NLP and Spirituality
Studying the sedative

Spirituality for me is about finding our deepest essence as human beings, the same essence we share with every person; it connects us to everyone else. So spirit is where we become most truly ourselves, by discovering and becoming most deeply connected with others. We find ourselves in our connections with others. One metaphor occurs constantly in spiritual literature is spirituality as a journey or search, sometimes on the outside, always within.

How does NLP connect with the quest for spirit, the inner journey? I think there is some good news and some bad news about NLP in this context. Bad news first. NLP has three elements woven into its title in a rich mixture:

Neuro- our neurology and our consciousness.
Linguistics- our language.
Thirdly our ability to go for outcomes: the programming part.

I would like to examine each of these three in turn. Consciousness can be a barrier if spirituality is thought of (consciously) as something to be attained, and if consciousness is assumed to be identical to self-consciousness. Consciousness is only a small part of our being, it cannot grasp the complete picture. Also something you consciously search for is different from you, the seeker. In 1934 a man named J.W. Dunne wrote an interesting book called The Serial Universe.(see footnote 1). Dunne tells of a certain artist who had escaped from the lunatic asylum, where he had been confined, perhaps by mistake. This artist bought some materials: paint and easel, and set out to make a complete picture of the universe. He was not crazy enough to think he could paint the whole world, but he was determined to do the best possible job on a small section: the beautiful countryside in which he found himself. He started by painting a small picture of the surrounding countryside in the middle of his huge canvas. He drew a wonderful picture. He was extremely pleased until he noticed that something was missing. He was part of this universe and he was not in the picture. How could he add a representation of himself? The man may have been crazy but he was not mad enough to think he could paint himself standing on the ground that he had already painted as lying in front of him. So he moved his easel a little way back, asked a passing farmer to be a model and drew a picture of himself drawing the original picture. However, he was still not satisfied. My first picture, he thought to himself, is a picture that a man would paint who is unaware of his own existence. My second picture rectifies that. But I, the real artist am conscious and aware of my own existence, so my second picture is still incomplete. So saying, he shifted his easel.

If there could be a picture of the real world, who would be painting it?

Now language. NLP has done great work here building on the insights of Korzybski who gets credit for the famous phrase 'the map is not the territory'. The word is not the thing. As Bateson pointed out, thinking that the word is the same as the thing it describes (whatever it might be) is like going into a restaurant and eating the menu.

Chuang Tzu, the Chinese master of the fourth century AD wrote:
'The fish trap exists because of the fish. Once you have gotten the fish you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit; once you have gotten the rabbit you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning. Once you have gotten the meaning you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words, so I can have a word with him?' (See footnote 2)

Language divides the world and divides us from the world on a profound level. Language creates dualities; black or white, day or night, good and bad. Qualities are defined by their opposite. We know the good the bad and the ugly by contrasting them with the better the worse and the beautiful. So to define something like spirit using words and attributing qualities to it is paradoxically to limit it by saying it is not something else. Secondly, when we do describe something we make a distinction between us and the thing described and so immediately dissociate from it. All spiritual writings describe spirituality in metaphor. If pressed for a more direct description it is always in terms of what it is Not : 'not this, not that', (in the Upanishads) and in the Tao Te Ching: 'The Tao that can be spoken in words is not the true Tao'.

If man is basically asleep to the spiritual realm as many mystics say, then language and normal waking conscious thought are the strong and principal soporifics that not only keep him asleep, but also fool him in thinking that he is really awake. So is NLP a study of the sleeping draught?

Chuang Tzu has another story: strolling along the banks of the Hao river with his friend Hui Tzu, he says, 'See how the minnows come out and dart round as they please! That's what fish really enjoy!' Hui Tzu replies, 'You're not a fish - how do you know what fish enjoy?' Chuang Tzu has a retort however, 'You're not I, so how do you know I don't know what fish enjoy?'
Hui Tzu comes back again, 'I'm not you, so I certainly don't know what you know. On the other hand you're certainly not a fish - so that still proves you don't know what fish enjoy!'
Chuang Tzu has the last word, 'Let's go back to the original question please. You asked me how I know what fish enjoy- so you already knew I knew it when you asked the question. I know it by standing here beside the Hao.' (See footnote 2)

Now the programming part of NLP - the ways we act with purpose to achieve outcomes. Outcomes are a very important part of NLP, they are the starting point for any NLP intervention. A basic NLP presupposition is that everything we do has a purpose. Conscious minds set outcomes. We set them and make sure they are expressed in the positive, are specified appropriately, within our influence, and appropriately sized. We make sure we have an evidence procedure for knowing when we have arrived, and attempt to make them ecological, although how our unaided conscious mind is supposed to do this, is hard to know. If outcomes are ends, things to be attained, the 'how to', the means are not specified, and yet how we go about achieving the outcome will affect what we get and the consequences. It's the 'how' that counts.

The books of the American Anthropologist Carlos Casteneda, are unacknowledged influences on NLP. Casteneda writes in his book Journey to Ixtlan, (see footnote 3), or rather reports his mentor Don Juan, talking about the spirit of the warrior. The

warrior is impeccable. The warrior sets outcomes knowing full well they may be totally trivial, but commits to them totally as if they were to be his or her last act on earth. The warrior is totally aligned and totally him or herself, so the resulting action has a purity and a focus that does not come from the outcome, but from the process of acting. It's interesting that the root of the word impeccable means 'unable to sin'. Casteneda is asking us to act 'As If' the quality of what we do is the most important thing in the world - regardless of what we are trying to achieve. As our lives are so complex and systemically intertwined the idea of outcomes as isolated occurrences are an illusion anyway. The quality of the journey is the important thing. Outcomes 'come out' of how we act to achieve what we want.

The road to Hell is paved with good intentions. This usually means wonderful outcomes and appalling means. The greater, the more refined and spiritual the outcome the more mayhem and havoc can be wreaked in trying to achieve it, once you accept that the end justifies the means. With an end outcome defined for the good of all, people have felt totally justified in committing atrocities trying to achieve it.

There is a character called Shigalov in Dostoevsky's novel The Possessed. (see Footnote 4).Shigalov has founded a Utopian system that will redeem present society. He warns his co-conspirators that even the shortest explanation of his system will take ten evening sessions to explain. And the system is not yet complete. He goes on: 'I am perplexed by my own data, and my conclusion is in direct contradiction to the original idea from which I started. Starting from unlimited freedom, I arrived at unlimited tyranny. I will add, however, that there is no other solution of the social formula than mine.' Here his friends started to laugh at him, which was probably the most sensible thing they could have done.

It is possible to argue the only humane definition of peace is actually a negative one: the absence of violence, because every positive definition will lead to violence in trying to attain it. This does not fit well with NLP well-formedness outcome conditions. Although good intentions pave the road to Hell, one of the important contributions of NLP is to separate behaviour from intention. So while marching towards the underworld we can at least acknowledge that this is not exactly where we want to go. In fact we want to go in the opposite direction, only the signposts got a little confused. By explicitly recognising the intention behind the behaviour we have a choice of moving logical levels. There is another NLP presupposition: everyone makes the best choice they can given their model of the world, but this does not excuse or explain that some terrible things are done in the world, NLP has to recognise this. Recognition, does not mean justification. Intentions are positive in the sense of being directed at some outcome as opposed to positive as being 'good' in some way. I do see a interesting clash between the focus on outcomes from NLP and spirituality as the quality of the journey. Perhaps setting process outcomes is one answer. End outcomes are what you get at the end, (eg. in sport winning the race), process outcomes are about how you are going to act in order to achieve it. Perhaps NLP could address the issue of well formedness conditions for process outcomes. How could you begin to think about setting an outcome to act impeccably?

That's the bad news. The good news is that precisely because NLP concerns itself so closely with linguistics, outcomes and consciousness, we have a fine way of exploring these issues. In another age old metaphor, if you perceive yourself in a

prison, a good place to start your escape plan is to study the walls, bars, and habits of the guards in detail. Only by knowing intimately what constrains you can you hope to escape it. NLP studies maps with the insistence that they are to be separated from the territory they represent. NLP's contribution to spirituality can be to carefully map the areas in its title. Spirituality itself will always begin just beyond the edge of the map. I believe Spirituality is territorial. NLP also insists on sensory based descriptions and the importance of sensory experience. This is congruent with spirituality which is about experience. Mystics through out the ages tell the same metaphors about spiritual experience, regardless of historical period, or the organised belief systems they subscribe to. They insist on the importance of the experience. Words fall short of the experience like stones thrown at the stars. We throw a lot of stones, some may be well aimed, but they still bring us no closer, nor do they help you appreciate their beauty.

A final story from Chuang Tzu, talking to his friend Hui Tzu.
Hui Tzu said to Chuang Tzu, 'Your words are useless!'
Chuang Tzu said, 'A man has to understand the useless before you can talk to him about the useful. The earth is certainly vast and broad, though a man uses no more of it than the area he puts his feet on. If however, you were to dig away all the earth from around his feet until you reached the Yellow Springs (The Underworld) then would the man still be able to make use of it?'
'No, it would be useless,' said Hui Tzu.
'It is obvious then,' said Chuang Tzu, 'that the useless has its uses.'

Footnote 1
J.W. Dunne, The Serial Universe (Faber 1934)

Footnote 2
Chuang Tzu - Basic Writings Translated by Burton Watson (Columbia University press 1964)

Footnote 3
Carlos Casteneda, Journey to Ixtlan (Simon and Schuster 1972)

Footnote 4
Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Possessed (various editions)

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