

# OMUK Precepts Group, First Precept Part 1

## **Prison Face:** *Working with the Zen Precepts*

### 1

#### **On Violence as the Heart of the Precepts: The First Applied Precept:**

*I bear witness to the reality of violence and abuse, in myself and in the world, and aspire to practice non-violence in my thoughts, words and actions.*

#### **Interesting Times**

Turning towards, turning away. While our aspiration to practicing non-violence is a turning away from violence, yet to do so we first have to turn towards it. Habitually, we shut our eyes to violence, or avert our gaze. We will even not see the violence happening in front of us, or the violence we ourselves are enacting. How much easier to ignore the violence that is not apparent or immediately visible, and the violence that is long ago or far away, yet of which we are very much a part. None of us come to Zen in search of violence, but instead as part of the flight from it, whether that's from the suffering of experienced trauma, the sense of our lack of control over our 'own' thoughts and feelings, or just the direction our lives are taking. If the answer (we think) is to be found in peace, harmony and stillness, why look to the violence of our tumultuous contemporary world? More than that, if the teaching of Zen is finally of the *perfection* of all things in *this* very moment, that we are finally *not-separate*, that there is 'nothing to do, nowhere to go', then why turn towards everything that informs us instead of separation and suffering in the past, present and future?

And yet, the first of what Buddhism has come to call the Four Noble Truths is the reality and omnipresence of suffering. It's a commonplace that the Four Noble Truths takes the form of a medical diagnosis and prescription (ancient Indian style): first name the condition, then analyse its causes and prescribe a treatment. Joko Beck was clear that it's in our trying to avoid the suffering we experience in our 'life as it is', in the resistance we offer to it, that we misrecognize and amplify that suffering. And that we even resist our own Zen practice when it brings us *too* close to the actual experiencing of that life. Instead of turning *away* from suffering we need instead to 'name' it, and come to understand why we act in the way that we do. And *as* we are not-separate, we have look at the whole to understand both our own actions and those of others. Why we behave *collectively* in the way we do, not simply as a collection of individuals, but as a society?

It was spending time in prison that taught me the problem with thinking about the Precepts as our *individual* concern. It's certainly true that we have to engage with them in our own bodily experience, our own thoughts and feelings. Unless we feel the drag of their sharp hooks in our own flesh, tearing at our own fondest beliefs and darkest places, we haven't really begun our work with them. But prison showed me that to understand the causes, nature and consequences of violence in all its many forms we had to look *beyond* the individual, and that to fail to do so is to fundamentally mis-recognise the nature of ourselves and of our world. Worse, it is to subscribe to a hugely damaging collective fiction that perpetuates the cycles of suffering of which we are all a part. So to begin I'd like to introduce us to Lee, someone I met in prison.

### Lee

Like many of the men I work with, Lee has been sent to prison for acts of violence, many minor, and some more extreme. I met Lee in a 'local' prison in England, and worked with him as much as I was able to over a couple of years. While he spent most of this time actually *in* prison, he was always *just* back inside being held on remand, *awaiting* sentencing, or *just* on the verge of being released. Despite this he is in no way what you think of as a 'career criminal'. He is in prison because he has very violent reflexive responses to feeling threatened by other people. We could call these habitual, or even instinctive, though we'd have to get clear what we mean by these words. He's not seen as 'mad' or having 'diminished responsibility', and so within our current system there is no other choice as to what to 'do' with him. So what is the cause of Lee's violence? For Lee it is the overwhelming panic he feels at any potential threat to him, a panic experienced against a background of chronic and crippling anxiety. He literally does not feel safe in the world, or in his own skin. And certainly not in prison.

How did Lee come to be here, for prison effectively to be his home? From his early years he was brought up in social care, during which time he tells me he was repeatedly physically and sexually abused. (How did those men come to do these things? What suffering led to *their* actions? ) He never spoke of his parents, but to have ended up in institutional 'care' there must have been a major lack of 'care' at home; presumably his parents had significant difficulties of their own (What was *their* suffering? Even here at its beginning this story is already generations old..). Early separation is potentially highly traumatic, and often experienced as a sense of rejection and personal worthlessness. Rather than finding himself in a place of safety, that might have given him the time and space to process this loss and grow through the building of positive relationships, by his own account he was instead used as an object of adult men's gratification in a way that was both terrifying and incomprehensible, the more so because these men had been legally placed in authority over him. In this world there was nobody to *speak for* him ('*bear witness*'), or co-create any sense of the reliability, predictability and care that give rise to our shared sense of appropriateness in any relationship, what we'll speak of in terms of *lawfulness*. Instead, all the 'law', the word of the individuals and system that controlled his world and his future, made a secret of the truth of his experience, and named him as the sole bearer of his problems. His only sense of self was as being an object for others, and hence permanently vulnerable. His anxiety is chronic, and frequently overwhelming. Others still make 'plans' for him, which lacking any sense of his own agency he knows

he'll be unable to carry out. I've seen versions of this over and over again. He lives absolutely 'in the moment', and each moment is always one of potential or actual catastrophe. Each perceived threat is hence always traumatic, as he revisits and attempts to ward off feelings of total vulnerability and disposability, of simply not mattering. It was in the care system that he had already established his involuntary coping strategy: acting out the danger he felt from the world around by coming to be seen as dangerous himself, as someone you don't mess with. So he began to respond reflexively to any perceived threat or challenge by becoming immediately physically violent. Violence kept him relatively 'safe', and it is the only 'safety' he has ever experienced, even as full of anxiety and terror as it is. He never *chooses* to be violent, and gets no pleasure or satisfaction from hurting other people: what he feels is frustration and despair at his own inability to respond differently. It's always a *reflexive* anger that gets him into trouble — a response conditioned by his early trauma — one that overrides a more rational response to any perceived challenge. He cannot trust other people, but worse still, he cannot trust *himself*.

So is Lee now, finally, in a place of safety? Paradoxically, the thick, locked steel door behind which he is held and which embodies absolutely in itself the violence of imprisonment, is almost a friend. He isolates himself behind it, venturing out only to snatch a shower or some food. He'd usually only get as far as the door of the Buddhist meetings I ran there, to ask for a book or some incense to relieve the boredom and overwhelming stench of confinement, before retreating back to his cell. That this tiny space with paint peeling from concrete walls and floor, a high, barred window, with only a steel bed frame and an uncurtained stainless-steel toilet that sometimes works and sometimes doesn't; that this should represent 'safety' for him...

Why does it feel that way to him? Being forcibly held to live among frustrated, bored and often angry men, many of whom have similar problems with violence, many of whom are either in the throes of drug or alcohol withdrawal or off their heads on whatever drugs make it into prison (a lot), does nothing to address Lee's anxiety or its violent expression. 'There are just too many nut jobs in here, and I can't get to the other end of the landing without something kicking off!' The physical prison environment is harsh, and the emotional one similarly so, particularly when you're not a 'good', 'well-behaved' prisoner. Life on a prison wing is always one of hyper-vigilance and self constraint for staff and prisoners alike. Many of the residents have found themselves in prison largely because of their problems with anger, and there may well be old or new scores to settle, debts to be enforced, status to be established or lost. Drug use, whether that's by prisoners who are actually high or those now in withdrawal adds to the unpredictability of the situation. But then boredom is also a major stressor, at once numbing and frustrating. Everything is *timetabled* to the minute in prison, except that this doesn't work out in practice. There is the pervasive sense that a prisoner's *time* is considered to be simply of no importance, it *doesn't matter* that things are cancelled or endlessly delayed, whether that's an exercise period or the vital document the processing of which will get the prisoner a stage nearer release, or simply to be allowed a visit from their child. There are the frequent and unexplained lockdowns which set the rumour mill working. The prisoner knows he is a nobody, without control, without agency, and that paradoxically it's when he steps out of

line that he will become important, individual, and in a sense, *real*. Frustration builds, and there is often the feeling that we are all nervously waiting for something to kick off. There is nowhere for the prisoners to go to let off steam, so pressure and tension continue to build. You can smell it...ventilation is often minimal... So this is Lee's home, his basic reality. Even behind the steel door there is no privacy: you will be observed through its observation window several times during the day and night. If you are very lucky there might be some kind of curtain for the toilet. Your cell, and perhaps your body, including its cavities, will be searched thoroughly and without warning. This environment has no warmth, no softness, no embodied *care* whatsoever. (I feel ridiculous even writing those words, so alien are they to this environment.)

I've never personally witnessed the serious violence that happens in prison, though walking down a corridor of cells I have passed one where staff are mopping up pools of fresh blood. One sangha member told me about witnessing a fatal stabbing, all the more shocking for its sudden swiftness: 'he was just stood there talking and ten seconds later he was dead...' Most fights are scuffles quickly dealt with, and actual deaths in custody are unusual here in the UK, but they do happen, most commonly as suicide rather at the hands of another and numbers are increasing. Attacks on prison officers are a daily occurrence in some prisons but very rare in others. I've also been told by several different prisoners (whose word I have no reason to doubt) of serious violence they have seen or suffered from prison officers, though anecdotally this seems to have declined significantly in recent years.

Lee is himself on heavy medication to try and stabilise his mood and decrease his violent outbursts, but the side effects of the drugs themselves are to make him confused and they lower his mood, simply giving him a different, less violent form of emotional instability. Despite this, talking to him regularly I get to see both his caring side and feel the pain of his fractured self and the position he finds himself in: he hates feeling out of control all the time, and is always genuinely apologetic about his latest outburst that's once more got him into trouble. In fact Lee has a genuine empathy for all the suffering he sees around him, especially witnessing the frequent self-harming that happens in prison. I come in one day to find him agitated and shaking. The day before, he had been out on the landing when a young prisoner broke a window and began to cut his wrists on the shards of glass left in the frame. He tells me of his astonishment at the lack of response of the young, newly qualified prison officer standing a few feet away: 'He did nothing! NOTHING!' Whether this is the whole story or not, it's important to Lee to *tell* me, for *me* to *bear witness* to *his* bearing witness, to acknowledge that yes, this *is* appalling, horrifying. A moment of a sense of shared *lawfulness*, of our agreeing on what is ok and what definitely not ok. But telling me this is a moment of recognition in a prison that for him now feels even less safe, less human, less possible than it did even a couple of days ago. Self-harm has become a major problem in prisons, included attempted and successful suicide attempts. Whether these are 'serious' attempts, or a 'cry for help' they are caught between the belief that life simply has no possibility of ever improving, and the attempt to regain some control over that life — a control so evidently normally denied — and to be recognised however briefly as *real*, as a human being to be *met*, not an *object* to be administered. A 24 hour watch can

be kept over those known to be at risk, assessments made, new strategies tried to reduce the consequences of all this suffering. But, obviously, nobody is going to just open the doors... Nor, seemingly, will anyone provide the consistently available help that might make a lasting difference. In any event, Lee is far from alone in having 'mental health problems', and for many they remain undiagnosed. Government estimates suggest that over half of those held in UK prisons have mental health issues needing treatment, but what is on offer is usually only the kind of mood stabilisers that Lee is prescribed.

Spending most of his time on short sentences of a few months Lee is now utterly homeless, unemployed, and very likely unemployable. His chronic anxiety means he can't even make it to a doctors' or hospital appointment to get the help he needs when he's out of prison. Instead he still reaches for the help that is easily to hand among those who scratch an existence on the edge of society, in the form of drink and drugs that ease the tension for a time. Is he an addict? No, he's a user, certainly, but primarily a victim of long term trauma who has fallen through every hole in every safety net. Last time we talked he was supposed to be released to a hostel bed, but had previously found this lightly supervised environment actually less safe for him than prison itself, because without the control offered by the prison officers and a regular routine the easy availability of drugs and alcohol to the other residents will lead to confrontation and violence, and the inevitable return to prison on yet more charges. He tells me that the only place he ever really seemed to feel safe was when he was sharing a friend's caravan, but that's not the kind of address that is acceptable to the authorities.

Underneath it all there's an intelligence and sensitivity that never gets the chance to show itself properly. As a 'Buddhist' he reads the books, tries to practice, and I get to talk to him most weeks. But an hour a week of my time won't do what's needed, even if I can get to see him face to face, and not have to shout a conversation from the other side of a thick steel door. What can Zen offer him within this environment? Is he in a fit state to begin watching his thoughts without being overwhelmed by them? He knows that life is suffering. He knows that he can't trust himself or rely on others. He definitely knows he is *vulnerable*. Here's a koan: what is Lee's 'True Self' here in prison?

Nothing is addressed or resolved, and the cycle of violence repeats; without proper help this is the best he will ever do. What help he has been offered has been sporadic and inconsistent (including mine). Neither the children's home nor prison have offered basic protection to him, let alone healing care. Instead they have shown him a violence to which his trauma has made him respond in kind: they have *produced* him as a violent offender. It is not some strange quirk of character or fate that has led Lee to this predicament. The causes are complex, but *social*. They could have been, and could even now still be addressed through social action. As a society we choose not to do so, and to turn a blind eye to the complexity and hopelessness of his situation. Lee's own reality is that he lives *within* violence as both perpetrator and victim, the former *because* he is the latter. Is prison an appropriate place for Lee? Definitely not. But having produced him *as* violent, this society has only a single response. As an individual, either he is *mad*, in which case he bears no responsibility and can exercise no agency, and so will receive compulsorily

whatever treatment those in authority deem appropriate, *or*, he is *sane* and hence entirely responsible for his actions, and so will be deprived of any possibility of agency and be subject to the violence of detention and indifferent neglect.

How could things have been different? There is little practical support for those leaving the care system, particularly for someone with an established reputation for being 'difficult' and even physically dangerous. We might think that as a society we should offer very generous support to those who lack the sense of uniqueness and unconditional care for that most of us get — at least to some degree — from the family in which we grew up. A majority of us also get ongoing support — whether that's practical, financial or emotional — for years after the age of sixteen when care provision ends; most of us have some choice as to when we officially 'leave home'. For the child in care none of this is the case, and as a direct result those who have spent years in care are hugely over-represented in prison. Lee got no academic qualifications while in care, and has never had a 'proper' job or his own home. He's spent twenty years alternating his frequent short spells in prison with living in squats or staying with friends, often from similar backgrounds. So it's no surprise that living on the fringes of drug culture, he's used alcohol, cannabis, and a variety of pills to attempt to self-medicate the pain of his past and present existence.

There are so many different aspects of violence in Lee's story. We could run through the entire list of the Precepts and itemise: victim and perpetrator of violence, check! Offered nothing freely, and having had much taken from him (his 'childhood'?...certainly his bodily integrity...), he has gone on to take what was not his to take, check! A victim of sexual violence, check! Deprived of a voice of his own, subjected to the false and harsh speech of others, check! Coping and not coping through the use of substances which cloud the mind...legal and illegal, and those actually prescribed for him. Check!... and so on, and so on. Separated *from* his parents, and from the care and safety he should have had in return. Instead subjected *to* the violence of sexual abuse, then forcibly kept *with* his abusers. Separated *from* those few friends who might support him, forcibly detained in prison *with* others more violent and equally as damaged as himself. The only option he has been able to see is to separate *himself* off from others (physically) and *from himself* (mentally) by self-isolation, whether in prison or out in the world.

What has failed Lee at every step is *care*. The care of parents, and of the children's home, obviously. The care to which we might hope anyone held captive by the state (and hence, nominally at least, on 'our' behalf) should be entitled. But more deeply the care of a *society that cares*, that is capable of addressing the real problems of real people in a connected fashion, and could still help Lee towards some kind of life rewarding to himself and useful to others. Instead Lee has been moved outside society, or rather to the concealment from view of its very edge. He is made to go away as a problem and become unseen, except of course to those whose job it is to (literally) oversee him. He ceases to be *our* problem, that of the actual human being we might meet, and becomes instead an administrative issue discussed primarily as a 'recidivist', and a drain on the public purse.

**Practice Check:**

*How do I feel reading Lee's story, what thoughts or emotions come up?*

*Do I think he's a 'typical' prisoner?*

*How do I feel about him, and what I think should happen to him?*

*What are my feelings and thoughts about 'criminals' in general?*

*What stories do I tell about 'them', and where do these stories come from?*

*Have I myself been a victim of crime or spent time in prison?*

*Who do I know who's been a victim of crime or spent time in prison?*

*Can I see anything of myself in Lee?*

*Can I see anything of Lee in myself?*

Is Lee an unfortunate exception? After all, it could be argued, if at any point 'the system' had worked as it was intended to, Lee would not find himself in the position he is today. In this line of thought, haven't I actually weakened any argument I might wish to make about the prison system as a whole by choosing such a clearly unusual case? I'd counter that Lee's experience is far from exceptional, and that it actually *embodies* the wider issue of violence in our society, a structural violence within our social order of which the prison system itself is but a part. I accept I'm going to have to make a good case for this, but I wanted to begin not from abstraction and generalisation, but from the actual experience of a real individual. Let's stay with the concrete, with the embodied, and think a little further about the physical existence of the prison itself. It is often recognised that the prison environment — from the organisation of physical space to the attitude and behaviour of the staff — considerably influences how prisoners themselves act. But more than that, prison itself *is* a singular act of violence. The locked door itself embodies violence, *separation by force*. If we unlocked all the doors, how many of these men would still be here 30 minutes later? Prisons could not operate for a single day without the active 'consent' of those imprisoned, and yet this is a consent based on the knowledge that any collective refusal will result in the immediate deployment of the riot squad, and if deemed necessary, snipers on the rooftops. We accept that in principle forced consent is no consent at all, and yet... But even for us outside prison, how far are our different consentings given 'freely'? The threat of violence controls our behaviour far more generally and effectively than its use. If prisons cannot work without the *consent* of those held there, that is always a *forced* consent, because as long as there is the threat of violence to *keep* that door locked there is no *real* choice.

Residents, uniformed staff, healthcare and psychology — and even Zen chaplains — we are all a part of this system. I actually get issued with the keys to unlock many of the doors, but the rules are strict as to how and when I may turn the key and whom I can allow through. Leaving any one of these doors or gates unlocked could lead to instant dismissal. We are none of us clean, none of us untouched by this regime of the violence of separation of the locked cell door. We could rebuild the place, increase the staffing levels, have better mental healthcare, and we absolutely should do all of these things. But the

basic violence of the locked cell door would remain intact. It's there to control the possibility of direct physical violence in those society has *already* produced as violent, but both directly and indirectly will inevitably also re-produce violence in and of itself.

According to our prevailing stories about prison, prisons are the (bad) place for bad men. We may call these men evil, or monsters, or sick (though not *blamelessly* 'sick' as in 'I've got the 'flu this week'). Or that they simply 'don't know the difference between right and wrong' (in which case we feel obliged to see that they have this pointed out to them). Either way, the badness is 'in' them, and it needs to be controlled, contained, or if possible removed. The argument is circular: the proof of their badness is that they are in prison (and in prison because they are bad)...hence I am good, and the proof of this is that I am not in prison (and I am not in prison because I am good)... At least that's so unless I am found out, identified, hailed: 'You there, stop!' Within this dominant story of prison, Lee figures as an exemplary lesson to all in the consequences of *individual* moral failure, fundamentally a failure to be willing and able to compete at life in socially sanctioned ways. I'll argue as we go on that this exemplary role is *both* structurally essential to the way we *outside* of prison all think of ourselves, *and* produces a specific and damaging kind of prisoner 'self': the 'prison face' that represents to us our own need to strive for goodness and consequent terror of being discovered. In fact I *am* going to argue in all seriousness that it our own *fear* of prison, not as some personal paranoia but as a foundational aspect of simply being the *subjects* of the state we all are, that requires us to make this distinction, that maintains our collective need to lock *them*, the *others* away. And that in all of this we see embodied the fundamental point of *Zen*: the foundational violence of the way in which we misrepresent *ourselves* to ourselves and the *world* to ourselves, of our being *deluded in delusion*.

### Trivial Me

A memory. I am, maybe, thirteen? My parents and I have been watching the television, some kind of drama whose plot line features an 'affair': a marital infidelity. 'Well,' my father addresses my mother, 'if I were to find out that you were having an affair I would kill him and then kill you!'. This is the only time I can ever remember my father saying he would wish to kill *anyone*, and yet here he was threatening to kill my mother if she were unfaithful to him. He was in many ways a kind man, and genuinely respected my mother. I don't believe for moment he would have carried out his threat, and I don't know whether he believed it or not, even as he said it. But that he felt it *could* be said, even *should* be said in order to show who *he* was, this too brings with it a whole world-view of what men and women are to themselves and to each other. This was at a time when domestic violence was epidemic but largely unrecognised, and the murder of a women within marriage often excused as a 'crime of passion' (though emphatically not that of a man by his wife). So here was my own primary model of loving relationship and family life offering a life-and-death lesson to me. Perhaps in fact it *was* important that this was a lesson to me: that I was there to bear witness to his (momentarily aspired to?) machismo, to affirm and comprehend in what true manhood consisted. I'll never know.



And what of my mum? An intelligent and sociable woman, who worked for fourteen years in banking before leaving to become a full-time mother, and who from the beginning had had sole control of my father's wage packet and family finances. The only relationship advice she ever offered me was when I was in my early twenties, and living with a partner they found 'difficult'. 'You know...' she confided in a half whisper... 'women actually *do* just want to be told what do...'

So how do I feel *now*, reading this back, having written it down? The significance of these two memories isn't for their *importance* as events, rather their *triviality*. They are even 'late': from moments in my life long after the infancy and childhood when what we'd think of as my basic 'character' or 'self' was constructed. But they resonate. Like most of us, I had an ambivalent relationship with my parents, those first figures we define ourselves in relation with and against. *This* body, both uniquely itself, *and* a scrambled version of the coding that brought theirs into being before me. But of course they were always far more than simple *bodies*, but *social* beings whose every word or gesture embodied the world of which they were a part. The whole sensory and sensual world evoked by these memories is *still* present in my muscles and my flesh. I don't have to *believe* that men should kill unfaithful partners, I may and *do* believe the absolute opposite. The stories and their effects on how I see the world are far more complex than simple belief, and much of it I am unconscious of. It will probably show up without any warning, and even without awareness on my part, as assumptions and expectations about relationships, the social order, property. These memories figure as tiny pieces in the jigsaw of how the world comes to appear to me, and of knowing how to do my life. As reflexive answers to the implicit question of each moment: 'What is *expected* of me in this situation?' Or to put it another way 'Who *am* I?' If I can become more aware then these stories can be worked through, challenged, understood differently. But it is never a matter of simply changing my mind. Understanding more about domestic violence and men's expectations of women and of themselves *do* help give me a different context for my father's death threat. But nothing is simply erased.

Another, earlier memory. When I was a child growing up in the UK of the 'sixties there was a marvellous and mysterious bottle that offered sweetness and a reassuring pleasure. That bottle contained Camp Coffee, a blend of sugar, chicory and (some) coffee combined into a treacle like liquid that could be used in baking or, as presumably originally intended, made into a drink with hot water or milk. It was rarely bought or used in my house, which only contributed further to the exotic mystery of seeing the bottle on a shelf in the cupboard. Exotic, because the picture on the label contained a whole world-view. A white British Army officer sits on a folding chair in front of his tent, and behind him stands a brown Indian soldier, presumably his batman or orderly, bearing Camp Coffee on a tray. Its innocence is touching, endearing, and awful. I find that Camp Coffee was first produced in 1876, and is still available, though the label has now changed. But my memory is from the 1960's, when India was already independent, the Empire gone. The Indian soldier stands in for all the loyal and cheerful subjects of the lost Empire, brown and black races happy under the benevolent tutelage of the superior Englishman. This is not the India of the 1857 Indian Rebellion, or the Amritsar massacre of 1919, or the British government's responsibility for the three million people who died in the Bengal Famine of

1943. The bottle and its invitingly sweet, warming and reassuring dark brown contents told me much about a particular version of what it was to be White, to be English, and the relation between the two. It helped the medicine go down.

Actually, in my memory, the white British officer bears a striking resemblance to Jake's father. Jake was my half-Indian friend at junior school and then later as a teenager when I was playing in his band. I don't remember him or his family experiencing any kind of overt or even covert racism, but maybe I wouldn't, would I? He and his sister were the only visibly different children in our not-very-mixed-at-all suburban community, and Jake's mother always wore her sari. As a teenager I had a crush on his sister, to my then eyes classically beautiful, like the Indian sculpture I was just beginning to become aware of (much of it transferred/looted to European and American museums). My mother, confessionally: 'We had to ask ourselves, how would we feel if you wanted to marry her?' Open mouthed, I had no response...

So again, how do I feel *now*? This isn't the place for judgement, but for awareness, and *bearing witness* to the world as it was and as it is, and my feelings about both. What strikes me most is my *innocence* then, which we could also call the *ignorance* I shared with much or most of my society. Ignorance: a different sort of *not-knowing*, one that Zen doesn't normally concern itself with. But ignorance is often seen within Buddhism as itself the root of suffering. 'Ignorance' or 'ignore-ance'? An innocent *lack* of knowledge or a more culpable *not-wanting-to-know*, an active *turning away* from reality: not seeing, turning a blind eye, excusing, naturalising... So, I feel a mixture of innocence and ignore-ance within myself, and that *disorienting* shock that I was not seeing, not hearing, not noticing, not *aware*. That I was, have been, am still being *lied to* every day about the world, whether or not it is our collective intention to do so. In Britain the struggle over the understanding and consequences of the British Empire plays a somewhat similar role to the struggle over the understanding and consequences of slavery, but both both are merely part of a much larger picture of the development of what might be called the current world system, whereby the alliance of capital to military power in post-medieval Europe transformed the politics and economics of the entire world. That we continue to live in ignore-ance of this reality burns me, makes me incandescent. So I *sit* with this, experienced in my muscles and flesh, in my anxiety, my despair, my numbness, my need to hit out, to resist, to do ... something... But we'll get back to that...

I recently moved house from the small and overwhelmingly white market town where I'd spent the last quarter of a century, to the small but ethnically very diverse city that lies a mere nine miles away. Sat in the main city park on a Friday evening watching groups of what I'll call 'British Asian' boys enthusiastically playing park cricket in a mixture of shalwar kameez and jeans, the intricacy of this complex web of culture, inheritance and exploitation strikes me. Along with the always-there opportunities for *joy*, for sharing, and for *care*.

### ***Practice Check:***

*What is my response to these stories?*

*What does my body feel?*

*What thoughts come up?*

*Which of **my** memories have a similar place in my self-story?*

*How is it to re-experience these memories?*

*What part do they play in how I experience the world **now**?*

*Am I aware of both ignorance and ignore-ance in myself?*

### **Violence?**

Violence in *all* its forms is the subject matter of the Precepts, and we can usefully think of the different Precepts as violence seen from different positions. Lee's story makes this abundantly clear, but all of us need to examine our actions, our speech, our thoughts and see as clearly as we may how we each live *in, with, and through* violence. But...what should we include under 'violence'? Actual physical violence — the direct use of force — is only the most obvious form in which we encounter it. It's paradigmatic, and may even seem to blunt our awareness of violence's more subtle forms. Violence is more often the threat of force, whether that's directly expressed or implied, or even simply 'understood'. As remarked, the prison system could not operate for a single day without the active 'consent' of those imprisoned, but it is a consent forced by threat. The *threat* of violence controls all our behaviour far more generally and effectively than its actual use, and Lee's behaviour is an embodiment of this: so sensitive is he to the threat of violence, both from other but also that of himself that he keeps to his cell, effectively a prison within a prison. He *restrains himself* as we all *restrain ourselves*, his problem is that this restraint is often overridden by his trauma. Restraint is an essential quality we all cultivate in order to survive in our culture. But at what cost, and to whom?

It is of course not even necessarily the threat of *physical* force that's the issue, because the threat of *psychological pain* and its consequences may be even more effective. Shaming, humiliation, loss of face, loss of human dignity, ridicule. These are all forms of violence employed at every level: by governments, organisations, groups and ... *you and me*. We have all undoubtedly been on the receiving end of psychological violence as well: much of the violence we encounter and are most immediately aware of is actually of this kind. There's a clear overlap between this and the violence of inequality and exclusion discussed in the next section. Again, prison is exemplary, as on the one side staff use whatever means they can to retain control and to distance themselves from prisoners, while establishing and maintaining their own de facto hierarchies parallel to the official one. On the other side prisoners practice resistance and intimidation to lessen the control of staff and re-establish some sense of personal and collective agency, while establishing and minting their own hierarchies and cliques. In a world of restriction and lack of control where any

actual physical attack or threat will risk punishment or reprisal, a cutting word, a look, an invasion of personal space or 'messaging' with the meagre possessions ('property') allowed is a safer and more effective strategy. But to say that prison is exemplary is to say: this is what we all do, it just shows up more clearly here. One of the principal reasons I will keep returning to the example of prison is that just as our zazen offers us controlled ('laboratory') conditions for the experiencing of the complexities of our own thoughts, emotions and feelings, so prison itself is a lab for the study of the control and resistance we all encounter and enact.

The violence of inequality and exclusion is insidious, and may be invisible most of the time, often even be unrecognised as such by its victims. The lack of opportunity in growing up poor in a deprived neighbourhood, or with the mantle of criminality that clothes perceptions of Blackness, or being born female in a culture where women's role is seen only as being to care for men and children, or where having a learning disability carries the assumption that you will never hold down a job, get married, have children of your own. Or simply being unable to access necessary medical care. Or... or... or... Does all this not count as violence even if it may often seem 'just the way things are'? The violence of discrimination and oppression encountered because I am seen as belonging to, because I am *identified as*: female, or 'disabled', or gay, or Black, or Muslim, or trans... continues through and shades into the less obvious but very real issues of being poor, uncredentialed and unskilled, or simply not that 'smart'. This shades into the obscure grey of *bias*: obscure not because it is unimportant, but often so hard to *see*, and only made visible through statistical analysis: whether you are a doctor, a teacher or an employer, we now know that your perceptions of me unknowingly inflect... my treatment plan, my grade, whether you actually offer me that job... and that this applies whatever you believe you believe, or think you think. So while there are indeed people who can meaningfully be described as 'racist', 'misogynist', 'transphobic' and the rest, this is violence in which we are all implicated, whatever our intentions. As in all other cases, prison shows this in an extreme form, perhaps beyond even what we'd expect. On the one hand, the well-spoken and well educated middle class prisoners I've known have, on the whole managed well in prison: they know how to behave and are relatively better looked after. They can make their needs known and will be listened to, they'll get the responsible jobs and the staff will be generally friendly, and at least see they don't get overly bullied. On the other hand, beyond the complications of gang culture and exploitation (a related but different subject) there is a distinct unofficial hierarchy among prisoners: 'straightforward' murderers and other hard men at the top, and paedophiles and child-murderers as an entirely separate class as the bottom. Many of those on 'VP' (Vulnerable Prisoner) wings fall into this latter category, so much so that *any* prisoner from a VP wing is liable to actual violent assault as a 'pedo' whenever outside the wing itself, and so separation is rigorous. They are the true prisoners within the prison. I remember one Buddhist prisoner on a VP wing telling me how terrified he was that his cell-mate, due for imminent release, would carry out his often repeated threat that he felt morally *compelled* to kill another prisoner on the same wing before he left. The potential victim was widely believed to have killed his baby son (no prisoner is officially allowed to know the crime of another, but of course this only makes gossip and rumour all the more rife...).

**Practice Check:**

Sorry, just to ask if you caught yourself thinking... 'yes, but surely **they** deserve all they get... '?

Is prison about punishment?

Why do we think so?

What makes each of us **deserving** of love or being met with violence?

All violence concerns *control*, of bodies, spaces, access, resources, or existence itself, and this whether or not there is the conscious or unconscious intention to control. In fact violence can only really be defined by its effect on its *victims* (who may of course also include the perpetrators), but whether in terms of the Precepts or more generally in our society, most discussion centres on the *aggressors*. I think this is a genuine problem, and that we can better understand violence in terms of our shared *vulnerability* than as the product of some *antagonistic* or *competitive* drive within us. I'd certainly argue that Lee's story is primarily one of vulnerability, a vulnerability socially produced and maintained, which our current State and public opinion are unwilling to recognise or address. But I'd also argue that this is, albeit usually with dramatically less catastrophic effect, the case for most or all of us. This is one of the major themes I want to explore as we continue.

Where does violence actually come from? Is violence 'natural', simply a part of my and your and their human nature? Is it 'in' me? For Buddhism in general and Zen in particular the answer has to be a firm 'no'. Which does not imply that we are all 'naturally good' either, merely that as *not-separate* we are all from the beginning *social*. There is no 'I' born separate and bound to struggle with all other 'I's, except insofar as we collectively construct it to be so. But our prevailing inherited view of the world, the one that is reconstructed and repeated in almost every aspect of our society and culture is the opposite. We have a fundamental choice here that, although rarely framed in this way, and being necessarily blurred in experiencing our lives as we live them, is nevertheless real. *If* I see myself as fundamentally *separate* from the world, as a self that is unique, self-responsible and as having some permanent core that continues from the point of my conception to my death (or even beyond), then it's perfectly rational to look only to my *own* interests, to try to get whatever I want by whatever means I can. Thinking in this way, life is essentially a struggle of all against all, and human society an always imperfect attempt to contain and mitigate this potential to violence. *Altruism*, acting for the good of 'others', becomes an anomaly we have to explain, or explain away. *Or...* do I see myself and all other people as fundamentally *not separate*, as having come to be the individuals we are solely by virtue of being a part of our human society, a society which is at once particular and global, and is an ever-evolving product of the causal processes of history? Which would suggest that my responsibility is hence not simply or primarily to a narrowly defined and experienced 'self', but shared with all people, and perhaps even with all beings with which I share this planet. And in this case I would not look for the cause of violence within 'me' or 'you', but

in the causes and conditions that structure our lives in society. To understand ourselves and our world in the first way is to see *caring* as fundamentally secondary: as something we are free to offer or receive (or not) for ultimately self-interested reasons. To understand ourselves as not-separate is to acknowledge *caring* and *being cared for* as the condition of our being, that beyond any questions of rights or responsibilities *caring* is simply what we are.

***Practice Check:***

*How do you feel? I mean right here and now, sat reading?*

*How is it in your muscles and your flesh, your nerves?*

*What thoughts arise, what do they connect to?*

*And how do you 'feel' about what you've been reading?*

*There's no 'correct' response, other than honestly having the one you have. Just as with any kind of zazen, it might be boredom, annoyance, frustration...or curiosity, interest, even delight.*

*Whatever it is, feel into it, physically, emotionally and mentally: what happens, where does it lead?*