

STEP 11: BREATH AND DEATH

If you have not yet read the earlier Studies on Step 11, it might be helpful to do so before reading this one. Those other Studies offer an understanding of some of the concepts that are assumed here. We do not suggest that you read them in order to *agree* with them – these Studies are offered merely for what they are worth to you, and as always you are invited to take what you need or want and leave the rest behind.

In particular, it is probably necessary that you understand what we have written about Step 11 meditation as *doing nothing in the presence of God*. In the earlier Step 11 Studies, we suggest that Step 11 meditation consists at its heart in doing nothing: that is, following the recommendations of Psalm 46:10 – “Be still and know that I am God.” We determined in those Studies that recovery consists largely (some would argue, totally) in surrendering completely to the will of God: that this is how we recover from our core addiction in the first place, and that the focus of the AA Big Book is to bring that concept of total surrender to every thought, feeling, and action we may be involved in in the rest of our lives. There is nothing, these Studies argue, that we can do to bring about our recovery. Even the working of the Steps is advised, it has been suggested, not to bring about recovery, but because it has been found that “the Steps are the twelve least dangerous things you can do while God is solving your problem.” Recovery, in other words, comes about purely as a result of grace. And what can we do to “help grace along”? Nothing: so nothing is what we do in Step 11 meditation.

We also discovered that it is extremely difficult to do nothing for any protracted period of time; and so we recommended that we focus on our in-breath and out-breath. We watch the in-breath from the moment it starts till the moment it ends; we watch how the end of the in-breath is succeeded immediately by the beginning of the out-breath; we watch the duration of the out-breath until it stops. We breathe normally, through the nose, but we watch for the beginning, the continuation, and the end of the in-breath, and then the beginning, the continuation, and the end of the out-breath.

We forget, of course, to keep watching the breath. Our minds wander, and we wander with them. Thoughts arise and we believe them and pursue them; feelings arise and we indulge them; “disturbances” or “interruptions” (as we typically think of them) arise and we are disturbed or interrupted by them. But sooner or later we “remember that we have forgotten” to watch the breath, and we return to it: the in-breath, from its inception to its ending, and the out-breath, from its inception to its ending. Every part of what we have described in this paragraph is part of Step 11 meditation. Watching the breath; forgetting to watch the breath; remembering to watch the breath; they are all part of meditation.

When we watch the breath like this for a while, we begin to realize that there is one more stage in this in-breath and out-breath business. While it tends to be true that the end of the in-breath is followed immediately by the beginning of the out-breath, it does not always seem to be the case that the end of the out-breath is followed by the beginning of the in-breath. Instead, there is often a space between them, a pause of a few seconds where the out-breath has finished but the in-breath has not yet begun. You can try

practicing this for yourself right now, without formally “meditating.” Not infrequently you will find that there is a pause after the end of the out-breath before the start of the next in-breath. If you do try this, don’t “force” the situation. Don’t deliberately hold your breath, for example. The idea always in Step 11 meditation is to watch something (or nothing) happen, not to *make* it happen. So watch for the pause. Watch too for the fact that the in-breath comes all by itself. It starts of its own accord. You don’t have to make it happen – you can simply watch.

As you continue to focus on the in-breath, the out-breath, and the pause in between, you may notice something else. You may notice that thoughts and feelings, ideas and distractions, disappear entirely or almost entirely during that pause in your breathing. It seems to be a place of almost perfect peace. It is a limited time of peace, of course; it is brief, and it’s succeeded almost too soon by the beginning of the next in-breath. So this seems to be what happens: We breathe in, we breathe out, and then – however briefly – we seem to experience peace. And then we must breathe in and out again, and then arrive once more at the brief period of peace.

Of course, the moment we realize that this peace is there, we start to strive to attain it. And that simply doesn’t work. We can’t meditate *in order* to experience peace; in fact, we can’t meditate *in order* to achieve anything, for meditation is in a way one of the most profoundly pointless things we can do. So just as soon as we start to watch the in-breath and out-breath *in order* to feel that peace, it vanishes.

You may also notice that the feeling of peace can only come if you have watched the in-breath from start to finish and the out-breath from start to finish. It doesn’t seem possible to let our attention wander during the in-breath and out-breath and then bring it back to the pause between the breaths in order to feel peaceful. If we do not watch the in-breath and the out-breath, we “forget” to feel the peace of the pause between the breaths.

That pause seems to be, in a sense, a prefiguring of our deaths. Death is typically something we fear: the breath vanishes, and life is over – *our* life is over. But it now turns out that we “die” in some sense between every contemplated breath we take. There is a pause between the out-breath and the in-breath; and, far from being something to be afraid of, it seems to be something that is almost desirable, something to be experienced, even enjoyed.

Those among you who are Christians will be familiar with the story of the Mount of Transfiguration (Mt. 17:1-8). You will remember what Peter’s response was: He wanted to build homes there, so that he could stay in that state of peace for ever. In fact, it turned out not only that he could not stay there, but that immediately upon his descent from the mountain he was confronted with one of the most unpleasant episodes of his life. And it’s the same way with this Step 11 meditation. The space between the breaths is a refreshing pause, but that is all it can be. All too soon, it seems, comes the next in-breath. But when we recognize what it is that truly comes between the breaths, we experience something of the greatest importance.

First, we recognize that it is part of our true nature to be at peace – a peace we cannot create for ourselves, but which we can experience if we so choose with literally every breath we take. We learn that peace is part of who we are, when we cease to pay attention to ourselves and instead pay attention to nothing. Second, we recognize that peace as being something that is given to us quite freely, without any striving on our part – “it just comes,” as the AA Big Book says in another context. Third, we come to see that this “something” that is given to us is “portable” – we get to carry it around with us. We don’t have to go to church, or to some beautiful location in the countryside, or to a distant, silent, and secluded place. We don’t have to go anywhere, because we are carrying it around inside ourselves. The Kingdom of God is indeed within us, and we can experience it any time we wish, any time that we are ready to set aside our ego-driven plans, thought, and feelings and just *be*. Fourth, we start to see that in a very profound way, we don’t breathe at all – something or somebody *breathes us*. Indeed, this is reflected in the Genesis story of man’s creation: “God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Gen. 2:7). To practice Step 11 meditation is to experience God breathing us, God meditating us, God living us. In the practice of meditation, these intransitive verbs become transitive: we are the object and God is the subject. This, incidentally, is the ultimate mystical experience: the reversal of subject and object in the God-man/woman relationship. Very oddly, such mystical experiences are regarded in most religious faiths as exceptional. Nothing could be further from the truth, and a key theme in the AA Big Book is the availability of mystical experience as a moment-by-moment routine.

Indeed, this “portable” practice is a core recommendation of the AA Big Book’s treatment of Step 11. It may be worth going back and reading this again, once you have begun your Step 11 meditation practice. Read what the Big Book says about how we are to live each day, and you will see that it takes this place of peace *for granted*. The Big Book does not seem to regard it as exceptional in any way. Indeed, it describes it as “a working part of the mind.” This is yet another reason why, against a committed practice of the last three Steps, it is possible to see the first eighty-eight pages of *Alcoholics Anonymous* as one of the supreme spiritual works of all time.

Lastly, we come to experience the ceasing of the breath, not as something to be frightened of, but as something to be accepted. If there is peace in the pause between the breaths, we start to see (and above all *experience*) that there will truly be peace when the breath ceases altogether.