An Introduction to Falun Gong

Falun Gong, also known as Falun Dafa, is a traditional Chinese spiritual discipline that consists of moral teachings, meditation, and four gentle exercises that are known in Chinese culture as “qigong.”

Falun Dafa was first taught widely in China in 1992, toward the end of China’s “qigong boom,” which saw hundreds of masters teaching various forms of slow-moving exercises and meditation believed to increase energy and improve health and well-being.

Beyond exercises

Although it was part of the broader qigong movement, Falun Gong was distinct from other practices being taught. It went beyond teaching physical exercises alone, and revived a rich moral and spiritual philosophy rooted in Buddhist and Daoist tradition.

At the heart of Falun Gong’s teachings is an emphasis on moral rectitude. The practice holds that the nature of the universe itself—the Dao, or the Buddhist Dharma—is encapsulated in the values of Truth, Compassion, and Forbearance. Students of Falun Gong strive to live in accordance with these principles in daily life to become more honest, altruistic, and self-aware. By elevating their realm of mind and moral character, and through the practice of qigong exercises and meditation, physical health can correspondingly improve.

Today, Falun Gong is practiced in over 70 countries worldwide by people of all ages, ethnicities, and socio-economic backgrounds.

Is Falun Gong a religion?

Belonging to the Buddhist school of thought, it is not incorrect to classify Falun Gong as a religion, but it may be more clear to simply refer to it as a spiritual practice. It does not involve physical places of worship, formal organizational hierarchies, rituals, membership, or fees. Thus it lacks some of the defining characteristics of religions. However, it does involve a systematic program of spiritual exercises, a complete and coherent cosmology, and teachings that seek to affect moral growth, inner purity, and higher states of spiritual realization. In Chinese culture it is simply called xiulian, or “cultivation practice.”

The Practice of Falun Gong

Exercises

Consisting of gentle, graceful movements (as seen to the left), Falun Gong’s four standing exercises are a powerful form of qigong to cleanse the body and mind, open energy channels, improve circulation, and enhance one’s wisdom and insight. They are easy to learn by people of all ages and backgrounds, and are always taught free of charge.

Meditation

The fifth exercise in Falun Gong is a sitting meditation (as seen in the photo above). Through the practice of meditation, one can achieve tranquility, greater awareness, and release from the stresses of daily life.

A Way of Life

The most important aspect of Falun Gong is that practitioners strive to live in accordance with the principles of Truthfulness, Compassion, and Forbearance. In the process of improving one’s character, or what the Chinese call xinxing, a practitioner is able to let go of destructive tendencies such as addiction, anger, and jealousy. Through consistent practice, Falun Gong can enable one to reach a state of altruism, health, and inner balance.

The primary book of Falun Gong is Zhuan Falun by Li Hongzhi. It has been translated into dozens of languages, and can be found at bookstores or downloaded for free at www.falundafa.org
When Falun Gong was first taught publicly in China in 1992, it was met with approval and praise from Chinese officials, who saw it as an effective means of improving public health and morality. Falun Gong’s teacher, Li Hongzhi, was invited to give lectures in government agencies, and was even invited to teach his practice at Chinese embassies in Europe as a way of promoting traditional Chinese culture.

High-ranking Communist Party members, government bureaucrats, and military leaders began practicing Falun Gong.

Falun Gong’s teachings resonated not only because the practice had gained a reputation for its ability to affect physical health and provide ethical and spiritual guidance, but it was also free and easy to learn. By placing primary importance on spiritual and ethical elements and the nurturing of virtues, Falun Gong enabled people to reconnect with earlier Buddhist and Daoist traditions after decades of repression under Communism. In late 1998, widely cited government surveys estimated that as many as 70 million Chinese citizens had taken up the practice.

Persecution unfolds

As Falun Gong grew in popularity in the mid- to late-1990s, some of China’s communist leaders began to view the practice and its moral philosophy as ideological competition to the Communist Party. Although Falun Gong is peaceful and possesses no political aspirations, as of 1996 it operated completely independently of the Chinese state, with no formal organization that could be controlled or overseen. The Communist Party of China does not tolerate large independent civil society groups—particularly spiritual or religious ones.

In July of 1999, Communist Party Secretary Jiang Zemin launched a campaign to “eradicate” Falun Gong. Jiang reportedly felt threatened by Falun Gong’s size and independence, thinking that its moral teachings were at odds with the official ideology and with the values of Marxism and materialism. He ordered the creation of a powerful new organization called the “610 Office,” which was charged with overseeing the eradication of Falun Gong and given extra-judicial power to execute its mandate.

Chinese police detain a Falun Gong practitioner.

The world’s largest group of prisoners of conscience

In the crackdown that followed, hundreds of thousands of Falun Gong practitioners have been arbitrarily detained in prisons, forced labor camps, and detention centers, where they are routinely tortured and abused. In recent years, estimates place the number of imprisoned Falun Gong adherents at 100,000 – 200,000 at any given time, making them the world’s largest group of prisoners of conscience.

The persecution has also been characterized by what Amnesty International calls a “massive propaganda campaign” to erode public sympathy for Falun Gong both inside and outside China. Falun Gong adherents are frequently denied jobs or educational opportunities, and have no ability to speak out in the press. They are denied their rights to legal representation and are imprisoned without trial simply for wanting to practice meditation, improve their health, and become more altruistic people through following Falun Gong’s teachings.

Falun Gong adherents face severe torture in labor and prison camps. In 2001, the Washington Post reported that Chinese authorities were sanctioning the use of systematic torture against Falun Gong practitioners to break their will and force them to recant their beliefs. In 2006, two-thirds of Chinese torture cases reported through the United Nations were committed against Falun Gong adherents.

Over 3,400 people have been reported tortured to death, and thousands more are missing throughout China.

“[We call] upon the Government of the People’s Republic of China to immediately cease and desist from its campaign to persecute, intimidate, imprison, and torture Falun Gong practitioners, to immediately abolish the 6-10 office, an extrajudicial security apparatus given the mandate to ‘eradicate’ Falun Gong, and to immediately release Falun Gong practitioners, detained solely for their beliefs, from prisons and re-education through labor (RTL) camps.”

—U.S. House of Representatives Res. 605
Communist Party Launches Campaign to ‘Transform’ Falun Gong Adherents

On the evening of February 26, 2011, Wang Qiuqing received a phone call from the Jiamusi Prison in China’s remote Heilongjiang province. Her husband, 47-year-old business owner Qin Yueming, had been detained there since 2002, having been sentenced in a show trial to 10 years in prison for practicing Falun Gong. With only one year left in his sentence, Qin was tortured to death in custody.

When Ms. Wang, now widowed with two teenaged daughters, arrived at the prison, she found her husband’s body covered in bruises. Sources familiar with his case report that he had been severely beaten and violently force-fed with salt and milk solutions, all in an effort to have him renounce Falun Gong.

Days later, 48-year-old Falun Gong practitioner Yu Yungang was rushed to a hospital from the Jiamusi Prison, where he had been sentenced for eight years. Like Mr. Qin, Yu suffered severe torture and passed away on March 1, 2011. One week after that, a third victim: 55-year-old Liu Chungjiang died in custody at Jiamusi Prison, his body promptly cremated by authorities to conceal evidence of torture. All three men, middle-aged and healthy, had been detained there since 2002, having been sentenced in a show trial to 10 years in prison for practicing Falun Gong. With only one year left in his sentence, Qin was tortured to death in custody.

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All three men, middle-aged and healthy, had been held by the “Strict Management Team,” established on February 22 to intensify efforts at “transforming” Falun Gong adherents. “Transformation” refers to a process of coercion and torture intended to force a person to recant their beliefs in Falun Gong and its values of truth, compassion, and forbearance. The emphasis on “transformation” has long been the centerpiece of the Communist Party’s campaign against Falun Gong, but in recent years, it has been pursued with renewed vigor.

In 2010, Communist Party authorities launched a new, three-year campaign to coercively “transform” the majority of known Falun Gong adherents in China. Official documents began appearing on Party and government websites throughout China, some of them setting forth mandates to “reeducate” 85 percent of Falun Gong adherents.

Draconian policies like this transformation campaign have been common practice throughout the history of the Chinese Communist Party. During the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 70s, it was common practice to force people to “confess” to crimes they had never committed. The goal then, as it is now, was to break the spirit of the person, to force them to betray their own conscience such that they may be more easily controlled.

This latest campaign follows closely on the heels of two other nationwide efforts to suppress Falun Gong. In 2008, Chinese authorities used the Beijing Olympics as a pretext to abduct and arbitrarily imprison over 8,000 Falun Gong adherents. Some of them were tortured to death within hours or days of being taken into custody. And in 2009, Xi Jinping—who is set to take over Communist Party leadership after Hu Jintao —led a special project to intensify monitoring and persecution of Falun Gong.

These campaigns, directed by the highest levels of the Communist Party, are indicative that Chinese authorities continue pursuing the eradication of this peaceful spiritual practice as a national priority. Yet within them, there is another message: that even after twelve years of torture, mass imprisonment, and repression, Falun Gong has survived.

Faces of Persecution

Yu Zhou was a 42-year-old popular folk musician from Beijing. On January 26, 2008, he and his wife were arrested on their way home from a concert. Within eleven days of the arrest, Yu Zhou was tortured to death for his belief in Falun Gong. His wife, Xu Na, was later sentenced to three years in a prison camp.

Gao Rongrong, an accountant from Northeast China, was imprisoned in July 2003 for practicing Falun Gong and sent to Longshan labor camp. There, guards tortured her with electric batons, burning and disfiguring her face. After enduring years of persecution, she was tortured to death on March 6, 2005 at age 37.
When the Communist Party launched the persecution in 1999, few observers expected Falun Gong to endure more than a few months. But more than ten years later, millions of Chinese citizens still practice Falun Gong, and the number is said to be growing. Not only are people continuing to practice, they are also actively working to educate their compatriots about the true nature of their spiritual discipline and the human rights violations committed against them.

Falun Gong’s response to persecution has been strictly non-violent. In the initial years after the crackdown began, adherents sought to appeal to authorities to reverse the ban, but as the persecution continued to escalate, the Falun Gong community in China was forced underground and turned its attention to grassroots public awareness.

Because Falun Gong has no voice in the state-run media and no official channels to speak out, Falun Gong practitioners in China have established a Samizdat-like network of largely autonomous, underground printing houses that produce literature about the persecution and the truth about Falun Gong. Others then distribute the information, often at great personal risk, to fellow citizens. According to 2009 estimates, these "material sites," as they are called, number around 200,000.

Falun Gong practitioners outside China have also been working to quell the tide of suppression, establishing Chinese-language media outlets, including a satellite television station, to broadcast information into the mainland that is not available in China’s state-run press. In 2001, Chinese-American Falun Gong practitioners began developing software to circumvent China’s Internet blockade. The software is now the most widely used anti-censorship technology in the world, providing freedom of information to millions every day. More recently, Falun Gong adherents outside China have turned to the arts as a means of reclaiming the dignity of their culture and reviving the spiritual and ethical foundations that have come under attack during Communist Party rule.

Falun Gong’s peaceful resistance has been guided by a belief in the power of truth, and a commitment to having compassion—even for those who imprison and torture them. In Communist China, even the persecutors are victims of the system, and only the truth can set them free.

Renouncing the Communist Party

In late 2004, a powerful movement quietly began sweeping China. The movement is called Tuidang, which literally translates as “withdraw from the party,” and it is comprised of tens of millions of Chinese citizens who have publicly renounced communism and disavowed their affiliations to China’s ruling party.

The Tuidang movement began with the publication of a book-length editorial series titled “Nine Commentaries on the Communist Party,” which detailed the party’s history of repression. The series drew heavily upon Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist philosophies, and called on Chinese citizens to take a principled stand against the duplicity and violence that have characterized communist rule. Falun Gong practitioners have actively supported the movement as a means of raising awareness of and seeking to mitigate human rights abuses.

The Tuidang movement’s participants, who number as many as 100 million, have varied backgrounds, experiences, and motivations for denouncing the Communist Party. One of the largest demographics found among the participants are members of Chinese security forces, such as local police, Public Security Bureaus, the Ministry of State Security, 6-10 offices, or the military. In their statements, they speak frequently of how they entered their profession with a desire to do good, to serve the public, and help their communities. Yet instead, they found themselves being ordered to arrest, torture, and even open fire on innocent civilians—tasks that left them unable to ever be at peace with themselves. Many of them speak of being ordered to persecute Falun Gong.

For them, the process of disavowing the Communist Party is a matter of seeking forgiveness, cleansing their conscience, and resolving to never again be accomplices to tyranny and oppression.