

Breath of Life: Words of the World

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1. Five "breath of life" concepts compared

Concept	Tradition	Literal root	What the tradition teaches	Key difference
Pneuma	Greek	Wind, breath	A refined substance of life; for Stoics, the rational breath of the cosmos	Often treated as physical matter
Prana	Indian (Vedic, yogic)	Breath, life	Life-force with bodily currents, cultivated through pranayama	Built into a breath practice
Qi	Chinese	Vapor, breath	Flowing substance-energy in all things, moving through meridians	Framed by yin-yang and five phases
Ruach	Hebrew	Wind, breath	The breath God gives to living beings; the spirit of God	Theological, not a physical theory
Ka	Ancient Egyptian	Life-force, double	A spiritual double that survives death and receives offerings	Not directly tied to breath

None of these has been detected or measured as a physical energy by modern science.

2. Pneuma timeline

c. 550 BCE	Anaximenes: air is the basic substance of everything and is linked to the soul
4th c. BCE	Aristotle: an innate pneuma helps explain movement and reproduction
c. 300 BCE	Stoics: pneuma of fire and air holds the cosmos together. Erasistratus: vital spirit in arteries, animal spirit in nerves
3rd to 1st c. BCE	Septuagint: Hebrew ruach often translated as Greek pneuma
1st c. CE	New Testament: Hagion Pneuma, the Holy Spirit; John 3:8 plays on wind and Spirit
2nd c. CE	Galen: vital pneuma in arteries is refined in the brain into psychic pneuma
1628	William Harvey shows blood circulation and finds no vital or animal spirits
1800s	Research on reflexes and nerve electricity replaces "animal spirits"

3. Five-minute breath-awareness practice (modern, inspired by pneuma)

1 Settle. Sit upright with feet on the floor, or lie on your back. One hand on your belly.
2 Notice. For a minute, feel the breath without changing it: cool going in, warm going out.
3 Soften. Let the belly rise on the in-breath through the nose and fall on the out-breath.
4 Slow. Let breaths lengthen gently, out-breath a little longer. Comfort over counting.
5 Widen. Picture your out-breath joining the air of the room.
6 Return. After about five minutes, breathe normally, then stand up slowly.

4. Safety

[] Never force or hold the breath. Stop if dizzy, light-headed, tingly or breathless.
[] Later in pregnancy, or if lying flat is uncomfortable, practice seated or on your side.
[] Stop if the practice increases anxiety or brings up distressing thoughts (NCCIH).
[] Epilepsy, some psychiatric conditions or a history of trauma: talk to a health professional first.
[] This practice does not replace treatment. Never stop a prescribed medicine because you started breathing exercises.
[] Ongoing shortness of breath needs a doctor. Chest pain or severe breathing difficulty: call emergency services.

Sources: Berryman, Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2005); Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Stoicism; Britannica, Pneumatism; Quin, J R Soc Med (1994); NCCIH, Relaxation Techniques.