

# **Qigong and Trauma**

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Today I would like to talk about Qigong and Trauma. I will approach this topic from a personal perspective and I will describe some of my own experiences with Qigong as a means to deal with trauma.

The inspiration to present my ideas about Qigong and Trauma from my personal experience came from Sigmund Freud, the founder of Psychoanalysis, who used many of his own dreams and personal insights in his work about the interpretation of dreams.

When I was in China 1992 I first got to know Qigong, but I did not practice on a regular basis. I started to learn and practice Chanmi Qigong 禅密气功 with Master Jiang Xueying here in Vienna in autumn 2000. Chanmi Qigong is a system which consists of Buddhist meditation practice from the school of Chan (Zen) and the secrete methods of the Vajrayana school (Mi, jingangcheng 金刚乘). For many centuries it was practiced and handed down secretly within the family of grandmaster Liu Hanwen. His ancestors were both Buddhist practitioners and doctors of Chinese medicine. Therefore the theory of Chinese medicine is also included in this Qigong system. Grandmaster Liu started to simplify the methods of Chanmi Qigong so that it could be easily understood and practiced by everyone. He started to teach in public at the beginning of the 1980<sup>th</sup>. It was spread in the Peoples Republic of China quickly

and later on also in the West. Master Jiang Xueying is the successor of Grandmaster Liu and now she is the lineage holder of this Qigong School.

After I had learned and practiced Chanmi Qigong for about one year we had a special course. There I first got to know the exercise of the double cloud (shuangyungong 双云功) which is a method of spontaneous movements (zifadonggong 自发动功). The specialty of this method is that the practitioner instead of making a certain set of movements he/she consciously quits control and the Qi takes over and moves the body in all different ways. During this exercise one can experience very strong body movements, or massaging and tapping of the body, or the expression of strong emotions like crying, laughing, shouting etc.

At the beginning it was very difficult to let go of the conscious control over my body. But at one point of the exercise I realized, that it was not me who moved the body but there was something else which took over and made the movement. As I started to let go I had the feeling that something was pulling me backwards. I started to walk backwards and after a while various kinds of movements developed by themselves.

After practicing the method of shuangyungong for a few times I had a very intense experience while doing this exercise. At one time I was pulled to the ground, lying face down and I started to breathe very rapidly. Although it was a bright summers day, I had the feeling that it was getting dark around me and I felt like my body was melting and dissolving into the earth. It felt as if I was dying. I experienced death at that moment. After finishing the exercise I realized that this feeling was connected with the death of my brother some years before. He had committed suicide and I had been the one who found his dead body lying face down. The death of my brother was a traumatic event in my life.

The difficulties of dealing with psychic trauma are that it is forced to stay unconscious, that it cannot be remembered because the affections connected with it are too forceful and threatening for a person. But the traumatic experience is constantly acted out in a person's life in different ways. Sigmund Freud stated that psychic trauma is of fundamental importance in the etiology of neurosis. Some persons develop strong defense mechanisms to avoid the recurrence of the trauma in their

lives, for example inhibitions. For these reasons the healing of psychic trauma becomes difficult and it can also lead to various bodily symptoms like chronic pain, high blood pressure, insomnia, chronic fatigue syndrome etc.

My personal experience with Qigong was that during the exercise the memory of the traumatic event came back very clearly, including the sensation of smell and sound and feelings of loss, fear and total destruction of my personal structure. This was a crucial point in my healing process. During my Qigong practice over the years I experienced that my body had a memory of that event. For some time I was in tears as soon as I started to practice Qigong and to relax my body. The blocked emotions of sorrow in my chest were slowly dissolving. The basic method of Chanmi Qigong is comprised of gentle wavelike movements of the spine with the visualization of Qi flowing inside the columnar vertebra. I realized that my feeling of weakness and inability to straighten up my lumbar spine was connected with the traumatic event of the death of my brother. I was able to remember that at that moment I felt all the vital force being drained out of my spine. In the theory of Chinese medicine a shock or trauma leads to a disturbance of the communication between the heart and the kidney, between shen 神 (mind, spirit) and jing 精 (essence). This causes an imbalance of Yin and Yang and the flow of Qi and blood in the body. Shock and terror disperses the shen. It is like birds suddenly flying up off a tree. The heart is not able to hold the shen anymore. The Qi becomes chaotic. The lumbar spine is the house of the kidney. The kidney is associated with the emotion of fear. An excess of fear weakens the kidney. Qigong practice helps to nurture the kidney energy and therefore it also has a positive influence on dealing with the emotion of fear.

How do the methods of Chanmi Qigong help to deal with traumatisations?

The basic of all kinds of Qigong is the relaxation of the body so that Qi and blood can circulate well in the body. In Chanmi Qigong there are two methods. It is the opening of the third eye (zhan huizhong 展慧中) and the relaxation of the perineum (song michu 松密处).

Huizhong 慧中 in Chinese has the meaning center of wisdom. It is an important pass way for Qi. In old times it was called a window for the “shen guang” (神光), the light of

shen. Information can be sent out or taken in. It is a point located on the forehead between the eyebrows. To open it is to feel that the area of the forehead is opening. This is similar to Buddhist images which show a third eye on their forehead. The method is to look inside ones body and to see, imagine and feel that a smile is beginning in the region of the heart. This smiling extends throughout the whole body so that each cell starts to smile and every pore of the skin is like a small mouth smiling.

Michu 密处 in Chinese means secret space. It is the acupuncture point huiyin located between the anus and the genitals. To relax this part one should relax the anus, genitals, perineum and the whole abdomen. In Chanmi Qigong the secret is to feel a slight sexual sensation at the perineum and a feeling of warmth at the inside of the thighs.

These two methods, to open the third eye and to relax the perineum, help to relax the whole body quickly. It leads to the regulation of the body, the mind and the breath (san tiao 三调) and helps the communication of Yin and Yang in the body.

People who have experienced trauma tend to a numbing of and dissociation from their body. Already at the beginning of the Chanmi Qigong exercises, when one starts to relax, it can help to enhance the perception of the body. In time one can feel more and more at ease with ones body. Through the simple method of the whole body smiling one learns to let go of emotions like aggression, fears, sorrow etc. and finds out that these emotions are not something solid and fixed and therefore they become less threatening and easier to deal with in daily life.

Zhuji gong (筑基功), the basic method of Chanmi Qigong, includes gentle flowing movements of the spine combined with the visualization (guanxiang 观想) of Qi flowing inside the vertebral column. The spine is one of the major energy channels of our body. It is part of the central nervous system and therefore connected with the organs and all tissues and structures of the body. Blockages in the vertebral column can have a negative influence on the organs and also on the emotions. For example blockages in the thoracic spine can lead to feelings of depression. Through the exercise of the basic movements of Chanmigong blockages in the vertebral column

and obstructions in the Qi and blood circulation can be removed. Body and mind seen as an entity influence each other. If the body becomes more flexible the structure of our mind can become more flexible as well.

Huigong 慧功, the wisdom exercise, is another example of Chanmi Qigong methods which can help to deal with traumatisation. This method helps to clear the body from illnesses and to take in new Qi on one hand side, on the other it helps to develop intelligence and enhances the function of the brain. During one part of the exercise the practitioner expands the whole body so that he/she becomes one with the universe and at the same time opens the third eye to look outside. The xu wo 虚我, the empty self, goes out through the third eye to travel around the universe (aoyou 遨游). Afterwards Qi and the xu wo are taken in again through the third eye. To support the coming back of the empty self one can call one's name. I believe that this exercise has a strong connection to ancient shamanistic practices. In Zhuang zi 庄子 we can find the expressions to "fly like a bird without wings" and to "wander and travel around the universe".

When a person experiences a shock, terror or trauma the shen is scattered and it is said that some parts of the persons self cannot come back. Through this disintegration of the shen the person will develop illnesses later on in life. To call back the lost parts of the shen will lead to cure. These techniques are still used by shamans in different cultures. In Chanmi Qigong practice it is also a part of supporting the healing process. A practitioner, who had experienced traumatic events in her childhood, said that after calling her name and bringing back these lost parts, she felt that chest and thoracic vertebra became warm, bright and full of Qi. This sensation endured over some time and she had the feeling that she became more alive and aware of this part of her body.

My own experience was that it really feels like something coming back inside my body while spontaneous movements take place in the body at the same time. In daily life I felt less jumpy and anxious afterwards.

In western psychoanalysis and psychotherapy it is well known that traumatized people often develop chronic pain syndromes, high blood pressure, insomnia,

chronic fatigue syndrome etc. These bodily symptoms can be treated with Qigong very well.

An example for one of the exercises of a higher level in Chanmi Qigong is the method of the enlightened heart (mingxin fa 明心法). It is practiced sitting in meditation posture. It combines special mudras (shouyin 手印), mantras (zhouyu 咒语) and visualization (guanxiang 观想). Here we can see the connection of Chanmigung with Buddhist philosophy and meditation practice. The practitioner expands himself with the region of the heart as center until he/she unites with the universe. Special gestures of the hands and special sounds help to connect with the Qi of the universe and to collect the Qi in the center of the heart region. Doing this exercise I often had the feeling of becoming one with the universe. My heart started to open up, becoming wide and empty of any thoughts and feelings. This experience helps to realize that our emotions are not something solid but constantly changing, developing and passing by. But we also come to know that there is something behind which is not changing and therefore it is possible to develop the feelings of trust and confidence in life.

In western psychotherapy methods today Buddhist concepts of awareness or interconnectedness are already used successfully.

In China traditionally Qigong is seen as a way of holistic self-development. These exercises were not only practiced to support the health of the body but to cultivate one's personality. This is expressed in the terms xiuyang 修养 self cultivation or xiu da dao 修大道 to cultivate the great way. This implies the social behavior of the individual and also the philosophical and spiritual development.

Although I have been doing Chanmi Qigong exercises for nine years I still don't know how it exactly works, how these methods bring about this change in the my self. Every time I practice it is different and every person has different experiences when doing the same exercises.

I have done psychoanalysis for one and a half years. During this time I saw an analyst three times a week. Although I often had the feeling that nothing special happened during these hours, I was just lying on the couch and talking, it had a great

effect and brought about a big change. It is the special analytic setting and we can understand the process with psychoanalytic theory formulated by Sigmund Freud. Through my experience of Qigong and psychoanalysis I believe that it is possible to understand Qigong better if we use the western science of psychoanalysis. Natural science can show and prove that Qi really exists, but it does not tell us anything how Qigong methods are working.

It is said that it is essential in Qigong that a method is transmitted personally from a master to a student. In psychoanalysis we know that an important part of the therapeutic effect is transference. I believe that this is the same with Qigong. The transference and counter transference between the Qigong practitioner and the Qigong master seem to be necessary for the healing process and development of the student.

One week before I stopped doing analysis I had a dream about my analyst. She was lying on a bed in a very small dark room. She was enchained to the bed and suffering enormous physical pain. She was getting tortured but no other person was there. At some point in the dream it was not her but me lying on that bed. When we talked about this dream in the analytic session I realized that analysis was sometimes very painful for me and that I would wish that all my emotional suffering should stay with her so that I could be free of it. But it also became clear that the pain and suffering is not caused from outside. The chains that hold me in the state of pain are an illusion, a fantasy. They are a symbol of the structures of behavior that were formed in my childhood through my family setting. For me it once more became obvious that this is the same as the Buddhist concept of suffering. It is an illusion which I hold on to and this is the cause for pain. To realize psychic patterns like that through the work with the unconscious in psychoanalysis also brings about change in the energetic system of the body. I often experienced loosening of tensions in the body during the analytic therapy.

If we approach the topic Qigong and Trauma from a social and historical view, we can find that the Qigong movement (Qigong re 气功热) in the PRC during the 1980<sup>th</sup> and 1990<sup>th</sup> was a way for Chinese society to cope with the trauma of the Cultural Revolution. After the 10 years of chaos Chinese people were turning back towards

their cultural roots. Qigong practice was one traditional way to deal with the symptoms of traumatisation like chronic pain syndromes, high blood pressure, insomnia and neurasthenia. There are many reports of Qigong practitioners from that time who had become ill during Cultural Revolution and took up practicing afterwards. Many of them have written amazing stories of healing themselves. Now we find that psychotherapy is getting very popular in China and Qigong becomes more and more appreciated in the West. Through this exchange new ways of therapeutic approaches will be found to meet the needs of people today.

From my point of view and experience so far I think that it is very fruitful to have an exchange and dialogue between Qigong and psychoanalysis. It will help to support the therapeutic effect and bring about a more profound understanding. In future I hope that we can find a way to formulate some theoretical basis.

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