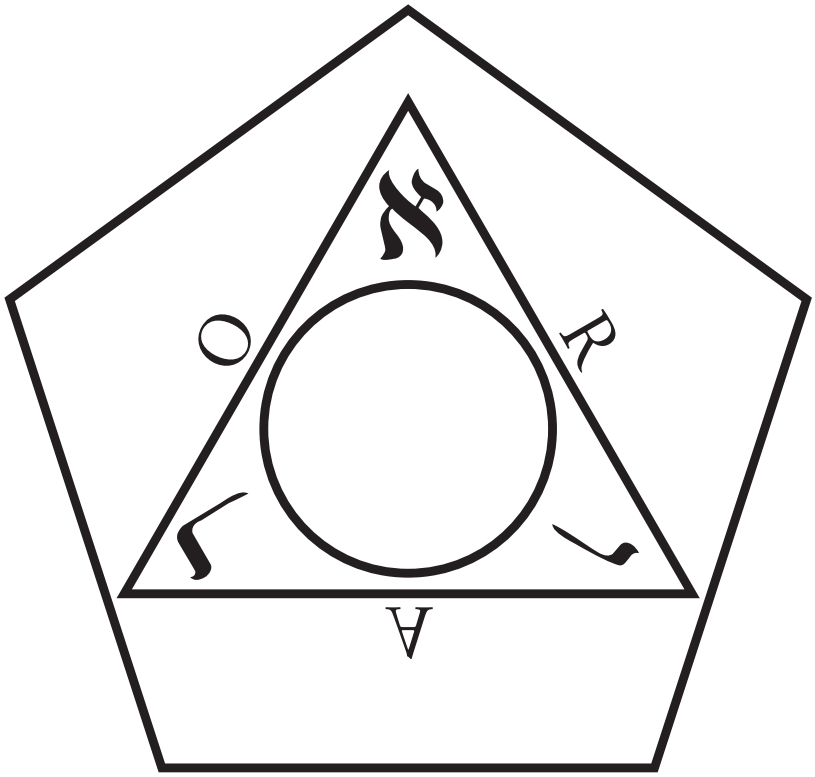
Academy of Reflection

— COURSE MATERIAL —



Basic Experiments with Breathwork

AOR1130

Prerequisite Courses

- *Basic Methods in the Intentional Practice of Awareness (AOR1000)*

Prerequisite Reading

- *None*

Course Guidelines

- None

Introduction

It can be argued that the fundamental element of life is breath. We may go many days without food and a few days without water, but our physical lives will end after only a few minutes without air. In many languages, the words that express the essence or higher levels of our being are closely related to the words for breath, wind, or air. For example, consider the English words ***spir****it*, *in****spir****ation* and *re****spir****ator*. The root of these words is the Latin ***spir****itus*, which literally means breath. In Hebrew, the three most commonly used words for soul – *nephesh*, *ruach* and *neschamah* – are also used for breath. The Chinese word Chi also refers to the breath of life. There are other examples, but the basic point is that our most ancient languages and texts reflect awareness that breath is central to life. Breathwork is therefore among the most common practices in the contemplative traditions of humanity, and it has been found to have significant effects on the body, mind, and spirit. This course provides simple but effective methods for doing such work in a way that is relevant to our experience of the Scottish Rite.

Part 1 – Mindful Breathing

Practice mindfulness of your breathing. Simply pay attention to the way you breathe and how it changes in different situations, from the moment you awaken in the morning until the moment you fall asleep at night. Do not attempt to interfere with it or regulate it in any way. Reflect on your experiences with your reviewer using the following questions:

- Approximately how much of your day do you naturally tend to breathe slowly and easily, with a relaxed belly, chest and throat?
- Considering these three body regions, how would you rank them in order of how much you tend to keep them tensed or tightened?
- How do different physical activities affect the rate, depth, and regions of your breathing?
- How do different emotional states affect your breathing?
- How does simply becoming mindful of your breathing affect you?

Objectives:

- Document at least 7 consecutive days of frequent mindfulness in your breathing and at least 60 minutes of reflection in dialogue with your reviewer.

Part 2 – Relaxed Natural Breathing

Set aside a few minutes once or twice a day to practice relaxed, natural breathing. Sit in a chair with your feet on the floor, your back supported and erect, and your neck straight. Close your eyes and focus on the sensations of your breathing. Relax your throat, chest, and belly. Feel the way the air flows in through your nostrils or lips, down your throat, and into your lungs. Notice that when you are relaxed, you pull the breath down with your belly, and that your chest actually does very little work. Feel how your diaphragm naturally forces the air out. Feel it flowing out of your lungs, up through your throat, and out your nostrils or lips. It is important to begin breathing through the nose as much as possible. Notice how your body relaxes, your mood calms, and your thinking becomes clearer as you focus on your breath. In fact, you may practice this exercise if you find yourself feeling tense or stressed and you wish to relax. After a while you may open your eyes.

Objectives:

- Document at least 7 consecutive days in which you have intentionally practiced relaxed, natural breathing at least once.

Part 3 – Deep Cleansing Breathing

Set aside a few minutes once or twice a day to practice deep, cleansing breaths. It is helpful to wear comfortable, non-restrictive clothing. Close your eyes and focus on the sensations of your breathing. Relax your throat, chest and belly. Allow yourself to breathe naturally through your nose for several breaths. At some point, inhale a deep full breath through your nose, and then hold that breath for a steady count of ten. As you hold the breath, try to keep your throat and sinuses open, using your diaphragm and chest muscles to keep the air in your lungs. Then exhale a full breath through your mouth. It will be necessary to tighten the muscles in your belly and chest a little to exhale fully, but do not strain. Hold the pause between breaths for a steady count of five. Then, completely relax your belly and chest as you begin another deep inhalation through your nose. Complete this process through three complete cycles. After the third exhalation and pause, simply relax and return to natural breathing through your nose. Notice the effects on your body, mind, and emotions. After several natural breaths, you may open your eyes.

Objectives:

- Document at least 7 consecutive days in which you have practiced deep cleansing breathing at least once.

Part 4 – Deeply Relaxed Breathing

Set aside a few minutes once or twice a day to practice deeply relaxed breathing. Close your eyes, focus on the sensations of your breathing, and relax. Focus on your breath flowing naturally in and out through your nose. As you continue to breathe naturally and peacefully, begin to count your breaths by mentally saying, "In one, out one. In two, out two." Continue through seven complete cycles. If you lose count, start over at one. With each exhalation, you feel your body becoming more and more relaxed, and your mind becoming quieter and calmer. You sink deeper and deeper toward a sleep-like state. After the seventh exhalation, release the count and sink ever deeper. When you are ready to end the meditation, take a deep breath, open your eyes and stretch before rising.

Objectives:

- Document at least 7 consecutive days in which you have practiced deeply relaxed breathing at least once.

Part 5 – Rhythmic Breathing

Set aside a few minutes once or twice a day to practice rhythmic breathing. Close your eyes, focus on the sensations of your breathing, and relax. Focus on your breath flowing naturally in and out through your nose. Use your fingers to feel for your pulse, either in your wrist or in your neck. In your mind, silently keep time with your pulse by repeatedly counting to four. After you have the tempo in your mind, put your hands back in their original positions. Now begin to inhale for a count of four, pause for two, exhale for four and pause for two. Remember that these breaths should be easy and peaceful. If it seems easier for you to use a six-three or eight-four rhythm, then feel free to make that adjustment. Maintain whichever rhythm you chose, and repeat the process through seven complete cycles. After the seventh cycle, release the tempo and simply sit in awareness of yourself as you breathe naturally. When you are ready to end the meditation, open your eyes and stretch before rising.

Objectives:

- Document at least 7 consecutive days in which you have practiced rhythmic breathing at least once.

Part 6 – Alchemical Breathing

The following breathwork is recommended as one form of inner work that naturally fits with the recurring presence of the classical elements in our degrees. These techniques have been adopted by many traditions, Eastern and Western, and have natural connections with the symbolism of alchemy as used in the Scottish Rite.

Unless otherwise noted, only one type of breath should be practiced in a given meditation. Begin with basic meditation, and then perform the breath as described. The breaths should be slow and deep, and repeated for at least 10 cycles. After the final exhalation, return to natural breathing and sit quietly, attending to how that type of breath has affected you. You are advised to work through the breaths in the given order.

1. Earth Breath – Imagine your breath as cold and dry as you breathe in and out through the nose.
2. Water Breath – Imagine your breath as a cool humid as you inhale through the nose and exhale through the mouth.
3. Fire Breath – Imagine your breath as hot and dry as you inhale through the mouth and exhale through the nose.
4. Air Breath – Imagine your breath as warm humid as you inhale and exhale through the mouth.
5. Aether Breath – Imagine your breath as neutral as you breathe in and out through the nose.
6. Moon Breath – Close your right nostril and breathe into and out through the left nostril. Imagine the breath as cool.
7. Sun Breath – Close your left nostril and breath into and out through the right nostril. Imagine the breath as warm.
8. Integrated Breath – In the same meditation, begin with the Earth breath and then progress through each of the remaining types, giving 3 cycles to each.

Additional Notes:

After this course is completed, it is recommended that you usually practice both the Moon and Sun breaths in the same meditation, either performing an equal number of repetitions of one after the other or alternating from one to the other.

Objectives:

- Document at least 60 minutes of meditation with each breath.

Part 7 – Reflective Writing

Reflect upon your experiences with Parts 1-6. In at least 500 words, summarize your experience, noting how it was personally meaningful to you in one or more of the following areas:

- Understanding of self
- Relationships with others
- Experience and appreciation of Freemasonry
- Relationship with the Divine