

Breath Prayer: An Ancient Spiritual Practice Connected with Science

The connection between the word “Spirit” and “Breath Prayer” is found in both the Hebrew and Greek language. Hebrew word *ruach* and Greek word *Pneuma* both mean breath, wind, and/or spirit.

The simplicity of breathing can relieve us from complicating our prayer. It can help us with Paul’s admonition to “pray without ceasing.”

Within the Orthodox tradition, Breath Prayer appears perhaps as early as the 3rd century. Known as the “Jesus Prayer” or “Prayer of the Heart,” it draws from Mark 10:47, where a blind man, Bartimaeus, calls Jesus to heal him. He says to Jesus, “Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” By placing a few words on the inhale and a few on the exhale, it unites the prayer with the body. We can choose a breath prayer that connects with what we are needing in our present lives:

- Help me Jesus
- Fill me, Holy Spirit
- Bring peace
- I receive Your love
- Give me grace
- Flow in me
- Etc.

There is also a scientific connection to breath prayers. We experience how our breath changes when we encounter sudden disturbances: a loss/grief, anxiety, fear, etc. This is what happens in these cases (how strongly depends on how significant the disturbance is): A surge of adrenaline begins blood rushing to the large muscles to activate a response. The eyes dilate to process the scene. Inflammation prepares the body to respond to injury. Pain tolerance increases and digestion and immunity responses stop to prioritize protection over health. Breathing becomes more rapid and this opens small airways in the lungs, moving more oxygen to the brain for greater awareness. The autonomic nervous system triggers all these responses in a flash. Nothing is thought out. We just sense there’s an increased sense of emergency. Often, previous experiences are triggered by the present experience.

Research has proven that voluntary-regulated breathing practices help to correct the imbalances of the stress response systems. The short version of this is that our bodies are part of our spiritual life with the Trinity and breathing blesses our spiritual life both by bringing some physical relief and connecting us to God in simple prayer.

You can pray a breath prayer when you are well; you don't have to be going through a difficult time. But if you are going through a difficult time, maybe your concentration span is low, you are in physical and/or emotional pain, have no motive to engage with other forms of prayer because of what you are going through, breath prayers are a real gift.

I'll close with a simple example:

Breathe in: Lord Jesus

Breathe Out: bring peace