

## *On Breathing*

### **A Particular Silence**

When we come into this world, we do not take our first breath. The air of the world rushes into our lungs, and we are breathed.

As a child, while sitting next to my mom in her red 1952 Chrysler, on the way to my grandparent's house, I remember thinking, "I wonder how long I can hold my breath?"

I soon found out that I did not have as much control over my breathing as I had hoped.

Breathing is mysterious and elusive. It can be slightly modified by our will, but remains an act of grace. Given. We are breathed by forces deep within us and all around us. And just exactly when these forces cease breathing us is, to a profound degree, not within our control. We are vitally bound to the One that breathes us. We are not the musician playing our accordion; we are an accordion being played by an unknown musician.

In order to let someone, or some force help us, we must first be able to stop insisting on doing everything ourselves. Unknowingly, we often interfere with breathing without understanding how or why, or even when, we do it. So first, it helps to become aware of the particular ways in which we interfere with breathing.

This, it turns out, is not so easy. As soon as we begin to set about studying our breath, this very act of studying it, begins to change it. Immediately we want to breathe right, or

well, or fully. Instantly we superimpose our attempt to breathe better, whatever our idea of that is, on top of our habitual way of breathing. We don't want to catch ourselves doing something wrong. No one does.

Breathing is not about doing something right or wrong; it's about doing and non-doing.

See what happens if you quietly decide neither to hold your breath, nor to take a breath. There's no need to decide how much air you need, how big or small a breath should be, how deep an exhale should be, or how long an exhale should be. No one knows these things.

Pretend you are half asleep. Whenever breath wants to leave, just let it leave. There's nothing for you to do, there is nothing you can do that will help. You can only be where you are, and what you are, and let air come in and go out, not at your will, but at its will.

What would happen if you trusted the world and your body to breathe you and just quit breathing for yourself? Do you know that breathing is not your responsibility, not your job? Do you know that air is not yours for the taking? It's not yours at all, nor mine.

Seeing that breathing defies being studied directly, our only recourse, if we want a way into the mystery of breath, is to study it indirectly. This means looking at the conditions that surround breathing. Breathing responds to pressure of any and all kinds. External pressure, for example, altitude, pollution, over stimulation, under stimulation, danger, as well as safety, comfort, love, a cat resting in your lap.

Breathing responds to internal pressures as well, like exertion, hunger, fatigue, strain, disease, self-imposed standards, time restraints. Breathing responds to the entire gamut of thoughts, sensations, emotions - be they painful or pleasurable.

Breath is not an action; it's a response. When we decide to run up a hill, we don't stand there and breathe until we have enough air to make it up the hill. We start running. The air of the world, and our bodies' reflexes, without our having to ask, help us to accomplish what we have decided to do. Just like that. Such support. Such kindness. Such faithfulness. And how often do we stop, and say thank you?

The moment we stop, and say thank you, and mean it, and feel it in our hearts, something stops. We stop doing. We are simply being thankful. Naturally, we become quiet, and still.

In that quietness, in that stillness, we begin to sense the subtle pressures and tensions that vibrate below the surface. Rather than trying to make them go away, or trying to go away from them, we can simply fall toward them, fall into them, fall through them.

How does breathing respond to an absence of pressure?

Ask yourself. What pressures can I let fall through the gaps?

Self-pity, quietly falling  
(the silence of gratitude).

Entitlement, quietly falling  
(the silence of fairness).

Fear, quietly falling  
(the silence of faith).

The moment you stop, really stop everything, and say, "Thank you for breathing me", you will hear a deep and particular silence.

When pressures mount, as they often do, when you can, just stop, utterly and completely, even for a few seconds, and softly ask yourself, "Who is breathing?"

And wait without waiting for anything particular, until you know it is not you.