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**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.**

With this Third Zenkai we bring our awareness and our aspiration to what is for many of us the most intimate aspect of our experience of 'self': my 'sexuality' understood as the sexual feelings I experience, the expression I give to them, and the way I think and talk about what I feel and what I do. While the First Zenkai asks us to become better aware of the violence of our world — a violence of which we ourselves are inevitably a part — and the Second Zenkai likewise invites our awareness of the ways in which different forms of inequality both structure and are structured by that violence, the Third turns our awareness to how all this shows up in 'myself and in the world' specifically in relation to sexuality. In response, we aspire to practice respect and open-heartedness as aspects of non-violence and sharing freely.

'Sex' can be our deepest and wildest joy and offer us a sense of profound connectedness with another, it can also be a place of anxiety, fear or acute suffering. We may well experience our sexuality as 'most intimate', close to our core sense of self, of who I feel I 'truly am'. Yet this is also where our sense of being a self 'in control' of itself is most directly challenged: we want what and whom we want, even against our own better judgement or conscious wishes — when we are caught up by desire and carried along by it, in what sense can we say that this desire is even really 'mine'?

We tend to think of sex in terms of spontaneity, abandon, even 'loss' of self, Our *morality* by contrast generally talks of where we are required to *inhibit* ourselves; in its potential loss of rational control, sex is in fact the paradigm for what morality cautions against about *all* desire. Hence *renouncing* sexuality has always been an important part of monastic practice — sex is dangerous at every level, so just say no! And say no too, to all desire other than the desire for enlightenment...

The Zenkai, however, are *not* a morality in this sense, and our aspiration to practice takes a very different path. We work with the *awareness* of our desire: firstly what I *feel*, both as sensation and emotion, but also what I *think*. What I think I know about how sex 'should' be, what I 'should' want, what another person 'might' or 'should' want of me... We look to become aware of separation and non-separation, of our *mutual recognition* and its failure. For *me*, is 'sex' about the gratification of 'my' fantasies, of 'my' pleasure imagined as entirely separate from (or even contrary too) that of another human being? Is sex *all about me*? In terms of our practice, this isn't a question about being 'kind', 'considerate', or 'thoughtful' per se, or even about *consent*, but brings us squarely back to one of the fundamental questions of our practice — how far in my thoughts and feelings, in my words and actions, do I experience this self that I am as *separate* or *not-separate*? 'Sex' seems like a really important and potentially highly insightful place to ask this question...

## Awareness of Feelings

We might begin with practicing awareness of our actual 'sexual' *feelings* — physical sensations, moods, emotions, arousal. What *actually* turns me on? That might be in the immediacy of what we feel in response to someone we pass on the street, or as a daydream or fantasy, or more generally in the *kind* of appearances or images we find 'sexy', 'hot', or definitely 'not'. As with all our practice of awareness, we can investigate beyond our immediate response of turning towards or turning away. What exactly *am* I feeling? *Where* am I feeling it, what *kind* of feeling is this? In what way is it pleasurable? Is this feeling complete and satisfying in itself, or asking or pushing me to *do* something in response?

How does this connect with my *actual* relationships, of whatever kind? What I feel when I'm with someone I 'like', what I feel if you and I are 'having a relationship', what we feel having made a lifetime commitment to each other as our exclusive sexual partner?

How do I feel at the prospect of 'sex' or its frustration, what are the 'feelings' — both the most particular intimate sensations *and* their accompanying emotions — experienced during 'sex' itself, whether that's solo or with this particular partner? How well do I really know these feelings, and which of them are welcome, which less so, which of them 'not me'? What of the *emotions* that come with these feelings and how I feel *about* feeling them, perhaps any or all of: love/joy/release/triumph/connection/exhaustion/disgust/satiety? And the patterns of thought and belief: of assumption and expectation and requirement, and of the role of fantasy in all of these? What do I (think I) want of 'sex' anyway... physical sensation, emotional fulfilment, personal validation, escape? Maybe (and no judgement) it might be any or all of these, or something else again... How did I get to be this way, to feel this way?

As with all our awareness practice, we simply feel what we feel, as self-honestly and non-judgementally as possible. This means not judging myself if I am having the 'wrong' feeling about someone, or a feeling about the 'wrong' someone. Again, as always we simply practice 'being with' the feeling, seeing where it leads, experiencing the accompanying emotions and thoughts that follow from it. 'Being with' the feeling in this sense requires us *not to act* on it, but simply hold it in our awareness.

## Desire

My desire was there almost before there was a 'me' to feel it — *already* there as I first began to have a sense of what it is to *be* a self. Desire is born in the *mutual* pleasure of play and discovery in our very first relationships with our caregivers, desire which itself gives birth to relationship and is essential to our developing our sense of self. This is desire before any idea of the specifically sexual, but is simply the *shared* pleasures of desire as *connection*, as the embodied and deeply physical foundation of pleasure itself: sucking, burping, biting, squeezing, pooing, stroking and being stroked...all things we learn as relationship with our carers before we come to own them as *ours*, as aspects of a separate-seeming '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 safely held, of being contained, or of containing (holding) the other. All of this is discovered *in* and *as* relationship, together with those others through and with whom I discover my sense of self. Given this, it's no surprise that our desire should often seem *so* intimate, *so* personal to each of us, *so* close to what we feel as our very root. And yet this physicality and experiencing of desiring and connecting is something so basic to every one of us, that in an important sense it's completely *impersonal*, below the threshold of any differentiation into a 'you' or 'me'. At this level we are each simply a body in the field of infinite possibility of desire and its fulfilment... And yet out of this desire we mutually create (have created, create and will create) both our own selves and each other *as* selves...

It's from this field of desire that what we think of as the *sexual* emerges, and with it sexual *relationship*. All relationship is concrete, embodied. In the context of sex, 'relationship' might exist in the continuity of a life-time partnership or in the most 'casual' sexual encounter, in how or whether I masturbate, how or whether I use pornography or sex toys, or even in the feelings I experience in chosen or involuntary celibacy. Relationship is between the play that I myself am, of *same-and-other*, of *self and not-self*, as well as between this complex self that *I* am and the self *you* are, and between myself and the real or virtual 'objects', the *things* that make up my world. The foundation of mutual recognition is that we *are* not-separate, that not only is relationship never between entirely separate individuals, but that 'I' only *happen* in relation to a 'you' that is happening in relation to 'me'. Recognition is *appropriate* relationship. As *self*-relationship this is without the internal othering of dissociation that may result in dependency or addiction; in terms of relationship with an other it is without *othering*, without *domination*. Owning the collapse into othering and domination — when they happen — is a vital part of relationship, and the precondition to repairing and deepening it. Sadly, our *ignore-ance* — the learned assumptions and expectations both of ourselves and of each other that can give rise to so much harm — often stops us seeing when this is happening.

### **'Consenting' Adults**

*Consent* is imagined as being like any other *contract* we make: we each undertake to provide a service within general or specified limits, with the proviso that this can be amended or cancelled as we proceed. All parties to the contract are assumed as to be *separate* and *autonomous* legal persons, and hence as making entirely *free* and *independent* choices. Consent *assumes* exactly the kind of 'self' that our Zen practice shows us to be a fiction. Recognition and relationship exist as the permanent openness to our mutual possibility, *what we may together become*. To approach sex *as if* what was on offer were a simple list of menu items I order in advance is to make sex 'all about me', all about an independent, separate and ultimately fictional 'me' that is a fantasy generated out of my assumptions, expectations and the pleasurable feelings — the 'affect' — that these become tied to. It also assumes that I am always able to exercise my free, rational and independent judgement about what I am doing/what is happening to me, and what *might* happen...

These aren't only theoretical problems, but more importantly very practical ones. There is *always* inequality between us — and inequality may even be part of the attraction — but

the legal fiction of our equality may dangerously mask this from us. How pronounced does this have to be? When does 'influence' become 'pressure', or even threat: you say you'll get me fired, or post intimate images of me for the whole world to see, *forever*? We know that intentional 'grooming' offers me only the pretence of recognition and relationship: flattery, presents, confidences that create an emotional dependency that slides through coercion into direct psychological and physical domination. Yes, but how *intentional* does this have to be, and how do we draw the line? Likely I'm flattered to be noticed by someone 'powerful' especially if you are my teacher, my coach, my therapist, my guru, my (pop) idol... Maybe it's your money, your 'looks', the respect or envy you inspire, your greater 'experience'? What if you offer me that fancy present, that rôle, that promotion? Or threaten to dump me... or I simply get the impression you're going to dump me *unless I do...*? It might be 'consenting' to 'rough' sex, or thinking I 'should' enjoy strangulation...or...or... Whatever, and however, is there true 'freedom' in any of this?

Consent doesn't ask questions about either the *what* or the *why* of sex. It's neutral, just like money itself. At its worst, consent assumes all sex to be a kind of mutual prostitution: you want *that...*? ...just find someone you can screw the best deal out of for it! The consequences of this failure to understand the problematic assumptions behind 'consent' blind our societies to the deeper structures at work, and the results range from the distressing to the actually catastrophic. Establishing the concept of consent has been a vital step to offering meaningful legal protection to all, and insofar as it actually works that way it is entirely a good thing; nevertheless, it is based on assumptions that are themselves part of the problem that leads to sexual harming and violence.

## Girls and Boys

From the moment of our birth, and alongside our coming-to-be-me through our experiencing of immediately embodied desire and pleasure, we are also learning important lessons about how we should and should not experience and express this desire, how to *control* and *canal* it. There are real and important questions to be asked about the relation of human biology to 'sex' and to 'gender', but what is beyond any doubt is that our sexual desire and how we do or don't express it is first to last bound up with our culture. In the stories we tell, the images we see, the fantasies we dream, and in the way we produce ourselves as sexual beings — whether in the clothes we wear, the postures and mannerisms we adopt, the actions we take and the assumptions we make, we *perform* our sexuality.

To take my *own* experience: "It's a boy!" ... from this moment on, and without my being aware of it, so many aspects of my life were routed exclusively down one of only two possible paths. I was a 'boy', and although I did not yet know it, this was entirely different, *separate* from being a 'girl'. I learned the difference between mummies and daddys, and that I was 'like' my daddy not my mummy. I learned that the whole world was (apparently) organised in this way. I learned the assumptions and expectations of how 'men' and 'women' would behave towards each other, and learnt too *not to notice*, to practice *ignore-ance* as to these *being* assumptions and expectations, and so to treat them as being as natural as the air I breathed, or as unsurprising as having spaghetti hoops for tea. I learnt that being a 'boy' was to learn to stand like a boy, run like a boy, throw like a boy, sit like a boy, talk like a boy, and to be interested in 'boy' things. Important to remember

that I learnt all this, learnt to *become* all this, only *in* and *through* relationship. Relationship with other boys, with my parents, teachers and other adults. Learnt *together* how to *feel* good about being a boy, and what *should* make me feel good, what to *imitate*, and what I should sneer at in others or be *shamed* by in myself. Sexually, what was presented to me as giving me pleasure and exciting me, what would gratify me as licit or illicit, all created a deeply felt sense that what most meaningfully and intimately defined me — defined my ultimate existence and value as a human being — would be in how and what I felt and, above all, in how I ‘performed’. Some of this came easily, some less so. Some of it was impossible for me, some of it impossible for any actual person. Some felt ‘natural’ — ‘like me’ — and some grated, and some seemed insane or genuinely *wrong*. But it was clear to me that all my failures or my inability always to *believe* or even to *feel* what I ‘should’ were *my* failures, that when there was a problem, that problem was *me*. But was I right?

### The Gender of Desire

Gender, as we began to explore with the Second Zenkai, structures our access to space, time and resources, and so restricts our ability to offer each other *mutual recognition*. Our gendering is never independent of our society’s other inequalities — race, class, and so on — and together these shape both the *what* and the *how* of our desire. Gender is perhaps the longest lasting and most deeply embedded of these, but that’s not to say it always operates in the same way across time and space. Nevertheless, when we looked at John Locke’s definition of what it is to be a *person*, a definition that embodies our modern, ‘liberal’ ideas of freedom and autonomy, we saw how he paradoxically drew on very ancient legal ideas of the central importance of ‘property’ as *exclusive possession* to do so. We saw too that while Locke’s idea of the person aspires to be universal, it is in practice highly gendered, unsurprising given that, like both ancient Greece and Rome, seventeenth century England was a highly *Patriarchal* society. A Patriarchy is a society where power and authority are held by the ‘fathers’ or ‘male elders’ — not simply ‘men ruling over women’, but some *few* men ruling everyone. Greek and Roman society were based on fundamental inequalities where those between citizen and non-citizen, master and slave, and parent and child paralleled that between men and women. The Roman *paterfamilias* had both the right and duty to take part in the government of the State, and ruled absolutely not only over his wife and daughters, but also over his sons, his servants and his slaves. All were his *property*, his *possessions* over whom he had *exclusive* rights, and who owed their own place in the family’s hierarchy entirely to him. The *paterfamilias* was the possessor of the land, and of familial and, importantly, *political* authority that only *he* had the *freedom* and *independence* to exercise, being both without obligation to a superior, and not having to work to support himself. Hence women’s place was in the home seeing to domestic matters (even to *speak* in public would be to unwoman herself), dependent servants had the work they were contracted to do, slaves their absolute obligation to obey their masters in all things, including all things sexual: slaves of both genders were expected to immediately gratify any desire of their master (or mistress) without demur or complaint. To be a woman (whether as wife, daughter, servant or slave) was thereby to be deprived of all independent agency, and hence her desire and ability to act on that desire has to pass by way of the *paterfamilias*, the man through whose authority she might vicariously exercise her own will over others.

Thus it was in ancient Greece and Rome... but the *paterfamilias* remains at the heart of Locke's *modern* description of what it is to be a *person*, and of the connection of personhood to the rights and exclusivity of legal *possession*. Possession confers authority over others — women, children, servants, employees — in fact *any* and *all* who lack property of their own. But in linking active *personhood* to possession, Locke ties our *desire* to possession also, and so effectively genders our desire as *male*. There is no place within patriarchy and its hierarchy of possession and property for genuine *mutual recognition*: the actual or would-be patriarch recognises others only as rivals or as more or less desirable objects to be possessed, while he in turn is desirable only insofar as his real or asserted ability to control others offers the prospect of vicarious authority through attracting and holding his desire.

### Appearing and Acting

We do not live in ancient Greece or Rome, nor in seventeenth century England. In the world of Instagram and TikTok, sex-positivity and Pornhub, and of the recognition of diverse sexualities and sexual orientations, what does it mean to say that Locke's definition of personhood *genders* desire as male? Writing in 1972, the critic John Berger described how what he termed the *male gaze* shapes our *collective desiring*:

A man's presence is dependent on the promise of power which he embodies... 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... 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)

Berger makes it perfectly clear that this gendering of vision — of a male subject who looks, and of a female object who is looked at — is nothing to do with 'human nature', but arises directly out of the relations of *inequality* of power and authority within society. If to be a woman is to be required to be a sight, then this is one that offers the pleasure of *vicarious possession* by its availability to the (male) gaze, a pleasure we give the name of *scopophilia*. For Locke, it is my memories, fantasies and desires that are the *possessions* that most intimately define me for myself, so to possess the *image* of a woman's *body* — whether only in fantasy, as still or moving image or 'in the flesh' — is *already* in part to

*possess* that body as an object and to experience the *pleasure* of possessing it. The male gaze *canals* our unformed and polymorphous desire for connection with the world into the desire and pleasure of possessing, of vicariously '*having*' her, as sexual slang puts it. Possession that slides between imagination and the act, and the potential *domination* and *control* that any *subject* seeks over an *object* that fails to meet their fantasied requirements. For a woman to deny the gaze its pleasure (or even to fail to assent to it) makes her at best invisible, or worse, experienced as actively threatening — hence the misogynist who claims "I don't *hate* women, I *love* all women! It is just that *she* (or *those* women) behave so rudely and unreasonably...". Acting rudely and unreasonably by — to barely scratch the surface of possibility — not *wanting* to be looked at, by not taking sufficient care in presenting their body to be available to be seen, by being too fat or too old or in any way deviating from what will offer him the pleasure of arousal or reassurance that he *matters*. Central to Berger's argument is that within our present day societies, being a 'sight' — being available to be seen by others, and specifically to be assessed by the 'male' gaze — becomes an element of women's *own* subjectivity, of her *sense of self*, and one that embodies a fundamental inequality. Her own relative autonomy is *via* his gaze: her power, her agency is to attract and hold this gaze, to make her (male) spectator 'feel good' and so to feel good about her, that she may feel good about herself.

It would be beyond absurd, of course, to suggest that women don't like to look at men, or look at other women in the way they are looked at by men, or men at each other; or that men don't like to be looked at as an object of pleasure for women, for other men, or, or, ... But rather, what's at stake here is that this underlying structure of the gaze places the person looking in an implicitly 'male position', and the body being looked at in an implicitly 'female position' that embodies the reality of our society's unequal gender relationships. As the expression of the fantasy of a separate self that seeks always to *possess*, the male gaze tends towards the possessive appropriation of its object, the pre-eminent example of which is woman's face and body.

## Selling Bodies

Far more than we meet *actual* others — and their actual bodies — we encounter *images* of bodies. Never in the history of the world have there been so many images presented to us for our *pleasure*. Images to explore, scan, and enjoy; images we both *desire in themselves* and for what is *shown to us* in them, modelling for 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 *looking* at women's *bodies*. These are images that always also demand that, in one form or another, we *pay* for our enjoyment of them; the commercial exploitation of women's faces and bodies is now one of the major modes of contemporary consumer capitalism, a culture of the image driven by and developed for profit. It is also — for people of all genders, and as our desire is shaped by and responds to it — a source not only of immense joy and pleasure, but also of anxiety, frustration, fear and despair. Indeed, it is only because it offers us both the (sometimes) reality and (sometimes) false promise of intimate pleasure, that it is able to realise a profit at all.

The central cultural importance of the production and circulation of women's faces and bodies (both of actual faces and bodies, and of their images) is shown not only by the huge scale of the revenue streams they generate, but even more so by the even and ever vaster

quantity of women's individual and collective *time* their creation, curation and appreciation demand. These images come to command how women themselves should *want* to appear, what they should *desire* of their bodies and desire of themselves, and how and what others should or will desire of them. Images of the pop or film star, the 'celebrity' and the influencer, of advertising 'models', those of OnlyFans, PornHub, and the dark web. One of 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. The exponential growth in the number and near infinite availability of sexualised images of women's bodies has had a profound effect on the 'real' world of actual desire and sexuality, and of how women and men act towards each other. So pervasive are these images, both still and moving, that they now form the way adolescents learn about how to do sex, or rather how to do porno-sex, where mere life attempts to imitate on-screen reality — sex as *simulacrum* of pornography. This extends to the actual and represented violence of much (most?) porn, violence overwhelmingly man-on-woman; male strangulation of women 'for pleasure' being virtually unknown until its popularisation by pornography, to the extent that it is now something women are supposed to *want*, or at least to *enjoy*.

More generally in our culture pornography appears to have shifted the parameters of our image of ideal femininity. While the effectively erotic has always relied on the tension between concealing and revealing, the commercialisation/industrialisation of the male gaze tends always to *more* — more exposure, and more explicit sexualisation. Such a body must be smooth and unblemished, skin taut and firmly contoured; no hair may be allowed disrupt the eye's passage over this immaculate surface. Close-fitting or sheer fabrics emphasise a long-limbed *thinness* — close to the anorexic — that even when presented as 'athletic' is certainly still the opposite to the muscled bulk of ideal contemporary masculinity. The face itself likewise smoothed and almost dematerialised to focus the gaze on large, over-emphasised mouth and eyes.

All of these are signs of *youth* — above all this body and this face must be perceived as *young* — and there are innumerable references to 'youthfulness', to 'staying young', and 'reversing the signs of ageing'. So 'youthful' that the lines between childhood and adulthood blur into undifferentiated adolescence, as in the use by fashion houses of 'teen' and even 'tween' models, and the elision of the difference between child and adult women's stylings, for example in the 'babydoll' dress, where the name really says it all — woman *playing* at being an infant playing at being a woman by playing with a doll that is an objectified representation of herself; and so representing herself *as* an *object* to be 'played with'. No better image of the working of the male gaze could be imagined.

Which raises two complementary questions. What when an actual child 'plays' at being a woman, or can simply come to be perceived as a similarly 'available' sexualised body, a receptive object? And what of the unambiguously *adult* woman? Is her value to herself and to the world, her desirability to herself and to the world to be measured by how far she is 'still' able to present an ideal availability to the gaze? So how (for example) to dress as a woman-in-business, or a politician who happens to be female? How to create a coherent and intelligible self-presentation demanding recognition of her authority entirely independent of offering pleasure to the gaze?

Within our culture of the image, a woman's power is imaged fundamentally as sexual power, as the power of her *body* as pleasurably seductive *object*, even though the seduction

remains only virtual. However 'powerful' or 'strong' the image a woman intentionally projects, however rich or influential she might be in reality, insofar as she makes herself *universally available*, both *to* and *through* the male gaze, there is still this basic trade.

It is the totality of gender relations in our patriarchal society that has created this gendering of desire, desire which capitalism has commercialised and exploited through the colonising the male gaze for profit (should we actually call this the *patriarchal* gaze to make the point clear?). Important to understand that such gendered ideas and images embody the paradox inherent in modernity of what it is to *be*, and what it is to *feel* as, to *desire* as, a gendered person.

We can perhaps best understand the rise of the 'manosphere' as a mistaking of effect for cause, and fantasy for reality. In the logic of our still-patriarchal culture, an image of femininity that demands women's *universal availability to the gaze* can be taken to mean that *any* woman should be *actually* available to *any* man who desires her. This is simply part of the logic of the 'service relationship' that patriarchy creates between women and men, the same service relationship that so much of our intentional change in social attitudes, legislation and employment and education actively seeks to dismantle. For any woman who declines the gaze, or fails to 'come through' on its false promise, male desire may flip into *shame*, and so to a chilling resentment or potentially violent rage.

## The Gender of Violence

This Third Zenkai asks us to become aware of the 'power of sexuality and its potential for both love and for harm in myself and in the world'. Given that within our culture the possessive male gaze is one aspect of the wider objectification of women, of male entitlement, and the lessening but still-real service relationship assumed between men and women, we might reasonably expect there to be a high level of gender-based violence, and that this would be carried out by men of all ages, predominantly on younger women and older female children. This is exactly what social research shows: more than ninety percent of sexual violence is committed by men, overwhelmingly on women (including trans women) and on older children. A recent World Health Organisation report suggests that globally, of women and girls aged 15-49 almost one third have experienced physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner. *Partner*, not 'stranger'. In the UK, around *one in six* pre-teen and teenage girls have been victims of sexual abuse involving actual physical contact, almost all of which is abuse by parents, siblings and extended family. Again, *not* at the hands of a 'stranger'.

It's always tempting (and this is one key way in which we practice *ignore-ance*) to see such violence as *exceptional*, the action of 'troubled', 'perverted' or 'mentally ill' individuals quite different from *us*, the 'normal' members of society. Yet it is inescapable that that it is 'us' who are both the perpetrators and the victims here, but that we collectively turn away from this reality. We offer a blind eye, minimising both the extent of abuse and its effects, we blame the victims and either demonise perpetrators or offer them 'himpathy' (to use Kate Manne's term), all of which leads to chronic under-reporting, miserable rates of conviction, and lack of meaningful support for victims, families and perpetrators alike (where any individual may in fact be all three at once). That sex is supposed to be about *love* complicates matters further. As, a century and a half ago, John Stuart Mill wrote of marriage in a still overtly patriarchal world: 'Men do not want solely

the obedience of women, they want their sentiments. All men...desire to have, in the woman most nearly connected with them, not a forced slave but a willing one, not a slave merely, but a favourite.' (*The Subjection of Women*, 1869, 1.11). Those who carry out sexual violence do not usually 'hate' their victims in any simple way, but often see their actions as resulting from love; there may well be complex emotions on both sides.

Our shared delusion that 'we' are all always fully 'rational', and so always make conscious and considered 'choices' about each of our actions gives rise to the further collective delusion that simply by passing (highly necessary!) legislation, and perhaps modestly increasing (hugely important!) 'relationship education' our society can 'deal with' this vast and complex problem. When these solutions very obviously *don't* work, we fall back on demanding that the police and justice system 'get tough!'. Yet the reality remains that sexual violence emerges from the structuring of our society itself and the contradictions it generates.

### **Real Selves, Real Bodies, Real Sex**

'Real life' desire, the desire of actually existing humans of all genders and all sexualities, both is and isn't like this patriarchal structure I've outlined. While our gendering does structure desire for all of us, this structuring is *ongoing*, shifting as our experience of a changing world and our changing relationships to others in turn changes *us*, not so much necessarily in our 'views' or what we 'believe', but in our *feelings* themselves. Whether we grew up as 'girl' or 'boy', and regardless of how well... or not... our assigned gender fits, this structuring both embodies and reproduces our culture's 'heteronormative assumptions', but the complex relationship of these assumptions to our lived experience of desire and pleasure plays out differently in *each* lived relationship — woman and woman, man and man, nonbinary, gender fluid and gender queer included.

Through the habits we form, and the approval, judgements and shamings we experience along the way, our desiring becomes organised in relation to our own and other bodies and *identifies* us both for ourself and for others as a 'straight man', as a 'lesbian', as a 'trans woman'. If I'm a gay man or woman I'm already placed in a different, questioning relationship to the sexual 'subject positions' of cisgender heterosexuality: do *we* embrace, or attempt to ironise, subvert or reject them? Do we perform 'butch' and 'femme' to each other as 'different', or seek to emphasise how we are 'the same'? How far do we conform to any of an emergent gay culture's own templates for what it is to be 'people like us'? How far does our difference from majority sexual orientation affect our wider sense of self, of 'who I am'? And how does this relate to the aspects of our relationship that are *not* explicitly sexual, and to our race, class, education, occupation and the rest? Do we abhor what we see as the patriarchal dogma of stable family life and pursue 'sexual freedom', or do we actually want to *be* that 'normal' couple, who just happen to be 'two guys' or 'two gals'? Does our sexuality embody a rigidity similar to that of the patriarchal schema, but simply with a different *object*, or does it overflow the bounds of identity towards a more open and fluid experience?

If I'm trans, how does my sense of self, both as a sexual being and more widely, relate to these two gendered positions, given that I've grown up within one and found 'myself' in the other? How comfortable, how consistent do I experience all this in, and as, myself? And if *gender* just doesn't seem to 'fit' me at all, if I really don't feel 'male' or 'female' in a

way that makes emotional sense to me, what freedoms of desire does this open to me, and in what ways does my desiring still find itself routed along conventional paths? And what if, regardless of my experience of gender, 'sex' just *isn't* something I feel drawn to, whether that's about the 'act' itself, or that I simply feel no desire to connect erotically with another body? By what routes does my desire for connection then travel?

It's still really the *same* set of questions for those of us who, whatever the more or less complex shaping of our experiencing of gender and sexual orientation, are comfortable to a greater or lesser degree in our assigned-at-birth gender and socially expected sexual orientation. How do we play out, play with, and navigate these 'subject positions' that have shaped our desiring? The male gaze is a general social condition, rather than something practiced independently by particular individuals, and we have all, men and women and others, learnt to desire, and to desire to be desired within its frame. Given this, how do we best come to feel our joy? Do we feel obliged or shamed into attempting to perform the complexities and contradictions inherent in what we see as our allotted roles?

Or conversely, what if we desire *not* to conform but to live differently, though still happily heterosexually, beyond and against patriarchal social structures we know to be harmful to *all* genders? How deeply and rigidly do we identify as 'woman' or 'man'? In terms both of the desire we experience, and the qualities that we desire of ourselves and each other? How do we then place ourselves relative to the male gaze, in our looking and being looked at? Or does our sexuality become more ambiguous and fluid, as not simply woman and man, but as woman and woman, man and man? These too, are questions for *all* of us, however we choose to define our gender, orientation, or sexuality.

We will explore *identity* more deeply as we work through the Zenkai. Here I'll just point to 'identity' as another aspect of how we practice as a 'self' — how far do we try to maintain the fantasy of ourselves as a fixed and separate 'thing', and how far do we come to experience ourselves as an always-open process of becoming? A 'becoming' that is always in relationship both to other people, and to 'other' aspects of ourselves. This is the very heart of our Zen practice.

## Sex In A Time Of Patriarchy

We all like to *look*, we all like to be *looked at*, to be desired. When does this pleasure in looking, pleasure in being looked at become *harmful* in any sense? Self-honesty demands that we bear witness to our inability ever entirely to control what we do and do not desire: when we talk about our desire as passion, we mean that in its true and original sense: desire *finds* us, *draws us along* in its wake, we don't get to *choose* where we 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 we are going to feel and then acting accordingly.

If patriarchy makes us all *complicit* here, we have to recognise this as a vital part of the wider teaching of the Zenkai, that there is *no escape*, no virtuous moral higher ground on which we can stand, and from which we can survey the lesser beings below us. This is both the good news and the bad news — no escape, but also no evasion from engagement with the world of which we are a part. 'Sex' is obviously not only a loving couple in their bedroom, but the entirety of our image-driven culture — the Incel in his bedroom, the teenage boy watching Andrew Tate videos, the teenage girl worrying about her thigh gap, the 'mature' woman contemplating her loss of 'youthfulness' and how to 'regain' it...

Including, of course, you and me. I grew up during the ‘sexual revolution’ of the 1960s, a time of the legalising of abortion and the advent of the contraceptive pill developed to offer women ‘choice’, which men read as ‘now you have no excuse not to have sex with me’. Likewise ‘sex positivity’, the idea that leading fulfilled lives requires us to have as much sex as possible, and in as varied ways as possible; hence, for instance, endorsement of female strangulation as a ‘healthy’ part of sexual ‘exploration’, rather than as an embodiment of the violence of possessive objectification. Ideas of ‘sexual liberation’ have tended to take the form of *transgressing* what is imagined as *repression*: the ‘good girl’ doesn’t ‘put out’, and we need to make it ok for her to feel ok about sex... Which is fine as far as it goes, but Victorian society was in practice as interested in the sexually active ‘Whore’ as the domestic ideal of the middle class wife as ‘Virgin’. As long ago as the 1970’s Michel Foucault challenged what he called the ‘repressive hypothesis’ about Victorian sexuality, and with it the idea that ‘subverting patriarchy’ simply meant more women having more sex more visibly. Whether with a partner or solo, sex always connects us to the not-separate whole, and this is so even in our fantasies and in our self-relationship, but also always in ways in which ‘my’ and ‘our’ experiencing of pleasure depends on the real lives and experience of those known and myriad unknown others who form part of the now-global sexual economy of bodies and images of bodies.

I argued in the two previous commentaries that violence and inequality both *require* and *bring about* a failure of *mutual recognition*, and this is no less true for our sexual expression and relationships. Recognition not as being a simple *identification* of another person and the assumptions and expectations that flow from this, but as a genuine *meeting*, the meeting of one’s own and each other’s otherness. Central to this is our shared acknowledgement of our vulnerability — our ability to mutually affect each other, and to be affected ourselves by the affect we have. Our joy is shared joy, our pain shared pain (and both may co-exist). Clearly, in the intimacy of sex, this recognition of each other — or its failure — is paramount.

Sex is never separate from the inevitable inequalities that shape the rest of our lives: *recognition* in our relationship is never simply ‘equality’, but a managing of difference that keeps in check tendencies towards domination and exploitation that arise out of existing inequalities (for example that of our gendering).

Relationships stutter and stumble, that is the nature of what it is to be different people. Repair involves acknowledgement of harm, of both sides feeling genuinely recognised by each other. We are all victims of sexual hurt, and have all hurt others. Bearing witness to, recognising this in ourselves is an important part of our practice.

Just as sexual violence does not require hatred, so it is that hurt, sexual or otherwise, does not necessarily involve an *intention* to hurt. Both the urgency of desire, and even more so the emotional ambience of ‘love’ can blind us to the hurt we may cause, or dismiss or repress the hurt we suffer. Remember John Stuart Mill’s description of nineteenth century marriage as ‘willing slavery’ — slavery is still slavery, willing or not. The harm caused may be an aspect of existing inequalities, more personal, or absolutely specific to this moment. But for all of these, our practice asks us to become better aware of, and to bear witness to, the particular and more general forms of our *ignore-ance* as they show up *here*, and *now*. Deep *listening*, whether to the other person’s *words*, or to our wider empathic communication, and listening too to our *own* feelings, as always *holding* them

rather than *acting* on them, or our simply *acting out*. Meeting the other, and in doing so meeting the otherness in ourself.

Whether for an hour or over a lifetime, in our exploration of our sameness and our difference both within and between ourselves, what may we together become?