

Unseating the Inner Tyrant

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With Dhamma practice one of the abiding insights is that although we encounter difficulties, struggles, and pain, the awareness that touches that feels bright. It's because practice is a matter of heart. If we love what we're doing we're prepared to engage with and meet pain and conflict. Just as you would if you were looking after someone who was ill and you had to put yourself out or clean up their mess – because you sincerely wish for their welfare, you felt good about doing all that. There's a palpable quality of feeling good because the quality of your intent was right.

So right intent is an important base to cultivate. The three inclinations that make up right intent are kindness, compassion and renunciation – letting go of the pull of the senses. Tuning into and sustaining this right intent feels good: firstly it generates self-respect or freedom from regret and anxiety. Then, because we act in accordance with that right intent, it means that we make good friends, and we cultivate livelihood that isn't caught up with greed or manipulation. So we both establish a sense of inner stability and dignity, and also we make our living context one of agreeable rather than toxic contact. When these are in place the heart can start to relax.

When you focus in the heart, you'll see that wholesomeness leads to pleasant feeling – whereas actions that are pushy, embittered or deceitful don't feel good. We can know both the wholesome and the unwholesome, and through steering away from harshness and greed feel a sense of coming into balance, of relating to this world, rather than trying to hold onto a position within it. To find this balance entails handling the internal and the external realities with the same intent - and it's only right intent that can do that. It means relating to oneself and others with the same intent of kindness and compassion: 'to others as to myself'. Then the heart isn't divided.

If one's energy is divided between trying to forget things, push things aside, trying to prove oneself as being okay, then the mind never consolidates or comes into its strength. But when the heart is confident and scrupulous, awareness feels uncramped and there is an increasing ability for focusing, inquiry and calm. An undivided heart can bring right effort to bear.

Effort is an important path-factor. And yet there's a snag if it isn't based on right intent. Right effort treasures the good, guards it, and finds occasion to develop it. This then becomes the basis for meditation - the mind is fit for inquiry into the causes of suffering. But when the place of intent isn't accessed, then we don't recognise the basic good in ourselves; instead the mind gets snagged on the moods and thoughts that pass on the surface. We tend to get stuck at that restless and unresolved level of mental activity, and lose track of the intent beneath the mental activity. Out of touch with our intent we get confused, doubt takes over and in that fluster, the mind produces self-narratives such as 'not

a very good meditator...can't concentrate, not very mindful at all etc.' That is, with that loss of heart, judgements about our doing and our performance arise.

The default of this performance review is critical. It focuses on how much better things could have been, and on what one may have done wrong; and exaggerates the flaws. This is anything but right intent!

The important thing to bear in mind is that intent isn't the ideas in your head, but the bearing of your heart. A lot of ideas are confused, but even good ideas are a problem – just because they take you up into your head and into some abstract idea of what you should or couldn't be. But if we come from ideas and idealism alone, heart-teachings get twisted. For example, the Buddha advised the recollection of Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha; that this gives rise to gladness and confidence. Gladness and faith are essential factors to give you energy and aim. But what can happen is that when we recollect the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, we think, 'Buddha... Buddha... Buddha...somebody a lot better than I am; Dhamma: something I haven't got very far with; Sangha: a bunch of people who are purer and more enlightened than me.' The idea hasn't translated into a heart-sense, and it turns against us. Now if I see a beautiful sunset, I don't think, 'I'm not as big and beautiful as that!' or 'Well, so what?' I can appreciate it – because my heart gets the meaning of beauty and receives and relaxes into that. Recollection is like that; it's a means for lifting the heart by receiving and empathising with wonderful things such as understanding and joy and freedom and integrity. But when it's used as a means for comparing and defining ourselves, it's miserable. The problem as always is this 'self-view.' And although self-view can wear many faces, it's the self-critical one that most people get stuck in. That's why I call this mind-set and view 'The Inner Tyrant.'

You've probably met this one: the Tyrant is the nagging voice that will always demand you achieve impossible standards of perfection, never offers congratulation or appreciation, exaggerates short-comings, indicts you with total responsibility for events that you may have been only part of; and based on this delivers indifference, scolding and punishment. Sometimes the Tyrant offers just a cold condescending self-regard. Sometimes the Tyrant keeps urging you to do more, to forgive others, to pull yourself together and to take responsibility – advice which has its place, but is inappropriate when it is coming from self-view. It just adds to the list of things that you should be and do. It adds more weight to carry, when this weight is the very obstacle that is making our lives problematic in the first place. When we're uplifted we can do and be a lot more than when we're depressed and weighed down. And all of this weight comes from the involuntary action of adopting mind-stuff as myself. Stupid, but we all do it (there's always the belief that I'll find one that is satisfying, and fits!).

This is the big weakness of the undeveloped mind – it makes how I feel, and what passes through awareness, into who I am. And what passes through is often the unresolved or problematic stuff. Yet the habit of identifying with mental content is so strong that with a grasp, and a contraction of the mind, we get pulled into the story, get mesmerised by it and rehash it time and time again. We fixate on the details of 'she said this five years ago and then yesterday she did this,' or we go into 'I'm always anxious and am never going to make it' again. By identifying with thoughts and emotions, we stop relating to them with right intent. Then the Tyrant takes over. The Tyrant is the mind-set that cuts off access to the

natural resonance and empathy of the heart. It will generally urge you to feel bad about yourself, to give upon yourself – and when that sense of self-respect is out of the way, then the field is open for addictive habits and 'It's all a waste of time anyway.' Somewhere down the end of that long track is spiritual or even physical suicide.

Now there are plenty of problems around. We dwell in a realm that is a place of difficulties, separations, painful experiences, brutalities, and inability to really hold on to something that's satisfying in a lasting way. There's the inability to ensure that nothing painful, hurtful or sorrowful will come to us. So we're all swimming around in this sea of unsatisfactoriness or '*dukkha*.' And the most important thing to bear in mind is not to ingest and drown in the water. The Buddha found that we don't have to, we can be released from suffering and stress in this life. The key that he presents is a release from the sense of identity; that is if we can cease from forming ourselves within a context, there can be way out. This is possible, because self is an action and a view, not a real entity. It's a deeply ingrained action of taking hold of feelings, interpretations and impulses and conceiving this is what I am. Whereas of course if we are something, we don't need to reach out and grab it, remember it, prove it or find it – it's already here and all that action only takes us away from ourselves. Whether we *are* and what we are is actually a side-track: in order to not drown in *dukkha*, the practice comes down to not *making* a self out of the habits of the mind. Then you can experience the results. And to the degree that any of us do this, painful and awkward stuff gets manageable and is even conducive to growth in terms of compassion, patience and understanding. Yes, we can actually grow through life rather than feel we have to defend ourselves against it or try to find some cosy corner to hang onto. So the primary aim of Buddhist practice to which other forms of effort lead up to is to let go of this identification activity.

However the Inner Tyrant is pretty thorough about making how I feel into who I am. Or it sets up an ideal that one shouldn't feel anything, because all that is an attachment. So then even when one does feel some happiness in meditation, the Inner Tyrant even takes over those crumbs of satisfaction and says, 'Don't hang on to that, too much self, what you need is to let go of that.' The Tyrant is full of ideological positions and control strategies. It doesn't do feelings or being with what's going on. It's a judge, whose actions and punishing demands come from losing touch with empathy. The scenarios are exaggerated, the verdicts severe, the punishments only make matters worse and heal nothing – but the Tyrant can't operate any other way. The Tyrant is trapped; it is a piece of stuck psychology, of relating to ourselves through an idea.

The Tyrant arises at that division between our inner life and our outer context. Internally, we experience ourselves feeling what we're feeling, having impulses coming up, interests and passions coming and going, and senses of pleasure and pain. There's that. And in terms of our external context, some of those impulses are either unacceptable or irrelevant, and a lot we're not sure about. Because we also have the experience of trying to present ourselves, to be accepted by the world around us. In this respect, we get a tremendous amount of messages as to what we should be. Some of these are to do with our intelligence, our physical appearance, and our mannerisms. Some of these involve catching on to what everybody else is wearing, and what the current jargon-words are to use to gain acceptance to the group. Some of this is job-oriented or partner-oriented; some of it is just social-

approval or social-okayness. All in all, there's a huge amount of energy and attention going into being an object that is seen as okay on all levels by everybody else or by one's particular group. So we're under considerable social pressure, and because the loss of place in the world is so damaging, our sense of not acting upon and non-mentioning the unacceptable can be based upon that social pressure, rather than from our own ethical sensitivity. In which case the centre of authority shifts away from our own heart-intelligence. Clearly it's not that we should act upon or express every feeling and impulse that occurs, but that we need to retain the authority to restrain, act or let go. Otherwise instead of coming from an empathic handling of the impulse (this doesn't feel good) we come from an ideological rejection of it (this shouldn't exist). And the problem is that immoral, unacceptable impulses *do* exist. Therefore because they shouldn't, it's *my fault*. There's something wrong with me. So wrong in fact that I can't tell anyone about it; I just better make sure they don't find out...etcetera.

But really, look around and you'll acknowledge that the human mind is capable of the most noble and the most selfish, brutal impulses. This is the mind. Handling it is quite a job, so you need all the encouragement that you can get. We need to sieve through the awareness of our own subjective, immediate, here-and-now experience, however messy and weird, rather than get stuck in the emphasis that we are seen to be 'okay.' Whatever that is. This is the message that gets internalised to: 'I want myself to be able to think that I'm okay; I want to be able to look at myself and conceive of myself as being an okay kind of person. I want to form a perfect self, with no weak spots at all.'

This may sound sensible at first: after all, we want to do what's right and be aware of our faults and blemishes and strive to realise truth and so on. But do you ever wonder why these thoughts and impulses are there? That maybe they're just energies that need to grow up and unravel? And that there might be a way of getting the mind to grow up – a way that blind suppression isn't going to do? Like listening to the mind with clarity and empathy? Then we can tune into our ability to feel the difference between good and evil and choose goodness. Because this growth, this maturation, is only going to happen through acknowledging the good and the bad – and making a choice.

Meanwhile, notice what it's like to notice some aspect of one's body or mind that seems flawed. What kind of fluster and tirade occurs when you lose something or make a mistake? What does it feel like to think about yourself? What kind of voice and energy starts happening? Is it supportive? That which thinks about you and your mind, is it on your side? Can it handle and work with your mind, or just complain? Does it lift you up, offer warmth, spaciousness or compassion? And if not, how is any intent based on that going to be of benefit to you?

The corrupting power of the Tyrant makes it imperative to unseat it. The simple strategy is to restore empathy, to come from the heart. And in meditation this is done close-up through being with, and feeling with, the energy and the feel of a thought or a mood or a pattern rather than following it, getting scared of it or believing in it. So the primary means of unseating the Inner Tyrant is the practice of 'measurelessness,' that is of replacing self-judgement with kindness, compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity. When the heart is made great with these, it can hold the Tyrant in check, and scan past his/her narratives to a

deeper sense of healthy awareness. It can bring to mind the sense that 'I am greater than this Tyrant, I don't believe this stuff.' 'I value just being here, even with my insecurity. I can be with that, and I can have compassion for that, and I don't even have to change it.' Because just to abide in compassionate awareness, not fixing, not blaming, and not changing anything, this itself is good. So then stuck stuff is met from a new angle, a stream of skilful intent rather than a self-view. And then transformation can occur. You step out of the stories, and you can listen to the Tyrant's ranting and grumbling with mindfulness, compassion – and eventually humour.

Meditating made me aware of the Tyrant for quite a while before I got round to unseating it. Naturally with spiritual practices, there's a good amount of aspiration and wish to experience purity, bliss and peace. The problem was that these aspirations and ideas tended to stick the mind to the ideal level when there wasn't the practical know-how to arrive there. And the non-pure, non-lofty, non-blissful would get condemned or trivialised. When I first practised it was just that. We just did meditation on our own in little huts and there was one meal a day that was brought around. I'd just come out of India at this time - I'd spent about six months there with amoebic dysentery for a good deal of the time so I was down to about somewhere between a hundred and thirty-five to a hundred and forty pounds. I was like a rake; I didn't have much flesh on my bones. So coming into this monastery and getting one meal a day - there was a certain amount of interest in this one meal a day! It was not great cuisine - but in that enervated condition, as long as you have something you can put inside you, you're not really that fussy. I'd also come out of a period of substance abuse and living pretty free and easy, and I really wanted to turn that around. The restraint that was the monastic standard seemed like a good way to root out my defilements. And not being in touch with the heart, I turned the restraint into an ideological compulsion – with disastrous results.

My meditation practice then was the Burmese Satipatthana method, which entails doing everything very slowly and making a mental note such as 'moving, touching, lifting, bending.' When this food would come in, all of that would go. I'd think, 'Intending to eat. Right: spoon, food,' – and then there would be a blur. Something in me was eating the food really fast. I thought I'd do better the next day, determine to do so...but lose it again. After a period of time I started to wonder why I was eating this food so fast – I mean the food wasn't going to run away! On examination I recognised I was eating it so fast so that my mind wouldn't be able to note it, because when my mind noticed it, I noticed I was feeling some excitement and happiness about eating food. If my mind noticed that, then that was always accompanied by a sense of criticism, that 'you shouldn't be enjoying this, there shouldn't be any sense of well-being arriving here.' So if I ate it quickly before I noticed it, there was a chance I'd get it down before the Tyrant came in. But the Tyrant always came in, even if it took until I was washing up. Then he'd say, 'Well, you lost mindfulness as well. You've got a big problem with food; you've got a big food-defilement. And you're not mindful either.' So I decided to eat less. I got down to eating about the amount of food you could hold in two cupped hands – and that was all for the day. I felt if I could just eat that much, maybe the Tyrant would leave me alone. But he always caught me somewhere. I was meditating somewhere between fourteen to fifteen hours a day and not feeling I was doing enough. Anything more than four hours sleep – not enough effort. It became obvious that no matter what I did, there was always more effort than could be made, or more comfort

that could be given up. The fact that I'd come from an easy-going kind of life to one of keeping precepts, abstaining from sex, music, entertainment and even companionship to live on one meal a day in a spartan hut in a country where I couldn't speak the language – I never touched into that as being a sign of having made any effort at all.

Then again, we were offered teachings on kindness, compassion, appreciation and equanimity – ‘to others, as to myself.’ But for quite a while I couldn't get much out of these teachings, not because I'm a particularly nasty person but because when I was ‘doing meditation’ I wasn't coming from the heart. I'd enjoy helping others, and be soft-hearted towards other creatures, but when it came down to doing kindness to myself...there wasn't much of a result. ‘May I be well... may I be well... may I be well...’ ‘May you be well... may you be well...’ My head would think, ‘What good does that do?’ That's because in life, like many other people, when it came down to really focusing on what I was doing, I operated through my non-empathic head. Without the presence of some living being to interact with, there wasn't a support for empathy.

When I did find a way of meditating, rather than of *trying* to meditate, it came through a fuller sense of the whole conscious system. I knew my mind and approach needed to get wider, I just couldn't keep working from being uptight and critical. So one of the things I worked on was to widen my attention beyond the head-intelligence through attuning to the bodily-sense. For example, when you're standing up and you know when you're balanced and when you're tilting over – that's a bodily sense. When you feel some tension and when you feel relaxed – that's a bodily sense. It's not focused on a particular point, it's a whole sense. When you feel welcome and when you feel rejected, there's a bodily sense there. When you feel frightened, there's a bodily sense. When you feel angry, there's a bodily sense. If you bring words associated with ill-will or kindness, you can feel how certain energies shift in your body. That's a bodily sense: it has intelligence; it fluctuates and changes; it responds and is affected. It's a way which we can use to know beyond thought-conception and judgement. Does this feel right? Do I feel settled here? Or do I feel something in me has to defend myself here? Something in me has to tense up here; something in me has to prove something here; and if this is occurring in the bodily sense, you can be sure that meditation based on that will never penetrate through to something that is peaceful and enjoyable. It will always carry this mark of tension and contraction, and one's capacity for warmth, ease or empathy diminishes.

Mindfulness of body is a meditation that can be practised very simply with the question ‘How is my bodily sense now?’ The question itself comes with right intent, the intent to get in touch with heart-intelligence: ‘How does it feel?’ Sometimes I imagine sitting in warmth or sunshine, or anything that gives rise to a sense of ease. Then – ‘Where is there balance? Can there be any less tension?’ That to me is the basic focus. From there it gets possible and useful to carry that focus onto breathing. But...if I start out with the idea, ‘Get focused on the breathing, and don't drift off’, the likelihood is that I won't have released residual tension in the body, and then through that abrupt attitude generate more. Essentially, when we haven't entered through being receptive and empathic towards the body, then the domineering head (aka Inner Tyrant) is likely to be the default director of the practice.

Widening my approach to include the three intelligences – body, head and heart – really helped turn my practice around. It was very ordinary and obvious. I could establish kindness from knowing in my body how good it felt to be warm-hearted. I'd imagine what it would feel like to have kindness manifested towards myself – or those occasions when others had manifested generosity, helpfulness, or sympathy. These didn't have to be emotionally highly-charged, just the ordinary decency that people do manifest towards each other. Even to being looked at by one's dog works – it's just to get into that empathic place. Then I'd sit with that for a long time until it felt right to share that space with others – to bring other people into mind and share the kindness, compassion, forgiveness, appreciation. Again just because it feels good and fine and natural, not from some ideological position of 'Don't hoard that good stuff, get out there and pump it out!'

I'd practise recollection: such as on the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. Also very useful was to recollect my own virtues. (Tyrant really has a problem with this one.) By this I mean that finding time to recollect, 'Today I didn't kill anything. Today I didn't steal anything. Today I didn't sexually abuse anybody. Ah. Today...well, I could have said a lot worse! I held back the real stinging stuff that was about to jump out. That was pretty good. I could have really lashed out there, but I didn't; that was pretty good. And today I didn't drink or intoxicate myself.' I would imagine that those reflections would be possible for all of us, they're not that far out. But they're not great performance stuff for the ego. In fact none of this is about making a self out of actions at all. The beauty is in the ordinariness of noticing actions that point to right intent. This intent doesn't originate with thoughts, it is a heart-inclination rather than an ideal, but you can use simple thoughts like the above to direct towards it. This is a skilful use of head-intelligence.

The next point is to keep the head from turning these heart-inclinations into ideals! For example, meditation in solitude is strongly renunciate – and certainly this is one of the skilful intents. Renunciation is an intent to keep things simple because it's easier that way. However when that intent of the heart gets turned into an ideal in the mind, we get ideological about it. Then the Tyrant takes over, and renunciation becomes 'the less, the better.' And an ideological mind is mono-focused – it sees everything from the perspective of its ideology. So how less is less enough? 'Even less!' says the Tyrant. That's the way to losing balance. So as soon as you get any compulsion, the 'whole view' approach is to get the feel for how the idea is affecting the whole system. If it's causing contraction and pressure, then it's not been handled properly, and it hasn't translated into heart.

When you get a feel for energy and intelligence, it's clear that the fundamental source and footprint of all greed, hatred, restlessness, attachment and so on is just this contracted experience. Whether it's anger which tightens us up, dullness which makes us feel compacted. or greed which makes us feel we've got to clench around some object, something in the whole system tightens up. If we can recognise it right at that level and know how we can release that, we undercut the base of all the hindrances. And it's not all a personal or internal matter. If you live in an urban environment, you have to deal with a certain amount of bodily tension that comes from the sharp impact, the unknown people, the uncertainties, the cars charging at you every time you try to cross the street, the lights flashing at you. The likelihood is that you're going to get contracted. That's not your fault; that's the body going into 'protect, defend' mode. But if that contraction is not released or

relaxed, then what occurs is it gets emotionally resonated as a sense of anxiety, frustration, niggardliness, irritability, greed and so forth.

If we can recognise the bodily sense of things it's a reliable touchstone to know what we have to deal with because it's beyond debate, and you can't fake it. We can all learn particular bodily stances: looking fairly cool, looking fairly relaxed. We can all mime or mimic the relaxed, at-ease person, because that's what we're supposed to be, so we learn how to do it; but actually feeling it in yourself, really feeling free, feeling open, feeling okay, is a very different thing. Because of course the bodily effect is connected to the heart.

In terms of the heart-base, whatever emotive effects we experience give rise to volition. The mind/heart responds when something touches us. Because we're touched, something in us jumps up – volition, our will, our interest to do. Then we think, 'Oh, right. Do that,' or 'That's wrong. Don't do that.' That little signal is going on. If we follow that signal, then we act in ways that form who we are in our context. This is kamma: repeated action forms who we feel ourselves as being. However, the mind doesn't have to move into 'Do that' or 'Don't do that.' And with the resting back from volition, the actions that form self with regard to that thought get curtailed: it's just a thought. The more then that the mind can be independent of volition, the less there is a sense of self created with respect to those thoughts and feelings. They have less of a base, less of an ego-track, to get going on. Instead there is a sense of freedom and peace. This letting go around volition is then an important aspect of the Awakening process.

Now because so much volition gets triggered by external stimulation and also by the internal stuff of the mind, you can find yourself with this restless feeling of – 'I need to fix something, get on with something. Don't waste time. Do something important right now.' Then, 'Was that good enough?' So volition, with its need to achieve and perform is a main vehicle for the Tyrant. We may very well feel that the right place of volition is to spur us ever onwards to the goal, but when the spurring and the rider are not on your side, the chance of it going to the right goal are not that great.

One of the things that I've been realising can be useful is to relax volition – to have a period of aimlessness. I might try five minutes of it for an experiment – and feel the sense of 'What am I supposed to do right now? I don't feel very good. This is wasting my time. I should be...' It doesn't take long for the Tyrant to get going, action is his primary domain, the more driven the better. The Tyrant gets quite upset with aimlessness: 'What's the point of all this silliness? Are you going to spend the rest of your life wasting your time? This is disgusting.' But all I'm doing is being aimless – for up to half an hour – just to notice what I'm feeling when there isn't any particular agenda. I acknowledge the subjective receptivity when there isn't anything to prove, accumulate or reject. It's a way of playing with or massaging volition so I'm no longer dominated by it.

I find this very useful. It really stirs the Inner Tyrant. I like to do it so the Tyrant is given a hard time every now and again, because he's given me such a hard time! Try it. In half an hour of aimlessness, just allow whatever thought is there, whatever feeling is there to be felt, to be sensed. If you feel like standing up, stand up. If you feel like walking, walk

slowly reflectively. Keep it simple. If you feel like stopping, stop. There's some kind of loosening up of the system. In my experience, it allows things to just settle and ease, and a sense of relaxation comes in. Then I find, 'Oh, this is peaceful. I think I'd like to just sit here and be with my body and breathe in and out.' I don't go crazy. Instead there's a massage of volition that takes me into the meditative process quite naturally.

I've worked hard on aimlessness. For example at one time I'd get very obsessive about tidying the room in the house we were given as a dwelling. I had a period of time when I was living in a room and doing 'sitter's practice' (where you don't lie down at all), so I was sitting all the time. I decided not to read anything either, and not to talk. I wasn't reading anything, talking or lying down. Although that surely should have pleased my Tyrant, I'd still get sleepy – which he didn't approve of at all. Then I'd notice that I would endlessly fuss around my room, sweeping it and tidying it; then the curtain looked like it needed folding so I'd do that and sit down again; then the grate of the fire needed sweeping...and so on. So I determined to spend a week of not tidying it at all, not doing anything to it; just sitting there and letting the dust accumulate. I'd feel the volitional twitch and acknowledge it, contemplate the volitional push and keep letting it go until the mind began to sink into a quiet place. And then really rest in that. With practice, I could come from that quiet place and do what that quiet place felt was appropriate.

One of the most wonderful moments in this period came around the meal-time. Having received the meal, I was sitting there contemplating my bowl with the food in it, when the familiar litany of thoughts came up about 'How much?' and 'Am I eating more than...?' I really 'saw' the pettiness of that Tyrant voice. Then something in me just told it very clearly to shut up. That I was going to eat my meal, so I needed to pay attention to what was actually happening – and we could get back to the judgements later. There was a sense of being startled – and the Tyrant slunk off.

So when we come out of the Tyrant program, volition is no longer dominated from the programmed head-centre but instead feels the whole sense of what's right. In this the path comes together both internally and externally, and because of that, the sense of oneself as some alienated object in the world begins to dissolve. It's a home-coming of a kind – not to the place of *dukkha*, but to the base of right intent. And it's only from here that we can offer some basic sanity to the world.