

Title: yudō: the Art of the Bath

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Abstract:

This brief pamphlet imagines an “Art of the Bath ... using Japanese linguistic and historical-cultural tools, focusing attention on the experience of bathing, playfully emphasizing its ritualized and contemplative aspects, and appreciating all forms & themes of bathing culture.” It is both a practical guide and a theoretical exploration, rounded out with dips into scientific and social matters.

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Date: 13 January 2019

Signed: Brent Emerson



yudō: the Art of the Bath
First edition

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Epigraphs from *edge of a mountain forest*



yudō: the Art of the Bath

湯
道

In broken light: a fountain of new language and color, diversity on another time scale, an opening.

A very brief introduction to
bathing culture

On the Pacific Ocean's Ring of Fire, the Earth is aflame deep underground. This region is known for its massive volcanos, where molten rock periodically erupts, but its plate tectonics also create the geologic conditions for *water* to be heated by magma chambers, and thereby propelled to the surface in only somewhat less dramatic expulsions of steam and hot water.

In the Americas, such *hot springs* are revered as places of peace and healing in many native cultures. In Japan and Korea, these *onsen/oncheon* set an important cultural touchstone, helping the ritualized communal temple bathing that arrived with Buddhism from India to flourish. Eventually it evolved into Japan's *furo* (a deep relaxing private bath at home or an inn, always following a cleansing scrub outside the bath) and *sentō* (a utilitarian and social bath house with an area for washing and then communal baths of diverse temperatures and types), and Korea's *mogyoktang* (similar to a *sentō*) and *jjimjilbang* (which usually adds several hot dry rooms and a warm stone *ondol* floor for relaxing or sleeping in a mixed-sex community space).

With a similar focus on recreation, cleansing, and healing, Roman baths (*thermae*) featured a *caldarium* (hot bath), *tepidarium* (warm room of radiant heat) and *frigidarium* (cold bath). After the decline of the Roman empire, interest in communal bathing waned in Europe, only to return after the Middle Ages as the healing-focused *spa* (named after a town in Belgium).

Turkey's *hamam* adds the element of Islamic ritual purification. Judaism prescribes a ritual *mikveh* bath for religious conversions and purification. Christians have *baptism* and *holy water*. Bathing in sacred rivers is an important Hindu purification ritual.

In very cold places, getting and staying warm is of supreme importance, and concentrating and holding heat in a small room has been a useful technology that often becomes an important part of community life. Finland's version is the *sauna* (a room of hot dry air, traditionally generated by a smoky fire under rocks) and Russia's the *banya* (a room of hot light steam, traditionally flavored with aromatic tree branches and leaves). Both are often paired with contrasting plunges in cold water or snow.

To sum up this very brief and incomplete tour: various regional geologies, climates, and histories have generated humanity's diverse material and cultural perspectives on bathing. Taken together, a universal bathing culture emerges. The Bath is:

- warmth / survival
- purification / renewal / initiation
- cleansing / healing
- enchanted / magical / sacred space
- relaxation / pleasure
- community

yudō emerges on the Ring of Fire, grounded in the embrace of every one of these forms and themes of bathing culture.

A small stream emptying into a deepening pool.

Historical & philosophical roots
of *yudō*

湯道—the Art of the Bath

yudō is a way to approach the bath using Japanese linguistic and historical-cultural tools, focusing attention on the experience of bathing, playfully emphasizing its ritualized and contemplative aspects, and appreciating all forms & themes of bathing culture.

The Japanese word *yu* (湯) means “hot water.” *Sentō* and *onsen* are often indicated on maps and signs by this character, or more simply by the phonetic ヲ or the pictographic 𩺰. The earliest communal temple baths in Japan were called *yuya* (湯屋, literally “hot water shops”) and this remains a synonym for *sentō*. So 湯 is hot water, but especially in the context of bathing.

dō (道) means a whole complex of things at the intersection of “path,” “art,” “way of life,” “mindful action,” and “the Way.” One way of understanding this concept in a Japanese context is to trace the spread of Buddhist culture from its birth in India eastward to Korea and Japan. Passing through China, Buddhism was influenced by *Tao*(道)ist philosophy, giving rise to the distinctive *Ch’an* Buddhism (which became *Seon* in Korea and *Zen* in Japan). Zen places importance on effortlessness, harmony, spontaneity, creativity, simplicity, moderation, compassion, and humility. Zen developed alongside the native Japanese *Shintō* religion and its deep respect for natural elements and forces (*kami*) and emphasis on ritual.

The resulting mixture of aesthetic and ethical values influenced many medieval Japanese arts/practices and their descendants, which is one reason that 道 is a natural end to many of their names:

- 劍道 (*kendō*, the way of the sword);
- 茶道 (*chadō*, the way of tea, tea ceremony);
- 書道 (*shodō*, the way of the brush, calligraphy);
- 華道 (*kadō*, the way of flowers, ikebana);
- 合氣道 (*aikidō*, the way of harmonious energy).

A central feature of these arts is humble, spontaneous creativity exercised within a relaxed, attentive body and mind, undertaken with the aim of disappearing into the flow of practice. In *zazen*, this is simplified all the way to just sitting in a field of attentive observation. It is into this family that *yudō* is born.

So *yudō* (湯道) literally means “the Way of Hot Water” but is more accurately “the Art of the Bath,” carrying the practical, aesthetic, ethical, and philosophical flavors of its lineage.

(Lest we get too serious, and speaking of flavors, let's note that in Chinese and Korean, the character 湯 is pronounced *tang* and tends in meaning away from “hot water” and towards “soup.” So 湯道 is also *tangdō*, “the Way of Soup.” Human soup.)

*Inside the water are wings. That familiar kind release surges
weightless on every side. You're sharpening and collapsing everything.*

What happens to us
in hot water

What happens to our bodies

We are supported. Hydrostatic pressure underwater is greater than the air pressure you normally live in; this increased pressure of water manifests as extra support to the body from the outside in, resisting your motion in every direction and increasing blood circulation.

We are lifted up. Because you're mostly made of water, the density of your body is only a bit higher than water's, so water exerts a strong buoyant force opposing gravity, making you lighter. (If the water contains a significant concentration of dissolved mineral salts, its specific gravity will be even higher, making the solution even more buoyant than water alone, and you even lighter!)

Our cardiovascular system adapts. When you place part of your body in hot water, your autonomic nervous system notices: charged with maintaining homeostatic balance, which includes keeping a nearly constant body temperature, it triggers nearby pre-capillary sphincters to relax, opening your capillaries in the warmer area to increase blood flow (vasodilation) to flush the extra heat away. When your entire body is submerged in hot water, this effect moves your blood generally outward (toward your skin and extremities), and increases your heart rate, blood volume, rate of blood flow, and the oxygen content in your blood.

We get cleaned. Another tactic your body uses to regain its normal temperature is to sweat, so that moisture on your skin will evaporate and cool you. This perspiration flushes and cleans your entire skin (your largest organ) from the inside out.

We get warmer. In dry air, vasodilation and perspiration are effective at cooling the body. But in a hot bath, the water surrounding your body is maintained at a high temperature, so increased blood flow closer to your skin instead picks up heat and *warms* you, deeper and deeper.

Our muscles relax. As warmed blood reaches deeper into your muscles, muscle fibers expand. This helps reduce muscle pain by easing any pinching of nerves or blood vessels, and by helping muscles rid themselves of lactic acid. Thus expanded, muscles' range of motion is increased, allowing for gentle exercise and stretching beyond what may be possible at room temperature. Heat also increases the extensibility of collagen tissues (tendons and ligaments), and allows joints to move more freely.

We're readied for contrast. Cold water triggers the opposite effect (vasoconstriction) where your body tries to keep blood away from a cold area to conserve core body heat. When your entire body is submerged in cold water, your blood moves generally inward (toward your core) and reverses other hot water effects. Alternating temperatures exercises these vascular fluctuations, increases circulation, and stimulates body systems.

What happens to our minds

We feel warm, slow, safe, and light immersed in the heat, resistance, support, and buoyancy we get from water.

Our pain is relieved. In response to applied heat, sensory neurons send impulses to the brain about unusual temperature. These signals compete with pain impulses, thereby reducing or relieving pain. Alternating with cold water produces additional competing temperature signals (on short application) as well as a general dampening of neuronal activity (when prolonged).

We feel pleasure. There is some evidence that the level of beta-endorphins in the blood increases during bathing (especially in very hot or cold water). Beta-endorphins are produced by the pituitary gland in response to physiologic stressors, are released into the blood and brain, and have morphine-like effects on the central and peripheral nervous systems to relieve pain and produce a pleasurable and even intoxicating feeling.

Our mood improves. Finding ourselves safe and warm, with relaxed muscles, lightness & enhanced freedom of movement, reduced pain, and increased pleasure, we feel good!

We are renewed. Stripped bare, cleaned by scrubbing and perspiration, stimulated and in improved mood, we experience a sense of renewal, the possibility of a fresh start.

What happens to our communities

We open up to each other. In Japanese, one speaks of *hadaka no tsukiai*, “naked communion”. In many bathing cultures, it is common for families and groups of friends or colleagues to bathe together, relaxing and talking. Scrubbed clean of daily life and soaking in the bath, ordinary social barriers break down, providing a chance to speak unusually openly and honestly with one another. In the bath, everyone is equal.

We become kinder and more accepting. Relieved of our own pain and content in our own good moods, it's easier to listen to each other and accept each other with compassion and kindness.

We gain confidence. Accepted by others at our most vulnerable, we gain confidence in ourselves and can reach out to each other even more effectively.

We share ideas and experience. A public bath may serve the role common to the town green, central plaza, public house, salon, and coffeehouse: a meeting place for the informal exchange of ideas and information, a place to build communal spirit and cohesion. Or it may be a place to share more subtle experiences without words, more like a church.

We get stronger. A group of open, kind, confident, friendly, and connected people is a foundation for a strong community.

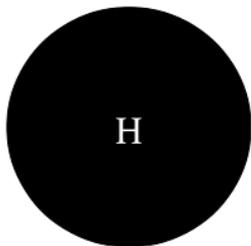
Steam sleeps on the other side of ice. One tastes the other's breath.

*what does your skin
divide?*

The theory
of *yudō*

The One Cycle: Hot

The one cycle is the most basic way to experience hot water in a bath: there is one bath, full of water heated to be quite warm to somewhat hot, and it is enjoyable to soak in. It's a very simple system:

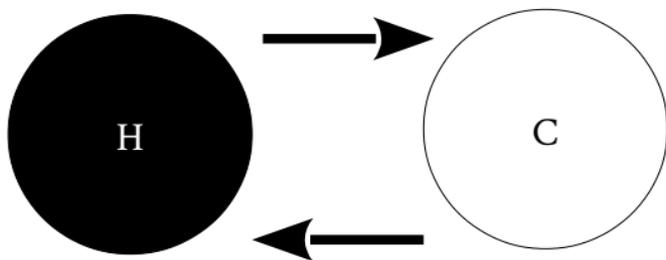


The primary effect is sedative, soporific, and dilatory. We melt away a bit into the water and our boundaries soften.

David Winnicott, a pioneering Object Relations theorist, suggests that humans are driven by the search for objects we experience as simultaneously within and outside ourselves. Where better to find it than in water, the universal solvent of all life?

The Two Cycle: Hot — Cold

Ah, the discovery of contrast! After our bodies adapt to a new homeostatic balance in a hot bath, it can be enjoyable to reset it by alternating with cool or cold air or water:

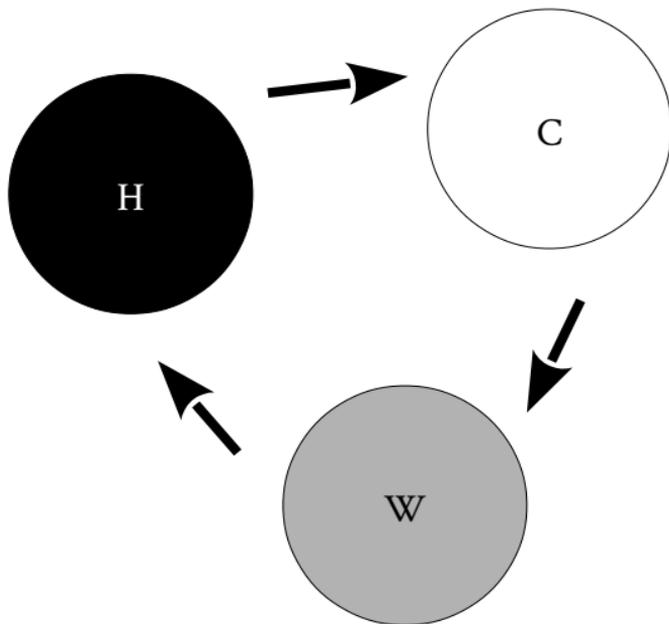


The cold water may serve initially to reactivate what we liked about the hot water, but we encounter a new sensation of fresh clarity there as well. Alternating the dilation we experience in the hot bath with constriction from the cold water exercises, flushes, and stimulates our skin, vascular system, heart, lungs, nervous system, and other organs.

Zen has been described as a way to harmonize the all-is-one with the all-is-different. Where better to practice than immersed in the all-is-flowing?

The Three Cycle: Hot—Cold—Warm

In the three cycle, we support, extend, and refine this simple contrast with the addition of a warm bath, at just above normal human body temperature. It might seem counterintuitive to turn to the most human-neutral temperature possible in search of contrast, but as we quickly discover, a long soak in a warm bath makes very hot water tolerable, very hot water makes it possible to remain in quite cold water much longer, and the contrast from deep cold activates warm water as a surprisingly powerful and pleasurable resting step:

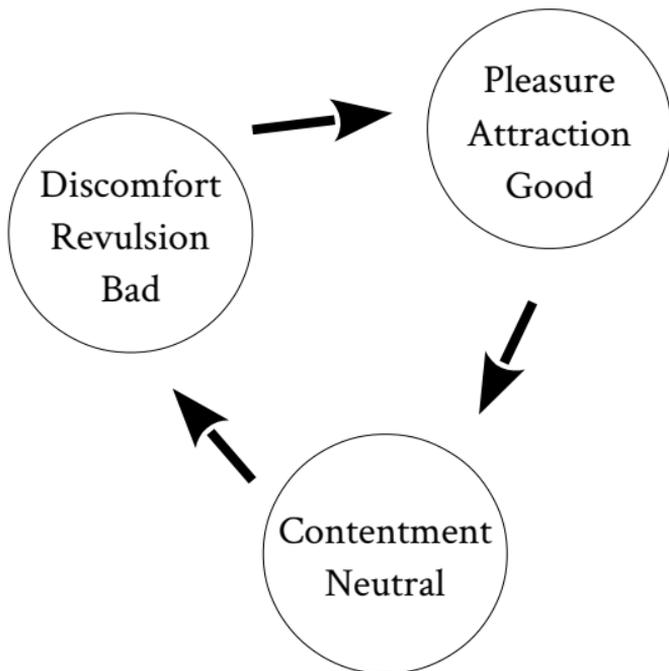


The combined effect is maximal dilation, constriction, contrast, clarity, and pleasure. In practicing the three cycle, our focus often shifts to the cold bath, rather than the hot water we usually think of as the center of the system. After all, cold provides relief from the very hot bath, activates the warm water, and offers in itself a clearing and freshening of mind. Going deeper, this cycle can be seen from the perspective of *any* of its baths as a central pivot. It is at this point that the three cycle reveals its deep symmetry, opening *yudō* into three advanced practices:

- 清水道 *kiyomizu-dō*, where each bath exists in relation to the cold: very hot water allows entry into and sustained presence in the cold bath, and heightens its contrast; warm offers a safe refuge from the long cold; and the cold bath is a refreshing still point of emptiness and clarity.
- 温水道 *onsui-dō*, where every bath exists in relation to the warm: cold activates the warm water; very hot is a refuge of heat when warm feels tepid; and warm itself offers union, a womblike embrace, tingling skin, powerful endorphins.
- 熱湯道 *nettō-dō*, where every bath exists in relation to the very hot: warm offers gentle preparation; cold is a relief and refuge; very hot a way to soak in abundant energy, survive fire.

In the three cycle, advanced *yudōka* practice all three at once!

In the context of the three cycle, each separate bath is usually experienced first as pleasurable, a relief. As our bodies adapt, the bath vanishes into neutrality. Eventually some discomfort—mild, moderate, then even extreme—creeps in, pushing us out and into the next bath. So the cycle of three baths generates a corresponding cycle of the three sensory/neurological states we experience in each one:



Seen in this light, the three cycle is an invitation to observe our own minds and nervous systems in action, to embodied reflection on adaptation, attachment, contextual meaning, and the myriad other phenomena that arise there.

And you may find that repeating the three cycle three times demonstrates much the same relation: the first is a gathering adaptation from chaos to order, the second a concentrated peak, the third a turning away.

The three cycle (of baths, of *yudō* practices, of sensory states, of cycles) is an example of one of the simplest abstract symmetrical systems. Mathematicians call it the cyclical group of order three, describing the rotational symmetries of an equilateral triangle, or arithmetic modulo three.

In relation to philosophies of nature, it might remind you of the Hindu Trimurti, the cosmic functions of creation-maintenance-destruction personified as Brahma-Vishnu-Siva. In relation to cognition and ideas, it might suggest the Hegelian dialectic of thesis-antithesis-synthesis.

And there are no doubt many more triads and trinities to be found in the three cycle, plenty of room for more symbology. (And four cycles and five cycles and six cycles to explore...)

To discover what it all means to you, get into the bath!

I step in, hard to separate, and I can see the opening behind love. She is full now, breaking the window to winding up history.

The practice
of *yudō*

1. Start & stay healthy

Drink plenty of water before, during, and after bathing. Your body is over 60% water, and it should stay that way. Warm and hot environments cause your body to lose water through perspiration, and contrast cycles change your blood circulation, the volume of your vascular system, and thereby your heart rate and blood pressure. Stay hydrated inside and out!

Eat healthy food, and enough of it, before bathing (though perhaps not immediately before). Don't enter hot or cold baths if your blood sugar is especially low.

Maintain adequate cardiovascular fitness with regular aerobic exercise, and know your limits when bathing. Exploring extremes of hot and cold exercises your heart.

Avoid alcohol, strong stimulants, and other drugs when bathing.

Please avoid bathing in hot water without the advice of a physician if you are pregnant, anemic, have a high fever, extreme hypertension, a liver, kidney, or circulation disorder, arteriosclerosis, congestive heart failure, or have experienced a recent stroke or heart attack.

2. Find a bath

You can practice *yudō* in your own tub, a remote natural spring, a developed communal hot spring resort, a posh spa, a public bath, or any other place you can find a hot bath. Access to cool or cold air, or better yet a cold bath, will enhance things. For the very richest experience, try to get access to immersive baths at a spectrum of temperatures, something like:

- Cold (58-62°F = 14-17°C)
- Cool (68-72°F = 20-22°C)
- Warm (100°F = 38°C)
- Hot (104-108°F = 40-42°C)
- Very Hot (110-114°F = 43-46°C)

You may enjoy other traditional bathing environments—a dry air wood or clay sauna, light steam banya, heavy steam hamam, warm stone ondol floor—or other types of warming or cooling rooms.

Explore your local options to find a place that's comfortable and enjoyable for you. *yudō* admits of many variations and different shapes and styles.

3. Remove your clothing

There are at least three good reasons to bathe nude:

- Clothing interferes with the thorough and effective cleaning of both our bodies and the water we're bathing in. Cleansing is perhaps the most basic and foundational theme of bathing culture.
- Clothing interferes with the body's easy and fluid exposure to water. It creates a physical barrier and weighs us down in the water and out. It feels better to be naked in water than clothed.
- Clothing interferes with the body's exposure to the world. Embedded as most of us are in cultures that excel at myriad kinds of body-shaming, bathing nude with others has the potential to be a profoundly liberating experience. While exposing your body to strangers or friends can initially be uncomfortable, surrendering to the reality of our own and others' bodies in a neutral social environment can be part of a process of testing openness, being accepted, gaining confidence, and letting go of the shame and judgement we are trained to collaborate in. (It should be noted that while *yudō* doesn't resist or judge human sexuality, it does not conceive of bathing itself as a sexual experience.)

We enter the bath vulnerable and exposed on purpose.

4. Get very, very clean

To keep communal water clean and thereby respect the water, other bathers, and ourselves, first clean very thoroughly with a shower or by washing and pouring water over yourself. Wash your hair and every part of your body, even between your toes and inside your ears. Scrub hard, rinse, and scrub again. Shave if you like, or brush your teeth. The process should be bright, enjoyable, and stimulating, and you should feel completely clean afterwards.

yudō can lead us to feel pure and clean at many levels. Scrubbing the outside surface of your body prepares you to access this more deeply in your body and mind.

5. Enter the water

Slide into a pool of warm or hot water. Relax. Be still and buoyant.

Give attention to your breath, your heartbeat, the sounds around you, the way light moves through water.

Stay there for a while.

6. Help everyone to be comfortable

If you're in a communal bathing environment, be aware of the other people around you. Do what you can to make others feel comfortable and safe.

Depending on the context, this may involve smiling or not smiling, joining others or staying alone, looking at each other or looking away. It may mean reaching out to ask a question, answering or anticipating others' questions, or remaining silent.

A bathing environment might be utilitarian, medical, social, contemplative, or many other things, and maybe all of them at different times. Remain sensitive and alert to the cultural norms of the place and the needs of the people you're bathing with.

7. Move through contrast

Now you get to be curious and creative. Diverse bathing environments present so many opportunities for different experiences of temperature and contrast!

After adapting to a warm or hot bath, you might experiment with warmer or cooler water. Spend at least a few minutes in each environment at first to learn how your body reacts. Do you

prefer consistency or contrast, smaller or bigger moves between temperatures? What order feels best? Does some time in hot or cool dry air fit in? Do the baths you prefer make a cycle that makes sense to you? Is there a temperature that feels like a natural starting, resting, or ending step?

The three cycle is a good place to start exploring contrast. Extend it as you discover new avenues of pleasure, relaxation, stimulation, and illumination.

8. Exit the water

How do you feel as you walk away from the bath and back into your ordinary life?

We woke the water.

Recommended Reading

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