

*"Think often on God, by day, by night, in your
business and even in your diversions. He is always near
you and with you; leave him not alone."*

BROTHER LAWRENCE

BREATH PRAYER

Desire	to pray a simple, intimate prayer of heartfelt desire before God
Definition	Breath prayer is a form of contemplative prayer linked to the rhythms of breathing: (1) breathe in, calling on a biblical name or image of God, and (2) breathe out a simple God-given desire.
Scripture	"Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18) "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness. . . . [H]e has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires." (2 Peter 1:3-4)
Practice Includes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • repeating a simple one-sentence prayer that begins with a biblical name of God that is meaningful to you; follow the name with a word or phrase expressing your deep God-given desire; connect the prayer to your breathing and return to it throughout the day until it becomes a soul reflex • saying a traditionally scriptural breath prayer known as the "Jesus Prayer": "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me, a sinner"; breath prayers include phrases of Scripture: for example, "My soul glorifies the Lord" (Luke 1:46), "My souls finds rest in God alone" (Psalm 62:1) • breath prayers can be short prayers of love and desire, for example, "Shepherd, lead me by still waters," or "Come, Holy Spirit, come"
God-Given Fruit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • keeping company with Jesus whether or not you feel his presence • abiding in Christ, opening yourself to constant union all day long • putting into a phrase the deepest desire of your heart and praying out of that desire • reminding yourself that God is present and living in you • guarding self-talk so your thoughts, feelings and behavior flow from an ongoing dialogue with God • regulating your imagination and fantasy life • breathing in the life of Christ and breathing out the work of Christ • developing a rhythm of turning to God at any time of the day • developing a constant, inner, unbroken, perpetual habit of prayer

BREATH PRAYER

BREATHING IS AN UNCONSCIOUS THING. And breath prayer reminds us that just as we can't live on one breath of air, we can't live on one breath of God. God is the oxygen of our soul, and we need to breathe him in all day long. After all, it is in him that "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Breath prayer reminds us that each breath we are given is God's gift and that God's Spirit is nearer to us than our own breath.

Breath prayer or "prayer of the heart" has been practiced in the church for millennia. The Eastern Orthodox Church in particular has seen breath prayer as a way of living out Paul's instruction to "pray without ceasing." The "Jesus Prayer" is a breath prayer described in *The Way of the Pilgrim*:

Take a seat in solitude and silence. Bend your head, close your eyes and breathing softly, in your imagination, look into your own heart. Let your mind, or rather, your thoughts flow from your head down to your heart and say, while breathing: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." Whisper these words gently or say them in your mind. Discard all other thoughts. Be serene, persevering and repeat them over and over again.

The Jesus Prayer combines "Son of David, have mercy on me" (Luke 18:39) with "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). Breathing in, you pray "Jesus, Son of David," breathing out, you say, "have mercy on me, a sinner." This short repetitive prayer frees you from linear thought and allows you to begin to pray in your body, not just your mind. It is meant to be a lived, breathing rhythm of surrender. And it is a constant reminder of the One in whose presence you stand.

To practice breath prayer, ponder the nearness of God. Settle deeply into the truth that Christ is in you. Deeply breathe in, repeating any name of God that is dear to you (see appendix 5, "Names for Worshiping God"). As you exhale, voice a deep desire of your heart. When you exhale, offer up the desire of your heart. The brevity of the prayer allows it to be repeated over and over throughout the day.

Examples of breath prayers are

- breathe in "Abba," breathe out "I belong to you."
- breathe in "Healer," breathe out "speak the word and I shall be healed."
- breathe in "Shepherd," breathe out "bring home my lost son."

- breathe in “Holy One,” breathe out “keep me true.”
 - breathe in “Lord,” breathe out “here I am.”
 - breathe in “Jesus,” breathe out “have mercy on me.”

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How do you practice Paul’s injunction to pray without ceasing?
2. How do you pray in a way that keeps you as conscious as possible of Christ’s presence within you?
3. How does the thought of repetitive prayer strike you?
4. What are the upsides and downsides of repetitive prayer?
5. How might a breath prayer be shorthand for a longer prayer of your heart?

SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

1. Become comfortable. Breathe deeply. Intentionally place yourself before God. In rhythm with your breathing, gratefully inhale the breath of life. Exhale remembering that Jesus gave his last breath for love of you. Gently and thankfully repeat, “Breath of life, breathe on me.”
2. Decide to pray the Jesus Prayer or some other scriptural breath prayer as often as you are able during one day. If you worry about forgetting, set a clock at every hour to remind you, or put the prayer on your car mirror. Reminders should be gentle and not forced. In the evening spend time telling the Lord what it means to you to be able to return to him again and again during the day with one particular prayer.
3. Is there someone for whom you wish to pray ceaselessly? Listen deeply to what Jesus’ desire for this person might be. Form a breath prayer naming God’s adequacy and your desire for the person. Throughout the day as they come to mind, offer up your prayer. Don’t allow yourself to be drawn into long prayer dialogues about what you want God to do in this person’s life. Let the breath prayer carry all your desire to God.
4. Begin and end each day with your breath prayer. Let it be the word that comes to mind as you wake and as you fall asleep.
5. Tell someone what breath prayer means to you.
6. Help a child form a breath prayer to say while at school or at play.

RESOURCES ON BREATH PRAYER

The Breath of the Soul: Reflections on Prayer by Joan Chittister

A Guidebook to Prayer: Twenty-Four Ways to Walk with God by MaryKate Morse

Soul Feast by Marjorie Thompson, chapter 3

The Way of the Pilgrim translated by Helen Bacovcin