Meditate to Integrate

By Robbie Steinhouse

In this piece, I want to look at meditation, consider the general question of whether it has a role in the teaching and application of NLP, then present a specific exercise which combines traditional Chinese meditation with modern NLP.

There are many kinds of meditation. The best known type involves concentrating one's attention on a repeated sound. This is a powerful and proven technique, but for my taste concentrates too much on the Auditory: traditional Chinese meditation works with all rep systems. The kind I shall discuss forms a part of the broader physical and spiritual discipline called Qigong (pronounced Chee-gong), which is closely related to Tai Chi.

I should say a little about my own experience before setting out. I was a student of meditation before I studied NLP, so have long been interested in the interaction between the two disciplines. I now teach NLP, and make meditation an important part of my teaching. Why?
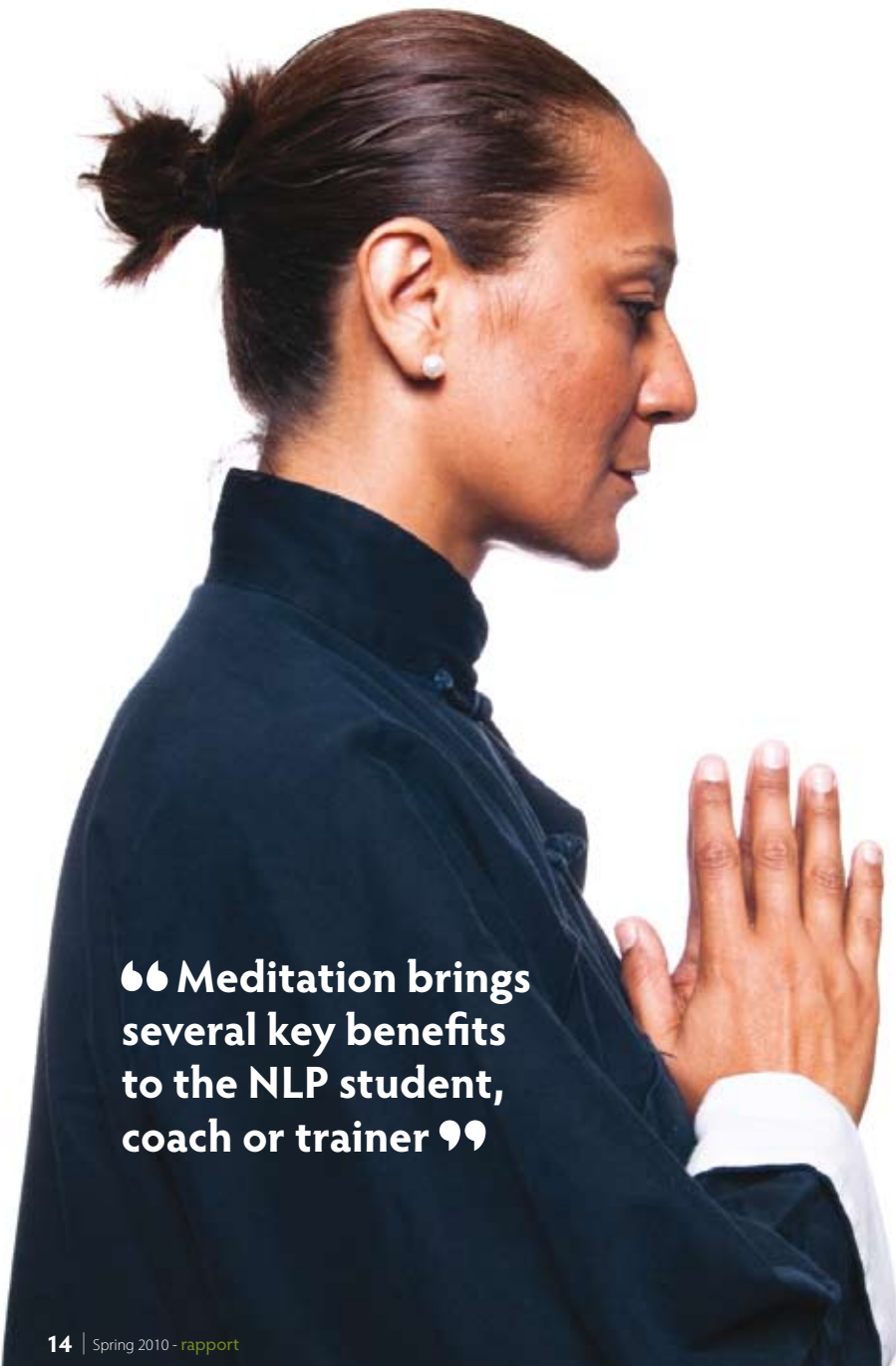
Meditation and NLP

Meditation brings several key benefits to the NLP student, coach or trainer. I start each day of my training with a meditation, and students find this gets their minds into a state of readiness to learn. This is partially an exercise in anchoring; they come to associate the meditative state with subsequent learning. It also acts as an anchor for me, to get me into 'teaching mode'.

I could use other anchors, however – why this one? Meditation is a great way of clearing the mind. In a meditative state, one is able to notice thoughts and feelings arising from inside oneself, but not be bound to connect to them or follow their promptings: the meditator becomes an observer of him- or herself. This seems to be an excellent state in which to learn: put away preconceptions and simply be curious!

I am also a coach, and before coaching, I use meditation as a way of stilling my mind, so I can concentrate on the client. Meditation is, of course, a state: the various techniques (counting the breath, visualisations, mantras and so on) are simply anchors that bring about that state. Experienced meditators can access the state directly, without using the techniques: this skill enables the practitioner to rapidly enter a useful NLP state, of being open and available for clients.

Finally I simply want my students to have the benefits of meditation. We live in a stressful world, and studies have shown the value of countering the effects of

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this by using meditation. One of the key presuppositions of NLP is that the body and mind are one system, and meditation is an excellent way of putting that presupposition to work for us.

The Qigong approach...

The term Qigong is of quite recent origin, but the practices date back many thousands of years. At the heart of it is the notion of Qi, or vital energy, which flows round the body, more or less freely – the aim of Qigong is to ease the flow to promote physical and spiritual health. From an NLP perspective, one does not have to accept the concept of Qi. However, I personally find it useful, and would also point out that the presupposition "energy follows intention (or attention)" supports the concept. But in the end, NLP is essentially about 'what works', and Qigong should be judged against this criterion.

Another central concept in Qigong is that of the Dan Tien (or Dantian) or Centre of Power. We have three of these. The most powerful one is situated three finger widths below the navel and two finger widths inside the body, in the abdomen. This is the seat of life force, and the 'centre of energetic gravity' (and almost of physical gravity) in the body. Anyone who has practiced martial arts or Tai Chi will be aware of the attention paid to this part of the body. The next Dan Tien is the heart. This is the seat of emotional energy. The third Dan Tien is in the middle of the forehead, and is the seat of intelligence of all kinds: not just ratiocination but intuition.

...and other models

Other 'triune' models map elegantly onto the Dan Tiens. The first is the three archetypal energies of strength, softness and humour. The link is quite easy to make: strength is a quality of the first, abdominal Dan Tien, softness a quality of the heart, and humour (and more generally, the capacity for perspective and objectivity) a quality of the upper Dan Tien. A refinement on this model

is the concept of the 'shadow'; the over- or under-representation of each energy in the psyche. For example, people with too much strength can become savage; people with too much softness can be flooded by emotion; and people with too much humour / intellect can either become manipulative or fundamentalists. On the deficit side, people with too little strength can become victims; with too little softness, excessively stoical; and with too little humour / intelligence, dim-witted.

Readers familiar with New Code NLP will also spot the similarity with the three perceptual positions used in Robert Dilts' Meta Mirror, with the assertive power of first position linking to the abdomen, the empathetic power of second position linking to the heart and the objectivity of third position linking to the head.

Breathing itself maps (almost) neatly onto these three energy centres. We have three ways of breathing, abdominal, intercostal and clavicular. Abdominal is the most powerful, and comes from the first Dan Tien. Intercostal ▶

breathing, using the muscles around the rib-cage, comes next, and is anatomically linked to the heart Dan Tien. The third Dan Tien… Okay, we don't do a huge amount of breathing with our forehead, so the mapping isn't perfect, but clavicular or 'upper-body' breathing is often associated with people who are 'too much in their head' and disconnected from their deeper physicality, so there is a meaningful link.

The great thing about the above links is that they enable us to create an exercise that combines quite abstract NLP concepts such as the Meta Mirror with the three archetypal energies, a more emotionally charged model, and with the physicality and spirituality of Qigong breathing – a powerful mixture. Let me take you through it…

An NLP Qigong meditation
Breathe deeply into and out from your abdomen. Be aware of the power that emanates from this place, and think of a time when you were strong. When you have that clearly in your mind, notice what you feel and where you feel it, and what sounds and visual images accompany it.

> ❝ **Meditation is a great way of clearing the mind** ❞

Now, look inside yourself for the two shadows, times when you have been overaggressive and times when you have been a victim. As with your memory of strength, locate the VAK concomitants of these shadow states. At this point, it is important not to judge the states, but just 'hold' and accept them, maybe with a touch of curiosity. Having visited both states, too much and too little of the energy, use your abdominal breathing to reconnect with your natural, balanced state of strength – and notice the difference between this and the state that accompanied your two shadows.

Next, repeat the same formula for the intercostal breathing. This time, think of a time when you were gentle and emotional – in the best sense of the word: feeling strong, empowering love. Notice what you feel and where you feel it, plus sounds and images, then visit the two shadows, of over-emotionality and coldness, before returning to your original point of healthy, energized emotion.

Next, do the same for the third Dan Tien, breathing with your upper body, connecting with your humour and intelligence and describing this connection in VAK terms, then visiting the shadows before returning to your original connection.

The three archetypes, and the three Dan Tiens, need to work in harmony, so the next part of the exercise is to integrate them. Keep breathing deeply and imagine your Qi – or however you visualize your life energy – flowing round you. Imagine it entering with your breath, flowing on through the second Dan Tien down to the first one, deep in your abdomen. Then imagining the energy moving on, up through your spine into your head then out as you exhale. 'Visual' people find it helpful to have an image of this – some kind of white mist is a popular one, or flowing liquid: whatever you need.

Qigong talks of five qualities of breath, and as you do this part of the exercise, it can help to bring these to mind. The qualities are 'long, deep, even, slow and fine' (fine as opposed to coarse). As you feel yourself breathing in and out and as you visualize the energy flowing round you, try saying: "The breath is long. The breath is deep. The breath is even. The breath is slow. The breath is fine." This creates a complete VAK experience.

The outcome of this exercise should be a greatly improved ability to calibrate our own inner states, and a better balance between those three archetypes (Judith de Lozier once said that "When something is wrong in my life, I know that one of these three energies is out of balance.") If the proponents of Qigong are right, it could also bring health benefits through a better flow of energy through our system.

What I particularly like about this exercise is that it is an example of NLP at its best. It uses NLP as a springboard to reach out to other cultures and traditions, and to take and use ideas from them, not in the spirit of an intellectual land-grab but as part of humanity's bigger journey towards self-knowledge. It does not tie us into any philosophical systems: we can take or leave the concept of Qi, and just do the exercise and be curious about how it affects us. And, I believe very strongly, it works – practicing it makes you more grounded, more balanced, more clear-headed, more eager to live and learn. That surely is what NLP is all about. ■

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