

A person with dark hair, wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt and dark pants, is sitting in a meditative pose on a large, reddish-brown rock. They are facing right, looking out over a vast landscape. The background features rolling green hills and a clear blue sky with some light clouds. The overall scene is peaceful and contemplative.

We take our breath for granted more often than not – and yet it contains profound wisdom for our health and wellbeing, explains Molly Larkin. In this exclusive edited extract from her book, 'The Fountain of Youth is Just a Breath Away,' we learn about breath from a spiritual perspective.

This amazing gift of breathing

Many ancient cultures teach that life begins with the first inhale and ends with the last exhale. This is a profound truth, and yet we give very little thought to the breaths we take in between.

Why is that? Perhaps because we tend to take for granted all that is sacred around us.

Our breath is, indeed, sacred.

It can extend our lives, as well as the quality of our lives. It can calm us, focus our minds and bring life-giving oxygen into our body.

So, for a balanced, healthy life, it's time to start paying attention to it.

"The pause between breathing in and breathing out is the doorway to mystery." Ojibway elder

All living organisms breathe

Quite a few years ago, I sat on a hillside in Santa Monica, California and saw a mountain breathe. I literally saw, or imagined I saw, the mountain moving up and down, in and out. It gave me a profound experience of unity with all of creation.

That experience started me on my spiritual quest because it showed me that absolutely everything was alive and that we are all related to everything in creation.

Think about it. We are breathing the same air our ancestors breathed;

the same air the spiritual masters such as the Christ and the Buddha breathed.

We are connected to every living thing through our breath. Every being breathes, and breathes with us.

We can survive weeks without food, days without water, and almost no time without breath. Yet most people use only a small part of their respiratory capacity. In fact, the typical person uses only 20% of their lung capacity!

Traditional views of the breath

All ancient wisdom cultures understood the power of the breath, both as a physical necessity and a spiritual tool. It is central to the

ancient practices of Yoga, Qi Gong, Tai Chi, Vipassana and many other meditative traditions.

Breath is Life. Everything we inhale comes from the Universe.

In many cultures, the terms for 'breath' and 'spirit' are used interchangeably.

- In Sanskrit, the word 'prana' means 'breath, spirit or universal energy'.
- In Latin, the word is 'spiritus'. In Greek, the word for 'spirit' is 'pneuma', which also means 'wind' or 'breath'. The ancient Hebrew word for 'God's Spirit' is 'Ruach', which means 'breath'.
- In Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus, the word for 'spirit' includes 'breath, air and wind', and the term 'Holy Spirit' can mean 'holly breath'.

According to Aramaic scholar Neil Douglas-Klotz in 'The Hidden Gospel,' there is no separation in Aramaic between spirit and body or between humanity and nature. Our breath is connected to the air we breathe; therefore, in breath is unity with all beings.

In fact, Klotz says that the first line of The Lord's Prayer could be correctly translated from Aramaic as: 'Respiration of all worlds, we hear you breathing – in and out – in silence.'

Ancient Hindu masters called the human soul, 'the one who breathes'. They measured the span of a person's life, not in terms of how many years they lived, but in terms of the number of breaths they take from the moment they're born until the moment they die.

...the Buddha said he had gained nothing, but, "I have lost my fear of sickness. I have lost my fear of old age, and I have lost my fear of death."

The chief spiritual discipline practised by the Buddha was meditation on the breath. On his deathbed, in response to being asked what he'd gained by a lifetime of meditating on his breath, the Buddha said he had gained nothing, but, "I have lost my fear of sickness. I have lost my fear of old age, and I have lost my fear of death."

In the indigenous purification lodge, water is poured on hot rocks to create heat and steam for the purpose of purifying body, mind and spirit. The steam created by the water poured on the rocks is called 'the breath of Spirit'.

Hildegard of Bingen, eight centuries ago, defined prayer as "breathing in and breathing out the one breath of the Universe."

In yoga, Pranayama means 'breath control'. Specifically, 'Prana' means 'vital energy' and 'Yama' means 'self-control'.

Some teachers say that the practice of yoga is really the practice of breath. Pranayama is actually a separate breathing practice to help clear the mind and cleanse the body.

Traditional Hawaiians use the term 'Haole' (pronounced 'Howlie') to refer to non-Hawaiians – the term means 'without breath', because when the Hawaiians first met Europeans they saw they were without Spirit or breath, meaning they had lost the ability to breathe naturally.

In fact, an ancient Hawaiian greeting is to touch foreheads together with hands clasped behind each other's head and actually exchange breath/Spirit together.

Understanding our breath can be the difference between thriving, or merely surviving, in life.

Molly Larkin is the pen name of Nancy O'Donohue, a Healing Trust tutor based in the United States. 'The Fountain of Youth is Just a Breath Away' by Molly Larkin is available from Amazon UK, price £2.22 (Kindle) or £3.88 (paperback).