

The Flow of the Breath

Levinas Mouth-to-Mouth with Buddhism

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Phenomenology challenges us with the opportunity to become aware of that which we normally take for granted, allowing us to see things that would have otherwise gone unseen, and to listen to voices that would have otherwise gone unheard. However, there are phenomena even more immediate than those we perceive through our senses. Not only can we learn to pay more attention to the things that appear before our eyes and ears, we also can become aware of that which is closest to us, our own breath, the persistent rhythm of the very materiality that we are.

During whatever moment and within whatever situation we find ourselves, we are always breathing. Beneath our consciousness, automatically, autonomically, air flows in and out of our bodies. Rarely are we aware of this fundamental part of our existence, yet we could not survive without it. What does the mundane fact of breathing mean? What could we learn by contemplating it?

The everyday process of breathing has an ethical profundity. During the timespan of a breath, our egos are disrupted and we are opened to that which is other than ourselves. This can already be appreciated with a straightforward observation: 63 percent of my body is oxygen. Oxygen is not something that I merely *use*; it is something that I *am*; something that *constitutes* my substance. The oxygen that enters into me through my breathing *becomes* me, transforming from a part of the atmosphere into the person who I am. Not only was it once part of the ambient, this oxygen that is me in the present was other beings

in the past, and will be others in the future. Through my breath, otherness invades and constitutes my very self.

This essay investigates the ethical significance of breathing by comparing two meditations upon it. The first section considers the work of Emmanuel Levinas, examining the motif of *la respiration* in *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*. As Michael Marder states, “The hitherto unexplored reserves of breathing in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas contain a wealth of hermeneutical possibilities.”¹ The second section discusses the earliest Buddhist texts on mindful breathing, the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*. By placing these meditations against each other, by allowing them to open up to each other, we notice resonances in how they analyze the temporal structure and the ethical significance of this most common bodily activity. We conclude by asking a new question: once we understand the ethical significance of breathing, how does this make us responsible for the air itself?

I. OPENING UP TO BREATHING IN *TOTALITY AND INFINITY*

Levinas develops the theme of breathing most earnestly in his second major work, *Otherwise than Being*. Because this volume so tightly packs together such hyperbolic metaphors,² it is useful first to trace their emergence in his previous writings, most significantly in his first major work, *Totality and Infinity*. As a narrative whole, *Totality and Infinity* describes the moment-to-moment procession of time as the continuous creation and recreation of gendered generations: starting with the birth of the interior being, through that being’s getting married and settling into a house, to its getting a job and producing work, to its getting old and dying, yet ultimately relating to its future through the birth of a son.

Totality and Infinity describes the birth of an individual psyche not as a simple event, but as a process of enjoying the world. Within enjoyment, one finds one’s self submerged by the element, by the pure density of sensual content. One then constitutes one’s interior space by nourishing oneself from this medium. These descriptions of the elemental medium, of nourishment, and of enjoyment’s temporal dynamic must be considered in order to understand the subsequent emergence of the motif of *la respiration*.

Levinas describes the birth of the moment as being immersed in the element: one is always within it, bathed in its medium. Amid these descriptions, Levinas first mentions the substance of breathing, referring to the elemental medium as “wind, earth, sea, sky, air” (TI 132). Although one’s relationship to the element is an individual one, prior to the intersubjective relationship, Levinas indicates that there is already an ethical aspect to it: he explores ethical responsibility through analyses of the face (*le visage*) of the other person and the ethical face-to-face (*face-à-face*) relation; yet already, while discussing the elemental, he refers to it as *le face* (translated by Lingis as “the side” [TI 131n]). Why does Levinas engage in such deliberate word-play? What is the ethical significance of the element?

Within the state of enjoyment, the self develops its own interiority, its separated psyche, in a process Levinas describes as “living from.” By employing the metaphors of alimentation and nourishment, Levinas indicates that the self constitutes its interiority by eating, filling itself up with the content provided by the element. Within this discussion, Levinas also introduces the theme of breathing. Oddly, however, he fails to differentiate it from eating. For example, he claims: “Life does not consist in consuming the fuel furnished by breathing and nourishment, but if we may so speak, in consummating terrestrial nourishments” (TI 114). Although the dynamic of “living from” reduces everything to the sameness of my egotistical interiority, here Levinas hints at its ethical aspect: “In satiety the real I sank my teeth into is assimilated, the forces that were in the other become my forces, become me” (129). That is, there is already a certain alterity within interiority. What is it? Where does this otherness come from? How does it relate to the transcendental, exterior other in its various manifestations—the master, the teacher, the destitute, the feminine, the beloved?

Focusing on the otherness already within interiority also draws attention to a latent stream of temporality within *Totality and Infinity*, which is often overlooked. As a whole, the book directs itself toward a relationship with the future, incarnated as the relationship with the exteriority of a son who is both same as and other than his father. In addition, Levinas also alludes to another kind of temporality already within interiority. He describes the experience of enjoying

the element as the “pulsation of the I” (TI 113), as some sort of oscillating movement within oneself—or perhaps between the otherness and sameness within oneself. Levinas describes the dynamism of this moment as a “becoming,” interpreting it through the most radical reading of Heraclitus’s doctrine “everything flows” (*panta rhei*), calling sensibility “a becoming . . . radically opposed to the idea of being . . . the resistance to every integration expressed by the image of the river in which, according to Heraclitus one does not bathe twice, and according to Cratylus, not even once” (60).³ That is, the domination of being is thwarted not just by the epiphany of the exterior other, but already within the dynamic *beyond being* of the psyche’s interior *becoming*.

II. LA RESPIRATION IN *OTHERWISE THAN BEING*, OR *BEYOND ESSENCE*

Within the genetic narrative of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas anticipates the theme of his later book by claiming that the initial emergence of an infantile interiority is “to exist in such a way as to be *beyond being*” (TI 120; emphasis added). *Otherwise than Being* develops *Totality and Infinity*’s metaphors of nativity, exploring what responsibilities are entailed simply from the fact of being born.⁴ In this context, the bodily act of breathing emerges as a major theme. Levinas expresses the exceptional importance of it in the conclusion to the book, writing, “That the respiration by which entities seem to affirm themselves triumphantly in their vital space would be a consummation, a coring out of my substantiality, that in respiring I already open myself to my subjection to the whole of the invisible other. . . . It is this wonder that has been the object of the book proposed here” (OB 181).⁵ Here Levinas makes the claim—admittedly hyperbolic—that the objective of the entirety of his later book has been to explicate the theme of respiration. In this, he reveals a shift in the focus of his ethical investigation: Whereas *Totality and Infinity* concentrated on the intersubjective experience of the other person, *Otherwise than Being* analyzes more closely the dynamic internal to subjectivity.

Although breathing is the first gesture of human life, it is not one of self-affirmation. It happens involuntarily, without the intervention

of my thought, desire, or will. Breathing establishes a space for the existence of the body, but Levinas claims that it is not a productive act of self-externalization.⁶ Instead, he explains that breathing is a profound opening up, one that both creates the self's insides and exposes it to what is external and other.

Not only does *Otherwise than Being* celebrate the extraordinary character of respiration, the book also exalts its ordinariness. What makes this wonder of breathing even more remarkable for Levinas is that it is the most commonplace event in human life. He claims, "In human respiration, in its everyday equality, perhaps we have to already hear the breathlessness of...an inspiration by the other" (*OB* 181). Ethical experience, one's responsibility toward other people, is not some supernatural event, some sudden epiphany that manifests only under special conditions. Instead, this remarkable ethical event of breathing is a component of each and all of our everyday experiences. It is something that forms the background of our every inhalation and exhalation, of our every action and reaction, of every moment of our existence.

A. Rethinking Sensibility

In order to understand the significance of breathing in *Otherwise than Being*, it is useful first to consider how Levinas renovates the description of sensibility given in *Totality and Infinity*. By doing so, he makes explicit what was already implicit in the previous book: the self's everyday enjoyment of the world around it, its establishment of an interior realm for its own psyche, already presupposes a radical openness to the other.

By rethinking the elemental in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas demonstrates the extreme exposure of selfhood. Whereas *Totality and Infinity* presented interiority as the private space in which the psyche could hide itself from the world, *Otherwise than Being* emphasizes that this space is a vulnerability: the self has an interiority only because it has already been broken open. Levinas describes this as an invasion of the milieu, rethinking the significance of elemental air. He claims that the ultimate passivity of the subject is indicated by the facts "that the emptiness of space would be filled with invisible air.... That

the simple ambiance is imposed as an atmosphere to which the subject gives himself and exposes himself in his lungs" (*OB* 180). In this quote, air, one of the manifestations of the elemental, is discussed not only as something within which the subject bathes, but also as that which is already within the subject. The ambiance around the subject is also the substance that suffuses its insides as the air within it, as the element that penetrates and exposes the subject to the other.

Otherwise than Being further highlights this preoriginal openness by distinguishing two preverbal modes of orality: eating and breathing. Unlike in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas no longer subsumes breathing under the category of eating. As he explains, "Taste is... the irreducible event in which the spatial phenomenon of biting becomes the identification called me" (*OB* 73). He goes on to describe hunger as "an *aspiration* which aims emptily" (96; emphasis added). What this reversal in priority indicates is a transformation in Levinas's analysis: even before the self can fill itself up, it first has to be emptied; breathing must have already opened up a cavity within the self.

Lastly, *Otherwise than Being* rethinks breathing by reconsidering the temporality of sensibility. Levinas does this in two ways: first, by considering the past rather than the future, and second, by revisiting the theme of becoming. In contrast to *Totality and Infinity's* focus on the future ensured by fecundity, *Otherwise than Being* contemplates the anarchy of the past. In every present moment of the self's existence, it is born into a situation where it finds itself responsible for a past that is irrevocably other, forced to assume a legacy that it cannot identify as its own heritage. Levinas expresses anarchic responsibility as being the recipient of a breathing. He states, "It is the possibility of being the author of what had been breathed in unbeknownst to me, of having received, one knows not from where, that of which I am author" (*OB* 148). Before I assert my own personality, I have already received a breath from the past.

Levinas further reinforces the passivity of temporality in *Otherwise than Being* by adumbrating *Totality and Infinity's* analysis of becoming, interpreting this reception of breath as a "becoming for the other" (*OB* 69). Respiration for Levinas indicates a rhythm of disruption within each moment of existence. As before, he invokes Heraclitus by referring to this radical breakup of identity in temporality as "flowing"

(34). Each lived moment, he explains, occurs as a “diachrony of inspiration and expiration” (181). With this notion, Levinas revises his earlier notion of the “pulsation of the I”—here not as a recovery of selfhood, but rather a putting oneself out of phase with oneself. He refers to it as a fissioning of the lungs or as an “exile in oneself, the in itself without rest. It is a panting” (180). Respiration is experienced as a self-separation, a temporality that never recovers the perpetual breakup of oneself.

B. Inspiration, Openness, and Emptiness

Among the most significant transformations in *Otherwise than Being* are Levinas’s developments of two new motifs: inspiration and emptiness. Throughout the book, he explains that respiration is aroused by inspiration. My own cycle of breathing is only possible because, already, air has been breathed into me. This inspiration is a radical opening up of space within myself. Whereas *Totality and Infinity* presented interiority as the sanctum in which one resides and can close oneself off from the world, it is here shown to be a radical opening of space. Levinas explains: “To open oneself as space, to free oneself by respiring from closure in oneself already presupposes this beyond: my responsibility for the other and my inspiration by the other” (OB 180–81). According to Levinas, when the self is closed in upon itself, it does not experience this as freedom but rather as an overwhelming burden—one needs to escape from being trapped within oneself. Inspiration provides this liberation.

Levinas expresses inspiration through the motifs of “animation,” “the pneuma [Greek for “spirit,” “breath,” “wind,”] in the psyche,” or “the other in the same,” again articulating a new model of dynamic becoming. That is, time does not progress though the self’s incorporating the other into its own identity, but instead as the self always being invaded and displaced by otherness, never being able to return to its identity, always being pushed away. One could perhaps express this model as the inverse of Rimbaud’s formulation—not “I is an other” but rather “The other am me” (compare with OB 118). The other is already there even before the self arrives: out of the other emerges the vanishing point of the self.

In order for this inspiration to occur, there must be an emptying out of selfhood. The self exists not as a positive plentitude, but rather as an emptiness, which opens itself to the invasion of the other. “To revert to oneself is not to establish oneself at home. . . . It is always to empty oneself anew of oneself” (OB 92).⁷ One’s internal space is not a locus for complacency, but always an emptiness in which to host the other. According to Levinas, to remain unmoved within oneself would not be an exertion of power, but instead it would be to be trapped, constricted within one’s skin. One only escapes this state, explains Levinas, because one is “forced to detach itself from itself, to breathe more deeply, all the way, forced to dispossess itself to the point of losing itself” (110). The process of becoming, the invasion of other-in-the-self, occurs thanks to the emptiness of the self, because the self continuously detaches from itself—because it breathes.

III. THE BUDDHIST *ĀNĀPĀNASATI SUTTA*

The first extended treatise on breathing within the Buddhist Pāli canon, the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, resonates with much of Levinas’s analysis of *la respiration*. It expresses similar conceptions of temporality and emptiness, as well as a similar openness to otherness. A focus on otherness in early Buddhist thought is perhaps unsurprising, considering that Buddhism aimed a sustained critique at the Vedic doctrine of the supreme Self or *Ātman*. Even in the *Dhammapada*, the Buddha states, “All phenomena are without Self (*Sabbe dhamma anattā*).”⁸ This refutation of *Ātman* is directly reflected in Buddhist breathing practice.

To appreciate the significance of the Buddhist conception of breathing taught in the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, it is useful to place it in its historical and geographical context. Ancient Indian religion had often emphasized the importance of meditative breathing exercises. According to his first biographers, the Buddha learned breathing techniques from several practitioners that allowed him to enter “the sphere of nothingness” and “the state of neither consciousness nor unconsciousness.” Although we do not have any documents that record what these practices might have been, it seems safe to assume that they were similar to the ones that have been preserved

in the Upanishads. The Upanishads instruct the spiritual disciple on how to discover the Ātman, or the true self, and how to merge it with *Brahman*, the ultimate reality. According to W. T. Stace, the Upanishads are paradigmatic of what he terms the “introvertive mystical experience,” the undifferentiated consciousness of the Pure Ego, when it unifies with the Cosmic Self.⁹

Throughout the many Upanishads, the practice most frequently described for achieving this mystical union is *prāṇāyāma*, a Sanskrit term that connotes the control or cessation (*āyāma*) of the breath (*prāṇa*). For example, the *Annapurna Upanishad* instructs “when the throb of vital breath ceases, the mind is wholly dissolved; *nirvāṇa* remains.”¹⁰ Through such breath control one can dissolve the empirical self until “the supreme Self, the transcendent light, alone remains” and can thus realize that “Brahman is all, man is Brahman indeed.”¹¹ Whatever such mystical states might have entailed, the Buddha realized that they would not culminate in liberation from suffering. Therefore, he continued his spiritual search, renouncing these techniques as well as the concepts of Brahman and Ātman. This disavowal is reflected in Buddhist breathing practice.

The Buddhist practice of *ānāpānasati* contrasts entirely with the breathing exercises taught in the Upanishads. The contrast can be understood simply by looking at their names: whereas *prāṇāyāma* translates as “the control of breath,” *ānāpānasati* translates as the “mindfulness (*sati*) of inhalation (*āna*) and exhalation (*apāna*).” There is no cessation or forceful interference with one’s normal breathing, only an engaged observation of it. Although many Buddhist traditions do recognize certain higher states of consciousness, most downplay the importance of any mystical experience. Unlike the Upanishads, they do not regard the achievement of these states to be spiritually necessary. In fact, the noted Vietnamese monk and scholar Thich Nhat Hanh argues that higher states of consciousness were not even discussed within the original Buddhist canon, but instead were integrated into the tradition over a century after the Buddha’s death.¹²

The most detailed instructions for meditation given in the Pāli Canon, the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* consists of 16 steps, four tetrads consisting of four lines each. The first two lines begin with a call to observe the patterns of breath: “While breathing in long, he knows

‘I am breathing in long’ / While breathing out long, he knows ‘I am breathing out long’ / While breathing in short, he knows ‘I am breathing in short’ / While breathing out short, he knows ‘I am breathing out short.’” The next two lines go on to describe heightened states of awareness that the disciple can achieve by focusing on the breathing: “He trains like this: experiencing the whole body I will breathe in / He trains like this: experiencing the whole body I will breathe out / He trains like this: making the bodily process calm I will breathe in / He trains like this: making the bodily process calm I will breathe out.”¹³ After experiencing the whole body and making the bodily process calm, the text instructs the disciple to train attention on the following, while continuing to breathe in and out: experiencing joy, experiencing pleasure, experiencing the mental process, making the mental process calm; experiencing the mind; gladdening the mind, concentrating the mind, freeing the mind; and, finally, contemplating impermanence, contemplating dispassion, contemplating cessation, and contemplating letting go.

Similar to the attention that Western phenomenology gives to consciousness, Theravāda Buddhism emphasizes engaged observation in its breathing practice. Buddhadhāsa Bhikkhu points out that breathing is something that one engages in every place and at every instant of one’s existence. Therefore, if one learns to attend to one’s breath, one can develop a capacity to live appropriately within each moment of existence. Buddhagosa calls this engaged mindfulness an “uninterrupted following.”¹⁴ Unintentionally echoing Heraclitus, Santikaro Bhikkhu invokes the metaphor of the river to explain this technique: “We can compare ‘following’ the breath to walking along a river. The water flows and we walk along watching it flow.”¹⁵ Rather than controlling the breath, the practitioner simply notices the various characteristics of the inhalations and exhalations. The adept takes note of what it feels like to breathe a long breath and to breathe a short breath, of how different inhalations and exhalations affect various parts of the body, feelings, and thoughts. The practitioner acknowledges both pleasant sensations and unpleasant ones. Just learning to become mindful of these various states helps to conduct the adept toward liberation.

The procession of lines in the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* teaches another important lesson, illustrating the Buddhist doctrine of dependent co-origination (*paticcasamuppāda*). Similar to Levinas, many schools of Buddhism teach that all phenomena depend radically on what is other. For this reason, all states of being change from one moment to the next. Through being mindful during the practice of *ānāpānasati*, the practitioner can become attuned to the way certain conditions (*sankhāra*) cause the arising of other phenomena in response. In the first tetrad, the practitioner focuses on how the quality of the breath affects the condition of the body; in the second tetrad, the practitioner focuses on how emotions affect cognitions. Buddhadhāsa Bhikkhu urges us to become mindful of this dynamic: “Please get to know the things that dominate humanity. Emotions (*vedanā*) have tremendous power and influence over us. If we cannot control feelings, we must rise and fall at their whim, which is suffering (*dukkha*).”¹⁶

As in Levinas, this lesson about how all sameness is dependent upon otherness also teaches about temporality. The Buddhist doctrine of dependent co-origination demonstrates that because all phenomena are interconnected, they are thus impermanent. This teaching is understood within the practice of *ānāpānasati*, because each breath may remind the practitioner of impermanence: sometimes one’s breath is long, sometimes short; sometimes the body is relaxed, sometimes tensed; sometimes one’s feelings are joyful, sometimes anxious; sometimes one’s mind is concentrated, sometimes distracted. All states, be they physical, emotional, or mental, arise and fall with time. Thich Nhat Hanh advises: “Mind is a river of psychological phenomena that is always flowing. In this river the arising duration and cessation of any phenomena is always linked with the arising duration and cessation of all other phenomena.”¹⁷ Not only is this metaphor again reminiscent of Heraclitus, but both Buddhadhāsa Bhikkhu and Thich Nhat Hanh explicitly compare the Buddhist understanding of impermanence with his doctrine of becoming. Buddhadhāsa Bhikkhu even claims that Heraclitus can be found in the Buddhist canon, saying, “The Buddha mentioned that there was a religious teacher at that time named Araka who taught about impermanence as much as the Buddha did, but went no further and said nothing about *dukkham*

(*suffering*) and *anattā* (*non-selfhood*)....The Blessed One probably meant Heraclitus.”¹⁸

Whether or not Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu’s interpretation of the Pāli Canon is historically accurate, his underlying point is still valid. The realization that everything is always changing is a fairly common insight. Many Buddhist traditions, however, understand this observation not merely as knowledge about the ontological character of existence, but more importantly as something that leads to a type of ethical awareness. Realizing that all phenomena are radically contingent, radically interconnected, and radically impermanent alters our existential orientation toward the world. Once we understand that the world is beyond our control and that we can never find our own selves in it, once we realize that we are vulnerable to both pain and pleasure—to both wounds and balms—we can begin to quell the attachment that causes us to suffer.

The fact that all conditions rely on each other displays another, deeper truth of Buddhism. Even more vigorously than Levinas, many schools of Buddhism stress that all things are empty of own-being (*svabhāva*). As mentioned above, early Buddhism opposed the Vedic notion that there is a supreme Self (*Ātman*) behind all phenomenon. In response, various Buddhist traditions developed not only the idea of nonselfhood (*anattā*) but also of emptiness (*suññatā*).¹⁹ All phenomena exist only by virtue of their conditioned relationships with each other, and they are therefore empty of any substantial nature. The ground for any sort of becoming whatsoever relies on the fact that all things are at bottom empty. Only because all *dhammas* are empty of any self-subsistent nature can there be any dependent co-origination, the dynamic transformation of one phenomenon into another.

By becoming aware of the *annatā* and *suññatā* of all *dhammas*, and of the absence of one’s own self-nature, the practitioner learns to transcend personal selfishness. The practitioner begins to understand that there is no separate, self-subsistent entity named *I*, and that the world cannot be reduced to a relationship with my own self, to being mine. In a passage strikingly similar to Levinas’s account of the self’s “living from” the elements, Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu explains,

“Throughout our lives we have been thieves. We have been stealing things that exist naturally—in and belonging to nature—namely, the conditions (*saṅkhāra*). We have plundered them and taken them to be our selves and our possessions.”²⁰ The Buddhist practice of mindful breathing is thus an *ethical* practice aimed at dispossessing the self of these stolen goods. Through the mindful observation of the arising and passing of phenomena, I resist the temptation to reduce everything to my own perspective, to think that I am the person who is breathing and that the sensations feelings and thoughts that arise belong to me, that they are mine. I must be able to acknowledge the real presence of these states existing in a place called me, identifying myself as those experiences, while also not claiming that a separated self has ownership of them. By releasing from such attachment to one’s own self, one starts toward liberation from suffering.

Beyond one’s own liberation from suffering, this detachment has a wider ethical purpose. Just as uncontrolled emotions can wreak havoc, so can unregulated selfishness. By overcoming this egoism, one can impact society in a meaningful way. Santikaro Bhikkhu explains that, by allowing us to understand and detach ourselves from the need to find ourselves in everything, “*ānāpānasati* helps us to let go of the selfishness that is destroying our lives and our worlds.”²¹ So much conflict and violence is born out of selfishness; detachment from selfhood ultimately intends to bring about peace.

For this reason, *ānāpānasati* meditation is often practiced alongside loving-kindness (*metta*) meditation, in a prayer for the wellbeing of all breathing beings (*sabbe pana*):

Whatsoever breathing beings there are—trembling, firm, or any other. . . / those who are seen, and those who are unseen, those who live far away, those who are near, those who are born, and those who still seek birth—may all beings in their hearts be happy! . . . In the same way as a mother would protect her child, her only child, with her life, so toward all beings [the practitioner] should develop the measureless thought. Towards the whole wide world he should develop the measureless thought of lovingkindness, above, below, and across, without barriers, hate, or enemy.²²

IV. CONCLUSION

By opening up the meditations by Levinas on *la respiration* and by Buddhism on mindful breathing to each other, we have taken note of similarities in how they consider this everyday activity. For both Levinas and Buddhism, a focus on breathing demonstrates deeper truths about the temporality of dynamic becoming. Time empties all entities of their self-identity, detaching them from their selves. It renders all selfhood radically open to an invasion by what is other than self. Through the course of time, otherness becomes transformed into an empty, vanishing point of selfhood. When one focuses on breathing and becomes aware of its deeper significance, one can thus effect an ethical transformation, a change that turns the self inside out and opens it to the other.

Beyond observing these important similarities between Levinas and Buddhism, what else can this extended meditation on breathing teach us? What other responsibilities does it engender? Now that we understand that we are connected to each other through our breathing, what responsibilities do we take on for each other's breathing and for the air that we share with each other?

At the very least, this meditation on breathing should help us to apply both Buddhism and Levinas to environmental ethics. Thich Nhat Hanh explains that the Buddhist insight into the interrelatedness of all things already makes it the oldest tradition of deep ecology.²³ In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas similarly indicates that, even before any confrontation with the other, the self already becomes ethically responsible through its submergence in the elemental milieu.

In his book, *Terror from the Air*, Peter Sloterdijk explains that the twentieth century witnessed the invention of gas warfare, a technique that turned people's everyday practice of breathing against them, by turning their means to life into a "breathing-unto-death."²⁴ Not only has this constituted a way of attacking others, it is also part of the violence that we are committing against ourselves. Toward the end of his book, Sloterdijk quotes a solemn speech by Elias Canetti: "To nothing is man so open as to air. . . . Air is the last common property. It belongs to all people collectively. It is not doled out in advance. Even the poorest may partake of it. And this last thing which has

belonged to all of us collectively shall poison all of us collectively.”²⁵
Can we avoid this terrifying fate?

The air that surrounds us constitutes the substance of our selves and of infinite others; taking care of our atmosphere enacts our responsibility both toward nature and toward humanity. Reflecting on breathing through Levinas and Buddhism can therefore remind us that taking care of the environment is one of the most profound ways in which we can take responsibility for the other. We can thus learn to hearken to the “Prayer to Future Beings” invoked by environmental activist and Buddhist teacher Joanna Macy:

You live inside us, beings of the future.

In the spiral ribbons of our cells, you are here. In our rage for the burning forests, the poisoned fields, the oil-drowned seals, you are here. You beat in our hearts through late-night meetings. You accompany us to clear-cuts and toxic dumps and the halls of the lawmakers. It is you who drive our dogged labors to save what is left.

O you who will walk this Earth when we are gone, stir us awake. Behold through our eyes the beauty of this world. Let us feel your breath in our lungs, your cry in our throat. Let us see you in the poor, the homeless, the sick. Haunt us with your hunger, hound us with your claims, that we may honour the life that links us.

You have as yet no faces we can see, no names we can say. But we need only hold you in our mind, and you teach us patience. You attune us to measures of time where healing can happen, where soil and souls can mend. You reveal courage within us we had not suspected, love we had not owned.

O you who come after, help us remember: we are your ancestors. Fill us with gladness for the work that must be done.²⁶

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