

BREATH OF LIFE, SPIRITUS VITAE: DECEPTIVELY SIMPLE, PROFOUNDLY SACRED

Suffering a stroke at age 31 forced Whitney Simpson to get in tune with her body, to literally take a deep breath. During this journey of healing and wholeness, Whitney began exploring practices that she found helpful to her recovery. She soon realized that these were ancient spiritual practices, grounded in connecting her body and spirit, and chose to primarily focus on:



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- Lectio Divina, meditative scripture prayer
- Yoga, understood as body prayer
- Breath prayer, often combined with a sacred word

These practices are also at the heart of ministry formation if we take seriously the need to cultivate an inner life, to enable us to be more present to ourselves, others and to the Absolute other (however we conceive that to be). In Simpson's excellent book *Holy Listening with Breath, Body, and the Spirit*, she convincingly argues that breath prayer has been part of the Judeo-Christian tradition since its inception and is effectively the foundation of all prayer.¹

In the Genesis account of Adam, whose name means dust/soil creature, human creation came into being when God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." (KJV Genesis 2:7). Three more times in Genesis (6:17; 7:15, 7:22) we find the expression "breath of life," and in each instance breath is equated with life itself. In seven instances in the Hebrew Scriptures, the life principle is referred to, not just as the breath, but as the breath in the nostrils (Genesis 7:22; II Samuel 22:16; Job 4:9; 27:3; Psalms 18:16; Isaiah 2:22; Lamentations 4:20). This physical and sacred emphasis on breath culminates in John's

Gospel, when Jesus Christ met with the apostles and "breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (John 20:22).

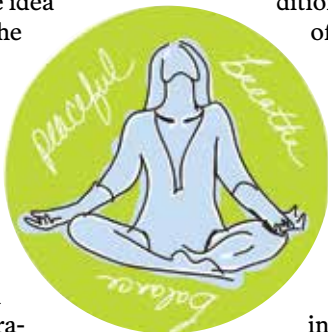
To feel someone's breath on you is incredibly intimate: a child's breath as she lays sleeping in your lap, a lover's breath soft on your neck. Humanity came into existence as God breathed into our nostrils the very breath of life. We received into our being the gift of the Holy Spirit through the breath of Jesus Christ. These profoundly significant events invite us to contemplate the meaning of breath. The word in Hebrew, "ruach," was translated into a feminine noun in modern Greek, "pnoe" (pneuma), and into Latin as "spiritus," continuing to connect breath directly to spirit. Breath is not only essential to our physical existence but foundational to our spiritual nourishment. It is

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also worth noting that in almost every religious tradition, breath is given a unique importance. In Buddhism and many Hindu traditions, breath is the central focus of all prayer practice. It is often presented as the greatest gift bestowed on humanity, enabling us to free ourselves from illusion and partake in the peace of suchness or the Absolute.

(Suchness is a translated word that means the true state of things; in this context it means the mind simply resting in being without thoughts or constructs.) One origin of the word breath is from the Sanskrit word “prana,” meaning the vital life force behind all being. The idea of the subtle vital force appears in the earliest Upanishads, dating back to 7th and 8th century BC. Breath has been given such a prominent focus from the most ancient spiritual writings to the most contemporary, and yet it appears to be incredibly neglected.²

What we often find contemporary writers referring to as breath prayer originated in the Christian tradition with the desert mothers and fathers more than two millennia ago as a way to respond to the Gospel imperative “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). To intentionally cultivate silence and attention, which is considered foundational to contemplation, they practiced devotional reading of Scripture. When moved by a particular word or phrase, they often used the



technique of breathing in with the first part of the text and breathing out with the next, repeating this pattern for extended periods of time. This evolved into the sacred art of Lectio Divina (sacred reading) and in the Eastern Orthodox tradition became the Jesus Prayer or Prayer of the Heart. What is important here is that breath and breathing have been known for many centuries to be at the heart of spiritual practice and well-being, and this is now receiving serious scientific support.

Harvard Medical School researchers, among many others, can show empirically that centering attention on our breathing creates a chain of neurological, physiological and psychological responses that can shift us from our often-unconscious tense flight/fright posture to a more embodied, relaxed presence. They can scientifically prove how breathing techniques offer a direct pathway to deeper relaxation, decreased stress and strengthening our immune system. Harvard Health Publishing offers techniques to

AWARENESS EXERCISE

A first step is to increase awareness of our breathing habits and to learn how to use breathing as a relaxation and meditation skill.

- Sitting or lying down in a relaxed body pose, bring your attention to your breathing and gently place one hand on the chest (between your collar bones) and another on the diaphragm, stomach or lower belly.

- Take three deep belly breaths and focus on feeling an expansion in the stomach. Your belly should expand in an exaggerated way on the inhale, your top hand should be still. This is the sort of “horizontal” breath you should aim for. Vertical chest or thoracic breathing is shallow and often associated with anxiety or other emotional distress.

- Try practicing this exercise in the morning, at noon and at night. You will notice the difference, as increased blood and oxygen flow to the brain and body have significant physical impact on your well-being and a host of health benefits.¹

- By increasing awareness of your own breathing pat-

terns and shifting to more abdominal breathing, you can reduce the muscle tension and anxiety present with stress-related symptoms or thoughts. Diaphragmatic or belly breathing is the easiest way of eliciting a psycho-physiological relaxation response.

- To slowly transform your breathing, sense the movement of your breath frequently in the midst of everyday activities. Try to keep your belly relaxed, and breathe into this area whenever it comes to your awareness. Let it expand as you inhale and retract as you exhale.

- Remember, you are a breathing being, alive right now and right here. Let yourself feel the mystery and the miracle of your breath, the breath of life, spiritus vitae.

NOTE

1. Tim Jewell and Debra Rose Wilson, “What Is Diaphragmatic Breathing?,” Healthline, <https://www.healthline.com/health/diaphragmatic-breathing>.

“help you turn down your response to stress.”

Breath focus helps with nearly all of them:

- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Mindfulness meditation
- Yoga, tai chi, and qi gong
- Repetitive prayer³

By exploring our breath, we discover new and deeper aspects of ourselves. Several contemporary Western neuropsychologists, Indian yoga and Chinese Taoist qi gong teachers go so far as to claim that by changing the way we breathe, we can change the way we live.⁴ We know that deep breathing directly impacts the part of the brain where stress dwells, encouraging our nervous system to slow down and gradually reside in the present moment. When we practice deep breathing that relaxes the body and centers the soul, we become less reactive and more receptive to the presence of God in us and in the world. As noted throughout, the breath of God is the breath of humanity. This deserves attention. Note in the King James Bible the following translation: “All the while my breath is in me, and the spirit of God is in my nostrils” (Job 27:3).

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NOTES

1. Whitney R. Simpson, *Holy Listening with Breath, Body, and the Spirit* (Nashville, Upper Room Books, 2017).
2. Richard Godwin, “‘You’ve Had What We Call a Cosmic Orgasm’: The Rise of Conscious Breathing,” *The Guardian*, August 4, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/aug/04/cosmic-orgasm-rise-of-conscious-breathing>.
3. “Relaxation Techniques: Breath Control Helps Quell Errant Stress Response,” Harvard Health Publishing, April 13, 2018, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/relaxation-techniques-breath-control-helps-quell-errant-stress-response>.
4. Jose L. Herrero et al., “Breathing Above the Brain Stem: Volitional Control and Attentional Modulation in Humans,” *Journal of Neurophysiology* 119, no. 1 (2018): 145–59; Geoff Pike and Phyllis Pike, *Ch'i the Power Within: Chi Kung Breathing Exercises for Health, Relaxation and Energy* (Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 1996).

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