Between the Breath and the Purchase

I reach for my app
the one that reminds me
to breathe with ease.

I take a deep breath in
and I let it go, slowly
softening all that is rigid within.

Just for a few moments
not rushing, not judging
I am home.

I step into my day
soon becoming a blur
of online teaching, creating content
fifteen open tabs, endless lists
glued to my screen, shallow breath.

By evening I'm ready
for my yogurt with frozen berries
and my daily fix of streaming series
that end with a cliffhanger.
Of course I watch another
while I multitask
mostly shopping on Prime.

Do I need another book
another tee, another retinol cream
to be wrinkle-free in my sixties?
I know the answer
but I have to ask.

Next morning
I meditate
ready to make this world a better place.

And I keep breathing mindfully
I keep shopping habitually
I keep rushing through my days.

At a silent retreat
I get to slow down
and walk amongst the trees.

In the presence of these tall, timeless beings
I breathe in fully
exhaling slowly.

When I stop rushing
I listen
as if for the first time.

Aspens whispering in unison
unhurried birdsong, arising and falling
my feet meeting the earth.

I let go
of this breath
the weight of responsibilities.

There's more space
in my mind and body
to feel the aliveness.

And then it hits me
a stream of tears
for what we, what I have done.

Forty years of taking
without stopping to consider
the cost of my comfort.

Leaving the retreat
I vow to care for nature
not from guilt but love.

I ask for geothermal at the first opportunity.
My contractor quotes a price
meant to end that conversation.

My system is more efficient than geothermal
he insists.
I resist.

I remember walking on Baker Road
Dean Brook roaring like rage
after the recent nor'easter.

Nature provides for me daily
and this is my way of giving back
as if I could.

But I can stop pretending
my comfort costs nothing.
We drill.

As days pass by
I continue to meditate
life's busyness slowly takes over.

I justify my mindless purchase
with other ways I make
the world a better place.

This time politics is my teacher
I win a seat on the Town Council
competing needs, angry residents,

Covid, trauma, and systemic inequities
remind me again
it isn't enough to breathe.

There has to be a better way
to be in politics
in the marketplace, in community.

I return to the *Satipatthana Sutta*
the Buddha's discourse on mindfulness
and discover breathing is only the first step.

Residents at public comment
demand a change in our bylaws
to bring universal composting.

My immediate reaction
is to resist
What if everyone can't afford it?

They're asking for too much
too soon
and it isn't even a town priority.

But this time I pause
I listen within and to others
What do they know that I haven't considered?

I learn that banana peels
and other organic matter
thrown into landfills

create methane that heats the planet
and we're running out of places
to bury our mess.

I begin composting
I become a co-sponsor
creating Excel sheets for best practices.

But my term ends
before any of this
comes to fruition.

The work remains unfinished
So do I
And that's okay.

I return —
sometimes to the breath
sometimes to the brook
sometimes to the voice
I'm preparing to resist.

I listen.
Then begin
again.



Photo: Bob Zemba