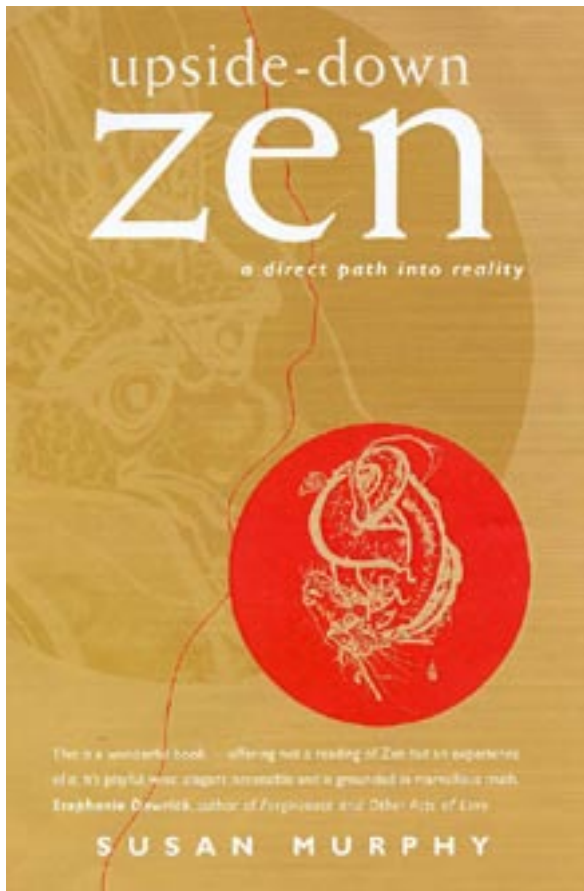


Chapter One

Breath, Like Mind, Like Water



We live by the sheer generosity of a moment by moment miracle, and it is called the breath.

Actually, we could say we live and die by this miracle. Every breath out is a practice of yielding the self to the universe. Every breath in is a reincarnation event, the self reborn, fresh. Zen is the practice of agreeing to live with a mind and self as alive and fluid as breathing itself: accepting the offer of each moment, yielding to the passing of each moment.

A time comes when it is just no longer convincing to continue to live as if we had an eternity of time ahead of us. Sometimes the shift comes in the form of the right kind of trouble, that churns a restless wake of searching behind it. Sometimes it is a medical diagnosis or a relationship catastrophe that seems to present the turning moment we can't ignore, to save our life! Other times it is a more subtle and gradual but absolutely unmistakable realization that we are moving into a phase of life that recognises and even welcomes (oh, so cautiously!) our own mortality. It may be retirement, or turning

forty, or beginning to hear the bones creak on the stairs. And sometimes it just ripples through us as early as our teens and early twenties, a strong call from somewhere unknown, saying: come home.

And then we look for a path into the place where the water is sweet, clear and fresh - yes, there are still untouched and wild places in this world, as close as your own breathing. Focus for a moment on your breath, and see what I mean.

First, sitting upright but relaxed in the neck and shoulders, turn your attention to the in-breath. When you breathe in, be aware of breathing in. This is already a step outside the human habit of distractibility, eating breakfast while scanning the cereal packet, and mentally noting to pick up the dry-cleaning on the way home. Instead of breathing on automatic pilot, notice the quality, sensation, sheer pleasure of air streaming in. Feel the entire pathway of breath energy into the depths of your body, like sparks in darkness. Enjoy the fullness of being that builds with the creative action of the in-breath. Receive the aware breathing-in of the universe.

And now, consider the first breath you ever drew; with that first breath, you came forth from nowhere into this, into the first spark of you.

Now focus on the out-breath. When you are breathing out, be aware of breathing out. Feel the yielding of your muscles and body tension, as you allow the out-breath to empty out, to give, give way, release. Be aware of yielding yourself back into the vast pool of all beings, all breaths.

Consider that one day, the final breath of your life will expire and take you with it back into pure unknowing, relinquishing the self forever.

And now, draw your attention to the place between the in-breath and the out-breath. Extend that threshold place as long as it is comfortable, and then slightly beyond that point. What does it feel like, holding the lungs and diaphragm at maximum distension and in a kind of forced but interesting stasis? What is the state of your mind and the condition of your body, as the pressure builds to let go? And how does it feel at that very moment when you cease to struggle and resist and just begin to let the held breath go?

And finally, focus on the place between the out-breath and the in-breath, and once more, extend that to the limit of what is comfortable, and just beyond. What is the energy, tone, life of your body when you let the breath go and stay with that going, that emptying out and dwindling of the self towards nothing? And when you yield, and let the tide turn once more towards drawing breath again, towards life, what is that like?

There are telling sensations and intuitions lying in these pauses between life and death, death and life, when we extend and inhabit them more fully. The body is usually far wiser and further along in its knowing than our conscious minds are prepared to admit and include. Meditation, an utterly embodied practice, is often an education in finally catching up and becoming consonant with your wise, wild, animal body, with its sharp keenness for life rooted in an old knowing that it dies.

Death is moment by moment. It is actually dark behind us - the very dark we came from. No breath-moment can be recovered or entered ever again. Life, too, blooms moment by moment. To live more closely attentive to the keenness of the one moment is to find it has no limits exactly as it is irrevocable.

In meditation we become the breath, not simply to regain the fragrance of really being alive, but to let the boundaries between 'me' and 'my breath' break down and fall away. Becoming breathing is not entering a trance, but the quality of our awareness shifts. It gradually includes, with the pure awareness of breath, the beating of the heart, the air on our face, the distant barking dog or passing car, the breeze stirring the leaves, and the coming and going of feelings and thoughts, but with a slow, wide sense of space around each thought. Thoughts come and go but the mind does not batten on to them. With the subtle skill of staying afloat in water, we make the infinite tiny adjustments that are just before thought, that will allow us to rest in the condition of being, the condition of true, without forming or reaching after thoughts about it. Body and mind begin to loosen and fall away, and we grow wider and more free, wanting less, wanting nothing. The most ordinary and subtle happiness arises in this wanting nothing. We dwell for a time open to all of the offers of life, without moving towards, or moving away, from a single thing.

And so we begin to be more deeply at home in the universe. We fit here, exactly. To become breathing is to become more boundless, seamless, and indivisible; for breathing belongs fully to the universe and has no mind of separation at all.

How to begin seated meditation

Counting the breaths is usually the first practice assigned and mastered on the Zen path towards this point of becoming intimate with breathing. The in-breath is drawn in simple appreciation of the fact of breathing; the out-breath is silently intoned with the number 'one', the next out-breath will be 'two', the third, nothing but 'three'. After loss of consciousness, the ability to count is often used as a sign of the return of consciousness; similarly, you may be asked to count down into unconsciousness as you enter a state of anaesthesia; counting is like the last and least effortful rung of conscious mind, and it is also steely and reliable. So if - no, when! - you find yourself drifting away from the count into swarms of thought, you just notice and then come back to one, again and again and again. 'One' is always ready to take you back, with no hard feelings.

At a certain point you may find the counting has naturally dropped away altogether into a very still and low-lit consciousness. Sometimes you can just rest there like a feather on a draft, aware, but not making a single move towards thought. But then the thought may come: 'Hey, I'm not thinking at all!' And then? Back to one.

These practices of following the breath can be taken up in an ordinary upright chair, with your feet flat on the ground and your spine straight, supported by a strong shape to the base of your spine, and preferably unsupported by the chair. When you are ready, and if you can physically manage, it is good to begin to sit in the traditional postures of seated meditation, upon a padded futon or flat cushion, called a zabuton in Japanese, with a smaller round cushion, or zafu, under the buttocks to give you some three to four inches in height. The legs are crossed in one of several traditional ways, such as tailor style or half-lotus, the knees supported with other cushions at first until the adductor muscles of your inner thighs begin to lengthen with practise and allow the knees to rest on the ground. Or you may use a meditation bench - a low stool that allows the legs to bend back underneath. It is good to get an experienced meditator to show you how to find ease and stability in these postures of alert but fluid mindfulness.

In either case, a solid connection with the earth is formed: you are sitting like a mountain, the small of the back slightly curved inwards to give the rest of your spine support and ease. The upper spine and neck and shoulders are now erect in an entirely unforced and energising posture of alertness. (Notice how a small child carries their body, with a natural lift and energy visible in the upper body. Notice too how an adult usually slumps in this segment of the body, with their centre of gravity dropped much lower and heavier, a posture of tiredness.) You know you have this right when your belly just naturally rounds into a soft outwards curve in reply. It is good to wear loose clothing so that your softened belly can directly receive the energy of your breath, unrestricted. The area just below the belly-button is called the hara, and it is good to maintain awareness of the hara with every mindful breath. Feel for the flow of energy there. As you follow the breath into deeper states of meditation, it is as though mind gradually settles deep into the body, unobstructed by mental activity, and takes up its true seat quite naturally in the hara.

The eyes are not closed as in sleep, but soft-focussed and half-closed, and the tongue rests in contact with the palate just above the upper teeth, centred and softened, with the jaw muscles and eye muscles relaxed. Hands are rested in the lap and held in a traditional mudra - left hand resting in the right, the thumbs making soft contact at the tips. It is good to sit for around 25 minutes and then walk in slow walking meditation for five more minutes, before sitting again if you wish. This is the time-honoured alternating rhythm you will encounter in most Zen places of practice, marked out with signals (not words) that are delivered by bells and clappers.

Walking meditation is a natural extension of seated focus: you simply continue to stay with your breath while rising to your feet, and then slowly beginning to walk, left foot with the in breath, right foot with the out breath, letting the loveliness of the body in motion explore you entirely. You can afford to let the world pass through you as you look for your next step, and feel the sunlight fall across your face; a bird sings right through the you that walks, the universe walking. And in particular, you now include in your focussed awareness the way the foot meets and articulates its many tiny bones to the shape and fact of the floor, the intimate return greeting offered by the floor or the earth to every footfall.

A fasting of the mind

Curiously, the world leaps back alive when we fast the mind - just as the taste of water is beyond compare when we are truly thirsty. Fasting the mind is not a matter of 'not thinking'. There is no such thing! Try it, it is impossible. To try to use the mind to cut off the activity of the mind is like trying to wash water away with water. What mind-fasting opens up is the possibility of knowing the mind at rest, and simplifying to meet it more fully.

Fasting the mind in meditation is not denying the mind but growing more subtle and sensitive within its natural activity, and approaching the point of choosing complete, intentional rest. The natural activity of the mind is to surge towards thought and bring things to the peculiar light of human consciousness. The mind that is being fasted in meditation is the mind of 'me' and 'mine', the mind of endless self-concern and self-defence, of have and have not, right and wrong, included and

excluded. When self-concern is quiet, heaven and earth lie open in complete generosity. That is the mind of abundance, the mind of flowing. When self-concern is noisy, the world is narrow and risky, and resources for the anxious self appear perennially scarce. The Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore spoke of this when he said "The one whom I enclose with my name is weeping in that dungeon".

Who is the one whom you enclose with your name? To find out, follow your breath in seated and walking meditation. When this attending to the breath of this moment grows more practised, with the simple dedicated repetition of practice, you will find yourself naturally more attentive and present to the matter of this moment in everyday circumstances - driving in thick traffic, waiting in a queue, picking up your child from school, bandaging a wound, noticing the pain on someone's face, hearing the quality of a pause on the telephone. Just to sit like a Buddha is already to reopen the Way directly to the deep original contentment of your true nature, sometimes called Buddha nature. It has never gone away. But it can be shut away from awareness for a lifetime.

An accomplice to all your wishes

Following your breath is not effortful. When you find yourself making effort, you are adding to something that is already entirely complete. Try giving your focussed alert awareness fifty percent less effort. The effort is brought simply to the intention and action of becoming still, so that the silt may begin just naturally to settle in the stillness of the mind, like water coming clear. Coming home is letting go, allowing resistance to drop away as it softens in the mind of breathing. Is it effortful to let go? Letting go is already dropping effort.

Jacques Lusseyrans, who became blind at the age of seven but found all of his senses, even vision, opening in an extraordinary way instead of closing down, said, "Being blind I thought I should have to go out to meet things, but I found that they came to meet me instead. I have never had to go more than halfway, and the universe became accomplice of all my wishes." He spoke of how the blind receive the exquisite return pressure of the universe in its many forms:

"If my fingers pressed the roundness of an apple, each one with a different weight, very soon I could not tell whether it was the apple or my fingers which were heavy. I didn't even know whether I was touching it or it was touching me. As I became part of the apple, the apple became part of me. ... As a child I spent hours leaning against objects and letting them lean against me. Any blind person can tell you that this gesture, this exchange, gives a satisfaction too deep for words."

In meditation we half-veil the eyes and let a kind of blindness open all our senses in a less knowing way. Even if you have never practised meditation you can freely enter the experience Lusseyrans is pointing to. Just lean over and gently press your hand to the floor. Close your eyes, if necessary, and just explore what happens. Feel the exact and absolutely reliable return of pressure from the floor to your hand. Or is it more like feel your hand become floor and floor become your hand, in a most exquisite meeting and exchange of confidences?

Just sitting is already an experience of this kind of subtle beauty at every point where you meet the universe: the air on your face; the moisture of your eyes; the taste of your own mouth; the pressure of your buttocks and knees being returned by the floor, as you go never more than halfway, never more than fifty percent, but just allow the universe to become your most intimate accomplice.

Silence

All meditation is a bathing in silence, which Meister Eckhart said is as much like God as anything in this world. That silence of course is full of the cries of the world - a distant plane, a hammer, mutter of speech, chainsaw or siren; the crickets in the grass; an echoing bark of a dog; a sharp exclamation, sneeze or nose-blow; the grace of bird-song; the infinitely subtle and musical speech of the wind and the leaves - and all of them call you back to the source, long for you to hear the unpronounceable name that they sing.

To really bathe in silence, the body is still (even when it is in motion in walking meditation, it is motion attuned to stillness), speech is silent, the mind is at rest or approaching rest. As the chatter of self-regard and fear dies away, the natural ground of the mind emerges as you. And so you just bathe in the presence of what is, letting yourself grow completely 'wet through' with it, with no thoughts, conditions, clingings or preferences being held onto or affirmed or pushed away. Even if you are working with pain in sitting, every breath is the possibility of entering the deep ease of offering no resistance, alight with a vivid energy of inquiry that is a willingness to accept all offers, and the subtle joy of feeling yourself becoming accomplice to the universe.

Our name - human being - suggests our true calling in this life. But it seems we have to practise with quite challenging and subtle adjustments of our habits of mind, to become a human being instead of one addicted to human doing. Just being, is letting be. Allowing what is our condition and our circumstance to be without bothering it. A wise old Zen teacher was once asked by her student why on earth she had set up a space of meditation for people so close to a busy road. All day and night, cars and trucks whizzing by, a racket that never permitted quietness to settle in the room. The student was full of frustrated anger with what is, just as it was presenting itself so freely. "Oh", said the teacher, "Why don't you try not bothering the traffic so much?"

When we find out who we enclose and wall in with the drama of the self, we also find out richly, perforce, about the nature of that endless, querulous drama that blocks so much of the light of life. Sometimes it is good to make a simple reality check about the latest edition of *The Drama* (playing on an inner screen near you). Ask yourself, "What is this, in the light of my own death? What will it be in a hundred years from now?" It is extraordinary how little will truly pass through that filter, and how freeing it is to see that it is so. Let it go, let it go. You will never die of letting it go. You well may die of holding on to it like grim death.

Although sudden contact skin to skin with the boundlessness can break through from nowhere, as an act of grace, I do not pretend that is an easy matter making ourselves more available for that lucky accident. Practice of meditation is called 'practice' because you have to give yourself to it almost blindly, and put up with its difficulty, in order to grow truly accident-prone, truly skilful in the art of holding yourself open. It's called practice because you are training and habituating the mind to a radically different set of responses than it has been settled in from early childhood, on the whole. But it is a practice of bringing your entire intentional and focussed will to bear on the infinitely delicate task of opening, becoming willing.

Childbirth is the nearest thing to this in my own experience (and not coincidentally - for what are you doing but giving birth to your true self?). To give birth, you must endure the painful softening up process, attending to it, agreeing to it, giving yourself to it almost blindly. And all kinds of new depths of will are called upon to do this, though you can't know and need not know where they come from (you reach, and they are there, your sheer need provides). Once childbirth is really underway, you don't have too much energy to spare for concepts about it. Bothering traffic is dangerous enough - try bothering the process of labour!

And then, when all things have grown soft enough at last to open and let the universe come through the universe, you must get out of the way completely and become sheer willingness. The bearing down stage of labour has almost no conscious thought in it at all. Neither does the miracle of staying open and not bothering what is - in the deep forms of meditative awareness, seated or walking or lying down. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, the miracle is not to walk on water but to walk on the green earth actually present to this moment that will not return.

To walk on the earth and to know it, to breathe in and breathe out and to know it, intimately, and from there to open and flow like water (which knows no resistance) - that is the real miracle of mindfulness. So meditation on the breath is offering oneself to the silence, the mind of unknowing that the breath bears us into. Unknowing is not the blankness of not having a clue, nor is it the delusion of cradling

a concept as if it were direct experience. Unknowing is another word for profound willingness, though it has infinite depths to show you, and there is always more to un-know.

Zen teachers are famous for saying "If it's not tied down, I'll take it away from you!" That is a kind of odd promise they make to their students. You can struggle to keep hold of your delusions and attachments and favourite stories, but the moment your grip loosens the teacher will snatch you free of it, with a comment or a move or a laugh, or by no movement whatsoever.

The more you can yield to unknowing, the more you enter what is happening at this very moment, where your life is being lived as intensely as a house on fire. When you practise this way, even your involuntary thoughts are no different from the sound of rain, or sudden bird-song cutting through. You don't try to stop them; and they can no longer stop you.

Why a house on fire? Because the present moment is the only time there is, and to be one with that is to live fiercely, accepting all offers, and without leaving a trace. Such awareness understands instantly the haiku by Seishi Yamagushi:

Diver in the air ---
how little time goes by before
he hits the water!

The present moment is utterly alive to the passing away of things; you could say it is utterly alive with death, with the fact that we are here only for this moment. It is life that at last includes and can stretch to embrace even the fact of death as the most startling and mysterious fact of life. Shunryu Suzuki compared meditation to the state of nearing death - a mental state of intense yet relaxed inquiry and attention. And when are we not nearing death?

This most intense inquiry opens as as this mind of unknowing, that is consonant with and near to the unknown place from which we appeared and to which we return, leaving no gap at all in the universe.

The bare fact

So breath awareness is living closely, intimately, with the bare fact of our lives, including our limitedness. Limitedness is the gate to the most boundless and free condition, but you must go through it, you cannot go around it. To walk on the green earth in the present moment is to practice living as close to the bone of now as you dare, and now is the bone of life in accord with death, of death in accord with life, an immense and general amnesty which can only be experienced by you in your own present set of bones, and nowhere else. For when we are here just as we are, making no bones about it, then there is no time at all. A brief wildflower holds eternity, a grain of sand opens up the infinity of the universe.

For these two, life and death, are not two. Not one, and not two. Can you begin to see where the ground of seeing lies? The real terror is not in death, which is utterly ordinary, but in the dualism of life as opposed to death. Life opposed to death is the grim exercise that encloses the true self, weeping, in a dungeon named after yourself. It is a life full of strain to keep the self separate from the everything else that would overwhelm it - the other (the infinite variety of the other that we effortlessly create with our thoughts and fears). In its most intimate guise, the other sometimes seems to be death, because to admit the other fully, is to lose the self. And what deprives us of that, more profoundly than death?

The camellia ---
it fell into the darkness
of the old well.

Camellias are so heavy with their own brilliance and perfection that the stem cannot hold them long. They seem designed to fall too soon. But although all life, even the lives of the ones we love most passionately in the world, even our own life, falls in time, almost always too soon, like a perfect camellia, yet the old well is not something other than us. All life comes out of that well, and all life returns to it, just like the great well from which we draw each breath, and give it back again.

So meditation is yielding the self until you become no different from the old well itself, and it is resting in knowing that you have never been other than this, and it is perfectly all right. All things are well and all manner of things shall be well. Only a mind like fire can know the fire that runs through all things. Only a mind like water can rest completely in the source itself.

When you regain the marrow-bone awareness that you are that, how can you possibly be afraid of it? A very wise and unpredictable old teacher, Wumen, said:

Better than knowing the body is knowing the mind in peace;
when the mind is realized, the body is no longer anxious.
When body and mind are fully realized,
the saintly hermit declines to become a noble.

Better than knowing the body is becoming it so thoroughly that there is no knowing left, and this condition of deep meditative awareness is indeed 'knowing the mind in peace'. When the mind is realized, there is no knowing at all, just the vast waters of unknowing that moistens all of life whether we realize it or not. (Realization is just that: coming into fully aware accord with what is always present, always manifesting every thing and each action and beat of consciousness.) The body is indeed no longer anxious: it sings the song of the universe.

So why does the person of fully realized body and mind 'decline to become a noble'? Well, Zen speaks with the deepest admiration of 'the true person of no rank'. The one we finally come to meet as us has no name, no rank, no identifying marks at all. It is not elevated or holy, but deeply at home in the nobility that is naturally ours from the beginning. Our name then is wet grass! cloud breath! dead chestnut tree! red dog running! Dandelion - that's my name!

Even in rain
the dandelions turn gold
at midday.