

FALUN GONG 27 YEARS LATER

The spiritual discipline flourishes despite the Chinese regime's brutal persecution



FIVE THOUSAND PEOPLE from around the world form an enormous falun emblem, the symbol of the spiritual discipline Falun Gong, also known as Falun Dafa. The emblem consists of ancient symbols, the yellow srivatsa from Buddhism and the red-black and red-blue taiji symbols from Taoist teachings. Below the falun are the Chinese characters for truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance, the core moral principles of Falun Gong. Since its introduction in mainland China in 1992, the meditation practice has spread to more than 70 countries. Its popularity in China—reaching 70 million

to 100 million practitioners by 1999—was seen by the Chinese regime as a threat to its authoritarian rule and atheistic ideology. In July 1999, the Chinese regime launched a brutal persecution, rounding up practitioners and throwing them into detention facilities, where they are often tortured. Despite Beijing's attempts to eradicate the faith and vilify its adherents by spreading hate propaganda, Falun Gong practitioners have persevered in raising awareness about the persecution. The spiritual discipline is still widely practiced inside and outside China.



1992: Falun Gong is taught to the public... Falun Gong is first publicly introduced by Mr. Li Hongzhi on May 13, 1992, in the city of Changchun, China.

1994: Mr. Li gives lectures throughout China... Falun Gong is well on its way to becoming the most popular system of qigong in the country.

1995: Mr. Li leaves China to spread the practice around the world... A number of Swedes attend a public lecture given by Mr. Li introducing Falun Gong in Gothenburg, Sweden.

1996: The Party applies pressure... As Falun Gong becomes more popular in China, tensions begin to emerge with the Chinese Communist Party.

1998: The lecture in the Assembly Hall at the United Nations Office at Geneva... In 1998, Mr. Li Hongzhi lectures widely around the world.

1999: More than 10,000 Falun Gong practitioners peacefully appeal at Zhongnanhai leadership compound in Beijing... On April 25, 1999, more than 10,000 Falun Gong practitioners appeal peacefully near the Zhongnanhai Party leadership compound.

The Chinese Communist Party launches the persecution of Falun Gong... On July 20, 1999, the persecution of Falun Gong begins with the abduction of hundreds of practitioners from their homes by security forces.

Falun Gong, Popular and Serene Meditation

THE PERSECUTION RAGES ON, 20 YEARS LATER

EPOCH TIMES STAFF

Approximately 100 million people in China were practicing Falun Gong by mid-1999. But even with 1 in 13 Chinese people practicing Falun Gong, it was nearly unknown outside of China—until the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) banned the spiritual discipline in July 1999 and instituted a far-reaching persecution campaign.

A key component of all the CCP's persecution campaigns is flooding the airwaves, printing presses, and diplomatic channels with false propaganda. The international media, which relied on Chinese state media for information, was a major target of the anti-Falun Gong propaganda. Thus, the first and often only exposure to Falun Gong that many people outside China had was an intentionally distorted picture that was choreographed by the CCP.

Mind and Body

Falun Gong refines, or cultivates, both the mind and the body, which makes it difficult for Western terminology to classify neatly. Is it a spiritual practice, or is it physical exercises? In fact, both are integral to Falun Gong.

There are five exercises in Falun Gong. Four are done standing, and one is a cross-legged meditation. Gentle and slow, they have names like "Falun Heavenly Circulation" and "Penetrating the Two Cosmic Extremes." People often report feeling refreshed or energized after exercising.

Falun Gong is also known as "Great Way." The discipline considers the fundamental principle of the universe to be "Zhen, Shan, Ren." Zhen translates to truth and truthfulness. Shan is compassion, benevolence, and goodness. Ren is tolerance, forbearance, and endurance. The teachings expound on this point to great depth.

Early Development

For thousands of years in China, spiritual practices have been handed down quietly from master to student. The teacher, or master, of Falun Gong, Li Hongzhi, learned the practice privately and then brought it out to teach anyone who wanted to learn, starting in May 1992. Mr. Li crisscrossed China through the end of 1994. He held 54 seminars, each 8 to 10 days long, wherever he was invited. He lectured on the principles, taught the exercises, and fielded questions.

At first, only a few hundred attended each seminar, but by the end of 1994, lecture halls seating several thousand filled up, as word-of-mouth preceded his visits. People told family, friends, and neighbors about how their ailments, from skin conditions to heart problems, were easing or vanishing. They also related how following the teachings led to better relationships with spouses and co-workers and, more generally, to a peaceful and relaxed state of mind.

The practice continued growing by word of mouth, from the tens of thousands who heard Mr. Li's lectures in person, to tens of millions by mid-1999. Practitioners included the old and the young, university professors and peasants, and military generals and Communist Party members. Practice sites popped up in public parks all across China. Volunteer assistants taught newcomers how to do the movements and brought a tape or CD player to play the music that accompanies the exercises.

After doing the exercises together, while some practitioners would go off to work, some would sit down and read from the main book, "Zhuan Falun," authored by Mr. Li. Refining the mind and character come through studying this book and other teachings—the texts of which are available for free online—and then applying what is learned in daily life.

MINGHUI



DAI BING/THE EPOCH TIMES



BENJAMIN CHASTEN/THE EPOCH TIMES



People often report feeling refreshed or energized after exercising.

Global Spread

Falun Gong practitioners took the practice with them to their universities and companies outside China, with many universities hosting Falun Gong student clubs. Mr. Li gave a full seminar in Sweden in early 1995 and lectured at conferences held by students in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, and elsewhere, before the CCP began its persecution campaign in 1999.

Brainwashing Centers

The sentencing of Chinese citizens to labor camps is arbitrary—but there is no law at all that governs brainwashing centers in China, which have a variety of names in different parts of the country. Sometimes they are called "admonition centers," sometimes "legal education bases." They can be set up in empty hotel rooms, in abandoned houses, or in the expansive facilities previously used by labor camps.

(Top) Falun Gong morning practice in Guangzhou, southern China, in 1998.

(Above L) Falun Gong practitioners meditate in New York's Central Park on May 10, 2014.

(Above R) Falun Gong practitioners perform a standing exercise at Union Square in New York as they celebrate World Falun Dafa Day on May 12, 2016.

EPOCH TIMES STAFF

This July marks the 20th year of the persecution of Falun Gong in China. To this day, Chinese authorities routinely round up practitioners around the country and detain them in prisons, labor camps, brainwashing centers, and other detention facilities—often without trial, or on trumped-up charges.

Labor Camps

When the Chinese Communist Party began its persecution of Falun Gong in 1999, it used one of its tried-and-true tools: the concentration camp. Called "laojiao suo" in Chinese, or "re-education through forced labor" in English, these camps could be found sprinkled across China, far out in the countryside or secreted in bustling urban enclaves. The smallest of labor camps could house hundreds of prisoners, while the largest could host thousands.

Falun Gong practitioners were usually detained in these camps for years on end, their sentences often extended arbitrarily. In the camps, the practitioners were forced to make products for export, subjected to brainwashing, and tortured, sometimes to death, in an attempt to have them renounce their beliefs.

Throughout the 2000s, the Masanjia labor camp in northeastern China gained infamy for its extreme methods of torture and forced ideological conversion. Torture techniques developed at Masanjia—including the use of electric batons in the mouths and in the vaginas of women, or the binding of Falun Gong practitioners in excruciating positions for days on end—were later spread to other labor camps around China, and

the prison authorities at Masanjia were even given awards for their efforts.

In December 2012, Masanjia made international headlines, when Oregon resident Julie Keith found a handwritten letter embedded in a Halloween decoration kit that was manufactured in China. The letter from a Masanjia detainee explained how Falun Gong practitioners were detained for their beliefs and forced into slave labor. Keith shared the letter with the media, and the story was quickly reported nationally and beyond. It was embarrassing exposés like these, experts say, that helped accelerate the shutdown of the labor camp system, which had become a lightning rod for criticism both inside and outside China.

Sometime late in 2013, the Chinese regime began closing the labor camps. But the arbitrary detention and torture of Falun Gong practitioners did not stop. Instead, adherents have increasingly been detained in an even more opaque and extrajudicial system: "legal education centers," or, as they are called by Falun Gong detainees, "brainwashing centers." In some cases, they were the same facilities as the labor camps but were simply renamed.

Brainwashing Centers

The sentencing of Chinese citizens to labor camps is arbitrary—but there is no law at all that governs brainwashing centers in China, which have a variety of names in different parts of the country. Sometimes they are called "admonition centers," sometimes "legal education bases." They can be set up in empty hotel rooms, in abandoned houses, or in the expansive facilities previously used by labor camps.

Officially, these brainwashing centers do not even exist. There is no administrative de-



Two Chinese police officers arrest a Falun Gong practitioner at Tiananmen Square in Beijing on Jan. 10, 2000.

partment of the Chinese regime that claims responsibility for them, and there are no laws on the books explaining how they ought to be run, or who should be sent to them, under what circumstances, and for how long. Instead, they appear to be set up by local police and state security forces on an ad hoc basis.

Once detained in these facilities, Falun Gong practitioners and other detainees are denied access to a lawyer or any right of appeal—they are fully at the mercy of their guards, which, according to accounts from those who have survived detention at these centers, may often include sadists who enthusiastically torture and beat detainees to extract confessions or renunciations of their faith. Falun Gong practitioners locked in brainwashing centers may be forced to watch videos attacking the practice all day, or be shocked with electric batons, punched in the face, suffocated, or subjected to dozens of other techniques of abuse or torture.

Organ Harvesting

Since the early 2000s, Falun Gong practitioners imprisoned in labor camps and prisons in China have been used as a live organ bank—killed as their or-

gans are harvested on demand—according to a growing body of evidence collected by researchers and journalists around the world.

The regime's security forces and military hospitals play a big role in the process, while the entire operation is overseen by the 610 Office, the Gestapo-like secret police agency expressly set up by the Communist Party to carry out the persecution of Falun Gong. The first evidence of these activities surfaced in 2006, when investigators made calls to hospitals around China posing as family members of individuals in need of organ transplants—and demanding that the organs be from Falun Gong practitioners.

Hospital staff readily assured them that they would indeed be able to provide Falun Gong organs. At that time, hospitals also openly advertised the ability to provide a transplant of any type of organ within mere weeks, or even days. This is an impossibility in the West, where a transplant recipient must wait until another individual dies before he or she can receive an organ.

In China, the "donor" is killed in the process of extracting the

organs. The Chinese authorities have acknowledged that they use the organs of prisoners who are executed for crimes—but executions in China are only in the low thousands each year, and many of the organs from prisoners are not viable for transplant because of the prevalence of diseases like hepatitis.

Moreover, to provide any organ within a week on a rolling basis requires a very large live donor bank—large enough to accommodate differences in tissue and blood type between "donors" and recipients—that can be tapped at any time.

China claims that since 2015, it has transitioned its organ transplantation system from using prisoners' organs to relying solely on those from citizen volunteers who die from natural causes.

The China Organ Harvest Research Center, a nongovernmental organization based in the state of New York, found in a 342-page report published in 2018 that prisoners of conscience continue to be killed for their organs.

The center cites as evidence the fact that the number of transplants continues to outpace the number of legal donations; the fact that organs are still available "on-demand" to foreigners; and the fact that there is still almost no oversight.

Chinese doctors carry fresh organs for transplant at a hospital in Henan Province on Aug. 16, 2012.



SCREENSHOT/SHU.COM

2001: Falun Gong practitioners from 12 countries gather on Tiananmen Square, Beijing... On Nov. 20, 2001, 36 practitioners from 12 countries gather on Tiananmen Square and meditate in protest; within a few minutes, they are arrested and some are beaten.

2004: Quit the Chinese Communist Party movement begins... After The Epoch Times publishes the "Nine Commentaries on the Communist Party"—detailing the Party's full history of abuses including the Cultural Revolution, the Tiananmen Square massacre, and the persecution of Falun Gong—the Quit the CCP or Tuidang (in Chinese) movement is born.

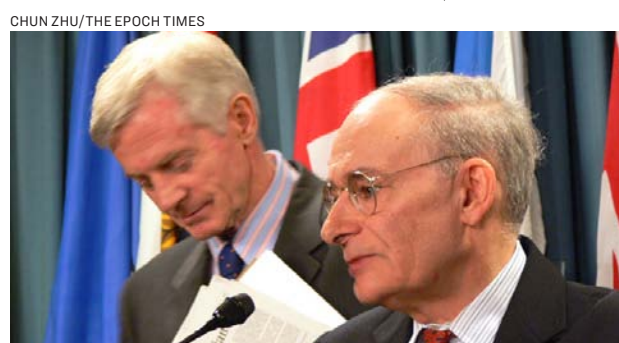
2006: A report on organ harvesting of Falun Gong practitioners is published... Former Canadian Secretary of State David Kilgour and human rights attorney David Matas release a report with evidence indicating that Chinese military hospitals and labor camps are cooperating to harvest organs from imprisoned Falun Gong practitioners.

2013: 1.5 million people worldwide sign a petition to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights... On International Human Rights Day (Dec. 10), a petition is submitted to the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights calling for "an immediate end to forced organ harvesting from Falun Gong practitioners in China."

2014: 'Human Harvest' documentary is released, exposing China's organ transplant trade... Through interviews with Chinese hospitals, transplant doctors, and other sources, the film provides damning evidence that the Chinese regime is systematically extracting organs from prisoners of conscience, mostly Falun Gong practitioners.

2016: US Congress unanimously passes resolution expressing concern for forced organ harvesting practices in China... The lower chamber of the U.S. legislature passes House Resolution 343 on June 13, calling out China for widespread organ harvesting from nonconsenting prisoners of conscience, "including from large numbers of Falun Gong practitioners and members of religious and ethnic minority groups."

2018: Number of Chinese people quitting the Chinese Communist Party reaches 300 million... Chinese communities around the world celebrate when the number of public withdrawals from the Chinese Communist Party and its affiliated organizations reaches 300 million.





The Tian Guo Marching Band marches through Times Square during the World Falun Dafa Day parade in New York on May 16, 2019.



A girl in Peruvian attire.



The parade passes Grand Central Terminal.



Women wearing traditional Korean attire wave to onlookers.



Paradegoers hold placards bearing images of Falun Dafa practitioners who have died from the persecution in China.



A woman in traditional Indonesian attire.



Practitioners hold signs calling for former Chinese dictator Jiang Zemin to be brought to justice. Jiang ordered the persecution of Falun Dafa in 1999.



A child holds a Falun Dafa film.



Practitioners call for an end to forced organ harvesting from Falun Dafa practitioners in China.



A woman on a lotus flower float waves to parade onlookers.

10,000-Strong Parade in New York Highlights Persecution in China

Parade celebrates World Falun Dafa Day while highlighting 20 years of suppression

CATHY HE & EVA FU

NEW YORK—Striking traditional costumes, colorful banners bearing messages of hope, and resonant melodies performed by a 500-strong marching band—these were the highlights of a parade held in Manhattan on May 16 to commemorate World Falun Dafa Day.

Falun Dafa, also known as Falun Gong, is a spiritual practice introduced to the public in 1992, consisting of meditative exercises and a set of moral teachings centered around the principles of truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance.

While it is freely practiced in more than 70 countries, the discipline is suppressed in China as a result of a brutal persecution launched by the Chinese communist regime almost two decades ago.

Nearly 10,000 Falun Dafa practitioners from dozens of countries marched across Manhattan, from the United Nations Plaza at 47th Street and Second Avenue, through Times Square, and finally ending near the

Francisco La Russa, a video editor from Buenos Aires, said his health improved after starting the practice in 2012. He used to experience back pain, but all that disappeared within a month after learning the exercises.

Chinese consulate on 12th Avenue.

The parade was both a celebration of the peaceful practice and a remembrance of those suffering under the persecution in China.

"We want to show the positive energy of Falun Dafa practitioners," said Sofia Dreveno, a 3-D graphic designer from Sweden.

Even though the parade aims to raise awareness about the brutal persecution, Dreveno said practitioners wished to do this from a positive starting point.

"That's why we are all so colorful and in good spirits, because to be able to [help others] understand the most difficult thing, we need to do it in a positive manner," she said.

The mood among the thousands of practitioners seemed to match their vibrantly colored clothing, which glowed under the soft spring sunlight. The sound of beating drums played by a Chinese waist-drum troupe, and tunes performed by the Tian Guo Marching Band, composed of practitioners from more than a half dozen countries, further charged the atmosphere.

Lives Changed

Dreveno, wearing a yellow shirt emblazoned with the words "Falun Dafa Is Good," said practicing Falun Gong helped her develop something she had always yearned for.

"Ever since I was very young, I ... always wished that I would have a self-confidence that would make me unbreakable in any situation," she said.

"I gradually understood that this [practice] is what will ... get [me] there."

Francisco La Russa, a video editor from Buenos Aires, said his health improved after starting the practice in 2012. He used to experience back pain, but all that disappeared within a month after learning the exercises.

After reading the main text of Falun Dafa, "Zhuang Falun," La Russa realized the practice was more than just physical exercises, he said.

"This [practice] has very pure, very profound principles that I want to follow," he said.

La Russa said he tries to apply the principles of truthfulness, compassion, and

tolerance in his daily life to improve his character. For instance, before La Russa started practicing, he was very arrogant and argumentative, but the teachings of Falun Dafa, he said, gave him a new perspective.

"It [provided] a way for me to really be a better person," he said.

Peder Giertsen, a retired management consultant from Norway who took up the practice in 1999, said Falun Dafa taught him to be kind and think of others, even when it seems difficult to do so.

"I don't have any enemies anymore," he said. "And I used to have quite a bit because I was rough, and I was tough, and I was direct."

Olivier Grenier-Leboeuf, a university student majoring in mathematics and computer science at McGill University in Canada, said that after he started learning Falun Dafa two years ago, he stopped wasting his time on video games and surfing the internet.

"I've changed my life when it comes to my outlook," he said. "I used to waste a lot of my time and have all sorts of bad thoughts.

I've noticed a strong purification of my mind after practicing."

Grenier-Leboeuf also plays trombone in the Tian Guo Marching Band. He hopes that the band's performances can spread the message that Falun Dafa is good.

"I think music can really touch people's souls. It's a different way of communication," he said.

Ending the Persecution

Prior to the parade, a rally was held at the Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza near U.N. headquarters, where speakers highlighted that the Chinese regime's suppression continues until this day.

"Organ harvesting atrocities are still going on in China, which is very severe," Teresa Chu, an attorney from Taiwan and spokesperson for the Taiwan Falun Gong Attorney Group, told The Epoch Times. The legal advocacy nonprofit brings lawsuits against Chinese officials responsible for the persecution when they travel abroad to countries in Asia, and advocates for

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OLIVIER GRENIER-LEBOEUF
University student,
from Canada

parliaments to pass legislation on Falun Gong issues, including organ harvesting.

In 2006, reports emerged that the Chinese regime was extracting organs from living prisoners of conscience, mainly Falun Dafa practitioners, for use in the country's organ transplant system.

An in-depth report by transplant ethics group International Coalition to End Transplant Abuse in China, released in 2016, found a huge discrepancy between China's official transplantation figures and the number of transplants performed at hospitals.

By analyzing the public records of 712 Chinese hospitals that carry out liver and kidney transplants, the report showed that roughly 60,000 to 100,000 transplants are conducted each year, far outstripping the official number of 10,000 to 20,000 per year. The shortfall, the report concluded, was largely made up of organs extracted from Falun Dafa practitioners held inside China's detention facilities.

In December 2018, an international independent people's tribunal held hearings

in the United Kingdom and issued an interim judgment stating that forced organ harvesting from prisoners of conscience has taken place in China "on a substantial scale." The final judgment is expected in June this year.

Wang Zhiyuan, spokesperson for U.S.-based nonprofit World Organization to Investigate the Persecution of Falun Gong (WOIPFG), also drew attention to the ongoing atrocities in China.

"[The persecution] has continued for 20 years. ... Organ harvesting, an unprecedented crime in the world, is still happening," Wang told The Epoch Times.

"We, WOIPFG, will continue investigating any crimes of persecution against Falun Gong and the related institutions or individuals. No matter where it is or how long it takes, we will go after them, until the end."

For Li Mingxi, who was dressed as a lotus flower fairy in the parade, the persecution has exacted a heavy personal toll.

Li's grandfather was sent to prison in the

northeastern province of Hebei for practicing Falun Dafa in 2010. After three days, he was released, but he could no longer speak or move his body. He was confined to his bed, only able to open and close his eyes. He died a few days later.

Li was taking part in a high school summer program when she heard the news. She rushed to her grandfather's home to see him during his final moments.

"I was terrified. Such a person who strives to be good would be arrested by the police—I felt that the whole world had become a place of darkness, and it was scary," Li said.

Li started practicing Falun Dafa in 2016 after she resettled in New York. Within half a year, her health problems that had developed after childbirth, such as high blood pressure, leg pains, and blurry eyesight, were all gone. She also no longer had to take medicine or use herbal remedies.

"I'm really happy to be in the land of the free and to show everyone the amazing benefits that the belief has brought me," she said.

(L-R)

Peder Giertsen, from Norway, holds his national flag ahead of the parade.

Francisco La Russa, from Argentina, wears a traditional gaucha outfit ahead of the parade.

Sofia Dreveno from Sweden.

Olivier Grenier-Leboeuf, a Tian Guo Marching Band member, holds his trombone ahead of the parade.





SAMIRABOUADU/THE EPOCH TIMES

“From that day onwards, [my] life—everything—turned upside down.”

JASON XIONG
Falun Gong practitioner

Xiong Wenqi, a Falun Gong practitioner tortured for his a in China, in Manhattan, New York, on May 16, 2019.

In Defiance of a Brutal Persecution

Falun Gong practitioner Jason Xiong tells his story of holding steadfast to his faith and courage in the face of violent torture

CATHY HE

NEW YORK—For more than a year, Jason Xiong was tied to a bed in a small prison cell and force-fed through a tube inserted into his nose going into his stomach. All four of his limbs were outstretched, lashed with ropes to the edges of a wooden bed frame.

Every few days or so, prison inmates would funnel some liquid sustenance, such as soy milk, milk, or congee, down the tube.

“It was very painful,” he told The Epoch Times. “But I gritted my teeth and persevered.”

Xiong was imprisoned in China for doing nothing more than practicing his faith. In an act of defiance, he started a hunger strike to protest the senseless persecution. The unwavering torture he suffered, however, brought him to the brink of death.

More than a decade later, Xiong, now safe and living in New York City, recalls his experiences of being tortured, harassed, and detained for his beliefs as though it were a dream.

“It was a very difficult time,” he said. “[I] had to overcome many challenges, some of which are hard for the average person to imagine.”

Xiong, originally from Shanghai, practices the spiritual discipline Falun Gong, also known as Falun Dafa. The traditional Chinese practice consists of meditation exercises and a set of moral teachings based on the principles of truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance.

Following its introduction to the public in 1992, Falun Gong surged in popularity in China, with around 70 million to 100 million adherents by the end of the decade, according to government estimates cited by Western media at the time.

The Chinese communist regime, feeling threatened by this popularity, banned the practice in 1999 and

The prolonged torture seriously damaged Xiong's stomach, shoulders, and other joints, as well as the nerves in his feet.

began a nationwide persecution of adherents. Practitioners were rounded up and sent to labor camps, prisons, brainwashing centers, and other detention facilities in an effort to force them to renounce their faith.

According to estimates by independent researcher Ethan Gutmann, between a half million and a million practitioners are held in various detention facilities around the country at any given time. To date, 4,135 Falun Gong adherents are verified to have died while in police or state custody, according to Minghui.org, a U.S.-based website that serves as a clearinghouse on the persecution. The actual number of deaths is likely much higher, due to the extreme difficulty of obtaining and verifying sensitive information in China.

Beginnings

Xiong started learning Falun Gong in 1997 at the age of 25, after seeing the effect of the practice on his grandfather.

His grandfather had a heart ailment that doctors said couldn't be treated. But after practicing the Falun Gong exercises, his health dramati-

cally improved. Xiong was shocked to find his previously ill grandfather in good health and spirits, and asked him what caused this turnaround. His grandfather handed Xiong the book, “Zhuang Falun,” the main text of Falun Gong, and Xiong started reading.

The biggest change that Xiong experienced was in his outlook on life. He learned how to be a good person and to improve his moral character by applying truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance in his daily life.

“This gave me a direction in life,” Xiong said.

He also noticed found a dramatic improvement in his physical health. Previously, Xiong would often get sick and run fevers, and his body felt weak. “After practicing Falun Gong, I distinctly felt my body getting stronger,” he said. “The illnesses also disappeared.”

In late 1998, Xiong, who worked as a civil servant in the Shanghai government, was recognized at his workplace as an “outstanding” employee.

“In my heart, I knew that all these changes came from my practicing Falun Gong,” he said.

Suppression

Everything changed on July 20, 1999. Xiong was at work when everyone in his office was instructed to go to a meeting room and watch a television broadcast on China's state-run CCTV. The broadcast said the authorities had branded Falun Gong as a “heretical religion” and ordered practitioners to give up the practice.

He didn't even know what to think. Until then, he was just an ordinary citizen.

“I was trying to be a good person,” he said. “I carried out my duties and observed the law.”

Suddenly, the authorities accused him of being someone he wasn't, Xiong said. The consequences would be serious.

“From that day onwards, [my] life—everything—turned upside down,” he said.

Each day at work, Xiong was sent to an office to meet with two people. Sometimes, they were his superiors; often, they were people he didn't know. All would use a combination of inducements, guile, and threats to coerce him to give up the practice of Falun Gong.

Meanwhile, he was forced to watch and read the propaganda that had begun to blanket the airwaves and print media.

Xiong's supervisors no longer assigned work to him—his only job now was to bend to the will of the state.

He refused to give in. He decided to write a statement about his personal experience of practicing Falun Gong, and distributed it to his superiors and to various departments at his workplace.

And he wanted to do more: He wanted to tell the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to stop targeting ordinary citizens who were only seeking to live peaceful lives and improve their character.

Like many practitioners at the time, Xiong went to the capital to petition the authorities to end the persecution. He traveled to Beijing in late December 1999 and went to Tiananmen Square to practice Falun Gong exercises as a form of protest.

At the square, uniformed and plain-clothes police were everywhere, while police cars were lined up around the precinct. They were ready for him and the scores of practitioners from all over the country who spilled into the square daily to appeal the persecution. “I felt my body was very heavy,” he said. “I felt as though every step I took encountered resistance.”

Nonetheless, Xiong entered the square and began doing the first standing exercise, with his arms stretching and relaxing in different positions. Almost immediately, he was manhandled by nearby police and forced inside a van.

A young policeman repeatedly struck Xiong in the face with the handle of a knife, while another officer slapped his face and kicked him in the stomach. After he was beaten for half an hour, his face was swollen beyond recognition.

Xiong was then sent back to Shanghai, where he was detained by police for a month.

Labor Camp

One night after his release in February 2000, Xiong was at home having dinner with his parents, when police came knocking. They asked him to go to the police station for a talk. The unsuspecting Xiong agreed, although his mother sensed that something was amiss.

But by then, it was too late. From the police car, Xiong saw his mother rush out of the building and stand helplessly on the side of the road as he was taken away. This image still haunts him to this day.

At the station, authorities sentenced Xiong to a year and a half in a labor

camp for distributing the personal statement at his workplace and for going to Tiananmen Square to do the exercises.

He was first confined at a detention center in Putuo district in Shanghai. He felt so depressed he couldn't eat, and after a while, this natural abstinence morphed into a willful act of resistance.

“I was locked up in here, so what method could I use to protest?” he said.

During the hunger strike, about every three days, the guards would order other inmates to pin Xiong down while a doctor snaked a long rubber tube into his nose and down to his stomach. The guards then funneled soy milk into the tube.

That lasted for about 30 days, until the authorities, thinking he might die, transferred Xiong to a local hospital for treatment.

While Xiong was under constant guard, his mother was allowed to visit him and help him start eating again. After a few weeks, Xiong slowly began to recover. Fearful that he would be sent back to detention after recovery, he managed to escape while the guard was distracted.

Xiong fled to Beijing and stayed at the home of a friend who also was a Falun Gong practitioner. But after about two months, the friend, his wife, and Xiong were arrested by Beijing police. Xiong was returned to Shanghai and sentenced to an additional year in a labor camp, bringing his total sentence to 2 1/2 years.

In May 2000, Xiong was sent to the No. 1 Detention Center in Shanghai. While inside, Xiong shared a room with three criminals who were tasked with monitoring and abusing him. Every day, they forced him to sit on a tiny stool with his legs together, back straight, hands on his knees, and eyes staring straight ahead. If Xiong slackened from that position, the inmates would hit or shout at him.

He sat that way from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. every day, only allowed breaks for meals and to use the restroom. Soon, the skin on his buttocks began wearing away, causing him intense pain.

Xiong again went on hunger strike. This time, the guards ordered the criminals to tie each of his four limbs to a wooden bed frame, so that his body resembled the shape of a star. His torso was also secured by rope to the frame. Again, he was force-fed through a foot-long plastic tube that was inserted into his nose.

The three criminals watched over him around the clock. Out of boredom, they would hit Xiong's face, torso, and legs with a bamboo stick; they laughed as they jabbed his armpits, ribcage, and abdomen.

Xiong managed to persevere for four months.

“I knew that I couldn't back down,” he said. “If you back down at the hardest part, then you'll collapse. It's all over.”

The prolonged torture seriously damaged Xiong's stomach, shoulders, and other joints, as well as the nerves in his feet. Fearing Xiong might not pull through, authorities again transferred him to a hospital, where it was found that he had severe gastritis and bleeding in his stomach. He was unable to lift anything, and his right foot was practically immobile.

Because of his dire health condition, officials at the labor camp—fearing that they would be held responsible should he die from torture—released him in October 2000. When he returned

home, Xiong continued practicing the Falun Gong exercises and studying the teachings. Within a few months, his health was completely restored.

As Xiong was recuperating at home, he began printing posters and other materials with information about Falun Gong and the ongoing persecution, seeking to dispel the Chinese regime's propaganda. These materials were handed to other practitioners around Shanghai, who then distributed them. Later, as his health improved, Xiong began distributing the materials himself.

Xiong was arrested again with two other practitioners in May 2001, after being tailed by several plain-clothes policemen. This time, he was sentenced by a court to 4 1/2 years at the Tilanqiao Prison in Shanghai.

The guards there were instructed by the local “610 Office”—a Gestapo-like extrajudicial organization tasked to persecute Falun Gong practitioners—to “transform” practitioners, by any means possible.

Three inmates were assigned to monitor Xiong and get him to “transform”—that is, to renounce his beliefs. He was beaten and forced to sit on a tiny stool for long periods of time and watch material slandering Falun Gong.

Xiong started another hunger strike, on and off for two years. He was tied to a wooden bed in his cell for about a year from 2004 to early 2005. The dirty ropes used to tie his wrists and ankles caused him to develop rashes that oozed pus and were extremely itchy.

Unsuccessful at breaking him, prison authorities escalated their efforts to “transform” Xiong by transferring him to the part of the prison that housed the most violent criminals. A group of roughly six criminals, later increased to 10, were tasked with supervising Xiong in rotation. The group was told that their sentences would be reduced if they could force Xiong to renounce his faith.

Several inmates would repeatedly smash Xiong into the wall or the ground. They used a wooden stick to hit the bare soles of his feet, only stopping when the stick broke from the force of the beating. They shoved the dirty bristles of a bamboo broom into his face, causing him to bleed in several places, and leaving scars that are still visible today.

In March 2005, an inmate used the hard plastic heel of a slipper to repeatedly hit Xiong in the head. The wounds began to bleed, and his head became so swollen that it looked as though he was wearing a helmet. When Xiong was taken to the hospital, the prison guards covered up the torture by claiming that he was injured in a fall.

It took months for the swelling and scabs on Xiong's head to heal. To this day, there's a patch on his head where he can't grow hair.

The inmates kept up their attacks. Every few minutes, 24 hours a day, they would hit him, or if they were too lazy to expend the effort, they would put chilli powder, cologne, or mosquito repellent oil onto his mouth, nose, and eyes. They told Xiong that they were there to make him wish he were dead.

They almost succeeded. Because of the unrelenting torment, Xiong worried that he may have reached the limits of his endurance, yet there was still some fight in him, which he partly attributes this to his stubborn personality.

“When you know you are right, then there's nothing be afraid of,” he said.

“I didn't want to die. But if you try to force me to kneel before you and become your slave, then I won't do it.”

One day, Xiong overheard other inmates talking about tactics to get transferred out of detention. One of the ways was to ingest a pen. So, in a last-ditch show of defiance, Xiong furtively took two pens while the inmates weren't looking and swallowed both of them.

One of the pens passed through, but the other ended up lodged between his intestines and liver, prompting another trip to the hospital. There, the doctors found his body gravely damaged from the torture: He had a lung infection, was running a high fever, and had dangerously low blood pressure. Thinking he was going to die, the prison released Xiong in April 2005 to his mother, who found a hospital where doctors were able to remove the pen.

When Xiong was discharged, his body was severely weakened and riddled with injuries.

Xiong largely recovered within six months, but even still, the prolonged torture left permanent scars. To this day, he often has pain in his back, abdomen, and knees, and experiences numbness in his right leg.

In the years that followed, Xiong managed to find a job working in human resources at a manufacturing company, and tried to live a normal life.

But it wasn't normal at all. After his release, Xiong was still under constant surveillance by police, and was followed everywhere he went. Even so, Xiong learned to evade the police, and snuck off to distribute materials and meet with other practitioners; he did that for eight years.

But that took its toll on Xiong's family members, who lived in constant fear of the moment when police would come knocking at the door.

So in 2013, Xiong decided to move to the United States. His family, whose only wish was for Xiong to be safe, were happy with his decision.

Freedom

After almost 14 years of persecution, living in an environment saturated in fear and brutality, Xiong's heart had hardened. But when he arrived in New York City, he instantly felt a sense of relief.

“It was like a burden was lifted from my heart,” he said. “[I realized that] this is what [life] is supposed to be like.”

Xiong said he never cried during his years of suffering in China. But seeing practitioners from around the world participate in parades and carry banners calling on the Chinese regime to end the suppression has often moved him to tears.

“To see these scenes, after so many years in China, it was like a spark, bringing up all these emotions,” he said.

These days, Xiong goes to major tourist attractions in New York City to tell people—often visiting tourists from mainland China—about his experiences, the Chinese regime's propaganda, and the ongoing persecution.

This is the least he can do, Xiong said, given that so many of his fellow practitioners are still suffering in his homeland.

As long as the persecution persists, Xiong won't be able to return to China to see his family.

“I wish that one day I can go back and be reunited with them,” he said. “I believe we will see that day.”



Jason Xiong's skull is exposed from beatings by inmates in the Tilanqiao Prison in Shanghai in 2005.



Police detain a Falun Gong protester at Tiananmen Square in Beijing on Oct. 1, 2000.

AP PHOTO/CHEN-MIN CHUNG

ALL PHOTOS BY LARRY DYE/THE EPOCH TIMES

Over 10,000 Attend Falun Dafa Conference to Hear Stories of Self-Improvement

Founder of spiritual discipline addresses audience

ANNIE WU

NEW YORK—As speakers stepped up to the podium and shared their journeys of self-improvement, many in the audience quietly wiped away tears. Many felt inspired to become better versions of themselves.

"It's so moving to see someone who is prepared to be so vulnerable," said Mark Hutchison, an entrepreneur from Perth, Australia.

Hutchison and more than 10,000 other practitioners of the spiritual discipline Falun Dafa convened at the Barclays Center in Brooklyn on May 17 for a day-long conference.

Attendees came from all over the world, as evidenced by the variety of languages for simultaneous translation of the speeches, including Chinese, Spanish, German, Korean, Japanese, and Italian.

Falun Dafa, also known as Falun Gong, is a traditional Chinese self-improvement discipline whose practitioners live according to the moral principles of truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance. They also do five sets of meditative exercises.

In China, spiritual practices were often passed down from master to student, across the generations. Falun Dafa, an ancient practice, was introduced by Mr. Li Hongzhi to the public in May 1992 in the northeastern Chinese city of Changchun.

Since then, it has spread to millions of adherents in more than 70 countries.

The conference was also a celebration of the 27 years since Falun Dafa's introduction.

Hutchison said that after learning Falun Dafa, he became a calmer person and gained a deeper understanding of one's purpose in life. "We fill our lives with so much busy-ness...but why are we human?"

Persecution

Falun Dafa reached enormous popularity in China, with 70 million to 100 million adherents by 1999,

according to Western news outlets, citing official estimates.

The then-paramount leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Jiang Zemin, feared that the practice's traditional moral teachings would prove more attractive to the Chinese people than the Party's atheistic ideology.

On July 20, 1999, Jiang launched a nationwide campaign to eradicate the practice. Adherents were rounded up and thrown into prison, labor camps, brainwashing centers, and other facilities, where they were often tortured in an effort to force them into giving up their faith.

The website Minghui.org, which serves as a clearinghouse for news about the persecution, has confirmed the number of deaths from torture and abuse as 4,304. The real number is believed to be far higher, due to the difficulty of getting information out of China.

In addition, large numbers are believed to have been murdered through the pillaging of their organs. Since The Epoch Times broke the story of



Mr. Li Hongzhi, founder of Falun Dafa, addresses more than 10,000 practitioners of the spiritual discipline at the Barclays Center in Brooklyn, N.Y., on May 17, 2019.

forced organ harvesting in China in 2006, independent researchers and journalists have investigated and confirmed allegations that the Chinese regime is extracting organs from living prisoners of conscience, mainly Falun Dafa practitioners, for use in the country's organ transplant system. Researchers have called this a "cold genocide." As an integral part of this campaign of persecution, the CCP's propaganda apparatus launched a campaign to vilify the practice and its adherents.

Many of the speakers spoke about their efforts in raising awareness about the persecution in China, and the difficulties they experienced while doing so.

One young woman currently living in Tokyo, Japan talked about her experiences telling visiting mainland Chinese tourists about the persecution of Falun Dafa.

Many had believed the propaganda by the Chinese regime and held negative feelings toward Falun Dafa, sometimes yelling or cursing at her and other Falun Dafa volunteers who

tried to speak with the tourists.

But the young woman realized that she should be kind and patient toward them despite their hatred. After telling them about how the Chinese regime disseminated hateful propaganda about Falun Dafa, many tourists changed their attitudes.

Rob Gray from the United Kingdom talked about his efforts to appeal to government officials about the issue of forced organ harvesting from Falun Dafa practitioners in China.

Gray spoke about his efforts to raise awareness about this issue in both the UK Parliament and the European Union, and how he persevered in the difficult, tiring task of coordinating outreach efforts due to his belief that more people needed to hear about these atrocities, which are still occurring in China today.

Founder of Falun Dafa Makes Appearance

Mr. Li Hongzhi came to speak to the conference.

In Chinese, Mr. Li is often referred to as "shifu," a term of respect for a great teacher. Upon his appearance on stage, Mr. Li was greeted by a standing ovation.

Mr. Li spoke for about two hours, discussing challenges Falun Gong practitioners face in their efforts to raise awareness about the persecution. After his address, which was delivered without the use of notes, he answered questions from the audience.

For William Wang, 42, this was his first time attending a major Falun Dafa conference since immigrating from Beijing to the United States in 2018.

Hearing Mr. Li speak in person stirred deep feelings of gratitude and wonder in Wang. "In the first 15 minutes, I didn't even realize that it's real that I can listen to Shifu in person," Wang said.

Wang said he was also very excited to meet with so many Falun Dafa practitioners and listen to their speeches.

Nicole Hao contributed to this report.



An audience of over 10,000 attend the Falun Dafa conference at New York's Barclays Center on May 17, 2019.

Truthfulness, Compassion, Tolerance Celebrated in New York City

EVA FU

NEW YORK—It took three days of preparation and more than 5,000 people to make it happen, but the result was a feast for the eyes: a 360-foot, colorful spiritual emblem framed by three characters, representing principles observed by millions of Falun Gong practitioners around the world.

Donning coordinated outfits, Falun Gong practitioners formed a massive version of the spiritual practice's emblem, known as the "falun," or "law wheel." The Chinese characters for truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance—the principles of the practice—were also displayed in yellow.

The formation lit up a grassy field on an already bright spring day on Governors Island, just off of Manhattan, on May 18. The event marked the close of three days of activities celebrating World Falun Dafa Day in New York.

First introduced in China in 1992, Falun Gong, also known as Falun Dafa, is a spiritual practice that consists of five sets of meditation exercises and a set of teachings centered on personal moral improvement.

Falun Gong, which drew tens of millions of adherents through word of mouth, had become one of the largest spiritual communities in the country by the time the Chinese communist regime deemed it a threat to its totalitarian control and banned the practice in 1999.

The nationwide persecution has led to waves of practitioners being thrown into prisons, labor camps, and brainwashing centers, where many have experienced torture and abuse, and have even died from their injuries.

Honoring a Tradition

The spectacle, known as character formation, is a decades-old tradition that started in China in the 1990s, when Falun Gong practitioners could still freely practice the exercises in public parks across the country.

Since the persecution, overseas practitioners have taken up the torch to keep the tradition alive.

Outside of China, Falun Gong is freely practiced in more than 70 countries.

The first overseas homage appeared in Taipei, Taiwan, in 2000, with giant characters for "truth,



Thousands of Falun Gong practitioners come together on Governors Island for a character formation event in New York on May 18, 2019.

compassion, tolerance" and "Falun Dafa" arrayed in the square in front of the National Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall.

In New York City, character formation has become an annual custom since 2013, and the number of participants keeps growing every year.

Marking the 27th anniversary of the practice's introduction to the public, this year's character formation was the largest staged in the United States.

The event organizers said they wanted to use this visual message to both celebrate the benefits of the practice and commemorate the ongoing persecution, with each Falun Gong practitioner involved representing one particle of a larger international community.

The falun emblem, the symbol of Falun Gong, incorporates the srivatsa symbol from Buddhism and the taiji symbol from Taoist teachings. The emblem bears the five standard colors in Chinese culture—blue, black, white, red, and yellow—each corresponding to the five elements of wood, water, metal, fire, and earth.

"What's meaningful about the character formation is that the grand setting really shows how wide

Dafa has spread, and it's also a chance to form a sense of community," event organizer Michael Yu told The Epoch Times.

"The aerial view of the imagery can be so powerful, and it can really bring the message home."

Living With Truthfulness, Compassion, and Tolerance

Although coming from all parts of the world and speaking different languages, practitioners participating in the event said they felt a sense of togetherness due to their shared aspiration to become better people.

Fabio Cotroneo from Rome found Falun Gong in 2012 after searching for a spiritual practice for most of his life.

"When I read 'Zhuang Falun,' I felt all the truth of the universe was inside [the book]," he said.

"For the first time, I felt peace in my heart."

"Zhuang Falun" is the main text of Falun Gong, which contains moral teachings centered around the tenets of truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance.

Cotroneo said applying compassion in his life

helped him in his role as a staff manager at a museum.

"My job ... is more simple now, because I don't give orders, but speak to people with heart," he said.

He said he now tries to listen and understand the people he manages, and to speak to them with kindness, even when they have made mistakes.

"The people that work with me always say to me that they are serene, they are peaceful when ... [they are] in [my] office, and they can speak with me," Cotroneo said.

For Joseph Gigliotti, a chiropractor from Ontario, Canada, the practice has helped him form a deeper bond with his family by teaching him to take a step back in conflicts and stand in others' shoes.

"My family always has to be right, so for me, the hardest part was not fighting back, to have patience and say, 'Hey, maybe they are right, too,'" he said.

Gigliotti said he used to get upset at his older brother, who always pointed out his faults. But the word "tolerance" reminded him to see the situation differently.

"[My brother is] doing it because he wants me to succeed, even if he didn't say it in a nice way. At the end of the day, if you can see how people care about you, that's what matters," Gigliotti said.

Myriam Orso, a public servant based in Geneva, Switzerland, started practicing Falun Gong 16 years ago. She said reading "Zhuang Falun" revealed to her the meaning of life.

"For everything, I try to first think of these three principles before doing something," Orso said.

Orso said that these values help her to keep calm and maintain kindness even when the other party is angry or hostile, and in doing so, she's found that the other person also cools down and begins to work with her to resolve the issues.

She also recently realized that tolerance included having the power to forgive others.

"[There are people] I have not forgiven ... for something they did in the past," Orso said.

But applying the principles made Orso see that those things that happened to her were not all bad, and allowed her to let go of her anger toward those people.

"I feel free. Very quiet and free," Orso said.

Cathy He contributed to this report.