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The Inner Game

What is the Inner Game?

What is it that a tennis pro discovers on the court, that he is then able to teach to ski instructors and golf pros, business executives and telephone switchboard operators; that can help physicians design more effective programs for the prevention of stroke and heart disease and help musicians play with more assurance, musicality, and delight? What exactly is the "inner" game that these very different areas of human performance all have in common?

Over the course of the next two chapters we will take a look at the Inner Game, explore its basic principles, and discover when and how it is played.

The Two Games

Whether you are playing tennis, engaged in business, or making music, each activity has its own challenges and ways to overcome them. It is, if you like, a game.

This game, the "outer" game, is the one we all know we are playing. You play it in the "outside" world, against "outside" opponents. The context or arena is the tennis court, the office, or the concert hall. The obstacles are your opponent's backhand, the cut-throat competition, or the intricate fingering. Your goal is to win the point, or land the contract, or play that difficult passage. And there are many books on the market designed to teach you how to play it better.

The fundamental insight of Tim Gallwey's approach is that you are also playing a second, or "inner," game all the time you are playing the "outer" game. This second game is subtler, less easily

noticed, and more quickly forgotten. It is played out in the arena of your mind. The obstacles are mental obstacles, such as lapses of concentration, nervousness, and self-doubt. Your goal is to express your potential to the fullest. And very few books talk about it.

These two games, the inner and the outer, are closely interrelated—and each one has a considerable impact on the other. It simply isn't possible to engage in any human activity without playing both games. The problem arises when we are playing both games but think we are only playing the outer game. These are the times when, as Tim puts it, "the game ends up playing the person," rather than the other way around.

In this book we shall concentrate on playing the Inner Game of Music, and leave instructions on the outer game—proper hand position, breath support, bowing techniques, and "the only right way to play Brahms"—to others. We will be asking you to let go of your outer game concerns, and to concentrate on developing your Inner Game.

There are two reasons for this. First, success in the Inner Game is very often the deciding factor between success in your outer game and failure. Second, the Inner Game is a fascinating game in its own right—and the only game that can be "applied" to all other games.

Tim Gallwey points out that "we are playing the Inner Game every day, whether we're aware of it or not, and winning or losing it every moment."

In a sense, the Inner Game is the key to success in the larger game of life.

Each one of us carries within us a reservoir of potential, which consists of natural abilities, capacities, and knowledge. We develop this potential when we face situations that challenge us to perform at new heights of achievement in any field of endeavor.

To meet these challenges, we have to solve problems in the real world around us. We have to play the outer game. You may, for instance, need to find ways to get the "cool" sound of Miles Davis when it's your turn to solo in a jazz combo.

But there are a whole set of inner problems that we also face and which directly affect our outer performance. You may feel nervous when the spotlight is on you, or feel doubtful that you can pull off

a difficult progression. These doubts are the challenges you face in the Inner Game.

As we turn to examine the inner world, with its teeming doubts and hopes and expectations, we need to know just what is going on inside us.

Inhibiting attitudes and tendencies—such as anxiety, fear of failure, and self-doubt—make us feel stressful, and our muscles respond by tightening up. They also distract and scatter our attention, and make us lose interest in what we are doing. In Inner Game terms, the kind of mental static that interferes with our natural ability is known as "self-interference."

Tim Gallwey's Inner Game approach teaches the awareness of attitudes that inhibit the expression of our full performance potential.

INNER GAME BASICS 1: The Performance Equation

The basic truth is that our performance of any task depends as much on the extent to which we interfere with our abilities as it does on those abilities themselves. This can be expressed as a formula:

$$P = p - i$$

In this equation P refers to Performance, which we define as the result you achieve—what you actually wind up feeling, achieving, and learning. Similarly, p stands for potential, defined as your innate ability—what you are naturally capable of. And i means interference—your capacity to get in your own way.

Improving Performance by Reducing Interference

Most people try to improve their performance *(P)* by increasing their potential *(p)* through practicing and learning new skills.

The Inner Game approach, on the other hand, is to reduce interference *(i)* at the same time that potential *(p)* is being trained—and the result is that our actual performance comes closer to our true potential.

THE STUMBLING BLOCK: SELF-INTERFERENCE

Remember the Worst Moment?

I'd like you to go back for a moment and take a look at the most painful and unpleasant musical experience you ever had. Even if it happened years ago, you may still have a very vivid picture of what happened—the tension in your body, and even the conflicts that were taking place in your head. It is likely to be an event that is engraved in your memory with surprising clarity, and you can probably describe it easily.

I remember only too clearly the day I played the bass for a final in my first year at Indiana University. It was a juried exam, and in addition to my own bass teacher, Murray Grodner, the examining board included the distinguished concert cellist Janos Starker; Josef Gingold, the dean of violin teachers; and William Primrose, perhaps the greatest violist of all time.

I was a nervous wreck. I felt sick to my stomach and was certain I would forget the music I had taken such pains to learn. Playing in front of the acknowledged masters in one's field is hardly the sort of thing that's conducive to self-confidence and ease. My hands were sweaty, my knees wobbled (which is a problem when you're holding a double bass), my heart was pounding, and I had trouble just breathing comfortably.

Worse, I can still hear the little voice in my head, pounding away at my last reserves of self-confidence. "I'm playing out of tune. What will they think? And I hit a wrong note there. Oh no, my bow is shaking. When will it stop? Still shaking. This is terrible. Now for the tricky part. Damn, if I could go over that measure again, I'm sure I could play it more smoothly. Hand up, remember, elbow firm, relax the third finger and vibrate fast! Yippee, I got it! Hope at least they were impressed with that little flourish. . . ."

I played as well as I could, given the battle that was going on inside me. And I don't suppose you'll be too surprised if I tell you the distinguished panel wasn't very impressed.

Remember the Best

And then there's the best musical experience you ever had. Can you remember it? It may have been a lesson, a recital, or a concert. What was it like? How much can you recall about the thoughts you had while you were playing? What was going on in your mind?

Did your mind interrupt in the middle of your playing to say, "Wow, this is really wonderful—I'm not making any mistakes?" Or is it possible that you were so involved in what you were doing that your mind wasn't able to comment on it? And if it did comment, just once maybe, to congratulate you, didn't it almost make you lose your stride?

The hundreds of musicians that I have spoken with—soloists, orchestral players, young students, and seasoned sessions men—almost all find it very difficult to remember much about the times when everything went well. They were aware that things were falling into place, and they remember feeling exhilarated and delighted.

That effortless fast technical passage, that quick motion to a high note when you hit it right on the button, and most of all, that unique suspended moment when you actually become the emotional or sensory quality of the music—the colors, the water, the love—we have all had times like these. They happen when we are mentally alert and aware, but too absorbed in the moment to be running any mental gossip. And as a result, it's very difficult to recall just exactly what was going on in our minds at the time.

The Lesson

What can we learn from all this?

Most of us have very clear memories of that self-critical internal conversation running on in our heads while we were playing poorly, and yet it often seems that we hardly remember noticing it at all while we were playing well. Isn't it reasonable to think that our performance would improve tremendously if we could eliminate that critical voice altogether?

Exercise: Identifying Self-interference

Take a moment to think about the things that make you nervous. Imagine yourself going on stage to play a concert and feeling those last-minute anxieties. Make a list of all the things that worry you, and then compare your list with the list I have compiled from literally hundreds of interviews with all sorts of musicians.

The musicians I spoke with, many of whom are at the top of their profession, all seemed to find themselves facing some of the same worries. Of course, the list varied from individual to individual—but the general focus was always the same. They said they

- doubted their own ability
- were afraid they would lose control
- felt they hadn't practiced enough
- were concerned they wouldn't see or hear properly
- were worried about their accompanist
- thought their equipment might malfunction
- worried about losing their place in the music
- doubted the audience would like their playing
- feared they would forget what they had memorized so well
- or feared that even if everything went well, their parents would still be disappointed they hadn't gone into business

Exercise: Noticing the Effects of Interference

These doubts and fears crop up, in one form or another, for almost all of us, and not just in the realm of music. Business executives, salespeople, artists, and athletes all experience equivalent doubts and fears.

Make a second list, this time of the mental and physical effects that doubt and anxiety have on you while you are performing, learning, or listening to music. How can you tell that you are feeling nervous? What are the clues that tell you that you are not at your best? What is your body telling you? And what's going on in your mind at times like this?

Again, you can compare your own list with the one that I drew up after interviewing musicians of every stripe and shape. Here's how their answers broke down into our two categories:

Physical problems included

- loss of breath
- dry mouth
- increased heartbeat
- sweaty hands
- shaking fingers, arms, or knees
- loss of the ability to see or hear clearly
- loss of sensitivity in the fingers
- tension
- stiff body movement
- feeling sick

Mental problems included

- inner voice's blaming or praising
- forgetting the words or fingering
- forgetting the music
- losing the sense of timing
- feeling distracted
- losing concentration

Once again, your own list will very likely include the same two categories of interference, and maybe even some of the same specific problems.

INNER GAME BASICS 2: Self 1 and Self 2

If you think about it, the presence of that voice in your head implies that someone or something is talking (it calls itself "I"), and someone or something else is doing the listening. Gallwey refers to the voice that's doing the talking as Self 1, and the person spoken to as Self 2.

Self 1 is our interference. It contains our concepts about how things should be, our judgments and associations. It is particularly fond of the words "should" and "shouldn't," and often sees things in terms of what "could have been."

Self 2 is the vast reservoir of potential within each one of us. It contains our natural talents and abilities, and is a virtually unlimited resource that we can tap and develop. Left to its own devices, it performs with gracefulness and ease.

A Word About Terminology

Many people, when they want to discuss these things, use terms like the "subconscious," "unconscious," and "conscious" minds. They may talk about the difference between "right brain" and "left brain" thinking. They may distinguish between the "reptilian" and "mammalian" brains and the "neocortex," or speak of the "brain/body" or "body/mind."

Each of these terms and distinctions has its place and meaning, and in a later chapter we shall discuss the difference between right and left brain modes of musical activity. But life gets very tricky when people start throwing different definitions of these terms around.

These terms are designed to describe the ways in which the incredibly complex human being is "wired and programmed." They are technical terms, from the disciplines of neurophysiology, philosophy, and psychology. As Karl Pribram, the distinguished neurophysiologist, has noted, we have as yet only the faintest inkling of what really goes on within the human brain.

Useful as these terms are, they can only confuse the issue here. Self 1 and Self 2 should not be taken to mean "left and right brain" or "mind and body" or "conscious and unconscious." They are terms that Tim Gallwey has coined to get around the complexity of these other definitions and the vast amount of argument surrounding them.

Unlike "unconscious," "left brain," and the rest, Self 1 and Self 2 do not pretend to describe particular mental structures or areas in the human body and brain. They describe mental and bodily processes in terms of their results rather than their nature. Hence the simplicity of Gallwey's definition:

- If it interferes with your potential, it's Self 1.
- If it expresses your potential, it's Self 2.

That's it. It's that simple. Self 2 may have access to the unconscious, or the right brain, or whatever; so might Self 1. The point is simply to know whether you are experiencing interference or expressing your fullest resources.

What Are the Characteristics of Self 1?

Self 1 gets in our way when it tells us what we should and shouldn't be doing, and talks to us largely in terms of the past and future. It loves to predict upcoming failures and successes, and often discusses things that have already happened in terms of the proverbial "if only." Like an after-dinner speaker, it also enjoys having our undivided attention.

Thinking is natural, and thoughts are likely to be present in every aspect of our lives: sometimes we pay attention to our thoughts, and sometimes we ignore them and change the subject. Self 1 includes not only our own thoughts, but also whatever we have picked up from our teacher's instructions, the hints our friends give us, our parents' hopes and desires, and our own urge to fulfill or reject those expectations. It includes everything we "think" we should be doing or worrying about.

While you are listening to Self 1's instructions, warnings, criticisms, and general play-by-play commentary, it is next to impossible to pay full attention to the music. Even when the comments that Self 1 makes are valid and true in themselves, it keeps you from being fully absorbed in the moment.

It is helpful to notice your thoughts, and to find out how much they contribute to your activity and how much they interfere with it. The best way to get to know your Self 1 is to give it a voice.

Exercise: Getting Acquainted with Self 1

While you are reading the next couple of paragraphs, I'd like you to notice any chatter that is going on in your head and then speak the chatter out loud. "How am I expected to keep on reading and speak out loud at the same time?" "My mind is pretty quiet today, isn't it?" "I need to get to the shops before dinner."

Notice how your talking interferes with your reading.

How many things can you pay attention to at the same time? Almost everyone can drive a car and talk, but can you read and talk simultaneously? If you can, is your reading as effective as it would be if you weren't talking? Do you understand as much, or do the words simply become a blur on the page?

That's enough.

Did you miss some of what you were reading? Do you need to go back and retrace your steps, rereading the passages you missed while you were thinking of something else?

Over the next few days, repeat this exercise while you are listening to music or playing your instrument. Notice how effective you are at what you are doing while you are speaking your thoughts out loud.

Even when you aren't speaking your thoughts out loud, they are still going on inside you. The distraction may be subtler, but it operates in much the same way, and speaking your thoughts aloud is one way of focusing in on it and seeing what impact it has. Most people find that their playing is less satisfactory when their minds are wandering or when they are listening to the "talker" inside their own heads.

How Did Self 1 Get into the Act?

Most children are avid and natural learners. For about the first eight years of our lives, we are in a wide-open state, ready and able to absorb whatever comes in front of us. We learn to walk and talk in the Self 2 way—without interference. Then, quite subtly, something changes. We begin to collect ideas, attitudes, and concepts, to draw conclusions, and to form our belief structures.

Of course, all this is proper and natural. These structures and attitudes provide us with the security of knowing what is known and can be taken for granted. But they also seal us off from Self 2, from the open and absorbing attitude with which we learned to walk and talk.

As we discover the value and utility of having relatively fixed ideas, attitudes, and opinions, the gap between our "critical" and "creative" selves becomes wider, and our spontaneous ability to tap the resources of Self 2 gradually disappears.

The Inner Game is designed to help regain this natural ability.

What Are the Characteristics of Self 2?

George Leonard, the former senior editor of *Look* magazine and author of many bestselling books on education and personal trans-

formation, describes what I understand as Self 2 knowledge in his book *The End of Sex.*

> The body is the best learning facility of all. It has thousands of feedback circuits. And the feedback is instantaneous. The body contains more information than all the libraries in the world, for it codifies, in its structure and its genes, evolutionary experience that goes all the way back to the first living organism. When we vacate our bodies [i.e., pay attention to Self 1 rather than Self 2] . . . this vast store of information is unavailable to us. When we reinhabit the body and learn to understand its messages, we gain access to a treasure of knowledge and guidance.

Self 2 has access both to our entire nervous system and the wealth of information that is stored in our past experiences, yet can be difficult for us to recall. Our Self 2, with its vast memory bank, contains all our past musical experience, everything we have ever heard, learned from others, or experienced for ourselves. It even contains knowledge that we assimilated directly from others without any specific instruction being given.

When we watch great artists perform (or for that matter our teachers and colleagues), we are continuously picking up and processing subtle bits of information. Have you ever noticed how your thinking or playing changes when you are surrounded by more advanced musicians? Are you influenced by their style of playing, their good judgment, their maturity and confidence?

What's more, since these great artists and teachers also learned in this way from other artists and their own teachers, what they pass on to us in this direct, nonverbal way includes a condensed awareness of the entire history of music. It is this type of nonverbal knowledge that helps us to develop our sense of what sounds, feels, and looks right, and this sense of rightness in turn is stored away in less conscious layers of the mind and nervous system.

Brain researchers tell us that most of us only use a small percentage of our mental powers. The rest is stored away in our unconscious mind and in the body. It is the challenge of the Inner Game that we can learn to avoid our self-interference, tap into this wealth of knowledge, and so gain access to our full inner resources.

Self 2 Performs Best in an "Unthinking" State

My fourteen-year-old cousin Dana puts in her regular piano practice when she is in her most "alert" state of mind—in the late morning or early afternoon. Yet she tells me she plays piano best when she has just rolled out of bed in the morning or when she is exhausted at the end of the day. She describes her playing in this state as "relaxed" and "flowing," while her practice session is "a stuggle," both mental and physical, with tension in her hands and arms and a galaxy of distracting thoughts—all of which makes her playing sluggish and unenthusiastic.

It seemed amazing to both of us that Dana was able to perform so much better when she was barely awake (or very relaxed indeed).

Other musicians, young and old, have also told me that they perform best when they are relaxed, slightly ill, tired, or in a mood where they don't care whether they "sound good" or not, perhaps while playing for a close friend. Somehow, lulling the alert, self-conscious Self 1 seems to play an important part in improving one's playing.

When Self 1 is disorganized, its interfering tendencies are kept to a minimum, and we gain easier access to the resources of Self 2. Our best performances often happen when we least expect them to, because we are allowing Self 2 to get on with playing, without our ideas of what "should be" getting in the way.

Self 2, then, is an unthinking state, one in which we are relaxed yet aware, and are letting our true ability and musicality express itself, without trying to control and manipulate it.

Managing Self 1 and Self 2

It is understandable that our teachers, parents, and friends may have instilled some fears and doubts in us when they told us what we "should" be doing. As anyone who teaches the Inner Game quickly finds out, it requires effort and attention to teach without prescribing "shoulds and shouldn'ts."

The problem is that we have now internalized these instructions from our teachers and chosen to focus on them while we are play-

ing. We need to realize that it is also possible to choose not to follow this kind of input. The critical Self 1 may tell us: "You are going to goof up. . . . Here comes the hard part. . . . Relax your third finger and press the thumb. . . ." But we don't have to listen.

When we eliminate our doubts and fears simply by ignoring the voice of Self 1 inside us, we also find we have eliminated its physical and mental effects. As our formula $(P = p - i)$ told us, when the interference is gone, our performance matches our potential.

Choosing to Ignore the "Good Advice" of Self 1

Self 1 is always trying to attract our attention away from the music we are playing or listening to. It is like a child who wants to interrupt a conversation we are having with a friend, or a stream of noisy traffic in the road outside the house.

What do you usually do when you are disturbed by the traffic outside the window or the children playing around the house? You may move to a quieter place, or speak louder, or perhaps pay closer attention to the person you are talking with. By focusing more closely on your conversation, you can often manage to "tune out" the distracting noises.

The first step in coping with our Self 1 voice is to recognize that it may not just get up and go away. As it talks to us, we have a natural tendency to talk back—and then we are in double trouble. Not only is Self 1 talking to us, but our own response is getting in the way of our concentrating on the music.

We don't have to talk back to Self 1.

We can choose.

In fact, there are a wide variety of choices open to us. We can choose to focus on various aspects of the music. We can listen to the sounds, watch ourselves as we are playing, sense the way in which our body is involved in the making of music, or monitor our feelings. Whichever of these or a dozen other choices we make, we are consciously choosing to focus on something that is happening right now, in the present moment.

When we are present in this way (focusing on something that is happening right now), Self 2 has the opportunity to emerge and express itself.

Self 1 is like those monsters in the early video games like Pac-Man that rushed around swallowing up anything that moved. While we are performing, little monsters of mental interference keep on chasing us in a perpetual Pac-Man game, trying to catch our attention, determined to "eat us up" before we accomplish our task—in this case, music.

In Pac-Man the objective is to clear all the dots out of a maze; but we must also manage to avoid the monsters that want to eat us. A good Pac-Man player knows how important it is to be aware of the monsters at all times, but will also tell you that putting your full attention on avoiding the monsters is a fatal mistake: as soon as you concentrate on avoiding the monster closest to you, the others will creep up on you from another direction. If instead you remain focused on the overall field without going into a panic, and concentrate primarily on clearing the maze of dots, you will be more likely to outwit the monsters.

If we pay attention to Self 1 while we are playing or listening to music, the monsters of self-doubt and mental interference are liable to get us. We are likely to lose our place, our tone, and our sense of being in control of the music.

But we do have a choice.

We can tune in to our Self 1 doubts and fears, or we can turn away from them. We can choose instead to concentrate on the essential elements of the music, and ignore Self 1's attempts to get our attention.

Relaxed Concentration

Inner Game techniques can reduce the effects of self-interference and guide us toward an ideal state of being. This state makes it easier for us to perform at our potential by rousing our interest, increasing our awareness, and teaching us to discover and trust our built-in resources and abilities. It is a state in which we are alert, relaxed, responsive, and focused. Gallwey refers to it as a state of "relaxed concentration," and calls it the "master skill" of the Inner Game.

Early in the development of the Inner Game, Tim Gallwey noticed that people played their best tennis when they were in this state. They were alert, yet at ease with themselves, and their atten-

tion seemed to be fully concentrated in the present moment. They enjoyed themselves, learned quickly, and seemed to be functioning at close to their full capacity.

In fact, this is a perfectly natural state of awareness in action. We all experience it often enough: when we lose track of time during a conversation with a friend, or when we forget we are watching a movie and get completely absorbed. Some people experience it while jogging, others in meditation, while typing, or even driving a car on the freeway.

We move quite naturally in and out of this absorbed state without giving it much thought, let alone thinking of it as "a state of relaxed concentration." And yet it is a special state, quite distinct from our normal waking consciousness.

Isaac Stern, one of the outstanding violinists of our time, sometimes plays very well—and sometimes plays superbly. His best performances allow us to glimpse his concentration, his power, his immersion in the music. It is as if he has gone beyond playing the violin, and taken us into his own deep experience of the music. We too are caught up in the same shift of consciousness as we give ourselves to the images and moods evoked by his playing. In Inner Game terms, we enter the state of relaxed concentration.

The challenge of the Inner Game is for you to bypass the critical interference of Self 1 and unleash the natural power and grace of Self 2.