



THE BREATH

THE ESSENCE OF THE
SPIRITUAL TRADITION

MICHEL CHIAMBRETTO

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SPIRITUAL TRADITION

RUAH • PNEUMA • SPIRITUS • QI • KI • PRANA • RUH

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Discovery Publisher

First published in French:

Le Souffle sous le sceau du secret, 2013, Mercure Dauphinois

For the English edition:

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New York • Paris • Dublin • Tokyo • Hong Kong

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Drawings: Rémy, Max, Michel.

My thanks to Claudine, Marie, Paul, Thomas, Didier, Vlad.

And also to H.M. Chan Buddhist monk, Masters W.X.J. and W.S.W. of the Chinese internal tradition, Roman Catholic Prior Don M., L.B.-M. Yoga Master, A.F. Master of the Occult, the F.: H.A., S.B., C.C., G.M., and Xue Yuan Kong Jin.

The illusion ends with the death of the illusionist.

M.C.

Foreword

A topic such as “the Breath¹” —or “spiritual energy” — can only be of interest to a person on a quest: a quest for truth, authenticity, a different relation, a discovery of an absolute beyond any understanding.

These days one has to be atypical to start on this path, which has no material gain in view. A path that promises neither power, nor appearance, nor profit, but simply a possibility to bring an answer to the *extreme thirst* coming from one’s Profound² that no one and nothing can quench. A *thirst* present within since forever and which progressively has become so pervasive that it requires a total involvement.

This book proposes a path to follow, providing indications on the direction to be taken, the steps to be made, the battle to be lead. It will provide details that will allow you to refine your discernment of the traditions covered, by keeping you informed of the mistakes and illusions to avoid; that is to say, the *illusory byways* intended for the greatest number of people, or in short, the exoteric approach. Above all, it will give you the ability to “recognize” the authentic methods of work that can open your mind toward a real and concrete awareness of the “Breath”. This “Breath” can become matter and can be transformed, with time and effort, and a certain level of abnegation,

1. Often translated as “energy”: the origin of this “translation/interpretation” comes undoubtedly from Henri Bergson’s: *Spiritual Energy: Essays and Lectures, 1919 (texts and conferences published between 1901 and 1913)*, even though it was actually described as “spiritual energy”.

The term “energy”, which appears more “concrete” to the layman, has been kept because it “sells better”. To simplify reading, the author will only use the term “breath” in quotation marks to express the “breath/spiritual energy”.

2. By the “Profound” the author means the transcendent spiritual dimension hidden inside every individual. To be distinguished from the “profound” or “deep”: the Limbic system or Reptilian brain, i.e. the unconscious.

into a link allowing the Union.

When reading the previous lines, the logical question that comes to mind is:

“Why reveal the principles of a “Tool” that has always been considered a “secret”?”

This is also something we asked ourselves before writing this essay. Our answer was based on:

- Firstly, the “contemporary deviation”. Today, most seminars dedicated to learning spiritual methods or exercises have a common mercantile character, despite their diversity. The resulting merchandising system, targeted at certain social categories, offers a sophisticated ritual, a flattering individuation, a culture to embrace, a language to adopt, all with the theoretical aim of assimilating the “tools” on offer. The whole rests on the supports of the ego, such as the desire for extraordinary knowledge, power and, most of all, appearance. Which can only prevent the “tools” from working, at least the authentic ones.
- In view of the above, two attitudes are possible: either one resigns oneself and accepts the nature of things and people, or one decides, for one last time, to throw a stone in the river, hoping that the ripples will move in a direction away from the common one. There are sincere Seekers who waste precious time in philosophical and intellectual research, while following a progression of elaborate rituals. Over time, they see their impetus fade, as they begin to realize that what they are doing is not working, and that only the illusion of appearances has been satisfied. Consequently, and in the interest of the Tradition itself, our duty to act as a “bridge” becomes self-evident.

With this in mind, this book aims to highlight the importance of the “Breath” in the various Traditions of the East, Far East and West. In these different latitudes, all authentic Traditions indicate that the “Breath” is the primordial element for connecting with God, the Tao, the All, although the metaphors and parables used need to be deciphered.

Last but not least, this book intends to emphasize something that must become obvious at some point. Something that will lead you to *“progres-*

1. By “Tool” the author means the “method” allowing to achieve a widening of the field of consciousness—for example: prayer, meditation, contemplation, pranayama, etc.

sively accept to enter the sea, then to continue until there is no foothold, while learning how to swim, and lastly to consent to drown¹.”

As can be seen, the path is the reverse of contemporary spiritual traditions, be they esoteric or initiatory, and what they offer, to wit, a construct of knowledge, rituals, techniques, attires and attractive novel cultures. The means are always the same: presenting the product as exceptional, offering the possibility to augment one’s potential in various rewarding areas and above all offering to differentiate oneself from the ordinary. Of course, it can be said that in order to attract the layman rattles have to be waved, otherwise no one will be interested, or very few. This is true, however it always ends up in total confusion — with time, the mantle of the Seeker thickens and it becomes impossible for him to “present himself naked”.

For this reason Bergson, philosopher of consciousness, divides religion into two: static religion and dynamic religion².

The former has a societal function, defining prohibitions and taboos through dogma, in contrast to the latter, which has for objective human fulfillment.

This same confusion was highlighted by René Guénon, who noted that Islam presents primitive Christianity as “Tariqa” (initiatory path), and not as “Sharia” (social legislation), thus demonstrating the evolution of an initiatory message toward a moral path understandable by all and so intended for the greatest number of people³. An evolution that can be considered generic to contemporary religious, esoteric and initiatory fields.

Our purpose is the opposite. It consists in showing you the elements necessary for the personal transmutation necessary for embarking on a path of initiation. This transformation will not happen by adding new stones to one’s “inner temple”, which in this case can only be an egocentric construct, but through a progressive deconstruction in order to find one’s inner essence.

“I will destroy this house, and none shall be able to build it again.⁴”

This is an extremely difficult task. It is necessary not only to gain awareness of one’s conditioning, but also to confront one’s nature, even the deep

1. A metaphor used by the author, which is relevant to any authentic spiritual path.

2. Henri Bergson, *The two sources of morality and religion*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1977

3. Jean Marc Vivenza, *Le dictionnaire de René Guénon*, Le Mercure Dauphinois, 2002

4. Gospel of Thomas 71

instinct that encloses every human in a bubble of consciousness.

For this reason, this book is not ordered in a logical or reasonable way. It may appear chaotic, but rest assured that at the end of this reading, a part of your deep “self” will feel impacted provided, of course, that you “open up” a little. In fact, this book is not addressed at the intellect but at the Other. The Other¹, who talks to us from time to time. The one who has been all but erased during our early childhood, when we were told by education that our thoughts are wrong, that our feelings do not conform, that what we perceive is the fruit of imagination or does not exist, that we have to join the world of adults.

Therefore, what follows should be read without preconceived ideas, without accepting or rejecting what is written. Simply read with a peaceful mind, same as a long, tranquil river follows its course, meandering its way through the twists and turns, and finally returning to its sea of origin.

No promises of superiority, of happiness with a capital H, of improved health, of potential performance. No, only the promise of rediscovering a long lost sense, so that one day, perhaps, you can become One by communing with the “undifferentiated breath”, if God opens the door for you, if the Tao welcomes you, if you awaken.

Ready to continue?

Let us walk together for a while...

1. “He now has become myself whom before I called “Another!””

Kabir, introduction and translation from Hindi and notes by Charlotte Vaudeville, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974

The Nature of the Breath

It is possible to find its trace under all latitudes, in most authentic traditions, whether religious, esoteric, mesoteric or exoteric, even philosophical ones. Of course, to recognize it, it is necessary to know the etymology of the different names used, as well as the meaning of the many parables and metaphors.

Faced with this multiplicity, the very notion has often found itself divided into multiple concepts, or even imaginary abstractions, confusing any and all understanding of the initial meaning and consequently of the initiatory dimension contained within.

If we list the different words that express the “Breath” today, we find:

- *Rua* in Hebrew
- *Pneuma* in Greek
- *Spiritus* in Latin
- *Ruh* in Arabic
- *Qi (Chi)* in Chinese
- *Ki* in Japanese
- *Prana* in Sanskrit

However, the list would be incomplete without taking into account the notion of “the holder of the breath within oneself” in the sense of “soul breath”, “breath-self”, “animated breath”, “differentiated breath”, or:

- *Nephesh* in Hebrew
- *Psukhe* in Greek
- *Anima* in Latin

- *An-Nafs* in Arabic

- *Hun* in Chinese

- *Atman* in Sanskrit

Lastly, to conclude this list, the fundamental texts of these religions also mention it using terms such as: wind, spirit, life, breath of life, the animated, the soul, the Holy Spirit, Angel Gabriel, inhale, exhale, breathing, impetus.

Some examples, chronologically:

- **In Brahmanism** (*about 1500 years BC*), we find in the *Upanishads* (*reference texts*) the notion of Atman (*breath/soul*), considered as the deepest essence of man.

The Atman is the breath of life at the origin of creation. It is buried deep within every human being, and constitutes the consciousness-carrying soul, the conscious self.

“In Prana all things that we see around us [moving or unmoving], disappear [at the time of their destruction. And at the time of their appearance,] they appear from Prana.¹”

But this self-awareness, which is also the link with the divine, can join the *Brahman*, the individual soul merging with the universal soul. However, this union cannot be described with words, because it is experiential.

The *Prana* (*material or immaterial breath*) for its part, is born from the Atman whose seat is in the heart.

“This Prana is born from Atman.²”

It is one of the five breaths of the body and by circulating connects the eyes, ears, mouth and nose.

The work of *Pranayama* in Yoga (*control or retention of the breath*) is therefore a part of this tradition. *Atman* is no longer mentioned today in the West, probably in order not to relate to Brahmanism.

Authentic *Pranayama* (*and Yoga techniques in general*) is not intended to be a physiological massage, to declog the body or invigorate antibodies, but to connect the Atman to the Brahman, the individual breath to the cosmic

1. *Chandogya Upanishad* (1.11.5), translated by Swami Lokeshwarananda, Ramakrishna Math, 1998

2. *Prashna Upanishad* (3.3), translated by Swami Sivananda

breath, in awareness, as is the case in any authentic tradition.

- **In Taoism** (6th century BC) the “breath” is also a connecting element, of relation between the self and the *Tao*. Knowing that the two are dissociated only by our awareness of the “moment”.

Lao Tzu (Laozi) says about the *Tao*¹:

“How still it was and formless, standing alone, and undergoing no change, reaching everywhere and in no danger (of being exhausted)! It may be regarded as the Mother of all things.”

“Profound it is, dark and obscure;

Things’ essences all there endure.

Those essences the truth enfold...”

And about humans:

“All things leave behind them the Obscurity (out of which they have come), and go forward to embrace the Brightness (into which they have emerged), while they are harmonized by the Breath of Vacancy.”

Tao did not originally mean “Way” as contemporary translations interpret it, but rather, as Henri Borel notes:

*“From the symbolism of *Tao*’s character itself, it naturally follows that it was not a question of path or way, but of Head, of the very Principle that circulates in the Universe².”*

Which is obvious in the *Tao Tè Ching* of Lao Tzu³:

*“The *Tao*, considered as unchanging, has no name.”*

*“The *Tao* is hidden, and has no name;”*

*“I do not know its name, and I give it the designation of the *Tao*.”*

*“The *Tao* is hidden, and has no name...”*

Chuang Tzu (Zhuang Zhou, Zhuangzi, 4th century BC) recalls when talking about his dead wife:

“When she first died, I certainly mourned just like everyone else! However, I

1. *The sacred books of the East (The Tao Teh King)*, translated by James Legge, 1891

2. Henri Borel, *L’esprit de la Chine*, La main courante, 2007

3. *The sacred books of the East (The Tao Teh King)*, translated by James Legge, 1891

then thought back to her birth and to the very roots of her being, before she was born. Indeed, not just before she was born but before the time when her body was created. Not just before her body was created but before the very origin of her life's breath. Out of all of this, through the wonderful mystery of change she was given her life's breath.¹"

Chu Hsi (Zhu Xi, 12th century AD) describes the change of state:

"When Tai breathed for the first time, this ethereal, actually coagulated breath, generated the Yang, and when this breath had reached the extreme point, and Tai had regained the state of rest, he generated the Yin². "

To conclude on the Taoist tradition, we would like to remind that the Taoist work of *inner alchemy* is based on the notions of *Jing*, *Qi* (*breath*) and *Shen*. Concepts that will be explained later.

• **In Buddhism** (6th century BC) the notion of "breath" is also essential.

Today, however, we can see that it has remained a very discreet teaching.

Indeed, it is quite surprising to see that the notion of "breathing" is limited entirely to physiological breathing for most contemporary currents of this tradition, at least when interpreted for the layman. Nonetheless, the Lotus position, which helps the feet to open up to the "subtle breath" (and the same goes for the palms, the belly breathing and the tip of the tongue pressed to the roof of the mouth), is proof to the contrary. The principles of "conscious breathing" specific to certain schools are just as much a matter of precise work (*a Tool*) with the "breath", and this even if renowned "*specialists*" say that:

"The right state of mind flows naturally from deep concentration on physical posture and breathing. The one with breath lives long, intensely, peacefully. The correct exercise of breath makes it possible to neutralize nervous shocks, to manage instincts and passions, and to control mental activity."

In contrast to this exoteric approach intended for the masses, the esoteric dimension of the "Breath" is only intended for Seekers on a quest, as Shakyamuni confirms:

"And I discovered that profound truth, so difficult to perceive, difficult to understand, tranquillizing and sublime, which is not to be gained by mere

1. *The book of Chuang Tzu*, translated by Martin Palmer, Penguin Classics, 2006

2. Henri Borel, *ibidem*

reasoning, and is visible only to the wise.¹”

However, it may also be a question of formulation, as the boundary between “pure consciousness” and “Breath” fades on its own, as we will discuss later. It can also be said that without “Breath” any emptiness could only be, as stated by Chan Buddhism, “stubborn emptiness”.

As an example of work with the “Breath”, we can mention the attention directed to breathing and then to the thirty-two parts of the body of the *Sutta-pitaka*, (*oral teachings of Buddha transcribed in the 1st century*), as well as the attention linked to the counting of breaths of the *Visuddhimagga* (“*The Path of Purity*”, 430 AD) of Buddhaghosa. Unfortunately, this “tool” is often seen in the West as a method using the physiological breathing to calm and focus the mind, which is certainly due to a lack of awareness/perception of the “matter” to be worked on (*“the breath” must be “matter”, otherwise how to sculpt the wind?*).

Another example is the Buddhist mantra (*tool of the Spirit*) which is exemplary for those who have been introduced to its use. Its principle is the repetition of a sound and rhythmic formula with the purpose of guiding the “breath”.

But it is true that the mantra is often presented as a “magic” formula to the layman, the latter not possessing, in awareness, the necessary “matter”.

Such “magic” is in opposition to the principles of the Buddha:

“It is because I see danger in the practice of these mystic wonders that I loathe and abhor and am ashamed thereof.”³

In the Tibetan tradition, a demonstrative expression of sound linked to the “Breath” is made by means of polyphonic chants, called *dbyangs* (“*vowels*” in *Tibetan*), where two to three notes are simultaneously emitted.

Finally, we can also mention the mudras, which are not a “*codified and symbolic positioning of the hands*”, but rather a principle of closing one of the “Breath” circuits, so as to provoke a particular opening of consciousness.

1. Nyanatiloka (compiler, translator), *The Word of the Buddha: An Outline of the Teaching of the Buddha in the Words of the Pali Canon*, 14th edition, Buddhist Publication Society, 1967

2. Dalai Lama and Sheng Yen, *Meeting of minds*, Dharma Drum Publications, 1999

3. Dīgha Nikāya

And to further emphasize the importance of the “breath” in this tradition, it is worth pointing out that when Buddhism made its first incursion into China in the 2nd century, the Taoist Masters of the time said that it was “*identical to original Taoism*”.

- **In Christianity**, the “Breath” is often described as the “Holy Spirit” of the “*Trinitarian Mystery*” (*Father, Son, Holy Spirit*).

The transcriptions are: *Ruah* in Hebrew, *Pneuma* in Greek and *Spiritus* in Latin, often translated as “*breath*”, “*spirit*”, “*breathing*”, “*wind*”, “*Holy Spirit*”. *Ruah* is quoted more than three hundred times in the Bible.

To mention but a few examples of the use of the word “Breath”:

◇ In the Book of Genesis:

* Chapter II

“Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”

* Chapter VI

“I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it.”

* Psalm 33:6

“By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth.”

* Proverbs 20:27

“The human spirit is the lamp of the Lord that sheds light on one’s inmost being.”

◇ In the Gospel according to Saint John 3:8:

“The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

Saint Paul contrasted the spiritual person (*pneumatikos*) with the psychic person (*psuchikos*, who has no Spirit).

* 1st Corinthians 2:14

“The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the

Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.”

Christian Gnostics took up this opposition, distinguishing between “*hylics*” (those attached to matter), “*psychics*” (Christians, but cut off from the Truth), and “*pneumatics*” (those who have the Knowledge, who possess Gnosis).

It should also be noted that nowadays work with the “Breath” is more particularly present in the Greek Orthodox tradition.

• **In Islam**, “Breath” is written as “*Ruh*” in the Quran.

Its different meanings are: “Breath of Life”, “Holy Spirit” or “Angel Gabriel” who is the Intermediary for the “Word of God” (*Revelation of the Quran*).

Ruh is mentioned more than twenty times in the Quran. Some examples:

* Ali 'Imran 3:49

“I have come to you with a sign from your Lord: I will make for you a bird from clay, breathe into it, and it will become a real bird—by Allah’s Will.”

* An-Nisa 4:171

“O People of the Book! Do not go to extremes regarding your faith; say nothing about Allah except the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was no more than a messenger of Allah and the fulfillment of His Word through Mary and a spirit ‘created by a command’ from Him.”

* Al-Hijr 15:29

“So when I have fashioned him and had a spirit of My Own creation breathed into him, fall down in prostration to him.”

* Al-Waqi’ah 56:83

“Why then are you helpless when the soul of a dying person reaches their throat...” (of a moribund)

The esoteric current of Islam, “*Sufism*”, presents a fascinating work with the breath using to the following tools:

◇ *Dhikr*, “remembrance of Allah”, which consists in repeating the name of God with a particular intention linked to the “Breath”, accompanied in some cases by mental attention to certain points of the body.

And we should not forget:

◇ *Sama*, “dance” of the whirling Derviches of the Mevlevi Sufis whose aesthetic aspect hides not only a great symbolism, but also a connection with *palpable* “Breath” for those who are aware of the “Breath” (not to be confused with the parodies offered to tourists).

As these few examples demonstrate, the notion of “Breath” is universal. It appears to always be:

- at the origin of human life,
- the link that ties humans to this origin,
- that which maintains their existence.

At some point every Seeker becomes aware that this notion unites all spiritual traditions, bearing witness to the existence of a “Primordial Tradition¹”, common to all mankind.

What is more, while in contact with discreet, esoteric and initiatory brotherhoods emanating from these different traditions, the Seeker discovers that the purpose of the tools provided in confidence is work with this “Breath” (*except when the “Breath” has become an “abstraction”*).

Most of the time the answer the Seeker is given on the interest of such practices is that they make it possible to amplify the “Breath” and therefore the relation with God, Allah, the Father, the Holy Spirit, the Tao, the All, the One, as each tradition wishes to translate it.

It is necessary for any sincere Seeker to approach the mystery of the “Breath” and, to do so, to know its nature. The first step would be for him to look at his own conditioning. But, as a consequence of the education received, like all his peers, to understand the new element he will begin with its definition. He will consult books and dictionaries on esoteric topics. Once obtained, the details and explanations provided will bring the desired conceptual satisfaction, which would be the result of an analysis made by the “Knowledgeables²”, chosen by society for their intellectual qualities.

1. Primordial tradition: meaning the one transmitted since the dawn of time, universal by the nature of man.

2. Knowledgeable: “man of knowledge”, where knowledge is in the realm of the intellect, in contrast with Seeker, “a man on a quest”, realm of the experiential

Then, having filed said “element” in a drawer of his memory, the understanding of the budding Seeker will be, from then on, limited to the learned definition. This is true to such an extent, that even in modern so-called “initiatory” associations, any essay begins with dictionary definitions, and paradoxically, this remains true even when the topic in question is a symbol.

A contemporary paradox — rather than escaping the rut of the definition through work with the symbol, the recipient finds himself forced back into it by the dictionary he is using.

What are the consequences of such “lapses”?

They are dramatic. Indeed, everything is restricted to the learned definition, and therefore any personal inquiry can only be done within a pre-defined limit. There is confusion between intellectual analysis, i.e. Reason¹ (*the cortex*) and the intuitive approach of the deep brains.

As a result of this type of conditioning, any individual perception is delimited by imposed criteria, or differently put, by the writings of society’s recognized intellectuals. This is an important, or rather fundamental, point because any sensitive perception is, in fact, modified, channeled.

Accordingly, to escape this hold, it is essential to approach the notion of “Breath” not with definitions, but by first listing what it is not. We will first list the pitfalls that the layman encounters most frequently.

These pitfall traps are all the more effective because they originate, for some, from religious currents that are supposed to bring “*the good word*”, or from esoteric movements that represent the most publicized paths of initiation or awakening. This causes great confusion in the mind of the Seeker who, respecting the societal order, is unable to question the philosophical-religious analyses offered by the institutional elites.

It is necessary to note that any expression of “*dynamic religion*” must involve the reality of “*being connected*”, and that the “esoteric” domain corresponds to knowledge “*hidden from ordinary people*”. These two universes are linked by experience, that is, by an opening of a previously hidden field of consciousness. The latter is a new perception not achievable by an up-front reasoned approach, since it is totally inconceivable by the intellect, and in

1. Reason: the entirety of the intellectual faculties allowing to discern true from false, good from bad, and organizing one’s relation with reality



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THE BREATH

THE ESSENCE OF THE SPIRITUAL TRADITION

The “Breath”, mystery of mysteries, is found in all Eastern, Far Eastern and Western traditions, whether Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Taoist, Brahmanic or Sikh, and is expressed as *Ruah* in Hebrew, *Pneuma* in Greek, *Spiritus* in Latin, *Ruh* in Arabic, *Chi (Qi)* in Chinese, *Ki* in Japanese, *Prana* in Sanskrit.

This book takes a look at these traditions and the importance of the “breath” in them, lifting the veil of secrecy that has covered it since the dawn of time. It provides an insight into its importance and meaning, not in a theoretical way, but through an experiential approach that enables the reader to become aware of its presence in concrete terms, and possibly to create a link with God, the Tao, the One, depending on the tradition.

This book is intended for those seeking spirituality, for seekers and pilgrims working towards union with the indescribable. It will also be useful to all those who practice meditation or sound work such as Mantra or Dhikr, or any art based on the “breath”, from martial arts to yoga and calligraphy.



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ISBN 978-1-78894-637-7



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