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## Self-questions

### *Introduction*

By asking interesting and unusual questions, the founders of NLP made many discoveries about how we structure our internal worlds and create our personal realities.

In the process, they also identified many interesting questions that we can use to enhance communication and understanding. Unfortunately, it is not self-evident when to ask what, as anyone who has tried to teach questioning techniques will recognize.

Reflecting on how to help people know when to ask which question, I realized that I had stumbled on a fascinating line of enquiry: What exactly is a question? Why do we ask questions anyway? And what is their role in our internal world?

This article attempts to answer these questions and explores how we might use the questions we ask ourselves in our heads to increase achievement and fulfillment in our lives.

### 1 SELF-TALK AND SELF-QUESTIONS

#### 1.1 *The three key elements of self-talk*

Our internal dialogue or “self-talk”, like ordinary talk, contains utterances in three main moods: affirmative, interrogative, and imperative—or statements, questions, and commands.

These basic language patterns are so important for how we organize and respond to our experience that we seem to acquire them before we can talk. Babies use rhythm and intonation patterns before they learn to use language fully. As any parent recognizes, they express statements, questions, and commands both with their bodies (gesture and facial expression) and through sound.

What is more, statement, question, and command correspond to the elements of the TOTE model (the “Test, Operate, Test, Exit” feedback loop originally proposed by Miller, Galanter, and Pribram in the 60s), which is perhaps the most economical way of representing how we solve problems and learn from experience (Figure 1). The tote model shows graphically how we carry out certain actions (operations) to achieve goals, testing against our criteria or evidence for having achieved the goal, until the goal is achieved.

In a tote, the goal is ordinarily expressed as a *statement* of what is wanted, the test is a *question*, and the operation an *order*, calling for the action to achieve the goal. The tote model suggests that statement, question, and command are the primary linguistic structures underpinning our ability to live and learn in the world. They allow us to define what is or is not, to examine and test, and they direct us to action. Without one of these linguistic moods, our thought processes would be so incomplete as to prevent us doing or achieving anything. They are necessary, not only for success, but for survival.

