

Schools being closed, self-isolation guidelines, suspension of group gatherings, and the unrelenting news reports generates a certain level of personal and social angst. This is along side concerns about health risks, finances, employment status, and keeping the kids occupied. It is a season of heightened tension. It is a crucial time for us all, and a time when spiritual habits can stabilize us. With this in mind I will share reflections from three sources which have helped me remain grounded.

Thich Nhat Hanh has written a wonderful book on mindfulness. Amongst some of the gems within this meditation manual are the following.

Counting Your Breath: As you breathe in, count 1 in your mind, and as you breathe out, count 1. Breathe in, count 2. Breathe out, count 2. Continue through 10, then return to 1 again. This counting is like a string which attaches your mindfulness to your breath. This exercise is the beginning point in the process of becoming continuously conscious of your breath. Without mindfulness, however, you will quickly lose count. When the count is lost, simply return to 1 and keep trying until you can keep the count correctly. Once you can truly focus your attention on the counts, you have reached the point at which you can begin to abandon the counting method and begin to concentrate solely on the breath itself.

In those moments when you are upset or dispersed and find it difficult to practice mindfulness, return to your breath: Taking hold of your breath is itself mindfulness. Your breath is the wondrous method of taking hold of your consciousness...Learn to practice breathing in order to regain control of body and mind, to practice mindfulness, and to develop concentration and wisdom...

Every Act is a Rite: [P]ractice meditation when you walk, stand, lie down, sit, and work, while washing your hands, washing the dishes, sweeping the floor, drinking tea, talking to friends, or whatever you are doing.¹ “If while washing dishes, we think only of the cup of tea that awaits us, thus hurrying to get the dishes out of the way as if they were a nuisance, then we are not “washing the dishes to wash the dishes.” What’s more, we are not alive during the time we are washing the dishes. In fact we are completely incapable of realizing the miracle of life while standing at the sink. If we can’t wash the dishes, the chances are we won’t be able to drink our tea either. While drinking the cup of tea, we will only be thinking of other things, barely aware of the cup in our hands. Thus we are sucked away into the future—and we are incapable of actually living one minute of life². When you are washing the dishes, washing

¹ Thich Nhat Hanh *The Miracle of Mindfulness!: A Manual on Meditation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), p. 21-24.

² Ibid, p. 4.

the dishes must be the most important thing in your life. Just as when you're drinking tea, drinking tea must be the most important thing in your life...Chopping wood is meditation. Carrying water is meditation. Be mindful 24 hours a day, not just during the one hour you may allot for formal meditation or reading scripture and reciting prayers...Each act is a rite, a ceremony.³

Recent conversations between Archbishop Desmond Tutu and “His Holiness” the Dalai Lama are also point us in helpful directions to remaining calm in the midst of storms. The Archbishop and Dalai Lama talk about suffering, and these two know something of hard times—very hard times. They ponder how we might find meaning and joy in the midst of suffering. These two great spiritual leaders of our age suggested the following for coming to terms with challenging circumstances⁴:

1. Practice love and compassion – learning to appreciate the grief and pain with which others live helps to moderate our own suffering. Yes some suffering is self-inflicted, but the practice of love and compassion has the capacity to transform our own pain.
2. Name the “dark night of soul” for what it is. We do not need to fix it. We name it. We hold it before God. We breathe in trust. We take the next step in the day. It is a minute by minute guide to survival.
3. We avoid mind wandering. This is the principal behind the exercise I outlined from Thich Nhat Hanh. A wandering mind often rests on regrets, anxieties, or the temptations of the flesh. Grounding our mind to the present allows us to appreciate the warmth of the tea cup, the beauty of the tree, the gift of a companion.
4. We practice generosity.

Franciscan Spiritual teacher has a wonderful insight regarding the name Yahweh, which is the sacred name of God in the Hebrew bible. It was so sacred, in fact, that Jews refrain from speaking this name when it appears in scripture readings, substituting Elohim or Adonai instead. Rohr writes,

“This unspeakability has long been recognized, but we now know it goes even deeper: formally the word was not spoken at all, but *breathed!* Many are convinced that its correct pronunciation is an attempt to replicate and imitate the very sound of inhalation and exhalation [citation]. The one thing we do every

³ Ibid, p. 24.

⁴ His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu (with Douglas Abrams), *The Book of Joy* (Viking Press, a subdivision of Penguin Random House Canada LTD, 2016), pp 55-57.

moment of our lives is therefore to speak the name of God. This makes it our first and our last word as we enter and leave the world....

When considered in this way, God is suddenly as available and accessible as the very thing we all do constantly—breathe. Exactly as some teachers of prayer always said, “Stay with the breath, attend to your breath”...

Just keep breathing consciously in this way and you will know that you are connected to humanity from cavemen to cosmonauts, to the entire animal world, and even to the trees and the plants. And we are now told that the atoms we breathe are physically the same as the stardust from the original Big Bang. Oneness is no longer merely a vague mystical notion, but a scientific fact.⁵”

Breathe in Yah, breathe out weh. Breath in God, breathe out God. If we do this for twenty minutes, or even five minutes, my guess is we will feel grounded in the one in whom we live and move and have our being.

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⁵ Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), pp 25-26.