



Breath Prayer

SOPHRONY'S LONGING FOR COMMUNION

Breath prayer is a short petition, repeated in the space of one inhalation-exhalation cycle, that acknowledges the natures of both the Lord and the petitioner.

Breath prayer is an ancient form that arose in the fourth century among church fathers, such as Gregory of Nyssa, as a way to contemplation and as a way to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17). Today, we are familiar with immediate breath prayers like Anne Lamott’s “Help me, help me, help me. Thank you, thank you, thank you.”¹ Indeed most breath prayers are short petitions that acknowledge who the Lord is and who the petitioner is.² They often repeat, following the rhythm of inhaling and exhaling, and the goal is to so fix them in the mind that they become as involuntary and as vital as breathing. The most famous of these is the Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner” (Ps 51:1; Matt 15:22; Luke 18:13).

After the Great Schism of 1054, this prayer continued in the Eastern branch of the church as a path to stillness. Not until the nineteenth century did the Jesus Prayer emerge again in the Western world. Among others, Father Sophrony the Archimandrite (1893–1938) brought the practice with him from Russia when he founded a monastery in Britain.³

Growing up in an Orthodox family, Sophrony had learned to pray for an hour at a time without tiring. However with the onset of the Russian Revolution, he rejected the Christian approach to God and sought instead an abstract Absolute through painting and yoga. He immigrated to Paris in 1921. One night as he wandered the streets, feeling spiritually void, he remembered the phrase “I am that I am” (Exod 3:14) and reawakened to the living, eternal God. His realization led him to confess that God cannot be pinned down by rational processes or by imagination. Instead the deep love within us responds to the infinite Love that is the divine. We humans are not closed containers; we are dynamic creatures, shaped by relationship with God.

Sophrony wanted to learn *how* to grow in this union with God, so he entered the monastery at Mount Athos. There he met Saint Silouan, an illiterate peasant monk. Watching the man, he could see the profound experience of God that Silouan practiced in spite of his simplicity. “If you are minded to pray in your heart and are not able,” Silouan told him, “repeat the words of your prayer with your lips and keep your mind on the words you are saying. . . . In time the Lord will give you interior prayer without distraction, and you will pray with ease.”⁴ Sophrony became Silouan’s scribe until the saint’s death in 1938, and eventually moved to Essex, establishing a community that continues to reflect Silouan’s habits of communion with God, including meditation through the repetition of breath prayers.

¹ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Anchor, 1999), 82.

² Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 123.

³ The following story and instructions are influenced by Brother Ramon and Simon Barrington-Ward, *Praying the Jesus Prayer Together* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004), 39–41, 55–58, 118–29.

⁴ Staretz Silouan, *Wisdom from Mount Athos: The Writings of Staretz Silouan 1866–1938* (ed. Archimandrite Sophrony; trans. Rosemary Edmonds; London: Mowbrays, 1974), 83.

Most religions practice some form of meditation, and its physiological impact is documented by science. The difference between mantras like “om” and breath prayer is that as believers we direct prayer to the God we trust, rather than opening ourselves to an abstract other or even seeking self. We recognize the “zone” that meditation achieves because it is similar to what happens when we sit in front of the TV, or scrub a dirty floor, or play a rote video game. With the repetitious work of breath prayer, however, we discipline the frenetic upper layers of the mind to continually return to Jesus, while allowing deeper thoughts and feelings to rise to the surface, be recognized, and be yielded to him.

Sophrony reminds us that “the way to the Father lies uniquely through the Son, only-begotten and consubstantial [one] with the Father” (John 3:16; 10:30).⁵ Jesus mediates our union with God because he is one with God already, and we can rest in the promise that he shares this union with us as we seek him (17:20–21). “He alone, ‘knows the Father’ with complete knowledge, and ‘no man cometh unto the Father, but by the Son’” (14:6). This knowledge, Sophrony says, “is acquired through prayer of the mind united with the heart, and our whole being given over to God.”⁶

When we seek communion with the Trinity using breath prayer, the prayer functions as a still place of peace. Awareness of our relationship with God grows like a bubble, expanding outward as we pass through our chaotic world. Instead of the chaos invading our spirits, breath prayer offers the protection of peace (Phil 4:7). For those of us who, like Sophrony, tend to induce self-forgetfulness through yoga, art, or—in our modern day—the internet, breath prayer helps release stress to Jesus instead of merely escaping it. It engages the body instead of placating it, so that turmoil is stilled and we are renewed for action in the world.

For those of us who are attuned to our environments, perhaps even ruled by social circumstances, breath prayer can help us stay connected to God. As a regular daily practice, the prayer keeps us humble and reminds us that we are loved, regardless of how others respond. Because it articulates who God is and who we are, it helps us maintain perspective and equips us to minister to others from a power that transcends our own (Heb 13:20–21).

Practice

1. Sit comfortably with your back straight and close your eyes.
2. Pay attention to your breathing. Focus on breathing will probably exaggerate the intake and output a little. Wait until a comfortable rhythm has returned.
3. Ask Jesus to be present, to lead, to guide, and to protect. Invite him to draw you into the community of the Trinity.
4. Wait silently until you feel ready to begin praying.

⁵ Archimandrite Sophrony, foreword to *Wisdom from Mount Athos: The Writings of Staretz Silouan 1866–1938*, by Staretz Silouan (ed. Archimandrite Sophrony; trans. Rosemary Edmonds; London: Mowbrays, 1974), 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*

5. When you are ready, pray in your breathing rhythm.

- Inhale: Lord, Jesus Christ,
- Pause: Son of God,
- Exhale: have mercy on me, a sinner.

6. Use a prayer rope, touching one knot or bead for each repetition. A typical prayer rope is strung with a sequence of one large bead to every ten small ones. The small beads remind one to focus on the prayer. The large one allows for a pause. You may simply touch each of your fingers in succession. Through the first ten repetitions, you might pray aloud, considering the words of the prayer. As distractions arise, gently return your concentration to the words. (Suggestions for dealing with distractions can be found under *Lectio Divina/Practice/4.*)

7. When you reach the large bead on the prayer rope or your tenth finger, pause. With the first pause you might converse with the Lord about any sin that has risen to your mind. You might tell him about distractions.

8. Begin the next ten when you are ready, praying silently, attending to the flow of air and how it merges with the words. Perhaps on the second pause, a person or situation may come to mind for whom you wish to pray, “have mercy.” Perhaps “on me” will shift to “on us.” Maybe you will appropriate the significance of the words to a particular concern of your own, or the plea for mercy will become a praise for mercy obtained. Take time to share these with God.

9. As you begin the next ten repetitions, listen for the Lord speaking in your heart. Perhaps on the next rest, you will pause to let his words flow.

10. As the prayer repetitions begin to move from your head to your heart, you may feel a desire to still even the echo of the words and to sit quietly with the Lord in peace. When you are ready, you may begin the prayer again or move on to other disciplines of the day.

11. When the silence is gathered and before you move on to the day’s tasks, write down anything that particularly stood out to you during your meditation. It may be that the prayer returns to you throughout the day with this nuance. The next time you practice the breath prayer, perhaps this will function as a starting point in your move to stillness.

12. Exercises other than breathing may also provide a physical rhythm that can fuse with the repetition of the prayer. You may wish to try an uninterrupted walk or bicycle ride in a quiet place, reciting each phrase of your prayer with every step or pedal-pump that you take.

13. Other short petitions in Scripture or some personal breath prayer may be used instead of the Jesus Prayer, for example “Help us, O Lord our God, for we rely on you” (2 Chr 14:1) or “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on me” (John 1:29). As you regularly practice

breath prayer, it will eventually enter into other daily activities like a song you cannot get out of your head. If the repetition becomes annoying or void of meaning, return with intention to the words, retaking them as a prayer for the moment.

Sample the Prayer

It is possible to incorporate breath prayer into one's daily routine, even if uninterrupted times for meditation are not available. It is doubtful that the Canaanite woman, who spoke one of the first variations of the Jesus Prayer (Matt 15:22), had the leisure to sit still either. Like her, we can turn to Jesus throughout the day as needs arise, weaving one or two repetitions of the prayer into the fabric of that incident, sometimes without even pausing our current activity.

Practice Together

Many of us are already accustomed to repeating prayers together. For example, we may say the Lord's Prayer in unison every Sunday during worship. Breath prayer takes a little more work, since we all breathe at different rates and meditation can be difficult or awkward if we cannot let go of our awareness of those around us. However, practicing this prayer together offers several benefits. Hearing others calm their breathing and center down may coach us to do the same without having to concentrate so hard. Also, listening to the Holy Spirit as he speaks to and through others around us may help us tune our ears to what he would say to our own hearts.

Choose a breath prayer that appeals to the characteristics or circumstances of your particular group. Say the words of the prayer together a couple of times, just to practice the sounds and the pauses. Designate one person to lead the prayer and make yourselves comfortable around the room. Take a few moments to "listen" to the silence while you calm your breathing. The leader can begin by inviting Jesus to draw you together into the communion of the Trinity and to guide and protect you as you seek him in the stillness.

When all seem ready, pray the first ten rounds out loud together and pause. The leader can then invite people to mention to the Lord any distractions or bits of trivia that have risen to mind during the repetitions. It can be amusing to hear the free associations that others' minds make. Allow the laughter and when it dies down, wait in silence.

Pray the second ten rounds out loud together and pause. Invite participants to pray sentence prayers of confession concerning any sin that the Lord may have brought to mind. Again, wait in silence.

For the third ten, let the leader pray aloud, while members pray in their breathing rhythms. At the pause, the leader can invite participants to pray the Lord's mercy on specific people or for specific situations, including themselves. Then keep silence together, listening for him to speak.

During the fourth round of ten, the leader and members can pray silently in their breathing rhythms, allowing the Lord to say what he will. When sufficient silence has been kept, the leader can thank the Lord for his presence and close the season of prayer.

Come back to the circle and share what God has brought to mind as you centered on him. What, if anything, stood out to you in the practice of this prayer? If you simply feel blank, what is the nothing like? As you discuss your individual experiences, do any themes or directions for the

group arise? What might the Lord be saying to your community? What further response might you consider?

As your group becomes more comfortable praying this way together, you may wish to apply less structure to the repetitions. As you still yourselves for prayer, one person may begin the prayer, establishing the rhythm, and continuing through fifty repetitions. Others may join in verbally and drop out to pray in their breathing rhythm along the way. After the first fifty, another person may take over the lead, maintaining the oral rhythm while some join in aloud and others drop out.⁷

Consider

1. The Jesus Prayer arises from several passages in Scripture. Look up Matthew 15:22 and Mark 10:47. What is the significance of the title “son of David”? Why do you think church tradition transformed this into “son of God”? See also Luke 18:13.
2. What is the significance of the phrase, “I am that I am” (Exod 3:14)? Why do you suppose it affected Sophrony the way it did?
3. How would your friends praying in unison with you be different than praying alone? What would be the advantage of another person praying aloud while you prayed silently?
4. If you were to compose your own breath prayer, what would it be about? Think for a moment. Which of God’s names would you choose to acknowledge who the Lord is? What words would you use to characterize yourself? What would be your petition? How could you shorten it so that it could truly follow the rhythm of your breath?

Study Further

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⁷ Brother Ramon, *A Hidden Fire: Exploring the Deeper Reaches of Prayer* (Hants, England: Marshall Pickering, 1987), 118.

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