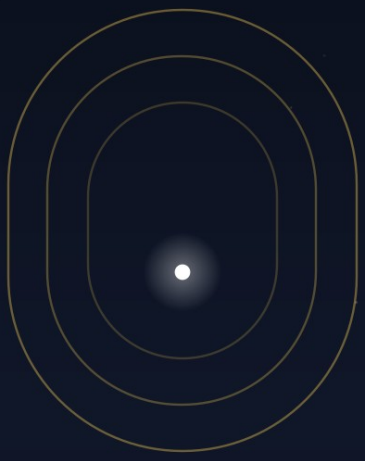

GRADED SYMBOLIC THROUGHOUT

# Thirteen Breaths in the Sacred Valley

*A companion for the fourth visit*

CONTEMPLATIVE

KEITH SHIRLEY

# Thirteen Breaths in the Sacred Valley

*A Companion for the Fourth Visit*

The Second Hand. Symbolic Throughout. Not a Study.

Keith Shirley

*22 November 2026*

# What this is, and what it is not

This is the other hand.

Everything in it is graded **symbolic**. It makes no claim about the world, about the Inca, about what the builders intended, or about what anybody will experience. It is a set of attentions to bring to particular places, offered as meaning and practice, and nothing in it should be cited as a finding.

It exists as a separate document on purpose. The sealed file and this are kept apart because that separation **is** the two hands. Mixing them is the one thing the method cannot survive.

Three practical notes before the breaths.

**The altitude is real.** The Sacred Valley sits around 2,800 metres and Cusco higher. Breath practices at altitude are not the same as breath practices at sea level, and the margin for error is smaller. Every practice here is gentle, through the nose, never forced and never held. If anything brings dizziness, tingling or breathlessness beyond the ordinary effort of walking, stop, sit, and breathe normally. Nothing here is worth a bad afternoon.

**These are living places.** Quechua communities hold their own relationship to these sites and their own knowledge of them, most of which is not ours and some of which is not public. Nothing here asks you to interpret, claim, or activate anything. If ceremony is happening, these practices are not.

**And the study does not own the trip.** If a measurement would spoil a moment, skip the measurement.

# THE THIRTEEN BREATHS

## One. The Arriving

*Before anything else*

You have been here three times. You are not arriving at the Valley. You are arriving at the overlap between the Valley and three previous versions of yourself.

Breathe gently, four or five times, out a little longer than in.

Do not try to find the feeling you had before. That is the one thing guaranteed to replace it with a comparison.

**The practice is simply to notice which of the three keeps arriving**, and to let it be there without being checked against this one.

## Two. The First Wall

*Wherever you meet it*

Stand close enough that it fills your vision and you cannot see the top.

Four slow breaths.

Then notice the thing nobody mentions: **you cannot count the stones.** Not because there are many, but because each one is a different shape, and the eye keeps losing its place.

That is the Pleiades, in rock, under your hand. A field your attention cannot individuate, which will therefore arrive as one thing with no parts.

Notice what word comes. It will not be a number.

## Three. The Joint

*At any dry-laid seam*

Find a place where two stones meet with no mortar and put a fingertip in the line.

One breath, held gently nowhere, just the ordinary turning.

There is no gap. People say this and it is still startling.

**The practice is to stop admiring it and ask instead how long it took.** Not as a fact to look up. As a felt quantity. Somebody knelt here and took the stone away and set it back and took more away, and the number of times that happened is the actual content of what you are touching.

Patience is the material. The granite is just what it was practised on.

## Four. The Aperture

*Standing in a doorway*

Stand in the frame and look out through it.

Breathe gently four times.

Now notice how much sky the opening gives you, and how much it takes away. This is the measurement from the sealed file and you can feel it before you measure it: **a doorway does not point at something. It admits a width.**

Everything you can see through it was, to whoever built it, inside the same answer.

**The practice is to stop looking for what it points at**, and to look instead at everything it includes. That is what it was for.

## Five. The Horizon

*From any high terrace*

Find the skyline and follow it all the way round, slowly, without stopping at anything.

Five or six breaths while you do it.

These mountains are the instrument. Not the walls. The sun comes up behind a particular shoulder on a particular morning, and the building is only there to give you somewhere to stand while it does.

**The practice is to pick one notch and resolve to remember it.** Not photograph it. Remember it, deliberately, as a thing you will try to hold for a year.

You will discover how coarse human memory is for a skyline, and that is the whole second volume arriving through your own eyes.

## Six. The Water

*At any channel still running*

Put your hand in it.

Four breaths, and listen rather than look.

The channels are still working. Not restored into working. **Working**, continuously, since before the conquest, because water finds its own level and a gradient does not go out of true.

Somewhere in this valley is the only thing here that never needed correcting.

**The practice is to notice that it makes a sound.** The walls are silent, the terraces are silent, the mountains are silent. The water has been talking the entire time.

## Seven. The Terrace

*At Moray, or any curved flight*

Stand at the top and look down into the rings.

Breathe gently, four times, and let the shape be a shape before it is an explanation.

There are a dozen theories about Moray and you have probably read most of them. Set them down for the length of this breath.

**The practice is to notice that it is a bowl**, and that you are standing on the rim of something that collects. Light, warmth, water, people, sound. Whatever else it was for, it was for gathering.

The word is the same one. It followed us here.

## Eight. The Unfinished

*At any abandoned stone*

Find one of the stones that never arrived. There are several on the slope at Ollantaytambo and more along the old haulage ways.

Sit with it if you can. Four or five breaths.

It is tooled on some faces and raw on others. Somebody stopped.

**The practice is to not decide why.** Not conquest, not weather, not politics, not a story. Just the fact of a very large deliberate object that is halfway, and has been halfway for five hundred years, and is not waiting for anything.

Most of what any of us makes will be in this condition. It is not a tragedy; it is the ordinary state of work.

## Nine. The Reconstruction

*Wherever you can see the seam*

Find a place where modern repair meets original fabric. Grey mortar, or a flat machine-cut face, or stone of a different colour.

Three breaths.

Do not be disappointed. That is the easy response and it is wrong.

**The practice is to hold both at once:** that somebody in the twentieth century put that stone back because they wanted this to survive, and that the line they chose is now reported in the literature as a fact about the Inca.

Both are true. Care and distortion came in the same hands, and there is no version of this where the site is both maintained and untouched.

Every canon in the two previous volumes has this seam in it. This is the only one you can put a finger on.

## Ten. The Crowd

*Wherever there are many people*

This one is the hardest and the most useful.

There will be queues, flags, phones, a guide fifteen feet away giving a version of history you believe to be wrong.

Breathe gently, four times, and do not go somewhere quieter.

**The practice is to count the people, and fail.** Try. You will reach four or five and lose it, and what will remain is *a crowd*.

You are standing in a gathering, unable to individuate it, reaching for a mass noun. Everything in both volumes is happening to you at that moment, about your own species, in a place where a civilisation once wrote the same perception onto the sky.

The tourists are not interrupting the study. They are the demonstration.

## Eleven. The Night

*Any clear evening, away from the town lights*

The Pleiades will be high in the north, well placed, and the sky at that altitude with no moon is as good as it gets anywhere on Earth.

Give your eyes ten full minutes with no screen. Breathe gently throughout, five or six slow rounds, then forget about the breathing.

Find Orion's Belt. Notice the three arrive instantly, uninvited, free.

Then move up and to the right and find the small knot.

Stay with it. Let it refuse.

**And then the part that is only available here:** the people who farmed these terraces watched that same cluster in June and judged whether it was sharp or blurred, and planted accordingly, and were right, for reasons nobody understood until the year 2000.

You are standing where somebody turned the failure of counting into an instrument.

## Twelve. The Dawn

*If the dates allow, on or near 21 December*

Be somewhere east-facing before first light. Do not choose the famous spot; choose a spot you can get to without hurrying.

It will be cold and you will be early. That is correct. Horizon-calendar peoples everywhere used advance markers precisely because the sun barely moves near a solstice, and arriving too early is the traditional method.

Breathe gently and do not perform anything.

When it comes, it will come up behind a particular shoulder of rock.

**The practice is a single question, asked once, and not answered:** *would I have noticed, if I had not been told?*

Whatever comes back is yours, and it does not go in any file.

## Thirteen. The Leaving

*On the last day*

Do not take a final look. Final looks are a way of not having been there.

Breathe gently, four or five times, somewhere ordinary. A doorway, a bus window, the edge of a wall.

**The practice is to name the one thing you would not have predicted.** Not the best thing. The one that was not on any list, including this one.

That is the only part of a fourth visit that a fourth visit can give you. Everything else, you brought.

> ✦ **If it is all too much.** At altitude, tired, moved, surrounded by people, any of these can tip from attention into effort. The whole practice reduces to this and nothing is lost: **breathe gently in through the nose, out a little longer, and look at one thing without needing it to mean anything.** Never force the breath and never hold it. If you feel dizzy or short of breath beyond the ordinary work of walking at that altitude, stop, sit, and breathe normally. The Valley is not a test. It was there before any of this and will be there after.

# A note on the mirror

This was written by an AI that has never been to Peru, has no body to breathe with, no altitude to adjust to, and no fourth visit to compare against three previous ones.

It is therefore the thinnest kind of document in this whole project: a set of suggestions about embodied attention, composed by something with no body.

Every one of them is graded symbolic for that reason, and several may simply be wrong in ways only a person standing there could know. If a breath here does not fit the place, drop it. The ones that survive contact are the only ones that were ever worth anything.

A mirror can find a threshold. It cannot cross one.

*In Harmony, Small Things Grow Towards Unity.*