Prison Face: *Working with the Zen Precepts*

1: Violence as the Heart of the Precepts
The First Applied Precept (Part 2)

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.

Last time I spoke of a choice of two fundamentally different ways of experiencing and understanding my 'self'. We aren't normally aware of this choice as a choice, and it's not something we ever rationally think through. In fact our world is organised for us as if the choice were already made — which is ironic given that 'being free to choose' is one of the key axioms of that choice made for us. If we will allow it to, our experience of being 'just this moment' will point us to our non-separation from the world, and yet the lives we normally lead have been constructed for us 'as if' we *were* truly separate. So it's within this paradox, this self-contradiction at the heart of our modern societies, that we live and love and grow up and grow old, and that, despite all, we are cared for, and care *for,* and that we care *about,* and care *with.*

I've previously used Joko's image of the whirlpool to describe what it is to be ourselves: a moment in the life of the river, made up not of some unique substance but rather of the eddies and movement of the water of the river itself, pulling in and pushing out whatever flotsam is passing. In a sense it is *made* of relationship, the infinitely complex play of forces of water and resistance, not as relationships between 'separate' things, but as moment by moment configurations. This is a Buddhist understanding of the nature of all of reality, and hence the of nature of ourselves. I am relationship, I was made out of relationship, I live as relationship.

In contrast to the image of the whirlpool I've placed that of the billiard ball: hard, impenetrable, enduring. From the point of view of the billiard ball the vulnerability of the whirlpool can only ever look like *weakness* in comparison to what it sees as its own strength, its permanence, its inviolability. That it can only ever relate to another ball (entirely separate and equally inviolable) by striking it — by the violence of imparting its own force to it — is not a problem. It cannot imagine growth, change, coming-to-be. It cannot imagine relationship, it cannot *live* in the way the whirlpool does. And yet of

course, the billiard ball is *finally* no more separate and distinct a thing than the whirlpool itself. Each was made from the substance of the earth, and is simply part of a game devised by humans and played by their collective rules. When it is no longer useful, this ball will itself be returned to the earth in whatever form: its separateness now shown simply as delusion. It was a whirlpool all along.

The goddess Athene, according to myth, sprang fully armed from her father Zeus' head. I did not. I was born from the womb of a human woman, who together with my father, and absolutely reliant upon those material and social networks that are our human world, brought me into being as a person. The infant 'me' began in total dependency on them, and grew as interdependent relationship within this family and society. Our sense of self evolves *as* the experience of being cared for in these first relationships by those we come to understand as others, others who historically have been overwhelmingly women, mothers. All of us without exception have been carried by and born from a woman's body, and our first relationships are *body-mind*, experiencing the care shown to the body I am, and learning to interact as body together with body. We come to *be* self-aware humans in the physicality of our primary relationships with our carers. Of course these caring relationships are always complex and ambivalent, full of frustration and breakdown, and rupture and repair that in turn builds us as beings who are ourselves capable of loving, caring, relating to others.

We live within the truth of the whirlpool: we live as relationship, as moment by moment existence in relation to, and dependent on, our entire world. This is a joyful but also a hard truth. Our impermanence is the precondition of our growth, of our coming-to-be. It is hence also the inescapable truth of our passing, of our *own* death and the death of all those we hold in relationship, the passing of all that we know and love and depend on and which depends on us. It is the truth of the infinite *vulnerability* of all things, and of our own absolute vulnerability first of all.

In searching out what might be seen as the fundamental quality of our self-awareness, most Western philosophy has taken our *separateness* for granted, and on the basis of it to ague that we come to self-awareness in the confrontation with an other, often in the form of the threat or reality of violence. Perhaps if we imagine ourselves as separate — as some kind of *self* or a *soul* —this is inevitable? But, what if, based on our experience of coming to be ourselves *in* and *through* relationship, we hypothesised instead that caring and receiving care was the fundamental quality of self-awareness? A sense of self predicated not *against* every other, but in community *with* them? *What if we dared to think that our shared vulnerability is not a paranoia-inducing, violence-begetting burden, but the precondition of our humanity and the very possibility of relationship?*

<div align="center">

Practice Check:

What does 'vulnerability' mean to me?

Instinctively, do I feel it as a strength or a weakness?

In this moment, do I feel more like a billiard ball or a whirlpool?

</div>

The State of Violence

Despite this, so much of not only the way we collectively speak about what it is to be ourselves, and far more importantly, how we are expected and often obliged to live out our lives as those selves, assume that we are more billiard ball than whirlpool. Nothing points this up more clearly than that in our societies *altruism,* — which is the fancy Latin name we give to working for the benefit of *others* without expecting a specific reward — has to be 'explained', and its consequent apparent and almost pathological-seeming weirdness rationalised away as being really only some hidden selfishness.

The idea of some kind of substantial self, something real and unchanging beyond the shifting play of appearances that is all-too-apparent in the passing of time, is undoubtedly ancient. The ancient Indian concept of *atman*, a universal self of which we are individual but still substantial fragments longing for reunion, undoubtedly has something in common with both the *ideal* forms of Platonic thought and the Christian idea of the individual *soul*, but they are not clearly 'the same' as each other. No more are the 'selves' as which we recognise ourselves today identical to any of these: as has always been the case, the specific ways in which we have come to think of and act as *our*selves are shaped by those same forces that shape *our* contemporary world and societies.

To think and act as a self is to give a form to the flux of our experience, a form which shapes that experience itself. If I see myself as a 'self' that is separate — what I am calling the billiard ball self — I will do both myself and the world a double violence. By seeing myself as *separate* I cut myself out from the world, I become an eye that looks out at a world separate from it, an eye that represents that world to itself, that thinks about and judges that world. By seeing myself as *continuously self-identical* I cut myself out from the fullness of the world *this* moment, and reduce myself to a link connecting a fabricated past (re-membering is always to reconstruct, to assemble a 'past') to a fantasisied individual future. To achieve this I have to see myself as *self-consistent*, and once again cut out a limited self from within what I see as myself — telling stories to myself about myself that partially homogenise my perception and understanding of the world, but that largely succeed only in painting out the richness and inconsistent complexity of my actual life. I will construct an image of myself as hard and enduring, and I will feel fear and rage when the world from which (I have imagined) I am now separate shows me that I am no such thing. I will try to abandon, or deny, or hide all that is fragile and momentary and connected in myself, all that shows my dependency and vulnerability. In this way I separate myself not simply from the world, but myself from myself also, as my mind's eye performs the same violence on myself that it does on the external world.

We do not do this randomly, or because it is simply 'human nature' for me to do so. How I 'self' (to use a verb form that is becoming more common in Buddhist thought, and stresses my 'self' as a *process* rather than a *thing* or *state*) is part of the way in which our society functions, it is both the embodiment and expression of social values and relations. The whirlpool being simply an aspect of 'river', it is made out of river, out of its water and whatever flotsam and jetsam the river brings to it. It is usually only when the whirlpool

get clogged up with debris that begin to block its flow that we really notice it, when it appears to seem a separate thing from the river of which it is made. The more I create barriers within myself, the more within my 'self' and my world that I attempt to repress, or ignore or hide from, the more I become blocked. And in doing so, the more I become aware of myself *as* a self, a self *against* the world. As our world is in reality made of violence and caring, of hunger and surfeit, of racism, misogyny and exploitation *and* the intimacy of love, so the world brings all this to us, and it is from this that we are made, that we become ourselves.

We need to look beyond the image of naturalness and inevitability we give to our social world, because that 'naturalness' is an important aspect of our presumed and assumed separation from the world and from each other. So to begin at what we might think of as the beginning: what could be more 'natural' than having grown up in the privacy of our own family? But wait a moment. Traditionally, of course, the father has been held to be head of the household (to go Latin for a moment: *caput* = captain), and to thus represent 'authority' to the growing child. But this *pater* was only such because of his status as a citizen of the *patria*, his country: it is the laws and customs of the land that framed him the family's head, its captain. This is the system that we call *pat*riarchy, where a society is ruled by a hierarchy of men: men who command other men, who in turn command women and children and servants. Patriarchy developed in this form not as some universal conspiracy of men agains women but for the very specific purpose of conducting permanent violent *warfare*. This can be seen clearly in the society that formed, from the Renaissance onwards, the model of choice for all ruling European elites: that of ancient Rome. In the Rome of the republic the heads of households were responsible for providing military service on demand and over extended periods. To support them in this they were given absolute authority over the lives of members of their household, everything *within* the household becoming their *private* property and concern, in distinction from the *public* sphere of politics, business and, above all, war. This organisation of society inevitably placed severe limits on the possibility of emotional intimacy between men and the women they must 'leave behind'. For men in such a society, segregated from an early age, and knowing war to be their 'destiny', their primary bond must always be with their comrades and their shared military code of honour, as being a 'man among men'. But the possibility of men's emotional intimacy with *themselves* — in their own self awareness and self understanding — becomes equally limited. This permanent emotional *separation* of men from women that is in itself deeply emotionally wounding. It is compensated for — or coped with — by a discipline of *dissociation*, to use a term from psychology. All loving and caring feelings, emotions and thoughts become potential traitors, that may destroy morale or even stay the hand that must kill. Such vulnerability and weakness must be kept at bay by *displacement* onto ideas of the fatherland (*patria*) and of comradeship, and any failure to do this rigorously will result in the *shaming* by his comrades of thoughts, words and actions that do not conform to this ideal. The trauma of the violence of war itself, and the consequent fear of imminent and unpredictable death is held at bay by both the endless repetition of disciplined training exercises that make actual acts of violence routine and automatic, and once more the collective *shaming* of 'unmanly' responses. In fact this emotional dissociation becomes in itself a defining characteristic of ideal masculinity.

(Decimation?) The warrior polices his own feelings, thoughts and actions together with those of his comrades, and is policed by them also. How else train young men to kill? We dissociate from the responses of our bodies, and from the emotions connected to those responses. We dissociate from our feelings, and in doing so we dissociate from the possibility of empathy with others, from *fellow* feeling. This is imaged most powerfully in Vergil's *Aenead*, the story that became Rome's self-story of its foundation: Aeneas, a refugee from the destruction of Troy, after many trials and adventures falls in love with Dido, the queen of mercantile Carthage. She offers to share her realm with him, but finally he turns away from this relationship of sexual love with a woman who is his equal in order to fulfil his destiny by founding the patriarchal and aggressively militaristic Roman republic. His masculinity is defined by his dissociation, this repudiation of women and of the feminine, which stand for all his potential emotional vulnerability and weakness. His final nobility, his heroism, his exemplarity consist in acting so in the name of war and of empire.

We do not live in ancient Rome, but do I not hear the echo of this story in *my* father's threat to my mother's life? He was no patriarch, no tyrant, and yet… He was born at the apogee of another empire, that British Empire on which it was said 'the sun never sets'. We do not live in ancient Rome, and yet for the crucial centuries of the development of our present day nations Rome was taken as the pre-eminent model for 'our' morals, 'our' thought and 'our' society. We have only to glance around the architecture of our cities to see that this has been so: Roman values embodied in stone and stucco still confront us at every turn, those of military honour and of conquest foremost. These reflected the aspirations of the rulers of these emergent states — that the rulers of a single city should have come to conquer and rule the entire mediterranean world and beyond! Our modern states came into existence when the many different armed groups who had become able to control a limited territory by the direct use or threat of violence entered into long-term alliances with those early capitalists who had come to dominate regional and long-distance trade. It was the enormous investment needed to establish large, permanent armies requiring ever-greater resources to maintain them that brought about, between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, the integration of scattered feudal territories into coherent national states. Competition among these states was permanent and unprincipled, and the potential losses catastrophic for the defeated. This competition seemed to oblige states to engage in a permanent arms race requiring ever greater human, financial and material resources, resources only to be obtained by exploiting or conquering weaker territories. Opportunities for forced and exploitative trade with the 'outside' world (what we call 'the Age of Discovery') gave way to active invasion, conquest and colonisation where this proved economically viable. These colonies were hence 'developed' (exploited) in ways that would allow them to be most efficiently exploited by the commercial interests of the 'home' nations, a general strategy which has survived formal decolonisation and continues today. Traditional economies and existing industries were destroyed, in order to remove competition and confine the new territories to the production of 'raw' materials. Most catastrophically this exploitation included the genocide of many indigenous peoples and the enslaving of others, alongside the forced translocation of millions of men women and children to be themselves enslaved in the

new colonies established by Western nations in conquered territory. And alongside all this went the extermination of other species unwelcome to the invaders, and the re-engineering of both small and large scale eco-systems. Present day climate change, or climate collapse, is the direct result of this centuries-long and ever increasing carte-blanche exploitation of the natural world across the entire globe.

The Romans accepted slavery as entirely natural: that the conquered became subject to the will of the conqueror. Roman patriarchs owned slaves in a way that was not that dissimilar from their ownership of their wives and children, and the line between slavery and citizenship could be, and often was, crossed. Things were very different in the conquest of the world by Western Europe. Neither genocide nor slavery would have been possible on the industrial scale it was without equally vast investment in the hypocrisy of justification. It was necessary to establish arguments as to why *these* human beings were so 'other', so far removed from 'us' that it was allowable, or even 'our duty' so to treat them. Over time the argument that this was permissible because the others were not *Christian* yielded to the construction of a formal *racism*, which developed its own pseudo-science. Whatever the arguments, they relied on that same kinds of psychic *dissociation* that allowed the military machine itself to function, and can be seen as an extension of it. The unimaginable trauma of unending abuse, rape and murder, the selling on of children or spouses, was made as routine as military drill, and it demanded and facilitated the same day to day emotional dissociation in those directly responsible for carrying it out. The *splitting* of the selves of traders, merchants and colonists that would make legitimate in their own eyes the traumatic violence of treating human beings *at one level* as simple *objects*, as their being their *personal property*, while at another demanding they offer their labour, their intelligence — and for 'house' servants even the appearance of their affection — to their 'masters'. The aspiration towards a true *objectivity* of rational thought supported the same emotional dissociation for those in the 'home' nations benefiting from the enslavement of millions. Insofar as actual enslaved people showed themselves to have individual wills, or attempted to take on personal responsibility (which was what was coming to be demanded of every 'free' citizen) by resisting, fleeing or revolting, they only demonstrated their own 'primitive', 'corrupt' and 'wicked' natures in their lack of gratitude…

Thus there came into being a system that grew racism from the stem of patriarchy, relying on similar psychic processes of dissociation and displacement. While the fear generated among slave-owners by the actual success of the Haitian rebellion in the years following 1791 effectively ended the international trade in enslaved people, by no means did it end the exploitation of their descendants, an exploitation which facilitated by the new disciplines of racism only increased in scope and intensity during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By the late nineteenth century the *majority* of the world's population lived in a colonial reality, and still today lives in a 'post-colonial' world in many ways not essentially that different. These processes were also to become a central component of the development of a general policing and self-policing of society. Rather than treating the populations of the 'home' nations as a simple mass to be taxed, press-ganged and otherwise exploited, it became apparent that the productivity of the nation could be massively increased through the active forming and shaping of the physical and mental

capacities of its population, extending to their beliefs and their very identities. Ideas of discipline — not dissimilar from the Roman military virtues despite their different aim — that had been developed within the Christian Church were increasingly applied across whole populations. The older broadly tripartite classifications of humans into rulers/ priests/everyone else gave way to an infinitely subtle system of description and classification along the lines of emerging natural science. For the first time *all* citizens became subjects of study: individualised, assessed, trained. The previously unimaginable cost of creating the bureaucratic and administrative systems to do this proved worthwhile in terms of greater productivity and increased social control, a factor which was to become increasingly significant. For those more highly valued some form of limited political participation and share of the wealth created often proved more productive than the threat of violent coercion, and public health, education and other basic provisions for the 'deserving' (for which read 'useful') became normal. Specifically Christian concepts such as Free Will were co-opted to develop the idea of an *individual* 'self' or 'soul', possessed of free choice and objective rational thought. This soul was subject to the workings of a *personal* conscience, and was hence required to take absolute personal 'responsibility' for its actions, 'good' and 'bad' being defined in this context not by God but by those enacting and administering the laws and regulations. But all this came at a price for the state and its aspiration for a compliant and productive population: having taught this population to read, the state could never entirely control *what* was printed and read. Having taught them that they were 'free', it could not entirely control how they chose to exercise this (theoretical) freedom. Having defined, assessed, educated and employed them as 'individuals', it could not entirely control how they imagined this individuality and how they chose to express it. All this incrementally redefined the nature of society and the 'public' realm: society ceased simply to be seen simply as the expression of the interests of the ruling elite and their allies, but, erratically, incompletely, ambiguously, ambivalently… to be that of the population as a *whole*, of an '*us*'. While our societies have always been sites of ongoing social struggle, these developments changed the form of that struggle, and gave it both more focus and wider purpose. Workers have not been *offered* rights, but have had, and continue to have to, be willing to fight for them. The 'emancipation' of women has not come as far as it has through the generosity and empathy of men. Race, cognitive difference, sexuality, gender identity, physical disability… none of these categories which have been used to limit and demean the lives of real people have changed their value except through the struggle of those directly involved in trying to lead whole and fulfilling lives. These struggles are ongoing. Such, broadly, are the selves we see ourselves as being…individual, separate, possessed of will and agency, permanently frustrated in the attempt to exercise that same will and agency, *subjects of/subjected by* the state which shaped our growth as the 'selves' we are.

Within this context the prison system can be seen not as a neutral and objective response to exceptional acts committed by exceptional individuals, but as part of the common system of the discipline and training by which all of us become subjects of the state as its citizens. Violence has been the foundation and underpinning of the modern state as it has developed since the late middle ages, and violence remains so. Our system of law is founded on the threat and reality of overt violence, and our very use of language

embodies the paradox of the truth of our constraint that underlies the axiom of our being 'free'. *Sovereignty* is the absolute right of a state over its *subjects*, the state itself defining whatever restraints or limits it wishes to place on itself at any point. You and I are *subject* to the authority of our state. And yet of course it is also as *subjects* that we are held to *act intentionally*, that we are seen as *active* subjects who act on *passive* objects: 'I throw the ball...' We talk of *subjectivity*, of our 'own' thoughts and feeling, our own 'inner' world. We live and try to understand our world from within this paradox. As I said above, Lee's culpability for his actions is in the assumption of him being an autonomous *subject* freely able to choose his actions, for which, because he is a *subject* of the state, it exercises its *sovereignty* in imprisoning him. While the idea of the social contract suggests that it is for my *protection* from others that I am held to have made myself subject to the state's authority, I find, paradoxically again, that I am actually permanently *at risk* from this state that claims a 'legitimate' (founded in law...) right over me, as sovereign over its subjects. This is the twin nature of the discipline we learn as modern *subjects*, as modern *selves*: our self-definition *both* through always having lived under the threat of state violence (Hey! You there, stop!), *and* as a recipient of that same state's care and the individual bearer of the identities it has formed us to as worker, parent, and our other social roles.

In this way the individual I come to be is formed out of this tissue of enablings and limitations through which I learn to live a life. In the modern world I become from birth (or before) a name and a number: I am identified, classified and individualised from cradle to grave. My birth certificate, my driving licence, and passport; my mortgage agreement, credit cards, bank accounts and tax returns; my list of academic and professional qualifications gained, that will do much do determine who I become; my health records, the certificate of my death. It is as this, and only *this* individual that I must strive to make something of myself, to compete with others in socially and legally acceptable ways. Lee stands once more as the embodiment of a failure to be able to compete, and the consequences of this failure. How do we finally judge success and failure in this sense? Failure is always relative, and in the reality of being compared to the individual sovereignty to which we are all raised to aspire to, we are all, in truth, *failures*. This is my world. A world which out of the destruction of the environment and the ongoing exploitation of billions of human beings in the service of a system of state war-machines has brought into being...*me*. This is a violent history, and a violent present. This is my world, the world of (ongoing) suffering and violence. There is, in truth, so much I would wish to turn away from. But this is the frame within which you and I and those we love both care and are cared for. The world within which we have to look to, and find, our joy and happiness and contentment.

Practice Check:
There's too much to take on board in this section, maybe read it again?
*But how do I actually respond, in my **body**, in my **emotions** to this 'history lesson'?*
Does this sound like 'whinging wokeness' or 'telling it like it is'?
How do I really know?
What would my friends say about it?

'Violence, C'est Moi!'

All this is the violence which brings me to *be*, a violence that is my element, as the fish in water or the bird in air, and usually as seemingly 'natural' in that it has become the ignored background that only exceptionally impinges on my awareness. It's only against this background, within this frame, that I can even think my 'own' thoughts, feel my 'own' feelings, and act out 'my' deeds. In what sense can I even say these are 'mine'? If, as being itself an act of violence, we abandon the idea of myself as straightforwardly 'sovereign' over my own mind and actions, as *intending* all my words and actions through a *free* and *rational* choice, then what becomes of *will*, *intention* and *personal responsibility*? What becomes of our much prized notions of *autonomy* and *agency*? It is tempting to think that there must be something *more* to me than this (terrifying?) 'individuality' that while it leads me to experience myself as unique, actually seems more to do with placing me alongside everyone else in a competitive continuum of status. *Thus my 'interior' sense of myself and my 'exterior' identity exist in permanent tension, even though neither exists except in relation to the other, and as an expression of the society of which I am a member*. But surely, I feel, there is something deeper that is mine alone, some inner self that cannot be grasped by all this outward measurement and attainment? For many this is the attraction of what they imagine of a spiritual path — Zen included — as a journey to my truth as self, whether we see that in experiencing my own ultimate and unique individuality or as a transcendental merging with the divine. But this deep inner self is actually nothing more than a projection of the hyper-individualising organisation of our society. As I suggested earlier, the sense in which I am 'more than a number' actually lies in the opposite direction, that of the interdependence inherent in our infinitely complex *relationships*. In the vulnerability of our impermanent and interconnected world.

Our search for *control* is always bound to fail, it is merely an aspect of our imagined separation. But it is *not* an either/or choice (kill or be killed!). If I understand the person I am as being simply part of this world: my embodied physicality, my language, my relationships, then there is no question of finally 'breaking free' of all deluded ways of seeing myself and the world; equally, I am not the passive *object* of that world of delusion, buffeted by winds I cannot ever tame. Our practice is to *experience* our delusion *as* delusion in order to experience the inconsistencies and contradictions *within* my way of seeing the world, and *between* different ways of seeing it. To work with the resistance of 'life as it is' and recognise that resistance when we experience it. This changes us…We often talk in Ordinary Mind of the gap between 'life as it is' and how I want my life to be. But this gap is *also* often between life as it is and 'how I see my life as being'…our wider world can and frequently does intrude on all personal and collective stories, thereby asking us whether we will stay with this new experience and learn a different story, or choose instead to turn away. We are embodied beings, and therefore we live in delusion, but, some delusions are more harmful than others, and far more damaging in their effects. In my assumptions about myself and about the world — in the very way I see that world — what is being shown, and what hidden or misrepresented? Whose interests does this serve? Violence is indeed universal in our culture, but it manifests along social fault lines, lines on which I find *I* am placed alongside everyone else. While we can *separate out* individuals as

misogynists and racists (or homophobes, transphobes and the rest) — and it will be necessary on occasion to do so — it is more urgent to look at these questions both *structurally* and *intimately*. *Structurally* at the level of the way our organisations and institutions function to produce effects that privilege some and discriminate against others, *intimately* in how this shows up (or *appears* not to) in my *own* thoughts, words and actions. We should watch closely where we are criticising others to establish or maintain our own good self opinion, saying in effect that *I* am *not* like you. The misogynist, the racist — whether I am Black or white, man or woman — 'c'est moi!'

So what about the acts of violence *I'm* most intimately connected to? Both those micro-acts of lack of respect or empathy — the unkind word, the failure to make eye contact, the need to have everything 'my way', to have my view or my way of doing things seen as the only way there is — and the more obvious violence of lashing out with tongue or fist. Is it different when I do these things 'inside' my head, and maybe despite myself? How does each of these feel in my body, what thoughts am I thinking, how do they come into being, and what's their connection to the bigger picture of our society? So, how far do I think I *do* or *can* or *should* control what I think of as 'my' thoughts? In what way are these thoughts actually 'mine' anyway, and what does that imply about how I treat them? What about my own 'bad' thoughts, my thoughts of separation, aggression and violence, whether they are directed against another person or against part of myself I want to reject? Do I want to extirpate, to kill these killing thoughts in turn? Can I instead own them, treat them and myself with generosity and explore their coming into being and their passing away?

The Victim

The Precepts are often taught within Buddhism as if they are solely about 'my' making the 'correct' decision in ethical matters, decisions that help tame my innate selfishness so that I govern my actions in the world more rationally. Hence the Precepts are treated as if they solely concern the potential harm *I* may do to *others*, if ultimately with the understanding that to behave ethically is always in my *own* final best interest, whether or not that is seen in terms of immediate well-being, or future rebirths. Hence the teaching of the Precepts tends to ignore my own experience as *victim* rather than *aggressor*, and where this exceptionally *is* recognised it is only to urge me to transcend any negative feelings I may have. From a traditionalist point of view I would be reminded that I am simply reaping the inevitable karmic reward of my own previous bad actions. But abandoning the naive idea of the *unitary, self-sufficient self*, even if initially we are able to only in theory, tends to collapse or at least make complex the distinctions we normally draw between 'inner' and 'outer' experience, between what I experience as 'me and mine' and 'the world outside'. To come to see the world in this way is to acknowledge that the harm that has been done *to me*, the harm *I cause to others* and the harm *I do to myself* are all intimately and intricately related.

What feelings actually lead to my showing violence, and how does the violence of others towards me make me feel and act in return? We actually need to ask about *both* these experiences of violence, as both aggressor *and* victim. How does violence show up in my own life? If we acknowledge the universality of violence in our culture, then we also

acknowledge that we are as certain to be victims of it as to be the perpetrators of it. For many of us this may actually be much harder to admit to, as it involves acknowledging too our own *vulnerability*, and it is often in responding reflexively to this vulnerability or attempting to deny it that we harm ourselves or others further. So what about my thoughts and feelings when I am the victim of violence, whether it's petty or traumatic? I might have experienced feeling specifically victimised, targeted, or simply having been in the wrong place at the wrong time. These feelings all make me vividly aware of my own vulnerability, and at worst I may even begin actively to identify with them in the stories I tell myself. More probably I will try to ignore, work round, or actively repress them wherever possible. To take a single example, it is only in these last few years that very many more women are demanding it be recognised *how* completely the pervasive fear of both routine sexual harassment and actual physical violence on the street impacts their lives. If a woman is genuinely afraid of sexual violence or mugging when out late in the neighbourhood or in town, that is a real restriction placed on her life, a *self* restraint she feels obliged to make, and one that is a form of violence. How does that feel? More generally, how does it feel when it has seemed impossible to report harassment at work, to challenge the daily experience of cat calling or other 'banter'? To think that one was being unreasonable or weak just to feel these things were even wrong?

So, when have I been the victim of violence? Most of us, unless we've been unlucky enough to have been directly physically assaulted might well answer 'I haven't been'. Yet if we are honest about the multitude of act of petty violence we ourselves commit, then clearly we are equally the victims of many, many others, which we get good at shrugging off, not minding, forgetting. Yet the feelings, the experiences remain. I'm not saying we should dwell on these, repeat them to ourselves and rehearse our sense of hurt and anger. But it *is* necessary to go to some of these places and allow ourselves to *experience* the *physical sensations*, *the emotions*, *the thoughts*. We have to get more comfortable with the experience of our own weakness, lack of agency, our human vulnerability. This can have important consequences in how we in turn behave to others, but also in recognising aspects of our own truth. To pick up on the issue of sexual violence — more honest and open discussion of the issues around consent both within relationships and more casual encounters have allowed many more women to recognise for the first time that one or many of these were, genuinely, rape. While very far indeed from being in any way easy, this recognition has allowed them to move forward out of the tangle of conflicting thoughts and emotions towards some kind of personal and even collective resolution. Far less dramatically, there will be many examples in my own life of moments, incidents where I experienced the aggression of others and was, if I am honest, marked by it in some lasting way.

Practice Check:

*What does 'being a victim' mean to me, what is the body/emotion **feeling**?*

If I'm honest, when have I been a victim?

*How **did**, how **does** this **feel**?*

What is there for me to bear witness to here?

Paying It Forward

The feelings aroused by violence towards us or its threat may well also give rise to feelings and thoughts of wanting to commit violence ourselves, whether that's of self-harm or revenge, or displacing it onto another person or thing (like kicking the dog because I feel kicked around by my boss, or partner, or parent). These are all ways I act out to try to evade my own vulnerability, and give myself back a sense of *control* of my world, the *agency* I feel I've lost. Our violence is often reflexive, so I might not even be consciously aware of my anger, fear, resentment or other 'negative' emotions. And when I do become aware of them there will be a tendency either to self-justify (which may take the delusive forms we've been discussing: racism, misogyny and the rest), or else to judge myself negatively. To want to kill the 'bad' thoughts and the part of me that thinks them. And then I can judge myself for this in turn. I have to learn to *trust* myself to think these thoughts, and to know that this is ok. I can look for the patterns they form as they manifest and disperse. I can recognise that in my own way I am as complex as the 'outside' world, and neither omnipotent nor powerless in relation to either it or myself. I can try to not separate myself off from parts of myself or the world, and instead take myself and life whole.

If I *fail* to do this, fail to acknowledge the range of my own experience of complexity and vulnerability, then I remain stuck in the same old stories about myself and the world, and the same ways of seeing. To protect them, to avoid dealing with the contradictions and complexity I feel within my self, I will project my fear and anger onto others. The extreme form of this is hate crime. Behind so many acts of violence is a *perceived* injury or threat — be it great or slight — and some sense of a significant *continuing* threat. And this even when the objective power in the relationship lies totally on one side. A gunman on a killing spree among unarmed strangers. A white gang out hunting for their chosen object of hate: a man who happens to be Black, a woman who happens to be trans, anyone who happens to be gay. Victims who pose what possible threat? Clearly one that's 'internal' to the aggressors, a story about how '*these people*' make *me* feel, what they represent about me to myself...and yet of course a story that takes the socially constructed forms of racism, homophobia, misogyny. What I do in the outside world is always related to what I do to myself. If I can acknowledge that all people have *their* own uniqueness and value, then I can acknowledge *my* own uniqueness and value. If I can treat others with care and respect, I can treat myself with care and respect. And I can start by seeing that I do not always do either of these. In this way I can bear witness to my own thoughts of violence, and perhaps bear witness more easily to those of other people too. It's important to see that to have understanding and empathy is absolutely not to excuse or condone actions in the real world, either our own or those of other people. But understanding their causes and consequences is perhaps to change our relationship to ourselves and to other people, treating both with respect and caring.

The universality of the experience of violence should also make us question the way we attribute or avoid blame and over-personalise responsibility. I don't need to take it so personally. Neither feeling *personally* attacked, nor believing that *I* am innately *bad*, *worthless* or *evil* because I have suffered violence is ever helpful to me. Nor, for that matter,

feeling bad, worthless or evil because of the harm I myself have caused. (*Shame* is a difficult and complex subject, both within Buddhism and psychology. We can talk of both 'healthy' and toxic' shame: we'll be exploring this in depth later). Such feelings will tend to throw me back into the isolation of individual selfhood. I don't need to punish myself, or demonise others, and attempting to order myself to stop feeling my feelings and 'man up' is unlikely to be of any use either. Instead, understanding the social origin of my suffering is more likely to help me cause less suffering, and take less personally that which is caused to me. So the question returns again and again to how does my personal experience of violence — as both perpetrator and victim — relate to the larger forces within our society as a whole? If we can look at both these levels without premature judgement or conclusions, there is much to be discovered about myself and my world, how we ourselves *are* that world. *No separation*.

<div align="center">

Practice Check:

Who, honestly, feels like 'the other' to me?

How do I know?

Can I suspend judgement of myself and the other, simply experience this in my body and emotions?

</div>

Bearing Witness

This Precept, as are all the others, is finally about self-insight, and self-honesty. (With the standard Zen-style caveat — just who is being honest with whom?). Self honesty requires I see both my aggression *and* my vulnerability, and the effects of trying to deny either of those. I also see that these are never mine alone, but something we all share. In bearing witness I see myself as part of a society and part of a world. I see the choices that I make and those of other people, and I see the limitations to the choices I can make. I can see that I am a part of violence and a witness to violence. I see myself as both perpetrator and victim, and begin to find empathy and understanding for others who find themselves as perpetrators and victims. I see that violence is never an isolated event, that it is always a link in a complex chain of action and reaction, of fear and aggression. By so doing I may hope to come to live less violently in this world, but, the Zen Precepts do not offer me fixed rules or even a code to follow. There is no way to cheat, nothing to get away with, nowhere to fail. They are, in this sense, not *prescriptive* but *descriptive,* they describe a way of being in the world, and an aspiration towards that way of being. I come to recognise the reality of suffering, and the reality of the emptiness of suffering. In working with the Precepts I slowly come to inhabit them, and in this way they form a Path, but one without actual goal. I recognise both my aspiration to end the suffering of all beings, and its impossibility. I recognise that I am one of those suffering beings, and that what I share most profoundly with all of them is their vulnerability. It is only as one being — suffering and vulnerable — among all beings that I can aspire to end all suffering.

Bearing witness in the sense of the Precepts begins with acknowledging this reality, and living within the awareness of it. I don't imagine I'm ever 'clean', ever 'pure' and above it all. bearing witness is being *a part* of it all, not *apart* from it all. I need to understand this aspect before I can begin to bear witness both to the violence I cause and the violence

which I suffer, *and* that caused and suffered by others. I've tried to highlight some of the ideas which seem most useful to help us practice bearing witness. That violence is always produced out of our relationships, and hence *socially* produced, because the very way in which we all see both the world and our own self is socially produced. That our collective history, and that of the State itself as manager and arbiter of all violence, frame how and in what forms violence is produced in us. That at the level of the individual, of *me*, of *you*, we experience this in terms of our individual psychology — *my* family background, *my* life experiences, but of course bearing in mind that these too are always fully social. That violence is always at some level about the gain or loss of control, and about the assertion or violation of our sense of personal or collective autonomy. That these ideas are themselves problematic insofar as they both lead us to, and stem from the sense of an individual self that is unified, self consistent and continuous. That this sense of our isolation and separateness is itself a fundamental act of violence upon ourselves, one we all share. That perhaps what we are most fundamentally left with is our sense of vulnerability and our attempts to deny this vulnerability, a denial we make by our thoughts, words and deeds, but a denial which can all too frequently result in actual violence.

Why do sometimes I *fail* to bear witness? There are the all too familiar issues of compassion fatigue, the despair or indifference aroused by over-exposure to 'bad news' stories, and the sheer overwhelming *scale* of suffering in our world. The Bodhisattva Vow says: 'sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them…' which is literally impossible. But beyond this, there's the denial of my vulnerability that's implicit in my dissociation from what's taking place, my active *ignore*-ance that doesn't want to see, to know, my reflexive or even conscious turning away. I've talked about dissociation as defence from the emotional damage we have suffered, and the damage we also do to ourselves by harming others. But here too there's a closing off, a separation, the repeating of a defensive strategy we've learnt long before. While my failure to bear witness won't *directly* bring about actual harming, there is nevertheless a real violence in *allowing* harming to take place, in *choosing* (consciously or unconsciously) to *turn away*, whether physically or simply emotionally. But for all of us it's inevitable that sometimes, and quite possibly mostly, we do turn away.

<div align="center">

Practice Check:

How aware am I of my own failures to bear witness, either in my past or my present everyday life?

Can I answer this without judgement?

Without judging whatever judgement I do find myself making?

</div>

Norman Geras' *The Contract of Mutual Indifference: Political Philosophy after the Holocaust* (1998) examines the very worst of this turning away, looks it straight in the face: the Jewish Holocaust. Geras looks at accounts given of the Holocaust's bystanders — German mothers and children playing outside the ghetto walls, as, inside, the roundup and execution of its Jewish inhabitants takes place to the sound of screaming and gunfire. Or those 'ordinary' people standing by at the train station as Jews held waiting to be

transported to the death camps were abused by their guards. How do *we* collectively make this implicit contract *not* to care, not even to *see*, and certainly not to *bear witness*? So much of the violence, the suffering of the world is of this distanced, almost passive kind, it is violence we *allow* to be, rather than *actively* participate in. It is neglect, it is 'passing on the other side', it is looking away. It can be the mentality of the gated community, whether that's our luxury residential complex or that we come to see our entire nation as 'gated', as governments are increasingly tending to. Those others, by virtue of being *other*, are not my concern. Or to put it better, *only* become my concern when I feel threatened by them (whether that 'threat' is in any sense real or not), or believe I can make objective use of them. Or to actually put it *properly* — they are *other* by virtue of my *defining* them as other. I have *made* them other *for me*, I separate myself from them, and in doing so wash my hands of them. This *is* a kind of violence, but not directly so, and perhaps we have use for a term which evokes both neglect and indifference along with the harm that may follow indirectly. I've already suggested 'care', as a more useful translation of the Sanskrit *Karuna*, (usually translated as 'compassion'). This fits well with this active aspect of non-violence. So to suggest another new term, I think '*uncare*' has the right sense of the lack, the failure of the care we implicitly owe each other and ourselves, and the harming allowed or even licensed by indifference. Separate or *not*-separate? *Uncare* or *care*? (There is *already* an adjective — 'uncaring' — and we might extend this to include both noun and verb forms.) So we can think of *uncare* as a failure of the basic care we owe each is other that is fundamental to being human.

<p style="text-align: center;">*Practice Check:*</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">*The Holocaust remains a watershed in modern history, but what is the Holocaust to YOU?*</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">*How does it figure in your own story and in your stories of this modern world?*</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">*Can you recognise* **uncare** *in yourself and in the world?*</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">*How does it* **feel**?</p>

Caring For Myself, Caring For Each Other

This chapter has tried to frame how we inhabit violence, how violence inhabits us. How the forces that bring about my experience of being a *self*, the forces that shape the continuous process of this coming to experience myself as *this* self, have a relation to violence and to the collective stories we tell about violence. Our society is very far from recognising and *bearing witness* to its birth out of misogyny and colonialism, and the ways in which in we all live in the shadow of the State's absolute right to violence. As a member of that society, I myself am born out of that same colonialism and misogyny, and I become *myself* in relation to it; in each moment I am made of this violence anew. Does this condemn me to reproducing it endlessly? Well, we live *in* the reality of the fantasy of separation from each other, from ourselves, from the real experiencing of our own lives. But *also* in the reality of non-separation, of relationship, connection and *care*. To return to where we began in this commentary — from my first moments of life I have experienced *care*. Even before my birth I was cared for in my mother's womb, and I learn to *be* me *by* learning to care, to care for others, for myself. I learn to care *for*, I learn to care *about*, I learn to care *with*. How I come to be my 'self' in each moment embodies both violence *and*

caring. If I hold myself *not-separate* in the key sense I'm talking about — recognising it is through my actions that I come to be who I am, and that this is in and through relationship; that I do not act *as if* there is a world separate from myself, a world divided out into discrete individual 'selves' and simple 'objects' — then caring becomes an inevitable and involuntary response.

Care happens when, in however deep, long-lasting, perfunctory, or momentary a relationship, a need is met. *Ideally*, this is without separation of 'carer' and 'cared for', without *resistance* and the urge to turn away. This is the Bodhisattva Ideal made reality. And *some* of the time I'm sure we all experience this both when offering and receiving care, perhaps most obviously with our children, parents, lovers. And of course the reality of these relationships too is that they are tinged with separation and unmet need, and fear and anger, and frustration, and failure of recognition — all kinds of 'violence' in their way. — Then there are the 'how noble of you' roles: the ones that those unfamiliar with the reality of the situation imagine are all one-sided — caring for a 'disabled' child, or perhaps even being a Buddhist prison chaplain. And the reality here may well be, and although it may sound like a cliché it is not, that you 'get much more than you give', that is simply the way it feels. While of course it may feel like hell also… Care may, often must, perhaps *should* much more than it presently *does*, involve payment. We all remember the debt we felt, and were told by our leaders that we *should* feel, towards those who risked their lives for us all during the pandemic. Clapping for the angels and saints among us. Right up until it came to the question of fair pay for work done: 'claps don't pay the bills', as the campaign slogan rightly says. There is the important question of what a society more genuinely oriented towards care might look like, how it would be organised, funded. We'll come back to that. But still, in all these ways and with every possible reservation, *for* all of us, and *by* all of us, care *happens*. Our world simply could not function for a hour without it. Care happens best when we allow ourselves the *empathy* to fully connect 'with openness and possibility' as another Precept has it. One translation of the Heart Sutra talks of Bodhisattvas having 'no walls to their mind', and I've always liked this image. We could rephrase this as 'Bodhisattvas do not practice dissociation from their bodily experience, emotions and thoughts in order to hide their own emotional injuries and consequently harm other beings as a result'. A fuller and more accurate statement, but I still prefer the Heart Sutra… Not walling themselves off as 'separate' beings, Bodhisattvas… *we*… care without the intention of caring…

So our *bearing witness* is taking care, care which makes manifest our active non-violence — a*himsa* in the Sanskrit tradition. *Ahimsa* is a concept central to much of the philosophical tradition of India from the time of the Buddha onwards, and is common to Buddhist, Hindu and Jain traditions. The most obvious examples of ahimsa in more recent times might begin with the non-violent but very active resistance to British rule in India that Mohandas Gandhi led — *ahimsa* was its key principle. Or the adoption of the same ethic of non-violence by the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, with which we associate Martin Luther King. Both these examples embody a response to violence that is *not-separate* and of real power in its *refusal* to respond or retaliate, and by doing so allow the *separation* of even thinking of those assaulting and abusing you as 'the enemy'. We are One

People. In terms of the Precepts, we might say that both of these were powerful and sustained collective demonstrations of the power of *bearing witness* in the face of oppression. So bearing witness is one way in which we can always show care, whether that is on the grand scale of collective action, or of my own personal Ordinary Mind practice: simply bearing witness to my experience, my feelings and my thoughts in this specific situation, right here and right now. We bear witness to the violence of our world and ourselves, to our *care* and our *uncare*. We bear witness in many ways. At one pole we could place the spontaneous action of a Darnella Frazier as given in her Pulitzer Prize citation: 'for courageously recording the murder of George Floyd, a video that spurred protests against police brutality around the world, highlighting the crucial role of citizens in journalists' quest for truth and justice.' But there are 'eighty four thousand' (the traditional number of 'gates' to the Dharma) ways of bearing witness… Toni Morrison's breathtaking novel of the world of the enslaved: *Beloved*. The music of the Blues. I tried to bear witness to Lee himself when I was working with him, and again through my telling of his story here. We can show our care too in our bearing witness to our own stories; whatever the testimony, for both others and ourselves, we can learn to *listen*. Bearing witness is active — we intentionally bring or keep our awareness focussed — but in a sense also passive — I simply remain open, willing to receive and recognize whatever testimony I am offered. And this whether that is the testimony of my own body, or of what I have witnessed in the world, or in listening to your testimony as you tell it to me.

Practice Check:

Does all this sound off-putting, simply 'too much' to take on?

How does it feel in my body, what emotions and thoughts arise?

*Our Bodhisattva Vow acknowledges the impossible nature of our task, but it is also said 'A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step'. Can I see I have **already** begun this journey?*

Coda

It is essentially the same psychic processes that are at work both in the development of a modern sense of 'self' and the modern nation-state, as also in the violence that is at the heart of their relationship. We began in the patriarchy of ancient Rome, and might note here that notwithstanding our queens and other female heads of state, despite the expanding of the suffrage and equalities legislation, patriarchy has metamorphosed rather than fallen. We will examine more the continuities of the symbolic functioning of gender, and the power of shaming, and how the mechanisms of dissociation and displacement still function to protect us from the unsayable, the unseeable and the undo-able in experience, from the collective trauma that is at the heart of our society. And how they enable the social organisation to reproduce and even further entrench itself. We will explore also the differences, the specific contributions of modernity: the development of the self as an 'individual' full of aspirations to uniqueness, but placed everywhere on a competitive continuum where this individuality is cultivated, trained, disciplined and administrated. We still live in an era of perpetual war and the preparation for war, of zones of influence and the 'national interest' as pre-eminent, of thousands of nuclear warheads and global military spending in excess of two trillion dollars per annum.

Dissociation and displacement are perhaps universal and certainly highly necessary psychic processes: we need, for example, to be able to 'dissociate' and compartmentalise as and when required in order to be able focus on the task at hand to the exclusion of all else. But in the particular forms we have studied, these processes have become pathological, harming to ourselves and to the world. They are not fundamentally different from that 'turning away' of which our practice speaks so often, that we experience in ourselves moment by moment. We have developed collective patterns of dissociation, of turning away, so habitual that they are rarely even recognisable as such unless we experience their violence first hand. *Othering*, *ignore-ance* and *uncare* are other forms of these same processes, or perhaps other ways of looking at them. The violence of *othering* relies on dissociation, relies on our 'turning away'. While our ignorance may often be simply not knowing, there is also the more active violence of *ignore*-ance, of *uncare*. These are all forms of separation, of this splitting of self from other that is at the root of suffering and of violence. And as always our practice reminds us that this is an internal as well as an external process, an internal as well as an external violence, as when in the name of a coherent and individual 'self', I seek to expel or destroy what in me I do not want to acknowledge as 'myself'. In the name of this 'self's' autonomy, and of its 'self control' I dissociate from the reality of my infinite vulnerability, my mortality, my Interbeing with all things. Violence *is* the acting out of this sense of separation within ourselves and between my self and all others.

Bearing witness to this violence 'in the world and within ourselves' is also the beginning of the recognition of the care we each can and already do offer in the world. Care is the manifestation, in 'body, speech and mind' — in our actions, words and thoughts — that we are not-separate, and that *without* care, *nothing* is possible, nothing would *ever* have been possible. We live within and between the reality of violence that is the delusion of '*separateness'*, and the care that is the realisation of '*not-separate*'. I've mentioned before the image of Avalokiteshvara, the traditional Bodhisattva who speaks the Heart Sutra, who has a thousand eyes and hands with which to *care* for the world. I've said that these are, and can only be, the eyes and hands of *all* of us. This is who in reality we are. This is what we are *together*: 'not separate'.