Reflections on 'The Air We Breathe' –28th April 2021 – prepared by Hazel

Opening words: This week, we have a transcript. We are no longer providing video resources every week but may continue to create these important seasons of the year. We have attached some pictures/ resources to help you in your meditation. If you are meditating alone but would like to feel 'with us' we meditate in our homes at 7.30pm on Wednesday. The tradition we meditate in is Centring Prayer which is fully inclusive of all traditions of Christian Meditation and welcoming of World Traditions.

Welcome to Christian Meditation in the Centering Prayer Tradition: A very warm welcome from Fiona, Marie, Rob, Hazel and Paul, the leaders of the Christian Meditation group at Wisdom Centre, Romsey. The whole session is about 50 minutes. We meditate beginning with an opening prayer followed by reflections and then 25 minutes of silence. We hope you enjoy your meditation with us.

Opening Prayer: Eternal God, through our meditation may the ears of our hearts be attentive to your Word. May we seek and find You. Awakened to Your presence may we be joyful, embodying peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-awareness. May we follow Your teaching, seeking also, the wisdom of the Holy Fathers and Mothers. May we, therefore, commit to community, love of earth, stability, peace and justice making. **Amen**



Introduction: Over the past week, there seem to have been many references to air in a range of contexts. Last Thursday was Earth Day[1], and our treatment of the planet was given much attention, particularly air and the atmosphere. Last Monday a coroner called for a change of law following the death of the young girl, Ella Adoo-Kissi-Debrah, due to air pollution in London[2]. Over recent days, health services in India have sent out emergency requests for oxygen in response to an overwhelming number of Covid-19 patients who cannot survive without breathing support. Last Wednesday a policeman was convicted of the murder of George Floyd, who died after repeatedly crying out 'I can't breathe' whilst the policeman's knee forced down on his neck[3]. As we have just passed the fourth Sunday of Easter, I am reminded too of Jesus crying out on the cross and taking his last breath before he died.

When we meditate, many of us bring our awareness to our breath, following its rhythm, noticing its sensations, using it as an anchor to return to when our attention wanders. What is our relationship with the air that we breathe? What do we know of it and what do we notice about this vital element of life?







Definitions: Air can be defined as 'the mixture of gases that surrounds the earth and that we breathe'[4]. By volume, dry air contains 78.09% nitrogen, 20.95% oxygen, 0.93% argon, 0.04% carbon dioxide, and small amounts of other gases. Air also contains a variable amount of water vapour, on average around 1% at sea level, and 0.4% over the entire atmosphere. In broad terms, the higher the altitude, the less dense is the air. As we breathe our diaphragm pulls down rhythmically; air fills our lungs; the diaphragm releases and we exhale air with a different composition. It is richer in carbon dioxide (approx. 4%) and water vapour (approx. 6%), with oxygen decreased to around 16%.



Air and Spirit: Air is one of the four classical elements named by ancient cultures – water, earth, fire, air. As such it holds a mystical nature that connects us with others over time, as well as being the substance that connects us all physically in the present moment all around the world. What we do with our air affects others.

In his study of the four elements, John O'Donohue[5] writes: 'One of the oldest words for God in the Hebrew Scriptures is the word 'Ruach' which also means breath. Even in the early Greek Stoic philosophy the fundamental concept of Spirit was rendered by the word '*Pneuma*', which could also mean air. … In the Bible there is the lovely story of Elijah who was waiting for God. First there came a storm, but God was not in the storm. Then a wind came, but God was not in the wind. Finally, a breeze came and God was in the gentle breeze. This is a lovely recognition of God as breath and tenderness.'

The word 'Inspiration' originally had a figurative meaning pertaining to the spirit or breath of God, and imparting a truth or idea, before later developing a more literal meaning of inhaling air. It derives from the latin '*inspiratio'* which means 'to breathe or put life or spirit into the human body.'

This is reflected in the various translations describing Jesus's last breath. The King James translation describes how '*Jesus cried with a loud voice, and gave up the ghost*', whilst other translations say '*gave up his spirit*' (eg NMB). The NRSV translation states, '*Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last'*, whilst The Message version states that, '*Jesus, with a loud cry, gave his last breath'* – a giving away of life. There is an often quoted calculation that in each breath we take, we inhale one or more molecules of the last breath of Leonardo da Vinci, or Jesus, or any other deceased person we might choose to name[6].

The space around us: If we explore what air means to us and what we notice about it, this invisible, seemingly inert and unnoticed substance yields an abundance of sensations in physical reality as well as a rich metaphorical and spiritual presence. It holds both light and shadow in physical reality as well as metaphorically. Perhaps through exploring this 'element', it can bring a sense of greater connection with nature, welcoming it as we move through it and breath it in, nurture it, and in so doing recognise the Spirit in and around us. It is not simply rational: '*The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.'* John 3:8

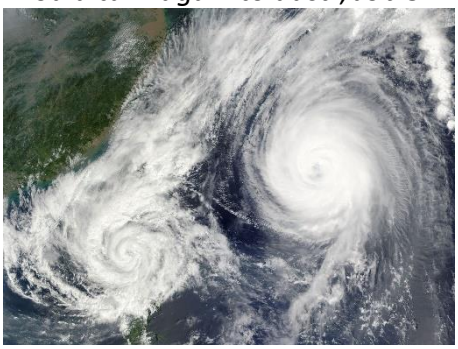
As John O'Donohue writes[5]: 'Humans are not simple creatures. They are exceptionally ancient and they are a curious mixture. They are in-between spirits, made out of clay and air. They have the earthen frame and the clay feet. But their inner world seems to be composed more of the air element. This is the world of soul and spirit within each one.'







The symbolism goes much further. Through the air our senses pick up on changes in temperature, sounds, darkness and light from nearby or far away, radio waves, phone signals, electricity in the form of lightning, movement through wind and our own motion through the air, chemicals as smells or of pure air itself as we breath it in. Such interconnectedness and transmission seems to occur spiritually. Touch or kind words given by one person, are received by another and in so doing, change the other. As we open to Divine Presence in our meditation, we connect with something ancient and immediate, individual and universal. In the book of Job we read: '*If God were to take back his spirit and withdraw his breath, all life would cease, and humanity would turn again to dust'*, Job 34:14-15.





The following work by John O'Donohue arose from his heightened awareness of nature and all that surrounded him and existed within him.

In Praise of Air' by John O'Donohue[7] (excerpts)

Let us bless the air,
Benefactor of breath;
Keeper of the fragile bridge
We breathe across.

Air, waiting outside
The womb, to funnel
A first breath
That lets us begin
To be here;
Each moment
Drawn from
Its invisible stock.

Air, along whose unseen path
Presence builds its quiet procession;
Sometimes in waves of sound,
Voices that can persuade
Every door of the heart;
Often, in tides of music
That absolve the cut of time.

Air: source of breath
That enables flowers to flourish,
And calls the dark-rooted trees
To ascend into blossom.

Air, perfect emptiness
For the mind of birds
To map with vanishings;
Womb of forms
That shapes embraces
To hold animal presence.

Let us bless the invigoration
Of clean, fresh air.

The gentleness of air
That holds and slows the rain,
Lets it fall down.

The shyness of air
That never shows its face.

The force of air
In wall after wall
Of straining wind.

In the name of the air,
The breeze
And the wind,
May our souls
Stay in rhythm
With eternal
Breath.



In bringing our awareness to air, just as we might to trees or flowers, rivers or oceans, as well as people and communities, perhaps we feel more attuned to it, grateful for it, caring for it and supported by it. We might become more at one with it, and more conscious of being infused with the universal Spirit of life.

Preparation for Meditation: Let us take a moment now to reflect and be still.

When you are ready, you may wish to move or stretch as you need to, and find a comfortable position. Perhaps take your attention to your sense of connection with the air and how it feels as you move gently in it. Now bringing your attention to your breath, you might notice the expansion of your chest and stomach, and the cool air entering your nose on the in breath, then changing to a warmer air as you release fully and gently on the out breath. If you have a sacred word you might notice its rhythm, in time with the breath, knowing that you can always return to your sacred word or your breath as your mind wanders.

Meditation for 25-minutes.

Prayer – 'This Breath'

Oh giver of life
As the diaphragm of time
Flows through the eternal
Moment
Of *this breath*,
May I dwell
In it richly,
Trusting the air that holds
And fills me,
Freely exhaling
Its joy
'til my last breath
Passes on to
The next generation of
Love.



Closing prayer: Loving and Eternal God, we thank you for the gifts of prayer, meditation and contemplation. We thank you for being with us and for this community. May we, therefore, pray with all others, as one community, one world and one spirit to One God…Moments of your personal prayer follow…**Amen.**

Thank you for meditating with us, please join us again soon. Stay safe and well.

Resources: Pictures from Pixabay.com / author

(1) Earth Day 2021
(2) BBC News (2021) Air pollution: Coroner calls for law change after Ella Adoo-Kissi-Debrah's death
(3) CWM (2021). I Can't Breathe
(4) Cambridge Dictionary online
(5) O'Donohue, J. (2010). 'The Four Elements: Reflections on Nature'.
(6) New Scientist (1996). 'Deep Breath'
(7) O'Donohue, J. (2007). 'Benedictus: A Book of Blessings'. London: Bantom Press.



Our peaceful outdoor spaces promote wellbeing and are open to all, free of charge.