as we experience the various stages of meditation and awareness? How could such knowledge help us on our journeys in Nature?* Fascinated by these questions, I spent several years surveying a variety of neuroscience-related research journals for clues and answers.

Interestingly, I found that many of the age-old mentoring strategies I had been steeped in match up perfectly with the latest cutting-edge findings in brain-based education and current understandings of how the brain works.

Pursuing this research, I also noted the great number of cognitive and health-related benefits that have been recorded in relation both to meditation and time spent in Nature; the intentional fusion of these two helpful sources of well-being yields results in personal transformation that are truly extraordinary.

So, along with discovering a variety of techniques and practices that are designed to lead you into your own deep engagement with Nature, you'll also find insights peppered throughout this book about what's happening "under the hood" in your brain each step of the way.

You'll get a glimpse at the amazing ways your brain constantly maps and makes sense of the world of Nature. You'll learn how you literally carry your sense of place with you in your neural web, and why the mentoring tools shared in this book are so essential in helping the strands of this web to reach out and make meaningful, conscious connections with the Nature within and around you.

My hope is that this information will encourage your practice as you see the many benefits of developing your own routines of meditating in Nature.

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How to Use This Book

I recommend reading the entire book through and trying out the techniques as they are shared, one chapter at a time.

Many of the practices are built sequentially, depending upon the understandings and techniques shared earlier in the text. This structure builds your skills of awareness a bit further each step of the way, just as a mentor would help you to do in a one-on-one setting.

Read, dabble, and have fun. Most importantly, put these skills to use. Adapt the practices so that Nature can nourish your life in the way that works for you. Reach beyond the concepts to taste the Reality. “He who tastes, knows.”

In Section One, Chapters 1-10 provide you with inspiring foundational techniques for meditating in Nature that you can get started with right away, including a review of the health benefits and brain functions related to meditation and time in the outdoors.

You’ll learn how by going into Nature with intention and mindful awareness, you can invite the power of the archetypal Hero’s Journey into your life to bring positive transformation and new heights of discovery.

You’ll also learn about the *five key brain states* that we use in everyday life, and how to balance them by using the practices in your growing meditation toolkit. The *arts of journaling and questioning* will be explored as a method to track and support your new awareness skills.

Importantly, we will cover the various *fears, doubts, and misconceptions* that are common to this transformational journey of awareness, and how to put them in perspective and keep your practice on track.

In Section Two, through Chapters 11-15, you’ll learn how to bring together the foundational skills you’ve been practicing into a complete four-part awareness cycle that you can use at your Meditation Spot.

With continued practice, you can learn to access these meditative states whenever you need them. Then, you can shift your mindstate as desired to help you accomplish your goals with a foundation of peace and the power of Nature-inspired creativity.

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Finally, in Part Three, Chapter 16, you'll learn an advanced technique called *Being Nature* that draws upon all of your Conscious Nature experiences for cultivating creative inspiration and insight at those times when you need it the most.

Through all of this, you'll be learning to attune to the flow and patterns of Nature's primal energy.

Get ready, young *padawan* — it's time to learn the ways of the Force and become a *Nature Jedi*. It's what you were born to do. Our journey begins as we step out the door... and face the Wall of Green.

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Josh Lane

An avid explorer of Nature's mysteries, Josh brings forward a depth of experience from his journeys in the realms of ancient Earth connection skills, Qi Gong, and visionary meditation.

Josh has mentored and trained people of all ages around the world for the past twenty years in the inner and outer arts of mindful, whole-being connection with Nature.

Josh's vision is to bridge the healing power of Nature into the modern experience, sharing the gifts of grounding, presence, and passion for life that a primary connection with the Earth offers us all.

Visit Josh's website at [http://
ConsciousNature.Net](http://ConsciousNature.Net)



Photo by Virginia Dunn

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- Q&A With the Author -

Q: How does Meditating in Nature positively transform the brain and body for greater health and well-being? What's the value of taking my meditation practice into Nature?

A: First, mindfully connecting with Nature helps us reset the tremendous *cognitive load* that we face; consider how many hundreds of details you must attend to throughout a given day - places to get to on time, traffic routes to negotiate during rush hour, bills to pay, people to call - each of these items on the daily task list demands a certain amount of space in your brain's attention circuits. Nature helps us reset these circuits, so that we can relax and wipe the mental slate clean; then, we can be more present as a human *being* rather a human *doing*.

Numerous studies point towards the positive effects of time spent in Nature for our well-being. Time outdoors in green space reduces stress chemicals, including cortisol. Powerful immune boosters such as Immunoglobulin-A are enhanced through time outdoors, and the beneficial effects stay in our systems long after we leave the woods.

On the meditation side of the equation, when we relaxedly concentrate for just 12-15 minutes, we can access a state called the *Relaxation Response*, first discovered by the Harvard researcher, Herbert Benson. This physiological state not only effectively reduces blood pressure and stress chemicals, but even more excitingly, changes our actual epigenetic expression. More recently, Benson found that through just 8 weeks of daily meditation, a person can switch more than 1500 genes towards a healthy, beneficial state of expression. That is to say, daily meditation not only reduces stress, but it literally changes how our genes express, leading towards greater states of health.

In terms of what's happening in the brain itself, meditation helps us shift out of the over-excitable neural circuits that get triggered when we encounter stress and trauma. The amygdala helps us scan for potential danger in the environment, but it can override logical decision making and shade our perception of the world with overtones fear and anxiety when it runs amok. Meditation allows us to quickly reset the stress button; mindful awareness provides a space in which we can choose to respond, rather than react to events in our lives.

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Meditation also changes the electrochemical activity of the brain. When you are studying for a test or working diligently on a project, your brain is creating rapid beta waves. These beta waves are localized pulses of activity that help you get various jobs done, such as solving a math problem or paying your bills. Beta is like 4th gear on a car; it's a mode of frequent mental chatter and high focus. This state is incredibly helpful in moderation. But, if you get caught in a perpetual beta mindset habit, as many of our jobs and lifestyles impel us to do these days, it can be hard to shift out of high gear and relax.

If you've ever lain awake with thoughts racing, that's a great example of beta mode refusing to tune down. Fortunately, both time spent in Nature and meditation are great ways to relax the mind. This shows up as slower alpha waves spread across the brain, allowing brain cells in vast regions to synchronize and nourish after periods of high mental performance. Alpha has been found to promote accelerated learning, relax the body and mind, and speed up healing, just to name a few benefits. Beta and alpha are just two of the five major brain states researchers have identified (some list 8 altogether) which we can learn to tap into through the art of meditation.

So, time in Nature is good for us, and meditation is also a powerful tool for supporting well-being. When we combine the two, we can reap the benefits of both for bringing more peace and presence into our lives.

Q: What do you mean when you say that humans are adapted to attune to Nature's patterns - if I live in the city, why does this matter today?

A: For most of humanity's long history, people lived close to the land, their senses highly attuned to subtle patterns in Nature. The alarm call of a distant bird could relay early warning of a big cat approaching unseen, or the sudden shift in wind could herald a storm approaching. Our senses are adapted to cue to these kinds of rich natural patterns.

Only in the last six- to ten-thousand years have large portions of the human population shifted their lifestyles to an agrarian existence, and then later, to urbanization and industry. The last 30 years has seen the dawn of the Digital Era, and we now have entire generations who have very little contact with Nature compared to even a hundred years ago. At the same time, we have seen massive increases in mental and physical health concerns on an unprecedented level. A wave of research now points towards the essential

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necessity of regular contact with Nature for cognitive and physical well-being; even putting a photo of an outdoor scene on your computer's desktop can improve your mood.

When we make space in our daily lives for intimately connecting with the natural world through full-being meditation, we enrich our lives and our health. This kind of connection can happen in the city park, in the suburban backyard, or in the deepest wilderness. It's a matter of shifting our perspective and discovering what Nature has to offer us in the moment, wherever we happen to be.

Q: You refer to the “Nature Around Us” and also to the “Nature Within”... why are these two perspectives on nature connection important, and how does it help us to mindfully attend to each of them?

A: When life gets busy and stressful, sometimes we can forget to tune in to our deepest passions and purpose. As we mindfully, heart-fully connect through our senses with Nature, we are soothed and restored; we find the space that helps us to turn deeper within, to get in touch with our inmost motivations and needs. In that way, the Nature around us helps us remember what it means to be connected to our Inner Nature.

On another level, Nature's complex patterns are powerful means of sparking creativity and inspiration in our lives. The stars, wind, soil, and myriad life forms each have stories to tell and gifts to offer that enliven our sense of the world. We are one with Nature, part of the dynamic web of life; what we observe around us in the natural patterns points towards corresponding patterns within our psyche and soul. Sages and mystics have long understood this connection, turning to Nature for inspiration and vision. We can, too!

Q: Could you describe some tangible ways that meditating in Nature can help us?

A: Meditation in Nature gives our nervous system a reboot, quickly shedding stress and increasing mental clarity. The immune system is strengthened, and pathways in the brain are tonified that allow greater mindful response in our life experiences. We learn to find the still center within us that allows us to be present and engaged in the motion of daily life without losing our center or grounding.

As we expand our senses to Nature's language, we experience a dynamic form of meditation. Through the response of the animals to our presence, we gain insights into

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our own state of being... whether we are aligned with Nature's flow, or not. Then we have a chance to adjust our own inner rhythms to the rhythms of the woods, and walk within the flow of Nature. Nature teaches us to find our rooting, and to carry this greater sense of well-being and grounding into the rest of our day, whether we are at work or at home.

Q: What if I'm scared to go into the woods? How can I get started meditating outdoors?

A: First, realize Nature is everywhere. It's just that different places highlight different aspects of Nature. You can find Nature on your back porch, in the elemental quality of each breath you take in, or in the trees growing on the sidewalks in the city. Yet, if you're new to exploring the woods or other outdoor areas, give yourself some adjustment time.

Take small steps. If you have a yard, setup a chair or sit on the back steps, and meditate by expanding your senses for five minutes while you drink your morning tea. If you're in the city, find a park bench to sit at and simply *be* as you tune into the sounds of the cityscape, including the birds, the directions of the breeze and clouds, and the colors and textures of the grass and the bark of the trees. If you have a favorite hiking trail, find a special spot that you can return to often where it feels good to be and spend time immersing in Nature. The more you go to that spot, the more you'll become comfortable being there. In time, that place will begin to feel like home, because you've internalized the patterns around you.

Q: What is "knowledge of place" and what impact does it have on our well-being? How can we intentionally support this kind of connection with our environment?

A: This is a key question - how well do we know our environment? There's the old saying that *what we know, we love, and what we love, we protect*. What places do you frequent and know "like the back of your hand"?

Of course we know the ins and outs of our homes, our neighborhoods, how to get to work, and how to get to the grocery store. These are basic examples of knowledge of place that help us to live our lives. Yet, how well do we *really* know our back yards?

Do we know where the sparrow sleeps in the raspberry thicket at the edge of the yard each night, or the corner fence that the local raccoon climbs each evening with her muddy

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paws on the way to the compost pile? Do we know about the approaching storm heralded by the southern breeze and the leaves showing their backs on the silver maple trees? Or do we know that a cat is hunting in the neighbor's yard, given away by the scolding calls of the jays? And what are the birds telling the cat and the raccoon about *our* movements through their voices and tone? How might knowing these things affect our feelings about our place and the beings that dwell there alongside us?

Our brains are constantly mapping our environments each and every moment. This happens on a largely unconscious level. The things we pay special attention to get tagged with an extra level of detail in these neural maps. For instance, the *place cells* in your hippocampus map out your home and the other spaces you frequent; inside this part of your brain, there is a spatial representation of your living room, your kitchen, and the other spaces that you must navigate every day. These cells are what allow you to wake up in the middle of the night and stumble groggily to the kitchen sink for a drink of water, even though the lights are off and you're still half-asleep. You could say that this neural mapping is part of the "biological machinery" that supports a deep knowledge of place.

Each time we have a sensory experience in Nature, those unique sights, sounds smells, tastes and feelings are working their way into our inner maps of the world. The ancient art of tracking and reading Nature's language involves learning to *notice and apply meaning* to details in the natural world that we would otherwise pass by - the faded print of a deer track in the mud, the thin whistling alarm of a robin, and the scent of the wind. Our brains are adapted to take notice of these kinds of rich, complex natural details.

When we engage our senses mindfully to Nature's patterns, we awaken the neural circuitry that allows us to feel intimately connected with the land, the animals, and the rich tapestry of Nature. As we connect with place, we start to feel a living, personal relationship with Nature; empathy awakens, and we find ourselves deeply connected through our knowledge of the land. This kind of intimate awareness becomes a dynamic meditation, as our senses dance and revel in Nature's cycles.

Q: What is Qi Gong, and why is this ancient practice so complementary to meditating in Nature?

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A: Qi (“chee”) indicates the life force inherent in the breath; Gong (“gung”) expresses a skill cultivated through persistent practice. Literally, Qi Gong means “skill with the life force.” Qi is found not just in the breath, but is observed moving in all aspects of Nature.

The ancient and enduring Wisdom Cultures each have their own understandings and ways of working with Nature’s life force to enhance health and well-being. Qi Gong is a fairly modern term describing the 3,500 or so breath, meditation, and movement systems that stem from Taoist practice and ancient shamanic knowledge in China and nearby areas.

Some of these systems also aligned with and absorbed various Buddhist and Yogic practices that found their way across the land at different times. In general, families developed their own ways of working with the breath and with Nature’s energy to expand consciousness, quicken healing, reduce stress, and explore the mysteries of life. To connect with the Tao is to connect with the source of Nature’s myriad patterns. As we turn within, we find clues to the patterns in Nature around us, and vice versa.

Q: How does happiness relate to meditating in Nature? Are there specific meditation practices that support inner joy and balance?

A: Meditation and time spent relaxing in Nature helps the busy mind to release its burdens and unwind; this relaxation creates an opening for greater joy to shine through in each moment. The alpha and theta states we tap into in meditation literally reset the brain’s neural circuits, providing a recharge period that clarifies our thinking and refreshes our mental outlook on life. Pleasurable bliss states appear as we go deeper into meditation, particularly when we rest our awareness on the heart space; by simply meditating on the heart beat for several minutes, the “love peptide” oxytocin is released, heart coherence increases, and we start to feel great!

Q: What’s one technique that you’d recommend for beginning a meditation practice in Nature?

A: The first key to attuning to Nature’s healing power is to be fully present to the gifts that are constantly unfolding in each moment.

If you’re not present to what’s happening, you’re missing the spark of creativity that’s waiting for you to align with it -- say you’re lost in thought about a big meeting coming

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up, and you're worried about the outcome -- in that moment, if you can release the worry and come to your senses (literally), you may receive just the right inspiration from Nature's patterns to inform how you wish to successfully proceed with your meeting. Perhaps you get an idea from a bird on the wing, or simply relax enough to open your creativity back up.

Relaxation is a big one, we need a daily reset to counteract the enormous amount of information and busyness that meets us each day. So, the first set of practices for meditating in Nature have to do with cultivating a state of full-sensory mindful awareness.

You can do this now: feel your body's sensation as you stand or sit. Feel the floor under you, and sense the earth beneath the building (if you are indoors), supporting both the floor and the structure of your skeleton. As you breathe in, feel the breath enter your nose, and become aware of the scents carried on the breeze, and the taste in your mouth. Tune into your skin and feel the light pressure of the air moving against your face and forearms. Listen close around you and notice the sounds nearby, and then further into the distance. Finally, look up to the horizon with "soft eyes," taking in the big picture of the world around you with your peripheral vision. Be there for a moment in all of your senses, attuned to what's happening in the moment.

Do this practice for just a minute or two when you step out of the door in the morning, and again on your doorstep when you come home later in the day. If you work on the computer a day, set a timer each hour and enjoy this routine for a full minute every hour. Your capacity to enjoy the moment, and to attune to Nature's patterns, is greatly empowered by this simple practice!