



Contemplative Outreach

Heart Intention Practice with Attention to the Breath and God
with David Frenette

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Transcript

Heart intention's essence is to unite the words of an intention, a prayer, or a Christian mantra with the body, the breath, the mind, the heart, and the Spirit in activity, in addition to sitting quietly for prayer, the Heart Intention is an embodied active, engaged, and embracing approach to meditation practice. So now that we've chosen a particular heart intention phrase could be the Jesus Prayer, "Lord, Jesus Christ have mercy on us, Son of the living God, amen." Or the spiritual, but not religious affirmation of unity, "Life, radiating love, amen." Or the Christian mantra, "Yeshua, Maranatha, Hesus, amen."

We unite one of those three phrases, those short sentences or affirmations of unity, with our breath, directing it into our heart, into the life that we live in the world, opening to the Divine Mystery that's constantly revealed to us and in surrender and in trust so that we can be more present. Present to the presence of the Divine in life as we understand this reality to be whether we call it God, Christ, or life itself. So let's explore the first engaged, embodied dimension of active practice, uniting or joining the heart intention phrase with the body and breath.

And spiritual teachers from all the different sacred traditions somehow always come back to the breath. Certainly this is the case with the traditions in Asia -- Buddhism and Hinduism -- but also Jewish mysticism, Sufi mysticism, and Christian mysticism in the west, employ the breath as a way to anchor and root our attention in the moment and an embodied or incarnational way. So one of the great Christian mystics from the Prayer of the Heart tradition, Gregory Palamas said, "We can bring the intellectual mind within ourselves by means of the breath. Pay attention to the exhalation and inhalation of the breath so that while we are watching it, the intellectual mind, too, may be held in balance."

So to hold in balance this gifted intellectual mind, this discursive mind, hold it in balance united with the breath and the body in a grounded way so that the Prayer of the Cloud -- that Centering Prayer has its primary inspiration in the Christian tradition -- the Prayer of the Cloud is grounded in the heart and in the body. My wife said to me the other day that if I wanted to really explore a grounding practice for the Prayer of the Cloud, we should try the Prayer of the Feet! But I'm going to try the Prayer of the Heart with this dimension of the breath and the body, which is an integral part of that tradition, the Prayer of the Heart. Heart Intention updates and translates the inspiration of the Prayer of the Heart into modern language.

And what that means very simply is that you just drop our attention into the breath, move from the mind into the body, into the breathing, like I am doing now. Even while I'm speaking, even while you're listening, you can be anchoring your attention into your breath -- on the inhale and on the exhale. And you can do that with the affirmation of intentionality, calling upon the name of the divine in your heart intention phrase. So for example, if I'm praying the traditional form of the Jesus Prayer, "Lord, Jesus Christ have mercy on us, Son of God, amen." I can unite my breath with the first part of that prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ." Dropping my attention into my body, trusting in the indwelling presence of God, the infused life of Christ in me and in all of us. The source of everything, including my efforts to be attentive and awaken alive, to serving God in other people. It starts with opening up to the indwelling God here and now. "Lord Jesus Christ" ... dropping attention, balancing the intellectual mind in the body. "Lord Jesus Christ"...

Or if your heart intention phrase, for example, is more meaningful for you as a spiritual rather than religious affirmation of unity, "Life, radiating love, amen." So with your repetition of the phrase, "life," the name Life for the divinity of the created world, drop your attention into your breath, into your breathing. Now "Life. Life." Anchoring with the words of your mouth or with the thought, the resonant auditory thought in your mind, "life." And how wonderful that the breath can be an anchor for our experience of the unity of life. That out of this hidden ground of love and oneness comes the effulgence, the merging diversity of life, and it's all embodied and anchored in this moment now, including the presence of life, the divine life, the sacred life of this moment in me, in you, in existence itself.

[Breathing] "Life."

This is where it starts, anchoring meditation practice in the body, starting with the body. Heart intention starts with what we have and the breath, like God, is with us from the moment of birth until the instant of death. We are breathing and God is present to us in a conscious way or heart intention practices to make God's presence conscious, more conscious, more awake and alive in us with attention and awareness.

And the third option of the heart intention phrases that we're exploring in this introduction is the mantra, "Yeshua, Maranatha, Hesed, amen. Yeshua, Maranatha, Hesed, amen."

So heart intention says, if that's your favored approach to this practice, to pray that Christian mantra, when you start it and call upon Yeshua, Yeshua drop your attention into your breathing. "Yeshua. Yeshua." [pauses, breathing]

And the nuance to heart intention practice is that one can join this name of the divine, this affirmation of life with your breathing in different ways with the in-breath, with the out-breath, with the resonant breath in your heart space, with the release of the breath at the top of the breath cycle, into pure awareness. With the dropping of the breath, into this area just behind the navel, oftentimes called the "hara," in at least Japanese Buddhism, the area behind your navel at the bottom of the breath cycle at the bottom of the diaphragm, drop your attention there. This is what the prayer of the heart teachers called in Greek, the "omphomathalia."

This area just behind the navel, an inch or two behind the navel. And I'm not sure if I'm pronouncing that term, right? It's all Greek to me, the "omphomathalia." So this is alive, this tradition of uniting the breath in its different expressions in the body with the Divine Presence, and the divine intentionality with the name of God. It's present in the Eastern Asian traditions and it's present in the Western and the Christian mystical contemplative tradition of the Prayer of the Heart. And Heart Intention says to bring this wisdom tradition, this wisdom insight forth into life, so that every step of life can be more present and alive and awake for us because we're anchoring repeatedly in the presence indwelling in us right now. [pauses, breathing] "Yeshua" or "Lord Jesus Christ" [breathing] or "Life." [pauses]

And one can experience just in that simple anchoring, the awakening of the breath into the body and the expansion of awareness into this moment. There's a difference between attention and more generalized awareness. So for example, I can direct my attention to this screen, to this camera, directing it towards you, the viewer who I can't see, but in my intention, you are the one I am in communication with. Or if I hear the bird tweeting outside my window, I can follow my attention towards that tweet. I can return my attention to my breath, anchoring it in the inhale, "life" and in the gentle exhale.

Attention is directed awareness, directed at an object. The camera, the bird, my breath, God, my awareness of God. Generalized awareness is the field in which attention arises. So I can release my directed attention now into a more spacious -- embodied still, still embodied -- but more spacious, out-breath perhaps. The awareness of my body itself like I'm wearing an over cloak, a cloak of awareness, embodied now. And my attention can be directed, and the name of the divine I'm practicing with, "Yeshua," can help direct that attention can help focus it back to my body, back to my breath, that area behind the navel, anchoring on the in-breath and having a deep belly breath that's grounded and rounded, present right here, "Life."

And I can release into pure awareness, the spaciousness that's represented in say an icon, if you can imagine an icon from the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition. The icons are depictions of a sacred figure, Jesus or another saint, and they'll always have this nimbus, this radiance around them depicted. It's like a field, that it's translated into the halo in devotional art, but in the iconic tradition, they have this living experience of contemplation and the living experience of

what the release into God's presence in pure awareness is because it is represented or experienced and symbolized in this generalized awareness as the nimbus. The Indwelling Presence is in the heart and in the body and in the breath, but also in this radiance of pure awareness symbolized in the nimbus, which unites us to the presence of God everywhere in oneness. Shared with other people present in nature; there's a way in which every creature or every created thing in the world, an old growth tree even, has a radiance of created awareness in us. It has its own nimbus so to speak, because creation is an expression of God, too. God's creative act. The Creator itself breathe into the world, a divine presence. So this is probably an insight of the traditions, the mystical contemplative traditions that we want to reclaim and own, that we're walking every moment of the day in the divine life. And that the natural world and other people and events and things that seem separate from God are actually sourced in God too, and we might even begin to perceive that presence.

The more present we are to the Presence in us, starting with awake, attentive, balancing of the mind, in the breath, in the body. So again, come back as I'm speaking, join me as we come back to life -- [pauses, breathing] -- dropping the anchor of your attention into your breath and letting it breathe for a moment in your heart space, resonate in the heart. "Lord Jesus Christ." [breathing] So as you breathe, inhale, you can feel your chest expand in the heart space and just drop the name of God there. Here too is life. In my heart's intention.

And why is this important again? Because daily life is *so intense* right now in our contemporary world. We carry trauma with us from early childhood, which tends towards leaving us in a dissociated state from our body. There's this wonderful short story by James Joyce, I can't remember the title right now, but the main character is called Mr. Duffy. And James Joyce introduces Mr. Duffy into the story with this short little phrase. He says, "Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body." "Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body," like we do! Kind of like living over here, [gesturing] here's my body, here's the home of my body, and I'm a little absent. I'm living a little further away, either in a fully disassociated state because of the trauma or just a distracted state. So whether it's distraction or dissociation, the invitation is to come home to this body, where the home, the familiarity of life here is because it's rooted in God.

So the breath is that invitation, attention to the breath, calling upon the divine name, "Yeshua, Lord Jesus Christ, Life" as a way of practice over and over again. And practice is just that, it's something that we do repeatedly because we're drawn off by habituated patterns, into distraction, into thought conditioned by trauma, conditioned by stress. So the great Buddhist tradition of mindfulness or shamatha, shamatha vipashyana practice, where they work so intensely with awareness through the breath and the way that religious meditation tradition has been translated for the Western or modern world as mindfulness. All the research that's shown that mindfulness is such a benefit towards health and presence and healing, and de-stressing. This is really a wonderful gift of the meditation tradition and this practice of heart intention kind of tunes into the same insight, that one can have this fidelity to heartfelt or mindful practice with the breath, not as a way of becoming, say, attached to the body, but realizing that the body is held in God too. There's no split between the body and the spirit, between the body and the mind. The insight of the contemplative meditation traditions is that

the body, the mind, the heart and the spirit are all part of the Godhead and all part of not only the divine nature, but our deep human nature. We're just not present or at home to that nature very often, so we need a repeated practice to come back home to where we live present at this address, here and now.

Attention to Divine. Calling out, Yeshua, or Lord Jesus Christ or Life. And this is where heart intention begins, uniting intentionality and purpose and meaning that's brought forth just by the phrase that we're practicing with, the traditional Jesus Prayer or the spiritual affirmation of unity, or the mantra, making that even more embodied now with this attention to the breath, in whatever form we're practicing with. Grounding and coming home to incarnational life.

And if you are a Centering Prayer practitioner, you could imagine what a great benefit this heart intention practice can be for your Centering Prayer. Because Centering Prayer is this sitting practice where we're not engaged with attention, we're practicing intention -- consent to the presence and action of God. So there needs to be an embodied component to complement the Centering Prayer, to bring it into life with attention and awareness, and that's what Heart Intention does. So some people I know who practice both approaches will do Heart Intention as a sitting practice, calling upon the name of God, attention to the breath, *before* they start the Centering Prayer so that they just come into the moment awake and alive with the attention and awareness, the gift of this sacramental moment, the sacrament of this present moment [pauses to breath] just for a couple of minutes as their vestibule or entry into Centering Prayers.

And then they let go of the attention to the breath and just enter into the pure consent with their sacred symbol that is the heart of Centering Prayer. So Centering Prayer and Heart Intention can go together and reinforce each other. As a matter of fact, in the decades of the development of the Centering Prayer wisdom tradition in the current era, this type of approach has been called by a few different names. When we lived at Chrysalis house, this retreat center, where I lived for 10 years as kind of doing a semi-monastic life before moving back into the world, we called it "attention and intention." A similar approach as what we're talking about with heart intention. It wasn't as connected with the Jesus Prayer, Prayer of the Heart tradition, but just the invitation to be very aware of how we are doing our work in moment to moment, and then anchoring that awareness and the breath with an intention to be of service.

Another decade later or so, I was calling this particular type of approach "heartfulness," but that was a little confusing because Father Keating at that time, the animator of Centering Prayer, was doing this wonderful video teaching on Centering Prayer and heartfulness. So it was a little confusing to be calling another practice heartfulness.

So, now here in this current decade, really connecting the inspiration of this embodied embracive approach to meditation, to bring the effects of Centering Prayer into daily life, connecting it more with its inspiration in the Prayer of the Heart tradition, the Jesus Prayer of the Heart tradition and updating and translating that into modern language. So you may have

heard about this approach as a Centering Prayer practitioner by another name, attention/intention, or heartfulness practice.

The essence of that by whatever name, Heart Intention is being present to the Divine Presence now through the body and the breath and the name of the divine. So as we continue unpacking all the dimensions of Heart Intention practice, the body, the mind, the heart, and the spirit have this foundation of practice with the breath. And the first phrase or movement of your heart intention, the name of God, Lord Jesus Christ, [pauses, breathing] Yeshua, or Life, life itself. And again, the intent of this video class is to describe a little bit of the orientation of this practice, to open the doorway to your own experience of it, trusting that *your living God*, the God who dwells in you and in whom you dwell will guide you further along this path. Trust your own experience and open your heart to the Living Presence. Thank you.

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