



THE EPISCOPAL CENTER FOR EMBODIED FAITH
PRESENTS
Theological Reflections on Embodied Faith

Breath and Spirit

The Rev. Dr. Lucas John Mix

“...the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” – *Romans 8:26-27*

A story is told about the origin of Shaolin Kung-Fu. It is likely apocryphal, but I find it revealing. It is said that the Indian Monk Bodhidharma came to China after the death of his teacher. After wandering and being chased out of Southern China, he settled at the Shaolin monastery, which had been founded fifty years earlier by another Indian Buddhist.

He tried to teach the Shaolin brothers what he had discovered about Enlightenment, but they did not understand him.

After many attempts, he switched tactics. He tried to teach them how to meditate by sitting and staring at the wall, a tradition still maintained in Chan or Zen Buddhism. By meditating, he hoped, they could understand Enlightenment. Sadly, meditation would not work for them. They could not sit still; they could not focus.

And so, a time came when Bodhidharma gave up on teaching them still meditation. He began to teach the monks how to breathe. By attending to their breath, he thought, they could learn to meditate, and by meditating, they could achieve Enlightenment. But, even breathing was too difficult. They did not know how to regulate their lungs and heartbeat. They did not know how to be intentional, mindful of their bodies.

As a last resort, Bodhidharma turned to kung-fu, in the hopes that it would help them breathe, and in helping them breathe, help them meditate, and in helping them meditate, they might achieve Enlightenment.

The Shaolin monks see kung-fu as a discipline for the sake of mindfulness. They are clear that it is not Buddhist mindfulness or Christian mindfulness, or any other brand of mindfulness. It is simply the connection of incarnation and intent. The monks believe that Buddhism is a natural consequence of harmony and awareness, and are happy to help people find what they find. I like the story of Bodhidharma and Shaolin because it emphasizes something important. It emphasizes the role that our bodies play in our spiritual life. It emphasizes the role of breath.

Christians made this same connection from the earliest days of the Church. The word “Spirit” refers, quite literally, to the Breath of God. It is that which stirs up the dust. “Spiritus” is Latin for “breath.” We say we are, again literally, inspired by God in

creation. Physically, we live because of our breath, which moves in and out of us all. We cannot own our breath. The air in our lungs is only there temporarily. You and I breathe the same air; that which makes us alive is not property, but grace. Spiritually, we speak of the Holy Spirit, of being alive because of God's grace which brings us out of death into life. We participate in the Spirit of God. We are the body of Christ. These statements, familiar from centuries of use, may have lost their original, visceral weight. Early Christians recognized that our bodily breath is related to the breath of God. Similarly, the Church was concretely considered to be an organism, enlivened by the Holy Spirit.

When I write about life concepts in the Bible, I argue that we must always take them more literally and not less. This resurrection life we speak of: just like physical life, it is not something we own, but something we share in. It only works when it works between us. Breathing marks the boundary between me and not me, for it is both inside and out, and it only works when it is moving.

When we are mindful of our breath, we are mindful of ourselves. We realize our radical dependence upon God and others. This is one of the chief reasons that religious groups recite and sing together. Breathing in unison and in time reinforces our common identity, viscerally. By tying together breath, intention, and community, these practices make us more aware of the role breath and spirit play in our lives.

I love the martial arts because they have taught me to be more mindful of my body and my breath. They provide concrete physical practices that help me understand the more subtle, invisible movements of energy in the world – both human and divine. They teach embodied mindfulness. They also provide a great meditation for people, like me, who simply cannot sit still.

Christians have our own breathing practices, from singing and chanting to breathing prayers. One of the clearest examples can be found in the Orthodox practice of saying the Jesus Prayer, breathing in with “Lord Jesus Christ,” and out with “have mercy on me.” Versions of this – including the longer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner” – have been in use for at least fifteen centuries.

No matter what your beliefs, you can benefit from reflecting on the way you breathe and from learning how to be more conscious about breath and body. Christians, East and West, have centuries of tradition to draw on, all pointing to the movement of the Spirit in all of us. God calls us to have that same breath within us that was in Christ Jesus.

Reflection Questions

- 1) Take a moment to reflect on how you are breathing.
 - a. What does it show about your physical condition?
 - b. What does it tell you about your emotional state?
 - c. What does it reveal about your spiritual state?
- 2) How is the Holy Spirit – God's breath – like the physical breath in your body?
 - a. How is it different?

For Further Exploration

- 1) "The Physicality of Prayer" by Rowan Williams - <http://myocn.net/rowan-williams-promoting-jesus-prayer-answer-modern-angst/>
- 2) "Breathe" from Rob Bell's NOOMA series - <http://nooma.com/films/014-breathe>
- 3) Psalm 51

About the Author: Lucas John Mix is an Episcopal priest with a doctorate in evolutionary biology and 6th degree black belt in the Korean Martial art of Hapkido. He has been teaching martial arts for 30 years and currently serves in a Seattle area parish. You can find out more about his research into theological biology at his website [here](#). His work in martial arts has been with [Enso Center for International Arts](#) in Redmond, WA.