

Trauma, Qigong, And Trust

By Michael Aanavi PhD LAC

"The man who strikes is not a man at all. The striking sword is not a sword. And for myself, the person who is about to cut, in a flash of lightning, it will be like cutting through the breeze that blows across the spring sky. It is the mind that absolutely does not stop."

—Takuan Soho

Trauma is, among other things, an embodied experience, and a variety of approaches to the bodily aspects of trauma can be of significant value in resolving post-traumatic residue—notably, among others, Peter Levine's process of Somatic Experiencing™. Many somatic approaches go quite deep, delving into mindful awareness of embodied experience, the physiology of trauma and nervous system arousal, and even the archetypal layers of the psyche that are accessible through embodiment. Both personally and professionally, I've found a variety of forms of bodywork, embodied trauma work, and somatic psychotherapy to be powerfully transformative, but in my experience, the core phenomenon underlying the somatic, physiological, and psychological sequelae of trauma is a disruption of energy: trauma is, in the most fundamental sense, an energetic disorder.

In the haunting film *Donnie Darko*, there's a scene in which rippling, tubular fields emerge from people's chests; these long, energetic phenomena seem to both meander and lead, and there's a kind of directionality implied, a connectedness to forward movement, to intention, perhaps even to a fated path. In a symbolic sense, this is a significant image for the experience of trauma—for me, it is exactly this energetic experience of directionality that is injured, stunted, sometimes even severed by the experience of both personal and transpersonal trauma.

In this context, much as I value recent developments in embodied trauma work, it's the energetic practices emerging from the Daoist tradition that have been most helpful for me in trauma recovery. There's something extraordinarily powerful in the long history of these practices, and in the directness of their approach in working with energy. Also, the lineage of these practices seems to resonate deeply in an intergenerational sense; something about this legacy

resonates with the deepest aspects of my own inherited legacy of trauma. In any case, these practices have had tremendous value for me not just in physical health, but also in the recovery of a relationship to energy—in the process of recovery of a kind of energetic integrity.

At core, what I'm referring to is *qi*—of which there are many forms and many understandings, and of which a thorough discussion is far beyond the scope of this work—and *qigong*, a plethora of traditional practices that develop, focus, even heal one's energy. Within the broad framework of *qigong*, some practices cultivate *qi*, others emphasize sensitivity and awareness of it, and still others—both medical and martial—focus on its purposeful application. Mindfulness, awareness, and somatic

connection are important components of all of these, but beyond simple awareness and embodiment, *qigong* is a real energetic phenomenon; it is about *qi*, which in an embodied sense can be injured, drained, blocked, or otherwise put in disarray by a variety of climatic and psychological causes—including trauma, both directly experienced and inherited.

Chinese medicine (which in essence is itself a form of *qigong*) is profoundly helpful in understanding the dynamics, the diagnostics of injuries to *qi* in both organ systems and meridians, from both external causes and traumatic events. But Chinese medicine intervention (acupuncture, herbs, and so on) aside, in terms of direct connection and energetic integrity, what's been most helpful for me is the formal practice

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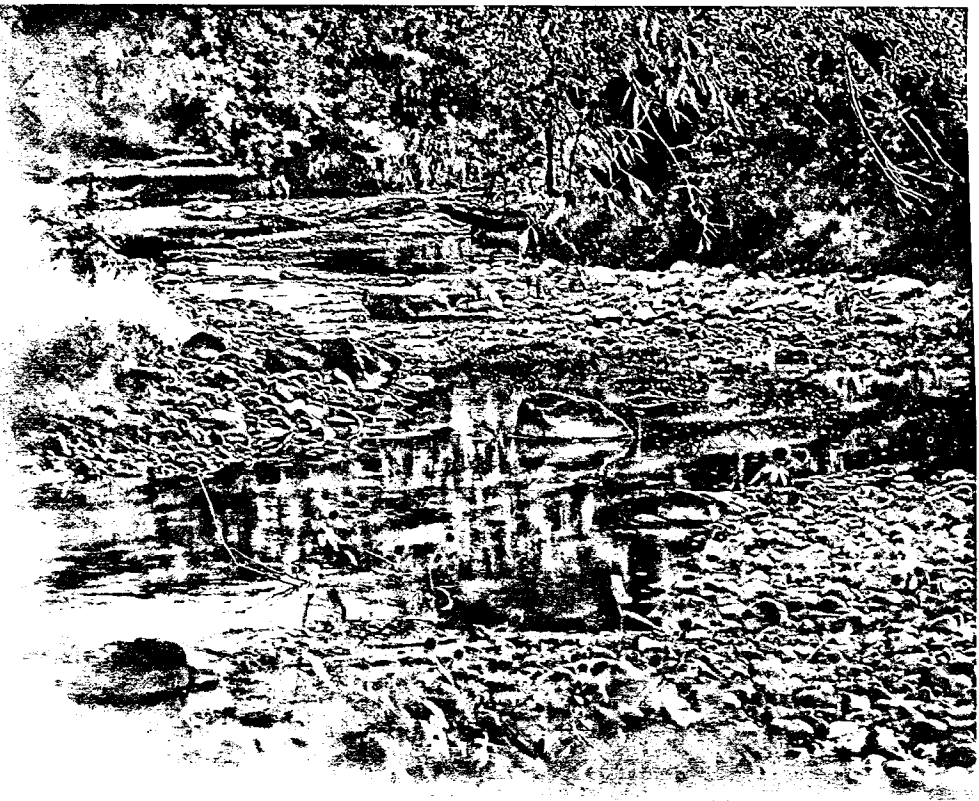
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of *qigong*—and in particular, the practice of what are often referred to as internal martial arts, of which *taijiquan* is the best known. While these martial *qigong* practices are essentially fighting arts, they are not solely for combat, but also develop both *qi* itself, and one's relationship with and sensitivity to it. (*Xingyiquan*, the martial embodiment of the bear, which is much more linear than *taiji* and its other cousins, has been particularly helpful for me in developing connection with my own forward momentum, my own directionality.)

My teachers, Drs. Benjamin Tong and Randy Sugawara, both have backgrounds in clinical psychology as well as extensive internal martial arts training, and have been working with exactly this kind of phenomenon for many years. In fact, Dr. Sugawara works specifically with addiction and relapse (as well as anxiety, depression, and related issues) through *qigong* practice as development of relationship with *qi*. Fundamentally, though, whether martial or not, and whether or not they are psychological in intent, these traditional practices are indeed about developing energy, but beyond that are also about developing a kind of relationship with one's deeper processes in a very literal, energetic sense. From my perspective, this develops in a form that is very different from other forms of somatic trauma work, in a way that establishes an actual connection with the source of one's being—in a way that is directly applicable to the experience of energy having been severed, stuck, stunted, or in some other way altered by trauma.

Putting aside for the moment any methodology of recovery from trauma—whether through *qigong* or other psychological or somatic processes—I think this energetic understanding of trauma is critically important for the mutual processes of recovery from trauma and recovery from addiction: these two processes, so often intimately linked, are in some ways diametrically opposed. Ultimately, an energetic perspective on trauma suggests a need to develop the capacity to trust one's own perceptions and sensibilities, to follow one's energy—to be aware of what feels like flow and what feels like stoppage, of what feels like abundance and what feels like restriction. But in my experience, much of mainstream recovery, rooted in the concept



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of disease, reinforces an essential distrust of one's perceptions, of one's decision-making processes. So, while I certainly recognize the importance of consulting others in decision-making (especially in early recovery), at a certain point this only reinforces the ideology that one's most vital processes and perceptions are fundamentally suspect. This reinforcement of distrust in some sense undermines the process necessary for recovery from personal and intergenerational trauma, and this, in my experience, is a significant dynamic for those who—like me—have both addiction and trauma history and who at points become stuck in their recovery from both. Unfortunately, I don't have a clear solution for this conundrum, but in fact I'm not sure it needs a solution—I'm not sure it's necessary that all paths and approaches are consistent, or even compatible with each

other. What is necessary, for me anyway, is the act of naming this conflict, for in some sense this simple acknowledgment of contradiction is in and of itself an act of connection with a fundamental aspect of energetic integrity.

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California Journal of Oriental Medicine Vol. 25 No. 1 • Spring/Summer 2014

