

1: Overthrowing the Inner Dictator

Dharma Talk by Ven. Shikai Zuiko O-sensei
Dainen-ji, November 24, 2001

Limbs flopping and puppet like in a mockery of life, hundreds of emaciated bodies turn and roll as they are bulldozed into pits. A puppy lies whimpering, abandoned, in a vacant lot, one paw cut off as a gang initiation. The raped and mutilated corpse of a child rots in the wreckage of what once was a church in the Congo . An airplane crashes into a skyscraper.

Events like this have occurred, do occur, and most probably will continue to occur, everywhere and often in our world, even right now. They have one thing in common: They are the end result of contraction. Someone convinced themselves and sometimes others, at some point, that such actions were justified, warranted, and the right thing to do. Actions were dictated.

Overthrowing our inner dictator means we have to look past its propaganda to what is going on for us, really, right now.

Roshi has said that practice is too intimate to be personal. It's not about your experiencing alone; it's not specific to a particular type or group of human beings. This raises a major point: The process of experiencing is the same for every human being who has walked on the face of the planet.

Dictators may be called Il Duce, or General Pinochet, or Idi Amin Dada. The slogans may be from the Bible or the Koran or Mein Kampf or a Constitution. We may call our contracted states fear, anger, irritation, or frustration. The name, the label, the story about the cause, is not the experience being described or what we are actually experiencing.

Another point: The label, what we choose to call this experience we have just noticed, is just a word. It is not the experience. It is a metaphor for the experience. We have become very used to labels. We like them; we even love them; we think they mean something. Slap on a label and we think we know what we are talking about. We nod our collective heads when we hear a label and we say "Yeah, yeah, that's it. Yeah, yeah, I know that one" and then go back to what we are really interested in - our self and how this relates to "me". "How do I feel about it?"

Labels, however, can be more or less useful. When the title for this Dharma Assembly was announced, a student emailed a request for registration. The student liked the idea of "overthrowing the inner dictator" and as well, wanted to know what to do about the "inner judiciary". It can be called the "inner prosecutor", a "material witness", a "bureaucracy", or the "Ministry for Nice Deeds". I don't care what you call it. We've got to stop. The inner judiciary or the inner dictator, of course, doesn't exist in any form anyway. The bodymind doesn't contain a cartoon dictator with a uniform and a peculiar moustache or a figure that looks like our mother, or our father, or a spouse, who is always telling us what to do. There is no dark side or evil twin, no Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

However, the metaphor of dictator is very accurate because it can seem as if we have no choice but to follow the commands of this tyrant. A dictator is defined as "a tyrant, a leader who rules with absolute power and usually with force; too radical in the exercise of power or authority, dictators can be cruel and irrational in insisting on complete obedience. Tyrants threaten and give harsh punishment for disobedience."

Dictatorships are states ruled by tyrants. When we get into a state about anything, caused by passion, aggression, or stupidity, we are ruled by the contraction, tyrannized and dictated to by the content of the thoughts we have allowed attention to fall into and the patterns we allow to play out.

As Anzan roshi says in "The Straight Path", commenting on the Satipatthana sutta,

A contracted mind is a shriveled mind, a fixated mind. A mind that is limited is a mind that has been overcome. It means literally "underneath," a time when one is falling into despair, or pride or any other such state or mood, without recognizing that fact.

Roshi goes on to say that,

A mind which is "unlimited," or anuttara, is a mind in which no mental state is predominant, a mind which is very open at that time.

Earlier in the commentary he had said that,

The word that we have translated as "open," or mahagatam, also means "greatness." It is a mind which has the quality of not being dominated by any of the states that are arising.

States don't have to be big or forceful to have an impact. They happen to us everyday. We wake up in the morning. That little voice says, "I'm so tired, too tired to sit. Don't get up." And we stay in bed. The dictator has been obeyed. Dictators and tyrants puff up and get more powerful the more they are obeyed. The motto of Mussolini's Italian Fascist Party was "Crederi. Obbedire. Combattere": "Believe. Obey. Fight."

We believe our story of being too tired. We obey by staying in bed until it is too late and then we start to defend our stance because after all, we should have gotten up. We will likely become defensive and aggressive if a Teacher or a practice advisor questions us. The content and discursiveness are not the state; they are the propaganda of the state. This example is mild and not very sexy and for those reasons may help us see the mechanism more clearly. (We are content junkies and can be very easily distracted.)

Another favourite campaign for the inner dictator is "understanding" or rather, the inability to understand the Teachings. We hear a teisho or a reading and because it is new to us, may have names we are not familiar with, or may speak too directly to how we are, familiar patterns arise: "I don't understand" fires off at the first opportunity and our attention salutes. As attention congeals, the senses contract, and we actually become less capable of understanding. The propaganda machine whirrs into action, stories start to proliferate. The stories usually have a theme of worthlessness and impossibility. More examples that "fit" are dredged up. They reinforce and concretize the state. We believe them. The stories propagate other stories that fit. If they don't fit, the parts that don't match up are simply ignored. We obey the instruction we have given ourselves to not understand and the fight starts.

The nature of the fight varies from force directed at oneself: self-criticism, derogatory comments about oneself; these cause the contraction to tighten. The power and force of the state increases with the fuel of more and more attention; the bodymind becomes more and more uncomfortable and feels more and more pressure. This can escalate into banging a desk or a wall, yelling or crying, or actually to the point of hitting

oneself. The force of contraction can also be directed against others. We may start off with criticism of another person; escalate to hurling derogatory, nasty, hurtful comments at someone or something else. The bodymind seems to puff up its chest, breathing becomes difficult, muscles become tight, the face is inflamed, the chin points sharply up and out like that of Mussolini, El Duce.

The momentum of the state builds and contraction continues to that very painful point. Our red, squinty eyes blink or bulge in wonder as they search for a target. We spy something. That something is “other” to our “self”, to our “state”. It is “other” and therefore, enemy. We lash out and hit someone or break something. A victory for the inner dictator.

“Fascist” comes from “fascio”, which means “bundle” or “group” and describes something which is difficult to break if it is bound together or organized: a bundle of firewood, for instance. “Skandha” in Sanskrit, means “piles” or “heaps” or “bundles” or “binding groups”. “Skandha” is the word used to describe how experience is displaying itself.

As Anzan roshi states in “The Straight Path”,

How a moment of perception and cognition arises in the context of self-image. First there is form, which is a moment of freezing, of knowing that something is being known. This is the process of objectification, which is how knowing occurs within self-image, within a structure of dualism. So there is a moment of crystallization or freezing. Then one begins to check it out with the next skandha of basic reactivity. You check it out to see if you can get something from it, or to see if it's going to threaten you or if you can just ignore it as much as possible. And then it starts to become sharper and clearer through the third skandha of symbolization: what is it? Perhaps a sound; perhaps a feeling-you aren't quite sure yet and then as it builds up, you begin to relate it to previous experiences and to look for something similar to compare it to. With the fourth skandha, habitual patterning, you determine how you will relate to it. And then finally there is the fifth skandha, the moment of becoming 'conscious' of it.

When these five piles, or heaps, or bundles, or binding groups, of perception and cognition are left unquestioned, they produce conditioned experience. Things pile up, unnoticed. Suddenly we may find ourselves laughing or crying for no real reason, but perfectly convinced of what it might be at the time. We may experience great waves of contraction and heat or even nausea. We can slap a label on it and say that we are frustrated, angry, ecstatic, bored, in love, in hate, or sick. We can sob and moan and whine or become aggressive.

In the early stages of this practice, however long that may be, everyone experiences sudden, profound, feelings which are often described as desolation, loneliness, anger, and so forth. If we are not aware of the process and compulsively react, we can cause suffering to ourselves and to others. The dictator rallies an army. Practice is the way to disarm that army and to overthrow the dictator.

The symbol of the Fascists was fasces, bundles of sticks used for flogging, wrapped around an axe for capital punishment. It's quite an accurate and fitting description of the way we beat ourselves up through allowing states to propagate and, in far too many cases, allowing them to propagate to the point of homicide, suicide or genocide. A state can kill.

Other tendencies of historical Fascism also describe the behaviour we can fall into when we are taken over

by an inner dictator: attacking others who are different or, in fact, making others different. "You people are just too weird" or "Those people from the other village smell funny. Let's kill them"; trying to reduce others to impotency: "What do you know? You're stupid, you can't teach me anything. I'm un-teachable"; elevating death as the true fulfillment of life: "I'd rather die than give up this view of myself" or "I'll kill myself, I'd be better off dead"; indoctrinating oneself as superior: "I don't need to do this. I'm better than all of you as it is"; keeping everyone else subservient to the state: "If you loved me, you would let me do what I want" or "I know I've been told to be on time and not keep people waiting but I really need this drink of water"; introducing severe censorship and not talking about what is going on in case it will cause you to be viewed badly: "I'm an angry person; I've always been angry" or pitifully, "I don't understand. I don't understand anything. I must be stupid."

In order to maintain a belief in the kind of sweeping statements that a state can and does make, we have to ignore most of our experience. Hand-to-hand with censorship comes the propaganda of the state. In order to have "always" been angry, we have to sift through all of our experiences and ignore the 99% of the time when weren't angry, when we were happy or just in neutral, distracted, or sleeping, or otherwise engaged. The state can and does defend itself as it scans through memory and comes up with distortions of stories to support its chosen slogan. When this is pointed out, the dictator can become irrational, incoherent, mumbling about "not having the words" or "You wouldn't understand" or "Off with their heads! Off with their heads!" But even this is okay in the view of the dictator as the cultivation of irrationality and impulse is viewed as more important than coherency and logical thought which can be, and is seen, as cold, unfeeling, inhuman, and a domain of the intellect.

Fascism is also marked by nostalgia, a longing for a "prior good time". Students often hold this as a story in the early stages of practice, although it may not be spoken about; stories along the line of "Everything was better before I started to practise. I don't want to see things this clearly. I was getting along just fine, now this. I wish things could be like they were before." Or even trying to produce the memory of a good sitting so that it can be re-created; or things standing out so vividly for them and they say, "Wha! This is just like when I was smoking grass!" And we don't see what we are doing; we don't see that inner dictator arranging experiences. We are deluding ourselves. We are ignoring reality.

Being late for a sitting and keeping others waiting; striking the gong too hard because we are angry or distracted, or forgetting to strike the gong because we are busy figuring out what we are going to say when we are asked how our practice is; speaking too quickly or with too much force; writhing in the contractions and contortions of not understanding; wishing we were dead; yelling at someone; hating or loving them to distraction, are all vivid examples of the inner dictatorship. Self-image is tyrannizing us and for a moment has taken over.

We all have recognized, or are in the process of recognizing, more clearly that we can and must practice to stop that cycle of tyranny. Each moment we notice anything at all about how we are and practise mindfulness of breath and the whole body we are making ourselves available to openness. A bodymind which is open cannot be dominated by any of the states that are arising.

A soldier holds a gun to a prisoner's head and fires. We gasp and say, "I don't understand how someone can do that." A naked girl, burning with napalm runs screaming down a road in Asia. We cover our eyes and whisper, "How terrible, how terrible" forgetting that someone just like us pushed the button that sprayed the chemical. We see the endless black and white photographs of the 'disappeared' and the pyramids of skulls

from the Killing Fields and we conveniently forget that other human beings just like us were the perpetrators. We like to think we are different but in truth I hope we will never have cause to find out whether we are right about that.

Practising looking into experiencing as it arises is the way to undo these bundles of misunderstandings and contraction. Practising noticing the arising of a state and allowing it to open by feeling the breath, seeing the seeing, hearing the hearing, frees us from conditioned experiencing and allows us to become true human beings. Paying attention to the arising and decaying of moments of experiencing rather than following anything, leaves us open to the richness of our lives in this moment. Seeing the reality of experiencing as it really is frees us from the lies and suffering caused by our own dictators.

After the events of September 11th, Anzan roshi spoke to the community of practitioners at a formal sitting. It was the most truthful and useful statement of all the statements I have heard or read about this event.

Birth and death are happening in each moment. This is always the case. Being mindful of this Great Matter of birth and death is not a matter of telling ourselves stories about it, but of being sensitive to the sheer vulnerability of ourselves and of all beings. The events of Tuesday, September 11th , 2001 are deeply shocking and truly terrible. But events of greater and lesser scale are always occurring everyday. This is the world as it is.

The states of aggression that have led to this violence occurred to people on a greater or lesser scale everyday. This is the world as it is. Passion, aggression and stupidity are the three klesas, the three poisons that arise from the contraction of dividing our lives into self and other. Our practice is to see through the contraction of self-image and release the gestures of attention that arise from it. We do this through the practice of whole-bodily mindfulness, moment-to-moment.

Thank you for listening.