

Reading Group Questions

THE BREATH OF GOD, A Novel of Suspense By Jeffrey Small

The reading group questions below are not meant to be exhaustive of all of the themes in *The Breath of God*, but they should provide a start for a lively conversation. The questions are organized into three sections: *General Questions* about the story, the characters, and the themes; *The Legend of Issa*, which explores the implications of Issa's quest; and *The Wisdom of Kinley*, which delves into Kinley's teachings and how they might apply to your life. To help you refer back to the relevant parts of the story, page numbers follow many of the questions. A quick disclaimer: you'll encounter numerous spoilers below, so you might want to finish the book first before reading further.

Because so many themes revolve around the topic of religion, which many people find uncomfortable discussing, you may want to consider setting some ground rules first for your group. Here are some suggestions: 1) *Confidentiality* – commit to each other that anything anyone reveals will not be repeated outside the room without their explicit permission. 2) *Listen Without Judgment* – everyone will have different thoughts, beliefs, and feelings. Accept and embrace these differences. Be careful of asking loaded questions, such as “How can you believe that?” Let others express their thoughts and accept them for what they are. 3) *Own Your Own Opinions* – be conscious that your thoughts are your opinions, not fact. Beginning a comment with “I think” or “I believe” is less threatening to others. 4) *Be Open and Have Fun* – take a risk and say something that you've been holding back on revealing. Your openness may encourage others in your group to open up too.

General Questions

Where does the title *The Breath of God* come from? (225, 255, 302-3, 313, 349, 393)
Why do you think that many of the world's religions find a relationship between the divine, the soul, and the breath? How aware are you of your own breath? At this moment, how does it feel—deep, shallow, rapid, slow?

So often dialogue among different religious faiths takes the form of discord and even violence. How can encouraging inter-religious dialogue help to foster respect and understanding? (401) Are there any aspects of other faiths that you encountered in the novel that you found intriguing?

How do you define fundamentalism in religion? What are its dangers? How is fundamentalism manifested in the novel, whether we are talking about Brady/Jennings, Tim, Lama Dorji, Swami Gundalini, Grant's father, or even Grant's own rigid thinking?

We see India from two different perspectives when looking through Grant's eyes versus Tim's. How do these different views color your impression of the country?

How do you imagine that Tim's dysfunctional family life and his conflict between his sexual orientation and his religion helped to turn him into the antagonist character?

Grant was raised in a fundamentalist household like Tim, but his experiences shaped him in a different way. How did Grant's experiences with his father lead him to seek out the legend of Issa? (161-2) How does he finally resolve his resentment toward his father? (392)

Discuss the symbolism of the serpent-like characteristics that Tim displays? How does this depiction intensify throughout the book?

Why is Tim so disturbed by Kinley in Ch 50?

Brady, Jennings, and Tim each quote the Bible to justify their actions. What are the dangers of doing so, and why might it not be appropriate?

What are the different personality and psychological drivers that motivate Brady and Jennings, and how do their different perspectives lead to different actions by each in the end?

How does the author use changes in POV to advance the story and to create tension?

How does Grant deal with his mixed feelings toward Kristin: an attraction yet an uncertainty? How are his thought patterns about her similar to his mindset in general?

How did Kristin's experience with her sister affect her relationships with men? (160-1) How does her development through the journey and the teachings she learns allow her to move past these issues during her kidnapping by Tim? (302-3)

In the *Secrets of the Blue Cliff Record*, a collection of ancient Japanese Zen koans, we find the following koan that Kinley and Grant refer to throughout the novel (for the first time on p. 39, and for the last time on p. 402):

"A monk asked Ummon, 'When the tree withers and the leaves fall, then what?'

Ummon said, 'The body is exposed in the autumn wind.'"

What does this koan mean to you? How do Grant's experiences help him arrive at a better understanding by the end of the book?

The symbolism of light as a marker for the divine occurs in every major religion. How is the imagery of light (whether by candle, spark, fire, sun) used in the novel? (some examples: 1, 89, 103, 225, 309, 311, 313, 352)

Another recurring symbol is that of the Lotus Flower (203-4, 395, 402). How does the life of this flower represent the journey that Grant and Kristin take? When in your own life did something good and beautiful come out of the difficult, the painful, or the messy?

The monks in the temple in the Punakha Dzong chant the popular mantra “*Om mani padme hum*,” which Grant translates as the “jewel in the lotus of the heart” or as he says “the idea that the light of the divine burns inside each of us.” (58) How does this mantra relate to the symbols of light and the lotus flower (see two previous questions) used throughout the book? How does the simple mantra summarize the spiritual transformations that Issa, Grant, and Kristin experience? How does it help to define the relationship between the divine and the human?

What do you make of the similar spiritual paths of the Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammad? (204-5, 272)

What might these paths mean for our own spiritual practices?

What do you think of the Buddhist explanation of our suffering (what they call *dukkha*) as resulting from our cravings for what we don’t have or our desires to change something that is? (26-27, 271) Is this a psychological or a religious explanation for our discontent? What is Grant grasping and how does it affect his mental state? How does he overcome his suffering? What in your life are you grasping for or resisting against that is causing you stress, anger, discomfort, sadness, frustration or discontent?

In his debate with Brady, Grant raises numerous objections to a literal reading of the Bible: scientific, historical, psychological, and even textual (Ch. 21). Do you feel that the Bible loses some of its power if we begin to see some of its stories as non-historical? Is there a way that by freeing ourselves from a requirement of historical accuracy, that the lessons and meaning behind the stories can be made more powerful and more universal?

Grant operates in a modern, scientific world with a rational and logical mindset, yet his intellectual interest is the area of religion, a field that to many seems at odds with the scientific world. How does Grant’s views on religion as well as his own internal spiritual quest evolve over the course of the story? Do you think that religion and science can be reconciled?

Grant says that it is often easier to believe than to question. (401) Do you agree? Do questions of faith make you uncomfortable? Why?

In Hinduism we see the infinite God *Brahman* represented in various manifestations of lesser gods that the people worship (249-250). In Buddhism, although the Buddha resisted deification in his life, adherents today prostrate themselves before his statues (270). Islam has a strict prohibition against any visual depictions of Mohammad so that their focus will be on Allah rather than the Prophet. In the Old Testament the Israelites built a Golden Calf to worship when they were anxious that Moses might not return from Mt. Sinai. And finally in Christianity, we have the figure of Jesus, the *Son of God*, who has become for many identical to God. Think again about the parable of the finger

pointing to the moon (355). How could that parable be used to explain this human need to worship the concrete? What is the difference between worshipping an idol versus the ultimate divine? If God is truly infinite and indescribable how do we worship what we cannot see or understand? Is this need to worship nothing more than a Freudian need for the illusion of comfort, security, and control in our lives that often have none of these elements? Or is it something deeper?

What is your reaction to Professor Deepraj's description of the nature of God? (249-250, 254-5) How might this description differ from the view of God that is commonly displayed in Christianity?

Often we hear in traditional Christian churches that there is only one path to God: belief and acceptance in Jesus. Traditional Islam proclaims that it has the only path to Allah. What do you make of a religion's exclusive claims to salvation? How do such claims of exclusivity help to strengthen a religion among its members and help to ensure its long-term survival? What are the dangers of this exclusionary view? What do you think about Deepraj's description that Hinduism teaches that there are multiple paths to God? (248)

Grant and Kinley have an ongoing debate about whether the essence of religion lies in history or personal experience. (205-6) Brady argues that it lies in scripture. (147-8) What is your view? Does one have to be correct, or could religion encompass elements of all of the above?

How did Kinley's techniques of meditation and mindfulness affect the flow of thoughts and emotions in Grant's head from the beginning of the novel until the end? (70, 361, 379, 392-3)

Discuss how Grant's following in Issa's footsteps helps to shape his own spiritual journey. What do you see are the similarities and the differences between Grant's and Issa's journeys and their developments? (354-5, 384, 392-3)

Once Grant has obtained what he's dedicated his career searching for, he experiences a sense of incompleteness, although he thought his life would be complete. (372-3) What does this say about the nature of our wants and desires. Can they every be quenched? What is an example from your own life when you obtained something that you thought was crucial for your happiness? How did you feel immediately after obtaining this? How did those feeling change a week later, a month, a year? What is the danger of looking to external things as sources of our happiness?

Grant learns the concept that true freedom comes from surrendering rather than resisting reality: a concept present in both Buddhism and Islam (204). How does Grant ultimately experience this lesson for himself and find peace? (392) Is the idea of surrender or acceptance the same as giving up? How in your life does resisting reality cause tension within you?

One of the enduring philosophical questions in religion, is that if there is only one ultimate truth, then why do we see so many different religions with conflicting histories and contradictory teachings? How does Grant begin to answer this question? (272, 401-3) Do you believe that one religion is the only right one? Imagine that you were born and raised in a different country with parents and a society who were strong believers in a faith different from your current one, how might your views on religion be different? What independent metrics could be used to judge which religion is the true one? How does Grant respond to Brady's assertion that his faith is the only correct one during their debate? (148)

Compare Kinley's parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant (68) with Grant's description of multiple paths through the forest (401-2). How could each of these parables help to explain the existence of multiple and diverse faiths in the world?

Discuss the theme is that the world is not a place of autonomous actions and beings but it is interconnected from the subatomic to the universal. How did the lives of Grant, Kristin, Kinley, Brady, and Tim, which were independent at the beginning of the book become interconnected? How did these interconnections fundamentally affect who they were as people? What are some examples from your own life where you've experienced connection with your environment and those around you? (87, 246, 272, 376)

The Legend of Issa

What do you make of the legend of Issa? Does it matter whether it is historical or mythical?

What is your reaction to the portrayal of a teenage Jesus as Issa in the three chapters from his point of view? Our images of pivotal people in history are usually shaped by their actions as adults. But each of these figures was molded by their experiences as children and as teens. If you are a parent, how do you imagine your children's experiences will shape them as adults?

How is Issa's personality similar to that of Jesus in the Gospels? In what ways is he younger, less mature?

Compare the Parable of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel Luke 10:25-37 to the events Issa faces with the injured Shudra porter and the tiger in Chapter 12.

How does Issa's reaction to the ancient Indian caste system (which is no longer official policy in India but which still widely influences daily life in everything from marriage, to religion, and to business) in Chapters 12 and 32 mirror Jesus' embracing the disenfranchised and the unclean and tearing down boundaries of class distinction during his ministry? What do you think of the idea that from the time we are born, we are preordained to live in certain positions in life (a concept not exclusive to India, but also present in Calvinism)? Part of the mythos of the American Dream is that our society is one of the most upwardly mobile in the world with fewer class and social boundaries, especially as compared with our European counterparts. A close inspection of American society, however, reveals that we too usually live within tight social circles, each with their own expectations of how we should live, what we should do with our lives, and who we should socialize with. What social *caste* do you live within? Do you ever feel constrained by the boundaries of its expectations?

When Issa is teaching the Untouchables in Chapter 32, he tells the Swami that they may be closer to God because they live simple, uncluttered lives. How often does your own hectic overscheduled life lead you away from seeing the presence of beauty and good around you?

How is the explanation of the Kingdom of God in the Parable of the Mustard Seed, which Jesus tells in Matthew 13:31-32, similar to The Parable of the Banyan Tree (taken from the Vedantic Hindu scripture *Chandogya Upanishad*) that Issa learns from his teacher? (312-3)

Issa's teacher tells him that he is a "child of God." (312) How does the teacher mean this expression and how might this meaning differ or be similar to the Christian understanding of Son of God? Why does Issa have a hard time recognizing his own nature? What does this philosophy say about the possibility of our own divine natures?

For two thousand years the Church along with generations of theologians have debated the meaning of the Incarnation: what is the essence and meaning of the divine nature of Christ? Was he divine from birth? Did the Holy Spirit enter him at his baptism by John? Was he just a man who saw and understood God, a prophet? Was he part man and part God, or fully human and fully divine? How does the depiction of Issa's spiritual development try to answer this question, especially in light of a different way of thinking about the divine? (254-256, Ch 46) Can a combined Eastern and Western view of incarnation help to answer the logical and scientific questions Grant poses to Brady in their debate? Can such a view be consistent with the teachings of the Bible? What does such a view say about the nature of God? What does it mean for our own spiritual practices and our own place in the world?

What do you make of the parallels between the birth stories of Jesus and the Buddha? (268-9)

What is the difference between the "mystical" and the "supernatural"? How does Grant see this distinction in his new understanding of Issa/Jesus? (383)

The Wisdom of Kinley

Discuss the meaning of the parable of the finger pointing to the moon. (39, 355) In what ways does this apply to your life?

Kinley's tells the story of the Buddha explaining his practice as "we sit, we walk, we eat." (42) How often do your days fly by when you are hardly aware of what you are doing at any moment? In our world of constant stimulation and multi-tasking, is life happening to you or are you truly living in your life?

When confronted with a racing mind or negative emotions, Kinley counsels Grant to watch the thoughts in his mind as if they were images being played on a movie screen, or notice the emotions as if they were a log floating down a river. (70, 379) Have you ever tried to watch your own thoughts or emotions as if you were a disinterested observer—not judging the thoughts and emotions in your mind and body, but merely observing them as an anthropologist might? What happens when you do so?

Kinley draws the analogy of our life's journey as ascending a staircase (86-7). Where are you right now on your life's staircase? Are you stuck on a landing, unsure about taking the next step? Is your attention focused on the steps behind you so that you cannot see those ahead?

Kinley quotes the following Zen lesson to Grant: "If you are full of doubt and uncertainty, even a thousand books of scripture are not sufficient; but when you truly understand, even one word is too much." (87) What is the relationship of faith and doubt? How does true understanding occur? How is the role of religious writings different in Buddhism than in Christianity and Islam, where many adherents see scripture as the Word of God?

In his Parable of the Horse, how does Kinley try to explain our reaction to the bad things that happen in our lives? (26-7) How does Grant's understanding of suffering evolve from this discussion to later when he explains the concept of *dukkha* (suffering) to Kristin when they are in Sarnath? (270-1)

What lessons does Kinley teach Grant when he asks "What is water?" (42-44) What does it mean to look deeply into the reality around us? How does Grant's understanding of this concept evolve by the end of the book? (375) What would it feel like to experience the true depth of our lives every day?

Kinley teaches that the essence of existence is change: "Every day, cells in your body die and are replaced with new ones. The neurons in your brain form new connections, as the old, unused ones die away. Memories fade, but are replaced by new ones. The thoughts and worries you have today are different from the ones you had then, just as the thoughts and worries you will have ten years from now will be different from those you have now." Think back ten years, then twenty. How are you different today than you were then? How might you be different ten years from now? How about tomorrow? How

does the desire to hold onto what by nature must change cause you discomfort? If you are constantly changing, then who are you really?

Kinley challenges Grant not to be a slave to his mind. “The carpenter should be master over his tools; the tools should not rule the carpenter?” (285-6) What do you think is the difference between you and your mind? Are they the same? Which one governs your actions, thoughts, feelings?

One of Kinley’s final words of advice for Grant is “Not knowing is the ultimate truth.” (345) How does this advice run counter to Grant’s very nature as an academic who has dedicated his life to uncovering answers to his questions? Can we ever really know the truth to anything? Does this mean that we should stop asking questions? Or does Kinley suggest that maybe we shouldn’t attach ourselves to either our questions or our answers?