

Breathing Out and Breathing In

The Word's Worth

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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Затаив дыхание: with bated breath

I think we can say that Russians have taken to День святого Валентина (aka St. Valentine's Day) like a duck to water. For weeks television, radio and online ads have been rising to a fever pitch, and today flowers and candy are now ten times their usual cost and restaurants, cafes, and even coffee shops will be filled with cuddling couples.

This day-long love fest reminded me of one of my favorite expressions: неровно дышать (to have a thing for someone, literally "to breath unevenly"). Конечно, он пригласит тебя на бал! Всем видно, как он к тебе неровно дышит! (Of course, he'll invite you to the ball.

Everyone knows that he's got a crush on you.)

And that, of course, took me down the rabbit hole of дышать (to breathe) and дыхание (breath). These words might seem pretty basic, but they actually describe a lot more than just breathing in and breathing out.

Дышать is, of course, what we all do all the time. Some people think there is a gender aspect to it: Мы и дышим-то по-разному: мужчины ☒ животом, женщины☒ грудью (You see, we all breathe differently: men breathe from the belly, women — from the chest). Sometimes it seems as if there isn't enough air to breathe: Мне нечем дышать (It's so stuffy I can't breathe).

Inanimate objects also breathe in Russian. You will be urged by your friends to buy natural fabrics because лён хорошо дышит (linen is really breathable) and to rent a wooden house instead of brick because деревянный дом дышит (a wooden house breathes). And in the countryside: Утро дышит свежестью и лёгкостью (The morning air is fresh and light, literally “breathes with freshness and light”).

Дышать can also be used as a metaphor for how we feel emotionally: Мне стало так легко дышать (I could breathe easily). Я без мамы, как без солнца, трудно мне дышать (Without my mother it's like being without the sun, and I can barely breathe).

And it can be used to describe what something is imbued with. A politician nostalgic for the past writes: Советское прошлое дышит могучей историей, светит красными звёздами (The Soviet past pulses with a powerful history and shines with red stars). Someone else exclaims: Эти стихи дышали правдой (Those lines of poetry were filled with truth). In the same way — and using the same instrumental case — it can describe what someone lives for: Он дышит музыкой, только музыкой (He lives for music, only music). Someone can even just breathe for a person, as it were: Его мать дышит только им (His mother lives just for him).

At the end of life, or the end of a shelf life, people and things breathe onto frankincense: дышать на ладан, a reference to the last rites being given to someone. This can be very sad and serious: Его дедушка очень болеет, боюсь, что дышит на ладан (His grandfather is very ill and I'm afraid he is near death). Or it can be a bit snarky: Военно-промышленный комплекс США дышит на ладан (The U.S. military-industrial complex is on its last legs).

Дыхание is the breath, which should be smooth and even: Ровное дыхание мамы нас успокаивало (Our mother's even breathing calmed us.)

Второе дыхание (second wind) is what you get some time around 4 a.m. when you're on deadline — if you're lucky. It can be metaphorical, too: В тот момент ему подарено было второе дыхание в его политической судьбе (At that moment his political career got a second wind).

And до последнего дыхания (to one's last breath) is used to describe something you do until the day you die. Моя любовь к России не дрогнет. Я до последнего дыхания её любить буду (My love for Russia will never waver. I'll love that country til my dying day).

In Russian, holding your breath can be literal or figurative, and you use different verbs depending on which sense you mean. Задержать дыхание (to hold your breath) is what you do underwater: Опытные дайверы могут задерживать дыхание на десять, пятнадцать минут (Experienced divers can hold their breath for 10–15 minutes). Затаить дыхание is when you hold your breath metaphorically as you wait eagerly for something: Когда оркестр уже сидел на сцене, а публика, затаив дыхание, готовилась увидеть своего любимца, наконец певец выходил (When the orchestra was already seated on stage and the public waited with bated breath to see their favorite, the singer finally came out).

Переводить дыхание isn't to translate your breath, but to catch your breath — which is, you will admit, just as odd a phrase. Старик шёл с трудом, постоянно останавливаясь и переводя дыхание (The old man stumbled along, constantly stopping to catch his breath). If you don't catch your breath, it means to do something at one go, in one breath, or with no break. Певец должен постоянно напевать слово «каббади», не переводя дыхания (The singer must constantly sing the word “kabbadi” in one breath). Казалось, она могла говорить, не переводя дыхания (It was like she could talk non-stop without pausing to catch her breath).

Sometimes a person or thing takes your breath away. In Russian this is захватывать / захватить дыхание (or дух). От красоты зрелища захватывало дыхание (The beauty of the performance took my breath away!) Or sometimes you get the breath knocked out of you. Ветер так сильно дул, что захватывало дыхание (The gale blew so hard that it knocked the wind out of us).

Finally, you can do something на одном дыхании. This is literally “in one breath,” and can mean doing something quickly, without taking a breath or pause. Он встал и, чеканя каждое слово, выговорил на одном дыхании: ✘ За крёстного, окрестившего меня в этой воде! (He stood up and emphasizing every word, he said all in one breath: “To my godfather, who christened me in this water!”)

But you'll hear it in contexts where not breathing isn't a possibility. Then it means that you do something with such pleasure that the time just flies by. This often requires some creative translation: Книга читается на одном дыхании (The book is a real page-turner, you can't put it down). Эти два месяца, что шли съёмки, мы прожили на одном дыхании (The two months of filming went by so fast that we didn't even notice). Фильм смотрится на одном дыхании, несмотря на его немалый хронометраж (You get so carried away by the film that the time just flies by, even though it is quite long).

So today, those canoodlers and cuddlers can say: Двадцать лет совместной жизни прошли на одном дыхании! (Twenty years of married life went by like it was a day.)

С Днём святого Валентина!

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