

Learning and Experiencing Chinese Qigong in Norway

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Received: 22 July 2008 / Accepted: 3 March 2009 / Published online: 25 March 2009
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Abstract This article discusses the reception of Chinese *qigong* in a Western context by focusing on the learning and experiencing of *qigong* in Norway. Drawing on ethnographic material from fieldwork among participants of a style of *qigong* referred to as Biyun medical *qigong*, I in particular explore the variety of body–mind states that Norwegian *qigong* students experience. I have differentiated five “stages” of Biyun practice. Using these stages as a framework, I demonstrate the gradual progression in the learning of *qigong*. “Body,” “concentration,” and *qi* (“life energy”) are all important constitutive dimensions in the practice, but as the learning progresses, *qi* becomes more and more prominent. Drawing on a definition of the body as “learning to be affected” and “learning to affect” (Despret, *Body Soc* 10:111–134, 2004; Latour, *Body Soc* 10:205–229, 2004), I suggest that *qigong* may be perceived as a practice that, at its core, involves learning to be affected by *qi* as well as to affect *qi*.

Keywords Chinese medical practices · Qigong · Biyun · Norway · Body–mind · *Qi* (“life energy”) · Globalization

1 Introduction

1.1 The Reception of Chinese Qigong in a Norwegian Context

In the past few decades, several Asian medical and health-enhancing practices, including Chinese *qigong*¹, have spread from their place of origin to numerous new

¹*Qi* in qigong has been translated in various ways; “vital energy,” “life energy,” “breath,” “air,” “life source” and *gong* as “work,” “training,” “skill,” “force,” “exercise,” and *qigong* as “endeavors of *qi*,” “*qi* exercises,” “breathing therapy,” “breathing exercises,” and “*qi* skills” (see e.g., Chen 2003a: 6, Hsu 1999: 19–25; Ots 1994: 120).

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localities all over the globe (Alter 2005; Hsu and Høg 2002). This article concerns ways in which the globalization of qigong unfolds in Norway. By focusing on the processes of learning qigong, I shall explore different stages that qigong students in Norway experience in the course of qigong training.

Qigong is a modern construct (Chen 2003a, b; Frank 2004; Hsu 1999; Miura 1989; Ots 1994; Palmer 2007; Penny 1993; Perry 2001; Xu 1999),² but many of the methods that today are recognized as qigong are derived from age-old Chinese traditions; most notably, Daoist longevity and immortality techniques, Buddhist meditations, life-cultivation arts (*yangsheng*), medicine, and forms of the martial arts (e.g., *taijiquan*) (Despeux 1989, 2005; Engelhardt 2000; Frank 2006; Harper 1998; Kohn 1989, 2000, 2006, 2007; Lo 2001; Robinet 1997; Saso 1995; Schipper 1993; Wile 1996). This origin of qigong practices is reflected in the way qigong in China is associated with understandings of the body–mind that diverge radically from assumptions normally taken for granted in Western societies. Moreover, qigong involves body movements and postures that are different from those known from conventional body practices popular in the West. This raises questions concerning how qigong is understood and practiced when established in new cultural settings. How is qigong taught and experienced when practiced in places outside China?

Reflecting its popularity in the West, the growing number of sociocultural studies focusing on Chinese therapies outside China primarily examine acupuncture (e.g., Barnes 1998, 2003, 2005; Bivins 2000; Frank and Stollberg 2004; Sagli 2003). Only a small number of sociocultural studies investigate qigong (Busby 1996; Chen 2003a; Kerr 2002; Komjathy 2006; Siegler 2006). The processes involved in the learning of qigong have not been the focus of interest in any of these studies.

To address the issue of learning and experiencing qigong in a Western context, I shall draw on ethnographic material generated by participant observation in groups of qigong practitioners in Norway and by the interviewing of participants in these groups.³ These practitioners engage in a style of qigong referred to as Biyun medical

² Qigong, as analysed in recent studies, is a modern phenomenon, an invented tradition and a social movement growing out of political and social circumstances particular to China after the establishing of the People's Republic in 1949. In the 1950s and 1960s, qigong was institutionalized as a therapeutic practice in state medical and rehabilitation institutions, primarily in institutions for cadres of the Chinese Communist Party. When qigong reemerged, after being officially banned during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), it was, however, not primarily a practice confined to medical institutions but had been taken up by popular mass movements in parks, on sports grounds, and at other public places. Charismatic qigong healers and masters became tremendously popular and built organizations with many followers. In the 1990s, changes in state policy towards qigong led to a decline in the popularity of qigong. The crackdown on *Falungong* (Falungong being a practice with its origins in qigong) in May 1999 had a negative impact on the whole qigong movement in China (Chen 2003a, b; Frank 2004; Hsu 1999; Miura 1989; Ots 1994; Palmer 2003, 2007; Penny 2003; Perry 2001; Xu 1999).

³ The data presented in this article are based on fieldwork that constituted part of a post-doctoral research project “New Strategies of Coping: A Qualitative Study of Strategies of Coping and Patients’ Experiences of Alternative Medicine” currently in progress at the University of Oslo (2006–2009). Data were not gathered specifically for the purpose of this article. In the research period, I attended most of the Biyun qigong courses taught by the originator of the Biyun system, qigong master Fan Xiulan. I also participated in weekly training sessions run by Norwegian Biyun instructors for senior citizens and for persons with rheumatism. In addition, I attended weekend courses and monthly come-together sessions organized by the leader of the Biyun association in Norway.

qigong.⁴ Biyun activities are arranged in many places outside China, in Germany, the USA, and Brazil, but Biyun has become particularly well-known in Scandinavia.

“Chinese medicine views human beings holistically; a patient is treated from an overall—body and soul—perspective,” a Scandinavian head instructor explains about Biyun (Nygren 2008: 1).⁵ By highlighting a holistic body–soul (mind)⁶ point of view, the instructor is indicating that, in this respect, qigong represents a preferable alternative to biomedicine, where body, mind, and soul are seen as dimensions of the human that can be treated separately.⁷ In Norway, public hospitals and health care services are predominately based on biomedical conceptions and practices (Larsen 1996). Settings outside these institutions tend to be less influenced by biomedical standards. In Norway, as in England, Japan, Taiwan, and the USA, qigong activities, including Biyun, are practiced outside public health care (Busby 1996; Chen 2003a; Siegler 2006).

The participants’ emphasis on Biyun as a holistic practice calls for inquiries into the particularities of this form of holism. What are the specific body–mind states established in the process of learning and experiencing qigong in a Norwegian context? How does the body–mind unity of Biyun qigong feature in Biyun practice? What categories are used in the instructions and communication concerning qigong movements and postures? These are the questions my analysis will concentrate on.

1.2 Learning Through Five Stages of Body–Mind States

Biyun qigong is organized into several programs, from the basic to the more advanced. Based on fieldwork experiences, I suggest that, in the process of learning

⁴ Biyun participants consider Biyun a medical form of qigong and one of the four main branches of Chinese medicine [together with acupuncture, herbs, and massage (*tuina*)]. For accounts of traditional Chinese medicine within the context of the People’s Republic of China, see, e.g., Farquhar (1994), Hsu (1999), Scheid (2002), and Zhang (2007). Traditional Chinese medicine, with TCM as the officially approved translation, is a term used from 1955 to label the revised, modernized forms of indigenous Chinese medicines promoted by the Chinese Communist Party (Hsu 1999; Taylor 2005).

⁵ Studies on Chinese medicine and qigong in China show that these practices employ many concepts that differentiate between bodily and spiritual dimensions of humanity (e.g., Ishida 1989; Ots 1994; Hsu 1999; Kohn 2006). This information was not referred to in Biyun contexts.

⁶ In this article, I use the term body–mind when I write from the perspective of the author as analyzer. I use body–mind in a nondualistic, broad sense, including a wide range of dimensions commonly referred to as, e.g., physical, material, somatic, psychic, mental, emotional, sensational, and spiritual. I use body–mind in a manner that corresponds roughly to terms in common use in contemporary medical anthropology, e.g., “mindful body” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987) and “embodiment” (Csordas 1990). When I refer to the Biyun informants’ viewpoints, I introduce the terminology used by them. In Norwegian, the expression *kropp og sjel* (translated into English as “body and soul” by the Scandinavian Biyun instructor) encompasses both the meanings “body and soul” and “body and mind,” and it also includes “emotions” and “feelings.” The Norwegian term *sjelelig*—from *sjel* (“soul”)—means “mental,” “spiritual,” and “emotional.”

⁷ As is widely recognized, biomedicine, influenced by Cartesian dualism, tends to treat human afflictions as either “in the body” or “in the mind” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987: 9), although within biomedicine, there are also divisions with practitioners who promote more holistic oriented models, such as the biopsychosocial model promoted by many general practitioners (Engel 1977), as well as models advocated in other forms of psychosomatic medicine. Biomedicine does not treat the soul or any spiritual dimensions. These dimensions are considered as belonging to the domains of the church or other religious communities.

and practicing Biyun qigong, the participants experience five “stages” of different body–mind states. I use “stage” as the designation for a qigong sequence characterized by a set of constitutive dimensions.⁸ I have labeled each stage according to the specific dimensions in focus in the instructions of the qigong exercises in each sequence; (1) “body movements”; (2) “body movements with concentration”; (3) “body movements, concentration, and qi (“life energy”)⁹; (4) “qi and body movements without concentration”; and (5) “body in stillness and moving qi.” It should perhaps be stressed that I use these “five stages” as an analytical scheme.¹⁰ According to my understanding, the progression of the five stages mirrors roughly the structure of the Biyun system, although the stages do not coincide exactly with any of the specific programs.

By demonstrating the gradual progression through different stages in the learning of qigong, I wish to contribute to an understanding of how this foreign, and in some respects strange and exotic, practice becomes acceptable and meaningful to those who practice it in the West. At the same time, I aim to demonstrate how, within this practice, there are opportunities for the creation of a variety of different body–mind states.

Some of the qigong stages open up experiences unfamiliar to qigong beginners; others are more familiar. While body and concentration serve as bridges to what is well-known, it is qi that first and foremost presents itself as new and different. However, qi in qigong is apparently not something one can get to know simply by being told what it is. Rather, qi is something that is cultivated into being. Inspired by Despret’s (2004) and Latour’s (2004) discussions of the body as “learning to be affected” and “learning to affect,” I have in the description of the five stages aimed to demonstrate how learning qigong may be perceived as a practice that, at its core, involves learning to be affected by qi, as well as learning to affect qi.

1.3 The Body that Learns to be Affected and Learns to Affect

“Learning to be affected” and “learning to affect”—“affected” in the meaning being effectuated, moved, put into motion by other entities (humans or nonhumans)—has, in recent scholarship, most notably by Despret (2004) and Latour (2004), been suggested as a useful understanding of what it means to have a body. Despret argues that this definition “enables us to overcome the distribution between bodies and minds, world and bodies, world and consciousness” (2004:

⁸ When there is a marked shift in constitutive dimensions in the practice, I call this a new stage. A shift is sometimes due to the fact that some dimensions are added or are not focused on anymore, or that some dimensions move more into the foreground or the background. Some stages are indeed more dominant in some programs than others, but there are also back and forth movements between the stages in most programs.

⁹ In Biyun circles, “life energy,” “life force,” and “vital energy” are the most common translations of qi. “Breath,” “vital force,” “energy,” “vapour,” “spirit,” “material force,” “matter energy,” and “pneuma” are among the numerous translations that have been tried as Western translations for qi.

¹⁰ Part of the content of some stages corresponds roughly to what other authors have categorized as “techniques,” “forms,” “styles,” or “methods” of qigong [e.g. *jinggong*, *donggong*, or “spontaneous-qigong” (Ots 1994; Palmer 2007: 5)]. I use “stage” as I want to emphasize the progression of the qigong learning process and the role of each of the stages in this process.

127).¹¹ Latour claims that, equipped with this definition, one is not obliged to define an essence, a substance (what the body is by nature), but rather “an interface, that becomes more and more describable as it learns to be affected by more and more elements” (Latour 2004: 206). I suggest that it is fruitful to see the practice of learning qigong in the light of the insights learned from Despret’s and Latour’s discussions. How body parts, qi, and concentration are differently engaged in the various stages of learning qigong, illustrates well, I claim, the ambiguous positions between subject and object, subjectivity and objectivity, body and mind, while learning qigong.

To explain what “learning to be affected” could mean, Latour uses as an example the training of “noses” for the perfume industry through the use of odor kits. He explains that “The odour kit is made of series of sharply distinct pure fragrances arranged in such a way that one can go from sharpest to the smallest contrast” (Latour 2004: 206). Through the training session, the dumb nose ends up becoming a “nose,” that is, someone able to discriminate more and more subtle differences. In this process, “body parts are progressively acquired at the same time as ‘world counter-parts’ are being registered in a new way” (Latour 2004: 207). The kit itself “although it is not part of the body as traditionally defined, it certainly is part of the body understood as ‘training to be affected’ ” (Latour 2004: 207). Similarly, as I shall show, the body in qigong is a body that progressively acquires new dimensions and, in particular, learns to be affected by qi and to affect qi.

Trust and interest, authority and expectations are central elements in Despret’s and Latour’s analysis of these practices that involve learning to be affected and to affect. Despret, using Gregory Bateson’s definition of authority, explains that, in this context, “a person is said to have authority when anyone who is under the influence of that authority does everything possible to make whatever this person says to be true” (Despret 2004: 118). This implies that, in the case of learning to be a nose, the students were able to obtain results that confirmed their expectations because it mattered to them that what the teacher took to be true was true. In a relationship characterized by authority, the teachers and pupils demonstrated what Despret calls a “preference for agreement”; a “will to achieve what was expected from each of them at different levels” (Despret 2004: 119). Similarly, I argue, when learning qigong in Norway, the relationship between the qigong students and the Biyun qigong master, and also other Biyun instructors, is characterized by trust and interest, expectations and authority. In this perspective, the qigong master and instructors authorize the students to become competent practitioners of qigong. The students, vice versa, authorize the qigong master and instructors to be qigong experts and capable of teaching this practice.

2 Biyun Qigong in Norway

2.1 The Prime Authority: Qigong Grand Master and Chinese Medicine Doctor Fan Xiulan

Before turning to the analysis of the actual practicing of the Biyun qigong exercises, I shall introduce selected contextual data concerning Biyun. In particular, I shall

¹¹ According to Despret, this definition of the body draws on William James’ theory of emotions (Despret 2004: 127).

focus on material that demonstrates examples of authority as established in Biyun contexts. The information I shall present is data that are circulating in Biyun circles. It is transmitted as books, course material, and oral presentations from instructors to students (e.g., Fan 2004, 2008). It is therefore reasonable to assume that the images of Biyun intrinsic in this information shape the students' expectations of Biyun.

The history of Biyun in Scandinavia stems from a contact established in the early 1990s between Scandinavians and the originator of Biyun qigong, Fan Xiulan. Fan has since then visited Scandinavia and taught qigong courses at least twice a year, resulting in the establishment of Biyun associations and Biyun teaching organizations. More than 90,000 persons—almost 1% of the Swedish population—have attended Biyun qigong courses in Sweden, and more than 600 Biyun instructors have been educated (Fan 2008; Jouper et al. 2006: 951).¹²

Biyun courses with Scandinavian instructors were arranged in Norway from 1997. The first course with Fan in Norway was arranged in 2001. The Biyun Association in Norway was thereupon established in 2003. Forms of Chinese health exercises were established in Norway already in the beginning of the 1980s, so Biyun was far from being the first qigong style established in Norway.¹³ The number of Biyun participants in Norway is, however, steadily increasing. Today, there are more than 45 Norwegian Biyun instructors. The leader of the Biyun Association in Norway estimates that 6,000–7,000 persons have attended her courses, while in addition, there are all those who have attended courses led by other instructors.¹⁴ The reputation of Biyun as a highly popular method is likely to contribute to the legitimacy of Biyun qigong.

However, with regard to authority, it is first and foremost Fan Xiulan (born 1947) and the narratives concerning her life and capabilities that need to be mentioned. Fan Xiulan, commonly entitled “Master” or “Grand Master Fan” by her students, holds a position as the unquestionable authority with respect to all Biyun activities. Biyun instructors in Norway turn to her statements and instructions as the major source of knowledge for questions of all kinds concerning Biyun and everything Chinese.

By attending Biyun courses or reading the books presenting Biyun, qigong students get to know master Fan as a most remarkable person with extraordinary capabilities (Fan 2004, 2008; Nygren 2008). Firstly, Fan holds formal qualifications and positions that are associated with credibility. Fan Xiulan is introduced as an authorized qigong master and doctor of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), a member of the board of the World Academic Society of Medical Qi Gong, and vice general-secretary of the Chinese Academic Society of Medical Qi Gong.

¹² Sweden has been the Biyun center in Scandinavia; the Swedish Green Dragon Association for traditional Chinese medicine was established already in 1992 and the Biyun School in 1995.

¹³ The exact number of qigong practitioners in Norway is not known. Qigong has not yet been a category in surveys conducted in Norway.

¹⁴ Norway's population numbers about 4.7 million, while Sweden has a population of over 9.2 million. The Biyun association in Norway has no centre of its own. The activities take place at different rented localities. The courses and training sessions I have attended were arranged in a variety of localities; community centres, after-school activity rooms, a church communion center, and a private holistic health care centre.

But even more so, Fan's life story creates a picture of her as special. The qigong students learn that she as a young child was taught qigong exercises that had been secretly transmitted within her family of medical practitioners. She experienced a turning point at the age of 30, when she was able to cure herself with qigong from a disease doctors had told her was fatal. Shortly after, she discovered that she had the ability to heal other persons by the laying on of hands and by the emission of qi, in addition to other extraordinary capabilities. She devoted her life to the practicing and teaching of qigong. To deepen her understanding of qigong, she studied for a period under an abbot at the famous temple for martial arts and Chan Buddhism, Shaolin Temple. Later, Fan supplemented her qigong knowledge with classes in acupuncture, massage, and herbs. Biyun qigong combines the methods Fan learned as a child with the knowledge she later acquired of TCM. Fan underlines its ethical foundation as a characteristic of Biyun and attributes Biyun's emphasis on "ethical consciousnesses" to the teaching of the abbot who was her mentor at the Shaolin Temple.

The name Biyun ("azure blue clouds") comes from the name of a Buddhist temple just outside Beijing. The temple is located in the neighborhood of a rehabilitation center for elderly persons that Fan Xiulan set up in 1985. According to her, Biyun was suggested as a name for her method by Dr. Cui Yueli, who at the time was the minister of health, and whom she had successfully treated.¹⁵ The story of minister Cui is only one example of numerous stories of successful treatments, stories that master Fan, as well as the Scandinavian instructors of Biyun, tell their qigong students in Norway in order to account for both Biyun's reputation as a powerful healing method and Fan's extraordinary capabilities.¹⁶

2.2 Biyun Medical Qigong: Presented as a Healing Method Anchored in Chinese Traditions

The majority of Biyun participants are recruited through networks of family, friends, and colleagues. Most are female.¹⁷ The composition of the Biyun groups often reflects the fact that the participants were recruited from certain milieus (e.g., a place

¹⁵ Cui Yueli is known as a person who has greatly contributed to the prestige of TCM and medical qigong, both in China and internationally (Scheid 2002: 92).

¹⁶ The life story of Fan Xiulan, extraordinary as it is when presented in a Norwegian context, nevertheless shares many of the characteristics that are seen as typical for the biographies of the thousands of Chinese qigong grandmasters in China who "came out of the mountains" (*chushan*) in the 1980s and 1990s and who struggled to be recognized and accepted by the public (Palmer 2007: 86–101).

¹⁷ This corresponds to findings from a study among Biyun participants in Sweden (Jouper et al. 2006). The sociodemographic profile of participants of qigong courses in Norway has not been surveyed. The study from Sweden examined sociodemographic data concerning members of the Green Dragon (the Swedish Biyun Association). In this study, a total of 372 (33%) of the Green Dragon members were randomly selected and a questionnaire was mailed to them. Two hundred fifty three (68%) responded; 38 men and 215 women. The average age in the groups of responders was 58 years. The majority lived with a partner (67%) and had a university degree (57%). Forty four percent were employed; 45% had retired; and 11% were students, job seekers, or working at home. On average, the qigong exercises were very physically active. The total exercise time for this group was 6h and 5min per week (including 2h and 39min with qigong). In total, 77 of the 253 were Biyun instructors.

of work or a home for the elderly) or through specific channels (e.g., through an announcement in a journal for persons with a specific diagnosis).

During Biyun training sessions, there is normally time for asking questions, sharing experiences, and explaining theory before and after the actual practicing of Biyun exercises. Health issues, both prevention and recovery from diseases, as well as general physical and mental well-being, are the most common reasons for taking up and maintaining Biyun qigong practice.¹⁸ The Biyun instructors have numerous case histories they relate concerning persons who have experienced improvement in their health condition or full recovery from diseases by the practicing of Biyun. Several of the instructors tell that they themselves have experienced stunning beneficial effects from Biyun practice.¹⁹ These accounts give further reason to trust Biyun as a healing method, and they also contribute to the authority of Fan as the originator of the method.²⁰

The theories behind qigong, which should explain why qigong can produce healing effects, form another major topic in the instructions and conversations. The instructors give introductions, normally portioned out in small pieces only, to the theories of TCM that they see as the most relevant to explain medical qigong.²¹ To make clear how qigong influences the whole person, and not only the physical body, is normally one of the issues. Although the exercises are not physically demanding with regard to muscle strength and endurance, they have the capacity to produce powerful effects. This is apparently due to their working mechanism, which, according to Chinese medicine, is that the exercises influence the circulation of qi, primarily through the system of the meridians. There are systematic interactions between the five inner organs (“heart,” “spleen,” “lungs,” “kidneys,” and “liver”), their corresponding meridians, and specific body–mind states according to the schemes of yin and yang and the five elements (“water,” “wood,” “fire,” “earth,” and

¹⁸ This information was communicated in qigong classes and confirmed in interviews. Interviewees mentioned a wide range of health effects. In the study among members of the Swedish Biyun Association (a total of 372), the respondents reported the following health gains: fewer common colds and infections; better breathing (asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease were specifically mentioned); gastrointestinal improvements; better maintenance of body–mind balance; fewer pains, migraines, and head-aches; less dizziness; increased blood circulation; improvements related to fibromyalgia, burnout, incontinence, drug abuse, allergies, medicine use, tinnitus, blood pressure, and depression; and recovery after cancer treatment (Jouper et al. 2006). Applying quantitative methods, one study from Norway (Festvåg et al. 2006) and a few from Sweden indicate beneficial effects after practicing Biyun (Johansson et al. 2008; Jouper et al. 2006; Linder and Svärdsudd 2006).

¹⁹ Cases histories, as well as evaluation reports concerning health effects after practicing Biyun, are also published on the Biyun association’s web page (www.Biyun.no). The book by Master Fan lists a series of ailments for which Biyun is seen as having beneficial effects (Fan 2008: 35–6).

²⁰ Notably, mental disorders associated with qigong practice, such as so-called “qigong-induced psychosis,” were not mentioned, although this phenomenon is well-known in China (Chen 2003a; Ng 1999).

²¹ Although the beginner courses always include some Chinese medicine information, it is very limited. There are, however, courses specialising in the theories of TCM open for all who are interested. For those who want to be Biyun qigong instructors, the TCM theory course is compulsory. Master Fan and other Biyun instructors do not explain to their students about the recent development of TCM within the context of the People’s Republic of China. In contrast, Master Fan and other Biyun instructors simply state that TCM has a history of several thousand years.

“metal”).²² The Biyun exercises, the students learn, are designed so that they will balance and unblock imbalances of all kinds, physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. Qigong will make the energy flow within the person; it will create an abundance of vitalizing qi and attune the qi of the humans to the qi of heaven and earth.

However, the theory of TCM is not the only one used to explain the healing and health-producing effects of qigong. Another explanation that Fan frequently draws attention to, obviously a very modern idea, is that feeling good (strong, healthy, beautiful, comfortable) and being in a peaceful, relaxed state have positive effects for the processes of physiological reconstitution of the cells in the body: “To create a good feeling is to create good cells, which is to create good health.”

Course participants are instructed that they should focus on doing the exercises and not on any thought of healing effects (or any other topic) when they practice qigong. Nonetheless, the stories of Biyun’s healing effects and the theories of TCM and old-age wisdom in conjunction with modern explanations are authoritative. In addition to the trust produced by Fan’s capabilities and her life story, they create expectations and therefore shape the experiencing of qigong.

3 Stages of “Body–Concentration–Qi” While Practicing Biyun

How are the different body–mind states brought about when practicing qigong? In what follows, I shall account for the five stages of learning and practicing Biyun qigong and describe how students of qigong are guided from what is familiar to what is new to them. Furthermore, the descriptions of the stages provide a useful framework for demonstrating how the understanding of the body as “learning to be affected” and “learning to affect,” as elaborated by Despret (2004) and Latour (2004), applies to learning qigong.

As taught in Norway today, the Biyun system consists of several qigong courses at three different levels. The general courses start with the *Jichu gong*²³ (basic qigong) at level one, continue with *Dong gong* (moving qi-exercises) at level two, and progress then to the five elements qigong at level three.²⁴ At level three, there

²² In Biyun contexts, it is common to talk about “five organs,” “meridians,” and “five elements” for the Chinese terms *wuzang*, *jingluo*, and *wuxing*. In order to emphasize that the Chinese terms are different from the Western terms organs, meridians, and elements, other translations have been suggested in the sinological literature on Chinese medicine; e.g., “five visceral systems of functions” instead of “five organs”; “tract” or “channels” instead of “meridians,” and “five phases” or “five agents” instead of “five elements” (e.g. Hsu 1999, 2007; Sivin 1987; Porkert 1974).

²³ When I refer to the names of the Biyun courses, I follow the standard used by the Biyun Association in Norway (which is, for example, to write *Jichu gong* and *Dong gong* in two words and with a capital letter). However, when I write concerning the content of the courses, I keep to the norm I use in general in this article.

²⁴ In addition to the general courses, there are several qigong programs for special groups; the elderly, children, young people, and women. There are also courses for those who want to be instructors for specific programs. All the qigong courses at level three and some at level two are taught by Fan Xiulan herself. She teaches in Chinese and her teaching is translated into Swedish by the Swedish main instructor who is the person who initially had invited Fan to Sweden. In addition to the qigong courses, there are several courses covering other Chinese methods, such as massage (*tuina*); acupressure; ear, hand, and tongue diagnosis; food as medicine; and a course addressing theoretical Chinese medicine issues. Master Fan is especially interested in food as medicine and she draws this issue into her lectures.

are two more programs teaching methods of *waiqi* (which Biyun instructors translate as “external qi”).²⁵ A goal for each course is to help the students to practice the program on their own at home, thereby converting qigong into a self-help method. Tapes and CDs with instructions have been recorded to assist the memorizing of the exercises. Because the sequencing of the exercises in each program is standardized, it appears legitimate to present examples of the five stages in Biyun qigong in a general way.²⁶

Earlier studies concerning qigong have demonstrated that different qigong techniques evoke very different experiences and feelings (Chen 2003a; Hsu 1999; Kohn 2006; Micollier 1999; Ots 1994; Palmer 2007). I shall therefore be concrete and detailed in my account.

3.1 Stage One: Focusing on “Body Movements”

In the introductory stage of a qigong course, it is the learning and practicing of the technical details of the body movements that are in focus. This involves learning the positioning of the body parts and the directions, figures, and coordination of the movements. The basic program starts with the feet and with the rotating of the feet. This and the subsequent exercises of the ankles, knees, hips, and pelvis are all plain and concrete. The exercises are described in terms of moving, stretching, bending, and strengthening these body parts.

The pattern of the movements gradually becomes more complex and unfamiliar elements, both in the movements and in the explanations, are blended into what is felt to be well-known. Meanings based on concepts from Chinese medicine, such as connections between acupuncture points and organs via a network of meridians and the importance of the balancing of yin and yang, are added to the exercises. When the students are doing an exercise that involves the stretching of the upper back, for example, they are instructed to lift up their arms and place their middle finger between the second and the third ribs in line with the middle of the collar bone, and to keep the fingers at this place all the time while doing a forward bending of the neck and elbows. The purpose of placing the middle finger exactly at this point, we learn, is that this spot is an acupuncture point for the lungs. Step by step, we get to know that, in addition to the effects on the body’s physical structures, each of the exercises serves a purpose according to the logic of Chinese medicine.

From listening to the conversations in the classes, I learned that this introductory phase is perceived as quite similar to what many of us had experienced before when trying to follow the instructions of teachers of physical exercises or gymnastics. This was also my own experience. What is in the foreground at this stage of the qigong

²⁵ How *waiqi* is understood in Biyun practice will be described below in the account of the five stages (see Section 3.3 and Note 34).

²⁶ This means that, although the various instructors have structured their courses somewhat differently (as weekend courses, as courses over some weeks, or as training once a week), the contents of the courses are almost the same. By this, however, I do not mean to imply that there were no differences in how the instructions were received and transmitted by individual practitioners.

practice is a body we are familiar with beforehand, consisting of bones, joints, muscles, tendons, nerves, blood vessels, and organs. This body is gradually supplemented with acupuncture points, meridians, and other elements from the Chinese medical tradition. Yet, being introduced to unfamiliar body movements and new theories of the body prepares the course participants for what is to come.

3.2 Stage Two: Focusing on “Body Movements with Concentration”

While doing the body movements, we should at the same time evoke certain mental images. Each of the exercises combines a specific image with the movements within its description. The instructors state over and over again that the beneficial effects of the exercises are closely associated with whether or not one is capable of keeping focus while doing the exercises. It requires, however, some confidence and fluency in performing the movements before one is capable of paying attention to this dimension. “It is not until you have achieved a routine that you can go into and really feel the exercises,” a student commented.

In the initial exercises, body structures involved in the movements should be focused. The course participants are instructed to concentrate on how the exercises “strengthen and support the feet,” “strengthen and support the ankles,” and so on. The subsequent exercises extend the focus from joints, muscles, and tendons to encompassing the internal organs; the kidneys, the heart, and the lungs. Yet, these exercises do not at all require any well-developed capability of imagination. The focus of our awareness rather serves as an affirmation of what we habitually take to be the realities inside the body. One of the first nonbody images the students are instructed to evoke, requiring more creative capability, is to visualize that “our arms are waves of water,” “we are a tree moving in the wind,” and “we are bending like a tree” while making wave-like movements of the arms and shoulders, and bending the upper trunk.

The instructors emphasize that the movements of the body parts should be gentle, soft, and slow and carried out with a feeling of pleasure and relaxation. Our focused awareness on the inner images should also be unstrained and relaxed. A relaxation session, initiated with three deep breaths, in advance of the exercises helps us to get into a relaxed state.²⁷ To assist in this, we are encouraged to do the exercises with closed eyes. The CD with the instructions is played when we practice longer sequences. We are told that the intellect or analytical mind should not be active: “Let the brain rest.”

The interactions of a series of elements, new patterns of physical movements performed at a slow pace and in a relaxed state; the mental focusing on specific images; and, in addition, the Chinese music and the low, relaxing voice from the CD all affect us. We, the qigong subjects, are put into motion. A feeling of being calm, of getting into a peaceful state and of being present are terms that many, if not all,

²⁷ While the patterns of breathing are complex in many qigong styles, in Biyun, the breathing should be natural and relaxed. In fact, the students are told not to focus on their breathing, except for the three deep breaths that normally initiate relaxation sessions. It is considered that a relaxed, deep breath will occur as a natural response to the Biyun exercises (Fan 2008: 20).

the qigong students I talked to underlined. As Elsa, now herself a qigong instructor, remembers from her early phase of practicing: “I got some concrete movements to do, so that the body was engaged. At the same time, I got something concrete to focus on, so that the analytical part could have a rest. To put it quite simply, there was no problem that I should solve (...). I should just feel my strength. That was all.” The emphasis on focused awareness is also part of what makes qigong into something more than an ordinary physical exercise. As Ann explains: “It is the combination of the physical exercises (...) with the fact that you concentrate and are present in yourself. You are not just sitting there, exercising on an ergometer bicycle.”

Although from an outsider’s point of view the exercises in this phase appear to some extent familiar, this stage offers opportunities to experience a body–mind state different from that which many of the students are accustomed to. A unity consisting of body movements and a focused awareness is in the foreground at this stage of qigong. “Concentration” and “concentrating on” are the terms most commonly applied by the Biyun participants in the contexts where I above have introduced concepts such as “focused awareness,” “imagination,” and “visualization.”²⁸ Expressed in Biyun terminology, this unity would be referred to as “body movements with concentration.”

3.3 Stage Three: Focusing on “Body Movements, Concentration and Qi”

Later in the course progression, concepts and images that are new to most of the participants are introduced. The images of the exercise referred to as “gathering” are perhaps the most evocative example of the beginners’ program. The instructions, as recorded on CD, go as follows:

(...)Then go out with your arms, palms facing upwards and in your concentration focus on gathering life energy from nature and from heaven. Then turn your palm downwards, imagine how you are bringing in lots of life energy which you have gathered. Imagine how you are bringing the energy of life through the top of your head, letting it flow down inside the middle of your

²⁸ “Concentration” is often used as a translation when Fan Xiulan uses the Chinese concept *yinian* (“thought,” “idea”). It is not uncommon to use “concentration,” “concentrating on” in English translations of meditation practices (see, e.g., Kohn 1989: 137). “Concentration” (*konsentrasjon* in Norwegian) and “concentrating on” (*å konsentrere seg om*) as used in Biyun contexts have a broader scope of meaning than in standard Norwegian (or English), their meaning encompassing, for example, “focused awareness,” “imagination,” “affirmation,” and “visualization.” “Concentration” as used in Biyun contexts can perhaps best be considered a Biyun-specific technical term and a Biyun *emic* term. Biyun instructions are often phrased according to the following pattern. If the first part is: “the concentration in this exercise is...,” this can be followed by a description of an image (for example “a tree waving in the wind”). Examples of such Biyun-specific use of “concentration” are easy to understand when used in Biyun contexts (meaning: “imagine that you are a tree waving in the wind”), but the meaning is not clear in ordinary Norwegian. Other examples are: “In Biyun the concentration is very simple” (meaning: “the contents of the mental images or visualizations are very simple”), “The concentration is positive” (meaning: “the focus should be on feeling good,” or “Concentration does not imply focusing on (...)” (meaning: “the focused awareness should be relaxed”).

body, down to the *dantian*.²⁹ Put your hands there, and keep your concentration on the dantian. With closed eyes, you don't look outwards, but inwards, concentrating on how you gather and regain all the positive life force for your day and your life. Stand with your hands on the dantian for a while. Rotate the hands around the dantian. Do this six times counter clockwise. Do this six times clockwise. Your attention should focus on a warm and a comfortable feeling in the dantian area (...).

Notably, several concepts—new to the course participants—are mentioned in the instructions for this exercise. First and foremost, the notion of “life energy,” in the qigong class often referred to as *qi*, is introduced. The participants know, of course, that qigong is about *qi*, but most new students have only a vague idea of the meaning of *qi*. Nowadays, it is commonplace among large sections of the population who have had experience with acupuncture to be familiar with the Chinese notion of the flow of some kind of energy in channels of the body.³⁰ However, the image of *qi* as something that can be gathered from the environment, “from the sun, moon, stars and other elements of the heaven and from mountains, water, trees, flowers and other elements of the earth” and brought into the body through the top of the head, is foreign to many of the Biyun students.³¹

The image of life energy flowing through the inside of the body to an area called dantian, just below the navel, is also new to many of the students. Instructors explain that to activate, vitalize, and build up energy in this area of the body is one the most important aspects of practicing qigong. From the dantian, life energy may be spread throughout the body, nourishing the whole body. Dantian is “your own health center.”

²⁹ In Biyun classes, *dantian* is explained to be an energy center located a few centimetres under the navel. In the literature on Daoist practices and Chinese medicine, dantian is commonly translated as “elixir field” or “cinnabar field” (e.g., Skar and Fabrizio 2000: 465; Schipper 1993: 142). In Daoism, dantian is closely associated with the practices of *neidan* (“inner alchemy”), in which one is aiming at the transcendence of the individual and cosmological states of being through cultivation of the “ingredients” within the person himself (Skar and Fabrizio 2000: 464). In contrast, *waidan* (“external alchemy”) practices rely on external ingredients such as drugs (Akahori 1989: 73–98). Daoist texts often mention three dantian; one in the head, one in the chest and one in the abdomen (see Skar and Fabrizio 2000: 465). In Daoists texts, the three dantian are the home of divine beings, as well as the site of energy. Skar and Pregadio point out that: “While a man’s energy resides in his lower Elixir Field, many texts assert that a woman’s energy resides in a point between the breasts called *qixue* (Cavity of Energy, a name for the lower energy field in the man’s body)” (Skar and Fabrizio 2000: 490). Schipper (1993:142) also explains that Chinese texts locate the cinnabar field at different places in the body: “Sometimes it is said to be the spot between the eyebrows, sometimes the mouth, or the heart, or a place under the navel, or the kidney, and so on.” After having spent time with the adepts of the practices to nourish the vital principle, Schipper concludes that, according to these adepts, the cinnabar field does not correspond to any exact place in the body, but “must be found by each for himself during meditation” (1993: 142).

³⁰ According to a recent survey, 28% of the population in Norway has received acupuncture treatment (Opinion 2006).

³¹ Master Fan states in her book that the “gathering” exercise has its origin from the *daoyin* exercises described in the Mawangdui texts from the Han dynasty (Fan 2008: 61). Fan does not provide more information on this issue. The Mawangdui texts were excavated from a tomb in Hunan province in China in 1973. The burial date is said to be 168 B.C. The *Daoyin* exercises have been discussed in several studies (e.g., Despeux 1989; Engelhardt 2000; Harper 1998; Kohn 2007).

The instructions for “the gathering” cited above are from the beginners’ program. However, visualizations of the gathering of qi from the environment and into the body and its path through the body constitute more central images in subsequent programs.³² Illustratively, the second course in the Biyun system is called Dong gong, which is translated as “moving qigong” or “moving qi” exercises. In this program, every exercise in one way or another involves interacting with qi. Beneficial qi is gathered from nature, harmful qi is rinsed out of the body, balls of qi are manipulated between our palms and qi is guided in a variety of routes and layers inside the body.³³ Moreover, in some of the courses that primarily are open to Biyun instructors, participants learn techniques for gathering qi from nature and thereafter transmitting qi, without physical contact, to another person in order to strengthen and heal him or her.³⁴

It was a common response among the more experienced practitioners to point out that the courses aimed at the moving and gathering of qi created effects that were more recognizable than, and different from, the effects in the beginners’ program. They felt that qigong helped them to “gain energy” and “activate the energy within themselves.” Peter, who has attended most of the available Biyun courses, explained: “When I started doing Dong gong, my recovering accelerated tremendously. In the course of a three-week period, I felt that I had..., I don’t know how to state it..., in my words, it was 200 percent improvement! I got so much more energy, concentration, feeling of presence, memory, self-confidence and mental strength. I became gradually aware of it, and people around me commented on me looking different.”

Interestingly, when I interviewed Biyun participants about their qigong experiences and their perceptions of qi, they often mentioned the exercise “gathering” and sometimes demonstrated it to me. This simple movement appears to be a powerful exercise. Elsa, an experienced qigong teacher, gives us one example of how instructors talk about this exercise: “You get an intensified feeling in your hands, don’t you, you get a feeling of..., well, I have a very concrete experience of ‘the gathering.’ I have the feeling I am very large, and that it is unlimited how large I can grow, and how much qi I can take in. I feel I am large and have a lot of energy. I do not create any particular imagery, except that I locate myself in places

³² The body in Chinese medicine, as well as in other forms of traditional Asian medicine, is known to be more permeable than the body in biomedicine. Moreover, body–environment interactions play a more emphasized role. The term “body ecologic” (Hsu 2007) has been suggested in order to reflect these characteristics.

³³ All these methods of gathering and guiding qi are well-known from studies of qigong and similar methods practiced in China (see, e.g., Kohn 2007; Hsu 1999).

³⁴ These are referred to as methods of waiqi (“external qi”). Waiqi methods in Biyun encompass methods for gathering qi from nature to strengthen oneself, as well as methods for emission of qi (*fa qi*) to other persons for healing purposes. Master Fan explains that, in Biyun, the transmission of qi primarily involves qi from nature (*da ziran de qi*) and not transmission of one’s own qi. She provides two explanations for the focus on qi derived from nature: (1) she says it may be harmful for oneself to use one’s own qi and (2) the quality of one’s own qi may not be very good, and to emit it can therefore potentially cause harm to the recipients. Fan explains: “While one’s own qi may be limited, the qi from nature is unlimited.” See Hsu (1999) for an account from China concerning how qigong sessions performed by Qiu, a qigong master in Yunnan province, included both gathering of qi from the universe (*yuzhou zhi qi*) and emission of qi (*fa qi*) in order to heal clients.

where I have been before, one place with a fantastic, beautiful tree and another place with a beautiful sun.”

Others emphasized how pleasant they experienced the feeling of being connected to an ocean of energies—from the elements of heaven and earth—from which one can draw energy when needed. As Ann stated: “It is hard to express in words. It gives me a very good physical and spiritual experience of being a body in wholeness. Flow! ‘Flow’ is a very good word for it. So, it is a pleasant flow; a flow which makes me calm down. Very pleasant!”

When practicing the exercise for the gathering of qi, the sensory experience of warmth underneath one’s palms placed on the stomach under the navel is understood to be a sign of qi being gathered in the dantian. Related to other exercises, the students spoke about a variety of other bodily sensations which are also interpreted as indications of qi being activated. Some talked about feeling cold, others of pain, a feeling of swollenness, pricking or an electric feeling. Some felt their body expanding, some felt it shrinking, while some felt light and others heavy.

Some of the course participants could feel qi from the beginning of practicing. Many said they gradually became aware of, sensitive to, or affected by “something.” Again, Ann’s account is quite typical: “From not feeling anything, from just doing the exercises, until all of a sudden I felt that there is a kind of...a kind of resistance, I would call it.” She explains that the feelings of “a kind of resistance” gradually became more and more distinct, and that the feeling became noticeably stronger and clearer after she had started to carry out exercises that focus on the gathering of qi from the environment. When she now practices qigong, she sees—with closed eyes—colors coming and going and “I feel a change; something like a stream coming.” She also feels the energy in the palms of her hands: “I can feel the energy in my hands, I can, as a warm or a tingling feeling.” She has also discovered that she has become capable of sensing the auras of other persons, “Now I can feel that there is energy around us,” she says. “It was such a great, strong experience!”

In the foreground at this stage of practicing Biyun is a wholeness focusing on the activating and gathering of qi. This wholeness is constituted of the practitioners’ body movements and their awareness concentrating on various images of qi. It could be called a “body movements–concentration–qi” unity. This unification gradually learns to be affected by qi in a variety of forms. Some forms of qi that the unity becomes sensitive to are from the environment, while others are inside the body. Qi is in both nature and in the body, and with closed eyes and inner awareness the boundaries between the physical body and the environment become blurred.

3.4 Stage Four: Focusing on “Qi and Body Movements Without Concentration”

In the next stage, the notion of a qi force is taken one step further. The main purpose in this stage is to learn exercises that enable us, the course participants, to let qi work on us, without our mind interfering with the qi movements. The exercises are, as usual, carried out with closed eyes and assisted with very quiet and soft Chinese music. The sequence of exercises starts with relaxation and inner awareness. Then, it continues with exercises aimed at gathering qi from the elements of nature; from the sun, moon, stars, mountains, waters, forests, or flowers. Thereafter, while connecting with qi from nature and at the same time making slow, soft, wave-like movements

with our arms, we should “let the concentration go” and allow ourselves to move with the qi that we are feeling within us. When, or if, our consciousness is activated, we should not hold on to these thoughts, but let them also go.

The instructors explain that the movements of qi can reveal themselves in a variety of ways: in spontaneous body movements; in a feeling of tiredness or stiffness; in an awareness of painful areas of the body; in the awakening of long-forgotten memories; or in an urge to cry, sing, laugh, or let out other forms of emotional or expressive feelings. “This is qi exercising you.”³⁵ The form of qi primarily activated in this exercise is referred to as the “original qi” (*yuanqi*) within us.³⁶ The students are told that this is the qi we have inherited from our parents and former generations. It is the deepest, truest, and most authentic dimension in us. This form of qi demonstrates itself most clearly in children’s naturalness and spontaneity. Qigong can help us to get in contact with our “inner child”; the naturalness and spontaneity in us, which we have learned to control and disregard in order to be respectable grownups.

From interviews and conversations in class, I got the impression that, in addition to the feeling of gaining energy, increased creativity and a feeling of reaching awareness are also common experiences attributed to this stage. Nils, for example, who practices almost every day the “free form,” as he calls it, explains that he feels that this form is helping him to be more flexible; it releases both muscle tensions of his physical body and other kinds of problems. “It gets the mess to the surface,” as he says, “and after some days the problems tend to dissolve. They don’t appear so difficult anymore.”

Nina explains that she practices this form only when she feels she is in need of something extra, or as she puts it, “when I need to see myself.” “The effect I get from doing this form of qigong is that I feel very creative. After practicing I write a lot. It goes very deep. In a way, it goes into your soul.” She explains that she has a lot of visions, almost like dreaming awake, and she sees small films from her life. “It feels like being a treasure hunter.”

Wholeness, namely, the unity of qi and the body, is given a prominent place in the exercises constituting this stage. This unity learns to be influenced by qi in the meaning of qi as a source of self-insight and creativity, in addition to the beneficial effects the qi movements are felt to cause on the physical body.

3.5 Stage Five: Focusing on “Body in Stillness and Moving Qi”

In the stages I have described so far, the exercises involve movements of the body. The qigong participants engage in slow, graceful, flowing movements, and without looking carefully, one may even overlook differences between the various stages. However, the exercises that constitute the last stage are, from an outsider’s viewpoint, definitely different. In these exercises, the body is, for the most part,

³⁵ The consequences of the “movements of qi” described here, spontaneous body movements, emotional outburst, etc., resemble those described in accounts of certain styles of qigong from China, e.g., by Ots (1994) and by Miura (1989) and in Taiwan described by Micollier (1999).

³⁶ Master Fan uses the concept of *yuanqi*, but *yuanqi* is rarely used by her students. The meaning of the concept of *yuanqi* (also translated as primordial qi) as used in qigong and medicine in China has been discussed in length in Hsu (1999: 71–78) (see also, e.g., Sivin 1987: 238).

still. These exercises are often talked about as *jinggong*, which in Biyun classes translates as “stillness qigong.” However, although the body is still, qi is moved about guided by the mind. Thus, I refer to the unity focused upon in this stage as “body in stillness and moving qi.”

Jinggong exercises are emphasized in the more advanced courses. The advanced students learn a whole repertoire of different jinggong exercises and they spend much time practicing them. Beginners also sometimes practice jinggong, but then as a form of relaxation and preparation for the training. While the images to be focused upon are simple in the beginners’ courses (e.g., “relax your head” and “relax your eyes”), the imageries involved in the jinggong exercises practiced in the advanced classes are, for the most part, very complex.

When practicing jinggong, the first step is to sit, stand, or lie in a comfortable position. To assist further relaxation, we, the course participants, are instructed to take three deep breaths and let ourselves be even calmer. The next step is to evoke a specific mental image. Similar to the previous stages, these images may involve, for example, light from the sun, light from the moon, or other images of nature, or they can encompass inner organs combined with colors, light, and body sensations; all perceived to be forms of qi. Next, the initial visualizations should be transformed into new images and, furthermore, they should be moved about by mental force. In some cases, the qi images are directed from the environment into the body, while in other cases, the routes of qi are within the body. In many jinggong exercises, the guiding of qi is continued into a phase where total stillness of the body and mind is sought. After some time, our awareness should again be focused before the exercises come to an end.

“If one wishes to gather life force, one needs to develop the power of one’s heart, the inner self, the soul,” Master Fan explains. She presents jinggong exercises as powerful methods in order to reach this goal: “Jinggong has the effect that it clears our hearts. The heart is the seat of the spirit. The heart is like a mirror. To reach a better understanding of ourselves, we need to polish the mirror.”

Although Master Fan emphasizes spiritual growth and development of ethical consciousness as important aspects of Biyun (Fan 2008: 25–28), qigong is hardly talked about in such terms in the beginners’ courses. None of the beginners I interviewed mentioned such dimensions. However, some of the experienced qigong instructors, like Elsa, stated that “to be able to help yourself, so that you will be able to help others, this is what I have come to see as the quintessence of Biyun.”

4 Discussion

4.1 “Learning to be Affected by Qi and Learning to Affect Qi”

In the above account, I have underlined the progression of learning Biyun qigong in Norway and suggested that the students are led from what is well-known to what is new through five stages. A variety of specific body–concentration–qi states are constituted at each of these stages. In some stages, body movements or body postures, or concentration, or qi are focused upon, while in others, one or two of these dimensions are toned down. In the course of the progression of the stages, the

role of what is new—namely qi—gradually becomes more prominent. Motivated by Despret's and Latour's discussion of the body as “learning to be affected” and “learning to affect,” my goal with the account of the five stages has been to show how learning qigong may be perceived as a practice that, at its core, involves learning to affect qi, as well as learning to be affected by qi.

An abundance of vitalizing qi, and its free flow, is, according to Biyun, the prime source for healing, health, and longevity, and qi is perceived as an unquestionable reality by Master Fan and by other Biyun instructors.³⁷ Through qigong practice, qi gradually becomes a reality also for many of the course participants.³⁸ Thus, a “preference for agreement” (Despret 2004: 119), which, according to Despret, is typical for relationships characterized by trust and authority, is demonstrated with the emergence of qi as a reality shared between instructors and students.

In the first stages, most of the exercises are associated with the physical body and images that relate to a Western common-sense world. Yet, by gradually being occupied with new patterns of movements and with the mind concentrating on specific images, the qigong course participants are acquiring new understandings, and the body–mind state that the participants started with is affected. The qigong subjects are put into motion and transformed in ways that apparently make them more sensitive to qi. In the stage I call “body movements, concentration, and qi,” qigong participants are learning to be affected by qi in the sense that they learn to feel qi as bodily sensations. Expressed in other words, qi is unfolding through a variety of bodily sensations; feelings of warmth, coldness, swollenness, and pricking, and as electrical and other sensory experiences.

After the subject has been transformed into an entity with the capability of feeling qi, qi—also in a variety of other forms—gradually comes into being through qigong practice. In the subsequent stage (“qi and body movements without concentration”), the participants are told that emotional outbursts, thoughts, memories, and creative activities are effects of qi working on them. Qi reveals itself in these effects. Qi is understood as encompassing not only bodily sensations but also mental dimensions. The participants thus learn that these dimensions, which we in Western societies generally categorize as products of the mind, are consequences of being affected by qi.

In the stage “body in stillness and moving qi,” qi is cultivated into being in yet other forms; self-insights, ethical consciousness, and spiritual power are perceived as products of moving qi, or of qi in stillness. The subject learning to be affected by qi in this stage learns to understand these dimensions as consequences of qi. By doing so, the meaning of qi is at the same time extended to encompass these dimensions.

³⁷ This is, of course, not special for Biyun qigong, but an understanding Biyun instructors share with practitioners of many forms of qigong, medical therapies, immortality, and longevity techniques.

³⁸ Qi was felt by many Biyun participants, but not by all. A few, especially among the beginners, stated that they did not want to relate to the concept of qi because, from their viewpoint, qi carries a religious or new-age connotation that they did not want to associate themselves with. Similarly, a few of the more experienced participants explained that they appreciate the practicing of the qigong exercises, but they neither appreciate nor approve of the Chinese theories and explanations. According to Master Fan, it is more difficult to feel qi if one is not able to relax, concentrate on the images, and let the analytical mind rest (“let the brain rest”).

Feeling qi can also invoke external forces derived from the sun, moon, stars, mountains, waters, trees, and other aspects of heaven and earth. The body–concentration–qi unity is progressively acquiring the capacity to be influenced by qi, while “at the same time ‘world counter-parts’ are being registered in a new way” (Latour 2004: 207). A close connection, a continuity, is created between dimensions of the outer worlds and sensory experiences felt by the individual practitioners. The meaning of qi transcends the conventional boundary between the inner body landscape and the outer world.

Moreover, qi is not something that the practitioners merely passively receive. Qigong also involves affecting qi. Qigong participants are acting upon qi. They engage in active gathering of qi from the environment into the body. Moreover, practicing qigong sometimes means to send out qi via the practitioner’s palms in order to heal other persons or oneself. In addition, it includes learning to guide the movements of qi inside the body. Qigong may in all these senses be characterized as involving learning to affect qi.

To sum up, when learning qigong, qi is cultivated into being, and it comes into being in a variety of forms. Qi as created in Biyun qigong blurs a series of distinctions that we are used to seeing as categorical in Western thinking: Qi goes beyond distinctions between inner and outer worlds, between body and mind and body and spirit. The subject learning to be affected by qi and to affect qi engages at the same time a unity that concerns all these dimensions. Practicing Biyun qigong definitely offers a series of opportunities to enjoy holistic experiences, and qi is a category that creates unfamiliar opportunities for expressing such experiences.

The unity of the body–mind is a well-known characteristic of practices such as qigong and medicine as practiced in China. In contrast to how body–mind distinctions tend to be treated in biomedicine (and other Western practices shaped by Cartesian dualism), in the Chinese practices, bodily, mental, and spiritual categories are rather seen as interconnected dimensions and as aspects of a continuum (Chen 2003a; Hsu 1999; Ishida 1989; Kohn 2006; Zhang 2007). Biyun qigong, an example of a form of Chinese qigong that has traveled globally, should clearly be perceived as a nondualistic practice, also when established in places outside China, such as in Norway, where biomedicine prevails.

5 Concluding Remark

5.1 Qigong as Both Medical Practice and Meditation

Qigong is not easy to label according to the categories that are available to us. From the position of an outside observer, the stage I have referred to as “the body in stillness and moving qi” is likely to be seen as meditation. The mental focusing on specific images that forms part of each exercise, what the Biyun participants refer to as “concentration,” resembles meditation. Some of the qigong participants talk about qigong in general as “movement meditation.” In a Western society like that of Norway, we habitually think of meditation as something we do for the mind and not for the body. However, as I have demonstrated through the description of the five stages of body–concentration–qi while practicing Biyun, the specific images focused

on in the concentrations include joints, muscles, internal organs, and other domains of the body, as well as mindful and spiritual dimensions. Thus, if we want to use meditation to describe qigong, we must emphasize that it is a meditation for all dimensions of the person and not only for the mind.

The Biyun instructors, however, emphasize that Biyun is a form of medical qigong. They announce that positive health outcomes can be expected and they persistently, from the beginners' to the advanced courses, tell stories about persons having experienced healing and improved health after beginning to practice qigong. Some indeed have stunning stories to tell about the healing influence they feel qigong practice has had on their problems. Many of the participants in Biyun groups explain that they continue to practice primarily because they feel qigong has beneficial effects on their health and bodily problems. In this respect, Biyun qigong definitely deserves to be called a medical practice. Yet, qigong as a medical practice is seen as healing not only the physiological dimensions, but it is also addressing emotional, spiritual, and ethical dimensions. If we want to use the terms "meditation" and "medical practice," I suggest one should underline that this form of meditation is for the body and mind, and this medicine is also for the body and mind.

Acknowledgements I am greatly indebted to Inger Altern and Ellen Kristvik for the fruitful long-term collaboration and the helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article. Special thanks to Elisabeth Hsu for several rounds with extensive comments and constructive suggestions for revisions. I would also like to extend thanks to the colleagues at the Section for medical anthropology and medical history at the University of Oslo for discussions and feedback on earlier versions. I am grateful for insightful comments and good suggestions from two anonymous reviewers. Thank you to the leader of the Biyun Association in Norway, Anne-Marie Giørtz, for reading and commenting on the article. I would also like to thank Biyun instructors and course participants for taking part in interviews and for giving me permission to do participant-observation in their qigong groups. Finally, I acknowledge the Norwegian Health and Rehabilitation Foundation (funding applied for through Norwegian Rheumatism Association) for financial support.

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