

## 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.**

This Precept is about our desire. Why do I experience the desires I do, and why do I act on these desires in the *way* I do? And, what is it to be *desirable*, what is it to *be* desired by another person? Are the ‘intimate relationships’ of the aspiration here just a euphemism for ‘sex’, or are we asking a deeper question about the relation of sex to intimacy? So how does our sexuality\* show up in our relationships, how does it deepen, damage or destroy them? My sexual response is my body and mind both equally: all my wildest pleasure, my darkest despair, my most eager anticipation, my deepest sense of self, and perhaps too my feeling of the entire *loss* of self in the moment: our sexuality is perhaps the area where we experience *most* clearly the inseparability of mind and body. Memory and fantasy, our thoughts, values and self-identities all framing and framed by the pleasure of *this* body.

Diane Rizzetto asks us to begin our investigation by sitting in Zazen and simply asking us to think of something... *sexy*. What arouses us? How does this feel in my body, what are the physical sensations? What thoughts, what images arise, how does all this unfold?

‘Stay relaxed with a gentle focus on breathing in and out. Now bring into mind any image sense, or word that excites you sexually. It can be a person, a picture, a smell, a melody. It can be a word or phrase. If you notice you begin to judge the object of your attention as good, bad, sick or something else, just identify those thoughts as *judging* and return to the object of your attention. When you’ve activated something, you’ll notice a change in your bodily experience. The breath may quicken, deepen, or shorten. The body may slightly contract or tighten. You may feel certain sensations. You may also feel nothing. Feeling nothing is also an experience. What is the numbness like? Deepen the body scan by paying closer attention to the heart, gut, and genital areas. Do some areas feel more remote than others? In other words, do you find awareness doesn’t go to certain areas? If it doesn’t, try moving in that direction and see what happens. Do any thoughts, emotions or judgements, like I can’t do this or I’m not good at this, arise around this numbness? If you notice a feeling such as fear, shame, hurt, anger or power, sub-vocalise the label and return to just breathing and feeling the sensation.’ (WU 135)

Rizzetto stresses that it’s important not to bring judgement to bear in this kind of inquiry, but to allow everything — sensations, feelings, emotions, images, ideas — spontaneously to arise and fade, to connect up and lead to new openings. She emphasises the complexity

\* NB: ‘Sexuality’ here and below refers to our feelings, responses, expressions and actions, and *not* to our specific ‘sexual orientation’.

of the emotions that may come up, and that besides any pleasure we may also experience anger, fear, or shame. We have a strong but often unrecognised need to self-censor, both in the turning away from those feelings and emotions we find difficult, but also in the *denial* of what we might find arousing. 'Should' and 'should not' are not a part of our practice (although, of course, they *make* themselves a part of it...). Being honest with ourselves, and trusting ourselves to feel what we feel *without* judgement are important parts of the process. It means resisting the urge to believe the (exciting/terrifying) stories\* about ourselves that we might well rush towards and hold fast to: does experiencing *this* feeling/image/thought mean I am *really*, in my deepest self — gay or straight, wishing to inflict or suffer violence, frigid or sex addicted, or secretly really wanting sex with the 'wrong' person? Our practice here is in *resisting allowing these stories the power to define or identify us*, but instead becoming more aware that these stories are, finally, just stories. Instead we simply hold in awareness the feelings and emotions these stories arouse and the further thoughts they give rise to: the subtle and not-so-subtle arousal and pleasure, and perhaps too any fear or shame. It's hard to remain grounded, and we need to use our practice to stay with the immediate physicality of this actual body. In exploring these questions further, Rizzetto asks us to take our awareness and observation beyond the cushion: to connect up with every aspect of our day to day experience.

'Now bring your enquiry into your daily experiences, noticing what sorts of reactions different situations bring up for you. Here, you are trying to bring out into the open not only your personal experience with sexual energy, but also attitudes and judgements you may hold towards others regarding their sexuality. The intention at this point is to be observant as much as possible to what goes on in you on the street, in the bus, at work, wherever you see or interact with others. Do certain types of people turn you off or on? Do you find yourself judging and closing off to certain individuals? Give yourself permission to think and feel without being restricted. Be open and observe whatever thoughts or feelings may arise. As in the exercise above, keep your inquiry at the level of invitation. You are not demanding anything to reveal itself. You are simply removing the veils covering your deepest holdings of the self-centred dream.' (WU 136)

Note how many of the implicit or explicit judgements we pass on other are not only about their desirability to *us*, but that we also judge them about their *own* desiring and their *own* self-sense of desirability. These judgements are not disinterested or abstract: we make them from the position of *our own* desiring, what arouses and what repels *us*, and the joy or distaste, even anger, at the implicit approval or rebuke that our desire meets in its arousal or frustration. These judgements, approving or damning, form part of the tissue of unconscious assumptions we bring to any fresh or renewed meeting with another: who *are* you, what do I *expect* of you, what do I expect *you* expect of *me*?

\*I'm using 'story' here, as always in these commentaries, as a *neutral, non-judgemental* term. 'Story' and 'history' share the same root, and are in one sense, the same thing... no story can ever be 'the whole truth', *all* accounts are partial. Nevertheless, some stories are clearly much more 'true' than others, while many may be largely the projection of our fantasies, positive or negative.

## Sexual Feeling

Our collective ideals, fears, dreams and injunctions tell us what we *should* or *must do*, or should not or must not even *imagine* doing. Bringing this to awareness may be difficult because of the strong sense that our sexuality is a very important part of our core self, of 'who I really am'. In fact in the way we develop from infancy onwards to become the being we now are involves unconsciously channeling and placing limits on what I experience as 'desirable': both in what I think I am 'supposed' to desire and what figures as 'forbidden'. As a consequence of this, a *fear* of relaxing my guard and being led to some strange dark place of dangerous desire lurks always on the edges of our consciousness. From our first experiences onwards we come to know implicitly that there are parts of our own and others' bodies that must normally be kept covered, hidden, and are 'not' to be explored. Shame is the punishment waiting for us should our transgressions be uncovered! Our society's 'background' Christian morality only adds to this, meaning that for many of us even the *awareness* of our desiring is blunted by feelings of guilt and shame. We may or may not feel comfortable talking about sex or about the desires that we experience, but there often remains, contrasting with the real or imagined pleasure, an underlying sense that sexuality is, like greed, *bad*, or at the least very *dangerous*.

But alongside this I may also feel pressure *to* desire, that I *should* be wanting to 'get more' or 'get better' sex, or even that I should feel sexual desire at all. Our society's assumptions and expectations were never unambivalent, and have clearly changed over time: 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 more and better of everything else. The sex positivity movement originating within one branch of feminism has, in its more full-blooded form, given rise to an attitude of *compulsory sexuality*: that it is *only* through a completely free and individualised sexual expression and gratification that true liberation from the (male) repression of (female) sexuality is to be found. In this it aligns itself on what are seen as characteristic 'always on' male attitudes towards sexuality, and (intentionally or unintentionally) on the individualisation and commercialisation characteristic of neoliberalism in general. So, should I be more 'adventurous', 'experimental', 'daring'? And above all, *am I missing out?*

One possible response to the contemporary social pressure to experience and act on sexual desire is self-defining as *asexual*, whether I see myself as self-consciously *rejecting* the demands of my culture, or simply *don't* experience sexual desire. In a world of 'norms' any difference from what is seen — at this particular moment — as 'normality' becomes by definition a 'problem' in search of a 'cure', and hence to reclaim it as a positive *identity* is an act of resistance: 'that's just the way we are...'. As with all resistance, it's not possible to withdraw entirely from playing this set of games that permeate every aspect of how we see ourselves and are seen by others, but we *can* aspire to play them *differently*, to create a more *liveable* space in which to dwell and to love.

Or is it, for *me*, the *gendering* of my desire that doesn't fit? What if the way gender supposes or assumes that I feel and want, and even what I am simply assumed to *be*, doesn't fit the experience of being *this* person that I actually am? If I feel that the

discomfort of not fitting the gender I was assigned at birth can be alleviated by a binary switching to the 'other' gender, (which I might or might not express as that 'I' am in the 'wrong' body), then *transition* offers a solution. But if neither gender really 'fits'? Then I will need to ask what gender is or might be *for me*, and even come to question the workings of our society's whole organisation of gender. Whether I identify as *non-binary* or not, we *all* need to understand the potential insight and freedom to be gained by questioning the form and inevitability of a pre-assigned mutually exclusive binary being taken to determine core aspects of who I am and who I will be thought to be, of how I should think, feel, act, *love*.

Our sexuality is one of the most obvious areas where we become aware of how we do, or don't, exercise *control*. It's never a case of simply *deciding* how I am going to feel and then acting accordingly. When we talk about *passion* in relation to our desire, we mean it in its original sense: desire *finds* me, draws me along in its wake, I don't get to *choose* where I feel its pull. The hormonal changes in our body whenever we think about (let alone do...) anything to do with sex, can easily lead to the same kind of intoxication and carelessness, heedlessness, that is the subject of the Fifth Precept. As Bryan Ferry once sang: 'Love is the drug and I need to score'. The merest prospect of sex can cloud our minds, and sex can be as powerful in this way as alcohol or other drugs, and of course it's not unknown for people to combine them all. We have to admit we don't always want to want what we want, or want what we want to want. Do I feel there are desires I can't or must not act out? Do I ever act against my better judgement? How do I feel about my fantasies in relation to what I actually do or don't do? If we feel we never experience any tension around our sexuality, then, honestly, we're probably lying to ourselves. Because our shared world is contradictory in itself, my own life is expressive of these contradictions, whether I experience them as a split 'within me', or as tension with what 'other people' or 'society' expect of me. The feelings aroused by sex are perhaps the area of our lives where self-honesty is *most* difficult. If desire itself can blind us, so too can hidden fears, feelings of shame, past trauma. As always, self-honesty involves coming to better own and acknowledge the *whole* of our experience, including the parts we deny, or try to ignore or repress. Can I own my violent feelings, my aggression, *and* my neediness and vulnerability? And what do I *do* with those feelings?

Both 'casual sex' and 'true love' are mythologised in a way that take us far from any simple experience of physical pleasure. A physiological/hormonal/emotional component may combine elements of release, joy and surrender, or conversely be in the service of a sense of one's own power and control: I can 'surrender' to what I feel as another part of myself, or to my partner, or to the act itself... Perhaps I want to experience my own desirability through though the eyes and body of another? Even the most intense physical sensation can only come to be experienced as pleasurable, profound, physically and emotionally 'moving', within a framing that's already psycho-social: so many different elements combine that we need to ask — *for me, here, now* — to what extent is sex even about 'sex' at all? Like greed, our emotional displacement and dissociation make our sexual expression a prime vehicle for attempting to compensate for our feelings of lacking, of personal insufficiency and fear of isolation. Am I looking for 'Love'? Distraction? The

thrill of transgression? Scratching an itch? Am I looking for shared intimacy, or the thrill of an anonymous encounter? For comfort or danger? The extremes of physical sensation, or for emotional fulfilment? Remembering the gendered nature of domination and mastery, of care and dependency: does 'proving myself' require a particular kind of sexual relationship with a particular kind of partner? Am I (for example) 'naturally' looking to/ for a woman (perhaps 'young' and 'sexually attractive'?) to meet my need for soothing, care, safety, even if for me this manifests as sexual desire? Am I perhaps looking rather for the reflected status that I feel a particular kind of partner can offer me? Do I feel I need validation through *conquest* of an *other*, someone whose desired 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? Perhaps for someone with whom to *be* vulnerable?

But...how far are the desires or wishes I experience in any real sense even *mine*? How far are they framed by what someone of this age, this gender, this orientation 'should', or 'naturally' wants? To whom do I go for my relationship advice? My friends? Reality TV? The internet? 'Influencers'? Watching porn? Do I think I am repeating my parents' path, or reacting against it? 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 otherness? We all have stories in our heads about how things should be, could be. These stories rarely align well on reality, yet we will often try to manipulate reality to fit these stories, and blame what goes wrong not on the stories themselves, but the real life other people of our relationships, and even, of course, on ourselves also. *Gender* tends to dominate the assumptions underlying all these stories. Gender organises the real inequalities and asymmetries of our society and our individual experience, comes to order the way we see the world, and hence even who and how we desire. I'll argue below that this isn't in any sense accidentally so, that the purpose of gendering is to keep us in separate and unequal camps, while its effects are in the endless misunderstandings, false assumptions, struggle, fear and violence that keep irrupting into our trying to relate to each other, to find and continue our actual relationships. And that that's as true if we are just buddies, or LGBTQI, or queer in whatever sense. I will try to lay out some pointers for our practice as to how gender works to frame our desiring and our relating, with the hope that seeing it more for what it is may allow us to respond differently in that desiring and relating. But first I wanted to look at what it might mean to *practice* with relationship, to use our Zen practice both on and off the cushion within the *mutuality* of our own relationships.

### **The Practice of Relationship: *Preliminaries***

How might we actually come to *practice* with intimate relationship? We've looked at some of Diane Rizzetto's ways of inviting us better to open up to our feelings and reactions around our sexuality. We might hope that beyond this, all we really need to do is sit, and then sit some more: sitting *does* soften us, makes us less resistant, less tight, less defensive. 'Open' awareness seems to suggest just accepting what 'this moment' brings to us — but is this all we do need to do? I've used the image of 'the walls to our mind' a lot: the habits, assumptions and beliefs whose effects on our actions and behaviour we are rarely aware of. I've talked too about *ignore-ance*: our actively *not*-looking, *not*-seeing aspects of our 'life as it is' that analyst Philip Bromberg has so thoroughly explored as *dissociation*. All these

are in a sense coping strategies in the face of what seems a contradictory and often frightening world. They seem to protect us, but break down and become actively damaging when they don't address the real contradictions within the world and our own lives, but instead cover them over, *hide* them. Our ignore-ance damages our real life relationships by falling back on stories about how things *are* or *should* be, stories that hurt and harm both ourselves and those we care about. We might also think about these stories as the justifications for what Diane calls our 'requirements' of any situation. So our practice needs to bring into the light both these strategies and what they cover over.

What we can think of as the preliminary work to our practice with this precept starts with the questions we've just been asking. To ask how things *connect up*: to look at the consequences of things being as they are, and also at how they got to be this way, and so come to experience better how our selfing is always a selfing *as relationship*, as the necessity of our mutual recognition with *others*. Any time we encounter the thought or feeling that 'that's just normal!' or 'it's only natural!' then it's worth asking *why* I think that's the case. Usually I've just encountered one of those invisible walls guiding my thoughts and feelings along a familiar path... In this 'solo' practice, we need to 'investigate thoroughly' what experiences, feelings and thoughts, what assumptions, stories and the rest lead us subtly and unconsciously towards our assertion of dominance or defended isolation, and so away from actual relationship. Acknowledging the reality and complexity of my feelings (or non-feelings), and bringing them to non-judgemental awareness while staying grounded in the reality of the experience of my physical sensations will help open a path of understanding what it is to be 'just this': an embodied being, embedded in a social world. *Where* do these images arise from, why do they connect up to feeling and emotion in me in the way they do? We are pointed back once more to the reality that I am not one single, unified and consistent 'self' with a single and consistent 'truth'. I am many things, many 'selves', some momentary, some longer lasting. My sense of separateness itself — whether I experience this as pride, shame or any other emotion — is itself a social construct, and my most private fantasies are as much a part of this social world as any other aspect of my thoughts, speech and actions. Our study with this precept can show us our 'selfing' more clearly, how we show up as *this 'me', here and now*. This is our own version of Dogen's familiar 'to study the self is to forget the self': the more I am aware of how things (me!) got to be the way they are, and of the consequences, the more I can stand back, bracket out, and finally *forget* to feel myself as separate from my world, and let go of the need to assert this separateness...

We can bring to this practice the fruits of our work with the other precepts: can I be aware enough, honest enough, to hear and *speak* the truth of my feelings, emotions and thoughts? Equally importantly, to *listen* and to *hear* the truth of *theirs*? To do all this with kindness and caringly? Can I approach the other not with requirements and assumptions, but with openness and possibility? Can I find and maintain with them the equal ground on which we may truly meet, and recover from our inevitable mutual misunderstandings and missteps, responding with care when difficult situations and emotions arise? And if I don't feel the inclination to do any or all of these things, at least to be honest with myself and each other about this too...

I said that all this is, in a way, *preliminary* practice, before we address the reality of *our* meeting and interacting in *actual* relationship. But it's also always *ongoing* practice, just allowing mental space when we return over and over again to the cushion, or recognising our insight when we suddenly see the world a little differently, as the 'walls of our mind' soften or realign. This awareness can happen either on or off the cushion, in the quiet of zazen or the 'live-action' of lived relationship. Practice on the cushion asks us to stay with the experiencing of *this* actual body, of the feelings and emotions I experience in *this* moment, and in *this*. But of course as we come better to bring awareness to every moment of our life, to stay closer to the shifting pattern of feeling and emotion and the thoughts that accompany them we notice more, we connect more. The actual experience of relationship, as Joko was always so insistent on, is a teacher like no other, if often a harsh one. The castles of complacency we so easily build, tumble before the slightest touch of the reality of our mutual interaction. The more we become sensitive to this, the more we will experience, the faster our awareness will respond. Growing awareness may well come to blunt the sharpness of our own reactions and our responses to the actions of others, without any conscious intention on our part. It's vital to remain as honest as we can be with ourselves, and vital too that self-honesty does not descend into self-judgement or self-deprecation — the paths directly opposite to relationship. Can we truly feel what we feel, *and* retain empathy both for ourselves and others? It's a big ask, and our development as *A Bigger Container* may well be tested... Can we come better to *care* for ourselves and for others in the light of growing awareness?

### **The Practice of Relationship: *Feeling My Own Hurt***

One crucial, I think *essential* aspect of this 'preliminary' practice is better to allow myself to *feel my own hurt*. We *don't* want to go there, and it can hurt. As always, the practice is to feel into my 'soft' limit, become aware of the 'edge' of potential discomfort/pain, and proceed cautiously and with care and kindness to myself, backing off whenever I have to. That might be a momentary pause to come back to the experience of *this* moment, the physical presence of my body *here* and *now*, or actually getting up and moving around, even intentionally distracting myself with the washing up, reading a book... Some of us might even need to talk this over with our therapist: please, whatever it takes to stay safe! This is serious work.

Why is this important? Usually when we discuss the precepts, we speak about the harm we have done to *others*. But I have tried throughout these commentaries to point to the importance of bearing witness to our *own* vulnerability, and to ask about our *own* experience of suffering harm. While we are told repeatedly in terms of our practice not to ruminate, not to obsess about any sense of hurt, this is because these are ways of trying to *avoid* the actual *experiencing* of our feelings and instead settle for the (albeit painful) story-cycle that keeps our deeper feelings in check. None of us *want* to think of ourselves in any way as 'victims', and one of the key elements in our personal *curative fantasy* may well be the hope of escaping exactly these feelings. We'll almost inevitably feel a sense of shame here because in our society one of the greatest crimes is to be seen as weak, and weakness is shaming, especially around anything remotely to do with 'sex'. But it is exactly *here* — in relation to intimacy — that this work is most essential.

The situations and feelings around sex that carry a sense of hurt for me may be overwhelmingly obvious, or I may at this point be thinking: 'ok, but I genuinely don't think I have any sense of hurt!' Important to understand that this *does not* have to be as a result of something criminal that was done to us, or of someone else's evil intent. Between having been the victim of actual physical assault or coercion and the unwelcome consequences of our own admitted misjudgements there is an infinity of different qualities of the experience of hurt. My hurt may not even include anything that was actually *done to* me or *by* me. The words of others can wound deeply: so many of our slurs derive from sex, and so much shaming 'teasing', 'banter', and 'horseplay' is sexualised and sexualising. What I perceive as the deficiencies of my own appearance (*why?*) may lead to a deep sense of insecurity and hurt in finding myself as this 'undesirable' (to whom?) body.

Hurt may not necessarily involve *blame*, but rather 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. Our assumptions, our unacknowledged 'requirements' in Diane Rizzetto's sense, were simply...different. Perhaps our differing libidos mean we don't desire each other in the same way? Whether this is terminal for our relationship or we just 'live with it', and whether we think it's down to nature, to our different work commitments or our social expectations, there may well be hurt on both sides. Then there is my own 'failure' (and perhaps shame is a particular problem here) to meet my *own* expectations/requirements of how I 'should' feel or perform, or what I 'should' experience, *or even what I imagine the other's expectations of me are*. In fact our sense of hurt may come directly from the real or perceived 'requirements' of our society or family: publicly owning a 'non-standard' sexual or gender identity to ourselves and to others may bring with it a sense of blissful release, but in our current society it will inevitably bring up complex emotions, although to deny that identity will invite shame and alienation.

While *all* of us experience hurt in relation to our sexuality and intimacy, important to recognise that our gender plays a significant role here: most women from girlhood on experience numerous examples of inappropriate sexualised language as well as touching and other contact, while between a quarter and one third will suffer actual physical or sexual assault, often from a partner. Of reported rapes, 90% are against women. 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 the problem to begin to come to light, and for individual women to recognise to themselves, perhaps only years after the event, that yes, that was *rape*, and so begin to process their experience. Why so long? If from childhood I'm told and shown, both explicitly and implicitly, that this is just the way of our gendered world, that we should simply 'get over it', and that we definitely *don't* talk about it or make a fuss; if it would be implied or stated that surely I must (or at least people will think that I must) have been in *some* way complicit in it... Then it will feel as if nobody wants to be contaminated by the infectious shame of rape, not family or friends, let alone the police. Easier then, in terms of our coping, to dissociate and fail to recognise myself in the event, dissociate from the feelings and even the memory itself. And of course although rape *is* overwhelming a crime



committed by men on women, male rape exists too, and precisely 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. (NB: what does this tell us about gender that the threat and reality of rape should be an accepted part of what it is to be a woman in this society?)

Whatever our hurt, it is actually far more likely to have been at the hands of family or friends than someone entirely unknown to us. Hurt we have experienced as children, or at *any* time from those we rely on and trust, can be more damaging than that caused by a stranger, and unrecognised hurt can easily perpetuate a cycle. It is estimated that a third, and possibly many more of those later convicted of child sexual abuse were themselves abused. Important too to recognise the sense of hurt that comes from *our* having hurt *others*: one important lesson of my time spent working in prisons has been that hurting others deeply hurts ourselves. I'm guessing that most of us (all of us?) carry *some* form of this kind of hurt, whether we simply try to dismiss it, or self-castigate because of it.

The fallout from our having been hurt can take on many different forms, and while some of this harm can be easily repaired, some cannot. The end of a long-term relationship might turn us towards depression, self-harm, or addiction. Childhood trauma, whether that's 'developmental' or more specifically located, will have its lasting effect on us as adults. Whether our hurt takes the form of actual and long lasting trauma, an acute but treatable depression, loss of self worth or sense of agency, or even just a different 'quality' to our ongoing lives, It can be healing to share this with another, but this *caring* is no less important and vital when it comes simply from ourselves.

None of us *want* to acknowledge the harm done to us, or its effects on us. As always the aim is to be as honest as possible about what I *do* feel, beginning with the direct and immediate experiencing of feelings and thoughts in *this* body in *this* moment, staying grounded in my bodily experience. Remaining open to the appearing of the patterns and connections that will offer us insight and healing, while being alert to the possibility of our flight into rumination and repetitive thought patterns. To explore with care these feelings, thoughts and connections as they show up and disperse. In this way we *bear witness* to the reality of the experience of our own hurt, and become better able to bear witness to the reality of the hurt done to others. I've tried to draw our attention over and over again to our own shared vulnerability being the heart of our practice, and of our sense of self. Our potential for empathy for others is always based on our own experience of hurt, on extending our sense of the *sameness* of others to appropriately allow their *difference*. All the issues in our discussion of *recognition* apply here. Can I use my empathy and intelligence to *stand with* others who experience harm? Feeling our own hurt offers us a way in to experiencing ourselves as more whole, more human. It offers us too a way of better responding to the hurt others have suffered, and even better understanding and responding to the hurt we ourselves, inevitably, have caused...

This practice is so important, but needs absolute self-care. Please be kind to yourself.

## The Practice of Relationship: *Mutual*

Pretty much everything you do these days involves a contract, whether that's your new energy provider, or the search engine you use on the internet. Every legal contract regards the different parties as separate and sovereign individuals 'freely' entering into an agreement with each other, defining and limiting exactly what their exchange will or may not involve. Despite this nominal equality, the terms and conditions of every contract reflect the balance of power between the respective parties: good luck in trying to renegotiate your contract with Google or Facebook! In fact our dominant practices of economics and of politics view every interaction we have as an implicit (and increasingly an explicit) contract, beginning with the 'Social Contract' itself that founds 'society'. So: how far do *we* — you and I, and whether we are friends, lovers, partners or married — see *our* relationship as a contract?

Ours *might* be a largely contractual relationship: we exchange (hopefully) pleasurably, while each remaining separately 'myself' and essentially unchanged. Perhaps our culture, relentlessly treating each of us as it does as entirely separate, free and autonomous, and increasingly as being competitively so, steers us towards this this kind of contractual intimacy, whether that's in terms of our choosing someone who is 'a good fit', of our frequency or style of sex, or even of our ultimate life goals. *Is* my 'true love', my perfect 'soul-mate' the one who wants to *be for me/do to me* exactly what I would want them to be/do, and likewise me for/to them? And what happens when as always, because this is real life, that *isn't* the case? Just how perfect is the mirroring of our 'ends': of our wants and desires, of our goals? Given the inevitability of mismatch between them (we are after all in this context *separate* and *individual* embodied beings)... what do we do about it? Can we compromise, balance our desires for and requirements of the other, achieve a workable mutual agreement? There are always going to be aspects of any relationship that are like this, when we experience being caught between our fantasies and the hard and sometimes insoluble realities of our actual lives. Can we negotiate a way forward, or is it time to cancel the contract and face the emotional consequences? Can we move *beyond* the contractual? What would help us?

Our stories of True Love offer us a very different idea of relationship: the fantasy of lovers fusing: 'we are the two halves of one complete soul...*of course* I want what you want, *of course* you want what I want!'. And there's the problem: unable to distinguish each from other, and regardless of whether I want to be *do-er* or *done to*, to play at 'Master' or want to abandon myself to be your doormat, the resulting enmeshment will be problematic at best, at worst disastrous. I identify my interest with *you*, or rather with my *fantasy* of you: 'love-bombing', coercive control, becoming violent when you *inexplicably* don't conform to my requirements of your behaviour, or even of your appearance. Or believing that *you* can do no wrong, or that you are still *right*, even when you're wrong. Putting you *first*, always, whether that's what you actually want or need or not. Losing any sense of *myself*, or eventually retreating into martyrdom, equally problematic whether joyous or spitefully resentful. Or our unspoken agreement to just evade all that is potentially painful or disruptive about our actual difference of desires and needs. How far is this attempted fusion in a strange distorted way, still *contractual*? About finding someone who will

consent to be a *means* to my *ends*, and for whom *I* can consent to being a means to *their* ends? We have many names for the different nuances of this version of relationship: 'co-dependency', 'women who love too much', coercive control... Our collective stories of romantic love in fact point us in exactly this direction: we should be 'overwhelmed' 'swept off our feet', 'struck dumb', we will 'instinctively' know when we have met '*the one*'. 'The one' who finally shows us we should not 'settle', should *never* 'settle' for anything less...

The fantasy of fusion, of becoming '*one*' is the mirror of contract's '*two*'. Both these strategies treat relationship, albeit by very different routes, as finally *instrumental*: we each treat the other as solely a *means* to our own *ends*, whether or not those ends are immediately apparent to us, or in any way objectively desirable. Is there a third option, a 'not-one-not-two'? Can we imagine a possibility within relationship that is neither contractual nor a fantasised fusion, but one that is founded in *mutual recognition*? Every relationship has its contractual side, and elements too of *do-er* and *done to*, while many (most?) romantic relationships, particularly at the beginning, flirt with fusion. The way beyond these is through what Jessica Benjamin talks about as our mutual recognition being the foundation of both the social bond *and* my own sense of self. We began this line of thought in relation to the Seventh Precept: my own sense of self is grounded in my non-separation, starting with the play between caregiver and child that brings into being the space of the Third, each recognising the effect of interaction with the other on themselves and the shared joy this brings. The Third is the safe space of sharing, which we might simply call *trust*. For Benjamin relationship isn't something we establish once and for all and then simply maintain, but rather something we lose and find again in a stronger form through the testing of our 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, our own sense of possibility, but alongside our desired stability and security, we add to this the possibility of the appearance of the previously unimaginable. We come to co-create a *shared* space that is 'safe but not too safe' to borrow a phrase from analyst Philip Bromberg, a dynamic space where our interaction *comes to change both of us*.

Hence all our previous work with the precepts takes on a new significance as it points clearly to what makes for loving, intimate relationships: *our* (shared) listening and speaking truthfully, *our* approaching others with openness and possibility, *our* meeting on equal ground. Coming to know together the inevitability and form of *our* delusions, whether as distractions, habits or addictions. Caring for, and learning from our anger. Caring enough to dare to repair our inevitable ruptures, to re-find the shared ground of relationship. Coming to better experience both each other and ourselves as *differing* but '*not-separate*'. The question is, given the extreme asymmetry of our gendered society and the inequalities to which this dualism gives rise, how *can* we come to meet others as 'equals', and form and sustain living relationships based on mutual recognition? And yet, now more and now less, we *do*.

This is not work that 'I' can do in isolation, however useful it is to return over and again to the cushion as I become more aware of where and how I am thinking or acting within or

outside this dynamic of relationship. We do this *together*, as we together lose and find again our shared space in the meeting of our eyes, that particular smile, the touch of hands, sharing a joke... A moment found, and connection reaffirmed before life sweeps us up again. Caring *enough*, for each to show the other our own vulnerability, our fallibility, our limitations, and be recognised in them also. Caring enough to follow through with that difficult conversation from the point of view of 'us' rather than 'me'. All our problems are better when experienced as *ours*, not *mine* or *yours*. If 'requirements' soften into simple desiring, or preference, or even dissolve as they are 'seen through', so much more becomes possible. This is the ground on which we might build relationship *beyond* the instrumental, beyond it being 'all about me'. But this is by no means a magic wand, and we will continue to fail and fail again, hopefully to fail better.

*Continuing our practice: on the cushion:* revisit all our preliminary work, but now from the point of view of 'us' rather than 'me'...

*...and off the cushion:* pay attention to where our actions point towards *our* fusion, *our* relations of contract or Mastery. Pay attention to what founds and what strengthens or challenges *our* shared space of the Third, our mutual trust. Be willing to show our vulnerability. *Bear witness* to ourselves, and to each other. *Talk*, with openness and a sense of *our* mutual possibility, aware too of our tendency to elevate and denigrate. Show *our* willingness to care *about*, to care *with*, to *offer* and to *receive* care. Experience and recognise the wonder of *our* sameness and *our* difference.

All our important relationships contain elements of the contractual, and of attempted Mastery. So the question for all of us is whether these remain their primary or even sole modes, or whether we develop towards a relationship that acknowledges our mutual *necessity*, and is hence is open to our mutual *possibility*, as we explore and live it out together. The question for our relationship is 'in the wonder of our sameness and our difference, what might we together *become*?'