Sufi Principles of Meditation

Lecture 6: Breath

“Nothing is more difficult for the friends of God than guarding their breaths in moments of rapture.”

— Farid Ad-Din ‘Attar
The Definition of Breath (*Nafs* / *Nafas*)

Inspiration, *nafas*—literally “breath,” also “breathing space” or ample room—is the refreshment of hearts by subtleties from the Unseen. A person who receives inspirations is finer and clearer than a person who is open to mystical states. The person of the momentary inner experience is at the beginning, the inspired person is at the conclusion, and the person of states is between the two.

—Al-Qushayri,

*Al-Risalah: Principles of Sufism*
The Best Act of Worship

The states are means and inspirations are the end of progressive development. Moments belong to those who have hearts, states belong to those who possess a spirit (ruh), and inspirations belong to the people of inner being (sirr). The Sufis have said, “The best act of worship is to count the breaths along with God Glorified and Exalted.”

–Al-Qushayri, Al-Risalah: Principles of Sufism
And they have said, “God created the hearts and made them mines of the understanding of Him. After that He created the secret inner awarenesses and made them a place for declaring the Unity. Every breath that occurs without the guide of knowledge of God and the sign of Unity emerges from blind compulsion, and it is a dead thing. The one to whom it belongs is accountable for it.”

I heard Abu Ali al-Daqqaq say, “No ‘breathing space’ is granted to the gnostic because no indulgence can take place with him. But the lover in the early stages (muhibb) must necessarily have some ‘breathing space,’” since were there not a breath for him he would be ruined, because of his lack of capacity.

—Al-Qushayri, Al-Risalah: Principles of Sufism
If someone’s share of this light is more perfect, his vision is wiser and his judgment based on his insight is more truer. Do you not see how the breathing of the Spirit into Adam made it necessary for the angels to prostrate before him? For the Most High said, ‘I formed him and I breathed into him of My Spirit, so fall down before him in prostration’ (15:29).”

–Al-Qushayri, Al-Risalah: Principles of Sufism
Abu-l-Hasan al-Nuri was asked, “What is the origin of spiritual insight in the one who has it?” He answered, “It comes from the saying of the Most High, ‘And I breathed into him (Adam) of My Spirit’ (15:29). –Al-Qushayri, Al-Risalah: Principles of Sufism
Inner Vision and Knowledge of God

This statement by Abu-l-Hasan al-Nuri is somewhat difficult, so be careful with it. In this mention of the breathing of the Spirit he was aiming to correct those who say that souls are uncreated. The situation is not as it might occur to the hearts of the weak. That to which this breathing (and union and separation) are properly attributed is liable to influence and alteration, which are signs of the transitoriness of created things. Yet God Glorious and Exalted has chosen the believers for perceptions and lights through which they come to possess insight. In essence, these are forms of the knowledge of God. This is the import of the Prophet’s saying, “The believer sees by the light of God”—that is, by a knowledge and inner vision for which God Most High has specially chosen him and by means of which He has distinguished him from others like him. To call these kinds of knowledge and perceptions “lights” is not an innovation, and to describe that process as “breathing” is not reaching far afield. What is intended is one’s created nature.

—Al-Qushayri, Al-Risalah: Principles of Sufism
Three Types of Breath

From the field of the Metaphysical Moment the field of Breath is born. God, the Most High, says, ‘When he recovered his senses he said: Glory be to You!’ (7:143).

The breath of the master of metaphysical time and moment is that which is untarnished by any matter pertaining to his self or ego. Adept in spiritual reality have three different kinds of breath: a penitent plaint, an infatuated cry, and a shout of ecstasy.

–Abdullah Ansari of Herat,

*Stations of the Sufi Path*
The Three Souls of the Qur’an:

- The Carnal Soul (el-Nafsu-l-Ammara) (12:53)
- The Blaming Soul (el-Nafsu-l-Lawwama) (75:2)
- The Soul at Peace (el-Nafsu-l-Mutma’inna) (89:27-8)
Breath and the Three Souls

The penitent plaint dispels demons, absolves sin and opens the heart. The infatuated cry of the attracted person purges the love for the world, sweeps material causality away, and causes one to become oblivious of creation. The shout of ecstasy of the raptured pierces the soul, sets the heart athirst and burns away the veils.

—Abdullah Ansari of Herat, *Stations of the Sufi Path*
"...there is a profound relation between one’s sexual forces and one’s breathing, so that when both are duly combined and harmonized, they bring about fundamental changes in one’s physical and psychological anatomy."