

## BREATHING PRAYER

*(by Tilden Edwards)*

Breathing is fundamental to our physical being. In Scripture it is a symbol of life from Genesis through Revelation. (Gen. 2:7 / Revelation 11:11)

More specifically it becomes a symbol of God's life, God's Spirit, God's holy Wind inspiring life ("ruach" in Hebrew, "pneuma" in Greek).

Physical breath is a very apt symbol of God's Spirit and our spirit. Breath is invisible to the naked eye, yet it is very real and powerful. It cleanses, enlivens, and calms us. It cannot be confined in one place. It has a dynamic quality of movement, drawing on the air that pervades us inside and out. Breath reveals the illusion in any sense of ultimate self-isolation and separateness: we are always drawing in into us and returning it, demonstrating the fluidity of our embodiment, its literal interdependence with the rest of life. Breath is our breath, and yet it is not: it is air that we cannot possess. Such physical realities help us to understand the subtle intimacy of our human-divine interconnectedness.

More practically, attention to our breathing provides the simplest physical means of releasing a crowded, tense surface of mind and body. The most fundamental point is to slow down the breath. The more shallow and high in the chest we breathe, the more rapidly we breathe. Such rapid shallow breathing usually both reflects and reinforces tension in us. This in turn has a way of stimulating rapid, shallow thoughts that match the breathing. Our minds are racing. One thought feeds another in a driven panicky way. There is no room for the deeper Spirit to get through to us. We are tied up in producing an ever taller mental junk heap that takes the place of God.

Even when we want to relinquish this pattern, we sometimes find that the physical process is so strong and reinforcing that we cannot. We might instinctively draw in a deep breath and sigh, our body's way of pointing out the way for us. We can take this hint and go farther. We can open our lives to God through our breathing . . .

### BREATHING OPEN

- Lightly notice the speediness of your breath and thoughts.
- Remember your desire for God in the form of a prayer or wordless feeling.
- Begin breathing slowly deep down into your diaphragm-stomach area. You can put your hands on this area and feel it swell out with your in-breath. Gradually fill your lungs from this bottom point inward.
- Hold the breath briefly, but without closing your throat.
- Release your breath very slowly, twice as slowly as you breathed in. Pause at the bottom of your breath briefly with a very still mind.



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Continue this rhythm of breathing for a few minutes or longer, but now with the specific intent of breathing in all that is of God, and breathing out all in your body and mind that is not. You need not think of anything in terms of content; just retain a naked intent to be filled from head to toe with all that is of God, and to release whatever may come between you and God. In the process let your body and mind sink beneath the crowded, surface tension to that more spacious and free place where you are confidently grounded in God.

Less exaggerated than the above practice, this kind of breathing can become your normal way of breathing most of the time, even with many forms of physical exercise. Such breathing then can become a regular means of heading off or releasing those grabby tensions and speediness of mind and body that easily take our awareness away from God. Breathing becomes a fundamental spiritual practices that is available all the time.

Perhaps Paul would understand this and other forms of bodily discipline in light of his pleas to “make every part of your body into a weapon fighting on the side of God” (Romans 6:13). However, we are speaking of very gentle weapons here that do not directly attack physical-mental antagonists, but rather transform their dividing power into calmed, available energy for God.

#### REFLECTING ON THE PRACTICE

- Did the slow breathing seem to make any difference to your presence for God?
- Can you think of ways that your breathing habits and mental associations with breathing have drawn you toward or away from presence for God?
- How did this breathing practice AWAKEN you to God and the world around you?
- What implications might this exercise have for your daily living?