

The breath of life

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I would like to share a few thoughts with you on the breath and breathing based on my everyday work, my reading of the Bible and my lived experience.

In my everyday work, I provide counselling and support to individuals from about 16 years of age to 80 plus. I am trained to provide Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy and Dialectical Behaviour Therapy — both of these modalities focus on learning to use the breath as a way to reduce depression or anxiety and to regulate emotion.

I have been reading the Bible for a number of years. I try to follow a daily Bible reading plan which takes me through the whole Bible each year. I began reading the King James Version, and then was introduced to the RSV as a teenager, and while undertaking university studies was able to take some courses in New Testament Greek. I did start learning Hebrew, but other activities got in the way and I am looking forward to taking that study up again when I retire! Lately, I have been reading from different versions of the Bible in order to keep things fresh and new — this year's version is the ESV — the English Standard Version (based on the RSV).

I belong to a small Bible-based faith community in rural Ontario which conveniently meets right across the road from my house and though small, provides regular lively interchanges around the Word of God. We meet weekly to remember our Lord in the bread and wine and during the week to read the Bible together.

In my work as a therapist, I often provide information to clients about breathing and how learning to breathe effectively can be so helpful in regulating our physical body and our emotions. You might think that the breath is just a means to an end in meditation or yoga, but the practice of breathing is actually an “end” or a destination itself. Let me explain how this works:

We usually breathe automatically without giving much thought to the process unless for some reason our breathing is restricted or constricted and we are having difficulty catching our

breath or breathing deeply. We might unconsciously hold our breath when we are concentrating on an activity or if we are experiencing anxiety or consciously hold it as we take a photo or dive underwater. A baby's belly rises and falls as it breathes in and out — this is the natural way to breathe which we have probably forgotten. Now we might breathe shallowly as a result of trauma held in the body. Place a hand on your chest and the other on your belly and notice which hand rises — this tells you whether you are a chest or a belly breather.

Breathing in activates the sympathetic nervous system — this is like the accelerator in our body and is fuelled by high-octane adrenalin. When we breathe in our heart rate and blood pressure increase, blood flows to the extremities and we are ready for action! Breathing out activates the parasympathetic nervous system (para means 'alongside' and this system lies alongside the first). The PSNS resembles the brake for our body and is fuelled by the soothing elixir of serotonin and oxytocin. When we breathe out our heart rate decreases, blood pressure lowers and the blood returns to the body core.

During respiration (the process of breathing) our heart rate fluctuates. This fluctuation known as Heart Rate Variation is one of the signs of a healthy heart; it balances effective arousal modulation and provides control over impulses and emotions. Lack of fluctuation in heart rate in response to breathing produces negative effects on our thinking, feeling and physical body. If we were to depict this fluctuation in heart rate on a graph it would look like a series of defined peaks and valleys. However, if we are experiencing depression, anxiety or the ongoing effects of previous trauma the line on the graph will be flattened and the peaks and valleys will be less distinct.

To me, this intricate balance is an example of wonderful design in God's creation. I will never forget the experience of waiting for my new born grand-daughter to take her first breath while whispering a fervent prayer myself: "Please, just breathe . . .;" and then observing the gradual change in colour through her body from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. Likewise, I will not forget sitting beside my mother, holding her hand as she drew her last breath before she died and the life left her body.

Genesis

I was interested in looking at the biblical context for the breath and the use of breathing. So I began by looking at the book of Genesis and in the first chapter came upon these words:

The Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. (Gen 1:2)

Hebrew is an onomatopoeic language, the words actually sound like the thing that they describe so I have included some Hebrew words that helped me to understand these concepts and processes.

The Spirit — Heb. *ruach*, wind, breath — of God moved upon the face of the waters. God's Spirit moved or “hovered” — a word that is used in Deut 32:11 to describe God's care for the nation of Israel as an eagle which “flutters” over the young, spreading out its wings to catch them.

the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature (Gen 2:7)

The LORD God formed man — the Heb. word is *adam*, and means red or ruddy, human being, from the Heb. *dam*, for blood. So Adam can be describes as ‘showing blood in the face’. God made Adam of the dust — this Heb. word, *apar*, means dust but also denotes ashes, clay, dust, as being powdered or grey — the dust of the ground — the Heb. word *adamah*, soil, from its generic redness.

When I read this passage I was vividly reminded of the birth of my granddaughter and the gradual transition from grey to red in her little body as she took her first breaths. Was this how Adam appeared to God as He breathed [Heb. *nephach*, to puff, inflate or blow hard] into Adam's nostrils the breath [Heb. *neshamah*, a puff, wind] of life [Heb. *chayim*]; and man became a living soul [Heb. *nephesh*, breathing, vitality]?

Neshamah describes the puff of wind which went from God into Adam's nostrils and gave him life and so Adam became a “breathing living” [in Hebrew a ‘*nephesh hayyah*’]. It reminded me of the first “puff” of rescue breathing in First Aid which is intended to inflate the lungs.

Later in the Bible (although probably more contemporary with the time of the Patriarchs than we might realize by where it is placed in our Old Testament), Job describes God's creative process in these words,

The Spirit [ruach] of God has made me, and the breath [neshamah] of the Almighty has given me life. (Job 33:4)

Job also sets the limits of mortal human life as

All the while my breath [neshamah] is in me, and the spirit [ruach] of God in my nostrils (Job 27:3)

While if God were to

set his heart upon man, if he gather unto himself his spirit [ruach] and his breath [neshamah], all flesh shall perish together, and man shall turn again unto dust (Job 34:14)

This did indeed happen in the early chapters of Genesis when God sent the flood and *all in whose nostrils was the breath [ruach] of life, of all that was in the dry land, died” (Gen 7:22)*

The links between life and blood are continued in Genesis and Leviticus

flesh with the life [nephesh] thereof, which is the blood (Gen 8:4)

The life of the flesh is in the blood (Lev 17:11)

Several passages in the Psalms also describe the role of God’s breath in the creation and sustenance of His creation, for example,

When you hide your face, they are dismayed when you take away their breath [ruach], they die and return to their dust [apar]. When you send forth your Spirit [ruach], they are created and you renew the face of the ground [adamah] (Ps 104:29-30)

His breath [ruach] goes forth, he returns to the soil, in that very day his thoughts perish. (Ps 146:4)

There are also many references in the book of Ecclesiastes to the breath [ruach] which are variously translated as “wind, spirit and breath.”

As you know not what is the way of the spirit [ruach] . . . even so you know not the works of God, who makes all. (Eccl 11:5)

The words of Jesus to Nicodemus are reminiscent of this passage in Ecclesiastes:

The wind [Gk. pneuma, a current of air, breath, breeze] blows where it wants, and you hear the sound thereof, but cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going, so is everyone who is born of the spirit [pneuma]. (John 3:8)

From a Biblical perspective, this dynamic powerful force goes out from God as the instrument of His creation, brings life to the inanimate body of Adam and much later overshadows the young woman, Mary (Luke 1:35) to bring forth the Messiah, the second Adam.

Getting to know our breath

The practice of breathing is strongly connected to scripture and our spiritual walk. I would like to share a short breathing exercise with you that helps us to put these facts and information into use. It might be helpful to listen to an audio version at this point.

The intent of this exercise is just to get to know our own individual pattern of breathing and to become acquainted or reacquainted with our breath. The advantage of knowing our breathing is that we can then use breathing as a tool to energize or calm our body and our emotions when required. Since we always have our breath with us as long as we are alive, this tool is extremely portable — no special equipment needed! The exercise is not intended to produce any particular outcome, just to help us get to know our breath.

I'm going to invite you to adopt an erect, dignified and comfortable posture. If you're sitting on a chair it is helpful to place your feet flat on the floor with your legs uncrossed, gently closing your eyes if that feels okay or maintaining a soft, unfocused gaze a few feet in front of you. Perhaps imagining that a cord is gently pulling your head up towards the ceiling.

First of all, bringing awareness to the level of physical sensations, by focusing attention on the sensations of touch and pressure in the body where it is making contact with the floor or whatever you are sitting on, and spending a moment exploring these sensations.

Now, turning your attention to the sensations of breathing wherever they are most vivid; perhaps at the nostrils, the chest or the level of the abdomen and placing attention here. There is no need to do anything in particular, or to change your breathing, just observe what it feels like to breathe. Paying attention, see what you notice about your breathing. Trying to be really curious about it, developing a kind of affectionate relationship toward your experience of breathing. Remember that there is no right or wrong here. There is simply your experience of breathing wherever you have chosen to be bringing your attention in the body. The only thing you need to be doing is paying attention to your experience.

You might be noticing that the air feels cool and dry in your nostrils as you breathe in and perhaps slightly warmer as you breathe out. Noticing the difference if there is a difference. Remembering that there is no right way to be breathing, there is only your experience in this moment. Staying with the movement of the body as you breathe in and out at your chosen focus as best you can is the intention of this practice.

In the position that you're in right now, you may be noticing that your abdomen rises as you breathe in and gently falls as you breathe out. You might want to check this out by gently placing your hand on your belly if this is helpful. Notice the abdomen rising and falling. But you're not trying to breathe abdominally. It tends to happen naturally, all on its own. You're not actually trying to do anything right now, except observe how your breath naturally unfolds. No need to be analyzing it, no need to judge it. The whole idea here is not to think about how you're breathing but to feel what it feels like in your body when you are breathing. To kind of sink into it and be with it, learning to be more at ease with your breathing and with yourself, naturally, effortlessly, no need to change anything.

You are not trying to breathe in any kind particular way. The whole idea here is to take the pressure off. You are bringing awareness to where you notice the movement of the breath in the body, however that feels. The lungs expand and then deflate due to their elasticity as you breathe out. Now you may be noticing that your attention has wandered away from paying attention to your breathing. You may be wondering if this is going to help you or you might be thinking about whether you are doing it correctly. Gently returning your attention to the sensations of breathing without judging yourself, trying to be accepting of your wandering attention, doing your best to be gentle with yourself is part of the practice.

Letting the breath do whatever it does, making room for it, being with it just as it is, in this moment. When the attention wanders, see if you can gently bring it back to feeling the breath in the body. No need for judgment or harshness, learning the skill of being at ease moment by moment in your body. Bringing attention to the initiation of the inhalation, the pause at the top of the inhalation, the initiation of the exhalation and the pause at the bottom of the exhalation. You are opening to what is in this moment. Not the kind of breath you had before or the kind of breath you would like to have but the breath you have right here, right now.

As you breathe in, the air around you goes inside your body. As you breathe out, the air inside you moves outside. Perhaps you feel spacious or perhaps something else entirely. Making room for the breath, opening and receiving or perhaps noticing something quite different. With the out breath, allowing the breath to flow out and with the in breath, allowing the breath to flow in.

At this point you may be noticing particularly challenging sensations arising in the body. If this is the case just noting these sensations and bringing curiosity to them, exploring their characteristics. If the sensations are too strong then perhaps trying to expand into them on the in breath and softening and opening on the out breath. Alternatively, if you feel the need to change position, doing so with intention and deliberation and then coming back to the focus of this practice, which is on the sensations of breathing wherever they are most dominant for you.

Giving with every out-breath and receiving with every in-breath.

And when the attention is wandering which it naturally will, simply escorting your attention back to the breath gently, without rigidity, with a sense of ease and intention. Coming back to the present moment can only be achieved by letting go of what the mind was occupied with previously.

With the out breath, all you have to do is let it go. Sitting back and identifying with the out breath which flows out naturally, all on its very own. And please remember that coming back to the breath is a part of mindfulness just as is the focusing on the breath itself. That moment that you become aware that the attention has wandered is mindful awareness itself. Being aware of the body, the entire breath in and the entire breath out, the transition points — cultivating your capacity to be present in this way is as much mindfulness as the escorting of the wandering attention back to the exercise at hand, the simple observation of your breathing. When you are bringing yourself back to the breath do so gently, without a story or narrative.

The breath is always with you, always present, always changing, an anchor to current experience. Remember being with the sensations of breathing can help you be in the present moment of life itself. You get to practice this moment-by-moment and breath-by-breath every day. This short exercise can help to connect us to the present moment and as we take a deeper in-breath and longer, purposeful out-breath, we can use this practice to focus our attention.

Mindful living

Thinking about breathing and the use of the breath, alongside reading about the formation of Adam from the dust of the ground, reminded me of what we call the “new creation” described later in the New Testament. We are invited to become part of this new creation being energized by the breath of God and given the spirit of life in Christ Jesus.

In the future, this will become a reality when we are given immortality — the first Adam was made a living soul (‘living being,’ RSV, NASB) from a grey, ashen, lifeless man of dust and Jesus, the last Adam was made an energizing, life-giving spirit being when he was resurrected from the dead (this is detailed by Paul in 1 Cor. 15:45-49). Paul also eloquently describes this creative process in Romans:

But if the Spirit that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken [or make alive] your mortal bodies by his spirit that dwells in you” (Rom 8:11)

These thoughts encourage me to practice conscious, present-focused living, being mindful of God each day and communicating with Him and with His Son. Focussing on the breath helps me to stay in the present moment, rather than ruminating about the past and becoming depressed, or starting to worry about the future and increasing anxiety. Instead I am able to take one day at a time and realize that one day’s burdens are enough for that day. This helps me to be content with what I have, simplify my life, and focus on taking good care of myself in order to be better equipped to help others, keeping in mind the words of Paul to the Athenians

The God who made the world and everything in it does not live in temples made by man, nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth. (Acts 17:24-26)

Thank you for allowing me to share these thoughts with you today. Take good care.