

Forest Exposure Practice

Kadmos2

This practice came about as an attempt at engaging in a practice that was not heavy on theory or predetermined conceptualization. In other words this was an attempt to go for a bottom-up kind of practice based primarily on experience. For this practice, I engaged in daily walks in nature with longer hikes in natural surroundings once or twice a week. As I live in the Pacific Northwest, this largely consisted of visits to forested areas. Before I get into any kind of description of my experience, I'll put this out there as an exercise for the reader, on the off chance that one might want to reproduce the exercise.

- 1) Find a natural setting in which to hike; this is not meant to be physically arduous. Ideally, find a site you have never been to before.
- 2) Upon arriving and just before setting out, take a moment to settle your mind and quiet your thoughts.
- 3) Start on the walk, focusing on your sensory experience.
- 4) If you find something interesting, try to record it - e.g., with a camera or audio recorder on your phone. Don't add any notes at the time about why you think it is interesting.
- 5) Leave after you are done with the hike. Record your general mood and mental content upon leaving.
- 6) After a day or so, look back at the images and sounds you recorded. Think about why these might have called out to you.
- 7) Try and come to a general thought, concept, or mood the walk elicited.
- 8) Repeat steps 1-7 several times as feasible.
- 9) Try and come to a general thought, concept, or mood the series of walks elicited.

There are many versions of walking meditation, including 'forest bathing' or shinrin yoku (森林浴) practice [which is meant to be therapeutic in nature]. This practice was different. There was no goal of awestruck self-immersion or absorption into the natural setting, no goal of forgetting one's self, no goal of settling or relaxation.

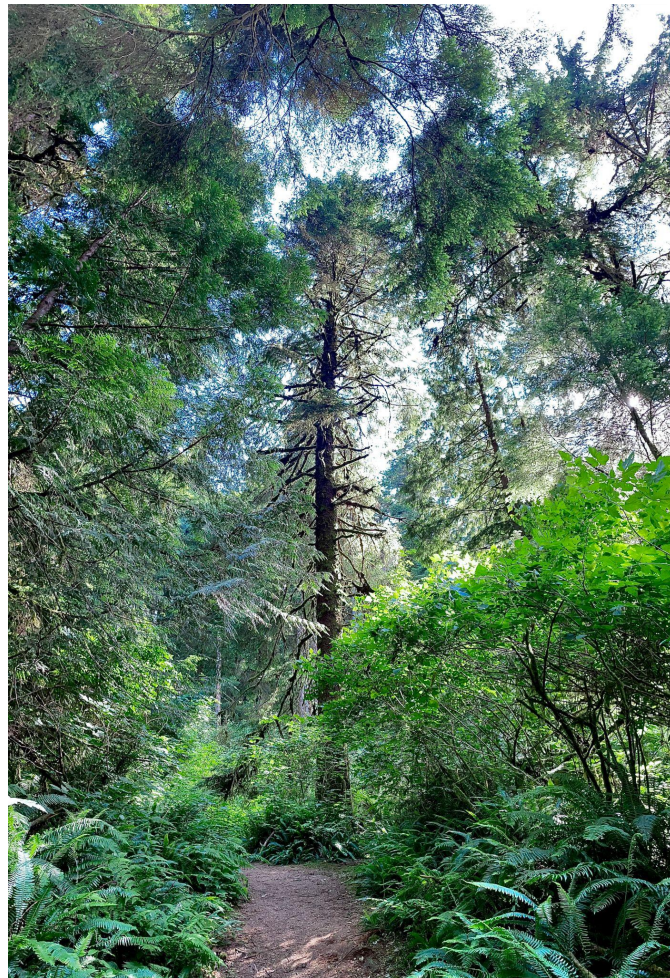
That said, I did try my best to intently pay attention to the surroundings, and so I made an effort to move slowly and quietly. I did not talk even though I was with others, and I did not verbally acknowledge those I passed on the trail (a simple nod was the most they got). At times, I engaged in a kind of stalking movement, stepping along the lateral aspect of the foot, slowly rolling the foot into place [fox walking], so as to slow down my progression on the path and to reduce the sound I was making.

I wanted to give myself an unpredictable experiential exposure. I did this by trying to select hikes I had not been on before. I would then try to capture sensory, emotional, and thought experiences. I would not try to purge the thoughts arising from my mind. Because I wanted to keep my hands as free as possible, I simply used my phone camera when I came across scenes that were of interest to me.

I enclose examples of what I captured on the following page. I hesitate to discuss the specific thoughts I had of each image, as I encourage the reader to come up with their own interpretation.









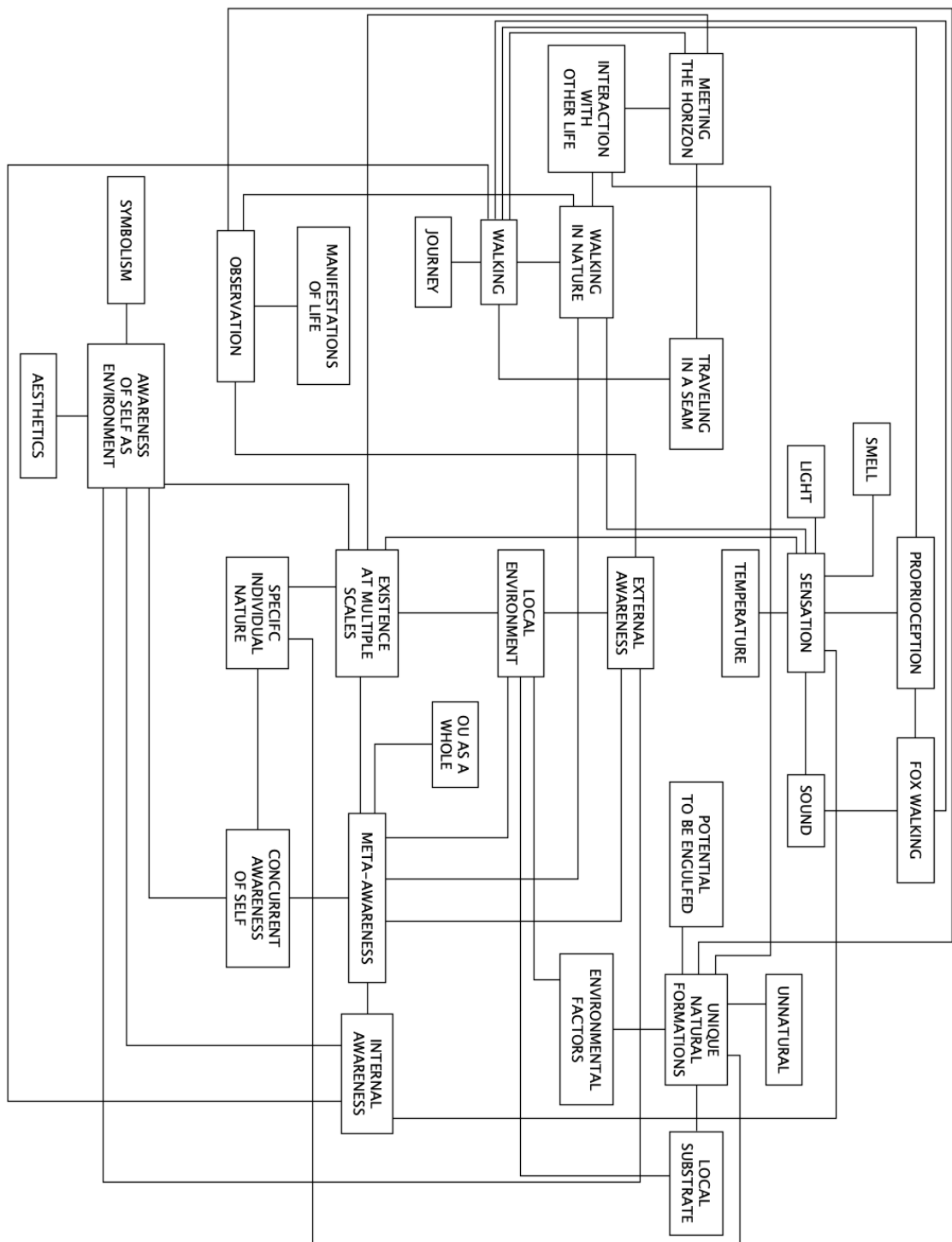
I will say that generally, these natural settings caught my eye because of a sensation that I had of witnessing myself outside of myself, or at least a similar process of life. These natural vignettes typically involved a lifeform or part of a lifeform making an unpredictable or really unique formation or shape. These patterns emerged from the combination of the organism's position, its natural growth pattern, and the environment it found itself in. And while the vast majority of plants around them grew in what seemed like typical ways, in these particular settings, very unusual formations occurred. It just so happened that for whatever constellation of factors, these unique expressions surfaced.

This expression of self of these plants demonstrated something about how the unique individual and its output in the environment arises. These weren't means of intended expression, they were ways of being. And this felt like an aspiration that I might use to lead my life and engage in Initiatory effort, is to engage my abilities and tendencies, while creating circumstances that allow for individual expression and being without forcing the issue.

The uniqueness of these natural formations was also paralleled by the unique moment in which I would encounter the scene - my awareness was in a unique state of consciousness and attention, impacted by what has happened in the day, how I was feeling, how my body was oriented, and so on. So there was a mirroring of a unique point of being in myself to meet that of the plants I was seeing.

This exercise could be compared to a visit to a museum - one bears witness to what one encounters - and one can attempt to do this by trying to really isolate the experience without preconception - perhaps a kind of bracketing, inasmuch as that is really possible. Both are potentially unpredictable and provide novel sensory content. However, the walk in nature is less curated, especially if one goes to places where one has not hiked before. We don't know that we are walking into the Contemporary Arts wing, or about to witness artifacts denoted as aesthetically worthy before the fact. The items we see are not selected.

I include below a mind-map of some concepts that came to mind from this work.



One question that arises is: what emerges from this work? Is there a pattern that is emergent from how we engage with life? I'd argue there is, and that it is radically complicated and nuanced by the flood of sensory and mental input, as well as pre-existing thoughts. This is certainly not a unique or new insight.

There are things we cannot change - the weather, geological phenomena, larger social trends, viral pandemics. That said, each time we take the commute on the same route, where one gets one's morning coffee, one's idiosyncratic mannerisms, one's dress - these all contribute to a kind of experiential micro-environment that fosters a kind of personal arising or development that we do have some control over.

We exist and engage in life at a multitude of scales from the molecular/physiologic to the social/interpersonal to the cosmic, and the experience of this exercise has prompted me to look at where I have an ability to impact my life at these various scales of existence - to draw out a set of horizons or interfaces where I can act. Perhaps this could be seen as tracing out a margin of Runa, or an outline of Self.

Xeper and Remanifest

Kadmos2