Over 25 years of teaching NLP skills professionally, my students have taught me a lot. I thank you all. It took me about 5 years to notice that some students got far more from their NLP training than others. Eventually, the penny dropped, and I started to systematically research what the critical differences were, using the technology of modelling. The most interesting thing to emerge was a surprising degree of overlap among the first seven people I modelled. These patterns continued to hold true. I remember getting a lot of support from Colin Turner at the Further Education Staff College, where I was National Tutor for NLP in Further and Higher Education. Over the years I have refined this down to a set of practices or habits that seem to work very well for the overwhelming majority of students, and this is now well integrated into our NLP trainings at all levels.

A year or so ago, I met with Paul Tosey and Jane Mathieson, who head up NLP research for the School of Management at Surrey University. With ANLP, they hosted the first International Research Conference on NLP in June 2008. Paul helped us design a research project to clarify what people actually got from our Practitioner courses. By using five independent researchers, we were able to identify all the main benefits, which included increased self-confidence, wellbeing and a much increased experience of choice in their lives. However the most satisfying finding for me, was that the vast majority of students were experiencing transformational learning. That is, they were learning how to transform themselves – to become self-actualising, in Maslow’s terminology. This is notoriously hard to achieve, and has long been a goal of the Human Potential Movement. This movement was itself instrumental in giving birth to NLP in the seventies, as Michael Hall has pointed out in recent articles.

To make sense of transformational learning, I need to mention Ken Wilber’s work in mapping out the main stages of development of human consciousness. To my mind, what he has accomplished is comparable to Darwin’s work on evolution. Wilber has spent his life identifying the main stages in the evolution of human consciousness from birth to enlightenment (or whatever you prefer to call it). He has done this by integrating the findings of some 200 disciplines including western psychology and the world’s main spiritual wisdom traditions.

Although excellent, his work is a little complex for most people, so for teaching purposes I summarise it down to three stages of childhood development, three stages of adult development, and three stages of transpersonal development. To explain more would take the rest of this article, perhaps another time. In NLP circles, the only similar model is Spiral Dynamics, by Beck and Cowan. In my view, this is rather weak on the transpersonal end, and doesn't particularly go into practices.
Why does this matter? Well, I was talking this through recently with Judith DeLozier, and we both agreed that NLP is fundamentally a set of communication skills in two main domains. One set of skills are those for inter-personal communication – communication between people. The other related set of skills are those for intra-personal communication – communication within a person. Since skills need practice to develop, clearly learning NLP skills needs practice. This is why all reputable NLP trainings encourage students to set up practice groups. Where they succeed, I believe this helps the inter-personal skills more than the intra-personal.

And yet, the intra-personal skills are the essential ones for personal development and transformational learning. Indeed, without them, there is a very real glass ceiling on the development of interpersonal skills. These skills include awareness of your own internal processes, let’s call this self-awareness (quite different from self-consciousness). More importantly for any transpersonal development, they include the ability to temporarily suspend your internal thought processes (through basic mediation techniques), and the ability to stabilise the 3rd position – the ‘witness’, as it is known in the wisdom traditions.

Of the seven practices outlined below, the major focus is on intra-personal skills, which is why I believe they are so effective. This potted summary is empirically based on my, and my fellow trainer’s experiences with thousands of students. It has also been influenced by the Integral Life Practices developed by Ken Wilber and his outstanding team at the Integral Institute - thank you folks.

These core practices tend to work better in the sequence below. Because one size does not fit all, it is really important that you tailor each one to your individual needs.

A practice is any habit sustained across time for the purpose of developing yourself. Here are the seven practices that lay down the habits of self-sustained personal development and lead to personal transformation.

**Practice One – Clarifying Core Values and Life Purpose**

This practice establishes your inner compass for steering your life in your chosen direction. It is important to revisit this two or three time each year. This gives you a way of keeping your life ‘on track’, and makes decision making much easier. If you have done this before, you will know the value of it. If you have not, be patient with yourself. It is a profound exercise and the answers will take time to clarify themselves as they emerge from the unconscious mind. You may prefer to do this with a close friend over a few hours, by journaling over a week or so, or both.

Keep asking yourself this question: ‘What are my top five life values?’
Identify the main keywords and/or phrases that keep coming up for you, and write them down. Ideally allow the top five, but no more than the top ten, that seem to be the most important for you at this stage of your life, to float to the top. Next, ask yourself which is more important than which? When you can place them in whichever rank order you are most congruent about, you are done. This will typically take a lot of repeats, and cause much reflective thinking.

You are now ready to move on to the second stage, the clarification of your life purpose. This is best done by writing. Start a sentence: 'The purpose of my life is...'

Now, relax, allow yourself to feel creative, and acting as if you have some idea of what you are here for, complete the above sentence. If in doubt, just make it up. This is only a first draft. Notice which aspects you are happy with, and which you are not. Write out the start again: 'The purpose of my life is... ' and complete it again, with whatever modifications seem like an improvement to you. Keep repeating this process and you will gradually get clearer on your life purpose. If you have never done this before, again, be patient with yourself. It may take as few as ten, or as many as fifty, repeats, before you feel reasonably congruent with what you have written.

**Practice Two – Life Planning**

Having a compass is not enough on its own. This is where you start developing a route map for your life. As with the first practice, the process is simple, but not easy. Stay curious and unattached to results. Some will results will show up simply by clarifying your intentions. Some will not, and you will need to reflect on your outcomes, often chunking them down to smaller or different ones. In my experience you can double the effectiveness of life planning, by paying as much attention to issues/limitations/problems as to intentions/outcomes/goals. In both cases identify the smallest number with the greatest leverage. By leverage, I mean looking for those which, if achieved or resolved, would make the most significant difference to you.

As with the first practice, it is important to revisit this two or three times a year. A robust way of doing this, is to divide your life into whatever you consider to be the seven main areas. You must figure out what these are for yourself. Next, on a clear page (best in your learning journal, if you have one) draw a grid of seven rows and three columns. The three columns are for three different time frames. If you are a beginner, I would recommend one month, one year, and ten years. Finally in each box enter at least one highly leveraged outcome and issue, and preferably no more than three of each.

Allow a few hours for doing this, on your own, or with a close friend. Remember these are intentions only. Do not try to make yourself do them, the willpower model is notoriously ineffective. You are also forbidden from beating yourself up when you ‘fail’. You are, however, allowed to become intensely curious about what results do, and don’t, show up. You can also be curious as to what you
might learn about yourself from whatever results you get. And this is where the other practices begin.

**Practice Three – Weekly Practice Groups (or 1:1s)**
If you want to learn to be really good at NLP, this will take a lot of practice. Going on training courses without practice doesn’t work – it is simply expensive entertainment. This is why practice groups evolved. They can and do work to help you build all those sophisticated change skills. Find or create a practice group – they will be provided as part of any reputable NLP training course.

In brief, they typically meet one evening per week at someone’s home for two or three hours. Usually there will be between three and six people. Have a pleasant social beginning and end, because if you don’t make it enjoyable, you won’t keep going. However, the important bit is practicing all those skills you have learning, in the three classic roles of client, practitioner, and observer. Always split the time equally between the three roles, and always respect client confidentiality.

The client gets to explore whatever issue and/or outcome they choose. Once you have established daily journaling, you will be much clearer on what to go for, as client. The practitioner gets to practice their NLP skills – rapport and information gathering will loom large here, with emphasis on language skills and staying cleanly in the client’s model of the world. Diagnosis and change skills will follow naturally. The observer keeps track of time and gets to observe the quality of the practitioner’s moves. By paying close attention to what works, what doesn’t, and what you might have done differently, you are well placed to learn the most from the interaction. Also, when the practitioner gets stuck, you will be more able to coach them effectively on what to do next – remember questions usually work better than telling. It is worth having a five minute debrief at the end of each round, covering what you each noticed and learned from it.

After a few years of practice groups, it can work well to substitute regular 1:1 sessions with a skilled peer. Without regular 1:1 sessions, your development will hit a glass ceiling resulting from your accumulated blind spots.

**Practice Four – Daily Reflective Journaling**
This builds awareness, provides a reality check, and supports daily practices. The aim of keeping a learning journal isn’t so much about what you write. It is more to develop the habit of reflecting regularly on your life, as you live it, one day at a time. And the purpose of this is to build the habits of learning, not external stuff, but about what does, and doesn’t, work for you, and who you are becoming.

Most people use an A5 spiral hardback notebook, bought specifically for the purpose. Find your own way of making it an enjoyable part of your daily rituals. Aim to spend ten to twenty minutes/day on this practice.
First think about what has happened in the last 24 hours. Ask yourself what has been significant, what’s on top? Write briefly. What has worked? What have you enjoyed? What hasn’t worked? And most importantly, the learning question, what would you do differently? This includes all the crucial inner stuff. What would you think, feel, and believe differently? If your don’t know, which we usually don’t, ask yourself how a favourite role model would have dealt with the same situation. If you’re still not sure, take a guess. Finally mentally rehearse your best option until you are congruent. This latter is what really burns it in to your neural networks. Doing all this regularly lays down the habits of the person you are becoming, rather than repeating those of the person you were.

Second, think about the next 24 hours. Not the to-do lists, these live in your normal diary. This part of your daily journaling is really about developing yourself, and your capabilities. Here you set small goals, baby steps, which will move you towards the significant goals you clarified in the first month of your life plan. Here also, you will take baby steps in learning from the significant issues that lie between you, and becoming the person you want to be. As you keep setting your intentions for the next 24 hours, remember not to be attached to them. Some will happen, and some won’t. Willpower and beating yourself up continue to be forbidden. Just stay curious about which ones show up, and which don’t. When they don’t, you probably need to change your outcome, often chunking it down to a smaller one, or you need to change your approach to achieving it. This practice really helps develop your self-awareness. It will be frustrating in the first few weeks. Equally, it will really start to pay off in the first few months. This practice leads naturally into the next.

**Practice Five – Growing Your Daily Practices**

This is the only way to sustainably develop yourself, and your quality of life. Always remember, a practice is a habit you do regularly for the purpose of developing yourself. Start with the most motivating and use your journaling to track results. These will take time to show up, so be patient. Keep varying your practices as you make progress.

Here are a few common examples for you to choose from: Time management, financial habits, emotional awareness, emotional resilience, learning from issues, the learning question, mental rehearsal, relaxation (downtime), meditation, optimum diet, supplements, strengthening your witness (3rd position), modelling others, exercise, developing conscious/unconscious relationship, reading, auditory mind-food (good for listening to in car. Eckhart Tolle is a current favourite for those with an interest in the transpersonal), internal resource room, learning something completely new, voluntary simplicity, financial independence, self modelling, letting death be your advisor, insight meditation (vipassana), professional development, appreciation/gratitude, volunteering/contribution, finding enjoyment in all you do, etc.

**Practice Six – The Four Levels – Cross-training**
These last two practices are really a refinement of the last one. They are based on the pioneering work in this area by Ken Wilber and his Integral Institute. These practices will move you beyond egoic adulthood and take you into the realms of the transpersonal, with all the considerable benefits that this brings. One central concept is that of cross-training. Research has shown that a mixed balance of practices will achieve more development with less effort that focussing on a single area. Here is the briefest introduction. However to make sense of it, I strongly recommend you get hold of ‘Integral Life Practice’, either the book, or the starter kit (which includes CDs and DVDs by world class teachers).

Balance your range of practices across the four developmental levels of:
- Body, e.g. aerobics, tai chi, weight training
- Emotion (including ‘Shadow’), e.g. awareness, choice, therapy
- Mind, e.g. reading and study, belief systems, integral AQAL (All Quadrants All Levels) framework
- Spirit, e.g. concentration meditation, vipassana, the 1, 2, 3, of ‘God’

Whichever level you are currently weakest at is the one to go for first.

**Practice Seven – The Four Quadrants – Cross-training**

This last practice brings into play Wilber’s profound insights into the four quadrants of human experience. Too sophisticated to summarise here, but if you have got this far, reading about Wilber’s AQAL framework will do the job nicely. Again, look for your weakest quadrant and develop your practices in that quadrant first. Aim to build a balance of practices across all four quadrants:
- Individual Interior, e.g. the learning question & mental rehearsal, meditation
- Individual Exterior, e.g. nutrition and physical exercise
- Collective Interior, e.g. practice groups, co-coaching, training
- Collective Exterior, e.g. contribution, voluntary simplicity, sustainable lifestyle

That’s the potted summary, and congratulations on making it this far. If you are motivated to make a start on developing your practices, you will find an expanded guide to most of this material in our free monthly newsletter at John Seymour Associates website (plus a free guide to choosing NLP training).

We have refined this material over twenty years, and it really works. Please take it, use it, and pass it on. If you talk with people who are interested in doing NLP training, this material is thoroughly embedded in all our NLP courses at JSA. It makes a huge difference to the effectiveness of our students. If you are a trainer, and wish to use this material, I would appreciate a mention as a leading co-developer.

Thank you. Go well and be well.
References

- John Seymour, monthly Newsletter Articles, free. To read previous months articles – [www.john-seymour-associates.co.uk](http://www.john-seymour-associates.co.uk), or, for free monthly subscription email: [enquiries@john.seymour-associates.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@john.seymour-associates.co.uk) or phone 08456 580654
- Integral Life Practice, book by Ken Wilber, Terry Patten, Adam Leonard, and Marco Morelli, £15ish
- Integral Life Practice, Starter Kit, £120ish – [www.integralinstitute.org](http://www.integralinstitute.org)