

The Contraptions of Contraction

by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei
Dainen-ji, June 13th, 2009



Ka-chunk.

One word and the gears have already begun to turn. “What does that mean, ‘ka-chunk’? What is she talking about?”

Well, that’s what I’m talking about.

One spark and the engine of the five skandhas is set in motion. Form — what is that? A some thing. A gear turns and engages a sprocket - basic reactivity. ‘Is that sound threatening? Can I get something from it? Can I just ignore it?’ A flywheel begins to spin - symbolization. “What kind of file match do I have for that?” Habitual patterning “Well, it’s like the sound of an engine, sort of. Consciousness - “Oh, it’s Sensei talking about machinery or something.”

When the contraption of contraction starts up, you could just let it run out of momentum, slow and stop, but once it’s set in motion, the tendency is to become engaged in how all of its moving parts seem to fit together. It is that sense of movement and it’s solidity, that generates locatedness and locatedness generates more and more complexity. Greased by the three klesas of passion, aggression and stupidity, self-image crunches the open field of present experience into gears and the noise and movement of the gears creates a stronger and stronger sense of a “self” and “other”, “this” and “that”. This storyline about “that” person and what “I” said or did, or what they said or did and how that led to this thing or that thing - the current confusions, petty gripes, strategies and storylines, all gears and cogs and sprockets turning with one another. And at the centre of it, some “one” who believes itself to be the engine, hiding amongst the cogs, wheels, gears and wires.

[sound of gears turning, made with a ratchet]

In the teisho, “Do Not Sway” in the series “Doing Not-Doing Part Three: commentaries on the Forty-eight Supporting Precepts”, Ven. Anzan Hoshin roshi said this to the monks in the room:

In each moment you can rest alert in balance point and in the exertion of the pivot point of this moment of colours and forms and sounds and sensations and not be swayed. You know that your stories are just stories. You know that the gestures of attention towards this or away from that are the same old mechanisms that you have seen break down over and over again. Now, monks, some of the gears still spin and chatter, a piston spasms, and sparks still fly and smoke still drifts up from here and there. But the contraption that you used to ride around in is broken now. You have ridden in it all of your life and rode it onto a zafu one day. And while we warned you that a zafu is corrosive to the mechanisms and machinations of self-image you kept sitting on one. Remember what a fine machine it was only five years ago, ten years ago, twenty years ago? How seriously you took it, how you polished it with such care and pride and self-loathing and fear and lust and pettiness and all of the other things it could become as contraction was propagated by your polishing? Remember how fast it could go, how far it would take you into states that you can no longer get even more than a wheezy puff out of now? Well, now look at it. Just look at it. What a piece of broken down junk. So now you might still sit in the ruined remnants of contraction. But sooner or later you will just give up on it and come out into the open field that the old contraption was always sitting in.

When sitting zazen or when not sitting, you see yourself fall again and again into the gears of old patterns of contraction. The wheels and cogs begin to turn, over even the smallest of “issues” and the “components” that make up those “issues” and connect to other larger and smaller “issues” – many gears with compatible teeth-like protrusions that bite into, grip and turn each other. The hum of the engine grows so loud that you think it is your name, that it is who you are. And even when it begins to wind down, you keep going back to it, cranking it up, feeding yourself into it.

[sound of gears turning, made with a ratchet]

Instead of understanding that what is going on is a process and a series of mechanisms, and letting them spin and clatter without becoming them, you become them. When someone else is caught in the wheels and cogs of contraction, instead of just staying sane, staying with what you are doing, you begin to contract and crunch the field into gears and their contraptions of contraction and yours become intertwined and tangled and you spin each other around.

Sometimes when sitting, but not really sitting, it can seem as though you can contract and not yourself become the contraction. Like you can drive the steam engine, but somehow not actually be in it. You may “sort of know” that it’s not a good idea to propagate a state, but you start doing it anyway, thinking that you can keep it ‘contained’. This stuff is quite tricky because the feeling of justification, of being “right” becomes so focused you can trick yourself into thinking that you stand apart from the grinding of the gears. Sometime there are many, many gears, intricately fitted together, all spinning tightly and your perspective becomes so narrowed and so focused that you feel very cool, cool to the point of cold. Steely. You think you have the state under control, but it’s really like a pressure cooker with the lid buckling, about to blow and all you are noticing is the thin stream of steam shooting out of the top of it. At other times, the gears wobble wildly, rub against each other and generate so much heat it cooks your brain. You can’t think straight, don’t know what to do and become confused and incapable. And all of this grinding and spinning is taking place seemingly “within” you, or within the space of the bodymind.

Where is this “space” and what is it? Is there a compartment inside of you that you are in, and in which all of

these mechanical bits are moving? This “place” inside of the bodymind where you seem to withdraw to, where you turn the hand wheel to crank up and ponder meanings and interpretations and try to figure out what is “right” or “real” is a fabricated construct. You become fabricated because self-image is itself a fabrication that manufactures itself moment by moment. It is only possible for this to happen if you invert and internalize attention. It can seem to have its own reality to you because it can compress and fold, bend and twist and distort knowing into numberless cogs and gears. But in all of this distortion there is also the illusion that you are “containing” it. Yet all you’ve done is to create a fabricated separation between body and mind and reality and it is that feeling of separation that allows you to feel that all of this stuff is going on “inside” of you, separate from what is “outside” of you. You have turned yourself into a “container” of madness, and all of this is madness. You become madness.

Kachunk.

When you see the first motions of the engine, when the first gear is engaged and the rotor begins to turn, if you practise, attention can be strong enough to notice them, but not fall into them, not become them.

As the Roshi said in the quote I just read, “So now you might still sit in the ruined remnants of contraction. But sooner or later you will just give up on it and come out into the open field that the old contraption was always sitting in.”

One way or the other, contraction always falls apart. Even if you do nothing, it will compress and compress and ultimately will decay simply because it is impermanent. You don’t have to wait for the contraption to run out of gas and exhaust itself for that to happen. If you understand anything about practising, you will not wait. You can always choose to “makusa”, as Dogen zenji and the Roshi say. This means to “do not-doing” or allow yourself to be natural and unfabricated by opening all around the whirring of the gears and staying with the spaciousness and vividness of experiencing as a whole. Release the narrowing of attention by coming back to the breath as a place of which you can release it, by opening to the colours and forms and sounds. You can just stop. If you are in the middle of a sentence and recognize that you are being an asshat, you can say “I’ll just stop now.” You don’t have to cling to the engine while it runs on and on by itself like a runaway lawnmower hacking its way through the field of open knowing. Just let go. Fall open to the open expanse of this moment.

I’ll tell you something about the Roshi that was very striking for me when I first began practising — he doesn’t contract. I mean, he really doesn’t contract. He doesn’t do what most people do. He doesn’t keep a collection of old memories about bad stuff. He doesn’t hold on to the memories of things that people have done to later use as ammunition. He doesn’t save crazy emails or letters or photographs so he can look through them and remember just how crazy people can be. He isn’t at all interested in the petty nonsense most human beings find entertaining. The way that he is when presenting teisho is how he is all of the time. Sometimes he might have a thoughtful expression on his face but unlike most people who are deeply into some storyline about something when they look thoughtful, the Roshi will usually say something like “You know, we could make noodles out of daikon and braise them in gojuchang.” Or “The graphic-user interface is being run in virtual terminal 7 out of 63 possible terminals. So it’s not so much that you are dropping out of or under the GUI as using the space around it in the command line.”

A process can be fluid and living or it can be heavy, cumbrous and inflexible. If what you are noticing is heavy, cumbrous and inflexible, that is telling you something very clearly. It is telling you that you should

drop it immediately because regardless of what might seem to be going on, you have abandoned intelligence for the apparent cleverness of how everything has become fitted by excluding everything else. Let the five skandhas just fall open instead of piling up and they become the five wisdoms.

What are the five wisdoms? Well, you know, the details of that don't matter right now. What matters is the great matter of birth and death, of how you live your life. You can wonder about wisdom all that you want but it will not fit inside that contraption. So wise up by opening out, right now. Instead of riding back and forth in imaginary time and space, in memories and rants and expectations Just sit here, right now.

[Sound of gears rapidly turning, slows and with one final click, stops]