Disability Massage and Qigong: Reflections from an Intercultural Space in Bali

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During the months of July and December of 2014 I had the good fortune to become involved in providing massage and teaching Qigong to a community of Balinese people with a wide range of disabilities. I did this on a voluntary basis and intend to continue this work into the foreseeable future. My desire to do this work was as much a result of my passion for disability massage and Qigong as of my lifelong love of Southeast Asian culture and peoples.

The community of approximately 20 people with disabilities is located in a small village called Tampaksiring in central Bali and as such it is somewhat off the tourist trails. Tampaksiring is at a slight elevation and therefore has a slightly cooler climate than much of Bali. The community, called 'Yayasan Cahaya Mutiara Ubud', comprises people of varying ages (from 15 years upwards) with a varying range of disabilities. 'Yayasan Cahaya Mutiara Ubud' roughly translates as 'Shiny Pearl Foundation Ubud'. However, Ubud is not the location of the community, though its title might suggest that it is. Its location is in the district of Gianyar.

In this paper I would like to reflect on the importance of trust, intercultural appreciation and respect, by drawing on key factors that influenced my approach to providing massage and Qigong instruction to people with disabilities in a Balinese community.
VISIT 1 - JULY 2014 - MASSAGE

The few months preceding my arrival in July were an extremely important time, as it involved communication via email between the members of the Yayasan (Foundation) and myself. I cannot overstate how crucial this time was with regard to the success of the program I was attempting to put together. All communications regarding who I was, what visa I would need, possible dates, sponsor letters, where we could acquire a massage table etc., were relayed to the Yayasan so that they would not feel that they were a group of people at the end of a process. The intention was to encourage them to feel in every sense that they were central to the proceedings. During July the entire time was for providing massage only.

In all I spent 16 full days providing massage at the Yayasan and a number of days simply visiting and helping with the cleaning or gardening, as well as attending a public performance of Traditional Balinese Dance that five of the members perform from their wheelchairs.

The first day of my visit to the Yayasan was spent talking, exchanging pleasantries and just generally getting to know each other. Again I stress the importance of this time. This gave the members an opportunity to listen to what I had to say, to ask questions, to get a sense of who I am. Equally it gave me the opportunity to ask questions of them - how would they like me to conduct the sessions, what degree of undress are they happy with for the massage sessions, what sensitivities (cultural or otherwise) do I need to take into consideration? Essentially it was an opportunity to ease myself into their way of life - not the other way around! Realistically speaking, they were my teachers and I was a newcomer whose specialty was in massage and Qigong.

I still continue to look at myself in this role with humility and never assume to know anything or do anything other than what I am there for in the first place.

The conditions of disability that the members presented with on that first day included genetic and acquired illnesses. I was interested to discover that poliomyelitis was largely responsible for close to 50% of disability within the group, the vaccination for this disease having been introduced to Indonesia only just over one decade ago. Some genetic conditions include missing bones and also what they refer to, in the Indonesian language, as 'tulang rapuh' or brittle bones. Other conditions include amputation, premature birth defects, osteoporosis, spinal injuries and more. More often than not, this array of conditions goes alongside various complaints such as fatigue, feeling cold or hot, swollen and...
aching joints, constipation, numbness and tingling feelings (mainly in legs and feet), headaches, skin disorders, hernias, ulcers, insomnia, dizziness, pneumonia, and more.

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During the first few days of massage I concentrated primarily on providing relaxation massage, as most of the members expressed the idea that it would be nice to imagine they were in a spa environment (spas are very popular at tourist attractions in Bali). There was a storage room at the Yayasan and we decided that this would be our 'spa'. We set up the room to suggest a spa as best we could by moving much storage material to another location and then installing the massage table, candles, incense and gentle music.

I felt that it was important that other members were also present during the massage sessions so they could all see what was happening and be given an opportunity to comment on it should they choose. Another reason for this decision was to make sure that they could see that no sexual abuse would occur. This is an important point, as people with disabilities are obviously extremely vulnerable. As it turned out, achieving this was no problem as it is in the nature of Balinese people to be gregarious so for a lot of the time the room would be quite full of people talking, laughing, putting out offerings to the gods and generally participating in the experience. This tends to be quite contrary to how we in the West conduct our massage, with our quiet rooms and closed doors. For me the experience was exhilarating and I soon felt comfortable enough to participate in the general chitchat of the room while continuing to conduct the massage session. As the trust between us grew I came to realise that this was completely appropriate and would possibly have seemed quite odd, perhaps even rude, were I to maintain a solemn practitioner's silence. An Indonesian/Balinese concept that is quite applicable here is 'rama tama', which roughly translates as 'joyfully crowded sociability'.

As time went by and we became more familiar with each other I would, every so often, add a few more techniques. Acupressure points for headache or expelling heat were becoming very popular. After a short time they asked me to be more specific with regard to applying techniques that might help their various complaints and very shortly remedial techniques were starting to become an everyday part of the sessions. We continued in this manner throughout the rest of the visit.

I believe that as massage therapists in the West we tend to have certain expectations as to how a good session should be conducted. The client arrives appropriately early, we enquire as to their condition, in modesty we leave the room as they undress, the client will already be lying on the massage table as we re-enter the room, and we give a massage for an allocated amount of time. Essentially the format of the entire session has been constructed by us and our clients generally comply, and to all intent and purpose it works well for us. However, for this Balinese community it is not quite the same. There are no care workers. There is no machine to lift a person from the wheelchair. Transfers to and from the massage table have to be done without anyone to help. Undressing and dressing is often difficult, as are finding a comfortable position to lie on the table, turning from a supine to a prone position, draping, and indeed the massage process itself, as mostly clients' bodies are not conveniently straight. Sometimes the only way a person could receive a massage was if I helped out with the transfer. This was hard cooperative work between the client and myself, and a great deal of care had to be taken so as not to cause pain or injury to either of us. Sometimes the nature of the disability meant that my client was unable to get onto the table. This was due either to their being unable to rise from the wheelchair to the height of the massage table or to lie on the table due to body shape, discomfort or pain. In such cases I would perform the massage while my client was in the wheelchair.

Another point of interest regarding the nature of the community was that if more people arrived at the Yayasan at any stage of the day then we had to make attempts to fit all of them into the remainder of that day. This is simply the way it was done. The Balinese way of life is community-based and it is therefore important that no one is neglected. In this manner the length of the sessions, particularly later in the day, could range anywhere from 20 minutes to one hour. On further analysis I believe that this communal approach to the massage process is a complete therapy in itself. On being asked, "How do you all maintain such everyday joy?" the Yayasan leader replied, "When we hold hands together we are strong."

VISIT 2 - DECEMBER 2014 - QIGONG & MASSAGE

During the December visit I included teaching Qigong alongside providing massage. This was at the instigation of
the group, after discussions during the first visit, I decided to teach them the First Shibashi Qigong set. It is one of the easiest to learn, can be performed from a chair and its benefits can generally be felt right from the start. During the time I was there those who chose to be involved in the classes had successfully learned nine of the forms. The format for each session encompassed a warm-up and the forms themselves.

After the first session everyone said they loved it because it was easy and they could feel heat and tingling in their hands. Another common experience of feeling Qi was reported by one member while we were performing ‘holding the ball’. In this instance he called out with great excitement “I can feel it”, referring to a sensation in and between the hands that feels like holding two magnets repelling each other. No one reported any feelings in their legs or feet, but I am hoping that this feeling will at some stage start to move down to their legs, as these are the parts of their bodies that are most often affected by their conditions, as well as from spending much of the day in a wheelchair.

During another Qigong session one of the youngest members (15 years old), who was not present during any of the previous sessions, picked up all four of the previously taught forms extremely easily and was the first to fully understand Form Five. With his help we had everyone doing Form Five by the end of the session. This young person is also one of the Traditional Balinese Dancers mentioned previously and I believe his understanding of Balinese Dance, as well as possessing the coordination required, enabled him to gain an insight into what we were trying to achieve.

As the Qigong sessions progressed the feeling of Qi in the hands was becoming second nature to participants but still not evident in other parts of the body. I believe this will take a while to achieve, due to posture, position in the wheelchair, physical disabilities and Qi blockage. I suggested to them that as time goes by they might start to feel these same sensations throughout the entire body and I am hopeful that it may eventually encourage a sense of lightness and health throughout. If so, being able to achieve this at any time they wish by doing a simple exercise would, I believe, be quite empowering and relieving for them.

During the first few days it was necessary for massage to take place on beds as our borrowed massage table had been taken away after my return to Australia at the end of July. This was a particularly difficult period for me to give massage and for the members to receive massage. However one member did actually benefit from this compromised situation. During my previous visit in July I was providing massage to him in his wheelchair as he was unable to get onto the massage table. This time he decided to follow suit and have massage on his bed. Because of this I was able to massage parts of his body that previously I could not reach. He mentioned in one of these sessions that he was so happy to be feeling good and pain-free. It was also during this session that he fell asleep.

After a number of days I managed to buy a massage table with the help of a generous Australian donor. I had been wanting to purchase a table that could belong to the Yayasan and this was my opportunity. With the new table finally located back in our ‘spa’ the sessions proceeded as they had in July, apart from the above-mentioned member, who elected to continue to have his massage on his bed.

I am returning to Bali again in July 2015 to continue the massage program. At the request of the Yayasan members I am presently looking for suitable massage therapists who would be interested in donating some of their time for this group, at times when I am unable to be there myself.

I feel I have been privileged to have this experience and I look forward to spending time again with this wonderful group of people in July 2015. I would like to thank every one of the members of ‘Yayasan Cahaya Mutiara Ubud’ for welcoming me into the family.

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