The Breath of Life

The Practice of Breath Meditation According to Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Jewish and Christian Traditions

Abbot George Burke (Swami Nirmalananda Giri)
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“He who breathes in with your breathing in is your Self. He who breathes out with your breathing out is your Self...The breaths are the Real, and their Reality is the Self.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad)

“One thing, developed and repeatedly practiced, leads to to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nirvana. What is this one thing? Respiration-mindfulness.” (Buddha, in the Anguttara Nikaya)

“When one gives undivided attention to the breath, and brings it to the utmost degree of pliancy, he can become as a babe....he can become without a flaw.” (Tao Teh King)

“God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” (Genesis 2:7)

“He breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Spirit.” (John 20:22)
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Glossary
Breath is the universal factor of life. We are born the first time we inspire, and we die the last time we expire. Breath is life itself. In Sanskrit the same word–prana–means both breath and life.

All that lives, breathes—even plants and the bacteria that make bread rise. The process of breath is identical in all, consisting of inhalation and exhalation. It is the most immaterial factor of our existence, being a link-manifestation of the mind/spirit that dwells in all. For this reason, the breath is the natural and logical basis for meditation, the attempt to “enter into life.” The breath is the key to the cultivation of pure consciousness.

Life causes us to breathe, and breath causes us to live. Usually breath leads us into the outer life, but it can lead us into the inner life—to the principle of Life itself. Therefore meditation on the breath is found in the spiritual practices of many religions, particularly in Buddhism, where it is known as Anapanasati, awareness of the inhaling and exhaling breaths, and is the meditation technique practiced and taught by the Buddha.

In this book I first present the actual technique of Breath Meditation, and in subsequent chapters present the teachings of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, and Christianity regarding its practice.

My hope is that the contents of this book will aid its readers in the successful practice of Breath Meditation and the attaining of its goal: supreme enlightenment.

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Chapter One
The Breath of Life:
The Practice of Breath Meditation

Why we meditate

Meditation is all about freedom. Only a fraction of the world’s population is formally imprisoned, but the entire human race is imprisoned in the body and the earth itself. None are free from the inevitability of sickness, age, and death, however free of them they may be at the moment. The human condition is subject to innumerable limitations. Who really controls his life fully, attains all his goals, and knows no setbacks of any kind? No one.

Our real self, the spirit, is ever perfect and free. But we have forgotten that. So we identify with our present experience of bondage and consequently suffer in countless ways. Our situation is like someone who is asleep and dreaming that he is being tortured and beaten. In reality he is not being touched at all; yet he is experiencing very real pain and fear. He need not placate, overpower, or escape his torturers. He needs only to wake up. Meditation is the way of self-awakening, the way to freedom from suffering and limitation.

Meditation is the way of remembrance and restoration. A person suffering from amnesia has not ceased to be who he really is, but he needs to regain his memory. The memory block from which we suffer is the condition of the various levels on which we presently function, especially the mind. It is also a matter of the dislocation of our consciousness from its natural center.

Meditation is the process of re-centering our awareness in the principle of pure consciousness which is our essential being. We have lost awareness of our true Self through awareness of external objects, and become habituated—even addicted—to objective consciousness. Rather than disperse our consciousness through objects that draw us outward, away from the center of our being, we can take an object that will have the opposite effect, present it to the mind, and reverse our consciousness. That object is the breath, which is the meeting place of body, mind, and spirit.

The breath and the body are interconnected, as is seen from the fact
that the breath is calm when the body is calm, and agitated or labored when the body is agitated or labored. The heavy exhalation made when feeling exhausted and the enthusiastic inhalation made when feeling energized or exhilarated establish the same fact.

The breath and the *emotions* are interconnected, as is seen from the fact that the breath is calm when the emotions are calm, and agitated and labored when the emotions are agitated or out of control. Our drawing of a quick breath when we are surprised, shocked, or fearful, and the forceful exhalation done when angry or annoyed demonstrate this.

The breath and the *mind* are interconnected, as is seen from the fact that the breath is calm when the mind is calm, and agitated, irregular, and labored when the mind is agitated or disturbed in any way. Our holding of the breath when attempting intense concentration also shows this.

Breath, which exists on all planes of manifestation, is the connecting link between matter and energy on the one hand and consciousness and mind on the other. By sitting with closed eyes and letting the mind become easefully absorbed in observing and experiencing the movements of the breath we enter into the consciousness from which it arises—the eternal Witness Consciousness.

We start with awareness of the ordinary physical breath, but that awareness, when cultivated correctly, leads us into higher awareness which enables us to perceive the subtle movement behind the breath. Ultimately, we come into contact with the Breather of the breath, our own Spirit-Self.

In many spiritual traditions the same word is used for both breath and spirit, underscoring the esoteric principle that in essence they are the same, though we naturally think of spirit as being the cause of breath(ing). The word used for both breath and spirit is: In Judaism: *Ruach*. In Eastern Christianity (and ancient Greek religion): *Pneuma*. In Western Christianity (and ancient Roman religion): *Spiritus* (which comes from *spiro*: “I breathe”). In Hinduism and Buddhism: *Atma* (from the root word *at* which means “to breathe”), and *Prana*. Meditation on the breath is meditation on spirit, on consciousness itself.

**Back to the Source**

We are without origin, for we are eternal, without beginning or end.
Yet we are not without a Source, for we are rooted in the Being that is called Brahman, Dharmakaya (Original Nature), Tao, or God. The names matter little, but the Reality is everything—including us.

Originally we were unmanifest, as transcendental as our Source. But just as the Source expanded into relative manifestation, so did we. In our undifferentiated being, the state of perfect unity, there manifested a single point. This did not upset or disrupt the original unity but it stressed it. Then, so imperceptibly and subtly as to hardly have even occurred, that stress point began to move internally, producing a magnetic duality so subtle it was really more an idea than an actual state. This was the Original Breath. Then the halves or poles of that duality began alternating in dominance, and a cycling or circling began. This cycling expanded outward, manifesting as embodiment in increasingly more objective body-vehicles, until at last the full state of relativity was reached. Like the bit of grit in an oyster, the Original Breath had become or produced everything we call “us.” The same thing had already happened to our Source on a cosmic level. So through the permutations of the Cosmic Breath we found a virtually infinite environment for our manifestation. This is the process known as samsara.

This had a practical purpose. The breath is the evolutionary force which causes us to enter into relative existence and manifest therein until—also through the breath—we evolve to the point where we are ready to return to our original status. To turn back from the multiplicity of relativity and return to our original unity we must center our awareness in that primal impulse to duality which is manifesting most objectively as the process of our physical inhaling and exhaling. These seemingly two movements are in reality one, inseparable from one another, and together are capable of leading us back to their—and our—source. Through our full attention focused on the entire process of inhalation and exhalation, we become immersed in the subtler levels of that alternating cycle, moving into deeper and deeper levels until we at last come to the originating point. Then transcending that dual movement, we regain our lost unity. By continual practice of that transcendence we will become established in that unity and freed forever from all forms of bondage, having attained Nirvana: permanent unbinding. This is why the contemporary Thai Buddhist Master Ajaan Fuang Jotiko said: “The breath can take you all the way to Nirvana,” and
Sri Ma Anandamayi, perhaps the most renowned spiritual figure of India in the latter half of the twentieth century, said: “Nothing can be achieved without cultivation of the breath.” This is done through the process simply known as Breath Meditation, for the breath is both entry and exit.

**The practice of Breath Meditation**

1) Sit upright, comfortable and relaxed, with your hands on your knees or thighs, palms up or palms down or resting, one on the other, in your lap.

2) Turn your eyes slightly downward and close them gently. This removes visual distractions and reduces your brain-wave activity by about seventy-five percent, thus helping to calm the mind.

3) Your mouth should be closed so all breathing is done through the nose. This, too, aids in quieting the mind. Though your mouth is closed, the jaw muscles should be relaxed so the upper and lower teeth are not clenched or touching one another, but parted.

4) Inhale and exhale slowly and deeply three or four times, feeling the inhaling and exhaling breath moving in and out through your nostrils.

5) Now breathe naturally and easefully, keeping your awareness on the tip of your nose, feeling the breath as it flows in and out of your nostrils. (Some people become more aware of the half-inch or so at the end of the nose, others the very end of the nose, and others remain more aware of the nostrils. Whichever happens naturally is the best for you. So whenever this book says “noisetip” it applies equally to these three areas.) Do not follow the breath in and out of your body, but just be aware of the breath movement sensation at the tip of your nose.

6) Keeping your awareness on the tip of your nose, breathe naturally and calmly, easefully observing the sensation of the breath moving there throughout all your inhalations and exhalations. This enables you to enter effortlessly into the Witness Consciousness that is your true nature.

7) Do this for the rest of the meditation, letting your awareness rest gently on the breath at the noisetip and feeling the sensations of the breath moving there. After a while it may feel as though the breath is flowing in and out the tip of your nose more than the actual nostrils, or you may not feel the nose at all, but just the breath moving at the point
in front of your face where the nose is located. That is perfectly all right, but the focus of your attention should be only at that point—not somewhere else either outside or inside the body.

8) Let the breath be as it will. If the breath is naturally long, let it be so. If it is short, let it be so. If the inhalations and exhalations are of unequal length, that is just fine. Let the breath be natural and unforced, and just observe and experience it.

In time your breath will become more subtle and refined, and slow down. Sometimes your breath can become so light that it almost seems as though you are not breathing at all. At such times you may perceive that your inhaling and exhaling are more like a magnetic pull or flow in and out instead of actual breath movements. This occurs as the subtle life force (prana) that produces the breath switches back and forth in polarity from positive to negative. It is also normal for your breath awareness to move back and forth from more objective to more subtle and back to more objective.

Sometimes the subtle breath is silent, but at other times you will inwardly “hear” the breath making sounds as it moves in and out. These will not be actual physical sounds, but very subtle mental sounds. They may be like the sounds made by forceful or heavy inhalation and exhalation—except softer—or they may be quite different. Whatever they may be, just be calmly aware of them while staying centered on the nosetip and breath.

The breath is a kind of barometer of the subtle energies of body and mind. Sometimes it is very smooth, light and easeful, and at other times it feels heavy, even constricted, or clogged, sticky, ragged, uneven, and generally uncomfortable and somehow feels “not right.” When this occurs, do not try to interfere with it or “make it better.” Rather, just relax and be calmly aware and let it be as it is. If you do this, the problem in the subtle energy levels which the breath is reflecting will correct itself and the breath will become easy and pleasant.

9) In Breath Meditation we only focus our awareness on the breath at the nosetip/nostrils, and not on any other point of the body such as the “third eye.” However, as you meditate you may become aware of one or more areas of your body at different times. This is all right when it comes and goes spontaneously, but keep centered on your nosetip and your breath.

10) Thoughts, impressions, memories, inner sensations, and
suchlike may also arise during meditation. Be calmly aware of all these things in a detached and objective manner. Let them come and go as they will, but keep your attention centered on the tip of the nose and your breath moving there. Be indifferent to any inner or outer phenomena. Breath Meditation produces peace, awareness and quiet joy in your mind as well as soothing radiations of energy in the physical and subtle bodies. Be calmly aware of all these things in a detached and objective manner—they are part of the transforming effect of meditation, and are perfectly all right—but keep your attention centered in your breath. Even though something feels very right or good when it occurs, it should not be forced or hung on to. The sum and substance of it all is this: It is not the experience we are after, but the effect.

11) If you find yourself getting restless, distracted, fuzzy, anxious or tense in any degree, just inhale and exhale slowly and deeply a few times, feeling the inhaling and exhaling breath moving in and out through your nostrils, at the same time feeling that you are releasing and breathing out all tensions. Then resume meditating as before. Relaxation is the key to successful meditation practice.

12) Keep in mind that Breath Meditation basically consists of being aware in a relaxed and easeful manner of your breath as it moves in and out at the tip of your nose. That is all!

At the end of your meditation time, keep on being calmly aware of your breath moving in and out of your nosetip as you go about your various activities. In this way you can maintain the calm and clear state of meditation.

Meditation checkpoints

Occasionally in your meditation it is good to check three things: 1) Am I aware of the tip of my nose? 2) Am I continually experiencing the movement or energy-flow of the breath at or in the tip of my nose? 3) Am I aware of the breath movement throughout the entire duration of each inhalation and exhalation? These are the essential points of Breath Meditation.

Simple and easy

Can it be that simple and easy? Yes, it can, and is. Suppose some people who have always lived in tents entered a house and came upon a locked door. Knowing nothing of doors, locks, and keys, how would
they open it? They might throw themselves against it, beat on it with their fists or heavy objects such as sledgehammers or even some kind of battering ram. If someone approached them with a tiny key they could easily snap in two and told them it would open the door, they would laugh at him. But he would simply insert the key, turn it, and enter. It would be that simple and that easy. Breath Meditation is also that simple and easy because it goes directly to the root of our bondage which is a single (and therefore simple) thing: loss of awareness.

Not only that, Breath Meditation is so natural and spontaneous that it teaches us about itself—the actual practice, its meaning, purpose and effect. The more we practice, the more our spiritual intuition comes to the fore and becomes our instructor. As Vyasa, the author of the Bhagavad Gita, said in his commentary on the Yoga Sutras: “Yoga is to be known by yoga. Yoga goes forward from yoga alone. He who is not careless [neglectful] in his yoga for a long time, rejoices in the yoga.”

Now let us look at the various components of our Breath Meditation practice so we can understand it fully.

**The posture for meditation**

For Breath Meditation we sit in a comfortable, upright position. This is for two reasons: so we will not fall asleep, and to facilitate the upward movement of the subtle life force called prana, of which the breath is a manifestation.

It is important that our meditation posture be comfortable and easy to maintain. Though sitting upright, be sure you are always relaxed. Yoga Sutra 2:46 says: “Posture [asana] should be steady and comfortable.” The *Yoga Vashishtha* (6:1:128) simply says: “He should sit on a soft seat in a comfortable posture conducive to equilibrium.” India’s great yogi-philosopher Shankara comments: “Let him practice a posture in which, when established, his mind and limbs will become steady, and which does not cause pain.” Here relaxation is the key, for Yoga Sutra 2:47 says: “Posture is mastered by relaxation.”

If you can sit in a cross-legged position without your legs going to sleep and making you have to shift them frequently, that is very good. There are several cross-legged postures recommended for meditation. You will find them described in books on Hatha Yoga. I especially recommend *Yoga Asanas* by Swami Sivananda of the Divine Life Society, as it is written from the perspective of spiritual development and also
gives many hints to help those who are taking up meditation later in life and whose bodies need special training or compensation.

Some meditators prefer to sit on the floor using a pillow and/or a mat. This, too, is fine if your legs do not go to sleep and distract you. But meditation done in a chair is equally as good. Better to sit at ease in a chair and be aware only of the breath than to sit cross-legged and be mostly aware of your poor, protesting legs.

If you use a chair, it should be comfortable, of moderate height, one that allows you to sit upright with ease while relaxed, with your feet flat on the floor. There is no objection to your back touching the back of the chair, either, as long as your spine will be straight. If you can easily sit upright without any support and prefer to do so, that is all right, too, but be sure you are always relaxed.

If you have any back difficulties, make compensation for them, and do not mind if you cannot sit fully upright. We work with what we have, the whole idea being to sit comfortably and at ease.

Hold your head so the chin is parallel to the ground or, as Shankara directs, “the chin should be held a fist’s breadth away from the chest.” Make a fist, hold it against your neck, and let your chin rest on your curled-together thumb and forefinger. You need not be painfully exact, about this. The idea is to hold your head at such an angle that it will not fall forward when you relax. Otherwise you may be afflicted with what meditators call “the bobs”—the upper body continually falling forward during meditation.

It does not matter how you place or position your hands, just as long as they are comfortable and you can forget about them. There is no need to bother with mudras as they are irrelevant to Breath Meditation practice.

Meditation is not a military exercise, so we need not be hard on ourselves about not moving in meditation. Move and even stretch occasionally if you find it benefits.

Reclining meditation

If we lie down for meditation we will likely go to sleep. Yet for those with back problems or some other situation interfering with their sitting upright, or who have trouble sitting upright for a long time, it is possible to meditate in a reclining position at a forty-five-degree angle. There may be a tendency to sleep, but we do what we can as we can.
Using a foam wedge with a forty-five-degree angle—or enough pillows to lie at that angle, or in a bed that raises up to that angle—lie on your back with your arms at your side, or across your stomach if that is more comfortable. Then engage in the meditation process just as you would if sitting upright.

When you are ill or for some reason unable to sit upright you can meditate in this way.

**Alternating positions in meditation**

Those not yet accustomed to sitting still for a long time, or those who want to meditate an especially long time, can alternate their meditation positions. After sitting as long as is comfortable, they can do some reclining meditation and then sit for some more time—according to their inclination.

**Relax**

During meditation, distracting thoughts and impressions arise mostly from physical or mental tension. To relax and be quietly observant of the breath at the nosetip is the prevention and cure. It is in the nature of things for your mind to move up and down—or in and out—during the practice of meditation, sometimes calm and sometimes restless. Do not mind this at all. Stay relaxed, at peace, and aware of the breath at the nosetip. You will find that this is the remedy for all problems in meditation.

As already said, when restlessness or distractions occur, take one or more deep breaths through your nose, breathe out, relax, and keep on meditating.

**Closed eyes and mouth**

By closing your eyes you remove visual distractions and eliminate over seventy-five percent of the usual brain wave activity, both calming and freeing the mind for absorption in meditation. Breathing through the mouth agitates the mind, so keeping your mouth closed and breathing only through the nose has a calming effect on both body and mind.

**Breath awareness**

We do not need to control the breath, only to experience, for if we fix
our awareness on it and let it move as it will, it will carry us onward to perfect spirit-consciousness. Simple breath awareness actually frees the breath—and our consciousness—from the blockages and static condition that have been produced by our being out of harmony with the cosmic order whose fundamental purpose is evolution through development of consciousness.

The breath is the primal manifestation of duality, and at its roots is the unity of pure awareness. The breath combines in itself both energy and consciousness. When we examine its nature, we see that the breath is not a “thing,” but a process which has the power to draw us into the core point from which it arises—the Self whose nature is consciousness—changing all the levels of our being. Awareness of breath produces awareness of awareness, consciousness of spirit.

There are two breaths, the outer breath and the subtle inner breath which produces it. By centering our awareness on the outer breath we enable ourselves to become aware of the inner breath. By attuning ourselves to them we attune ourselves to the spirit from which they take their origin. Observing the breath releases the spirit-soul consciousness which includes the spiritual will. In this way the spirit takes control of our life and directs it.

We keep our awareness on both the inhaling and exhaling breaths because they are manifestation/reflections of the two poles that are found in every existing object. The subtle currents that emanate from these two poles have become all the forms of energy within the physical and subtle bodies. These currents move outward and manifest as inhalation and exhalation. Within the body the two breaths are the forces of positive and negative, yin and yang, which affect the two sides of the meditator’s being. Ultimately they are one, and each breath moves us toward unity.

In all relative beings the prana-breath has become corrupted and confused, binding the consciousness rather than freeing it. It has gotten out of phase, out of tune, or off key—out of alignment with its original, natural pattern of movement. By deeply observing his breath, the meditator realigns and repolarizes it, effortlessly restoring it to its original form and function. In this way he sets himself squarely in the upward-moving stream of evolution and accelerates his movement within it.
Effective attention

Breath Meditation was called Anapanasati by Buddha. Anapana means inhalation and exhalation. Sati means deliberate attention, not just simple involuntary awareness. At first in our practice we are simply aware of the breath, but after some time we will find that the breath makes us aware of awareness itself. Then anapanasati means the awareness produced by—or inherent in—the breath.

It is possible to pray, sing, or recite mantras without really paying any attention to them—even thinking of other things—but you cannot practice breath awareness at the tip of the nose without being very aware of it. Breath awareness ensures that the yogi’s mind remains one-pointed. As the Gita says: “The light of a lamp does not flicker in a windless place: that is the simile which describes a yogi of one-pointed mind” (Bhagavad Gita 6:19).

Although we tend to think of attention as merely a state of the mind, the opposite of inattention, it is really a great psychic force. Quantum physics has discovered that when a human being sets his attention on anything, that object is immediately affected to some degree—so much so that a scientist can unintentionally influence the result of an experiment, however controlled the external conditions may be. Thoughts are indeed things, but attention is the fundamental power of thought.

As we calmly fix our awareness on the breath, it becomes increasingly refined, gentle and easeful, often as light as the breeze of a butterfly’s wings. The subtler the breath sensations the closer the awareness is coming to the Self, and therefore the more easeful and joyful the experience. To experience the breath fully is to experience the Self. When the breath disappears, Self-awareness remains.

Since it is natural for the breath to become increasingly refined as you observe it, you need not attempt to deliberately make this happen. Your attention will automatically refine it. As we become more and more aware of the subtle forms or movements of the inner breaths, it automatically happens that the breath movements on all levels become slower. This is the highest form of pranayama.

The more attention we give to the breath, the subtler it becomes until it reveals itself as an act of the mind, consisting of mind-stuff (chitta) itself. The breath, like an onion, has many layers. In the practice of Breath Meditation we experience these layers, beginning with the
most objective, physical layer and progressing to increasingly subtle layers, until, as with an onion at its core, there are no more layers, but only pure being (consciousness). The breath becomes increasingly refined as we observe it, and as a result our awareness also becomes refined.

When the breath seems not right, or uncomfortable or unsatisfactory in some way, it is the simple power of attention (sati) that will make everything right in time. This is important to realize, for at such times of discontent with the breath we are actually confronting blockages or entanglements in the various levels of our being. If we try to correct them or banish them we may make them worse. But calm and disinterested observation/awareness of the breath, ignoring its momentary qualities, will straighten everything out by removing those blockages or problems. This especially takes place in the mind. So just keep watching—relaxed attention takes care of it all.

The same is true when we experience the inner, subtle sounds of the breath. The life-energies, called prana, which manifest as the breath are also manifesting as the physical and subtle bodies. That is why the Upanishads declare that everything is prana-breath. As the prana of those bodies move or vibrate within them, much as many currents move within a river or ocean, they produce subtle sounds of varying frequencies. Therefore when you are deep in breath awareness you may hear many different forms of subtle sound as those pranic flows are being strengthened, enhanced, or corrected by your effective attention (sati).

Sri Ramana Maharshi said that internalized attention placed on the mind would cause it to resolve into the Self, the pure consciousness from which it arose. We experience this for ourselves in Breath Meditation, when the breath becomes revealed as not just an act of the mind, but the mind itself—which then resolves into the pure consciousness of our spiritual being, the Self.

Attention is the therapeutic spotlight of our consciousness, revealing, restoring, and perfecting. So it is attention—literally pure and simple—that makes Breath Meditation work.

**The tip of the nose**

In Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist traditions meditators are told to fix their attention on the tip of the nose. This has the obvious practical
value of giving us a steady point of reference so our minds do not drift around during meditation. But there is much more to it, as the faithful meditator will discover. The tip of the nose is the best point to focus attention and the best point for subtle perception.

Nosetip awareness ensures that you will not get lost in the many strands or currents of the subtle prana-breath, but will only be aware of the breath currents of inhalation and exhalation (prana/apana) that are the heart of the spirit-breath.

In relative existence we are constantly pulled between two poles, both experientially and philosophically: form and formlessness, duality and unity, embodied and disembodied, bound and freed, unconscious and conscious, matter and spirit, infinite and finite. Unfortunately we tend to think of choosing and becoming identified with one the other, when we need to transcend them. In Breath Meditation we fix our attention on the nosetip because it is neither within the body nor outside the body, and therefore the point of attention from which we can slip, untouched between and beyond the poles that bind us.

Buddha never omitted awareness of the nosetip in his meditation instructions, and neither do the classical Buddhist manuals on meditation and the contemporary Buddhist teachers cited in the Buddhist Tradition chapter of this book. Buddha taught that at the beginning of Breath Meditation we should put our attention parimukha, which means both “in front of the face” and “above the mouth”–in other words: the nosetip.

It should be understood that “nosetip” means much more than the cartilage and skin of the nose, but rather the point within the subtle levels of our existence that correspond to the physical nosetip. It is from here that the real breath is experienced.

Since this form of meditation is called Breath Meditation we should not forget that our relaxed awareness should always be on/in the breath. To do that we observe our breath at the nosetip, for that is the best place for us to become fully aware of the breath. The attention to the breath as it moves through/at the nosetip is like the drawing of a string between the joined tips of the forefinger and thumb. We only feel and are aware of the string and its movement at the point where the fingers are joined. In the same way, we are aware of the breath movements in/at the nose.

Buddhist writers on Breath Meditation use the simile of the
gatekeeper of a city: the traffic moves in and out in a continual stream, but his attention is at the gate alone. He sees everyone going and coming, but he follows after no one. (I think of it as being like someone putting their finger lightly on a moving belt: he will feel the motion, yet his awareness will remain at the fingertip.) In the same way, we keep our attention at the gate of the nosetip, watching the ingoing breath arriving there and the outgoing breath departing there.

It is natural for your awareness of the nosetip and the breath to sometimes get vague or out of focus, or your attention to get fuzzy or drifty. When this happens, just take some careful, long breaths through your nose, being very aware of the breath movement at the tip of the nose, and that will refocus your awareness. Do not hesitate to even reach up and touch your nosetip and make sure your awareness is centered there.

Just as the breath becomes refined, so does our awareness. Sometimes after a while in meditation we may lose the more physical awareness of our nosetip and become aware of it as a point in front of our face, the “point of attention” of which the nosetip is just the most objective manifestation. This is perfectly all right, as long as we keep aware of that point and remain aware of the breath-movement there, even though its subtle forms may be more like a magnetic pull or flow rather than a movement of breath (air), or even a kind of switching of the polarity of the breath.

Since you can be aware of the breath and not aware of the nosetip— but not aware of the nosetip and not be aware of the breath—it is awareness of the nosetip that is the key to the effective practice of anapanasati. Also, if we make ourselves aware of the breath alone, we will stay aware of the physical breath only. But if we hold to awareness of the nosetip we will become aware of the inner, increasingly subtle breath that is the real Breath of Life.

So when you have gained some proficiency in Breath Meditation you will find that a simple focussing of the attention on the nosetip will make everything else follow in good order. Just as closing the eyes eliminates a great deal of brain-wave activity, so also merging the attention into the tip of the nose disengages the machinery of the mind to a great extent and cuts down on random thoughts. At the same time, however, the higher faculties of intuition become engaged and render the meditator capable of profound intuitive insight (vipassana).
Why the tip of the nose?

Speech and most language originate in the subconscious. Therefore we often say things of which we have only subliminal knowledge. For example, although few people believe in (and even less can see) the phenomenon known as the aura—the field of subtle, colored energies that surround the body—it is common for just about everyone to use expressions regarding the aura. When someone is clever we say they are “bright” and when they are unintelligent we say they are “dull.” When cowardly we say they are “yellow.” We say that people are “green with envy” that jealous people have “green eyes.” If we are feeling down we say we are “blue,” and when we feel very well we say we are “in the pink.” When angry we say that we “see red.” And it is not uncommon to hear about “purple passion.” All these things attest to a subconscious knowledge of the aura.

It is the same with the nose. We talk about people having “a nose for news,” call inquisitive people “nosey,” and speak of those trying to find things out as “nosing around.” Those who are extremely intent on their work are said to have their “nose to the grindstone.” All of these terms link the nose with the capacity for attention and perception. There must be validity to these applications, for in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions meditators are told to fix their attention on the tip of the nose. This has the obvious practical value of giving us a steady point of reference so our minds do not drift around during meditation. But there is much more to it, as the faithful meditator will discover. The tip of the nose is the best point to focus attention and the best point for pure perception.

Why is this? Because the body is literally congealed karma. That is, the physical body is the objective manifestation of the karmic forces (energies) created in previous lives—forces that have impelled us into incarnation within its bonds. In one sense the body is a bundle of ignorance, a heap of delusions. It is our own private net in which we find ourselves helplessly caught. To enter within this house of illusion during meditation is to risk being caught up in the subtle energies of karma and becoming even more under their bondage, even more deceived by their false ways. Yes, some types of meditation can make us more ignorant and more enslaved! Which is why Buddha counseled Right Meditation as a factor for liberation.
There are various energy-points and energy-reservoirs throughout the body that are whorls of karmic force, energy mechanisms which maintain the entire system of karmic bondage. These centers are powerful repositories of karmic seeds, and their energization can produce the fruition of these seeds, resulting in even more karmic entanglements. Furthermore, these centers are the producers of various “states of consciousness” that are really nothing but psychic hallucinations, virulent germs and viruses that cause the multifarious diseases of samsara. To merely touch these whirlpools results in our being drawn into them, whirled around in their confusion, and drowned in their deadly illusion: the sleep of death that we erroneously call “life.”

For this reason the process of meditation must take place virtually outside the body—at the nosetip which is not really in the body, and where the (inner liberating) breath flows. We must at least “touch” the body through nosetip awareness, for if we were to set our attention at a point out in space beyond the body, that would dissipate our awareness and result in illusory “out-of body-experiences” or simple mental disorientation that would terminate in profound sleep.

When the awareness is drawn into the body, the principle of Yang predominates. When the awareness is drawn outside away from the body, the principle of Yin predominates. But when the awareness is centered at the nosetip in the breath movements there, the two come into perfect balance and in time are transcended in the passage from duality to unity.

The nosetip is thus the gateway of liberated consciousness as well as the gate of the breath. After a while just putting attention on the nosetip will cause you to move into higher consciousness.

Closing–opening

Just as closing the eyes eliminates a great deal of brain-wave activity, so also merging the attention into the tip of the nose disengages the “machinery” of the mind to a great extent and cuts down on random thoughts. At the same time, however, the higher faculties of intuition become “engaged” and render the meditator capable of true vipassana–intuitive insight.

The breath sensation
We speak of feeling the breath moving at/in the tip of the nose. Just what kind of sensation will that be? Actually, it may be one or more of several sensations: 1) a feeling of the breath moving in a horizontal movement; 2) a feeling of the breath moving in a vertical manner; 3) a feeling of the breath circling inside the tip of the nose; 4) a feeling of the breath collecting in the noisetip and producing a sensation of a gentle pressure. None of these is better than another as they are all simply impressions or interpretations of the nervous system, and completely different sensations may occur than those I have listed. Also, they may change throughout the meditation—even within a single breath. But however that might be, the breath sensations should occur with—and throughout—each inhalation and exhalation, for that is what Buddha meant when he spoke of experiencing the “entire body” of the breath.

The subtle, inner breath has differing sensations also, which arise as you stay aware of the breath at the noisetip. Sometimes the breath seems to be gently vibrating there, stimulating awareness of the noisetip and producing a gentle sensation of expansion and contraction, rising and falling, fullness, pressure, a kind of magnetic pull (first in one direction or pole and then in another direction or pole), or energy movement there—as if the breath were circling or accumulating there. On occasion you may feel that you are pushing and pulling the magnetic flow as it moves in and out.

Sometimes you may just be aware of the breath as a presence at or in the tip of the nose, and not a movement at all. The form in which the breath is felt does not really matter—it is the simple sensation/awareness of the breath at the noisetip that is important.

When the breath becomes subtle

The practice of Breath Meditation refines the breath and transfers the awareness from the outer to the inner breath, from the outer mind to the inner mind, and then to the no-breath and the no-mind: the pure consciousness that is spirit.

This process is very much like the Indian story of the man who was imprisoned at the top of a high tower. To rescue him, his wife came at night with a beetle, a silk thread, a cotton cord, a rope, and some honey. She tied the silk thread to one of the beetle’s back legs, put a drop of honey on its horns, and set it on the side of the tower, pointing straight
up toward the window where her husband was waiting. Wanting the honey, the beetle crawled forward, ever forward, until it reached the window and the prisoner, who untied the thread and held on to it. His wife then tied the cord to the silk thread, and her husband pulled it up. Finally she tied the rope to the end of the cord and he pulled that up, secured it, and climbed down to freedom. In this parable things went from subtle to gross, but in anapanasati the breath progresses from gross to subtle—and freedom.

Although it is a good thing for the breath to become increasingly refined as you observe it (perhaps it would be more accurate to say that your awareness becomes refined, though the breath does become lighter in character), still you need not attempt to deliberately make this happen, since it is your attention itself that will refine it. Attention is the key.

Sometimes we lose awareness of our breath because it has become subtle and we are, often unconsciously, trying to force it back into the more objective and easily-perceived mode that it was in at the beginning of our meditation. At such times we must consciously “lighten up” in the most literal sense, relax, and just “breathe” our awareness or breath. At the other times we may seem to be just thinking or willing or conceptualizing the breath more than actually breathing. This, too, is right. As already said, the breath can become as light and subtle as the movement of air produced by the wings of a butterfly. This is an extremely important point to keep in mind, for it is easy to assume that the breath movements and sensations have stopped when actually they have progressed to a subtler stage to which we are not accustomed.

Another experience you may have in the subtle levels of the breath is awareness of a perpetual flow of subtle breath either outward or inward, while at the same time the regular inhalation and exhalation keeps on taking place as usual. On occasion this continuous flow comes to the foreground of your awareness and the inhalation and exhalation become more in the background. Or you experience inhalation and exhalation as taking place “inside” the continuous flow. As a rule this continuous movement is outward—a form of perpetual exhalation—but it can also take the form of a continuous inhalation. And you may even become aware of them both simultaneously. Whatever occurs spontaneously is right. Also, you may experience the breath as a
stationary presence within which the inhaling and exhaling movements are taking place. All of these are correct when they occur. You come to experience that the breath is much more than you previously understood.

**When the breath is “lost”**

When you “lose” the awareness of the breath because it becomes so subtle, you can do one of two things: 1) Take one or more deep breaths through the nose (keeping the mouth closed) to re-establish awareness of the breath, and then continue observing it as usual. 2) Make yourself very aware of the tip of the nose (touch it, if you need to), and simply observe what is–or is not–going on there. Usually, after just a few moments this will enable you to again perceive the subtle movement of the breath, but if not, you can simply sit and be aware of the nosetip alone–of the seeming absence of the breath. In time the awareness of the subtle breath will arise and you can keep on observing it as usual. This is because the nosetip itself is an ideal sensor of the subtle breath movements.

When nothing seems to be going on, do not force anything. Just keep your awareness at the nosetip: watching, watching, watching. In time the very subtle breath will be perceived there. No forcing is needed, just observing.

**The quality of the breath**

When we make ourselves aware of the breath, it begins to become refined and easeful, even joyful, and we enter a much subtler realm of consciousness. As the breath becomes increasingly refined and subtle during meditation it goes through many stages that we experience, most of them basically indescribable because they are so individual and various, and take place beyond the levels where language can go. Some stages produce inner sensations, some evoke various impressions, mental and sensory, and in some stages the breath is experienced as making very subtle, whisperlike sounds–sometimes a kind of glistening or whooshing-shooshing sound. These attributes of the breath reflect our inner state–are a kind of inner mirror.

The quality or texture of the breath must not be tampered with, for it changes according to the quality or condition of the subtle levels of our being. Sensations of shallowness, inhibition, or discomfort in the
breath(ing) are signs of the conditions of the inner body and mind–do not resist them or try to change them. Rather be fully aware of them, as your attention to them will itself correct them in time. So no matter how uncomfortable or strange the sensations that arise as we observe the breath (most especially in the beginning of our meditation time), just experience them and let them be what they are. This objective observation will of itself then correct all kinks and the breath will become soothing and easeful. Only by not “touching” it can we straighten it out. That is contradictory, but reality almost always is.

Just as there should be no clinging to name, form, or thoughts in meditation, so also there should be no attempt to produce or eliminate a particular mode of breath sensation. There should be neither an attraction nor an aversion for however it is at the moment–only acceptance and experience of its quality.

Sometimes in Breath Meditation the awareness of the breath and the nosetip can be very strong, almost heavy, as though your awareness is being drawn into a vortex of magnetic energy. At other times it can be extremely light and subtle, with your attention gently resting on/in them like a kind of glow or faint breeze. These two extremes–and any degrees in between–are natural and right.

**Experience the whole breath**

Do not become spacey and be aware of the breath only minimally or in a vague or abstract way. Be intent on the breath. Neither should you be aware only of the beginning and end of the inhalations and exhalations. Rather, experience the whole breath, the entire flow of the breath sensation at the nosetip. (Actually, it is only possible to experience the whole breath by keeping our awareness at the tip of the nose.)

We are to experience the breath–not the path of the breath. If we follow the breath inside the body and back out, leaving the nosetip, our awareness will become diluted and even scattered. So stay with the nosetip.

**The unified breath**

We do not try to be aware of any moment between inhalation and exhalation or between exhalation and inhalation. Just the opposite: by keeping our awareness on the real nosetip breath, relaxed and intent on
that breath, it becomes smooth, united, and continuous. This is referred
to in the Bhagavad Gita (4:29) where it speaks of those who “offer the
outgoing into the incoming breath, and the incoming into the outgoing
breath.” Buddhist writings on Breath Meditation speak of “joining” or
“circling”–the breath spontaneously becoming unified, the in-and-out
breaths smooth and continuous without there being any break or pause
between inhalation and exhalation, and vice versa. This, too, should
happen spontaneously, and not be forced by us trying to make it so.

The two factors of Breath Meditation

For the successful practice of Breath Meditation we need two factors:
1) awareness of the tip of the nose, 2) awareness of the entire
movement or energy-flow of the breath there. We need to keep
reminding ourselves of this fact. They are the essential ingredients of
Breath Meditation, and we should confine our attention to them. If in
meditation we feel unsure as to whether things are going right, we need
only check to see if these two things are being done and our attention is
centered in them. If so, all is well. If not, it is a simple matter to return
to them and make everything right. Then the two in time produce a
third factor: pure awareness.

Avoiding the gears

In meditation stay away from the gears of the mind. It is the nature
of the mind to dance around producing thoughts, impressions,
memories, etc., to draw you into the mental machinery which will whirl
you around and confuse and misguide you as it has in this life and your
previous births beyond number. Stay away.

Therefore we ignore any potential distractions that may arise during
meditation. And then they are no longer distractions. So stay with the
breath and forget everything else.

Do not let the mind entice you with supposed insight, inspiration, or
knowledge of any kind. According to Shankara the practice of
meditation “has right vision alone for its goal, and glories of knowledge
and power are not its purpose.”

Never come out of meditation to note or write down something. If
the inspiration, insight, or idea is really from your higher Self or from
God it will come back to you outside of meditation.

Also, during meditation do not engage the mind-gears with words–
mantras, prayers, affirmations, and suchlike—for the same thought machine that generates the repetition of mantras and prayers generates all other thoughts. Consequently their repetition keeps the machine engaged and in working condition—and makes us conscious of it instead of our true Self. That is why the Meditation Word should be used only sparingly. The same principle applies to any kind of visualization.

We do not give the mind any mental toys to play with or yogic gimmicks to produce ego-desired results. Even holy thoughts and impressions are unholy if they disrupt the process of meditation. Even the purest thoughts are defilements in the context of Breath Meditation. Silence alone is proper.

It is like when a thief hides in a house or someone goes into a forest to observe the wildlife. When the house is quiet the thief comes out and does his work. If the forest observer sits without moving, in time the forest dwellers will emerge and be seen. In the same way, those who become still will find the mind revealing itself and giving up its hidden contents. A lot goes on, but it does not touch us, nor—if we are wise—do we touch it. And in time the mind of the mind—the spirit—emerges and reveals itself.

One of the great values of breath awareness is its ability to help us live without extraneous thoughts both in and out of meditation.

Experiences and thoughts in meditation: be indifferent

While mindfully experiencing the breath, many things—some of them quite dramatic, impressive, and even enjoyable, as well as inane, boring, and uncomfortable—occur as a side-effect, as Buddha outlined in several sutras. Have no desire to produce or reproduce or avoid any state or experience of any kind, to any degree. Our only interest should be our observation of the breath at the nosetip. Much revealing and release takes place in both the conscious and subconscious minds—and sometimes even the physical body—as the result of watching the breath, and should always be a passively observed process without getting involved in any way. Just as we observe any discomforts in the breath to correct them, in the same way we observe restlessness, the arising of thoughts, and even boredom to straighten out the kinks in the subtle energy levels, some of which are manifesting physically.

Thoughts from the subconscious may float—or even flood—up, but you need only be sure you do not generate (think) any thoughts. But if
you forget and do produce some thoughts, just go back to experiencing the breath at the nosetip. The states of consciousness that meditation produces are the only things that matter, for they alone bring us to the Goal.

Just as the mind has gears, so does the body–especially the chakras and kundalini. We need pay no special attention to them. By right meditation we will automatically purify and perfect all the levels (bodies) of our being and the energies of which they are composed. Our inner faculties and forces will spontaneously awaken at the right time. Much phenomena can take place during the process of correction and purification that is an integral part of meditation. When the chakras are being cleansed and perfected, they may become energized, awakened, or opened. In the same way subtle channels in the spine and body may open and subtle energies begin flowing in them. This is all good when it happens spontaneously, effortlessly. But whatever happens in meditation, our sole occupation should be with awareness of the breath.

**Entering the Silence**

In the practice of Breath Meditation we go deeper and deeper into the breath until we reach the heart of all, which is Silence. Through breath the meditator leads his awareness into the silence of the spirit which is beyond the clamor of the mind and the distractions and movements of the body. The state of silence is produced in our mind by enabling us to center it in the principle of the silent witnessing consciousness. For true silence is not mere absence of sound, but a profound condition of awareness that prevails at all times–even during the “noise” of our daily life. Silence is also a state of stillness of spirit in which all movement ceases and we know ourselves as pure consciousness alone. “Soundless, formless, intangible, undying, tasteless, odorless, without beginning, without end, eternal, immutable, beyond nature, is the Self. Knowing him as such, one is freed from death” (Katha Upanishad 1:3:15).

**Visions**

Most visions seen in meditation occur because the meditator has fallen asleep and is dreaming. There are genuine visions, actual psychic experiences, that can occur in meditation, but Ramana Maharshi gives
the true facts about all visions when he says: “Visions do occur. To know how you look you must look into a mirror, but do not take that reflection to be yourself. What is perceived by our senses and the mind is never the [ultimate] truth. All visions are mere mental creations, and if you believe in them, your progress ceases. Enquire to whom the visions occur. Find out who is their witness. Stay in pure awareness, free from all thoughts. Do not move out of that state” (The Power of the Presence, vol. 3, p. 249).

Buddha was quite explicit about Breath Meditation producing Knowing. There is no need for either words or visions. We will know from the depths of our being. There really is no other way.

“Concentration”

Although in this book you will find the word “concentration,” it is not used in the sense of forcing or tensing the mind. Rather, we are wanting to become aware—that is, attentive—to the fullest degree. The classic Buddhist manual on meditation and the development of consciousness, the Visuddhimagga, defines concentration (steadiness) as “centering the mind evenly, placing it evenly on the object”—which in this case is the nosetip and the breath. And this is accomplished by two things: relaxing and merging. So when we say “concentration” we mean relaxed awareness/attention.

Not just the body, but the mind needs to be relaxed. This relaxation is what most readily facilitates meditation. Think of the mind as a sponge, absolutely full of water. If you hold it in your hand, fully relaxed, all will be well. But if you grip it or squeeze it, water will spray out. If you “hold” the mind in a state of calm relaxation, very few distractions in the form of memories and thoughts will arise. But if you try to force the mind and tense it, then a multitude of distractions will arise.

Natural practice

It is important in meditation to be relaxed, natural, and spontaneous—to neither desire or try to make the meditation go in a certain direction or try to keep it from going in a particular direction. If our meditation is to bring us to our eternal, natural, innate, spontaneous state of spirit-consciousness, it, too, must be totally eternal, natural, innate and spontaneous. Breath Meditation fits this
criterion perfectly, for the breath movement occurs in every evolving sentient being. Nothing, then, is more natural than awareness of the breath. It is the key to our inmost Self and its revelation.

That Breath Meditation is truly a natural practice can be seen by the fact that if a person sits silently in a quiet environment, thinking no thoughts but just being relaxed and aware, in time he will become aware of his breathing as the dominant object of his awareness. If he continues being aware of the breath, after a while his focus of awareness will be on the tip of the nose and/or his nostrils. This awareness will continue for as long as he sits in silent observation. In this way each one can “teach” himself Breath Meditation. It is both natural and universal.

A yogic practice which “makes things happen” by arbitrary will is not real yoga, for real yoga brings about everything spontaneously from deep within, from the Self, with no need for lesser volition. It is putting—and keeping—yourself in a position where things start happening of their own accord. So correct meditation practice is never passive or mentally inert. At all times you are consciously and intentionally experiencing the breath, though easeful and relaxed. “He who sees the inaction that is in action, and the action that is in inaction, is wise indeed” (Bhagavad Gita 4:18). Breath Meditation is the natural entry into profound awareness. In Breath Meditation we are not doing, we are BEING.

Never try to make one meditation period be like one before it. Each session of meditation is different, even though it will have elements or experiences in common with other sessions. Do not be unhappy with yourself if sometimes in meditation it seems you are just floating on the top rather than going deep. That is what you need at the moment. Keep on; everything is all right.

Non-doing

Although we will be looking at the Hindu tradition regarding Breath Meditation later, there are some words of Sri Ramana Maharshi that are particularly relevant at this point.

1) “The Self is not attained by doing anything, but by remaining still and being as we are.”
2) “He who instructs an ardent seeker to do this or that is not a true Master. The seeker is already afflicted by his activities and wants peace and rest. In other words he wants cessation of his activities….If activity is advocated, the advisor is not a Master but a killer. He cannot liberate the aspirant; he can only strengthen his fetters.”

3) “That one should give up all thought and abide as the Self is the conclusion of all religions.”

4) “What is there to be gained which we do not already possess? In meditation, concentration and contemplation, all we have to do is be still and not think of anything. Then we shall be in our natural state. … the Self is realized not by doing something but by refraining from doing anything, by remaining still and being simply what one really is.”

Observation of the spontaneous breath is not really “doing” at all—it is just being aware. The more we engage in Breath Meditation the more natural and real we become by being increasingly aware of awareness itself. For our essential nature is simple consciousness. Yet our focused awareness allows great change and development to occur—effortlessly.

The truth is that we are constantly working at keeping ourselves bound and ignorant. Like the Red Queen in *Through the Looking Glass*, we are running frantically just to stay in one place and not move forward and evolve. If we will examine just a single day in our life—or in that of others—we will see that this is true, even though we are usually not aware of it at all. We are constantly frustrating the inner impulse to liberation and diverting it to that which binds. If we will stop, really stop, and let the inherent pattern of our mind—as well as that of the cosmos—come into operation, everything will correct itself and start going in the direction of real growth and evolution. Through Breath Meditation and Breath Awareness the goal will be reached much quicker and easier than we previously thought.

**Doing while not doing**

On the other hand, the process of Breath Meditation, though done in a relaxed manner and in consonance with the natural movement of the physical breath, is always a deliberate act. Considered in this way it is a practice, something that is done, while from another viewpoint it is doing nothing. Both are true, and this contradiction itself is part of the necessary mental training of meditation, for in time you will be able to consciously function in the (seeming) paradox of higher reality as
compared with the flatline mode of consciousness we usually experience.

In the practice of Breath Meditation we are completely relaxed and breathing naturally and spontaneously. Yet, at the same time we are breathing deliberately in the sense that we are doing it with full awareness and intention. When the breath becomes subtle—almost ideational (and in time does become completely ideational)—we become aware that our breathing is fully an act of will, that the breath itself is a movement of our will rather than a mechanical process of the body. In time we come to see that the breath is a movement of consciousness itself.

Even though in Breath Meditation we do not control the breath or concentrate in any particular way—and throughout the practice we simply breathe naturally and pay attention to it—it is in no way a passive practice. Quite the opposite. For we consciously put our attention on the tip of the nose and intentionally make ourselves fully aware of the process of inhalation and exhalation.

Through awareness of the breath you make yourself aware of awareness itself: conscious of consciousness. Thus the only thing you need ever do is observe and experience the breath at the tip of the nose. Though a lot of other things will happen, it will not be your doing, but the natural consequence of meditation itself.

Enlightenment is the revelation of that which has ever been the essential nature of our selves. It has always been present, for it is us, and does not need to be attained, only revealed (or recognized). For this reason correct meditation is simply the dropping of unreality which automatically is a movement into Reality. This is Nirvana—unbinding.

Two views on the nature of meditation—and a third

In India there is a long-standing disagreement on the nature and purpose of meditation. One school of thought considers that definite—and conscious—evolutionary change is necessary for liberation; consequently meditation must be an actively transforming process. The other view is that the only thing needed for liberation is re-entry into our true, eternal nature—that nothing need be done at all except to perceive the truth of ourselves. Obviously their meditation procedures are going to be completely different.

There is, however, a third perspective on the matter which combines
both views. It is true, as said at the beginning of this chapter, that “we are ever-free, ever-perfect, but we have forgotten that fact and have wandered in aimless suffering for countless incarnations.” No one is so foolish as to suggest to a person suffering from amnesia that he need not regain his memory since he has not ceased to be who he really is. Obviously, then, something really does have to be done to change this condition. A dirty window need not be changed in nature, but it needs to be cleansed of that which is not its nature for us to see through it. It is the same with a dusty or smudgy mirror. Meditation is the process of cleansing our consciousness.

Shankara puts forth the question, “How can there be a means to obtain liberation? Liberation is not a thing which can be obtained, for it is simply cessation of bondage.” He then answers himself: “For ignorance [bondage] to cease, something has to be done, with effort, as in the breaking of a fetter. Though liberation is not a thing, inasmuch as it is cessation of ignorance in the presence of right knowledge, it is figuratively spoken of as something to be obtained.” And he concludes: “The purpose of Yoga is the knowledge of Reality.”

Vyasa defines liberation in this way: “Liberation is absence of bondage.” (It is also the definition of Nirvana—“no binding.”) Shankara carries it a bit further, saying: “Nor is liberation something that has to be brought about apart from the absence of bondage, and this is why it is always accepted that liberation is eternal.”

Meditation affects our energy-bodies, not our inner consciousness—it reveals our consciousness rather than changes or produces it. The purpose of meditation is liberation, and to this end it affects the energy complex which is the adjunct of our spirit-Self. Because of this, it is only natural and right that thoughts, impressions, sensations and feelings of many kinds should arise as you meditate, since your meditation is evoking them as part of the transformation process. All you need do is stay relaxed and keep with the breath.

The meditator is already in the Self, is the Self, so in meditation he is looking at/into his personal energy-entity in the same way God observes the evolving creation. Right Meditation purifies and evolves the bodies, including the intelligence (buddhi), and realigns our consciousness with its true state, accomplishing the aims of both schools of meditational thought mentioned before.
Hatching the egg

Each person will experience meditation in a different way, even if there are points of similarity with that of others. Also, meditations can vary greatly. In some meditations a lot will be going on, and then in other meditations it will seem as though we are just sitting and coasting along with nothing happening.

When nothing seems to be going on at all, we may mistakenly think we are meditating incorrectly or it just does not work. Actually, meditation produces profound and far-reaching changes in our extremely complex makeup, whether we do or do not perceive those changes. Some meditations are times of quiet assimilation of prior changes and balancing out to get ready for more change. If we are meditating in the way outlined at the beginning of this chapter, we are doing everything correctly and everything is going on just as it should be—every breath is further refining our inner faculties of awareness.

Very early in the scale of evolution sentient beings are born from eggs, so it is not inappropriate to think of our development in those terms. All eggs hatch and develop through heat—this is absolutely necessary, just as it is for the germination of seeds (the eggs of plants). Yoga is called tapasya, the generation of heat, for that very reason. Our meditation, then, is like the hatching of an egg. Nothing may seem to be going on, but life is developing on the unseen levels.

The hatching of a chicken egg is a prime example. Inside the egg there is nothing but two kinds of goo—the white and the yolk. Both are liquids and have no other perceptible characteristics than color. The hen does nothing more than sit on the egg and keep it warm, yet as the days pass the goo inside the shell turns into internal organs, blood, bones, skin, feathers, brain, ears, and eyes—all that goes to make up a chicken—just by being incubated, by the hen doing “nothing.” At last a living, conscious being breaks its way out of the shell. No wonder eggs have been used as symbols of resurrection from death into life.

Another apt symbol is the cocoon. The dull-colored, earth-crawling, caterpillar encases itself in a shroud of its own making and becomes totally dormant. Yet, as weeks pass a wondrous transformation takes place internally until one day an utterly different creature emerges: a beautifully colored and graceful butterfly that flies into the sky and thenceforth rarely if ever touches the earth.

The same is true of the persevering meditator and the eventual
revelation of his true nature. Through the “heat” of meditation, simple as it is, our full spiritual potential will develop and manifest in us. Meditation evolves the meditator, turning the “goo” of his present state into a life beyond present conceptions. This is not abstract theory.

**Simplicity of practice**

The simpler and more easeful the meditation practice, the more deeply effective it is. This is a universal principle in the realm of inner development and experience. How is this? In the inner world of meditation things are often just the opposite to the way they are in the outer world. Whereas in the outer world a strong, aggressive force is most effective in producing a change, in the inner world it is subtle, almost minimal force or movement that is most effectual—even supremely powerful. Those familiar with homeopathic medicine will understand the concept that the more subtle an element is, the more potentially effective it is. In meditation, the lightest touch is usually the most efficient. This being so, the subtle breath movements experienced in meditation are the most powerful, producing the deepest effects.

An incident that took place during one of the crusades illustrates this. At a meeting between the leaders of the European forces and Saladin, commander of the Arab armies, one of the Europeans tried to impress and intimidate Saladin by having one of his soldiers cleave a heavy wooden chair in half with a single downstroke of his broadsword. In response, Saladin ordered someone to toss a silk scarf as light and delicate as a spider’s web into the air. As it descended, he simply held his scimitar beneath it with the sharp edge upward. When the scarf touched the edge, it sheared in half and fell on either side of the blade without even a whisper as he held it completely still.

There are no “higher techniques” of Breath Meditation, but through its regular and prolonged practice there are higher experiences and effects that will open up for the meditator. As time goes on the efficiency of the practice and the resulting depth of inner experience will greatly increase, transforming the practice into something undreamed-of by the beginning meditator—for the change really takes place in the meditator’s consciousness. Practice, practice, practice is the key.

**Practical benefits of meditation**

Here are four scientific reports about the practical benefits of
meditation, the first three being about Breath Meditation specifically:

1) “Everyone around the water cooler knows that meditation reduces stress. But with the aid of advanced brain-scanning technology, researchers are beginning to show that meditation directly affects the function and structure of the brain, changing it in ways that appear to increase attention span, sharpen focus and improve memory. One recent study found evidence that the daily practice of meditation thickened the parts of the brain’s cerebral cortex responsible for decision making, attention and memory. Sara Lazar, a research scientist at Massachusetts General Hospital, presented preliminary results last November that showed that the gray matter of twenty men and women who meditated for just forty minutes a day was thicker than that of people who did not....What’s more, her research suggests that meditation may slow the natural thinning of that section of the cortex that occurs with age.” (How to Get Smarter, One Breath At A Time, Lisa Takeuchi Cullen. Time, January 16, 2006, p. 93.)

2) “In a study published in the journal NeuroImage, researchers report that certain regions in the brains of long-term meditators were larger than in a similar control group.

“Specifically, meditators showed significantly larger volumes of the hippocampus and areas within the orbito-frontal cortex, the thalamus and the inferior temporal gyrus—all regions known for regulating emotions.

“We know that people who consistently meditate have a singular ability to cultivate positive emotions, retain emotional stability and engage in mindful behavior,’ said Eileen Luders, lead author and a postdoctoral research fellow at the UCLA Laboratory of Neuro Imaging. ‘The observed differences in brain anatomy might give us a clue why meditators have these exceptional abilities.’

“Research has confirmed the beneficial aspects of meditation. In addition to having better focus and control over their emotions, many people who meditate regularly have reduced levels of stress and bolstered immune systems. But less is known about the link between meditation and brain structure.

“The researchers found significantly larger cerebral measurements in meditators compared with controls, including larger volumes of the right hippocampus and increased gray matter in the right orbito-frontal cortex, the right thalamus and the left inferior temporal lobe. There
were no regions where controls had significantly larger volumes or more gray matter than meditators.

“Because these areas of the brain are closely linked to emotion, Luders said, ‘these might be the neuronal underpinnings that give meditators the outstanding ability to regulate their emotions and allow for well-adjusted responses to whatever life throws their way.’” (PhysOrg–May 13, 2009. Source: University of California-Los Angeles)

3) “People who meditate grow bigger brains than those who don’t. Researchers at Harvard, Yale, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology have found the first evidence that meditation can alter the physical structure of our brains. Brain scans they conducted reveal that experienced meditators boasted increased thickness in parts of the brain that deal with attention and processing sensory input.

“In one area of gray matter, the thickening turns out to be more pronounced in older than in younger people. That’s intriguing because those sections of the human cortex, or thinking cap, normally get thinner as we age.

“Our data suggest that meditation practice can promote cortical plasticity in adults in areas important for cognitive and emotional processing and well-being,’ says Sara Lazar, leader of the study and a psychologist at Harvard Medical School.

“The researchers compared brain scans of 20 experienced meditators with those of 15 non-meditators. Four of the former taught meditation or yoga...the rest worked in careers such as law, health care, and journalism....During scanning, the meditators meditated; the others just relaxed and thought about whatever they wanted.

“Some had been doing [meditation] for only a year, others for decades. Depth of the meditation was measured by the slowing of breathing rates. Those most deeply involved in the meditation showed the greatest changes in brain structure. ‘This strongly suggests,’ Lazar concludes, ‘that the differences in brain structure were caused by the meditation, rather than that differences in brain thickness got them into meditation in the first place.’

“Since this type of meditation counteracts the natural thinning of the thinking surface of the brain, could it play a role in slowing—even reversing—aging? That could really be mind-boggling in the most positive sense.” (PhysOrg–January 31, 2006. Harvard University.
William J. Cromie.

Another report on this study in the *New Scientist*, titled “Meditation Builds Up the Brain,” says that “meditating actually increases the thickness of the cortex in areas involved in attention and sensory processing, such as the prefrontal cortex and the right anterior insula.

“You are exercising it while you meditate, and it gets bigger,” she [Sara Lazar] says....It is further evidence, says Lazar, that yogis ‘aren’t just sitting there doing nothing.’”

4) “There was a study reported at the American Geriatric Association convention in 1979 involving forty-seven participants whose average age was 52.5 years. It found that people who had been meditating more than seven years were approximately twelve years younger physiologically than those of the same chronological age who were not meditating.” (Gabriel Cousens, M.D., *Conscious Eating*, p. 281.)

Falling asleep in meditation

It is normal for beginning meditators to sometimes fall asleep while meditating, since meditation is relaxing and moves the consciousness inward. Both the body and the mind are used to entering into the state of sleep at such times. After a while, though, you will naturally (and hopefully, usually) move into the “conscious sleep” state, so do not worry. You may find that even though you fall asleep you continue to be aware of the nosetip and the breath.

At the same time, be aware that falling asleep in meditation can be a signal from your body that you are not getting enough sleep. People are different, and some do need more than eight hours’ sleep. You should consider extending your sleep time or taking some kind of nap break during the day. Falling asleep in meditation can also be a symptom of a nutritional lack, an indication of low vitality.

Please do not do such things as shock your body with cold water, drink coffee, and run around a bit—hoping to force yourself to stay awake in meditation. This is not the way. Listen to your body and take care of it. Meditators are not storm-troopers. We are engaged in peace, not war.

Yoga Nidra—“conscious sleep”

The purpose of meditation is the development of deep inner awareness. The *Yoga Vashishtha* (5:78), a classical treatise on yoga,
speaks of the state “when the consciousness reaches the deep sleep state” known in Sanskrit as *sushupti*. The sage Sandilya in his treatise on yoga, the Sandilya Upanishad, also speaks of “when sushupti is rightly cognized [experienced] while conscious.” Ramana Maharshi also spoke frequently of this yogic state known as *yoga nidra*—yoga sleep. Although it is described as “dreamless sleep,” it is much, much more, for there is a deepening of consciousness in this state that does not occur in ordinary dreamless sleep.

In deep meditation we enter into the silent witness state, experiencing the state of dreamless sleep while fully conscious and aware. When approaching this state the beginner may actually fall asleep. This is not to be worried about, for such is quite natural, and after a while will not occur. From birth we have been habituated to falling asleep when the mind reached a certain inner point. Now through meditation we will take another turn—into the state of deep inner awareness. Ramana Maharshi said that even if a yogi falls asleep while approaching—or in—yoga nidra, the process of meditation still continues.

So when you have this “awake while asleep” state occur, know that you are on the right track—when it is imageless and thoughtless. “Astral dreaming” during meditation is only dreaming illusion. Not that visions cannot occur during meditation, but it is easy to mistake dreams for visions. Therefore it is wise to value only the conscious sushupti experience in meditation, within which the breath continues to be the focus of our awareness. This is the true superconscious state (samadhi).

**Physical distractions**

We have talked about mental distractions, but what about physical ones? Simple: scratch when you itch, yawn when tired, shift or stretch when you have a muscle cramp, and if you feel uncomfortable, shift your position. We are meditating, not torturing or coercing the body. Such distractions are normal and not to be concerned about. If we give them undue attention by being annoyed or disgusted with them, or trying to force our attention away from them, we will only be concentrating on them, and will compound their distracting power. In time most of these little annoyances stop occurring. Until then, just be calm and scratch and rub and move a little, while keeping your awareness where it belongs—on the nosetip and the breath.
What about noises? Accept them. Do not wish they would stop, and do not try to not hear them. Just keep aware of the breath, and accept the noise as part of your present situation. Neither like nor dislike it.

Care only for your meditation, confident that a few itchings, cramping, noises, thoughts, or memories will not ruin your meditation. “Greater is he [the spirit] that is in you, than he [the body] that is in the world” (I John 4:4). It is your attention to them that will spoil your meditation. You must guard against that, and relaxation and indifference to them is the way.

Throughout the day

Meditation is effective, but its effects need to be sustained throughout the day. To do this, as much as possible keep your awareness centered on the tip of your nose and observe the breath movements there. Since there is no time when you do not breathe, this is really not hard. Just be aware of your nosetip and breathe. Of course your breath and attention may not be as easeful and subtle as it is in meditation, but that is all right, as that, too, is an indication of what is going on with (in) us.

Whenever you cannot be fully aware of the breath, as when you are speaking to someone, or when doing some kind of physically distracting activity, at least try to keep your awareness fixed on the nosetip so it will remind you to resume breath awareness as soon as possible.

A good way to get yourself habituated to constant breath awareness is to read something while at the same time keeping aware of the nosetip and the movements of the breath. Rather than verbalizing in your mind, simply look at or scan the page (this is the secret of “speed reading”). Once you learn to do that, since reading demands so much attention, you will pretty well be able to keep nose/breath awareness in other activities, as well.

Before sleep

Whenever you lie down to sleep, continue being aware of your nosetip and breath in a very relaxed and gentle manner until you fall asleep. Not only does this deepen your consciousness, it also enables you to obtain much more benefit from your sleep, as you will discover.

You may find it helpful to sleep in the so-called Corpse Pose (Savasana): Lie flat on your back with your arms at your side, palms
downward (or across your stomach if that is more comfortable), and
your legs out straight but relaxed. The feet need not be held straight up.
Relax completely, with closed eyes, and do the normal process of
meditation until you fall asleep. If you find that lying on your back is
not conducive to sleep, then lie in any position in which you can be
comfortable and relaxed.

If you awaken during the sleep period, keep on doing the same until
you fall sleep again. And in the morning, immediately upon awakening
put your awareness on the nosetip and breath.

This practice is also helpful when you are ill, as it can aid the healing
process.

Training for living
Breath Meditation is the ideal training of the mind for daily life.
1) Through observation of the breath we cultivate the ability to be
objective–separate from objects but keenly aware of them and thus able
to not be caught up in them while at the same time completely aware of
them and thus able to function in relation to them.

2) The breath cannot be held onto at all; thus the meditator becomes
adept in realizing that all objects are merely a series of comings into
being and goings out of being, and not to be grasped at, and also learns
to be at peace with this experience and knowledge.

3) The breath is really not a thing at all, but only a process whose
very nature is perpetual arising and subsiding, and so the meditator
comes to realize that life itself is exactly the same—that it ultimately is
never any “thing” at all, is not an entity unto itself and therefore cannot
by its nature be clung to. At the same time the mediator comes to
realize that the many objects which roll through the stream of our life
are also “nothing” at all in essence and therefore cannot cause us any
pain whatsoever—all our pain and stress are simply our own ignorant
responses to them and to life itself.

Meditation is the most effective school for living open to us.

Daily meditation
“The Self resides within the lotus of the heart. Knowing this,
devoted to the Self, the sage enters daily that holy
sanctuary” (Chandogya Upanishad 8:3:3). The heart is not the organ
that pumps blood, but the essence of our being: spirit-consciousness.
Ramana Maharshi made this observation: “The real Heart is just consciousness in its native purity. The Self is also that consciousness. So it follows that the Self is itself the Heart” (*The Power of the Presence*, vol. 3, p. 179). This should be kept in mind when later on the “heart” is mentioned in scriptural citations.

The secret of success in anything is regularity in endeavor. “A diamond is a piece of coal that never gave up.” Water, though the softest substance known, can wear through the hardest stone by means of a steady dripping. In the old story of the tortoise and the hare, the tortoise won the race because he kept at it steadily, whereas the hare ran in spurts. He ran much faster then the tortoise, but the irregularity of his running made him lose the race.

Meditation keeps moving onward in its effect when regularly practiced, producing steady growth through steady practice. The more we walk the farther we travel; the more we meditate the nearer and quicker we draw to the goal.

Meditation should be done daily, and if possible it should be done twice daily—morning and evening, or before and after work, whichever is more convenient. If your schedule permits a single, long meditation period of at least three hours, and you prefer it, that is good, too.

When your period of meditation is over, do your utmost to maintain nosetip breath awareness in all your activities. For those who diligently and continually apply themselves, attainment is inevitable.

When you find yourself with some time—even a few minutes—during the day, sit and meditate. Every little bit certainly does help.

**Length of meditation**

How long at a time should you meditate? You should not push or strain yourself. Start with a modest time—fifteen or twenty minutes—and gradually work up to an hour or an hour and a half, perhaps once a week meditating longer if that is practical. But do not force or burn yourself out. It is a common trick of the mind to have you meditate for a very long time and then skip some days or weeks and then overdo it again. It is better to do the minimum time every day without fail. Remember the tortoise and the hare.

Furthermore, as time goes by the process of meditation becomes more efficient, more effective, and one meditation can produce the effect of several meditations done earlier.
In times of stress

Lord Buddha said that Breath Meditation “leads to a vast harvest and great richness.” One of the benefits is its calming effect during times of mental stress. How many times have we found ourselves simply incapable of silencing our mind—which insists on going over and over our present troubles and shouting out its panic, frustration, anger, or fear? If at such times we will fix our attention on the breath at the tip of the nose—even if we are not sitting for meditation or closing our eyes— we will find that our minds will begin to quieten. Although surrounded by people and in the midst of activity, if we hold our attention on the nosetip and the breath while still looking at what is going on and listening to those around us, we will find ourselves amazingly helped. The same should be done whenever we encounter any undesirable emotional or mental disturbance.

Mindfulness of breathing, if maintained throughout our daily work or routine, will anchor us in the harbor of peace, however high the waves of disturbance may be. And it will not act upon us like a soporific or drug, dulling our awareness of the difficulty. Just the opposite: it will make us more aware of it in a positive way and help us to calmly see how to resolve the trouble.

Please do not forget this in times of stress or sorrow. I knew a man who frequently refused medication, saying: “I’m too sick right now to take medicine. I’ll take it when I feel better.” This amazed me, but we tend to do the same thing regarding meditation. It is the only way to real peace, but when our lives are being swept with the storms of grief, disaster, fears, anger, and suchlike, we say the same thing: “I am too upset [or flustered, or nervous, or unhappy, or distressed, or angry, or confused, etc.] to meditate. I’ll do it later.” But the wise who really know the ways of the mind tell us that Breath Meditation has the ability to right away cut off all disturbed thoughts and inner states. So whenever any distracted or negative conditions arise in our minds and lives, meditation is the key to peace and clear thinking.

Awareness outside meditation

Breath Meditation is the ideal training of the mind for daily life, the most effective school for living open to us. Meditation is not an end in itself, but rather the means to an end—to the daily living out of the
illumined consciousness produced by meditation. We go into meditation so we can come out of meditation more conscious and better equipped to live our life. The change will not be instant, but after a reasonable time we should see a definite effect in how we live. If the meditator does not find that his state of mind during daily activities has been affected by his meditation, then his meditation is without value. This is especially important for us in the West since meditation is continually being touted as a “natural high” or a producer of cataclysmic experiences. Such experiences may sound good on paper or in a metaphysical bragfest, but in time they are seen to be empty of worth on any level—ephemeral dreams without substance.

Success in meditation is manifested outside meditation—by the states of mind and depth of insight that become habitual. The proof of its viability is the meditator’s continual state of mind and his apprehension of both reality and Reality. The state of mental clarity produced by meditation should continue outside meditation enabling us to see deeply into things. Through meditation we cultivate the ability to be objective—separate from objects but keenly aware of them and thus able to intelligently and effectively function in relation to them. At the same time, meditation establishes us in interior life, making us increasingly aware inwardly as well as outwardly. This is because reality consists of two aspects: the unmoving consciousness of spirit and the moving, dynamic activity of evolutionary energy. Reality embraces both, and to be without the awareness of one or the other is to be incomplete.

The inner changes resulting from meditation manifest as a more compassionate outlook, a deeper self-understanding, an awareness of changelessness amidst change, a taste for spiritual conversation and reading, and experience of inmost peace. One man who had been practicing meditation for a while remarked to another meditator, “I can’t figure out what is happening to me. Last night for the first time in my married life I helped my wife do the dishes.”

In meditation we are putting ourselves into a totally—even sublimely—different sphere of consciousness and experience from that in which so much phenomena arise. Meditation is done for the development of consciousness—truly pure and simple—whereas it is our active life that is meant for both seeing and experiencing. It is all a matter of consciousness—of consciousness that pervades our entire life—not just a “wonderful feeling” in meditation. It is the fundamental state of
consciousness and mind outside of meditation that matters. Therefore the process of meditation should continue outside meditation. Breath Awareness does this in the simplest way through its two components: 1) awareness of the nosetip and 2) awareness of the breath. Reality consists of two aspects: the unmoving consciousness of spirit and the moving, dynamic activity of evolutionary energy. Through focusing our awareness on the tip of the nose throughout our meditation and daily activity, we anchor our awareness in the unmoving and unchanging aspect; and through continuous awareness of the (whole) breath, we at the same time have our awareness posited in the constantly moving and changing aspect. In this way our minds become enabled to remain steady in activity and active in calmness. And in such an incredibly simple and easy manner.

Moreover, awareness of the breath throughout our daily activities eliminates forgetfulness and useless mental wandering. By keeping your awareness on the tip of the nose and your breathing all the time (whether your breathing is rapid or slow, even or uneven), whatever you may be doing, you will be perpetually cultivating pure awareness itself. When speaking with people you can still be aware of the nosetip even if not aware of the breath moving there.

**Effects of practice**

Although the practical focus of our attention in meditation is breath awareness, we must also be aware of the effects the practice produces. For the goal of meditation is perfect awareness of the spirit within Spirit, and our meditation experiences are steps in the ladder taking us onward/upward to the supreme Goal. We experience subtler and higher levels of breath awareness until we reach the Highest. We are not obsessed with meditational phenomena, but we are keenly aware of them. We need not analyze them, only observe them in a calm and relaxed manner, understanding that they come and go and are not to be held onto, but perceived like the signs on a highway indicating our position and where we are going. Actually, we are indifferent to them as phenomena, but intent on them as messages from the spirit and evidences of the transforming power of yoga.

**Cultivating consciousness**

The root cause of our ignorance and its attendant miseries is
forgetfulness of our true Self-nature—which includes God, the Self of our Self. Our intention in meditating is to center our awareness permanently in the consciousness of who we really are—in the spirit whose nature is itself pure consciousness. We center our awareness in the breath because it arises directly from the Self and will lead us into the consciousness which is the Self.

Shankara defines correct meditation as “meditation established in the perception of the nature of Spirit alone, pure Consciousness itself.” Yoga Sutra 3:55 tells us: “Liberation is attained when the mind is the same as the spirit in purity.” That is, when through meditation we are permanently filled with nothing but the awareness of pure consciousness, liberation is attained. “That is the liberation of the spirit when the spirit stands alone in its true nature as pure light. So it is.” This is the conclusion of Vyasa. The pure consciousness of I AM alone prevails.

We are never anything but consciousness, yet having extended ourself outward as the many levels of our present state of being, we have lost control over just about everything, and by becoming absorbed in awareness of our external being have caused it to take on a virtually independent existence, dragging us along with it. Conversely, by keeping ourselves centered in pure awareness, the witnessing consciousness that is our real Self, we will begin the process of turning all those levels back into consciousness.

Prayer
In most traditions it is usual for some brief prayer to be made before and after meditation. Before meditation a simple prayer is made asking divine blessing and guidance; then at the end another brief prayer is made giving thanks, offering the meditation to God, and asking divine blessing for the rest of the day. There is no set form, just words from the heart. This is not essential for Breath Meditation practice, but those who are so inclined may find it beneficial.

Walking mindfulness
Although the term “walking meditation” is so common, it is really more appropriate to call it “walking mindfulness,” for it is meant to be an exercise in maintaining the calmness and deepened consciousness that is produced by Breath Meditation, and it is as simple and direct.
Here is how it is done:

Clasp your hands together in whatever way seems natural and comfortable for you. You may hold them either in front of you or behind you–whichever you like.

Now simply walk in a natural manner.

As you walk, remain aware of your breath and nosetip exactly as in meditation. In other words, keep “meditating” as you walk.

That is all there is–or should be–to it.

It is important to have your hands clasped as described, for letting the arms hang down can become a distraction, and swinging them back and forth disrupts mindfulness and produces “bodyfulness.”

You can look around as you walk, or at the ground in front of you, or at your feet, watching them as they move forward. Watching the ground or your feet aids greatly in remaining centered within.
Chapter Two
The Meditation Word

The “Meditation Word”

Practitioners of Breath Meditation, whatever their tradition, have found that sometimes in meditation the mind just refuses to calm down and be absorbed in the breath. When that happens a “Meditation Word,” a single word that best symbolizes the Supreme Consciousness to the meditator, can be employed to soothe and refine the mind and the breath (since they are fundamentally the same), and lead to the silence that is the essence of Breath Meditation. This is done by mentally intoning the Meditation Word once during inhalation and once during exhalation, fitting the single intonation to the length (or shortness) of the breath, while being aware of the tip of the nose. As soon as the mind calms, the Word is dropped and the silent contemplation of the breath at the nosetip continues on its own.

If, at the beginning of meditation, you find your awareness easily becoming absorbed in awareness of the breath, then there is no need to intone the Meditation Word. But whenever you find your mind a bit restless, distracted or tending to drift from the breath–whether right at the beginning or at any time during the meditation–then intone your Meditation Word mentally in time with your breath while remaining aware of the nosetip, as already described. Then when the mind begins to calm, drop the intonations and silently remain aware of the breath at the nosetip.

Do the same when during the day, or at night before going to sleep, if you have trouble just being aware of the nosetip and the breath.

Meditation Words

Many are the possible Meditation Words, and whichever is used should be chosen by the meditator according to personal preference. A simple Meditation Word is more helpful in Breath Meditation practice than longer, formal mantras.

Some Meditation Words are: Om, So’ham (SoHum), Brahman, Vishnu, Hari, Shiva, Krishna, Rama, Kali, Durga, Tao, Buddha (Pali: Buddho), Amida, Amitabha, Kwan Yin, Guan Yin, Jehovah, Hayah (I
Am), Adonai, Elohim, El Shaddai, Jesus [In Sanskrit: Isha (Ee-shuh), Mary, Allah—according to the spiritual tradition or preference of the individual.
Chapter Three
The Hindu Tradition

“From Him springs forth the breath of life” (Mundaka Upanishad 2:1:3).

The breath

The breath does not just begin or support life, the breath is the totality of life. It is life, far beyond the simple movement of the lungs in the bodies of mammals. Every single movement in the cosmos is a movement of the vishwaprana, the Cosmic Breath. In our own personal cosmos of the body and mind (including their subtle levels), nothing occurs that is not a movement of prana-breath. Every life process is breath itself. Breath is the substance of which the inner and outer universe is constructed as well as the power within it which causes it to move and live. (This was the teaching of Zen Master Hogen, as well.) Breath is All.

Our attention focused on the breath causes its potential to manifest in the way sunlight causes the petals of a flower to open. It is the key to life on the cosmic level. For this reason Breath Meditation is productive of many functions of the life-force sometimes called “kriyas.” These kriyas will vary greatly in scope and intensity, but they will all produce needed changes, some of which will be perceived, and some will not—but the effects will eventually all be perceived by the consciousness refined by meditation. It is good to keep in mind that all phenomena, personal and cosmic, are actions of the breath. This is why Swami Sri Yukteswar Giri, the guru of Paramhansa Yogananda, wrote in a song:

Pranayama be thy religion,
Pranayama will give thee salvation,
Pranayama is the Wishing Tree.

Pranayama is Beloved God,
Pranayama is Creator Lord,
Pranayama is the Cosmic World.
Control the little pranayama,
Become all-pervading pranayama,
You won’t have to fear anything anymore.

Pranayama is both the practice and the result of Breath Meditation.

**Intuition and breath**

In *Journey to Self-Realization*, a collection of Yogananda’s talks, we find the following on page 309 under the heading: *In Calmness, Intuition Gives Birth to Faith*.

“The Sanskrit word for faith is wonderfully expressive. It is *visvas*. The common literal rendering, ‘to breathe easy; have trust be free from fear,’ does not convey the full meaning. Sanskrit *svas* refers to the motions of breath, implying thereby life and feeling. *Vi* conveys the meaning of ‘opposite; without.’ That is, he whose breath, life, and feeling are calm, he can have faith born of intuition.”

**The Rig Veda**

The most ancient spiritual text of India, the Rig Veda, has some interesting things to say about the breath. In the great Hymn of Creation (10:129:2) it says of the Absolute: “That One Thing, breathless, breathed by its own nature.” Before creation the Cosmic Breath was fully internal, becoming external at the advent of the universe. It is the same way with us. In the depths of meditation the breath becomes internal so that we, too, breathe inwardly and perceive that inward movement which is a manifestation of our own essential nature.

Rig Veda 1:66:1, speaks of “breath which is the life,” as does 1:113:16.

“In thee is each living creature’s breath and life” (1:48:10). Our breath is inherent in Brahman, Absolute Being-Existence.

“Breath which is the life, like one’s own son” (1:66:1). The breath is the extension of our inmost life. It is our “offspring.”

Another hymn speaks of “All the world that moves and breathes” (1:101:5), implying that the whole world breathes, that breath encompasses the whole world.

“Arise! the breath, the life, again hath reached us: darkness hath passed away and light approacheth” (1:113:16). The breath bears life
and light within itself.

“In thee is each living creature’s breath and life” (1:48:10). The breath is inseparable from Brahman.

Brahman is also described as “giver of breath” in 10:121:2.

**Breath and mind**

The reason why breath plays such an important part in the technique of classical Yoga lies in the close relation existing between breath and mind. “Breath and mind arise from the same source”—the Self—according to Sri Ramana Maharshi in *Day By Day With Bhagavan*.

Breath, which exists on all the planes of manifestation, is the connecting link between matter and energy on the one hand and consciousness and mind on the other. Consciousness expressing itself through the mind cannot come into touch with matter and function through it without the intermediate presence of breath. Matter in association with energy cannot affect consciousness except through the agency of breath. That is why breath is found on all the planes. It is necessary for the vitalization and functioning of all vehicles of consciousness, physical or superphysical. This capacity to act as intermediary depends upon its peculiar constitution. It combines in itself in some mysterious manner the essential qualities of both matter and consciousness and is thus able to serve as an instrument for their actions and reactions on each other.

The Chandogya Upanishad speaks of the Atman-Self as: “He who is permeating the mind, who has the breath for his body, whose nature is consciousness, who is without speech…” (Chandogya Upanishad 3:14:2). So in Breath Meditation we immerse our awareness in the breath as that is beyond the thinking mind, beyond all words and concepts, and leads us to the silent consciousness that is our sole reality.

**The nosetip in traditional Yoga**

In the fundamental texts on yoga meditation, some of which we will be considering later, we are told to fix our awareness on the tip of the nose, the *nasikagram*. Preeminent among them are the writings of Gorakhnath, perhaps the most influential yogi of India’s history. We do not know just when he lived, but every district in India has much local lore about his visits there, and even in Tibet, Bhutan and Ladakh he is still held in reverent memory. He seems to have lived to a tremendous
According to Gorakhnath our subtle energy bodies consist of chakras, adharas and nadiis. We are all familiar with chakras and nadiis, the power centers and channels through which the spiritual life force circulates, but adharas are not so commonly known. Adharas are reservoirs of life force. The chakras are like artesian wells and the adharas are like cisterns. Although the chakras are the sources of spiritual energies, the adharas are like storage batteries of those energies from which our subtle bodies draw their power.

The main adhara is the Nasadhara at the tip of the nose, where we are told to establish our attention in meditation. This nosetip adhara is directly connected to a most important chakra located directly opposite the tip of the nose at the root of the palate. Known as the Talu Chakra, this is the “switching station” through which the sushumna/kundalini passes (crosses over) from the seventh cervical chakra in the spine to the point between the eyebrows on the front of the head, the Ajna chakra, in its journey to the Brahmarandhra at the crown of the head. This sandhya, or junction, is extremely important to the yogi, for without its activation the ascending kundalini cannot rise higher than the seventh cervical chakra. So nosetip awareness is a key element in the yogi’s development. In Philosophy of Gorakhnath, Akshaya Kumar Banerjea writes about the sixteen adharas and says: “The thirteenth is called Nasadhara, which is in the nose. The nose is an important center of vital functions. The trainee is advised to focus his vision on the tip of the nose and concentrate his attention upon this one point. If this practice is continued for some time, the mind becomes free from restlessness and fit for deep meditation.”

The nosetip and the medulla

Indian yogis refer to the medulla oblongata as the ajna chakra, and say that it has two “petals” or rays—the subtle movements of consciousness and energy that culminate in the breath as inhalation and exhalation. There is a subtle connection between the medulla and the tip of the nose. It is commonly thought that the point between the eyebrows, the so-called “third eye,” is the opposite pole of the medulla. But this is incorrect. The tip of the nose is the opposite pole of the medulla, and concentration on the tip of the nose thus directly affects the medulla. During meditation you may even feel the medulla being
energized.
Actually, concentration on the nosetip directly stimulates the three major glands in the head: pituitary, hypothalamus, and pineal. Secondarily, it stimulates the thyroid and thymus glands, in the throat and chest respectively, as well. For this reason, during meditation you may become aware of these glands (or their locales) and feel energy flowing there. This is as it should be, but no special attention need be given to it.

**Ida, Pingala, Sushumna, and Kundalini**

In classical yoga there are four very important terms used in speaking of the subtle energy systems through which the evolution of the individual person, the jivatman, is accomplished.

1) The Ida, a subtle channel that extends from the base of the spine to the medulla on the left side of the spine.

2) The Pingala, a subtle channel that extends from the base of the spine to the medulla on the right side of the spine.

3) The Sushumna, a subtle passage in the midst of the spinal column, corresponding to the spinal cord, that extends from the base of the spine to the medulla oblongata in the head.

4) The Kundalini, the primordial cosmic energy located in the individual; it is usually thought of as lying coiled up like a serpent at the base of the spine. When activated, it rises up the sushumna to the crown of the head, the Brahmarandhra.

They are almost never considered in relation to Breath Meditation because they are not factors in its technique, in its practice. This is because they come into play without there being any deliberate involvement with them, but, they really have a very significant role in the experience of the Breath Yogi.

When the Ida comes into dominance, the subtle life force (prana) flows upward through it, and at the same time, the Breath Yogi experiences the perpetual exhalation movement of the subtle breath at the nosetip.

When the Pingala comes into dominance, the subtle life force flows downward through it, and at the same time, the Breath Yogi experiences the perpetual inhalation movement of the subtle breath at the nosetip.

When the Ida and Pingala are coming into balance, the Breath Yogi
experiences both the perpetual inhalation and exhalation movements of the subtle breath at the nosetip simultaneously.

After the Ida and Pingala are in perfect balance for a while, the Sushumna comes into dominance and the Kundalini begins to rise upward through it into the Brahmarandhra. Simultaneously, the Kundalini that is dispersed throughout the body withdraws back into the spine and rises up through the Sushumna. At this time the Breath Yogi experiences at the nosetip the motionless “presence” breath that is in the midst of the perpetual inhalation and exhalation movements at the nosetip.

This is spoken of symbolically in the Bible as the times when the waters of the Red Sea and the Jordan River parted, standing on the right and left hands, while the Hebrews passed dry shod through their midst and reached their goal. Since these two “Pass-overs” are really motionless, they are “dry” passages, motionless movement.

Pranayama

Within the yogic systems of both Hinduism and Buddhism the breath is considered an actual body within the body–exactly as Buddha speaks of it in the Anapanasati Sutra. It is called the pranamaya kosha—the body formed of breath or prana. And working with it is known as pranayama.

Pranayama can mean restraint of prana, and it can also mean control [yama] of the breath, but ayama also means length, expansion, and extension. Thus pranayama can also mean the lengthening, expansion, and extension of the breath as occurs spontaneously in Breath Meditation. For Patanjali’s Yoga Sutra 2:50 says that pranayama is “external, internal or suppressed modification [of breath], and it becomes measured or regulated [paridrishto], prolonged [dirgha] and subtle or attenuated [sukshmah].” Sutra 51 says: “That pranayama which goes beyond the sphere of internal and external is the fourth”—that which directly relates to turiya or pure consciousness, beyond the three states of waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep. Also, internal and external can refer either to: 1) inhaling and exhaling, 2) the outer breath accompanied by movement of the lungs, or 3) to the internal movement of the subtle prana or breath that has no outer manifestation. It is our attention to the breath at the nosetip that is the practice of pranayama. For Shankara says: “Pranayama is caused by a
mental activity deriving from a restraining effort inherent in the Self.”

In Sutra 2:51 Patanjali speaks of “pranayama which goes beyond the sphere of inhalation and exhalation.” In time a meditator becomes aware that there is an internal breath that is the support and stimulus of the bodily breathing. Behind that breath is an even subtler force, and so on back to utter stillness at the core of his being. It is the experiencing of all such subtle forms of breath that is pranayama. Through meditation we effect the inner pranayama and achieve the inner “breathlessness” that is a state of pure awareness. (It is true, though, that during meditation the physical breath becomes, as Vyasa says, “prolonged and light [fine],” and may even stop for a while.)

There is more to this pranayama: “From that [pranayama] is dissolved the covering of light” (Yoga Sutras 2:52). The inner pranayama dissolves the veil which covers the light of the knowledge of the Self. Yet this veil is itself light—the light of subtle matter or energy, the substance of which the most subtle bodies are formed. They might reasonably be called light that veils the ultimate light. “The covering of light referred to in this sutra is obviously not used in reference to the light of the soul, but to the light or luminosity associated with the subtler vehicles associated with and interpenetrating the physical vehicle,” according to Taimni in The Science of Yoga.

Vyasa expands on this, saying: “It [pranayama] destroys the karma which covers up the light of knowledge in the yogi. As it is declared: ‘When the ever-shining [Self] is covered over by the net of great illusion, one is impelled to what is not to be done.’ By the power of pranayama, the light-veiling karma binding him to the world becomes powerless, and moment by moment is destroyed. So it has been said [in The Laws of Manu 6:70, 72]: ‘There is no tapas higher than pranayama; from it come purification from taints and the light of knowledge [of the Self].’” Breath Meditation, then, is the direct way to dissolve karma and be free, for “it is karma by which the light is covered,” says Shankara. And both he and Vyasa explain to us that karma not only binds us to material experience, it also impels us to create even more karma—and more bondage—in a self-perpetuating circle. But by Breath Meditation the karma “becomes powerless, and moment by moment is destroyed.” That is, the karmic seeds are “roasted” and rendered incapable of creating future experience or births and are ultimately completely annihilated. The more we do meditation, the more karma is dissolved.
In a conversation regarding his instructions on breath given in the book *Maha Yoga*, Sri Ramana Maharshi remarked: “Pranayama is of two kinds: one of controlling and regulating the breath and the other of simply watching the breath.” The purpose of working with the breath is simple: “From that comes the dissolving of the covering of light and the fitting of the mind for meditation” (Yoga Sutras 52 and 53). When by the process of Breath Meditation the breath is refined, so also is the mind; and eventually so is the nervous system and the entire body. Since the body is a vehicle of the mind this is a very important effect.

**Chidakasha**

In advanced yoga treatises we frequently encounter the term, “Chidakasha,” which means “the Space (Ether) of Consciousness.” This is the level of existence and consciousness so pure and subtle, so interwoven with spirit, that it is indistinguishable from spirit. Various yogic texts inform us that the breath arises directly from the Chidakasha. Breath Meditation right away begins centering our awareness in the etheric levels of our being, in the Chidakasha. By fixing our attention on the movement of the breath our awareness enters into the very root of our existence.

The process of meditation takes place within the Chidakasha, the seat of the Spirit-Self. This is the Paradise from which we fell into the “earth” of material consciousness, and to which we return through meditation. In Breath Meditation, through increasing awareness of the breath we begin experiencing the Chidakasha to greater and greater degrees. This is the highest experience for the meditator. The more we meditate the higher and higher and further and further we penetrate into the Infinite Consciousness of which we are an eternal part.

The formless and placeless Chidakasha is perfect Unity, and is our real nature. Those who continually attune and merge their consciousness in this way with the Chidakasha will in time become totally identified with the individual Spirit-Self and with the Supreme Spirit. Since all things have arisen from/in the Chidakasha, this merging is the beginning of Cosmic Consciousness.

**The evolving breath**

Life and evolution are synonymous. Just as Brahman has “clothed” Itself in creative, evolutionary energy–Prakriti–and is actively engaged
in cosmic progression toward perfection, in the same way the individual spirit (atman) is encased in its own energy-prakriti and is evolving it toward perfection. This is life within Life.

In the twelfth chapter of *Autobiography of a Yogi*, Yogananda wrote: “Master numbered many doctors among his disciples. ‘Those who have ferreted out the physical laws can easily investigate the science of the soul,’ he told them. ‘A subtle spiritual mechanism [antahkarana] is hidden just behind the bodily structure.’”

The breath is intended to evolve us, to move us forward breath by breath in the stream of evolution, but from ages past our breath along with our minds have gotten out of phase or sync so they no longer move us forward but backward and around and around like a whirlpool. When the breath is restored to its correct form and held there, then our evolution moves forward.

Breath meditation is like keeping a boat in the middle of a river where the current moves us onward, keeping the boat from drifting to one side or getting stuck along the bank. Here, too, it is not passive, but in a mysterious way active without acting, through simple attention holding the breath in its intended channel, moving ever onward to its predestined consummation/culmination. Since the breath arises from spirit it leads us to spirit, into consciousness itself.

The original Impulse which begins, sustains, and completes all evolution, the dance of creation itself, is the Cosmic Breath within us and outside us as the cosmos. Both the cosmic and the individual life-force are known as prana–vital energy–which manifests as breath. All that exists is formed of prana-breath, which acts as a mirror for the individual spirits, changing and modifying itself as they change and modify–as they evolve.

Relativity evolves through the alternating cycles of creation and dissolution–outward movement and inward movement. In the same way the simple act of breathing evolves all sentient beings–whose fundamental common trait is that of breathing. Thus merely living and breathing is a process of ascent in consciousness if the individual does nothing to counteract that process–which we all do, retarding and even halting our progress and causing ourselves to become bound to the wheel of continual birth and death. Breath Meditation frees the breath from all interference or inhibition and thus allows this automatic development to go forward and manifest.
The purpose of the original, dual breath was to enable us to descend into the plane of relativity and begin evolving therein until we could develop the capacity for infinite consciousness. It not only moved us downward into material embodiment, it also began to impel us upward on the evolutionary scale so we might finally develop or evolve to the point where we can finally share—actually participate—in the infinity of God. If unhindered, it would accomplish this evolutionary movement. But in our present state we are always thwarting its purpose, especially by keeping its action bound and buried in the subconscious rather than resurrecting it into our conscious life and cooperating with it and thereby accelerating our growth. When awareness of the breath is consciously cultivated, the two currents become united and oriented toward their original purpose, which they then accomplish. In this way every single breath becomes a step forward and upward on the path of spiritual evolution.

Throughout the upanishads the breath is mentioned as the evolutionary force which only much later began to be called “kundalini.” This is why breath is the focus of our internal cultivation.

**The Bhagavad Gita**

The most influential scripture of India, the Bhagavad Gita, gives us some indications of Breath Meditation. First, the yogi sits upright. “His posture will be motionless, with the body, head and neck held erect, and the vision indrawn, as if gazing at the tip of the nose” (6:13). The instruction *swam nasikagram samprekshya*—“as if gazing at the tip of the nose,” means that your eyes should be closed, relaxed, and turned somewhat downward. “As though gazing at the tip of the nose” indicates that your eyes should not be crossed—but just turned downward at the angle that they would be if looking at the tip of the nose in a relaxed manner.

To help you sense the right angle to turn your eyes down, touch the middle of your horizontal forefinger to the tip of your nose and look down at the finger without turning your eyes in. That way you can determine the angle without making yourself cross-eyed. The angle is important because turning the eyes all the way down may strain them and also tend to put us to sleep. Shankara uses a dramatic simile: “Let him fix the gaze on the tip of the nose, like one dead or asleep.” If you have ever seen people who slightly open their eyes in sleep, or have
done so in death, you will know what he means. So the eyes should be turned down, closed, relaxed, and then forgotten about.

Next, he breathes through his nose in a completely natural and spontaneous manner. From that vantage point the breath is observed as is indicated in Krishna’s statement that the yogis “offer as sacrifice the outgoing breath in the incoming, and the incoming in the outgoing, restraining the courses of the outgoing and the incoming breaths, solely absorbed in the restraint of the breath” (4:29), in this way “equalizing the outgoing and incoming breaths moving within the nostrils” (5:27), easily calming and refining the breath.

The “offering” of the exhalation into the inhalation and vice versa refers to the smoothing of the breath until there is no significant or marked pause between inhaling and exhaling, but rather there is a smooth transition from one to the other—one seeming to arise from the other, both together being a single organic unity. As the Sandilya Upanishad 17 says: “Pranayama is the union of inhalation and exhalation.” Some Buddhist texts refer to this as “joining” or “circling.”

As we become more and more aware of the subtle forms or movements of the inner breaths, it automatically happens that the breath movements on all levels become slower; this is what is meant by “restrained”—not the holding of the breath. We need not try to produce this deliberately, since attention itself modifies and decreases the breath. As a result we easefully remain relaxed and “solely absorbed in the movement of the breath.” This, according to Krishna, is pranayama.

And the ultimate result he also tells us: “With the senses, the mind and the intellect always controlled, having liberation as his supreme goal, free from desire, fear and anger—the sage is verily liberated for ever” (5:28). “Thus, always keeping the mind balanced, the yogi, with the mind controlled, attains to the peace abiding in Me, which culminates in liberation” (6:15).

**Breath in the Upanishads**

Here are some of the things the major upanishads have to tell us about Breath. The upanishads use two words for the Supreme and the Individual Self: Atman and Purusha. Atman means “the breather” and purusha means “person” in the sense of a conscious spirit.

**Katha Upanishad**
“[He who perceives] this Aditi that comes into being as the Breath, comprising all the gods, that is manifested along with the elements, and that, entering into the cavity of the heart, is seated there, he perceives that very Brahman.” (Katha Upanishad 2.1.7) Aditi—boundless—is a designation of the boundless “Infinite Mother”—Prakriti—the source of all the forms of consciousness from physical upwards. In Vedic cosmology Aditi is the mother of the gods. The meaning here is that the breath is the first aspect of sentient being that comes into manifestation, that the senses (“gods”) are permutations of the primal breath, as are the five elements (panchabhuta) to which they correspond. Seated in the very core of our being is the breath, and he who truly knows the breath knows Brahman.

“[The Self] sends forth the exhaling breath and draws in the inhaling breath. All the gods [senses] worship Him who is adorable and seated in the middle [of the breath]” (Katha Upanishad 2.2.3). Breathing is an action of the Self who is seated in midst of the breath. That is, exhalation and inhalation take place around the Self. For that reason those who observe the breath movements regain the awareness of their Self which they had lost. It is a reviving of their original consciousness.

“Not by inhaling, not by exhaling, does a mortal live; but all live by something else on which these two depend” (Katha Upanishad 2.2.5). And that something else is the Self upon which they depend, wherefore through them the Self is experienced.

“The world, whatever here exists, springs from and moves in Breath” (Katha Upanishad 2.3.2). The Cosmic Breath is spoken of here, but it applies equally to the individual breath in each evolving entity.

Prashna Upanishad
“The sun is verily Breath.... That very one rises up who is Breath, who is identified with all creatures, and who is possessed of all forms. This very one, that has been referred to, is spoken of by the mantra: ‘The realizers of Brahman knew the one that is possessed of all forms, full of rays, endowed with illumination, the resort of all, the single light (of all), and the radiator of heat. It is the sun that rises—the sun that possesses a thousand rays, exists in a hundred forms and is the life of
all creatures” (Prashna Upanishad 1:5, 7, 8).

The sun is the source of all life in our solar system. The enlivening energy of the sun enters all living beings in the form of breath–is drawn into the body with each inhalation, and circulates throughout the body with each exhalation to sustain it. Accordingly, the sun and the breath are equated here. All life forms exist by means of the breath. The solar breath ensouls all life forms in many modes (rays). The breath “rises” in us at the dawn of life and “sets” at the end of life. The breath is Life, and those who truly know the breath know Brahman, for the breath is an extension of Brahman.

By means of the breath all else is controlled. This is revealed in the following parable: “Once the senses of the body made the boastful assertion: ‘We hold the body together and support it,’ whereupon Breath said to them: ‘Do not deceive yourselves. It is I alone, who hold together this body and support it.’ But they would not believe him. Breath, to justify himself, made as if he intended to leave the body. But as he rose and appeared to be going, all the rest realized that if he went they also would have to depart with him; and as Breath again seated himself, the rest found their respective places. As bees go out when their queen goes out, and return when she returns, so was it with speech, mind, vision, hearing, and the rest [in relation to the Breath]. Convinced of their error, the powers now praised Breath, saying: ‘He is immortal life.’ All things are fixed in the Breath like spokes on the hub of a chariot wheel” (Prashna Upanishad 2:2-6). He, then, who is truly one with the breath (in the fullest sense) is one with all the aspects of his existence, and is immortal.

A eulogy then follows from verse six to verse thirteen continuing the theme of the glories of the breath, including:

1) All things are rooted in the breath like spokes fixed in the hub of a wheel.

2) The breath is present even in the womb as the spark of life. (In the chapter on Taoism we will find reference to “the womb breath.”)

3) The breath is the Lord of Creation, and it is the breath that empowers birth and growth to adulthood within each life form.

4) It is the breath that enables the senses to function, and regulates that function.

5) The breath is both awareness and strength in the individual.
6) The breath is the expansive power of evolution.
7) The breath is the source of mental and physical well-being.
8) The breath is the basic “food” of the body. (That is why great yogis in various religions have lived without eating—on breath alone.)
9) All things are under the control of breath, including the body and mind of sentient beings.
10) The breath protects, develops, and perfects all life forms.

“This breath is born of the Self. As a person casts a shadow, so is this breath connected with the Self. It comes into this body by the action of the mind” (Prashna Upanishad 3:3). Not only is the Self the source of the breath, the breath and the mind are interdependent. This means that we can reach the Self by means of the breath and can purify and perfect the mind (buddhi) by the breath—and the breath by the mind—through fixing the attention of the mind on the breath.

“The wise one who knows Breath thus...becomes immortal. As to this there is this verse: The birth, the entrance, the abode, the fivefold lordship and the relation to the Self of the Breath—knowing these one obtains immortality, knowing these one obtains immortality” (Prashna Upanishad 3:11, 12). The repetition of the final clause emphasizes the truth of the breath as the means of immortality.

There are five forms of sacred fire in Vedic religious rites. The upanishad (4:3, 4) next says that “It is the ‘fires’ of Breath that really keep awake in this city of the body,” meaning that it is not the body that is really alive, but the breath moving inside it. Then it likens the mind aware of the breath to a priest supervising the fires, and concludes that the breath “leads this sacrificer every day to Brahman.”

The absolute rulership of the breath in the individual is outlined in this way: “Earth and the element of earth, water and the element of water, fire and the element of fire, space and the element of space, the organ and object of vision, the organ and object of hearing, the organ and object of smell, the organ and object of taste, the organ and object of touch, the organ and content of speech, the hands and the object grasped, sex and enjoyment, the organ of excretion and the excreta, the feet and the space trodden, the mind and the content of thought,
understanding and the content of understanding, egoism and the content of egoism, awareness and the content of awareness, the shining skin and the object revealed by that—all that is held and controlled by Breath” (Prashna Upanishad 4:8).

Finally the upanishad (6:4) declares that the Supreme Self created the Breath, and from the Breath was created all the worlds and all that is within them. The same is true of the individual Self as well.

**Mundaka Upanishad**

“From the Self [purusha] originates the breath as well as the mind, all the senses, space, air, fire, water, and earth that supports everything” (Mundaka Upanishad 2.1.3). This is a hierarchal list. First there is the breath, and then everything that follows are its modifications.

Mundaka Upanishad 2.2.8 explains why we fix the mind on the breath, saying: “It is the director of the breath-body [prana sharira].” We will find the expression “body of the breath” in the teachings of Buddha and Buddhist meditation masters in the chapter on the Buddhist tradition.

“Truly it is Breath that shine forth in all beings. Knowing it, the wise man does not talk of anything else. Sporting in the Self, delighting in the Self, performing works, such a one is the greatest of the knowers of Brahman” (Mundaka Upanishad 3.1.4). The wise man “does not talk of anything else” but the breath in the sense that he knows that whatever he speaks of is a ray of the breath-sun. Knowing the breath, he rejoices in the Self and does all things in the consciousness of the Self. Certainly he is among the greatest of those who know the Absolute. He no longer experiences the breath as anything but Brahman.

“The Self [atman] is to be known by means of the breath which pervades the mind [chitta]” (Mundaka Upanishad 3.1.9). In Taoist writings we frequently find the directive to make the breath rest on the mind and the mind rest on the breath. This makes it clear.

**Taittiriya Upanishad**
Earlier the subject of a yogi leaving the body on the vehicle of the
breath was mentioned. Since there is no physical body in the higher
worlds, does breath remain relevant? Will not breath awareness cease
as soon as the person leaves the body? Yes, the breath does remain
relevant to the disembodied yogi, and No, breath awareness will not
cease, for the Taittiriya Upanishad tells us: “The gods breathe along
with the breath, as also humans and animals; the breath is the life of all
beings. Therefore, it is called the Life of All. They who worship
Brahman as breath attain to a full life, for the breath is the life of all
beings. Therefore it is called the life of all. The breath is indeed the
embodied soul of the physical body” (Taittiriya Upanishad 2.3.1). From
this we see that the subtle breath continues on the higher levels of
existence, so the practice of Breath Meditation continues, as well. This
is underlined by the following verse: “Breath is Brahman. For truly,
beings here are born from breath, when born they live by breath, and
they enter into breath when they depart” (Taittiriya Upanishad 3.3.1).

“Breath, verily, is food. The body is the ‘eater’ of that food. In breath
is the body established; in the body is the breath established” (Taittiriya
Upanishad).

**Chandogya Upanishad**

“Verily, indeed, all beings here enter with breath and depart with
breath” (Chandogya Upanishad 1.11.5).

As in other upanishads, the following verse applies both to Brahman
and the Self: “He consists of mind, his body is breath” (Chandogya
Upanishad 3.14.2).

“I take refuge in breath, for verily breath is everything here that has
come to be, whatsoever there is” (Chandogya Upanishad 3.15.4).

The sage Ghora Angirasa was the spiritual teacher of Krishna. He
taught him to say in prayers: “Thou art the essence of
breath” (Chandogya Upanishad 3.17.6).

We have already seen that the senses are “rays” of the breath;
therefore the upanishad (4.3.3) next says that in both sleep and death
the senses become withdrawn into the breath.

“Breath is Brahman” (Chandogya Upanishad 4.10.3).

“Verily, he who knows the eldest and the best, surely becomes the eldest and the best. Breath is indeed the eldest and the best” (Chandogya Upanishad). This is meant both cosmically and individually. Shankara, commenting on this verse, says that one reason the breath is called the “eldest” is that it functions in the womb, whereas all the other faculties usually only come into function at birth. Again we have reference to the “womb breath” of which the Taoist scriptures speak.

Another parable regarding the supremacy of the breath among the faculties and powers of the body is found in 5.1.6 to 5.1.15. There each of the bodily powers in turn depart and return to find the body still alive though bereft of that sense or function while it was gone. But the moment the breath even began to depart, all the other powers realized that they were departing also because they were rooted in the breath. So the parable concludes with the statement that all these are really forms of the breath, “for the breath indeed is all these.”

In the section on the practice of Breath Meditation, diet was emphasized as a vital factor in its practice. The upanishad informs us (5.2.1-3; 6.5.2, 4; 6.6.3, 5; 6.7.1) that the subtle energies of our food and drink become our breath energies. This being true, the quality of our breath is determined by diet–the more pure it is, the more pure and refined our breath will be. We can imagine what quality breath would be produced from dead animal bodies, nicotine, drugs and alcohol. It is crucial that the yogi avoid them altogether.

“Just as a bird tied by a string, after flying in various directions without finding a resting-place elsewhere settles down at the place where it is bound, so also the mind, after flying in various directions without finding a resting-place elsewhere settles down in the breath, for the mind is bound to breath” (Chandogya Upanishad 6.8.2). And the breath is bound at the tip of the nose.
“Even as the spokes are fastened in the hub, so on the breath all this is fastened. Life moves by the breath. Breath gives life to a living creature. Breath is one’s father, breath is one’s mother, breath is one’s brother, breath is one’s sister, breath is one’s teacher, breath is the Brahmin [knower of Brahman]” (Chandogya Upanishad 7.15.1). That breath is a teacher-revealer to the meditator will be the experience of those that apply themselves to Breath Meditation.

“Breath springs from the Self” (Chandogya Upanishad 7.26.1).

“As an animal is attached to a chariot, even so is the Breath attached to this body” (Chandogya Upanishad 8.12.3). Because of breath the body moves (“lives”).

**Brihadaranyaka Upanishad**
In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad we have an interesting variation of the parable regarding the supremacy of the breath. In it Death seized each of the body’s powers in turn and they ceased, but Death was unable to even touch the breath, which was immortality itself. Then the upanishad says this is true even of the gods in the high astral worlds—breath is their life. And the subject is concluded by the words: “Breath, verily, is the Immortal” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1.6.3).

“The being who is the breath within—him I meditate upon as Brahman....That which breathes in is thy Self, which is within all.... That which breathes out is thy Self, which is within all....Breath is the abode of Brahman” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2.1.6).

“As a spider moves along the thread, as small sparks come forth from the fire, even so from this Self come forth all breaths....The breaths are the Real [in manifestation] and the reality of the breaths is the Self” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2.1.20).

“The Self is The Truth of Truth, and verily the Breath is Truth, and the Self is the Truth of the Breath” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2.3.6).

“This shining, immortal Person who is Breath is this Self” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2.5.4).
“Verily, the breath is the priest of the [cosmic and individual] sacrifice. That which is this breath is liberation–complete liberation” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3.1.5).

“He who breathes through your breath is your Self” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3.4.1).

“He who dwells in the breath, and is within the breath,…whose body the breath is, and who controls the breath from within, he is your Self, the inner controller, the immortal” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3.7.16).

“Which is the one God? The Breath. He is Brahman. They call him That” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3.9.9). That–Tat–is a common designation of God.

“On what do the body and the heart rest? On the Breath” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3.9.26).

“The Breath, verily is Brahman….Breath is, in truth, the highest Brahman. Breath does not desert him who, knowing thus, worships it as such. All beings approach him. Having become a god, he goes to the gods” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.1.3).

In the upanishads both the universal Self and the individual Self are symbolized as a swan (hansa). In verse 4.3.12, it is said that the swan-Self protects its “nest”—the body—through the breath, and also moves out of the body by means of the breath.

“They who know the breath of the breath have realized the ancient primordial Brahman” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.4.18).

In 5.13.1-4, we find a passage that is very hard to translate, but the gist of it is that the breath is the vitalizer of all, that which puts us in touch with all things through perception, that which unites us mentally with whatever we desire to know, and is the ruler and protector that needs no ruler and protector itself. Those who know this attain union
with the Self in the transcendental world of the Self.

“The Breath is Strength” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 5.14.4).

“Verily, he who knows the oldest and the greatest becomes the oldest and the greatest. Breath is, indeed, the oldest and the greatest. He who knows this becomes the oldest and the greatest” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 6.1.1).

6.1.7-13 gives the usual parable about the supremacy of the Breath.

Shvetashvatara Upanishad

In the fifth verse of the first section of the Shvetashvatara Upanishad it is said that the Self is like a river and the breath is the streams of that river.

A final word about breath in the upanishads

The breath is considered to have five modes of function that affect both the body and the mind. Consequently there is a large amount of material outlining those functions. These I have omitted as so much citation would have been tedious and have only a peripheral relevance to Breath Meditation. Nevertheless they do show that the human being is really breath in manifestation, that those who unite with the breath truly are Masters in a very literal sense.

What is relevant, though, is the statement that the breath is moving through seven million two hundred seventy-two thousand (7,272,000) channels—known as nadis—in the physical and subtle bodies. Obviously, then, when we perfect the breath we perfect all these channels as well. Further, in meditation we can experience an amazing number of differing sensations of the breath as these channels come into prominence and are perceived by us. These can also translate themselves into color and sound. The variations are endless. Also, the movements of the breath can be felt in various parts of the body. Yet it is extremely important that at all times we keep focused on the tip of the nose and the breath sensations there. The nosetip is our safety zone and the inhaling/exhaling breath our only object of attention.

The solar path of liberation
All plant, animal, and human life on this planet depends upon the sun. It is the subtle powers of sunlight which stimulate growth and evolution. Sunlight particularly stimulates the activity of the higher centers in the brain, especially that of the pineal gland. Even in the depths of the earth a sensitive man can tell when the sun rises and sets above him. The sun truly awakens us in the deepest sense. As the germinating seed struggles upward toward the sun and out into its life-giving rays, so all higher forms of life reach out for the sun, which acts as a metaphysical magnet, drawing them upward and outward toward ever-expanding consciousness. Human beings, especially, are solar creatures.

The Amritabindu Upanishad (26) refers to “the gate of liberation which is known as the open orb”—the sun. When the individual comes into manifestation on this earth he passes from the astral world into the material plane by means of the sun, which is a mass of exploding astral energies, not mere flaming gases. And when the individual has completed his course of evolution within this plane, upon the death of his body he rises upward in his subtle body and passes through the sun into the higher worlds, there to evolve even higher or to pass directly into the depths of the transcendent Brahman. It is very important, then, that the yogi maintain breath awareness at the time of death so this will take place easily and without hindrance.

The Chandogya Upanishad says: “Even as a great extending highway runs between two villages, this one and that yonder, even so the rays of the sun go to both these worlds, this one and that yonder. They start from the yonder sun and enter into the nadis. They start from the nadis and enter into the yonder sun.” (Chandogya Upanishad 8.6.2,5). The solar energies and the breath are also intimately connected. Our life depends on the light of the sun, and Breath Meditation aligns us with the solar powers and greatly increase our life force and the evolution of all the levels of our being.

The solar rays do not just flow into this world, they also draw upward through the sun and beyond. In the human body the process of exhalation and inhalation is related to solar energy, and much of the solar power on which we subsist is drawn into the body through our breathing. Which is why Giri Bala (see Autobiography of a Yogi, Chapter Forty-Six) employed a special form of breathing to live without eating. The solar rays do not just strike the surface of our body, but penetrate
into the nadis, the channels in the astral body that correspond to the physical nerves. Just as the electrical impulses flow through the physical nerves, the subtle solar life force, or prana, flows through the subtle nadis and keeps us alive and functioning. The breath, then, is a vehicle for the solar energies that produce evolution, and we increase its effect through Breath Yoga.

The continual awareness of the breath during and outside of meditation, conditions our subtle levels so that at the time of death we will be oriented toward the solar powers and can ascend upon them—especially if we continue breath awareness even after the physical body has been dropped. Awareness of the subtle breath will guarantee our ascent into the solar world. We will enter through the solar gate and never be compelled to return to earthly rebirth.

Eightfold Yoga

Classical Yoga is that which is outlined by Patanjali in his Yoga Sutras. It will be meaningful to consider the eight components of yoga as he lists them, for in Sutra 2:28 he avers: “From the practice of the component exercises of Yoga, spiritual illumination arises which develops into awareness of Reality.” In the next sutra he lists the components: “Yama, niyama, asana, pranayama, pratyahara, dharana, dhyana, and samadhi.” Let us look at each in turn.

Yama and Niyama are the abstentions and observances which create the personal mental and physical environment that is indispensable for the successful practice of meditation. (This was the teaching of Buddha, as well.) Since they are not part of the actual practice of meditation, we need not analyze them here, having done so in the first chapter as the Ten Commandments of Yoga. The other steps have a multitude of meanings assigned to them in contemporary writings and commentaries, but I will only discuss what is salient to us in the practice of Breath Meditation.

Asana is usually thought of as meditation posture, but it also means “sitting” (for meditation).

So we sit. Then what do we do? We observe the breath—and that is pranayama.

We close our eyes and turn the mind inward, and that is pratyahara—“the interiorizing of the mind.”

But we do not just observe the breath. We focus our attention on the
tip of the nose. And that is *dharana*, which Patanjali defines as: “the fixing of the mind on a single point or object.”

Our turning of the mind inward and experiencing the movement of the breath at/in the tip of the nose is itself the process of *dhyana*—meditation—which is defined as “the movement of the mind inward like the pouring of a stream of oil.” The simile of oil is used because it does not splash like water but is silent when poured out. Also, it is steady and continuous.

*Samadhi* is the absorption of the awareness into itself—the state of awareness of pure consciousness—which occurs through the correct and prolonged practice of meditation.

From this we can understand why some researchers and scholars believe that Breath Meditation is the original Eightfold (Ashtanga) Yoga taught by Patanjali.

**The identity of the breath with the individual spirit, the Atman (Self)**

The breath is the spirit in extension. “The Self is the breath of the breath” (*Kena Upanishad* 1:2). This being so, through the outer breath we come in contact with the inner breath, and through the inner, refined, subtle breath we enter the consciousness that is the Self (Atman/spirit). “The subtle Self within the living and breathing body is realized in that pure consciousness wherein is no duality” (*Mundaka Upanishad* 3.1.9). And this consciousness comes from tracing the breath back to its Source.

When we observe the breath, we actually observe our Self acting. “He who breathes in with your breathing in is your Self. He who breathes out with your breathing out is your Self” (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 3.4.1). “The breaths are the Real, and their Reality is the Self” (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 2.1.20).

The breath is also the “body” of the Self: “He, who is permeating the mind, whose nature is consciousness, has the breath for his body” (*Chandogya Upanishad* 3:14:2). “The Breath is born from the Self” (*Prashna Upanishad* 3:3). The breath can lead us inward into the center—to the spirit. When we relax and make ourselves aware of the breath, the mind naturally turns within and begins tracing the breath-thread back to the consciousness of which it is the manifestation. This is accomplished by breathing naturally and letting the breath do as it
will rather than by forcing it into artificial modes.

**The identity of the breath with the Supreme Spirit, Brahman**

But breath is much more than an individual matter, and therefore is more than a means to uncover the individual consciousness of which it is a manifestation. It is also a bridge to the Infinite Consciousness, being rooted in the Supreme Spirit. The breath is the living presence and action of God (Brahman). “That which is not drawn by the breath but by which the breath is drawn know that to be Brahman” (Kena Upanishad 1:9). “He, the adorable one, seated in the heart, is the power that gives breath. Unto him all the senses do homage” (Katha Upanishad 2.2.3).

“Man does not live by breath alone, but by him in whom is the power of breath” (Katha Upanishad 2.2.5).

“O Prana, lord of creation, thou as breath dwellest in the body” (Prashna Upanishad 2.7).

“Self-luminous is that Being, and formless. He dwells within all and without all. He is unborn, pure, greater than the greatest. From him is born the breath” (Mundaka Upanishad 2.1.2,3).

“The Self-Existent is the essence of all felicity. Who could live, who could breathe, if that blissful Self dwelt not within the lotus of the heart? He it is that gives joy” (Taittiriya Upanishad 2.7.1). “Breath is a part of Brahman” (Chandogya Upanishad 4.9.3).

“When one breathes, one knows him as breath” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1.4.7). This implies that through breathing—specifically through observing the breath—God can be known.

“The being who is the breath within—him I meditate upon as Brahman” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2.1.6).

“Breath is the Immortal One” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1.6.3).

“The breath is real, and He (Brahman) is the reality of the
“The shining, immortal person who is breath is the Self, is Brahman” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2.5.4).

“Which is the one God? The breath. He is Brahman” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3.9.9).

“They who know the breath of the breath...have realized the ancient, primordial Brahman” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.4.18).

“The breath is the Supreme Brahman. The breath never deserts him who, knowing thus, meditates upon it. Having become a god, he goes to the gods” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.1.3).

When we remain “in” the breath, we abide in Brahman. When our awareness is centered in the breath it is centered in God. Furthermore, the breath is the substance of all things. “All these beings, whatsoever exist, are indeed Breath. So it was in this alone that I took refuge” (Chandogya Upanishad 3:15:4). A little later (3:17:6) the upanishad says regarding Brahman: “Thou art the subtle essence of Breath.”

Sri Ramana Maharshi

Sri Ramana Maharshi was one of the most widely-known and sought-after sages of modern India. His uncompromising teachings on non-dual realization have influenced untold numbers of seekers—and continue to do so. One of Sri Ramana’s most important teachings is: “The Self is not attained by doing anything, but by remaining still and being as we are” (The Power of the Presence, vol. III, p. 131, footnote).

“He who instructs an ardent seeker to do this or that is not a true Master. The seeker is already afflicted by his activities and wants peace and rest. In other words he wants cessation of his activities. Instead of that, he is told to do something in addition to or in place of his other activities. Can that be a help to the seeker?

“Activity is a creation; activity is the destruction of one’s inherent happiness. If activity is advocated, the advisor is not a Master but a
killer. Either the Creator, Brahma, or Death, Yama, may be said to have come in the guise of such a Master. He cannot liberate the aspirant; he can only strengthen his fetters” (The Power of the Presence, vol. III, p. 128).

“Even the idea ‘I am Brahma’ [the mahavakya Aham Brahmasmi] is only a thought and is not atmanishta [Self-abidance]. That one should give up all thought and abide as the Self is the conclusion of all religions. Even nirvikalpa samadhi is only a stage in sadhana. It implies going into samadhi and rising from samadhi” (The Power of the Presence, vol. III, p. 129).

“Sadhana implies an object to be gained and the means of gaining it. What is there to be gained which we do not already possess? In meditation, concentration and contemplation, all we have to do is be still and not think of anything. Then we shall be in our natural state. This natural state is given many names–moksha, jnana, Atman, etc.–and these give rise to many controversies....People seem to think that by practicing some elaborate sadhana the Self will one day descend upon them as something very big and with tremendous glory, giving them what is called sakshatkaram [direct experience]. The Self is sakshat [direct] all right, but there is no karam [the one who performs actions] or kritam [the action that is performed] about it. The word karam implies doing something. But the Self is realized not by doing something but by refraining from doing anything, by remaining still and being simply what one really is” (The Power of the Presence, vol. III, p. 130-132). “Doing” anything in meditation drives away the perception of spirit–of consciousness itself–from our awareness. Breath Meditation, however, is really not a “doing” but a “being.” And, as already quoted: “Pranayama is of two kinds: one of controlling and regulating the breath and the other of simply watching the breath.”

In the book Day By Day With Bhagavan, we find the following: “[Seekers] are advised to watch their breathing, since such watching will naturally and as a matter of course lead to cessation of thought and bring the mind under control.

“Breath and mind arise from the same place and when one of them is controlled, the other is also controlled....The method [of Self-Inquiry
recommended by Sri Ramana] contains within it...the watching of the breath. When we watch wherefrom the ‘I’ thought, the root of all thoughts, springs, we are necessarily watching the source of breath also, as the ‘I’ thought and the breath arise from the same source.”

When asked in the same conversation about actually controlling the breath, he commented: “Watching the breath is also one form of pranayama. Retaining breath, etc., is more violent and may be harmful in some cases.... But merely watching the breath is easy and involves no risk.”

The following comes from Talks With Sri Ramana Maharshi, a stenographic record of his conversations: “To watch the breath is one way of doing pranayama. The mind abstracted from other activities is engaged in watching the breath. That controls the breath; and in its turn the mind is controlled.” And further: “Breath and mind arise from the same source. The source can be reached by regulating the breath.... Regulation of the breath is accomplished by watching its movements.”

**Paramhansa Nityananda**

One of the most renowned yogis of twentieth century India was Paramhansa Nityananda. Some of his teachings were recorded, compiled and made into a book called The Chidakasha Gita. The following are his words on breath. (The numbers following them are the numbers of the aphorisms in the Chidakasha Gita.)

“When the movement of the breath is internal, one will see the world in himself” (11).

“It is the breath that man brings here at birth and it is the breath that man takes with him when he leaves this world” (52).

“Just as small rivers enter the sea, our attention must be fixed on the internal breath” (58).

“Harmonizing the prana [inhalation] and apana [exhalation], enjoy the eternal bliss. The seat of breath is the truth. It is the internal space (chidakasha). In the eternal space is the tower of eternal bliss. This
tower is the seat of eternal peace. In the ‘unconscious sleep,’ enjoy the ‘conscious sleep’ of bliss. This is not the sleep of beasts. Sleep the ‘sleep of man.’ Enjoy that sleep which must be the aim and end of man. Sleep the sleep of the ‘spiritual eye’ (upanayana). When talking, when sitting, without any desires, without any thoughts, sleep this spiritual sleep. Fixing your attention on breath, sleep. Perform the natural ‘japa’ of the inward and the outward breath” (120).

“Breath is the ONE. Breath is the ONE in all. Breath is existence. This is known only to those who have practiced yoga. Those who have not practiced yoga are not aware of this fact” (121).

“Those who do not practice pranayama have no yoga. It is impossible to draw water from a well without a rope” (204).

“Many sorts of cakes are prepared from the same rice. So also, by breath everything is accomplished….What is called pranayama is all internal working” (210).

“The internal breath is not divisible. It is indivisible; it is one” (215).

“The origin of breath is true ananda” (231).

“Those who do not concentrate on breath have no aim, no state, no intelligence and no fulfillment. So concentrate and think. Concentrate on the indrawing and outgoing breath” (232).

“The internal faith should be concentrated upon breath” (240).

“O breath! Enter the abode of peace. Have under control both this world and the next! Such souls will attain Satchitananda. They have no attachment to the results of karma. They are eternally liberated from bondage. They are eternally one-minded. They have conquered the qualities of the jiva” (279).

Sri Anandamayi Ma
Sri Sri Anandamayi Ma (the Joy-filled Mother) was also one of the most renowned spiritual figures of twentieth-century India. Paramhansa
Yogananda devoted an entire chapter of his *Autobiography of Yogi* to her. Here are some of her words regarding breath:

“As soon as the mind understands the fact of His immanence, then... He becomes as it were active within us, at first through the vehicle of the breath, which is an expression of the life-force [prana]....Be ever aware of the following: What is called life-breath is really an aspect of a universal, all-pervasive power that functions continuously. It is He in one of His forms. He Who is Truth-Consciousness reveals Himself in this mode. If...we can remain concentrated on the breath,...simply watching the movement of the breath, this will help to steady the mind and may also be an aid in our search of Him Who is the Life of our life [or: Who is the Breath of our breath], Who is the Whole, the Eternal One....

“The ever-moving breath changes its rhythm according to what we do, feel and think, with the precision of a clock’s pendulum, which works without a break although it may at times go fast or slow. With a similar constancy endeavor to concentrate on the breath; this will exercise a check on the mind and prevent it from wandering away to outer objects....With the help of your intelligence and individual capacity try to unite the mind with the breath” (Extracted from *Matri Vani*, pp. 145-148).

Mataji said that all the life process of the gross and subtle bodies are actions (kriyas) of the breath, that the breath was the key to ALL.

On another occasion some people expressed to Anandamayi Ma their disinterest in the worship of symbols. One of them asked: “What is the means of steadying the mind?” To this query Mataji responded: “Very well, you sit quietly and concentrate on your breath–there is no need to do anything else. **Inhalation and exhalation are your symbols**” (Gurupriya Devi, *Sri Sri Ma Anandamayi*, Volume Five, page 136).

“Watch your breath moving in and out. It is this breathing that enables us to remain alive. However different human beings, animals, birds, etc., may be in species and also each creature from the other, in this respect, as far as breath is concerned, they are the same....As the breath He resides within each creature. He is the Breath of all breathers
[praner prana], the Supreme Breath....Just as still water can be reached by pursuing flowing waves, so Supreme Life [or Breath] can be realized by performing sadhana with every breath [praner sadhana]. This kind of sadhana can be practiced in all circumstances. God Himself is present as the breath of life. Nothing can be achieved without cultivation of the breath” (From In Association With Sri Sri Ma Anandamayi by Amulya Kumar Datta Gupta).

Sri Ma Anandamayi also advised her ill devotees to practice Breath Meditation while lying down for their healing, just as Buddha did in the Girimananda Sutra.

Ajapa japa

When Paramhansa Nityananda said: “Perform the natural ‘japa’ of the inward and the outward breath” he was referring to ajapa japa, a yogic term that means the natural, spontaneous sound of the breath that goes on perpetually in the subtle levels of perception as we breathe. This subtle, inner sound is experienced in Breath Meditation when the breath and mind become refined, and though non-verbal is the highest form of mantra.
Chapter Four
The Buddhist Tradition

One who has gradually practiced,
Developed and brought to perfection
Mindfulness of the in-and-out breath
As taught by the Enlightened One,
Illuminates the entire world
Like the moon when freed from clouds. (Theragatha 548)

There is much more Buddhist material on Breath Meditation than that of other traditions. This is because Buddha quite openly and continually advocated Breath Meditation and it was never “lost” to Buddhism at any time. So we have over two thousand years of very clear teaching on the subject.

What Buddha did and taught

When Buddha was a child, there was an annual celebration called the Plowing Festival. One year he was very bored with it all, and so went and sat under a tree. There he spontaneously entered into profound meditation through observing his breath. At the end of the festival his parents discovered him beneath the tree, roused him from his inner absorption, and took him home. He never repeated what he had done that day beneath the tree, but he never forgot it. Later, after years of practicing incredible austerities and many yogas, he found himself without authentic realization. Sitting beneath a tree, he vowed to remain there until he attained enlightenment. But how would he do that? What should be his practice, since everything he had learned in so many years had proven useless? Then he recalled his childhood meditation at the Plowing Festival. “Might that be the way to enlightenment?” he wondered. It seemed unthinkable that the simple, spontaneous practice of his long-ago childhood could be the key to Nirvana. But something from deep within him spoke, saying: “That is the only way to enlightenment.” He tried it; and continued it; and it worked. Consequently, he recommended it to others.

To his son Rahula, who had become a monk and was wanting to
practice meditation, he said: “Practice being mindful of the breath, Rahula. Practicing continuous mindfulness of breathing in and breathing out is of great fruit, of great benefit (or riches). And how, Rahula, is mindfulness of breath practiced, and how does its sincere practice lead to a great harvest of richness?” Then he proceeded to give the instructions found in the Maha Rahulovada Sutra, concluding: “This is the practice of mindfulness of breath, Rahula. This is how the sincere practice of mindfulness of breath is of great fruit, of great benefit. \textit{If mindfulness of breath is practiced continuously, then your last breath will be in knowing, not in unknowing.}” For as the already-cited meditation master, Ajaan Fuang said: “The breath can take you all the way to Nirvana.”

You will find that there is much more Buddhist material on Breath Meditation than that of other traditions. This is because Buddha quite openly and continually advocated Breath Meditation and it was never altogether lost to Buddhism at any time. So we have over two-thousand five-hundred years of very clear teaching on the subject.

The Anapanasati Sutra

The basic text on Breath Meditation is the Anapanasati Sutra.

“At Savatthi. There the Blessed One said this:

“Bhikkhus [monks], when mindfulness of breathing is developed and cultivated, it is of great fruit and great benefit. When mindfulness of breathing is developed and cultivated, it fulfils the four foundations of mindfulness. When the four foundations of mindfulness are developed and cultivated, they fulfil the seven enlightenment factors. When the seven enlightenment factors are developed and cultivated, they fulfil true knowledge and deliverance.

“And how, bhikkhus, is mindfulness of breathing developed and cultivated, so that it is of great fruit and great benefit?

“Here a bhikkhu, gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut, sits down; having folded his legs crosswise, set his body erect, and established mindfulness in front of him [parimukha: “in front of the face”–at the tip of the nose], ever mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out.

“Breathing in long, he understands: ‘I breathe in long;’ or breathing out long, he understands: ‘I breathe out long.’

“Breathing in short, he understands: ‘I breathe in short;’ or breathing out short, he understands: ‘I breathe out short,’ He trains thus:
'Experiencing the whole body, I will breathe in;' he trains thus: ‘Experiencing the whole body, I will breathe out.’ He trains thus: ‘Tranquillizing the bodily formation, I will breathe in;' he trains thus: ‘Tranquillizing the bodily formation, I will breathe out.’

“He trains thus: “Experiencing rapture [piti], I will breathe in;' he trains thus: “Experiencing rapture, I will breathe out.” He trains thus: “Experiencing happiness, I will breathe in;' he trains thus: ‘Experiencing happiness, I will breathe out.” He trains thus: ‘Experiencing the mental formation, I will breathe in;' he trains thus: ‘Experiencing the mental formation, I will breathe out.’ He trains thus: ‘Tranquillizing the mental formation, I will breathe in;' he trains thus: ‘Tranquillizing the mental formation, I will breathe out.’

“He trains thus: ‘Experiencing the mind, I will breathe in;' he trains thus: ‘Experiencing the mind, I will breathe out.’ He trains thus: ‘Gladdening the mind, I will breathe in;' he trains thus: ‘Gladdening the mind, I will breathe out.’ He trains thus: ‘Concentrating the mind, I will breathe in;' he trains thus: ‘Concentrating the mind, I will breathe out.’ He trains thus: ‘Liberating the mind, I will breathe in;' he trains thus: ‘Liberating the mind, I will breathe out.’ [The Patisambhida-magga says: “Intellect, intellection, heart, lucidity, mind, mind-base, mind-faculty, consciousness, consciousness aggregate, appropriate mind-consciousness element—that is mind.”]

“‘He trains thus: ‘Contemplating impermanence, I will breathe in;’ he trains thus: ‘Contemplating impermanence, I will breathe out.’ He trains thus: ‘Contemplating fading away, I will breathe in;' he trains thus: ‘Contemplating fading away, I will breathe out.’ He trains thus: ‘Contemplating cessation, I will breathe in;' he trains thus: ‘Contemplating cessation, I will breathe out.’ He trains thus: ‘Contemplating relinquishment, I will breathe in;' he trains thus: ‘Contemplating relinquishment, I will breathe out.

“It is, bhikkhus, when mindfulness of breathing is developed and cultivated in this way that it is of great fruit and benefit.”

The four foundations of mindfulness
The four foundations of mindfulness are: 1) contemplation of the body, 2) contemplation of feelings, 3) contemplation of the mind, and 4) contemplation of mental phenomena—mental states and the arising and cessation of such states, along with the factors that produce such
arising and cessation. It might seem to us that we would need to delve at different times into the “realities” of our body, feelings, mind, and mental phenomena, and that different techniques would be necessary for these inquiries. But such is not the case. Breath Meditation by itself reveals to us the truth of body, feelings, mind, and mental phenomena—and with no need for special methods or volition on our part. By holding to the breath and the noisetip alone, all will be manifested to us in time without our needing to look or concentrate elsewhere. This is the teaching of Buddha.

The seven factors of enlightenment

The Buddha further tells us that anapanasati produces the seven factors of enlightenment: 1) mindfulness, 2) investigation into phenomena [the quality or nature of things], 3) energy, 4) bliss, 5) tranquillity, 6) concentration [samadhi], and 7) equanimity. And the capstone of Breath Meditation is freedom (liberation; nirvana) itself. It is no wonder, then, that Arahant Upatissa, the author of the Vimuttimagga (The Path of Freedom), said about Breath Meditation:“This has been praised by the Blessed One. This is the abode of the Noble Ones, of Brahma and of the Tathagata.” The Noble Ones (Aryas), Brahma (the Creator of the lower worlds) and the Perfectly Liberated (Tathagatas) abide in the State of Being inherent in Anapanasati. Breath Meditation is the treasury wherein the Treasure of Liberation is to be found.

The tip of the nose

In the Dhatuvibhanga Sutra (M 140:4), Buddha’s entry into meditation is described in this way: “The Blessed One sat down, folding his legs crosswise, setting his body erect, and establishing mindfulness in front of him—that is, establishing his awareness parimukha—in front of his face at the tip of his nose.” So focussing attention on the tip of the nose is a requisite for meditation in general. This is further borne out by Buddha’s description of meditation practice in the Maha-Assapura Sutra (M 39:13): “He sits down, folding his legs crosswise, setting his body erect and establishing mindfulness in front of him [parimukha].”

In the practice of anapanasati the ideal place for observing the breath is the tip of the nose. The Thai meditation master, Ajaan Lee, said: “...as he [Buddha] was meditating on his breath, he gained Awakening. He
found what he was looking for–right at the tip of his nose. Nirvana does not lie far away. It is right at the tip of our nose” through the practice of anapanasati.

In the translation of the Anapanasati Sutra quoted above, it says: “[The yogi] sits down; having folded his legs crosswise, set his body erect, and established mindfulness in front of him [parimukha], ever mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out.” This implies that mindfulness of in-and-out breathing at the nosetip becomes the focus of our attention—in the foreground of our mind. Soma Thera, in The Way of Mindfulness: The Satipatthana Sutra and Its Commentary, renders this verse: “A bhikkhu, gone to the forest, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty place, sits down, bends in his legs crosswise on his lap, keeps his body erect, and arouses mindfulness in the object of meditation, namely, the breath which is in front of him. Mindful he breathes in, and mindful he breathes out.” In the commentary he explains the expression “arouses mindfulness in front” as meaning that the meditator “fixes the attention by directing it towards the breath which is in front.” Nyanasatta Thera, in The Foundations of Mindfulness says that the expression in the Satipatthana Sutra means “setting up mindfulness in front.” Parimukham may be literally translated as “in front of the face,” but it may also be rendered “above [pari] the mouth [mukha]”—in other words, the nosetip. So there is a firm basis to understand the Buddha’s words as instructing us to fix our attention on the nosetip for the practice of Breath Meditation.

As Ajaan Chah, another Thai meditation master, says in A Taste of Freedom: “We do not have to follow the breath, just establish mindfulness in front of us at the nose-tip, and note the breath at this one point—entering, leaving, entering, leaving....” The Visuddhimagga says: “The bhikkhu who is possessed of this mindfulness and understanding should not look for these in-breaths and out-breaths elsewhere than at the original place of contact [the nosetip]....Thus, indeed, the bhikkhu should not seek the in-breaths and out-breaths elsewhere than at the original point of contact, and...he should set the mind on the original place of contact and keep that before his mind.”

“The whole body”

When the Buddha says “experiencing the whole body,” he is not referring to the physical body, but to the breath itself in its entirety, the
idea being that each moment of the breath is keenly and clearly perceived by the meditator without any vagueness or fuzziness in his awareness. This is important—never is consciousness of the breath lost or peripheral. For the breath is the sole subject of our meditation. Buddha also says in the Ananda Sutra: “I tell you that this—the in-and-out breath—is classed as a body among bodies, which is why the monk on that occasion remains focused on the body in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful.”

The sutra says such things as: “Breathing in a long breath, he knows, ‘I am breathing in a long breath;’...Breathing in a short breath, he knows, ‘I am breathing in a short breath,’” to convey the idea that we are to be aware of the entire breath—not just the fact that we are inhaling or exhaling, or just a tenuous awareness at the tip of the nose. We must experience the entire breath, even though we do not “follow” it in and out of the body. That is also why Buddha refers to the breath as a “body.” It is a complete thing, of which we need to be completely aware. The Visuddhimagga says: “Breathing, because of being included in the tangible-object base, is a certain body.”

According to the Visuddhimagga, anapanasati also enables us to contemplate “the feelings in the feelings”—to pierce directly into the very core-source and nature of all feelings or states of mind (bhavas), to comprehend their basis, their primal nature. It also says that through Breath Meditation “a bhikkhu abides contemplating mental objects in mental objects” as well.

Having said that, I need to point out that during Breath Meditation we can sometimes become aware of the entire body, from top of head to soles of feet—the total physical entity—as if the whole body is being held or suspended within the breath. We are then experiencing the pranamaya kosa, the body consisting of life force (prana), of which the breath is its most objective manifestation. That is why Buddha said: “I tell you that this—the in-and-out breath—is classed as a body among bodies.”

“I breathe.”

Lord Buddha also says that “he knows, ‘I am breathing....’” “Knows” means that it is a matter of conscious experience, of intentional awareness of the breath. But perhaps even more important is the Buddha’s assertion that the practitioner will know “I am breathing.” This
has more than one significant truth for us.

The first one is supremely practical: Breathing is not utterly automatic, nor is it a purely physical function. A friend told me that in his first conversation with a great yogi, the yogi asked him: “How do the lungs breathe, the heart beat, and the cells divide?” When he replied that they were activities of the involuntary nervous system, the yogi told him: “Then get busy and know that which is behind the involuntary nervous system, for that is the root of life. That is what you really are—not the shallow phantom of your conscious mind.” Buddha’s declaration assures us that through anapanasati the subconscious becomes conscious, that we become aware of The Breather.

Secondly, the Buddha’s statement that we will know: “I am breathing” informs us that although we are watching the breath and letting it be spontaneous, at the same time we are engaging in a subtle act of will (or: feeling, imagining, intending, sensing or thinking) for the breath to move at/in the nosetip during our inhalations and exhalations. It is not a matter of forcing or of intense will, but it is a subtle “setting of the sails” to ensure that the breath and awareness of the breath will continually be centered in the tip of the nose. It is something that we are doing, though in the subtlest possible way.

This underlines that the practice of anapanasati is not passive but subtly active as we consciously center our attention on the tip of the nose and make ourselves feel or perceive the breath moving there—actually making the breath move there by an act of will, however slight. Furthermore, breathing in deliberately on occasion in no way interrupts or disturbs the process. There will be times during meditation when our experience of the breath will be very objective—as though we are watching something completely separate from us—and at other times we will be very aware that we are doing the breathing intentionally. It is natural for this to move back and forth and also occur simultaneously.

Thirdly, Buddha is saying that by means of Breath Meditation we shall come to know the true nature of our “I,” that by observing the breath we come to be aware of the observer, the “who” of us that is separate from and untouched by the duality that is embodied in the breath process, that full awareness of the dual breath leads us to the non-dual consciousness which both produces and perceives the breath. We breathe, and we know we breathe, and we come to know who we are. This is the purpose of Breath Meditation.
(This statement may seem inconsistent with contemporary Buddhist thought, but the historical fact is that until the wiping out of Buddhism from India in the thirteenth century, one of the largest schools of Buddhist thought was the Pudgalavadin–the “Personalist”–school that claimed Buddha had taught the existence of a “person” who was different from the five skandhas, and who reincarnated with a continuous consciousness. In the Gangetic plain the Pudgalavadins were in the majority and were also to be found throughout India and even in large numbers in what is now Vietnam. Recently there has been considerable scholarly interest in these “forgotten” Buddhists. See Buddhist Religion by Robinson.)

A right understanding

Buddha said that it was essential for the sadhaka–one who is seeking truth through methodical spiritual practice–to come to know the four foundations of mindfulness: the body, the feelings, the mind, and the contents and states of the mind. This is sometimes misunderstood as meaning that we must engage in intellectual analysis of these four factors. The same mistake is made in regard to the sixteen sentences beginning with: “Breathing in long, he knows: ‘I breathe in long;’…” and ending with: “‘Contemplating relinquishment, I will breathe out.”’ It is commonly thought that these are sixteen “breathing exercises” and affirmations–that a person should breathe in and out thinking: “I am steadying the mind…I am releasing the mind…,” and such like. But really they are outlinings of what will automatically happen to the meditator as he continues to keep his consciousness centered in the in-and-out breaths. That is why Buddha first lists the experience and follows it with the words: “I will breathe….” Furthermore, by attention on the breath and experiencing these various other things only peripherally, we will not get lost in them and distracted from our focused awareness on the breath.

Regarding this, Larry Rosenberg says in Breath By Breath: “Much of what the [Anapanasati] Sutra describes will turn up naturally if you just sit and follow the breathing, if you persist in that practice over the course of days and months and years. It is natural for your attention to deepen until it includes the whole body, and for that process gradually to calm the body. Once your attention is in the body, you begin to notice feelings and your mental reactions to them, which lead you into
the mind as a vast realm to explore. Finally, if you are paying attention, you cannot help noticing that all the phenomena you are observing arise and pass away, that they are impermanent and lack an essential core. The sixteen contemplations, then, represent a natural process. They might not unfold in exactly that order, and some of them might stand out more than others. But most of these aspects of body and mind eventually, and quite naturally, show up if you sit and look into yourself over a period of time.”

These states will not necessarily arise in exactly the order of their listing, because meditation experience, like everything else in our life, is a highly individual matter. Buddha is only giving the general outline of what will happen to us so we can get the general idea. Some of the states he lists may never arise for us—at least not in our conscious awareness—and many not listed may arise, since it is different for each person.

Part of the idea of listing the states that will arise is to indicate that such states are dealt with by not dealing with them, but keeping intent on the breath. Buddha’s way of expressing the practice of anapanasati indicates that we are solely occupied with the breathing as our focus of attention, and not the effects it may produce.

The sixteen factors—and more

Buddha speaks of the necessity for being aware of the body, the feelings, the mind, and the objects of the mind. The sixteen states or experiences listed in the sutra are four groups of four relating to just these four categories. In Indian thought the number sixteen often indicated perfect completeness. For example, it was considered that there are sixteen levels of existence (kalas) in physical manifestation. And there used to be sixteen “annas” in a rupee.

The Patisambhida-magga, an authoritative treatise on meditation and mental development, says that for one who develops the sixteen-based respiration mindfulness concentration, more than two hundred kinds of knowledge arise, and proceeds to name them. (Since they are extremely technical I am not including them here.)

It is not without significance that in the Buddha’s outline of the states that will arise from the practice of Breath Meditation he does not at all mention visions, sounds, memories, inspirations, or intellectual insights. The mindfulness enjoined by the Buddha is the mindfulness of
the breath in all our activities, a mindfulness that will then illumine and perfect those activities.

There is a further way of looking at the list given in the sutra; namely that all the things found there—the body, the bodily processes, rapture, pleasure, mental processes and their calming, the mind itself along with its satisfying, steadying, and releasing, inconstancy, dispassion, cessation, and relinquishment—are the breath itself in its many permutations. That is, these states are not just inherent in the breath... they are the breath. This is why anapanasati accomplishes all that is needful for the attainment of Nirvana. For both the Visuddhimagga and the Papancasudani in commenting on the Sutra say that the attainments of “the fourfold jhana” as taught by the Buddha are “due to respiration-mindfulness.” (Jhana is the Pali word both for meditation and the states of meditation. Its Sanskrit equivalent is Dhyana.)

The Ananda Sutra

The Ananda Sutra is very similar to the Anapanasati Sutra, but contains these distinctive passages:

“Thus developed, bhikkhus, thus repeatedly practiced, the concentration on the mindfulness of breathing is of great fruit, of great benefit. Before my awakening, while I was still a bodhisattva, I too, dwelt much in this way of life. Dwelling much in this way of life,... through not clinging my mind was freed from defilements.”

“This concentration on the mindfulness of breathing, bhikkhus, developed and repeatedly practiced, is both peaceful and sublime, unadulterated and of happy life; it causes to vanish at once and suppresses evil and unbeneificial thoughts as soon as they arise. Just as in the last month of the hot season the dirt and dust blow about, and then, out of season, a great rain-cloud causes them to vanish at once and suppresses them; so, indeed bhikkhus, the concentration on the mindfulness of breathing...is peaceful and sublime....”

“From respiration-mindfulness, bhikkhus, thus developed, thus repeatedly practiced, one of two fruits is to be expected: final knowledge here and now, or, if there is some remainder of clinging, the state of non-return.

“From respiration-mindfulness, bhikkhus, thus developed, thus repeatedly practiced, seven fruits, seven benefits, are to be expected. What seven fruits, seven benefits?
“One attains to final knowledge here and now, in the course of life.
“If one does not attain to final knowledge here and now, in the course of life, then one attains to final knowledge at the time of death.
“If one does not attain to final knowledge at the time of death, then, having destroyed the five lower fetters [as a non-returner], one attains Nirvana during [one’s term of life in some particular heaven].
“If one does not...one attains Nirvana after reducing [the number of births]....one attains Nirvana without exertion....one attains Nirvana by exertion....one goes upstream, destined for the highest gods.”
“From the development, from the repeated practice, of respiration-mindfulness concentration, there comes to be neither wavering nor trembling of body, nor wavering nor trembling of mind.”

The Satipatthana Sutra
On one occasion the Buddha was instructing the monks in the way to reach Nirvana through contemplation of the breath. His instructions were exactly the same as those in the previously-cited sutras. But in conclusion he said: “Thus he lives contemplating the body [that is, the breath] in the body,...and he lives detached, and clings to nothing in the world. Thus also, monks, a monk lives contemplating the body in the body.”

The MahaRahulovada Sutra
“The venerable Sariputta saw Rahula [the son of the Buddha] sitting cross-legged at the root of a tree with the body erect, keeping mindfulness present. He addressed Rahula, ‘You should practice being mindful of the in-breath and out-breath, Rahula. If mindfulness of breath is cultivated with continuous practice, then there is a vast harvest, there is great richness.’
“At evening time the venerable Rahula arose from solitude and approached the Generous One [the Buddha], sitting down to one side. Seated, Rahula asked the Generous One, ‘How is mindfulness of breath to be practiced? How is it that continuous practice will bring a vast harvest and great richness?’”
Buddha then spoke of the need to no longer identify with material things, but to engage in unwavering practice. Finally he said: “Practice being mindful of the breath, Rahula. Practicing continuous mindfulness of breathing in and breathing out leads to a vast harvest and great
riches. And how, Rahula, is mindfulness of breath practiced and how does its sincere practice lead to a great harvest of richness?”

He then gave instructions virtually identical with those of the Anapanasati and Satipatthana Sutras, concluding: “This is the practice of mindfulness of breath, Rahula. This is how the sincere practice of mindfulness of breath leads to a vast harvest and great richness. *If mindfulness of breath is practiced continuously, then your last breath will be in knowing, not in unknowing.*”

**The Sambodhi Sutra**

“He should develop mindfulness of in-and-out breathing so as to cut off distractive thinking.” The identical words are found in the Meghiya Sutra as well.

**The Kayagata-sati Sutra**

“And how is mindfulness immersed in the body developed, how is it pursued, so as to be of great fruit and great benefit?” The outline of Anapanasati is then given in a briefer form, concluding with the statement that from his practice: “his mind gathers and settles inwardly, grows unified and centered. This is how a monk develops mindfulness immersed in the body.” Again: the “body” is the breath.

**The Girimananda Sutra**

Once Girimananda, a disciple of the Lord Buddha, was seriously ill and in great pain. The Buddha sent his chief disciple, Ananda, to give him instructions for his relief. Ten things were prescribed by the Buddha, among them being the mindfulness of in-and-out breathing. The instructions of the practice of anapanasati were those given in the sutras that have already been cited, but given in such a way that it was evident that the other nine instructions were to be fulfilled by the practice of Breath Meditation itself. Girimananda followed the Buddha’s directions and was completely healed.

**The Samyutta Nikaya**

In the sutra collection known as the *Samyutta Nikaya*, the fifty-fourth section, known as the Anapanasamyutta is a compilation of material on Breath Meditation extracted from many sutras so as to give a complete overview of the subject. The following are the most relevant parts.
4. Fruits

“When, bhikkhus, mindfulness of breathing has been developed and cultivated in this way, one of two fruits may be expected: either final knowledge in this very life or, if there is a residue of clinging, the state of non-returning.”

8. The Simile of the Lamp

“I too, bhikkhus, before my enlightenment, while I was still a bodhisattva, not yet fully enlightened, generally dwelt in this dwelling. While I generally dwelt in this dwelling, neither my body nor my eyes became fatigued and my mind, by not clinging, was liberated from the taints.

“Therefore, bhikkhus, if a bhikkhu wishes: ‘May neither my body nor my eyes become fatigued and may my mind, by not clinging, be liberated from the taints,’ this same concentration by mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.”

[The Buddha then gives a list of undesirable thoughts and perceptions and says that if the practicer wishes to avoid them, “mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.”]

“Therefore, bhikkhus, if a bhikkhu wishes: ‘May I, secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, enter and dwell in the first jhana, which is accompanied by thought and examination, with rapture and happiness born of seclusion,’ this same concentration by mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.

“Therefore, bhikkhus, if a bhikkhu wishes: ‘May I, with the subsiding of thought and examination, enter and dwell in the second jhana, which has internal confidence and unification of mind, is without thought and examination, and has rapture and happiness born of concentration,’ this same concentration by mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.

“Therefore, bhikkhus, if a bhikkhu wishes: ‘May I, with the fading away as well of rapture, dwell equanimous and mindful and clearly comprehending, may I experience happiness with the body; may I enter and dwell in the third jhana of which the noble ones declare: “He is equanimous, mindful, one who dwells happily,”’ this same concentration by mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.

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“Therefore, bhikkhus, if a bhikkhu wishes: ‘May I, with the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous passing away of joy and displeasure, enter and dwell in the fourth jhana, which is neither painful nor pleasant and includes the purification of mindfulness by equanimity,’ this same concentration by mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.

“Therefore, bhikkhus, if a bhikkhu wishes: ‘May I, with the complete transcendence of perceptions of forms, with the passing away of perceptions of sensory impingement, with non-attention to perceptions of diversity, aware that ““space is infinite,”” enter and dwell in the base of the infinity of space,’ this same concentration by mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.

“Therefore, bhikkhus, if a bhikkhu wishes: ‘May I, by completely transcending the base of the infinity of space, aware that ““consciousness is infinite,”” enter and dwell in the base of the infinity of consciousness,’ this same concentration by mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.

“Therefore, bhikkhus, if a bhikkhu wishes: ‘May I, by completely transcending the base of the infinity of consciousness, aware that ““there is nothing,”” enter and dwell in the base of nothingness,’ this same concentration by mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.

“Therefore, bhikkhus, if a bhikkhu wishes: ‘May I, by completely transcending the base of nothingness, enter and dwell in the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception,’ this same concentration by mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.

“Therefore, bhikkhus, if a bhikkhu wishes: ‘May I, by completely transcending the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, enter and dwell in the cessation of perception and feeling,’ this same concentration by mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.

“When, bhikkhus, the concentration by mindfulness of breathing has been developed and cultivated in this way, if he feels a pleasant feeling, he understands: ‘It is impermanent;’ he understands: ‘It is not held to;’ he understands: ‘It is not delighted in.’ If he feels a painful feeling, he understands: ‘It is impermanent;’ he understands: ‘It is not held to;’ he understands: ‘It is not delighted in.’ If he feels a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he understands: ‘It is impermanent;’ he
understands: ‘It is not held to;’ he understands: ‘It is not delighted in.’

“If he feels a pleasant feeling, he feels it detached; if he feels a painful feeling, he feels it detached; if he feels a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he feels it detached.

“When he feels a feeling terminating with the body, he understands: ‘I feel a feeling terminating with the body.’ When he feels a feeling terminating with life, he understands: ‘I feel a feeling terminating with life.’ He understands: ‘With the breakup of the body, following the exhaustion of life, all that is felt, not being delighted in, will become cool right here.’

“Just as, bhikkhus, an oil lamp burns in dependence on the oil and the wick, and with the exhaustion of the oil and the wick it is extinguished through lack of fuel, so too, bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu feels a feeling terminating with the body...terminating..., with life...He understands: ‘With the breakup of the body, following the exhaustion of life, all that is felt, not being delighted in, will become cool right here.’”

9. At Vesali

“Bhikkhus, this concentration by mindfulness of breathing, when developed and cultivated, is peaceful and sublime, an ambrosial pleasant dwelling, and it disperses and quells right on the spot evil unwholesome states whenever they arise.

“Just as, bhikkhus, in the last month of the hot season, when a mass of dust and dirt has swirled up, a great rain cloud out of season disperses it and quells it on the spot, so too concentration by mindfulness of breathing, when developed and cultivated, is peaceful and sublime, an ambrosial pleasant dwelling, and it disperses and quells on the spot evil unwholesome states whenever they arise.”

11. At Icchanangala

“Bhikkhus, if wanderers of other sects ask you: ‘In what dwelling, friends, did the Blessed One generally dwell during the rains residence?’—being asked thus, you should answer those wanderers thus: ‘During the rains residence, friends, the Blessed One generally dwelt in the concentration by mindfulness of breathing.’

“Here, bhikkhus, mindful I breathe in, mindful I breathe out. When breathing in long I know: ‘I breathe in long,’ when breathing out long I know: ‘I breathe out long.’ When breathing in short I know: ‘I breathe
in short;’ when breathing out short I know: ‘I breathe out short.’ I know: ‘Experiencing the whole body I will breathe in.’...I know: ‘Contemplating relinquishment, I will breathe out.’

“If anyone, bhikkhus, speaking rightly could say of anything: ‘It is a noble dwelling, a divine dwelling, the Tathagata’s dwelling,’ it is of concentration by mindfulness of breathing that one could rightly say this.

“Bhikkhus, those bhikkhus who are trainees, who have not attained their mind’s ideal, who dwell aspiring for the unsurpassed security from bondage: for them concentration by mindfulness of breathing, when developed and cultivated, leads to the destruction of the taints. Those bhikkhus who are arahants, whose taints are destroyed, who have lived the holy life, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, reached their own goal, utterly destroyed the fetters of existence, those completely liberated through final knowledge: for them concentration by mindfulness of breathing, when developed and cultivated, leads to a pleasant dwelling in this very life and to mindfulness and clear comprehension.

“If anyone, bhikkhus, speaking rightly could say of anything: ‘It is a noble dwelling, a divine dwelling, the Tathagata’s dwelling,’ it is of concentration by mindfulness of breathing that one could rightly say this.”

17. The Fetters

“Bhikkhus, concentration by mindfulness of breathing, when developed and cultivated, leads to the abandoning of the fetters.”

18. The Underlying Tendencies

“Bhikkhus, concentration by mindfulness of breathing, when developed and cultivated, leads to the uprooting of the underlying tendencies.”

19. (9) The Course

“Bhikkhus, concentration by mindfulness of breathing, when developed and cultivated, leads to the full understanding of the course.”

20. The Destruction of the Taints

“Bhikkhus, concentration by mindfulness of breathing, when
developed and cultivated, leads to the destruction of the taints.”

**Anguttara Nikaya**

The Anguttara Nikaya is a collection of various short sayings of the Buddha, rather than entire discourses, that were remembered by his disciples after his leaving this world. The following are some of them.

*Ekaka Nipata*, 16. “One thing, bhikkhus, developed and repeatedly practiced, leads to complete revulsion [for wrong actions], to fading away [of defilements], to cessation, to pacification, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nirvana. What is this one thing? Respiration-mindfulness.”


*Chakka Nipata*, 115. “For the abandoning of distraction of the mind, respiration-mindfulness is to be developed.”

*Navaka Nipata*, 1. “Respiration-mindfulness is to be developed for the cutting off of thoughts.”

*Itivuttaka*, 85. “Let mindfulness of your own respiration be well established at the tip of your nose....When mindfulness of one’s own respiration is well established at the tip of the nose, the habits of thought which tend to produce irritation are no more.

“In the body the foul discerning,
Mindful of breathing in and out,
Ever ardent, comprehending
Pacification of all formations.

“And indeed, this bhikkhu rightly seeing
Is henceforth liberated here;
Armed with full knowledge and at peace
This sage has severed all bonds.”

**The Dhammapada**
The thirty-third verse of the Dhammapada says: “The mind is wavering and restless, difficult to guard and restrain: let the wise man straighten his mind as a maker of arrows makes his arrows straight.” The way a fletcher (arrow-maker) makes his arrows straight is by holding them directly in front of his nose at an angle and looking down his nose at them. This is the only way to perfectly see whether the arrow shaft is absolutely straight. So he keeps testing the arrow in this manner until it is seen to be truly straight. The mind, too, is made straight by looking at the nosetip in the same way as the breath is being observed in an objective and penetrative manner.

Patisambhidamagga

The Patisambhidamagga, The Path of Analysis, by Mahanama, is an ancient text that is usually considered part of the Pali Canon, and therefore is of considerable authority.

“For one who knows one-pointedness and non-distraction of mind by means of the awareness of in-breaths and out-breaths, feelings are known as they arise, known as they appear, known as they subside. Perceptions are known as they arise, known as they appear, known as they subside. Applied thoughts are known as they arise, known as they appear, known as they subside.” This statement of the Patisambhidamagga underscores the fact that the breath is the basic substance of feelings, perceptions, and thoughts—the basic substance of mind itself. And it defines “mind” for us: “Intellect, intellection, heart, lucidity, mind, mind-base, mind-faculty, consciousness, consciousness aggregate, appropriate mind-consciousness element—that is mind.”

“One who knows one-pointedness and non-distraction of mind by means of the awareness of in-breaths and out-breaths, brings to bear the faculties, the powers, the enlightenment factors, the path, mental objects, knows the domain, penetrates the meaning of calm.” The Saddhammappakasini, a commentary on the Patisambhida-magga, makes a very important point, saying that following “after in-breath or out-breath which has passed beyond the place of contact [the nose-tip] and gone away from it” produces distraction in the meditator’s mind.

Full awareness of the beginning, middle, and end of each inhalation and exhalation according to the Patisambhidamagga “is purity of conduct in the sense of restraint, purity of consciousness in the sense of non-distraction, and purity of view in the sense of seeing. What is restraint
therein is the training in the higher virtuous conduct; what is non-distruction therein is the training in the higher consciousness; what is seeing therein is the training in the higher understanding.”

The *Patisambhidamagga* says that Breath Meditation is like the striking of a gong: there is the loud sound which diminishes into increasingly fainter sounds. In the same way, at the beginning of meditation the breath is very gross and objective, but as the meditation goes on, the breath becomes increasingly subtle and refined. This is a sign of successful practice.

**The Vimuttimagga**

The *Vimuttimagga*—The Path of Freedom—was written by Arahant Upatissa in the first century of the Christian era, and is a complex treatise on all the aspects of meditation—for meditation is the path of freedom. The fourth section of the eighth chapter of the *Vimuttimagga* is devoted to Breath Meditation and is well worth our careful perusal. At the very beginning it is stated that anapanasati “is ‘being mindful,’ ‘mindfulness,’ and ‘right mindfulness.’”

Upatissa then gives us the primary purpose of anapanasati, saying: “To cause arising of perception…is its salient characteristic.”

Next he tells us that: “Removal of discursive thought is its near [immediate] cause.” This is extremely important. Our mental energies are depleted by constant discursive thinking. With the conservation, clarification, and correction of our mental energies produced by anapanasati we can lead an intelligent, coherent, and meaningful life.

Then he cites these wonderful words of the Buddha about Breath Meditation: “If a man practices mindfulness of respiration, he attains to the peaceful, the exquisite, the lovely, and the blissful life. He causes evil and demeritorious states to disappear and to perish as soon as they arise. He is not negligent as regards his body or his organ of sight. His body and mind do not waver or tremble. He fulfils the four foundations of mindfulness, the seven enlightenment factors and freedom. This has been praised by the Blessed One. This is the abode of the Noble Ones, of Brahma and of the Tathagata.”

Arahant Upatissa comments on these words of Buddha, saying: “The foundation of mindfulness which begins with the long incoming breath and the long outgoing breath is the reviewing of the body. That which begins with the experiencing of joy is the reviewing of feeling. That
which begins with the experiencing of the mind is the reviewing of thought. That which begins with the discernment of impermanence is the reviewing of states. Thus one who practices mindfulness of respiration fulfils the four foundations of mindfulness.”

He then enumerates the two factors of Breath Meditation. First: “mindfulness established in front–fixed at the nosetip.” Second: “The yogi…considers the sensation of the incoming and the outgoing breath through mindfulness that is fixed at the nosetip.” And he cautions us that the meditator “does not consider the breath when it has gone in and also when it has gone out.” That is, he does not follow the breath into the body when inhaling or out of the body when exhaling. Instead, “he considers the sensation of the incoming breath and the outgoing breath at the nosetip, with mindfulness.” Then he gives us an illustration of this. “It is as if a man were sawing wood. That man does not attend to the going back and forth of the saw [but only the point where the teeth are cutting].” In the same way the meditator does not follow the breath in and out, back and forth, but “he is aware of the sensation at the nosetip, and he breathes in and out with mindfulness.” If he practices in any other way “his mind will be distracted. If his mind is distracted, his body and mind will waver and tremble.”

The following caution is then given: “He should not endeavor too strenuously nor too laxly. If he endeavors too laxly, he will fall into rigidity and torpor. If he endeavors too strenuously, he will become restless.” What is needed is a gentle persistence.

Our venerable guide then speaks of what is called the nimitta—the image or “sign” of correctness in anapanasati practice. The nimitta is a most pleasant inner sensation experienced at the tip of the nose. He describes the nimitta in very simple words: “a pleasant feeling similar to that which is produced in the action of spinning cotton or silk cotton. Also, it is likened to the pleasant feeling produced by a breeze. …This does not depend on color or form.”

The simile of spinning is very significant. When cotton is held in the hand and the thread is formed, the grip must be neither too tight nor too loose. So the nimitta arises as a sign of correctness in meditation when, as already set forth, we are neither practicing strenuously nor laxly. But the most important point in this simile is the fact that the thread is felt to be forming at the point of holding—the spinner’s awareness is focused there. So also the nimitta occurs at the nosetip
itself when the meditator’s awareness is centered there. At such times the breath may be experienced as though it were arising at the nosetip itself—neither coming from somewhere nor going somewhere. It is moving, but it does not move. This is really impossible for a person who has not experienced the nimitta to understand, but for one who has, this simile greatly illuminates the character of its experience. And it enables the meditator to be assured that his practice is right. For in correct practice the breath sensation at the nosetip changes into the nimitta and remains so unless the attention begins to slip away from its focus. For it really is the nimitta form of the breath which is the ultimate nimitta, and which becomes the object of our meditation rather than the mere physical breath. Furthermore the text informs us that the nimitta is purely tactile and has no relation with or dependence upon the visual experiences of color or form—though that will be discussed almost immediately.

Finally, the nimitta is really more of a psychological phenomenon than a sensory one, for it soothes and calms the mind when it arises. Rather than being a reward or a toy for the mind to fiddle with, it is a sober and assuring sign of correctness in meditation—no more. Hence the meditator feels no compulsion to grasp or hold on to it. Yet his objectivity will enable the nimitta experience to increase.

Upatissa then tells us that the nimitta may be experienced, not only at the nosetip, but also at the point between the eyebrows or the forehead. It has been my experience that it may also be experienced at the medulla, in the center of the head, at the hollow of the throat, or at the center of the chest—all of these being the points of power known as “chakras.” However it is crucial that the meditator not transfer his awareness from the nosetip to whatever place the nimitta is also manifesting. Rather, he should maintain his focus upon the tip of the nose, for it is that which brought about the secondary appearance of the nimitta—which will fade away if he abandons the nosetip. In time, through the increase and expansion of the nimitta, “He attains to distinction through bliss, his whole body is charged with bliss. This is called Perfection.”

Now we come to the matter of visual experiences during meditation. Certain visual phenomena often occur at the onset of the rise of the nimitta. In themselves they are nothing, merely “signs of the sign.” Yet, they do indicate that it is the true nimitta that is arising, so they are a
kind of proof or test. “He sees various forms such as smoke, mist, dust, sand of gold....” These are approximate descriptions of inner light that the meditator may see with his eyes closed. The *Visuddhimagga* says that some see “a star or a cluster of gems or a cluster of pearls,...a wreath of flowers or a puff of smoke,...a stretched-out cobweb or a film or a cloud or a lotus flower or a chariot-wheel or the moon’s disk or the sun’s disk.” Again, these are only approximations in most cases. I have seen several of these myself; some are something like, and some are exactly like the objects listed. I must say I was surprised to see the string of pearls, since when I read about the experience I figured it was either a mistranslation or just silly. It was neither. I have also seen a kind of golden rain.

The nimitta itself—at the nosetip—causes us no problems and never leads us astray or distracts us. But this is not so in relation to visual phenomena, for: “If his mind does not become clear regarding these different images, he will be confused and distracted from anapanasati. If his mind remains clear, the yogin does not experience confusion.” And how does his mind remain clear at the time of visual experiences? “*He attends to respiration and he does not cause the arising of other perceptions.*” So by calmly remaining centered in the breath, the meditator’s mind remains clear and free of confusion. “Meditating thus he is able to end confusion...and he attends to respiration with a mind that is free....that yogin attends to respiration and becomes joyful.”

Toward the end of the section on anapanasati, the *Vimuttimagga* simply says: “Practice means attaining.” That is, in Breath Meditation all practice is fruitful. The very practice of anapanasati guarantees results. When you practice, you attain.

**The Visuddhimagga**

The *Visuddhimagga*—The Path of Purification—was written in the fifth century by the great Buddhist commentator Bhadantacariya Buddhaghosa. It deals with all the aspects of the Buddha’s teaching, including meditation, and is considered the “great treatise” of Theravada Buddhism.

“When his gross in-breaths and out-breaths have ceased, his consciousness occurs with the sign of the subtle in-breaths and out-breaths as its object. And when that has ceased, it goes on occurring with the successively subtler signs as its object.” Commenting on this,
Bhikkhu Nanamoli, the translator, says: “The point made here is that if the breaths themselves get temporarily too faint [subtle] to be observed, he should carry on by observing the tip of the nose...till they become apparent again.” Sometimes when the expression “sign” is used in Buddhist texts on meditation the tip of the nose is meant. The *Saddhammappakasini* says: “The ‘sign’ is the place where the inbreaths and out-breaths touch. For in-breaths and out-breaths as they occur strike the nose-tip.”

[After prolonged practice] “in the case of the meditating bhikkhu the in-breaths and out-breaths are still and occur so subtly that he has to investigate whether they exist or not.”

“While other subjects of meditation become clearer at each higher stage, this one does not. But for him who is developing it, it becomes more subtle at each higher stage.” [Just before this passage, the *Visuddhimagga* uses the striking of a gong to illustrate this idea. First the loud sound of the blow on the gong is heard, and then the resonance is heard, diminishing into fainter and fainter sounds. Later it says: “In proportion as continued attention is given to it, it becomes more peaceful and more subtle.”] Also it comes to the point at which it is not manifested. But when it is not manifested thus, the bhikkhu should not rise from his seat and go away. What should be done?...By just sitting as he was, it should be reinstated from the point (where it was formerly established).” That is, the meditator should take one or more deliberate, deep breaths through the nose, reestablishing his awareness of both the noisetip and the breath, and then continue on as before.

“The mind of the bhikkhu, which has long been pursuing sense objects such as visible forms and so on, has no wish to mount respiration-mindfulness concentration as its object; but it runs off the track like a vehicle yoked to a runaway ox. Therefore, just as a cowherd, wishing to tame an unruly calf, might tie it up by a rope to a strong post driven into the ground, then that calf of his, dashing to and fro, unable to run away, sits down or lies down by that post; so indeed, the bhikkhu, wishing to tame his corrupted mind, should tie it by the rope of mindfulness to the post of in-and-out breathing. And so that mind of his, though it may dash to and fro, being unable to break the rope of mindfulness and run away, it sits down, lies down, beside that object, by virtue of access and full absorption. Hence the Ancients said:
“Just as the man who tames a calf
Would tie it to a post, so here
Should one’s own mind by mindfulness
Be firmly fastened to the object.”

Elsewhere it says: “The clever man binds his mind onto the breathings in and out” as to a post.

“Respiration-mindfulness as a meditation subject is foremost among the various meditation subjects for all Buddhhas, Paccekebuddhas, and Buddhhas’ disciples, as the basis for the attainment of distinction and a happy life here and now.” (A paccekebuddha is one who is almost a Buddha, and whose attainment of Buddhahood is assured.)

“Mindfulness of breathing is...a field in which only the minds of Buddhhas, Paccekabuddhas, and Buddhhas’ sons are at home. It is no trivial matter, nor can it be cultivated by trivial persons. In proportion as continued attention is given to it, it becomes more peaceful and more subtle. So strong mindfulness and understanding are necessary here.”

Regarding the enumeration of the sixteen states in the Anapanasati Sutra, the Visuddhimagga makes it very clear that they are not being set forth as affirmations or exercises, but rather that “the bhikkhu having seated himself thus and having established mindfulness thus, not abandoning it, just mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out.”

The Paramattha-manjusa, a commentary on the Visuddhimagga says virtually the same words:

“The long kind and the short as well,
The in-breath and the out-breath, too–
Such are the four kinds that happen
At the nose-tip of the bhikkhu.”

When speaking of Breath Meditation in the Eighth Section, the Visuddhimagga says that “it is sublime, something one cannot have enough of,...it is unalloyed, unmixed, particular, special. Here it is not a question of peacefulness to be reached through preliminary work....It is peaceful and sublime in its own individual essence too, starting with the very first attention given to it....So it should be understood to be ‘unadulterated’ and a ‘blissful abiding’ since it leads to the obtaining of
bodily and mental bliss with every moment of absorption.”

Anapanasati is unalloyed and unadulterated because there is nothing in its makeup or practice that is inconsistent with enlightenment. It is not a thorn that takes out a thorn and then gets thrown away—a simile very much used by Indian yogis in speaking of meditation, but which implies that meditation is inconsistent with enlightenment. But Buddha has declared that Breath Meditation “is the abode of the Noble Ones, of Brahma and of the Tathagata.” For this reason Buddha continued to meditate right up to his final entering into Nirvana. He truly did “abide” in anapanasati because it essentially is really not a practice or method at all, but the abiding in the state of liberating consciousness.

Commenting on the Anapanasati Sutra, Buddhaghosa says that Breath Meditation “is training in the higher virtue,...training in the higher consciousness, and...training in the higher understanding.” And in its practice, “he should only breathe in and breathe out and not do anything else at all.” For Bhikkhu Nanamoli, the translator of the Visuddhimagga, says in a note on VIII, 175 that the breath originates in the consciousness. Consequently, it can open and reveal the original consciousness to the meditator. Later he says of the breath: “It is born of awareness, its source is awareness, and it is produced by awareness.”

Buddhaghosa also affirms that in anapanasati we are “not apprehending them [the inhaling and exhaling breaths] either inside or outside the body, but apprehending them just at the door” of the nosetip, “not discerning the air either inside or outside” the body. “Just as a gate-keeper does not examine people inside and outside the town, [asking:] ‘Who are you? Where have you come from? Where are you going? What have you got in your hand?’—for these people are not his concern—but he examines each man as he arrives at the gate; so, indeed, the incoming breaths inside and the outgoing breaths outside are not the concern of this bhikkhu but, as they arrive just at the gate [of the nose-tip], they are his concern.”

He warns us against any other form of observation, saying: “By bringing his consciousness inside along with the incoming breath, it seems as if it were buffeted by the wind inside or filled with fat [that is, heavy, thick, and sluggish]. By taking his consciousness outside together with the outgoing breath it gets distracted among the many objects outside. However, his development is successful when he fixes his mindfulness on the place of contact [the nose-tip].” To elucidate
this, the *Visuddhimagga* says a little further on: “The mind of one who follows the breathing [in and out of the body] is confused by agitation and vacillation, according as is said in the *Patisambhida*: ‘In one whose consciousness is distracted [by following the breath in and out of the body], both body and mind are disturbed, unsettled, and unsteady.’ So when he gives his attention to it he should do so instead by contact [of the nose-tip] and by fixing [the awareness on the nose-tip alone].”

Regarding the nimitta, he says that “it is not the same for all,” and gives the list already cited in the *Vimuttimagga* section. Then he quotes what he says is an ancient aphorism:

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Fixing his mind upon the nimitta
And putting away extraneous aspects,
The clever man anchors his mind
Upon the breathings in and out.
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And he comments: “So as soon as the nimitta appears, his hindrances are suppressed, his defilements subside, his mindfulness is established, and his consciousness is concentrated in access concentration....He should guard it as carefully as a king’s chief queen guards the child in her womb due to become a Wheel-turning Monarch [an Emperor], or as a farmer guards the ripening crops.... Then, guarding it thus, he should make it grow and improve with repeated attention....”

The Buddha outlined four states of meditation (jhana), all of which are produced by Breath Meditation. Buddhaghosa puts it this way: “He both breathes in and breathes out delivering, liberating, the mind from the hindrances by means of the first jhana, from applied and sustained thought by means of the second, from happiness by means of the third, from pleasure and pain by means of the fourth.”

Regarding the fervent and steady practicer of Breath Meditation, the *Visuddhimagga* says: “The body and the mind of one who is energetic become pliable—this is the endeavor. The imperfections of one who is energetic are abandoned and his applied thinking is pacified—this is the task. The fetters of one who is energetic are abandoned and his inherent tendencies are brought to an end—this is the distinction. Thus his consciousness does not become distracted; he manifests endeavor, accomplishes the task, and achieves distinction.” “Through the more
subtle state of the in-breaths and out-breaths, through the increased peacefulness, through the advancement, there arises joy for the mind devoted to development.” So says the Paramattha-manjusa.

Concluding the section on anapanasati, Buddhaghosa says: “This mindfulness of breathing...thus is of great fruit, of great benefit....for it is because it is peaceful, sublime, and an unadulterated blissful abiding that it cuts off the mind’s running hither and thither with applied thoughts obstructive to concentration, and keeps the mind only on the breaths as object. Hence it is said: ‘Mindfulness of breathing should be developed in order to cut off applied thoughts.’...Also its great beneficialness should be understood as the root condition for the perfecting of clear vision and deliverance; for this has been said by the Blessed One.” And he ends with this aphorism:

“So let a man, if he is wise,
Untiringly devote his days
To mindfulness of breathing, which
Rewards him always in these ways.”

Vipassana: clear-sight

Many things lighten and purify the mind, but nothing clarifies the mind like meditation. Without prolonged and profound practice of meditation, the mind will not be clarified to the point that the state of “clear-sight”—vipassana—arises in the mind. For clear-sight is a state—not a practice. This is extremely important to know, for a great deal of people think that clear-sight is a technique or intellectual insight, whereas it is a mode of seeing, not a mode of thinking. It is crucial for us to understand this, lest we waste our time in a kind of monologuing self-analysis, a form of auto-psychoanalysis that has nothing whatsoever to do with real clear-sight.

Although the state of clear-sight is produced by meditation, the experience of clear-sight also occurs spontaneously outside meditation, either in times of quiet examination (which may follow the period of meditation) or during daily activities. At those times the mind sees deep into whatever it perceives or focuses on. It not only sees, it knows. And that is clear-sight.

Sitting like Buddha
When Gotama Buddha sat beneath the bodhi tree he vowed that until he was enlightened he would not get up even if his flesh and bones were to be dissolved. This is why it is said that Buddha got enlightenment because he knew how to sit. His “sitting” was in the consciousness of the Self, not just the body. So if you “sit” in the same way during meditation, you will be safe from distractions and illusions as was Buddha.

All the forces of the cosmos came to distract Buddha from his inner quest. Cosmic Illusion itself in the form of Mara came to distract him. But he did not move, either in body or mind. Such steadfastness conquered the forces of ignorance completely. Buddha conquered them by simply ignoring them—which was the only sensible course, seeing that they were just illusions. You, too, can conquer distractions not by combating them, not by killing them, not by “seeing through” them or any such thing—but by just having nothing to do with them. The true Self does not touch any of these things, so the true path involves not touching them in your mind.

By sitting and ignoring the unreal, Buddha found the Real. Therefore many centuries later Jesus simply said: “In your patience possess your souls” (Luke 21:19). To relax and experience is the key for the correct practice of meditation.

**Contemporary Buddhist Teachers on Breath Meditation**

This section contains a great deal of material, but whenever I read through it with the intention of paring it down, the profound wisdom and inspiration of every sentence made me abandon the idea. I hope you will value it as highly as I do.

**Thich Nhat Hanh**

“Breathing is a means of awakening and maintaining full attention in order to look carefully, long, and deeply, see the nature of all things, and arrive at liberation.”

“Our mind and our breath become one.”

“Well-known commentaries, such as the *Patisambhida Magga* (Path of
No Hesitation) and the Visuddhi Magga (Path of Purity), teach that while we breathe, we should be aware of our nostrils, the place where air enters and leaves the body. Just as when we cut a log we keep our eyes on the place where the saw touches the log (rather than looking at the teeth of the saw), we pay attention to the nostrils and not to the air as it enters the body. Many commentators point out that if you follow the breath entering the body, then the object of your attention is not a single object, and thus concentration will be difficult. For this reason, they say that ‘the whole body’ in the third method means the whole body of breath and not the whole body of the practitioner.”

“All the commentaries—the Patisambhida Magga (Path of No Hesitation) by Mahanama, the Vimutti Magga (Path of Liberation) by Upatissa, and the Visuddhi Magga (Path of Purity) by Buddhagosa—recommend that practitioners focus on the tip of the nose rather than follow the breath as it enters the body. If the practitioner follows the breath into the body, they say, the practitioner will be dispersed…. Focusing the mind at the tip of the nose and being aware of the first moment of contact of air at its place of entry into the body, just as the carpenter looks only at the place of contact of the saw’s teeth as they enter and leave the wood, gradually the rough, uneven breathing becomes delicate and subtle, and finally discrimination [between the two] disappears.”

“Only by practicing correctly, according to the teachings of the Buddha in the Anapanasati and Satipatthana Sutras, can we be sure we will not stray into practices we may later regret.”

“Most readers of this book do not live in forests, under trees, or in monasteries. In our daily lives, we drive cars, wait for buses, work in offices and factories, talk on the telephone, clean our houses, cook meals, wash clothes, and so on. Therefore, it is important that we learn to practice Full Awareness of Breathing during our daily lives. Usually, when we perform these tasks, our thoughts wander, and our joy, sorrow, anger, and unease follow close behind. Although we are alive, we are not able to bring our minds into the present moment, and we live in forgetfulness…. Full Awareness of our Breathing helps our mind stop wandering in confused, never-ending thoughts.
“Most of our daily activities can be accomplished while following our breath….Stopping the random progression of thoughts and no longer living in forgetfulness are giant steps forward in our meditation practice. We can realize this by following our breath and combining it with awareness of each daily activity.

“There are people who have no peace or joy because they cannot stop their unnecessary thinking. They are forced to take sedatives to fall asleep, but even in their dreams, they continue to feel fears, anxieties, and unease. Thinking too much can give us headaches, and our spiritual power will diminish. By following our breath and combining conscious breathing with our daily activities, we can cut across the stream of disturbing thoughts and light the lamp of awakening. Full Awareness of an out-breath and an in-breath is something wonderful that anyone can practice.”

“At this point, allow your breathing, your body, and your observing mind to all become one. Breathing and body are one. Breathing and mind are one. Mind and body are one. Mind is not an entity that exists independently, outside of our breathing and our body. The boundary between the subject and the object of observation does not actually exists. We observe ‘the body in the body.’ The mind is one with the object it is observing.”

(From his book Breathe! You Are Alive. He also extensively expresses his opinion that anapanasati is the only formal yogic-type “technique” taught by Buddha—all other practices being more in the form of contemplations or ponderings by the intellect.)

Santikaro Bhikkhu

“Mindfulness with breathing is a meditation technique anchored in our breathing. It is an exquisite tool for exploring life through subtle awareness and an active investigation of breathing and of life. The breath is life; to stop breathing is to die. The breath is vital, natural, soothing, revealing. It is our constant companion. Wherever we go, at all times, the breath sustains life and provides the opportunity for spiritual development. In practicing mindfulness upon and through breathing, we develop and strengthen our mental abilities and spiritual qualities....And all the while, we are anchored in the breath, nourished
and sustained by the breath, soothed and balanced by the breath, sensitive to breathing in and breathing out.

“Mindfulness with breathing is the system of meditation, or mental cultivation (citta-bhavana), often practiced and most often taught by Buddha Gotama.…

“Thus, the comprehensive form of mindfulness with breathing taught by the Buddha leads to the realization of humanity’s highest potential—spiritual awakening and liberation. It has other fruits as well, and so offers something of both immediate and long-term value, of both mundane and spiritual benefit to people at all stages of spiritual development.

“We should always remember that meditation is the cultivation and practice of non-attachment. The Buddha taught only the middle way, and anapanasati is nothing but the middle way. It is neither an intense practice, nor can it be done without effort. It must be done with balance. Properly done, anapanasati is neither detached pushing away nor egoistic clinging; it is a practice of non-attachment. Be very careful about sitting down with ideas like, ‘I am sitting, I am watching, I am breathing, I am meditating. I am this, that is mine, my breathing, my body, my mind, my feelings, I, I, me, me, mine, mine.…’ Learn to let go of these attached feelings and ideas of ‘I’ and ‘mine.’ Learn to stay balanced in the breathing with sati (mindfulness/awareness).

“We do not cling to the technique we are using, nor do we cling to its theory. We do not use anapanasati to collect mundane trivia about the breath, ourselves, or anything else. We do not abuse it in the pursuit of attainments. Rather, we respectfully use anapanasati to develop the skills and learning we need, and all we need so to let go of attachments and thereby quench our dukkha [stress or pain]....

“Attachment is a long-established habit for most of us. If we could drop it easily, we would become buddhas just like that! Instead, most of us must work at letting go of our attachments and the habit of clinging and grasping. Anapanasati is one way of letting go. We begin by letting go of our coarse attachments: attachments to the body, to aches and pains; attachments to agitation and impatience, to boredom and laziness; attachments to external disturbances and petty annoyances. Then, we find ourselves becoming attached to more subtle things, such as happy feelings. Once we let go of these, we discover attachments to higher, brighter, clearer, more refined states of awareness. Letting go of
these, we begin to have some insight into reality and so we become attached to the insights. Finally, we learn to let go of everything. In this way, anapanasati is a systematic method of successively letting go of more and more subtle attachments until there is no attachment left at all. …

“With anapanasati we learn to live in the present moment, the only place one can truly live. Anapanasati will guide us to the bottom of this nasty ‘I-ing’ and ‘my-ing’ that spawns selfishness. It is not necessary to shout for peace when we need merely to breathe with wise awareness.”

“Of the many approaches [to vipassana, to meditation], anapanasati surely has the best claim to being Lord Buddha’s approach. No other system is detailed in the Sutras, whereas anapanasati has it own sutra, is partially discussed in the two satipatthana sutras, and is prominent in the Vinaya-pitaka [the texts on monastic discipline] and the Samyutta-nikaya [a large collection of Buddhist sutras] as well.”

(The quotations here are taken from his introduction to Mindfulness With Breathing by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu.)

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu

“The breath awareness teaching in the Anapanasati Sutra provides a clear and comprehensive way for us to develop both samatha [calmness] and vipassana [clear-sight]. The Buddha himself is reported to have attained liberation using this very method.”

“There are many different systems and techniques of mental development, or vipassana, for training the mind. Nevertheless, of all known techniques, the best is anapanasati-bhavana, the cultivation of mindfulness with breathing.”

“What parts and components come together to form a body? We should note that there is one very important component which nourishes the rest of this body, namely, the breath....

“The breath-body is very important because it sustains life in the rest of the body. This relationship is crucial to our study. Although we lack the ability to control the general body, or flesh-body, directly, we
can master it indirectly by using the breath. If we act in a certain way toward the breath-body, there will also be a specific effect upon the flesh-body. This is why we take the breath as the object of our training. Supervising the breath, to whatever degree, is equivalent to regulating the flesh-body to that same degree. This point will be more clearly understood when we have trained up to the particular stage of anapanasati.

“...the flesh-body and the breath-body are interconnected and inseparable....This, in turn, will allow us to master the flesh-body by means of regulating the breath.”

“The samadhi-bhavana [mental cultivation through concentration; meditation] specifically introduced and recommended by Lord Buddha himself [is] anapanasati. This method appears in both brief references and detailed explanations in the Pali Tripitaka. Anapanasati is the Buddha’s system, ‘the Buddha’s samadhi-bhavana.’...This system is simply the correct way as recommended by the Buddha. He declared this form of samadhi-bhavana to be the one through which he himself realized the Dharma of Perfect Awakening.”

“In ancient times, practitioners took clean lukewarm water in the palm of the hand, drew it up into the nose, and then blew the water out. If we do this two or three times, the nose will be clean and prepared, able to breathe well. The nose will then be much more sensitive to the breath. This is an example of getting our body ready.” [I can unreservedly recommend the use of a “neti pot” to accomplish the same thing—and much easier, too.—Nirmalananda]

“The spine is a vital part of the nervous system, so...a straight spine is necessary [in meditation] because it stimulates the correct kind of breathing.”

“Next, consider the hands. The most comfortable and easiest placement is to let the hands fall onto the knees.”

“We are intent upon gazing at the nose, at feeling the nose, and at the same time we feel the body breathing.”

“We do not allow empty spaces where the mind might wander but
keep the mind constantly focused on the breathing in and out.”

“We should not forget: in every step, in every stage and interval of the practice, we must note the breathing in and breathing out. This is the background and foundation of our sati. This is how to be supremely mindful.”

“Lord Buddha himself declared that he realized Perfect Self-Awakening (anuttara-sammasambodhi) through the practice of anapanasati. So he offered it to us as the best system to practice. He advised us to use this practice for our own welfare, for the welfare of others, for the welfare of everyone. There is no better way to practice Dharma than mindfulness with breathing. May you give careful attention to it.”

(Most of the quotations given here are from his book Mindfulness With Breathing.)

Ajaan Lee

“Being mindful and alert to the in-and-out breath is the actual meditation.”

“The in-and-out breath is like the wick of a candle or a lantern. Focusing mindfulness on the breath is like lighting the wick so that it gives off light. A single candle, if its wick is lit, can burn down an entire city. In the same way, mindfulness can destroy all the bad things within us: defilement, unawareness, craving, and attachment. Mindfulness is the consuming fire of the practice.”

“Being mindful of the breath is like casting a Buddha image inside yourself. Your body is like the furnace, mindfulness is like the mold. If mindfulness lapses, the bronze will leak out of the mold and your Buddha image will be ruined.”

“When the mind stays with the full breath, it does not waver or loosen its grip in the wake of any passing distractions, as when sounds strike the ear and so forth. Feelings are still experienced as they are felt, but at this point they do not give rise to craving, attachment, states of
being, or birth. Awareness is simply aware. This is serenity as a factor of Awakening.”

“From what I have observed in my own practice, there is only one path that is short, easy, effective, and pleasant, and at the same time has hardly anything to lead you astray: the path of keeping the breath in mind, the same path the Lord Buddha himself used with such good results.”

“If you let the breath follow its own nature, and the mind its own nature, the results of your practice will without a doubt be all that you hope for.”

“When you focus your attention on the breath—which exists in each of us—to the point where the mind settles down and is centered, you will have the chance to meet with the real thing: buddha, pure knowing.”

“Let the breath be relaxed and natural. Keep your mind perfectly still, focused on the breath as it comes in and out of the nostrils. When the breath goes out, do not send the mind out after it. When the breath comes in, do not let the mind follow it in. Let your awareness be broad and open. Do not force the mind too much. Relax....Keep the mind still, like a post at the edge of the sea. When the water rises, the post does not rise with it; when the water ebbs, the post does not sink.

“When you’ve reached this level of stillness,...simply be aware of the feeling of the breath.”

“A mind intent only on issues related to the breath, not pulling any other objects in to interfere, until the breath is refined, giving rise to fixed absorption and then liberating insight: This is Right Concentration.”

“Another, even briefer way to express the four Noble Truths is this: The in-and-out breath is the truth of stress. Not being aware of the in-breath, not being aware of the out-breath: This is the cause of stress—obscured, deluded awareness. Seeing into all aspects of the breath so clearly that you can let them go with no sense of attachment, is the
disbanding of stress. Being constantly mindful and aware of all aspects of the breath, is the path to the disbanding of stress.

“When you can do this, you can say that you are correctly following the path of breath meditation. Your awareness is unobscured.”

“These three qualities [of directed thought (vitakka), singleness of preoccupation (ekaggatarammana), and evaluation (vicara)] must be brought together to bear on the same stream of breathing for the first level of jhana [meditation] to arise. This stream of breathing can then take you all the way to the fourth [and highest] level of jhana.”

“As rapture and pleasure grow stronger, the breath becomes more subtle. The longer you stay focused and absorbed, the more powerful the results become.”

“Actually, our mind tends to be working all the time, but the work it gets involved in is usually a lot of fuss and bother without any real substance. So we have to find work of real value for it to do—something that won’t harm it, something really worth doing. This is why we are doing breath meditation, focusing on our breathing, focusing on our mind. Put aside all your other work and be intent on doing just this and nothing else. This is the sort of attitude you need when you meditate.”

“Breath meditation—keeping the breath steadily in mind—is the best method the Buddha taught for wiping out these Hindrances [sensual desire, ill will, torpor and lethargy, restlessness and anxiety, and uncertainty]....

“...As soon as you bring the mind to the breath, you’ll feel a sense of rapture and refreshment. The four bases of attainment (iddhipada)—and the desire to practice, persistence in the practice, intentness, and circumspection in your practice—will develop step by step. These four qualities are like the ingredients in a health tonic. Whoever takes this tonic will have a long life. If you want to die, you do not have to take it, but if you do not want to die, you have to take a lot. The more you take it, the faster the diseases in your mind will disappear.”

“When you sit and meditate, even if you do not gain any intuitive insights, make sure at least that you know this much: When the breath
comes in, you know. When it goes out, you know. When it is long, you know. When it is short, you know. Whether it is pleasant or unpleasant, you know. If you can know this much, you are doing fine. As for the various thoughts and concepts (sanna) that come into the mind, brush them away—whether they are good or bad, whether they deal with the past or the future. Do not let them interfere with what you are doing—and do not go chasing after them to straighten them out. When a thought of this sort comes passing in, simply let it go passing on. Keep your awareness, unperturbed, in the present.”

“The awareness that forms the present: That is the true mind.”

“…as he [Buddha] was meditating on his breath, he gained Awakening. He found what he was looking for—right at the tip of his nose.

“Nirvana does not lie far away. It’s right at the tip of our nose. But we keep groping around and never find it. If you are really serious about finding purity, set your mind on meditation and nothing else. As for whatever else may come your way, you can say, ‘No thanks.’ Pleasure? ‘No thanks.’ Pain? ‘No thanks.’ Goodness? ‘No thanks.’ Evil? ‘No thanks.’ Attainment? ‘No thanks.’ Nirvana? ‘No thanks.’ If it is ‘no thanks’ to everything, what will you have left? You won’t need to have anything left. THAT is Nirvana.”

“What’s difficult about the highest good lies in the beginning, in laying the groundwork—being constantly mindful, examining and evaluating your breath at all times. But if you can keep at it, you are bound to succeed in the end.”

“The breath is a mirror for the mind.”

“With one exception, all of the meditation themes mentioned here are simply gocara dhamma—foraging places for the mind. They are not places for the mind to stay. If we try to go live in the things we see when we are out foraging, we will end up in trouble. Thus, there is one theme that’s termed vihara dhamma or anagocara: Once you have developed it, you can use it as a place to stay. When you practice meditation, you don’t have to go foraging in other themes; you can stay
in the single theme that is the apex of all meditation themes: *anapanasati*, keeping the breath in mind. This theme, unlike the others, has none of the features or various deceptions that can upset or disturb the heart.…

“Thus only one of these themes–anapanasati, keeping the breath in mind–is truly safe. This is the supreme meditation theme. You do not have to send your awareness out to fix it on any outside objects at all. Even if you may go foraging through such objects, do not go living in them, because after a while they can waver and shift, just as when we cross the sea in a boat: When we first get into the boat we may feel all right, but as soon as the boat heads out into the open bay and we are buffeted by wind and waves, we can start feeling seasick. To practice keeping the breath in mind, though, is like sitting in an open shelter at dockside: We will not feel queasy or sick; we can see boats as they pass by on the water, and people as they pass by on land. Thus, keeping the breath in mind is classed:

“–as an exercise agreeable to people of any and every temperament;
“–as *anagocara*, an exercise in which you focus exclusively on the breath while you sit in meditation, without having to compound things by sending your awareness out to grab this or get hold of that;
“–and as *dhamma-thiti*, i.e., all you have to do is keep your mind established firm and in place.”

“The breath is one thing, mindfulness is another, and your awareness, still another. You have to twist these three strands together so that they do not break away from one another. In other words, your awareness has to stay with the act of mindfulness, thinking about the breath. And both your awareness and mindfulness have to stay with the breath. Only then can you say that these things are factors of meditation.”

“If you force the mind too much, it is bound to pop away. If you loosen your grip too much, it is going to get lost. So try to tend to it in a way that’s just right. The important point is that your mindfulness and alertness be circumspect. Do not let the mind go flowing out after other preoccupations.”

“So be aware simply of the breath, for the breath is what gives life
and leads you to higher happiness.”

“Mindfulness is like a magic soap that scrubs the breath. Alertness is another bar of magic soap for scrubbing the mind. If you constantly have mindfulness and alertness in conjunction with the breath and the mind, your body and mind will be valuable and pure, so that as long as you live in the world you’ll be at your ease; when you die, you will not be put to difficulties.”

“To put it simply: every aspect of meditation is good. No matter how much you do, even if you do not seem to be getting any results, it is all good regardless....When you are mindful of the breath, it is good for the mind. When you can make the mind still with the breath, it is good for the mind. For this reason, meditation is something you should do at all times. Do not let the time and opportunity to meditate pass you by.”

“Ordinary, everyday breathing does not do anything special for you except keep you from dying. The breathing on which your awareness is intent can give rise to all kinds of good things.”

(From The Skill of Release, Basic Themes, Keeping the Breath in Mind, and Starting Out Small. Ajaan Lee was one of the foremost teachers in the Thai forest ascetic tradition of meditation founded at the turn of the century by his teacher, Phra Ajaan Mun Bhuridatta. His life was short but eventful. Known for his skill as a teacher and his mastery of supernatural powers, he was the first to bring the ascetic tradition out of the forests of the Mekhong basin and into the mainstream of Thai society in central Thailand.)

Maha Boowa Nanasampanno

“Whether the breath is heavy or refined, simply be aware of it as it normally is. Do not set up any expectations. Do not force the breath to be like this or that. Keep your awareness with the breath, because in meditating by taking the breath as your preoccupation, you are not after the breath. The breath is simply something for the mind to hold to so that you can reach the real thing, just as when you follow the tracks of an ox: You are not after the tracks of the ox. You follow its track because you want to reach the ox. Here you are keeping track of the
breath so as to reach the real thing: awareness. If you were to start out just by holding on to awareness, you would not get any results, just as you would not be sure of finding the ox if you simply went around looking for it. But if you follow its tracks, you are going to find it for sure....

“The same holds true with focusing on the breath. If it is heavy, know that it is heavy. Do not get worried or upset about it,...the important point is to keep track of the breath coming in and out. Eventually the breath will become more and more refined, because mindfulness is focused on the breath and does not go anywhere else. When the breath goes in, be aware of it. When it goes out, be aware of it, but there is no need to follow it in and out. That would simply be creating a greater burden for yourself, and your attention might slip away. So focus right on the entry point where the breath goes in and out....the tip of the nose is the place to focus on the breath. Keep watch right there. Keep aware right there. Do not waste your time speculating or planning on how the results will appear, or else your mind will wander away from the principle of the cause that will give rise to those results. Keep close watch on the cause–what you are doing–and the breath will become more and more refined.

“When the breath becomes more refined, that shows that the mind is refined. Even if the breath becomes so refined that it disappears–at the same time that you are aware that it is disappearing–do not be afraid. The breath disappears, but your awareness does not disappear. You are meditating not for the sake of the breath, but for the sake of awareness, so stay with that awareness. You do not have to worry or be afraid that you will faint or die. As long as the mind is still in charge of the body, then even if the breath disappears, you will not die. The mind will dwell with freedom, with no agitation, no worries, no fears at all. This is how you focus on the breath.”

(From Things As They Are. Venerable Ajaan Maha Boowa was a disciple of the Venerable Ajaan Mun and followed him into the forests of northeast Thailand. He often went into solitary retreat in the mountains and jungle, but stayed with Ajaan Mun for seven years, until his venerable teacher’s passing away. The vigor and uncompromising determination of his Dharma practice attracted other monks dedicated to meditation and this eventually resulted in the founding of Wat Pa
Bahn Tahd, in a forest near the village where he was born. Venerable Ajaan Maha Boowa is well known for the fluency and skill of his Dharma talks, and their direct and dynamic approach.

**Sumana Samanera**

“...mindfully he breathes in, mindfully he breathes out, and he wins to the insight that frees from suffering.”

“If you attach great significance to Mindfulness of Breathing (anapanasati) you have perceived an important fact. As the four Foundations of Mindfulness (satipatthana) may be called the heart of the doctrine, so is Mindfulness of Breathing, if rightly understood, the heart of the heart. ‘Mindfulness of Breathing if developed well and regularly practiced, brings to perfection the four Foundations of Mindfulness,’ thus it is said in the 118th Discourse [the Anapanasati Sutra]. He who knows these means of deliverance, and applies them, will experience by himself that restlessness, desire, anger, misapprehensions and thereby all deep sorrows, will vanish, and will reappear only and always, when that mindfulness (sati) is absent. While our other fellow-beings—millions of them—go on living without any substantial gain in liberation (‘worn out in vain, this body dies away’), he who knows the laws of deliverance can purposefully take into his hands the work of their unfolding; he can loosen, and finally break, the chains of slavery.”

“First of all, three things are required here: 1. persistence, 2. persistence, 3. persistence. Without great devotion, without extraordinary patience even one who is otherwise gifted, will not be able to make progress.”

(From his book *Going Forth* [Pabbajja]).

**Bhikkhu Khantipalo**

“Mindfulness of breathing was, by tradition, the subject used by Gotama in his efforts to attain Enlightenment. It is most suitable for promoting calm and concentrated states and so for quelling the distracted mind.”
“Mindfulness of breathing is especially good as a concentration method for use during travel and during the times when one is restlessly expecting a bus or a train. Why be agitated or impatient? A little mindful breathing is just the practice for these moments, since it calms the feverish workings of the mind and the restless movements of the body.”

“The mindfulness of breathing is recommended for calming and clearing the mind, and a person of almost any temperament may practice it with benefit, though great care is needed in the subtler ranges of this exercise. The breathing is never forced but observed constantly with mindfulness, the point of concentration being the nose-tip.”

(From his books Lay Buddhist Practice and Practical Advice For Meditation.)

Bhikkhu Bodhi

“Mindfulness of breathing (anapanasati) is generally regarded as the most important meditation subject taught in the Nikayas [collections of Buddha’s teachings]. The Pali exegetical tradition holds that it was mindfulness of breathing that the Buddha practiced on the night of his enlightenment, ... and during his teaching career he occasionally would go off into seclusion to devote himself to this meditation. He calls it ‘the Tathagata’s dwelling,’ a lofty honor, and often recommends it to both trainees and arahants. For those in training it leads to the destruction of the taints; for arahants it leads to a pleasant dwelling here and now and to mindfulness and clear comprehension.”

“This method of exposition [in the Samyutta Nikaya] shows mindfulness of breathing as a complete subject of meditation that begins with simple attention to the breath and culminates in the highest deliverance of the mind.”

“The Buddha begins his exposition of the body with contemplation of the mindfulness of breathing (anapanasati). Though not required as a starting point for meditation, in actual practice mindfulness of breathing usually serves as the ‘root meditation subject,’ the foundation
Mindfulness of breathing can function so effectively as a subject of meditation because it works with a process that is always available to us, the process of respiration. What it does to turn this process into a basis for meditation is simply to bring it into the range of awareness by making the breath an object of observation. The meditation requires no special intellectual sophistication, only awareness of the breath. One merely breathes naturally...keeping the breath in mind....There should be no attempt to control the breath or to force it into predetermined rhythms, only a mindful contemplation of the natural process of breathing in and out. The awareness of breath cuts through the complexities of discursive thinking, rescues us from pointless wandering in the labyrinth of vain imaginings, and grounds us solidly in the present. For whenever we become aware of breathing, really aware of it, we can be aware of it only in the present, never in the past or the future.”

“Mindfulness has to cover the whole extent of the breath, its beginning, middle and end. This is what is meant by the passage in the Sutra, ‘Experiencing the whole [breath] body, I shall breathe in and out.’ Similarly, the entire ‘breath’ or rhythm of our life will become deeper and fuller if, through slowing-down, we get used to sustained attention.”

(From the introductory material in his translation of the Samyutta Nikaya and to his book The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering.)
Mahathera Ledi Sayadaw  
“It is usual for all Buddhas to attain Supreme Enlightenment by means of mindfulness of breathing, and having attained Buddhahood, all Buddhas have continued to remain established in mindfulness of breathing without a break until they attained Paranirvana.

“Of the forty prescribed exercises of tranquillity meditation, mindfulness of breathing is the easiest to establish continuously at all times. The Buddha also extolled this meditation subject more highly than he did other subjects. The commentators too called anapanasati ‘the plane of great personages.’”

“O bhikkhus! If mindfulness of breathing is cultivated and developed many times for a lengthy period, the four foundations of mindfulness are fulfilled and perfected. If the four foundations of mindfulness are cultivated and developed many times for a lengthy period, the seven factors of enlightenment are fulfilled and perfected. If the seven factors of enlightenment are cultivated and developed many times for a lengthy period, knowledge and deliverance are fulfilled and perfected.’

“Here, knowledge means the four path knowledges, and deliverance the four fruition knowledges. The essential meaning is that if mindfulness of breathing is practiced assiduously for days and months, the work of the four foundations of mindfulness, the seven factors of enlightenment, and knowledge and deliverance is automatically accomplished. The four foundations of mindfulness, the seven factors of enlightenment, and knowledge and deliverance comprise the thirty-seven aids to enlightenment, and hence it means that the thirty-seven aids to enlightenment are automatically accomplished [by the mindfulness of breathing].”

“Says the Sutra: ‘When, to a yogi practicing mindfulness of breathing, mindfulness becomes firm, and there is no moment when he is without mindfulness, then the enlightenment factor of mindfulness is accomplished.’”

(From his book Manual of Mindfulness of Breathing.)

Nyanasatta Thera
“Mindfulness of breathing takes the highest place among the various subjects of Buddhist meditation. It has been recommended and praised by the Enlightened One thus: ‘This concentration through mindfulness of breathing, when developed and practiced much, is both peaceful and sublime, it is an unadulterated blissful abiding, and it banishes at once and stills evil unprofitable thoughts as soon as they arise.’ Though of such a high order, the initial stages of this meditation are well within the reach of a beginner though he be only a lay student of the Buddha-Dharma.”

“Though we have been breathing throughout our life, we have done so devoid of mindfulness, and hence, when we try to follow each breath attentively, we find that the Buddhist teachers of old were right when they compared the natural state of an uncontrolled mind to an untamed calf. Our minds have long been dissipated among visible data and other objects of the senses and of thought, and hence do not yield easily to attempts at mind-control.

“Suppose a cowherd wanted to tame a wild calf: he would take it away from the cow and tie it up apart with a rope to a stout post. Then the calf might dash to and fro, but being unable to get away and tired after its effort, it would eventually lie down by the post. So too, when the meditator wants to tame his own mind that has long been reared on the enjoyment of sense objects, he should take it away from places where these sense objects abound, and tie the mind to the post of in-breaths and out-breaths with the rope of mindfulness. And though his mind may then dash to and fro when deprived of its liberty to roam among the sense objects, it will ultimately settle down when mindfulness is persistent and strong.

“When practicing mindfulness of breathing, attention should be focused at the tip of the nose.... The meditator’s attention should not leave this ‘focusing point’ from where the in-coming and out-going breaths can be easily felt and observed. The meditator may become aware of the breath’s route through the body but he should not pay attention to it.”

“It has been said by the Buddha: ‘Mindfulness of breathing, developed and repeatedly practiced, is of great fruit, of great advantage, for it fulfils the four foundations of mindfulness; the four foundations
of mindfulness, developed and repeatedly practiced, fulfil the seven enlightenment factors; the seven enlightenment factors, developed and repeatedly practiced, fulfil clear-vision and deliverance.’ Clear vision and deliverance, or direct knowledge and the bliss of liberation, are the highest fruit of the application of mindfulness.”

(From his introduction to his translation of the Satipatthana Sutra.)

**Ajaan Fuang Jotiko**

“We have got to be observant as much as possible. Use your mindfulness to keep the breath in mind—the breath that’s already there within you, that’s been there from the day you were born up to the present. The effort lies in taking what’s already there and keeping it continuous, without break, so that it grows, so that it is steady and constant. It’ll then gain momentum. There will be strength in the breath. Developments will appear. Our in-and-out breath will become timeless. It will appear continuously to our awareness. This is something we have to pursue as much as possible, do as much as possible. The more we do it, the more all sorts of good things will appear within us. If we do not work at it, our goodness will not develop....The opportunity to know the truth will not appear clearly within us. The truth will stay incomplete. So we have to use the power of our mindfulness to keep the breath in mind in a way that becomes more and more complete. Then developments will appear within us.”

“The breath does not belong to Buddhism or Christianity or anyone else. It is common property all over the world, and everyone has the right to look at it. So try looking at the breath until you can see your own mind and know your own mind. Then the question of what religion you belong to will not be an issue, because we can talk about the mind instead of discussing religions. This way we can understand each other.”

“You have to know the breath at all times, and then happiness will be yours. The human state, the heavenly state, and Nirvana are all here in the breath. If you get carried away with other things, happiness will slip through your fingers, so you have to learn how to observe the in-and-out breath at all times. Pay attention to how it is getting along—do
not leave it to fend for itself. When you know its way of life—sitting, standing, walking, everything—then you can get what you want from it. The body will be light, the mind at ease, happy at all times."

"The breath can take you all the way to Nirvana."

"The first step is simply to look at the breath as it is. You do not have to go fiddling around with it a lot.... Do not force the breath, or force the mind into a trance. Simply hold the mind carefully right there with each breath."

"[The breath] is always real, right there. The important thing is whether or not you are for real. If you are, then simply keep at it. That is all there is to it. Simply keep being real, being true in what you do, and your meditation will make progress. It will gradually grow stronger, and the mind will grow calm. Just be clear about what you are doing. Do not have any doubts. If you can doubt even your own breath, then there are no two ways about it: You will doubt everything. No matter what happens, you will be uncertain about it. So be straightforward and true in whatever you do, for everything comes down to whether or not you are true."

"Make the mind and the breath one and the same. Do not let them be two."

"Do not be a post planted in the mud. Have you ever seen a post planted in the mud? It sways back and forth and can never stand firm. Whatever you do, be firm and single-minded about it. Like when you focus on the breath: Make the mind one with it, like a post planted firmly in solid rock."

"Hold onto the breath the way a red ant bites: Even if you pull its body so that it separates from the head, the head will keep on biting and will not let go."

"Observing the breath is the cause, the pleasure that arises is the result. Focus as much as you can on the cause. If you ignore the cause and get carried away with the result, it will run out and you will end up
with nothing at all.”

“The main thing when you meditate is to be observant.”

“The breath can be a resting place for the mind, or it can be what the mind actively contemplates.”

“If you were to say it is easy, well yes, it is easy. If you were to say it is hard, it is hard. It all depends on you.”

“All you need to do is keep your sense of simple awareness solid and strong, and nothing will be able to overwhelm you.”

“Right awareness has to be paired with the breath.”

“All the things you need for the practice—the breath, the mind—are already there.”

(From the books Timeless and True, and Awareness Itself. Ajaan Fuang was one of Ajaan Lee’s most devoted students, spending some twenty-four rains retreats in the company of his renowned teacher. After Ajaan Lee’s death, Ajaan Fuang continued on at Wat Asokaram, Ajaan Lee’s bustling monastery near Bangkok. A true forest monk at heart, Ajaan Fuang left Wat Asokaram in 1965 in search of greater solitude more conducive to meditation, and ultimately ended up at Wat Dhammasathit in Rayong province, where he lived as abbot until his death in 1986.)

Ajaan Chah

“When sitting in meditation we are told to close the eyes, not to look at anything else, because now we are going to look directly at the mind. When we close our eyes, our attention comes inwards. We establish our attention on the breath, center our feelings there, put our mindfulness there. When the factors of the path are in harmony we will be able to see the breath, the feelings, the mind and its mood for what they are. Here we will see the ‘focus point,’ where samadhi and the other factors of the Path converge in harmony.”

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“Let the breath go naturally, do not force it to be short or long or whatever, just sit and watch it going in and out. When the mind lets go of all external impressions, the sounds of cars and such will not disturb you. Nothing, whether sights or sounds, will disturb you, because the mind does not receive them. Your attention will come together on the breath.

“If the mind is confused and will not concentrate on the breath, take a full, deep breath, as deep as you can, and then let it all out till there is none left. Do this three times and then re-establish your attention. The mind will become calm.

“It’s natural for it to be calm for a while, and then restlessness and confusion may arise again. When this happens, concentrate, breathe deeply again, and then re-establish your attention on the breath. Just keep going like this. When this has happened many times you will become adept at it, the mind will let go of all external manifestations. External impressions will not reach the mind. Sati will be firmly established. As the mind becomes more refined, so does the breath. Feelings will become finer and finer, the body and mind will be light. Our attention is solely on the inner, we see the in-breaths and out-breaths clearly, we see all impressions clearly.…

“After watching the breath for a long time, it may become very refined; the awareness of the breath will gradually cease, leaving only bare awareness. The breath may become so refined it disappears! Perhaps we are ‘just sitting,’ as if there is no breathing at all. Actually there is breathing, but it seems as if there is none. This is because the mind has reached its most refined state, there is just bare awareness. It has gone beyond the breath. The knowledge that the breath has disappeared becomes established. What will we take as our object of meditation now? We take just this knowledge as our object, that is, the awareness that there is no breath.

“Unexpected things may happen at this time; some people experience them, some do not. If they do arise, we should be firm and have strong mindfulness. Some people see that the breath has disappeared and get a fright, they are afraid they might die. Here we should know the situation just as it is. We simply notice that there is no breath and take that as our object of awareness. This, we can say, is the firmest, surest type of samadhi. There is only one firm, unmoving state of mind. Perhaps the body will become so light it is as if there is no
body at all. We feel like we are sitting in empty space, all seems empty. Although this may seem very unusual, you should understand that there is nothing to worry about. Firmly establish your mind like this.

“When the mind is firmly unified, having no sense impressions to disturb it, one can remain in that state for any length of time. There will be no painful feelings to disturb us. When samadhi has reached this level, we can leave it when we choose, but if we come out of this samadhi we do so comfortably, not because we have become bored with it or tired. We come out because we have had enough for now, we feel at ease, we have no problems at all.

“If we can develop this type of samadhi, then if we sit, say, thirty minutes or an hour, the mind will be cool and calm for many days. When the mind is cool and calm like this, it is clean. Whatever we experience, the mind will take up and investigate. This is a fruit of samadhi.”

“We sit in meditation to establish peacefulness and cultivate mental energy. We do not do it in order to play around at anything special. Insight meditation is sitting in samadhi itself. At some places they say, ‘Now we are going to sit in samadhi, after that we will do insight meditation.’ Do not divide them like this! Tranquillity is the base which gives rise to wisdom; wisdom is the fruit of tranquillity. To say that now we are going to do calm meditation [samatha], later we will do insight [vipassana]—you cannot do that! You can only divide them in speech. Just like a knife, the blade is on one side, the back of the blade on the other. You cannot divide them. If you pick up one side you get both sides. Tranquillity gives rise to wisdom like this.”

“When you fix attention on the breath, make a clear mental determination that you are not going to force it in any way. If you get disturbed by the breathing, it is a sign that you still are not practicing in the right way. If you are not at ease with the breath then it will always seem either too short or too long, too gentle or too forceful, and it will not feel comfortable. But once you do feel at ease with it and there is awareness of each in-breath and out-breath, you have got it right. This indicates that you are practicing in the correct way.”

“In the course of the meditation, if you desire to experience different
things—or you actually do start to experience different psychic phenomena, such as bright lights or visions of celestial palaces or other similar things—do not be afraid. Be mindful of such experiences and keep doing the meditation.”

“Sometimes you might be meditating and the sensation of the breath totally disappears. It might truly seem to have vanished making you afraid. Actually, there is no need to be afraid; it is only your thoughts that have vanished. The breath is still there, but is simply operating on a much more refined level than normal. Once an appropriate period of time has elapsed, the sensation of the breathing will return by itself.”

“To meditate you do not have to think much more than to resolve that right now is the time for training the mind and nothing else. Do not let the mind shoot off to the left or to the right, to the front or behind, above or below. Our only duty right now is to practice mindfulness of the breathing....Your sole duty is to observe the inhalations and exhalations. Do not force the breath to be any longer or shorter than normal, just allow it to continue easily. Do not put any pressure on the breath, rather let it flow evenly, letting go with each in-breath and out-breath.

“You must understand that you are letting go as you do this, but there should still be awareness. You must maintain this awareness, allowing the breath to enter and leave comfortably. There is no need to force the breath, just allow it to flow easily and naturally. Maintain the resolve that at this time you have no other duties or responsibilities. Thoughts about what will happen, what you will know or see during the sitting, may arise from time to time, but once they arise just let them cease by themselves, do not be concerned over them.

“During the meditation there is no need to pay attention to sense impressions. Whenever the mind is affected by sense impingement, whenever there is a feeling or sensation in the mind, just let it go. Whether those sensations are good or bad is unimportant. It is not necessary to make anything out of those sensations, just let them pass away and return your attention to the breath. Maintain the awareness of the breath entering and leaving. Do not create suffering over the breath being too long or too short, simply observe it without trying to control or suppress it in any way. In other words, do not attach. Allow the
breath to continue as it is, and the mind will become calm. As you continue the mind will gradually lay things down and come to rest, the breath becoming lighter and lighter until it becomes so faint, that it seems like it is not there at all. Both the body and the mind will feel light and energized. All that will remain will be a one-pointed knowing. You could say that the mind has changed and reached a state of calm.

“If the mind becomes agitated, set up mindfulness and inhale deeply till there is no space left to store any air, then release it all completely until none remains. Follow this with another deep inhalation until you are full, then release the air again. Do this two or three times, then reestablish concentration. The mind should be calmer. If any more sense impressions cause agitation in the mind, repeat the process on every occasion. Similarly with walking meditation. If, while walking, the mind become agitated, then stop still, calm the mind, reestablish the awareness with the meditation object [the breath] and then continue walking. Sitting and walking meditation are in essence the same, differing only in terms of the physical posture used.

“Sometimes there may be doubt, so you must have sati [mindfulness, awareness], to be the one who knows, continually following and examining the agitated mind in whatever form it takes. This is to have sati. Sati watches over and takes care of the mind. You must maintain this knowing and not be careless or wander astray, no matter what condition the mind takes on.

“The trick is to have sati taking control and supervising the mind. Once the mind is unified with sati a new kind of awareness will emerge. The mind that has developed calm is held in check by that calm, just like a chicken held in a coop...the chicken is unable to wander outside, but it can still move around within the coop. Its walking to and fro does not get it into trouble because it is restrained by the coop. Likewise the awareness that takes place when the mind has sati and is calm does not cause trouble. None of the thinking or sensations that take place within the calm mind cause harm or disturbance.

“Some people do not want to experience any thoughts or feelings at all, but this is going too far. Feelings arise within the state of calm. The mind is both experiencing feelings and calm at the same time, without being disturbed. When there is calm like this there are no harmful consequences. Problems occur when the ‘chicken’ gets out of the ‘coop.’ For instance, you may be watching the breath entering and leaving and
then forget yourself, allowing the mind to wander away from the breath back home, off to the shops or to any number of different places. Maybe even half an hour may pass before you suddenly realize you are supposed to be practicing meditation and reprimand yourself for your lack of sati. This is where you have to be really careful, because this is where the chicken gets out of the coop—the mind leaves its base of calm.

“You must take care to maintain the awareness with sati and try to pull the mind back. Although I use the words ‘pull the mind back,’ in fact the mind does not really go anywhere, only the object of awareness has changed. You must make the mind stay right here and now. As long as there is sati there will be presence of mind. It seems like you are pulling the mind back but really it has not gone anywhere, it has simply changed a little. It seems that the mind goes here and there, but in fact the change occurs right at the one spot. When sati is regained, in a flash you are back with the mind without it having to be brought from anywhere.

“When there is total knowing, a continuous and unbroken awareness at each and every moment, this is called presence of mind. If your attention drifts from the breath to other places then the knowing is broken. Whenever there is awareness of the breath the mind is there. With just the breath and this even and continuous awareness you have presence of mind.

“There must be both sati and sampajañña. Sati is recollection and sampajañña is self-awareness. Right now you are clearly aware of the breath. This exercise of watching the breath helps sati and sampajañña develop together. They share the work. Having both sati and sampajañña is like having two workers to lift a heavy plank of wood. Suppose there are two people trying to lift some heavy planks, but the weight is so great, they have to strain so hard, that it is almost unendurable. Then another person, imbued with good will, sees them and rushes in to help. In the same way, when there is sati and sampajañña, then pañña [wisdom] will arise at the same place to help out. Then all three of them support each other.

“With pañña there will be an understanding of sense objects. For instance, during meditation sense objects are experienced which give rise to feelings and moods. You may start to think of a friend, but then pañña should immediately counter with ‘It does not matter,’ ‘Stop,’ or ‘Forget it.’ Or if there are thoughts about where you will go tomorrow,
then the response should be ‘I am not interested, I do not want to concern myself with such things.’ Maybe you start thinking about other people, then you should think: ‘No, I do not want to get involved,’ ‘Just let go,’ or ‘It is all uncertain and never a sure thing.’ This is how you should deal with things in meditation, recognizing them as ‘not sure, not sure,’ and maintaining this kind of awareness.

“You must give up all the thinking, the inner dialogue, and the doubting. Do not get caught up in these things during the meditation. In the end all that will remain in the mind in its purest form are sati, sampajañña, and pañña. Try to develop sati like this until it can be maintained at all times. Then you will understand sati, sampajañña, and samadhi thoroughly.

“Focusing the attention at this point [the breath/nosetip] you will see sati, sampajañña, samadhi, and pañña together. Whether you are attracted to or repelled by external sense objects, you will be able to tell yourself ‘It is not sure.’ Either way they are just hindrances to be swept away till the mind is clean. All that should remain is sati, recollection; sampajañña, clear awareness; samadhi, the firm and unwavering mind; and pañña, consummate wisdom.”

“…it will have to take many sittings and much effort before you become proficient. Once you are, the mind will let go of the external world and remain undisturbed. Mind-objects from the outside will be unable to penetrate inside and disturb the mind itself. Once they are unable to penetrate inside, you will see the mind. You will see the mind as one object of awareness, the breath as another and mind-objects as another. They will all be present within the field of awareness, centered at the tip of your nose. Once sati is firmly established with the in-breaths and out-breaths, you can continue to practice at your ease. As the mind becomes calm, the breath, which was originally coarse, correspondingly becomes lighter and more refined. The object of mind also becomes increasingly subtle and refined. The body feels lighter and the mind itself feels progressively lighter and unburdened. The mind lets go of external mind-objects and you continue to observe internally.”

“When you focus attention in just one place—in this case, the breath—you gain a clarity and awareness because of the uninterrupted presence of sati. As you continue to see the breath clearly, sati will become
stronger and the mind will become more sensitive in many different ways. You will see the mind in the center of the place (the breath), one-pointed with awareness focused inwards, rather than turning towards the world outside. The external world gradually disappears from your awareness and the mind will no longer be going to perform any work on the outside. It is as if you have come inside your “house,” where all your sense faculties have come together to form one compact unit. You are at your ease and the mind is free from all external objects. Awareness remains with the breath, and over time it will penetrate deeper and deeper inside, becoming progressively more refined.”

(From the books A Taste of Freedom and The Key to Liberation and the Path to Peace. Ajaan Chah was born in the northeastern part of Thailand. He became a novice at a young age and received higher ordination at the age of twenty. He followed the austere Forest Tradition for years, living in forests and begging for almsfood as he wandered about on mendicant pilgrimage. He practiced meditation under a number of masters, among whom was Ajaan Mun, a highly respected and accomplished meditation teacher of the time. Ajaan Mun had an indelible influence on Ajaan Chah. Ajaan Chah later became an accomplished meditation teacher in his own right, sharing his realization of the Dharma with those who sought it.)

Ajaan Suwat Suvaco

“Simply be mindful of the breath. When the breath comes in, let it come in with ease. When it goes out, let it go out with ease. Let the mind be at ease, too. If anything comes along to disturb you, do not get involved with it. Just keep that sense of ease going.”

(From A Fistful of Sand. Ajaan Suwat ordained in 1939 at the age of 20 as a student of Ajaan Funn Acaro. He also studied briefly with Ajaan Mun. In the 1980’s Ajaan Suwat came to the United States, where he established four monasteries: one near Seattle, Washington, two near Los Angeles, and one in the hills of San Diego County [Metta Forest Monastery]. He returned to Thailand in 1996.)

Narada Mahathera

“Concentration on the breathing process leads to one-pointedness of
the mind and ultimately to Insight which enables one to attain Sainthood or Arahatship.”

“The Buddha also practiced concentration on respiration before He attained Enlightenment.”

“This harmless concentration may be practiced by any person irrespective of religious beliefs.”

“It is of no importance which posture one may adopt provided the position is easy and relaxed.”

“It is clear that the object of this concentration on respiration is not merely to gain one-pointedness but also to cultivate Insight to obtain deliverance from suffering.”

(From Buddhism in a Nutshell.)

Webu Sayadaw

In the discourse entitled “A Roof That Does Not Leak” the Venerable Webu Sayadaw likens our life to a roof. If the roof is well-made it does not leak and so no water enters the house. In the same way, if our lives are “well-made” by conformity to spiritual principles, no suffering will enter our heart. Therefore he says:

“You see, you think that the teachings of the Buddha are vast and varied, but really they are just one single way of escape from suffering. Only if you take up one object of meditation given by the Buddha and pursue it with steadfast effort to the end, can you justly claim that your roof is not leaking anymore. If your roof is not rain-proof yet, you have to be aware of this.

“...Only if you are steadfast does your practice resemble a roof, and greed, aversion and delusion cannot leak through. Only if the roof is not leaking can we say that we are sheltered.

“...While you sit, walk, stand and work, it is always possible to be aware of the in-breaths and out-breaths, isn’t it?

“The men, Devas [gods] and Brahmases [creators] who received the teachings after the Buddha’s awakening practiced [anapanasati] continuously and therefore their respective aspirations for awakening
were fulfilled. What the Buddha taught is enshrined in the Tripitaka. If you keep your attention focused on the spot [i.e., the tip of the nose] and on the in-breath and out-breath, the whole of the Tripitaka is there.

“When you concentrate at the spot, there is understanding, and ignorance has been banned. Now, if we continue to concentrate on the spot, will ignorance spring back up again?

“You see, you have to establish understanding in this way. You have found it now; do not allow it to escape again. Can you suddenly be overpowered by delusion if your understanding keeps growing moment by moment? Do good people still have to moan and complain, saying that it is difficult to get rid of ignorance once they have been given the teachings of the Buddha, which are the tool to overcome and defeat ignorance?

“So, you realize that all that the Buddha taught is contained in this meditation. If you put forth effort, establish yourselves in perfect effort, then you will reach full understanding. . . . Now you have to build a roof that really protects you against rain. Once you have built a good shelter you will not get wet and you will not have to suffer the heat of the sun anymore.

“In that case, put forth full effort so that you do not have to suffer sun and rain ever again.”

(From The Essential Practice Dharma Discourses of Venerable Webu Sayadaw.)

Robert Bogoda

“Apart from its ultimate benefits, mindfulness of breathing has an immediate value that can be seen in one’s daily life. It promotes detachment and objectivity. It allows one the mental distance needed to arrive at wise decisions in the countless difficulties of daily life. Regular practice of this meditation brings increased concentration and self-control, improved mindfulness, and is also conducive to healthy and relaxed living.”

(From A Simple Guide to Life.)

Mahathera Nanyane Ariyadhamma

“Anapana sati, the meditation on in-and-out breathing, is the first
subject of meditation expounded by the Buddha in the Maha Satipatthana Sutra, the Great Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness. The Buddha laid special stress on this meditation, for it is the gateway to enlightenment and Nirvana adopted by all the Buddhas of the past as the very basis for their attainment of Buddhahood. When the Blessed One sat at the foot of the Bodhi Tree and resolved not to rise until he had reached enlightenment, he took up anapana sati as his subject of meditation. On the basis of this, he attained the four jhanas, recollected his previous lives, fathomed the nature of samsara, aroused the succession of great insight knowledges, and at dawn, while 100,000 world systems trembled, he attained the limitless wisdom of a Fully Enlightened Buddha.

“Let us then offer our veneration to the Blessed One, who became a peerless world-transcending Buddha through this meditation of anapana sati. May we comprehend this subject of meditation fully, with wisdom resplendent like the sun and moon. Through its power may we attain the blissful peace of Nirvana.”

“The practitioner of meditation who consciously watches the breath in this manner should never try to control his breathing or hold back his breath with effort. For if he controls his breath or holds back his breath with conscious effort, he will become fatigued and his mental concentration will be disturbed and broken. The key to the practice is to set up mindfulness naturally at the spot where the in-breaths and the out-breaths are felt entering and leaving the nostrils. Then the meditator has to maintain his awareness of the touch sensation of the breath, keeping the awareness as steady and consistent as possible.”

“‘Following’ means following the breath with the mind. This is explained by the Buddha in this manner: ‘When the meditator breathes in a long breath, he comprehends that he is breathing in a long breath; and when he is breathing out a long breath, he comprehends that he is breathing out a long breath.’ Herein, one does not deliberately take a long in-breath or a long out-breath. One simply comprehends what actually takes place.

“The Buddha has declared in the next passage that a meditator trains himself thinking: ‘I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body, and I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body.’ Here, what is meant as
‘the whole body’ is the entire cycle of breathing in and breathing out. The meditator should fix his attention so as to see the beginning, the middle and the end of each cycle of in-breathing and out-breathing. It is this practice that is called ‘experiencing the whole body.’”

“The beginning, middle and end of the breath must be correctly understood. It is incorrect to consider the tip of the nose to be the beginning of the breath, the chest to be the middle, and the navel to be the end. If one attempts to trace the breath from the nose through the chest to the belly, or to follow it out from the belly through the chest to the nose, one’s concentration will be disrupted and one’s mind will become agitated. The beginning of the in-breath, properly understood, is the start of the inhalation, the middle is continued inhalation, and the end is the completion of the inhalation. Likewise, in regard to the out breath, the beginning is the start of the exhalation, the middle is the continued exhalation, and the end is the completion of the exhalation. To ‘experience the whole body’ means to be aware of the entire cycle of each inhalation and exhalation, keeping the mind fixed at the spot around the nostrils where the breath is felt entering and leaving the nose.

“This work of contemplating the breath at the area around the nostrils, without following it inside and outside the body, is illustrated by the commentaries with the similes of the gatekeeper and the saw.

“Just as a gatekeeper examines each person entering and leaving the city only as he passes through the gate, without following him inside or outside the city, so the meditator should be aware of each breath only as it passes through the nostrils, without following it inside or outside the body.

“Just as a man sawing a log will keep his attention fixed on the spot where the teeth of the saw cut through the wood, without following the movement of the teeth back and forth, so the meditator should contemplate the breath as it swings back and forth around the nostrils, without letting his mindfulness be distracted by the breath’s inward and outward passage through the body.

“When a person meditates earnestly in this manner, seeing the entire process, a joyous thrill pervades his mind. And since the mind does not wander about, the whole body becomes calm and composed, cool and comfortable.”
“When the mindfulness of breathing is maintained, the breathing becomes more and more subtle and tranquil. As a result the body becomes calm and ceases to feel fatigued. Bodily pain and numbness disappear, and the body begins to feel an exhilarating comfort, as if it were being fanned with a cool gentle breeze.

“At that time, because of the tranquillity of the mind, the breathing becomes finer and finer until it seems that it has ceased. At times this condition lasts for many minutes. This is when breathing ceases to be felt. At this time some become alarmed thinking the breathing has ceased, but it is not so. The breathing exists but in a very delicate and subtle form. No matter how subtle the breathing becomes, one must still keep mindful of the contact (phusana) of the breath in the area of the nostrils, without losing track of it. The mind then becomes free from the five hindrances—sensual desire, anger, drowsiness, restlessness and doubt. As a result one becomes calm and joyful.”

“It is at this stage that the ‘signs’ or mental images appear heralding the success of concentration. First comes the learning sign (uggaha-nimitta), then the counterpart sign (patibhaga-nimitta). To some the [learning] sign appears like a wad of cotton, like an electric light, a silver chain, a mist or a wheel. It appeared to the Buddha like the clear and bright midday sun.

“The learning sign is unsteady, it moves here and there, up and down. But the counterpart sign [that is the sensation of the breath] appearing at the end of the nostrils is steady, fixed and motionless. At this time there are no hindrances, the mind is most active and extremely tranquil. This stage is expounded by the Buddha when he states that one breathes in tranquilizing the activity of the body, one breathes out tranquilizing the activity of the body.

“The arising of the counterpart sign and the suppression of the five hindrances marks the attainment of access concentration (upacara-samadhi). As concentration is further developed, the meditator attains full absorption (appana-samadhi) beginning with the first jhana. Four stages of absorption can be attained by the practice of anapana sati, namely, the first, second, third and fourth jhanas.”

“Births like ours are rare in samsara. We have been fortunate to
encounter the Buddha's message, to enjoy the association of good friends, to have the opportunity to listen to the Dharma. As we have been endowed with all these blessings, if our aspirations are ripe, we can in this very life reach the final goal of Nirvana through its graduated stages of stream entry, once-returner, non-returner and arahatship. Therefore, let us make our life fruitful by developing regularly the meditation of anapana sati. Having received proper instructions on how to practice this method of meditation, one should purify one’s moral virtue by observing the precepts and should surrender one’s life to the Triple Gem.”

“One should choose a convenient time for meditation and practice with utmost regularity, reserving the same period each day for one’s practice....Then, arousing the confidence that one is walking the very road to Nirvana walked by all the enlightened ones of the past, one should proceed forth on the path of meditation and strive with diligent effort.”

(From his booklet *Anapana Sati: Meditation on Breathing.*)

**Ajaan Sim**

“Take as example the founder of our religion, the fully self-enlightened Buddha. Before his enlightenment he practiced calm meditation using the breath as his initial object. On the day of his enlightenment he practiced this way. On the in-breath he focused intently on the in-breath. On the out-breath he focused intently on the out-breath. All mental agitation and movement ceased, leaving only the in-breaths and out-breaths remaining. The Lord’s mind was focused intently on the breath until his mind became calm, cool and easeful, attaining the firmness of *khanika*, *upacara*, and ultimately the unwavering *appana* samadhi. When the Buddha-to-be’s mind was thus unwaveringly and undeviatingly single-pointed vipassana took place: there was clear knowing....” [Note that vipassana *took place*—it was not “done” or engaged in in an intellectual sense. (Nirmalananda)]

“On that Visakha Puja night the Lord did not move from his seat; he just sat. Even so it says in the scriptures that the daughters of Mara, all the hosts of temptation, attacked him strongly. But the Buddha did not give in. They urged him to get up but he would not. The Buddha
focused his attention on his breathing. If he did get up he knew that all that awaited him was death, at most he might postpone it for eighty or a hundred years, and so he just looked intently at his breathing. He reflected that if after inhalation some obstruction or other prevented the exhalation, then he would die. If after exhalation some blockage in the lungs prevented inhalation then also he would die. The Buddha just stayed with the breath,...until a strong conviction and clarity of mind arose in him.”

“The Buddha himself used the breathing process as the subject of calm meditation and the foundation of insight meditation. It was the ground of his Dharma practice. All of us too are inhaling and exhaling, we too all have body and mind. As the Buddha did, if we overcome the defilements in our hearts we will clearly perceive Nirvana.”

(From the book Simply So: Dharma Teachings of Looang Boo Sim Buddhacaro.)

Larry Rosenberg

“Bhikkhu Vimalo argued that I was seriously limiting my work with the breath, that in fact the breath could take me all the way to the deepest realizations.”

“Soto Zen emphasizes full attention to breathing and posture; all the wisdom one needs will be a natural outcome of such complete presence. The Anapanasati Sutra—though it can be used as a systematic course of contemplations—is also a blueprint of the way in which that wisdom can arise.”

“Much of what the [Anapanasati] Sutra describes will turn up naturally if you just sit and follow the breathing, if you persist in that practice over the course of days and months and years. It is natural for your attention to deepen until it includes the whole body, and for that process gradually to calm the body. Once your attention is in the body, you begin to notice feelings and your mental reactions to them, which lead you into the mind as a vast realm to explore. Finally, if you are paying attention, you cannot help noticing that all the phenomena you are observing arise and pass away, that they are impermanent and lack
an essential core.

“The sixteen contemplations, then, represent a natural process. They might not unfold in exactly that order, and some of them might stand out more than others. But most of these aspects of body and mind eventually, and quite naturally, show up if you sit and look into yourself over a period of time.”

“You can use the [Anapanasati] Sutra as a training program or as the description of a process, but, however you use it, you cannot force these [sixteen] steps. They will happen in their own time; you cannot bring them about. You can prepare the ground, certainly, and make a sincere effort, but ultimately your body and mind do what they want, and you will not have much to say about it.”

“Try to be straight and comfortable, relaxed and balanced. This isn’t a mindless rigidity, which locks itself at the base of the spine and does not give the posture another thought, but a relaxed, aware straightness, an uprightness that emerges from within. An erect posture makes the breathing easier, and ease of breathing relaxes the body. These two factors feed on each other.”

“When we focus on the breath, we are focusing on the life force [prana]. Life begins with our first breath and will end after our last. To contemplate breathing is to contemplate life itself.”

“We are all breathing. The instruction is just to know that we are, not in an intellectual sense, but to be aware of the simple sensation, the in-breath and the out-breath. Even in this first instruction, we are learning something extremely important, to allow the breathing to follow its own nature, to breathe itself. We are not trying to make the breath deep or keep it shallow. We are seeing how it is.

“That flies in the face of our lifelong conditioning to control, direct, and orchestrate everything....”

“The breath is an object that the Buddha often meditated on. It is what he used to help him achieve enlightenment. He continued to practice with it for years after his awakening. The breath, as we gradually discover, is a whole world. It is easily worth a lifetime of
“It is important to emphasize, in discussing the art of meditation (and the practice as you continue it becomes an art, with many subtle nuances), that you shouldn’t start out with some idea of gaining. This is the deepest paradox in all of meditation: we want to get somewhere—we wouldn’t have taken up the practice if we didn’t—but the way to get there is just to be fully here. The way to get from point A to point B is really to be at A. When we follow the breathing in the hope of becoming something better, we are compromising our connection to the present, which is all we ever have. If your breathing is shallow, your mind and body restless, let them be that way, for as long as they need to. Just watch them.

“The first law of Buddhism is that everything is constantly changing. No one is saying that the breathing should be some particular way all the time. If you find yourself disappointed with your meditation, there is a good chance that some ideal of gaining is present. See that, and let it go. However your practice seems to you, cherish it just the way it is. You may think that you want it to change, but that act of acceptance is in itself a major change. It has the dynamic power to take your mind into stability and serenity.…. 

“One place where ideas of gaining typically come in, where people get obsessive about the practice, is in the task of staying with the breathing. We take a simple instruction and create a drama of success and failure around it: we are succeeding when we are with the breath, failing when we are not. Actually, the whole process is meditation: being with the breathing, drifting away, seeing that we have drifted away, gently coming back. It is extremely important to come back without blame, without judgment, without a feeling of failure. If you have to come back a thousand times in a five-minute period of sitting, just do it. It is not a problem unless you make it into one.

“Each instance of seeing that you’ve been away is, after all, a moment of mindfulness, as well as a seed that increases the likelihood of such moments in the future. Best of all is to go beyond the whole mentality of success and failure, to understand that our lives are a series of alternations between various states. If you already had some kind of laser-like attention that never wavered, you wouldn’t need to practice meditation at all. The object is not to make your breathing
perfect. It is to see how your breathing really is.”

“Obsession with a target is not the point. We in the West have a very
strong ‘in order to’ mind. We want to go from A to B, B to C. Ideally
we’d like to go from A straight to Z, get our Ph.D. the first day, skip all
the steps in between. Enlightenment in one easy lesson. Our mind
spends all its time calculating. Everything is a means to an end.
“But that misses the point. Each breath moment is both a means and
an end. we are not looking at the breath in order to get to
enlightenment, we are just looking at the breath, rooted to it, sitting
with it like a lion. Enlightenment, after all, is just one more bone [for
the doggie mind to pursue]. It is an idea we have.
“The instruction is to disappear into the breathing....”

“Return gently to the breath.”

“So the constant repetition of coming back to the breath has real
value. Our wish always to hit the target, always be doing it right, is an
obstacle. We start to blame ourselves: I do not know how to do this, I’m a
bad meditator, everybody else is concentrating but me. If only my mind didn’t
wander, I’d be able to practice. But seeing that the mind has wandered is
practice. If you continue for years, you’ll have to come back, who
knows, millions of times. So learning to come back gracefully is
extremely important. Make it a dance, not a wrestling match.”

“The body, mind, and breath become one.”

“Thich Nhat Hanh says he has been watching the breath for fifty
years and it only grows in interest.”

“[Tang Hoi] speaks of realizing the breathing practice, which means
seeing the breath vividly, make attention to the breath continuous.
“When the yogi has realized the breathing process the mind is
ablaze with light. Using that light to observe deeply, nothing can enter
the yogi’s mind that he does not see.’
“It is as if the murky shadowy place that we call the mind–where so
much happens that we do not understand–is suddenly bright and clear,
like a large empty room. According to Tang Hoi, it is attention to the
breath that brings that transformation about.”

“Zen Master Hogen said that the whole universe is the breath. If you really pay attention to it, it takes you to its immaculate source. You can call that Buddha nature, nirvana, the deathless, whatever you want. All the names for it are human inventions. What they point to is the deepest truth we know.”

“For long periods of time—like the spider—you might sit in silence. That is not wasted time. The silence is also nourishing. What we are learning to rest in finally is awareness itself, Buddha: that which knows. All the arising and passing away, and the growing periods of silence, are the contemplative’s food.

“The attitude to sit with is one of total receptivity and openness. You lay the calculating mind to rest and allow life to come to you, without reaching out for anything at all. You sit with relaxed alertness, knowing that life will provide you with all the material necessary for your meditation to flourish. Whatever is there is perfect to practice with, because it is there. It is your life in that moment.”

“It is wrong to call what we do—trying to stay with the breath from moment to moment throughout the day—practice, which sounds artificial and contrived. It is really a way of living, one in which we give attentiveness and alertness to every moment the highest priority. Finally it is not a technique or practice at all. It is much larger than that.

“That is the wonderful thing about the breathing, and the reason it is such a helpful object of attention. It is both perfectly ordinary (we are all doing it, all the time) and extremely special (if we weren’t doing it, we’d be dead). There is nothing Buddhist about it. Everybody breathes. It is also extremely portable. We take it everywhere we go. So if you choose to practice with the breathing, it has the advantage of always being there. No matter how many times you forget it throughout the day, you can always take it up again. There’s another in-breath. There’s another out-breath.…

“One thing that many students find is that the more they pay attention to the breathing throughout the day—while eating, washing the dishes, listening to music, walking in the woods—the easier it is.
The capacity to stay with the breath gets stronger and stronger, and the breath itself becomes more vivid and available and alive.”

“The breath can be helpful by acting as a brake on the mind’s tendency to act impulsively, to prefer any course of action to the anguish that accompanies confusion. Sometimes wisdom is not to act.”

“The breath can be a great help by giving you space around your words. Sometimes you are just moments from saying the wrong thing, but spending those moments with the breathing can give you the clarity to avoid it. In the same way, one of my students once told me of a situation in which he was perhaps thirty seconds away from committing a sexual indiscretion. He wanted to, and felt that the woman he was with did also. But in the brief period he was able to come to the breathing and bring himself back from a fantasy that had been very compelling. He had been carried away by a thought in the same way that he might have been on the cushion [sitting in meditation].”

“Buddha is saying that both the four foundations and the seven factors develop out of the practice of anapanasati.”

(These are taken from his book *Breath by Breath.*)
Chapter Five
The Taoist Tradition

Taoism is a religion so old it can justly be called primeval—and it vastly predates its written scriptures. Somewhere along its immeasurable history-line (if not from the very beginning) meditation or “internal alchemy” became a major factor in at least some of the schools of Taoism. Breath is a major factor in Taoist yoga as will be seen. If you keep the Buddhist material in mind, you will easily understand what is presented here.

The Tao is the totality of Reality, transcending name, form, and even conception. Nevertheless It can be known by those who cultivate the Tao—the Way. However, that cultivation is not a “doing” or a “making.” All of our troubles come from our resistance, avoiding, and denial of the Tao, of our being out of phase or out of harmony with the Tao. What is needed is for us to stop doing and making, and enter into the stream of the Tao. Then everything we need will occur spontaneously. Since we cannot ever be separated from the Tao we need not invoke or find It. We must let Tao be the Tao and carry us on to the perfection that is the entire purpose of the Tao. We are ourselves part of the Tao, so Taoist yoga is intelligent and skillful undoing and unmaking. That is why Buddha used the word Nirvana—Unbinding—to speak about enlightenment. Anapanasati—known in Taoism as Uniting Intention With Breath—is the way to live in and as the Tao.

Right meditation is a great deal like the opening of a water gate in a dam. Opening the gate does not cause the water to flow out—that is a matter of internal pressure within the dam. The gate just gets out of the way and the water pours forth in great power. In the same way, when we get out of the way of the Tao in meditation It will flow forth and flood our life and consciousness with Its transforming power and light.

Taoist texts often express themselves symbolically in the terminology of alchemy, considering the human body to be the laboratory of spiritual transmutation. Since heat is an essential element of alchemy, the tip of the nose is called the Spirit Stove.

Tao Teh King
“When one gives undivided attention to the breath, and brings it to the utmost degree of pliancy, he can become as a babe. When he has cleansed away the most mysterious sights, he can become without a flaw” (10. James Legge translation)

An infant is utterly natural. It has no motivations, analyses, or reflections. It simply IS. It does not think; it perceives. It lives as a matter of simple being. The supreme sage Lao Tzu, speaking as the voice of the Tao, tells us that undivided attention to the breath, letting it be spontaneous and subtle, enables us to become as infants. He then tells us that when we clear away all mind mirages, our consciousness shall be like a flawless crystal. This is the way of anapanasati. This verse may also be a reference to “womb breathing” mentioned in texts cited later on in this chapter. Womb breathing is internal breathing, the movement of the subtle breath that occurs in the womb before the child is born and begins breathing through the lungs. In meditation the breath becomes subtle and internal, mirroring the state in the womb.

**Anthology on the Cultivation of Realization** (Thomas Cleary, translator)

“The spirit cannot be stabilized by force; when the mind and breathing rest on each other, then the spirit naturally stabilizes” (Old Age). This is said because mind, breath, and spirit are one—the mind and breath are manifestations of the spirit.

“Life has its stem of life, which is the true breath” (Essence and Life). The true breath is the inmost breath, of which the physical breath is its shadow.

“The whole work is in stopping thought. The most direct and rapid method for this is keeping mind and breathing together. How so? Energy is the mother of spirit, spirit is the child of energy; mind and breathing keeping together is like child and mother meeting. When spirit and energy merge into one, after a long period of close intimacy this produces great stabilization. This is called returning to the root and restoring life. When the root is deep, the stem is solid; this is the way of long life and eternal vision.

“Ancestral Teacher Qiu said, ‘If the breathing is at all unsettled, life is not your own.’ I say, ‘If the mind is at all unforgotten, breathing cannot
be settled’” (Essence and Life).

“When there is no minding, continue this by resting on the breathing. When the breathing is settled, the spirit settles along with it” (Mind).

“When energy goes out and in, this is called ordinary breathing; when it does not go out and in, this is called true breathing.

“Generally speaking, when the ordinary breathing is stilled, the true breathing is spontaneously activated. The way breathing is stilled is not by forcefully holding it so that it does not come out. It is a matter of absolute emptiness and utter stillness; the steadier the mind, the subtler the breathing.

“The way to do this is to return the mind to quietude whatever you are doing, not imagining what is yet to come and not thinking about what has already passed. After a long time at this spirit and energy merge, feelings and objects are forgotten; spirit solidifies, energy congeals, and there is just one breath revolving without going out or in. This is called womb breathing.

“Once this breathing occurs, keep strictly to empty quiet, refining vitality into energy.... This is called the real bellows, the real furnace and cauldron, and the real firing process” (Energy).

“In realized people, the spirit rests on the breath, entering deeply into its own lair, subtly continuous, there as such, without the slightest interruption.

“Thus one attains the wonder of ‘concentrating energy and making it supple’ and so one is able to ‘observe its return.’

‘Lao-tzu said, ‘The space between heaven and earth is like a bellows.’ Human beings are born by virtue of the energy of heaven and earth; respiration is the mechanism of the bellows.

“The breath is the energy of respiration. So this true breath is the stem of reception of energy, the source of production of energy.

“The rising and descending of exhalation and inhalation in alternate succession corresponds to the relationship of yin and yang.

“Therefore it is said, ‘the breath count of the natural cycle is counted very subtly; the cold drip of the water clock matches drop by drop.’

“Some ask if it is also said that the true breathing is the alchemical
fire. The answer is that the true breathing is not considered the fire.

“The fire is the human spirit; the breathing is the bellows of the fire. The unbroken continuity of the bellows is as realized people do.

“Therefore it is said, ‘Stay leisurely by the medicine stove to watch the firing process; just calm mind and breath and leave it to nature’” (Energy).

“It is essential to unify the mind and stop the breath so the spirit is pervasive, the energy is full, and energy flows easily” (Energy).

“Now your breath is going out and in; are you aware of it? If you can be aware of it and can stay with it, you can thereby not deliberately exhale or inhale.

“When you arrive at the point of not exhaling or inhaling, then energy is whole and life is established” (Knowledge).

“When you are mindful at every moment, nurturing it with each breath, the work is never interrupted; perfected day after day and month after month, learning will shine with light” (Action).

Secret Writings on The Mechanisms of Nature (Thomas Cleary, translator)

“When mind and breath stay together and work in unison, this keeps the mind from leaping about and prevents attention from running off” (Collecting the Mind and Refining the Self).

“As long as you sense your breathing is gentle and feel empty, clear, and exhilarated, this is correct practice of solidifying the spirit and attaining transformation” (Returning to Emptiness and Hibernating in the Cavern of Energy).

“It is all a matter of making space the place you store your mind, using abstruse silence as the place you rest your spirit. Do it over and over again, clarifying and clarifying, deepening and deepening; gradually mind and breath come to stay together, spirit and energy merge harmoniously. Before you realize it, positive energy arises ecstatically, and you are as if intoxicated” (Returning to Emptiness and Hibernating in the Cavern of Energy).
“With the ethereal spiritual light of essence of the basic spirit within, be like a turtle hiding, like a snake hibernating; do not forget, do not force, as if present yet as if absent. Eventually exhalation and inhalation will join, spirit and energy will embrace, the mystic pass will naturally open, and the seed of realization will be produced” (The Natural Mechanism of Turning Attention Around to Gaze Within).

Zhang Sanfeng’s Taiji Alchemy Secrets (Thomas Cleary, translator)

“Sit down, close your eyes, become aware of the spirit, quiet the mind, and tune the breathing. This exercise is to refine vitality into energy.

“Turn attention around to gaze inwardly, freeze the spirit in the alchemical opening, make the true breath circulate” (2).

We will be encountering quite a few references to “tuning” the breath. This is a precise term and easy to misunderstand since we are so used to meddling and controlling things. In his commentary on Ancestor Lu’s Hundred-Character Tablet Chang San-feng says: “Tuning the breath is not difficult. Once the spirit of mind is quiet, breathe naturally. I just keep this naturalness, and also focus attention downward [into the nosetip]. This is tuning the breath.” Chen Yingning in his commentary on Sun Bu-er’s Cultivating the Elixir, tells us: “Sanfeng also said, ‘To tune the temporal breathing calls for letting it tune itself, for only in this way can it be tuned in such a way as to be able to rouse primal breathing. I just become empty and stay quiet, that is all.” This should be kept in mind while reading the other sections that speak of tuning the breath.

Lu Yen (Ancestor Lu)—Sayings (Thomas Cleary, translator)

“To restore the mind to its unfragmented origin, sit quietly and... tune the breath until it is imperceptible” (Restoring the Mind).

This can be taken in two ways: 1) that during meditation the breath must cease to be perceived as just the physical in-and-out movement of the breath, but rather be experienced as a subtle movement of inner force—even of mind itself; and 2) that the breath must cease to even be a movement, and become known/perceived as an interior state—eventually as consciousness itself.

“As long as the breath is even slightly unsettled, one’s life is not
secure. It is necessary to reach the point where mind and breath rest on each other....In essence it requires relaxation and patience. The secret is put this way: ‘...Just settle spirit and breath, and trust nature’” (A Temporary Device).

“Exhalation and inhalation are ‘extraction’ and ‘addition.’” (Three Levels of Attainment) This is a reference to the alchemical symbolism used throughout many Taoist texts.

**Chang Po-tuan** (Thomas Cleary, translator)

“Containing the light of the eyes, freezing the tones of the ears, tuning the breath in the nose, sealing the energy of the tongue–this is called combining the four signs.”

This is significant for two reasons. First, it tells us that the focus of breath awareness is to be in the nose. Second, it tells us that the function or sensory experience of the eyes (sight), ears (hearing), and tongue (speech) are to be eliminated, both as activity and passive experience. But this is not said about the breath. Rather, it is to be experienced and tuned to the most subtle component. So in meditation awareness is confined to the breath.

“In one day one forms an embryo of thirteen thousand five hundred breaths” (Introduction to the Four-Hundred-Character Treatise on the Golden Elixir).

A great deal is said in Taoist writings about the formation of the “spiritual embryo”–the “new life” or “new person” that manifests through meditation. Here we are told that mindful, subtle breaths are the very substance that becomes the “embryo.”

“The breath through your nose will naturally become light and subtle, going out and in evenly and finely, continuously and quietly, gradually becoming slighter and subtler....each exhalation and inhalation so subtle as to seem to be on the borderline of existence and nonexistence. After a long time at this, the true breath naturally remains, and there seems to be no flow of air through the nose.” (The Secret of Opening the Passes)

**Ch’en Hsu-pai–Compass Center Directions** (Thomas Cleary,
“A poem says, ‘...Breathing out and breathing in without interruption, the complete embryo forms and combines with the original beginning.’

“Then what should one do? If you use your will undividedly, then you solidify the spirit. Just clarify the mind, cut off rumination, tune the breathing until it is even, and maintain a calm, constant awareness. Do not allow yourself to become oblivious or distracted. Watch for your energy to become peaceful and harmonious; real people enter concentration herein.

“In concentration you observe your inner state: when attention reaches it, evidence of it appears, and you notice a breath arising..., flowing continuously, steady yet lively. Sustain this earnestly, listen to it mentally. The six sense faculties become calm and steady, the womb breathing stabilizes; neither stopping nor counting it, you let it be as it is. When stillness climaxes, you breathe out, like fish in a spring pond; when movement climaxes, you breathe in, like insects going into hibernation” (The Mysterious Female).

The foregoing is an excellent summary of how to meditate rightly. It is interesting that he speaks here of the continuous breath and the subtle sound of the inner breath.

“Breath after breath, continuity unbroken, in every action, and whenever sitting, it becomes increasingly clear.” Breath awareness must be paramount whatever we are doing, throughout everything. He then says that “clarity and calm are made into a pill”—the medicine of immortality.

“In sum, the mysterious female is the source of yin and yang, the house of spirit and energy. Spirit and energy are the medicines of essence and life, the root of womb breathing, the ancestor of respiration, the way to make the roots deep and the stem firm. The ‘womb’ is the place where the spirit is stored, the breathing is the basis of evolving the embryo. The embryo is produced by the breathing, the breathing is stabilized by the embryo. Without the breath, the embryo does not form, without the spirit, the breathing has no master” (The Medicinal Substances).
As I said, Taoists use a great deal of alchemical terminology in symbolic manner. The elixir of immortality can only be made by “firing”—what the Indian yogis call “heating” or tapasya. So now he give us a very interesting exposition: “However, the essential point of verbally transmitted secrets of the firing process should above all be sought in true breathing. This is because breathing comes from mind, when the mind is quiet the breathing is harmonious. When each breath returns to the root, that is the matrix of the gold pill. This is what is meant by the Heart Seal Scripture when it says, ‘The returning breeze mixes the compound, the hundred days’ work is effective.’...exhalation and inhalation are allowed their natural spontaneity.” Then he gives a list of the essential processes for inner success, and comments: “None of this is apart from a single breath,” the idea being that they are all manifestations—products—of the breath.

In conclusion, speaking of length of practice, he says: “If you talk in terms of time, then it can be practiced twenty-four hours a day, whenever the attention is there....Just settle spirit and breath, letting them be natural” (The Firing Process).

**Chang San-feng—Commentary on Ancestor Lu’s Hundred-Character Tablet** (Thomas Cleary, translator)

“Keep mind and breath on each other.”

“Activity and quietude mean tuning and harmonizing of the true breath, or true energy, and securely aligning the truly fundamental in its proper position in your life.

“It is said that when you breathe out you contact the Root of Heaven and experience a sense of openness, and when you breathe in you contact the Root of Earth and experience a sense of solidity. Breathing out is associated with the fluidity of the dragon, breathing in is associated with the strength of the tiger.

“As you go on breathing with this frame of mind, with these associations, alternating between movement and stillness, it is important that the focus of your mind does not shift.

“Let the true breath come and go, a subtle continuum on the brink of existence. Tune the breathing until you get breath without breathing; become one with it, and then the spirit can be solidified and the elixir
can be made.”

“The secret is to turn the attention around to illumine the source of consciousness, the whole unified mind remaining within, inward thoughts not coming out, outward thoughts not coming in.”

“Then the true breath spontaneously stills, all the body’s nerve channels spontaneously stop. Sun and moon halt, the stars do not revolve in the sky.”

In *Discourses on the Teachings of Wang Che*, he simply says: “When the energy is settled, true breath grows daily.”

As already cited, in *Words on the Way* he has this to say: “‘Freezing the spirit, tune the breath; tuning the breath, freeze the spirit.’ This is the starting work. This should be done single-mindedly, continuing from step to step....Tuning the breath is not difficult. Once the spirit of mind is quiet, breathe naturally. I just keep this naturalness, and also focus attention downward [into the nosetip]. This is tuning the breath....

When spirit and breathing stay together, keeping their clarity and naturalness is called ‘not forgetting’ going along with their clarity and naturalness is called ‘not forcing.’ Not forgetting, not forcing, quietly, gently, the breath is vigorous and the mind is free....clarify them again and again, until suddenly the spirit and breath are both forgotten, spirit and energy merge.”

**The Secret of the Golden Flower** (Thomas Cleary, translator)

There is deluded awareness and there is undeluded awareness—ignorance consciousness and wisdom consciousness. How do we leave the one and enter into the other? Verse 3:7 says: “Just observe clearly, and when your breath grows quiet you then become accurately aware. This is application of the method of reversal.”

The fourth section has very important things to say about breath: “On the whole, beginners suffer from two kinds of problems: oblivion and distraction. There is a device to get rid of them, which is simply to rest the mind on the breath. The breath is one’s own mind, one’s own mind does the breathing....Should one not breathe? It is impossible not
to breathe. Nothing compares to making the affliction itself into medicine, which means to have mind and breath rest on each other” (4:2, 3, 5).

Then the process is reviewed: “When you sit, lower your eyelids and then establish a point of reference [the nosetip]. Now let go [that is, relax]….You should not allow your breathing to actually be audible [to the ears], just listen to its soundlessness….The more you let go, the greater the subtlety [of the breath], and the greater the subtlety, the deeper the quietude. Eventually, after a long time, all of the sudden even the subtle will be interrupted and the true breathing will appear, whereupon the substance of mind will become perceptible. This is because when mind is subtle, breath is subtle; when breath is subtle, mind is subtle” (4:7-10).

Next, the subject of “movement” is introduced and defined as “control”–a product of ego. The sage then asks: “Since you can cause movement by vigorous action, how could you not be able to cause stillness by pure quietude?” (4:11).

Life and death in the metaphysical sense then come under consideration: “The life of the spirit comes from the prior death of the [delusive] mind. If people can kill the [delusive] mind, the original [true mind] comes alive. Killing the mind does not mean quietism, it means undivided concentration. Buddha said, ‘Place the mind on one point, and everything can be done.’ If the mind tends to run off, then unify it by means of the breath, if the breath tends to become rough, then use the mind to make it subtle. If you do this, how can the mind fail to stabilize?” (4:14, 15).

Once more the subject of oblivion and distraction is taken up. “Generally speaking, the two afflictions of oblivion and distraction just require that quieting practice continue unbroken day after day until complete cessation and rest occur spontaneously….Repelling oblivion is simply a matter of tuning the breath. The ‘breath’ in this case is respiration, not the ‘true breathing.’ Nevertheless the true breathing is present within it. Whenever you sit, you should quiet your mind and unify your energy. How is the mind quieted? The mechanism is in the
breathing, but the mind alone knows you are breathing out and in; do not let the [outer] ears hear. When you do not hear it [physically], the breathing is subtle, and when breathing is subtle, the mind is clear. The mind should be kept on the breathing. It is also essential to understand that this device is not mechanical or forced. Just maintain a subtle looking and listening. What is ‘looking’? It is the light of the eyes spontaneously shining, the eyes only looking inward and not outward. Not looking outward yet being alert is inward looking; it is not that there really is such a thing as looking inward. What is ‘listening’? It is the light of the ears spontaneously listening, the ears only listening inward and not outward. Not listening outward yet being alert is inward listening; it is not that there really is such a thing as listening inward. Listening means listening to the soundless; looking means looking at the formless” (4:16, 21-26).

It is definitely true that the subtle energies of the seeing and hearing faculties can be perceived at times by the meditator, but we are not seeking to produce that. Further it is important to realize that the terms “inward” and “outward” are not to be taken literally, but as indicative of internal and external consciousness, of gross and subtle awareness. This is important, as some very materialistic teachers in the East have taught that the physical eyes must be forced to turn around until the pupils are facing inward and the backs of the eyeballs are turned fully outward. This is insane and destructive.

“Breath is one’s own mind; one’s own mind is the breath’s original spirit, original energy, and original vitality; rising and descending, parting and joining, all arise from the mind” (9:3).

“Midnight, noon, and in between, if you stabilize breathing, the light returns to the primal opening, so all psychic functions are calm. There emerges the unified energy of the river source that produces the medicine [of immortality]” (13:3-5).

“‘Settling the breath’ means a state of centeredness in which you go back to the root with each breath. ‘Sitting’ means that the mind is unmoved….just use the true breathing for stable awareness. After a long time at this you will naturally commune with the spirit and attain transmutation….You should each practice diligently; it would be too
bad if you wasted time. If you do not practice for a day, then you are a ghost for a day; if you do practice for a single breath, then you are a realized immortal for a breath. Work on this” (13:22).

“Only when mind and breathing rest on each other is this the true breath” (“Questions and Answers Opening up the Mysteries of the Doctrine of the Golden Flower” 19).

Teaching of Sun Bu-er (Thomas Cleary, translator)

Sun Bu-Er was a female Taoist Immortal, her spiritual name being Clear and Calm Free Human.

The meaning of “tuning the breath” is important, since it must not be thought of as an artificial conditioning or working with the breath. Here is how the sage Chen Yingning defines it in his commentary on Sun Bu-er’s Cultivating the Elixir: “Sanfeng also said, ‘Tuning the breath calls for use of the temporal breathing to seek the realm of the breathing of the Real Human Being. But to tune the temporal breathing calls for letting it tune itself, for only in this way can it be tuned in such a way as to be able to rouse primal breathing. I just become empty and stay quiet, that is all. Once the true breath stirs, the Mysterious Pass [to enlightenment] is not far away. If you progress in practice with this in mind, you may be expected to have constructed the foundation soon.’”

In The Womb Breath Sun Bu-er wrote: “Attentively guard the spiritual medicine [of immortality]; with every breath return to the beginning of the creative,” and Chen Yingning says: “The spiritual medicine is subtle being, and subtle being means true breathing. So attentively guarding the spiritual medicine means keeping the attention on the breathing. The beginning of creation is true openness, and true openness is the awareness of Tao. With every breath returning to the beginning of creation thus means the breathing staying with the mind. Even if beginners can keep mind and breath together, because they have not done it for long, they again separate; when one reaches the womb breath, then mind and breath are always together.”

The Convergence and the Fire: “At the point where the womb breath is continuous, you should distinguish the beginnings of movement and
Grafting the Medicine: “Gazing at the nose, one takes in pure positive energy.” Chen Yingning: “This statement is about the real work by which one can transcend the ordinary and become a sage;… According to this method, the breath of Heaven and humanity is a continuum, flowing back and forth. Humans live on the breath given by Heaven, and they die when Heaven takes the breath away again…. Master Qiu of the Eternal Spring said, ‘If you can keep your attention continually on your breath, you will change your body so that in it jade liquid [– immortality; the Tao–] will flow.’”

Spiritual Alchemy for Women (Thomas Cleary, translator)

*Spiritual Alchemy for Women* was written in 1899, but the author’s name is unknown.

“Self-refinement is a matter of mind and breathing resting on each other. This means that the mind rests on the breathing, and the breathing rests on the mind. What is most important in this is harmony. Harmony is in balance, balance is in harmony. Are they one or two? The union of balance and harmony is called the go-between. With the harmonious attunement of the go-between, there is natural mutual love between mind and breathing, there is mutual attraction, mutual inspiration, mutual expiration. Continuing uninterrupted, do not forget, yet do not force…. The reality behind all of these sayings is spirit and energy being together, which means mind and breathing being together. Spirit is essence, energy is life. This is what is meant by the classic saying, ‘The root of essence is rooted in mind; the stem of life stems from breathing.’ It is necessary to know that creative evolution only takes place when spirit and energy are joined into one. The joining of the two into one is the reversion of the two modes–yin and yang–back into one totality. This is called the twin cultivation of essence and life. The twin cultivation of essence and life is a matter of keeping the mind and breathing together, not letting them separate even for a moment. Therefore an ancient alchemist said that ‘firing the medicine to produce the elixir’ means driving energy by spirit, thereby attaining the Tao. In daily practice it is essential to embrace the breathing steadily with the mind and embrace the mind steadily with the breathing. When
you have done this for a time, once you reach even balance you naturally become very stable and concentrated. You plunge into a profound trance where there is no sky and no earth, where you forget about everything, including your own body.”

Secret Records of Understanding the Way (Thomas Cleary, translator)
“If…the breath in the nose has not become subtle,…no state is genuine.”

“You must reach the point where…the breathing in the nose is extremely subtle.”
This is a reference to “tortoise breathing,” which Eva Wong defines as breathing in which “the breath is so light that it is almost nonexistent. Called tortoise breathing because it resembles a tortoise’s way of breathing when the animal is inside its shell, such breathing occurs naturally at advanced stages of internal alchemy. It is said that the tortoise leads a long life because of this form of breathing” (The Shambala Guide to Taoism, p. 215).

Wu-jen p’ien–Understanding Reality (Eva Wong, translator)
“I advise you to find the place where your body was born” (1:9).
Our body is “born” at our first breath. The “place” of our birth, then, is the nosetip.

“Relax beside the medicine furnace and watch the fires. Let the spiritual breath follow its natural way” (1:13).
The nosetip is called the “spirit furnace.” “The fires” are the inhalations and exhalations.

Tao-hsuan p’ien–The Mysteries of the Tao (Eva Wong, translator)
“The spirit resides in the breath, and the breath lives in the house of the spirit. When spirit and breath unite, you will attain great clarity” (18).

T’ai Shang Ch’ing-ching Ching–Cultivating Stillness. Commentary of Shui-ch’ing Tzu (Eva Wong, translator)
“Practice the art of purity and stillness and let heavenly breath in the
body return to its place. Then the breath of heaven outside the body will follow this course. Practice the art of purity and stillness and let the earthly breath return to its place. Then the breath of the earth outside the body will follow this course as well.

“...When heaven and earth, when the inside and outside of the body resonate with each other and are guided by the same master, the breath of heaven and the breath of earth will return to the origin. If there is no guide, then the breath of heaven and earth in our body will flow out of us. Not only can we not achieve union with the Tao, but the Tao will be damaged” (5).

“Humans are created from the descent of heavenly breath and the ascent of earthly vapor” (6).

“The breath of the natural course can envelop the universe, It radiates the first yang and forever permeates through the ages, Peacefulness and bliss know no boundary, The pure air emerges from the spirit like the opening of a precious book, As heaven and earth have their origins, so will this be, True nature is mysterious through and through” (12).

Those who practice Breath Meditation will tame and ride both the tiger and the dragon.
“All the while my breath is in me, and the spirit of God is in my nostrils” (Job 27:3).

The Breath of Life

It is interesting to note that in the Genesis account of Adam’s creation it is said that God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life”—not into his body, mouth, or lungs, but the nose—“and man became a living soul” (Genesis 2:7). “Nostrils…living soul” indicates that breath awareness at nosetip makes us conscious—aware of spirit. Three more times in Genesis (6:17; 7:15, 22) we find the expression “breath of life,” and in each instance breath is equated with life itself. In seven further instances in the Bible, the life principle is referred to, not just as the breath, but as the breath in the nostrils (Genesis 7:22; II Samuel 22:16; Job 4:9; 27:3; Psalms 18:15; Isaiah 2:22; Lamentations 4:20). This cannot be without significance. This verse, however, tells us more.

First, we learn that the breath comes directly from God, second, that through it “man became a living soul”—it is the breath that makes the psychic part of our makeup to live, just as it makes the body live. From this it becomes evident that the breath and spirit are the same; that the breath of life is the spirit of life—and ultimately is Divinity Itself. “The Spirit of God hath made me, and the breath of the Almighty hath given me life” (Job 33:4). Meditation on the breath, then, is direct meditation on God—“the God in whose hand thy breath is” (Daniel 5:23)—with no intermediary whatsoever.

God is “He that giveth breath unto the people upon [the earth], and spirit to them that walk therein” (Isaiah 42:5). Just as the breath of God is the Spirit of God, so also, since we are made in His image and likeness (Genesis 1:26), our breath one with our spirit, is our true nature and self. Wherefore: “Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live....Thus saith the
Lord God; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live....So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived” (Ezekiel 37:5, 6, 9, 10). Interestingly, in Lamentations 4:20 the Messiah is called “the breath of our nostrils.”

The breath of God is His creative power; and all things were made by it. And that power is the Holy Spirit. It is God “in whose hand is the soul of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind” (Job 12:10). Even more, the breath of God is the breath of mankind: “All the while my breath is in me, and the spirit of God is in my nostrils” (Job 27:3).

This alone would establish Breath Meditation as the essence of spiritual practice, the original yoga initiated by the original guru: God. but there is even more to be learned from the Bible regarding the nature of breath.

Health and breath

The breath being the principle of life, it is also the power of healing. This is perceived right away by those who give adequate time to Breath Meditation practice. It is also the condition of the breath that produces disease and death. “My breath is corrupt, my days are extinct, the graves are ready for me” (Job 17:1). The breath is not only the means by which life enters into us—as stated in the first verse considered above—it is also the means by which we depart from this world into another, for Job says: “By the breath of his mouth shall he go away” (Job 15:30). Cultivation of the breath is cultivation of life and health.

The Silence

Silent awareness is the prime characteristic and purpose of Breath Meditation. Throughout the Hebrew scriptures silence and quiescence are set forth as essential for communion with Spirit. “Their strength is to sit still” (Isaiah 30:7). “Be aware and be quiet” (Isaiah 7:4). “Be silent, O all flesh, before the Lord” (Zechariah 2:13). “Then are they glad because they be quiet; so he bringeth them unto their desired haven” (Psalms 107:30).

The Silence has a practical effect. “Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord” (Exodus 14:13). “Moses said unto them, Stand still, and I will hear what the Lord will command concerning you” (Numbers 9:8). And Samuel: “Stand thou still a while, that I may shew thee the word of
God” (I Samuel 9:27). “Ye shall not need to fight in this battle: set yourselves, stand ye still, and see the salvation of the Lord with you” (II Chronicles 20:17).

Through Isaiah the Lord has said: “Keep silence before me, and let the people renew their strength” (Isaiah 41:1). “They that wait upon the Lord” in silent awareness “shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint” (Isaiah 40:31). It is indeed true that “The Lord is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him. It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord....He sitteth alone and keepeth silence” (Lamentations 3:25, 26, 28).

“Therefore the prudent shall keep silence in that time” (Amos 5:13). “Stand still, and consider the wondrous works of God” (Job 37:14). “Commune with your own heart, and be still” (Psalms 4:4). “Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for him” (Psalms 37:7). “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalms 46:10). “Be silent, O all flesh, before the Lord: for he is raised up out of his holy habitation” (Zechariah 2:13) within each one of us.

“The Lord is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him” (Habakkuk 2:20). The Silence is not empty. “For while all things were in quiet silence, and that night was in the midst of her swift course, Thine Almighty word leaped down from heaven out of thy royal throne” (Wisdom 18:14,15). Inspired intuition speaks in the silence. All knowledge that leads to wisdom is there in the Silence.

“There is a path which no fowl knoweth, and which the vulture’s eye hath not seen” (Job 28:7). When the meditator stands still in the midst of the inhaling and exhaling breath, the Pathless Path opens before him, just as when the priests bearing the Ark of the Covenant stood in the flowing waters of Jordan, those waters ceased to flow and all were enabled to cross over (Joshua 3:7-17). But the secret of this crossing over is in the standing still. Speaking of that time of profound tranquility, David sang: “He leadeth me beside the still waters” (Psalms 23:2).

**The voice in the Silence**

“And Elijah arose, and went unto Horeb the mount of God. And he came thither unto a cave, and lodged there; and, behold, the word of the
Lord came to him, and he said unto him,...Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him” (I Kings 19:8-13).

The nosetip is the mouth of Elijah’s cave, and the still small voice is the subtle sound produced by the refined breath during meditation. In Writings From the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart: by Kadloubovsky and Palmer, p. 84, footnote 24, they say regarding this: “The nearest English equivalent to the Slavonic version is ‘subtle and serene wafting of wind.’” That is a very good description of the subtle breath sound. But the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible has: “a sound of sheer silence.”

“My heart wakes”

David counsels us: “Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still” (Psalms 4:4). In the Bible “sleep” often refers to the state of inmost consciousness when the body and mind are at rest and silent and only the core of our being is awake. This is first mentioned in Genesis: “When the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram” (Genesis 15:12). It is of this Yoga Nidra—yogic sleep state—called sushupti in Sanskrit, that David further sang: “He giveth to His beloved in sleep” (Psalms 127:2). “As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness” (Psalms 17:15 ). “When I awake, I am still with thee” (Psalms 139:18). Speaking of that state, Jeremiah said this: “Upon this I awakened, and beheld; and my sleep was sweet unto me” (Jeremiah 31:26). In the sweet sleep of interior awareness we truly awake and see. The practice of Breath Meditation produces this waking sleep so we can say like David: “I laid me down and slept; [yet] I awaked” (Psalms 3:5). Describing this, the mystical writing known as The Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon) says: “I sleep, but my heart waketh” (Song of Solomon 5:2). Both Daniel and Zechariah speak of their inmost experiences as being “asleep” (Daniel 8:18, 10:9; Zechariah 4:1). On
the Mount of Transfiguration, before witnessing the Divine Light the disciples of Jesus felt they “were heavy with sleep” (Luke 9:32). Many mystics have covered their inner experiences by claiming to have dozed off.

Yoga Nidra is also referred to as “rest” in the Bible. “My flesh also shall rest in hope” (Psalms 16:9). “Return unto thy rest, O my soul” (Psalms 116:7). The prophets other than David also spoke of this mystic experience. “The whole earth is at rest, and is quiet” (Isaiah 14:7). “This is the rest wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing” (Isaiah 28:12).

The breath as the pathway to God in the Kabbalah

“The goal of meditation, especially as described by the Kabbalistic masters, is to attain enlightenment. In Hebrew, the word most often used to describe such enlightenment is Ruach HaKodesh, which can literally be translated as ‘Holy Spirit.’ It is this term that is consistently used by all Hebrew writers.” So Aryeh Kaplan tells us in Meditation and the Bible, from which all subsequent quotations in this section are taken. And Ruach HaKodesh can also legitimately be translated as “the Holy Breath” as is reflected in some of the Biblical passages already cited. The breath–particularly the Holy Breath of meditation (anapanasati)–is both the presence and the working of the Holy Spirit in us. “As we have seen, Rabbi Abraham Maimonides explains that the ‘pure heart’ for which King David prayed (Psalms 51:12-14) refers to a heart and mind cleansed of all external thoughts through intense meditation. The level of enlightenment implied by Ruach HaKodesh involves a clarity of understanding, an enhancement of perception, an awareness of the spiritual”–in other words, vipassana. “While in its lowest state, Ruach HaKodesh consists of general enlightenment and perception, in its higher, true states, Ruach HaKodesh provides the individual with clear, unequivocal perception, where he can actually receive information that is not otherwise available.”

In the Kabbalah it is considered that there are three levels of our spiritual being: Nefesh, Ruach, and Neshamah. All three refer to levels of breath. Nefesh literally means “that which rests” in the human being: the Divine Life-Breath Itself. Ruach is spirit with the connotation of movement as in “wind,” which is another viable translation. Respecting this, Kaplan says: “Although God’s influence constantly permeates
man’s being, like the air around us, it is not usually detectable. Air can only be felt when it is in motion, when we sense it as a wind (Ruach). Similarly, God’s spirit can only be detected when it moves in us [as the breath], and it is for this reason that such spirit is also called Ruach, the same word as for wind.” This also makes it clear as to why we need to take hold of the awareness of the “moving spirit” of our breath by means of Breath Meditation to enable us to rise to perception of and union with the Divine Presence that manifests as that breath. Neshimah means the simple external breath of the body. Thus we see that the breath is a kind of ladder of ascending grades. By means of the physical breath we can merge into the psychic or soul-breath, and ascend through that to the Breath of God that is breathing into us and manifesting as the two “lower” breaths. And since God is absolutely one (homogeneous), His Breath is also His Consciousness. The breath then, is itself the ascent to Supreme Consciousness when Breath Meditation is correctly and persistently practiced.

“This is also evident from the etymology of the word Ruach. This word is closely related to the Hebrew word Oreach, meaning a ‘visitor’ or ‘guest,’ as well as the word Orach meaning a path.” The breath, then, is both a visitation of the Divine Guest as well as the path we can tread hand-in-hand with that blessed Guest back to the Kingdom of Blessedness that is the Blessed One Himself. “Thou hast granted me life and favour, and thy visitation hath preserved my spirit” (Job 10:12).

The inhaling and exhaling breaths are the two edges of the flaming sword which guards and lights the way to the tree of life in Paradise (Genesis 3:24). Self-knowledge is the fruit of the Tree of Life that will make us immortal gods within God.

Tracing the Kabbalistic tradition of Breath Meditation has not been easy, and has given meager results. If any reader can supply me with more source information I will be most grateful.
Chapter Seven
The Christian Tradition

The Holy Breath

“For as many as are led by the Spirit [Breath] of God, they are the sons of God” (Romans 8:14). “Holy Spirit”–Agia Pneuma–means Holy Breath as well as Holy Spirit, and many verses about the Holy Spirit can be interpreted in this light to reveal their inner esoteric meaning. It is very worthwhile to look up the passages in the Bible that speak of “spirit” and substitute the word “breath.” Some interesting insights will be gained.

The inner secret

The breath of the yogi is the inner secret of the yogi. For the scripture says: “We all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit [the Breath] of the Lord” (II Corinthians 3:18). The Breath of the Lord active within him transforms the yogi from glory to glory: from the glory of enlightened humanity to the glory of enlightening Divinity–of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). For the Holy Spirit–the Holy Breath–of which he is a living temple (I Corinthians 6:19) continually breathes within the depths of his being. Thus constant awareness of the breath empowers and recreates the individual, often working profound transformations in his inner makeup. When Jesus “breathed on [the apostles], and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost” (John 20:22), he was indicating that the breath and the Holy Spirit are identical–to meditate upon the breath is to meditate upon the Holy Spirit. Or more to the point: to experience the breath is to experience the Holy Spirit. The inmost, subtle breath that arises from the spirit is the transforming power of God. Uniting ourselves with the breath is uniting ourselves to the evolving and life-giving action of the Holy Spirit. Thus, from the very first moment of Breath Meditation we are engaging in spiritual experience–experience in which any “phenomena” are of negligible and peripheral value. For it is not the experiences within meditation that matter, but rather the result that manifests outside of meditation in the continuous state of
consciousness.

The divine and human breaths

Through the union of the divine and the human breaths accomplished in Breath Meditation, we come to life, grow “unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ,” (Ephesians 4:13) and attain the knowledge of God through that union. To that end Jesus “breathed on [the apostles], and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost.”

God, being the source of life, is also the source of breath, “seeing he giveth to all life, and breath” (Acts 17:25). Regarding this Father William Johnston has written in Christian Zen:

“Breath rises from the very root of the being, so that consciousness of the breath can lead to a realization of the deepest self by opening up new doors in the psychic life. In the Bible it is clear that breath is identified with the deepest thing in man; it is precisely when breath enters into matter that man becomes man.

“Further, it should be remembered that in Eastern thought breath is not only the little breath in my little body. It is much more than this. It is associated with the breath of the cosmos, so that regulating the breath means regulating one’s relationship with the whole cosmos and bringing about harmony and order. This is true of both Zen and Yoga, where breath plays such an important part....

“I myself believe that the consciousness of the breathing is somehow linked to a basic rhythm in the body, a rhythm that can be deepened and deepened until it reaches the center of one’s being from which enlightenment breaks forth. Let me try to explain what I mean.

“There is a basic rhythm in the body, linked to a consciousness that is deeper than is ordinarily experienced....

“As I have said, the rhythm of breath leads to something deeper. All points to the center of the soul, the core of the being, the sovereign point of the spirit, the divine spark, the true self, the realm from which enlightenment arises. This is the truest thing that exists....

“If one perseveres one gradually comes to realize that this breath is not only the life that fills the body from head to toe. It is more. The Sanskrit prana, like the Japanese ki, is the breath of the universe, a cosmic force which penetrates all things. As for the Hebrews, they believed that their breath was the breath of God whose presence gave them life.
For Christians the breath, like the wind, symbolizes the Holy Spirit who fills all things with his love, giving wisdom and joy and peace.

“It is interesting to recall here that scientists distinguish between the voluntary and involuntary nervous system. There are bodily functions which are voluntary in that we only perform them by an act of the will; and there are others (such as digestion, heartbeat, metabolism and so on) which are involuntary or automatic. And breathing stands midway between the two. With most people it is involuntary but it can easily be made conscious, regulated and brought under control of the will. When one becomes conscious of the breathing one gradually becomes conscious of the whole body and even learns to control the whole body. Breathing is the gateway to the unconscious.”

“And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works” (Revelation 20: 12, 13). This symbolic revealing and release that takes place in both the conscious and subconscious minds—and sometimes even the physical body—is the result of long-term watching of the breath, and is always a passively observed process.

The work of the Holy Spirit

This is the unique work of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Breath, for as Saint Paul assures us “the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered” (Romans 8:26). The word translated “groanings” is stenagmos, which more properly means “sighings”—in other words, the subtle sound of the inner breath. Those who go deep in their practice of Breath Meditation will sometimes experience the subtle currents of inhalation and exhalation as faint breath-like or “sighing” sounds.

Saint Paul also informs us that these “sighings of the Spirit” are alaletos, unutterable, and therefore cannot really be spoken by human beings, though they can be approximated. Our part is to meditate and enter into the Holy Spirit’s utterance of them, the Holy Spirit’s speaking (breathing) which gives us life—the Life in (and of) Christ.
“Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the spirit [subtle breath], and watching thereunto with all perseverance” (Ephesians 6:18).

Through meditation we literally breathe the Holy Spirit, becoming filled with and united to the Life that is the Holy Spirit. Meditation is in truth the “praying in the Holy Ghost” enjoined by Saint Jude (1:20). “I will pray with the spirit [breath], and I will pray with the understanding also” (I Corinthians 14:15).

“Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit [Breath] of God dwelleth in you?” (I Corinthians 3:16; 6:19). Through the practice of Breath Meditation this is revealed to us.

In the account of the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, we are told that “cloven tongues like as of fire” appeared over the heads of those who were present. (Acts 2:3) This is a poetic description of the two “petals” of the ajna chakra, and the inhaling and exhaling breaths. The Holy Spirit is infused into our breath, and thus the Christian literally breathes the Holy Spirit, becoming filled with and united in anapanasati to the Life that is the Holy Spirit.

“He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters” (Psalms 23:2). The waters flow...yet they are still. So also in the practice of meditation the “water” of the breath flows—yet is perfectly still. “This is a great mystery” (Ephesians 5:32). “And he said unto me, I am Alpha and Omega. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely” (Revelation 21:6). “Rivers of living water shall flow out of the inmost being of him who believes on Me” (John 7:38). “Therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation” (Isaiah 12:3). The breath of the Christian is his water of life, for his breath is also the Breath of God. “For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one” (I John 5:7). The “Father” is the witnessing consciousness of the meditator, the “Word” is the subtle sound of the breath, and the “Spirit” is the breath itself.

The surprised seeker

In the first quarter of the fourteenth century a man named Gregory entered the monastery on the sacred mountain of Sinai. Filled with zeal, he engaged in all the ascetic practices that were being done there, always exceeding his brother monastics in their observance. After a
while they became annoyed with the spiritual one-upmanship of the young monk, and he, too, was not pleased, for he intuited that there was more to spiritual life than what he had learned there. Consequently, for the next years he wandered throughout Egypt and Palestine, visiting monasteries and hermits in the desert, learning of their disciplines and adopting them in an even more intense degree. Yet he remained spiritually empty, discontent, and desolate.

In time he decided to visit the island of Crete. Upon reaching there he met several devout people who urged him to visit an aged priest named Arsenios that was living the eremitical life in a cave somewhere on the island. After a great deal of searching he found the priest and began questioning him both about ascetic labors and the complexities of theology. To all his queries the old man simply replied: “I am sorry, but I do not know anything of these matters.” At first Gregory thought he was being modest and humble, but after lengthy questioning he realized that the elder’s answers were the truth: he really know nothing of those things. Disgusted and angry, Gregory left, telling himself that the old man was nothing more than an ignorant beast, unworthy of anyone’s regard or attention. Greatly disappointed at yet another dead-end search, he found a cave at the other end of the island and began living there.

A few weeks later his solitude was disrupted by the arrival of the old priest at the mouth of Gregory’s cave. “Please, Father, you are an educated man and an exemplary monk,” the old man said, “so I have come to ask you for spiritual instruction.” Suppressing his desire to call the old man a donkey and drive him away, Gregory asked impatiently what he wanted to ask—feeling sure that the stupid old man would be able to comprehend nothing of what he might say to him. “Well, the problem is this, Father,” began the priest, “when in the depths of prayer you establish yourself in the gate, some say that you should sit looking out of the gate, but others say that you should only sit looking in at the gate. And I want to know your opinion on this.”

Gregory was thoroughly perplexed at the old man’s words and asked him to repeat them. He did so, but Gregory still had no idea what the question meant. Then, as he sat puzzling over the matter, the realization came to him that his visitor was not a fool, a donkey, or stupid. Rather, he knew a whole dimension of spiritual life—real, inner spiritual life—of which neither Gregory not any of the monks he had met
so far knew even a hint. Chagrined, he admitted his ignorance and begged the old priest tell him how to turn within and reach the gate. Which he did. And so began for him the path that would lead in his becoming Saint Gregory of Sinai: the practice of Breath Meditation, which he called Hesychia–the Silence.

In the practice of Breath Meditation the tip of the nose is called the gate or the door, since that is where the breath enters and exits. “Looking out” means to feel the breath moving out of the nosetip into the body when inhaling, and flowing out of the body away from the nosetip when exhaling. “Looking in” means to feel the breath flowing into the nosetip from outside the body when inhaling and flowing into the nosetip from within the body when exhaling. That is, the awareness is kept on the tip of the nose alone and the sensation of the breath moving in there–not outward. “Looking in” is the preferred practice–as the old priest knew, for he was only testing Saint Gregory–but not an absolute.

This is referred to symbolically by the prophet Ezekiel: “Then brought he me the way of the north gate before the house: and I looked, and, behold, the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord: and I fell upon my face. And the Lord said unto me, Son of man, mark well,… mark well the entering in of the house, with every going forth” (Ezekiel 44:4, 5). In the psychic anatomy of the human being, the head is “House of the Lord,” the Temple of God, the entire body being the City of God. The right side of the body (and the brain) is “east,” the left is “west,” the back is “south” and the front is “north.” The nosetip is the “north gate” of the Temple, and “the entering in of the house, with every going forth” are the inhaling and exhaling breaths which we are to “mark well.”

**Hesychia: Breath Meditation**

I have used the Pali term anapanasati because it best conveys what the practice of meditation should be: the awareness of exhalation and inhalation. But in the tradition of the Christian East the word commonly used for meditation is the Greek word *Hesychia*: the Silence.

Saint Gregory Palamas wrote extensively on Hesychia in the fourteenth century. In one essay he said: “We counsel those newly embarked on the spiritual path to draw their intellect into themselves by means of their breathing.” Here we have classical anapanasati:
observance of the in-going and out-going breaths. Saint Gregory further cites Saint Paul’s statement that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit–the Holy Breath. It is our breathing that is the primary manifestation of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in us, and for that reason it is possible to attain awareness of the indwelling Divinity through the merging of our awareness into the breath. He then cites the mystical writings of Saint Dionysius the Areopagite which speak of the “circular movement” in meditation—an expression found also in Buddhist writings on anapanasati, and which refers to the inhalations and exhalations being so smooth and continuous that they are like a single, circular movement rather than two separated movements broken by pauses, however slight, between inhaling and exhaling.

“It is not out of place to teach [seekers] to bring their intellect within themselves by means of their breathing,” concludes Saint Gregory. Therefore it is reasonable to “recommend them to pay attention to the exhalation and inhalation of their breath, so that while they are watching it the intellect, too, may be held in check....This control of the breathing may, indeed, be regarded as a spontaneous consequence of paying attention to the intellect; for the breath is always quietly inhaled and exhaled at moments of intense concentration, especially in the case of those who practice stillness [hesychia] both bodily and mentally.”

The Hesychast Fathers were keenly aware that the mind is a field of reflective energies. They further realized that the shaping of the mind into “waves” in the form of sensory impressions and thought patterns was an impairment-veiling of the true consciousness that lay behind it. Water which is broken up by waves and swirls not only cannot act as an accurate reflective mirror, it conveys a distortion of whatever it reflects. These agitations of the mind are like radio static or television interference which can distort, reduce, or altogether eliminate the message. And they discovered that it is the breath which ties us to the mind. What is needed, then, is to get to the root of the breath and untie the “knot” that binds us to the mind and the entire range of relative experience. Breath awareness was the “untying” which they employed.

**Hesychia: Stillness**

“Commune with your own heart...and be still” (Psalms 4:4). Hesychia is frequently translated “Stillness,” and this is quite
appropriate because in Breath Meditation we are silently aware so that in time the mind and heart become absolutely still–unmoving. When questioned about a profound interior experience he had undergone, Elder Joseph the Cave-dweller of Athos responded: “At such times as those, the mind stops altogether.” And we are consciously seeking the same.

A perfect symbol of this is given in the book of Acts: “He commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him” (Acts 8:38). To make the chariot of the mind stand still and descend into the stream of the breath to be baptized in the Silence is to be baptized in Christ, in the Word, and to be truly Christed (Christened). “For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27).

Hesychia is also referred to as “rest”–the equivalent of Yoga Nidra. When Jesus said: “Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while,” it was also meant to be a symbol of entering into silence, a “desert” free from thoughts and sense impressions. In the book of Hebrews we find: “There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God” (4:9), meaning the highest–seventh–level of consciousness. “For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his. Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest” (4:10, 11). “When he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven” (Revelation 8:1).

Hesychia: “Attention”

What, then, is real meditation? It is a single thing: the cultivation of consciousness. That is why Jesus continually exhorted His disciples to “watch,” to simply be silently aware in the depths of their being (Matthew 21:42; 25:13; 26:41). He also used the simile of people waiting with burning lamps (Luke 12:35) to give the idea that we are silent in a negative or blank sense, but are conscious–even alight with consciousness. And consciousness is silent.

In many texts Hesychia it is simply called “attention.” This is because Hesychia is not “prayer” in the usual sense of verbalization, but rather is the cultivation of prajna–awareness–through observation of (attention on) the breath. The use of the simple word “attention” also implies the truth so often spoken by Jesus that the kingdom of God is right at hand–we need only turn around and there it is. (“Repent” is a
completely inaccurate translation of metanionite that means to turn around 180 degrees.) As Buddha said: “Turn around, and behold! the other shore.” For this reason, in meditation we need to keep silence in the absolute sense and simply be aware of awareness, to be still and know—to practice sati.

Attention is the effective element of Breath Meditation, awareness of the movements of the subtle breath at the nosetip. This is accomplished through the sense of touch. Interestingly, Nikitas Stithatos, the disciple and biographer of Saint Symeon the New Theologian, wrote about this in On the Practice of the Virtues: “If you refer the activities of the outer senses back to their inner counterparts—exposing your sight to the intellect, the beholder of the light of life, your hearing to the judgment of the soul, your taste to the discrimination of the intelligence, your sense of smell to the understanding of the intellect, and relating your sense of touch to the watchfulness of the heart—you will lead an angelic life on earth; while being and appearing as a man among men, you will also be an angel coexisting with angels and spiritually conscious in the same way as they are” (8).

Mary, the sister of Lazarus, is a perfect example of both stillness and attention: “Now it came to pass, as they went, that Jesus entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus’ feet, and heard his word. But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me. And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: but one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:38-42). Mary chose the best part by not doing anything but sitting still and being aware, whereas Martha was running around doing many things. Martha practices methods; Mary practices awareness.

This was dramatically illustrated by David when he was just a teenage boy. In the seventeenth chapter of First Samuel we are told that when he went to being food to his brothers who were fighting the Philistines he found everyone, including the king, terrified of the gigantic warrior Goliath and unwilling to fight him. Seeing this, David offered to fight the giant. Willing to try anything but fight himself, King
Saul put his own armor on the boy along with a brass helmet and a coat of chain mail. David buckled on his own sword and started to go, but he stopped and said that he could not fight with all those encumbrances. So he took them all off and left them behind—including his sword—taking with him only his slingshot, the toy of a child and no weapon at all. But onward he went, faced and challenged Goliath, and killed him with a single stone hurled from his sling. There is lesson for the aspiring yogi in this. All kinds of cumbrances in the forms of observances, recitations, and meditation methods are being thrust on us from every side by the professionals of religion and yoga—each one insisting that without their wares and trappings we either cannot succeed or will be hindered and delayed in our practice without them. (It is amazing how many “jet-plane” routes to God have surfaced in the last half a century, and how no one that has taken them has yet been seen to arrive—anywhere.) But if we engage in the simple practice of observing the breath—which he have had from birth—we will find like David that the simple thing works the best and does it well, that there is a marvelous sophistication to such simplicity. I knew a yogi that had traveled several “jet planes” over the course of many years. After only a few days’ of Breath Meditation experience he said: “This is what I thought would happen to me when I took up yoga over forty years ago.”

Hesychia: Prayer of the Heart

“But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet” (Matthew 6:6). The Hesychast Fathers say that the “closet” referred to by Jesus is the heart—not the physical heart, but the metaphysical heart, the core of our being: our pure spirit consciousness. In other word, the heart is our true self. And in hesychastic texts we are told to “lead the mind into the heart by means of the breath,” for through the breath we can enter into spirit.

Hesychia is also called Prayer of the Heart. Prayer (prosevke) means to draw near, to enter into something. “Heart” (kardia) means the absolute center, the core, of our being. Ramana Maharshi made this observation: “The real Heart is just consciousness in its native purity. The Self is also that consciousness. So it follows that the Self is itself the Heart” (The Power of the Presence, vol. 3, p. 179). Entering into the consciousness that is our true self through Breath Meditation is thus the Prayer of the

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Heart.

Silence As Prayer

The religions of the East fundamentally understand that God is utterly beyond all words or thought of any kind, that communion with God must necessarily occur beyond the mind in the silence of the spirit whose nature is pure consciousness. Although, beginning with Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, Christian writers and mystics have said the same thing, over time words and thoughts have almost completely taken over the province of spiritual life, including meditation. So much so that simple silence is considered by nearly all Christians as meaningless and worthless. Therefore I am including the following extensive section to assure you that the silent awareness of breath meditation is the highest form of prayer in the Christian tradition as well.

Saint Issac of Syria

The greatest Hesychast [Keeper of Silence] of the Eastern Christian Church was Saint Isaac of Syria, and his teachings on interior life are found in a large number of essays. In the twenty-third essay he has this to say about “spiritual prayer,” which is pure silence, as contrasted with “word prayer” that remains in the domain of the mind and cannot, despite its efforts, reach into the realm of the spirit where truth resides. For when the awareness moves into spiritual prayer “it no longer possesses prayer, or movement, or emotion, or control, or acts of will, or petition, or desire, or longing for any ‘thing’ in this world or the next. Therefore there exists no ‘prayer’” in this world of the spirit.” Although there are many gears in the prayer machine, since it is a product of the mind machine: “beyond this boundary there is awestruck wonder and not prayer. For what pertains to prayer has ceased, while a certain divine vision remains, and the mind does not pray a prayer. Every type of prayer arises from a movement of the mind, but once the awareness enters into spiritual territory, there is no longer any kind of prayer. Prayer is one thing, but the divine vision is another....in which the reaper stands in ecstasy before the unutterable sight....Then he remains entirely motionless in his divine vision.” For “what lies beyond cannot be called prayer.” And “it is blasphemous for a created being to
say that spiritual prayer can be ‘prayed’ at all. For any prayer that can be
prayed is inferior to what is spiritual…. This is because “whenever the
intellect moves, it is found in the natural realm; but once it enters into
that other realm, it ceases from prayer. The saints of the ages to come
do not pray with prayer when their intellects have been swallowed up
by the Spirit, but rather with awestruck wonder they dwell in that
gladdening glory….Let no one blaspheme and dare to affirm that it is
possible to ‘pray’ spiritual prayer.”

Saint Isaac then explains how this can be. “At that moment the
intellect is yonder, above prayer, and by the discovery of something
better, prayer is abandoned. Then the intellect does not pray with
prayer, but it gazes in ecstasy at incomprehensible things which surpass
this mortal world, and it is silenced by its ignorance of all that is found
there. This is the unknowing which has been called more sublime than
knowledge.”

In his sixty-fifth discourse the saint gives us a maxim that sums it all
up: “Silence is a mystery of the age to come, but words are instruments
of this world.” Another translation is: “Silence is the mystery of the
future age, while words are mere implements of this world.”

May we ever seek the holiness that Saint Isaac calls “the secret
silence of the Lord,” the Silence that is the Lord.

Margery Kempe
Jesus said to the medieval English mystic, Margery Kempe: “If you
wore a hair shirt, fasted on bread and water, and said a thousand ‘Our
Fathers’ every day, you would not be as pleasing to Me as you are when
you keep silence and allow Me to speak in your soul….But you do not
believe me, and go on telling your beads.”

Saint Albert the Great (On Cleaving to God)
“You should not be much concerned about tangible devotion, the
experience of sweetness or tears, but rather that you should be mentally
united with God within yourself by a good will in your intellect. For
what pleases God above everything is a mind free from imaginations,
that is images, ideas and the representations of created things. It befits
a monk to be indifferent to everything created so that he can turn easily
and barely to God alone within himself, be empty for him and cleave to
him….‘For one thing is necessary’ (Luke 10:42). You will experience
because of it great grace, helping you towards the acquisition of nakedness of mind and simplicity of heart. Indeed this One Thing is very much present with you if you have made yourself bare of imaginations and all other entanglements, and you will soon experience that this is so—namely when you can be empty and cleave to God with a naked and resolute mind.”

“Grasp every opportunity when you can find the place, time and means to devote yourself to silence and contemplation, and gathering the secret fruits of silence, so that you can escape the shipwreck of this present age and avoid the restless agitation of the noisy world. For this reason apply yourself at all times to purity, clarity and peace of heart above all things, so that, so far as possible, you can keep the doors of your heart resolutely barred to the forms and images of the physical senses and worldly imaginations by shutting off the doors of the physical senses and turning within yourself. After all, purity of heart is recognized as the most important thing among all spiritual practices, as its final aim, and the reward for all the labours that a spiritual-minded person and true religious may undertake in this life.”

“So simplify your heart with all care, diligence and effort so that still and at peace from the products of the imagination you can turn round and remain always in the Lord within yourself, as if your mind were already in the now of eternity, that is of the godhead. You must always keep the eye of your mind clear and still. You must guard your understanding from daydreams and thoughts of earthly things. In just this way your whole mind gathered up with all its powers and faculties in God, may become one spirit with him, in whom the supreme perfection of life is known to consist.

“This is the true union of spirit and love by which a man is made compliant to all the impulses of the supreme and eternal will, so that he becomes by grace what God is by nature.”

“What is more, as is said in the book On the Spirit and the Soul (of St. Augustine), to ascend to God means to enter into oneself. He who entering within and penetrating his inmost nature, goes beyond himself, he is truly ascending to God.”
Above all it is important for you to keep your mind bare—without imaginations and images and free of any sort of entanglement, so that you are not concerned about either the world, friends, prosperity or adversity, or anything present, past or future, whether in yourself or in others—not even your own sins. But consider yourself with a certain pure simplicity to be alone with God outside the world, and as if your mind were already in eternity and separated from the body so that it will certainly not bother about worldly things or be concerned about the state of the world, about peace or war, about good weather or rain, or about anything at all in this world, but with complete docility will turn to God alone, be empty for him and cleave to him....And let your spirit be cleansed in this way from all imaginations, coverings and things obscuring its vision, like an angel not tied to a body, who is not hindered by the works of the flesh nor tangled in vain and wandering thoughts.

**Meister Eckhart**

“If all images are detached from the soul, and it contemplates only the Simple One, then the soul’s naked being finds the naked, formless being of the divine unity, which is there a being above being, accepting and reposing in itself. Ah, marvel of marvels how noble is that acceptance, when the soul’s being can accept nothing else than the naked unity of God!” (*Be Renewed in Your Spirit*)

**Walter Hilton** (*The Ladder of Perfection*)

“This opening of the spiritual eye is that lightsome darkness and rich nough that I spake of before, and it may be called purity of spirit and spiritual rest, inward stillness and peace of conscience, highness of thought and loneliness of soul, a lively feeling of grace and retiredness of heart, the watchful sleep of the spouse and tasting of heavenly savor, burning in love and shining in light, the gate of Contemplation and reforming in feeling. And this is the *waking sleep of the Spouse*, of the which the Scripture thus: *I sleep, and my heart waketh.*

**Theologia Germanica**

“It hath been asked whether it be possible for the soul, while it is yet in the body, to reach so high as to cast a, glance into eternity, and receive a foretaste of eternal life and eternal blessedness. This is
commonly denied; and truly so in a sense. For it indeed cannot be so long as the soul is taking heed to the body, and the things which minister and appertain thereto, and to time and the creature, and is disturbed and troubled and distracted thereby. For if the soul shall rise to such a state, she must be quite pure, wholly stripped and bare of all images, and be entirely separate from all creatures, and above all from herself. Now many think this is not to be done and is impossible in this present time. But St. Dionysius maintains that it is possible, as we find from his words in his Epistle to Timothy, where he saith: ‘For the beholding of the hidden things of God, shalt thou forsake sense and the things of the flesh, and all that the senses can apprehend, and that reason of her own powers can bring forth, and all things created and uncreated that reason is able to comprehend and know, and shalt take thy stand upon an utter abandonment of thyself, and as knowing none of the aforesaid things, and enter into union with Him who is, and who is above all existence and all knowledge.’ Now if he did not hold this to be possible in this present time, why should he teach it and enjoin it on us in this present time. But it behoveth you to know that a master hath said on this passage of St. Dionysius, that it is possible, and may happen to a man often, till he become so accustomed to it, as to be able to look into eternity whenever he will. For when a thing is at first very hard to a man and strange, and seemingly quite impossible, if he put all his strength and energy into it, and persevere therein, that will afterward grow quite light and easy, which he at first thought quite out of reach, seeing that it is of no use to begin any work, unless it may be brought to a good end.

“And a single one of these excellent glances is better, worthier, higher and more pleasing to God, than all that the creature can perform as a creature. And as soon as a man turneth himself in spirit, and with his whole heart and mind entereth into the mind of God which is above time, all that ever he hath lost is restored in a moment. And if a man were to do thus a thousand times in a day, each time a fresh and real union would take place; and in this sweet and divine work standeth the truest and fullest union that may be in this present time. For he who hath attained thereto, asketh nothing further, for he hath found the Kingdom of Heaven and Eternal Life on earth.” (Chapter Eight)

Saint John of the Cross
“From what has been said it is to be inferred that, in order for the understanding to be prepared for this Divine union, it must be pure and void of all that pertains to sense, and detached and freed from all that can clearly be apprehended by the understanding, profoundly hushed and put to silence.”

“Since we are here giving instruction to those who would progress farther in contemplation, even to union with God, to which end all of these means and exercises of sense concerning the faculties must recede into the background, and be put to silence, to the end that God may of His own accord work Divine union in the soul, it is necessary to proceed by this method of disencumbering and emptying the soul, and causing it to reject the natural jurisdiction and operations of the faculties, so that they may become capable of infusion and illumination from supernatural sources; for their capacity cannot attain to so lofty an experience, but will rather hinder it, if it be not disregarded.... Wherefore it is best to learn to silence the faculties and to cause them to be still, so that God may speak. For, as we have said, in order to attain to this state the natural operations must be completely disregarded, and this happens, as the Prophet says, when the soul comes into solitude, according to these its faculties, and God speaks to its heart. [Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her. Hosea 2:14].

“...In this state we shut the door to all things whence distraction may come, causing the memory to be still and dumb, and the ear of the spirit to be attentive, in silence, to God alone, saying with the Prophet: ‘Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth’ [I Samuel 3:10]. It was thus that the Spouse in the Songs said that his Bride should be, in these words: ‘My sister is a garden enclosed and a fountain sealed up’ [Song of Solomon 4:12]–that is to say, enclosed and sealed up against all things that may enter.

“Let the soul, then, remain ‘enclosed,’ without anxieties and troubles, and He that entered in bodily form to His disciples when the doors were shut, and gave them peace [John 20:19], though they neither knew nor thought that this was possible nor knew how it was possible, will enter spiritually into the soul, without its knowing how He does so, when the doors of its faculties–memory, understanding and
will—are enclosed against all apprehensions. And He will fill them with peace, coming down upon the soul, as the prophet says, like a river of peace [Isaiah 48:18], and taking it from all the misgivings and suspicions, disturbances and darknesses which caused it to fear that it was lost or was on the way to being so. Let it not grow careless about prayer, and let it wait in detachment and emptiness, for its blessings will not tarry.”

(Spiritual Canticle)

“Contemplation, is called ‘night,’ because contemplation is dim; and that is the reason why it is also called mystical theology—that is, the secret or hidden wisdom of God, where, without the sound of words, or the intervention of any bodily or spiritual sense, as it were in silence and in repose, in the darkness of sense and nature, God teaches the soul—and the soul knows not how—in a most secret and hidden way.

“Some spiritual writers call this ‘understanding without understanding,’ because it does not take place in what philosophers call the active understanding which is conversant with the forms, fancies, and apprehensions of the physical faculties, but in the understanding as it is possible and passive, which without receiving such forms receives passively only the substantial knowledge of them free from all imagery. This occurs without effort or exertion on its part, and for this reason contemplation is called night, in which the soul through the channel of its transformation learns in this life that it already possesses, in a supreme degree, this divine fruition, together with its beauty.”

Miguel Molinos (The Spiritual Guide)

“Contemplation [is] naked, pure and internal.”

“There are three kinds of Silence; the first is of Words, the Second of Desires, and the third of Thoughts. The first is perfect; the second more perfect; and the third more perfect. In the first, that is, of words, Virtue is acquired; in the second, to wit, of Desires, quietness is attained to; in the third of Thoughts, Internal Recollection is gained. By not speaking, not desiring, and not thinking, one arrives at the true and perfect Mystical Silence, wherein God speaks with the Soul, communicates himself to it, and in the Abyss of its own Depth, teaches it the most perfect and exalted Wisdom.
“He calls and guides it to this inward Solitude, and mystical Silence, when he says, that he will speak to it alone, in the most secret and hidden part of the Heart. Thou art to keep thy self in this mystical Silence, if thou wouldest hear the sweet and divine Voice. It is not enough for gaining this Treasure, to forsake the World, nor to renounce thine own Desires, and all things created; if thou wean not thy self from all Desires and Thoughts. Rest in this mystical Silence, and open the Door, that so God may communicate himself unto thee, unite with thee, and transform thee into himself.

“The perfection of the Soul consists not in speaking nor in thinking much on God; but in loving him sufficiently: This love is attained to by means of perfect Resignation and internal Silence, all consists in Works: The love of God has but few Words. Thus St. John the Evangelist confirms and inculcates it: “My little Children, let us not love in Word, neither in Tongue, but in Deed and in Truth” (I John 3:18).

“Thou art clearly convinced now, that perfect Love consists not in amorous Acts, nor tender Ejaculations, nor yet in the internal Acts, wherein thou tellest God, that thou hast an infinite Love for him, and thou lovest him more than thy self. It may be that at that time thou seekest more thy self, and the love of thy self, than the true Love of God, Because Love consists in Works, and not in fair Discourses.

“That a rational Creature may understand the secret desire and intention of thy Heart, there is a necessity that thou shouldest express it to him in Words. But God who searches the Hearts, standeth not in need that thou shouldest make profession and assure him of it; nor does he rest satisfied, as the Evangelist says, with Love in Word nor in Tongue, but with that which is true and indeed. What avails it to tell them with great zeal and fervor, that thou tenderly and perfectly lovest him above all things, if at one bitter word, or slight injury, thou doest not resign thy self, nor are mortified for the love of him? A manifest proof that thy love was a love in Tongue and not in Deed.

“Strive to be resigned in all things with Silence, and in so doing, without saying that thou lovest him, thou wilt attain to the most perfect quiet, effectual and true love. St. Peter most affectionately told the Lord, that for his sake he was ready, willingly to lay down his Life; but at the word of a young Damsel, he denied him, and there was an end of his Zeal. Mary Magdelen said not a word, and yet the Lord himself taken with her perfect Love, became her Panegyrist, saying that
she had loved much. It is internally, then, that with dumb Silence, the
most perfect Virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity are practiced, without
any necessity of telling God, that thou lovest him, hopest and believest
in him; because the Lord knows better than thou dost, what the
internal Motions of thy Heart are.

“How well was that pure act of Love understood and practiced by
that profound and great mystic, the Venerable Gregory Lopez, whose
whole Life was a continual Prayer, and a continued Act of
Contemplation; and of so pure and spiritual Love of God, that it never
gave way to Affections and sensible Sentiments:

“Having for the space of three Years continued that Ejaculation, Thy
will be done in Time, and in Eternity; repeating it as often as he breathed;
God Almighty discovered to him, that infinite Treasure of the pure and
continued Act of Faith and Love, with Silence and Resignation: so that
he came to say, That during the thirty six Years he lived after, he always
continued in his inward Man; that pure Act of Love, without ever
uttering the least Petition, Ejaculation, or any thing that was Sensible,
or sprung from Nature. O Incarnate Seraphim, and Deified Man! How
well didst thou know how to dive into that internal and mystical
Silence, and to distinguish betwixt the outward and inward Man?”

“You must know, that when once the Soul is habituated to internal
Recollection, then God uses to take it alone by it self, and raise it more
then it knows, to a complete repose, where he sweetly and inwardly
infuses in it his Light, his Love and his Strength, enkindling and
inflaming it with a true disposition to all manner of Virtue.

“There the Divine Spouse, suspending its Powers, puts it to sleep in
a most sweet and pleasant rest: There it sleeps, and quietly receives and
enjoys (without knowing it ) what it enjoys, with a most lovely and
charming Calm: There the Soul raised and lifted up to this passive
State, becomes united to its greatest Good, without costing it any
trouble or pains for this Union: There in that supreme Region, and
sacred Temple of the Soul, that greatest Good takes its Complacency,
manifests it self, and creates a relish from the Creature, in a way above
Sense and all humane understanding: There also only the pure Spirit,
who is God, (the purity of the Soul being incapable of sensible things)
rules it, and gets the mastership of it, communicating to it its
illustrations, and those Sentiments which are necessary for the most
pure and perfect Union.

“The Soul coming to itself again from these sweet and divine Embracings, becomes rich in light and love, and a mighty esteem of the divine Greatness, and the knowledge of its own Misery, finding itself all changed divinely, and disposed to embrace, to suffer, and to practice perfect Virtue.

“A simple, pure, infused, and perfect Contemplation, therefore is a known and inward manifestation which God gives of himself, of his goodness, of his Peace, of his sweetness, whose object is God, pure, unspeakable, abstracted from all particular thoughts, within an inward silence: but it is God delights us, God that draws us, God that sweetly raises us in a spiritual and pure manner, an admirable gift, which the divine Majesty bestows to whom he will, as he will, and when he will, and for what time he will, though the state of this Life be rather a state of the cross of Patience, of humility, and of suffering, than of enjoying.

“Never wilt thou enjoy this divine Nectar, till thou art advanced in Virtue and inward Mortification; till thou doest heartily endeavor to fix in thy Soul a great Peace, silence, forgetfulness and internal solitude: How is it possible to hear the sweet, inward and powerful Voice of God in the midst of the noise and tumults of the Creatures? And how can the pure spirit be heard in the midst of Considerations and discourses of Artifice? If the Soul will not continually dye in it self, denying it self to all these Materialities and satisfactions, the Contemplation can be no more but a mere vanity, a vain complacency and Presumption.”

The Wisdom of Madame Guyon

“[Meditation is] an eager sinking into ourselves, restraining all our senses from wandering abroad: this serves to extricate us, in the first instance, from numerous distractions, to remove us far from external objects, and to bring us nigh to God, Who is only to be found in our inmost center, which is the Holy of Holies wherein He dwells. He has even promised to come and make His abode with him that doeth His will (John 14:23). St. Augustine blames himself for the time he had lost in not having sought God, from the first, in this manner of prayer.”

“When...we gradually begin to relish silence and repose, this experimental enjoyment of the presence of God introduces the soul into [contemplation].”
“The soul that is tranquil and peaceful in prayer, sinks frequently into a mystic slumber, wherein all its powers are at rest, till it is wholly fitted for that state, of which it enjoys these transient anticipations. You see that in this process the soul is led naturally, without trouble, effort, art or study.

“The interior is not a stronghold, to be taken by storm and violence; but a kingdom of peace.

“The most sublime attainments in religion, are those which are easiest reached; the most necessary ordinances are the least difficult. It is thus also in natural things; if you would reach the sea, embark on a river, and you will be conveyed to it insensibly and without exertion. Would you go to God, follow this sweet and simple path, and you will arrive at the desired object, with an ease and expedition that will amaze you....but those who expect all from themselves, may hear this rebuke of God by his prophet Isaiah, ‘Ye have wearied yourselves in the multiplicity of your ways, and have not said, Let us rest in peace’ (Isaiah 57:10).”

Some persons, when they hear of the prayer of silence, falsely imagine that the soul remains stupid, dead, and inactive; but it unquestionably acts more nobly and more extensively than it had ever done before; for God himself is its mover, and it now acts by the agency of his Spirit. St. Paul would have us led by the Spirit of God (Romans 8:14).”

(These quotations are taken from A Short and Very Easy Method of Prayer by the seventeenth-century French mystic Madame Guyon.)

**Johannes Kelpius** (A Short, Easy, and Comprehensive Method of Prayer)

“Internal Prayer is so weighty a Point, that one may call it the only Means to attain Perfection in this Life,...so this inward Prayer suits all Persons. It is no new Invention, as some will say, seeing Jesus Christ spent his whole Life in inward Prayer; and the Evangelist Luke tells us that he continued in it whole Nights....Inward Prayer is not less for every one, than Faith, Hope, and Charity or Love, which are Virtues belonging properly to true Christians....Therefore all are called to this Way and to this End, to will naught but what God wills, namely
through the Means of inward Prayer to return into their Origin, which is God.”

“Inward Prayer is the Nourishment of the Soul; it is in this holy Rest that the Soul obtains that Strength which is so needful for her…the Prayer of the Heart, without Words or Thoughts.

“For one may pray without forming or uttering of any Words, without Consideration or Speculation of the Mind, without holding rational Discourses, or making Conclusions, yea, without knowing the least Thing in a Manner relative to the outward Senses: and this Prayer is the Prayer of the Heart, the unutterable Prayer; [in which] the necessitous and straitened Heart lays itself open before God.”

“The Soul has no more to do the whole time of Prayer but to remain in Peace and Silence.”

“This is properly the Prayer of the pure Giving-up or Presentation, or what is called the Prayer of Innocence; which prays without saying any thing, and awaiteth all without asking any thing, and desires with Submission to the Will of God, whether he will grant what is desired or deny it; and obtains more than it dare venture to pray for….here the Soul does nothing else but present herself before God; which is something very innocent.”

“The Soul having thus presented herself before God, he instructs her in the Way of his Commandments: for God takes Delight in instructing the Soul, as soon as the Soul is attentive.

Even this I desire of you, that your Prayers may be simple, without a Multiplicity of Words, so that God, who pours out his Spirit upon the Simple, may himself be your Prayer: simple in Thoughts, abandoning and not entertaining them; simple in Understanding, depending wholly upon God.”

“For our parts, we should and can do so much as to refrain from all Thoughts and Words, (those excepted to which the Circumstances of our Condition, Business and Office oblige us) and to avoid all rational Cogitations, all Forms and Figures, not only during the Time of our Prayer, but also all Day long, that as soon as they appear we suppress"
them without Admittance.

“I have long ago very well conceived how necessary it is not to suffer any Thought to enter into the Mind, neither good nor bad, and to be free from all Figures and Images, in order to perform the inward Prayer.”

“We ought not to believe, that such a State of inward Silence is Indolence or Loss of Time; by no means: on the contrary, the Soul is then more active than ever, since she is practicing Faith, Hope and Love; Faith, in that she believes in God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and is resigned to him, who is so truly present in her as he is in Heaven; Hope, since she would by no means abide in this State of inward Silence and Prayer, if she did not hope thereby to please God; but she practices still better the Virtue of Love, in that she is all this while resigned and given up to the Will of God.

“Let this then henceforth be our Prayer: because in such a reverential Silence the great Virtues are so nobly practiced, but chiefly for the sake of pure Love.”

“Now where the Spirit of God is, there is Freedom.... Therefore there must be no compelling to any particular Degree of Prayer, but to open the Heart to the Holy Spirit, and resign it wholly to him.”

“Accordingly we must pray and walk in the divine Presence, be not too busy with outward Things, keep the Flesh in Subjection, deny ourselves and our inordinate Inclinations, since this must keep Pace with the inward Prayer, for that from this is inseparable, for we must not be deceived: without inward Prayer there is no Conquest over the Flesh, and without this Conquest over the Flesh, no true inward Prayer, and without this, the one and the other is no Conversion, no true internal Life, no Perfection or Christianity.

“Thus we must be very faithful in the Beginning to accustom ourselves to suppress and mortify all Evils, that nothing may escape our Notice; and afterwards in Perseverance in a spiritual Life, will more Care be required to free ourselves from our own Self-workings, and admit the Workings of God in their Room, not to work and pray by our own Power, but that the Spirit of God in us may do it.

“In this State we perform a powerful Prayer, the Prayer of Jesus
Christ, and through his Spirit: The Soul can then no more pray with Cogitation, and make conclusive Reasonings, since she is found in a continual and working Prayer. All what the Soul is and what is in her, prays through and in Jesus Christ; and being not intent upon her own Will, nor thinking discerningly on what she prays for, she receives at once what she has need of. O what Power has Prayer with God! But what Prayer? The inward Prayer of Silence, the Inclination of the Heart to God, without Thoughts, Words or Images; when we expect and wait for all from the Power and Mercy of God. Those who perform this Prayer, obtain therein so much Strength that they are not only comforted themselves, but they also comfort others who are oppressed.”

“We must also take diligent Care with what People we converse; so must we also reserve the needful Hours wherein to converse with no Man, but with God in Prayer. For I could never yet conceive how a Man could be right in his Internals, and yet be negligent in Prayer.”

“Let us ascend the Mountain with Jesus Christ; let us pray as he has prayed; let us contemplate, let us love; so shall we perform God’s Prayer.

“O divine Jesus! I join with thee in thy Prayer which thou hast in Solitude by Night prayed; in this Prayer of God grant that we may perform no other Prayer.

“O God! send this internal Spirit over the whole Earth; so will it be a-new created. Let this Spirit rest on the Waters of thy usual and wonted Grace, which thou offereth to all Men; so will it distribute an overflowing Fruitfulness. O give us new Hearts! Amen, O Jesus!”

Saint Seraphim of Sarov

Nicholas A. Motovilov recorded a conversation in the first half of the nineteenth century with the renowned Russian Orthodox mystic, Saint Seraphim of Sarov, on the subject of the purpose of the Christian life—which the saint said was one thing alone: the acquisition of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Breath. Here are the saint’s relevant comments about the necessity for silence in interior practice:

“We must pray only until God the Holy Spirit descends on us…. And when He deigns to visit us, we must stop praying….That is why is is
said, ‘Be still and know that I am God (Psalms 45:10)….I will tell you in the name of God that...[when] out Lord God the Holy Spirit condescends to visit us, and comes to us in the plenitude of His unutterable goodness, we must be dead to prayer, too....At the descent of the Holy Spirit we must remain in complete silence” (Saint Seraphim, Wonderworker of Sarov, pp. 123, 124). Later he cited the words of Job: “All the while my breath is in me, and the spirit of God is in my nostrils” (Job 27:3).

Emily Bronte
Though it is not commonly recognized, the British novelist, Emily Bronte, was a highly developed mystic, as is shown in her poetry. In her final poem, written not long before her death and addressed to God, she says: “Thou art Being and Breath,” affirming the dual character of Divinity as both Consciousness and Energy, which is therefore reflected in us who can, by means of the breath, penetrate into the heart of being.

Bennett A. Brockman (The Prayer of Silence)
“The Prayer of Silence is a receptive prayer of resting in God and being open to God’s loving, transforming presence. Its key is the willingness to be changed by God’s indwelling; acknowledging our imperfection as not a condemnation, but an invitation to alteration.”

“The Prayer of Silence is at the same time a relationship with God and a discipline fostering that relationship.”

“It focuses on attention to the breath as the symbol of the divine presence.”

“In this prayer we offer ourselves to God in silence, in the willingness to be transformed more completely into the image of God in which we were created. We acknowledge that God is beyond our human knowing, while believing that God desires only that which is eternally good for us.”

“We enter into the presence of God with our deepest self, as we are right now, with all of our self with our deepest intention,
acknowledging that God matters above *everything* else.”

“Paying attention to our breath enables us to recognize passing thoughts as merely that—passing thoughts. Only God is permanent; everything else is changing, moment by moment. Trying to hold on to anything merely frustrates us and makes us anxious.”

“Most of our thoughts can be gently ignored by returning our consciousness to the breathing, knowing that we thereby are lingering in the presence of God, and that our desire to do so is in fact pleasing to God, welcomed by God—and blessed by God.”

“We gently return to the awareness of breathing, as if it were God’s spirit (breath) breathing in us.”

“Practice has revealed that the virtue of this prayer form is not in ‘doing it well,’ but in practicing it consistently and in consistently returning to awareness of breath as the focus on and receptiveness to God.”

“We expect nothing during the time of prayer, nor do we celebrate mental phenomena that might occur; nor do we aim for a particular goal other than our aim to be in the presence of God and to be transformed into God’s likeness by that experience.”

“Rather, we realize that the fruits of the Prayer of Silence are in the way we are in the world:

- in a diminishing of anxiety and egoism;
- in a deepening of faith;
- in a serenity in living out our faith in more deeply grounded ways, as our deepest self—the self created in God’s image—begins to emerge, as we experience ourselves participating in the divine eternal life more completely and more willingly;
- in moving through the world we inhabit with compassion and love defining us;
- in our being able fully to delight in the moment that is—holding on to it very lightly;

*It is not so much that things have changed, as it is that our relationship to*
things has changed.”

“We come to realize that the actions of our lives, being grounded in this prayer, become the fruits of this prayer also.”

“We are less ‘attached’ to things—little irritations irritate less, disappointments leave us less crestfallen or angry. We are able to welcome God’s loving transformation of us—letting go of the ‘don’t mess with me, I’m perfect just like I am’ attitude and of the ‘I must control my world’ attitude.

“We are more continuously mindful of the presence of God, of the divine Self in which we move and have our being, which is continually reshaping us in the divine image in concert with our attentiveness:

“It is helpful to recall that the purpose of the mind is to think; it is impossible to turn off our thinking. Therefore we do not get exasperated with ourselves that our attentiveness wanders; rather, we simply, gently, as soon as we become aware of wandering, return to God, paying attention to our breath. Let the thought be, and return to the breath.”

“Remember that the virtue of this prayer is in returning; returning signifies our belief that God is supremely important. Remember also that we do not return to a state of mind or to a thought or image, but to our intention of being in God’s presence and our willingness to be transformed by God’s presence.”

The Philokalia

In the eighteenth century, two saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church, Saint Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain and Saint Makarios of Corinth, compiled a five-volume collection of writings from the fourth to fifteenth centuries on Hesychia which they entitled The Philokalia—The Love of the Good. All the following extracts relevant to Breath Meditation are from that collection. The expressions “attention,” watchfulness,” “stillness,” and “silence” all refer to the practice of silent, pure awareness.
Saint Antony the Great

“By virtue of his body man is mortal: and by virtue of his intellect and intelligence he is immortal. Through silence you come to understanding; having understood, you give expression. It is in silence that the intellect gives birth to the intelligence; and the thankful intelligence offered to God is man’s salvation.”

“A true man is one who understands that the soul is divine and immortal, being God’s breath.”

“The soul is a breath of God.”

Saint Diadochos of Photiki

“The unilluminated should not embark on spiritual speculations nor, on the other hand, should anyone try to speak while the light of the Holy Spirit is shining richly upon him. For where there is emptiness, ignorance is also to be found, but where there is richness of the Spirit, no speech is possible. At such a time the soul is drunk with the love of God and, with voice silent, delights in His glory.”

“Spiritual knowledge comes through deep stillness.”

“When [the intellect] is at peace in times of stillness, it is more and more renewed in its swift and effortless understanding of divine truth, and with great humility it advances in its knowledge of discrimination.”

In one section the saint speaks of “…the beauty of silence.”

Evagrius the Solitary

“Let the monk…win the blessings of stillness. For the practice of stillness is full of joy and beauty: its yoke is easy and its burden light.

“...safeguard the way of stillness. …the science of stillness.”

Saint Gregory of Sinai

“Ignore all images, whether sensory or conceptual, that rise up from the heart. For stillness means the shedding of all thoughts for a time, even those which are divine and engendered by the Spirit; otherwise through giving them our attention because they are good we will lose
what is better."

“If while engaged in spiritual work you see a light or a fire outside you, or a form supposedly of Christ or of an angel or of someone else, reject it. And do not pay court to images, lest you allow them to stamp themselves on your intellect."

“According to Saint John Klimakos, ‘stillness is the shedding of thoughts,’ whether of sensible or of intelligible realities....Stillness, in accordance with its name, is maintained by means of peace and serenity; for God is peace (Ephesians 2:14) beyond all unrest and clamor.”

“If you are rightly cultivating stillness and aspiring to be with God, and you see something either sensory or noetic, within or without, be it even an image of Christ or of an angel or of some saint, or you imagine you see a light in your intellect and give it a specific form, you should never entertain it. For the intellect itself naturally possesses an imaginative power and in those who do not keep a strict watch over it it can easily produce, to its own hurt, whatever forms and images it wants to. In this way the recollection of things good or evil can suddenly imprint images on the intellect’s perceptive faculty and so induce it to entertain fantasies, thus making whoever this happens to a daydreamer rather than a hesychast.

“Be careful, therefore, not to entertain and readily give assent to anything even if it be good. Always be suspicious of it and keep your intellect free from colors, forms and images.”

Saint Gregory Palamas

“[The intellect] returns to itself and operates within itself, and so beholds itself; and this is called by Saint Dionysios the intellect’s ‘circular movement.’ This is the intellect’s highest and most befitting activity and, through it, it even transcends itself and is united with God. ‘For the intellect,’ writes Saint Basil, ‘when not dispersed outwardly, returns to itself, and through itself ascends to God’ in a way that is free from delusion. Saint Dionysios, the unerring beholder of noetic things, also says that this circular movement of the intellect is not subject to delusion.”
“Saint John Klimakos [said]: ‘A hesychast is one who tries to enshrine what is bodiless within his body.’ And our spiritual fathers have rightly taught us things in harmony with this. For if the hesychast does not enclose his intellect within his body, how can he possess within himself the One who is invested with the body and who as its natural form penetrates all structurally organized matter? The determined exterior aspect of this matter—the material body—cannot enshrine the essence of the intellect until the material body itself truly lives by adopting a form of life appropriate to union with the intellect.

“Do you see, brother, how Saint John has shown, not simply from the spiritual but even from a human point of view, how vital it is for those who seek to be true masters of themselves, and to be monks according to their inner self, to install or possess the intellect within the body? Nor is it out of place to teach beginners in particular to look within themselves and to bring their intellect within themselves by means of their breathing. For no one of sound judgment would prevent a person who has not yet achieved a true knowledge of himself from concentrating his intellect within himself with the aid of certain methods. Since the intellect of those recently embarked on the spiritual path continually darts away again as soon as it has been concentrated, they must continually bring it back once more; for in their inexperience they are unaware that of all things it is the most difficult to observe and the most mobile. That is why some teachers recommend them to pay attention to the exhalation and inhalation of their breath, so that while they are watching it the intellect, too, may be held in check. This they should do to prevent their intellect from going out to external things, to keep it uncompounded, and to gather it into what Saint Dionysios calls a state of ‘unified concentration.’ This control of the breathing may, indeed, be regarded as a spontaneous consequence of paying attention to the intellect; for the breath is always quietly inhaled and exhaled at moments of intense concentration, especially in the case of those who practice stillness both bodily and mentally. Such people keep the Sabbath in a spiritual fashion and, so far as is possible, they rest from all personal activities; they strip their soul’s powers free from every transient, fleeting and compound form of knowledge, from every type of sense-perception and, in general, from every bodily act that is under our sway, and, so far as they can, even from those not entirely under our
sway, such as breathing.”

“Through the practice of the life of stillness [the hesychasts] devote their attention undistractedly to themselves and to God, and by transcending themselves through establishing themselves in God through their mystical and supra-intellectual union with Him they have been initiated into what surpasses the intellect.”

Saint Hesychios The Priest

“Watchfulness is a spiritual method which, if practiced over a long period, completely frees us from impassioned thoughts, impassioned words and evil actions. It leads, in so far as this is possible, to a sure knowledge of the inapprehensible God, and helps us to penetrate the divine and hidden mysteries. It enables us to fulfill every divine commandment in the Old and New Testaments and bestows upon us every blessing of the age to come. It is, in the true sense, purity of heart, a state blessed by Christ when He says: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8). Because this is its nature, watchfulness is to be bought only at a great price. But once established in us, it guides us to a true and holy way of life. It teaches us how to activate the three aspects of our soul correctly, and how to keep a firm guard over the senses. It promotes the daily growth of the four principal virtues, and is the basis of our contemplation.”

“Watchfulness is a way embracing every virtue, every commandment. It is the heart’s stillness and, when free from mental images, it is the guarding of the intellect.”

“Just as a man blind from birth does not see the sun’s light, so one who fails to pursue watchfulness does not see the rich radiance of divine grace.”

“Attentiveness is the heart’s stillness, unbroken by any thought.”

“Continuity of attention produces inner stability; inner stability produces a natural intensification of watchfulness; and this intensification gradually and in due measure gives contemplative insight in which the intellect, free from all images, enjoys complete
“Watchfulness consists in freeing the heart from all thoughts, keeping it profoundly silent and still.”

“The task of wisdom is to prompt the intelligence to strict watchfulness, constancy, and spiritual contemplation.”

“Watchfulness is like Jacob’s ladder: God is at the top while the angels climb it. It rids us of everything bad, cuts out loose chatter, abuse, backbiting, and all other evil practices of this kind. Yet in doing this, not for an instant does it lose its own sweetness.”

“This is the path of true spiritual wisdom. In great watchfulness and fervent desire travel along it, keeping the lips of both the senses and the intellect silent…. Travel along it with a mind trained in understanding, and with God’s help it will teach you things you had not hoped for; it will give you knowledge, enlightenment and instruction of a kind to which your intellect was impervious.”

“We sweeten [the heart] with the sense of blessed delight when in intense desire for God we practice this attention, keenly and diligently in the mind’s workshop. Then we are eager to pursue stillness of heart simply for the sweetness and delight it produces in the soul.”

“Whoever aspires day and night to peace and stillness of intellect finds it easy to be indifferent to all material matters and so does not labor in vain.”

“If we give attention to the intellect and assiduously reestablish its activity, it will stop being neglectful and will regain its proper state and its watchfulness.”

“When the heart has acquired stillness it will perceive the heights and depths of knowledge; and the ear of the still intellect will be made to hear marvelous things from God.”

“Every monk will be uncertain about his spiritual work until he has
achieved watchfulness of intellect. Either he will be ignorant of the beauty of this watchfulness or, if he is aware of it, he will fail to achieve it because of his negligence. He will resolve his uncertainty only when he has learnt to guard his intellect. This guarding is rightly called mental philosophy or the practical wisdom of the intellect. Through it one finds the way of Him who said, ‘I am the way, the resurrection and the life’ (John 11:25; 14:6).”

“As has been said, the assiduous practice of watchfulness teaches a man marvelous things.”

“A ship does not go far without water; and there is no progress whatsoever in the guarding of the intellect without watchfulness.”

“If our inner self is watchful it can protect the outer self.”

“With your breathing combine watchfulness.”

Ilias the Presbyter
“During prayer alienate yourself from everything except life and breath if you want to be with the intellect alone.”

Saint Isaiah the Solitary
“Like a pilot steering a boat through the waves, he should hold to his course, guided by grace. Keeping his attention fixed within himself, he should commune with God in stillness, guarding his thoughts from distraction and his intellect from curiosity.”

Saint John of Karpathos
“A monk should at all times cultivate intense stillness.”

“You should not be surprised when those who are themselves incapable of attaining stillness ridicule the stillness that we have achieved.”

Saint. Mark the Ascetic
“Stillness helps us by making evil inoperative.”
“Of all the commandments, therefore, the most comprehensive is to love God and our neighbor. This love is made firm through abstaining from material things, and through stillness of thoughts.”

Saint Maximos the Confessor

“Perfect silence alone proclaims Him, and total and transcendent unknowing brings us into His presence.”

Nikiphoros the Monk

“A hesychast is one who strives to enshrine what is bodiless within the temple of the body, paradoxical though this may sound. A hesychast is one who says, ‘I sleep but my heart is watchful’ (Song of Songs 5:2).”

“Some of the saints have called attentiveness the guarding of the intellect others have called it custody of the heart, or watchfulness, or noetic stillness, and others something else. All these expressions indicate one and the same thing, and you should read them in this sense.”

Nikitas Stithatos

“Through the watchfulness of the heart we consciously perceive the Spirit, who refreshes the flame of our desire for supernal blessings and warms our spiritual powers, numbed as they have been by the frost of the passions.”

“Immersed in the silence and serenity of inward peace, [the body] becomes full of a new power, a new vigor, a new spiritual strength. When the soul works hand in hand with such a body, it promptly begins to perform spiritual work, and guards in itself the immortal fruits of the noetic paradise, where the rivers of godlike intellection have their source, and where stands the tree of divine knowledge (Genesis 2:9-10), bearing the fruits of wisdom, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, long-suffering and ineffable love (Galatians 1:22). Working assiduously in this manner and guarding what it harvests, the soul goes out of the body and enters into the darkness of mystical theology. It leaves everything behind, not held back by anything belonging to the visible world; and, united with God, it ceases from toil and grief.”
“Bringing inner stillness to their thoughts, this dispassion raises them to a state of intellectual peace, making their intellect visionary and prophetic to the highest degree: visionary in matters divine, in insight into supernal realities, and in the disclosure of God’s mysteries; prophetic in matters human, destined to happen in the distant future.”

“Full of reverence and joy, and in indescribable silence, you will dwell in the divine realm of God’s blessed glory, all your senses transformed, and at the same time you will live spiritually among men like an angel in a material body.”

“Their [the hesychasts’] life is the life of angels and is hidden in God (Colossians 5:3), their progress is based upon holy stillness.”

“Stillness is an undisturbed state of the intellect, the calm of a free and joyful soul, the tranquil unwavering stability of the heart in God, the contemplation of light, the knowledge of the mysteries of God, consciousness of wisdom by virtue of a pure mind, the abyss of divine intellections, the rapture of the intellect, intercourse with God, an unsleeping watchfulness, spiritual prayer, untroubled repose in the midst of great hardship and, finally, solidarity and union with God.”

In one place the saint refers to: “…the upper room of your stillness.”

“Guardianship of the hidden treasure of the Spirit consists in that state of detachment from human affairs which is properly termed stillness. When through purity of heart and joyful compunction this stillness kindles a yet fiercer longing for God’s love, it releases the soul from the bonds of the senses and impels it to embrace the life of freedom. Recalled to its natural state, the soul reorientates its powers, restoring them to their original condition.”

“It is stillness, full of wisdom and benediction, that leads us to this holy and godlike state of perfection—when, that is, it is practiced and pursued genuinely. If an apparent hesychast has not attained this eminence and perfection, his stillness is not yet this noetic and perfect stillness.”
Saint Peter of Damaskos
“Stillness, which is the basis of the soul’s purification, makes the observance of the commandments relatively painless. ‘Flee,’ it has been said, ‘keep silence, be still, for herein lie the roots of sinlessness.’”

“Let each of us seek his own soul, in stillness following the angelic way.”

“The only path leading to heaven is that of complete stillness....As Saint. Basil puts it, ‘stillness initiates the soul’s purification.’”

“Devote yourself to stillness and know’ (Psalms 46:10).”

“Stillness alone engenders knowledge of God. This peace is the ‘realm’ or ‘dwelling-place of God,’ as Evagrius says, referring to the Psalter: ‘In peace is His dwelling-place’ (Ps. 76:2, Septuagint reading).”

“With humility we should strive to maintain a state of stillness, free from all distraction, knowing that no one can do us harm unless we ourselves wish for it.”

“Nothing so benefits the weak as withdrawal into stillness.”

“We must remember, too, that stillness is the highest gift of all, and that without it we cannot be purified if we are to attain the humility and spiritual knowledge necessary for the understanding of the mysteries hidden in the divine Scriptures and in all creation.”

“Stillness [is] the beginning of the soul’s purification.”

Abba Philimon
“You must purify your intellect completely through stillness and engage it ceaselessly in spiritual work. For just as the eye is attentive to sensible things and is fascinated by what it sees, so the purified intellect is attentive to intelligible realities and becomes so rapt by spiritual contemplation that it is hard to tear it away. And the more the intellect is stripped of the passions and purified through stillness, the greater the spiritual knowledge it is found worthy to receive. The intellect is perfect
when it transcends knowledge of created things and is united with God: having then attained a royal dignity it no longer allows itself to be pauperized or aroused by lower desires, even if offered all the kingdoms of the world. If, therefore, you want to acquire all these virtues, be detached from every man, flee the world and sedulously follow the path of the saints.”

“The soul’s passions are allayed by stillness.”

“He who renounces the world, ranging himself with Christ and devoting himself to stillness, loves God; he guards the divine image in himself and enriches his likeness to God, receiving from Him the help of the Spirit and becoming an abode of God; and he acts righteously in God’s sight.”

“Above all, guard the intellect and be watchful.”

Saint Philotheos of Sinai

“It is very rare to find people whose intelligence is in a state of stillness. Indeed, such a state is only to be found in those who through their whole manner of life strive to attract divine grace and blessing to themselves. If, then, we seek—by guarding our intellect and by inner watchfulness—to engage in the noetic work that is the true philosophy in Christ, we must begin by exercising self-control. Watchfulness may fittingly be called a path leading both to the kingdom within us and to that which is to be; while noetic work, which trains and purifies the intellect and changes it from an impassioned state to a state of dispassion, is like a window full of light through which God looks, revealing Himself to the intellect.”

“The intellect should always be watchful. In this way it maintains its natural state and is a true guardian of the divine commandments.”

“Watchfulness cleanses the conscience and makes it lucid. Thus cleansed, it immediately shines out like a light that has been uncovered, banishing much darkness. Once this darkness has been banished through constant and genuine watchfulness, the conscience then reveals things hidden from us. He who has tasted this light will
understand what I am talking about.”

“Let us go forward with the heart completely attentive and the soul fully conscious. A spiritual heaven, with sun, moon and stars, is formed in the blessed heart of one who has reached a state of watchfulness, or who strives to attain it; for such a heart, as a result of mystical contemplation and ascent, is enabled to contain within itself the uncontainable God.”

“We must always breathe God.”

Saint Symeon the New Theologian

“Our holy fathers hearkened to the Lord’s words, ‘Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, unchastity, thefts, perjuries, blasphemies; these are the things that defile a man’ (Matthew 15:19-20); and they also hearkened to Him when He enjoins us to cleanse the inside of the cup so that the outside may also be clean (Matthew 23:26). Hence they abandoned all other forms of spiritual labor and concentrated wholly on this one task of guarding the heart, convinced that through this practice they would also possess every other virtue, whereas without it no virtue could be firmly established. Some of the fathers have called this practice stillness of the heart, others attentiveness, others the guarding of the heart, others watchfulness and rebuttal, and others again the investigation of thoughts and the guarding of the intellect. But all of them alike worked the earth of their own heart, and in this way they were fed on the divine manna (Exodus 16: 15).”

“To speak generally, it is impossible to acquire all the other virtues except through watchfulness. For this reason you must pursue it more diligently than anything else, so as to learn from experience these things, unknown to others, that I am speaking to you about.”

“God asks only this of us, that our heart be purified through watchfulness. As Saint Paul says, if the root is holy, so also will the branches and the fruit be holy (Romans 11:16).”

Saint Thalassios the Libyan
“Seal your senses with stillness.”

“The person who is unaffected by the things of this world loves stillness.”

“Enclose your senses in the citadel of stillness so that they do not involve the intellect in their desires.”

“Blessed stillness gives birth to blessed children: self-control, love and pure prayer.”

Theoliptos, Metropolitan of Philadelphia

“On account of your watchfulness the grace of contemplation will descend upon you, knowledge will dwell in you by virtue of your prayer, and wisdom will repose in you because of your compunction, banishing mindless pleasure and replacing it with divine love.”
The past, present, and future history of breath

When relative existence, individual or cosmic, begins, there is a chain of manifestation. First there is an out-turning of Consciousness, an Expansion which is known as the Chidakasha, the Space (Ether) of Consciousness. Immediately there arises within this infinite Expanse a movement that is the Cosmic Breath or Prana. From that comes all that exist in the realm of Relativity. As Swami Vivekananda wrote: “Just as Akasha [Ether] is the infinite, omnipresent material of this universe, so is this Prana the infinite, omnipresent manifesting power of this universe.”

The cosmos and the individual are manifested by the same process: ever-expanding prana/breath. As we enter into relative consciousness through the expansion of breath, just so can we enter back into transcendent Consciousness through the profound awareness of breath that occurs in meditation. Tracing the breath back to its source, the yogi discovers within himself both Power and Consciousness. Through meditation he experiences the subtle states of consciousness inherent in the breath. This procedure is spoken of in the Katha Upanishad: “The self, though hidden in all beings, does not shine forth but can be seen by those subtle seers, through their sharp and subtle intelligence” (Katha Upanishad 1.3.12).

This means that consciousness is the root of breath—innate in breath. Breath, then, is the direct means to return our awareness to the inmost level of our being and put us into touch with consciousness itself. At the same time, breath (prana) rules all the levels of our being and has the ability to infuse all those levels with the highest spiritual consciousness, to spiritualize every bit of us. For the essence, the root, of breath is both energy and consciousness. Awareness of the breath right away centers our awareness in the highest, etheric level of our being. It returns our awareness to its source, gathers up and centers every other aspect of our being in spiritual consciousness.

Breath, Prana, pervades all our bodies, corrects, directs, and empowers them to perfectly and fully manifest all their potentials—
which is the root purpose of our relative existence. Through Breath Meditation practice all the aspects of our being are brought into perfect fruition and enabled to merge back into their Source in the state of absolute liberation. Breath Meditation, then, embraces all the aspects of our existence—not only the highest part—and is supremely practical.

In Indian mythology it is said that the realm of Vishnu is guarded by two doorkeepers who escort the questing soul into the throne room and then stand at the door to guard against intruders. This is a symbol of the inhalations and exhalations which lead the yogi into the world of higher consciousness, into the Divine Presence. The breath leads us into the realm of the Chidakasha, the Space of Consciousness, and keep guard there against the intrusion of distracting thoughts and states of mind, seeing that nothing disturbs our inner quest.

It cannot be overemphasized that the breath is the object that transfers our awareness into the subject: consciousness itself. Other objects draw our attention outward, into the experience of them, and perpetuate the loss of self-awareness which is our root problem. They are not only incapable of producing the awareness of pure consciousness, they make it impossible. This should not be forgotten.

**The Truth**

The source of the breath is the Truth—our essential being: spirit. Yet the inhalations and exhalations are like two fires between which we must walk untouched. Although called “breath meditation” is is really consciousness meditation, freeing us from the duality of breath—or rather taking us to the place where the breath is both one and unmoving (consciousness). Like Brahman we must “breathe, breathless” as the Rig Veda describes. Meditation is a reunion/reuniting of the breath, for it is its duality that has led us into the experience of duality. Again, it is not transcending the breath but returning to Original Breath which is inseparable from Original Nature.

**Letting go**

In pure meditation “doing nothing” and “letting go” is the only right thing to “do.” As already quoted, “absolute fading away is Nirvana.” That is, totally letting go and releasing all things and states that arise during Breath Meditation is the relinquishment which the *Visuddhimagga* says is so essential to the seeker after liberation. And it
tells us a most interesting spiritual fact: relinquishment is both a giving up and an entering into. “Relinquishment as giving up, gives up materiality. The entering of the mind into the cessation of materiality, into Nirvana, is relinquishment as entering into,” says the Patisambhida-magga.

Enlightenment is the revelation of what has ever been the essential nature of our selves. It has always been present with us, and does not need to be attained, only revealed (or recognized). For this reason correct meditation is simply the dropping of unreality which automatically is a movement into Reality. “So it is called both relinquishment as giving up and relinquishment as entering into.”

Our purpose

Shankara stated that the practice of yoga “has right vision alone for its goal, and glories of [external] knowledge and power are not its purpose.” Spirit-consciousness alone is true and real. The Katha Upanishad (2:3:8, 9) makes this very clear. First it speaks of what God (Brahman) really is, saying: “Brahman [is] the all-pervading spirit, the unconditioned, knowing whom one attains to freedom and achieves immortality. None beholds him with the eyes, for he is without visible form. Yet in the heart is he revealed, through self-control and meditation. Those who know him become immortal.”

Brahman is pure spirit, beyond all phenomena, beyond all relative existence or relative experience (objective consciousness). Brahman is not perceived by the senses, inner or outer (“none beholds him with the eyes”), yet He is revealed in the core of the yogi’s being in meditation. “Those who know him become immortal” because they experience their identity with the immortal Brahman.

The Katha Upanishad describes the nature of meditation in which Brahman is realized. “When all the senses are stilled, when the mind is at rest, when the intellect wavers not–then, say the wise, is reached the highest state. This calm of the senses and the mind has been defined as yoga. He who attains it is freed from delusion” (Katha Upanishad 2:3:10, 11).

So here are the characteristics of meditation which the upanishad calls “the highest state”: 1) the senses are stilled, 2) the mind is at rest, 3) the intellect wavers not. Then the idea is really driven home by the upanishad: “This calm of the senses and the mind has been defined as yoga.”
Shankara affirms that the seeker of spiritual freedom is seeking nothing from meditation “other than the special serenity of meditation practice.” This state is also called *sthirattwa* by the yogis. “He who attains it is freed from delusion.” When Yogiraj Lahiri Mahasaya was asked: “On which deity do you meditate?” He simply replied: “I meditate on sthirattwa”–the serenity produced by meditation in which he ever dwelt, and of which he was the embodiment.

**Not a “thing”**

If we touch the water in a flowing stream, remove our hand, and then touch it again, we are not touching the same water at all. In the same way the flowing breath is not the same but different each time we breathe. So we are not fixing our attention on a “thing” at all, but on an utter intangible. The breath, then, is not really an “object” of meditation, but the means by which our inner witness-consciousness naturally and spontaneously becomes the object in Breath Meditation.

Breath Meditation (Anapanasati) is so subtle and seemingly “nothing” to the unpracticed, that it is no wonder Buddha considered at first that he could not teach anyone what he knew, since it was so opposite to their usual external physical experience.

**The best koan**

The breath is the best “koan” to ponder (be aware of) for it is not a question or a problem, but the answer.

**Going far**

At the beginning, when you are not used to turning your awareness deeply within, at the conclusion of meditation you may feel as though you are coming back from a long way, or as if you were awakening from a deep sleep. This is because your mind is not used to the transition from outer to inner and back to the outer awareness. In time, with practice, this will cease to be so marked, and your mind will make the transition almost immediately without any particular sensations. Right now, however, your mind is learning a completely new way to function, is exploring new territory, and the contrast may be more apparent than it will be later on. I mention this so you will not think after a while that you are not going as deep in meditation as you did before.
Distraction and boredom

Do not worry about the possibility of being bored in doing such a practice (non-practice, actually). You will not be bored if you practice correctly. If, however, you do find yourself feeling restless, dissatisfied, or bored, then gently increase your awareness of the nosetip and of the breath moving there. For if your attention slips away from the tip of the nose and/or the breath, then distraction, boredom, or disorientation will definitely occur.

During the practice of Breath Meditation the ego-mind may begin to scream that we are doing nothing, that we must do something. But we are doing something. We are doing nothing—no thing. We are being purely aware, which is the state of our spirit. The ego-mind will not accept this, though, and will insist that we do something to make our meditation effective, or devotional, or sacred. “You cannot just sit like a knot on a log,” it will tell us. Knots on logs do not merge back into their pure consciousness, but we do, and that is the only truly effective, devotional, or sacred act.

Breath Meditation is not just non-doing, it is undoing—the process of Nirvana.

Inner negativity

Impulses to negativity or foolishness, whether mental or physical, exist in our minds in the form of samskaras or vasanas. (Samskaras are impressions in the mind produced by previous actions or experiences, and vasanas are bundles or aggregates of similar samskaras.) Worries and anxieties about these samskaras and vasanas in the form of “sins,” “temptations,” and “wrong thinking” torment a lot of seekers. Even more futile is obsession with “getting rid of the ego.” For the yogi who regularly practices meditation and arranges his inner and outer life so as to avoid their counteracting or conflicting with his practice there is no need for such self-torture. Speaking of these negative and troublesome things, Shankara confidently says: “they are dissolved along with the receptacle, the chitta.... Because they have no effect, they are not given attention, for when a thing is falling of itself there is no point in searching for something to make it fall.” I. K. Taimni says: “As the object of meditation continues to fill the mind completely there can be no question of emptying the mind.”
Afterword: It Is All Up To You

One whose mindfulness of breathing
Is undeveloped and imperfect,
Remains unsettled in his body,
Remains unsettled in his mind,
Remains unsteady in his body,
Remains unsteady in his mind.

One whose mindfulness of breathing
Is developed and perfected,
Remains quite settled in his body,
Remains quite settled in his mind,
Remains quite steady in his body,
Remains quite steady in his mind.

(The Patisambhida-magga)

Many have heard of the philosophy and practice of meditation, many have enjoyed lectures and books on the subject (some have even given the lectures and written the books), and yet have never taken up the practice to any degree. Why? They simply did not make the connection between the beautiful theory and the actuality of their own lives. This is pretty much the trouble in all “spiritual” matters—people do not make the connection or transition from the theoretical to the practical. Writing on the subject of Breath Meditation in Going Forth (Pabbajja), the Venerable Sumana Samanera said: “First of all, three things are required here: 1. persistence, 2. persistence, 3. persistence. Without great devotion, without extraordinary patience even one who is otherwise gifted, will not be able to make progress.” It is the matter of perseverance that usually presents the greatest difficulty to the meditator.

It is essential in meditation, as in ordinary matters, to realize that all goes according to precise laws. When speaking of meditation, Patanjali says: “Its application is by stages” (Yoga Sutras 3:6). That is, meditation keeps moving onward in its effect when regularly practiced, just like the taking of a journey. It all goes in an exact sequence. Meditation
produces steady growth if there is steady practice.

All the theory and eulogy in the world regarding a meditation practice mean virtually nothing. But practice is everything. Buddha insisted that his hearers not accept something because he taught it–but rather that they should gain their own experience and thereby know the truth and the value of what he said. This is most especially true in regard to the meditation method he taught them: Breath Meditation. It is extremely difficult to believe that such a simple practice could have such a profound effect–Nirvana itself in time. And it is not only difficult for the hearer to believe this, it is incredible to the practicer that it works so powerfully and profoundly. In Breath Meditation more than anything I know, practice certainly does Make Perfect. And the practice is so marvelously simple.

We observe the breath because it has the power to draw us into it, into the “still point” from which the breath arises. And that point is the individual spirit itself. Watching the breath lets the pure Self manifest and work its will in us, changing all the levels of our being. And that is everything, as you will discover yourself.

Recounting his experience beneath the Bodhi Tree, Buddha said: “I thought: ‘While my Sakyan father was busy and I [as a child] was sitting in the shade of a rose apple tree, then…I had direct acquaintance of entering upon and abiding in…meditation….Might that be the way to enlightenment?’ And following that memory came the recognition: ‘That is the only way to enlightenment’” (MN 36).

The first time I heard a story about someone who had three wishes, like just about everybody else on their first time around, I said: “I would wish for a magic ring that would give me all the wishes I might ask!” That was something not permitted in the fantasy story, but it is a reality in the realm of Breath Meditation. It will do everything for us on the path to enlightenment. All the sixteen states outlined in the Anapanasati Sutra as well as all possible states between “here” and “there” are opened up to us by the simple means of Breath Meditation. That is why Ajahn Lee could confidently say: “...as he [Buddha] was meditating on his breath, he gained Awakening. He found what he was looking for–right at the tip of his nose. Nirvana does not lie far away. It is right at the tip of our nose.” His disciple Ajahn Fuang said it even more directly: “The breath can take you all the way to Nirvana.”

The great Master, the Lord Buddha, said: “Mindfulness of in-and-out
breathing, when developed and pursued, brings clear knowing and release [nirvana] to completion.”

And the *Visuddhimagga* itself sums it up perfectly:

“When mindfulness of breathing in
And out is perfect, well developed,
Gradually brought to growth
According as the Buddha taught,
’Tis he illuminates the world,
Like the full moon freed from cloud.”

Yoga, the spiritual state, is produced by yoga the practice. Those who persevere in their meditation practice find unfailing and abundant happiness, peace, and fulfillment. Certainly the goal is not reached without much practice through the years, but every step of the way is blessed and brings rejoicing to the meditator’s heart. Then at last no more steps are needed, and he enters the ocean of Satchidananda. “A tiny bubble of laughter, I am become the Sea of Mirth Itself,” wrote Yogananda.

As Ajaan Fuang Jotiko said: “If you were to say it is easy, well yes, it is easy. If you were to say it is hard, it is hard. It all depends on you.”

So it really is all up to you.
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