

## Breathing as Spiritual Practice: Experiencing the Presence of God

**Will Johnson**

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On a ten-day retreat at a Benedictine monastery, Will Johnson explored breathing as a way to sense God. The result is *Breathing as Spiritual Practice*, a personal wellness guide that takes an ecumenical view and encourages meditative breathing for everyone.

Johnson, a longtime Buddhist and the director of the Institute for Embodiment Training, chronicles one day of the retreat per chapter. Its a personable, laid-back approach to exploring the esoteric premise of “Breathing God.” Journal entries alternate with abstract, uplifting poems whose plainspoken verses range from observations on breathing to incantatory statements, reiterating the same ideas shown in the text.

Reflections on distracting thoughts and doubt reveal that the process of reaching a unified state is imperfect and nonlinear. Johnson becomes his own case study, which is useful for others who wish to emulate the spiritual retreat, but a drawback when the writing wanders into dream fragments and other digressions.

The monastery’s desert locale inspires detailed, beautiful descriptions of nature. Apt, promising quotations from Genesis, Rumi, and other religious sources, as well as the Hebrew term *Ruach*, are used to support the idea of breath as an animating, direct sign of God’s presence.

The book’s key principles are provocative: people have made faith a cerebral experience, it says, but focusing on breathing instead is beneficial. It promotes bodily awareness, helps in returning to a more receptive state, and underscores how similar people are, no matter their religion. The book’s call to let the “egoic mind” go and cultivate stillness to let God enter is familiar; the work is more radical in its suggestion that those who have lost their sense of breath as a spiritual connection lead to many of the world’s violent ills.

Exploratory, spare, and glancing at related practices like fasting, *Breathing as Spiritual Practice* is an optimistic guide to breathing in order to transcend physiological barriers and map a deeper spiritual connection.

KAREN RIGBY (November / December 2019)

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