

OMUK Precepts Group:

Prison Face: Working with the Zen Precepts

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Desire:

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. But desire for what? ‘Sex’ covers so wide a field! Although at one level our sexual response is ‘biological’ — an urging experienced as my body — there’s no question that my mind is equally involved. My wildest pleasure, my darkest despair, my most eager anticipation, my deepest sense of self, and perhaps too my *loss* of self entirely in the moment... In fact our sexuality is perhaps the area we experience most clearly the inseparability of mind and body in the full complexity of the interplay of our senses, an interplay not only with memory and fantasy, but as also and equally with all our thoughts, values and self-identities. 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?

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 actually 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 onto new openings. She emphasises too the complexity of emotions that may come up, that may equally feel distressing as they do pleasurable: there may well be anger, fear, or shame. We need to be aware of our 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 this practice! Being honest with ourselves and trusting ourselves to feel what we feel without judgement are both important parts of the process. It means *resisting* telling ourselves the *stories* we might well rush towards: does experiencing this feeling/image/thought mean I am secretly, *really* gay/straight, wishing to inflict/suffer violence, wanting sex with my co-worker/boss/secretary? ...Resisting while in turn noticing, and becoming aware of these stories *as stories*. Hard to remain grounded in the physicality of this actual body, in the subtle and not-so-subtle feelings of arousal and pleasure alongside whatever emotions arise... This whole area may be difficult because of the strong sense that our sexuality in the widest sense is a very important part of our core self, of ‘who I really am’. In fact the development from infancy onwards of our growing to become the being we now are involves unconsciously channeling and placing limits on what I experience as ‘desirable’: both what I think I am ‘supposed’ to desire and what figures as ‘forbidden’. As a consequence of this the *fear* of relaxing my guard and being led to some strange dark place of dangerous desire lurks always on the edges of our consciousness... Acknowledging these feelings, bringing them to non-judgemental awareness while staying grounded in the reality of the experience of my physical sensations open a path of understanding what it is to be ‘*just this*’: me myself as an *embodied* being 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.

As our first step in exploring further these questions, 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 implicit or explicit judgements we pass that are directly related not only to our *own* desiring and the desirability of others *for us*, but also those judgements that we make about *their* own desiring and *their* sense of desirability. These judgements are not disinterested or abstract: we make them from 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. Because of the way gendering works in our society, women are particularly subject to both perpetually being judged and self-judging, whether they intentionally try to follow or reject the range of 'normally' desirable self-presentation. No need to recapitulate the full range of slurs that condemn a woman's desiring outside the narrow limits of (patriarchally?) approved sexuality, or assume a mismatch between her *own* image of her desirability and the spectator's *judgement* of that desirability. These judgements, approving or damning, form part of the tissue of unconscious assumption 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?

Do we think that our desiring and desirability are simply natural inclinations and qualities that we and others may or may not possess? Where do our fantasies, both realistic (what I might actually want) and unrealistic (what it might be arousing to imagine) come from? Deep 'within' me? Or as individual expressions of the complex web of stories and images, that traverse both social and physical space? A web within which our sexuality is constructed, and increasingly marketed to us at multiple levels. A web that is the embodiment of our collective ideas and values, and of our economic and other political inequalities, in the broadest sense. And of the inconsistencies, the self contradictions within those values and realities. Hip-hop artist Speech writes, as a father in his early fifties, about the trust he places in his twenty-something daughter 'I'll let her do her...' in the face of the personal and political complexity of the sexual stereotypes she faces:

“...I tell her:

You're a black queen and you're not a bitch and (nah nah!)

You are not a vixen (nah nah!)

You are not a trick bitch (nah nah!)

You're nobody's quick fix (nah nah!)

America's never had your back, no no no

You're not a trap queen (nah nah!)

A stripper lap dance queen (nah nah!)

White boy fetish dream (nah nah!)

Melanated Black Queen, high esteem (yeah yeah!)...”

Sexual desire is one of the strongest emotions we ever feel. But there are many reasons why for most of us it is not so much a problem talking about our desires as to actually being fully aware of them to begin with. Our society's 'background' Christian morality is often felt as simply labelling sexual desire as, like greed, *bad* if not *evil*. (Worth noting in passing that monastic Buddhism absolutely reinforces this attitude, as our desires in general are labelled as one of the 'three poisons', or as being in themselves the root cause of all our suffering.) In fact our society is conflicted around sexuality in a similar way to its ambivalence to greed. It could be argued that this ambivalence is itself a major source of attraction, as the forbidden (or dangerous) acquires an allure in and of itself. The novelist Salman Rushdie worked in advertising in the 1980's, and perhaps his best-remembered slogan is one for the marketing of cream cakes: 'naughty but nice'. The slogan is a masterpiece: the somewhat dull and unhealthy cream cake is recast as the object of our forbidden and indulgent gratification... Which I suppose does take us back to one of the master-myths of our culture, and one not unassociated with sex: Adam and Eve tasting the forbidden apple in the Garden of Eden. Censorship and morality on the one hand, and all-pervasive sexualised marketing on the other (sex sells!). In some ways we are well beyond the naivety of the 1960's and 70's when as the very embodiment of what 'success' and the good life comprised, semi-naked (female) models were paid to drape themselves over the latest sports cars at leading motor shows. However, sex, or rather the implication of sexual availability, has come to play an ever-increasing role in marketing. And sex itself has been made the great object of commercialism, from perfumes to fashion and accessories. Even within third wave feminism itself there has arisen a movement towards *compulsory sexuality*: that it is only through a completely free and individualised sexual expression and gratification that liberation is to be found. Within this way of thinking both pornography and 'sex work' can be seen as liberatory, working against the repression and control of female sexuality so characteristic of patriarchy. Two obvious caveats: both porn and prostitution tend in practice strongly to embody those very patriarchal power structures — from the 'male gaze' to the economics of exploitation — and that this feminism is only too compatible with the commercialisation of sex is perhaps one major reason for its success. So it is through the interaction, the push-pull of morality and censorship on the one hand and commercialisation on the other, we experience our sexuality within the same tension that marks our being our 'selves': my sexuality is my most intimate self, containing who knows what desires and fantasies... all the darkness of 'my' 'unconscious'... Is *this* particular desire forbidden/permissible/compulsory, and to be repressed/allowed/sought out? Our ambivalent reaction towards these attitudes and the resulting attempt to repress the experience of desire make us believe that our sexuality is really a core part of ourselves and our identity. Any gap between the desire I actually experience and that which I rationally think I 'should' or would like to feel, hence seems to point to something felt as my darkest, innermost self, and the mark of either an inner badness I have to cover up, or a true self that requires liberating. (Point of fact: neither of these is true.) So our sexuality is one of the most obvious areas where we don't always experience ourselves as whole, as simple and uncomplicated, and where we become most aware of how we do, or don't, exercise *control*. If we are simply ourselves and undivided, there's no need to control anything. But if we feel we never experience any tension around

our sexuality, then, honestly, we're probably lying to ourselves. Do I feel there are desires I can't or must not act out? Do I feel I *have* to give my desires sexual expression? 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*. 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 what we want, or want what we want to want. Nor do we always want what we think we should want, or are told we should want. So what would it be, to become, and stay, self-responsible? Is it perhaps better to have nothing at all to do with sex? This is the line taken in the monastery. For many people there may well be points in our lives where celibacy feels the most appropriate path. But celibacy too has to be a way of working with our sexuality, not simply trying to ignore it. What is denied, repressed or ignored will always find expression somewhere, and often in damaging and harmful ways. And if we aim to be entirely without desires, then we are also without pleasure, without joy, without relationship, without life itself.

We normally feel our sexuality is deeply personal and unique, really *mine*, really a part of *me*. But of course Buddhism asks us to pause every time we use those words, and ask, what do I mean by *me* and *mine*? Whatever we think about the contribution made by our genes, our sexual experience is shaped from birth by our environment: how our parents behaved, by our school friends and the adults in our world, by film, television and now the internet and social media. We could as well think of our collective sexual fantasies, images, and phobias as independent powers coming to find their temporary home in us, as think of them being our *own* individual property or elements of my very *self*. How can we come to recognise *this* aspect of our desire without allowing it in turn to be experienced as a split within ourselves? Another way of disavowing my wholeness, my complexity, my inconsistency, my multiplicity? Do I embrace or reject my complexity? Do I cleave to my sexuality as my innermost self, or say of part or all of it 'that is not who I am?'

Practice question: *What formed your own attitudes to your sexuality?*

How was it, and how was it not, to be expressed?

What influences have challenged or changed those thoughts or feelings over the course of your life?

*What are your feelings about how **other** people should or should not express their sexuality?*

Love is the Drug

The feelings aroused by sex are perhaps the area where self-honesty is most difficult of all. It doesn't help that desire can completely blind us. 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 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 drugs or alcohol, and of course, it's not unknown for people to combine them... If desire itself can blind us, so too can hidden fears, feelings of shame, past trauma. As always, self-honesty involves owning and acknowledging the *whole* of our experience, including the parts we deny, try to ignore or repress. Can I own my own misogyny, aggression, neediness? And what do I

do with those feelings? What actually *are* the drivers for our desire for sexual expression? Am I looking for shared intimacy, or the thrill of an anonymous encounter? For comfort, for danger? The extremes of physical sensation, emotional fulfilment? The validation of self through conquest, or its surrender in the surrender of my body to another? Love? Distraction? The thrill of transgression? Scratching an itch?

Clearly, the psychological forces acting on us are complex and usually inconsistent. A physiological/hormonal/emotional component that may combine elements of release, joy and surrender, or conversely be in the service of a sense of one's own power and control. In fact these are not necessarily mutually exclusive: one may 'surrender' to what one feels as another part of one's self, or to one's partner, or to the act itself... (NB 'Surrender' is a complex subject that tips over all too easily into 'submission'...we shall return to this.) Perhaps to experience one's own desirability through though the eyes and body of another? Within these frames to experience intense physical sensation as pleasurable, profound, physically and emotionally 'moving'... If any or all of this were the whole story, that would be more than complex enough, but as we discussed with 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, our insecurities and the perpetual need to attempt to prove ourselves. None of these aspects are ever purely psychological, but always psycho-social: does part of 'proving myself' require a particular kind of sexual relationship with a particular kind of partner? What about the gendered nature of care and dependency: am I (for example) 'naturally' looking to/for a woman (and perhaps a young and sexually attractive one) to meet my need for soothing, care, safety, even if for me this manifests as sexual desire?

Feeling My Own Hurt

Usually when we discuss the Precepts, we speak about the harm we have done to others, or may do to others. But I have tried with these commentaries to point to the importance of the other side to this, and to ask us to bear witness to our *own* vulnerability and ask about our own experience of *suffering* harm. Because we are so invested in our sexuality — not just in the sights and sounds, the smells, tastes and touch — but in our actual interactions as human (whether with a true *other*, or society in general, or even with those 'other' aspects of *myself*), our misunderstandings, our own missteps and those of others can only too easily lead to momentary or longer lasting hurt. Some of this can be easily repaired, some not. Our relationship to this hurt we may feel around sexuality is always complex, and the range is vast. The end of a long-term relationship might well turn us towards depression, and even lead towards addiction. Owning a 'non-standard' sexual or gender identity to ourselves or others may bring complex issues, while their denial may only bring different ones. Those of us who are women might point to the horrifying statistics on sexual harassment and assault: *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. The consequences of this may be catastrophic.

Whether it is actual and long lasting trauma, depression, loss of self worth or sense of agency, or even much more 'minor' losses, all these hurts are real and need to be recognised. We need once more to bear witness to the reality of the experience of our *own* hurt, and reality of the hurt of *all* others. Peter's story (below) is one example of how unrecognised hurt can perpetuate a cycle, and it is estimated that perhaps a third, possibly many more, of those later convicted of sexual abuse have themselves been abused. But *all* of our individual and collective hurt needs recognition and compassionate care. It can be healing to share this with another, but this caring is no less important and vital when it comes simply from ourselves. 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?

Practice Question: ONLY IF safe to do so, bring to mind a sexual relationship or encounter about which you still feel a sense of hurt.

What are the bodily feelings that you notice?

What is the key story about it?

What role did the assumptions of myself or the other play?

Use and Misuse

We all have a responsibility to recognise and to accept the harm we do to others and to ourselves. So the crucial practical question for Buddhism remains around what I *do*: what are the consequences of my actions? When I act, can I face up to the real effects on others and on myself of what I do? The problem is that in practice this may not always be clear to us. I've already mentioned the literal intoxication we often feel in relation to sexual desire. Our own previous experiences of what is 'normal' within our group or society may not be a reliable guide either. We talk of 'drug misuse' and perhaps it might be useful to think of 'sex misuse' too, without any idea of *moral judgement*, but simply looking at harm done. *Misusing involves harming*: anything that is likely to harm another person or oneself, now or in the future. So, if I'm chasing that hit of pleasure in this moment, (or even a momentary release from some inner pain) but someone's going to suffer for it, that's misuse. Addictions, major or minor, legal or illegal, are one kind of misuse. I want pleasure now, and don't care about the damage I'm doing to get it. Sex can obviously get to be an addiction in this sense, overriding our ability to think clearly, and making us blind to consequences. And with any addictive pattern, satisfaction is always short lived, and so there is the need to repeat it again and again and again... Hoping for permanent satisfaction from some pleasure which is always going to be temporary is most definitely a form of delusion, if an almost universal one...

It's perhaps in this context that pornography is best considered from the perspective of the Precepts. We don't need to oversimplify or elide the vast differences across the spectrum of what gets defined as 'porn', or imagine it is always and only liberatory, *or* is in and of itself a form of depravity. In Thich Nhat Hanh's formulation of the precepts (as the Fourteen

Mindfulness Trainings), pornography is effectively counted as an intoxicant that clouds the mind, and one that can easily become addictive. If we have been at pains to stress the *intersubjectivity* of even the most trivial of relationships, pornography inevitably reduces this to a subject/object relationship: I see, I look and am aroused by what I know to be a person, but whose actual subjectivity I discount (even though I may fantasise around it, but there again, the lack of autonomous subjectivity may be part of the attraction itself.) Beyond the lack of a play of mutual subjectivity, there is another sense in which I become *flattened*: confined to an image, a text, or a voice on the phone, the richness of my bodily experience and sensorium is reduced to a few core stimuli. Buddhism has always pointed to the impermanent nature of pleasure, and the pleasures of such flattened experience are more passing than most. Because my responses quickly habituate to any 'new' stimulus, what was once an overwhelming stimulus becomes rapidly tame, I may well find I need constantly to seek to more (fresh, new), more (quantity), and more ('extreme'). All the key features of addictive behaviour are here, with the addition of an active hormonal override over our mindful awareness. Further, because pornography is purely economically driven, any and all inclinations must and will be catered for, participants found, money taken. The resulting industrial product resembles, I suppose, both the omnipresent ubiquity of alcohol, and the free availability, for those who wish (or feel driven), of the hardest and most dangerous of illegal drugs. Further, and very importantly, because of the way that our desires are socially formed at a level below that of conscious thought, the forms pornography takes will always tend to embody and reproduce the major inequalities and their formative attitudes and predispositions, from the basic *form* of the male gaze (an active subject looking at a passive objectified body) to the *specifics* of how particular actions are acted out. Of course this does allow potential opportunities for subversion, but these will always be possible only in a very small minority of contexts. As mentioned earlier, transgression itself is an important stimulation, but one firmly integrated into the mainstream...the opportunities for elaboration on the basic form are endless.

Does use — even excessive use — of pornography necessarily lead to acting out in the 'real' world? Probably not, but it maintains and reinforces a sexual culture that is anything but meaningfully intersubjective and 'not-separate', and certainly not one that conduces to mutual pleasure, joy and meaningful connection. We are still in the relatively early days of internet and social media use, and longer term effects may not become apparent for years or decades. We mentioned in the previous section on gender the reach of such hyper-male figures as Andrew Tate, promoting a very conservative and exploitative version of male/female relationships. The consequences of the ability of such material to rack up literally billions of views should not be underestimated. It's evident that such material is a pose, an act that is artificial in its complicity from women subject to forced prostitution and trafficking unconnected to genuine relationship. But even this is still minor compared to the tendency becoming apparent for boys/young men routinely watching pornography that would have been unimaginable twenty years ago, and so coming to treat pornography as the 'real thing' to which any actual physical sexual encounter should attempt to conform. To borrow a term from the cultural theory of the 1970's, sex has become its own *simulacrum*: pornography's acted out and highly contrived display of bodies, specific acts, gestures, vocalisations, has now become aspirational: real sex is

successful and fulfilling only to the degree it can imitate the artificial world of pornography. Partners are expected to agree to whatever has been represented and express their 'enjoyment' in the appropriate manner. All generations have come to the experience of sex with a largely unhelpful ragbag of myths and assumptions, but no previous generation has been subject to anything like such explicit mis-instruction, mis-instruction created for profit and as digital theatre. Beyond this again is the complex and highly questionable nature of the economics involved: pornography has grown to become a vast and hugely profitable industry with infinitely ramified forms of involvement, some very obviously coercive and exploitative (and in some/many cases illegal), others apparently less so, although still situated firmly within the reproduction of a flattened and objectified version of sexuality. Pornography also has a complex relationship with prostitution, where many of the same issues are raised. And yet the very ubiquity of pornography, its new instant and near universal availability, the number of websites devoted to it, the sheer number of images, videos...and viewings...point to the *pleasure* it must be bringing. That this pleasure is problematic is undeniable, for all the reasons outlined above. How are we to understand this, how best navigate it as a society, and as families, friends, lovers?

What counts as use and misuse? We could say that anything which causes a narrowing of our vision, and hence a blindness to where things may lead, is likely to cause me harm, and so qualifies as misuse. And that this blindness will make me less aware of the needs of other people, and so much more likely to cause harm to them. This can be especially true when we use sex or other sense pleasure to hide from our real problems, to mask the pain of the true causes of our dissatisfaction or unhappiness. At best this gives us a momentary release, but it also diverts us from dealing with our real lives. This is exactly the kind of situation where we can act out of our own pain in a way that causes real damage.

Practice Question: Without judging yourself, think of a time you acted unwisely sexually.

What do you understand about how you came to act in that way?

*What do you think you **really** wanted — what was **lacking** in your life?*

Peter

Peter grew up in Manchester in the 'seventies he says he was always aware of being poor and 'different'. His family dynamic was complicated, his mother probably having been bipolar, and the children were often left to look out for themselves. He was cared for by his older sisters, part of which care involved, from an early age, their routinely sexually abusing him. This was 'simply normal, how you showed love and affection. Something in me just got wired wrong...' He doesn't connect this to the suicidal thoughts he has had constantly since around the time of puberty. And he clearly was, and perhaps remains, ambivalent around this early sexual abuse. On the one hand it was a genuinely traumatic source of alienation from himself, and on the other a source of comfort and connection to his immediate family. Both 'wrong' and 'taboo', but also in one sense at least, also a way of getting attention, and the source of pleasure.

As an adult he worked successfully for many years as a car mechanic, combining this with extensive recreational drug use, mainly marijuana and MDMA. Things went well, in a

freewheeling way, and he began a settled relationship to which his new partner brought a pre-teen stepdaughter. But when after some years that relationship began to fail, his need for affection turned to the now fourteen year old, and he began act towards her in a way that was inappropriately intimate and finally overtly sexual ('we never had intercourse though!'). He's clear that in his own mind and at the time he *felt* this was consensual. 'It just seemed natural...'. He now recognises that this was completely wrong, and so I'm surprised, given the general level of his empathy for others, to find how he was still shocked by the degree of her hostility towards him, when she recently asked to meet him in prison as part of a restorative justice programme. She clearly still feels very unsafe in his presence, and alarmed at the idea of his eventual release. Perhaps truly opening emotionally to the extent of the damage he's done would be too painful in relation to his own abuse at the hands of his sisters.

Nobody in the prison system really seems to know what to do with Peter. He's been sent on psychology courses, as well as doing training and education. He's friendly and likeable, but has had a hard time with forensic psychology and the probation service, who, contrary to everyone else, find him difficult and uncooperative... 'it's because I just speaks my mind, man, I won't tell 'em what they all want to hear me say, won't blow smoke up their arses!' This attitude hasn't helped his release.

And there *is* a resistance there, even in Sangha: Peter will have to do things his own way, rearrange things, arrive and leave when he likes. His positive contributions outweigh this irritation: he's always the first to join discussion, but will carefully listen to the views of others as well, and is always ready to offer practical help to anyone (and of course a little grit in the smooth running of Sangha can be no bad thing...). But there's also the sense that he'll only join on his own terms, and only if he can feel in control. Perhaps there are echoes of a childhood spent under the watchful eye of his pastor in Church, and the desire to break away from that fervent certitude and discipline. Perhaps also to manage the memories of his sisters' abuse, where he was in no sense in control.

At the deepest level he's emotionally shut down, can't dare to feel beyond the day to day, even though at that day to day level there's a genuine warmth to him. Would he have committed his offence without the habitual depression of inhibitions (particularly around emotional expression and physical contact) characteristic of ecstasy and cannabis? And now, after ten years without any drug use, and without any sexual contact with another human being, how is he? With me, he's pretty open about his current emotional inhibition, his sense of physical and mental constriction and the pointlessness of his life. Prison life has made him feel he can't trust himself, cannot be himself even with himself. Or, perhaps, prison has just confirmed what his childhood experience taught him, that his life is impossible. Perhaps his determination to do everything on his own terms is a demonstration/acting out of this impossibility? He will be released eventually, but feels he has little or nothing to look forward to, other than being able to offer his mother some company and practical support, due to the extremely restrictive conditions that will be imposed, specifically around forming even the most superficial of relationships. 'I just can't afford to risk it — any kind of getting remotely close to anyone'. How will he fare?

*Practice Question: Our society generally considers those who commit child sexual abuse to be the 'lowest of the low'. How do you **actually** feel about Peter having heard something of his story? Do you have any bodily response or reaction? What thoughts or feelings come up?*

Inside Sex

Sex of any kind is categorically forbidden in UK prisons, and even masturbation, assuming you can find a moment's privacy, may be punished or lead to an adverse report affecting your privileges or release date. Of course in reality sex of all kinds does take place, and if the situation in the UK is not quite as James Gilligan describes the United States, I do personally know of several cases of young men — teenagers — having been violently raped, or raped with the threat of violence. In one case the victim tried to report this to prison staff only to be told to 'grow a pair of balls' by the prison officer. There is also the not uncommon phenomenon of men who don't consider themselves gay, and are exclusively straight when outside, but have consensual sex and even long-term relationships with other inmates while in prison. Then there are the highest-stakes relationships of all: those between (usually female) staff and male prisoners. What are the specific factors at work here? I'm sure they are complex, and inevitably involve the playing out of gender roles conventionally or unconventionally. Does the staff member see themselves as more powerful, experience the fact that they have now become universally attractive within the confined world of prison, or feel the attraction of a transgressive relationship, or the (fabled? ...mythical?...) lure of the 'bad boy', or simply as a response to the super-charged hormonal tension that is the norm of prison life? Perhaps they are manipulated or coerced, perhaps several of these issues are in play. And these *are* high stakes relationships: they will inevitably result in dismissal if discovered. Shame, secrecy, transgression. These are the hallmarks of sexual activity in prison, as they are of the sexual activity that brought these men to be imprisoned. But as usual, prison only mirrors and magnifies the world we experience on the out'. The question is, is this in any way a healthy environment to place the vulnerable (which many are), those who find themselves having been caught out by their own desire, or, even, those we might want to characterise as serial sexual predators? An ever larger number of prisoners are in prison for a 'sexual offence', itself something of a catch-all term. 'The public' may well need protection from specific individual men, but it is highly questionable whether we as a society are in any way safer in the long term under the current system. Placing men in confinement for several or many years where they are specifically denied any legitimate sexual expression will at best leave issues and problems unresolved, and quite probably actually reinforce dangerous sexual inclinations and predispositions. But — surely — the treatment offered in prison must address this? Beyond the highly erratic availability of psychotherapy, (in contrast to the omnipresence of a forensic psychology that takes the assumption and management of 'risk' as its starting point and *raison d'être*) those courses specifically designed to address sexual behaviour have been shown actually to *increase* reoffending, if only marginally. Why? Allegedly voluntary, they are in reality imposed on often unwilling prisoners. Based on 'bad psychology' (see Robert A. Forde's exposé of the limitations of prison psychology in general in his book 'Bad Psychology') they use techniques that in any other but the prison context would themselves constitute a serious

sexual assault, highly likely to re-traumatise those many whose offending behaviour is as a result of their own experience of sexual trauma. They constitute one of the more overt faces of the psychological 'rape' that is characteristic of the prison system as a whole, from initial strip and cavity searches onwards. Degradation is rarely conducive to healthy behaviour of any kind, sexual degradation and control is highly unlikely to lead to a healthier expression of sexuality, or a healthier relationship to self.

The prohibition on sex is one of the more overt aspects of punishment, and returns us once more to the very specific understanding of 'self' which the criminal justice system shares with contemporary politics and economics. Those who commit offences of any kind have 'freely' chosen to do so, independently of the causes and conditions which frame their lives. As such they bear a unique and sole responsibility for their actions, actions which now require them to be *punished*. Why this punishment would be thought to bring about significant or lasting behavioural change remains unclear: under this imaginary version of the self I remain absolutely 'free' to reoffend, which many repeatedly do. Is the threat of coercive violence truly the best my society has to offer to protect us? If we begin to understand the complexity of our sexual desire, of our feelings and responses, of what arouses or repels us, the often contradictory nature of the sexual messaging we experience, and the scale and nature of the commercialisation of sex, then we see too the strictly relative nature of what we think of as our 'freedom' as embodied and social beings. Our sexuality brings into sharp focus the limits of our collective self-view as 'rational' and free beings, and the blindness, and, yes, damage and harming that results from it.

Universal?

Traditionally, this Third Precept was seen simply as...'follow the rules of the society in which you live, both laws and customs'. Today we live in changing times. *Child* marriage, *rape* as a means of forcing marriage on a woman, as well as what we would now clearly see as rape *within* marriage have been legal in very many cultures at one time or another, and are all still legal in some countries today (significantly, and perhaps shockingly, child marriage in the United States). When I was born, homosexuality, child sexual abuse and rape were all equally illegal, but a blind eye was often turned to these acts depending on who was involved. Today, being gay, bi, queer or straight are simply seen as alternative sexual expressions, while the huge scale of unrecognised sexual violence and abuse in the recent past are at last being discussed, even if our society still seems incapable of devising measures significantly to reduce it in the present day. In recent decades there has been little stable consensus on any major issue, as, for example, recent US Supreme Court rulings and their political fallout have shown only too clearly. We live in changing times, and are hence obliged to choose (where choosing *not* to choose is itself a political choice) in situations where our grandparents' generation would not even have been aware of a potential question. What for us is legitimate sexual expression, and what is a *misuse* of sexuality? We tend to argue by extension and by analogy, and by historical example. *Or* we attempt to establish *universal* rules based on first principles. Because our sexuality is always partly about the pleasure of *this* body in *this* moment, but *also* extends to the most fundamental levels of our social and psychological organisation and behaviour, it is in their area that we can experience very clearly the high emotions and high stakes involved

when our views and desires differ dramatically from those of others in our society. What limits to *my* behaviour — being the desiring, embodied, social creature that I am — should I accept in the judgement of others (of whom?). What limits do I feel should be placed on the behaviour of *other* desiring, embodied, social creatures? Non-harming seems like a good point to begin, but what forms of harming do or don't we recognise? Do we always take the individual as our starting point? The 'family'? 'Society'? When is what I do or don't do with *my* body somebody else's business? When and what kind of control do I feel entitled to exercise over what *other* people do with their bodies?

Consent and Power

There's no possibility in Peter's case that legal consent *could* have been given by his under-age victim. But equally, it's not at all uncommon in similar cases for those convicted to say they *felt* consent had been given. I think it's clear with Peter that as a result of his own experience a large part of him believed this, though I'm equally sure another part would even then have acknowledged his actions as straightforwardly *wrong, harmful*, and not just illegal. This is a perfect example of the kind of complex dissociation we practice, simultaneously 'knowing' and 'not knowing', empathising and not empathising from one or another of our different self-states. The greater the trauma we've experienced, the more easily and completely this seems to happen, and the more we can appear to live out two conflicting realities without becoming aware of the contradictions between them. I mentioned Peter's genuine surprise at his stepdaughter's continuing hostility towards him, and perhaps this is a measure of how far this dissociation is still operating? There's undoubtedly a gendered component here also, which takes us straight back to Kate Manne's arguments about the nature of men's expectations of women: the way that gender functions within our society (its 'logic') *assumes* women to be at the service of men, whether that is for emotional, practical, reproductive or sexual services. Which also raises the question of what Peter was really looking for, where was the lack not even consciously acknowledged, that his previous experience of abuse in one part of his mind 'licenced' him to attempt to meet in this harming way? I can't say for sure, but I suspect that warmth, the touching of skin and being touched, physical reassurance and above all a sense of intimate connection were as much, if not *more* important than ideas of possession or self assertion. (It is of course possible that his victim might have experienced this as *more* traumatic than a direct violent assault: understanding better the complexity of causation is not to diminish the actual harm experienced). But whatever the individual case, we can see this same logic of gender playing out in an infinite number of ways, some more and some less directly damaging.

Peter's victim clearly could not give consent. Our collective rules are there to clarify what might be (mis)taken to be ambiguous situations, but of course by so doing they over-clarify by removing the complexities of real life. I mean this in the sense that our consent is never absolutely free: that would be only to have completely random encounters! There are always inequalities that may or may not in themselves be part of the attraction, and I am never fully aware of even my own desire, intention, motivation, or of many of the other forces acting on me. So could we argue that what is really at issue are the conditions for consent to be 'freely enough, adequately' given? Our society has itself historically been

very ambivalent around the question of consent — usually meaning female consent — and it remains so. The evolving public discussions (of which the #MeToo movement is an important example) are one attempt to help clarify this by pointing up these complexities resulting from the imbalance of power in relationships and encounters. We have now come to see that consent needs to be active and explicit, and that everyone involved has to be *competent* to give it (eg, not a child, not drunk or otherwise intoxicated). Competence is of course itself a difficult issue: we have traditionally *denied* competence not only to children but also to the cognitively different, to those with disabilities, and in a moral sense to women as a whole (as either virgins or married and therefore restricted to being actual or potential mothers to their husband's children). There is in all these cases the question of whether my *subjectivity* is actually recognised: when can I be seen as a full human subject, and when not? There are no absolute answers, however practically essential it is for such lines to be drawn. If I am plied with drink, or even have taken substances of my own 'free' will, then we now understand that my judgement of my own welfare is compromised, I would likely have acted otherwise if I had been thinking more clearly. I was unable to exercise my subjectivity as part of a mutual relationship.

This ties into a key Buddhist argument, that is specifically the subject of the Fifth Precept: we all of us are at best little enough aware and mindful, a state which leads to self- and other-harm; further compromising what awareness we have can only make things worse. I have already referred to the expanded version of this Precept given by Thich Nhat Hanh this is extended to cover other 'intoxicants' as various as pornography, ideology (including Buddhism!), gambling, and anything else that can suck us in and compromise our awareness and judgement. So it is in this sense that the awareness #MeToo has brought offers us extra insight. No-one should be unduly influenced in supposedly giving consent through the imbalance of power between those involved, influences that compromise my ability to 'freely' give consent (and of course this comes back to the Second Precept... 'taking things not freely given'). Where there is any kind of obvious power imbalance involved — say a film producer and an actor, or a sports coach and a novice player or athlete, or a teacher and a student, or a celebrity and a fan — it's hard to see how either side can give 'freely', and meet on terms of equality. In fact the actual *lack* of equality may form a considerable part of the attraction on both sides: one flattered to be noticed ('recognised'), and to be granted the at least the fantasy of a possible future, the other safe in the knowledge that the power in the relationship is overwhelmingly in their hands, their pleasure amplified by the vulnerability of the other. In the case of 'professional' relationships the responsibility is clear: the position of power carries the obligation not to abuse, and *any* intimacy is potentially — and probably actually — abuse. But what if the one in the position of power (normally a man) genuinely believes that their attention confers some special privilege in and of itself?

Even Zen teachers do not seem to be particularly enlightened in this respect, of whom Joko's own teacher, Maezumi Roshi, would be a classic example. Brilliant teaching, alcoholism and serial sexual abuse of his students co-existed in him, as non-communicating dissociated self-states. Or... what if the one holding power (normally a man) tells us that they are 'really in love' and hence cannot be expected to behave

rationality, ethically, legally? What if they have become the hero of their own tragic love story? What of the victim they take with them? Is unconscious or even 'well-intentioned' manipulation ok? Or even avoidable? Rules may or may not be observed, and even when observed can only take us so far. Developing our own awareness and situational responsibility is vital, and manipulation can and will happen from both sides. But where the victim's *own* judgement might be clouded means that their consent is compromised, further clearly returning the taking of responsibility to the more powerful partner. Desiring the teacher/analyst or other figure of authority and power may be a part of the student/patient/other's pedagogical/curative/strategic fantasy. Many sexual abusers do tell us that they felt seduced by their victims, and part of them may well genuinely believe this. Does this in any way excuse them? Is it a 'mitigating circumstance'? This slides incrementally into the argument of 'sexual provocation': her manner, the way she was dressed...your honour, I genuinely believed... It is not so many years since it could be seriously proposed (by many men) that (for a woman) saying No! *really* means Yes! (And in some circles this *is* clearly still a socially acceptable idea..) Without clear guidance and necessary legislation any amount of abuse may thrive in grey areas, and what if those charged with enforcing the law themselves share many of the root assumptions of the abusers, or are even abusers themselves? (The Report in to London's Metropolitan Police is only the latest and most damning insight into the prevalence of an institutional and systemic misogyny that presents enormous dangers both too the women who work within it, and for the public at large.)

If on the one hand we have sorely needed the clarity brought by the idea that *No!* always, unequivocally and universally means *NO*, this can't be used to appear to erase the complexity and ambiguity around our gendered and other sexual assumptions, stereotypes and reactions. No-one — man or woman — is *simply* rational when it comes to our sexual attitudes and behaviours. We can't assume pure, objective rationality on the part of anyone. We shouldn't really delude ourselves that anyone will sit down, calmly examine only the 'facts' of the case, and come to a reasoned decision: this is simply not how deluded beings such as ourselves operate. We've referred to the universal gendered assumption/reflex that women somehow 'owe' men support, whether that is emotional, practical or sexual. However absurd this might rationally be, there is no point simply demanding that men 'shouldn't' do this, the question is, individually and collectively, how do we bring this about? This is neither to justify or excuse, but simply to contribute to an explanation and possible remediation. How to raise awareness of the kind of structural gendered dissociation that is by definition something we are blind to? How to challenge something so deeply rooted, ingrained in our attitudes and behaviour? Our individual and collective goodwill is a beginning, but only a beginning.

And if we *lack* that goodwill? If we see *their* (women's) unwillingness to provide *us* (men) with the services to which we feel *entitled* as their active and illegitimate *refusal*? If *they* frustrate our *desire*, and hence our true fulfilment as men, active and potent? If this amounts to some kind of female conspiracy against the true and natural order of things, a conspiracy which must be resisted and reversed by whatever means are appropriate? If we

were under the impression that such views are dead or dying there we are sorely mistaken. We referred above to Andrew Tate's extraordinary and sudden influence over millions of boys and young men, but this is a much wider based problem. Laura Bates (of Everyday Sexism) has explored in detail the breadth and scope of this active and organised misogyny. Of these the Incel (involuntary celibate) movement is among the most extreme, an internally coherent ideology viewing men in general as suffering grievous oppression at the hands of women and proposing varied solutions to these fictitious problem, solutions which play into every gender stereotype and many darker fantasies. Again, the key point is that remain with an idea of desire which aims only at an *object*, which flattens real human subjects into being treated as *things* ('things' in that they 'should' or 'have to' comply with '*my*' desire) is to form a relation of *power over*, not a *meeting* in anything resembling *relationship*.

In terms of unequal power within relationships, how far should we go in allowing or disallowing? How far does this extend? We know that wealth is attractive in and of itself for many people, and if there's real inequality between those involved, how far does that colour a possible relationship? Among the middle and upper classes, women were historically expected to trade 'beauty' and 'charm' for access to economic resources they could otherwise not hope for, having in the past been implicitly or actually barred professions or business, or even having control over their own or their families' property . Even with all the many changes in our society, there are still ways in which similar conditions actually apply today. Is wealth simply a practically minded alternative to good looks, intelligence or kindness as being attractive to a possible mate? Between what actual laws can hope to regulate, to those relationships that require formal rules (for example those that govern sexual contact between doctor and patient), and what we can still leave to custom and common sense, there's a vast spectrum.

As we have noted, there is, can be, no *absolutely* 'freely given' consent, in the sense of a fully autonomous person thinking rationally about the full consequences of their actions. Desire catches us up, it's a *passion*, a force that acts upon us, its very nature is a lessening of any 'conscious' control. And *what* do I think I am consenting to, anyway? What do I think *you* are consenting to? Our assumptions will depend so much on the interdependent and interpenetrating desires, assumptions, proscriptions, fears, pleasures and bliss that are both put common currency, and which make each of individually who we are. One of the greatest pleasures of sexuality can be in embracing a *loss* of control (when that loss is experienced in safety and not traumatically), what we can talk about psychologically in terms of *surrender* to the experience. Perhaps we might argue for a *minimum mutual recognition of subjectivity*, however nuanced this might be in individual cases or relationships, a subjectivity that acknowledges *both* our shared vulnerability and the ability to cause harm. It's within this context that I can offer my consent within the bounds I set and appropriately communicate...sounds simple! But of course this mutual recognition has to acknowledge the bounds of individual competence. No-one would, presumably, deny a younger teenager their subjectivity, but we do consider them to lack competence over voting, their sexuality when it involves another person... Such issues show us both the need for caution and scepticism over *all* our views and ideas, but

without their being mistakenly seen to offer us a nihilistic or relativistic 'anything goes' path that could and would sanction disastrous harming. For example, while there can be no actual, universally appropriate 'age of consent', yet clearly we need a 'best we can actually do' protection that is legislated and enforced, while admitting that this is, finally, arbitrary and conventional. But as remarked above, it is this *same* logic which absolutely denies active consent to the child that has also always been used to assume that those with learning difficulties, dementia and cognitive deficits of all kind equally *cannot* give consent, an attitude that is now being actively challenged. It's realised now that custom and tradition (for which read prejudice) have denied many adults full humanity, whether that is in voting rights or the right to sexual expression. In fact it can now be seen that the 'competency contract' has been a pillar on which our own ideas of who counts as *fully* human beings is based. As usual in binary oppositions, it is the excluded term, in this case the *incompetent*, those who were described as the 'mad' and the 'idiots', who show by contrast what we the *competent* are, what a *true* fully human person actually *is*.

It is simply false for any of us to argue that we are ever *fully* 'in control' of ourselves, or that we ever act with complete *freedom*, and so we have to face up to the fact that whether at the level of our own individual actions or in framing society's laws, questions of control and consent do not have simple or absolute answers, however much *in practice* we do need active guidance and sanction that is necessarily universal in its aim. As with all the Precepts, *the point is absolutely not that we should overthink and agonise about every decision we make*. Our work with the Precept is much more about seeing how I actually *do* feel and behave, and while being more aware of potential harming, than it is trying to work out what I 'should' do. Here again, remembering the idea that the Precepts are more a *description* of enlightened behaviour than a *prescription* for what we ought to do can be helpful. There is a fundamental paradox here that Buddhism addresses. Is the opposite of 'sleepwalking' through my life to try instead to actively take *control* of it? 'Control' itself has come to be seen as a very masculine virtue in our very gendered society. Controlling other people, controlling our environment, has been the name of the game for men. Is trying to control *ourselves* just more of the same? One image we use in Zen is that of the deep ditches on either side of our path, the *Way*, as it's often expressed. If we are the helpless slave of our desires, or see ourselves as vainly battling against them, that's one ditch. But the other ditch we may not even recognise, because it's based in denial. It's that I (and exactly *who* is that?) can simply choose to be the master of my desires, to be in control, to feel what I choose to feel, or ignore what I *do* feel. The illusion of mastery always comes at a price, and that's one that I may seem to pay entirely myself, by cutting myself off from myself and building walls against the parts of me I don't want to own. But the greater danger is in how that leads me to treat others, and what I expect of them. When I *do fail* in this supposed self mastery, the consequences can be catastrophic.

Zen offers a subtly different understanding of freedom: *wu-wei*, translated as 'not-doing' or 'effortless action'. It has the meaning of spontaneously doing what is natural and appropriate to the situation. But how to distinguish the ease of *this* spontaneity from the easiness of acting out of habit, out of the usual tissue of assumptions and preconceptions that govern even our actual perception of the world, and so come to colour our intentional

actions? Remembering that the Precepts are a *description* of enlightened action, we can ask are we simply and spontaneously responding to the situation at hand with kindness and caring, the traditional Buddhist qualities of *maitri* and *karuna* (often translated as 'loving kindness' and 'compassion')? Responding that acknowledges our *non-separation* from the world. It would be ridiculous to say that there is no 'I', no 'self' here (though that is exactly what often *is* said), but it is clearly not that self that is defined as separate from a world it needs to control and defend itself against. It involves a literal shift in how we see and experience the world, a shift in our selfworld that becomes embodied in our actions. It is a self better oriented and able to relate to *other* selves, other subjects and subjectivities. We shall return to this important point in later commentaries. Does our expression of sexuality help or harm this mutual recognition? Does it lead us to act towards others, and ourselves, as more fully human, alike in our desire and our vulnerability, different in the infinite modes of that desiring and being vulnerable?

So, we've come a long way in thinking about this Precept from the obvious do or don't questions, like 'is it ok to sleep around?' Our thoughts and feelings around sexuality, and the stories we tell ourselves and each other about it are some of the most potent we have. Interestingly, the original wording of this Precept in the Pali refers to *Kama*, which is any kind of deep enjoyment we get through the senses. It came to be seen as referring to sex as *the* sense pleasure, probably the more so because it was framed by celibate monks! The monastic tradition also has grave concerns about music, dancing, jewellery...and all the kind of pleasures we out here in the world take for granted. I've used 'desire' here as meaning sexual desire, but of course we desire in all these kinds of ways and many more. So we might want to think more widely around pleasure, and the ambivalence of our feelings around it (remembering the English phrases 'guilty pleasures', and 'naughty but nice'..). Do we have a problem enjoying ourselves? And when might we harm ourselves or others in doing so? This Precept offers us an exploration of our own felt experience of the complexity of this most intimate, personal, of shared social reflexes and responses, desires, habits, assumptions and predispositions. Of how we come to experience our own desire and that of others.

Pleasure. Bliss. Fun. Delight. Joy. Starting from a sense of recognition (of ourselves, of the other), and a sense of 'lawfulness' — of the shared sense of possibility, of limit and concern — to explore our responses both within and across selves and bodies. We are never *simply* either at the mercy or in complete control of our hormones, or of our ideas. But bringing kind and caring awareness to ourselves and others we may better express and enjoy ourselves more spontaneously in the spirit of *wu-wei!*