Chapter I

The Way of Body and Breath

1. Correct Breathing

Breathing and Mental Activity

Our consciousness is like the sea whose surface is covered by restless waves but whose depths are peaceful and undisturbed. The practice of prayer has for its purpose to calm the waves found in consciousness, in order that the spirit may become still, transparent water. When consciousness is in repose the door to contemplation is opened. But since it is not possible to stop our thoughts on command, we make use of our breathing in order to create the fundamental condition for contemplation.

Breathing plays a decisive role in intensifying the attention and concentration that are required for contemplation. Even our everyday experience teaches us that undivided attention is more easily achieved when we hold our breath. We hold our breath when, for example, we are trying to thread a needle or are suddenly frightened. In common parlance we often say “he caught his breath” or “it took her breath away.”

Experiment proves that there is a close connection between brain activity and the abdominal muscles. In expressing feeling, we set these muscles in motion, as, for example, when we laugh or when we weep violently. Conversely, correct abdominal breathing leads the spirit into repose by calming the activity of the mind, just as a wind that dies down becomes unmoving air. After a time of sustained practice in breathing one reaches a state of repose that becomes independent of outward circumstances to some degree and follows laws of its own. In this state one feels like a mountain that is solidly rooted in
the earth. Thoughts still come and go, but they are like the clouds that move around the mountain. One becomes aware that discursive thought is not the center, the true reality, of a human being. Instead, one discovers a core, a power, that is experienced as the real self. Ultimately a point is reached at which there is only experience without an experiencer, perception without a perceiver. This does not mean that the person becomes unconscious; the description is simply an attempt to characterize the manner of the "gazing."

The most important part of the breathing process is expiration or breathing out. It should take longer than breathing in, the air being checked and allowed to escape only slowly. We should not, however, think in terms of holding our breath. It is better in the beginning to imagine that just in front of our nose there is a down feather which we want to avoid blowing away. This will help keep the force of the breath dammed up in the abdomen and thus create a natural tension in the abdominal wall. In general, one should breathe quite naturally with as little manipulation as possible, and what has been said above will occur of itself.

In the course of time, breathing becomes so peaceful that hardly any movement can be seen in the entire set of muscles used for breathing. The body is satisfied with a few breaths a minute. One is no longer aware of breathing: peace and quiet reign in body and spirit. This state is a great help to contemplation and a source of spiritual power.

**Attention to Breathing in the Monastic Fathers**

The spiritual teachers of the East are not the only ones aware of the mysterious power present in breathing. In their instructions on prayer the early monastic Fathers of the Thebaid and Syria also say in their own manner that the way to the prayer of quiet and to experience of God is through attention to breathing rather than through training of the intellect. Gregory of Thessalonica, for example, wishing to help his novices calm their minds and recollect their spirits, writes:

> If we want to become truly interior persons and authentic monks, we have to recollect our spirits

within our bodies. There is nothing wrong therefore in encouraging novices to attend to themselves and to focus their spirit on itself by way of their breathing.

It is a fact that in those who enter the spiritual arena for the first time the spirit is distracted rather than recollected and that a mighty effort is required to break down its resistance. They are therefore encouraged to master their own breathing by briefly holding the air they have breathed in and during this period taking control of the spirit.

Breathing in and breathing out very gradually leads the spirit to enter into itself.¹

Gregory of Sinai gives similar advice on the control of breathing as a means of calming the spirit when he writes: “Control the lungs as they breathe so that they will not breathe randomly. Impetuous breathing descends like a tempest on the heart and thereby darkens the spirit and makes the soul restless. Restrain your breathing as much as you can; lock the breath firmly in your heart and practice the Jesus prayer without ceasing.”²

The idea of directing the entire person to God by means of posture, breath control, and a resultant recollection of spirit is thus by no means alien to Christianity. Only when discursive thought has been halted through breath control can the desired state of repose be achieved.

**Everyday Life as Practice Field**

The kind of breathing required for contemplation can be advantageously practiced everywhere and at all times, for it facilitates both bodily and intellectual work. Ultimately, all that needs to be done is what often occurs spontaneously in manual labor: to make the abdomen a reservoir of strength through breathing. The gathering of strength through breathing also plays a major role in sport, be it mountain climbing, swimming, shooting, or skiing.
2. Posture

It is undoubtedly possible to meditate while assuming any bodily posture, sitting on a chair included. On the other hand, it has been shown that a proper sitting posture is very useful for contemplation.

In the beginning, the simplest and most convenient way is to use a low bench for meditation. One kneels on the floor, places the stool over the calves, and sits on it. The knees should remain somewhat apart.

Another way of sitting for meditation is to sit back on the heels. In order to keep the full weight of the body off the heels, one can place a pillow under the buttocks.

Sitting with crossed legs is the traditional Eastern way of sitting for meditation. One sits on a well-padded pillow and places each bent leg on the opposite thigh.

Whatever the manner of sitting that one chooses as suitable for oneself, it is important to attend to the following points:

1. Knees and buttocks should form a triangle that gives the body a solid base.
2. Pelvis and lumbar vertebrae are thrust forward so that the abdomen can move freely.
3. The spinal column is held upright, that is, it has a normal slight S-curvature.
4. The chin should not be thrust forward but rather tucked in.
5. The shoulders are relaxed but do not slump forward.
6. The hands rest in the lap, one hand loosely grasping the thumb of the other. Or one may let the hands rest on the knees.
7. The eyes are directed to a point on the ground a short distance away, but without focusing on an object. They should be kept half-open.
8. The tongue lies relaxed in the mouth, which is always kept closed.

A proper sitting posture is like the foundation of a building. Sitting on a stool is better than sitting on a chair, and sitting on the floor is preferable to sitting on a stool. The reason is that during somewhat lengthy periods of prayer sitting on a chair or stool requires more energy and attention than sitting on the floor.

Like correct breathing, correct sitting takes time to learn. In the beginning we have to be very patient with ourselves, because only gradually do the muscles and limbs relax and become flexible. It is advisable to be attentive to tensions throughout the body and to relax them by regular physical exercises. Many of the instructions given in any good book of yoga will help in achieving a good sitting posture. The important thing is to find a way of sitting in which one can peacefully devote oneself to prayer for twenty minutes.

The Greek monastic Fathers knew that bodily repose makes for repose of spirit. Gregory of Thessalonica, for example, writes that those absorbed in God "repress as far as they can every movement and change." Elsewhere, citing John Climacus, he says: "The person absorbed in God endeavors to capture the incorporeal in the corporeal." Those who follow the instructions of the ancient monastic Fathers, which were based on experience, will, like them, attain to contemplation through patience and perseverance.

3. Recollection

Using a Word

In addition to correct breathing and posture, the repetition of a word can help in attaining the recollection that is essential for contemplation. We owe the practice of using a word to an anonymous English mystic of the fourteenth century whose instructions are collected in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. They are intended to help a young man reach contemplation. The same author later wrote supplementary letters that were collected in the work known to us as *The Book of Privy Counselling*.

The path to contemplation that is described in these two books requires the fading away of all sense perceptions and the turning off of the active intellectual processes, the imagination, and all impulses of the will, since these must all be silent if we
are to experience the divine within us. A first step toward the
required emptying of consciousness is to bring it into unity. In
his instructions for attaining to this unification the author rec-
ommends the repetition of a short word:

If you want to gather all your desire into one simple
word that the mind can easily retain, choose a short
word rather than a long one. A one-syllable word such as "God"
or "love" is best. But choose one that is
meaningful to you. Then fix it in your mind so that it
will stay there come what may. This word will be your
defense in conflict and in peace. Use it to beat upon
the cloud of darkness above you and to subdue all dis-
tractions, consigning them to the cloud of forgetting
beneath you.6

Experience has shown that short words with dark vowels
and soft consonants are better suited than other words. Some
individuals choose their own names, others choose sounds like
o (as in "so"), u (i.e., "ooh"), and a (as in "father" or "abba").
When these sounds are drawn out they give expression to a
sense of wonder at something unknown. People spontaneously
say "oooh" and "aah" when confronted with something splen-
did or astonishing (see Appendix: Reports of Experiences,
henceforth abbreviated as RE, I and II).

In religious terms we may call these vowels primal sounds
of wonder that are wholly open to the experience of the divine
in contemplation. Angelus Silesius was thinking of this kind of
prayer when he wrote: "People chatter a great deal. Those who
know how to pray in the Spirit can come before God with con-
fidence while saying only A and O." The following is told of
Brother Masseo, an early follower of St. Francis:

Often when he was praying, he would express his joy
in a soft constant cooing sound like a gentle dove:
"Ooo-Ooo." And he would remain in contemplation
that way, with a joyful expression on his face and a
happy heart. Moreover, he became extremely humble
and considered himself the least of all the men in the
world.

Brother James of Falerone, of holy memory, asked
him why he never changed tone in his rejoicing. And
he answered very joyfully: "Because when we have
found all that is good in one thing, it is not necessary
to change tone."7

In choosing a word we should seek advice from a spiritual
director who is experienced in this form of prayer. Then, once
a word has been selected, it should not be changed. The word
should completely absorb our consciousness when we are pray-
ing; nothing else should be given room with it. No thought, no
image should be allowed in.

If we follow these rules, the word will become a personal
one, even though many others may also be using it. It must
become the "Logos" or "Word" through which God created all
things (Jn 1:1). It will mean for us the incomprehensible divine
reality and, at the same time, everything that exists. We must
identify ourselves with this word or sound (see RE II: 1). After
being spoken interiorly as we sit quietly in the practice of con-
templation it will continue to exert its efficacy throughout our
daily activities. It is as though we were to pluck a string on a
musical instrument and set it vibrating; it continues to vibrate
and emit its sound even after we have stopped plucking it (see
RE I: 4 and II: 1). RE VII shows what can be really accomplished
in prayer with the help of a word.

The word should never be made the object of reflection
during prayer. The author of The Cloud of Unknowing says
expressly:

If your mind begins to intellectualize over the mean-
ing and connotations of this little word, remind your-
self that its value lies in its simplicity. Do this and I
assure you these thoughts will vanish...8

It is quite sufficient to focus your attention on a simple
word ... and without the intervention of analytical
thought allow yourself to experience directly the reality it signifies. Do not use clever logic to examine or explain this word to yourself nor allow yourself to ponder its ramifications. . . . I do not believe reasoning ever helps in the contemplative work."

We should not concentrate, then, on the meaning and content of the word. Its function in contemplation is to provide consciousness with an unwavering focal point; we bring our entire consciousness to bear on it.

**The Word and Breathing**

A word exerts its real power when its use is coordinated with breathing. One speaks the word as one breathes out, and holds the final vowel as long as breath permits. A person meditating in private may even sing the word for a short time. The exercise sets the chest cavity vibrating, prevents any tension, and has a salutary effect on the glands of neck and head. Circulation is improved, and so in particular is the action of the pituitary gland which regulates all the other glands in the endocrine system. When the word is spoken aloud one is also able to see whether breathing is really free of tension, because if there is tension the tone becomes irregular.

Resonance is achieved through the natural tension in the abdomen, as was mentioned in the first part of this chapter. After a short time one should start practicing with the mouth closed, while continuing to sing the word interiorly. The manner of breathing remains the same.

The purpose of combining use of a word with abdominal breathing is to absorb one’s consciousness so that one forgets everything, including oneself. Through persevering practice one eventually becomes one’s word. Once the activity of reason has been silenced the consciousness is filled with a diffuse attentiveness. In this experience consciousness can be compared with the wind which, in the right conditions, becomes unmoving air. So too use of a word can halt the moving stream of consciousness. A clear, pure attentiveness increasingly prevails.