

The Third Applied Precept:

I bear witness to the power of sexuality and its potential for both love and for harm in myself and in the world, and aspire to engage respectfully with an open heart in intimate relationships.

An Apology

Before I say anything, an apology. I'm an Old White Guy, and whoever *you* may be, dear reader, I'm not trying to speak 'for' you. If at times it seems that's exactly what I *am* doing, then my absolute and unconditional apology. *Please tell me*, and I'll try to do better.

Kāma

Kāma, The Pali word used in the traditional phrasing of this precept doesn't only refer to sex, but rather includes *all* the different kinds of pleasure that come to us through our senses. All that we see and hear and taste and smell and touch, as well as our memories and imaginings are part of *kāma*, as too are what we would think of as the emotions of love, and longing. *Kāma* is there in the beauty we find in a tree or the sound of birdsong, in the brush of a feather on our skin, the taste of chocolate, the smell of a rose, the memory of the first time I saw your face... *Kāma* is our engagement with the world, and is our *turning towards* this world of experiencing; *kāma* is our *desiring*. And yet as traditionally practiced by lay people, the precept was rather about the listing the kinds of *women* who were off-limits sexually to the assumed-to-be-male, assumed-to-be-heterosexual Buddhist: all those under the control of (usually male) family members, or who have been 'promised' to a man. So from the first there is a tension in practicing this precept between considering the whole and infinite variety of our *desire* and *pleasure*, and the *rules* of patriarchal sex.

Sexual desire can arouse both our strongest sense of self ('who I really am, the deepest part of me...'), and our most intense experience of loss of self in the immediacy of experience ('there was no me, no you...'). So our *desiring* is an excellent place to study the 'self', to study our selfing *as* self. As with all our study it quickly becomes apparent that this selfing is never 'all about me', but about our relationships with other beings, relationships that flow by way of images and assumptions, digital information and financial transaction as much by the simple coming together of bodies. For *me*, experiencing *these* feelings in *this* way *here* and *now*, is sex even about 'sex' at all? Am I 'looking for Love'? Or looking for distraction? Perhaps I want to experience my own desirability through though the eyes and body of another? Am I looking for soothing, care, safety—even if for me this shows up as sexual desire? For shared intimacy, or the thrill of an anonymous encounter? The extremes of physical sensation, or for emotional fulfilment? For being comforted, or experiencing danger, the buzz of transgression? Do I feel I need validation through my 'conquests': someone whose passivity would give my own desires (and my sense of self worth and power) free reign? Or a surrender of my self in surrendering my body to another's will? But how far are the desires or wishes I experience in any real sense even 'mine'? How far are they what someone of my age, my gender, my sexual orientation is told and (nowadays) *shown* they 'should', or 'naturally' want? Where

do I go to learn about 'sex' and for my 'relationship advice'? My friends? Reality TV? The internet? 'Influencers'? Watching porn? How *do* I think I know about how things 'should' be, whether that's in wanting to be 'normal' or in embracing some form of queerness?

We all have stories in our heads about how things 'should be', or 'could be', or 'might have been'. These stories rarely correspond to reality, but we will usually try to manipulate our reality to fit them regardless, and then end up blaming what goes wrong not on the stories we tell, but on the real life human beings involved. Wherever we allow these *stories* about sex and relationships to become *assumptions*, whenever we frame them as *requirements*; whenever we experience our conforming to them or not conforming to them as *shaming*, and whenever someone is making a *financial profit* from telling us what to do, then real danger lurks. Our *collective* assumptions have clearly changed over time, often in contradictory ways, and in recent years the default seems to have shifted to the *expectation* that we should *all always* be wanting 'more' and 'better' sex, as we should want (and be prepared to *pay* for) more and better of everything else. So, should I be more 'adventurous', 'experimental', 'daring'? And above all, *am I missing out?*

Desiring

Desire is born in the mutual pleasure of play and discovery in our very first relationships. We could say relationship itself is born *out of* our desire. These pleasures of connection are of a *sub-personal*, 'molecular' kind: the connecting up and stopping of different kinds of *flow*. The physical but also deeply emotional pleasures of sucking, of burping, biting, squeezing, poohing, stroking and being stroked...all things we learn in relationship with our carers before we come to own them as *ours*, as another aspect of what makes me 'me'. The experience of filling, containing, holding and releasing, emptying. Picking up or pulling towards, pushing or throwing away. Putting outside inside, and inside outside, the boundary that is rim, lips, whatever... All this experienced through the sense of touch, of skin to skin, accompanied by smell and taste and sound. The enormous pleasure of *looking*, the wonder of shape and colour... Looking as it brings us towards the experiencing of both self and other as relationship: making and breaking eye contact, making the world disappear and reappear (peepo!), bringing a smile or laughter to the other, feeling the smile break across 'my' own face... The joy of being contained—safely held—or of containing (holding) the other. All of this is discovered in and as relationship, together with those *through* and *with* whom I find my sense of self.

As I grow up things both change and don't: although the what and where and how and when may change, fundamentally there are still the basic 'molecular' connections and my experiencing them as pleasure, or (sometimes) pain. 'My' desire and pleasure were formed in the evolving patterns of my gendering and sexuality. This is my *lived experience*, but framed by what I come to believe I should or should not *feel*, and what I should or should not *do* in response to what I feel. Our Zen practice shows us that there is *no* single, permanent 'I' who is doing and experiencing all of this, but that what I think of as my 'self' is made out of my experiencing these molecular pleasures disciplined and canalised into a 'me' that is still always shifting and discontinuous. Nevertheless, it is in my 'selfing' as a sexual being that I feel perhaps *most* intimately 'me': who I *am*, or *wish* to be, or wish I *wasn't*. This *overcoding* of pleasure comes about through the habits we form, and the

approval, judgements and shamings we experience along the way. How my desiring becomes organised in relation to my own and other bodies *identifies* me both for myself and others as a 'straight man', as a 'lesbian', as a 'trans woman'. But set against this is my inability entirely to control 'who I really am' in terms of what I *do* and *do not* desire: when we talk about our desire as *passion*, we mean that in its true original sense: desire finds me, draws me along in its wake, I don't get to choose where I feel its pull. Our sexuality confronts us with the real limits to our exercising 'control' over 'ourselves': it's never a case of simply *deciding* how I am going to feel and then acting accordingly. We have to admit we don't always want to want what we want, or want what we want to want.

'Consent'

My sense of self comes into being in relating to others, and what catalyses both self-sense and relationship is *desire*. 'I' am not single but multiple, and neither am I separate and distinct from the world that contains 'you' and every other being. So there is and can be no single *owner* for my desire, yet this is exactly what both our legal system and so many of the stories we tell about sex take to be self-evident. Hence our ideas about *consent* assume that we are each entirely separate, 'free' moral agents: free to make purely 'rational' choices, exactly as economics assumes we choose a sandwich or a new pair of shoes. Sexual consent is seen as an informal contract between 'equals', but, as with my more formal contracts, the power is rarely equal on both sides. Cultural conventions shape what is expected or allowed, and also shape the law itself (*rape within marriage* was not legally recognised in the UK until 2003). It's probably not that important whether we choose Thai or Italian food on our first date, but is *consent* really just like choosing dinner? Is whether I *want*, or might I be prepared to *try*, S & M, anal, choking or a threesome, simply another list of possible menu choices? What would the 'freedom to choose' really mean here? Much of our desire is formed in micro-pleasures that barely reach the threshold of conscious awareness: desire strikes us from where we know not where, and our passions sway us. Our own hormones have an equal or more profound effect on us than the 'drink' or 'drugs' that may accompany our sexual encounters... So how 'free' are either you or I really? If you hold a knife to my throat, any consent I might voice would clearly be null and void, but most encounters are more nuanced. Given men's *expectations* of the services to be offered by women (including *sexual* services), it seems men still routinely *don't hear women* or *take seriously what women say*. So can you *hear* me if I say 'No!', and do I have the courage, do I think I have the *right*, or even the self-awareness to?

If I *do* consent, what about *influence*, *pressure*, or *threat*: getting fired, having intimate images posted on the internet for the whole world to see? Or you simply threaten to *dump* me? Or that rôle, that contract, that promotion, that fancy present? Maybe the *inequality* of our positions is attractive in itself: your money, your 'looks', the respect or envy you inspire, your greater 'experience'? Or that you are my teacher, my coach, my therapist, my guru, my (pop) idol? I'm flattered to be *noticed* by someone 'powerful', *my* vulnerability amplifying *your* pleasure. In the case of 'professional' relationships, power carries the *obligation* not to abuse, but will that be respected?

'Grooming' is the pretence of recognition and relationship: flattery, presents, the creation of an emotional dependency that slides through coercion into direct psychological

and physical domination. This would all seem clear enough, absolutely so when the victims are *children*, and yet we know that victim-blaming is rife, including by the police: she might be twelve, but she was just *that* sort of girl... 'promiscuous'. She (or more rarely he) remains *unrecognised*, even by the very authorities charged with keeping them safe.

All of these aspects are highly *gendered*, meaning they apply differently depending on whether you are 'male' or 'female', and while consent *assumes* we are all always equal, we have to remember that 90+% of sexual violence is carried out *by* men, *on* women (including trans women). Threat, influence, coercion, grooming: all these are overwhelmingly male actions towards women and children, all tend towards *coercing* consent, or *silencing* its possible *refusal*. Differences in race, class, education, our relative affluence or poverty: all these *also* play an important point in whether we will *hear* each other and whether we feel we have the *right to refuse*. And worse still: such inequalities will follow us into the courtroom, where experience shows only too clearly that in reality we remain very *unequal* before the law.

If 'consent' gives both of us the idea that we are *sharing* control of our encounter, so taking a step towards actual trust, then that's a good thing. But even *with* our consent, it doesn't mean that harming is not being done. In assuming we always bring some kind of rational and self-responsible *objectivity* towards our desire for sex, we are in denial about the deluded and perhaps dangerously dissociated self-states that sexual desire provokes in us—this is simply and inevitably a large part of what sex *is*. Even where we 'objectively' know that what we are drawn to is potentially or actively harmful our facility for dissociation allows us to carry on regardless. We need to accept our own lack of self-transparency, the different levels of our wanting and not-wanting. Doing so, the inescapable conclusion is that the premises on which our 'contract' of consent is based—of *separation*, *self-consistency*, and *autonomous* 'free' choice—are, simply, *false*. Too often in the past consent has been allowed to be *assumed*, and so a minimum requirement has to be that our consent is *active* and *ongoing*, but consent still offers only a veneer of rationality. Yet, outside authentically *mutual* recognition in relationship, this contractual approach of our moment by moment consent still seems the best protection we have to offer.

Recognising Relationship

For each of us it was in the *mutuality of relationship* that we first found our own sense of self. In the sharing of pleasure in seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling, as laughter, as the games we played, as the *care* that was shown to us. And also as the failure—the frustration, the fear, the anger and the sense of separation—that was healed as relationship was restored. *Desire*, seeking connection, was a part of all of this. Sharing *together* we brought into being the space Jessica Benjamin calls the 'Third', each recognising ourselves in our interaction with the other and the mutual joy this brings. Together we created a 'safe space' of sharing, of *trust*: shared assumptions developed and tested by shared experience. Our adult relationships are like this too, although the 'Third' spaces we create together are more complex, as we now lead fully social adult lives. Our desires too, overcoded and overwritten by the assumptions and requirements that have found their home in us, have become more complex, and perhaps more self-contradictory. In attempting to live out the fantasies of what we *imagine* relationship is—whether that's of the perfect one-night-stand

or our raising a family together—our actual relationship in the here and now may come under strain. Our relationships are never something we establish once and for all and then simply maintain, but rather each relationship is lost and found again in a stronger form through the testing of this shared space of the Third, the testing and strengthening of our shared trust. Relationship in this sense is dynamic rather than static, it evolves as we together do, as rupture is followed by repair. We still need and retain our *relative* autonomy, but not simply as compromise or limitation, because my own sense of being ‘me’ *depends on* my recognition of ‘you’ as being an *other*, but an other who is ‘like me’. We come to co-create a shared space that is ‘safe but not too safe’ to borrow a phrase from psychoanalyst Philip Bromberg, a dynamic space where our interaction allows both of us to experience change. Hence all our previous work with the precepts points clearly to what makes for loving, intimate relationships: our (shared) listening and speaking truthfully, our thinking about others with openness and possibility, our willingness to meet each other on equal ground. Caring enough to dare to repair our inevitable ruptures, to rebuild the shared ground of relationship. Coming to better experience as ‘not-separate’, the differences both ‘between’ each other and ‘within’ ourselves. This space of the possibility of possibility is where we can discover and define what relationship can be for *us*, both in this moment and as it develops. My own ‘internal’ otherness can let me empathise with and appreciate both your otherness ‘to’ me, and your otherness ‘within’ yourself: our shared but different multiplicity.

We can contrast this *mutual* kind of relationship to the *contractual* or *fused* forms into which it may well slip, or as which it may well have initially begun. If we see our relationship as some kind of implicit contract (as with our *consenting*), then although we may accept the necessity of ‘compromise’, we each remain essentially separate, and both you and I *judge* our relationship primarily according to how it fulfils *our own* aims, what ‘I’ want: I remain essentially unchanged as myself. My desire is *my* affair, and the success of our relationship will be measured by how *your* desire can be aligned with it. Our society actually steers us towards this kind of *reciprocal* but not *mutual* intimacy, and there are always going to be aspects of any relationship where we experience being caught between our fantasies and the hard and sometimes insoluble realities of our actual lives. If we see our relationship as a contract, then given the inevitability of mismatch between us, can we compromise, balance our desires for and requirements of the other, achieve a workable reciprocal agreement? Can we negotiate a way forward, or is it time to *cancel* the contract and pay the emotional and possibly financial price?

Superficially this approach could not be more different from our stories of ‘True Love’, of our meeting ‘The One’ and living ‘Happy Ever After’. Already with Plato we find the fantasy of lovers *fusing*: ‘we are the two halves of one complete soul...’ and so we imagine ‘of course we want what each other want!’ And there’s the problem: unable to distinguish each from other the resulting enmeshment will be at best problematic, at worst disastrous. I (mis)identify myself with my (mistaken) image of you. For some inexplicable reason you don’t behave how I want you to (I may even say I know that deep down you really *want to*), and I’m reduced to trying to dominate, coerce or manipulate you—if only by way of agreeing to everything—into showing me love in the way I want you to. I may decide that I am a failure, irredeemably inadequate, or that you are, somehow, both my True Love and an Evil Monster. Or I may decide I was simply mistaken: you are not The One, and so I

want my money back, I want to cancel what I now see as having been a contract after all... Neither contract nor fusion offer us the mutuality of more genuine relationship.

Our deeper, mutual sense of relationship develops and evolves through time, as we come to know the other through ourselves, and ourselves through the other. We *only* learn to be ourselves through relationship, and of course *learning* to relate, learning *how* to do relationship is a massively important part of this. We can never consider 'sex' in isolation from the *whole* of any relationship, or from the *totality* of *both* of our lives. In contemporary society both employment opportunities and actual pay are still in practice highly gendered, and whether or not we have access to flexible working, part time work and/or job-sharing, maternity and paternity leave, working from home, available and affordable childcare will all affect the way our relationship is impacted by our gender. Gendered attitudes strongly influence what we even think of as being 'work' at all, with much of the 'caring' entrusted to (demanded of?) women being unpaid, or professionalised as 'unskilled' and accordingly very poorly paid. What is included in *our* formal and informal 'caring'? *Who* takes on *what*, or simply finds themselves *tasked* with what, unasked? Any and every aspect of our lives may make its presence felt in the form of our *desiring* or our *absence of desire*, as our different lived experience affects you and me... differently.

Because the nature of relationship is that it will always be 'work in progress', this is something we have to continue to learn, to practice with, to become. Nevertheless, provided we have had the experience of 'good enough' relationship—and so of the other's very *difference* being the ground of their *like-me-ness*—then I have the ability to offer recognition to *every* other I meet or encounter, to offer the recognition that they are *like-me*, but *not-me*. Recognition as the *possibility* of a relationship between us that is more than contractual, that is based on more than our reciprocal mis-identification. Recognition that includes awareness of our shared vulnerability, our shared embodiment and so our shared mortality, our nature as suffering beings, and hence also as being capable of joy, of pleasure, ecstasy, fulfilment. Recognition that when I fail to recognise and respect these in the *other*, then I deny them in *myself*, and with it the basis of my existence *as myself*. This recognition can be partial, stuttering, sometimes one-sided, and can be withdrawn or denied. We may think we have offered the other proper recognition, only suddenly to see—whether in the moment or in hindsight—that our assumptions and habits have led us to treating *this* other as *less-than*, as reduced to my (mis-)identification of them. Can we, if our mistake is pointed out to us, find renewed trust in the shared space of our mutuality, whether in the meeting of eyes, the sharing of a joke, or starting *that* difficult conversation with an open heart and open mind?

Other-ness and Other-ing

Recognising each other isn't all-or-nothing. While we're all aware of some of the ways we *other* particular people or whole groups, from overt racism or homophobia to just keeping our distance from people 'not like us', othering doesn't have to be hateful or hostile, and in fact we frequently other *within* relationship also, and often without really being aware we are doing it. In our inevitable assumptions and requirements of each other we place limits on the possibilities of relationship between us, and where those assumptions and requirements are based on some supposed *fundamental difference* between

us then our 'othering' opens the door not only to breakdown, but also to all forms of domination, coercion and manipulation, whether recognised as such or not. First and foremost among these differences, across continents and over the past several thousand years is *gender*. 'Being a woman' and 'being a man' are about so much more than the relatively minor anatomical differences between those of us assigned male and assigned female: it's not so long since women were effectively *owned* by fathers or husbands, and increasing formal legal equality has not, and will not cancel out existing inbuilt inequalities or transform entrenched attitudes any day soon.

The ways in which gender has for so long shaped our culture show up in what and how we *desire*, both as what we find desirable in the other, and in what we experience as desirable (or otherwise) in ourselves. In some ways the pace of change in our collective desiring can seem quite rapid, for example in the way sexual attitudes now seem much more permissive than a couple of generations ago, or in the effects on us of social media; at a deeper level change is glacial, and much in contemporary culture seems to reinforce rather than challenge existing attitudes. This is important because it affects *both* our most casual social interactions *and* our most significant and lasting relationships. I have, consciously or unconsciously, assumptions and requirements that have been shaped by inequality generation after generation, and, in ways that may be obvious or barely noticeable, we treat each other accordingly. I identify you as 'man' or 'woman' before I register anything else about you, and in fact the way we *see* each other, and the way we *present ourselves to be seen*, are both shaped fundamentally by gender.

Appearing and Acting

Here's the critic John Berger writing in the early 1970's about the *male gaze*, in a way that if anything has come to seem more relevant with the passing decades:

...the social presence of a woman is different in kind from that of a man. A man's presence is dependent on the promise of power which he embodies... By contrast, a woman's presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can or cannot be done to her. Her presence is manifest in her gestures, voice, opinions, expressions, clothes, chosen surroundings, taste... To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split in two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually...

She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another...

One might simplify this by saying: *men act* and *women appear*. This determines not only most relations between men and women, but also the relation of

women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object — and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (John Berger, *Ways Of Seeing*, 46-7)

This male gaze is the most immediate and inescapable way we experience the *gendering of our desire* as masculine and feminine, a gendering that is inevitably *asymmetrical* and *unequal*. We *all* practice self-surveillance, and we all divide the world into *subjects* who see and *objects* to be seen, but in our gendered culture the assumption is that it will be ‘men’ looking at ‘women’: while a man actively *looks*, a woman exists *to be seen by men*. Hence the male gaze is already a kind of domination, but one we normally experience as being simply ‘natural’—at least unless or until it becomes intrusive as staring, cat-calling or worse. How we *express* our gender is central to the way we actually *experience* being a ‘woman’ or being a ‘man’, hence, how I experience *myself*, and how I am experienced by *others*, including what we respond to as beauty and/or as sexually arousing, are all caught up in this structure of the gaze. There is a subtle interplay here: not *direct* domination through coercion, but, a *reciprocal and highly asymmetrical coming-to-be* of our desire. Expressing my gender is part of experiencing myself as ‘me’, and growing up we each navigated acceptable and unacceptable expressions of our assigned gender, and were *rewarded, corrected* or *shamed* accordingly. However much or little we personally might wish to embody ‘traditional’ gender expectations, it is this gendered world that has formed us, and within which we must find ways of living out fulfilling relationships.

Selling Bodies

Never in the history of the world have there been so many images presented to us to for our *pleasure*, to explore, scan, and enjoy; images we both *desire in themselves* and for what is *shown to us* in them. Images that are implicitly *also* presented to us as models, ideals and fantasies, and demand too that we *pay* for them, in one form or another. These images show us what we are to desire in and of others, and what it is to be desirable ourselves. In our culture of gendered vision this is overwhelmingly about *men* looking at women’s *bodies*. One of John Berger’s key points about the male gaze is that it operates *in the same way* across our high and popular culture, *and* pornography and other forms of sex work. So if Berger’s argument still applies (and I’d argue strongly that if anything it is more true in the 2020s than the 1970s), then how pornography represents the female body will help us understand how our current deluge of images of desirability shape our desire itself.

Pornography has become vastly more important and influential since the development of digital imagery that allows any image to be infinitely reproduced. We are still in the relatively early days of the internet and of social media, but we *all* now have instant access to pornography that in terms of both quantity and content would have been unavailable to *anyone* even thirty years ago. It’s unclear whether pornography is itself *driving* the increasing sexualisation of imagery generally, or whether it is simply a *part* of it. Perhaps 10% of global websites are devoted to pornography, with the largest, Pornhub, being by one measure the world’s fourth most visited, and it’s been suggested that pornography is the subject of a similar percentage of our internet searches on mobile phones. Pornography is the renting-for-sex of virtual bodies, overwhelmingly *women’s* bodies, commercialised

for the 'male' gaze. It is now 'normal' for the algorithms that govern online content feeds to offer violent misogynistic pornography to children and young adults. Whether this experience is *directly* traumatic for them or not, they are growing up with the sense that what they see online is what sex *is*. What happens when we take this *performance of sexual performance* as how sex actually is 'in real life', as 'what everyone does'? Real life sex now moves towards being the attempt to *re-create*, to *re-enact* the *image* we have seen on the screen. To borrow a term from cultural theory, sex has become its own *simulacrum*: pornography's highly contrived displaying of bodies, specific acts, gestures, and vocalisations is for many now becoming the 'real thing': as the distinction between 'real' sex and 'making images of sex' collapses, 'real-life' sex becomes just a minor category of acted-out pornography.

A sexual image offers us visual (over)-stimulation, but without there being any *response* from the other. It offers us the instant pleasure of visual *possession* of the female body...but only momentarily... there's none of the *mutual* relationship central to our deeper sense of self. Pornography's controlling and dominating gaze wears itself out, what *was* exciting stops being so, becomes flat and hollow. Hence its insatiability: the need for the new, the same-but-different, the *more*. This more may be more in quantity, more explicit, more extreme. The AI *deepfake* offers us the perfected form of pornography: endless variations of a simulacrum of the body in a simulacrum of sex. The deepfake image, whatever *pleasure* its viewing may bring, is about taming the potential power of woman's agency over her own body or speech into a fantasy of possession and control, whether she is Taylor Swift, your classmate, or work colleague.

Although there have been many attempts to disrupt, ironise, challenge or subvert the male gaze in pornography, 99% strictly follows the same formula because this is what *sells*: global revenues for pornography are as high as \$200 billion annually. And presumably sells largely because of the *pleasure* that many, many millions of (mainly) men and (less so) women find in it, however problematic the *form* of that pleasure, whereby all the molecular micro-pleasures of *looking* come to be *overcoded* as *domination*. Viewing the image we control it, and by extension the woman depicted. But, it would seem, this level of domination isn't enough, and pornography very often represents or even records direct domination over the woman's body as humiliation, as threat, as pain, as actual violence. Just how much pornography actually includes some form of misogynistic violence? I've seen varying estimates of what percentage of pornography should be described as 'misogynistic violence', and it's clearly high...perhaps *most*. But that this is hard to quantify is actually part of the problem: there is no clear line between 'consensual' *play* at violence, 'realistic' *representations* of violence, and *actual* violence itself. 'Playing' at domination is still part of the gender game, part of the *real-life* domination that gender organises as both our economic reality and our desire. Real-life female partners can hence be expected (required!) to *consent* to whatever has been *seen* online (to *want* it?) and to express 'enjoyment' in similar ways to the women represented: allowing their partial *strangulation* during sex is now, at least in popular imagination, 'normal' or even 'required' of women, even 'what women *want*', and so now what many routinely experience.

Pornography is now mainstream, many, many millions of viewers, billions in profit for the hosting platforms. On the non-commercial fringes of pornography are other kinds of intimate images, absolutely violating the real women whose bodies are shown:

'upskirting', recently made illegal in the UK; hidden cameras in women's changing rooms, often those of professional athletes. Are the men who do this fundamentally *different* from the rest of us in being 'sick' or 'perverted' *individuals*? Or are they better seen as simply acting out in more extreme form the basic domination of the male gaze? Denying mutual recognition and the woman's agency, reducing her to an object—placing the viewer in a *pleasurably* dominant position. We'd have to call all this kind of image-theft overtly misogynistic, and indeed, with 'revenge porn' this becomes quite explicit: intimate images circulated online with the specific intent of shaming and traumatising. The female *body* has become not only a source of *pleasure*, but also the site of inflicting emotional *pain*, and this pleasure is now intimately connected to that pain. This version of the male gaze *overcodes*, 'hijacks' the simple micro-pleasures of looking, to the point where in these darker forms it becomes purely pathological: seeing as *possession*, as a forced symbolic *penetration*. This is the point at which visual *pleasure* has become *rape culture*.

'Violence Against Women and Girls'

Everyone is talking about AI these days, and I've no wish to join the hype, but the 'no rules, no boundaries' world of virtual reality can show us something of the underlying direction and structuring of our own very real world. Here's Laura Bates, hero of the 'Everyday Sexism' website, writing about...

...Chub AI, a website where users can chat with AI bots and role-play violent and illegal acts. For as little as \$5 a month, users can access a 'brothel' staffed by girls below the age of 15, described on the site as a 'world without feminism'. Or they can chat with a range of characters, including Olivia, a 13 year-old girl with pigtails wearing a hospital gown, or Reiko, 'your clumsy older sister', who is described as 'constantly having sexual accidents with her younger brother'. (This is) just one of thousands of applications of this new technology that are re-embedding misogyny deep into the foundations of our future... Sex robots are being developed at breakneck speed...some manufacturers have dreamed up a 'frigid' setting that allow their users to simulate rape. Millions of men are already using AI 'companions'—virtual girlfriends, available and subservient 24/7, whose breast size and personality they can customise and manipulate.

Nearly nine in ten women polled in a 2020 Economist study said they restricted their online activity in some way as a result of cyber-harassment, hacking, online stalking and doxing. (Laura Bates, *The Guardian* 3rd June 2025)

This is clearly taking the male fantasy and reality of 'control' of women to the next level: we can't disconnect the *pleasure* of the fantasy from the reality of *silencing* actual women. This is masculinity as *fear* of actual mutual relationship, where the only *pleasure* left to us is through *sexual domination*: raping my sex-robot or a '13 year old' avatar... Any real adult woman, by experiencing and wanting to act on her own desire, her own wants, needs, ideas, fears and all that makes any of us actually human, becomes a threat to masculinity's inflated self-image, and hence the need to reduce, contain, remake 'woman' as an object

that can be *safely* desired, a 'femininity' that can be compliant or resistant as individual men require. The *child-woman*.

Patriarchy has always treated women and children for many purposes as being 'the same': both seen as physically weaker and less capable of rational thought than men, and so as being vulnerable and in need of masculine 'protection' (for which as always read *control*). *Adult* and *child* come to parallel *man* and *woman*, and with the equation of man = adult, and woman = child, our 'childlike' women become required to accept their 'natural' dependancy on adult men: to be 'looked after', 'protected', but also obliged to provide whatever kinds of 'service' are demanded of them. Traditionalists (now including 'trad wives') have in fact taken this as a feminine *ideal*.

There has been an important shift in recent decades in how this shows up in our visual culture in the way this eliding of the difference between adult and child has come to be *imaged*. Contemporary visual culture increasingly *blurs* the line between self-responsible female adults and dependent children, so that while once there was a clear distinction between the self-presentation of girls and of women through (among other things) style of clothing, hair, and the presence or absence of make-up, this has been eroded through the *marketising* of the appearance of the *youthful* female body to be the universal standard of desirability to the male gaze, and so to women's actual self-presentation, self-imaging, and their sense of what it is *to be themselves*.

Although *all* appearance plays a game of the pleasurable tension between concealing and revealing the body, overall the male gaze seeks the *availability* to vision of the female body as both pleasurable in itself, and as a promise of physical availability: bared flesh, fabrics that stretch to mould to and reveal the body's shape, styles and cuts that emphasise crotch, buttocks, breasts. Tightness emphasises restriction of movement, and the perpetual 'attraction' of high heels confirms the point: the most sexually attractive and available woman is one who cannot run away. This body, and particularly the ideal face, appear above all 'youthful', and near-infinite pains are to be taken in *investing* in the *purchasing* of 'maintaining' and 'perfecting' the appearance of 'youth' (= 'being' a child). We could go on: the emphasis on 'big eyes', for example. This body also appears 'youthful' because it is *thin*, perhaps now the thinness of the toned athlete, but *definitely* thin, *girl-thin*, *child-thin*. Impossible here not to mention the *shaming* role of 'diets' and female starvation/self-starvation, now supported by the use of weight-loss drugs as a tool to maintain an exaggerated thinness. We have already referenced Cathy O'Neil's *The Shame Machine - Who Profits in the New Age of Humiliation* (2022), where she draws on her own experience about the double-bind whereby women are expected to discipline themselves out of the *pleasure* of food in the name of a *to-be-desired* yet (for most) unachievable thinness. This body's youthfulness is also shown by its being *hairless*, nothing being allowed to disrupt the display of invitingly smooth, unblemished skin, again displaying the characteristics of the girl-as-child. As this version of 'femininity' emphasises extreme youth and thinness—almost frailty—as an index of desirability, hence it was entirely logical for mainstream fashion magazines of the recent past to use girls as young as twelve as being the perfect embodiment of skinny 'feminine' vulnerability to model 'sexy' adult women's clothes. If our ideal of attractiveness *is* to be young and skinny and vulnerable, then a twelve year old may well be as or more 'attractive' by this standard, with unconscious male anticipation of the compliance and service expected of the girl's being *also a child*.

A recent World Health Organisation report suggests that globally *almost one third of women and girls aged 15-49 have experienced physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner*. We might ask about why this stat doesn't separate out *adults* from *children*, 'women' from 'girls'? I think the answer is that our still-dominant patriarchal version of masculinity has difficulty telling the difference. Male sexual predation on children is nothing new, and it is a huge real-life problem. *Globally* it's estimated that one in eight children have been victims of some form of online Child Sexual Abuse (CSA): non-consensual taking, sharing and exposure to sexual images and videos, or of sexting, unwanted sexual questions and unwanted requesting of sexual acts. That's more than one in ten of the world's children being treated as objects of sexual violence, violence that the perpetrators *know* to be illegal. In surveys across the United States, Britain and Australia, around one in ten men *admitted online sexual offending against children* at some point in their lives, while a figure equivalent to many millions of men across all three countries said they would *seek to commit contact sexual offences against children if they knew no one would find out*, with evidence from Australia suggesting that around one in five adult men either 'have sexual feelings' for children under 18, or *have actually offended against them*. While perhaps one in twenty of UK children have been victims of *contact* sexual abuse—almost all by parents, siblings and extended family—this skews dramatically towards older rather than younger children, and towards girls over boys, *peaking at around one in six for pre-teen and teenage girls*. If we include *non-contact* CSA, then it's perhaps *one in four girls*, one in four *female children*. The 'adult' male fantasy of the 'sexy schoolgirl' shows how we collectively acknowledge and simultaneously disavow all this: even if we dismiss it as 'just a bit of fun', and even if adult women play along on hen nights or as fancy dress, we still confirm rather than deny the underlying structure. A 'schoolgirl' is by definition under 16—the UK age of consent. The young female body—*actually* young, or *maintained* as young-looking—has become the benchmark of desirability itself. This body is offered to our gaze as accessible, as non-threatening, and as silent; able to be controlled either through force, or willing complicity. We might think about the ongoing global pandemic of *street harassment* here, and whether we are talking about female children or adult women, what is being *required* (and the *frustration* of which may well increase the actual risk) by the men doing it is *complicity* in a form of *pleasure-as-domination*, whether that's as the intrusive male gaze, as sexualised language, or actual physical contact. In a UN commissioned survey only 3% of UK women aged 18-24 said they *hadn't* experienced some form of sexual harassment in public places.

Bodies, Selling

Sexualised imagery is now a part of selling pretty much *everything*: every product made, every service on offer. The pleasure of the male gaze has become directly monetised in a global market created using the same range of digital platforms crucial to the evolution of contemporary pornography. Websites, social media platforms and other apps all equally accessible from your smartphone, tablet, or computer, all actively promoting content on their 'feeds' that their algorithms determine will increase advertising revenue (*your* clicks = their money). The rise of these digital platforms has led to the elision of boundaries not just between what would until recently have been considered 'hard core' and 'soft core' pornography, but also between what is and is not considered 'pornography' at all: there is now simply a continuum of more and less sexualised images of *young women's* bodies.

For example, the presentation of female performers in the music videos so central to their own promotion and to the music 'industry' as a whole inevitably positions them in relation to this basic structure of the sexualised male gaze. Their presentation as being themselves 'strong' 'independent', 'in control' and even sexually *dominant*, the evidence for which is the ability of a few performers to make millions, still relies on the presentation/exploitation of the female body as a kind of 'natural' resource. This is a very liberal, entrepreneurial version of 'feminism': exploit *your* sexual capital to succeed in life! (In the same vein, the 'OnlyFans' app allows producer-users to sell their *own* sexualised images.) All of which frames the self-image of *all* young women, as they inevitably have to position themselves in terms of the form and degree of their own self-sexualisation within a world of highly competitive female desirability.

Following Berger, in each of these very different kinds of imagery we find the same basic structure of objectification and possession. Perhaps the perspective of someone who is native to two very different cultural responses to the male gaze might offer some insight: here is Nadeine Asbali, responding to claims that Muslim women are 'oppressed' by wearing the hijab:

It is disingenuous to pretend that Muslim women are uniquely prone to victimhood. Can we truthfully say anything about the way women are expected to lead our lives isn't rooted in patriarchy? Whether it's the bikini or the push-up bra, miniskirts or high heels, as women we are conditioned to shape our identity under the watchful eye of the male gaze. (Nadeine Asbali, *The Guardian*, 20th June 2025)

Interesting that Asbali chooses the mini-skirt: *the* visual icon of the 'swinging sixties' and 'liberated' sexuality, and one that has maintained its currency ever since. By wearing the 'mini' as skirt or dress a (young) woman shows herself as having command over her *own* sexuality, but does so by *displaying* her body as being available to the male gaze (and implicitly touch), in a style of dress or skirt traditional for female children to wear *before* puberty, the dress even known as a 'baby-doll'. No coincidence that *the* model associated with the mini was Twiggy, eponymously named for her stick-thin limbs, flat chest and huge kohled eyes. The 'girl' claims her independence to desire *for herself* by (paradoxically) conforming to *men's image* of the 'girl' as biddable child-woman.

And yet... there is ambiguity and ambivalence in not yet being fully integrated into an adult world where 'masculine' and 'feminine' play only their prescribed roles. The girl is 'unfinished', and so potentially *unlimited*, and so radically *other*. Will she deny, defy the implicit attempt to always sexualise her, and demand simply to be taken on her *own* terms? Whether consciously or not, will she call on her potential sexual power, find ways of using it that are neither simply passive or attempting to exploit the exploiter in return? Think of the many different versions of 'Girl Power': the Guerrilla Girls, Riot Girls, and Grrrls, and the commercially complicit but much loved Spice Girls (and of course *that* Union Jack mini-dress...). The ambiguity of herself being still always a 'girl' offers the *adult* woman too this potential space of otherness. The poet Ruth Padel titled her most recent collection of poems simply *Girl*, fascinated by how this identity, although itself constructed by men, still offers the possibility of holding off, pushing back against, contesting our assumptions of what it is to be a woman (or for that matter what it is to be a

man). And so the 'girl', whether she's wearing a mini-skirt or hijab, studying nuclear physics or out with her mates, embodies the complexity of where we *all* find ourselves, caught up by forces not of our own making, and made to play the game by 'their' rules; compromised, and yet creating new possibilities for hope and joy and relationship.

Masculinity and Mastery

Our contemporary paradigm of gender, of masculinity and femininity, is not some relic of a patriarchal past, nor is it in any way 'natural' or 'just the way things are'. In our modern societies masculinity takes the form of Mastery, a way of understanding and acting which at the limit takes the whole world as potential *object* to its *subject*: every *other*, whether human or other being, or 'natural resource', becomes a mere thing to be known, catalogued and exploited, to be used, and used up, to be *consumed*. All *others*—other genders, other races, other classes, other abilities—are there to be of service and to be *used*, or to be dismissed as *use-less*: hence permanent and ever more efficient expropriation and exploitation, and *also* genocide, displacement, the erasure of the 'unwanted'. We are all a part of this, however simultaneously willing and unwilling. Mastery shows up in our economic and political organisation, in our core philosophical assumptions, and, as masculinity, even in what we experience as 'desirable', attractive', 'sexy', and so in our pleasures, our joys, our ecstasies. However, Mastery's contradictions mean that its very need to dominate brings about its own *failure*, not only in the limitation in our own experiencing of the possibilities for genuine intimacy and relationship, but also as existing levels of social inequality that fuel ever greater inequality and the exploitation of the natural world that is leading to climate collapse and the destruction of entire ecosystems.

So, against our society's stumbling but real progress towards formal gender equality, the current resurgence of 'traditional' or even hyper-masculinity within the online 'manosphere' should not really surprise us. We've already heard from Laura Bates on the AI world, but for another influential contemporary version of masculinity 'taken to the limit', we might look at, say, Andrew Tate's hugely popular YouTube and Instagram content, his online 'courses' and 'seminars' on how to *get rich* and *get women*. This is a world of *hyper-masculinity*, and one that offers us a highly gendered and highly exploitative image of male/female relationships. Tate's own initial route to celebrity was as a cage-fighter, and his career since has been in *selling* (and this is finally more about money than anything else) an image of masculinity as lifestyle: 'money, women, cigars and cars'. The hyper-masculinity of the all-conquering 'warrior' hence *requires* as its complement a sexualised and (enforcedly) submissive hyper-femininity. Here, to *be* a man is to exercise the power that goes with being wealthy, to have *objects* you *possess*, among which 'women' figure as particular possessions to be used or traded. To *be* a man within this world is to be able to impose your will on others by whatever means: the physical violence of the man-on-man cage fight and the man-on-woman of domestic abuse (slapping and choking as required...) are just different modes of *showing* who is Master. (Let's pause for a moment here to remember that in 'real life' *one in four adult women* have been subject to one or multiple forms of such 'domestic' abuse). To truly be a man is to compete with all other men, and to be able to display the fruits of victory... It's a clear and simple message: women will not look at a weakling, but will admire your domination of

them... life is perpetual struggle, we should all take the fantasised 'nobility' of the ancient warrior as our true ideal. Even to challenge this for a moment is to show oneself as 'cucked' (cuckolded), and so as *feminised*, as being *no man at all*... which is of course one of the most traditional and universal ways men use to *shame* other men in the contest for status among themselves...

Tate's repetitive self-promotion, like that of every other hustler, is actively marketed and sold for profit by the visually-based digital platforms that host it: far from being in any way 'neutral' over questions of content, the algorithms these platforms use to control the content they feed individual users actually promote controversial material that will provoke a reaction from the viewer. The sole reason these platforms exist is to *sell* advertising, and each time we click, they profit. *Clicks = advertising revenue*. Behind the image of the heroic warrior as Master, the *true* struggle is as always simply that for money as status. Regardless, the effects of the penetration of Tate's and similar misogynists' postings on social media and the internet—many billions of views—should not be underestimated.

Tate and his fellow hustlers are selling a high-contrast version of our *existing and long-established collective image* of the relation between masculinity and femininity, where masculinity = Mastery. We might remember James Gilligan's work with those held in prison in the US: the expression of violence, and specifically of sexual violence always carried the symbolic meaning 'I am not a woman!', the frequent instances of male-on-male rape in prison having the message that 'I am a man because I have *made* you into a *woman*!' Our system of gender has *always* worked to normalise, naturalise and perpetuate inequality, and in this respect Tate is a True Prophet. *Inequality* here is the point: for the true Master, real equality can only ever be experienced as his being himself *oppressed*.

I was born into and raised within our culture of masculinity, which means that it's not necessary for me to 'believe in' or 'agree with' any of its promises or commands in order to find myself acting, or more often as *having* acted, 'as if' I did... To have been raised as, and to be seen as a 'man' *does* bring with it a certain self-sense and assumption of *entitlement*, and in retrospect I see that sometimes (often?) I've *required* to be so treated, and actually *have* been. But, as I've tried to emphasise, Mastery is ultimately self-contradictory, in that what it forever seeks—recognition by the other, connection—is exactly what it denies itself by treating everyone else as 'things', as objects to be controlled. Ask Trump, Putin and the rest if they ever have *enough*, ever *are* enough. So, paradoxically, to be a 'real man' is also always to experience oneself as *lacking*, and so as having *something to prove*. Masculine entitlement has to be exercised, either in direct competition with other men, or as receiving the compliance and service of women. Hence masculinity-as-Mastery is far from being what it imagines—the assertion and enjoyment of *virile strength*—but rather *the expression of our fear of the shame of actually experiencing what we think of as our weakness—our vulnerability, our need for care*. What runs our culture of masculinity is, finally, nothing more than a desperate and often wildly destructive attempt to avoid our potential *shame*.

For example, in my decade spent as a prison chaplain, I knew men who had been convicted of sexual assault against (older) female children, often those in a 'step' relationship or similar. Rather than taking pleasure in what was in reality their domination and exploitation of their victims, or having feelings of hatred or hostility towards them, most had, *in their own terms*, been looking more for emotional support and a closeness

lacking in other relationships. Few seemed really to understand the actual harm done to their victims, either in the degree of trauma inflicted or the duration of its effects. That we can understand this kind of CSA as *at one and the same time* a criminal form of violent domination, *and* a reaching out for emotional support and human warmth, points to the complex interaction of *status* and *shaming*: if my relationships with actual adult *others* have become too status-insecure (or I am even fearful of them), then the child as a both symbolically and physically weaker, and a *seemingly* welcoming (even obligated) *other*, may appear to offer a less status-threatening and less self-shaming path for my desire, at least until I am exposed to the shame of *public* view. The same applies to the many 'ordinary' and 'family' men who pay sex workers for sex: by making the exchange *contractual* men avoid the shaming they might experience in a relationship between equals.

When men try to escape their *vulnerability to the shame of appearing vulnerable*, it is up to women (and sometimes children) to soothe it away. Women repeatedly find themselves tasked with dealing with men's shame as part of the many forms that their 'service' takes, not only as housework, childcare, or 'sex', but also as 'emotional' service: listening, soothing, reassuring. This is all gendered *work*, unpaid and often unrecognised. Whenever *as a man* I am actively shamed by others, or simply experience shame at my own perceived lack or failure, patriarchy assures me that I should *expect* women to offer me these compensatory services, and I will experience myself as failing *further* if I don't get them, and so I am *further shamed* as a man. Proving my masculinity through violence (in whatever form) is the required symbolic response. Thus 'domestic' *abuse* by a partner might take the form of physical violence as assault or rape; the psychological violence of shaming, gaslighting, or coercive control; the threat of, or actual violence towards other family members—often the children. As already noted, estimates suggest that *one in four adult women* have been subject to one or (often) more of these forms of abuse.

For women to be violent is to be *un-feminine* according to the logic of gender, and so when women are shamed (by men, by each other, by self-contradictory media-led expectations and perceived 'requirements') they usually send it *inwards* as insecurity, low self-esteem, depression, *self-harm*. Heads women lose, tails women lose, and of course men lose too (and that's an important point), but not in the same way, and when men do lose women will still, somehow, often end up paying the price.

...this violence is everywhere, and it deeply shapes—or misshapes—our society...all girls and women are impacted by the reality that so many men want to harm us and these crimes could happen to any one of us. This violence affects the choices we make about where to go and when, what jobs to take, when to speak up, what to wear. The threat of violence and actual violence by some men against some women and girls establishes female vulnerability and fear and disempowerment far more broadly.

...the problem is systemic, and the answer isn't police and prison. It's social change, and societies will have changed enough when violence against women ceases to be a pandemic that stretches across continents and centuries. (Rebecca Solnit, *The Guardian*, 3rd August 2025)

Feeling Our Own Hurt

Can *we* instead bring at least the possibility of mutual recognition to *this* meeting, and even to *every* encounter, those which are sexual and those which are not? As the complex embodied beings we each are, unless we recognise our *own* vulnerability *together* with that of the other, our capacity to inflict or suffer further harm is hugely increased. We can't really meet each other, while we are hiding from ourselves. So that as well as recognising the harm that *we* have done, we all also need to bear witness to our *own* vulnerability, and to ask about our *own* experience of *being harmed*. In our society vulnerability and weakness are always *shaming*, and because so much of our social shaming is sexual in nature, this is especially so around 'sex'. None of us want to think of ourselves as 'victims', but it is exactly here—in relation to intimacy—that this work is most essential.

Can we even recognise *as harm* what we have suffered, are we able to give it its name? It's only in very recent years that attempts—of which the #MeToo movement has been an important part—to clarify what we might mean by sexual assault and actual rape have allowed the real scale of these harms to begin to come to light, and for individual women to acknowledge to themselves, perhaps only years after the event, that *no*, that was not 'my fault', it did not 'just happen', it was *rape*... and so begin properly to process their experience. Although rape is overwhelmingly committed on women, male rape exists too, and because suffering rape runs so counter to our accepted image of what it is to be a man, can be even harder to acknowledge publicly or privately.

But it is also very important to understand that *hurt* in this sense *does not* have to be as a result of something criminal done to us, or even of someone else's bad intent. Our hurt may not even include anything *physical* done to or by us. The words of others can wound deeply: so many of our slurs derive from sex, and so much of shaming as 'teasing', 'banter', or 'horseplay' is sexualised and sexualising. What I perceive as my 'undesirable' body (undesirable to whom, how did I come to believe this?) may lead to a deep sense of insecurity and hurt. Perhaps it is my own 'failure' to meet my own expectations/requirements of how I 'should' feel or perform (and perhaps shame is a particular problem here), or what I 'should' experience, or even what I imagine the other's expectations of me are? Again, how did I come by these assumptions, beliefs, judgements?

Hurt in relationship may not require *blame*, and my suffering is no less real if it arises from the unwelcome consequences of my own admitted misjudgements. Or it may come from a mismatch of unvoiced expectation: we wanted different things, but didn't necessarily even *know* we wanted different things *until* the moment the situation arose. Perhaps our differing libidos mean we don't desire each other in the same way? However we respond, there may well be hurt on both sides. Important too to recognise the hurt that comes from our having harmed others: in hurting others we also deeply hurt ourselves.

Our shared vulnerability is at the heart of our practice: our experience of hurt is the basic condition of our empathy for others, and in bearing witness to our own hurt we become better able to bear witness to the hurt done to others. Can I *stand with others* who experience harm? Feeling our own hurt allows our experiencing ourselves as more whole, more human. Thich Nhat Hanh used to say he would not wish to live in a world without suffering, because without it we would not have the emotional resources genuinely to recognise and to relate to *any* other.

Relationship: Beyond Mastery

I'll note here some of the many things I *should* have, and in a more extended treatment *would* have talked about. *Sexual difference*: I'm hoping you're happy with the idea that while *gender* is obviously a historically evolving social construct, this doesn't presuppose any specific view of its relation to sexual differentiation, and to 'biology'. I've not said much at all about *motherhood*, that most important task of human life, where the abstract structure of gender intersects with the lived bodily experience of actual women: what kind of support are you offered if you choose motherhood, and, whatever your choices, how far are you able to exercise control over your own body, whether that's as contraception, abortion or IVF? I've not talked about trans, or non-binary or even gay or lesbian experience directly, but confined myself to trying to outline the basic symbolic social structure within which we all live our lives, lives which for all of us in reality exceed and overflow that structure, the more so for those of us who have no simple 'place' within it. I've also not found space to explore the crucial intersections of our gender with those other lines of identity by which our society differentiates and discriminates against us: race, wealth, education, (dis)-ability, sexuality, and the many other forms of othering. I would have dearly liked to have explored at least something of the range of often contradictory *feminist* responses to the commercialisation of sexuality: can doing sex-work for money actually represent a 'liberation of female sexuality' against patriarchal and bourgeois norms? Is it woman's responsibility to exploit her 'sexual capital' to the max? Does 'sex-positivity' mean that every woman ought to explore every possible sexual variation in her search for personal fulfilment? Or as perhaps more politically aware feminists argue, are these just further examples of women providing yet more of the *sexual* labour they have long provided together with so many other forms of labour and care? While for the individual this is up to each woman to decide, as a society such questions concern us *all*.

Our gendering divides us both one from another and within ourselves. By defining masculinity and masculine desire in terms of *subjectivity*, *agency*, and *control*, and in opposition to a *femininity-as-service* where a woman's desire and agency are reduced to *desiring to be of service*, and to *desiring to be a desirable body*, neither side can recognise *either* self *or* other, there can be no meeting and relating 'with openness and possibility'. And yet, of course, we are never *only* this. In our capacity for joy, for pleasure, and for suffering too, we are far more than these roles allotted to us by the workings of gender. Our earlier discussions explored the paradoxical role of *identity* in relationship: that all relationships presuppose identities of some kind, but that these identities are always also *mis-*identifications in that they limit the openness and possibility of our *mutual coming-to-be*, by containing relationship within a *reciprocal* 'I am this and you are that'. So do I recognise you in a limited way 'as a woman' or 'as a man', together with the assumptions, expectations and behaviours that identification brings with it? Or recognise *us* instead as the openness and possibility of a *not knowing* that we as vulnerable, mortal, embodied sentient beings always already *are* and may together further *become* in our relationship?

We each have to navigate a path through this gendered world that has shaped us and shaped our desiring, a path that is at the same time individual and collective, uniquely our own, and shared with others. This paradigm of masculinity and femininity seems surprisingly resilient, and yet it's constantly being renewed and reproduced through each

of us, which means, of course, that it is always changing, re-invented for better and for worse. Precisely because Mastery is ultimately inimical to the genuine relationship by which we mutually become ourselves, our actual relationships always exceed, overflow, outwit the limitations of gender. Every limitation is itself an invitation to find fresh opportunities for resistance, evasion, freedom. *For me, here, now*, what is a 'successful' life? None of us are 'straight' in Mastery's sense, and however we identify, all of us are 'girl', all of us are 'queer' in the infinite possibilities we may still find for joy in the interstices of our own complicity in this compromised but wonderful world.

So, to pose some questions for 'myself', and perhaps also for all who like me were raised to be 'men'. How far do I intentionally or unintentionally conform to ideas of what it is 'to be a man', and how do they show up in how I approach relationship? How do I deal with the shaming I have received, and will receive in the future? Does this lead me to shame other people (my partner, my children), to become aggressive or even violent, or can I transform this energy into something more positive? What about the *multiplicity* of what I am, beyond 'being a man', the space I make, for instance, for what I or others might regard as my 'feminine side'? Born into masculinity, how does the range of what arouses or excites me relate to what I see as *my* values, or instead to aspects of Mastery, and how far am I 'at ease' with this? If I'm *aware* of these kinds of questions, how not to get caught up in indecision, overthinking? Where does necessary self-criticism slide into unhealthy self-doubt? If I challenge aspects of this masculinity in myself or in other people, how to be a genuine 'ally' in a struggle against something in which I am inevitably complicit, even though not by my own choosing? In a world where I am 'supposed' to compete and even to dominate, what might a 'successful' life *as a man* look like, feel like, *in my own terms*?

'Empty?'

As Zennists, we might return here to our own direct experiencing on the cushion, and to our experiencing of lived relationship. How *do* I experience my *gender* and my *desiring*? Does it all feel simply what I *am*, or are there tensions to my experiencing, whether in the thoughts I think, the emotions I feel, or in my body experiencing what I do or don't find exciting, arousing, pleasurable? (Or for that matter...horrifying or disgusting?) Because *intimacy*—and including our sexual identity, feelings and expressions as one of the *most* intimate aspects of ourselves—is where we may feel most truly or deeply 'me' (and whether this is 'simply' me, or itself experienced as a place of deep conflict), it is one of the most direct opportunities to experience the fragmentary nature of our self and selfing, and of our illusions of substantiality and certainty. In my awareness of where and how desire does and does not find me, and to where it does and does not lead, I may perhaps come to *experience* some sense of the true *emptiness* of self, and of whatever certainties of *identity* I hold about myself. Not as any kind of void or lack, but simply as always and only *relational*, always and only a part of the shared world we collectively, along with all beings, *are*. We can no more step *outside* of our desiring, or the way gender constructs our culture than we can step outside our selves (and the relationship of each to each is 'most intimate'), but we *can* come to be better *aware* of our *experiencing* of each and all, which changes...everything and nothing.

But I'll give the last word here to *joy*, to *pleasure*, to the *desire for connection* that our desire fundamentally *is*. Mutual pleasure, mutual joy are the very foundation of relationship, and as I become more aware of where and how I am thinking or acting within the dynamic of relationship, it is *together* that we do this, caring enough to show the other our own vulnerability, our fallibility, our limitations, and be recognised in them also. This is the ground on which we are able to build relationships beyond the instrumental, beyond it being 'all about me'. To share and to love, which requires us also to accept the darker moments of our relationship: misunderstanding, even hatred, breakdown. 'Relationship' is no magic wand, and we will continue to fail and fail again, hopefully to fail better. The question for *our* relationships (and for all relationships) is 'in the wonder of our sameness and our difference, what might we together become?'