

Brain Gym

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

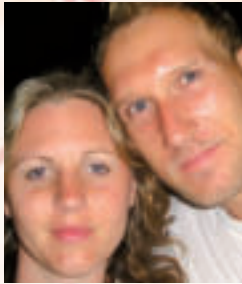
Great expectations

My first placement as a newly qualified teacher (NQT) had its fair share of highs and lows. To begin with, I thought I had found the perfect middle school in which to teach physical education. It had a warm and friendly staff, strong leadership, excellent facilities – including a new sports hall, large playing field and two AstroTurf pitches – and was situated just ten minutes from my home. What more could a newly qualified PE teacher ask for? As the new term approached I felt excited and eager to work in such a ‘good school’, and could not help wondering what opportunities God might have in store for me.

The summer holiday flew by and, before I knew it, it was September already. My first morning at school as an NQT began well. I and three other NQTs received a warm welcome and felt right at home as the entire staff gathered in the school library for a training day. All was going well – despite the feeling of information overload – until the topic of Brain Gym was introduced.

Energy pathways

As the school’s resident Brain Gym practitioner entered the room and began to introduce the concept I felt uncomfortable in my spirit. All I could hear were the words ‘Get out! Get out!’ reverberating inside my head. I knew the Lord was speaking to me clearly about the nature of Brain Gym. On this occasion I opted out of the exercises and just sat at the back of the room and listened intently. The course leader explained that Brain Gym uses physical movements to develop mental abilities. She then talked about ‘energy chakras’ in the body and how there can be blockages along certain ‘energy pathways’, such as the kidney meridian, that are created by stress in life. These blockages needed to be cleared out to restore the



Chris Dobson qualified as a teacher in 2003. He came to faith in Dereham in Norfolk, when he attended a family-centred Baptist church with his parents.

Chris says: ‘God took hold of my life and revealed His power and love for me when I came to university in Bedford in a more tangible way than I had allowed Him before. I encountered the Holy Spirit who changed me and my desires from the inside out.’ After this transformation Chris felt the Lord direct him to Ellel Ministries. Here he invested some of his student loan and undertook several teaching courses on healing and deliverance. Chris found the teaching and ministry inspirational and life-changing, making him more spiritually aware of New Age practices.

Chris and his wife, Charlotte, attend a New Frontiers Church called the ‘The King’s Arms’ in Bedford.

balance in the body and mind of the individual. This was achieved, she said, by using Brain Gym exercises in a disciplined fashion.

As I listened, I was surprised that nobody questioned her rationale or assumptions. In fact I was shocked that such a philosophy was so widely accepted by a group of ‘normal’ professional educators. No one saw this as strange, indeed it seemed this approach was completely endorsed by the headteacher. I, however, felt extremely uncomfortable.

As used by NASA

After the day ended, I arranged a brief meeting with my new headteacher to discuss my stance on Brain Gym. I must point out that he saw no ‘spiritual’ element associated with the discipline at all. All he was concerned with was the benefits to the children who took part. Most people I have spoken with in school circles showed no concern about Brain Gym and considered it purely a warm up exercise for the right and left brain hemispheres. The headteacher tried to allay my misgivings by assuring me that NASA astronauts also did Brain Gym to help them reacclimatise to life on earth after returning from space. But this did not reassure me at all.

I was told of many ‘proven benefits’ associated with Brain Gym. Such benefits include heightened concentration levels, improved reading skills, refined motor skills, help for people with dyslexia and relief from mental fatigue. In fact, as I researched the subject, it seemed as though there was nothing it did not claim to remedy or completely cure given enough time!

Greater concerns

I began to realise that the notion of teachers acting in *loco parentis* to protect pupils physically and emotionally was not, at least in the mind of my headteacher, extended to safeguarding spiritual well-being.

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Schools take the protection of a child's body seriously, for example in a PE lesson pupils who wear jewellery are required to remove earrings and necklaces prior to the lesson to prevent physical injury. Likewise schools develop and enforce bullying policies to ensure that children are protected from physical and/or emotional harm. However, children do not have a covering of protection within school for their spirit. Yet, I believe, the spirit is who we are; it is the part of a human being created in God's image.

I seek to highlight the potential harmfulness of Brain Gym to our children's spirits. The New Age influences, as well as the eastern religious roots that Brain Gym exhibits, cause me a great deal of concern.

Compromise

I commend and respect the headteacher for striving to help pupils fulfil their potential, and I am aware of certain evidence which suggests that Brain Gym can help pupils in the ways I have already mentioned. Hence I am not of the opinion that all aspects of Brain Gym are wrong for a Christian, such as myself.

My headteacher decided to offer a compromise. He arranged for a trained Brain Gym practitioner to take my class through 'PACE' each morning instead of me. I was, of course, present to take the register. PACE is a process of movements that the pupils are required to do each morning and afternoon. In the literature that the staff received about Brain Gym, it said that PACE is 'four steps to being Positive, Active, Clear and Energetic'. The four exercises prescribed were: 'Drinking Water', 'Brain Buttons', 'Cross Crawl', and 'Cook's Hook Ups'.

Four exercises

I certainly have no objection to encouraging pupils to drink water at the start of the school day. In fact I would encourage it. Water is essential to hydrate the body and has numerous benefits to the various body systems and organs, and is known to be especially good for the brain.

Secondly, pupils are required to perform the Brain Buttons exercise. This involves taking slow, deep

breaths whilst massaging the last acupuncture points on the kidney meridian found under the clavicle whilst creating a claw like shape with the other hand and holding the navel. We were told the tongue has to be on the roof of the mouth to allow electrical energy to flow around the body and up to the brain. This is certainly an odd movement. According to New Age belief, this kind of exercise helps people to empty their mind and become 'centred', ie creating harmony between mind and body. This allegedly creates an altered state of consciousness, making individuals both more open to outside influence and more in touch with a 'divine consciousness' within.

I stood firm and told my headteacher that I wouldn't carry out Brain Gym

Thirdly, pupils do the Cross Crawl. This is supposed to improve spelling, writing, listening, reading and comprehension. Its most obvious benefit might be co-ordination as it requires the pupil to cross the 'midline' with alternate arm and leg movements. As a Christian I object to the term 'midline' which is associated with eastern mysticism and acupuncture. Yes, as a PE teacher, I can quite see the benefit of getting pupils to stretch in the morning and develop physical co-ordination. But, as a Christian PE teacher, I must insist that we do not justify such exercises on the basis of New Age superstition or philosophy.

Finally, Cook's Hook Ups involves a complex hand and arm fold. Fingers interlocked and legs crossed over. I was told by the school's resident Brain Gym practitioner that unless this is done exactly with the tongue on the roof of the mouth it fails to be effective. Now, what can be so important with these particular movements that if just one little thing is left out the whole process is broken?

A notice appeared on the staffroom notice board outlining PACE and informing staff that unless PACE was done correctly and fully it would cease to work. The bulletin further reprimanded staff for not doing it correctly and stated that staff would be monitored to ensure correct practice.

Empty rituals

Proponents of Brain Gym PACE exercises, stress that ritual movements must be done in a prescribed way – missing nothing out – for the activity to 'work'. I wonder: could there be a 'power' released by this process of movements that could account for the promised outcomes? New Age practitioners of Brain Gym say: 'Yes.'

'Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.'

Joshua 1: 8

Certainly the notion of emptying one's mind – as per the Brain Buttons exercise described above – implies that a spiritual and/or supernatural 'power' is at work. The key question is: 'Is this the power of God?' I believe the answer is straightforward: 'No.'

Followers of New Age cults and eastern religions use mind-emptying ritual body movements and chants in an attempt to get in tune with their inner self and/or the universe around them. In contrast, Christian meditation and worship is about actively engaging our minds by thinking about God, His ways and His Word and, ultimately, coming into His holy presence. Christian meditation should never be self-centered or mindless; it should be God-centred and mindful. The Bible tells us to ponder godly things (Philippians 4:8) and to meditate on Scripture (Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:2-3; Psalm 119:10,15) so that our spirit is aligned with God's Spirit.

As a Christian I reject the belief in Ch'i and any talk of life force or energy

Ch'i power

Could 'Ch'i power', the same 'Ch'i power' spoken of in martial arts forms, be harnessed in Brain Gym? Certainly, as far as I can see, Brain Gym draws heavily on Kinesiology teachings. I have some understanding of Kinesiology as I have studied it at degree level at university.

Kinesiology has various sub branches. Some areas are scientifically proven to be physiological. For example, biomechanics and muscle force measurement are explained in relation to sports science. This is completely scientific. However, Applied (Systematic) Kinesiology, the kind that Brain Gym is founded on, has an altogether different emphasis. Its basic philosophy and theories include a mixture of Ch'i, vital energy forces, innate intelligence and healing by magnetic forces.

Ch'i is known to Brain Gym and Applied Kinesiology practitioners as 'vital energy'. This energy is said to flow around the body through 'meridians'. Brain Gym is meant to unblock blocked meridians. I once heard the Brain Gym practitioner talking about a pupil whose meridian lines were blocked and were consequently 'turned off'. On this occasion she had to 'switch on' nine meridians so that the pupil could be 'healed' – for want of a better word.

Ch'i is the complete opposite to God's Holy Spirit. Ch'i is said to contain an equal balance of light and

'But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.'

Psalm 1: 2-3

dark – commonly seen and known as Ying and Yang. As a Christian I reject the belief in Ch'i and any talk of life force or energy. This is a New Age belief based, in turn, on ancient Chinese religious beliefs including Zen Buddhism. Jesus says that He is the healer of our souls and we should look to Him for all our needs in this world. If we trust in and practice other belief systems or ways of healing, we are certainly entering into disobedience and even idolatry.

A new school year

My second academic school year began and once again I had responsibility for tutoring a new class. The expectation that I should include Brain Gym in this form time was still prominent; however I continued to exclude it from the daily register time. As the first few weeks passed I became increasingly aware that management staff were keeping a close eye on my classroom each day.

A little while later the headteacher called me to a meeting. Once again he stated the importance of the children taking part in the Brain Gym activities. He was clearly not prepared to negotiate; nor was I willing to compromise. Consequently he suggested I extend my career further by teaching PE in the upper school sector, and gave me a week to think on this. I began to wonder if I was being too extreme and tried to rationalise it in my head, but God confirmed I was to stand firm. As I read Daniel chapter three I saw clear parallels with my situation at school.

Standing firm

The headteacher commanded that everyone at the school should effectively bow down to Brain Gym (the golden statue). In Daniel 3:8-15 King Nebuchadnezzar was informed by those he had sent out to spy that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who were responsible for the affairs of Babylon, were not complying with his command-

A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit

ments. Like myself, these were people in positions of responsibility. In verse 15 King Nebuchadnezzar gives them a second chance to comply before threatening them with the blazing furnace. My headteacher was also giving me a final option to reconsider and bow down by allowing Brain Gym, making it clear that my continued disobedience (to him, rather than God) would mean I would be forced to leave the school.

Having talked and prayed about this with my wife and church house group we strongly felt that making any compromise would be wrong; I needed to choose the fiery furnace. I stood firm and told my headteacher that I wouldn't carry out Brain Gym and that I would be actively looking for another job.

Children do not have a covering of protection within school for their spirit

Through this season God placed this Scripture on my heart:

'Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes you may be able to stand your ground...' (Ephesians 6:10-13)

New developments

I followed the headteacher's advice; I left the middle school and moved to an upper school to further my experience of teaching to GCSE level. After a year-and-a-half, however, I decided to move on and find a new middle school.

At this point my first headteacher invited me back to my original middle school to provide long-term supply cover before my new post commenced. This was a great opportunity for me to witness to dear colleagues once again, catch up with excellent pupils, and meet and discuss my convictions with the headteacher. Second time around he did not put any pressure on me to do Brain Gym. I felt uplifted and no longer marginalised by the staff. Thanks be to God!

Over the past few years I have worked in several schools. In that time I never encountered Brain Gym to the extent that I did in my first school.

I have been informed by close colleagues at my original middle school that Brain Gym has been

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superseded by something called 'Heart Math'. According to the Institute of Heart Math website (www.heartmath.org) '*research has identified a measurable physiological state that underlies optimal learning and performance. In this state, our emotions are calm, and our brain, nervous system and other bodily systems function with increased synchronization and harmony.*' As far as I can determine, Heart Math uses deep breathing techniques of the kind found commonly in Yoga. This development seems to confirm my initial hunch that Brain Gym itself is little more than a spiritual warm up for true yogic practices.

Advocates of Brain Gym and Heart Math often play down or completely deny any spiritual and supernatural dimensions, preferring to concentrate on rational measurable outcomes, ie better test results. But, as followers of Christ, we are called to discern darkness from light.

Spiritual insights

In Matthew 7:15-20 we read: '*Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits.*'

I believe Satan rubs his hands whenever he sees schools wholeheartedly implementing schemes like Brain Gym and Heart Math. The enemy of truth has a habit of finding a door ajar, getting his foot in it, and then walking straight on in.

May the Lord have mercy on our nation's schools and colleges and all who work in them, especially headteachers/principals, teachers and teaching assistants. They have a powerful influence on, and awesome responsibility for, the spiritual well-being of future generations. May God raise up godly educational leaders who will inspire and teach the young people in our nation. And may each and every school and college curriculum be filled with all that is true, honourable, right, pure, lovely, of good repute, excellent and worthy of praise (Philippians 4:8). Amen.

■ Chris Dobson

