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, oth- erness invades and constitutes my very self. 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 (annatā) 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 under- stand 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 thes real presence of these states existing in a place called me, identifying es myself as those experiences, while also not claiming that a separated Pr self has ownership of them. By releasing from such attachment to ity one’s own self, one starts toward liberation from suffering. rs Beyond one’s own liberation from suffering, this detachment has a ve wider ethical purpose. Just as uncontrolled emotions can wreak havoc, U so can unregulated selfishness. By overcoming this egoism, one can ni impact society in a meaningful way. Santikaro Bhikkhu explains that, e by allowing us to understand and detach ourselves from the need to sn find ourselves in everything, “ānāpānasati helps us to let go of the ue selfishness that is destroying our lives and our worlds.”21 So much uq conflict and violence is born out of selfishness; detachment from self- D hood ultimately intends to bring about peace. 13 For this reason, ānāpānasati meditation is often practiced along- 20 side 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 mea- sureless thought of lovingkindness, above, below, and across, without barriers, hate, or enemy.

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 ren- ders 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 rs and Buddhism, what else can this extended meditation on breathing ve teach us? What other responsibilities does it engender? Now that we Uni understand that we are connected to each other through our breath- ing, what responsibilities do we take on for each other’s breathing e sn and for the air that we share with each other? ue At the very least, this meditation on breathing should help us to uq apply both Buddhism and Levinas to environmental ethics. Thich Nhat Hanh explains that the Buddhist insight into the interrelatedness D of all things already makes it the oldest tradition of deep ecology.23 13 In Otherwise than Being, Levinas similarly indicates that, even before 20 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

225-240\_KALMANSON ET AL\_F15.indd 238 8/23/2013 7:16:10 PM The Flow of the Breath 239 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: s You live inside us, beings of the future. es Pr 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 ity here. You beat in our hearts through late-night meetings. You accom- rs pany us to clear-cuts and toxic dumps and the halls of the lawmakers. ve It is you who drive our dogged labors to save what is left. U O you who will walk this Earth when we are gone, stir us awake. ni Behold through our eyes the beauty of this world. Let us feel your e breath in our lungs, your cry in our throat. Let us see you in the poor, sn the homeless, the sick. Haunt us with your hunger, hound us with ue 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 uq need only hold you in our mind, and you teach us patience. You attune D us to measures of time where healing can happen, where soil and souls 13 can mend. You reveal courage within us we had not suspected, love we 20 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