



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

## **Breathing the Spirit of Life**

Rev. Sally Mabelle © 24 March 2024

*During my 12 years as a member and lay worship leader at Auckland Unitarian church, we sang that 'Spirit of Life' song hundreds of times, to begin nearly every Sunday service. Today, I'd like to draw our attention directly to that same Spirit of Life, which is intimately with us in every moment - I'm talking about our very breath - literally our IN-spiration - and our EX-spiration...a free gift that we receive at birth and is our closest and most constant spiritual companion throughout our whole life.*

*For many people today, the anthropomorphic concept of GOD doesn't speak to us, and something tangible like 'BREATH' is more relatable. I recently was involved in a two-year training entitled 'God is Breath' - which involved daily breathing and awareness exercises to build my awareness of breath or the Spirit of Life.*

*This enhanced awareness has made a huge difference to me in terms of greater patience, tolerance, and resilience, and has helped me to be much less reactive to emotional challenges. So, I'm passionate about sharing with you today around the theme of 'Breathing the Spirit of Life'.*

*How aware are you of your breath and the rhythm and ease or dis-ease of your breathing? And why does it matter?*

*As Unitarian Universalists, we are concerned with world peace and social justice, and we are aware that there is much discord, unrest, and conflict in the world today. We read about it everyday and watch videos, and need to manage our own anger, fear, upset in personal situations. We are aware that many people are dealing with discontent, unhappiness, and even*

*depression. It's understandable why many of us are feeling despairing, helpless, and hopeless...or angry.*

*Besides donating money, writing letters, or demonstrating, what can we actually do to contribute to world peace? However, how much focus do we give to what is within our own locus of control?.. How much attention do we give to our most intimate and powerful instrument of peace? How much attention do we give to our very own breath? How may contribute to disharmony and conflict in our own lives and in the world at large?*

*According to Thich Nhat Hanh, the Buddhist teacher and author who recently passed away, "We will always blame and condemn those we feel are responsible for wars and social injustice, without recognizing the degree of conflict within ourselves. We must devote ourselves to practising inner peace which involves mindful breathing if we wish to contribute to world peace.*

*Breath is central to many cultures and spiritual traditions around the world...Here are a few examples: The word aloha in hawaii is similar to our word Aroha in Maori... When broken down, the literal translation of the phrase translates to [Alo] or Aro meaning 'presence' and [Hā] meaning 'breath. It also means love, peace, respect...' Together the words aloha or aroha translates to 'The presence of breath' or 'breath of life. It's interesting that in the ancient aramaic, supposedly Jesus' native language, the word for God is AllaHA...so close to Aloha and Aroha...In Arabic, Ruh, means breath or spirit... Ruach means breath or the holy spirit or wind in Hebrew, In Ancient Greek, (pneuma)means "breath" as in "a breath of air" (literal) or "divine breath of inspiration" (figurative); it can also mean "life", "spirit", and "vitality"-in Latin, Numinous...comes from the word numen..which means 'divine will' or the inexpressible mystery...what we call the interconnected web of all existence...In India, the sanskrit word Prana stands for Life Force, or Breath...and it is central to yogic philosophy and practice.*

*In China, the word for breath is 'Chi'...which is the glue that connects body, mind, and spirit...In Japan, it's IKI...*

*So, clearly breath is of central importance to our life, our sense of peace and inner harmony.*

*So what are the greater implications of our awareness of breath?*

*We each are literally receiving and releasing the Spirit of Life an average of 20,000 times per day or 7.5 million times per year according to the American Lung Association.*

*Most of us aren't entirely mindful of each inbreath and outbreath, and yet numerous studies have been done which hail the benefits of paying attention to our breathing...the word often used for this simple awareness is Mindfulness. In thousands of studies, mindful breathing practice has been shown to produce numerous benefits such as:*

- 1. Lower anxiety, depression, and the stress response*
- 2. Increase focus, concentration, memory, and cognitive control*
- 3. Improve decision-making*
- 4. Enhance pro-social, generous, and optimistic behaviours*
- 5. Improve sleep quality and general well-being*
- 6. Increase clarity and quality strategic thinking*
- 7. Reduce blood pressure*
- 8. Decrease tiredness, aches, and pains*

*Sound good?*

*How would this impact our world if more of us were developing these qualities and experiencing these benefits?*

*How would this contribute to world peace???*

*The quality of our breathing directly impacts the quality of our life. and can make a huge difference not only in our own physical and mental health but our capacity to make a difference in the world.*

*An unhealthy breathing rhythm can often result in a sense of fear and lack which increases self-obsession and leads to greater disinterest in the wellbeing of others and the world in general.*

*Breathing in a more relaxed, healthy way supports us to live in a happier, more peaceful state..which allows us to feel more compassion and care for the well-being of others. When we have the capacity to care for others, we can then more easily take action to make the world a better place and contribute to world peace.*

*Psychotherapist Donna Martin wrote a poem, in the words of the Spirit of Life...*

*Observe me, says the Breath, and learn to live effortlessly in the Present Moment.*

*Feel me, says the Breath, and feel the Ebb and Flow of Life.*

*Allow me, says the Breath, and I'll sustain and nourish you, filling you with energy and cleansing you of tension and fatigue.*

*Move with me, says the Breath, and I'll invite your soul to dance.*

*Make sounds with me and I shall teach your soul to sing.*

*Follow me, says the Breath, and I'll lead you out to the farthest reaches of the Universe and inward to the deepest parts of your inner world.*

*Notice, says the Breath, that I am as valuable to you coming or going that every part of my cycle is as necessary as another that after I'm released, I return again and again that even after a long pause - moments when nothing seems to happen - eventually I am there.*

*Each time I come, says the Breath, I am a gift from Life. And yet I am released without regret, without suffering, without fear.*

*Notice how you take me in, says the Breath....is it with joy. With gratitude. Do you take me in fully....invite me into all the inner spaces of your home...or carefully into just the front foyer? What places in you am I not allowed to nourish?*

*And notice, says the Breath, how you release me. Do you hold me prisoner in closed up places in the body? Is my release resisted or do you let me go reluctantly, not easily?*

*And are my waves of Breath, of Life, as gentle as a quiet sea, softly smoothing sandy stretches of yourself; or anxious, urgent, choppy waves; or the crashing tumult of a stormy sea?*

*And can you feel me as the link between your inner and outer worlds, suggest the Breath, feel me as Life's exchange between the universe and you? The universe breathes me into you - you send me back to the universe...I am the flow of Life between every single part and the whole.*

*Your attitude to me, says the Breath, is your attitude to Life. Welcome me.... embrace me fully. Let me nourish you completely, then set me free. Move with me, dance with me, sing with me, sigh with me....love me, trust me, don't try to control me.*

*I am the Breath. Life is the Musician. You are the Flute. And Music - Creativity depends on all of us. You are not the Creator....nor the Creation. We are all a part of the process of Creativity....you, Life and me: the Breath.*

*"The Breath is Life's Teacher" Donna Martin*

***Thich Nhat Hanh, known as 'the father of mindfulness' was a peace activist, prolific author, poet, and teacher, and founder***

*Of Plum Village, Europe;s largest Zen monastery to over 200 monks and nuns, taught and practised mindful breathing to thousands of people throughout his life. I'd like to share with you his words on mindful breathing. I encourage you to pay attention to your breath as I recite his words:*

*Breathing in, I know I am breathing in.*

*Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.*

*Breathing in, I notice my in-breath has become deeper.*

*Breathing out, I notice that my out-breath has become slower....*

*Breathing in, I calm myself.*

*Breathing out, I feel at ease.*

*Breathing in, I smile.*

*Breathing out, I release.*

*Breathing in, I dwell in the present moment.*

*Breathing out, I feel it is a wonderful moment.*

*(Thich Nhat Hanh on The Practice of Mindfulness)*

*Mevlana Jelaladin Rumi's poem 'ONLY BREATH' echoes the centrality of the simple, universal process of breathing - the Spirit of life - it's a most basic spiritual activity that we all share - no matter what our religion.*

*Not Christian or Jew or Muslim, not Hindu  
Buddhist, sufi, or zen. Not any religion*

*or cultural system. I am not from the East  
or the West, not out of the ocean or up*

*from the ground, not natural or ethereal, not  
composed of elements at all. I do not exist,*

*am not an entity in this world or in the next,  
did not descend from Adam and Eve or any*

*origin story. My place is placeless, a trace  
of the traceless. Neither body or soul.*

*I belong to the beloved, have seen the two  
worlds as one and that one call to know,*

*first, last, outer, inner, I am only that  
**breath - breathing** human being.  
(["Only Breath"](#) Mevlana Jelaladin Rumi)*

*Rumi's poem points to the essential and universal nature of human existence. - what is one  
mystery we all share in common despite our different philosophies and world views?...It is  
the Mystery of Breath...Spirit of Life...Life force..wairua...Chi..Prana...Ruach...Aloha..Aroha...*

*Ha ki Roto - Ha ki Waho - Arohaaaaaaa*

*Amene - Blessed Be - Namaste*

### ***Meditation / Conversation starter***

- How do you manage your own anger, sadness, despair, reactivity?
- What have you discovered by working with your breath?