

Breath Prayer: An Ancient Practice for the Everyday Sacred by Christine Valters Paintner

Breath prayer is a beautiful and simple practice that can help us to drop into stillness wherever we are. We pause, we breathe, we let the words dance with our inhale and exhale, we rest for a few moments into the space carved out in us by prayer.

Breath plays a central role in Scripture, from the very beginning in which God breathes life into human form. Even the words for “spirit” in Hebrew (ruach) and Greek (pneuma)—the two languages in which the Bible was originally written—can also mean “breath.” It seems breath is not only essential to our physical existence but our spiritual nourishment, too.

The roots of breath prayer are built from St Paul’s invitation to “pray without ceasing.” In early Christianity, many monks and nuns would practice by bringing prayer to each breath. They would combine a phrase of prayer or blessing with the inhale and exhale so that every breath was a chance for them to be present to the sacred. In earliest tradition, the words they used were the Jesus prayer, Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Though not a well-known practice today, breath prayer is shaped by the action most essential to our lives: our very breath. It is our first action on the day we are born and our final act on the day that we die.

Begin by just sitting quietly, savoring a few moments of stillness. This time of quiet is to simply practice aligning your prayer with your breathing. It gives time and space to become acquainted with this type of prayer. It offers the chance to slow down and discover the gifts that come when we cultivate an inner and outer silence and direct our attention to the Source of all peace and all love.

You may speak aloud but it is easier to speak quietly in your mind:

Inhale. Fill your whole self with breath.

Feel the air in your lungs. And then pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, son of God,

Exhale slowly and fully.

Have mercy on me, a sinner.

Now let’s switch the word “sinner” for “your beloved child” and notice how your body and soul responds to the change.

Inhale. Fill your whole self with breath.

Feel the air in your lungs. And then pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, son of God,

Exhale slowly and fully.

Have mercy on me, your beloved child.

When we pray with the rhythm of the breath it provides us an anchor in the midst of whatever we are doing. Breath is our constant companion, as is our heartbeat, and these gentle risings and fallings offer us the gift of a kind of scaffolding for our prayers.

The words are less important than the intention behind them, but still language can offer us imagery that guides our distracted minds towards a particular place. In the case of prayer, this place is toward the sacred presence beating in the heart of the world.

As you inhale, **I breathe in peace.**

You might add an element of visualization to this as well. Perhaps images are a more potent form of prayer for you, in which case, as you breathe in, see yourself drawing in the gift of peace into your body. Notice what color it is or texture. Pay attention to your body's response as it fills you.

As you exhale, **I breathe out love.**

Imagine inviting love to fill the world with each out-breath, see it filling every crack and corner. Again, notice any colors or textures. How does your body respond knowing love is being sent out to the world?

**I breathe in peace,
I breathe out love.**

Once we become rooted in this rhythm of praying, we will be able to draw on it more naturally as we are engaged in our daily activities. It is in these moments that we pause and remember the root of our root. We connect back to Source. We stop what we are doing to reconnect to the foundation of the world and of our lives.

The act of lighting a candle creates a shift in intention and energy in a room. Something about the warmth of flame touches a primal longing in us. There are many opportunities to light a candle: as we meditate or pray, when we journal or make art, for a meal or even when we bathe.

Take a few deep breaths as you light a candle.

Breath in: **I light a flame**

Breath out: **to remember**

Breath in: **all is sacred**

Breath out: **here and now.**

The root of the word remember is re-member, which means to make whole again. Our loving attention and awareness remind us of our original wholeness. Sit for a few minutes repeating this prayer, gazing at the flame. Let the flame be an anchor for your attention, along with the words you are speaking.

Breathing in, say **I light a flame**, breathing out, **say to remember.**

Continue the prayer, breathing in **all is sacred**, breathing out, **here and now.**

As you create or discover your own breath prayers, consider what activities you would love to bless with more awareness and presence. Also consider phrases from sacred text that inspire you and how they might help you breathe more deeply into your life right now. But also open to your own words, the prayers of your heart that rise up. Let those words bless and reveal the way the sacred is already present.