



Just Breathe: The Pause that Refreshes

A Five-Minute Experiment

Before reading anything from this resource, perhaps you could pause ... right now ... and take three or four conscious breaths. For just a minute, would you be willing to let go of all else—thoughts, concerns, the next task, and allow your breath to center you, to bring you into your body. Now, using your breath as a guide, slowly scan your body and with each out-breath, relax any places of tension. When you feel yourself relaxing, breathe into your center and attune to the Divine Presence dwelling within your very being. Simply rest in that Presence for a minute.

In his book *Healing Breath*, Zen teacher and former Jesuit, Ruben Habito, suggests that as we focus on our breathing in and out, here and now, we are literally putting ourselves in connection with all the living beings with whom we share the air we breathe.

As we attune to our breath, we are in touch with our deepest self and we are at the heart of the circle of interconnectedness of the whole Earth community.

Reflection

God is breath.

All that breathes resides in the Only Being.
From my breath to the air we share
to the wind that blows around the planet:
Sacred Unity inspires all.



In both Hebrew and Aramaic, the same word—*ruah* stands for several different English words: spirit, wind, air and breath. So “Holy Spirit” might also be “Holy Breath.” This requires us to shift our consciousness. The separations between spirit and body, between humanity and nature, which we often take for granted in the English language, begin to fall away.

From the perspective of Sacred Unity, my breath is connected to the air we all breathe. ... In a very expansive way, our [breath] unites us with all other breathing beings in a melody of unity.

—Neil Douglas Klotz, *The Hidden Gospel*, p. 43-44, an alternate reading of John 4:24 from the Aramaic.

This song by Sara Thomsen sensually alerts us to the mystical reality of communion as we awaken to the unity of our breath, and blood, and body, and Spirit.



By Breath

By breath, by blood, by body, by Spirit, we are all one.

The air that is my breath is the air that you are breathing
And the air that is your breath is the air that I am breathing
The wind rising in my breast is the wind from the east, from the west
From the north, from the south, breathing in, breathing out.

The water that is my blood, my sweat, tears from crying
Is the water that is your blood, your sweat, tears from crying.
And the rising of the tide is in our veins and in the ocean wide
We are in the rising steam, rushing river, running stream

The earth is dust, the earth is clay, flow'rs blossoming and fading
We are dust and we are clay, we are blossoming and fading
Every color, every sound, every place is holy ground
Oh, every living thing, can you hear it laugh? Can you hear it sing?

The fire in my heart, my soul flame burning
Is the fire in your heart, your soul flame burning
We are Spirit burning bright, by light of day, in the dark of night
We are shining like the sun, and like the moon, like the Holy One

(Words and music by Sara Thomsen
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<https://www.sarathomsen.com/>

Invitation

Etty Hillesum, a Jewish woman who died as one of the millions of victims of the holocaust, dedicated herself to bearing witness to the tremendous power of love. For her, breath was one way she united with the Holy even in the midst of the most intense suffering. In her diary she wrote,

*Sometimes the most important thing in a whole day
is the rest we take between two deep breaths,
or the turning inwards in prayer for five short minutes.*

Today you might enjoy taking a breather, a pause that refreshes, once each hour. Simply return to your breath; notice where you are holding tension in your body. Just this noticing with compassion is a contemplative movement. Again and again, let your out-breath be one of relaxation and peace.

Release your breath through your body to touch the spaciousness of the cosmos.

Practice Tonglen



Breathe in suffering, your own and others;
breathe out compassion.

You may wish to try this meditative practice from Buddhist teacher Pema Chödrön.

Tonglen is . . . the most effective tool for developing courage and arousing our sense of oneness with others.

There are various ways that tonglen is taught, but the essence of it is breathing in that which is unpleasant and unwanted and breathing out—sending out—that which is pleasing, relieving, enjoyable. In other words, we breathe in the things we usually try to avoid, such as our sadness and anger [and suffering], and we send out the things we usually cling to, such as our happiness and good health. We breathe in pain and send out pleasure. We breathe in disgrace and send out good reputation. We breathe in loss and send out gain. This is an exceedingly counter-habitual practice. It helps us overcome our fear of suffering and tap into the compassion that’s inherent in us all.

The word *tonglen* is Tibetan for “sending and receiving.” It refers to our willingness to take on the pain of others we know are hurting and extend to them whatever we feel will ease their pain, whatever will enable them to stay present with the sorrows and losses and disappointments of life.

Practicing tonglen awakens our natural empathy, our innate ability to put ourselves in others’ shoes. Caring about people when they’re scared or sad or angry or arrogant can be a challenge; it confronts us with our own pain and fear, with the places where we’re stuck. But if we can stay with those unwanted feelings, we can use them as stepping-stones to understanding the pain and fear of others. Tonglen allows us to acknowledge where we are in the moment and, at the same time, cultivate a sense of kinship with others. When painful feelings arise, we breathe them in, opening to our own suffering and the suffering of everyone else who is feeling the same way. Then we send relief to us all. . . .

Tonglen isn’t just a practice to do on the meditation cushion. It’s particularly useful right in the midst of our life, wherever we are as we go about the day. . . .

Pema Chödrön, *Living Beautifully with Uncertainty and Change*, 80-81, 82, 84.

Deepening Practice

Today when you become aware of your breath, listen.

This breath right now can be whatever you need
a dropping down into your heart.
a surrender, a letting go, a release.
a return to the healing field of silence.
a return to Being, to Presence, to God.

Your breath invites you to make space for yourself, for whatever moves in your body, in your heart.

With intention, your breathing becomes a communion with the Holy Breath suffusing and healing whatever it touches within you, around you, and in this world.



Invitation to Contemplative Dialogue

As you reflect on “Just Breathe” and as you lean into the practices and readings, what surprises you or challenges you? What feels inviting or comforting? Where are you drawn to practice?

What difference might it make to be aware that attuning to the breath is a way of communion with your deep self that puts you at the heart of the circle of intercommunion with the whole Earth community?

If you’ve tried it, what has been your experience of tonglen?
Can you share one experience of actually practicing it?

How might this counter-cultural practice make a difference for you, for our world?
In light of the distresses of our earth community, what possibilities do you see for practicing tonglen communally?

Further Resources

For a painting and a blessing by Jan Richardson: <https://skylineucc.org/tag/jan-richardson>

Neil Douglas-Klotz books *Prayers of the Cosmos* and *The Hidden Gospel* offer Jesus’ familiar words in fresh ways as he translates them anew from the Aramaic. His meditations invite us to use the body and breath to ground our prayer.