

BREATHING LESSONS UNLEARNING THE MINDSET OF THERAPY

by
Patrick Dougherty

AS I ENTERED THE CLASSROOM OF OUR local community college, two things struck me. First, where was everybody?! I was here for my first class in the Chinese practice of qigong, and expected to join a bustling group of students. Instead, I saw exactly four people sitting at desks, looking as tentative as I was feeling. At the front of the room, our teacher sat quietly. If this qigong thing was so terrific and the guy teaching it was a bona fide Chinese master, how come he couldn't pack the room?

But at the same time—and this was the second thing I noticed—this man seemed to radiate something powerful that I couldn't quite name. Physically, there was nothing especially notable about him. He was quite slender, with a pleasant, angular face and dark, slightly thinning hair. He sat quietly, even a bit awkwardly, at the front of the room, as though he didn't quite belong in this American community-college environment. Yet there was something arresting about him. As I waited for the class to start, I was aware that whatever it was that shone from this man seemed to be beaming its way into me, infusing me with an unfamiliar sense of peace and ease.

A few moments later, he stood and moved to the center of the room. "Hello everyone, I am qigong master from China, Master Chunyi Lin." He pronounced each word carefully, with a thick accent. "I know Americans feel funny about calling someone Master. So you can call me Chunyi, or Lin." Looking out at us, his eyes crinkled at the corners. "Or, 'hey, Chinese guy.'"

As I listened to this introduction, I had no way of knowing the impact that this man and his teachings would have on me. I joined the class to learn stress reduction, hoping for a set of techniques that would help me better manage my time-squeezed life. But in the 10 years I've studied with him, I've learned that Master Lin is after something much bigger than stress relief. This gentle teacher and this simple practice would transform the way I saw clients, how I responded to them, and the way I thought about the entire healing process. But for any of this to happen, qigong first had to change me.

When I first started taking classes, I was involved in a full-time private practice, doing mostly long-term, psychodynamic and psychoanalytic-informed therapy. In my spare time, I taught at a local university, led therapy workshops, and was involved in the usual round of professional activities. I was also coping with family strains, including marital struggles and my father's recent diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. Some mornings I'd wake up feeling so burdened that I'd have to force myself to get out of bed and go to work. Yet at the end of the day, I'd realize that I was in no hurry to get home. Every part of my life felt suffused with pressure.

I tried various ways to tame my stress. I ran when I could, and I meditated, off and on. But I couldn't seem to sustain any practice. There seemed never to be enough time to take care of myself, yet far too much time for junk food, coffee, and TV. I looked like many of my friends and clients—a bit haggard and a lot tired. Maybe this is just the way life is, I thought to myself. You suck it up and just keep moving, just like everyone else. But I didn't entirely believe it. Nor did I want it.

I first heard about Master Lin from Jim, an African American friend who's keenly interested in the world of alternative healing. We were having lunch at a Thai restaurant in my hometown of St. Paul, Minnesota, on a snowy December afternoon. "What do you know about qigong?" I asked. I'd heard a little about this ancient practice and its supposed ability to help reduce stress. "Well, if you're interested in qigong," Jim responded with a wry smile, "you might as well learn from a Chinese master."

"Great," I laughed. "So how do I find a Chinese qigong master, fly to Beijing?" Jim shook his head. "There's one right up in Coon Rapids," he said, referring to a working-class suburb just 10 miles north of us.

It was a small opening, one I might have missed on another day, another lunch. Maybe there was something about the cultural intersections of that moment—hearing from my African American friend about a Chinese qigong master teaching in Coon Rapids, Minnesota, as I ate my Thai lunch—that invited me to try something new, something that felt both deeply strange and somehow welcoming. When Jim offered me a phone number, I wrote it down.

Lightening Up

Before I started class, all I knew about qigong was that it was a branch of traditional Chinese medicine, coming out of the Taoist tradition. The philosophy underlying this practice is that free-flowing energy throughout the body is vital to good physical and mental health. I'd learn from Master Lin that many factors can block that energy flow—stress, illness, emotional conflicts, poor diet—and that the practice of qigong, sometimes called self-acupuncture, is a simple and powerful way to open up those blocks. Master Lin would also say, “You do not need to know any more than that.”

During that first class, he explained to us that breathing was the foundation of qigong, and that the best way to learn it was to focus attention on an energy center behind the navel called the “lower tantien.” The first thing he asked us to do was inhale, all the while visualizing energy moving toward us from every corner of universe, entering our pores and gathering in our lower tantien. “Take deep, slow, quiet breaths,” said Master Lin. “Do not work hard at it.”

We breathed as instructed. “Very good,” he said, smiling. “You are now all practicing qigong.” Then he added, “When you exhale, visualize all energy blocks, all anxieties, all depressions, all illness, all pain, turning to smoke and leaving your body.” My psychologist self woke up, bristled. You can heal yourself with an image and a breath? Nice try! Yet the confidence and conviction with which Master Lin spoke was palpable. I didn't really believe him. But I wanted to.

Despite my skepticism, I decided to follow my teacher's advice to practice qigong each day. At first, it didn't seem to make any difference. But after a couple of weeks, I began to notice some subtle, tingling sensations, especially around my hands and head. I'd learn that this was my energy starting to become more active. A little later, I became aware of a strange lightness in my limbs. Within a few more weeks, I noticed that I was no longer feeling so strung out, so perpetually on guard. It was as though a network of tight wires inside of me had begun to loosen.

Encouraged, I completed the first level of qigong with Master Lin and signed up for the next one. One evening, while chatting with my teacher after class, I mentioned that I was a psychologist. His face lit up. “Patrick, please come my apartment sometime so we talk psychology,” he said. “I am excited to talk to American psychologist.” I wasn't so sure I was ready to be the representative of American psychology, but the opportunity to talk with a qigong master about psychotherapy intrigued me. It was also my chance get to know this “Chinese guy” a little better.

When I arrived at his small apartment after dinner one evening, Master Lin greeted me warmly. Looking around, I saw a small table and a couple of chairs in the kitchen, and two nondescript, upholstered chairs in the living room. That was it. He lived alone; his family in China would join him here in a few years. He led me into the tiny kitchen and invited me to sit at the table. “Now,” he said, his eyes warm with curiosity. “Tell me what you do.”

For a moment, I was stumped: How to explain the intricacies of psychotherapy? I began by describing my work with a particular client, a man I'd been seeing for three years, who'd initially come in for depression and to talk about the trauma of growing up in his family. I was about to launch into the finer points of my approach when Master Lin politely held up his hand. “Patrick, I do not understand,” he said. “Why you think talking to this man about his depression would help him?” He looked genuinely bewildered.

Before I could even think how to respond, he leaned forward with another question. “Why you look backward with this man for so long?” he asked. Again, he looked truly confused. I was confused, too. And intrigued. Why would he ask such a question?

That evening was the beginning of what I came to call our “kitchen table talks.” They continued for the next two years, until his wife and son arrived and moved with him into a larger home. Over glasses of tap water, we'd talk about psychological theory, American and Chinese. Our differing perspectives seemed to energize both of us. He'd asked me to explain peculiarities of our culture to help him understand his students better. Meanwhile, I'd pepper him with questions about qigong. Occasionally he'd remind me that our talks, enlightening and enjoyable as they were, were only part of the picture. “We must live what learn,” he said.

Early on in my qigong practice, I became aware that, most mornings while shaving, I'd get into this negative thought loop about my exuberantly active son. I'd imagine Oliver leaving his bed a mess, forgetting to brush his teeth, and bounding out the door without his homework. As I shaved, I'd start

thinking about these organizational lapses and feel my jaw tighten. After class one day, I asked Master Lin why he thought I might be having such obsessively negative thoughts about my son, whom I loved deeply and didn't want to hurt.

He smiled and shook his head. "Patrick, it does not matter why you do it. You just change it." I suppressed a groan: How could he be so naive? "When you catch yourself having those thoughts," he continued, "simply watch them turn into smoke, and replace them with kind, loving thoughts." Then, he added: "And please do not go talk to a therapist about your negative thinking—they will make more of it than it deserves." His eyes were teasing, twinkling. But I knew that on some level, he meant it.

Simplistic or not, Master Lin's prescription seemed better than none at all. So the next time I caught myself beginning to think about Oliver's inconvenient habits, I watched those images begin to fuzz around the edges, and then evaporate into smoke. I then began to consciously think about what I loved about my son—his openhearted delight in everything life offered, the way his unstoppable curiosity invited me to share his sense of wonder about life. This led to a new problem: it was hard to shave while smiling. Before long, I found myself actually looking forward to sending Oliver off to school, relishing his energy and wild enthusiasm for the world.

Going Deeper

As I dove still more deeply into qigong practice, a group of us students began to organize peer practice groups and potluck dinners. These get-togethers gradually expanded into annual conferences, which I volunteered to help organize. In the process, I was introduced to another side of Master Lin—a side that didn't make decisions with typical Western dispatch. I needed his input to reserve a hotel, contact the necessary speakers, and so on. But each time I'd press him for information, he'd tell me that he was still "listening to the energy" and would go forward only when something became clear to him. At times, I was convinced that "listening to the energy" was a euphemism for "hasn't even thought about it."

One evening, my frustration boiled over. I rang up Master Lin and told him I had to meet with him, ASAP. "Tonight, fine," he responded pleasantly. I drove out to his house, my Irish ire whipped up into a foamy lather. When I arrived, he led me into his healing and meditation room, where his ever-present qigong music was playing in the background. Then he offered me a seat, relaxed into his own chair, and waited for me to speak.

"Master Lin, I'm really frustrated and angry," I burst out. "I want you to hear me out. Please don't interrupt me like you usually do, because I need to say it all." I was astonished at my own words: I'd never spoken to my teacher like this.

I lit into him for about 10 minutes, detailing the troubles he was causing me. "You could make this conference process so much easier if you'd only make some decisions!" I said. "Because of you, we're getting nothing done!" I was so furious my voice shook. I hardly took a breath to make sure he didn't interrupt me.

It's hard to describe what it felt like to look into Master Lin's face as I vented my wrath. He gazed at me in a way I'd never been looked at before, as though he were seeing past my churlish tantrum to something else in me, something that was bigger, and truer. When I finally wound down, exhausted and slightly dizzy, he leaned toward me.

"Patrick, if you are serious about this path, this is great opportunity for you," he said, his voice soft and grave. "All of your unhappiness, it has nothing to do with me." He moved his hand to his chest. "It is about the place where your heart is closed." I became conscious then of something tense and lumpy in my chest, like a fist. "If you can find out how to open your heart, right here in the middle of this time," he said gently, "it will benefit you so much."

It wasn't his words. It was how he was with me in that moment. Master Lin looked at me in a way that was beyond simply kind. His gaze radiated a deep knowing, lighting a path to some part of me that I'd forgotten about, or maybe had never known. A place beyond all my judgments and strivings. A place of simple openheartedness, toward myself and toward others. I felt like weeping.

I wish I could say that this incident transformed me—that from that day on, I walked the earth with a loving and spacious heart. But for me, openheartedness was a hit-or-miss affair. On certain days, I'd feel painfully separate from others, tightly locked up within myself. When I asked Master Lin

what to do at times like this, he advised me to visualize and sense a lotus flower—a powerful healing image in qigong—in the heart of the person I was with. My knee-jerk reaction was to roll my eyes, but by now I understood that when my teacher suggested something, I should probably at least consider it. Since my stormy evening at his house, I'd realized that I'd been carrying around this tight feeling in my chest, off and on, for most of my life.

Open-Heart Therapy

One morning soon afterward, I sat with Andrew, a middle-aged man who'd been my client for almost five years. He was living in a stale, empty marriage, which he'd been trying to end for a couple of years. But every time he got anywhere near to his grief or anger, he'd freeze up and dissociate from his feelings and body. Andrew knew about his issues—he'd grown up feeling abandoned by his parents and was afraid to be divorced and alone. But he couldn't directly experience that fear, nor his yearning for connection.

On this particular morning, Andrew was talking yet again about his bankrupt marriage. His affect was flat, his voice a murmuring monotone. Had I not known him as well as I did, I probably wouldn't have noticed the shadow of pain in his eyes. I saw him turn his gaze from me—a sure sign that he was getting closer to his feelings. We both knew what was going to happen next. He was going to shut down.

I wasn't feeling very heart-centered that day. In fact, I was feeling a lot like Andrew looked—flat and distant. I could see that he'd soon hit the wall, and I realized I felt a bit irritated with his predictable reaction. I knew my annoyance stemmed from my own sense of helplessness, but knowing that didn't help. Okay, here goes, I thought. Feeling slightly foolish, I began to imagine a white lotus flower sitting in Andrew's heart area. Focusing intently, I saw the flower's graceful, multipetaled shape; I felt its velvety coolness; I smelled its delicate, slightly sweet fragrance.

I continued to sit with my client, quietly breathing, focusing on the lotus flower. After a few moments, I felt something within me quicken, like a vibration slowly gaining momentum. Then I experienced a kind of loosening and softening in my chest. Then a slight tingling in my heart area. As I continued to visualize the flower opening up in Andrew's chest, I realized that my irritation had dissipated. In its place, I was conscious of a pulsing, spreading sense of warmth. As Andrew continued to describe his marriage in the tone of someone discussing the future of farm subsidies, I saw a man full of sorrow and pain.

Still, I had no idea what to do next. We'd already gone over his childhood, his marriage, the trouble he had accessing his emotions. I'd even tried to teach him qigong breathing exercises, with limited success. What was left?

“When you are not sure what to do, Patrick, do less.” It was my teacher's voice. I sank more deeply into my breath. As I continued to sit quietly with Andrew, seeing him painfully stuck once again and at the same time sensing the deep goodness of his heart, I felt a kind of spaciousness grow within me.

“Andrew,” I said, “I wish there was something I could do for you. Right here, right now. It really pains me to not know what to do to help you more.”

Andrew looked up at me, surprised and white-faced. He sat silently for a few seconds, and then turned his head from me ever so slightly. Almost in a whisper, he said, “I think I need to know if you love me.”

I felt something in me—something invisible, yet alive—reach toward my client. Quietly, I said: “Boy, I sure do.”

Andrew put his hand to his face and held the bridge of his nose tightly. For the next few minutes, he cried soundlessly into his hand, his head bowed. When he finally looked up, I saw that his face had relaxed, softened. The moment loosened up something between us. It also opened up a language and longing in Andrew that he's now, tentatively, bringing into our therapy sessions. I'm glad, and hopeful.

Feeling a Shift

When I began to practice qigong, I had no intention of seeking a more open heart. If someone had told me, starting out, that this was the whole point, I wouldn't have believed it, nor would I have probably much cared. I wanted to reduce my stress, period. The truth is, I'm not that preoccupied

with my stress and problems anymore. It's not that I never experience frustrations or grievances or needs or worries—they still hang around. But they interest me less and less.

This shift astonishes me. As a psychologist who's spent half of his adult life in therapy and devoted nearly 30 years of full-time work to therapy clients, I was one guy who could, and did, analyze just about everything. Now, when I catch myself rehashing my old stuff, such as last Thanksgiving's family-of-origin drama, I try to remember to pause and send loving energy to everyone in my family back on that day. Then I bring my mind back to the present, and send loving energy to wherever family members are today. This doesn't always work. But I'm amazed how often it does.

Losing my fascination with my own story is, I think, changing me as a therapist. When I'm able to sit with an open heart, it's easier to let go of being the expert in the room and just be with my clients in all of their troubles, their stuck places, and even their discontent toward me. When I can sense the essence of those sitting across from me—their aching, brave, beautiful humanity—something ineffable happens. It has to do with witnessing, and truly accompanying, another human being. I see these moments changing my clients, and changing me.

When I recently commented on this shift to Master Lin, he responded with a chuckle: "You'd better be careful, Patrick. If just loving your clients heals them, it could put you out of business." He was teasing, I knew. But I could see his happiness for me.

Last night, my daughter, Mairead, left my house to spend the next week at her mother's. I felt the pang of grief I always experience when she leaves to switch homes. I also felt unhappy because she left very angry with me about some school issues we'd been discussing. As I began my evening qigong practice, I hoped for some relief from my turmoil. With my candle burning and Chinese qigong music playing softly, I began one of my favorite exercises, called Breath of the Universe.

Starting with my upper arms directly at my sides, I bent my elbows, raised my hands and turned my palms to face each other. As I inhaled, I slowly guided my hands out to my sides as I imagined perfect, beautiful energy infusing every part of my body. As I exhaled, I brought my hands back toward each other, visualizing all of my energy blocks turning to smoke and shooting out of my heart area.

What was blocking me, at that moment, was my agitated attempt to second-guess the conversation with my daughter. Maybe I should have said less? Or maybe more? I tried to locate that quiet, spacious place within me. But the soothing music, the flickering candle, and my competent execution of the exercise seemed to be making no difference at all.

Then, unbidden, a thought arose. I realized that during my difficult encounter with Mairead, I'd responded with more patience and kindness than I'd have been able to do a year ago. My mind quieted a little. Then another thought appeared. I remembered a particularly tough period several months earlier, when I'd felt closed off and resentful, day after day. Of course, I'd gone to my teacher about it. "Master Lin, I've tried everything," I'd said. "My heart won't open. What can I do?"

He'd looked at me with that warm, enveloping gaze of his, speaking to that something in me that was beyond my desperation, beyond the walls I'd thrown up inside myself. "You can always find that openhearted place, Patrick," he said. "So simple. Just go back to the beginning, take a breath, and practice your qigong."

Slowly, I moved my palms in front of my body until they faced each other, my fingers inclining ever so slightly toward each other. I inhaled. ■

Patrick Dougherty, M.A., L.P., is in private practice in St. Paul, Minnesota. He's been teaching qigong and its applicability to psychotherapy for many years. His just-completed book is entitled *You Can Do*

So Much by Doing So Little: An Eastern, Mind/Body Approach to Mental Health. Contact: www.breathingqigong.com. Letters to the Editor about this feature may be e-mailed to letters@psychnetworker.org.