

# The New Mesmerists



NLP and other nonsense  
Andrew Newton

# The New Mesmerists – NLP and Other Nonsense

---

Over the last 30 years, the global mind therapy business has grown at an astonishing rate. The drive to make your life a better place to live has mushroomed to industrial proportions to become a highly competitive multi-billion dollar enterprise. Just three decades ago, the traditional approach to self-improvement was limited to the ability to stand on one's own two feet, an ability that was taken for granted by previous generations. For anyone born before the 1970s, the ability to take control of one's own destiny was a given – something which merely required a degree of commitment, application and hard work.

There are now an almost infinite variety of courses, seminars, workshops, master classes and personal development trainings that offer individuals or groups the principles and values that our parents and grandparents already believed in and took for granted. This more conventional mindset – one of hard work and responsibility – was core to survival and it gave our forebears the tools to live in what was an altogether less comfortable world. The mindset of the twenty-first century is more 'don't worry, be happy' – words that imply an abdication of personal responsibility.

A dazzling array of therapies can help us to become better and happier people. The government encourages happiness, and that quest is supported by the Welfare State, but to tout happiness as something that we simply *must* have is both dubious and disingenuous.

In the Royal Kingdom of Bhutan, happiness is a legal requirement. To be unhappy in Bhutan is to break the law! I have no idea how they enforce this – maybe when the police call round, everyone sits around with a big smile on their face until they've left. In Bhutan, the happiness of the individual has been guaranteed by banning wrestling and MTV – a very good start!

The great humanitarian and philanthropist Josef Stalin called himself the 'constructor of happiness' – a philanthropic mindset that caused some twenty million Russians to die in forced labour camps. Astonishingly, they still weren't happy. Presently, Chinese citizens are encouraged to be happy by not criticising the behemoth Communist Party, which manages every part of your life – down to the finest detail – for you.

In Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, making people happy was the precondition for stable government. But *Brave New World* was a novel – and a warning that policies designed to make happy citizens of us all have little to do with the real needs of ordinary people. State sponsored happiness is bunkum – a coldly calculated concept to make us all believe we are happier when in fact we're not. The problem with enforced happiness is that it strips the individual of their right to be unhappy.

Yet, the pursuit of happiness has become the new Holy Grail of people management. It is no longer enough to teach children maths and science and English, now the government has decreed that they should also be taught how to be happy. Happiness means being satisfied with what is on offer. In reality, happiness means getting a job and paying tax. Happiness means fitting in, not rocking the boat. Everyone wants to understand the meaning of life but platitudes such as 'money doesn't buy happiness' mean that if we lower our expectations we will be happier. True, money doesn't buy happiness, but it makes most things more bearable. Brainwashing the population into being happy and therefore satisfied with mediocrity is a very useful get-out clause for politicians with

nothing to offer. After all, if everyone was blissfully happy, there would be no need to invent things and civilisation would stagnate. Happiness is for those with no agenda – ok in its own way, but no substitute for getting off your arse and doing something about your life.

Of course there is a difference between moral education, which advocates the difference between right and wrong and emotional education, which instructs the populace in how they should feel – this is what to think and this is when to think it – all calculated to turn a thinking, go-getting population into a flock of unquestioning sheep.

In earlier times, leadership and guidance was offered by more traditional figures in the community – priests, teachers, headmasters, policemen and political and civic leaders. In the twenty-first century, many people have lost faith in these traditional conduits of wisdom, models of social behaviour and icons of stability: people have generally lost their sense of respect for the establishment and its representatives (and who can blame them?) and frequently seek answers elsewhere.

The first example I personally recall was in 1967 when The Beatles, possessing more money than sense, sparked international interest, not to mention a certain amount of controversy (and therefore free publicity) by consulting with an absolutely delighted Indian mystic, the Maharishi, a man who is presently worth about five hundred million pounds. At a press conference called by Paul McCartney, the Fab Four told the world that the teachings of the Maharishi had persuaded them to give up cannabis and LSD and that this change of heart had been brought about by the repetition of a simple mantra several times a day. Emile Coué would have been proud, but the Maharishi was prouder still. As John Lennon spoke about the tremendous benefits of spiritual regeneration, the Maharishi's grin grew ever wider – and not just for the benefit of the cameras.

A few weeks later, John, Paul, George and the one that played the drums headed off to the Himalayas for another helping of the Great Mystic's mystical teachings, along with, amongst others with money to burn, the actress Mia Farrow, who was nineteen at the time and fortunately for the Maharishi, not yet engaged to Frank Sinatra. The Great One invited Miss Farrow backstage for a little private meditation which she regrettably confused with a blatant sexual advance. Unfortunately for the Maharishi, the very next day, detecting a little hypocrisy, John, Paul, George and the one that played the drums packed their bags to leave. Asked by the Maharishi why they were leaving, John Lennon replied, with all the subtle jocularly of the Scouser, 'You're so cosmic, you'll know why we're going!'

Even so, The Beatle's encounter with the Maharishi, shown on television news programmes all over the world, had already had its desired effect and it rapidly led to a flood of western hippie types seeking similar spiritual enlightenment in Eastern culture and in the East itself.

This was also the first time that Transcendental Meditation had been brought to public notice. Or just meditation if you prefer, or self-hypnosis, or Tibetan Mind Control, or... well, you get my drift. They are all exactly the same thing – that is, the ability to concentrate, focus the attention and explore inner thoughts, feelings and emotions. It's really just organised day-dreaming – no bad thing in itself you understand, it can be very relaxing and therefore beneficial. For some people, it gives them something to do and helps pass the time when there are no trees to hug.

I have not come to any of these conclusions by accident – they are based on interviews with a substantial number of people who practice this sort of thing and they all describe exactly the same experience. However, try to persuade someone who practices transcendental meditation that all they are doing is what anyone who practices self-

hypnosis is doing and you will be arguing all night. Again, we seem to be faced with the percentage of the population who are susceptible to these sorts of notions anyway, in this case made more powerful as there is nearly always a spiritual dimension to their experiences. What the mind expects, the mind nearly always gets and so we must conclude that self-suggestion plays an enormous part in these events.

A growing number of companies in the United States are sending staff on meditation courses and an increasing number of doctors are finally prescribing meditation, transcendental or otherwise, to patients. And you know what? This is a very good thing. If one can relieve stress or anxiety using only natural methods, that has to be a good consequence and I am all in favour of it. Simple relaxation exercises relieve tension and stress in minutes.

Although Flower Power and the 'make love not war' movement had already pre-empted The Beatles by just a few years, it could be said that the publicity surrounding The Beatles' association with this (to western eyes at least) new vogue for self-examination and spirituality was the watershed moment that led on to the huge increase in the number of people turning their backs on materialism – people who, once sufficiently persuaded, were then willing to hand over their life savings to an assortment of Rolls-Royce-friendly con-artists who were in turn all too happy to relieve the rationally challenged of their cash and in many cases, their homes, wives and daughters.

From the Maharishi to the Reverend Moon, there has been no shortage of those willing to lead and certainly no shortage of those willing to follow, having first divested themselves of their possessions and ultimately the contents of their bank accounts. It is truly incredible what some people are willing to do in order to achieve that elusive measure of inner peace.

Of course there had always been Gypsy Petulengro, smart enough to know what the endless line of gullibles wanted to hear in exchange for a few silver coins. Gypsy Petulengro's monologue would go something like this: 'you are a very reasonable person who is even-tempered and fair, however when really pushed to the limit you can very occasionally lose your temper. You are an intelligent and therefore very moral person who is not easily led and you also have a logical and rational mind, though sometimes you have the astuteness to see where other people around you are going wrong. You are not the sort of person who expects too much from others and neither are you the sort of person who is easily prejudiced', Of course everyone is like this (I know I am) and so it's almost impossible for Gypsy Petulengro to get it wrong and she routinely tells everybody more or less the same thing. This wholly credible preamble establishes a perceived truth and always comes before the bit about meeting a tall, dark, handsome stranger. Does this remind you of anything?

In the twenty-first century, the new but equally ruthless exploiters of our hopes and fears are an entirely different breed altogether and they come in all sorts of different guises. The first and probably most blatant category consists of the wholesale con men and include such luminaries as the Reverend Sun Myung Moon and American TV evangelist and multi-millionaire Benny Hinn – they are under no illusions whatsoever about what they are doing and how they are doing it. They make hundreds of millions of dollars a year and knowingly use tried and tested hypnotic techniques to enrich themselves, though this clandestine use of hypnosis is kept secret. They have counterparts in almost every country on earth who follow exactly the same tried and tested methods in the same way that stage hypnotists throughout the world rely on the same format and in most cases the same routines. Their reach extends deep into Africa as well as into Darkest America. There is nowhere on the

planet that escapes their interest, proving that the power of suggestion knows no political or cultural boundaries.

The second category is altogether more disturbing and potentially a lot more dangerous. This second group includes the likes of Jimmy Jones and David Koresh. They are not in it for the money but do it because they are profoundly disturbed themselves. They also use hypnotic techniques, even if they don't know it, which they almost certainly do. The reach of this second group is limited by the relatively small section of the market they can command – the ultra-suggestible unfortunates who can be hypnotised without their knowing it, to believe that a giant space-ship is coming to whisk them away to planet paradise – but only after the ritual mass suicide that represents the price of the one way ticket.

The third group makes no secret of their use of hypnosis, au contraire – they proudly proclaim its benefits from the rooftops. They are at an advantage because they claim to be scientific, they even admit to being atheists and sometimes they call themselves 'Doctor' and thus are able to reach a section of the market that is closed off to those in the first two categories. This makes them all the more insidious. They prey on the emotionally needy and financially incompetent. They are in it for the money and perpetrate just as much of a confidence trick as do the Moons and the Hinns and the Koreshes. They don't make as much money as the Moons and the Hinns and the Koreshes but they make more money than Gypsy Petulengro. Their techniques are much more subtle because of their perceived openness and transparency but nonetheless, they fleece their customers just the same, this time by means of a stream of verbal diarrhoea.

The peddlers of this nonsense had the good fortune to realise there was an opportunity to put a western materialistic spin on the greed and suggestibility of people a little closer to home. Some of these twenty-first century gurus have become extremely rich on the back of their fellow man's addiction to inadequacy. Purporting to provide answers, both spiritual and practical, to those who suffer from incurable naivety is nothing new, but it has now become fashionable and very much OK to do it for profit. No longer do we have to use our own collective experience of the world and our own imaginations to get on, we can now get advice in the same way as we are able to get ready-to-eat convenience food. Why make the effort to stand on your own two feet when it's easier to let someone else do it for you? This smacks of laziness on the part of the beneficiary and supreme condescension on the part of the donor.

This new model army of so-called experts, the vast majority of whom have no qualifications that could be fairly recognised in say, a court of law, is a direct result of the pilgrimage for the Holy Grail of the meaning of life, the universe and everything – something that has eluded all but the brightest and the most cynical for centuries. Now the Holy Grail can be yours for as little as £100 an hour or just £1,200 for a weekend (all major credit cards accepted). Handing over this sort of money for a string of banal platitudes really is symptomatic of a society with too much disposable income. If you really want to broaden your mind – travel. It's a lot more fun, a lot more interesting and in the long run you will learn a lot more than you ever could sat in the conference room of a hotel in central London (average rent £500 per day) on a rainy weekend in November furiously taking notes.

It is truly astonishing that people are willing to hand over such large sums of cash in exchange for false promises of how to be more effective communicators, or remove obstacles that prevent learning. In truth, there is only one way to remove obstacles that prevent you learning – get out of bed earlier and get down to some serious study. In other

words, try a little resoluteness and determination – a slice of ambition is anyone's for the taking. That advice is age-old and comes free. More important, it's as relevant and effective today as it ever was. A promise to be able to 'access empowering states of mind and body' is as meaningless as it is pretentious and the charlatans that promise it should be embarrassed and probably would be if they were not so busy counting the money. The fact of the matter is that the majority of those who attend these sorts of self-achievement courses learn very little of any lasting value and having handed over their money, do not end up empowered enough to ask for it back. Many drift on to the next type of therapy and some become course junkies, learning all the detail but somehow never seeing the bigger picture.

The list of alternatives is long and is getting longer: Reiki Thought Field Therapy (TFT,) Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT,) Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP,) Reflexology, Aromatherapy, self-assembly furniture therapy (MFI)... All have in common the placebo effect, something we have discussed at length in previous chapters. Depending on the type of therapy, the placebo component looms ever large. With that simple fact in mind and coupled with the invaluable knowledge of the power of suggestion, it would be possible to start one's own brand tomorrow. All you need is a catchy name for it, basic internet access and hey presto! You too can become a life coach, peddling your own trademarked nonsense to a world already hungry for more. It really is that easy – have a look on line and see for yourself!

Worldwide, there are now lots of NLP training courses on offer and trainers attend as many subject-related courses as they can before regurgitating the best bits for their students at a later date, such is the thirst for knowledge.

The very latest, state of the art remedy, one which is being actively embraced by the wonderful New Labour government, is Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) and at the moment it's flavour of the month, and being heavily promoted as a panacea for all mental ills, which it isn't.

Again, as with the more traditional psychotherapies on offer, CBT does not dwell on the unfortunate past, instead it focuses on the clients innermost negative thoughts and fears and then attempts to encourage the client to deal with them by focussing on happy thoughts instead. It matters not how bad the picture of the past is, CBT will just paint over it with a nice bright colour. The real beauty of CBT however, is that it usually goes on for about twelve sessions and it's available on the NHS. Ker-ching!

Jeffrey Schwarz and his colleagues at the University of California in Los Angeles have found that CBT can lessen the activity in the circuits that underlie obsessive compulsive disorder in exactly the same way as the drug Paroxetine does. Schwartz's idea was that 'Mindfulness Meditation' would encourage subjects to think about their obsession as if it was someone else's problem. The first step however, was to get the patient to recognise the fact that their thoughts were obsessive in the first place. Brain scans carried out both before and after the therapy showed that 'self-directed neuroplasticity' could indeed 'rewire' circuitry in the brain and change the way people thought.

Research scientists headed by Dr. Zindel Segal at the University of Toronto used CBT techniques in an attempt to cure depression in a group of fourteen patients. A second group were given the anti-depressant Paroxetine as a control but members of both groups showed signs of improvement. After the usual before and after brain scans were carried out, the results were even more interesting. CBT appeared to mute activity in the frontal cortex, the seat of reasoning and logic and endless musings about particular depressions, whereas Paroxetine heightened activity there. By the same token, Paroxetine lowered

activity in the hippocampus but CBT increased the amount of activity in the hippocampus, the brain's emotion centre.

So this sort of cognitive therapy targets the thinking brain, modifying the way one processes information and leads to changes in thinking patterns, weaning the patient off obsessive rumination whilst at the same time training the brain to adopt different ways of thinking.

The downside is that both the long and short term success of this radical new therapy seems largely to depend on the suggestibility of the individual undergoing it. Some clients revert to their own personal misery – sometimes within days, others within months, as those nasty old negative thoughts start to creep back in – usually as a result of the client finding themselves back in an all too familiar environment and surrounded by reminders of the bad times. Thus, the positive suggestions induced by CBT are eventually negated. The fact is it can take a fair degree of will power to hold on to new suggestions and again those that find success are more suggestible ones.

Figures suggest that two thirds of CBT patients relapse within two years and even this is probably an optimistic estimate. Like the vast majority of alternative therapies, the short term results are usually spectacular but when it comes to long term remedies, we seem to be back with the problem of natural decay which simply means, it starts to wear off after a while. At least it proves the old adage that you can take a horse to water but you can't always make it drink.

Apart from the obvious component of suggestibility, the experience of lying on a couch discussing one's deepest and most intimate secrets with a total stranger is itself cathartic – it represents another peak experience and so for a while at least, everything that has been discussed stays uppermost in the mind of the patient. Once the therapy comes to an end and the client is released back into the wild, the memory of those endless sessions, with their tears and mental gymnastics, begins to fade and with it can fade the effectiveness of whatever remedy was on offer at the time.

I am not singling out CBT here for special criticism (wait until I get started on NLP!) I am merely pointing out the glaringly obvious similarities all these therapies have in common.

For starters, they all have the very disingenuous tendency to encourage the client to seal themselves in a rose-tinted bubble of positive illusion, safe from the cruel world and all its nastiness and become unrealistically optimistic. But life can be a bitch and sooner or later reality bites. Well guess what? We weren't put on this earth to be happy, even though most people are most of the time. Real life in the real world can be tough, full of disappointments and full of occasions when things don't work out quite as we expected them to. The big problem with CBT is that it sets out to teach the client to ignore [negative] thoughts and feelings no matter how true those thoughts and feelings are.

A point in its favour though, is that it encourages rational thought over emotion and in that at least, CBT makes an attempt at putting things into perspective, which is always a good thing. Mr. Spock would definitely approve of this logic, and so do I... but putting things into perspective is only the very beginning of recovery. Trying to gloss over negative emotions that might also be caused by a genetic, hereditary or chemical imbalance in the brain isn't going to do it. Perhaps rather than being determined to 'think positive' it might be more useful to pursue more mature and insightful treatments such as those on offer from properly qualified psychologists. The techniques of CBT differ very little from the 'swish' technique of NLP, something which we will be looking at in greater detail shortly.

Here's a worse one. Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR) is without doubt the biggest load of bollocks I have ever come across. Invented in the late 1980's, EMDR is the most ridiculous crackpot idea in the history of ridiculous crackpot ideas. This is how this crackpot idea works: the subject follows the movements of the therapist's index finger with his eyes, which moves rapidly from left to right, backwards and forwards like the old swinging watch of the Hollywood hypnotist, only much, much faster. This is supposed to simulate the kind of rapid eye movement that occurs when we are in the later stages of normal sleep and is meant to help the client (or subject) channel (or 'corral') bad memories so they can be dealt with accordingly.

The idea was made up by Francine Shapiro, a psychologist no less, and the story of how she made it up goes like this... One day, whilst walking through a park, Ms. Shapiro started to have some very unpleasant thoughts and while she was having them she noticed that her eyes started to move rapidly from side to side! Recalling the thoughts a little later, she found that they were no longer quite as distressing.

Now here's the catch... most of us can get used to and learn to live with thoughts and memories of experiences which are at first upsetting, particularly when it comes to broken relationships or bereavement or fears and phobias. Most of these things take on less and less importance anyway as time goes by. Where the rapid eye movement comes in to its own is that it convinces the patient that something profound is happening – it represents another kind of peak experience and it's a placebo, pure and simple. It's also positively weird.

The big problem with this half-baked initiative is that it can reinforce the patient's belief that they really do have something seriously wrong. But that's alright – the nice therapist will sort them out and it will only cost £300 a session if his office is located in central London, or forty quid if he's doing it from his front room Doncaster. Of course there will be many, many sessions. Suggestible clients will keep coming back for more and not-so-suggestible clients will see through it straight away and dissociate themselves from the weirdo, sorry, therapist, at the first opportunity.

I have inherited clients who have been put through this 'treatment'. Some told me that the procedure gave them a headache and that comes as no big surprise. Try sitting still for ten minutes while an amateur snake-oil salesman puts you through these optical gymnastics and you'll feel well and truly f\*\*\*ed by the end. Sometimes clicking sounds or tapping on the back of the hands is used.

In EMDR, the unpleasant memory (called the 'node') is replaced with more positive ideas and... haven't we seen this before somewhere? The method is allegedly useful for trauma and phobias although from what I have observed, the practice of EMDR is more traumatic than the original crisis. One could be forgiven for wondering why EMDR therapists don't just use good old fashioned magnets!

EMDR is steeped in pseudo-Freudian theory in that it presupposes that certain memories are too traumatic to recall and that the use of EMDR can safely coax those traumatic memories to the surface where the patient can come to terms with them. An interesting theory, but in practice, a complete load of bollocks.

Neuroscientist Richard Davidson of the University of Wisconsin has discovered that greater activity in the left prefrontal cortex than the right prefrontal cortex goes pretty much hand in hand with a higher baseline state of happiness and contentment. This relationship between left and right activity has come to be seen as a marker for the happiness 'set point' that human beings return to even after extremes of sadness or extremes of

happiness. No EMDR needed. They just get back there in their own good time. So the old adage that time is a great healer turns out to be true after all!

Unfortunately, EMDR is not just bollocks – I believe it's positively dangerous. In March 2007 a Royal Navy Chief Petty officer was found guilty by Court Martial of the rape of a junior rating in a prosecution where, in the absence of witnesses or any medical or forensic evidence, the only confirmation was that obtained under extremely spurious circumstances.

The complainant claimed that she had drunk one bottle of wine, a vodka and lemonade and two glasses of punch and was unable to remember anything about the incident the following day. After a session of EMDR, carried out more than two months after the event by consultant psychologist Dr. Carol McGowan, she miraculously remembered everything. The therapy carried out by Dr. McGowan consisted of tapping on the back of the complainant's hand which apparently triggered the recollection of 'images' and 'gut feelings' which went on to facilitate her recollection of 'more accurate' memories, vis-à-vis, the conviction that she had been raped.

Under cross-examination Dr. McGowan admitted that the technique was regarded by some scientists as controversial and that it was possible for false memories to be generated as well as real ones. The truth is more disturbing. The majority of psychologists and psychiatrists are deeply suspicious of EMDR and at least one university psychology professor I know regards its use as ill-advised and irresponsible. The problem is that for the subject, false memories are just as real as genuine memories. Dr. McGowan claims that she did not accidentally plant memories or ideas in her client's head but merely provided an environment that was conducive to memory recall. Dr. McGowan may well have gone out of her way to ensure there were no leading suggestions implanted – but that's not the point.

Imagine the scene... A twenty-four year old woman thinks that she might have been raped but is not sure. She is introduced to a procedure which allows her to explore and formulate ideas which then emerge as memories whether true or false, all the while being encouraged by the terribly nice therapist who is in all probability very enthusiastic about her new toy, something that in all likelihood has been presented at some conference as the greatest thing since Freud invented the motherf\*\*\*er complex. Quite unconsciously, through subtle changes in body language, ideomotor movements, posture, breathing, unconscious mirroring and automatic reflexes, the therapist unintentionally assists the subject invent and embellish. If she wasn't sure she was raped when the session started, she will be shortly – after all, in the atmosphere of the therapy room, there can be tremendous pressure to deliver. The subject then goes home and again, quite unconsciously, has an opportunity to think about what's happened or what has been 'uncovered' during the 'therapy' and by the next session, the memory has begun to take on a reality all of its own.

I am making no judgement as to whether or not this particular young woman was raped or not or whether the defendant is guilty or not – all I am saying is that information gleaned as the result of a process which is wholly unproven and is an example of the worst type of amateur psychobabble, should never have been admissible as 'evidence' in a court of law. And as for Dr. McGowan – shame on you – you must be an idiot, or desperate, or vainglorious to have stood by it. Or maybe you just don't understand your subject fully enough. Either way, what you did was not only unsafe, it was wrong.

*\*Since the first edition of this book was published, the conviction in this case has been overturned, presumably the court took the few that, in the absence of any empirical evidence, the conviction was unsafe – which it was!*

Reiki, reflexology, homeopathic remedies, voodoo – you name it, we got it – all have as their basis, suggestion and some of them bear a remarkable similarity to the ‘laying on of hands’ which is so popular with some of the more outlandish Christian sects. Charismatic healers often employ the laying on of hands and one should not put too small a value on its efficacy. The simple fact of the matter is that there is very little to choose between any of these practices. Whether the laying on of hands takes place in the healing atmosphere of a church or the less religious environment of the therapy room is irrelevant, the placing of a healer’s hands upon another person’s body can be an extremely relaxing (and peak) experience all in itself. There is the warmth of the healer’s palms placed on the subject’s head or body, which can not only be relaxing, but given the correct ambience and the requisite degree of expectation, can even be erotic. Then there is the surrender of the individual and abdication of control implicit in what otherwise would be an inappropriate invasion of personal space.

Therapeutic massage is its most pure form. Once the pleasure centres are activated, the production of dopamine facilitates a natural high which can be more than just relaxing. Reiki is the laying on of hands without the actual laying on of hands because the hands rarely come into contact with the body – they are usually positioned a couple of inches above the body and follow ‘meridians’ or imaginary lines similar to those in acupuncture.

In the case of TFT (Thought Field Therapy) and EFT (Emotional Freedom Technique) the laying on of hands, or the fingertips to be more precise, is done by the patient (or client, for legal reasons) themselves. Tapping on certain points along the meridians (or energy pathways) it is claimed, will clear any blockages in the ‘thought fields’ and free up the flow of energy along the meridians. To the naïve, all this must sound marvellous – after all, there are magnetic fields and gravity fields, so why not thought fields too?

The main difference between TFT (invented by Dr. Roger Callaghan) and EFT (developed by personal development coach Gary Craig) is that TFT has approximately 365 meridian points (one for every day of the year, coincidentally) whereas EFT only has 11, a more manageable number and much easier to remember where most of them are. They are tapped to the accompaniment of repeated positive affirmations. Sound familiar?

I have been to trade fairs where customers can have their ‘aura’ photographed with a special camera, and very creative it looks too, multi coloured photographs of bodies radiating auras – or maybe it’s just a lens filter and an over-exposed film. The real astonishment emanates from the number of people queuing to have their aura photo taken. Likewise the number of people who are willing to sit absolutely still for ten minutes with their eyes closed and palms face up, while a Native American – complete with feathered headdress – taps out a slow, monotonous rhythm on a drum.

Then there are the crystal salesmen (doing a roaring trade) and they’re situated just down the hall from the people selling dream-catchers and – you guessed it – personal magnetic field generators which are competitively priced at anything from £400 to £1,500 for the deluxe model – guaranteed to improve your physical health, your digestion and your energy levels, straighten out your meridians, buff up your aura and everything else you can imagine. Mesmer would have wept tears of joy. If none of the above does it for you, you can always try sitting cross-legged under a pyramid for a few hours.

For one horrible moment I thought that the Tarot card-readers' invitations had been lost in the post, but despair not, they were tucked away in a corner with the crystal ball-gazers, palm readers, people who talk to the dead and Gypsy Petulengro look-alikes. Mercifully, for the rest of us at any rate, the Primal Screamers had been allocated their own special primal screaming room and by the time I located them, they had already screamed themselves hoarse.

There was one product however that was noticeable by its absence. No one was selling or promoting Ouija boards, probably because in an atmosphere of such positivity and optimism, the Ouija board is perhaps a little too reminiscent of the (completely imaginary) dark arts. Ironic that, because the Ouija board only works as a result of the combined unconscious ideomotor actions of the group in this case rather than the individual, produced as a result of suggestion in exactly the same way Chevereul's Pendulum works as a suggestibility test.

There were innumerable CD recordings of rain-forest, waterfalls and ocean/seashore sounds which really *are* relaxing and then of course there were the masseuses and herbalists and homeopaths touting their wares.

Not all the stuff on sale at these exhibitions is nonsense however, and in the interests of balance, many people find some of the above mentioned very therapeutic and, according to their own dispositions or their own degree of suggestibility. But there's no getting away from the fact that it's all placebo, right down to the last tea-leaf. Still, I suppose we have at least moved on from the days of gunpowder and brandy and I searched in vain for an actual bottle of snake-oil.

Now you may think that I'm just taking the Mickey here (OK, I am a bit) but hold on to your horses for a moment. I'm still talking about *belief* and although none of the aforementioned is really harmful, I now want you to consider a situation where blind belief becomes really dangerous – really dangerous not only to those who believe, but also dangerous to those who *don't* believe.

In South Africa in 2006 the deputy president, Jacob Zuma was tried for the crime of raping a young girl whom he *knew* to be HIV positive. I was in Cape Town at the time and like everyone else in the country I followed the trial with the same morbid curiosity as Americans followed the O. J. Simpson trial. What caught the headlines was not the question of whether or not the girl had consented to sex, but the fact that Zuma had told the court that he was not afraid of contracting HIV or AIDS because he had taken a shower immediately afterwards. Even the judge was taken aback by this ridiculous claim and yet again South Africa became the laughing stock of the Western world. Two years previously, the actual president, Thabo Mbeki, announced to the world's media (the story was extensively covered in TIME magazine) that he did not believe that HIV led to AIDS, a claim that flew in the face of all the scientific and medical wisdom and which again was the foundation of much mirth in the international press.

Then, again in 2006, the Minister of Health announced to an astonished nation that the best way to combat AIDS was to eat lots of beetroot. This story, I can assure you, is absolutely true. There is worse to come. It was believed by a substantial minority of Southern Africa's black population that the only way to cure AIDS would be to have sexual intercourse with a virgin – hence the soaring number of rapes in South Africa – including a disturbing number of child-rapes.

The question is, what is the difference between this kind of hare-brained ridiculousness and the idea of squatting under a pyramid or wearing a crystal necklace? Well, for those of you who haven't quite got it yet, I will spell it out for you:

- Blind belief is so powerful that it can make people behave in very strange ways indeed,
- Belief is OK and even useful for purely psychosomatic ailments but when taken too far it can be a recipe for disaster.

In the 1960s, when Timothy Leary advanced the 'turn on, tune in, drop out' philosophy of the path to self realisation, it was very definitely couched in terms that clearly said 'be yourself'. Today's life coaches tell who we should be, how we should feel, what we should think and when we should think it. It is impossible to miss the irony when one is confronted by all the lifestyle sages and makeover experts who now tell us no longer to be ourselves, but to be someone else.

Ironic it is that that someone else should so often be the mirror image of a total stranger's chosen coach, counsellor, mentor, or spiritual guide, or whatever you want to call them – flawed individuals themselves because the way they think, act, eat, dress, make love, has been fashioned in turn by others. Only those at the very top of the pyramid (and those mercifully cynical enough to see that they are being fed a line on day one) are the truly wise and therefore truly free.

I find it extremely disquieting that literally every aspect of our lives can be examined, deconstructed and then reconstructed according to the philosophy of someone else's model of the perfect world. 'Don't stand out... conform!' You only have to look at TV and social media to realise how big conformity has become. If ever there was a conspiracy theory about controlling the will of an entire population, then the influence of social media would fit snugly into it.

It is now more than just fashionable, it is positively de-rigueur to make grown adults change the way they dress, the way they wear their hair, the way they decorate their homes, the way they eat and even the way they love – all so that they can become er... grown adults. It seems there are no limits to this obsession with compliance. On a recent Channel 4 programme an expert shamelessly shared with viewers the secret of the correct way to defecate! This arrogant interference in every aspect of our existence and how people are now supposed to live their lives amounts to a new kind of imposition of authority. After all, no-one wants to be different. A casual observer could be forgiven for assuming that the individual is being slowly phased out and that humanity is being remodelled in accordance with the erroneous philosophy of a handful of Z list celebrities. It is my opinion that the people who willingly put themselves on the receiving end of this 'advice' are suffering from a variety of incurable idleness, if only on an unconscious level. Why make the effort to think for yourself when for a small fee someone else can think it all for you?

But there is worse to come! There is a new and perilous presumption that more and more adults are unable to make even simple decisions without the intervention of the appropriate professional expert. That's fine if your car breaks down and you call a mechanic, but to be assumed to be emotionally challenged while a complete stranger, however well meaning, takes control of your life, tearing it apart and then rebuilding it, is both pathetically sad and potentially damaging to boot. Human beings are in greater danger than ever of surrendering their individuality and becoming submerged in, and taken over by, the dreaded larger organism. It is one thing to advocate the philosophy that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one, but quite another to blind the many to

the contribution of the one. Is it because we have been schooled in resignation that we are failing to notice these changes.

Who are these 'therapists?' Psychiatrists have to be medically qualified (this is because they are able to prescribe drugs, recommend incarceration and in extreme cases, surgical intervention) and are permitted to practice only after years of supervised training and passing lots of legitimate examinations. Even then, major decisions about a patient's welfare are made by teams of two or more, and only after considerable and careful examination and deliberation. Psychologists have done at least three years at university before practising and in most cases this is usually followed by more supervised study in specialised fields such as social, industrial or child psychology before they can claim sufficient expertise.

The huge number of NLP practitioners attend very brief training courses that culminate in a perfunctory exam which no-one ever fails. All are presented with the appropriate certificate at the end – all included in the price. Some of the more cynical among us may be wondering just how much can possibly be learned in a week.

The average length of the new class of therapy course is anything from a weekend to five or ten days – that is supposedly plenty of time to learn all there is to know in order to embark upon a career that will enable you to deal with a wide range of needs, from emotional problems to relationship problems, to dealing with fears and phobias to increasing your own wealth and the wealth of others. Yes, you too can not only help people to feel better about themselves but more crucially, you can help them feel better about handing over their cash.

Courses are aggressively marketed with early-bird discounts and refer-a-friend schemes. All you need to know in just seven days and a certificate to prove it! Anyone can become a licensed NLP practitioner! Licensed did you say? Licensed by whom? Why... the people who do the training of course! The country is now awash with amateur 'healers', spouting inexpert pseudo-psychobabble, some doing more harm than good, some are doing irreparable harm and some unknowingly harming even themselves.

What they don't tell you is, once the students or delegates have completed their chosen course, hardly any practitioners go on to make any real money – the industry standard is that most struggle to make a half-decent living even if they go into it full time and many are forced to seek alternative forms of employment within weeks of handing over their fifteen hundred quid in exchange for what is in effect a worthless piece of paper. The hard truth is that the only people who are making the real money are the people who run the courses.

A three year course in psychology at a legitimate university or college comes with guarantees of certain academic standards. NLP, EFT, TFT training courses and the like come with no such guarantees and are run, without exception, as commercial enterprises. Hand over your cash and we'll make sure that you will hand over even more cash next time. Quote: *'The NLP Trainer Certificate is awarded for experience and superior knowledge in the use and application of NLP to the standards set out by Dr. Richard Bandler'*. [The tempting words here are superior and knowledge, but to continue...] *'Depending on your level of experience and ability, we may ask that you gain further experience or take additional Society of NLP [prop. R. Bandler] training before full certification is guaranteed'*.

Well, you've spent so much money so far, what's another few hundred quid? And if the invitation comes personally from Bandler himself, then it's almost irresistible. *'Take control*

*of your Life with NLP'* screams the publicity... but abdicate control of your critical faculties and your holiday money.

The people who run NLP courses have already received their own validation in return for cash. There are simply no checks and balances in place. However altruistic their motives are, it's the money that's the bottom line and this presents another of the major difficulties. There is no guarantee that what you are being told has any legitimacy – the information imparted on these courses has to be taken on trust. Later in this book I will devote a few words to the benefits of NLP but I should forewarn you that there is nothing that can be learned from NLP that cannot be, or has not already been learned by doing conventional mainstream psychology as disseminated in recognised and genuine colleges and universities.

In the self-improvement industry, where guidance and direction is offered to clients after the most cursory investigation, all this mental reconditioning comes with the baggage of a mountain of vacuous gibberish. Self styled corporate gurus like Anthony Robbins lead a highly spirited field, and most of the time the specialist subject turns out to be the obvious. Astonishingly, people pay thousands of pounds to listen to facile inanities such as *'the only limit on your impact is your imagination and your commitment... You can be the best you can be!'* Astonishing! Such words of wisdom!

Anthony Robbins has become an international phenomenon. His books, CD's and DVD's have sold in their millions and for this reason alone he is worthy of a second look.

From anywhere between £400 and £1,200, excited (or excitable) punters can hurriedly walk barefoot along three metres of hot coals. This, claims Robbins, will transform your life. He also claims that only twelve people so far have been burned and doubtless it changed their lives too. Nonetheless, the fire walk is bound to be memorable – given the excitement and the emotional build-up preceding the occasion, it's obviously going to be one of those peak experiences that *will* be memorable. It's in the same league as bungee jumping but cheaper.

Navigating the fiery coals is supposed to be the watershed moment that will help punters overcome all the negative fears and emotions that have been holding them back and transform not only their level of self-confidence but improve their love lives, game of golf and bank balances – oh, and their *'happiness quotient'* too. According to Robbins, once a person has crossed this red hot Rubicon they will be well on their way to achieving the exceptional life that was er... theirs for the taking in the first place.

Anthony Robbins seminars follow the same familiar pattern as stage hypnosis and stage religious healing. First there is the focus on the main protagonist, in this case a six foot seven inch tall overbearing American and the promise that all assembled will learn how to *'unleash the power within'* and infuse their lives with passion and boundless energy. Isn't that what we all want? Anthony Robbins promises to deliver it on a plate and as a consequence, his appearances are almost always sold out. All attending are expecting a life changing experience and, as with any other upmarket fairground barker, the expectancy in the crowd is almost tangible. The audience are pumped up before the great man has even set his size 13 foot on stage.

We are treated to the carefully orchestrated highs and lows of the ritualistic Sermon on the Mount, punctuated by carefully chosen pieces of music – the theme from Titanic, 2001 A Space Odyssey, Chariots of Fire and so on, all rather cheesy, all added to enhance moments of inane spirituality – a perfect blend of happy-clappy and hero-worship that made me want to throw up.

Robbins uses all the old tricks. 'Are you ready?' his voice booms around the arena. And everyone screams 'Yes, yes, yes!' Every time this happens, Robbins is gleaning consent. Every time the crowd consents, they are one step closer to swallowing the avalanche of drivel they are being spoon fed. Robbins (to his grateful audience he's Tony) controls and manipulates the emotions of the crowd with the skill of the seasoned gospel preacher. Tony tells them when to stand, when to sit, when to shout, and soon everyone is performing all these actions in lock-step – and individuals become submerged in the larger organism of the group. There is no time for disagreement or dissent and before they know what's happening, Tony has moved on to the next phase – telling them what to think. It's Neuremburg all over again, but with fancy lighting.

The Nazis used torch-lit parades and marching – the 'make your life a better place to live' mob unashamedly use the same techniques of crowd manipulation. The leader always promises something special and today the message is exactly the same as it was in 1933. Think like this... do as I say... and you will have a better life. And people fall for the same empty promise time and time again... Will they never learn?

*'The only thing holding you back is your own negative view of yourself'* he says with the passion of an Archimedes just discovered that Eureka moment. To many of those standing in the hall, this statement is akin to an epiphany. *Of course... that's the problem... it's all because I have a negative view of myself. Now I understand! Soon all my problems will be banished forever... Thank you Jesus... I mean Tony!*

Nonetheless, the proof of the pudding is standing right in front of our very eyes. Tony has achieved massive success. All you have to do is believe in yourself, hug a few strangers and keep yelling 'Yes! Yes! Yes!' without actually stopping to consider what it is that you're saying yes to. For one awful moment I thought Tony was going to try and sell me time-share. And then suddenly I realised the awful truth – for an entire day Tony had simply been telling them what they wanted to hear.

Wending my weary way back towards the station (I find all these type of events exhausting, but maybe that's part of the schtick) and with the unmistakable odour of snake oil still in my nostrils, I found myself weaving among the crowd and catching odd bits of Robbins-related conversation. Some of these people were genuinely elated, and would remain so until their brain chemicals re-balanced. I couldn't help but think that Big Tony's act was all emotion and no substance. I mean, it's not as if he had told us anything we could really use, perhaps some cosmic secret of the universe that we hadn't dreamt of before, that only he, Tony, was able to impart. Even some kind of business strategy that would come in useful that we hadn't known about before might have been reasonably impressive. But no... Tony's message was simple. *'You can be the best you can be..!'* Obvious once you see it.

Tony sold us all the excitement of the race, without the actual race taking place. Very clever, working on people's emotions the way he did. And yet quite pathetic at the same time, in an unprincipled, advantage-taking sort of way.

Such unjustifiable pursuit of an unrealistically optimistic line was part and parcel of the official Bolshevik line and was known as 'Social Realism'. Anyone who was not socially realistic enough was sent to be re-educated in Social Realism in one of Stalin's Gulags, usually for between ten and twenty-five years which comprised mainly of forced labour in the sub-zero temperatures of Siberia, the garden-spot of the Soviet Union. In Soviet Russia, between 1921 and 1953, 66 million Russians went on this crash course in how to be a bit more optimistic.

Tony has become rich and like TV star evangelist Benny Hinn, is the market leader in his chosen field. His DVD box set 'Change Your Life in Seven Weeks' has inspired others keen to jump on the Tony bandwagon. Paul McKenna's book 'Change Your Life in Seven Days' is one that immediately springs to mind and regurgitates all the same kind of stuff – and it knocks six weeks off for a fraction of the price!

Calling the Anthony Robbins hot-line to book a place, you get the hard sell. I wasn't sure that I was definitely going to go, but I could see how suggestible individuals will be hooked in more or less straight away. Still, the nice girl on the other end was very insistent. She even called me back a few times, asking me if I would be interested in bringing ten friends along and if not, how would I like to do the Anthony Robbins one week education course? I didn't get this much hassle from the Scientologists!

My favourite piece of vacuous tosh however comes from the NLP repertoire and it's a question designed to solve the enduring mystery of those lost keys... *'If you could remember where you put them, where would that be?'* Facile rubbish and worse, rubbish that borders on insulting one's intelligence. Welcome to the whacky world of Neuro-Linguistic Programming.

NLP is mainstream psychology given the spin-doctor treatment. 'Neuro' refers to the mind, the brain, how it works... 'Linguistic' refers to the language used – that is, the way people express themselves and communicate their experience to others... and 'Programming' refers to the effect that language has on the mind and on behaviour.

In other words it is what was once known as exchanging ideas in a lucid and thought provoking way, or, response to suggestion – something which practitioners of the art of hypnosis already understand. The danger is that psychology with a spin is just, er... spin.

NLP also stands for Natural Language Patterns. In other words, the aim of NLP is to get inside a person's natural language, body and thought patterns and use this knowledge to help them achieve their goal, or Well Formed Outcome as it is henceforth to be known in NLP speak. And on the surface it seems that that is the essence of what NLP is supposed to be all about. In NLP, the well formed outcome is... the well formed outcome... or good result... or success... you know... a well formed outcome!

NLP has an irritating habit of using new and exotic language to describe old ideas – ideas that would be startlingly familiar to any first year psychology undergraduate. This is in the same vain as referring to civilian casualties in war as collateral damage, bin-men as urban sanitation engineers or sex shops as women's empowerment outlets. In the brave new world of NLP, making a telephone call is now referred to as audio conferencing. If the NLP'ers got their way, a toilet duck would be known as a 'swan-necked cleansing agent application unit'.

NLP offers the practitioner a loophole that offers a way of being allowed to practice a form of pseudo-psychology without the inconvenience of having to go to college or university, or proving one's ability by means of cumbersome examinations and authentic credentials. Attendees of courses in NLP never fail either – often there is no examination at the end but a 'Certificate of Completion' before they are let loose on an unsuspecting public without any checking or monitoring system whatsoever. They are then free to screw around with people's lives and minds with impunity. All this goes beyond the oldest imperative of therapy, one which Freud understood perfectly – that is 'a problem shared is a problem halved'. In the multi-choice world of alternative therapy, anyone can now get a fee for exercising this simple mathematical formula.

Even within the NLP fraternity, there is often a divergence of opinion as to what actually constitutes NLP, mainly because it represents such a varied collection of theories and techniques. This is probably why people are always finding new things to do with NLP – in fact a lot of NLP practitioners like to refer to themselves as ‘experiential explorers’.

Many NLP experts spend a lot of time searching for a Unified Field Theory in much the same way astronomers and physicists have sought a unifying theory for the mysteries of the physical universe. In the same way, a unified theory would bring together all the disciplines of psychology, psychoanalysis, hypnosis, spirituality and so forth. This would also give NLP practitioners the credibility they desire.

Although originally the chief aim of NLP was the treatment of emotional problems, in more recent years it has been used more and more in the world of business and sport. This is where the real money is. Individuals tend to have limited resources, but corporate expense accounts can be generous. The monetary outlay involved in sending senior management to NLP trainings is not only tax deductible, but often provides a welcome distraction from the more mundane day to day activities associated with actually doing some work. The satisfying smack of a paint-ball on back of Phil from Accounts’ thigh also provides the same sort of relief often mistaken for a valuable team building exercise. Just wait for the Christmas party... Thankfully most company directors still believe in the more time-tested techniques of praise accompanied by financial reward linked to performance – something that rarely fails.

NLP is based on real life behaviour and its main aim is to help people get better at whatever it is they do, whether it's in a personal or professional capacity, whether it's to improve personal relationships or be a better salesperson, the list is infinite and limited only by the imagination.

NLP would have you believe that it is a panacea for all evils. It claims to cure everything from insomnia to lack of confidence to better sex to improved performance in business. Mercifully it stops short of claiming to remove stains from carpets but I fear that it's only a matter of time before courses come with a free iPhone.

All students of NLP are introduced to a new system of beliefs at the very outset of the course – thus begins their indoctrination. Chief among these is the tenet that '*all things are possible if you truly believe that you can achieve them*'. This is not only obvious but a blatant rip-off of Henry Ford's admonition that '*Whether you believe you can do a thing or not, you're probably right*'. And that just about sums it up. It also draws on the oldest religious creed that '*all things are possible to those that believeth*'.

What they don't tell you is that this new found belief in one's own abilities is not enough – there will still be the real world to navigate with all its pitfalls and unfairness. NLP can help you to hug trees, but it neglects to mention that trees don't hug you back. If they do hug you back, then the chances are you need an altogether different sort of therapy.

These ‘beliefs’ represent an unstable reality. The introduction of beliefs so early on, when delegate's minds are fresh and open, utilises the oldest trick in the cult religions armoury of cultish old tricks. Even if you suspect that these new found beliefs are false, no one in a room full of people will dare to question, dare to be different, dare to stand out from the crowd. Thus they prepare the ground for the unquestioning obedience of the delegates in plenty of time for the real bollocks to be served up. In Paul McKenna trainings there are plenty of ‘assistants’ to keep the delegates in order and make sure everyone does exactly as they are told.

NLP talks about 'strategies'. but in everyday language, this just means the way you do things. But there again, strategy is all part of the newspeak of NLP which we will look at shortly, for now it is enough to know that when dealing with personal problems or personal advancement, cutting to the chase when it comes to language that everyone can understand is more likely to produce a result... er, sorry... well formed outcome.

English Law had this problem for many years until more enlightened Law Lords decreed that court proceedings were in future to be conducted in terms that the man on the Clapham Omnibus would be able to understand. Thus, the Latin words 'mens rea' was replaced with the more readily understandable word 'intent', much to the relief of juries and those taking the omnibus to Clapham. In other words, cut the bull and talk about things in words that anyone can understand. NLP unashamedly reverts to the old mystiques and this deserves to be exposed as the fraud it is. The Campaign for Plain English will be furious with this lot.

Excellence in Performance is one of NLP's more laudable goals and requires the development of skills and the corresponding physical and mental states. These physical and mental states can be compartmentalised and summarised in terms of motivation, learning, maintaining good health and fitness, communication, negotiating, public speaking, team building and change management. In other words, all the things they tried to teach us at school.

NLP claims to encompass both a systematic and holistic approach to improving yourself using organisational effectiveness, in other words, using your common sense, concentrating on the task in hand and generally getting your act together. Getting yourself organised was always one of the central tenets of my education and that creed is vital to success in any activity or any business.

Richard Bandler – held by many to be the Godfather of NLP – is quoted as saying that it is necessary to 'let it [NLP] completely permeate your thinking and feeling' and that it involves '*a ferocious spirit of 'going for it', characteristics of excitement, curiosity, high level state management of your own moods, passion and commitment*'. This is more of the same obvious and vacuous hot air which blights NLP.

John Grindler, another founder member of the NLP movement, flatters recruits by telling them that they need to possess '*sparkling intelligence*' and '*physical fitness...*' A bit of flattery goes a long way, but the problem is that not everyone does possess sparkling intelligence or is physical fit...

NLP devotees need to be '*more in control of their thoughts, feelings and actions, more positive in their approach to life and better able to achieve results*'. Goodness... this is so true... and totally obvious! '*If people do not have, within themselves, the knowledge or resources to achieve what they want, NLP makes it possible to adapt other people's skills and ways of thinking and incorporate them within their own lives in order to be more successful*', So, in plain English, if you don't feel you are doing things quite right, have a look at how someone else, someone who is more successful than you, is doing them, and copy them! The manifest obviousness of this statement beggars belief.

In fairness it should be said that to the NLP purist, modelling is not just copying. The NLP approach is that a person actually 'morphs' into the other person, thinking like them, behaving like them, dressing like them, eating at the same restaurants as them, doing as them – not only copying, but trying to *be* them. This is supposed to offer more of an insight into how the individual you are copying has achieved success. In reality, it just makes the copyist seem a little strange and it's a technique for sad people without an original idea in

their heads. All you have to do is pretend to be someone else for the rest of your life and change your name to Walter Mitty. NLP has a name for this bizarre apprenticeship – it's called Morphic Resonance.

Modelling has the twin disadvantages of a) being a cause for concern for those people close to you who may not understand or appreciate your absurd amateur theatrics and b) be the cause of long or short term obsessive behaviour which again, some might find odd and may well lead to a less healthy life spent in a world of fantasy. I quote the example of a barrister who, impressed by the forthright style of a particular judge very quickly adopted the same mannerisms, the same idiosyncratic speech and went round with his eyebrows permanently raised. This is modelling as recommended by NLP. He did not become a better barrister because his success rate in court did not improve, but he did gain the reputation as someone who had 'turned a little queer'.

A change in demeanour however is unlikely to affect character or personality as both character and personality are firmly established in a person by the age of sixteen or seventeen. Any change nearly always turns out to be temporary, a passing fad, before the individual concerned normally gets bored with their brief flirtation with eccentricity and looks elsewhere for answers. The expression regarding leopards and spots immediately springs to mind.

Mirroring on the other hand means that you closely observe another person's body language and speech patterns and 'mirror' them. You copy the way they nod, talk, express themselves, etc. This, it is said, will bring you in closer harmony with that individual and is supposed to help when it comes to getting them to see your point of view or to agree to the sale or whatever. Whenever people do that to me, I'm always left wondering if they're taking the piss. It's exactly what we used to do when we were kids to annoy other kids. The next NLP drone that tries that with me is going to get punched.

Pacing is simply a matter of matching another person as they change their behaviour and reactions and raises the practice of mirroring to the level of competitive sport.

NLP has been called some of the following:

- an owners guide to the mind
- the study of subjective experience
- software for the brain
- the study of human excellence
- a programme of health and happiness in union with other people and nature
- a manual for the structured use of creativity
- an adventure experience
- a guide to positive thinking so you can enhance your experience
- a bunch of pretentious crap

And so the list goes on, but it's so close to the principles of humanistic psychology that one is immediately suspicious about its originality. Whatever label NLP attaches to itself, it's still the same old stuff. Take a good look at the above list and tell me that it's not hollow and insincere drivel (apart from the last one.)

NLP tries to persuade us to think of the glass as half full rather than half empty. In the real world however it doesn't matter whether it's half full or half empty because eventually,

you've still got to wash the thing. Or maybe it's because the glass was twice as big as it needed to be in the first place...

NLP stresses 'the importance of a balanced emotional state in achieving effective importance'. Armed with clipboard and pen, I questioned random passers-by at a shopping mall and asked them what they thought this statement meant. Most didn't have the first clue – the typical response was a bemused shrug of the shoulders but some of them said that they thought it meant 'having your head screwed on the right way' which sounds about right. What it actually means is that you have a better chance of doing well if you are a reasonably normal and balanced person. Well I never!

NLP claims that whereas related disciplines, such as psychology, may give an insight into human behaviour and motivation, NLP can 'actually provide practical ways of improving your performance'. So can any other type of learning process, including reading, attending lectures, dedication and practice. Given all this, it's difficult to see what is special about NLP.

NLP can distinguish between present states and desired states. In other words, how you are now versus how you would like to be in the future. This sounds suspiciously like one of the things we realise as we grow up.

In this transition from the present state to the desired state, there are three elements, namely:

- you – your own situation and disposition
- others – those with whom you are dealing
- flexibility – the possibility of varying what you do in order to be effective.

On the face of it, NLP could be a formula for motivating people. But humans have been able to do this since the dawn of time. It's a process of interaction between individuals or groups of people, where compromise sometimes *has* to be made in order to get what you want.

By changing your posture or even the way you dress, (clothes maketh the man! – another ancient adage) devotees of NLP have discovered that you can change the way you feel, even your level of confidence. This is obvious, I mean... really obvious! Try putting on a new suit and going out – see how much more confident you feel!

NLP focuses on 'mental processing' or to put it another way, having a good old fashioned think about things, or a positive mental attitude. Many performers, musicians and sports persons already understand this. This is another difficulty with NLP. To discover what distinctive features it offers one must ask what marks out NLP from other, more traditional thought processes? The answer is – little or nothing.

It could be said that NLP shares some common beliefs with Taoism – both seem dedicated to the enhancement of a sense of fulfilment and personal experience. To the Taoist, a flower on a sunny day is a beautiful thing... and so is a petrified tree after a thunder storm.

Significantly, NLP practitioners claim that NLP as an approach to therapy is neutral. NLP is a tool, not a prescription. How it's used depends entirely on the user or the client. This reminds me of what Carl Rogers said – it is the client who is responsible for improving their lives rather than the therapist. This is a very rational approach in that it allows more leeway, even a complete incompetent can get away with it. Unlike psychoanalysis, which very often focuses on the past, NLP focuses almost entirely on the future. This is a good thing,

but again, I remember something my grandmother used to say – 'use the past as a springboard not a settee' – and this is the same thing, so nothing new there either.

Note the use of the word client and not patient – very useful in avoiding any unpleasantness with the trade's descriptions people. This is also a useful 'get out of jail free card' because NLP, unlike other therapies, cleverly claims no pretence of being in any way a 'cure'. Practitioners need no qualifications other than those in NLP. Remember, anyone can do it, without the constraints and requirements of formal examinations and recognised qualifications. Very useful in the United States of America where psychologists, like all medical practitioners, have to be licensed... but not NLP practitioners apparently.

Practitioners also say that one of the fundamental principles of NLP is respect for others, but that is neither unique nor original, as the tenet clearly falls under the heading of normal human altruism and has already been adequately explained by humanistic psychologists. It is hard to think of any type of therapy which is not based on respect for others, save perhaps the practice of electric shock therapy.

It is further claimed that it is the emphasis on ethics which makes NLP stand out from many other disciplines, but that surely does a disservice to other therapies, never mind other therapists. This seems like a classic case of the holier than thou syndrome rearing its ugly head again, blatantly designed to elevate the standing of NLP.

In NLP, experience has a structure which can be notated, compartmentalised and pigeon-holed before it is interpreted by people with little or no knowledge or training in psychology or other closely related disciplines. Notating, compartmentalising and pigeon-holing is part and parcel of the way psychologists measure behaviour – so still nothing new. It may be of interest that many university trained psychologists refer NLP as 'emperor's new clothes rubbish' and most hold hypnosis in higher regard, if only because hypnosis offers a rapidity and effectiveness which psychoanalysis and NLP can't match.

The NLP philosophy holds that *'if something can be done by somebody, then potentially it can be done by anybody, given the right resources'*. This statement is again, obvious, obvious, obvious! But also manifestly misleading because it is fundamentally flawed. It simply does not follow – given the same resources such as upbringing, education, opportunities etc. – that because one fourteen year old can become a mathematical genius, then so can every other fourteen year old. This reasoning simply flies in the face of conventional wisdom, not to mention observation and real life experience, particularly in view of the ongoing nature versus nurture debate.

The fact of the matter is that different brains are wired differently. Not everyone can be a Winston Churchill, some will have to be (and are) content with being a Charles Pooter. In the real world, everyone is not afforded the same opportunities, especially when it comes to education, because on planet Earth, resources are simply not shared equally. In this, NLP suffers from an unreality and this is a fundamental and irreparable flaw in its system of beliefs. Claims that NLP can 're-programme' or 're-pattern' the brain are looked at with a great deal of scepticism by scientists and psychologists, and now we know why!

One of the basic doctrines of NLP is its inherent flexibility – if you're flexible enough, there can be no failure, only feedback. If you don't achieve what you set out to achieve, this is not to be regarded as failure but as useful information to help you in your future endeavours. This ideology was formerly known as 'learning by your mistakes'.

The NLP view that 'every behaviour has a positive intent' is so defective as to be laughable, if not downright dangerous. The belief that even the most negative behaviour is

done for a positive purpose is to deny reality. This mentality would demand a reworking of the story of the Good Samaritan. A man lies by the roadside, cut and bleeding because he has been attacked and robbed. Stooping over the victim, the NLP Samaritan says 'the people who did this to you need help'. Whoever thought this one up has never been in a British city centre at two-o'clock on a Sunday morning as all the nightclubs empty their customers onto the streets at the same time.

True, NLP has similarities and associations with Behavioural and Applied Psychology and hypnosis as well as physical techniques such as the Alexander Technique, Tai Chi etc, but this mixture of posture and mental and emotional control is as old as the hills. Again we seem to be back to good old fashioned positive thinking, but positive thinking with new labels. Once something has a label, it has conferred upon it value, even if it is only a *perceived* value. Once something has value, it becomes a commodity that can be bought, sold and exchanged. More importantly, it can be profited from and it is *that the one thing makes NLP different*.

Neuro-Linguistic Programming originated in California during the early 1970's and is a byproduct, or at least a hangover, from the flower power era when lots of college students, prompted by their right-on left-leaning tutors, suddenly had the overwhelming desire to be one with nature and at peace with a nuclear-free, whale-saving world.

The name most often associated with the creation of NLP is Dr. Richard Bandler although full credit should also be given to John Grinder. Grinder was a linguist whilst Bandler was actually a mathematician. Grinder has in recent years expressed reservations about the way NLP is being used, whilst Bandler can at least work out how much money Paul McKenna has made out of it. In the interests of balance, it has to be said that McKenna is a very astute businessman although a distinctly mediocre hypnotist – he couldn't hold a candle to the likes of Peter Casson or Peter Powers. If there was a competition between the three of them, McKenna would come seventh.

Bandler is said to have exceptional ability in absorbing other people's behavioural patterns, so much so that he had an uncanny ability to 'become' another person. This is not as uncanny as it appears – impressionists Mike Yarwood, Rory Bremner, and John Culshaw were also very good at this.

Grinder also had a talent for 'changing his colours without changing himself'. This is what NLP calls modelling – it's what I call method acting. Any drama student knows this and it's quite possible to become another person in a very short time by studying their body language, speech patterns and individual idiosyncrasies. Actors study film footage of the people they are to portray on screen – Will Smith did it for his role as Mohamed Ali and Anthony Hopkins did it when he played Richard Nixon. The great actor Peter Sellers was so good at it that he sometimes found it difficult to come out of character when filming was over, much to the frustration of his wives. A lot of entertainers find difficulty leaving their stage persona at the stage door, hence the divorce rate among entertainers is so high.

Richard Bandler himself is not a great advertisement for some of the principles that NLP is supposed to stand for. A heavy smoker and cocaine snorter, attendees at Bandler seminars are likely to be treated to a stream of four-letter words and foul language – some female members of the audience may even be propositioned by the great Maharishi, er... sorry... the great Bandler himself. Practically every one of Bandler's jokes are about murder or are violent crime-related – an interesting study in itself, as Bandler was once arrested and tried for the murder of prostitute Corine Christensen, the ex-girlfriend of his drug dealer.

Bandler was acquitted, claiming that he hypnotised the jury. He openly admits that he once electrocuted his step-father by building a booby trap. *'I stripped a lamp cord, put it underneath the wire-mesh doormat, put the other end in the keyhole and put my hand on the switch. When the key went in, I clicked the switch. There was a loud scream. He went over the railing. Six months in hospital'* [from an interview in The Guardian.]

His first wife divorced him claiming that he had choked her. He also has a track record of saying that with his CIA or Mafia connections, all he has to do is make one phone call and have you killed. Anyone else who carried on like that would likely as not be thought of as an asshole, but there is a great deal of mythology surrounding (and encouraged by) Bandler, and this has served to immunise him against such criticism. The telling and retelling of all these remarkable anecdotes cements the mythology. This then is the man that thousands of people in America and Britain trust to train them to rebuild the broken lives of others.

In 1977, Bandler married another NLP devotee, Leslie Cameron. They were married by John Grindler who was also a preacher from the Universal Light Church. Unfortunately the marriage only lasted a year – so much for NLP then. Bandler and Grindler set up the Society of Neuro Linguistic Programming and under the name 'Meta Publications' published most of the notable books on NLP.

Other names associated with the NLP movement are the linguist Noam Chomsky, Alfred Korzybski, Carlos Castaneda, Virginia Satir, Fritz Perls, Milton Erickson, Frank Farrelly, Judith DeLozier, Robert Dilts – all names to bandy about at parties if you wish to become expert in bluffing your way in NLP. We also find – surprise, surprise – Anthony Robbins. Robbins uses many of the techniques of NLP in his training seminars. In fact both Bandler and Robbins claim extraordinary results when it comes to turning corporate incompetents into the sharp-shooters and movers and shakers of industry.

Anyone attending a seminar on any subject in which they already have an interest, will come away having learned something new. Where Robbins and the like score highly is that they are impressive and inspirational speakers. So was Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy. I stop short of mentioning Adolf Hitler at this juncture because that would be rude. People queuing to see Anthony Robbins will experience the same sense of emotional expectancy as those queuing to see their favourite rock star and most will come away having had their expectations fulfilled by a comfortable and familiar encounter – the key words being expectation and comfortable and familiar.

The founders of NLP, or anyone in fact who has written a book on it or added even the most superficial incidental to the issue are held in awe as modern day Messiahs by their followers and revered almost as living gods within the NLP community, especially if they are from America. You only have to take a look at all the fawning assistants Paul McKenna employs at his training courses to see what I mean.

People travel thousands of miles to listen to their pronouncements, which are beyond criticism and venerated with an almost pious fervour. At these events, hundreds of people gather – literally mesmerised by the pumping music and lights. The problem is, some of them are damaged human beings looking to be healed and some are looking for answers they hope will repair damaged lives. They leave clutching their seven day practitioner's certificate believing they have found them.

Bandler, like many before him, is a good showman. Any stage hypnotist worth their salt know that getting someone to experience powerful change in front of an audience is no more difficult or complex than getting them to believe they are Elvis. One could almost say

it was the thinking man's stage hypnosis, except that it isn't – the audience stopped thinking on the first day of the course.

The religious zeal with which many of the disciples defend NLP is sometimes downright alarming. I have frequently found myself confronted by blinkered and irrational dogma when the words I tried to get in edgeways were 'yes, it works, but what works is based on well known, tried and tested psychology'. At this point the offended party usually goes spontaneously deaf and wanders off to seek out others from their own tribe. If only they had done some basic psychology first, they could have saved all that money and got a certificate that actually meant something...

The NLP version of personal growth can be summarised in four easy steps:

1. using your self-esteem as a resource
2. keeping your body fit and healthy
3. learning and developing skills
4. increasing spirituality

In the 1930's, another group of people had uncannily similar ideas to these. They were called the Nazi Party.

Nonetheless, the process of growth is defined in the following 3 easy steps:

1. Present State: (for example, I cannot play the violin)
2. Desired State: (I would like to play the violin)
3. Transition State: (I will take violin lessons)

It's all so obvious! But there's worse to come – this is nothing more than a blatant re-hash of ground-breaking psychologist B.F. Skinner's three stage training method, which has been applied not just to training, but to education generally and was around a long time before NLP. Here it is

1. Define the goal (Terminal Behaviour)
2. Define the start (Entering Behaviour)
3. Positively reinforce each step (Increment) in the desired direction while ignoring all other behaviour.

Improving Self Esteem according to NLP, means adopting a more positive mental attitude when it comes to everyday pursuits such as engaging in internal dialogue. In other words, saying 'I can do this' instead of 'I can't do this'. Derivative and obvious... much more of this stuff and I'm going to start banging my head against the nearest brick wall.

It is important that the patient – sorry... client – repeats their own particular mantra over and over again in their heads in such a way that they can actually hear them:

*'I am as valuable as other people... I am going to talk to those people on equal terms'* and so on. This is unashamedly based on Emile Coué's repetition therapy of *'every day in every way, I am getting better and better...'*

Repetition works because repetition reinforces connections in the brain – and that is one of the main reasons there is so much repetition in hypnosis... and now in NLP...

The same technique works in the exact same way with confidence, emotional control and an almost endless list of other problems. In a strikingly similar way, the emotional impact of traumatic events can be reduced by making the subject view the incident remotely, in other words, imagine seeing the event in a distant, detached way. This technique has its roots in Freudian psychoanalysis and hypnosis, not to mention Wolpe's 1958 work on counter-conditioning therapy.

NLP claims to be effective with an almost limitless list of problems, from weight reduction, to allergies – even to cancer, where the patient imagines the cancer as a snowball which is melting from the heat of the body's immune system. This form of 'therapy' has come in for a great deal of criticism from the medical profession and rightly so. It may be that a handful of people had their cancer go into remission after this kind of therapy, but there is no proof that it wasn't as a result of more conventional intervention. It's also well documented that some cancers go into remission on their own.

NLP approaches include Reframing – that is, experiencing a condition from a different perspective may help alleviate symptoms. For example, recovering after an operation may provide time to catch up on other things like reading... or suddenly feeling fortunate you missed the flight when you saw on the news that the plane you were supposed be on crashed into a mountain.

Reframing is merely the application of the 'every cloud has a silver lining' principle. It is the ability to turn a situation to your advantage. For example 'It's raining... I do not like the rain... but the rain will give me the opportunity to check out the new bus system'. Yeah... sure... This was formerly known as making the best of things or, 'as one door closes, another door opens'.

The famous, but now deceased spiritualist, Doris Stokes was a true master of reframing. She had never heard of NLP let alone studied it, but she did possess a spine-chilling natural ability to reframe. Doris was presented with tricky situations all the time, particularly when she was talking to the dead, or when she was 'in touch' with the other side as she preferred to call it. I saw her in Edinburgh in the early 1980's. Telling an elderly lady in the audience that her husband had recently died [of course he was dead, otherwise the woman wouldn't have been there] the lady replied that her husband had been dead for nearly thirty years. Totally unruffled, the wily old Doris said that thirty years was very recent in the spirit world.

She had the bare faced audacity to tell another lady that although she had been on holiday, her late husband would not have enjoyed it because the weather hadn't been very nice. It turned out that the weather had been warm and sunny, but that did not deter Doris, whose rapier-like response was that he would have found it too hot. And finally, I feel unable to move on until I have regaled you with the one about Doris telling a member of her audience that their dear departed had expired as the result of something that was wrong in his brain. In reality, it transpired that his demise was due to a heart attack. *'Ah yes love, it was, but it all started up there... now you didn't know that did you?'* God bless her, the devious old fraud.

Incidentally, dear old Doris wasn't always plain old Doris Stokes – her real name was actually Marilyn Dashing, but her manager made her change it on the grounds that it sounded a bit too 'show-business',

But back to Neuro-Linguistic Poppycock... Sub-modality work simply means picturing or visualising yourself getting better and healthier and improving on a daily basis. Again, from the nineteenth century, Emile Coué... *'Every day, in every way, I am getting better and*

better...' but Coué's mantra become more powerful when hypnosis is added into the equation. Emile Coué also used hypnosis!

'Programming for Control' is a technique which gets the client to imagine pain levels on a scale of 1 to 10 and then mentally reposition the level, or dialling the 'volume' of the pain down. Again, this works well, but it's just like the self-hypnosis hypnotherapists teach their clients on a daily basis!

'Shifting beliefs' is akin to believing you are capable of seeing without glasses – better watch out for that bus!

'Using hypnotic trance states' involves speeding up recovery by using suggestion – also a major component of hypnotherapy.

'Visualisation' is when the patient creates a mental image of the disease being drawn out of the body. Again we're back on dangerous ground here... Claims that such therapy has been proved to work must be viewed with a great deal of scepticism and be subject to test before they can be corroborated (I can't for a moment imagine it working for HIV or AIDS.) Remember, some illnesses get better by themselves and the vast majority of doctors put these results down to the patient's own will to recover. Two thirds of mental problems disappear all on their own anyway after time, largely due to the human brain's own inbuilt capacity for self-healing and rationalisation.

'Analysis of behaviour patterns' means that you analyse what you are doing right and apply it to other activities to produce better results. For example, you know that drinking two bottles of vodka keeps making you ill so you decide only to drink only one bottle. This is all pain and pleasure stuff and again it's based on psychologists Watson and Skinner's Behaviourism, which is all to do with the ability to apply principle. There's a bit of Freudian psychology thrown in for good measure, but according to NLP, pain and pleasure motivates us in everything we do! And indeed it does, but then we knew that decades before NLP came along!

There is no doubt that mental preparation, even mental practice, can go a long way to enhancing physical performance. Notice how Olympic athletes 'limber-up' before an event and focus their minds on the task in hand. So as far as NLP is concerned, there is really nothing new in this at all. Focussing one's attention is a technique was already proved to lead to greater confidence.

Some people are naturally better at creative visualisation than others – an ability we are all born with, passed to us partly through nature and partly through nurture. Our ability to visualise creatively can be improved with practice, but the same problem arises with NLP as it does with hypnosis and other associated disciplines – it depends almost entirely on a person's natural ability to respond to suggestion, whether those suggestions emanate from their own inner voice or from the therapist.

Neurological Levels (or Logical Levels as they are sometimes called, depending on whose book you read) can be neatly organised into a framework of six basic levels:

1. Spirituality – why a person does things – what they believe exists beyond themselves.
2. Identity – who a person thinks they are – their sense of self and personal mission.
3. Belief – what motivates a person (why they do things).
4. Capability – how a person does things, utilises skills, forms a strategy and follows plans.
5. Behaviour – what a person does – actions and reactions.

## 6. Environment – where and when things happen – opportunities and constraints.

Whereas it is certainly possible to adopt this framework and use it as a guide to sorting out your life, it does not really add to what we already know, or at least suspect, about how each of us should change for the better or come to grips with our own particular problems – that is of course presuming that we really want to. Believe it or not, there are some people who are happier when they are miserable. These misanthropes are more common than you might imagine, but they all have one thing in common... they all have their feet firmly on the ground, they are all cynical, and they are hardly ever surprised or disappointed by the perfidy of others.

One NLP practitioner tried to impress me with a story about a truly marvellous result, or well formed outcome, she had managed to achieve with a client. This bloke, who was in his mid forties, shared a house with two other blokes who were also in their mid forties. All were moderate drinkers and spent a couple of hours in the pub every day. They enjoyed eating in greasy spoon cafes, going out for curries, visiting the dog track and generally having a laddish good time. He had gone to see her because he felt that he was a bit overweight. After various lengthy sessions and consultations, taking on board the self improvement strategies that were presented to him, he had not only lost the ten kilos he wanted to lose, but had moved into his own self-contained flat, had stopped drinking so much and was eating food that was much healthier for him. In the process however, he had gradually lost touch with his friends. The end result, or well formed outcome, was that very soon he became unhappy with the way his life had turned out and had started to feel like a bit of a loner. Eventually he gave up his new bohemian lifestyle and rediscovered the happiness of his genuine roots.

This is a true story and highlights the dangers of pseudo-psychology in the hands of an amateur. What stuck in my mind was this woman's self-satisfied 'I'm right, you're wrong' mentality and her critical disappointment that eventually he had the courage to define his own life once again on his own terms – the life that she had so nearly succeeded in ruining for him. What an arrogant, superior, condescending b1tch.

It's always easier to deal with a problem if someone else, a counsellor, friend, or mentor, is looking at it objectively, so long as they are fighting your corner and not their own. It's the same as any of life's little crises – it's always easier to see other people's problems because it's easier to take a more objective view. We often turn to close friends for advice and most of the time it is our real friends who give the best advice. They just don't fill your head with pseudo-scientific gobbledygook and tell you to make an appointment for the same time next week.

The newspeak that permeates NLP is truly staggering and I'm now going to attempt to explain it.

New Code NLP is like the old NLP but new and improved, the way washing powder is 'new and improved' every few years. New Code NLP teaches that by listening to the body, which has its own inborn wisdom, it's possible to obtain excellent information about what is or isn't the appropriate action to take. An example of this – if you feel full, stop eating. This is *amazing* stuff... or maybe not.

Systemic NLP is more concerned with relationships and interactions with other people. The gist of it is that you are much more likely to get a well formed outcome if you ask in a nice way and remember to smile – just like mother told us when we were four.

As for Personal Edits, they sound suspiciously like the Personal Audits pushed by Scientology.

So nothing new here. Most industries train their staff to smile and be polite, even when dealing with awkward customers and this is fine as far as it goes, but... a two year research programme carried out by the University of Frankfurt am Main has proved beyond any real doubt that when people suppress their true feelings, especially for extended periods of time, there can be negative consequences for their health. If one is forced to smile at rude customers for too long, the inevitable result is stress, and this in turn can lead to major health issues. The researchers in Frankfurt go even further – faking happiness leads to burnout, depression and in extreme cases can accelerate the onset of heart disease.

To prove the point, the performance of four thousand staff was assessed at airports, hospitals and call centres. Half the volunteers were told that they must smile and be polite at all times whereas the other half were allowed to answer back to rude customers. The tests showed that those who were allowed to express themselves honestly displayed a slightly increased heart rate while those forced to remain polite found their heart rates noticeably increased at the end of the encounter.

The Meta Model of NLP was designed because people do not always spell out exactly what they mean. Sometimes they leave things out or are not able to make their thoughts clear, particularly if they are tired or under stress.

This difficulty has been pigeon-holed by NLP into three failings, known in NLP-speak as, deletion, distortion and generalisation. All human beings fall into these traps, especially, and through no fault of their own, the poorly educated. Not everyone has the ability to make themselves clear every time they open their mouths, particularly when under stress. Fortunately, the Meta Model is here to help. Precise language can be effective to achieve particular results. The best way to achieve clarity is to sit down and discuss exactly what it is you mean until both sides have a clear understanding about what is actually meant. This can be time consuming but it prevents any misunderstanding and normal people can do this once they put their minds to it. In the real world, it is known as ‘talking’ and I have even heard it referred to as ‘communicating’.

The Milton Model is based upon the language patterns of Milton Erickson, so in theory it should really have been called the Erickson Model, Milton being a bit over-familiar. Some features of the Milton Model are the use of generalisation, ambiguity and indirect language and suggestion. Being non-specific allows a person to use their imagination and indirect language can be used for persuasiveness and influence. This contradicts the theory behind the Meta Model, which just goes to show how flexible NLP can be!

Perceptual Positions means putting yourself in someone else’s shoes or being able to see another person’s point of view, also something we were taught as children. See how obvious all this is once you cut through the crap?

Sensory Preferences deal with how people talk and look, which is supposed to give clues as to what sensory channels they are using. This involves careful monitoring of body movements and eye movements. Children do this a lot but usually stop once their mothers tell them that it’s rude to stare. People tend to look up when they are visualising, and down when they are emotionally stressed or telling lies. (I wonder if the police know about this?) If they speak quickly, it may be that they are trying to keep up with rapidly changing mental images. On the other hand it could be that they are speaking quickly because they normally speak quickly or have a bus to catch. Maybe they are looking down because they

have noticed a stray five pound note on the floor and are hoping you haven't. Talking rapidly often depends on a person's level of literacy and their ability to... er... talk rapidly.

To gain a thorough insight into the meaning of one person's subtle body language takes a long time and the meanings are not quite as universal as NLP claims they are. People who have known each other for years can still struggle to interpret the body language of their nearest and dearest, so the interpretation of the body language of a total stranger may be unreliable. It might be more helpful to offer them a nice cup of tea and then study the tiny tea leaves left in the bottom of the cup. This is known as Tasseographic Augury and is probably just as reliable.

Still, there are those who excel at this sort of thing and they are sometimes called Derren Brown, Doris Stokes or Gypsy Petulengro, who is also very good at it but only does it at the end of the pier in Blackpool and then only during the Season. Spiritualists, fortune tellers and good old-fashioned flim-flam artists have used the same techniques for centuries. They can spot a sucker a mile off and tailor their approach to their victim's needs and expectations before telling them about the tall, dark, handsome stranger they're going to meet. Failing that, they may even ask you whether you would like your drive Tarmacking because they happen to have a little left over from a job they were doing on the M62. Or would you like to purchase some lucky heather?

NLP offers nothing new. We have seen it all before somewhere, we just didn't make the connection. Further proof is in a book published in 1971 called *The Chosen Ones – The Psychology of Jury Selection* by Dr. William J. Bryan Jr. M.D., J.D., PhD. In his book, Dr. Bryan gives all the examples of the dead giveaway body language so beloved of the NLP enthusiast. Here are just a few examples of the obvious:

- Legs twisted or knotted together (as opposed to just crossed) – something to hide
- Finger covering the lips – shush! I don't want to talk about that
- Hands with fingers interlocked and turned inside out – unconsciously pushing away
- Pushing back in the chair leaning backwards – resistance
- Leaning forward in chair – acceptance
- Covering the mouth with the hand – there's something else to hide
- Sitting with legs wide open – nothing to hide
- Crossing the arms – resistant
- In a swivel chair, moving from side to side – unconsciously saying no
- In a swivel chair, moving from side to side and nodding at the same time – very definitely no
- In a swivel chair, moving from side to side, nodding at the same time and with arms folded – which part of no don't you understand?
- In a swivel chair, moving from side to side, nodding at the same time, with arms folded and legs tightly crossed and with one hand raised to cover the mouth – do I have to call the police?
- In a swivel chair, not moving from side to side with arms unfolded and legs wide apart whilst stark naked – supreme confidence.

Sub-modalities is a technique for exploring the five senses: sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch. This is also sometimes called Representational Systems. For example, think of an

elephant. Try to think not only about the size of the elephant, but the feel of its skin, the smell of the elephant house at the zoo, what the ear-splitting noise would sound like if the elephant made that ear-splitting noise that elephants make and what it would taste like if it sat on your face. Because of NLP's abilities to manipulate the senses – otherwise known as using your imagination – NLP can be used to create more, or even less, pleasant experiences. Hypnotists have been teaching people to manipulate their imaginations and senses for decades, particularly when they get their subjects to munch into raw onions believing they are really juicy, delicious apples, or when they tell their subjects that all the people in the audience have no clothes on.

Synaesthesia is the word NLP uses to describe the simultaneous experience of more than one sensory process. Synaesthesia is a neurological trait or condition that results in a joining or merging of senses that aren't normally connected. The stimulation of one sense causes an involuntary reaction in one or more of the other senses. For example, someone with synaesthesia may hear colour or see sound. How exciting!

The Primary System is the sense that a person favours over the others, for example, the sense of sight over the sense hearing (usually the case) or your ability to visualise a completed piece of self-assembly furniture over your sense of hearing and listening to your wife's advice to read the instructions first.

The Lead System is the sense a person is more likely to use as an initial response to a situation. I think there is something burning... shall I use my sense of smell or shall I listen extremely carefully for a few moments? Why not call it the lead sense or the primary sense?

Rapport is the state which exists when two people are getting on well together. People who can get on well together find it easier to share activities or even share silence. Rapport is also the state of trust between two people, for example between therapist and client. Trust is something that has to be earned rather than created artificially by a load of shallow NLP newspeak and confusing claptrap which, rather than engendering trust, is more likely to provoke wariness.

Presupposition really means assumption. For example, you presuppose that if you cook a meal for a friend, you assume that they are going to eat it and not turn their nose up at it. Another example is that you have sampled your friend's culinary excellence on a previous occasion and after last time, you have a presupposition that you will be going out for a curry instead. This is simply about learning by experience.

Perspective Patterns are used for fast phobia cures. Briefly, a positive mental image is superimposed on a negative one in order to re-programme the mind to respond in a more positive way to a negative situation. A good technique, one often used in hypnosis, is to imagine the spider you have always been afraid of as a comic character, complete with red nose and Wellington boots on its feet, in which case we're back to Wolpe's desensitisation and counter conditioning therapy. What it means is that people can be persuaded to look at their phobias and emotional problems in a detached way, even giving them a humorous slant.

It can also work like this: You take a bad idea, thought or emotion and imagine it as a picture on a TV screen. All you have to do then is 'swish' it away and replace it with a good idea, thought or emotion. This is called the Swish Technique and is one of the very few occasions NLP relies on plain English. You find out where the image is in relation to the normal field of vision – near, close, up to the left, down to the right, etc. and then just swish

it away. This is more effective if the swishing is accompanied by a theatrical 'swish' gesture.

It is claimed that part of the 'neural coding' of the brain (where we get these feelings and behaviours from) comes from the position of these images. I ran this past a neurologist and after he'd stopped laughing, he said that he could at least see the symbolic relevance and the value of the implied suggestion. Images that are close and bright and bold supposedly have strong emotional intensity while those that are dim and far away are supposed to have much weaker emotional intensity. According to NLP.

Hypnotherapists have been using symbolism and imagery for a very long time, and the symbolism of breaking through barriers or washing away negative thoughts and emotions is decades old. The swish technique just puts another spin – or swish – on it. Dave Elman wrote about these ideas in the 1950's. Dramatically grabbing the image out of the air and throwing it away or getting the subject to imagine it growing smaller, paler, transparent, is part and parcel of the hypnotherapist's armoury. It was good because it worked... and now it's part of NLP.

These methods are also very useful for people recovering from broken relationships. Instead of thinking about the girl you lost as the most beautiful woman you ever knew, it is possible to change the emotional response by referring to her in future as 'the nutter' or 'the control freak'. Paul McKenna demonstrated this technique very well on one of his TV programmes. A jilted lover was finding it difficult to recover from the loss of her one-time boyfriend. *'Was there a time when perhaps you didn't like him so much?'* asked the pompous self-important little prick. *'Yes... when he put on some weight'*. *'OK... let's call him Fatty...'* – a perfect example of readjustment of perspective. Well done Baldy!

And just when you thought it couldn't possibly get any more ridiculous, Mind Mapping plumbs the very depths of banality by presenting itself as a way of organising your life by making a simple 'shopping list' or a 'to do' list. Then, you simply split the list up into different parts with your well formed outcome (goal) at the top and a list of things you must do to achieve it. Just like we were told at prep school.

Accessing cues is a cute way of watching for movements or gestures that give clues to the mental processes a person is engaging. For example if they are imagining a large visual image, they may lean back in their chair as if they are trying to encompass the size of the picture. Or they might just be making themselves more comfortable, or trying to surreptitiously claim the five pound note that you haven't seen but that they spotted several paragraphs ago.

Robert Dilts – one of the heroes of NLP folklore – conducted his own research into eye-movement patterns. The direction in which people move their eyes is allegedly linked to the way people process information:

- Up and to the left – remembering images
- Up and to the right – constructing images
- Looking straight ahead – remembering or constructing images
- Horizontally and to the left – remembering sounds
- Horizontally and to the right – constructing sounds
- Down and to the left – mentally talking to yourself
- Down and to the right – experiencing feelings

It doesn't take a genius to work out that this may not be accurate in all cases. For starters, it does not take into consideration left or right brain dominance and it certainly doesn't take into consideration the fact that it is entirely untested – except by Dr. Michael Heap at Sheffield University who carried out numerous and detailed tests which found, unsurprisingly, that the whole theory was pseudo-scientific nonsense.

Never mind, NLP's devotees believe it. I have had clients who have argued with their NLP practitioner as a result of this tea-leaf reading practice. One individual was even told by the NLP practitioner that he was being defensive and was in denial. Amateur psychology at its worst – and totally phoney.

Analogue Marking is quite simply using movements and gestures, for example, pointing to emphasise a word, intention or feeling. In more traditional psychological language, it is known as iconic gesturing. Tony Blair did it a lot when he was persuading us that Saddam Hissein really did have weapons of mass destruction which could annihilate large areas of the UK in 45 minutes. Hitler did it a lot. Italians do it all the time. Barristers are discouraged from doing it. People in straight-jackets are prevented from doing it.

Verbal messages can be reinforced by non-verbal means. Iconic gestures such as hand movements are often unconscious, but unconscious iconic gestures are natural and look natural. Rehearsed and therefore conscious gestures are artificial and contrived and look false and insincere. Other than that, you can always use pictures, graphs, pie-charts or a smack on the head with a rolled up umbrella to really drive the point home.

Metaphor is when you use an example or a story to focus the attention in order to change one's perception of a particular problem. Jesus used metaphors to great effect in the Parables, as did Aesop in his Fables. Using metaphor can also increase understanding. *'Have you heard the one about the little Dutch boy who put his finger in the dyke?'* has always been one of my firm favourites.

Punted as an exploration of complex behaviours, TOTE models have also been around for a long time and psychologists would instantly recognise them but not necessarily in the terms adopted by NLP. TOTE stands for Test, Operate, Test, and Exit:

- Test – find out what the problem is,
- Operate – sort the problem out,
- Test – make sure that the cure you have suggested works,
- Exit – take the money and run before the client realises that they could have got the same advice for just 35p in the Dear Jane column in the Daily Mirror.

An Anchor is the association of a memory with a response, for example hearing a certain piece of music and recalling a particular memory – remembering a certain smell and associating it with a pleasant (or unpleasant) experience. Any one of Pavlov's doggies would understand this one.

Anchoring means dealing with situations by way of conditioned responses, for example, you can deal with a problem more effectively by remembering or associating a pleasant experience. This action can help a person to remain in a positive emotional state. This could be very useful if, whilst being mugged, you remember the time you had your best sex.

When NLP'ers do anchoring, say for example in a selling situation, one popular technique they use is to ask questions or make comments that will elicit emotions associated with

pleasant things in such as *'did you enjoy your weekend? I bet you're so proud your son did well in his exams'*. Every time they get a positive response, they gently nudge your arm or make some other kind of 'signal'. In this way, the sensation of having your arm nudged is associated with pleasant emotions so that when they move in to close the deal, a simple nudge will make you think that buying whatever it is they're selling is a good idea. The reality is that it's irritating. The other reality is that it doesn't work. Even without NLP I already have the confidence to tell people to stop doing it. If they don't, I tell them that if they do it again, I'll break their arm. Not to worry, at NLP training courses, the delegates sit around for hours on end practicing these skills on each other and it's a very creepy scene indeed.

'Auditory' is a simple matter of imagining your own voice in your head – imagining that you are talking to yourself. If you do this, it might be better not to tell anyone that you talk to yourself or hear voices.

'Association' means being immersed in your feelings. If those feelings are happy feelings, then that can be a good thing. It could also mean you are an air-head. If those feelings are unpleasant feelings, maybe it's time to stop listening to the voices.

'Dissociation' means being detached from yourself as if you are an observer. Many people such as students have experienced this feeling whilst lying drunk in the gutter in the early hours of Sunday morning.

'Calibration' means observing a person's behaviour (how they look, sound, behave etc.) and then using these observations as a reference for future observations. This takes a very, very long time as lots of people have the same expressions and ways of behaving for boredom as they do for irritation. Calibration is the big new fancy NLP word for measuring behaviour. Only the label is new, as any A level psychology student will confirm. One of the first things psychology students learn is that behaviour can be observed, measured, and predicted, thus offering a window on the mind, which can't.

Going over every tiny unpleasant event in a client's life and then trying to match it with the way they feel now is rather pointless. The way an individual feels about their present emotional state is not necessarily linked to the way they felt when they only got a grade 2 instead of the hoped for grade 1 in their maths exam and were worried that they had disappointed their father. Mercifully, NLP ignores these vague or imaginary past experiences and concentrates on encouraging clients to look to a more positive future – as a consequence NLP earns one Brownie point. But minus one Brownie point because encouraging clients to look to a more positive future was part of mainstream psychology along before NLP. Humanistic psychology got there first.

In other types of therapeutic situation, rather than waste time observing, nit-picking, measuring, or going over the minutiae of people's lives, it's often far easier to just ask the client a straightforward question, something maybe along the lines of, *'when did you start to hear these voices?'* or *'why do you think you hear voices?'* This can then be followed up with questions such as *'what do the voices say?'* and *'why do you think the voices told you to invade Iraq?'*

I could go on and into even more detail about sub-modalities, representational systems, mismatching, complex equivalence, congruence (something to do with triangles I seem to remember) nominalisations and conversational postulates but it would be a waste of time and frankly, I am now getting bored and irritated by all this facetious hogwash. The real point at issue here is that the more you flower-up the language, the more complex you can make it. Something that was once reasonably simple now takes longer to teach but at

least now you can charge more money for it. The bottom line however is that BIG WORDS DON'T HELP THE CLIENT.

NLP has attempted to fix psychology – except that psychology wasn't broken in the first place. The newspeak is pure psychobabble and nothing less than a major confidence trick, calculated to bamboozle the unsuspecting buyer. Students think they are learning something marvellous when in fact they are not. If you really want to find out about the human condition, you will learn more from reading Dickens or Tolstoy or Brontë, or better still, go to night school or college or university and study psychology – it will be less expensive and you will actually learn something of value. Not only that, but in the end you will come away with a genuine qualification, one that is actually worth something!

Reading Tolstoy's *War and Peace* – now there's a study of the human condition – greed, jealousy, ambition, love, hatred, betrayal, regret, hope, uncertainty, loyalty, despair, hypocrisy, fear, loss, joy, relationships, the French... it's all in there, but to fully understand what I mean, you really must read it. For those who can't be bothered to read it, it's also available on BBC DVD and stars the very excellent Anthony Hopkins.

Someone has made a lot of money out of all this premeditated pile of pure piffle. Maybe they should have called it Neuro-Linguistic Poppycock – I do.

Meekly allowing others to advise you how to live your life with bumptious philosophies that are irrelevant is not the solution to life problems. Maybe the ability to tell someone else to f\*\*k off with impunity has some merit – it certainly shows a certain degree of confidence. It's the rest of us, those whose mothers always told us to be polite, that are constrained to suffer the real dilemma. 'Say no to drugs? Certainly not – say *'no thank you'* – there's no excuse for discourtesy.

However, I can tell you from experience that telling someone to 'f\*\*k off', and meaning it, is a thoroughly liberating experience. Apart from the parliamentary system of democracy and the games of football and cricket the expression 'f\*\*k off' is one of Britain's greatest exports. 'F\*\*k off!' Practice it at every opportunity... you'll feel much better. \*

NLP is not just about getting on with people but about getting them on your side. You would be staggered to see how similar (and therefore not new at all) this aspect of NLP is to Dale Carnegie's bestselling book *'How to Win Friends and Influence People'* which was published in 1953.

Being persuasive and influential is what NLP is about, and quite apart from a certain amount of manipulation, which we all unconsciously indulge in from time to time, this is a variation on an old strategy, and it was around centuries before NLP. It works by finding out what motivates the other person and following those patterns to establish credibility and stimulate enthusiasm.

\* It's always tempting to wave two fingers in the air at the same time as saying the words, but that spoils the neatness and purity of effect and it's a hangover from the battle of Agincourt, when the Frogs vowed to cut off the bowstring fingers of all the English archers after the battle. The fight went rather badly for the French and against all the odds, the English won. At the end of the fight, our plucky longbow-men waved their two fingers at the retreating French lines in an act of defiance, the spirit of which has been passed down through generations of patriotic Englishmen and is now universally accepted as the sign language equivalent of this internationally recognised two word phrase. The expression is afforded a certain poetic simplicity by its phonetic structure – after a soft start with the sound of the letter f, it rapidly reaches a climax as it meets the harsher click of the post-vowel letters ck. finally it tails away with the word off... It's both lyrical and to the point – expressive and direct and embodies an underlying sense of purpose and resolve.

NLP's main problem is that although the parts based on real psychology can be effective, it contains a whopping amount of vacuous nonsense. But in fairness to the 'unifying theory of everything' it would be a lot cheaper to go out and buy Dale Carnegie's book (which predates NLP by approximately forty years). It's much easier to follow and makes a lot more sense.

For example, the use of the future tense when having a conversation – '*you're going to find that you will get accustomed to these feelings of success*' – promotes expectation and helps the client get used to the idea that they really are going to experience feelings of success. The use of the word 'when' and not 'if' is also more positive.

It is also useful to use a person's preferred ways of perceiving to enhance your message. For example, some people respond to visual suggestions more than others, some people respond better to advice proffered by a professional than they do the same advice given by a relative, and some people are more easily influenced by advertising. It's amazing how many people are influenced by the information disseminated by the bloke at the pub and accept it as fact. A very helpful strategy is to provide evidence that will meet the other person's requirements. It's no use just stating a fact and expecting that fact to be accepted – even the most suggestible need proof that certain statements are true.

In work and business, setting objectives, planning and organising, solving problems and making decisions, managing time and resources, writing letters, memos and interminable reports, making presentations, selling, marketing, coaching and mentoring... dare I go on... there is nothing that can't be improved by NLP.

In my schooldays it was called 'using your initiative'. With NLP, you still have to use your initiative, but with the obligatory flowery vernacular that accompanies it. I am reminded of W.S. Gilbert's aesthetic poet, Reginald Bunthorne's words '*If this young man expresses himself in terms too deep for me, then what a very singularly deep young man, this deep young man must be!*'

When all is reduced to its lowest common denominator, the bottom line is this: there is no substitute for commitment, application and hard work and the more you commit yourself, the more you apply yourself and the harder you work, the more likely will be the prospect of success. Furthermore, self-examination, something humans have been doing for hundreds of thousands of years, or examining your inner-self, has f\*\*k all to do with NLP. What particularly irks me is the way these natural and perfectly normal skills are presented with such evangelical enthusiasm.

In conclusion, it is difficult to see just what it is that distinguishes NLP's contribution to the development of personal excellence, self-improvement and/or contentment, that is not already offered by a host of existing techniques, therapies and spiritualities. Much of it derives from humanistic psychology. Modelling was pioneered by both B.F. Skinner and Albert Bandura in the 1930's and has been used successfully as part of the armoury of therapies ever since. In fact the only apparent contribution NLP has made is to couch old tried and tested ideas in jargon that only the members of the cult understand. The expression 'old wine in new bottles' immediately springs to mind... as does the expression 'smoke and mirrors' or perhaps 'smoke and mirroring' would be more accurate.

This is part of the appeal. NLP disciples seem strangely at home with the idea that they have a deeper comprehension of the human psyche than the rest of us, that they have been raised to a higher plane of understanding and, like members of any secret society, are able to converse amongst themselves using lots of impressive words. This wholly

unnecessarily complex phraseology, they believe, confers a respectability that would otherwise be absent.

Over the last few years I have met many NLP practitioners. Most of them have so many issues and emotional problems of their own that it's difficult to see how they can possibly attempt to treat others. Even after short conversations at seminars and conferences I am frequently left with the impression that taking up NLP, Reiki, in fact anything that's at all 'curative' gives these individuals a feeling of power, if on an unconscious level. They *think* they are doing something marvellous and immensely worthwhile but they are fooling themselves. It is a disturbing fact, hidden from their clients, that they themselves have been fooled into believing they are now part of a privileged elite with some kind of specialised knowledge. An alarming number of them are just plain mad. Some I have met are completely bonkers, self-absorbed and a danger to themselves.

I notice certain similarities between NLP and some religious cults. Paul McKenna told me when I first met him that he wanted to start his own religion.

NLP is ultimately a hierarchy – there are practitioners and master practitioners, and trainers and master trainers. If there is one thing about NLP I find particularly interesting, it's that it's not so much about what has been learned, it's more about by whom one was trained. This addiction to cultish hero-worship is maybe what keeps people going back for more. Or maybe like any other kind of groupie, they just want to get closer to McKenna or Bandler. At trainings, students are forbidden to speak to or approach any of the trainers, and there are plenty of fawning assistants on hand ready to intercept anyone who forgets that rule.

There is always one more course to go on, always more to learn and apparently no shortage of money to hand over. NLP is like a pyramid selling scheme with Bandler balanced precariously on the top.

There is no doubt that many of the visualisation techniques and modelling exercises expounded by NLP acolytes do have an effect. But is NLP something new, or are we back to the old magic of the power of suggestion, conferring authority and credibility to the practitioner and much wished-for personal confidence on the client? A good proportion of NLP training is spent teaching recruits how to hypnotise.

On the face of it, NLP has all the hallmarks of the wild west traveling snake-oil salesman and all the undertones of extracting money from the feeble minded and gullible people who would otherwise have benefited from a good talking to.

The big problem with NLP is that as soon as a client starts to hear all the big words, they are even more certain to feel insecure about themselves. Once a therapist – and remember, this is someone the client desperately wants to trust – starts spouting any portion of pseudo-psychological drivel, they are bound to feel as if there really is something wrong with them. By default, this represents a key negative suggestion and this is a huge mistake. Astonishingly, there is a massive short cut to a cure – sorry, well formed outcome – and the procedure is two-tiered. First, a little bit of reassurance goes a long way – something along the lines of *'there's actually nothing wrong with you, a lot of people feel like this, now let's try and put it into perspective and see what we can achieve'* always works wonders. Second, the right positive suggestions will have them up and running again in no time at all, and hypnosis will make these suggestions and ideas more robust.

I get angry with therapists who have their clients come back week after week like walking cash dispensers. Clients can and do become therapy junkies and it's part of the therapist's job to stop that happening.

The real reason these sessions go on week after week is that with anything slightly more complex than the usual fears and phobias, the NLP practitioner has no real grounding in psychology or psychotherapy, something which Bandler recklessly rubbishes as outdated and useless. Instead, they flounder about trying one technique then another until eventually they find something that sort of works, or the client gets bored with the charade and cancels their remaining appointments.

I wonder how many NLP practitioners take out public liability insurance in the event a dissatisfied customer files a claim for malpractice. I wonder how many NLP practitioners keep patient notes of the way sessions are conducted, and if they do, how many are familiar with the stringent demands of the Data Protection Act? What about the potential implications of doing change therapy when they are confronted with a client who might be required to give evidence at a later date in a court of law, say in a case of sexual assault? What if that witness is then to be cross-examined? Will their memory of the event still be accurate?

I wonder how many NLP practitioners would know how or where to refer seriously ill clients? Can we be sure an NLP practitioner is knowledgeable enough to be able to accurately diagnose schizophrenia? How many NLP'ers might consider the possibility that their client's depression might be the symptom of a brain tumour, or diabetes, or perhaps just the result of a poor diet? Would a practitioner recognise that lethargy, fatigue or persistent tiredness might actually be the result of impending heart failure? How many bother to ask if a client has sought advice from their own GP first?

The most important question I *have* to ask though is this: if NLP is so damned good, why aren't psychologists or psychiatrists using it?

NLP'ers routinely criticise more traditional mental health therapies, but how many have ever taken the trouble to gain even a modicum of experience working for a mental health charity? I fear the answer to that question is around the zero mark.

NLP is controversial and it has been criticised by the scientific community as unscientific, pseudo-scientific and unproven. NLP has not even been accorded the courtesy of being considered a proto-science – that is, a new, still to be thoroughly evaluated discipline. There are those, and by this time it must be clear that I am one of them, who consider NLP to be palpably fraudulent because of its exaggerated claims and lack of checks and balances.

The original developers claimed not to be interested in theory and NLP teaches a practitioner to 'focus on what works' which is, by any standards, pretty open-ended. Focusing on what works can mean floundering around trying to find something that does work! Some practitioners have their own theories about how and why NLP works and have absolutely no hesitation in teaching these theories as fact in their own training courses. Of course, this might be a good thing. Or maybe not.

NLP teaches no scientific method for assessing whether the therapy has been effective or not, but NLP promises results, even extraordinary results. Of all the thousands of people who have been seduced by the miracle cure-all of NLP, how many of them have taken the trouble to follow up on clients six months, twelve months, five years after treatment? My educated guess would be somewhere in the region of er... none. Human nature being

what it is, dissatisfied clients simply don't complain, they just don't come back, a result which the NLP practitioner is more than likely to quietly count as a success.

At the time of writing, reports vary from no benefit, to huge benefit. Many reports conclude there is evidence of 'something going on' but further study is required to determine with any scientific accuracy exactly what. And here, at the very great risk of repeating myself, a lot of it just comes down to the placebo effect and the belief of the recipient in its value.

The emphasis on imagining a better future and copying the behaviour of those we admire may not be such a bad thing – after all, good role models generally exert a positive influence, and copying behaviour is something we all do as children anyway – some people continue to do it well into adulthood without NLP – so in that respect at least, it's probably harmless. But harmless does not necessarily mean curative.

Neuro-Linguistic Programming is an elegant label for a depressingly small and loosely connected collection of relatively straightforward ideas which all have their roots in well understood psychological techniques (if only its advocates had bothered to look them up) and based on other people's work which predates the 1960's and 'flower power'. By adopting the mnemonic NLP, NLP has itself gained a certain mystique, but remains tragically long on detail and short on anything that adds any real substance to our understanding of the human condition in the same way the study of psychology has over the last one hundred years.

NLP works very well with some people and not so well with others and this is common with the hypnosis it incorporates. It tends to work well with people who are naturally suggestible and naturally open to new ideas anyway. There are those of course who swear that their lives have improved dramatically, and that's fine and dandy, but suggestion and placebo it is.

On closer investigation, it seems that NLP is perfect for those who are happier to abdicate responsibility to others in exchange for a small fee before they realise that their lives have not dramatically changed for the better and move on to the next fad... or Reiki. NLP is supposed to give direction but the result is too often disappointment... or confusion.

As for modelling, people who pretend to be someone they are not are fantasists. I have had personal experience of a young and impressionable woman who became an NLP practitioner and who was exhorted to '*live the life of success to achieve success*' which she did. Unfortunately, the consequence of taking this facile piece of advice was that living the life meant living beyond her means and succeeded only in putting her into serious and inescapable debt.

Human beings function better when they have the confidence to be themselves. Furthermore, true talent, whether in the field of performance, art, science or business, is ALWAYS a natural gift – it can't be imitated or taught... like all talent, you've either got it or you haven't!

Trying to make sense of visual clues (accessing) so often prone to misinterpretation is no substitute for thorough investigation of complex emotional and mental problems by those who really do know what they are doing. So as far as NLP is concerned, it might be well to remember that however attractive the packaging, all that glitters is not gold. The difficulty, for those with the strength of mind to be able to cut through the psychobabble, is that all in all, NLP seems to be a collection of something borrowed, nothing new and just the most recent contender in the already over-crowded self-improvement market. Worst of all, in common with a lot of other lifestyle change and so called self-improvement strategies, and

despite claims to the contrary, rather than celebrating individuality, it encourages the disempowerment of the individual and that *has* to be cause for concern. I have spoken to many people in Britain who started in either hypnotherapy or legitimate psychology and most of them dismiss the NLP courses they have been on as 'utter rubbish'.

It is true that NLP can occasionally work minor miracles in the same way as the simple psychology it pretends not to be – but like many therapies, it suffers from the disadvantage of being long-winded and needing several sessions to achieve a well formed outcome. Bear in mind that like other psychotherapies, including hypnosis, the onus really lies with the client.

In psychotherapy, the client expects that the end result will be feeling better – more often than not a result of clients being afforded the opportunity to get things off their chest and out into the open, aided by the guidance offered by the therapist.

With hypnosis, the client often expects a miracle cure. Hypnotherapy Clients turn up with the assumption that they will automatically leave a non-smoker. That is, after all, what they are paying for, so the hypnotist has to deliver. If, on the other hand, a client has a session with an NLP practitioner they may be satisfied if, at the end of the session, they just feel relaxed or slightly more positive, which will make them feel a little better anyway. The expectations a client has of hypnosis are far higher, yet easy to enough to deliver once you know how.

Confucius would say that 'the mind is like a parachute – it only works when it's open'. I would say that 'the mind once open gives others the opportunity to fill it with pretentious crap'.

In the physical world, there are so many things that have made life so much easier – convenient travel, convenience foods and domestic appliances such as refrigerators, dish-washers, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, mobile telephones – that it's hard to imagine what life was like just five decades ago.

And so it is with our personal wellbeing. Instead of trying to work out our problems for ourselves in the time honoured manner and with the instinctive tools that nature gave us, we now find it far more convenient to throw ourselves into the welcoming arms of defeat – a place where the relevant expert will coax us back to 'normality' in return for cash. The inevitable result for modern society is already becoming apparent.

The danger is that appropriation and application of false wisdom is not enhancing our lives but setting us back. You won't catch any immigrant from the third world falling for this woo woo bollocks – they already understand the key to success – hard work and application.

The twenty-first century wizards and witch-doctors weave their spells for the needy and the suggestible. The problem is, their spells are intentionally calculated to construct problems that weren't there in the first place. And *that's the con!!!* Remember, these people are just as ruthless as the con artists who sell you books entitled 'I can make you rich' and their targets are middle-class people with disposable income and time on their hands.

This hard sell is constantly reinforced by images of an army of so-called 'celebrities' going into therapy. They tell us their 'genius' has made it impossible to cope with the real world and like the cabaret-singer-made-good Robbie Williams, they routinely check themselves into the Priory Clinic for a quick pampering, only to emerge with their egos intact, having taken advantage of the opportunity to talk about themselves – their favourite subject – to a therapist whom they are paying a fortune to sit and listen to their 'poor me' story. The

upside is tax-deductible publicity that otherwise, money couldn't buy. How can you possibly be *that* unhappy with 100million in the bank?

The inference is clear – admitting you're pathetic is no longer something to be ashamed of. Instead, it's now a badge of honour, like an ASBO or an ankle tag, not to mention a cheap marketing tool. It satisfies their desire to persuade the rest of us that they are somehow special and supremely gifted creative geniuses.

Former dim-brained Big Brother contestant Jade Goody checked herself into the same establishment as Robbie Williams, prompted by her PR man, the disgraced Max Clifford, as a way of keeping her porcine good looks in the papers. If it were not for Max Clifford she would still be the unknown, obnoxious, loud-mouthed racist tart she actually was. We all want a slice of the celebrity lifestyle, so a bit of pseudo-therapy might be alright, after all, victimhood, is now all the rage.

Time now to take a quick look at 'Rebirthing' – claimed by its disciple therapists as a cure for almost any ailment, from anxiety to family problems to drug addiction. What happens in rebirthing is the client is made to crawl through a very narrow tube, sometimes something as basic as a rolled-up carpet, which is supposed to represent the mother's birth canal, thus causing the client to be magically re-born. Many re-birthing therapists go on to make their clients wear nappies (which they are encouraged to soil) and drink milk from the breast area of the therapist, before crawling around the floor on all fours. The client then hands over a large wad of cash, leaving him free to return to his job as a High Court Judge.

So far, I have tried to deliberately limit myself to the 'talking therapies' and equally deliberately given pseudo-sciences like homeopathy a wide berth, if only for the reason that Prince Charles is a great believer in its efficacy.

Nonetheless, there have been some clinical studies done which have produced some interesting results. Without exception, these studies always produce around a 70% success rate, impressive in its own way and reflective of the 70% success rate of any placebo based cure. The basic premise of homeopathy is that the particular plant/herb/whatever is diluted to a proportion which is so weak it could have no effect on the physical body whatsoever.

However, homeopathy routinely refuses to get involved in clinical trials or study involving control groups, and there you have your answer. On the rare occasions when the researchers manage to persuade homeopaths to get involved, the procedure always follows the same format:

First, the homeopaths are delighted that at long last they will have the chance to prove to a disbelieving world that their methods will be vindicated and they will get the massive publicity they so richly deserve – publicity which will guarantee an increase in their business beyond dreams of avarice. Second, the results prove beyond any shadow of doubt that the placebo effect is the main driver in the cure. Third, they complain the test was not scientific enough. There's no pleasing some people.

When I was studying English literature at school for what was then 'O level', we used to take sections from the works of the great writers – Dickens, Shakespeare – and examine every word, every phrase, every sentence, and every meaning. This was called the study of the English Language and its richness can be enjoyed by anyone who can be bothered to make the effort to pick up a good book.

NLP would have us believe that this tried and tested method of understanding language is something new, and that it is called NLP. It isn't. It's called understanding language, and it works with any language.

A few short years later, when I became a professional musician, doing extra-work with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, I had the opportunity of working with some of the finest conductors in the business. What makes a fine conductor, I hear you ask? Well, three main qualities make a good conductor:

First is the ability to say something about the music, and to translate those thoughts into performance. The second quality is to know how to use the rehearsal time to the best advantage. Third is to be able to establish a rapport with the musicians, all fellow professionals. These three qualities can be applied as principles to any part of your life. If you understand what I mean, then you are already on your way to feeling better about yourself! You won't be needing Tony Robbins, NLP, hypnosis, Paul McKenna's superficial books or anything else for that matter – you are already a healthy, well-adjusted, successful human.

If, like me, you spend any portion of your life sitting on aeroplanes, flicking through the free glossy magazine that is there solely to get you to spend even more money, you might have come across some of the advertisements bearing the kind of slogan Anthony Robbins didn't think of. Here are some of the ones I have collected over the last few months:

- *Live Your Passion* Frederique Constant (Watches)
- *Just Do It* Nike (Sportswear)
- *Impossible is Nothing* Adidas (Sportswear)
- *Be the Best* British Army (Military)
- *Live the Dream* Honda (Cars)
- *Be All That You Can Be* United States Army (Oil)
- *The Power to be Your Best* Apple Computers (Computers)
- *Ride the Light* Qwest (Communications)

My favourite has to be William Shatner's remark to a fan at a Star Trek Convention – *Get a Life!*

Although other contenders might be philosopher René Descartes *Cogito ergo sum - I think, therefore I am*, or *Carpe Diem - Live for the day*.

Meaningless verbosity can be attractive and can impact us all to some degree – that's how suggestion works – you just have to be on your guard not to be fooled into buying into every part of it!

**Copyright Andrew Newton 2000. All rights reserved.**