

Shereen Yusuff

Foreword by Fr. Andreas Kramarz, LC

Seeking the Spirit Within



*Experiencing Union with
God Through Breath*

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*To the Bread of Life,
who is my breath of life*

The courage and strength that are in me
are not of me, but of Him who lives
in me—it is the Eucharist.

—SAINT FAUSTINA KOWALSKA,
DIARY, 91

Ruah

When are we aware of our breath?
Is it only when we are in the presence of death?
Or when we are paying attention to our health?

When I look up at the stars and the moon,
or when I listen to my favorite tune.
When I smell beautiful flowers,
or look up at incredibly tall towers.
When I notice the plume of birds,
or see horses and cows in herds.
When I hear the giggle of a child,
or hear roosters crowing in the wild.

When I experience God within and around me,
which leads me to break into dance gleefully.
There is not a moment that passes by me
when I do not appreciate breath for its magnificence and
glory.
For even though its presence is subtle,
and delicate like a bubble,
it feels no need to call attention to itself,
for it knows its value and strength and its place in our
existence.

Every breath I take is a kiss from God,
gently reminding me of the intimacy I share with the
universe,
of how beautiful everything is,
to enjoy and value it for all it is.
Whatever I inhale or take in,
I have to exhale or let go.
Not to obtain or to possess,
but to admire and to be in awe.
And the sheer magic that takes place within me,
when God breathes life into me.

Our breath is our life force.
Qi, Prana, Ruah.
Breath is life,
breath is happiness,
breath is love.
God is love.
May we all experience God's breath within us.

Foreword

Breathing and spirituality have rarely shared a common space in the Catholic tradition. Yes, the Holy Spirit, referred to as God's breath or "wind" (*ruah*), is mentioned in the creation narrative (Genesis 1:2) and when Christ breathed upon the apostles after His resurrection (John 20:22), but we typically only pay attention to *our own* breath during yoga or relaxation exercises.

Thanks to Shereen Yusuff's training as a certified breath coach, her personal faith journey, and her selfless dedication to writing this book, we now possess in written form a unique way of bringing these two realities together. She converts our continuous act of breathing, one of the most basic bodily functions, into a deep spiritual experience.

Before I was graced with meeting Shereen in a course on spiritual direction at Divine Mercy University in Virginia, I had never been exposed to any intentional way of dealing with breath. At first, I was rather skeptical about the usefulness, let alone necessity, of looking into my breathing. I thought this practice was only for runners,

opera singers, or divers. Why would I spend any time or effort on it? But the message in this book, together with individualized coaching, has changed my life. Not only have these exercises elicited an almost immediate improvement in some areas of bodily and mental functioning—from reducing allergic sneezing and congestion to greater alertness and emotional balance, just to mention a few—but they have also led me into previously uncharted territory in my relationship with God.

What Shereen does is make us aware of something that is so subtle, so intimate, and yet so essential to our existence. Learning to breathe better can lead to praying better and, ultimately, to loving better—loving more the way God loves. For if we experience in every inhale the love of the Creator giving us life and if we learn to listen to His loving voice in the silent rhythm of respiration, we can enter—both neurologically and spiritually—a safe space in our hearts. This space allows us to process and heal difficult, often hidden, realities, so we can enter an interior state that leads us to relate to others in a much more relaxed, emotionally balanced, and joyful way. Through the embrace of Christ’s love, we are able to overcome fear and to open our hearts to others. We may then say we are on a path that leads to progress, not only spiritually but also holistically.

The heart is significant in this context. The way both holy Scripture and ordinary language use the word *heart* signifies a spiritual reality that connects all the operations

in the human soul. While the heart is often associated primarily with emotions, it is also the place where we reflect (just as Mary “pondered [all the words] in her heart,” Luke 2:19);* understand (“I have given you a wise and intelligent heart,” 1 Kings 3:12); remember (“recall in your heart,” Isaiah 46:8); hope (“in him my heart trusts,” Psalm 28:7); and discern (“has determined in his own mind,” 1 Corinthians 7:37). The heart is the integral and integrative center of the person,** and its bodily side is the physical heart (along with other organs), which modern neurology has discovered is extensively connected with the brain and whose relevance goes far beyond pumping blood through our veins. *Heart* in general can thus stand for the meeting point between body and soul, and we can influence it physically through our breathing.

The connection between breathing and God’s loving presence in our life is not something made up by pious imagination. It unearths a deep theological truth that is backed up by Scripture, beginning with “the breath of life” that the first human being received from God (Genesis 2:7) and that has been sustaining all human life ever since. Even the provision of material goods ultimately depends on God, who is the first cause of all physical and chemical

*All Bible quotations in this paragraph are Father Andreas’s own translations.

**This is the way Pope Francis explained the concept of the heart in his last encyclical letter *Dilexit Nos*, para. 15, October 24, 2024, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/20241024-enciclica-dilexit-nos.html.

processes.* Exploring this truth in the fundamental reality of our breathing allows us to experience more deeply that “God has no other reason for creating than his love and goodness.”** Shereen carries this reality further by connecting it climactically to the mystery of the Eucharist, where the loving union between God and the believer takes place in the most intimate bodily-spiritual way possible during our life on earth, helping us to take the bodily dimension of our existence and of our faith more seriously.

In Catholic circles, the physical reality of our lives has been explored most prominently by Saint Pope John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body*. It deals primarily with the sacramentality of human love as experienced in the context of marriage and encoded in sexuality. This avenue deserves to be pursued in other areas of human life as well. Catholic Church documents have been insisting increasingly on the relevance of the *integral* formation and development of the person, of the whole and as a whole.*** Shereen’s

*See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), 79, para. 301: God “at every moment, upholds and sustains [creatures] in being, enables them to act and brings them to their final end.”

***Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 77, para. 293.

***See Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, March 26, 1967, para. 14, www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html; Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, December 30, 1988, para. 58–60, www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici.html; Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, June 29, 2009, para. 15, www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html; Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, May 24, 2015, para. 157, www.vatican.va/content

book has the potential to become a key piece of a larger vision of human development that overcomes fragmentation and compartmentalization in favor of a truly integral approach.

I can only wish this book many readers. It's hard to imagine that anyone would not benefit from it. Rather, I envision that the more people were to engage in spiritual breath work, the more significant the positive shift in our human relations would be. This includes our families, parishes, schools, friends, but most importantly, our relationship with God. For if learning to find God's Spirit in our breath can lead us to love more, love better, love deeply, and love selflessly, the impact on an authentic Christian life will be noteworthy. I hope every reader will persevere in not only reading but also practicing what is laid out here and invite others to do the same.

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Preface

Our hearts are sacred.

In the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, golden rays come from His heart, which appears radiant and healthy, even though it has been pierced by immense amounts of pain and suffering.

The Divine Mercy image also emphasizes His heart. We pray: “O blood and water which gushed forth from the *heart* of Jesus, I trust in You.”

Verses on the heart appear multiple times in the Bible. For example:

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
(Matthew 5:8)

Keep your heart with all vigilance,
for from it flow the springs of life. (Proverbs 4:23)

The heart plays a pivotal role in seeing God and experiencing His power, mercy, and grace. We must take responsibility for it, guarding it as we would a precious diamond.

The heart is the source of our life, in a physical sense, and it is the place where God abides within us in a spiritual sense. The day our heart stops beating, our life on earth stops as well. When our heart stops beating for God, we are unable to experience God's peace. As Saint Augustine said in *Confessions*, "Our heart is restless, until it rests in you."

The condition of our heart also has an impact on how we interact with the rest of the world. Pain distracts us and limits our ability to be in the present moment. It takes a great deal of energy to stay focused when one is physically and mentally in pain. Additionally, it is common for individuals with unhealthy hearts to feel anxious and worried about the future.

Since the heart is within us, a great way to access it is through our breath. The way we inhale and exhale can directly affect the way our heart beats and its general condition.

We see the connection between the breath—or spirit—and the heart in the following Scripture passages:

The LORD is near to the brokenhearted,
and saves the crushed in spirit. (Psalm 34:18)

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
(Psalm 51:10)

In John 15:4, Jesus tells us to abide in Him. Only when we abide in Him can He abide in us. Abiding in the Lord can mean so many things—from receiving the Holy Eucharist to resting in Him, from reading Scripture to obeying His Word. In this book, I explore the concept of abiding in Him from the angle of resting in Him through our spirit and our heart. Every breath we take and every beat of our hearts can be for Him. If Jesus abides within us, within our hearts, is it not our responsibility to ensure that we have a beautiful home for our Lord to dwell in? And more importantly, should we not have access to this home as well?

For the remainder of this book, I encourage you to consider the literal condition of your heart and breath. Someone with a “good heart” not only signifies a person who is generous and kind but also who has great cardiovascular health and has the energy to minister to others with zeal. Just like the apostles asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, we need to be taught how to breathe. It’s like picking up a pen and never learning how to write—the pen would be useless. It is the same with our breath. Most of us don’t recognize how powerful our breath can be in terms of leading a healthier life through sleeping better, eating well, having a stronger immune system, improving the way we think, and enhancing the clarity of our minds. It helps us understand the sources of our anger and become more patient. Intentional breathing reduces stress, anxi-

ety, and depression and lessens the urge to adopt addictive habits. It helps us access our hearts, physically and spiritually.

My goal with this book is to help you seek the true body and blood, soul, and divinity of Christ within you—the Eucharist within. Just as maintaining a car involves ensuring the tires have the right pressure, the radiator is filled with water, and the engine has clean oil—giving us the confidence that the car will not break down when we are traveling—we should also focus on creating a beautiful vehicle for God. By doing so, we can wait patiently for God to take the driver’s seat. The less pain and noise and the fewer distractions that come from within, which are often self-inflicted, the easier it becomes for us to access our heart and, in due time, experience the presence of the Almighty within us. Resting in Him allows healing to take place, and we emerge as recharged and radiant beings, shining His light. Surrendering to God’s will becomes the way we live our lives.

So, let us immerse ourselves into learning more about our breath and our heart.

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Note to the Reader

You might be thinking, *Why would I want to spend the next few weeks focusing on my breath? Especially when I have been breathing all my life. Surely, I can't be doing it wrong if I am still alive!*

Alive can be a subjective term. Do you go through life feeling as though you are becoming a better version of yourself every day? More energized than exhausted? Or do you deal with a lot of physical pain and emotional discomfort in your life? Practicing proper breathing can bring about a heightened state of awareness in all aspects of your life.

Being aware of our thoughts and feelings can greatly impact our ability to discern God's voice and presence. Expressions like "use your moral compass," "listen to your heart," and "follow your conscience" might strike a chord. The more present we are with our breath, the easier it is to access our hearts.

If you're someone who wants to hear the voice of God or experience God's presence in your life and have been confused on how to go about it, this book is for you.

My own journey with breath started in the secular realm, with a focus on the mind and the body. Eventually, I landed in the spiritual realm, as Saint Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:46: “It is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual.” This mirrors the structure of the book, with a focus on the mind and the body, or the physical, followed by the spiritual.

I grew up playing semi-professional tennis, then went on to participate in numerous ultra-endurance events like marathons, ultramarathons, and Ironman races, and, eventually, turned to top-tier mountaineering. These athletic pursuits drove me to appreciate the power of breath, but it was mountaineering that led me to focus on understanding breathing more fully, since the higher I climbed, the colder I got and the harder it was to breathe. Even though that was my initial reason for breath training, I quickly became fascinated by the impact breath made not only on my endurance and ability to withstand the cold but also on other aspects of my life. Being a science geek by nature and an engineer by education, I started studying more about the heart and its relationship with breath, the role of hormones, and how various chemicals in our bodies can affect our state of mind—including how happy or sad we feel. I also noticed that several of the ailments I had—such as acid reflux, allergies, sinusitis issues—started vanishing.

In my early thirties, I developed acne and suffered from

severe menstrual cramps. In the United States, birth control pills are commonly suggested as a treatment for both issues. However, I found that practicing breath and cold training significantly reduced my acne and alleviated my cramps. They also helped enhance my sports performance, including recovery between training sessions. I was able to do things on back-to-back days that I had never been able to do before. My mobility and movement improved. Breathing correctly and exposing myself to cold training enhanced blood circulation within my body, and it allowed me to cherish and be more present in nature. I started experiencing more happiness and peace, even in very difficult situations. My enjoyment at work increased as well. After fifteen years in engineering, I received a breath of fresh air in terms of how creative and energized I felt. I was making decisions faster and didn't need a lot of time to finish projects. I was happy with where I was.

My deep interest in breath eventually culminated in my becoming a certified breath, cold exposure, and mobility coach. Although engineering was my main career, teaching became my side passion.

Then, one day, my journey went from understanding the mind and body to having a spiritual encounter with God. Everything changed after that. My first struggle was my inability to process my experiences in engineering language. Science and faith are not supposed to go together! Or are they? Years later, I can confidently say that God was

always present in my life. I just wasn't aware of His presence.

When I look back at that period in my life, at how many changes I experienced in a six-month period—my career, graduate education, religion, citizenship status—I felt like I was “dying to myself.” It was as though my entire world were coming to an end, and I had no idea what I was being led to do next. My lifestyle, which I had engineered to perfection, was crumbling before my eyes. Despite how happy I'd been, it seemed as though I had reached the zenith. I had to change tracks to go further in my journey and experience a peace that I later came to know as God's peace—the peace that comes from doing God's will for me. God's perfect timing was not lost on me.

I remember that during those times all I had was (1) prayer; (2) the anchor of my unceasing breath, which gave me a glimpse of what it felt like to pray unceasingly; and most importantly, (3) the Eucharist. I often sought solitude to hear God's voice so He could continue to guide me, one step at a time, amid the chaos and the doubts of all the people who questioned my path and the decisions I was making. I am grateful for never having let go of these three things, since they led me to surrender to God and, eventually, allow Him to take control of my life.

Writing this book is a part of that journey too. When I first felt the Holy Spirit ask me to teach breath, combining faith and science, my level of discomfort soared through

the roof. What was wrong with teaching the way I always had? Was it not good enough? Why should I change what was already working so well? Most of my apprehension came from feeling that faith was too difficult a topic to take on. How could I, an engineer, possibly think that I had the words to describe the love I had for God—or that He had for me? I was also afraid of facing the backlash from both religious and scientific communities, telling me that my work made no sense! Ultimately, the fear of hurting who was most precious to me, God, by not doing His holy will, surpassed my fear of not being accepted for this work, and that is when I sat down to write. It took me three years to finally succumb to the repetitive requests of the Holy Spirit.

While writing this book, I learned that seven in ten Catholics did not believe in the true presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist.* I was in shock! I immediately started reminiscing about my own journey of seeing the Eucharist for what it is. The first time I encountered the Eucharist in Adoration, I *knew* it was Him. The first time I consumed the Eucharist, I *knew* He was within me, and since then, I have never once doubted that He abides in me as I abide in Him. This kind of *knowing* does

*Gregory A. Smith, "Just One-Third of U.S. Catholics Agree with Their Church That Eucharist Is Body, Blood of Christ," Pew Research Center, August 5, 2019, www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/08/05/transubstantiation-eucharist-u-s-catholics.

not come from science but from an actual encounter with God. I also believe that we must want to see Him and be ready to do all that it takes to encounter Him. After all, He tells us, “Everyone who searches finds” (Matthew 7:8). During all the years that I invested in understanding my body and my mind better, I didn’t realize that I was seeking truth and love. Today, I can confidently say that encountering God gave me both. I did not know it then, but I was seeking Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life, and aligning my mind and heart helped in my journey.

Getting Ready

As you go through the exercises in this book, it doesn't matter how fast you complete them but rather how *often* you practice them. These exercises will also help you acquire self-discipline. Repetition is key!

Treat this book as a workbook and record your progress as you go along. Keeping a notebook handy for taking notes and tracking your progress will help motivate you to do the exercises. When it comes to breath work, it's crucial to not only understand the exercises but also to actively practice them.

Before embarking on a new journey, it's important to reflect on where you are so that you can keep track of the changes you experience. Conduct a self-examination of the current quality of your physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. Be patient with yourself. Learning breathing exercises can be as frustrating as trying to master any new skill for the first time. You might get so frustrated at not doing it "right" that you may want to end the journey soon after you begin, or you might feel tempted to rush through the book without taking the time to engage with the exer-

cises. Both approaches will limit the amount of progress you will be able to make over the coming weeks. My advice is not to rush through the book but to follow a reasonable timeline and be honest with yourself about when you are truly ready to move forward to the next exercise. A general rule of thumb is to spend the same amount of time, perhaps a week, on each exercise before progressing to the next step. Treat this book like a Bible study, where you are expected to do one chapter a week, spending ten to fifteen minutes a day doing the exercises, if not more. There may be a step or two where you may want to spend more than a week, and that is perfectly fine. Taking things slowly is preferable to racing through each chapter. The time frame for each exercise is only a guideline. Consistency is more important than perfection.

If you're doing the exercises with a group, which is also a very effective way to implement this book, try to agree upon a set time when you will be checking in with one another, perhaps weekly. Share your victories and struggles as the weeks go by.

The most important thing to remember is that you are on the journey of building awareness around how you breathe and how your heart beats. You have been breathing, and your heart has been beating all your life: You cannot fail with these exercises.

What You May Encounter Doing the Exercises

Most of the students who have done these exercises have experienced changes over a single week, while for others it has taken the entire period of ten to twelve weeks. The variation is because of each person's unique life circumstances and differing mental, physical, and physiological conditions. An athlete's physiology will be very different from that of a person who is homebound. This is also why I haven't characterized any of the exercises with what "optimal" might look like; experiencing improvement is a personal journey and can look very different for each person.

In the following, I have listed a few things that may help you on your upcoming journey.

1) Learning humility through self-knowledge

Here, humility is defined as being aware of what you can and cannot do—and the grace to accept this knowledge. Humility can lead to a healthy desire to change specific aspects of your life. You may notice that some of the exercises are very easy for you, while some are much harder. You will discover information in this book that is entirely new to you. Being patient with yourself as you maneuver through some of the more difficult sections in the book is key.

2) Recognizing when you are and are not doing the exercises

I go into a lot more detail on this topic in chapter 1, “The Fall.” We sometimes prefer to pay attention only to the moments when we are doing the exercises and ignore the times when we’re missing the mark. However, on the journey of breathing correctly, becoming aware of when you’re not doing the exercises is just as important, since gently nudging the body to follow an intentional pattern of breathing is like teaching a child how to write the alphabet. After repeatedly doing the same act, it becomes a part of your natural way of being. You don’t have to think about the act anymore and you do it without thinking. This eventually leads you to becoming aware of when you step away from what you have trained your body to do. Just as a person’s handwriting can easily identify them, your breathing patterns can similarly reveal your interior state.

3) Increasing self-discipline

Many of the exercises require that you set aside time and do them throughout the day. Since the exercises are always structured around breath and breath never leaves us, it’s easy for you to do them at any time! It’s also possible to do the exercises in tandem with other activities that you might be in-

volved in. I discuss this in more detail in the individual chapters.

4) Building enthusiasm to continue the exercises as a result of positive changes

Experiencing change can be powerful, leading to a domino effect that motivates you to continue the practice and also influence those around you to develop greater self-discipline and self-awareness. You might find yourself gravitating toward certain exercises over others. Even though this is natural and isn't a terrible thing, it's crucial to follow the specific exercises as they are presented each week.

5) Finding that the exercises are becoming second nature

After a certain point, the exercises will become part of your muscle memory, and you'll find yourself doing certain exercises even though you aren't consciously thinking about them. This is a positive sign that your body is beginning to habitually follow a different pattern from what you were accustomed to. Establishing muscle memory can take several weeks, but with intentional practice, it may start happening a lot sooner.

6) Growing love for God, for self, and for others

Tapping into breath brings about a more balanced way of looking at things. It frees you from whatever has prevented you from looking at yourself as being made in the image and likeness of God. The movement of your breath instigates letting go of things instead of holding on to them. You start to notice changes in your breathing patterns when you hold on to things. It also becomes easier to love and to forgive others. And once you realize that the exercises facilitate your growth in love, you'll also feel a greater desire to continue them.

7) Discovering the ongoing nature of the journey of breath work

Even after you finish this book, you'll find new areas of your life that you would like to bring to God—this is a lifelong process. I encourage you to always explore your *why* when you start doing the exercises, and the next section on “Conscious Self-Examination” is designed to aid you with understanding your reasons. However, along the journey, your motivations may change. If you're reading this book, something about the message or the title resonated with you, sparking a desire in your heart to explore more. Be open to this desire and keep it close. Along the way, you may gain further insights that guide you to go deeper into the root of your

why. What matters is to be present to the ebbs and flows that you are experiencing within.

I am excited for you as you embark on this journey of self-exploration and self-awareness. The journey with breath can be very gentle. The more we become aware of the subtle power of our breath, the easier it becomes to experience the subtle presence of our God at all times.

Conscious Self-Examination

In Thanksgiving for
Where We Are and
Where We Are Headed

*Self-knowledge puts us on our knees, and it is
very necessary for love. For knowledge of God gives love,
and knowledge of self gives humility.*

—SAINT TERESA OF CALCUTTA

*Enter the room of self-knowledge first, instead of
floating off to the other places. This is the path.*

—SAINT TERESA OF ÁVILA

Please take this book and stand in front of a mirror, ideally one that allows you to see all the way down to your waistline.

Examine your posture as you answer the following questions:

- Do you notice your shoulders either slumping or curving in? Do you feel any tightness or pain in your neck or your shoulders?
- Turn sideways and look at yourself. Is your body slumping around the belly area?
- When you inhale, does your tummy move inward or outward? How about on your exhale?
- Do you notice a lot of upper chest movement when you breathe?
- Are you breathing through your mouth? Either on the inhale or the exhale?
- Are you breathing rapidly? Do you feel as though you are short on breath or not getting enough breath?
- Where does your tongue rest in your mouth? Up against the palate or at the base of your mouth?
- Can you hear yourself breathe?

Now take a seat and answer the next few questions:

- Are you struggling with fatigue?
- Do you have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep?
- Do you snore?
- Do you get up in the middle of the night to urinate?

- Have you been diagnosed with an autoimmune disorder like fibromyalgia or a respiratory disorder like asthma?
- Do you suffer from any mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, depression, or PTSD?
- Do you struggle with addiction? This includes pornography, drugs, alcohol, sex, and stress eating—to name a few.
- Are you struggling with weight management?
- Are you unable to make decisions?
- Are you on any medication? This includes nonprescription and pain medications.
- Do you often experience migraines?
- Do you find it hard to move on after you have experienced setbacks?
- Do you struggle with emotional management or expressing your emotions in a healthy, constructive way?

If you are a woman, please answer the following questions:

- Are you taking birth control pills to help you regulate your hormones?
- Are you taking hormonal treatment to help you

with menopause?

- Do you have severe menstrual cramps?
- Are you suffering from acne? Or any other kind of skin-surface eruption?
- Are you trying to get pregnant?

If you are an athlete, please answer these questions:

- Do you find yourself short on breath while playing your sport? For example, having to bend over your knees to be able to slow down your breathing?
- Do you find yourself getting distracted by factors beyond your control, for example, crowd cheering or jeering, or bad referee calls?
- Do you find it hard to get motivated to practice every day?
- Do you find yourself not being able to recover after game day and/or not able to recover fast enough before your next game?
- Do you partake in a pre- or post-workout drink?
- Do you find yourself getting into regular arguments with your teammates, coach, and/or captain? Do you struggle with seeing eye to eye with them?
- Do you feel like quitting as soon as you start losing?
- Are you able to make decisions on the fly while

being in the game?

Finally, please try to answer these questions as honestly as possible:

- Would you consider yourself a happy person?
- Are you eager to become the best version of yourself every day?
- Are you hungry to experience a deeper prayer life?
- Would you like to experience healing—physically, emotionally, and spiritually?
- Do you sit in silence? If yes, how many times a week and for how long in one session?

I am confident that doing the breathing exercises shared in this book will bring about various positive changes in your life. This book is not meant to replace anything you currently utilize, be it medication or prayer. Instead, it will help you explore ways to enhance your current life and relationship with God through breath.

Prayer Before We Begin Our Journey Together

Set an intention to commit to doing the breathing exercises for the next few weeks. Nothing is considered too

small or too big in the realm of intentions. If you struggle to believe in the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist, then pray for this to be revealed to you during your exercises. Every time you're aware of your breath, you are engaging in breath work and activating, subconsciously, your intention. Knowing your *why* is just as important as learning the *how*. Your *why* will be the reason for you to do your exercises every day.

I invite you to say the following prayer, which was written by Saint Augustine, as you begin your journey in walking through this program with me.

Breathe in me, O Holy Spirit, that my thoughts may all
be holy.

Act in me, O Holy Spirit, that my work, too, may be holy.

Draw my heart, O Holy Spirit, that I love but what is
holy.

Strengthen me, O Holy Spirit, to defend all that is holy.

Guard me, then, O Holy Spirit, that I always may be holy.

Seeking the Spirit Within

The Fall

Setting Yourself Up for Success

Though they fall seven times, they will rise again.

—PROVERBS 24:16

*When I thought, “My foot is slipping,”
your steadfast love, O LORD, held me up.*

—PSALM 94:18

Most of the time, when people refer to the Fall, they're talking about Adam, Eve, and the fruit. Whenever I think of the Fall, my mind immediately goes to Jesus falling three times before He was crucified. I love this image because knowing that Jesus fell three times on His way to the Cross makes me feel like my falls are also an important part of God's plan. My falls make my heart meek and humble, but they also inspire me keep my gaze on every step I take to minimize unnecessary falls in the future.

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I also remember that Jesus had help along the way. Through all the pushing, shoving, and kicking, Simon of Cyrene lessened Jesus's burden (Matthew 27:32). We play the roles of Jesus and Simon at different times. Sometimes it is Jesus's burden that we are lessening by walking alongside those who need our love and support. Sometimes we're the ones falling, carrying the heavy burden, executing God's plan, while feeling the constant shoving and pushing of others around us.

I reflect on the distance that Jesus had to traverse for Him to be crucified. Had the distance been short, He might not have met Veronica, Simon of Cyrene, or His mother—Our Lady. He would not have been able to talk to the wailing women or experience Veronica's endearing act of wiping His face, which occurred after He fell. There were a lot of people whom Jesus ministered to while on His journey to fulfilling God's plan for our redemption.

Sometimes having a winding path with a lot of falls may not be bad—we get to execute God's plan by experiencing the falls and meeting our own Simons and Veronicas, creating moments of endearment. Sadly, we may encounter people who try to trample and kick us while not offering any help at all. However, the ones who do help us and love us, despite our closeness to the ground or burden of a heavy cross, really make strong impressions. These moments of love shine through a dark night like a beacon of light and inspire us to do the same for others.

Your journey with breathing exercises will be similar. There will be days when you have no desire to do the exercises, and that is perfectly fine. It is like the times when you didn't want to stick to your diet, go to bed on time, refrain from eating sugar, help the homeless person, say the Rosary,* or go to Holy Mass. The awareness of these moments is just as important as having the moment itself. Every time you have a fall, either by not doing your practices in a disciplined fashion or catching yourself breathing in a way that's not recommended in the coming pages, unite yourself with the Fall of Christ. Recognize that His falling and getting back up was a part of His divine plan, just as it may be a part of yours. You can fall a million times, provided you rise a million times. Doing my breathing exercises is like brushing my teeth—a task so essential that others would suffer if I didn't complete it. And so, if you're the kind of person who is constantly looking to do something nice for another, do your breathing exercises!

Work on yourself first before you decide to advise others to follow your ways. The best way to minister to others is not through words but through actions. It is always helpful to have others keep you accountable when you are attempting to do something new. Bring your Simons and

*The Rosary helps us meditate on the lives of Jesus and Mary. For guidance on how to pray it, this is a great resource: "How to Pray the Rosary," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, www.usccb.org/how-to-pray-the-rosary. Another great resource is the book *The Secret of the Rosary* by St. Louis de Montfort.

Veronicas along with you on this journey, and, who knows, they might end up doing the exercises as well; then you can all work on embodying Christ's light and experience the Holy Spirit together.

Exercise

The first exercise is to become aware of how many breaths you take in a minute—which is your respiratory rate. Use a timer and measure one minute, counting the number of breaths you take during that time. By *breath*, I mean one cycle of inhale and exhale. Write down the number of breaths and keep it in your record, along with the other questions you answered in the self-examination section earlier in the book. This exercise needs to be done only once this week, but you will be tracking your respiratory rate in the coming weeks.

Next, you are going to practice seeing what your body does while you are breathing. Put your hand on your stomach and observe the movement of your hand while you are breathing. You should feel a gentle outward movement on the inhale and a similar inward movement on the exhale. If you're struggling to feel this movement, you can lie on a flat surface and rest a book on your stomach. You should see a gentle rise when you inhale and a gentle fall when you exhale. Don't try to force your stomach in and

out, but rather observe the natural motion of your stomach as you breathe. If you notice that the movement is the opposite of what was just described, then intentionally work on raising the book on the inhale and letting it fall on the exhale. Breathing with this intention will begin the process of retraining your body to breathe correctly. If you're unable to do this exercise, ask a friend or family member to breathe and watch their body's movement. Watching another person do the exercise correctly can teach you to do it correctly as well.

Once that is done, set an alarm for every hour on the hour. When it sounds, take at least a minute to focus on your breathing. If this is too much for you, choose times of the day when you can commit to becoming aware of your breath. I suggest coupling the exercise with something you're already doing. For example, you can do the exercise every time you step into a car or every time you are standing in line at the grocery store or waiting to get cash at an ATM. The options are limitless as to how you can incorporate this exercise into your life. *This exercise has more to do with the awareness of your breath than it does with how you are breathing.* In the upcoming chapters, we will go into the *how*, but for now, you can freestyle.

As explained previously, there will be moments or days when you completely forget to be aware of your breath, which would be considered a fall. Treat your falls with patience and love, thanking them for giving you opportu-

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nities to pick yourself up again and to keep moving forward with the exercise. The act of not being aware of your breath is just as important as being aware of your breath.

Reflection Questions

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, how hard has it been for you to be aware of your breath at set times during the day?
2. Have you been able to incorporate self-discipline to stick to your pre-decided times?
3. Have you been aware of your breath outside the times that you had set to pay attention to your breath?

If the answer to the last question is “Yes, often,” then it’s time to move forward.

Shereen Yusuff

Foreword by Fr. Andreas Kramarz, LC

Seeking the Spirit Within



*Experiencing Union with
God Through Breath*

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