

# **The Five Aspects of Prayer and the Five Elements**

by Pir Zia Inayat-Khan

Five aspects of prayer are described by the Sufi teacher Hazrat Inayat Khan. I have found a correspondence between these and the Five Elements to which we attune through the Purification Breaths.

The best time for the breath practice is first thing in the morning, outside or in front of an open window. Practise it standing, or if necessary sitting with your back straight. Once you are familiar with the breaths, it is better to keep the eyes open, but at first you can close your eyes.

## **Earth Purification breath**

The first element is Earth, and the first aspect of prayer is gratitude.

The earth breath is inhaling and exhaling through the nose. To attune to one's relationship with the earth one needs to awaken to one's subtle energetic body. In the same way that the physical body is continuously nourished by digesting and metabolizing the physical substance of the planet, on a subtle level our magnetic field is nourished by the magnetism of the planet.

It is useful to first locate the rhythm of your heart. Then see if you can find the echo of the heartbeat in your hands, feet and head. Scientists used to speak of the heart as the pump of the circulatory system, but now it is understood that the heart itself is pumped by the collective action of the entire circulatory system. So you can't think of your heart as being limited to your chest. In fact, if you feel the pulsation of circulation in your hands, fingertips, feet and head, you may feel that there is no definite boundary. When your eyes are closed, your hands don't feel as if they are made up of five fingers, but rather you feel the vibration that pulses through the hands, expanding in all directions and forming a field that emanates into space.

Once you have attuned to your electromagnetic field, as you inhale you can become conscious of how your life field expands with the influx of energy from the earth through the soles of your feet, through the palms of your hands and through the base of your spine. Then as you exhale, feel yourself collapsing into the gravitational field of the earth, sinking down to be composted and recycled in the body of the earth. So you have to overcome the idea that you are separate from the earth. Remember that your cells are always dividing, new cells being born and old cells dying — in the space of five years, one's entire body is recycled. So one thinks of oneself as a cell in the body of the earth, in which the earth has articulated itself in order to experience itself.

Relax and open your eyes.

## **Gratitude**

Related to the element earth is a specific quality of prayer, which is thanksgiving. Every day is an opportunity to count one's blessings, instead of the opposite which is to enumerate our troubles — and of course in doing so we attract more trouble to ourselves. For example, if we give a gift to someone, and that person appears indifferent and shows no gratitude, we are less likely to give a gift to that person again. It's the same way with the universe.

Gratitude is not only for the sake of obliging the one who has given us something; it is for our own sake, because when one is inattentive to the blessings of life, even that which one has been given is as if it were absent. But for the one who is grateful, even when that for which one is grateful is no longer with you, it remains present because of your gratitude. Gratitude immortalizes one's experience

because in gratitude one lives life vividly. That for which you are grateful engages your full attention and comes alive in you.

So we can always remind ourselves to count our blessings, and you will find that it really does affect your attitude in life. When you realize how much has been given to you, you simply feel happy. and if you are happy, then other people are less likely to feel threatened by you, and so consequently they are more likely to be nice to you.

*Take a minute now. Invoke one object of your experience: a person, animal, plant, object, or an aspect of nature like the blueness of the sky. As the Sufis say, taste it, savour it, enjoy it in your mind, feel what it means to live in a world in which you have the privilege of experiencing that thing.*

### **Water Purification breath**

Let us return to our breath, inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth. One becomes attuned to the more fluid dimension of one's subtle being. The body from the outside looks solid, but we know that we are more than 75 percent water. A Sufi poet once said, 'That which I took for stillness was the essence of movement'. He meant that when I walk and move around, I feel that I am solid, but when I sit in meditation, I feel the motion within, in the same way that water is buried deep under the earth. The pulsation of the water within carries the memory of the state of the womb – that state of primal unity in which we were bathed in the water of compassion; and the pulsation of the mother's heartbeat that filled the womb carried a deeper memory, the memory of the primeval ocean from which our life emerged. The ebb and flow of the waves of the primeval ocean carries the memory of the ocean of light.

So through the breath we become conscious once again of this ancient lineage of pulsation that continues to flow through us. Feel yourself washed within as the water flows through every particle of your body and washes away everything that is superfluous, bringing movement where there was no movement, washing away the blockages and obstructions that allow emotion to flow freely, because the true nature of emotion is motion. As Hazrat Inayat Khan says, the water that purifies the heart is the continual running of the love stream.

Relax again.

### **Repentance**

We come to the aspect of prayer that relates to water, and that is repentance, which is most beautifully expressed in tears of repentance. There is the story of a Sufi who was in the habit of praying five times a day. Once, going to sleep late, he was going to miss his morning prayer, when a supernatural creature came and woke him up. You would think that must have been an angel, but it was the devil. You can imagine how surprised he was that the devil should wake him up so that he could say his prayers! The devil explained, 'I saw that you were going to miss your prayer, and I knew that when you woke up you would be so disappointed in yourself that you would cry, and a tear of repentance of such grace and beauty would fall from your eye that it would wash away all the sins of the world'.

Tears are the perfume of repentance. Repentance is the act of accepting responsibility for one's mistakes, one's shortcomings, one's limitation. One needs to make the vow not to repeat the mistake, and enquire into oneself to understand the condition that gave rise to that mistake so that one learns from it, and then leave the matter to the divine mercy.

Our natural tendency is for the ego, the small self, to perpetuate itself by promoting its agenda and suppressing other people. Denied by the ego, the impression of the mistake, of the harmful action, is repressed and becomes unconscious, but it lingers within oneself as a source of guilt. The mistake belongs to the ego, but there is another part of oneself that never made the mistake, that is one's soul.

Since the ego denies the mistake and therefore the impression of it, the guilt becomes a covering over the soul, covering that which is purity itself. For the soul to reclaim its light, the ego has to accept its responsibility, to bring the error back into consciousness and attempt to grow and not repeat the mistake. Then one finds that the soul becomes liberated because all of that residue of guilt and sin is cleared, and the soul can shine through with such confidence that every action becomes a holy work.

At first it seems like an unpleasant thing to do, to return to bad memories, but one finds that there is much grace that comes when one finally does face up to the Shadow, accept responsibility and turn to the source of forgiveness. There was a Sufi named Samad who said, 'Although I regret my error, I feel so privileged that my limitation allowed me to experience the incredible beauty of Your forgiveness'. In fact, the Sufis say that the most essential qualities of the divine nature are mercy and compassion. So if there were no error, mistakes, sin, then that which is most essential to reality would have no scope to express itself.

*Could we again take a moment in silence. This time, look to see if there is something lingering in the depths of your mind that you don't feel quite right about, but you haven't allowed yourself to look at closely. Try to move beyond the rationales, the excuses that you give yourself, and really listen to the voice of your conscience which can see beyond that.*

*Just imagine what it would be like to be a child who has made a mistake, admits it and turns to the loving embrace of a parent.*

### **Fire Purification breath**

The breath of fire is inhaling through the mouth and exhaling through the nose. The temperature of our body is an indication that we are in a process of perpetual combustion. Combustion means that matter is quickened; particles escape their frozen conditions and begin to move rapidly, and as a consequence great amounts of energy are released. It is the same as in history when great empires or institutions have fallen and suddenly there are new opportunities and a great surge of creativity and freedom. Physiologically the rate of one's metabolism can be intensified by consciously cultivating heat. What begins as heat in the lower centres rises and is transmuted into light in the higher centres. As one does this one can imagine what it means to have a countenance, a face, like the sun.

Now return to your natural breath.

### **Supplication**

The direction of earth is spreading (gratitude); the direction of water is descending (the mercy and grace that descends with repentance); the direction of fire is rising: supplication, which means asking for one's need. Sometimes we wonder whether we ought to ask for our need. I recently visited a church where they told the congregation they must never ask anything from God. That is a genuine teaching, but it belongs to a very high level of attainment, to the station of one who has no expectations; but as long as you are hopeful of something, then you have something to ask for. You might say, why should I impose upon God to help me with what seems like a trifling matter? And moreover it might be said that if God is omniscient and omnipotent, it means that God already knows what I want and if He/She hasn't fulfilled it there must be a reason that I don't know.

The problem with that argument is that it is based on duality: God outside there and me over here. But what if one understood one's relationship with God as the Sufis do, as two ends of a line. On one end is a state of limitation, but nonetheless a state of actualization, and the other side is an unlimited and yet unactualized state. So the actualization of the unlimited can only be through the limited being. In fact it is in prayer that the two poles come together, because in articulating your need you bring your desire into concrete reality, through your thought and emotion.

Something begins as a universal impulse of *ishq*, of longing, but still very vague and unformed. Then when it becomes more clear it becomes a desire. Then when the desire becomes more clear, it becomes a wish. And when the wish becomes more clear it becomes a will, and it's through will that everything is accomplished in this world.

So supplication is the process of clarifying one's desire, letting one's desire resonate and pulsate within oneself and become more and more strong and focused until it attracts its own fulfilment. Hazrat Inayat Khan said something very challenging: if your desire was not fulfilled it means that you did not know how to desire. It's also true that sometimes we pray ardently for something and something else happens. This means that the universe is not mechanical, it's not a vending machine; if it were, there would be no place for evolution. Evolution comes in dialogue: you put forward your wish, your will, with all sincerity and clarity, and that will be heard. The answer may not be the answer you expect, but nonetheless it incorporates the message that you sent in your prayer. And the answer in turn stimulates a new need, a new desire; it is in this spirit that our desires themselves evolve and transform.

God is limitless, and we are creatures of limitation. That is precisely the role that we have to play: we can offer forth our limitation, that is our best gift. We can offer forth our sincerest need in faith, in trust that the answer that is intended will come.

*Let us take another moment of silence now. Remember what Hazrat Inayat Khan says, that the one whose desire is not fulfilled did not know how to desire. He goes on to say, 'Failure is due to indistinctness of motive.' In fact, our greatest problem in life is being at cross purposes with ourselves.*

*So just imagine that a supernatural being appears, a genie of the lamp, and says, 'You can have whatever you want now'. What is it?*

### **Air Purification breath**

Inhale and exhale through the mouth. Recall that if you were to look at your body through an electron microscope you would have a very different profile than the one that you ordinarily see. Your body would look like the starry sky at night: points of light in the midst of vast empty space. The points of light are all in motion, and so one's sense of solidity is belied by a profounder vision of oneself which is not a form so much as a choreography. When one becomes frustrated in the constraint of the more concretized mode of ones being, one can revert to this dimension and experience the sense of freedom and liberation that comes with it. Float above everything, and nothing can weigh you down. One identifies with the primordial state of the cosmos which was a swirling cloud of gas, rich with infinite possibilities.

Return to your natural breath.

### **Invocation**

The next aspect of prayer is invocation. There is a saying of Ali, a great saint, who said, 'Pray to God as if you see God'. What does it mean, to 'see' God? It sounds paradoxical. Of course we keep speaking about God and it seems to take for granted that we all believe in God. Do you believe in God? If I ask you whether you believe in God, you'll probably say, 'That's just a word. Define what you mean, and then I'll tell you whether I believe in God or not.' But perhaps then I would change the question and instead of giving you a definition I would ask you to supply the definition of the God that you believe in. If we did that we might find that we have as many definitions as there are people. The Sufis say, there are as many paths to God as there are breaths. Every path is an ideal, and everyone has an ideal.

Sometimes someone will say, 'I can't relate to prayer because I don't believe in God and I feel it would be hypocritical to pray to God whom I don't believe in'. When you ask why it is hypocritical, they

answer, 'It is contrary to my sense of the truth, and truth is something absolute that can never be compromised; it's an essential principle; it's of the essence.' Then suddenly a light comes on, and you see: it's something prior to all other phenomena; it's of the nature of essence, and it's an absolute principle that cannot be compromised. You have a God ideal: it's Truth.

Everyone has an ideal; one could not live in this world without an ideal – one would be broken. When Hazrat Ali speaks of praying to God as if you see God, it is to bring that ideal from the abstract realm of conjecture into one's lived reality. So if one's God ideal is the Truth, it means living according to the Truth, reminding oneself on all occasions of the imperatives of the Truth, seeking the manifestation of Truth in all things. And you may find that that which defines the ideal for a person is precisely what that person needs to develop himself or herself, and it changes at different times in one's life.

Murshid says, 'God is what is needed to complete oneself', so each of us is a work in progress and there are qualities that belong to our essence but are not yet adequately expressed in our life and are struggling to be born. They are brought to our attention in the form of our ideal, and in life we are attracted to people who manifest that ideal in a way that we are not yet able to manifest. That person then becomes a mirror in which our true self sees itself, because all of the perfection that we witness in the world is only the reflection of that which exists within ourselves: you cannot recognize it unless it's already there in you.

Invocation means, to live with that quality of being just as you would live with another person, to experience it as having such validity, such vividness in your life, that it is a relationship perhaps more important than any other relationship.

*Let us take another moment in silence. Open your awareness to perfection. And receive the form, whatever form it is, in which that perfection manifests itself to you.*

### **Ether Purification breath**

Now we return to the breaths, and we'll review five breaths of each element beginning with Earth... Water...Fire...Air...

Let your breath return to its natural state, deepened and refined through the purification of those four elements, feeling them balanced in your constitution. In this balanced state intuit the presence of the most fifth and most subtle element, ether.

### **Communion**

*Open yourself to the fifth aspect of prayer, which is 'at-onement' or communion. A great dervish once said, when you look for God, God is in the look in your eyes. And so suddenly one realizes that it is God that prays to God. And the person that you took to be yourself is just a mirror in which the divine light reflects back on itself.*

As we come to the end of this meditation, feel the soles of your feet on the ground, and open your eyes.

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