

## Windwalkers Honoring the Four Elements, Part III

by  
Todd F. Eklof  
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According to the Upanishads, a seeker once asked a wise sage, “Lord, just how many deities are there who hold together the body? Which of them, thus, are most manifest in it? And which is the most excellent?”<sup>1</sup> To which he replied, “Space is such a deity, and so are wind, fire, water, and earth, as are speech, mind, sight, and hearing. As they become manifest, they say: ‘We are the ones who shore up this reed and support it.’”<sup>2</sup> But when they say this, Lifebreath, the most excellent among them, says, “Don’t delude yourself! It is I who, dividing myself into five parts, shore up this reed and support it.’ But they didn’t believe him. So, out of pride, Lifebreath started to set off. As he was setting off, then, all the others set off too, and as he was settling down, they all settled down. Just as all the bees set off when the queen bee sets off, and settle down when she settles down, so did speech, mind, sight, and hearing. Delighted, then, they praised the lifebreath.”<sup>3</sup>

In this Hindu myth, breath, associated with air, claims to be the most important of the elements making up our bodies, suggesting, in fact, that all the other elements are but manifestations of air—breath divided, like light through a prism, into other parts. Obviously this is a bit of a boast since our survival depends upon all the elements; *water*, which composes 70 percent of our bodies; *earth*, or, *humus*, from which we get our name, “human;” and, *fire*, which produces the photons we convert into energy and eat to sustain us. As Thich Naht Hanh explains, “When we look into the heart of a flower, we see clouds, sunshine, minerals, time, the earth, and everything else in the cosmos in it. Without clouds, there could be no rain, and there would be no flower. Without time, the flower could not bloom. In fact, the flower is made entirely of non-flower elements; it has no independent, individual existence.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, each of the elements is essential, but in this story, Lifebreath, makes the point that it is the queen bee, that without it, the reed cannot stand, that life must follow wherever the wind blows, it must flow with the breath. We can lose some of the earth of our bodies, its substance, perhaps completely severing a limb or two, and go on to live a full life; we can go weeks without eating food containing the converted sunlight that fuels and fires our bodies, and we can even go several days without drinking water; but without air we can’t last more than a few minutes. Life follows breath whether it wants to or not.

Hinduism takes this fact so seriously that its traditional system of healthcare, *Ayurvedice medicine*, and its spiritual practice of *yoga*, are based on *prana*, the Sanskrit word meaning, “breath,” “air,” or, “life force.” It is believed that *prana* flows through the various energy centers, the *charkas*, of the subtle body, terminating at the *ida*, the left nostril, and the *pingala*, the right nostril, which is why, in some practices, alternate nostril

breathing is used to help balance the flow of *prana* throughout the body. Without this unobstructed, healthy flow of vital energy, the body becomes sick, and, without *prana* altogether, it dies.

This is not unlike our own western tradition in which *pneuma*, in Greek, and *ruah*, in Hebrew, is the same word for both “breath” and “spirit.” When an animal, an animated one, stops breathing, it is without *pneuma*, without *ruah*, without breath. For the ancients, breath and spirit were one and the same, and any action is a sign of spirit. As is written in the Hebrew creation story, for example, “then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.”<sup>5</sup> The late Professor Julian Jaynes, speaking on the language of the *Iliad*, further reminds us, “The word *psyche*, which later means soul or conscious mind, is in most instances life-substances, such as blood or breath: a dying warrior bleeds out his psyche onto the ground or breathes it out in his last gasp.”<sup>6</sup> Our ancestors did not differentiate between breath and spirit, between living and being spiritual. For them breathing was spiritual, and once we stop breathing, the spirit leaves our bodies. Breath is life, and life is the Spirit of God. To breathe is to be inspired, to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit. This idea is similar to a traditional Native American Prayer that begins by saying, “Or Great Spirit, whose voice speaks in the winds, and in the trees, whose breath gives life to all the world.”<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, Master Ueshiba, the founder of *Aikido*, the Way of Harmony, taught that it’s possible for us to “absorb the entire universe inside [our] belly with each inhalation.” This sentiment explains why breathing is so fundamental to Buddhist practice. Meditation itself is more about conscious breathing than about quieting the mind. In concentrating on one’s breath, one becomes more present. Meditation, then, is about becoming more mindful, not letting go of thought. As Thich Nhat Hanh explains, “By becoming aware of breathing in and out we become aware of our body. ‘Breathing in, I am aware of my body, breathing out, I am aware of my whole body.’ Go back to your body. Embrace it with the energy of mindfulness generated by the practice of mindful breathing.”<sup>8</sup> In his classic work, *The Way of Zen*, Alan Watts, who says, “The slow, easy breathing from the belly works upon the consciousness like bellows, and gives it a still, bright clarity,”<sup>9</sup> also admits, “Physiologically and psychologically, the relationship between breathing and ‘insight’ is not yet altogether clear.”<sup>10</sup> But the link seems rather obvious to me. In breathing air, which is everywhere and all around us, we’re taking in the entire Universe. Air is as vast as the sky and represents a clear and open mind. To be truly spiritual is to be openminded. Again, as Master Ueshiba said, “Always keep your mind as bright and clear as the vast sky... empty of all thoughts.”

Breath also represents balance, peace, and harmony. Thich Naht Hanh says, “Mindful breathing is the practice that can help us take care our emotions.”<sup>11</sup> This is the reason we sometimes advise those overcome with anger, grief, or panic, to “take a deep breath.” Breathing has a calming effect. Breathing in and out, diastole and systole, manifests *yin*

and *yang*, all opposites, which is why, in mediation practice, students learn to breath in a way that fully completes the process. Again, as Watts explains, “grasping air with the lungs goes hand-in-hand with grasping at life,” but for most of us, “So-called, ‘normal’ breathing is fitful and anxious,”<sup>12</sup> because we breath compulsively rather than freely. The proper technique, he continues, “begins by encouraging a full release of the breath—easing it out as the body we’re being emptied of air by a great leaden ball sinking through the chest and abdomen, and settling down into the ground. The returning in-breath is then allowed to follow as a simple reflex-action. The air is not actively inhaled; it is just allowed to come—and then, when the lungs are comfortably filled, it is allowed to go out once more, the image of the leaden ball giving it the sense of ‘falling’ out as distinct from being pushed out.”<sup>13</sup> So breathing represents the spiritual state of harmony, of being at peace with what’s happening—contentedness—as well as the ability to go with the flow, and letting go, for, as Watts says, “the breath will always take care of itself.”<sup>14</sup> This is why, “Breathing, like mediation,” Hahn says, “is no less than an art. You have to be very artful in handling your in-breath and out-breath, so that harmony can be reestablished in your body and your mind.”<sup>15</sup>

What a powerful metaphor, then, is this element we call air, wind, breath. It symbolizes life, harmony, clarity, and spirit. So it seems as incomprehensible as it is tragic that we are treating this all-important element so disdainfully, stuffing what is, by its nature, clear and empty, full of toxic pollutants. In our age of global warming, caused directly by greenhouse gas emissions, our CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are on the rise, up from 280 parts per million prior to the industrial age, to nearly 400 parts per million today, a number that is expected to double, at the current rate by the year 2050. Our own country, the largest polluter in the world, representing only five percent of its population, has refused to join the Kyoto Protocol to curb these emissions; and here in Kentucky, legislators recently voted to give massive tax incentives to entice more coal companies into our state. In his disturbing book, *Crimes Against Nature*, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., claims that the National Mining Association, which contributed more than half a million dollars to the Republican Party in 2000, ended up a year later having nine contracts with Dick Cheney’s Energy Task Force, “as did Westinghouse, which contributed \$65,000. The American Gas Association, which contributed \$480, 478 to Republicans from 1999 to 2002, had at least eight contracts, as did CMS Energy, which contributed \$357,715. The American Petroleum Instituted, which contributed \$44,301 to Republicans from 1999 to 2002, had contact with the task force at least six times, as did Exelon Corporation, which contributed \$910,886.”<sup>16</sup> He goes on to explain that the results of this marriage between the government and big energy corporations resulted in 2000 with an immediate “Inauguration Day freeze on environmental regulations.”<sup>17</sup> And while it was composing our nation’s energy bill, coal company lobbyists and executives, in particular, had, what Kennedy calls, “unparalleled access to Cheney’s task force.”<sup>18</sup> The world’s largest coal company, Peabody, met repeatedly with the task force, and ended up with a bill recommending \$2 billion in federal subsidies to coal companies for research, and Peabody itself ended up with permission to build the largest coal-fired plant constructed in 30 years “upwind of Mammoth Cave National Park,”<sup>19</sup> right here in Kentucky. In addition, Quin Shea, a top lobbyist for the Edison Electric Institute, who

had unprecedented access to the task force, cautioned that “several Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act requirements—in his words, ‘coal killers’—would soon impose costly cleanup measures on fossil fuel companies unless something was done to scuttle or delay them.”<sup>20</sup> In transcripts Shea later boasted, “Kyoto is dead. Kyoto is absolutely dead... For those of you... who want to continue to beat that dead horse, let me tell you right now, there will be no equine resurrection here.”<sup>21</sup> He went on to say, “We’re taking several steps right now to reverse every piece of paper the EPA has put together where they could call CO2 a pollutant under the Clean Air Act.”<sup>22</sup>

Fortunately, if there is anything fortunate about air pollution, global warming is now undeniable and is fast becoming the primary concern of everyone around the world. Just this past week, after more than a decade of conservative rule, voters in Australia elected a new Prime Minister who, just a day after his victory, reversed his country’s previous position by signing on to the Kyoto Protocol in response to a poll indicating climate control is Australia’s number one concern. In the same way, the air we breathe ought to be the first concern for all of us. For without it we will quickly perish. It is the basis of life, clarity, harmony, and spirit. None of us can afford to keep treating this sacred element, which may rightly be the Holy Spirit itself, with such reckless disdain. For if, as in the Hindu myth with which we began, this Spirit should decide to depart from us, just to prove a point, then, like the bee following its queen, we have no choice but to follow too, both in this life, and, if we’re not more reverent, into the next, much sooner than we should. “Delighted then, they praised the Lifebreath.”

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<sup>1</sup> *Prasna Upanishad*, 2:1

<sup>2</sup> *PU* 2:2

<sup>3</sup> *PU* 2:3-4

<sup>4</sup> Hanh, Thich Nhat, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, Riverhead Books, Berkley Publishing Group, New York, NY, 1995, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 2:7 (NRSV)

<sup>6</sup> Jaynes, Julian, *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, Mass., 1976, 1990, p. 69.

<sup>7</sup> Harvey, Andrew, ed., *The Essential Mystics*, Castle Books, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1996, p. 10

<sup>8</sup> Hanh, Thich Nhat, *Anger*, Riverhead Books, Berkley Publishing Group, New York, NY, 2001, p. 177

<sup>9</sup> Watts, Alan, *The Way of Zen*, Pantheon Books, New York, NY, 1957, p. 156

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198

<sup>11</sup> Hanh, *ibid.*, p., 177

<sup>12</sup> Watts, *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Hanh, *ibid.*, p. 179

<sup>16</sup> Kennedy, Jr., Robert F., *Crimes Against Nature*, Harper Perennial, New York, NY, 2004, p. 102

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97

18 Ibid., p. 117

19 Ibid., p. 118

20 Ibid., p. 119

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.