

ONE

The Breath

To breathe deeply and gently is to draw near this Spirit, to feel oneself inhaled and exhaled by God.

—Jean-Yves Leloup,
Being Still: Reflections on an Ancient Mystical Tradition

We begin this journey through the layers of sacred time with the most organic and primal of units—the breath. Certainly there are shorter and more defined time spans, such as the second and even milli- or nano-second, but these are not particularly meaningful in terms of our human experience. Genesis tells us we were breathed into by God and given life. Psalm 104 proclaims God as the sustainer of life. And in the book of Ezekiel, the dry bones are reanimated, made alive again, through the gift of breath.

Our breath continues automatically whether we're conscious of it or not. The breath is a threshold—a gateway to a profound immersion in this moment here and now. When we cultivate the ability to allow our breath to anchor us, our awareness can become deeply rooted in the present. The past has come to completion; the future is yet to be created. And while both remembering and dreaming are vital acts, when they move into regret and anxiety, we are drained of the life offered to us right now. Breath invites us to be here. Someone who lives to be eighty years old will take close to 700 million breaths in their lifetime, on average, so there are many opportunities offered to us to step across the threshold into an experience of being more present to our lives. The more rushed and restless we feel, the more we are invited to pause and taste eternity by paying attention to this moment in time.

We've all had experiences when the clock drags on and we wish our time away, or when the clock feels relentless in its onward march with never enough hours to get things done. The key is not to multitask so we

can be more productive. The breath teaches us that the key is actually to do the opposite—to learn to solo-task, to focus on what is at hand, to slow down. The breath can help us with this.

How many of us have lamented that there just aren't enough hours in the day? Yet how many of us have also lost track of time and touched those eternal moments when listening to a piece of beautiful music, having a conversation with a friend, strolling through a magical place, writing a poem, or gardening? These moments of time outside of time are often what bring meaning to our lives.

With each breath we inhale oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide, while the trees do the reverse in what Teilhard de Chardin called “the breathing together of all things.”¹ Philosopher and ecologist David Abram reminds us of the sustaining power of sacred breath in Hebrew cosmology when he writes that “sacred breath enters not just into human beings . . . it also animates and sustains the whole of the sensible world. . . . Without the continual outflow of God's breath, all of the letters that stand within the things of this world—all the letter combinations embodied in particular animals, plants, and stones—would be extinguished.”² The poet Mary Oliver asks the question, “Listen—are you breathing just a little and calling it a life?”³ which opens us to the possibility that deepening our breath is also a deepening of life and our presence to our own aliveness.

Fighting time and forever feeling its scarcity is a sure way to reach the end of each day and our lives feeling exhausted, frustrated, depleted, and perhaps cheated out of time. The monks and hermits of various spiritual traditions know this truth—that rushing does not bring the grace of the fullness of time; only slowing down can do that. This is the paradox at the heart of contemplative life. When we slow down, life and its possibilities seem to expand. When we rush, everything feels constricted. It is in bringing ourselves even more fully to the present moment that we begin to see that eternity isn't a faraway reality behind the pearly gates. Eternity is right here below the surface of things; and we can access it—through both our own intention and our practice—and allow ourselves to be taken over by it, surrendering to the flow of spaciousness and ease that we occasionally touch without even trying.

Remember Your Mortality

Sometimes our resistance to slowness is because we fear what we'll encounter within ourselves when we slow our busy, distracted minds enough to listen to what is happening deep within: the shadows that have gone untended, the regrets we feel, or the sorrow over time spent on things that weren't our great loves in the world. The reality of our mortality is a core aspect of our relationship to time and our sense of time running out. The ancient monks had a practice of *memento mori*—to remember your death, or to “keep death daily before your eyes,” as St. Benedict writes in his Rule. This was not a morbid exercise, but a practice of gratitude for the gift of life, the gift of awareness in this moment now.

St. Francis referred to death as “Sister Death” in his Cantic of Creation, a companion and kin on the path of our lives to remind us of the treasure each breath brings. Each breath we are given is another opportunity to fall even more in love with the world. Each breath is a doorway to the eternal.

One of my most sacred memories is sitting with my mother as she lay dying in the intensive care unit at a hospital in Sacramento, California. Each breath was monitored along with her heartbeat. She had a ventilator so she wouldn't choke to death, but all of her systems were shutting down while I sat vigil with her for five days. It was like being in time outside of time. Everything fell away. I did not concern myself with my teaching or other responsibilities; anything that was not absolutely necessary was released, forgotten for the duration. My husband flew down to be with me, and other family members joined us. We waited, we sang to her, we anointed her; we took turns catching fistfuls of sleep, nibbling on snacks, breathing sometimes slowly and deeply and sometimes in great heaving sobs. We continued to wait until her very final exhale came and the machine had one long, sustained beep, her chest lay flat and still, and I began to wail.

Breath can be an ally in labor or when we experience physical or emotional pain. In the terrible grief that followed my mother's death, sometimes all that carried me through was my breath—getting through the next five breaths, then the next five.

Midwives coach women in labor over when and how to breathe to facilitate birthing. Spiritual directors and soul friends offer a similar guidance for those who are birthing something new in their lives at a

soul level or those who are moving through a season of grieving. There can be impatience and anxiety, and the breath helps us to stay with the process, be present to the unfolding, and release our need to see what is coming and the exact shape of things.

Memento mori offers us the tremendous gift of reminding us that our breaths are limited. That reminder confronts us with the vital question: Knowing we won't live forever, how will we choose to live now? Forever harried, frazzled, and anxious, or in a slow, reverent way as much as possible?



Scripture Reflection from John Valters Paintner

Story of Adam and Eve

(Genesis 2:4-25)

In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground—then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

—Genesis 2:4b-7

The Irish language is full of proverbs, and one of my favorites is *Tús maith, leath na hoibre*, which translates into English as “A good start is half the work.” It’s practical advice from a largely agrarian culture. Crops and livestock keep their own schedules. And procrastination only breeds more work later. It’s best to get up early and get “tucked

in,” as they say. Why wait? And so that is what we are doing here now: starting at the beginning.

In terms of the presented order of scripture, this is not the first of the creation myths. However, it is commonly believed to have been written first, with chapter 1 of Genesis being added later. Now, both creation myths are important (even if the details and order of events in each contradict one another), and the sequence of the two stories also matters greatly.

In chapter 1, we learn of a good and loving God who creates an abundant and orderly world out of the chaos. God is almost methodical in creation. One thing leads to another, all with a purpose. Once everything is prepared, according to the grand design, humans are created in God’s likeness. And it was very good.

Chapters 2 and 3 teach us that we humans are to blame for why God’s perfect creation is no longer perfect: the existence of suffering, pain, death, and so forth. The how and why of that isn’t relevant to this discussion today. But this second creation myth picks up from where the first one ends: a good and loving God carefully makes the world, including humans.

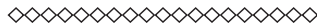
In this second myth, humans are the first living things created. We are told here that God formed us carefully and artistically from the earth. We were molded, crafted into being. But that was just our form. What gave us life, according to this story, was that God breathed life into us. Our being was filled with God’s Spirit. Breathing was the first thing we did. It was an extension, a continuation, of God’s creative act, and it is a sign of God’s divinity within each and every one of us.

Which brings us to our theme—breath. Or more to the point, it brings us to the rhythm and cycle of breathing, the in and out, the holding and releasing, the filling and emptying. We could begin anywhere on this wheel of breath, but this passage from scripture lays out an example for us. And so to paraphrase Genesis, chapter 2, “God breathed into our nostrils the breath of life and we became living beings.”

- With every inhale, remember that life is gift, graced from our Creator. All good things are given to us from a good and loving God.

- Pause, filled with gratitude, and be filled with the Spirit of God. The Creator is all around us, but also within, filling our being.
- Then, with gratitude, breathe out, sharing the gift freely given to us with others. We join in the creative act when we give to one another.
- And so pause again, resting into the emptiness. Acknowledge the need to stop and rest, before we can be ready to begin again.

Set aside time each day to take even just a moment to concentrate on your breathing and make it a prayer of gratitude.



Practice: Slow Being

Time is not the steady beat of a clock, nor is eternity an experience of complete stillness. We actually experience time in various tempos. Think of our bodies with their various rhythms. The heartbeat and breath are the two most foundational, the ones we can hear and connect with in an intimate way. When we sleep, our breath slows way down, and when we run or walk up a hill, our breath speeds up. When we experience strong emotion such as fear, anxiety, or joy, our heart rate increases and breath often becomes faster and shallower. When we meditate we can slow these down again.

St. Hildegard of Bingen, a twelfth-century German Benedictine abbess, described herself as a “feather on the breath of God.”⁴ I love this image. There is such delicacy in being a feather, a sense of being carried gently. She also saw the breath as what gives the body life, just as the air is what gives the earth life. We can join together with other creatures, trees, and plants in an extravagant harmony of breath.

Each chapter of this book will invite you into a practice of slowing down in some way. Your first practice is to try something simple: five slow, deep breaths. See if you can keep your awareness focused on each inhale and exhale. Notice when your mind starts to wander away. Allow yourself a few moments to rest into the experience of being inhaled and exhaled

by God. As you sink into this place of rhythm and stillness, what do you notice about your own longings? If you imagine on the inhale that you are being filled with the energy and wisdom needed to share your gifts, and on the exhale that you are offering them in service to the world, what images come to your mind and heart? What quality does time take on? Do you notice yourself still rushed and frenzied, or is another perspective offered?

Statio is the monastic practice of blessing the in-between moments. We get so impatient when appointments run behind and cause a cascading effect of delays from one commitment to another. Or we stand in line absentmindedly filling the time with mindless scrolling through social media, which rarely does much to uplift us. What if we instead allowed those in-between moments to offer us the chance for five slow, deep breaths? Before you hop out of the car to another task, slow yourself way down. Embrace the in-between moment.

We live in a culture that values productivity and achievement at the expense of our physical and emotional health, our time for relationships and creative pursuits, and our time to simply savor and cherish the gifts each moment might bring. The breath is a gateway into this awareness, with its ability to slow us down so we can experience time in a different way, deepen into friendship with eternity, and grow familiar with the experience of spaciousness in our lives and learn to cherish it.

The breath offers us another gift. Often when we are rushing through life, our whole physical system is running on adrenaline; cortisol pulses through us, our breathing is shallow, and our muscles tense to brace us for what comes next. These are some of the reasons it can actually be physically uncomfortable to slow down if it is not our usual practice. Our bodies are so primed for action and can feel a profound restlessness as we try to stop that pattern. By working with the breath in an intentional way, we can impact these biological responses to stress, which keep us amped up all the time. We can begin to slow our systems down so we feel more at ease with pausing.

Modern life seems to move at full speed, and many of us can hardly catch our breath between the demands of earning a living, nurturing family and friendships, and the hundreds of small daily details, such as paying our bills, cleaning, and grocery shopping. More and more we feel stretched thin by commitments and lament our busyness, but without a

clear sense of the alternative. Even when there is nothing immediately upcoming on our schedules, we are overwhelmed by all the things we feel we should do. There is no space left to consider other options, and heading off on a retreat to ponder new possibilities may be beyond our reach.

But there are opportunities for breathing spaces within our days. The monastic tradition invites us into the practice of stopping one thing before beginning another. Doing so acknowledges that in the space of transition and threshold is a sacred dimension, a holy pause full of possibility. What might it be like to allow a five-minute window to sit in silence between appointments? Or to take five long, slow, deep breaths after finishing a phone call or checking your email and before pushing on to the next thing?

We often think of these in-between times as wasted moments and inconveniences rather than opportunities to return again and again to the present, to awaken to the gifts right here, not the ones we imagine waiting for us beyond the next door. But what if we built in these thresholds between our daily activities, just for a few minutes, to intentionally savor silence and breath?

When we pause between activities or moments in our day, we open ourselves to the possibility of discovering a new kind of presence in the in-between times. When we rush from one thing to another, we skim over the surface of life, losing that sacred attentiveness that brings forth revelations in the most ordinary of moments.

We are continually crossing thresholds in our lives—both the literal thresholds when moving through doorways, leaving the building, or going to another room and the metaphorical thresholds when time becomes a transition space of waiting and tending. We hope for news about a friend struggling with illness; we are longing for clarity about our own deepest dreams. This *place between* is a place of stillness, where we let go of what came before and prepare ourselves to enter fully into what comes next.

Meditation: The Seasons of the Breath

As you pause during the day to breathe, imagine as you inhale that you are breathing in the Spirit. The Latin word for “spirit” is *spiritus* and is the root of the word “inspire”; when you inhale, you breathe in the Spirit’s inspiring and enlivening presence. Allow that moment of fullness to connect you with the sacred presence always sustaining you. When you

exhale, imagine releasing what is not needed in this moment, setting aside all that keeps you from God. Notice how your perspective on time shifts when you pay attention to your breath.

I credit my practice of yoga over the last twenty-five years for my understanding of the ways breath can help me be present to my experience and lift me out of the relentless anxiety of my mind around having enough time. When I breathe deeply not only do I discover an anchor into this moment here and now but also there is a physiological effect on my body that calms my nervous system and allows me to be more present. When I slow myself down and tend to the breath, I discover a fullness I didn't see before in my rushed existence.

I used to think of the breath as only the inhale and exhale, but in my yoga classes I was taught *sama vritti*, which is known as “equal parts breathing.” You begin by allowing the inhale and the exhale to have the same length; for example, breathe in for a count of three and breathe out for a count of three. Once you've established that steady rhythm, you add another layer to the practice—breathe in for three, hold the fullness for three, exhale for three, hold the emptiness for three. Those moments between the inhale and exhale and between the exhale and inhale don't often receive our attention, but they do offer us windows into the experience of fullness and emptiness that arrives with each breath.

I began to see how this four-part breathing rhythm actually reflects the four-part rhythm of the seasons with their movements of blossoming (inhale), fruitfulness (hold), release (exhale), and resting (hold). We experience it during the day as well with the four hinges of dawn, day, dusk, and dark and in the lunar cycles of waxing, fullness, waning, and darkness. Why is this important? I've found that the more I live into an awareness of this four-part sacred rhythm at the heart of everything—the more I see and experience the rise and fall, the fullness and emptiness of each breath—the more I grow in trust that when I am invited into release and rest in my life, flowering and fruitfulness will eventually follow.

The following is a simple meditation for paying attention to the different qualities of the breath. Begin by getting in a comfortable position and closing your eyes if you would like. Then pay attention to your breath without changing anything. Simply take a few moments to connect with this life-sustaining energy moving through you.

Now start to slow your breath down and move into an awareness of the four parts of the breath—the moment of inhale, the pause between your inhale and exhale, the moment of exhale, and the pause between your exhale and inhale. Take a couple of breaths, focusing your awareness on all four moments in your breath and noticing the different quality each part has. We're going to spend a little bit of time exploring each of these four moments.

As you breathe, bring your focus to your inhalation and allow it to be slow and full. As you repeat each breath cycle, notice how that moment of breathing in and taking in oxygen feels in your body. Call to mind the dawn as a time of awakening, an experience of breathing in new life. Feel the experience of spring's blossoming in your body. Hold this question: How are you being invited to awaken today? Take a few moments of silence to simply experience the fullness of your inhalation.

Now, as you continue noticing your breath, bring your focus to the moment between your inhalation and your exhalation. Pause for just a moment between the inhale and exhale, and notice how this moment of the breath feels in your body. Experience the fullness of oxygen in your lungs. With each breath cycle, pause at this moment and call to mind the height of the day as a time of fullness. Feel the experience of summer's heat and fruitfulness in your body. Hold this question: How are you being invited into the fullness of who you are today? Take a few moments of silence to simply experience this moment between inhale and exhale.

Continue to notice your breath, but now bring your focus to your exhalation and allow it to be slow and full. As you repeat each breath cycle, notice how that moment of breathing out feels in your body; sink into the experience of surrender and release that exhaling invites us into. With each exhale, call to mind dusk as a time of letting go, an experience of releasing that which no longer serves you, of being confronted with your own mortality and the knowledge that one day you will release your final exhale. Feel the experience of autumn's vulnerability in your body. Hold this question: What are you being asked to release today? Take a few moments of silence to simply experience the surrender of your exhalation.

Now move to the final part of the breath. As you continue your breath cycles, bring your focus to the moment between exhalation and