

The Breath - The Common Thread Across Major Religions

Many of the world's great religions, in particular the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam as well as Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism, all make reference in one way or another to 'the breath' as the source of our life or our life force. In this essay, I will seek to establish how 'the breath' serves as a common thread connecting and potentially uniting all religions through the simple practice of receiving the Holy Breath of God known to Christians as the Holy Spirit.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Book of Genesis records that "the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and *breathed* into his nostrils *the breath of life*; and man became a living soul." (Gen 2:7, KJV) Taking this creation story to be an allegory that applies to all of humanity, it is the Breath of God that makes us living souls. The power of God's Breath is clearly not just about oxygen. The vivifying Breath of God has the power to enliven and nourish our souls. The same creation story is found in the Qur'an where, just as in Genesis, God breathed His Spirit into Adam (Qur'an 32:9). The breath - in Arabic *rūh* - appears in the Qur'an 21 times, sometimes as *Rūh al-Qudus* (the Holy Spirit) or simply *al-Rūh* meaning *My/His (God's) Rūh* - Spirit or Breath.¹

In the first century Koine Greek New Testament, the word *pneuma* has traditionally been translated as 'spirit' but can also be translated as 'breath'. However, it never appears as such in connection with the word translated as 'holy' in English translations of the Bible. In the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament), the Hebrew word translated as 'spirit' is *ruach* which also can be translated as 'breath, moving air or wind'. Even the common English terms 'spirit' and 'spiritual' come from the Latin noun *spiritus* meaning 'breath or wind' and the verb *spirare* meaning 'to breathe'. Consequently, every time in English versions of scripture where reference is made to the Holy Spirit, these verses could potentially also be translated and read as 'Holy Breath'.

As we have already seen above, the Arabic word for breath or spirit is *rūh*. In Aramaic, the *lingua franca* of the region and the spoken language of Ye'shua - better known as Jesus, the word used by Jesus was *rukha* which can also be translated as breath, wind, spirit or soul. Jesus preached in Aramaic and used the word *rukha* or *ruha* at various times, particularly in the Beatitudes recorded in the Gospel of Matthew as translated by Aramaic scholar, Dr Neil Douglas-Klotz in his book *Prayers of the Cosmos* and his other works. And while Jesus may have spoken a Galilean dialect of Aramaic, his words in Aramaic have been preserved over two millennia in the Syriac Aramaic version of the Bible used by Eastern Christian communities in the form of the Peshitta New Testament. This is the version of the New Testament that Douglas-Klotz relies on for his work.

1. Sarra Tlili. "From Breath to Soul: the Quranic word Rūh and its (Mis)interpretations". In Lowry, J.E.; Toorawa, S.M. (eds.). *Arabic Humanities, Islamic Thought: Essays in Honor of Everett K. Rowson*. (2017)

By way of example, the first line of The Beatitudes in the Aramaic Peshitta (transliterated here) uses the word *rukḥ*;-

Tubwayhum l'meskenae b'rukḥ d'dilhounhie malkutha d'ashmaya

In the King James Version (Matthew 5:3) it reads;-

Blessed are the poor in **spirit**; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Douglas-Klotz uses the Midrashic method for the interpretation of semitic languages such as Aramaic which emphasises the multi-levelled possibilities for the translation of semitic texts. Using this method, Douglas-Klotz offers a number of possible alternative translations of this verse;-

- Happy and aligned with the One are those who find their home in the breathing; to them belong the kingdom and queendom of heaven.²
- Blessed are those who are refined in breath; they shall find their ruling principles and ideals guided by God's light.³
- Tuned to the Source are those who live by breathing Unity; their "I can" is included in God's.⁴
- Ripe are those who reside in the breath; to them belongs the reign of unity.⁵

Clearly, it is possible that a native Aramaic speaker hearing the words of Jesus' sermon on the Mount of Olives may well have understood a connection between 'the breath' and the lived experience of the kingdom of heaven referred to in the second half of the verse. However, as Douglas-Klotz asserts;

Theological ideas of some abstract "spirit" obscure what Jesus is actually saying here. The Greek word *pneuma*, used to translate both *breath* and *spirit* in the Greek version of the Gospels, can be rendered in the same double way. This means that even the English translations and interpretations that rely on the Greek text could have been done differently; however, by that time people were already losing the sense that "breath" is more than a material substance as by the Middle Ages more than a thousand years of theology had happened.⁶

2. Neil Douglas-Klotz, *Prayers of the Cosmos: Reflections on the Original Meaning of Jesus's Words*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1990). 47.

3. Ibid. 47

4. Ibid. 47

5. Neil Douglas-Klotz, *The Hidden Gospel: Decoding the Spiritual Message of the Aramaic Jesus*. (Wheaton. Quest Books, 1999), 41.

6. Neil Douglas-Klotz, *Revelations of the Aramaic Jesus: The Hidden Teachings of Life and Death*, Charlottesville. (Hampton Roads Publishing Company, 2022) 49.

Therefore, based on this Midrashic approach, 1 Corinthians 6:19 could legitimately be translated as; “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the *Holy Breath*, who is in you, whom you have received from God?”. (NIV) Translating *pneuma* as ‘breath’ has the potential to make one’s experience of the Holy ‘Spirit’ much more tangible and real - a daily lived experience of *receiving* the Breath of God.

However, biblical scholars relying on the Greek, Hebrew, Latin or English translations of ancient texts have by default chosen ‘spirit’ as the definitive and exclusive translation of the respective original Greek, Hebrew or Latin word. In doing so, they have ignored an alternative and possibly intended meaning - breath - which could have continued to vivify and empower Jesus’s followers as he had intended. One interesting exception to this trend is in 2 Timothy 16:3 where it states that “All scripture is God-breathed” (NIV). Even the early church father Ignatius of Antioch, in his *Letter to the Ephesians*, used the metaphor of ‘breath’ when he refers to Jesus being anointed with oil so “that he might *breathe* immortality into the church” (17:1) If, in fact, Jesus had intended ‘the breath’ to be an aspect of his spiritual legacy, any appreciation of the breath as a spiritual practice amongst the followers of Jesus didn’t last very long.

The 2nd and 3rd century Desert Mothers and Desert Fathers who lived very close in time to Jesus and his ministry may well have been influenced by Jesus’ teachings on ‘the breath’ either through oral or written transmission of his teachings. Indeed, some writings by those early Desert Mothers and Fathers do make reference to ‘following the breath’ as the basis for their spiritual practice while in contemplative isolation in the deserts of Egypt and Syria soon after Jesus’ brief ministry in Palestine. For example, the Desert monks Callistus and Ignatius taught: “Collect your mind from its customary circling and wandering outside, and quietly lead it into the heart by way of breathing”.⁷

Those devoted souls who lived so soon after Jesus may well have based their personal contemplative practice on what they understood at the time to be what Jesus himself did and was teaching during his ministry - unless of course they discovered this process of paying conscious attention to the breath all by themselves, independently of Jesus’ spiritual legacy. In any case, Jesus’ teaching on ‘the breath’ has effectively been ‘lost in translation’ for subsequent generations of Christians relying on non-Aramaic versions of scripture but is, nevertheless, a truth hiding in plain sight in the Aramaic version of the New Testament - if one can read the Aramaic that is.

Jesus’ emphasis on ‘the breath’, however, is demonstrated very explicitly in the Gospel of John which records Jesus’ last act and final admonition to his disciples before he left them. In John 20:22 it states that after emerging from the tomb, Jesus met with his disciples and *breathed* on them and then said, “*Receive* the Holy Spirit”. That such a simple, seemingly mundane action as breathing which most people take for granted was specifically recorded in the Gospel of John suggests that it was an intentional, deliberate and, therefore, significant action on Jesus’ part – a tangible sign with a message.

7. Callistus and Ignatius of Xanthopoulos, “Directions to Hesychasts” Chap. 25, in *Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart*, 195 Kadloubovsky, E., 1892; Palmer, G. E. H. (Gerald Eustace Howell), 1904-1957

While Christians might interpret that deliberate action of breathing on his disciples as signifying Jesus imparting the Holy Spirit to them, presumably once and for all time to come, it may have, instead, been meant as a final reminder of something he had taught his disciples and preached during his ministry. The fact that this deliberate action on Jesus' part - breathing on his disciples - was accompanied by his parting words to "receive the Holy Spirit (Holy Breath)" suggests that he was reinforcing to his disciples the need to rely on the Holy Spirit (as the Holy Breath) for ongoing support in their evangelism and personal spiritual journey.

Did Jesus really intend this 'receiving' of the Holy Spirit or Holy Breath to be a daily spiritual practice? Was this how Jesus 'prayed'? Was it a sign from Jesus to all those who would follow him to 'pray' like he did? Indeed, was Jesus reminding his disciples to focus on the breath as a spiritual practice in perhaps the same way that Gautama Buddha taught mindful breathing as the means to personal liberation from suffering?

The entire religion of Buddhism is based on observance or mindfulness of the breath. The Buddha's first written sutra - the *Anapanasati sutta* (a Pali text) meaning 'mindfulness of breathing' - is a detailed description of how the Buddha himself achieved enlightenment. This sutra, the first ever divulged by the Buddha and used thereafter as the guide to all his subsequent followers, outlines the method by which the Buddha himself used awareness of the breath as the basis for his meditation practice. The name of this sutra spells it out;- *ana* refers to the in-breath; *pana* refers to the out-breath; and *sati* refers to the remembrance of one's true nature experienced as bliss. And it all comes from following the breath.

The Anapanasati sutra describes a 16-step process the Buddha followed on his way to discovering *nirvana* or heaven within. As outlined by Buddhist teacher Larry Rosenberg, a teacher of Insight (or Vipassana) Meditation at the Cambridge Insight Meditation Centre in Boston, Massachusetts, this process can be performed as a program of sequential, progressive contemplations or as a simple integrated process where "much of what the [sutra] describes will turn up naturally if you just sit and follow the breathing".⁸

Rosenberg writes that as one immerses oneself in this process;- "There's a feeling of *being breathed*, rather than of breathing to attain anything".⁹ In 2023, after my first reading of his book, I wrote to Rosenberg, now in his 90's, to ask him ... "Breathed by what?" but never got a reply. There was nothing in his book to suggest any divine entity or spirit was *doing the breathing*. The Buddha himself was agnostic, so didn't believe in God as such despite or perhaps because of the plethora of gods worshipped by Hindus in India during his time and still to this day.

8. Rosenberg, Larry. *Breath by Breath: The Liberating Practice of Insight Meditation*, (Boston, Shambala Publications, 1999) 5

9. Ibid. 131

The Buddha, apparently, did not feel it necessary to attribute his rapturous, ecstatic state of blissful enlightenment to any divine source but he nevertheless still enjoyed all the benefits of his mindful breathing practice and showed his followers how they too could transcend all suffering and achieve nirvana while still in human form. Unlike the Buddha, Jesus did acknowledge the Source of His Life and sought to direct his followers to that same Source by exhorting them to receive the Holy Spirit or the Holy Breath. Sadly though, that practice didn't really catch on for Christians.

Also, within Hinduism there are strong traditions and spiritual practices that utilise conscious breathing or *pranayama* as did the Buddha who was originally a Hindu prince named Siddhartha Gautama. The power source for *pranayama* that all yoga practitioners tap into is *prāṇa* which refers to the breath as the life-force energy that sustains all life according to Hindus with + *āyāma* referring to the suspension of breath in certain yogic breathing practices.¹⁰ A multiplicity of yoga styles have proliferated in the Western world introducing Westerners to some of the secrets Hindus have known for over three millennia. Styles such as Hatha Yoga, Ashtanga and Iyengar Yoga all involve the practice of certain physical postures or positions called *asanas* that must be performed while simultaneously observing the incoming and outgoing breath. The combination of maintaining a certain physical position accompanied by conscious awareness of the breath brings the practitioner into a direct experience of the here and now, the present moment - of Presence itself. Hence, yoga's attractiveness to Westerners seeking an escape from their thinking-obsessed minds is only temporarily.

India, believed by some to be the birthplace of all religions including Buddhism, was also the birthplace of the Upanishads - sometimes referred to as The Breath of the Cosmos. The fundamental concept at the heart of the Upanishads is the notion of *ātman* or 'self' which has a variety of meanings including 'breath', 'spirit', and 'body'. In the Upanishads, the *Atman* was seen as being one with *Brahman* (the ultimate Hindu word for God). The central teaching of the Upanishads is to know oneself as *brahman* or as Jesus would say, "... that they [may] be one, just as you [Father] and I are one ..." (John 17:21, NLT)

In the Chinese tradition of Taoism, the concept of *qi* symbolises energy and power, strength and vitality - all qualities that can be equally attributed to the sustaining power of the Holy Spirit. According to Nadeau, the word *qi* "can be interpreted concretely as vapor [sic], steam or breath".¹¹ Nadeau goes on to describe how the oscillating energy of *yang qi* and *yin qi* whose *yang* exhalations and *yin* inhalations are vital to the creative unfolding of the cosmos. This, says Nadeau, "is the cosmic breath, the ebb and flow of the universe".¹²

10. Arthur Macdonell, *A Practical Sanskrit Dictionary*. (Munshiram Monoharlal Publishers, 1996).

11. Randall Nadeau, *Asian Religions: A Cultural Perspective*. (Malden. Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 78

12. Ibid. 79

Potentially then, if we were to mimic this same process in our own bodies - consciously opening to receive the *yin qi* energy with our inbreath and releasing *yang qi* with our outbreath - we would be effectively aligning ourselves with the process that is 'breathing' the universe into existence - cosmic breath by cosmic breath. We would effectively merge with the Tao - the One - that is behind the great cosmic breathing of the universe. Through such a conscious breathing practice, we would become a living and breathing fleshy microcosm of the universal macrocosm - a hologram of the universe ... for we, too, are made of God's Light. (Gen 1:3, KJV)

Conclusion

Despite the fact that God's breath and the Holy Spirit are repeatedly referred to in the scriptures of the Abrahamic faiths, none of these faith traditions have any ostensible spiritual practice focussing on the breath - let alone receiving the Holy Spirit/Breath as Jesus admonished his disciples to do, presumably to serve as a model for other Christians to emulate. In Hinduism and Buddhism, however, we see a profound, fundamental and widespread use of the breath as something integral to one's spiritual practice and development. And while Taoism, like Christianity, does not prescribe any specific spiritual practice focusing on breath awareness, I have shown how an individual could simply replicate in their own bodies the breathing process Taoism describes as underlying the entire cosmos with a simple, conscious breathing process opening to receive *yin qi* and releasing *yang qi* into the world. And if we dared to imagine the universal *qi* life force as God's Love mediated by the Holy Breath, what a difference might that make to the world? Are we not awesomely and wonderfully made human fractals of Eternal Being? (Psalm 139:14, NASB) Weren't we made for this?

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