

Take Time for Breath Prayer

This simple meditative prayer can bring big transformation.



Image: Julie Doens/EyeEm/Getty

The act of breathing is an amazing and miraculous process. It is an involuntary process that our bodies engage in independently from conscious volition. Being connected to our breath is intimate; our very lives depend on breathing regularly and yet, for the most part, we often forget and disconnect from this important relationship with our bodies.

This is why mindfulness and meditation have become increasingly popular as a practice in psychology and therapeutic treatment. These practices help in paying attention, and becoming more aware of the present moment, connecting the body and mind. Many are surprised when they learn that meditation as a practice rests at the core of Christian spirituality as an invitation to dwell on, pay attention to, and engage with God, his works, and his words.

We all practice meditation in some form because all of us ruminate. Anxiety, worry, and other negative emotional states are usually associated with rumination. Rumination is a form of meditation where we focus our attention on our distress, and the causes and consequences of that distress. Thankfully, we can work on re-training our brains to reconnect with our bodies, minds, hearts, and souls through a meditative practice called breath prayer.

Breath Prayer

Breath prayer has been practiced in the church for millennia. It is a form of contemplative prayer linked to the rhythms of breathing. Contemplative prayer is prayer that is focused on being with

God, awakening to his presence in all things. Contemplative prayer in some forms can be prayer without words, or few words. This allows us to be released from thinking too much about praying the “right words,” being in our heads too much as we pray, and being released into praying with our hearts instead. This is why breath prayer is also called “prayer of the heart.”

The purpose and desire is to pray a simple, intimate prayer of heartfelt desire before God. It is another way to practice the presence of God (another contemplative spiritual discipline), or staying present to God in the moment. God is close to you, closer than your breath. The more you practice breath prayer, the more you learn to pray without ceasing. Breath prayer is one way to do full and embodied prayers (with your whole being), which brings to mind Acts 17:28: “For in him we live and move and have our being.” It is also a critical reminder that just as we can’t live without breathing physically, we can’t live without breathing spiritually with God as the source of oxygen to our souls.

Breath prayer has been an important transformative practice for me over the years. For a stretch of time, my breath prayer was, [inhale] “Father, [exhale] love me.” I needed to know the love of a good parent, and God really did answer that prayer for me over time. Breath prayer has been a part of my journey in connecting my heart, mind, body, and soul, especially when I was very disconnected from being burned out from ministry. Practices like breath prayer draw us into simple meditation of who God is and who we are, and provide ways to deepen the connections to God, ourselves, and one another that we all need and long for.

As you think about the coming months, is there a specific invitation that God has for you to deepen these connections to become more holistically who you are meant to be? I am offering breath prayer as a rich exercise that you can do anytime to pay attention and explore that invitation.

How to Practice Breath Prayer

Start with practicing taking full, deep breaths (sometimes called belly breathing). Most of us only breathe with our chests, a very shallow form of breathing. Fill your chest, your ribs, and your belly with a full breath. Take 10 full breaths. What do you notice about your body? How do you feel? Maybe you notice that you carry tension in your chest and you feel anxiety. Or maybe you notice that your heart is beating strongly and you feel healthy. Pay attention to what your body is feeling.

Breath prayer links your rhythm of breathing in this way: 1) breathe in, calling on a biblical name or image of God, and 2) breathe out, sharing a simple God-given desire. Here is one breath prayer: Breathe in, “Be Still and Know.” Breathe out, “That I am God.” Breathe this breath prayer 10 times. Breathe slowly, taking your time, there is no rush. Consider these questions:

What do you notice right now?

How easy is it for God to get your attention?

When are you able to hear God’s still, small voice best?

In what ways has God been inviting you just to be with him?

When is God most present with you and you most present to God?

How is God inviting you to be in this posture of being still and knowing that he is God for in the coming months?

There are many examples of breath prayer. Maybe you are drawn to a certain name or image of God, and longing or desire. Take some time to examine what those might be, and perhaps what comes to mind will form your personal breath prayer for a season. It is amazing how simple a practice can bring about so much transformation holistically. As you breathe and pray, may you find new life.

For more on this topic, see: [Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us](#) by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun



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