

A Heartening Alternative

*Western focus on chemical therapy versus
the Eastern principle of holistic medicine*

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The veritably translucent line that separates science and spirituality has been repeatedly disputed, distorted, erased and redefined, with little chance of ever becoming distinct. When the focus is shifted toward health issues, however, the debate becomes a matter of medical priority, pitting the advocates for orthodox science against those who support methods of alternative healing.

One of the most contested methods of alternative medicine is the practice of Qigong (pronounced "Chi-Kung"), a Chinese system of channeling internal energy for the purpose of self-healing. Qigong is built upon the principle of *qi* ("chi"), the body's vital energy, which flows through pathways that connect to one's internal organs and functions (Barrett, 2001). Illness is caused when one's *qi* is disturbed, projecting the body into a state of imbalance (Journal of Traditional Eastern Health, 2001).

Although the custom is only recently acquiring popularity in North America, it has formed an extensive foundation in China. Qigong stresses the importance of healing through the cultivation of inner energy, via two major branches of practise: the Taoist School and the Buddha's School. Practitioners of either school defend the medical significance of the art through the logic that cultivation energy is akin to actual energy, which, in turn, can be justified as matter (Jauhal, 1998).

Breathing initially triggers the healing process of Qigong, and it has proven effective for thousands of years in treating mainly chronic disorders. Some such ailments include: neurosis, arthritis, anxiety attacks, muscle aches, and high stress levels (Wharton, 2001). As a significantly meditative practice, Qigong encourages recuperation by merely acting as an aid to the body's visceral functions. Anne Wharton, a patient and advocate of this physiological therapy, explains the process of healing in a basic experience:

The deeply relaxing state achieved by the practice of Qigong suppresses the excitation perimeters of the cerebral cortex (in the brain). This internal inhibition or suppression of over excitation and fatigue of the cerebral cortex allows a quiet calm state for extended periods, and this provides a receptive medium for the restoration of the brain to its normal calm and alert condition. Hyperactivity is quietened by internal control, which means conditions in the central nervous system become more conducive to the regeneration of vitality, and recovery of health from disease (Wharton, 2001).

Often described as a holistic approach to healing, Qigong may thus be seen as a sort of "grass-roots" method of disease treatment in its potent ability to focus on the initial cause of illness.

Arguably the most infamous form of Qigong, however, is Falun Dafa, or more commonly, Falun Gong (pronounced fah-luhn gong), which has proven controversial for both its effects on a political level, as well as its claims of validity as a method of healing. Falun Gong is an arrangement of five exercises that involve yoga-type postures and a wide range of limb movements (Religious Tolerance, 2001). Typically performed to calming music, this rapidly spreading movement began in China in 1992, when its founder, Li Hongzhi (a.k.a. Master Li), finished the development of its principles. In disseminating the message of "truthfulness, benevolence and forbearance," the practise places more emphasis on spirituality and healing the body's ailments on a mainly

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ADHD

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breakdown of attention, the result is more intricate than a mere sum of the brain parts.

These brain regions communicate primarily through the neurotransmitter, dopamine, involved particularly in regulating movement and emotion. A decrease in the effectiveness of this neurotransmitter is believed to play a key role in ADHD. When examining a possible explanation for this phenomenon, researchers at the University of California at Irvine have linked the malfunction to a specific dopamine receptor gene, D4 (Moyzis, 2001). The understood action of dopamine provides the main basis for handling ADHD, and methylphenidate, more commonly known as ritalin, is the most commonly prescribed drug treatment. Acting as a stimulant, ritalin inhibits the transporter for both dopamine and norepinephrine (also known as, noradrenaline), thereby blocking their reuptake. Although the amount of dopamine is not altered, its postsynaptic effect becomes amplified (Sanagare, 2000). This method of drug action has proved effective in increasing attentiveness, and studies involving children indicated that their behavior had improved as a result of using this drug (AORN Journal, 1999).

Putting children on drugs always comes with some controversy, and ritalin is no exception. Its side effects include nervousness, weight loss, appetite loss, sleep disturbances, and even impeded growth. Additionally, it may interfere with drug metabolism and have interactions with other medications. Reportedly 80% of children with ADHD, however, show improvement while receiving this drug (Dugas, 2000). While addiction has also been stated as a concern, research has shown that people with ADHD will not become addicted if the medication is taken in the prescribed form and dosage (Volkow, 1998). It has been found that, 60 minutes after ingestion, the drug reaches its peak concentration in the brain. As a result of this slower course of action, users do not experience a chemical high (AORN Journal, 1999). A recommended solution by the Canadian Pediatric Society is an annual trial without the medication. This course of action would provide an important assessment of whether the drug is necessary. Drugs are by no means the only forms of treatment; psychotherapy, cognitive behavioural therapy, as well as support groups, all prove beneficial in addressing the social, psychological and behavioural aspects of the disorder.

As research continues to delve into ADHD, scientists will be able to identify further causes, and thus will be better able to treat it. The known genetic link, supported by twin studies, is just one factor of the disease; researchers are also aware of the impact of cigarette, alcohol and drug abuse during pregnancy, and environmental toxins such as lead. Knowing further links that may act as triggers for the disorder could potentially have positive implications for preventative measures. It is clear that new questions will continue to be generated by the many implications of ADHD, but by studying the biology of the disorder, much will be illuminated about the intricate processes involved in learning, attention and activity.

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psychological premise (Asia Society, 1999). Presently, organizations of Falun Gong boast upwards of 100 million members worldwide (Religious Tolerance, 2001).

Whereas Qigong is known as the more physiologically beneficial form of exercise, Falun Gong has developed a reputation for effectiveness in calming the mind, as well as calming the body. The five basic postures are as follows:

1. *The Buddha Showing the Thousand Hands* is the first stance, whose purpose exercise is to broaden and open paths through the body's energy channels. Typically, it is performed first.
2. *The Falun Standing Stance*, the second position, is comprised of four wheel-embracing movements. Each movement is perpetuated for lengthy periods in order to strengthen the practitioner's energy potency.
3. *Penetrating the Two Cosmic Extremes*, the third exercise, is intended to capture and substitute the *qi* from the cosmos to the human body, and vice versa. For the sake of inner purification, the practitioner takes in positive *qi* and dispels negative *qi*.
4. *Falun Heavenly Circulation*, is the fourth posture, which is meant to circulate one's own energy throughout his/her body. As the term "falun" refers to an inner wheel that regulates the human system, its rotation is used to rectify all the abnormal conditions of the human body.
5. *Strengthening Supernormal Powers*, the final pose, is usually practised in the Lotus position at the end of all exercises. It is performed as a type of intensive meditation in order to achieve the deepest sense of unity among the body's organs and functions (Jauhal, 2002).

Falun Dafa Canada maintains that these exercises are a costless and effective way to improve one's circulation, respiration and overall health. On the self-improvement front, the organization claims that Falun Gong "emphasizes the cultivation of moral qualities in daily life. Practitioners lead normal family and work lives as responsible, contributing members of society. Whenever in conflict with others, a practitioner strives to look inside for self-improvement and become a better person under all circumstances... Practising Falun [Gong] has helped many people turn away from drugs, alcohol, and violence" (Falun Dafa Canada, 2001).

However, practicing Falun Gong has also sent many people to their deaths.

Condemned by the Chinese government as a cult designed to rebel against the regime, the Falun Gong movement has warranted dire implications for thousands of its followers. Before April 1999, the Chinese Communist Party encouraged Qigong and Falun Gong, as these methods of exercise were seen as cultural landmarks that were exclusive to China (Sanghvi, 2001). Upon witnessing the ever-increasing masses at public exercise sessions and protest rallies, however, the Chinese administration no longer viewed the movement as a non-threatening practice. Falun Gong was promptly outlawed (Sanghvi, 2001). But despite its current role as a vehicle for political action, the roots of the therapeutic technique continue to remain peaceful and health-oriented.

Nevertheless, the scientific validity of Falun Gong continues to be strongly questioned by Western methods of medicine.

Scientific or Holistic?

Traditional forms of Eastern medicine are too often seen as "alternative" in the West, despite having millions of followers in various parts of the globe. Also, these forms of healing are, more often than not, intergenerational remedies (O'Brien, 1998). A strong case for homeopathic healing stems from the common knowledge that it existed among the villages of the world's ancient cultures, whereas today's antibiotics did not. Arguably, the average lifespan of today's man or woman is decades greater than that of our ancestors, however, the successfulness of any type of remedy can, logically, only be evaluated by one judge: the patient.

As a basis for their claims that alternative medicine is unjustifiable on a scientific playing field, many Western doctors believe mysticism to be the root of holistic medicine:

Regrettably, most Americans are untrained in logic and science and have been favorably exposed to magical, mystical belief systems. Such persons are ill-equipped to discern pseudoscience in any field and are thus especially vulnerable to the scientific-sounding rhetoric of the quacks, hucksters, cultists, and gurus of alternative medicine (Homola and Raso, 2000).

The implication in this statement is that forms of alternative medicine, such as Qigong and Falun Gong, lack the necessary logic and scientific methodology to qualify as effective approaches to healing. Furthermore, followers of orthodox science are often apt to believe that, when a patient of unconventional medicine claims that the treatment "works", he/she only speaks from a psychosomatic point of view (Barrett, 2001).

Yet, nowadays, it is all too easy to turn to drugs and antibiotics to solve the problems of the human race. Aside from the fact that only a very small percentage of the world's population can actually afford such medication, it is necessary to recognize how blatantly said percentage exploits its medical resources (Ballentine, 2001). A prime example of such misuse lies in the overwhelming prescription rate of behaviour-modifying drugs, like Ritalin, for school-age children. The question begs to be asked: if generations upon generations of human beings have survived thus far without chemical medication, how is it that an overwhelming need for said medication should suddenly arise in the present day?

"Although many scientists are no doubt fine, upstanding individuals, science itself is totally lacking in a moral compass," states Randall Effner in *Macrobiotics Today*. "It always asks, 'Can this be done?' but never asks, 'Should this be done?'" (Effner, 2001). In this respect, critics of modern science believe that scientists configure the need to fit the drug, and not vice versa.

Additionally, students and patients of alternative medicine challenge the word "normal" and the way it has become synonymous with the word "effective." Discrimination against alternative methods of healing has, conversely, placed "unconventional" on the same plateau as "ineffective" (O'Brien, 1998). Even in the event that the results of holistic medicine are, in fact, psychosomatic or perceived cures, practitioners question why the process should matter if the patient turns out healthy in the end.

The answer is this: alternative medicine may or may not be effective, but it is definitely profitable.

Possessing a choice in their medical affairs, Canadians are not only investing in alternative exercises such as Qigong and Falun Gong therapy, but are increasingly spurning professional doctors in the search for their own cures (Hass, 1999). In places where the general public suffers from cuts to health care as well as decreased medical attention, this is an understandable option. Many people who turn to homeopathic medicine, however, do so for the comfort of having total control over their health and not being subject to the authority of doctors. Still, others attribute the growing popularity of alternative healing to its efficacy in accordance with the patient's point of view (Hass, 1999).

Regardless, holistic medicine/healing is a swiftly growing trend, not only among the general public, but also among medical institutions. Hospitals all over North America are hurrying to establish shelf space for herbal medications and full departments for alternative healing (Ballentine, 2001). If the medical society leans toward the inclination to further incorporate holistic medicine with conventional, scientific methods of treatment.

"No doubt," Effner attests, "if we were exclusively physical beings, science [alone] would have solved all of our problems a long time ago."

Fig. 1: the various positions of meditation
Photo courtesy of: Falun Dafa Canada