

THE INTERNAL COMBUSTION ENGINE OF THE HUMAN BEING

An article on inner fire and human consciousness

by

Andrew Marshall

This is the fourth in a series of seven articles being published in 2009 which may be downloaded as they become available at www.joyousness.org. The articles may be copied for private use provided they are copied in their entirety and that no charge whatsoever is made for them.

THE INTERNAL COMBUSTION ENGINE OF THE HUMAN BEING

Fire is essential for life and the energy of our whole solar system is based on fire. The Vedic pundits of old called this essence *agni* and it is to be found in every living being. Fire is caused by friction, by the rapid acceleration of molecules resulting in a kind of alchemy where one state of matter is transformed into something quite dissimilar. This we can understand in the ordinary, everyday sense where fire is used for cooking and heating, for instance.

In a similar way, there is combustion in the human being through the effects of respiration, digestion and so on. It may be an unfamiliar use of terminology to describe the metabolic processes of the human body as the action of fire, which we normally associate with flames and smoke. There is a magical transformation as oxygen is brought into the body and combines with the energy in food to produce heat and kinetic energy. Some ancient health systems, particularly ayurveda, assert that good health is very much dependent on the state of the body's fire or *agni*, particularly the digestive fire which is regarded as the most important. Pictorial though such a description may be, it is quite apt in describing a biological process. If the fire is strong, digestion is good; in other words if the appetite is healthy, normally food is digested well. If the appetite is dull and we pile food into the stomach, it isn't digested properly and a residue of toxins is left in the system. Think in terms of a coal or wood fire and the effect is similar – putting fuel onto a low fire will produce smoke, tar and unburnt material.

Where a little deeper thought is needed, simply because the concept is not one that is used very much if at all, is relating fire to some of the internal processes of the human being. *Internal processes* means here the workings of the mind and of consciousness, and thought, as we shall see, depends on *agni* or fire. The brain itself requires fire in order to function organically but the realms of thought itself, of awareness, of spiritual growth or evolution of consciousness are dependent on a subtler aspect of *agni* and that is what we shall look at now.

When a thought arises, what happens? There is a movement in the mind. Quite naturally we describe states of mind in terms that indicate movement – disturbed, tranquil, lively, lethargic, chaotic, emotional, and so on – and these all occur from, as well as result in, patterns of thought. It is difficult, if not impossible, to pin down what the mind actually is. A little analysis shows us, though, that what we commonly label as mind is a combination of awareness and successive impressions within awareness. Those impressions are themselves a combination of thoughts, perceptions and underlying beliefs, the last two colouring the first to a considerable degree. When there are no thoughts, there is simply awareness. Interestingly, some schools of thought refer to there being a *mind-stream* rather than a mind because of its constantly changing nature. For thoughts to be movement, there has to

be movement of something and for the moment let's think of the something that thoughts arise in as *mental matter*. In a sense, it is like matter because just as in physical matter a movement anywhere causes a chain reaction of causes and effects, so every thought causes another thought. We might even say that there is no such thing as a thought because thoughts are like ripples on the surface of consciousness. The ever-changing pattern of ripples, together with the underlying deeper currents that come from our beliefs and conditioning, form our continually changing states of mind. So, in the same way that ripples on the surface of water are nothing other than water, we could say that thoughts are nothing other than consciousness itself. However, as consciousness is abstract, the idea of mental matter is easier to grasp for the purposes of understanding various processes that go on within us.

So what place does fire have in all this? Fire gives off heat and it also gives off light; the better the quality of light, the greater the clarity. There is that lovely euphemistic phrase of an unproductive meeting of minds producing much heat but little light and perhaps that is not so far from the truth. When the mind is too busy or hyperactive, there is in a sense a form of heat being produced. There is so much movement in mental matter that a type of friction is created. The mind literally becomes hot and that can actually be reflected in the head and upper body as heat and tension. The heat in the mind is the operation of *agni*, internal fire, which has become out of balance. Too much heat in the mind can make us believe that we are doing right and are in a state of high productivity. Actually that isn't so because the heat produces tension in the mind and also in the way we feel – in what is sometimes called the emotional body – as well as producing physical symptoms. By contrast, in *t'ai chi*, an internal martial art characterised by slow movements, a calm mind is essential because the vital energy of the body or *chi* cannot flow freely where there is tension of any sort – mental, emotional or physical. Whatever activity we pursue, if we want to develop spiritually and evolve fully as human beings so that our inner potential is realised, we have to have a correct balance of internal fire. There has to be heat because without it there is dullness or inertia, but there also has to be light. This is not light as we understand it in a physical sense but as clarity in the mental and emotional bodies; in the physical body it manifests as poise.

Fire has more subtle aspects because as consciousness evolves there is the experience of finer or lighter states of awareness. They are not marked necessarily by a sharp intellect because these are more in the nature of abstract levels of mind, beyond ordinary thought. Here is the realm of intuition, creativity and inspiration. At this level, our internal fire is more coherent and the more it is allowed to infuse our lives, the more coherent and evolutionary our ordinary thinking mind becomes. Note the use of the words *allowed to*; force is totally alien to this part of our wonderful internal mechanism. The higher aspects of mind only come into play when both the lower mind – the everyday thinking part of mind that thrives on judgment and discursive thought – and the emotions have become relatively clear and calm.

With all this talk of fire, where or what is the internal combustion engine of the human being, the subject matter of our title? Let us leave aside consideration of the physical body for a moment because if evolution of consciousness is our reason for being, then we really should be looking internally rather than at the outer structure, important though that is. In any event, we know that the body and its functions are affected by the mind and emotions. Internally, then, the combustion engine must be the part of our mechanism or inner make-up that predominantly drives us. That will depend, for sure, on our stage of evolution of consciousness. Assuming that anyone reading this will have reached a certain level of understanding that might at the least be called spiritually inquiring, the most important qualities of inner fire for us are a balanced combination of light (clarity) and warmth. Warmth comes from kindness which gradually develops into loving-kindness and eventually into true compassion. Light or clarity comes from having a calm and untroubled mind which slowly develops into wisdom as we understand more and more about our real nature. If we try to develop wisdom without love, there is a certain coldness or lack of feeling; on the other hand, love in a troubled mind can give rise to all sorts of emotional turmoil.

The real internal combustion engine, the real driving force of the *bodhisattva* – a person seeking enlightenment or evolution of their consciousness to benefit others rather than out of any self-interest – is the spiritual heart. Its place relative to the body could be said to be in the region of the physical heart but a little more centrally placed; in reality, though, this is unimportant because the spiritual heart depends not on physical position but on purity of motive. When we have that right, our inner fire is good and strong. Then the outer fires of the body, emotions and intellectual mind will respond to it. Slowly but surely, the inner purifies the outer. The heart is the engine, loving-kindness is the fuel and the clear head of wisdom is the driver who knows where to go.

Andrew Marshall

August 2009

Andrew Marshall is the author of a number of articles that are published on www.joyousness.org and also of **The Great Little Book of Happiness – A Guide to Leading a Happier Life** published by **Radiant Sun Books** (ISBN 978-0-9559364-0-1) – visit www.thegreatlittlebookofhappiness.com for more information.

© Andrew Marshall 2009