

17th September 2022

Breathing

"A *bhikkhu*, having gone to the forest, or to the foot of a tree, or to an empty, solitary place, sits down cross-legged, keeping his body erect, and directs his mindfulness. Then only with keen mindfulness he breathes in, and only with keen mindfulness he breathes out."

Gautama Buddha, *Mahsatipatthana Sutta*

A friend tells the story of attending a Taizé-style act of worship on a weekend retreat. A lady arrived with a very large dog, a "St Bernard" in size, and took her place, with the dog settling at her feet. For an hour the group listened to reflective readings and sang a series of Taizé chants, interspersed with periods of contemplative silence. At least the silences were *supposed* to be contemplative, but my friend couldn't get past the rasping, wheezy breathing of a crashed-out large dog, obviously well into contemplation before anyone else. I once attended a meditative session where one of the instructions at the start was to "concentrate on your breathing", just as the *bhikkhu*** did in his solitary place in the forest where he could direct his mindfulness. I hope *he* didn't have a large, wheezy dog close by, or it would have been the dog's breathing that he was mindful of and not his own! An interesting picture which got me thinking ...

In the Bible, the word in Greek that's used for "the spirit" of God is the same word as "breath" or "wind". Might breathing with the *bhikkhu*'s "keen breathing" – or even the heavy breathing of a large dog – contrive to direct us to the very breath of God? For the breath of God remains a powerful symbol of the gentle touch of God's presence. And in the heightened awareness which the events surrounding the Queen's death have created for us, might a sense of the breath of God matter even more? Revelations of God – if God is the metaphor we choose to utilise in any definition of mindfulness – are seldom dramatic, at least, they're not for me. More often we *sense* the presence of God in gentle, almost imperceptible ways, as unseen yet as noticeable as a soothing breath.

That's what we might be mindful of in our quiet places this weekend, don't you think? The *bhikkhu*'s mindfulness – and the wheezy breathing of a large dog – could be useful reminders of that.

*** An ordained male in Buddhist monasticism*

A prayer for today

I need to be mindful today. I pray that I will sense you in my quiet places. Amen

An original reflection by © Tom Gordon

Also available at <https://swallowsnestnet.wordpress.com>