

Breathing as a Spiritual Practice©  
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet  
Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman August 5, 2018

Breathing as a Spiritual Practice - Part 1

As we just heard in the reading Sandy shared with us, “Our breathing can help us capture our moments.” I don’t know about you, but all too often the moments of my life get away from me. I lose them and have no idea where they went. And sometimes, when things around me get intense, the moments of my life tend to capture me instead of me capturing them. What Jon Kabat-Zinn as well as many others propose is that if we would make time regularly to attend to our breath and to our breathing, a multitude of benefits would result. What type of benefits, you might ask? Let’s take some time this morning to focus on our breathing and find out what we discover.

Breathing is something we do every day of our lives. The vast majority of the time however, we pay no attention to this essential activity that keeps us alive. It is a good thing that we have an autonomic nervous system that keeps us inhaling and exhaling. Without such a system, we wouldn’t be able to survive. But we want to do more than just survive. We want to thrive and grow and learn and appreciate life as much as we possibly can.

While breathing is something we do automatically, a spiritual practice isn’t hard wired into our nervous system. And very few if any of us have a spiritual practice that we engage in as frequently as we take a breath. In our fast-paced world, engaging in a regular spiritual practice even once a day can seem like a lot to expect of oneself. With all of the demands on our time, adding another item to our to-do list can seem overwhelming. I am aware that some people feel intimidated at the thought of developing a regular spiritual practice. And some people have negative impressions in regards to the concept of spiritual practices in general. Such negative impressions can tend to hinder or even prevent a person from looking into how developing a spiritual practice might be beneficial.

Before I go any further, it might be helpful to identify what I am referring to when I use the phrase “spiritual practice.” What a “spiritual practice” is has been defined and described in a multitude of ways. One of the descriptions that fits with what I am sharing this morning is the following: “honest and sincere efforts done consistently on a daily basis to develop divine qualities and achieve everlasting happiness or Bliss.” I would expand this description just a bit since I believe a spiritual practice may be done regularly even if it isn’t done daily. I should also mention that the first letter in the word “divine” in this description is lower case. My sense is that all of us would like to develop qualities that are of the highest nature, and achieve a significantly greater degree of happiness or Bliss. This description certainly doesn’t cover all aspects of what a spiritual practice might include, but for our purposes this morning it will suffice.

There are many actions or activities that are considered to be spiritual practices. These include such things as prayer, fasting, demonstrating loving-kindness, almsgiving or generosity toward those in need, meditation, and chanting. There are also specific physical activities such as yoga, tai-chi, chi gong and even dancing that qualify as spiritual practices. In every one of the activities I just mentioned, breathing is an

essential element. Years ago I had the opportunity to learn tai-chi from a man who had spent ten years of his childhood in a Taoist monastery. The first class I attended began with specific instruction on breathing.

So today, I would like us to consider how breathing, something that we do many times a day, might become more than an unconscious and automatic action—how we might transform the act of breathing into a spiritual practice. Instead of simply talking about how breathing can become a spiritual practice, it might be helpful at this point to allow us to experience how this might be accomplished. I invite Sandy to lead us in a meditation that focuses on the breath.

## **Meditation**

### **Breathing as a Spiritual Practice - Part 2**

Thank you, Sandy.

As you no doubt noticed, the meditation Sandy just led us in was very simple, very basic. It allowed us to become aware of our breath. We weren't asked or expected to change or control our breathing for a significant period of time. Instead, we were instructed to first take a few breathes to make ourselves conscious of breathing, and then to just be aware of the sensations of inhaling and exhaling. That short meditation is one example of how, in any given moment, we can transform the act of taking a breath into a spiritual practice.

As we engaged in this meditation we had the opportunity to experience something we heard about in our reading. For a brief time we captured our moments. For a brief time our moments didn't escape from us or overrun us. Instead, we were present with and mindful of the moment as we focused on our breath. Those of you who were present here three weeks ago when Rev. Alex Holt was speaking may recall this quote. "Very few times are present moments, mindfulness moments." He then went on to state that mindfulness moments "are the moments to step back and breathe ourselves back to centeredness and calm abiding." My hope is that this meditation provided each of you with an experience of stepping back, even if just for a brief moment, into centeredness and calm abiding.

I think all of us appreciate feeling centered and calm. We would probably all like more of both. There is so much more though that a spiritual practice of breathing can offer. Since Jon Kabat-Zinn founded the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in 1979 there has been a dramatic increase in research conducted on the subject of meditation and mindfulness. Mindfulness is a relatively new term which is being used to identify practices taught by spiritual teachers for centuries. Much of the research has been confirming what the spiritual teachers have been claiming all along, that these practices are very beneficial to our wellbeing.

Let me give you a couple examples of how developing a spiritual practice of attending to our breathing can be of benefit to us as individuals. Research has shown that 20 minutes a day of focusing our attention on the breath, similar to the meditation Sandy led us in, can reduce the level of stress-related hormones in our bloodstream, and not just for an hour or two but for a day or more. The medical community has known for some time that excess amounts of such stress-related hormones can have an

array of negative effects on not only our health but on our life expectancy as well. And very recent research has been done specifically on how the breath affects our emotions —on what we feel at any given moment. This recent research found that many of the emotions we experience are accompanied by very specific breathing patterns. After the researchers learned these breathing patterns from the subjects in the first portion of their study, they then taught these patterns of breathing to people who were unaware of the emotions the breathing patterns were associated with. When this second group of subjects was asked to describe the feeling they had as they breathed in the way they had been instructed, the vast majority of subject responses matched with the corresponding emotional states from the earlier part of the research. Learning the specific breathing patterns of a variety of emotional states would definitely be an advanced step or stage in developing a breathing practice.

But what, you might ask, does this research have to do with a person's everyday life? As I mentioned earlier, there are times when my moments tend to capture me instead of me capturing them. Such moments often occur when I am experiencing a powerful emotional response, a response such as fear, anxiety, sadness, loneliness or hurt. During such moments I frequently find myself feeling stressed or even a captive to these emotions. I think many of you may have your own personal experiences with what I am describing here. Just imagine, what it would be like to have a way to consciously and intentionally reduce your stress level or even change your emotional state. What would it be worth to you to develop such an ability? Would it be worth twenty minutes a day? To me, that seems like a very reasonable price to pay to develop the ability to manage my physical and emotional states.

These are just two areas where research indicates that learning to attend to one's breathing might be beneficial to an individual. There are numerous other research findings which identify benefits too numerous or too specific to mention in this sermon.

But shouldn't a spiritual practice benefit more than just a single person, the person who engages in the practice? My answer is that a spiritual practice should benefit others as well. That said, it would appear that the description of a spiritual practice I mentioned earlier only refers to what the practice does for the individual. Here again is that description, "honest and sincere efforts done consistently on a daily basis to develop divine qualities and achieve everlasting happiness or Bliss."

Is it possible that this description may also include benefit for others—for those who the person doing a spiritual practice encounters? I believe the answer is a definite yes. For example, I know that when I am able to stay calm in situations where others are upset, whether they are fearful, anxious, sad, angry or hurt, it is more likely that the person's upset or discomfort will be less intense and subside more quickly than if I were to become upset as well. My own ability to, as Rev. Holt said in his sermon, "step back and breathe myself back to centeredness and calm abiding," is beneficial to those around me. And if I or you were able to more fully develop divine qualities, qualities such as patience, loving-kindness, and compassion, toward everyone we meet, how much better off would we and those we meet be? I believe the answer is clear—considerably better off. Breathing, the common, everyday act of inhaling and exhaling a breath, has the ability to be something that benefits not just me or you, it can benefit every person we encounter.

This morning, we have taken one small step in exploring how breathing can be a spiritual practice. There are many more steps to be taken if a person decides to do so. While the steps can be many, each next step must follow the first step. Developing a spiritual practice of breathing then is as Jon Kabat-Zinn stated in our reading.

...just a bare bones awareness of the breath moving in and the breath moving out. It doesn't have to be for a long time at any one stretch. Using the breath to bring us back to the present moment takes no time at all, only a shift in attention. But great adventures await you if you give yourself a little time to string moments of awareness together, breath by breath, moment to moment."

May your adventures be truly great for as long as you take another breath. And may you live long as you seek to discover the wonders and the benefits that each breath has to offer in this, the journey of life.

So may it be.