

## CHAPTER ONE

# ARRIVING PRACTICE

*Everything in nature invites us constantly to be what we are.*

— GRETEL EHRLICH

**A**rriving in a particular place, mindfully aware and attuned, is one of the simplest and yet most important ways to enter into relationship with nature. It is a way of sensitively orienting to the environment you find yourself in. It allows us to let go of our busy, thinking mind and mental preoccupations and instead arrive in our senses in the moment.

On my Awake in the Wild nature programs, when I bring people to a particular place to meditate—perhaps in a forest, along an ocean bluff, or in a sandy canyon in the desert—I share this process of “arriving” as a way to begin to help people orient to the particularities of place.

Once you arrive at a place outdoors that you would like to spend time or meditate in, find somewhere you can sit or rest comfortably for ten to fifteen minutes. Prior to meditating or trying to be mindful, invite a quality of relaxation and rest at ease sitting on the earth.

Then open up your senses fully to begin the process of “arriving.” Notice what immediately allures your attention. Look around and take in the variety of life here. You may be pulled to the array of colors around you, or to gaze at the tree canopy or at the clouds. Perhaps the intimacy with life on the ground catches your attention.

Notice the sounds of this place, the soundscape of the forest, the insects, frogs, or birdsong. You may notice the ebb and flow of sounds, particularly as winds blow through the landscape. Maybe you are captivated by the sound of silence and how that touches a sense of stillness within you.

Sometimes you may simply feel all the sensory impressions as you sit in this landscape—the softness or hardness of the ground, the breeze blowing against your skin, the warmth or coolness of the air, the sunlight against your body.

Occasionally you may sense the fragrances that are here, perhaps the rich smells of the forest after rainfall or the sweet aroma of blossoming flowers in Spring. Or you might notice the salty air with each inhale as you sit by the ocean.

One of the things that can captivate our attention is the dynamism of a place. You may be drawn to the movement of leaves in the trees, the changing patterns on the surface of water, the cumulus clouds mushrooming in the sky, or the way dappled light moves through the forest.

What is key to all these sense impressions is to notice how effortlessly you are brought into the present moment without any effort or strain. Nature spontaneously allures our curiosity to its effervescent, rich, changing forms. This natural quality of knowing brings forth an important point—that being outside allows a more relaxed, natural quality of attention. Mindfulness practice outdoors, when attuned to our sensory experience, can be effortless and easeful and happens almost by itself.

So as you continue to sit here in this place, let your attention continue to be drawn to whatever catches your interest. See how easy it is to reside in the present moment. Observe how this simple act of arriving allows you to enter into a particular landscape, to become familiar with it. Notice how it deepens your sense of connection with life around you.

Each time you move to a different place outdoors, be sure to begin by doing this practice of “arriving” even if only for a few moments. Doing so will help you attune more intimately with wherever you are.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# BREATHING WITH NATURE

*Every breath we take, every step we make, can be filled with peace, joy and serenity.*

— THICH NHAT HANH

**M**odern life tends to accentuate a sense of feeling separate. We mostly live inside, cut off from the elements and the vibrancy of life outdoors. We live much of our lives looking at screens rather than at people. Living so separately can create a sense of anxiety and alienation.

In contrast, when we go outdoors we immediately feel how interconnected everything is, including ourselves. This meditation is an exploration of this interconnected awareness through the simple act of breathing. When we feel more connected, we tend to feel more alive and more supported in life.

Begin this simple meditation by finding a comfortable posture outdoors. Ideally, you will be sitting near trees, or by a meadow, grasses, or plants. As you find your seat, spend a moment gazing at the flora around you. Notice the trees, grasses, and plants both near and far.

Reflect on how flora are engaged in the wondrous process of photosynthesis, soaking up light from the sun, transforming it into energy, and drawing carbon in through their leaves and releasing oxygen. Reflect on the miracle of how plant life thrives in this way, creating an atmosphere rich in life-giving oxygen.

Now close your eyes or lower your gaze and turn your attention to your inner environment. As you sense yourself on the earth, notice your body is breathing by itself. Start to feel the rhythmic wave-like motion of breath. Feel the gentle stream of cool air enter the nose, tickling the throat. Notice how the inhale expands the chest, rib-cage, shoulders and upper back. Feel the motion of the diaphragm and belly moving in and out.

Without trying to change or manipulate the breath, attune to all the different sensations. Notice the stillness between breaths and see if that echoes the stillness around you.

If your attention wanders into thinking, acknowledge that and then release the thought and orient awareness again to breathing. No need to judge the thought. Thinking is a process of nature. Our practice is to recognize being lost in thought and then return attention to the breath over and over again.

Similarly, when your attention is drawn to other things like sounds, feelings or other phenomena, acknowledge those experiences and then re-establish awareness of breath. In this way, we are training the attention to focus and steady by attuning to one experience.

As awareness of breath deepens, turn your attention to the inhale. As you breathe in, be mindful that you are taking in oxygen released from the leaves, plants and grasses. If you are by the ocean, bear in mind the air is pervaded with oxygen released from phytoplankton—their exhale is literally what keeps us alive.

We are connected with forests, grasslands and plants in invisible ways through the medium of air. Notice what happens when you breathe and reflect in this way. You are literally breathing with trillions of trees each and every moment.

In the same way, sense your exhale. As your body breathes out, you release carbon into the atmosphere. That CO<sub>2</sub> is absorbed by the plant kingdom. As you breathe, sense this reciprocal relationship. You are breathing with forests and plants who depend on that carbon dioxide.

Continue to attune to breath sensations as if it was the first time you've breathed. Take in this simple miracle **with a curious** attention. Be aware that each breath connects you to the vastness of life around you. Each breath is shared with all living, breathing animals, birds, insects and marine species. Continue this practice as long as **feels** comfortable. That may be as short as five to ten minutes or up to thirty minutes or longer.

As you bring this meditation to a close, observe how being mindful of breath in this way feels. How has it affected your body? What happens in your heart and mind as you are aware of breathing with all photosynthesizing life?

Practice awareness of breath throughout the day. Your breath can be your best friend when it comes to training attention and learning to be mindful, embodied and present.