

BREATH AND PRAYER IN ANCIENT AND MODERN TIMES

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AND the Lord God formed man of the slime of the earth: and breathed into his face the breath of life, and man became a living soul' (Gen. 2, 7). Since that moment of creation when God raised Adam above all mere animal life by the communication of his own divine life, breath has helped to build a bridge between two worlds, the seen and the unseen, the world within and the world without. Breath—*ruach*, *animus*, *spiritus*—the life-giving medium, creates unity between body and soul, matter and spirit. It is that breath of God which moves and inspires man: *Spiritus est qui vivificat*. The opening chapters of Genesis are perfectly paralleled and reach perfect fulfilment in the closing chapters of St John's Gospel. When man had been restored to God's friendship through the Passion and Resurrection, God gave him the same sign of union and likeness to himself as he had given to Adam: 'Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them: Peace be to you. . . . As the Father hath sent me, I also send you. When he had said this, he breathed on them: and he said to them: Receive ye the Holy Ghost' (John 20, 19-22). Holy Scripture uses the word 'breath', therefore, to signify the principle of supernatural as well as natural life.

That this truth is deeply implanted in the human heart may be inferred from the fact that even in common speech, the process of respiration is so closely connected with the very conception of life that the word 'expiration' connotes extinction of life, and 'inspiration' its elevation to a super-human level. Yet the Western mind with its hatred of abstraction and its tendency to concentrate upon the essentially practical is in danger of entirely overlooking a fact which has been a commonplace of Eastern philosophies for thousands of years. Long before the Fathers of the Desert and the Christians of the East adopted and adapted it to their needs, Indian and Chinese thought had regarded breath as the link between the divine and the human. Here it may be necessary to point out, however obvious it may seem, that in the remarks which follow, there is no identification intended between Christian and non-

Christian modes of thought. Each uses the same words with vastly different meaning. The Biblical (Jewish and Christian) standpoint recognizes breath merely as an analogy, a symbol, or metaphor for spiritual action—the effort of man towards God, the inpouring of grace from God to man. So Mechtild of Magdeburg, striving to express the inexpressible, has recourse to this metaphor: ‘There is always this wordless breathing’, she writes, ‘between God and myself in which I discover and see many miracles and things beyond description’. And St Jane de Chantal defines prayer as ‘a wordless breathing of love in the immediate presence of God’.

In Indian and Chinese thought, on the other hand, ‘breath’ appears to partake of the divinity itself, as one might expect in pantheistic systems. Yet it contains a substantial truth which, as we shall see, the saints of the early Church were quick to seize upon and utilize in the life of Christian asceticism. In these days, modern psychologists are re-discovering the value of these age-long truths and practices and applying them to the disorders of twentieth-century life. So it may not be out of place to make a brief examination of Eastern philosophy before passing on to discuss the matter of breath in our own religious life, for in our restless times there exists more than ever a need for solitude and interior silence to counterbalance our many-sided exterior activities.

Breath regarded as the prayer-medium *par excellence* is a fundamental principle of Indian Yoga philosophy. The very word *yoga* is derived from the verb *yuga*, to yoke, to weld, to unite. According to its teaching, certain physical and mental exercises enable the embodied spirit to become one with the Universal Spirit. For Hindus and Buddhists alike, the art and practice of breathing creates a physical basis for a spiritual action. Life power, *prana*, is more than mere inhaling of oxygen, more than breath. It is the secret power without and within, which creates life and reveals itself most visibly in breath. The Indians regard the secret of spiritual and cosmic consciousness as intimately connected with breath-mastery and maintain that the life-force, ordinarily absorbed in maintaining the heart pump, must be freed for higher activities by methods calculated to still the constant demands of the breath. *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, an ancient Chinese thega text of the year 755 B.C., discusses the connection between Yo art of breathing and the rhythm of the heartbeat during prayer

and meditation. The Chinese character for breath, *hsi*, is composed of the character for 'self' and that of 'heart', intimating that heart and self are at one and in harmony. In this ancient treatise, the 'indestructible breath-body' is developed to become the essential carrier of life and the writer gives practical directions as to its accomplishment.

Before attempting any exercises, care must be taken that everything proceeds in a comfortable and easy manner. Right posture is of greatest importance. 'Sitting upright in a comfortable position, fix the heart at the centre within.' The most important item is to bring heart and breathing into close relationship with each other. Otherwise confused phantasies may arise which make the heart beat strongly. 'Unrhythmical breathing is the result of unrest of heart', says Master Lu Tzu. When breathing is rhythmical, the heart is at rest. The heart, according to the Chinese conception, is the seat of emotional consciousness, which is aroused by the five senses through impressions of the outside world. During the first period of concentration two chief mistakes occur, 'laziness and distraction'. These can be overcome by making breathing rhythmic and inward. The heart must not enter into the breathing completely. The text continues to quote as follows: 'Breathing comes from the heart. When the heart stirs, breath-power develops and breath-power is originally transformed activity of the heart.' Thus quite automatically heartbeat and breath-power learn to correspond to one another.

Having established a harmony between heart and breath, the Indian philosophers pointed out the connection between sound and breath. The ancient Rishis discovered the law of sound-alliance between nature and man. As Nature was to them an objectivation of 'Aum', the primary sound or vibratory word, they held that man was able to obtain control over all natural manifestations and establish contact with the supernatural world by means of certain *mantras* or chants. Phrases from their sacred writings, certain formulas were used to recreate union of body and soul and these formulas by degrees reduced themselves to a repetition of a single name or syllable, such as the holy word 'Aum' itself.

Finally, in order to acquire the knowledge necessary for the true performance of what we might term 'the technique of contemplation', they insist on the absolute need of a right teacher,

Guru. 'When the right man makes use of the wrong means', says an ancient Chinese proverb, 'the wrong means work in the right way.' The object of all their striving, whether it be expressed in the Buddhist term of 'the transient' as being the fundamental truth of religion, or in Taoism contemplation of 'emptiness', was the acquisition of 'the spiritual elixir of life' by which man was enabled to pass from death to life.

These three fundamental requirements: correct breathing, ejaculatory prayer and an experienced guide, are to be found in almost every page of the writings of the Fathers of the Desert and the Eastern Fathers of the first millennium of Christianity as evidenced, for instance, in the *Lausiac History* of Palladius, or the writings of the *Philokalia*. The monks of Egypt, we are told, prayed very frequently but very briefly. Their prayer was short and ejaculatory so that the intense application so necessary in prayer should not vanish or lose its keenness by a slow performance. The favourite prayer of the Egyptian fathers was the opening verse of Psalm 69, '*Deus in adjutorium*', while that of the Russian and Greek fathers was the prayer of Jesus: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me'.

It is particularly in the writings of the *Philokalia* that likenesses to the Indian and Chinese systems are most apparent. I say 'likenesses' advisedly. The Christian fathers never made the mistake of becoming pantheists and the main reason why they insist on breathing technique as a preparation for prayer is in order to collect wandering thoughts and concentrate attention on divine things. 'The first, or rather the greatest and most important thing on which the success of this mental doing depends is the help of divine grace, together with a heartfelt, pure and undistracted calling to our Lord Jesus Christ; and it can in no way be achieved solely by this natural method of descent into the heart by way of breathing, or by seclusion in a quiet and dimly lit place.' (*Philokalia*, p. 195.) There speaks orthodox Christianity. But it is precisely because these natural processes of breathing are, as it were, the ante-chamber to the spiritual life and are so often completely ignored or misunderstood in our Western processes of thought that it may be profitable to study them in order to correct our misapprehensions and ignorance.

'You know, brother, how we breathe', says the holy father Nicephorus. 'We breathe the air in and out. On this is based the

life of the body and on this depends its warmth. So, sitting down in your cell, collect your mind, lead it into the path of the breath along which the air enters in, constrain it to enter the heart together with the inhaled air and keep it there. Keep it there, but do not leave it silent and idle; instead, give it the following prayer: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me' (*Philokalia*, p. 192). The Russian fathers, like the Jewish mystics and Yoga philosophers, claim that the unceasing invocation of the divine Name of itself creates a harmony of body, mind and soul. Professor Jung has pointed out that much of modern psychology is only part of the technique of Yoga and he utters a warning against any attempt to transplant Eastern knowledge and inner disposition into the Western mind and soul. 'Only by standing firmly on our own soil without sacrificing our own nature can we assimilate the spirit of the East and create a bridge towards its understanding', he says. How far the Jesus prayer can be practised in the Western hemisphere is a matter to be decided in each individual case. The practice is quite workable and salutary, but like all aspirations it demands a good deal of conscious effort and discipline. The result is a co-ordination and development very beneficial to both body and soul. Many Saints have their own favourite ejaculations. St Francis of Assisi spent whole nights crying: 'My God and my All'; the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* advocates the simple repetition of the monosyllable 'God'; St Francis Xavier found expression for his love of God in a constantly repeated 'O *beata Trinitas*'. Examples could be multiplied, but it is not this side of the question which concerns us here.

What I am anxious to show is that it is not fantastic or impracticable as a remote preparation for prayer to regulate the act of breathing and so attune the physical and psychical powers of the human body to the spiritual powers of the human soul. There is too great a tendency in Western spirituality to regard the body as an encumbrance which hinders the process of prayer, to call it with St Francis, 'Brother Ass' instead of 'Brother Body', as he did when he reached perfect wisdom. The Incarnation teaches us that when the Word was made flesh, flesh was redeemed by Divinity. We cannot pray without the body. In prayer all the powers of body and soul play their part and the energies of the body, far from being suppressed, have to be controlled, changed and incorporated in the action of the soul. 'I praise thee, O Lord', says St

Mechtild, 'with all my strength, with all my senses, with all my movements.' Our bodies have to become pure vessels, the temple of God's indwelling, for the body too shares in the redemption. It has to be prepared in this life for its final resurrection by becoming whole, healthy. The word 'holy' is derived from the Anglo-Saxon *halig*, which means healthy and whole. It is here that the breathing technique can be used as a means to create or recreate this oneness between body and soul, in order to remove those hindrances which may stand in the way of the true union between the human and divine. At the Preface of the Mass we are exhorted to lift up our hearts: *Sursum corda*. A correct breathing method, rightly taught and applied, actually does lift up the heart by means of the diaphragm and when one is light-hearted one can pray.

My own experience of work among religious communities has taught me that often during the noviciate—and the effects, alas, may be felt for a whole lifetime—a kind of manichaeian attitude, arising no doubt from the best of motives, is adopted towards the body. As a result the religious endures all manner of physical pains and mental difficulties which could easily be avoided if traced to their proper cause by an understanding and experienced guide. It is here that the 'right master', the Guru of Indian philosophy, the Abba of the Egyptian desert, the Staretz of the Russian fathers, is an imperative necessity. Symptoms due to unaccustomed stress often appear early in the religious life which might easily result in permanent disabilities if not correctly analysed and remedied, and many a breakdown in middle life could be thus avoided.

Avoidable difficulties can often be traced to wrong posture or forced breathing. These cause headaches, dizziness, backache, cramp in legs, foot troubles and even deformities, while the mental and nervous strain often experienced during noviciate training may create a tension in the inner organs which may give rise, amongst other things, to acute indigestion or even ulceration. Only after the diagnosis of pains and difficulties unconsciously acquired or inherited is it possible to discover what trial is appointed by God; what is the cross, in other words, which has to be accepted in all humility and borne not only with patience but even with joy. God's grace can, of course, transform any and every human imperfection in the twinkling of an eye, but this by no means relieves us of the obligation of striving our utmost to

keep body and soul fit instruments worthy of the Creator. 'Why should we preserve ourselves?' many a religious has asked. The answer is this: A priest or religious whose life is dedicated to suffering mankind seems to react in the manner of a divining rod towards the needs of his fellow human-beings and to attract to himself their physical and mental sufferings. Hence the urgent need for physical and mental reserves. Every religious is responsible to his own religious family and if in a human body any defect in cell or organ weakens the whole physical organism, of how much more vital importance is the health, the wholeness, the 'holiness' of each individual as a cell within the Mystical Body!

From the point of view of a man or woman leading the religious life, physical exercises such as posture, breathing or rhythmic movement might at first seem meaningless, unless their inner significance in connection with religious rites and their ultimate aim of purification and sanctification are pointed out. 'Not only posture and breath-control', says Mgr Davis (*THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*, January 1953), 'but also the therapeutic value of rhythmic movement (play and dance) seem to have been well known to the early Christians and to have formed part of the religious rite.' It is for us in the twentieth century to recover this lost tradition of the primitive Church, for as Dom Bede Griffiths (*LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*, Vol. VI, Nos. 62-63, Aug./Sept. 1951) has also pointed out, 'rhythmic movement after some time produces a state of recollection and the rhythm of the word (of text and psalm) gradually exerts its influence'.

Before starting breathing exercises, Eastern and Western methods alike lay stress upon the importance of posture as preparation for breath and prayer. Experiences with individuals as well as with groups give ample proof that, in order to pray, to contemplate, without undue disturbance, the right posture has to be found and practised. Countless examples in various religious rites prove that posture, as well as gesture and movements, are intentionally prescribed. All teachers alike agree that posture should never be rigid or taut, that the body should be given a position that allows full freedom for the breathing process within. For the Eastern student of the Art of Breathing (Hatha Yoga), the lotus seat can easily be practised (a posture rarely possible for Western man). This is the ideal posture, as seen in statues of Buddha, for the practice of prayer and meditation, as the spinal

column is straightened up. It leaves the upper part of the body erect, the chest free for the expansion of the lungs, and at the same time allows the three important nerve currents to the left, to the right and to the centre of the spinal chord to rise unhindered. Another reason for the importance of right posture is that, whilst concentrating in prayer and meditation, certain currents develop, which are felt particularly at feet and hands and in the lumbar region. The Yogis, knowing that these currents emanate from the aforementioned three centres in the body, in order to isolate or hinder these emanations, intentionally chose the lotus seat, thus bringing the three centres as near as possible into contact with the solar plexus. The kneeling posture during prayer of the Western Church seems to follow—consciously or unconsciously—a similar aim, namely, to bring these three poles of currents as close together as possible.

It is perhaps not without its significance that the very English and highly individual Richard Rolle seems to have discovered for himself the Buddha-like attitude of prayer as being most suited for contemplation. (And would not many a Carmelite agree?) 'And I have loved for to sit', he writes in *The Form of Perfect Living*, 'for no penance, nor fantasy, nor that I wished men to talk of me, nor for no such thing: but only because I knew that I loved God more, and longer lasted within the comfort of love, than going, or standing, or kneeling. For sitting I am most at rest, and my heart most upward.' And in *The Fire of Love* he even goes so far as to declare that: 'He therefore that as yet is more delighted in God standing than sitting, may know that he is full far from the height of contemplation'.

For attainment of the right posture, it is not sufficient for the spinal column to be erect and flexible. In at least 15 per cent of cases, unfortunately, it is bent inward into the lumbar region and often outwards or backwards in the dorsal region, which can result in all sorts of physical difficulties. In whatever posture a human being is placed, whether lying down, sitting or standing, the whole body is grouped around its static centre, the centre of gravity, situated within the lumbar region of the spinal column.

From here all movements originate; around this centre every movement should circulate. Displacement or shifting of the centre of gravity only too often results in wrong posture, forceful breathing, disturbing the rhythm and harmony of the whole

body. It produces unnecessary strain on lungs and other inner organs, a wastage of muscular and nervous energies, and thus increases already existing physical and mental difficulties. People who have learnt to relax in this centre of gravity can rest or contemplate in any posture. The wrong posture hinders the even flow of breath, distracting and disturbing the quietude of mind essential to prayer and contemplation, whilst the right and easy posture, at first practised consciously and later on automatically, serves to create the right disposition for breath and prayer. Numerous examples in ancient and modern art show the dynamic and controlled power of breath hidden in posture, though we should not mistake inertia in posture for achieved mastery of breath.

As soon as the pupil has achieved the right posture, he can start instructions for prayer and breathing control which includes all phases of breath. An even balance of various phases within the breathing process helps to create rhythmic harmony between body and soul.

First of all we have to learn to empty ourselves. As water cleans the outer man, so the outgoing breath purifies the inner man, heart and mind, from all alien images and thoughts. After exhaling we have to learn to wait in order to be filled (the creative pause), to abandon our individual breath to the divine breath, as a wave abandons itself to the ocean. If the muscles of the abdominal wall are automatically drawn upwards with the outgoing breath, this action helps to lift the diaphragm upwards, emptying the lower lobes of the lungs, thus easing the pressure on the heart and in fact lifting it up. The Russian father, the blessed Nicephorus, describes the human heart as follows: 'It has the shape of an oblong bag which widens upwards and narrows towards the base. It is fastened by its upper extremities, which is opposite the left nipple of the breast, but its lower part, which descends towards the end of the ribs, is free. When shaken, this shaking is called the beating of the heart. Many people think, wrongly, that their heart is where they feel its beating.'

The monk Basil goes even further than this statement of Nicephorus. He says that 'the three powers of the soul: the power of reason or spirit, the power of fervour and the power of desire, are located in various parts of the heart, namely the power of reason in the upper part; the power of fervour in the middle part; the power of desire in the lower part of the heart. Now if breath

is conducted into the lower parts of the heart, the beating of the heart is greatly increased. Any impression filling the heart with agitation must come from the region of passion, causing carnal desires and often a state of delusion.' Therefore the pupil has to learn by degrees to direct the mind towards the upper part of the heart and thus reunite body and spirit in prayer. 'The purified heart is the centre of the rational will.' St Maximus quotes: 'When grace fills all the pastures of the heart, it governs all thoughts and all members'. This brings us back to the Psalmist who prayed (Ps. 50, 12): 'Create a clean heart in me, O God, and renew a right spirit within my bowels'.

After waiting to be filled, with each intake of breath, with the pulsation of each heartbeat, we have to learn to wait upon the beat of the Holy Spirit to enlighten and elevate it. Anyone who has achieved the mastery of controlled rhythmic breathing can carry breath and prayer into all activities of life.

Here I want to repeat again that the mere imitation of Eastern breathing technique, particularly in connection with the prayer of the heart without individual preparation, cannot achieve the desired result. Ignorant use of breathing technique can produce extreme heat in various parts and organs of the body, creating congestion of the blood, producing sexual lust and images, leading to all sorts of mental delusions. An experienced teacher therefore will use prudent caution, watching appearing symptoms, controlling physical and mental energies until, by degrees, they are transformed. As in the control of posture, this external and conscious preparatory training eventually and quite automatically passes over into an internal, unconsciously performed process, where the even balance of the breathing process creates the right condition for harmony of body and soul, preparing the path to wholeness and holiness.