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The intersection between mindfulness and human rights: The case of Falun Gong and its implications for social work

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ABSTRACT

The author reports on a qualitative study conducted with Falun Gong practitioners in Canada, and explores how a mindful meditative practice can facilitate peaceful resistance to global human rights violations. Falun Gong is a Chinese traditional meditative practice rooted in Buddhist and Daoist philosophies. The Falun Gong experience illuminates a global peace praxis that harmonizes an inward spiritual focus with an outward social action that integrates ethics, morality, and inner transformation in a collective manner through mindful meditative practice. Articulating a few lessons learned from the research, the author discusses how the mindful meditative practice of Falun Gong and practitioners' peaceful resistance can help to expand social work's engagement in the protection of human rights of people of faith on a global scale. The Chinese traditional mindful meditative practice of Falun Gong can help integrate personal, collective, and social transformation to uphold justice and to protect the human rights of all people of faith, which has implications for social work.

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Social justice and human rights are core foundational values of social work (IFSW, 2014). Lundy (2011) contends that “social workers by their very positions and commitment are human rights workers, advocating for individual and collective rights every day” (p. 41). What does this statement mean in a global context of violations of freedom of religion and spirituality? Hodge (2006) suggests that one’s religious right is a “forgotten human right” in social work (p. 433). He reports that “According to U.S. government estimates, more than one-half of the world’s population lives under authorities that severely restrict or prohibit the freedom to believe and practice the faith of their choice” (Hodge, 2007, p. 141). Flynn (2005) argues that our profession has an obligation to ensure collective spiritual and religious rights and help to eliminate hatred. Brooks (2015) underscores that it is the ethical duty of social work to engage in peaceful activism in order to counteract and challenge oppressive and violent structures that lead to torture against groups of people who are being dehumanized, or labeled as “social outcasts” (p. 321).

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Social work has an extended history of involvement in human rights movements especially in its formative years (Webb, 2009). However, Healy (2008) challenges that the profession is “not widely regarded as a leader within the larger global human rights movement” (p. 735). Brooks (2015) finds that social work has failed to respond to global and structural issues of torture. Even when social workers advocate for people’s rights, they usually emphasize social and economic rights, rather than civil and political rights (Healy, 2008). Overall, social work is seen to play an insignificant role in international human rights advocacy (Healy, 2008; Reichert, 2007). Hodge (2007) argues that most faith groups in the world are victims of persecution and he urges for more social work interventions opposing religious discrimination against people of faith and ensure that all people have the right to practice their beliefs. This article reports on a qualitative research study conducted with Falun Gong practitioners in Canada and explores how a mindful meditative practice can facilitate a peaceful resistance to global human rights violations. Lessons learned from the research includes how the mindful meditative practice of Falun Gong and its practitioners’ peaceful resistance can help to expand social work’s engagement in the protection of human rights of people of faith on a global scale.

Mindfulness and empirical evidence of its impact

Mindfulness originated in the Buddhist meditative tradition (Hick, 2009). While scientific inquiry of mindfulness is only a recent endeavour (Hayes & Plumb, 2007), much empirical evidence has supported the benefits of mindfulness in bringing changes and transformation mostly at a personal level. For example, neuroscientific research has found that mindfulness meditation can improve one’s physical conditions (e.g., strengthen immune systems, reduce pain, and improve intrinsic brain connectivity such as auditory and visual functioning), mental health (e.g., reduce stress, overcome depression and anxiety), cognitive functioning, and ameliorate a wide range of clinical disorders (Hölzel et al., 2011; Zeidan, Grant, Brown, McHaffie, & Coghill, 2012). In social work and psychology, much evidence-based practice research has provided empirical support to mindfulness-based therapies (Garland, 2013; Rosch, 2007). For example, mindfulness-based stress reduction has successfully worked with people with different diseases and disorders, while mindfulness-based cognitive therapy has helped people with depression (Eberth & Sedlmeier, 2012).

In the midst of many definitions of mindfulness, Garland (2013) calls for a clearer conceptualization of the term. He operationalizes mindfulness as (a) a state, which is “a naturalistic mindset characterized by an attentive and nonjudgmental metacognitive monitoring of moment-by-moment cognition, emotion, perception, and sensation without fixation on thoughts of past and

future”; (b) a practice, in the form of meditation and other formats; and (c) a trait or disposition that can be developed over time through consistent practice of engaging in a state of mindfulness (p. 440). In achieving a state of being in the present moment, a mindful meditative practice can nurture traits such as acceptance, openness, compassion, forgiveness, mindful attention, and awareness (Leary & Tate, 2007; Warren, Klepper, Lambert, Nunez, & Williams, 2011). Kabat-Zinn sees mindfulness as “living in harmony with oneself and with the world” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 3).

The development of greater self-awareness and self-regulation from mindfulness awakens a new mode of knowing (Burrows, 2015; Leary & Tate, 2007). The change experienced by being conscious of feelings and thoughts expands the horizon of one’s consciousness (Mamgain, 2010; Rosch, 2007). These findings provide insight into articulating how mindfulness affects structural change. Hick and Furlotte (2009) articulate the relationship between mindfulness and structural change in their exploration of the congruency and tension between mindfulness and social justice. They apply a radical mindfulness approach (the interaction of the personal, interpersonal, and societal issues) to work with disadvantaged people in bringing social change (Hick & Furlotte, 2010). However, scholarship on the articulation on an integration of mindfulness with social justice and human rights issues is scant. To further this cause, I contend that the Chinese traditional mindful meditative practice of Falun Gong can help integrate personal, collective, and social transformation to uphold justice and to protect the human rights of people of faith.

What is Falun Gong?

Falun Gong (also known as Falun Dafa) is a traditional Chinese mindful meditative spiritual discipline comprised of a sitting meditation and four standing exercises, accompanied by a set of guiding principles —“Truthfulness, Compassion, and Tolerance”—grounded in Buddhist and Daoist philosophies (Falun Dafa Info Centre, 2008). The philosophies can be traced back to the ancient Chinese culture that emphasizes self-cultivation. The purpose of cultivation is to return to one’s original true self by giving up human attachments such as greed, pride, jealousy, and anger (Li, 2000). Through persistent practice of meditation and the guiding principles of “truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance” in daily life, practitioners gradually achieve a state of selflessness, greater insight, and awareness that leads them to a state of spiritual attainment. Falun Gong argues that one attains enlightenment and achieves consummation (transcendence) by eliminating karma accumulated through many cycles of samsara, and assimilating to a standard of higher moral values (Li, 2000). As a result, Falun Gong considers the practice more as

a spiritual discipline and distinguishes it from the institutionalized religions, since one cultivates the heart rather than conforms to formal institutional structures (Li, 2000).

A historical context for the peaceful resistance of the Falun Gong

The peaceful resistance of the Falun Gong needs to be seen in its historical context in China under the Chinese Communist regime. Mr. Li Hongzhi started teaching the Falun Gong to the public in Changchun and Beijing, China in 1992. The body–mind–spirit meditative exercises appealed to people from all walks of life. Many found healing in their ailing bodies, and achieved a holistic balance of mental and physical well-being. The organic exercise groups of Falun Gong blossomed in major cities in China and spread across the country. The official, Chinese government discourse in the early 1990s supported Falun Gong (Ownby, 2008). However, by the mid-1990s, with the considerable growth of the Falun Gong practice sites, the stance of the government began to shift. Even though the Falun Gong had no membership count, the Chinese government's official statements reported that the Falun Gong had 70–100 million adherents in the late 1990s, exceeding Chinese Communist Party (CCP) membership (Matas & Cheung, 2012). Although the Falun Gong had done no harm to people, harassment and public attacks on the Falun Gong became intensified and escalated. The former leader of the CCP, Jiang Zemin, ordered a crackdown on the spiritual practice after a peaceful protest had been organized by Falun Gong practitioners in Beijing on April 25, 1999. The protest was an appeal for the release of 45 practitioners from unreasonable detention. Despite the legitimacy of the appeal according to the Chinese constitution, Jiang launched a systematic persecution campaign aimed at eradicating this peaceful meditative group (Matas & Cheung, 2012).

Language and meaning played an important role in this domination of power relations. In order to justify the persecution, the regime launched an intensive nationwide media denunciation campaign to incite hatred against the Falun Gong through a construction of “evil” in order to eradicate the group (Matas & Cheung, 2012, p. 71). This is a strategy inherited from past political practices of the CCP (Chu, 1997). The climax of hate propaganda targeted against the Falun Gong was reached with the self-immolation of five people in Tiananmen Square, staged by the CCP and aired by its media arm, China Central Television in 2001; it was charged that these individuals practiced Falun Gong (Falun Dafa Clearwisdom, 2001). Despite Western media and analysis outside of China finding that these self-immolated individuals were not Falun Gong practitioners, the general public was swayed into either believing the government propaganda, or being too afraid to speak about the subject matter (Gutmann, 2014).

Without public support, Falun Gong practitioners were sent to forced labor camps and brainwashing centers, mostly without trial. Acting counter to the Chinese constitution, the CCP set up a gestapo-like “610 office,” which can bypass the legal system and send practitioners directly to detention (Matas & Cheung, 2012, p. 68). In his 2006 report, Manfred Nowak, the United Nations Rapporteur on Torture, found that Falun Gong practitioners constituted the largest victim group of torture in China (as cited in Matas & Cheung, 2012, p. 71). Falun Gong practitioners in China face daily threats of harassment, arrest, abduction, enslavement, and forced renouncement of belief. According to Ethan Gutmann’s (2014) survey-based estimation from 2000 to 2008, an average of 450,000 to a million Falun Gong practitioners were detained in forced labor camps at any given time. After the abolition of these camps in 2014 due to international pressure, practitioners are still being sent to extrajudicial confinement in brainwashing centers, which adopts mind control and violence to force practitioners to renounce their belief (Falun Dafa Clearwisdom, 2014). Detained practitioners are subjected to forced labor, physical, psychological, and sexual abuses, and severe torture. It has been confirmed that more than 3,000 practitioners were tortured to death during detention (Matas & Cheung, 2012). The most horrific crime committed by the CCP is the killing of Falun Gong practitioners through organ pillaging. According to Ethan Gutmann’s (2014) survey-based estimation from 2000 to 2008, at least 65,000 Falun Gong practitioners succumbed due to forced organ harvesting, which is both a violation of medical ethics and a crime against humanity. This ethical violation has aroused much concern in the medical communities outside China (Sharif, Fiatarone Singh, Trey, & Lavee, 2014).

Despite the mass atrocities committed in mainland China, the dominant CCP discourse of demonization and defamation of Falun Gong is replicated in Canada by mainstream Chinese Canadian media under the influence of the Chinese regime through the arm of the Chinese Consulate (Matas & Cheung, 2012). Some, mostly Chinese, have acted upon this discourse and thus engage in discriminatory behavior against Falun Gong practitioners. In countering hate and discrimination, Falun Gong practitioners brought complaints before the human rights tribunals and Canadian courts (Matas & Cheung, 2012). In order to counteract the propaganda against the Falun Gong and pursue justice for those who are subjected to the persecution, Falun Gong practitioners inside and outside of China continue to engage in peaceful resistance while trying to bring a stop to the persecutions and the killings of innocent people.

A qualitative study on the peaceful resistance of the Falun Gong

In 2012, the author (with Dr. Terry Russell, Asian Studies, University of Manitoba) conducted a qualitative study on the discrimination and

marginalization of the Falun Gong practitioners in three diaspora Chinese communities in Canada: Toronto, Vancouver, and Ottawa. The study received an internal university UM/SSHRC grant and was approved by the University's ethics review board. Participants were recruited from the Falun Gong practice sites in each respective city. Thirteen Falun Gong practitioners participated in the study on a voluntary basis; among which, six respondents had first-hand experience of the persecution of the Falun Gong in mainland China.

Hannah Arendt, writing about the Holocaust, stated "storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it" (in Whitmore, Wilson, & Calhoun, 2011, p. 133). Narrative inquiry was adopted as the research methodology to interview and analyze data from the 13 Falun Gong practitioners (Clandinin, 2007). The method of narrative analysis preserves the integrity and coherence of the stories presented by the research participants. Respondents' stories of their experiences of being discriminated against were treated as individual, analytical units (Riessman, 2008). Line by line coding (Fraser, 2004) was also used to capture the respondents' nuances of speech and meanings according to analytical themes corresponding with their lived experiences, such as how they started practicing Falun Gong, the discrimination they experienced due to their beliefs, and, for many, the persecution experienced firsthand in mainland China.

With the focus of this article on the intersection between mindfulness and human rights, I will discuss the meanings behind the respondents' involvement in the peaceful resistance of the Falun Gong in the context of the persecution and its extension to Canada, as well as the lessons learned from their experiences.

Discussion of findings

Telling the truth through stories is a powerful nonviolent form of resistance to oppression (Regan, 2010). It is a gift of testimony to create space for people to understand justice, compassion, hope, and resilience in a mindful meditative practice. The stories from the Falun Gong practitioners are not only about the abuses and discrimination they experienced, but also convey resistance and renewal in collective and social transformation. Three nuances of the research findings have been selected to illuminate how a mindful meditative practice of the Falun Gong came to be involved in nonviolent resistance against the powerful and oppressive regime of China.

The power of truth-telling to uphold humanity

During the years of the persecution, Falun Gong practitioners have engaged in peaceful protests outside Chinese Consulates, and raised awareness about the persecution, especially the forced organ-harvesting issue. Apart from

grassroots actions such as organizing peaceful rallies and signing petitions, many practitioners have used their own resources to develop online technologies to document the atrocities happening in China, and run media outlets to counteract the defamatory propaganda disseminated by the CCP. A number of tortured victims brought their perpetrators to courts outside of China (Matas & Cheung, 2012).

In the above-mentioned qualitative study, the two researchers asked about the motivation behind the Falun Gong practitioners' truth-telling efforts, which respondents called "truth clarification." Their narratives conveyed a strong desire for upholding justice, a way to uphold Canadian values. A respondent said,

I don't think our [truth clarification in] anti-persecution effort is only protecting the rights of Falun Gong. When individuals' rights are violated, it is just reasonable to uphold their rights. What Falun Gong practitioners are doing also defends the values of Canada. Canada is a multicultural society, a country that upholds freedom of belief and religion, and human rights. These values make up the foundation of this nation. Without these values, there would not be a Canada.

The respondents who had experienced first-hand persecution in China remarked that they could not just sit and meditate when practitioners around them were disappearing. A few respondents endured severe torture, both physically and psychologically, and witnessed torture suffered by fellow practitioners. One of them said,

When I saw that people who did the meditation with me in the park were being taken away and faced torture, I felt I must do something as this persecution is still continuing. I just try the best I can.

Another said,

We need to tell the truth to the international community to expose the violent act of CCP and ask them to stop these brutal acts. It's not just to defend our rights, but also for rights of all humankind. When all people have a better human value, there'll be a better future. We're using peaceful, rational, and non-violent means to ask the kind people in the world to support Falun Gong. This is for the sake of humankind.

The respondents underscored that their truth clarification is for the sake of humanity. Few veteran practitioners stressed that, if they had not told the truth about the persecution and who these practitioners are, people would believe the CCP's propaganda portrayal of the Falun Gong. Respondents viewed telling the truth as powerful. The Falun Gong practitioners believe that people are born with good hearts. Their truth-telling is to tap into the moral and compassionate side of people. When they call on people's kind conscience by helping people understand what is actually happening, people will stand on the side of truth. In one respondent's words, "when people understand the truth, evil is exposed to light and has no place to hide. Light will come and evil will not prevail."

London (2009) describes Gandhi's pursuit of mindfulness as grounded in his search for truth through his personal sufferings, which formed the basis of his emancipatory practices. Regan (2010) finds that telling the truth carries risks, because some outsiders can see it as subversive or oppositional. In the interviews, Falun Gong practitioners told many stories about how they were accused of being anti-China and misunderstood as oppositional by fellow Chinese in their communities. They were being yelled at and spit upon while they displayed information, or were in peaceful rallies in Chinatown to tell the truth about the persecution. Falun Gong practitioners continue their truth clarification on the streets and outside the Chinese Consulates, despite severe weather of cold, heat, rain, and hostile responses or even physical and verbal violence against them (Matas & Cheung, 2012). They endure personal suffering and respond with a compassionate heart to seek for the truth and live in the truth in order to find ways to stop the persecution and uphold the principles of humanity.

Compassion is the driving force for overcoming oppression

Kittel (2011) underscores that mindful meditative spiritual practice sustains compassionate actions. Offering one of the teachings, Li Hongzhi, founder of the Falun Gong, said, "compassion comes from a person's cultivation, and it's not something that's acted out; it comes from deep inside, and it's not something done to show others" (Li, 2003). In other words, compassion is cultivated. According to the philosophies of Falun Gong, one's goal of cultivation is to strive for self-improvement through constant reflexivity to search for inner meanings (Li, 2000). With a mindful cultivation of "truth, compassion, and tolerance," Falun Gong practitioners consider others first. What practitioners do is to use their hearts to tell people the truth and expose the nature of the totalitarian rule of the CCP in order to help people exercise their own compassion and make moral decisions. The following narrative from a respondent depicts the principles of "truth, compassion, and tolerance" when she described the peaceful resistance:

During these many years of the persecution, we persist in peaceful appeal and use the facts to tell the truth despite practitioners being tortured to death or illegally detained. There is no violence, no negativity. We're not considering ourselves first, but put others first. It's a great compassion and forbearance [In Chinese, the word "forbearance" is interchangeable with tolerance].

Falun Gong practitioners underscored that they do not hold hostility toward the oppressive Chinese regime or individual perpetrators in the system. Despite their sufferings through discriminative and inhumane treatment in mainland China, their purpose is to save sentient beings; that is to help people out of suffering in the long run (Li, 2000). Practitioners hold a common belief that one is rewarded for good deeds while those who

commit evil deeds will suffer retribution. They underscored that their efforts in preventing further atrocities is to help people to make a stand that will benefit the people and the nation in the long run:

Imagine if a country or a nation has done evil to an authentic belief. Would it be penalized? The greater cosmic force or God will punish them. The result can be natural disasters or human atrocities, like a sandstorm, drought, or flood. Also, in China, the mass unrest incidents are causing instability. If we don't do anything, billions of people can be affected. We believe what we are doing is acting on the basis of justice. We're acting out of our responsibility to society and to the practitioners who are directly suffering from the persecution.

The respondents see those who misunderstood them are also victims of an oppressive system. The following narrative reflects the practitioners' other-orientation and conveys the benevolence and compassion they acquired from the practice of Falun Gong:

Think about the public in China, or overseas Chinese. Their information mostly comes from the Central Television Network of China that is the mouthpiece of the CCP. It is very unfortunate when one doesn't want to hear the truth, or if one can't hear the truth. Everyone has two ears. Today's China shuts down one ear and one eye of its own people who can only hear its propaganda. People have the right to know. So, isn't that sad?

Falun Gong practitioners' compassionate truth-telling is to help people "get back their two eyes and two ears," which they perceive as a basic human right to access information. The respondents believe that the persecution against the Falun Gong will end if most people understand the truth. Their compassion is also extended to the perpetrators. They use the metaphor of being held hostage to describe how ordinary Chinese citizens and low-ranking policemen are subjected to control by the CCP; many of these people are compelled to act against their consciences. One respondent said,

The regime not only forces practitioners to act against their will, but also forces police to do evil deeds, like beating them [practitioners] up and even killing them. ... I know some policemen had nightmares because of what they did. The crimes they committed will accompany them all their lives. I think this is an injustice to them. When the truth is revealed one day, the people involved will feel guilty, no matter what their moral or conscience level is. So, it's necessary to tell what Falun Gong is about and why the CCP persecutes them so that people can decide and act according to their conscience.

A mindful meditative practice leads to critical analysis and ethical actions

Hick and Furlotte (2009, 2010) postulate a radical mindful approach that integrates a social justice framework with mindfulness that goes beyond an awareness of one's bodily sensations and personal experiences of the world. A radical mindfulness connects one's critical self-awareness with an awareness of one's feeling of oppression and the structural dynamics that contribute to an

individual's or group's oppression (Hick & Furlotte, 2009; Todd, 2009). This radical mindfulness contributes to a critical analysis of the power structures and results in ethical actions. When that happens, a vision of social transformation can be realized that serves the goal of social justice and social change (Hick & Furlotte, 2009).

In the case of the Falun Gong, one may wonder why a meditative spiritual practice would engage in social activism. Kittel (2011) underscores the necessity of critical analysis from an engaged Buddhist perspective:

The roots of evil and human rights abuse are not external to human beings, but are the internal mental afflictions of greed, hatred (anger), and delusion. To treat their outer manifestations (rights abuses) without addressing their inner sources is to apply a partial solution to a systemic problem. (p. 907)

Staub (2011) also articulates that “widespread violence in a society must have its origins in cultural characteristics, current societal conditions, or both” (p. 117). Falun Gong practitioners, including the participants of the study, raise consciousness by providing a detailed analysis of the oppressive power of the CCP that leads the persecution campaign against the Falun Gong. They refer to the seminal work of the *Nine Commentaries on the Chinese Communist Party* (The Epoch Times, 2004) which provides a pertinent analysis of the CCP by illustrating the nature of the regime and the history of CCP-instigated persecutions launched during the regime's rule of China. The analyses of this literature echo Chu's (1997) account of the culture of violence which has been perpetuated by the Communist rule in China: “[the Chinese regime] uses rituals of violence and the rhetoric of denunciation and popular mobilization not merely to eliminate ‘enemies’ but also to create a political culture in which violence is taken for granted” (p. 69).

In the Falun Gong study, respondents told many stories about how their collective actions have brought an increase of awareness in their local communities. One of their action projects named *Tuidang* is particularly successful. It is an awareness-raising effort to help mainland Chinese who had been members of major CCP-related organizations (the *Chinese Communist Party*, the *Youth League*, and the *Pioneering groups* which targeted young students) to withdraw from them in a symbolic manner. One respondent, who was the first to use his real name to withdraw openly from CCP-related organizations, captures the meaning of this action:

I did feel the pressure when I publicly announced my withdrawal from the CCP, but my act served as an impetus for many others to stand up and declare their stance. I don't see it as a political act. Rather it is a peaceful means to take a moral stance of not standing with evil by breaking the vow, which we're indoctrinated to pledge allegiance to the CCP. The goal is to stop the oppression and persecution, and not for political gain or control.

Resistance that is seemingly political is, in fact, making an ethical stance to uphold justice. The connection between a practitioner's critical self-awareness in experiencing suffering from the persecution and a compassionate mindful awareness of broader structural issues elicits an ethical and moral response to human rights violation. The altruistic orientation of Falun Gong practitioners reflects a compassion that shows no anger or aversion, but leads people to engage in "forceful action," as described more broadly by Todd (2009, p. 182). Their persistent truth telling creates a positive force beyond the Falun Gong communities to arouse the conscience of the wider community. The following narrative captures the necessity of their ethical actions:

The support we got from people who have a sense of justice are positive forces that we created. If we didn't do what we had done, we are not following our principles of truth, compassion, and forbearance. With all the interferences from CCP in Canada, we cannot allow an evil regime to exploit the kindness of Canadians. That would be horrible. We're glad to see what we've achieved, but it came out of a situation where we have no second choice. We forbear much pressure, but we see something good is happening.

The compassion manifested by the Falun Gong practitioners has moved many people's hearts in their respective communities. The above-mentioned study finds that Chinese people in diaspora communities in Canada have come to a better understanding about their struggle for humanity.

Implications for social work: Lessons learned from the Falun Gong

Hodge (2007) calls for developing a "human rights-based social justice ethic," based on the United Nation's 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to respond to the injustice experienced by faith groups and religious minorities around the globe (p. 139). The persecution of the Falun Gong under the Chinese Communist regime has violated many articles in the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), to which China is a signatory. They include Article 18 on freedom of religion and belief; Articles 4 and 5 on protection from torture, cruel punishment, and any form of slave labor; Articles 9, 10, 11 on due process of law; and Article 19 on freedom of assembly and association under UDHR (Casil, 2004). Hodge (2007) identifies out that the lack of social work literature to address social injustice and human rights violations in the areas of religion and spirituality as a significant oversight despite the growing professional interest in these areas. The silence of the Falun Gong issue in social work literature reflects the ineffective and remedial role of the profession regarding global human rights violations (Hodge, 2007; Reichert, 2007).

In the human rights-based discourse of international social work (Dominelli, 2007; Healy & Link, 2012; Ife, 2012), a major argument is that

human rights mechanisms are derived from Western notions based on individualistic rights. Some argue that such conceptualization is inconsistent with the collectivistic culture of the East (Skegg, 2005; Staub-Bernasconi, 2011). Another major argument of the international social work discourse on human rights focuses on universalism and cultural specificity (Healy, 2007). In social work, debate continues about whether human rights ethics are fixed or universal, versus ethical decisions varying according to cultural contexts. With past lessons learned from colonization, worries are expressed over “an unethical implosion of culturally foreign values” (Hodge, 2007, p. 140); that is, whether human rights are used as an imperialistic tool to assert dominant Western values on non-Western countries.

As social work struggles along the “universalist-relativism continuum” in ethical considerations, Healy (2007) underscores that protection of life remains the primary concern. Reichert (2007) argues that social workers should guard against an uncritical acceptance of cultural relativism over universal human rights principles. By upholding cultural relativism, would we be complicit in affirming perpetrating countries have “international legitimacy without the ‘inconvenience’ of compliance with human rights standards”? (Reichert, 2007, p. 8). In the case of the persecution of Falun Gong, a universal “common humanity” is called for (Ife, 2005, p. 60). A crime against humanity is a crime against all. During the years of the persecution of Falun Gong, China has been negating criticisms of its human rights records and silencing critics by labelling them as imperialists. The denial and authoritarian rule of the Chinese regime does not allow redress over any form of social injustice within the country. International responses to human rights violations such as the Falun Gong become the main avenue for people outside of China to understand the truth, and bring justice to the abuses and violations that are happening in China (Matas & Cheung, 2012). In Hodge’s (2007) words, “to reject universalism is to accept the idea that there is no place for widely affirmed basic rights, such as freedom from torture” (p. 140).

From the experiences of the peaceful resistance and mindful meditative practice of the Falun Gong, I find lessons can be learned from three areas that are relevant to social work’s reconsideration of its role in the protection of global human rights for people of faith: (a) nondualistic relationship between the inner self and social transformation; (b) compassionate awareness developed in mindfulness leads to praxis; and (c) compassionate mindfulness brings collective empowerment, resilience, and hope.

Nondualistic relationship between the inner self and social transformation

In recent decades, Asian Buddhist spiritual leaders such as Thich Nhat Hanh, Aung San Suu Kyi, and Dalai Lama have demonstrated the feasibility of promoting peace and reconciliation by connecting personal and social

transformation based on ethics of truth, nonviolence, and compassion to resist oppression (King, 2009). Their inspiring acts prompted authors like Kittel (2011) and Pyles (2005) to conceptualize an integration between an integration of an inner awareness and the outer environment in pursuing human rights and social justice. The nonduality of the inner and the outer world cannot separate the individual from the societal and the global (Kabat-Zinn in Todd, 2009).

The notion of nonduality rejects a distinction between individual and collective rights, and instead understands human rights as having both individual and collective aspects (Mapp, 2007). Mindfulness meditation bridges the inner self and an outer world that deepens human connectedness. Hick and Furlotte (2009) suggest “true learning occurs when a person can watch the inner and outer experience” (p. 15). The struggle for the rights and freedom of belief by Falun Gong practitioners illustrates how inner transformation through mindfulness meditation is accompanied by a collective transformation to alleviate human suffering. The nondualistic relationship between the self-transformation and an outer social engagement can serve as a guiding principle for social work to make a stronger stance in the global issue of crime against humanity.

Compassionate awareness developed in mindfulness leads to praxis

Mamgain (2010) articulates that all sentient beings have a Buddha nature, which is made up of wisdom and compassion. In order to awaken one’s Buddha nature, one cultivates a calm and peaceful mind through meditation. She indicates that “this calm mind fosters an awareness that allows one to assess reality with clarity, and more clearly observe the activities of one’s mind as they unfold” (p. 24). In articulating a contemplative pedagogy, Mamgain finds that a Buddhist tradition of meditation serves as the ground for a deeper personal transformation that leads to virtue ethics, a collective way of expressing heartfelt empathy with others: “the development of virtue ethics implies a development of ethical consciousness” (Mamgain, 2010, p. 24). The interface between an inward spiritual focus and outward social action connects the inner and outer world through a practice of morality (Kittel, 2011).

The Falun Gong practitioners display the above-mentioned qualities and manifestation of compassion. The compassion cultivated in practitioners is a kind of compassionate awareness—a deep level of empathy that gives rise to compassion when one sees suffering in all sentient beings. As Hick and Furlotte (2009) argue, when one’s compassion is developed, one is more sensitized to power inequities and subjugated people. A cultivated compassionate awareness opens up alternatives and actions, which Ife (2005) advocated for the protection of human rights. Thich Nhat Hanh, a proponent of socially engaged Buddhism,

emphasizes that the practice of Buddhism cannot be separated from social action when injustice prevails (King, 2009). The compassionate awareness that Falun Gong practitioners cultivated through an integration of spiritual practice and social engagement of activism contributes to a new model of praxis. This praxis of compassionate mindfulness is based on a synthesis of critical consciousness with mindful awareness of the structural causes of injustice and dynamics surrounding oppression.

Kittel (2011) states that “peace in the world begins within the self” (p. 912). Falun Gong practitioners take the meditative practice to the world by transforming their inner selves and the outer world through meditation and engaged compassionate actions. Regan (2010) stipulates that praxis links theory and practice to explore the pedagogical potential of truth-telling and reconciliation processes. Falun Gong practitioners’ practice of truth-telling brings about ethical social change. The practice of deep empathy gives rise to compassionate awareness and actions, which serve as a foundational praxis of peace for the world and which can strengthen the role of social work in pursuing global justice.

Compassionate mindfulness brings collective empowerment, resilience, and hope

Hayes and Plumb (2007) find that a mindfulness state of presence and acceptance can reduce human suffering when combined with value-based actions. The Falun Gong practitioners take a further step to transcend their personal sufferings to save sentient beings from the suffering of being induced into hostility and hate when they fall victim to the misinformation and propaganda orchestrated by the CCP. The cultivation of compassion and forbearance achieved through mindfulness meditation and teachings help the Falun Gong practitioners endure humiliation and sufferings, but without compromising their continuing truth-telling actions.

A compassionate mindfulness cultivated through meditation results in an inner strength and peace, which brings empowerment for a person to confront social justice and human rights issues, and promotes resilience. Lundy (2011) sees empowerment as “the act of acquiring a critical awareness of one’s situation and an increased capacity to act on that awareness” (p. 168). Freire (1993) asserts that “overcoming oppression requires internal work to see the interconnectedness of all human beings and to recognize the inherent humanness and value in all of us” (in Todd, 2009, p. 178). The Falun Gong community has built a collective grassroots response to resist peacefully a nation-wide oppression. The interconnectedness and sense of community bound by ethical values creates strength and solidarity for those who are experiencing the persecution. The deep connection to fellow human beings help a suffering community sustain hope in resisting oppression.

Regan (2010) calls for a “critical hope” rooted in the struggle for freedom (p. 22). She quotes Bell Hooks who said, “hopefulness empowers us to continue to work for justice even as the forces of injustice may gain great power for a time” (p. 23). Together with critical awareness, courage and hope sustain actions that generate collective empowerment and resilience. Petrič and Petrovčič (2014) refer to collective empowerment as “processes by which individuals join together to break their solitude and silence, help one another, learn together, and develop skills for collective action” (p. 530).

The shared meaning generated in the collective struggle of the Falun Gong practitioners generates a form of community resilience (Ungar, 2011) to overcome the human-right atrocities that they or fellow practitioners in mainland China are experiencing. In the Falun Gong communities’ experiences, their personal experience of engagement in peaceful resistance is transcended through a collective empowerment, a sense of one body, or what Whitmore and colleagues (2011) described as “being part of something bigger” and “being together with people who share the same vision and commitment” (p. 154). The resilience and hope built from collective actions to stop a persecution actually transform the Falun Gong community from victimization to agency that, in turn, reinforces collective empowerment. The personal and collective transformation of the Falun Gong practitioners creates an alternative way to counteract the propaganda campaigns launched by the CCP and to confront the oppressive power of the CCP. Resistance to, and renunciation of, the Chinese regime’s oppression is a quest for peace in a collective sense to safeguard humanity. The changing consciousness resulting from a mindfully engaged meditative spiritual practice can construct a path for social work to explore further its role in bringing transformative change in the international development arena of protecting human rights.

Conclusion

In recent decades, social work has gained momentum to eradicate inequality and bridge the gaps created by oppressive structures such as racism, classism, and sexism (Coates, 2003). Hodge (2007) identifies that “religious persecution is a growing global problem that affects all groups to some degree” (p. 141). As a profession that proudly cites social justice and human rights as guiding values, social work has an ethical duty to uphold justice and protect the most vulnerable people of faith, perhaps particularly the persecuted groups such as the Falun Gong. Reichert (2007) comments that social workers have often been involved in whistle-blowing initiatives and have developed a variety of skills such as mediation and dialogue. These skills can be applied to a global intervention of human rights issues such as the oppression faced by Falun Gong practitioners.

Purser and Milillo (2015) call for revisiting the Buddhist philosophical basis from which mindfulness originates. The Falun Gong experiences enlighten with a holistic approach to peace and justice. Mindful meditation connects humans deeply to themselves, to each other, and to life. The compassion of Falun Gong practitioners to let people understand the truth manifests a collective inner power generated from the grassroots. In a state of mindfulness, being nonjudgmental through meditation, Falun Gong practitioners cultivate compassion and other-orientation. This compassionate awareness and consciousness brings about collective ethical actions. The collectivity of being one body becomes an alternative and compassionate voice to challenge an oppressive force. The Falun Gong experience illuminates a global peace praxis that harmonizes the integration of personal, collective, and social transformation through mindful meditative practice, grounded in ethics and morality. This praxis model opens the possibility for social work to integrate meditation, mindfulness, and ethics in pursuing social justice and human rights.

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