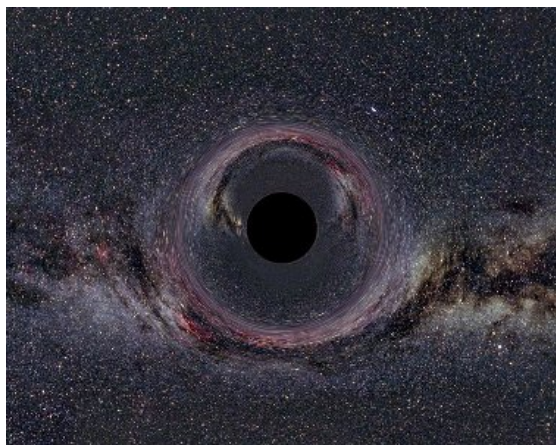


Crunch

by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei

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Crunch

[pause]

Crunch

[Pause]

Cunch, crunch, crunch

When you are sitting, gazing at the wall, if you are practising at all and if you are honest with yourself, you can see attention narrowing and the shadows of storylines forming. They begin to come up as a fragment of a thought about perhaps something that happened yesterday or something that you might do later today or something you are concerned about.

Crunch

Although you know you should practise, you feel compelled to look more closely at this storyline that is forming.

Crunch, crunch

What will you do about this? You could stay with the breath, the sensations of the body, the spaciousness of seeing and hearing. But...

Crunch, crunch, crunch

Now you are chewing on the storyline like it's a bone and it seems to you that you are getting something out of it so you keep chewing on it. But what are you getting out of it?

Sometimes a dog will find a bone and will chew on it until it shatters. Crunch, crunch, crunch. The shards of bone cut the soft tissues of the mouth until they bleed. Mmmm. Tastes good. Tastes like meat.

How is this different from what you do? Well, there is no blood, but you are chewing on yourself. The stuff the storylines are made up of, the images, the feelings, the internalized sounds - what are they? They are the

folding and congealing of attention into the distorted shapes and shadows of the strange and sometime torturous landscapes that you conjure up in the “privacy of your own thoughts”. All of this is the result of crunching attention, but you’re not noticing the crunching because you are obsessed with the “flavour” of the storyline.

Anzan Hoshin roshi’s translation of Eihei Dogen zenji’s text the “Fukanzazengi” includes a paragraph which explains:

You’ve got what you need, the treasure of this body and birth, so don’t waste your time. Keep to this as the basis of the Way of Awake Awareness. Don’t be attracted by just a spark from the flint. Anyway, your body is like dew on the grass, your life a flash of lightning; vain for a moment and then vanished in an instant.

This treasure of body and birth is the energy of bodymind. I don’t mean some “mystical” energy. I mean the vivid fact of being alive, as the whole bodymind, meat, bone, marrow, eyes, ears, nose, the capacity to think and feel, all of these are energies of bodymind. You can make choices concerning how you will use these energies.

The capacity to think and feel can be open or closed. When closed there is a sense of fundamental problem and a great deal of the energy of thought and feeling is spent in the attempt to control one’s world, to control experience, to fill the sense of poverty. This sense of problem is fundamental, wordless, and so we try to put words to it, give it a reason for being there. But the only reason that it is there is that attention is contracted. Moment after moment we have the opportunity to open to reality, but because our expectations seldom match our experiencing as it actually is, our expectations put us at odds with ourselves and the world around us. And that is the whole point of expectations. Self-image, which is itself a process of contraction has learned that giving rise to expectation inevitably leads to failed expectation and so provides an ongoing sense of problem to chew on.

But our lives do not take place in the language, imagery and feeling tones of expectation. Our lives take place amidst colours and forms and sounds and sensations. Our practice of mindfulness is about opening the capacities of bodymind to feel, to see, to hear and taste and think clearly, openly, instead of crunching attention.

Through practising the posture of zazen, you can begin to recognize the states that come up for you that cause you to move away from the posture. The details of the posture are very specific: sitting still in a balanced and aligned posture; the position of the hands in the mudra, opening the eye gaze, keeping the tip of the tongue against the hard palate, teeth lightly touching. All of these are “points of mindfulness” and if you are practising them and really paying attention to them, you will notice if they begin to change and this gives you an opportunity to practise with the states that give rise to these changes long before you would ordinarily notice them. This also becomes true at other times, when you are not sitting zazen. You can recognize the same bodily effects of crunching, such as the furrow between your brows, hunching the shoulders, clenching the hands or teeth, becoming a black hole in space through focusing on one thing instead of opening to experience as a whole.

There have always been gaps between our storylines...which is good because if all that we ever do is to go from one claustrophobic storyline into another and another and another and another, we become completely

dysfunctional. These shifts in attention that allow us to open to at least some of the details of present experiencing, at least some of the time, are how we are able to recognize what is going on and get some necessary tasks done. But you could practise the shift all of the time, instead of waiting for it to randomly happen.

Uncrunching attention is not difficult. Today, while you are sitting, as soon as you notice that what you are seeing is not the wall, but the imagery of your internalized ghost-world, sit up straight, practise the details of the posture and open to peripheral vision. As soon as you notice that what you are listening to is not the sounds in the room or outside of the room, but the drone of your own commentary as words and phrases, don't even bother completing the sentence. Instead, sit up straight, feel the breath, open attention to the sensations of the whole bodymind sitting and open to what you are actually hearing with your ears. As soon as you notice that your attention is becoming fixated on feeling tones, use the noticing of that as a reminder to feel the breath, the tanden, the sensations of the whole bodymind sitting. Open attention to bodily sensation instead of being sucked into a vortex of feeling tones. Lift yourself out from underneath the weight of sadness or confusion or self-involved storylines by releasing attention into the colours and forms and sounds and sensations. You already know what all of those storylines are about because they are your storylines. You created them and you keep them going and deepen them by propagating them. Of course they can seem to make sense to you when they are going on, but that is only because contraction always makes sense to contraction — because it's contracted. The content of the storyline isn't the point. The content is a smokescreen. The point is contracting into a "self" peering out at others or at situations or at the world from the vantage point of "self" and "other". Don't crunch. Don't do this to yourself and to those around you.

Today, when walking through the hallways of the monastery, don't crunch attention. Straighten up and pay attention to the details of experiencing. Open to sensations and seeing and hearing so that you can experience walking with the whole bodymind. Make use of the forms and practise them as completely as you are able. The forms are a constant reminder to stop rushing past what is being experienced. If you allow a state or a storyline to gloss over the details of the forms, then you are allowing that state or storyline to be more important than your practice. And if you do that, then you are stuck with the state.

If you are sweeping a floor, feel the breath and body, feel not just the broom but the hands that are holding the broom. Open to seeing and hearing. Release the crunching of attention by paying attention to what you are actually doing. Open past the storylines, the "personal" associations, the reluctance and recoil and sense of grudge that self-image is so quick to generate.

If you are sitting outside on one of the monastery porches drinking a cup of coffee during a free period, don't crunch while you drink. Instead, sit up straight, open to peripheral vision and allow the bodymind to open to and enjoy the vividness of seeing and hearing and sensation.

In the teisho "Completely It", in the series "Five Fingers, Ten Directions: Commentaries on Eihei Dogen zenji's text "Jippo" the Roshi says:

The tenzo presented a wonderful oryoki meal of herbaceous pasta salad with a variety of tomatoes and beans and Italian parsley; a salad of fennel, escarole, celery, and olives; beautifully crisp red radishes drizzled with extra virgin olive oil, kosher salt and fresh cracked black pepper. But it was not made for "you" to eat it. The flavour of a meal, its texture on the tongue, is poisoned if there is someone there

eating it. If there is “someone” squatting there behind the eyes eating the meal, although the meal has been swallowed it has not really been tasted, and so has not really been eaten. But there is no self behind the eyes. When it appears to be present it makes everything that is truly present into an absence. Most of the colours and forms fade and others grow lurid, most of the sounds dim and others blare. And so the meal that is served in oryoki is not for you to eat. It is for the bowl and spoon and hand and mouth and the ten directions of this whole world. If you bring in a “someone”, an agent of these boundless activities, even Dogen cannot pretend that you do not deserve thirty blows.

Let’s just let this “someone”, this “self-image” go. There is nothing here for it anyway. It really only enjoys itself when it can complain or feel threatened or stupid or worried. There is really no problem here in this wondrous world of ten directions and so there is nothing for it. Just let the tongue and teeth enjoy the radish. That’s what the meal was prepared for. Let seeing enjoy the colours and forms. Let hearing present itself joyfully as sounds. Let zazen enjoy zazen.

The office of the Tenzo has carefully prepared two meals to provide nourishment to those attending the Dharma Assembly today so that they can continue to practice. But any food that we eat, whenever it is prepared, provides us with the most precious resource of energy. Please don’t waste that energy by crunching and folding down. As our Meal Chant, the Gokan-no-ge or the Five Rememberances says:

*This meal arises from the labour of all beings,
may we remember their offering.*

*Delusions are many, attention wanders,
may we justify this offering.*

*Greed arises from self-cherishing,
may we be free in moderation.*

*This offering sustains us, gives us strength,
may we be grateful.*

We use this strength and attain the Way.

Prajnaparamita!

We justify this offering by just responding to this moment as it actually is. Instead of crunching down on that bone of lifeless contraction, use the energy you are given to open whole-bodily to the vividness of experiencing. The generosity of life offers us life as colours, forms, sounds and sensations and all that we need do is make ourselves available to it with our skin, meat bone, and marrow, with the whole bodymind as a whole.

So please, don’t crunch yourself up, unfold yourself.