

“Like a Flower in a Snowfield” Self-Healing in the Dahn Hak Community

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Eight months ago I was diagnosed as a chronic back-pain sufferer. My right shoulder was the epicenter of my pain. Plagued with muscular knots too many to count and too tender to touch, I had experimented with innumerable remedies and forms of body work to little avail. I had to give up my dedication to dance and to my Ashtanga yoga practice. The scope of my physical motion was limited in ways I had never known before. I was miserable. Nevertheless, I did not give up my search for health. After all, this body is the only one I have. And so, one fall day in October, as I strolled through Davis Square, a storefront advertisement caught my eye. It read: “Dahn Yoga for holistic healing of chronic pain, stress relief, energy rejuvenation, and increased concentration.” I desperately struggled with all these things, and so, in yet another attempt to heal my debilitating back pain, I gave Dahn Hak a try.

For two full months I intensely involved myself in the Dahn Hak mind-body healing practice. Three times a week, I attended classes, where, surrounded by fellow Dahn members, I learned basic techniques of the Dahn Hak system designed to help bring people back into energetic harmony, thereby helping them find the road to good health.

It was all quite strange to me at first: from the all-white Asian-style uniforms that members wear; to the directional and intentional bowing that people engage in when entering and exiting the training room and when greeting others; to the physical exercises of body patting, tapping, and postures; to the meditation techniques; to the repeated reminder to “focus on myself,” or to focus on my energetic base, called the *dahn jon*; to the intensely happy and friendly and intentional communal reflection and personal sharing. Nevertheless, this provided an effective remedy to my pain.

On the surface, Dahn has the trappings of a religion and religious community, and yet I was told several times that it was not a religion. For two months I attended training regularly and thought

about this issue, and, as time wore on, I began to see more clearly Dahn Hak’s patterns, intentionality, philosophy, and goals.

According to its modern-day founder and leader, Grand Master Ilchi Lee, Dahn Hak is an ancient Korean body practice that was lost two thousand years ago and rediscovered by Grand Master Lee himself through his personal journey of self-realization and rigorous self-discipline. In 1985, Lee founded the first Dahn center in Seoul, Korea. Today, there are over three hundred Dahn centers worldwide.

The central philosophy of the Dahn Hak practice is that it is a comprehensive system of physical and mental exercises, or mind-body techniques, that seek to stimulate the *ki* (Korean; *ch’i*, Chinese), or energy, system of the body in order to activate the body’s natural healing power, thereby optimizing personal physical, emotional, and spiritual health.

The history of Dahn Hak as a practice and its *ki* (energy) philosophy of optimizing the flow of *ki* by focusing on oneself are made clear from the moment one joins the community. Constant repetition of key phrases, such as “focus on your *dahn jon*,” “focus on yourself,” “release your stagnant energy,” “let your healing energy flow,” “watch yourself,” “listen to your body,” embodies the Dahn energy-centered philosophy. Moreover, after every training, members sit down in a sharing circle to discuss their class experiences and to test their newly rejuvenated sensitivities and sensations over spicy, sweet, and warm ginger tea. This sharing time is when each member present has the opportunity to bring, momentarily, all attention in the room onto individual reflections on sensations and on one’s focus during training. This time is community-building time, essential to both personal practice and to the Dahn movement as a whole.

As my time as a Dahn member grew longer, I found myself being pushed to deepen my commitment to the practice and to the community by increasing my monthly, three-classes-per-week

membership to a year-long membership that included retreat weekends and intensive workshops. I was getting the sense that my weekday training sessions did not bring me “deep enough” into myself; they did not allow me to focus “deeply” enough on myself, nor did they bring me into contact with other Dahn members and with community organizers enough. The pressure to increase my commitment to the community and to spend a good part of my monthly budget on my membership became too great, and so, despite the fact that my back pain had significantly improved since joining, I decided to end my membership.

I left the Somerville Dahn community with mixed feelings about the decision I had made to move on. However, I also came away from it with a great sense of intrigue: How do members reconcile their religiosity with the intense dedication that Dahn Hak seemed to call for? How do members who benefit from the spirituality of the practice manage to stay in touch with their religiously oriented spirituality? Was there a difference between the two forms of spirituality? Was there a problem between the two? Motivated by these questions, I decided to focus my five-month study as a member of the Health and Healing Seminar at Harvard Divinity School on the Dahn Hak healing community. I quickly discovered that what I had perceived to be problematic was a non-issue for most of the members with whom I formally spoke. Twelve of the fifteen people I interviewed claimed that religion was not a central factor in their lives, if it was a factor at all. Many of them grew up with religion, but today lead secular lives. Two of my informants, both of whom are actively engaged in their churches, feel that Dahn Hak, in teaching them to “go inside,” to “know themselves,” and to “find their center,” helps them to approach their religion and their God from their Dahn-strengthened places of centeredness and confidence. In addition, Genia (whose name, like all others I will mention, remains unchanged) is a Boston College seminary student undergoing Dahn-master’s training. She spoke to me of how Dahn and her Catholic faith are mutually informative, but that to dedicate herself equally to both communities would simply be too much. She chose Dahn Hak.

The discussions that I had with Dahn Hak members highlight the increasingly secular nature of American society today, and at the same time point to the growing individual need for community and healthy spirituality. Even though Dahn Hak seems religious to those of us observing it, people seeking membership are not looking for explicit religiosity. People are turning to the Dahn for healing and, in

the process, they find a community that guides them down a road of enhanced spirituality. One of the most fascinating things about Dahn Hak is the way in which it thrives upon a unique tension between its philosophy of how good health is dependent upon the individual focusing on herself or himself and its insistence, at the same time, that such a focus is highly dependent upon the work, cohesiveness, and dedication of community.

In his work on small groups in the United States, sociologist and religionist Robert Wuthnow established a paradigm that highlights the ways in which small groups have significantly altered American society by changing the ways in which Americans understand *community and individuality* and by redefining *spirituality and divinity*.

Based on my work on the Dahn community in Boston, I have found that the Dahn Hak movement fits Wuthnow’s small groups paradigm well. However, it also brings us to question the ways in which “spirituality” is used as a blanket term to refer to a variety of very different spiritual experiences.

As we are all aware, the highly individualized nature of American society causes one’s sense of self to be defined according to one’s own accomplishments rather than in relation to the connections that one may have to other people within a distinct community group or support network. Dahn Hak, like the small groups that Wuthnow studies, provides a context in which an individual experiencing physiological pain caused by stress, anxiety, lack of self confidence, or, as Dahn members would say, “loss of center,” can find or rediscover a sense of self. Dahn methods are taught, practiced, and contemplated in the controlled community settings of classes, workshops, and special events such as movie nights, potluck dinners, coffee houses, or retreat weekends. Dahn members come into the community spaces in search of a place where they can “find their centers” by “focusing on themselves.” Dahn master Lucie Sabumnim said it best: “You can throw yourself into the most difficult environment and it will be really hard to improve your health – it’s like a flower blooming in a snowfield. The world is a very hard place to live right now, and the community that we are creating at the Dahn is creating an energy field that people can come into and heal themselves.”

By taking part in Dahn Hak community events, one is given the tools and the opportunity to rediscover and redefine oneself through healing practices. Somerville community Dahn member Whan-hee told me that to be healthy is “to use your body and mind in the way that you intend.” Danielle, a Somerville center organizer, claims that “to be

healthy is to know how to manage oneself” and to heal is to grow your strength to the point where you can “manage life on your own.” Thus, to be truly healthy is to hone and know your individual self, your center, your “True Self” – and the Dahn way of doing this is by being a member of the Dahn community.

In his work on small groups, Wuthnow found that although many small groups in the United States have some sort of religious affiliation or leaning, secular spirituality is becoming more of a reality in a large number of small groups today. Secularism provides an orientation that encourages a safe and domesticated version of the sacred, without attachments to the words or experiences of a higher power or blessed being who is more reverent, enlightened, and deserving than the rest of us. God is now less of an external authority and more of an internal presence. In remembering her first days as a member of the Dahn community, Danielle told me that when she attended a workshop explicitly designed for participants to uncover their “True Self,” she felt deeply impacted. “At that time,” said Danielle “I really touched a very deep place inside of me and since then I have been growing that place. It felt like touching my divinity. Maybe a very small freckle of it, but it felt like it. Like what I was looking for, like what other things were missing to me. It was all inside me.”

Divinity, as experienced by Dahn Hak members like Danielle, is, as Wuthnow claims, redefined by the philosophy of the group in which people take part. The same holds true for notions of spirituality. Although no Dahn member accepted my assertion that Dahn Hak looks like a religion, most of them recognized a spiritual element in their practice, and a change in their own personal sense of the spiritual and of their spirituality. Arthur, a smiley, soft-spoken twenty-three-year-old Dahn member claims that one of the reasons he joined Dahn Hak was

because he was looking for a way to be more spiritual. Arthur identifies himself as Jewish in terms of his religion, but his spiritual practice is guided by his Dahn practice. Spirituality, Arthur says, “is about being aware of yourself,” and Dahn Hak’s goals are to teach its members exactly that. Arthur is not alone in voicing this sentiment. Many of the members with whom I spoke claim that people first come to Dahn in order to relieve physical pain or simply to find peace of mind. As time goes by, however, most of the members claim that their sense of the spiritual and of their own spirituality changes, and they become more aware of the “God within,” of their “Divinity,” of their “True Selves.”

The experience of Dahn members working toward enhanced spirituality can be likened to the experience of religious practitioners who join small groups with explicit spiritual goals in mind. However, Dahn members’ aversion to calling their movement religious further underscores the fact that notions of spirituality and religion are varied and often quite contentious. Wuthnow’s work leaves these intricacies out, and yet, as this Dahn case shows, the meaning, implication, and value of spiritual work is not a monolithic thing. For some, spirituality has nothing to do with religiosity, for others, spirituality enhances one’s sense of religiosity and religious dedication, and still for others, being spiritual is about being a healthy and centered individual in a group of other healthy and centered individuals. For observers like us, spirituality may mean the same thing for everyone; it may be, as a non-Dahn member commented at a recent public Dahn event: “It is just like at my church group.” Clearly, according to the Dahn mindset, each of us must recognize the unique flowers that we are in the midst of this snowfield of a world. In so doing, we realize that spirituality, in definition and in experience, is highly variable.