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PERSONAL POWER OR HARMFUL HEDONISM?

Assessing the Teachings of Anthony Robbins

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Synopsis

In the 1980s, Anthony Robbins garnered much media attention due to his unusual practice of firewalking as part of his motivational seminars. Today, Robbins hosts conferences such as “Unleash the Power Within” the world over. At more than \$2,500 per ticket for front row seating, the Robbins media empire is thriving. With NBC announcing a new television program, *Breakthrough with Tony Robbins*, the self-proclaimed life coach and peak performance coach is spreading his message of “unlimited power” to eager audiences. But beneath the confident and lucrative exterior are a repackaging of human potential ideas, the denigration of truth to mere personal taste, a touch of quackery, and elements of pragmatic hedonism.

Not without controversy, Robbins has endured a divorce, a lawsuit over copyright infringement, and criticisms of his methods such as neuroassociative conditioning. Theologically speaking, while offering veiled suggestions supportive of “soft” theism, in practice Robbins appears at best a sort of religious pluralist, claiming that belief systems are not so much concerned with truth, but are more about personal empowerment regardless of whether those beliefs correspond to reality.

Bestselling books, expensive seminars, and a television series do not outweigh the errors underlying the flawed philosophy espoused by Tony Robbins. Personal power that neglects the true human condition and the power of the cross of Christ in favor of worldly success is merely hollow, harmful, and hedonistic.

“Trusting experts blindly is not well-advised. Don’t blindly accept everything I say, either!”¹

– Anthony Robbins

Standing at six feet, seven inches, Anthony “Tony” Robbins is an imposing figure. His overly large hands and feet, the result of a medical condition, make him appear somewhat awkward. But as he takes the stage, it is clear he is a confident individual, speaking clearly and with conviction. Robbins talks of harnessing personal power, our innate ability to do nearly everything we would like to do, and offers eager audiences around the world simple steps for achieving unparalleled success. A bestselling author and popular motivational speaker, Tony Robbins began his rise to fame while still in his twenties. His first book, *Unlimited Power: The New Science of Personal Achievement*² (1986), further propelled his success, as did *Awaken the Giant Within* (1991). Grabbing media attention by including firewalking in his seminars, Robbins soon turned his speaking engagements into a media empire, adding motion picture appearances to his portfolio as well.³ In addition, NBC announced early in 2009 a new television series, *Breakthrough with Tony Robbins*, while his seemingly endless speaking schedule takes him from his private Namale Resort in Fiji to Canada, Rome, Singapore, the United States, and elsewhere. Conference titles include

“Date with Destiny,” “Life Mastery,” “Wealth Mastery,” “Leadership Mastery,” and “Unleash the Power Within.” Robbins also is well represented online, where he has more than a million followers on microblogging site Twitter⁴ as well as his own website, www.tonyrobbins.com, where a variety of related products and services are sold.

Nevertheless, Robbins has faced his share of controversy. In 2001 his fifteen-year marriage ended in divorce, with Robbins remarrying later that same year. Some critics pointed to his divorce as an example of the failure of his teachings, noting, for instance, that at the time of the divorce Robbins was leading workshops on the subject of healthy relationships.

Another controversy involved accusations by financial “guru” Wade Cook, who claimed that Robbins used material from Cook’s book *Wall Street Money Machine*, including specific terms and phrases, without permission. Cook filed a lawsuit and, in 1998, was awarded more than \$650,000 in damages.

The National Council against Health Fraud, a private health agency, has also questioned some of the health and dietary advice offered by Robbins including dubious breathing techniques, “misinformation” about combining foods, and more, noting, “Robbins reveals his ignorance about physiology as he misinforms readers about how the body rids itself of metabolic wastes.”⁵

What is the substance behind the teachings that draw throngs of adoring crowds to Anthony Robbins’s events? Are his ideas compatible with biblical theology? Are they logical and coherent? The remainder of this article will address two key foundations of his ideas (pain/pleasure and neurolinguistic techniques), as well as his views of truth, theism, and his firewalking practices.

IF IT FEELS GOOD...

The two foundational concepts that form the basis of the ideas of Anthony Robbins are his views on pain and pleasure and his ideas in relation to neurology. We’ll begin our assessment of his teachings by exploring his views of pain and pleasure.

Robbins is quite clear about his belief that success in life is determined by our views of pain and pleasure. Indeed, changing our perspective of pain and pleasure, according to Robbins, is key to succeeding in life. Calling it “the force that shapes your life,”⁶ Robbins explains, “There is undoubtedly a single driving force behind all human behavior. This force impacts every facet of our lives, from our relationships to our finances to our bodies and brains. What is this force that is controlling you even now and will continue to do so for the rest of your life? **PAIN and PLEASURE!** *Everything you and I do, we do either out of our need to avoid pain or our desire to gain pleasure*” (emphases in original).⁷ He adds, “The secret of success is learning how to use pain and pleasure instead of having pain and pleasure use you. If you can do that, you’re in control of your life. If you don’t, life controls you.”⁸

Are these claims true? Is everything we do motivated by pain and pleasure? Robbins offers Donald Trump and Mother Teresa as examples of being motivated by pain and pleasure. Despite their obvious differences in goals— with Trump seeking accumulation of wealth and worldly success, and Mother Teresa having sought to help the poor—Robbins claims they are both, in fact, motivated by pain and pleasure.⁹ However, Robbins fails to factor into his assessment that in the case of a Christian living biblically, motivations are not based on responses to pain or pleasure but are instead rooted in God’s love. As a result, multitudes of Christians have endured pain and hardship for the sake of Christ, rather than avoiding pain in order to seek pleasure. The gospel of Christ has a way of turning our attempts at interpreting human behavior upside down.

Robbins’s descriptions of pain and pleasure actually have much in common with hedonism. Hedonism, as used here, does not refer to the casual term associated with an exclusive emphasis on

pleasure through self-indulgence or even debauchery. Rather, as classically defined in philosophy, hedonism is broadly concerned with maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. In a sense, this form of hedonism is *eudaemonistic*, meaning that it views happiness, in this case resulting from pleasure, as the highest good. Pleasure in hedonistic thinking is always good, while pain is always bad.

What may be termed *psychological hedonism* places the emphasis on human motivations in seeking pleasure, with some forms indicating that our foundational drive is to seek pleasure. *Ethical hedonism*, however, while it may involve elements of psychological hedonism, is more concerned with pleasure seeking as being morally right.

Hedonism has been criticized for various reasons. One interesting critique is known as “the *hedonistic paradox*, which may be put as follows. Many of the deepest and best pleasures of life (of love, of child rearing, of work) seem to come most often to those who are engaging in an activity for reasons other than pleasure seeking. Hence, not only is it dubious that we always in fact seek (or value only) pleasure, but also dubious that the best way to achieve pleasure is to seek it.”¹⁰ In other words, at times significant pleasures in life involve pain, but we do not avoid these pains, and, in fact, often pursue them.

Within the Christian worldview, Christ is our highest good and our best pursuit, not our own pleasure. Christ told his followers not to focus on themselves, but to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Him (Matt. 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 10:39). This hardly sounds self-centered or in line with the avoidance of pain and the seeking of pleasure. Christ did not promise “success,” as the world defines it, but hardship that is worth enduring.

NEUROLOGICAL NONSENSE?

Combined with his views of pain and pleasure, Robbins’s other key belief has its roots in neurolinguistic programming (NLP). Although he now prefers the term neuroassociative conditioning (NAC), for all intents and purposes the terms are synonymous.¹¹ According to Robbins, it is not enough merely to understand his perspective on pain and pleasure: “If you and I want to change our behavior, there is only one effective way to do it: we must link unbearable and immediate sensations of pain to our old behavior, and incredible and immediate sensations of pleasure to a new one.”¹² The intent is to be able to create nearly instant change in any area of life, thus creating a changed “state,” as Robbins calls it. Consequently, a problem that may normally take much time and effort to address, such as a phobia, can supposedly be cured rapidly by applying Robbins’s NLP-inspired techniques. Robbins, in fact, claims that “all changes are created in a moment,”¹³ misquoting 1 Corinthians 15:51–52 in the process (“Behold, I show you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye ...”).¹⁴

Robbins, however, does not like the term “programming” in NLP, finding it misleading: “It suggests that you could come to me, I would program you, and then everything would be fine.”¹⁵ Not wanting to repeat the same “mistake” made by other motivational teachers, resulting in minimizing personal responsibility and placing all the success on the technique itself (as well as the teacher), Robbins opted to drop the term “programming”: “As a result of this new perspective, I decided to change the metaphor for what I do. I stopped using the word ‘programming’ because while I continue to use many NLP techniques, I believe it’s inaccurate. A better metaphor for long-term change is conditioning” (emphasis in original).¹⁶

How can NAC help change behavior and thus lead to success? NAC is primarily concerned with perceived links between neurology, language, body language, and resulting behavior. Prior to dropping the term “programming” in favor of “conditioning,” Robbins defined NLP as follows: “NLP is the study of how language, both verbal and nonverbal, affects our nervous system. Our ability to do anything in

life is based upon our ability to direct our own nervous system.”¹⁷ Modeling, a technique of NLP and NAC, is important. By emulating or modeling someone successful, claims Robbins, we begin to condition ourselves to succeed.¹⁸ Changing “states” is also significant, with the goal being to foster empowering states rather than disempowering states.

There are a number of questions one might ask about NAC. Is it true that, as quoted earlier, “there is only one effective way to” change our behavior and that way is via the techniques of NAC? Certainly there are other ways to change behavior. Robbins’s hyperbole aside, what he probably is suggesting is that the fastest and best way involves the techniques he offers. But there are a number of competing theories of human behavior. To state that his method is the best is somewhat naïve given the history of human psychology and the fact that techniques such as NLP, which inspired NAC, have only been around some thirty years.

Moreover, for the Christian, changing behavior is not about reprogramming or reconditioning our neurology via language, but about reliance on Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit. Scripturally speaking, we can do everything through Christ and the strength he provides (Phil. 4:13). Robbins’s approach also leaves out the concept of human sin and depravity. If indeed we are sinful, fallen beings, then much of what we think we want to succeed at in life is probably skewed by this deleterious condition, meaning that much of the time, influenced by sin, most of us don’t really know what is best for us. Robbins leaves this out of his technique entirely.

In addition, the concepts promoted by Robbins are essentially presented as quick fixes for some deep issues. Can we just snap our mental fingers, as Robbins claims, and instantly change our behavior? Extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence, which appears to be seriously lacking in reference to neurolinguistic/neuroassociative techniques. Furthermore, there are some “states” that we are better off not changing instantly. For instance, God may wish to use pain, guilt, remorse, and other circumstances in order to help us mature as individuals, lead us to Him, and, in the long run, make us better people rather than desiring us immediately to vanquish such feelings.

Finally, the neurolinguistic/neuroassociative techniques Robbins presents are suspect. As Stephen Barrett, longtime critic of questionable alternative medicine practices, has written, “Scientific studies have demonstrated no correlation between eye movements and visual imagery, reported thoughts, or language choices. A National Research Council committee has found no significant evidence that NLP’s theories are sound or that its practices are effective.”¹⁹

TONY’S TRUTH

In addition to pleasure-pain theory and neurology, Robbins also makes comments that touch on the philosophical. Specifically, some of his remarks addressing belief systems relate to truth and epistemology (knowledge). In *Awaken the Giant Within*, Robbins writes, “The question is: which one of these beliefs is the true belief? The answer is that it doesn’t matter which one is true. What matters is which one is most *empowering*.”²⁰ In other words, at least as far as Robbins’s template for success is concerned, truth is irrelevant. Followed to its logical conclusions, then, if someone finds pantheism empowering, then that’s just fine. If another individual finds atheism empowering, then that’s fine, too.

This sort of approach to truth results in logical contradictions. The pantheist claims that everything is divine, while the atheist denies that anything divine exists. Yet within the epistemological framework that Robbins has established, such contradictions don’t really matter. While this sort of ideology may help Robbins reach broader audiences with his message, allowing him to avoid criticizing or excluding his audience’s beliefs or traditions, it is epistemologically untenable.

How then do we fit truth into the ideas Robbins presents? He adds, "We can all find someone to back up our belief and make us feel more solid about it. This is how human beings are able to rationalize. The key question, again, is whether this belief is strengthening or weakening us, empowering or disempowering us on a daily basis."²¹

There are a number of problems with such a perspective. Who is to say whether a particular belief is empowering, disempowering, strengthening, weakening or not? The ideology lacks a foundation, not only in the area of knowledge, but also in the area of ethics.

Moreover, what if a terrorist were to adopt the advice offered by Robbins? The implication is that the belief system of the terrorist, regardless of whether it is true, is acceptable to follow to its conclusions so long as the terrorist "feels" empowered. Granted, Robbins nowhere endorses terrorism, but the concern here is the rational implications and consequences of ideas. Given what Robbins has said about truth, belief systems, and empowerment, there is nothing to stop a terrorist from being empowered to continue to terrorize.

Another consequence of Robbins's view of truth is the question and significance of truth itself. Robbins summarily casts truth aside in favor of empowerment. Rather than seeking to understand the nature of truth and seeking to determine whether a particular truth claim corresponds to reality or not, Robbins simply casts the matter aside and moves on. But truth is not so easily ignored. Robbins's view of truth is only valid if truth actually does not matter. Truth, however, does matter, particularly in relation to explanations of reality. Indeed, the consequences of the truth or falsity of worldviews such as theism, atheism, and pantheism are metaphysically monumental. To ignore truth claims of this magnitude and simply say, "Whatever works for you is fine," is to cast aside human intellect in favor of what may very well be temporal pleasures that could result in dire eternal consequences.

From a Christian point of view, Robbins's ideas in the area of truth could very well lead people eternally astray. The truth claim, "Jesus is Lord," is either true or it is not. Whether it is "empowering" or not is irrelevant to the question regarding its truth or falsity.

SOFT THEISM

This leads to another question regarding Robbins. Is he a theist?

Before addressing this question, it will be beneficial to offer a brief definition of theism. In its most rudimentary sense, theism holds that a personal God exists. Traditionally, theists also tend to hold that this personal God created the universe, sustains it, is involved in it, and is a loving being. By definition, theism rules out competing worldviews such as atheism that denies that God exists, pantheism that denies that anything else exists besides God, and deism that affirms that God exists but denies that He is actively present in His creation or in human affairs.

Robbins does appear to be a theist, but a sort of "soft" theist who avoids getting into specifics. For instance, Robbins refers to "God" on occasion, as well as to a "Creator," and acknowledges the power of prayer, but not in any detail. Given his views on truth, as addressed earlier, it would seem that if indeed Robbins is a theist he is of the mindset that theism is not supremely important in one's worldview. If it were, Robbins would not be so cavalier about the question of truth.

Given the underpinnings of his teachings, asking whether Robbins is a Christian seems an odd inquiry. However, given the soft theism mentioned by Robbins, it is perhaps a valid one. While no one is in a position to judge the salvation of another person, we are in a position to judge teachings. Although there appears to be an undercurrent of theism in what Robbins believes, it is indeed vague. Moreover, his teachings are clearly at odds with biblical Christianity.

In addition, while Robbins quotes from a variety of sources, including the Bible, he also cites Buddhism, other religions and religious figures, and, on a number of occasions, American transcendentalist writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman. Merely quoting such sources does not suggest explicit endorsement of everything they believed, but, when taken as a whole, the citation of non-Christian sources does not bode well for the exclusive claims of Christ and Christianity.

For instance, when Robbins praises *A Course in Miracles*,²² a book that is overtly at odds with the Christian message, it's difficult, if not impossible, to fit such citations into the framework of theism, much less Christian theism.

Given the lack of emphasis on truth and the variety of citations from contradictory religious sources, Robbins appears to be a religious pluralist. This means that he is not concerned with the truth or falsity of any particular religion, but instead seems to view all religions as valid so long as they "empower" and "strengthen" the adherent.

Robbins's primary emphasis, however, comes across as sympathetic to Eastern religious ideas. Specific phrases and ideas are also reminiscent of "New Age" spirituality such as when he writes, "Your reality is the reality you create."²³ One of his Twitter posts quotes Taoist philosopher Lao-tzu: "There are many paths to enlightenment. Be sure to take one with a heart."²⁴

Ron Rhodes has written of Robbins: "In his books he approvingly cites Eastern and New Age types like Marianne Williamson, Bernie Siegel, Deepak Chopra, Andrew Weil, Confucius, Mahatma Gandhi, Emmet Fox, and *A Course in Miracles*. Other New Age indicators involve his use of Native American chants, and his idea that mystical secrets locked in the right side of the brain can be unleashed using his techniques."

Robbins's religious eclecticism is also, as Rhodes observes, "in keeping with his New Age leanings. On a number of occasions, he acknowledges many 'great teachers' —including Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad, Confucius, and Lao-Tzu."²⁵

TRIAL BY FIREWALKING

More than any other teaching or practice, firewalking is what initially drew the media to Tony Robbins. Does Robbins still promote firewalking? Yes. During his "Unleash the Power Within" conferences, for instance, attendees walk barefoot across a bed of hot coals that is some twelve feet long (taking about five or six steps to complete).

The term firewalking is itself a misnomer in that one does not walk across literal flames, but hot coals. Critics are quick to point out that walking across hot coals without getting burned is not a matter of positive mental thinking or religious mysticism, but merely physics. Just as placing your hand inside a hot oven will not burn you while touching metal in the oven will indeed burn, the solution to safe firewalking has to do with heat conductivity and thermal conduction. There's also the factor of time. Firewalking over ten or twelve feet is literally over within a matter of just a few seconds or less — hardly enough time for hot coals to burn through the soles of the feet of the average person.²⁶

Robbins, however, does not present the firewalking experience as religious. Using his techniques, if someone is in the proper mental state, then firewalking becomes a metaphor about being able to accomplish the seemingly impossible. For Robbins, overcoming fear through positive action is the purpose of the firewalk. Robbins explains: "The firewalk has fascinated the media to the point I fear its message is getting lost. The point is not to walk on fire....Instead, the firewalk is an experience in personal power and a metaphor for possibilities, an opportunity for people to produce results they

previously had thought impossible....When I conduct a firewalk, it's not part of any religious experience in the conventional sense. But it is an experience in belief. It teaches people in the most visceral sense that they can change, they can grow, they can stretch themselves, they can do things they never thought possible, that their greatest fears and limitations are self-imposed."²⁷

For the Christian, firewalking for religious or motivational reasons is unnecessary. Our source of motivational ability is not within our own fallen nature, but in Christ.

THE REAL GIANT WITHIN

Tony Robbins comes across as an amiable, caring, and sincere individual. His Twitter posts, for instance, often convey joy, encouragement, and a delight in life. In addition, he is not a hoarder of his wealth, having established a variety of venues to offer philanthropic assistance in various forms. Nevertheless, good intentions, no matter how sincere, are not enough to outweigh serious logical and theological deficiencies. The foundational principles underlying his philosophy are on shaky ground, to say the least. The purpose here, however, has not been to attack Robbins as an individual, but to assess his ideas. As he himself has said, "Don't blindly accept everything I say, either!"²⁸

Unlike human potential thinking that is often deeply self-centered, Christianity calls followers to be Christ-centered and other-centered. This does not mean neglecting ourselves, but rather placing ourselves in the proper context of God's will. With God and others as our primary focus, we can begin to become the kind of people God wants us to become—not self-centered individuals seeking wealth and other forms of worldly power, but instead humble individuals seeking to share the love of Christ. There is nothing wrong with success, per se, so long as one remains Christ-centered and pursues success with godly intentions and within godly parameters, but wealth and an easy life are not guaranteed for the Christian. Instead, we are told we will face hardships and endure suffering for the name of Christ.

Our power is limited, but God's power is not. We are flawed, fallen, depraved beings in desperate need of radical redemption that is Savior-centered, not self-centered. Being made in God's image, we have the capacity for creativity and greatness, but we are also in dire circumstances that only Christ can save us from. The real giant within is not unbounded human potential, but our capacity to sin. What is the solution to our serious problem? It is not in us, but in Christ. As Paul wrote, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom. 7:24–25).

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notes

- 1 Anthony Robbins, *Awaken the Giant Within: How to Take Immediate Control of Your Mental, Emotional, Physical and Financial Destiny!* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 90.
- 2 Anthony Robbins, *Unlimited Power: The New Science of Personal Achievement* (New York: Free Press, 1986).
- 3 His image appeared briefly in the film *Men in Black* (1997), he shared a scene with actor Jack Black in *Shallow Hal* (2001), and he is featured in *The Singularity Is Near* (2009).
- 4 As of August 2009.
- 5 William T. Jarvis, "Anthony Robbins," available at <http://www.ncahf.org/articles/or/robbins.html>. The NCAHF, co-founded by Dr. Stephen Barrett of Quackwatch.org, is a private organization "that focuses upon health misinformation, fraud, and quackery as public health problems" (<http://www.ncahf.org/>).
- 6 *Awaken the Giant Within*, 52.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 53.

- 8 Ibid., 54.
- 9 Ibid., 55–56.
- 10 James A. Montmarquet, in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd edition, gen. ed. Robert Audi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), s.v. “hedonism.”
- 11 Robbins prefers to spell it “Neuro-Associative Conditioning,” complete with a trademark symbol, perhaps to differentiate his approach from that of NLP and provide marketing branding as well.
- 12 Robbins, *Awaken the Giant Within*, 123.
- 13 Ibid., 108.
- 14 Ibid., 107. Robbins leaves off the “1” in 1 Corinthians and also fails to note that the passage encompasses verses 51 and 52 (he lists only verse 51). More significantly, he fails to grasp the meaning of the passage in context—Christians receiving imperishable and glorified bodies, not neurolinguistic changes of states. Robbins misquotes the Bible on several occasions (see, e.g., Ron Rhodes, “Anthony Robbins and the Quest for Unlimited Power,” *SCP Journal* (Summer/Fall 1998): 56–58).
- 15 Ibid., 111.
- 16 Ibid., 111–112.
- 17 Robbins, *Unlimited Power*, 26.
- 18 Ibid., 29.
- 19 Stephen Barrett, “Mental Help: Procedures to Avoid,” available at <http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/mentserv.html>. As evidence supporting his critique of NLP, Barrett references Daniel Druckman and John A. Swets, eds., *Enhancing Human Performance* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1988).
- 20 Robbins, *Awaken the Giant Within*, 79.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Robbins, *Awaken the Giant Within*, 264.
- 23 Robbins, *Unlimited Power*, 67.
- 24 June 16, 2009; <http://twitter.com/tonyrobbins>
- 25 Rhodes, 55. Deepak Chopra, a monistic pantheist, is also a featured speaker at Robbins events such as “Life Mastery.”
- 26 See, for instance, a physics-oriented explanation of firewalking offered by *The Skeptic’s Dictionary* at <http://www.skeptdic.com/firewalk.html>.
- 27 Robbins, *Unlimited Power*, 14–15.
- 28 Robbins, *Awaken the Giant Within*, 90.