



*Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath:  
Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that  
they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived,  
and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.  
Ezekiel 37.9-10 NRSV*

## **BREATH**

It can be argued that the fundamental element of life is breath. We may go many days without food and a few without water, but our physical lives will end after only a minutes without air. In many languages the words that express the essence or higher levels of our being are closely related to the words for breath, wind or air. As an example, consider the similarities between the English words *spirit*, *inspiration* and *respirator*. The root of these words is the Latin *spiritus*, which literally means breath. In Hebrew, the three most commonly used words for soul – *nephesh*, *ruach* and *neschamah* – are also used for breath. In fact, the book of Genesis literally says that God breathed life into Adam. The Chinese word *Chi* also refers to the breath of life. There are other examples, but the basic point is that our most ancient languages and texts reflect awareness that the breath is central to life. As a Contemplative Mason, you will pay closer attention to your breath, and you will learn to use it to affect your consciousness, mood and behavior.

### **Exercise 1:6**

For one week, set aside a few minutes once or twice a day to be mindful and prayerful in your breathing. Do not attempt to interfere with it or regulate it in any way. Simply pay attention to the way that you breathe and how it changes in different situations, from the moment you awaken in the morning until the moment you fall asleep at night. Make daily notes in your journal, including answers to the following questions:

- How much of your day do you naturally tend to breathe slowly and easily, with a relaxed belly, chest and throat?
- Considering these three body regions, how would you rank them in order of how much you tend to keep them tensed or tightened?

- How do different physical activities affect the rate, depth and regions of your breathing?
- How do different emotional states affect your breathing?
- How does simply becoming mindful of your breathing affect it?
- What occurred to you, as you were prayerful in your breathing?

### **Exercise 1:7**

For one week, set aside a few minutes once or twice a day to practice relaxed, natural breathing. Sit in a chair with your feet on the floor, your back supported and erect, your neck straight. Close your eyes and focus on the sensations of your breathing. Relax your throat, chest and belly. Feel the way the air flows in through your nostrils or lips, down your throat, and into your lungs. Notice that when you are relaxed, you pull the breath down with your belly, and that your chest actually does very little work. Feel how your diaphragm naturally forces the air out. Feel it flowing out of your lungs, up through your throat and out your nostrils or lips. It is important to begin breathing through the nose as much as possible. Notice how your body relaxes, your mood calms and your thinking becomes clearer as you focus on your breath. In fact, you may practice this exercise if you find yourself feeling tense or stressed and you wish to relax. After a while you may open your eyes. Make appropriate notes in your journal.

### **Exercise 1:8**

For one week, set aside a few minutes once or twice a day to practice deep, cleansing breaths. It is especially recommended that you do so soon after awakening, and you may wish to make it a permanent part of your morning routine. It is also very helpful if you are wearing comfortable, non-restrictive clothing. Sit in a chair with your feet on the floor, your back supported and erect, your neck straight. Close your eyes and focus on the sensations of your breathing. Relax your throat, chest and belly. Allow yourself to breathe naturally through your nose for several breaths. At some point, inhale a deep full breath through your nose, and then hold that breath for a steady count of ten. As you hold the breath, be sure to keep your throat and sinuses open. Use your diaphragm and chest muscles to keep the air in your lungs. Then exhale a full breath through your mouth. It will be necessary to tighten the muscles in your belly and chest a little, but do not strain. Hold the pause between breaths for a steady count of seven. Then, completely relax your belly and chest as you begin another deep inhalation through your nose. Complete this process through three complete cycles. After the third exhalation and pause, simply relax and return to natural breathing through your nose. Notice how the dramatic increase of oxygen in your blood has affected your body, mind and emotions. After several natural breaths, you may open your eyes. Make appropriate notes in your journal. Regular use of this technique may help your respiratory and cardiovascular systems. If you already have chronic problems in either of these systems, you should consider consulting a doctor before practicing this exercise.

**Exercise 1:9**

For one week, set aside a few minutes once or twice a day to practice deeply relaxed breathing. It is especially recommended that you do so just before you actually get in bed, and you may wish to make it a permanent part of your evening routine. Sit in a chair with your feet on the floor, your back supported and erect, your neck straight. Close your eyes and focus on the sensations of your breathing. Relax your throat, chest and belly. Focus on your breath flowing naturally in and out through your nose. As you continue to breathe naturally and peacefully, begin to count your breaths by mentally saying, "In one, out one. In two, out two." Continue through seven complete cycles of inhale and exhale. If you lose count, start over at one. With each exhale you feel your body becoming more and more relaxed, and your mind becoming more and more quiet and still. You sink deeper and deeper toward a sleep-like state. After the seventh exhale, you may open your eyes. Make appropriate notes in your journal. Regular use of this technique may improve your sleep.

**Exercise 1:10**

For one week, set aside a few minutes once or twice a day to practice rhythmic breathing. Sit in a chair with your feet on the floor, your back supported and erect, your neck straight. Close your eyes and focus on the sensations of your breathing. Relax your throat, chest and belly. Focus on your breath flowing naturally in and out through your nose. Use your fingers to feel for your pulse, either in your wrist or in your neck. In your mind, silently keep time with your pulse by repeatedly counting to four. After you have the tempo in your mind, put your hands back in their original positions. Now begin to inhale for a count of four, pause for two, exhale for four and pause for two. Remember that these breaths are supposed to be easy and peaceful. If it seems easier for you to use a six-three or eight-four rhythm, then feel free to make that adjustment. Maintain whatever rhythm you chose, and repeat the process through seven complete cycles. After the seventh cycle you may open your eyes. Make appropriate notes in your journal. Regular use of this technique may help harmonize your mind and body.