

“THE POWER”



Cathleen B. Rich

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Quaking and the Rediscovery of Primitive Quakerism

by Scott Martin

The Power of the Lord,” or just simply, “The Power,” was a very important concept to the early Quakers, but it is virtually unknown among Friends today. In *The Power of the Lord Is Over All: The Pastoral Letters of George Fox*, T. Canby Jones notes that Quakers frequently say that Fox’s central teaching was there is “that of God in every one.” Surprisingly, this phrase appears only 108 times in his writings. Variations of Scott Martin is a longtime attendee at Centre Meeting in Centreville, Delaware.

the “Power of the Lord,” however, appear 388 times, and it is the single most often used phrase in his *Journal*.

“The Power of the Lord” had multiple meanings for Fox and other early Friends, but the most common use of the phrase was to refer to a sensible, divine power or energy. Friends would experience this power surrounding them or flowing through their bodies under a variety of conditions, but most often at the point of conviction, when facing a trial, or during meeting for worship. An experience of

the power was often associated with some kind of involuntary physical or mental phenomenon. When seized by the power, some Friends quaked, vocalized, or fell unconscious to the floor, while other Friends saw brilliant light, had visions, experienced healing, or felt a force emanating from them that was capable of subduing an angry and hostile mob.

Not all 17th-century Friends were of one mind regarding the power, and so it should not be surprising to find many different opinions of it among Friends

today. My guess is that some of us find the power fascinating, while others dismiss it as excessive religious enthusiasm, superstition, or as simply irrelevant to our lives as Quakers today. I am of the first opinion. To me, the experience of the power and its accompanying phenomena constitute what Harvey Cox, in *Fire from Heaven*, might term “primitive” or “primal” spirituality. Far from being some kind of aberration or even unique to Quakers, these phenomena represent “archetypal forms” of religious expression, a “surging, ever-present undercurrent” of religiosity, usually suppressed, but occasionally breaking to the surface when conditions allow. While I am not suggesting that we return to the 17th-century worldview, I do think that we have a lot to learn from these experiences of the early Friends, if only we take them seriously and view them from the vantage point of the increased knowledge available to us today.



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Cultures as different as the ancient Greeks and Romans on the one hand, and Native Americans on the other, have had words in their languages referring to a life force or divine energy. John Mann and Lar Short, in *The Body of Light*, have identified 49 cultures with words for this kind of energy. This idea is also very important in Asian religions and cultures; in China, the life force is called *chi*, and in India, it is known as *prana*. Both cultures have developed an elaborate science of energy, complete with maps of how it moves in the body through a network of energy centers and connecting pathways. Eastern cultures also have developed sophisticated psychospiritual technologies for cultivating energy. These practices are known in China as *qigong* and in India as *yoga*. Cultivation of energy is at the heart of the spirituality and traditional medicine of both cultures.

It is not just ancient or Eastern cultures and religions that speak of subtle energy. References abound in Christianity too, although you often have to read between the lines to see them. The curious statement in the Bible, “If thine eye be single, thy whole body will be filled with light” (Matthew 6:22) sounds very similar to what would be called in the East “the opening of the third eye.” And there is good reason for believing that Jesus was aware of energy flowing through his body.

For example, his statement in John 7:38, “He who believes in me, . . . from his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water” is a beautiful description of the activation of the *dan tien*, an energy center that the Chinese place just below the navel. The account in Mark 5:30 of Jesus walking through a crowd and exclaiming “Who touched me?” because he felt some of his power leaving him is a clue that Jesus was not only aware of his energy but understood its connection to healing. The practice in religious art of depicting Christ and the saints with a halo or radiance surrounding their bodies may have been, on some level, a recognition of their extraordinarily strong energy. And there are many fascinating references to energetic phenomena in the lives of the Christian saints.

While Asian religions conceptualize energy as an impersonal life force coming from within, Christianity tends to use the image of the indwelling of a personal Holy Spirit from above. Both, I think, are speaking about much the same experience. When the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles at Pentecost or moved among the believers during America’s many revivals, the resulting physical and mental phenomena are not all that different from the experiences reported by practitioners of *qigong*, *yoga*, or meditation.

When more energy begins to flow in a person’s body than an undeveloped or

blocked energy system can handle—whether as the result of meditation, energetic exercises, or religious practices and ceremonies—this excess energy must be expended in some way, usually in the form of involuntary movement or sense experience. William James, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, called these phenomena “automatisms,” and he believed that all of the great religious figures exhibited them. Christians throughout history have experienced them too. When moved by the spirit, it is not just the Quakers who quake, but Shakers shake, Holy Rollers roll, and Pentecostalists speak in tongues and are slain in the spirit. These physical and sensory phenomena, however, are not all that important in themselves. What is important is the energy that gives rise to them.

I believe the energetic experiences of early Friends greatly influenced how they conceptualized their faith. Before Quaker notions such as “the power of the Lord,” “inner light,” or “the seed” were abstract theological concepts, they were, I believe, actual bodily experiences. As John Mann and Lar Short point out in *The Body of Light*, “the physical body is the mediator of all our experiences,” and this is especially true of our profound religious experiences. The body is truly the temple of the Holy Spirit.

George Fox was gifted with an extraordinary charge of energy. In fact, I wonder if much of the psychological turmoil he experienced early in life resulted from his struggle to control the powerful energy that flowed in his body. He exhibited a host of automatisms, both physical and psychic, such as visions and telepathic experiences. Many people commented on the power of George Fox’s eyes and the energy that seemed to radiate from him. There can be no doubt that Fox knew how to use his energy for self-healing. When walking barefoot through the snow-covered streets of Lichfield, Fox felt the “fire of the Lord” so in his feet and all over him that he suffered no discomfort. On another occasion, Fox was hit on the arm and lost all use of it. Although onlookers were sure he would be disabled for life, Fox focused his attention on the arm and the Lord’s power sprang through it, healing it instantly. Fox was credited with many miraculous healings of others, often involving the laying on of hands. His reference to seeing the “sparks of life”

suggests to me, at least, that he was accused to seeing auras.

The writings of Isaac Penington contain many clues to his experiences with energy. Penington's advice to sink down daily to the seed planted in the heart (a 17th-century term for "center") is identical to instructions that might be given by a *qigong* teacher today. The Chinese concept of the *dan tien* is indistinguishable from Penington's idea of the seed when seen not as an abstract theological statement, but as an actual location in the body. In fact, I thought of Penington immediately when I read the advice of Deng Ming-Dao, a modern-day Taoist: sit still and "fertilize the seed within; let it sprout into a flower of pure light" (365 *Tao Daily Meditations*). Furthermore, Teresina Havens has pointed out in her pamphlet, *Mind What Stirs in Your Heart*, that Penington's references to "true breathings" and the "breathing life of the seed" suggest that he understood the connection between breathing and prayer, and, I might add, the cultivation of energy in his own body. I think Havens is absolutely correct when she implies that Penington's frequent use of phrases such as the "rising of the power" and "purely springing life" suggests that these were actual, bodily experiences. He says as much when he writes, "In your meetings . . . be every one of you very careful and diligent in watching to his power, that ye may have the sensible living feeling of it."

Why is it that the early Quakers had such an intense experience of the power while we do not today? My guess is that the widespread practice of daily retirement in that time may have been a factor. Both Fox and Penington, for example, were known for their ability to sit for many hours at a time. Tranquil sitting is a powerful method of energy cultivation, and although from the outside it may look like the body is inactive, much is happening inside on an energetic level. In abandoning the practice of daily sitting, which might legitimately be called the "Quaker yoga," modern Friends may be cutting ourselves off from a deeper, more profound experience of worship. It is only logical that Friends who sit only on First Day simply cannot have as deep an energetic experience as those who have done this every day for many years.

However, the way in which early Friends conducted their meetings for worship also has to be considered when trying

to understand the outpouring of the power that occurred in that day. Worship in the 17th century went on for many hours at a time. There was an intense, emotional tone to those meetings that is lacking today, as one Friend after another would rise, voicing deep contrition for sin. Many hours of sitting, coupled with the strong catharsis of confession, probably triggered powerful, energetic releases, not only in those speaking, but in the rest of the meeting as well. (When I think of those early meetings with Friends quaking, moaning, and becoming incontinent, and then compare it to worship today where a rumbling stomach or persistent cough can be a cause for some embarrassment, I begin to wonder just who the Puritans are—they or us!)

It would be a mistake, however, to think that the power is no longer present in Quaker worship today. Modern Friends may no longer quake, but we still experience the power flowing through our bodies, although many do not recognize it as such. Quaker worship, whatever else it may be, is clearly a form of corporate *qigong*, or group energy exchange. When we center down in meeting, clear the mind, and breathe deeply, the charge of energy in our bodies increases and the field of energy surrounding us expands. As our energy field interpenetrates the energy fields of those around us, the charge of the energy field of the entire meeting increases, bringing everyone to a higher level. It is this heightened energetic state, I think, that Quakers have traditionally called a covered meeting. Robert Barclay's metaphor of many candles lighted in one place, augmenting the light of all, is a beautiful description of what actually may be happening on an energetic level. When Friends, during worship, experience sensations of tingling or vibration, warmth in the abdomen or streaming down the legs and arms, or a rootedness or groundedness (as though sinking into the bench or floor) along with a feeling of lightness or expansiveness, they are experiencing the very same "Power of the Lord" that animated Fox, Penington, and the early Quakers.

It has never been surprising to me that early Friends quaked. What I find puzzling is that modern Friends do not. Just what do we do with the excess energy we generate in ourselves and absorb from others during meeting? Could it be that if Friends felt free to shake, sway, or bounce when needed during worship today,

we might experience deeper states of centeredness?

Of course, there is only one way to know if the power is real and if the cultivation of it will be beneficial to you on your spiritual journey, and that is to begin a daily practice. If there is a *qigong* or yoga teacher in your area, that is probably the best way to go, but you can also do some experimenting on your own. Find a quiet place in your home where you will not be disturbed. Sit down on a chair, not leaning against the back, but sitting more to the front of the seat so you will have room to move, if necessary. Relax totally and sit up straight with your feet firmly planted on the floor. Tuck your chin in slightly and allow your head to raise up as if extended by a string from above. Don't force this, just let it happen as it will; energy cannot move where there is physical tension. Place the tip of your tongue on your upper palette, just behind your front teeth. This connects two very important meridians that in time will allow energy to fill your torso. Place your hands, one over the other, on your *dan tien*, the spot three finger-widths below your navel. Place your concentration there, too. Shift your breathing from your chest down to the abdomen. With each inhalation, allow your belly to swell like a balloon and push outward against your hands. When exhaling, allow your belly to contract and your hands to fall.

Practice this form of seated *qigong* for 20 minutes daily for at least three to six months. In time, you may feel that your body wants to shake, sway, or bounce. Yield to this impulse, knowing that you can always stop the movement if you wish. Do not allow the movements to become too intense—the idea here is to allow yourself to move with the energy, not injure yourself or fall off the chair! You will find that periods of movement will be followed by periods of deep relaxation. If you feel nauseous or dizzy, discontinue the movement or end your practice for the day.

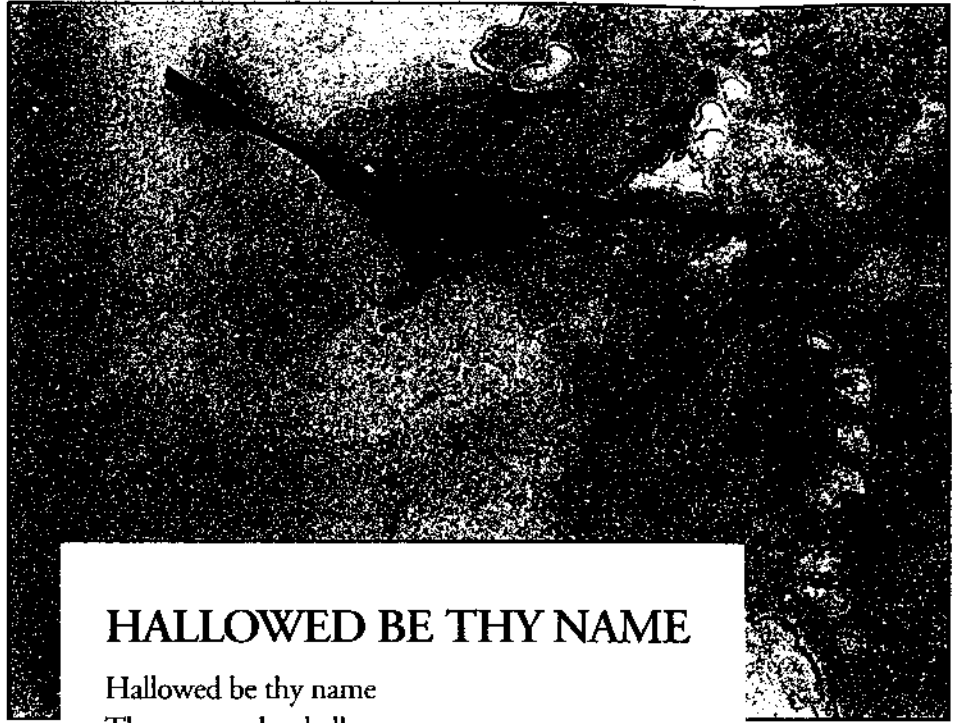
In China, what I am describing is known as "spontaneous movement *qigong*." The movements arising from the practice, called "*chi*-induced movements," are the result of energy trying to navigate through areas of tension in the body. (In yoga, involuntary movements such as these are known as *kriyas*.) By cooperating with

the impulse to move, you are assisting the energy to eventually make its way through the blockage. Since the movements that each person experiences are different, dictated by their particular energy blockages, it has been argued that spontaneous movement is a faster method of energy cultivation than following a prescribed choreography, such as in *tai chi* or yoga. I recently visited several hospitals in China where *qigong* is used to treat illnesses. The doctors, all *qigong* masters, emit energy from their own bodies, usually from the hands, to increase the flow of energy in the bodies of their patients. Often during these treatments, patients will begin to move spontaneously. Certain *qigong* masters, it is said, are capable of filling large auditoriums with energy, causing some in the audience to begin moving or even to experience spontaneous healing. I have often wondered if George Fox was doing something similar when he was able to have such an effect over large groups of people, even angry and hostile crowds.

By the close of the 17th century, the power and quaking had begun to fall out of favor among Friends. There were probably some political reasons for this, but clearly things were getting out of hand. Take, for example, the accounts of Friends trying to use the power to raise people from the dead! There were casualties of the power, too; the intense energetic experiences common in that day were more than some unbalanced people could handle.

I think the time is right for a rediscovery of the power and daily sitting. Many Friends, like me, are experiencing what Harvey Cox calls an "ecstasy deficit." We read the accounts of the early days of Quakerism with a certain amount of envy, sensing that there is a greater depth to our faith than we are experiencing today. Worship often feels flat, and we wonder if we are doing something wrong. We feel frustrated that our practice does not seem to transform us. Those traditional Quaker qualities of peacefulness, acceptance, and love seem to elude us. We are tired of reading books about other people's experiences. We want to get out of our heads and into our bodies. We seek a deeper healing.

Isaac Pennington's advice to the seekers of the 17th century applies equally to the seekers among us today: Oh, sit, sit daily and sink down to the seed and "wait for the risings of the power . . . that thou mayst feel inward healing." □



HALLOWED BE THY NAME

Hallowed be thy name
The stones, the shells,
The sticks, the air, the sea,
The ways we name thee.

Coming back to where I first
Learned what is holy,
Returning to where it is easiest
To see,
I arrive stunned by longing
That fills my sleep with wrecked boats,
Dead-end roads and pathless mountains.

I collect this place day by day:
The white and golden bits of shell,
Chips of pastel sea glass, dried buttercups and
Fern fronds pressed in books,
Mica crusted stones,
Small strange sticks whose omens I can't read.

Hallowed be thy name.
I hold you in the stones.
I bring you back each year
As though I am alone.

—Peg Edera

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