

CONVERSATIONS IN THE FIELD

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Embodying the Tension Between Opposites in Qigong

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- Can you master your wandering mind and embrace original unity?
- Can you calm your breath, cultivate essential energy, and sustain the suppleness of a newborn with no cares?
- Can you clarify and refine your inner vision until you perceive nothing but pure radiant light?
- Can you love without expectation or contrivance and guide others without imposing your own desires?

Lao Tzu

Like that of many Jungian scholars whom I have known, my life has been primarily oriented toward the intellectual. Yet, when I reflect upon the experiences that have been truly transformational in my path to wholeness, they have not been intellectual or analytical, but rather those that have brought me into my body. When I first came across the Jungian notion of “the second half of life,” it was easy to see the divide between the two halves of my life as before and after I started the practice of yoga. Although I have studied a lot of Jungian theory, it has been through my body that the Self has blossomed and become more open to grace. Later in life when I began to learn qigong, I remember the joy of feeling that I had now entered the “third” half of my life. For, although the energy generated by yoga is often intense, I have always experienced it as contained within myself. When I am practicing qigong, the experience seems to be more, as Jean Bolen describes the Tao: “an awareness of an underlying oneness through which we are connected to everything in the universe” (1979, p. 23). Although it is difficult to describe in words this non-languaged experience, the energy seems to be flowing through rather than within me, or rather the flow seems to be created by my movement through a boundless energy field.

The essence of both Jungian theory and the Taoist (Daoist) philosophy that underlies qigong¹ is the energy that is generated by the tension between opposites (Rosen, 1996). As a principle of psychology, this notion has always struck me as problematic because my experience is of a multiplicity of attractors rather than a movement between polarities. However, I cannot deny that much of the experience of the body does involve the tension between polar opposites such as up and down, right and left, closed and open, full and empty. Chang San-feng, in an 800-year-old Chinese classic recommends: “You should follow the T’ai Chi principle of opposites: when you move upward, the mind must be aware of down; when moving forward, the mind also thinks of moving back; when shifting to the left side, the mind should simultaneously notice the right side—so that if the mind is going up, it is also going down” (1990, p. 92).

The ultimate purpose for doing qigong is to move in union with the Tao (Frantzis, 2006). The Tao cannot be expressed in words, but Jungian authors have used words to evoke the intuitive experience of its reality. Jung himself believed: “The psychological content of the concept takes the Tao to be the method or conscious way by which to unite what is separated” (1931, p. 99). Jean Bolen alludes to the Tao as “the underlying connection between ourselves and others, between ourselves and the universe” (1979, p. xi). David Rosen interprets the pictogram for the Tao as “the Way, which, though fixed in itself, leads from beginning to end and back to the beginning” (1996, p. xvii). Its practitioners recognize doing qigong as a way of manifesting the Tao in your everyday life (Frantzis, 2006).



The Tao

Some of the reasons that people do qigong include improving health, reducing stress and gaining strength and flexibility, cultivating mental acuity and emotional well-being, deflecting aging, coordinating awareness of mind and body, and integrating inner and outer selves. One of the most dramatic effects that I have seen from the practice is on my memory, which is getting progressively better at recalling the flow of the forms. Doing qigong can change the energy of your environment into a more positive and loving atmosphere (Marin, 2006). For example, whenever I teach a class or conduct a workshop, I try to arrive a little early to start off with qigong to activate a clear, vibrant energy in the space. Qigong is often performed outdoors to heighten attunement with nature and the universe. Even in a city park, practicing qigong heightens my awareness of and connection with the tremendous vitality of trees, rocks, water, sky, and earth. Many people do their qigong in a group because it involves connecting with other people through embodiment in an energy field (Jahnke, 2002). Even if we cannot usually detect them, the patterns of chi generated by individuals do not have boundaries. There are moments when I am doing qigong when it does seem that the boundaries created by the ego are diminished, and I experience a sort of buoyancy of immersion in these harmonically resonating patterns.

The *chi* of qigong is the flow of energy or life force of Taoist theory, and the term qigong means “energy practice” (Frantzis, 2006).² The practice is based on the axiom that the mind has the ability to direct *chi*. Like Jungian practice, the flow of *chi* depends upon active imagination (Waysun Liao). It uses body-based techniques such as gentle movement, breathing, sound, massage, and meditation to promote the circulation of energy between the opposites of yin and yang (Jahnke, 1997). Qigong is based on the fundamental principles of heaven, earth, and man (Frantzis). Energy is drawn up from the earth and pulled down from heaven through the crown of the head, creating a circuit to receive energy from both sources without blockages. Thus, humans are an integral partner with heaven and earth in the cosmic balance (Hon Sat Chen, 2003).

The Alchemy of Qigong

Qigong is an alchemical process (Frantzis, 2006; Marin, 2006). In fact, Jung wrote that it was a Taoist text, *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, that steered him in the direction of alchemy (1931, p. xiv). In Taoist theory, *chi* takes on the form of five elements: water, fire, metal, wood, and earth. Water and fire represent the opposites of yin and yang. Wood corresponds to the movement from water to fire and metal the movement from fire to water. The fifth element, earth, correlates to the harmony between yin and yang. Qigong is considered an alchemical process because it physically and metaphorically cultivates one’s self by

transmuting and refining these five elements in our bodies. “Alchemy is nothing other than transmuting your inner life force so that it tastes good” (Hon Sat Chen, 2003, p. 27). The process does not result in some static final state because it is the continuous transformation and flow of *chi* that creates the patterns of well-being. You are always in movement when you do qigong. Even if you are perfectly still, your breath is constantly circulating *chi* through your body. Qigong places us in a constant state of imbalance that moves us in the direction of harmony with the universe (Marin, 2006).



The Golden Flower

Each of the five elements is linked with a complex energy system in the body that is associated with one of the inner organs (Zhang, 2008). The *chi* of metal is related with the lungs, of water with the kidneys, of fire with the

heart, of wood with the liver, and of earth with the spleen and stomach. Specific movements of qigong are often related to cultivating the five elements and associated organic systems. For example, one of the movements that nourish the kidneys involves bending forward and making a scooping motion in a wide arc. It is easy to imagine scooping up a handful of *chi* and pouring the energy into these vital organs.

For me, the experience of doing qigong evokes Jungian theory in another language. For example, Taoist theory sees the flow of *chi* as passing through energy gates in the body (Frantzis, 2006). However, the flow of *chi* can become constricted by blockages that I see as a somatic manifestation of what in Jungian terms are called complexes. Qigong movements work to dissolve these blockages, freeing trapped emotions and transforming them into usable energy. For example, when I do a particular movement that is performed to open the heart gate, I experience a physical sensation of energy flowing more freely through my heart. The various movements can each target a specific emotional transformation (Marin, 2006).

- Nourishing the metal *chi* of the lungs releases sorrow and generates courage and facilitates our ability to mature emotionally.
- Replenishing the water *chi* of the kidneys releases fear and generates creativity and nourishes emotional sensitivity.
- Circulating the fire *chi* of the heart releases depression and generates compassion and stimulates our vision of our life purpose and spiritual life.
- Stimulating the wood *chi* of the liver releases anger and generates clarity and enables us to better confront our mental limitations.
- Activating the earth *chi* of the spleen and stomach releases anxiety and generates authenticity and harmonizes our energy with the environment.

I cannot think of a better prescription than these transformations for individuation. And several Jungian authors recognize cultivation of harmony with the Tao as cultivation of the Self as conceived in Jungian theory. Heyong Shen (p. 203) sees the “Chinese way of embodied imagination” as a key to experiencing the transformation of individuation. David Rosen describes the individuation process as “virtually the same as the Taoist Way of Integrity” (1996, p. 10). Jean Bolen sees the Tao and the Self as one and the same: “The Self is usually felt as an inner perception of a numinous center, while the Tao by giving us an awareness of an underlying oneness through which we are connected to everything in the universe—often seems outside of us. Both are versions of the same vision of reality and are interchangeable” (1979, p. 23).

Qigong and Healing



Roger Jahnke regards practicing qigong as “a way of healing the world” (1997, p. 235). In China, hospital clinics are using qigong for treating both physical and mental illness based on the idea of a healing energy field (Frantzis, 2006). The movements of qigong are used to improve structural integrity, body mechanics, and physical energy as well as to calm and balance psychic energy (Jahnke). Even paralyzed patients participate by doing the movements in their imagination. Comatose patients are placed in a group of practitioners to absorb the energy. Studies looking for scientific validation of the therapeutic value of qigong, although conducted to date on a small scale, have confirmed such benefits (Sancier & Hole, 2001).

My experience of energy practice is one of healing and wholeness. I participated in my first tai chi class on a January 2 with a resolution of learning something new. The first form we tackled, the Tai Chi Easy, is an Americanized sequence developed by Jahnke (2007) as an initiation into the healing practice of chi. The movements of tai chi are very precise and have been choreographed into graceful flowing sequences that have been refined over several hundred years. Even the simplest form takes hours of practice and endless repetition. We spent several months learning the movements and celebrated by taking the form outdoors to perform in the park. However, newcomers were reluctant to join the class because of the awkwardness and dislocation of not knowing the movements. So the class was redirected towards qigong because this discipline has movements that are easier to follow and are usually repeated several times rather than choreographed into a continuous flow. Our new teacher, although American, was a Taoist priest and practitioner of Chinese medicine, who introduced us to Taoist alchemy. One of the things I noticed was the connection of qigong

practice with the number three. The movements seem to be always done in repetitions of 3, 6, 9, and occasionally 18. I also noticed that in both qigong and tai chi, the movements usually originate in the left, or yin, side of the body, for in Taoist theory all life originates in yin or water.

When the teacher moved a continent away, I was determined to continue learning and practicing. I discovered that the local Chinese Seniors' Association had classes in tai chi and Chinese dance. Like most energy practice, the classes include qigong as part of their warmup. I attended my first class on the day after the Chinese New Year with both exhilaration and trepidation, for I am not a particularly good dancer. Nor do I understand Mandarin, the principal language of the class. Although the group is extremely inclusive and always provides some explanation in English, I have never had to rely so much on my body and senses for clues as to what I am supposed to be doing. I could not help absorbing a few words, and they are revealing about the practice. By the second class I had figured out the Mandarin words for "inhale" and "exhale" and within a few weeks I could count to eight—almost everything we did other than qigong was to an eight count. The three tai chi forms we perform every class, for example, are the 8, the 16, and the 24, named for their number of movements. The first expression I picked up was *kuài lè*, which is Chinese for "happiness," and the next was *shin* or "heart."

Nevertheless, I was by no means able to follow the teacher's verbal instructions. Since the experience was embodied rather than languaged, I reflected little on my practice. However, when I started reading about the history and theory of qigong and tai chi, I began to notice many connections with my Jungian studies. The idea of being embodied in an energy field was particularly resonant with my experience of the practice as well as the correlations I explored between field theory and Jungian concepts at the 2006 IAJS conference in Greenwich (Wyatt, 2006). These correlations suggest that, by practicing qigong, the individual can generate and amplify patterns that contribute to the health of the collective.

Massage, breathing and meditation are other elements of qigong related to health. Massage is used to relieve blockages in the circulation of *chi*. This often takes the form of tapping some of the nearly one thousand acupuncture points such as those at the wrist, shoulder, and ankle. For example, I have a tendency to store my worries in my kidneys and I have found that the qigong treatment of massaging my kidneys is an excellent way of managing anxiety.

Qigong uses meditation to relax the body and calm and clarify the mind. Meditation is usually done in a standing (rather than sitting or reclining) position. It can be completely still, standing like a tree (Lam Kam Chuen, 1991). But, when you slow down your movements, calm your mind, and synchronize your breath, qigong can become a moving meditation. A tai chi, movement called "Wave Hands Like Clouds," is considered by many to be the most complete movement for a moving meditation because it contains the entire process of moving between opposites (Frantzis, 2006). As a teacher of research methodology, I tell my students that the single thing they can do that will best improve their skills as qualitative researchers is to learn to meditate. For it is in stilling yourself that you can become better attuned to both collecting and seeing the patterns in your data. The next step that I want to take in my research on qigong is to look for ways that I can incorporate it into the design of my own research methodology.

According to Ian Baker (1998), the language of the body is as important as the language of dreams. Sometimes it is easier to discover the archetypal patterns of your life in your own body than in an image (Zhuang), or a sensation in the body can evoke a feeling tone or image. Nevertheless, as recently as 1999, Joan Chodorow pointed out that the role of body experience remains largely undeveloped in Jungian thought (p.



253). We have not been accustomed to the idea that the conscious experience of physical movement produces changes in the psyche (Whitehouse, 1999, p. 52). It is only in relatively recent times that depth psychologists such as Michael Mayer have begun to integrate qigong into their practice. Mayer points out that healing requires the interweaving of body and myth. “By using Qigong postures to ground our psycho-mythological inner work, a vital pathway is opened to change our life stances” (2009, p. 325).

One of the difficulties with integrating body experience in Jungian practice is that it is non-linguaged experience. Talking about it distances us from the experience. Of course, even aside from the limitation of language in expressing the experience of the body, I can barely touch on the basic aspects of qigong in this short paper, but I hope that I have managed to provide a glimpse of the healing energy that can be experienced from this energy practice. Taoist theory sees the practice of qigong as therapeutic not only for the individual but also for the collective psyche. In a book titled *The Healing Promise of Qi*, Jahnke affirms: “With the widespread use of Qigong and Tai Chi, the purposeful evolution of individuals and groups is neither impossible nor costly” (2002, p. 278).

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NOTES

¹ Chinese words are transliterated into English in various ways, sometimes capitalized and sometimes not. Qigong is also qi gong, chi kung, Chi Kung, chi gung (the closest to its actual pronunciation), and Chi Gung. Tai Chi is also t'ai chi and taiji. The Tao is also the Dao. The name of Lao Tzu, the philosopher most closely associated with Taoism, is also transliterated in numerous ways.

² In its broadest meaning as “energy practice,” qigong includes all the Chinese energy practices such as tai chi and kung fu. The term is customarily used in a more limited sense to refer to energy practices for healing as opposed to the martial arts. The comments in this paper generally apply to all forms of Chinese energy practice.

³ In references, Chinese names are sometimes printed with the surname first (with no comma), in accordance with Chinese custom, and sometimes with the surname last, in accordance with Western norms. In references, it is not always obvious which usage is being employed.

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