

# Opening Traps and Cages Part Two

Dharma Talk Presented by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei (while training as "Osho")  
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Numberless people all around the world are held captive in prisons, in massive buildings of concrete and metal, and with each passing year more are being built to hold those who break the rules of society. But if you look at the sheer number of people now incarcerated, it is fairly obvious that this is not just about people breaking the rules of society. It also points to how broken society is. We have these facts - social problems do exist; we have developed laws and systems of punishment to address violations, and we have built prisons to contain offenders. But there are questions about our values in all of this - what we value, how we treat those who don't hold the same values, and what we can do about all of this. We know that things can go wrong and sometimes do go wrong. Very badly wrong. And we know that as human beings we can be extraordinarily resourceful and creative in finding solutions when things go wrong. But without clearly understanding where things go wrong and addressing that, we are not solving anything. We are just perpetuating old modes of behaviour and of punishment, still holding to old views.

The Dharma shows us that the fundamental question is not even about our views but instead is: what is it that is doing the viewing? What position or location is being assumed in order to take on a particular perspective?

When you look out at the world, when you look at yourself, when you look at other people, what are you doing that with? Mind. The mind is not contained inside that bony egg-like structure on your neck and shoulders. The colours and forms you see before you right now are being seen with mind. The sounds you hear, the sensations you experience, all of these are experienced with mind and body. If you are not experiencing them with bodymind, then how could you possibly be experiencing them? You are not somewhere else, separate from the colours and forms and sounds and sensations. Even the illusory sense of a self, of "you" or "I", is just another experience, another sensation.

What is the difference between your mind and the mind of a petty thief, a thug, a rapist, or a suicide bomber? The difference is in the degree of contraction.

Contraction, is a way of speaking about the process that gives rise to self-image - the sense of self and all of its concerns. Self-image is the image we have of ourselves and of the world and our impressions of the world are filtered through it. The metaphor that the Roshi has often used to describe the process of contraction which gives rise to self-image is that of a hand closed into a fist. Take one hand out of the mudra and form it into a fist. Close it really tightly. Clench it so hard that the nails dig into the palm of your hand. And now we're going to stay like that for 30 seconds or so.

It hurts, doesn't it? And it also feels very defined, very solid.

Now open your hand slowly, and let it relax.

The sensations feel very different, do they not? Quite effervescent in comparison to the way they felt when you were clenching your hand.

And yet it is the same hand.

When you contract attention, the process is very similar. The contraction of attention is a kind of clenching

that feels very solid, very defined. When people propagate and follow states of fear or anger or confusion, that feeling of solidity and definition creates the illusion of a very strong sense of an “I”, an “I” that is fearful, angry, confused. The stronger the state, the stronger the sense of “I”, the stronger the sense of separation between oneself and the world. In very densely contracted states we view ourselves as being completely separate from others, from the world. We have a looming sense of opposition, of threat. If these states are propagated to the point of being acted out, if we project all of that negativity into the space around us, then we give that negativity form. We make it ‘real’. And the problem with all of this is that when we contract, we really don’t know at the outset just how far we will contract or what the outcome will be.

I have a little story about contraction to tell you. It’s a true story, involving a very ordinary trip to the grocery store.

Anzan roshi and I walked to our local grocery store one morning to pick up a few items for the monastery. Entering the main door, we walked up a flight of steps to an open space just outside the store itself, where shopping carts and baskets are stored and I selected a cart. We were about to enter the store, when the store manager came out through the door, leading a youth of perhaps 18 and two other store employees. The manager had obviously brought the youth out of the store because he wanted to talk to him and judging by the expression on his face, it was about a serious matter. They were standing no more than eight feet from the Roshi and I when the conversation began. The manager said to the fellow, “You were in twice yesterday and again today. Please open your knapsack.” The young man began to protest, but the manager would have none of that and insisted that he open it. He peered into the knapsack and then said “Come with me”. The young man gathered up his things and, led by the manager, with the two employees behind him, they walked past the Roshi and I, moving in the direction of the store office. The store manager was clearly upset and concerned but it was obvious he had no choice about apprehending the young man, who was now crying. The two employees following them were visibly upset as well. And the Roshi turned to me and said “Ach. Contraction always leads to further contraction”.

When someone steals, their attention becomes very, very contracted and the more that attention contracts and narrows, the more the rest of the world seems to become meaningless. But the reality of it was that this one act of stealing affected many, many other people. When the focus of the teenager’s contraction was broken open by the manager, the embarrassment and shame the teenager felt was excruciating for him. But it also made many others sad – the manager and the other employees, the Roshi and myself, the police officer who would have had to arrest him; his parents, his friends, the effects on his life for years to come – this is all very sad.

Self-image is not your evil twin. It is not something that’s lurking in you, waiting to come out as an array of bad habits or habits and patterns you don’t like. It’s a much more serious matter than that. And one of the reasons it is so serious is that when people contract, they seldom realize that they ARE contracting. And this is where practice comes in. If you practice, you can begin to notice contraction when it begins and you can learn to release it.

When you are sitting zazen, practicing, you can see again and again how your attention falls into patterns, how it will turn to the same storylines again and again; how it fragments into thoughts and feeling tones; how you trick yourself into believing that it is alright to waste your sitting time following these. And as your practice deepens, you will see that these same patterns of attention come up the rest of the time, when you are not sitting. You will see how you feel compelled to respond in a certain way, from a pattern, because that

is how you have always responded in this or that situation; how you will agree to certain things even though you are not in agreement with yourself about agreeing, without really being intentional about what you say and do because you're following a pattern. You will begin to notice that your states have a kind of texture to them that can be felt. Patterns can be felt.

At first, this might seem rather uncomfortable and inconvenient to you because where you would ordinarily just let yourself babble on about meaningless trivia, you'll start to notice that you are doing that. Where your usual habits of attention might dictate that you just leave that dirty cup on the counter, you'll find yourself recognizing that that is just something you are doing out of habit and not because you are making a choice. It starts in small ways and it is not comfortable. It is like a needle in a bag, finding its way through the cloth, piercing your complacency.

This discomfort is often expressed by students in daisan, who want to know how they should respond to this or that situation. What they would really like is to be given some kind of new 'formula' they can apply to situations that come up, one formula that will work in all situations. But it is not like that. There is no 'formula', there is no one way of being. The discomfort that you would like to replace with a new super pattern is the discomfort of Waking Up. Good for you! You are Waking Up! You are starting to recognize that you do not have to follow old familiar patterns of thought and feeling; that you can actually make the choice to open attention to things as they are in this moment; that you can practise the 'Suchness' of things as they actually are. And why should you do that? Because the only real choice you can make, moment to moment, is to open. Otherwise you are just following the momentum of compulsion and contraction.

The most effective way to learn to recognize and practice opening around contraction is to sit zazen. The practice of zazen is so simple that you cannot help but see how contraction forms and it is through seeing it and learning to practise with it that you can recognize it and release it before it is acted out. A lot of what comes up while sitting on the cushion is fragments and remnants of reactivity about stuff that is not going on - reactivity about past experiences - an argument with a spouse, confusion about a job, fear about illnesses real or imagined, lots of snippets of stuff that attention wants to keep turning toward. At first a lot of strategy comes up about these fragments, trying to ignore them, trying to control them, propagating them to see where they will lead, what kind of storyline they might turn into. But after a while it becomes obvious that the content that comes up, the themes and storylines are not the point. The point is this narrowing of attention around a thought or a feeling and recognizing that this streaming of reactivity is really just that - a kind of movement. This is the beginning of recognizing movements of attention and the structures they create.

One moment you might be sitting and things are relatively open, and you know to some extent that you are just sitting on a cushion in this beautiful room and there is some clarity about what it is that you are doing while sitting here - opening to the field of seeing, of hearing, of bodily sensation. The body feels balanced and aligned, and there is no sense of struggle, just this experience of sitting, opening, attending. And in the next moment, there is a movement of attention toward a feeling tone or a slight feeling of discomfort or a flicker of memory and attention begins to narrow. If you don't understand what is taking place or do not understand the instructions of practice or forget how to apply them, in a matter of moments you can be swept away by a current of discursiveness. So I will talk a little about why this is confusing to students, what actually takes place.

People often experience a lot of confusion about the difference between feelings, feeling tones, and feeling

into the sensations of the body. These are all quite different things and it is important to know what it is that we are experiencing.

Bodily feeling refers to feeling into the sensations of the body. The sensations of the hand, for example, are felt by the hand. Only the hand can feel the hand; it does not require that you “think” about the sensations, but instead, feel into them. In feeling into them it can be noticed that some sensations stand out; others are more subtle. The sensations are not separate from one another – the hand is not separate from the wrist; the wrist is not separate from the arm. The more that we practice opening to the sensations of the breath, the tanden, feeling into the sensations of the rest of the body, the more we find that each sensation opens out into every other sensation and so we can learn to feel the whole body simultaneously.

Feelings (or what most people refer to as ‘emotions’) are not really directed towards anything when they first come up. They are simply an acknowledgment of something that is going on. Not how we “feel” about what is going on, but acknowledging that it is happening. For example, a feeling of grief may come up as an honest and direct acknowledgment of the fact that someone we knew has died. It does not require thought about it, does not require us to move attention towards it. It is simply there as an acknowledgment of something that is true and is felt, simply and directly, without commentary, without storylines, without any kind of embellishment. But if we begin to focus on a feeling, give it too much attention it will begin to distort into what we refer to as “feeling tones.”

Feeling tones are a distortion or misinterpretation of feeling that come about through turning attention to a feeling and propagating it. Feeling tones condition or “colour” our experiencing.

For example, when we are sitting feelings frequently come up as an acknowledgment of what we are experiencing while sitting. We are practicing opening attention and so perhaps a subtle feeling of anticipation springs up simply because we are acknowledging that we do not know what our experiencing might be in the next moment, what we will notice. There is just a brightness and freshness to things because we are paying attention to what is going on and the feeling is not really about anything specific, is not directed towards anything.

If attention begins to move towards that subtle feeling of anticipation and focuses on it, then we begin to propagate it by giving it too much attention. The word “propagate” comes from the Sanskrit word, “prapancha”, which means “five times too many”.

Giving a simple, honest feeling too much focus of attention will cause it to come out of focus and distort and it may begin to take the form of perhaps a kind of grasping – wanting to know what it is that we are anticipating. If we continue to propagate, a feeling of unsatisfactoriness can begin to form because we want to know what is coming up before it comes up. The more we propagate, the more feeling tones we generate about our experiencing and in a very short time we can go from a simple feeling of anticipation, to a feeling tone of unsatisfactoriness to a feeling tone of confusion. This is just an example of how a feeling tone can move from one view of things to another, to another, in a short space of time. It is also an example of how contraction begins.

Feeling tones, as I mention, colour or set the tone for how we are experiencing things. They have an “environmental quality” to them. From the feeling tone, thoughts begin to spring up to justify or explain the feeling tone. And so we might start talking to ourselves about how we want to make some kind of “break-

through” in our practice so that we know we are “progressing” and perhaps how hard we’ve tried to do the practice and blah, blah, blah. As we continue to propagate these thoughts, they generate more feeling tones, which generate more thoughts, which generate more feeling tones and a loop begins to form.

States of mind are not separate from states of body, so the more that we do this, the more we will tend to act it out with the body. If there is a feeling tone present that is perhaps about anger, we will act that out with the body and so the breath might become tight and constricted; the shoulders may rise; the jaw clenches; the facial muscles tighten; the thumbs, held in the mudra may begin to push against one another.

If there is a feeling tone present that is about sadness, the shoulders may become rounded, the chest somewhat concave; we begin to sigh; the mudra collapses. We habitually act out states with the body during our waking hours and even when we are sleeping and dreaming. When we are sitting, we don’t do this. We let the body sit as body. So regardless of whatever feelings or feeling tones or thoughts there are that come up, we stay in posture and refrain from acting them out. Instead of acting them out or propagating them, we use the noticing of them as a reminder to re-initiate our practice - to open to whole-bodily sensation, the colours and forms and sounds.

Most of what people describe as “feelings” are not actually feelings. They are feeling tones. Most of us are thoroughly addicted to feeling tones and to such a degree that there is an almost continuous flow of them. We also swap feeling tones all day long with other people and help one another to propagate them. I am sure you have had the experience of going to work feeling just fine, encountering someone in a bad mood, having a brief conversation with them, and for the rest of the morning feeling unsettled or confused or angry.

Sometimes another kind of confusion comes up for people that isn’t so much about whatever feelings there are that might seem to presence, but rather that they don’t seem to be feeling anything at all. This can come up so strongly that they wonder if they aren’t “dead inside”. When this perception is present, we believe that it is due to an “absence” of feeling, when in actual fact what we are experiencing is a presencing of something - a feeling tone that registers as “absence”. If you are noticing that “feeling tone”, it is because you are “feeling” it, so in fact it is not true that you are not feeling anything - you are feeling something that you are calling the absence of feeling.

When you are sitting, what you should be doing is paying attention to reality, paying attention to what is actually taking place in THIS moment. If attention begins to move towards thoughts and feelings, distorting feelings into feeling tones, you need to come back to the practice to ground yourself in reality and begin again. And you will need to do this countless times during a sitting round because the habit of propagating and distorting is very strong. But as your practice deepens, your ability to recognize the difference between what is actually going on and your interpretations about what is going on will become stronger and clearer. And not just when you are sitting zazen, but all of the time.

This recognition that springs directly from practice helps you to see past the distortion and reactivity that are so central to self-image so that you can see things as they actually are. And I have another story for you that illustrates a moment of seeing past usual structures of attention and why this is important.

This story involves a student who has been practising for some years. She and her husband were walking towards a metro station to catch a train home and they were in a hurry. They were in such a hurry that when they passed a homeless couple on the sidewalk they didn’t stop. But despite the hurry, the student

noticed that the woman was cradling the man's head in her lap, calling his name in a pleading voice, again and again and the man appeared to be unconscious. The scene bothered the student, but she was in a hurry like all of the other commuters trying to catch the next train so she justified walking past them by telling herself someone would stop and help them or maybe someone had already called for help. And that is when the needle in the bag began working its way through the fabric of this state of rushing. She noticed something about the quality of rushing, rushing past experiencing, rushing past the couple on the sidewalk. Reaching the metro station, she was about to take the escalator down to the train when she realized that it was unlikely that anyone would be coming to their aid because they were homeless and looked very unkempt. She called to her husband who had walked ahead of her and said that they had to help the people outside on the sidewalk. He was surprised but agreed with her, so they walked back to the couple and asked the woman if she wanted them to call 911 for her. The woman was relieved and very grateful, and used their phone to speak to the 911 operator to provide details of her friend's condition and the 911 operator dispatched an ambulance.

What the student did was not a big deal but it was a big step for her to stop in her tracks and turn back and drag her husband along. And when she stated the obvious it was obvious to him too. And it made a big difference to the person being cradled and the person cradling on the sidewalk.

When we sit up straight in zazen, truly straight not only in body but in mind, not only with the bodymind but with the straightforwardness of the whole moment, we can release ourselves from our traps and cages. When we are free, then we can work to free others. And every step counts, no matter how small or big, even if it means stopping our momentum and turning.