

Opening Traps and Cages, Part One

Dharma Talk Presented by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei (while training as "Osho")
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In the "Fukanzazengi" by Eihei Dogen zenji, translated by Anzan Hoshin roshi and Joshu Dainen roshi as "How Everyone Can Sit", it says of the practice of zazen, "Traps and cages spring open."

The first time I heard this phrase, many years ago, one of the first thoughts that came up for me was that it wasn't true. If it were true that by just practising traps and cages can spring open, then what about people sitting in prisons, confined by concrete and steel? This statement "traps and cages spring open" seemed to me to be fraught with contradictions and at the time I resolved this by coming to the conclusion that it must just refer to practising with the usual run-of-the-mill states such as anger or confusion or sadness. But now, twenty years later, I understand it in a completely different way. What this phrase is pointing to is true, and it is true of all situations, in all places, and all times.

So what about the millions of people who are incarcerated around the world? In some instances these are people who have committed crimes of such severity that it was necessary to separate them from society, but in so many cases they have been incarcerated for political reasons, or for breaking religious codes, for simply breaking laws in order to feed their families and on and on and on. In the United States and Canada we have emptied our mental institutions and many of these people have ended up in prisons where they do not receive adequate care. In some countries children are incarcerated with their mothers, without adequate nutrition, medical care or sanitation. And I will spare you the details but will mention the forced confessions obtained through confining prisoners in isolation cells for extended periods of time, torture of every imaginable kind and even mock executions designed to produce the most excruciating terror. And there is the stunning list of ways in which human beings are actually executed in 58 countries around the world: lethal injection and the electric chair, death by firing squad, hanging, beheading and stoning. Stoning, by the way, is still within the penal codes of ten countries.

So what does our practice have to do with any of this? How do these traps and cages spring open? Now again, I am not saying that there aren't situations in which someone breaks a law and must be kept away from other people. But we live in a world in which expressing political views can lead to imprisonment and possibly execution. A world in which - in some countries, there are stonings and beheadings for crimes that in many other countries we would not consider to even be 'crimes' at all.

At the mention of these topics, I am sure most of you in this room believe that these situations I am speaking of have absolutely nothing to do with you. Well they do. They have everything to do with all of us. We are none of us separate from each other. We are not separate from the world around us.

Most of us here today have never looked out through the steel bars of a prison cells and hopefully never will. We don't even see prisons for the most part, as they are built in more secluded areas. We might read about the prison systems in our own country from time to time. We might read about the atrocious judicial practices of other countries, but because it's all 'somewhere else' or 'over there' we tend to view these 'misfits' and 'unfortunates' as having nothing to do with us and think that there is nothing we can do about them. But this leaves out all of the detail of what all of this actually is and how it happens.

Breaking a law does not come first. What comes first is the patterns of attention that give rise to forms of behaviour that are unacceptable to society. The creation of absurd laws, building prisons and then imprisoning people in them because they have broken these absurd laws does not come first. What comes first is the structures and patterns of attention that lead to viewing others as something 'other', something threatening, something that must be stifled. Torture, electric chairs, lethal injections and nooses do not come first. What comes first is patterns of attention that lead to the presumption of a self with a set of beliefs that justify torture and execution.

The patterns of attention I am referring to are the fabrications of self-image, the image we have of ourselves and the world. The materials prisons are constructed from, concrete and steel, are the final physical manifestations of the traps and cages created by self-image.

Traps and cages can take many, many forms. Feeling 'trapped' by a job, or viewing oneself as 'caged' in a marriage are certainly not uncommon situations to find oneself in. But again, it is not the job or the marriage that creates the cage or the trap. It is the movements and structures of attention that give rise to behaviours that lead to those situations. Being in a state, whether it is a state of dukkha, of feeling that everything is unsatisfactory; being in a state of anger or confusion - no matter what the configuration is, how these come about is through movements and structures of attention that create the sense of being trapped by them.

When we practise opening attention, we are practising with the very roots of all of these mechanisms that give rise to the very worst of human behaviour in the world. Whether we are looking at our injustice towards each other or the petty bullshit you have to put up with at the office, or how you broadcast your bad mood to your partner at the end of the day, what all of these have in common is a set of presumptions that have built on other presumptions, which have built on yet more presumptions, that have piled up and have become a whole set of belief systems. These belief systems are precisely what make people feel justified in speaking to and behaving towards others as though they were 'other' or even sub-human. They are what makes it possible for someone to torture another human being, whether it be with words and attitudes, or by acting it out in an extreme form of brutal punishment.

When you practise opening attention you are doing everything you can to be human. In the simplest and most direct way, you are allowing attention to fall open to what is most true of your experiencing, which is beyond presumptions and belief systems. You are practising the ability to see and hear and feel into the world around you. And when you do this, you can so easily understand that your thoughts and feelings about yourself and the world are just that - thoughts and feelings. Like and dislike flicker and change like a flame on a candle and there is room for them to come and go without acting them out. There is room to question into what is being experienced, to listen and learn and make intelligent choices instead of being swept along by the momentum of compulsion and habit.

If you look at what is going on in the world, you see an enormous tangled mess of war, mismanagement, irresponsible environmental policies, and on and on. You could look at this tangled ball of stuff and wonder where the original knot is, where it all really started. Where it all started was in moment-to-moment choices made by countless beings. You can trace back the historical details of any of these issues but you won't find the causes there because the actual causes were not noticed as they were occurring. They occurred as collective movements of attention, agreements made between people acting out similar movements of attention, reinforcing patterns of attention and then giving them names, making policies and laws out of them.

And don't you do the same thing? When you identify with a pattern of attention, you think there is nothing outside of that pattern. You think it's true. The more contracted a state is, the denser it is, the more that attention seems to be trapped within a structure arising within it, the more it seems to be true. You feel angry and you think you are completely justified in being angry. Or perhaps you're angry and you think maybe you're not completely justified, but you're angry enough that you continue to feed the anger. You feel resentful, confused, sad, and while any of these states is going on, you think that they actually mean something about you, that that is who you are. And very often you're convinced enough that you would say or do something to make sure others 'outside' of you know that that is who you are. You'll even campaign for support about these states by talking with other people about them so that they can help you propagate them. In short, the last thing you want to do is to let go of them, even if they hurt you; even if they hurt the people around you.

How do you know what is true, moment by moment? How do you release yourself from traps and cages? We release ourselves again and again, in each moment, in this moment of being aware, by attending to our experiencing as it actually is. Each detail that is noticed stands out distinctly as what it is. The sound of a bird; a drop of rain falling on your head; the coolness of the air on your skin; the changing light in the room; the myriad sensations of the body - all of these present themselves just as they are. Each colour and form, each sound, each sensation is telling you what is true. And when we practise this coming back again and again to what is true in each moment, the ways in which we lie to ourselves, inflate and propagate and trick ourselves, stand out clearly.

In each moment we can choose to open traps and cages. The more that we enter fully into and as this moment the more that they spring open of themselves. When we have entered completely we will see that there has never been anything to entrap us.

This is the first Dharma Talk of a series. I will be returning to this topic.