1.

I bear witness to the reality of violence and abuse, in myself and in the world, and aspire to practise non-violence in my thoughts, words and actions.

Unless I've been convicted of assault, rape or murder, or barred from seeing my ex-partner and children, I probably don't consider myself particularly *violent*. Unless I've been physically assaulted in the street, or attacked in the intimacy of my home, I probably don't consider myself a significant *victim* of violence. Violence can seem very abstract, somewhere else, someone else's problem. But what do we mean by 'violence' anyway?

I might begin by *bearing witness* to *my* actual experiencing in this moment. Simply becoming better *aware of* the violent feelings I experience, both the great and the small — I may surprise myself. When do I, if only for the moment before my internal censor strikes it down, feel I could happily punch, stab or shoot someone? Digging deeper, can I *suspend my self judgement* long enough to come more honestly to see my own hostility, anger, meanness, pettiness, irritability, grumpiness, ignoring, assumption-making, liberty taking, all the ways in which I fail to recognise and respect the other beings with whom I share this life? And, no less importantly, to bear honest witness when *they* fail to so recognise and respect *me?* Bearing witness also to how I then respond in turn, whether as counter-aggression, displacement onto (weaker) others, or denial? Violence responds to violence.

Thinking about 'violence in the world', our dominant story-tellers — TV, podcasts, tabloids, novels and the rest — tend to assure us that this is the fault of deviant *individuals*, of their greed or psychopathic tendencies, while our news feeds show us more brutally and intimately than ever before the *collective* suffering of the wars carried out both between and within our Nation States. Between these two there is quieter, often silent, but in many ways even more destructive violence — the millions of children even in our own rich countries going to bed hungry, and all-too-often even without a bed to sleep in, and on the global scale the vast horror of those many more millions left displaced and desperate by entirely avoidable conflict, and by the demands of a global economic system that places profit before human existence. Not to mention the violence of *lost possibility*: of what *could* have been done. Could have been done instead, for example, with the trillions of dollars spent annually on weapons of individual and mass destruction.

Taking the *wide* view, at the level of *separate* and *not-separate*, might we best see 'violence' as *acting out the fantasy of separation*, the fantasy that allows living beings to be treated as 'things', as mere objects to be used or discounted insofar as their *otherness* marks them out as different, as not demanding respect and active consideration, their full recognition as a fellow being? And by 'fellow being' we need to include *all* beings — animals, plants, mountains, rivers, oceans, and all with whom we share this world.

The Jungle

Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood. In a way, he thought, they were right. The more coloured people spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle white folks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own… Meantime, the secret spread of this new kind of whitefolks' jungle was hidden, silent, except once in a while when you could hear its mumbling…

Toni Morrison, 'Beloved', 234-235

This is from Toni Morrison's masterpiece, *Beloved*, her novel set in the last days of Black enslavement in the United States. Without wanting to diminish in any way the absolute horror and specific brutality of this regime, the traumatic effects of which extend to the present day, the novel tells us much about how violence *in general* works, and in particular the relation of violence to *othering*, the active division into 'us' and 'them' as *separate*.

The novel pulls no punches in its description of the extreme physical brutality of enslavement, but it is equally devastating about the psychological violence and the displacement of the ongoing burden of responsibility and fear from oppressor to oppressed. About the process of *othering* whereby each us finds ourself assigned as an 'us' or 'them', with the demand that we come to think, feel and act out our place as *dominant or dominated*. This process of othering *still* implicitly chooses a place, a side for each of us who read the novel, demanding we ask 'who am *I* here? How am *I* supposed to *feel* here?' So: how does your answer differ if you are of Black or Brown heritage, rather than seeing yourself and being treated by others as 'White'? If it's the latter, then do I react defensively by speaking of those being 'other times', or that 'we are all equal now'? Do I push away, or perhaps embrace some idea of 'White guilt' or 'White entitlement' as being still active today? And of course, whatever of this I *feel*, then *becoming aware* that this is so is the beginning of my *bearing witness* to the violence of our world.

It is the regime of enslavement — the *greed* not of an individual but of an *economic system* driving every possible cruelty and abomination — that demands that the enslavers invent themselves as *different from*, as *other to* the enslaved, and so to their *creating* us as 'White' and 'Black'. In doing so, they create too an image, a fantasy of the other as *fearful*, as dangerous and threatening, as the very opposite of 'gentle', 'clever', 'loving' and 'human', an image that they demand that the other (the 'coloured people', the 'Negro') accept as the truth about themselves. But this image is rather the truth of the enslaver and *their* violence, and so it returns to, and acts on them themselves:

And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly,

worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own…

This quote is about the relation to violence of all of us — our relation to the *othering* it exemplifies, and the physical, the psychological, the economic violence, and too the political violence that both licences and enacts that violence. The traditional *Three Fires* or *Three Poisons* of Buddhism can be translated as '*greed*', '*aversion*' and '*ignorance*'. Buddhism talks very directly about 'greed', and if it says surprisingly little about *fear*, it has much say about the *anger* and *aversion* that follow from fear. Both greed and fear are strong 'affects' in our terms, they make us really *feel*, they 'move' us both emotionally and physically, and so make us take action, make us *do* things; they help create and sustain a world for us. Violence, fear, greed and ignorance *inter-are*, to use Thich Nhat Hanh's term, are always present together in shifting forms and combinations. In Morrison's example it is the enslavers' greed that makes them violent, their own violence that makes them fearful, their fear which is itself a form of ignorance that seeks to hide their greed and their violence, and so licences the cycle to continue. *Othering* is central to this whole process, the *real* effects in the world of the *fantasy* of making-separate. *Ignorance*, which I'll write as *ignore-ance*, is neither a simple *lack* of knowledge, nor a set of *beliefs* about the world, but an *active* process of not knowing that is also a not seeing and not saying, of *wanting* not to know. Our *ignore-ance* makes possible the ways in which how we *feel* and *act* in the world causes suffering to ourselves and to others, how we come to cause harm.

Non-violence then, is not simply a lack, a passive absence of violence, but an *active engagement* with our ignorance, and hence with our fear, our greed, our othering and our being-othered. Our ignorance is not something we can simply rectify by reading a book or even sitting zazen every morning, and it's not primarily individual, but rather it is cultural, societal, global. There are many ways in which we come to see and feel the world 'upside down', misperceptions that *shape* our thoughts, feeling and actions. Our aspiration is to bear witness to this misperceiving, to see it for what it is and so to act differently.

My Country

Whatever our nation, we are told essentially the same story: our brave founders united a People, essentially peaceable, who through their strength, hard work and self-belief, their loyalty and justice overcame many difficulties to establish a society that is for the benefit of all, or at least all *true* citizens. Of course wars had, reluctantly, to be fought against enemies intent on domination, enslavement or extinction, and that such wars were won, and 'our' prosperity (such as it is or may be imagined to be) achieved, goes definitively to prove that God, or 'democracy', or our Great Leader, or our economic system (or some combination of these) has uniquely favoured our exceptional and rightfully pre-eminent nation. We are asked to respect, even to love our flag, our traditions, and the 'values' for which our proud nation stands.

So it can be hard to take that, however far certain particular elements of these stories may be true, and however pleasant or not may be the lives of some within our borders, these stories are nevertheless essentially unmitigated lies of omission. The anthem *Rule Britannia*, for example may boldly assert that 'Britons never, never, never shall be slaves', but the reality is that either in law or simply *de facto*, very many Britons *have* been enslaved, and almost without exception to other Britons. Within the 'home' nation, the

development of agricultural and then industrial capitalism changed the slavery of serfdom to the precarity of a form of 'wage slavery' that was by turns more or less vigorously and violently pursued, while the Atlantic Slave Trade is only the most notorious example of the enslavement *by* Britons of *other* peoples, and of the colonialist project of the conquest (violent *theft*) of their land and resources. This project frequently involved cultural or literal genocide, and extended well into the twentieth century. The same is obviously true, *mutatis mutandem*, for every other Western nation, (and others besides), and this is the basis on which the self-proclaimed superiority of Western culture and indeed our entire 'civilisation' has been built. Without conquest and expropriation abroad, without the exploitation of labour at home, little of the industrial development, the growth of cities, the physical infrastructure or the social institutions that underlie our contemporary world would have come to be. In the 'post-colonial' era the extraction of resources and wealth continues, but by less overt means — take-it-or-leave-it terms of trade, of 'aid'.

We each inherit, to very varying extents, the benefits and losses of this unimaginable range and intensity of violence, both the most bloody and the stone-cold. We are each beneficiary *and* victim of this inheritance, in Buddhist terms this *karma*, and our response seems inevitably to involve a partial self blinding as we live out our very different relationships to the reality of this multi-generational and ongoing trauma.

What does 'country' *mean* to me? Which is to ask — how do I *feel* about it? Do I in some way feel *responsible* for the actions of my compatriots or government (the shame of Brexit for example, or the actions of a reckless President?). Do I, even while bearing witness to all of this, still hold to a *love* of country, hold to a kernel of the *goodness* or *rightness* of 'Englishness', of 'being an American'? Or that this simply *is* 'my country right or wrong?' In reality this 'country' never was or can be 'one thing', but is rather a montage of very different and often conflicting elements, the infinite complexities of many millions of real lives lived out within and beyond its borders, which I then represent to myself in fantasy and memory, in my positive and negative feelings, in my ignore-ance. Often though, when we speak of a 'country' we are really talking about a *State*, its system of governance and administration. It's not countries that decide to spend trillions on weaponry rather than hospitals, or to declare war on each other, but *States*.

The State

My country's *State* comprises our public institutions and administration — the government, the legal system, the police, the military, and so on. Our State will tell us that it represents or embodies 'our' *will,* the will of 'the People', and it may even suggest that *only* it may legitimately speak on our behalf. We are told that our State exists to protect and defend us, and that it regulates our lives in order to guarantee our 'freedom'. But the State is, inextricably, nevertheless tied to *violence*. In the sociologist Max Weber's now classic definition, 'the modern state is a compulsory association… to monopolise the legitimate use of physical force as a means of domination within a territory.' To speak plainly: *all* States, and *all* their laws, regardless of whatever arguments they may offer in justification, rely finally on that State's ability and willingness to use violence. This violence may be against any or all within or beyond its territorial borders. Four hundred or so years ago Thomas Hobbes first articulated this modern view of national *sovereignty*, arguing that we each as individuals should be *assumed to have consented in advance* to giving *all* our rights

(including the right to life itself) over to a *sovereign,* whether that be embodied literally in a King or simply as the State itself. For Hobbes this was the only alternative he could imagine to our lives being lived in permanent fear of violent attack that might lead to the theft of our property or even our death (and we'll see as we go forward how important the linking of 'property' to 'life' itself has become.) So, to guarantee my safety, my freedom and my property, my State enforces its right to act through the law and the police to lock me up, to dispossess me, and should it choose to do so, *kill* me. It also demands that I can be required to place my own life in danger as part of the military, and kill anyone it defines as its 'enemy'. More fundamentally, in the apparatus of the law and the courts the State enforces its rights over *truth* itself — to *define* what counts as truth and *how* this is to be established — and so shapes what is even see-able and say-able within our society; how we think, but also how we perceive, and how we *feel*. There is a terrible ambivalence here in how the State's *care* of us is *intrinsically* tied to its own violence.

In this and other ways, the State takes on the final responsibility of every aspect of formal *othering*, both internally and externally: who is 'bad' (criminals) and who is 'mad' (and must also be locked up); who is protected by it (the responsible citizen), and who must be permanently suspected (the alien); whom we must hate (those who 'threaten' our State's 'interests'), and whom we must be willing to kill (those whose would actively resist the impact of those interests). Which (non human) beings may be freely killed. In every dimension of life, the State both makes formal who 'we' and who 'they' are, and decides what must be done about 'them', the *others* — whether that is surveillance, sanction, confinement, or death.

Of course 'the State' itself is not 'one thing', but formed out of the struggles of competing interests, whether those of aristocracies, merchants and financiers, the industrialists, the emerging 'working class', and now the 'platform capitalism' of Meta and Google, of Uber and Amazon. 'Politics' has become largely the attempt of different groups to capture or hold control over the State — by and large it is 'capital' that has succeeded.

My Family

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn
By fools in old-style hats and coats,
Who half the time were soppy-stern
And half at one another's throats.

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.

(Philip Larkin, 'This Be The Verse')

Larkin's bleak vision in many ways accords well with traditional monastic Buddhism of a 'stop the world, I want to get off!' kind, but for those of us who practise our Zen *within* society, who choose *not* to cut all family ties and even to 'raise' a family of our own, we have to ask about the ignore-ance, the violence, the fear and greed, the othering, that happens *within* our experience of family. We are asked and we are expected to love and respect our parents, care unreservedly for our children, value the ties of being sister or brother. We are told this must be unconditional, and unending. Our dominant narratives often depict the ties of family as trumping all others and as justifying any action — sheltering the sibling 'on the run', taking violent revenge on outsiders. But in reality *all* family relationships are complex: mixtures of love, anger, hurt and indifference, and always too directly involving rather than excluding the outside world. In fact the image of the family as a separate, sealed world within (and often opposed to) society is in itself a key example of our ignore-ance, and the harm it may facilitate and hide. Far more than any of us would like to admit, the vast majority of the physical, sexual and psychological abuse (which is to say *violence*) carried out against children happens *within* the family, whether from parents, siblings, other relatives or family friends. To that we have to add the partner on partner violence that is endemic to our society (to call such violence 'domestic' is euphemistic here), something with which we are collectively still only beginning to come to terms. Understandably we all want this to be the fault of people who are *other* than us, not people who are *like* us, and whom we may even know well.

Zen practice *isn't* therapy, and shouldn't be mistaken for, or substituted for it, but in the stillness of zazen much of what appears *will* be directly or indirectly related to our being born into *this* family, in *this* place, at *this* time — as too are our everyday reactions and responses towards family, friends and colleagues. If Jōko's teaching didn't encourage us to see our parents as responsible for our problems, nevertheless one of her key checking questions for any student coming to her to tell of some marvellous insight experience was "…and how's your relationship with your mother?". A self-honest practising of awareness can't help but be engaged with the psychological aspects of family life — even the (genuinely) 'happiest' family is a place of half-truths and secrets, of the *Unsaid*. We each grew up with a place in our family that brought with it a role in relation to other family members, a role that may perhaps have felt like I was simply being 'me', or instead as having been an excruciating self-betrayal, maybe both by turns. And what of the greyer aspects of family life, the inevitable lapses of care, the ways in which we learn both shame and shaming, and the complexities of our parents not as mythic ideals, but as real people each with their own backstory? However it was for us, along with the role we adopted (or which feels like it adopted us) came a sense of what was *sayable*, and even what was *see-able*. This is the active ignore-ance (which is always also an unacknowledged violence), that exists within any family. We learn concealment, to hide truths from both others and from ourselves. One of the most important things we can do both in relation to 'family' and the wider world is to become better aware of, *bear witness* to, our desire not to see, not to know, not to think about, and the self-dishonesty this brings about both within ourselves and in relationships with others, the ignore-ance that is violence, the violence that is ignore-ance.

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There are revealing symbolic and practical parallels between the family and the State. The State takes on something of the role of the 'parent' to its citizens, and with that some of the omnipotence and infallibility the young child ascribes to its parents. Both parents and State wish to be seen as caring and benevolent, as wishing us to *believe* and share their 'values', but nevertheless *also* act to enforce rules that we have little or no part in setting. Both set the ground of what counts as 'truth', and what is see-able and say-able within the realms of, respectively, the *private* and the *public*, realms of which the State itself sets the boundaries. Both family and State frame our collective othering in key ways: whom we *should* or *must* assume responsibility for, and who is *not* our responsibility and so has no claim on us. 'Inside' and 'outside', 'us' and 'them'.

Karma: Cause and Effect

'Karma', can probably be best translated as something like 'cause and effect'. Within Buddhism karma has, rather paradoxically, usually been thought of in primarily *personal* terms, though some teachers such as Thich Nhat Hanh have spoken insightfully about *collective* karma. Our karma is the complex of forces that have acted on us to bring us, individually and collectively, to *this* point, *this* moment, here and now. In the popular imagination karma is often represented as some kind of inexorable 'fate', or 'burden', but this is certainly not its sense even in traditional Buddhist interpretations; 'our' karma sets the conditions under which we act in the present (conditions of which our intention and aspiration are themselves a part), and which while setting the limits of the possible and probable, never simply *determine* the future. This is because in Buddhism, and certainly for Mahāyāna Buddhism, cause and effect have always been seen as *immanent*, as being the working out of infinitely complex relationships of interconnection (what Thich Nhat Hanh has called *Interbeing),* within a world where every element is impermanent and without individual essence: 'empty' and so 'not-separate'. For Buddhism there is no place for an *external* cause, such as God, 'Spirit' or even the human 'will' as acting *independently* of the world, and hence no guiding purpose or direction to the world, no 'teleology' to use the philosophical term.

The violence of the world — and hence the violence I see showing up in my own thoughts, feelings and actions — is not the result of my Human Nature, of any individual failing or Original Sin in me, not the unfolding of some vast Cosmic Plan. The karma of the past carries the world forward: the consequences and the continuing energy of a past of extreme and sustained violence the effects of which are the ongoing violence to which we *bear witness* in the Zenkai. Violence is renewed in each of us in our reactions and responses to the world, violence reproduces through each of us. We are all compromised, complicit, down and dirty with the violence of the world. Which is also to say that we are *involved*, *concerned*, that we *care* about what happens. It is precisely this involvement that makes it possible for us to *intend*, *aspire* and *act* to do better.

My Self, My Selves

As suggested above, I might begin my own *bearing witness* with my actual experiencing in *this* moment, and the shifting self-states that make up my various 'parts' or 'selves'. Simply experiencing these feelings as the pattern of *tension* in my body that signals their arrival, the *bodily feelings* and *'atmosphere'*, and the more definable *emotions* as I become aware of their arrival, their presence, and their fading. Noting the *objects* to which these feelings attach, whether an actual person, an item on the news, a jam-jar's recalcitrant lid. Noticing too, perhaps, the *patterning* of these feelings and possible *consistency* between them. Practising awareness, too, of what happens when I find myself the object of my own violence — self-judgement, haranguing, sabotage, or actual physical self-harming. The ways in which, in fact, I fail to recognise and respect myself, and how this relates to how I may fail to recognise and respect other people Treating *myself* as separate, as *other*, the 'good' me and the 'bad' me, the me I show the world, the me I try to keep hidden even from myself, *especially* from myself.

Non-Violence

So, is *non*-violence simply holding my tongue (or my fists…), or is it something more? To answer we have to come back to the question of how *my* violence and the violence I *suffer*, great or small, links to 'violence in the world'? This is the real 'Great Matter of Life and Death' of which Zen speaks: Auschwitz is *not* here and now for us, but in a real sense Auschwitz always *begins* here with you and me. If we are serious about 'Never Again!' then this is the responsibility of each and all of us.

So what of my *aspiration* towards non-violence? If all violence is in one sense grounded in making-separate, in *othering*, and in active or passive *ignore-ance*, then non-violence is our seeing, feeling and acting *as* not-separate, our acting with true *recognition* of the other and of the world. So our bearing witness is itself already a form of non-violence, and our aspiration the setting of this non-violence as the orientation we will always hold in mind.

There are many, many ways in which we all can and do practice non-violence. On the one hand we have the non-violence of all forms of generosity and kindness — treating each other not as parties to a contract of exchange, but as fully human beings with needs and vulnerabilities we each recognise and respect. There is the non-violence we all practice each and every time we recognise the *other*, whether that's our partner, our parents, children, friends or work colleagues, whether that's a few words exchanged buying the milk, or sharing a smile with someone we pass on the street. Every time we meet an *other* with some sense of openness, of possibility — a meeting which if it is perhaps not entirely without agenda, nevertheless fully recognises the other as '*like* me but *not* me'. Such things are important, vital, they *matter*. They remind us all of our shared world, that we are not-separate. They also matter in the way we deal with disagreement, anger (ours or someone else's), outrage… *If* I can hold on to some real sense of our relationship, of connection, of the not-separate — a sense that allows your true *otherness*, that you are *not* me, and hence may think and feel and act differently in this particular respect — then we have the basis for resolving our disagreement, assuaging our anger, moderating our outrage, and so re-finding connection and strengthening relationship. This is non-violence in action.

Practising such non-violence may challenge us to confront aspects of our relationships that the dominant stories we have been told and which we tell ourselves have led us to ignore, and to which we are now asked to bear witness in the name of relationship and of the not-separate. So, we would all like it never to become an issue that you and I are 'man' and 'woman', 'Black' and 'White', 'boss' and 'worker', 'rich' and 'poor', 'citizen' and 'undocumented', 'parent' and 'child'… but of course such differences *do* matter, and *matter differently* in different contexts. Our world is organised in hierarchies that intersect, reinforce and contradict each other, and the stories we share and do not share both express and challenge these hierarchies. Many such stories tell us what is 'natural' or 'normal' in the way we do or 'should' relate to each other, and bearing witness to the way they are *scripted* to *hide* and so lead us to *ignore* the realities of the hierarchies of gender, class, race and the rest, may become an essential part of our practice of non-violence.

What when our *collective* mutual recognition breaks down in some fundamental way, or has never really been properly established? Thich Nhat Hanh always argued strongly that we cannot simply fight for 'Peace', but that we ourselves have to *be* the peace we wish to bring about. Jōko Beck, seemingly never one to espouse any 'cause' in her teaching, still talked of the importance — if we wish to be listened to — of criticising from a place of *love*, which in this sense is simply another way of saying 'not-separate'. I think the pre-eminent example of this remains the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and '60s in the United States, not only in its scale, its organisation and its effects, but in its being definitively grounded in non-violence as its principle, as exemplified by Martin Luther King Jr. and others. King argued that if our very point is that although we may be in many and various ways *different* from each other we are nevertheless 'one people', that we best show this unity with those who would oppose, discriminate against or actually harm us in *not* treating them as 'enemies', as separate, as a 'them' opposed in every way to 'us'. As our needing to offer *them* recognition, *love*, as the precondition for any real reconciliation, of our *witnessing* being meaningfully *heard*.

So, I think, feel and act with violence! Yes, and I always will, because that's just what it is to be a vulnerable, mortal, embodied being. But I can bear witness to the concrete specifics of this violence, and in doing so constructively *aspire* towards *non-violence*. As we work through the different Zenkai we can bear witness to the way in which each invites us to investigate a specific aspect of this violence of othering, and to experience the ways in which all are different aspects of the violence of the fantasy of separation. Violence, 'in myself and in the world' is not going to disappear, and neither I nor the world am about to be magically transformed, or transported to a place of perfect peace. The question is always how we *approach disagreement and even actual conflict non-violently*, how we speak and act to minimise the violence of any event or situation. This is an *aspiration* for my whole life-time, and begins with the simple *bearing witness* to my thoughts, my emotions and my feelings, as they are in *this* moment.

All of this is the non-violence to which we aspire. And to differing degrees and in differing ways it is the wonderful, awesome (literally!) non-violence we each already practice in our quotidian, everyday, lives — 'life as it is' for each of us. Deep bows and huge respect to us all! It is in the ongoing cultivation of this everyday, this ethos, that we ground our both bearing witness and our aspiration, whether for us that takes the form of individual acts of caring or kindness, or taking on the mantle of a Doctor King.