

Practical Campbell

Spirit Wind

In this Practical Campbell essay, Stephen Gerringer follows a single mythic image, letting it take him wherever the wind blows.



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PRACTICAL CAMPBELL

Spirit Wind

*The wind is air, the highest holy power of the universe, **Brahman**, the life-force of the world; for the wind persists in its blowing when all the other powers of the body of the universe have temporarily ceased to exist ...*

Heinrich Zimmer, [Myths & Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization](#), ed. Joseph Campbell, p. 171

One might live a celibate life, forego the comforts of family and home, maybe even survive a few days without food and water—but I have yet to meet anyone who can pass an hour without taking a breath. Earth's atmosphere provides the context for all life. The air we breathe is the same air our fellow creatures breathe. Even the plants and trees mirror this dance, breathing out as we breathe in.

Nothing is more common to the diverse indigenous cultures of the earth than a recognition of the air, the wind, and the breath, as aspects of a singularly sacred power. By virtue of its pervading presence, its utter invisibility, and its manifest influence on all manner of visible phenomena, the air, for oral peoples, is the archetype of all that is ineffable, unknowable, yet undeniably real and efficacious.

[David Abrams, The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World](#), p. 226,

Air, Wind, and Breath are subtle expressions of a universal archetype common not just to pre-literate cultures, but a source of exquisite imagery found in all mythologies, mystical traditions, and metaphysical systems.

Joseph Campbell associates such mythological archetypes with the Indian concept of *mārga*:

***Mārga** comes from a root that has to do with an animal trail; it means “the path.” By this, Indians mean the path by which the particular aspect of a symbol leads you to personal illumination; it is the path to enlightenment.*

Joseph Campbell, [Pathways to Bliss](#), ed. David Kudler, p. 96

Is all in the imagination, or do mythological images reference real experiences, available and accessible to real people in the real world?

We'll explore this question by taking a cue from Campbell's description of *mārga*—pick up the traces of a single universal motif at its source in collective human experience, and follow its trail through a variety of languages, cultures, and mythological systems, to see if this path might indeed point to

personal illumination.

Where does our journey begin?

With a deep breath ...

THE BIG GULP

It's no surprise that Creation Myths often open with the wind stirring the waters. In Genesis 1:2 we read that “the Wind [or Spirit] of God moved across the face of the waters”; among the Dine' (or Navajo), *n'ílch'i*—the Holy Wind—existed first; in Babylonian myth *Anu* begets the four winds on the surface waters of *Tiamat*, disturbing this Dragon Goddess of Chaos whose Being forms the substance of all that is; and Joseph Campbell often points to Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*, which likens the forms of the phenomenal world (as experienced through the organs of mind and senses) to the surface of a pond rippled by the breeze.

No humans existed at the Beginning of Time to witness these miracles—but the mythological act that gives life to mankind, on the other hand, is rooted in human experience.

Life outside the womb for every human begins with that first breath. Every breath thereafter marks our existence as a separate, individual being growing into our own conscious awareness of the world around us—until our final breath, when consciousness recedes, to we know not where.

Consciousness washes in, consciousness washes out—but whence the source of consciousness, and where does it go? Mythology associates consciousness with the breath—so what, then, is the Source of Breath?

*And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and **breathed** into his nostrils the **breath** of life, and man became a **living soul**.*

Genesis 2:7, King James Version (KJV), [*emphasis mine*]

The Hebrew word for soul in this passage is *naphesh*—“a breathing creature.” Corresponding terms in the Indo-European languages parallel Semitic derivations: in Latin, for example, *anima* means “breath” **and** “soul” (etymologically then, an *animal* is a being “having a soul,” or “a being which breathes,” congruent to the Hebrew *naphesh*). Similarly, *ātman*, in Sanskrit—often translated “soul” or the “divine Self”—comes from the root *an* (“to breathe”), and is related to the German *Atmen* (“breath”), and the English *atmosphere*.

Though these terms clearly resonate with the biblical image, there do seem to be significant differences, particularly in the extension of consciousness and soul beyond the confines of the human mind.

Another variance would appear to be in contrasting mythological perceptions of the Creator:

He [the Divine Self] dwells in the breath, He is within the breath; the breath, however, does not know Him: the breath is His body, He controls the breath from within. He dwells in the mind, He is within the mind; the mind does not know Him: the mind is His body, He controls the mind from within.

Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3.7.1, cited in Heinrich Zimmer, [Myths & Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization](#), ed. Joseph Campbell, p. 366

A far cry from the cosmic mouth-to-mouth resuscitation described in Genesis! God isn't just the source of Breath in Hindu mythology, but **inhabits** the Breath and **is** the Breath (and, by extension, inhabits and is the Mind—Consciousness—as well). That's somewhat abstract and vaporous compared to the robust, vigorous God of Judeo-Christo-Islamic mythologies, who projects a sharply-defined muscular ego (“I Am That I Am”) more clearly in tune with western sensibilities. The God of scripture might be the *source* of breath, the *source* of human consciousness, but He doesn't **identify** with either

... or does He?

A WIND DIVINE

Recall the passage from Genesis 1:2, which the King James translates as the “Spirit” of God moving over the face of the waters. The Hebrew word translated “spirit” is *ruach*, which also means “wind,” “blow,” or “breathe.” Joseph Campbell adds another layer to this association, citing Professor T.J. Meek's discussion of the origin of Yahweh (the “unpronounceable” name of God, spelled in Hebrew with just the consonants *YHWH*):

*“The name [states Professor Meek] ... was foreign to the Hebrews, and in their attempted explanation of it they connected it with the word **hayah**, ‘to be,’ just as the Greeks, who did not know the origin and exact meaning of ‘Zeus,’ connected the name with ‘to live,’ whereas it is derived from the Indo-European **dyu**, ‘to shine.’ The contention that Yahweh was of Arabian origin is clearly in accord with the Old Testament records, which connect him with the Negeb and with southern sanctuaries like Sinai-Horeb and Kadesh ... The most probable [origin of the name] in our opinion is from the Arabic root **hwy**, ‘to blow.’”*

T.J. Meek, [Hebrew Origins](#), pp. 108-109, in Joseph Campbell's [The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology](#), p. 132-133

David Abram, who explores the origin of language in the animate natural world in [The Spell of the Sensuous](#) (an exquisite, elegant volume I cannot recommend highly enough), points out that some

scribes, to compensate for Hebrew's lack of written vowels, adopted the Aramaean practice of using the consonants *H*, *W*, and *Y* to note vowel sounds. Abram then offers a brilliant insight as to why vowels are missing in Hebrew texts, shedding further light on the relationship of Yahweh (YHWH) to Breath:

*While consonants are those shapes, made by the lips, teeth, tongue, palate, or throat, that momentarily obstruct the flow of breath and so give form to our words and phrases, the vowels are those sounds that are made by the unimpeded breath itself. **The vowels, that is to say, are nothing other than sounded breath.** And the breath, for the ancient Semites, was the very mystery of life and awareness, a mystery inseparable from the invisible **ruach**—the holy wind or spirit. The breath, as we have noted, was the vital substance blown into Adam's nostrils by God himself, who thereby granted life and consciousness to humankind. It is possible, then, that the Hebrew scribes refrained from creating distinct letters for the vowel-sounds in order to avoid making a visible representation of the invisible. To fashion a visible representation of the vowels, of the sounded breath, would have been to concretize the ineffable, **to make a visible likeness of the divine.** It would have been to make a visible representation of a mystery whose very essence was to be invisible and hence unknowable—the sacred breath, the holy wind. And thus it was not done.*

[Abram, The Spell of the Sensuous](#), p. 241-242

Different language groups, different geographical regions, vastly different cultures—yet whether *Brahman*, *YHWH*, or *n'ílch'í* of the Dine', the Name of God is written in the Wind.

THE AIR WE BREATHE

But what is the individual to God?

*[B]reath, as we learn in the next section of Genesis, is the most intimate and elemental bond linking humans to the divine; it is that which flows most directly between God and man. For after God forms an earthling (*adamah*), He blows into the earthling's nostrils the breath of life, and the human awakens. Although **ruach** may be used to refer to the breath, the Hebrew term used here is **neshamah**, which denotes both the breath and the soul. While **ruach** generally refers to the wind, or spirit, at large, **neshamah** commonly signifies the more personal, individualized aspect of wind, the wind or breath of a particular body—like the “wind within one” of a Navajo person. In this sense, **neshamah** is used to signify conscious awareness.*

[The Spell of the Sensuous](#), p. 239

The relationship of the individual soul to God in early Hebraic mythology seems little different from

that of *Atman* to *Brahman* in Hindu mythology—the same as breath to wind, or individual consciousness to spirit.

The association of breath to spirit is reflected in our language as well as our myths. The aforementioned *naphesh*, *ruach* and *neshamah* are related to breath, wind, spirit, and soul. *Pneuma* (Greek for spirit), *psyche* (soul, mind) and *anima* (soul) are also related to wind or breath, as are *Atman* and *Brahman*; similarly, *prana*, *chi*, and *ki* are Sanskrit, Chinese, and Japanese terms for the subtle breath, spirit, or energy that infuses the universe. In English we find *spirit* itself embedded in *respiration*, *inspiration*, *expiration*, and other breath-related terms—clearly a common thread, no matter the language or culture.

This mythic motif conveys a subtle and sublime metaphysical realization—an illumination arrived at not through abstract theological reasoning, but rather flowering directly from subjective experience.

ENGAGING THE METAPHOR

Normally, my heart beats on its own—“I” don't exert direct conscious control over the frequency or intensity of my pulse. All other bodily processes—circulation, perspiration, metabolism, etc.—are similarly autonomic, or “unconscious.” Obviously, I **am** beating my heart, monitoring my internal body temperature, secreting the necessary hormones—but not the conscious, waking me.

Breathing also occurs without conscious direction or intervention—yet it is different from other involuntary processes in that we **can** consciously control our breath. Hence breathing is that act where consciousness and the unconscious most clearly come together, and so has long served as a launching pad for subjective explorations of the mystery of Being.

Joseph Campbell charts this development as starting roughly 5,000 years ago, once someone in India noticed that we breathe differently when being chased by a tiger than when lounging on the lush green banks of river skipping stones across the water.

In the first circumstance, one is in an agitated state of mind; in the second, one is peaceful, calm and serene. Naturally it's the circumstances that trigger the breathing **and** the state of mind (who isn't agitated when chased by a tiger?), but what if we turn it around and put the breathing first?

You begin by breath control, by breathing to certain paces, and the breath is very curious ... The notion is that emotion and feeling and state of mind are related to breath. When you are at rest, the breathing is in a nice, even order. When you are stirred with shock, the breathing changes. With passion the breathing changes. Change the breathing, and you change the state.

Joseph Campbell, [Transformations of Myth Through Time](#), p. 135

Sure enough, hyperventilating can leave one anxious and agitated, even if there are no tigers in the

immediate vicinity, while focusing on steadying the breath induces tranquility and equanimity, leaving one open to Stillness—the Silence beneath the rush of reality.

BREATH WORK

*The practical method employed to the achievement of this end is indeed strange. It is known as **prāṇāyāma**, “disciplined control (**yāma**) of the breath (**prāṇā**; Latin, **spiritus**)” ...*

*This continuing through hours without end for days, for months, or for years, at some point the body and mind together become fundamentally aware and convinced that **the energy by which the body is pervaded is the same as that which illuminates the world and maintains alive all beings**, the two breaths being the same: which is the awakening of the body to its inherent spirituality ...*

Campbell, [The Inner Reaches of Outer Space](#), p. 73

There are many different breath work techniques, from simply observing one's breath (a long term process of regular meditation requiring discipline and commitment) to much more dramatic, even explosive, practices, like the *pranic* breathing central to tantric traditions that resurfaces in contemporary western approaches (such as [Rebirthing](#), as practiced by Leonard Orr and Sondra Ray, or the [Holotropic Breathwork™](#) pioneered by Stan and Christina Grof). Eastern practices once considered foreign and exotic are far more common in the West today—hence the value of seemingly archaic mythological imagery in processing those experiences.

As a regular practice, I am drawn to the sitting meditation of *zazen*. Through this ritual I observe breath flow in, and breath flow out, like the tide—and so recognize I am not the source of my breath; at the same time I watch thoughts flow in and thoughts flow out, independent of conscious intention, and so recognize that I am not the source of my thoughts, not the source of consciousness—an embodied “knowing” that grows out of practice, mirroring the mythic motifs discussed above.

Other techniques trigger different, more spectacular experiences, but these, too, reflect the mythology of Breath.

For example, I have participated in rebirthing rituals on several occasions. No past-life memories have surfaced, nor did I re-experience my birth trauma, but there were a few mind-boggling moments that seem somehow to have slipped the bonds of time. I offer a personal example to indicate one role a mythic image can play in individual experience today:

The guide for my first rebirthing session was a good friend thoroughly trained in the technique. At his instruction I lay down on a bed and performed rapid, shallow, circular breathing—not easy to maintain for an extended period, so his coaching helped keep me focused and on track the next two hours.

Intriguing process—monotonous at first, interminably so—but then I noticed a tingling in fingers

and toes, a metallic taste in the mouth, and a heavy coldness—not shivery, but oddly refreshing—starting in the extremities and slowly moving up my limbs.

No need to bore everyone with the details, but I'll mention one tangential tidbit. Halfway through I needed to heed nature's call, so my coach allowed the necessary break, encouraging me to maintain the circular rhythm of my breath while away. I slowly shuffled down the hall to the bathroom—and shuffle is the right word, for that's all I could do.

When I looked in the mirror, my face was different, the fingers of my hands were scrunched together in a tight little wedge (like a newborn babe?) with my body drawn up so that I appeared smaller—and I could not, voluntarily, release my fingers or unclench my hands—which made taking care of business a touch more challenging than usual ...

and then, back to the bed, breathing, breathing ...

At one point I recall thinking I had drifted off, for I heard my guide's voice somewhere in the distance, calling me back, urging me to breathe—and I felt a little disappointed in myself, assuming I had simply fallen asleep.

This happened twice more.

With the process complete I finally surfaced, feeling peaceful and relaxed. That's when my guide informed me that on the three occasions when I thought I had drifted off, I actually stopped breathing. Aaron had timed each occurrence; the last was the longest—*after* exhaling, I did not breathe in for a full five minutes and thirty-seven seconds!

Aaron finally called me back when my lips turned blue ...

He asked where I had gone that last time the breath had left.

I recounted moving through a passageway of red rock, similar to the Siq, the entry to the ancient Nabatean city of Petra (the setting of the final scene in *Indiana Jones and the Holy Grail*), toward a warm, welcoming, bright, loving light—not exactly white, but an ivory hue—where, at some sort of rustic cabin that proved larger on the inside than the outside, I was welcomed by my deceased father, and surrounded by a supportive crowd of friends and relatives long gone. I recall a warm, intimate, lengthy exchange with my father, though I'm not sure if words were involved; everyone else seemed somewhat amorphous and vague.

In fact, I had a sense that the deeper I journeyed into this realm, the more vague it becomes—as if I and the world were slowly dissolving—yet I felt no anxiety about this possibility...

...and then I heard Aaron's voice, faint, but growing stronger: "...breathe... Breathe..."

It's a sweet memory I treasure today.

True, there could be many explanations. It might be no more than the nitrogen "high" affecting my brain in the absence of oxygen, a hallucination triggered by self-induced hyperventilation—or it might be the dying flickers of the electrons in my brain building a pleasant image, a compensatory metaphor for the most unpleasant process (to waking ego) of the body dying.

Yes, it could all be hallucination—but there's one other element in the adventure where the dream intersects waking reality.

During one of the other episodes when I stopped breathing, I recall attending a party, meeting a cute girl, talking to her for hours on the front porch, and then, as rain descended, retreating to a hippie van parked in front of the house and, well, everything kind of faded out from there ...

I shared this, what?—memory? dream? wishful thinking?—with my guide.

The other image, of the long passage with light at the end and the meeting with my father, seemed archetypal enough—but we could make neither heads nor tails of the Girl-on-the-Porch, no matter what symbols we tried to see

... until that evening, when I pedaled a borrowed bicycle seven miles across Portland to a party I had been invited to that afternoon—after the rebirthing—where I talked for hours with a now familiar girl on the front porch, until it started storming and we had to seek shelter inside a Volkswagen van.

(Is that a Rod Serling voice-over in the background?)

Though a part of me remains inclined to write off the encounter with my father as self-induced hallucination, the precognitive nature of the vision of the Girl-on-the-Porch makes it difficult for me to simply dismiss either episode.

I don't know quite what to make of it all, so I treat this as an experience of metaphor: true on the inside, not sure what on the outside.

The way I process this memory is through the mythological complex of wind and spirit and breath and soul. Consciousness seems to have left my body with my breath—and consciousness returned when breath returned.

Sound familiar?

Archetypal imagery provides a context within which to place this and similar experiences; conversely, my personal experience allows a greater appreciation of the depth and profundity of the many mythic variations on this universal motif, and I am thrilled to find echoes of this theme underlying my own Judeo-Christian tradition.

If these are my thoughts after but a brief immersion, what of someone whose whole life is devoted to such rituals, one who regularly ventures forth into the Otherworld—a mystic, or a shaman? Perhaps we catch a glimpse of how myths might have emerged—as “found” truths, discovered on inward journeys, conveyed to the outer world through the power of the poetic image.

Those images with staying power—the ones that resonated over time with the collective imagination—evolved into the mythologies that have shaped, and will continue to shape, human culture.

Of course, one needn't have a full-fledged mystical vision to connect with a mythic symbol.

TAKING FLIGHT

In India a wondering monk is often referred to as *hamsa* (“gander” or “swan”) or *Paramahansa* (“supreme gander”):

The wild gander (hamsa) strikingly exhibits in its mode of life the twofold nature of all beings. It swims on the surface of the water, but is not bound to it. Withdrawing from the watery realm, it wings into the pure and stainless air, where it is as much at home as in the world below ...

On the one hand earth-bound, limited in life-strength, in virtues, and in consciousness, but on the other hand a manifestation of the divine essence, which is unlimited, immortal, virtually omniscient and all-powerful, we, like the wild goose, are citizens of two-spheres. We are mortal individuals bearing within ourselves an immortal, supra-individual nucleus ...

The macrocosmic gander, the Divine Self in the body of the universe, manifests itself through a song.

[Zimmer, Myth & Symbol in Indian Art and Civilization](#), p.48

This is a song we all sing, though few actually hear it. However, if you focus on your breath, you'll hear the sound *ham*, just barely audible, every time you breathe in—and the syllable *sa* sounds with every exhale. “*Ham-sa, ham-sa,*” sings our breath, all day, all night, all our life, making known the inner presence of this wild gander to all with the ears to hear.

But the song, like the image of the wild gander, is twofold. Not only does our breath sing “*Hamsa, hamsa*” but also “*sa-ham, sa-ham.*”

Sa means “this” and *ham* means “I”; the lesson is, “This am I.” I, the human individual of limited consciousness, steeped in delusion, spellbound by Maya, actually and fundamentally am This, or He, namely the Atman or Self, the Highest Being of unlimited consciousness and existence. I am not to be identified with the perishable individual, who accepts as utterly real and fatal the processes and happenings of the psyche and the body. “I am He who is free and divine.” That is the lesson sung to every man by every movement of inhalation and exhalation, asserting the divine nature of Him in whom breath abides.

[Zimmer](#), pp. 49-50

One needn't adopt a mendicant lifestyle, indulge in tantric practices, or even meditate, to appreciate and be inspired by the profound poetic image evoked in the whisper of one's own breath...

...but a deep breath is, indeed, the perfect place to start.