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The Fourth Applied Precept:

**I bear witness to the lack of honesty in myself and in the world,
and aspire to speak truthfully and caringly**

Traditionally: I undertake the precept to refrain from incorrect speech

Or: 'Don't tell lies!'

Each of the Precepts addresses something fundamental in our relationships with each other, and within the multiplicity that is ourselves. With this Fourth Precept the question is: what is it to speak, and to be spoken to: to speak one to another, *me* to *you*? When I open my mouth, just who speaks and who hears? And of course when I say 'speak' I also mean, what is it to *write* this, and for you to be reading it? If to speak and to hear is always to be within *relationship*, then do I, do you, affirm or deny our mutual subjectivity? Affirm or deny our interdependence? Affirm or deny the reality of our mutual *not-separateness*?

I suppose we would all like to think we are the master of our words, that we say what we mean and mean what we say. We like to think that words describe and represent 'inside' our minds a reality that is 'out there', and that the words we use should be able, ideally at least, to state without ambiguity the facts of whatever event or experience I wish to relate to you or comment on. This is certainly the way speech is normally presented within Buddhism as an ideal to which we all should aspire. And yet if words clearly *do* have meaning, this is not primarily by way of their corresponding with any external reality by faithfully *representing* it, but by being tools with which we come to act on each other, and through which we fabricate both each other and ourselves. These tools are not of our own making: I speak a language which pre-existed me, and through *using* it I became the self I am. More, our use of language is always motivated, purposeful, particular. My words may over and over again claim objective and independent truth — 'you can't possibly deny that you always say that!' — but the reality is that my words cannot help but embody my whole approach to the world: an approach made up as much of my hopes, fears and desires, my assumptions, habits and preconceptions, as it is of things and persons in any sense 'out there'. Rather than a simple relaying of independent facts, our speech always carries value.

#FakeCrisis?

The memory of the COVID pandemic is still fresh. From the beginning of this crisis everyone had an opinion, a definite view of serious it was, or might become. All sought the authoritative tone of certainty. The conspiracy theories that spread on social media and the internet are still circulating three years later, and there were (and are) even those virulently arguing that the crisis itself was fake. It did not help that our collective statistical incompetence made for vast intentional and unintentional distortions in the presentation of what reliable data actually was available.

Why is this? It seems that nobody is at ease with uncertainty, especially so when it really isn't possible to draw proper conclusions because we simply don't have the necessary data. In the full Buddhist sense of this word, we *crave* certainty, we crave belief, and we crave appearing to be 'in control' both to ourselves and to others. *Uncertainty* is actually our fundamental condition in all of life, but we constantly use words to try to evade this fact, a strategy that paradoxically leads to our utter irresponsibility in both word and actions. If we come back to the core principle of our practice as being *not turning away* from our experiencing, from 'life as it is', then we can see ourselves as trying to evade the uncomfortable experience of uncertainty for the pleasurable one of certainty and the illusion of control it brings.

Our collective experience of COVID shows too how we believe what we have *become pre-disposed* to believe: we crave the comfort and certainty of having a position, a view, and once formed we allow this view to shape our perception and the formation of future views. The ideas of conspiracy fantasists — that all individual medics would conspire with governments across the world in pursuit of non-specific and utterly unbelievable aims, or that a cabal of vampire child murderers secretly run the world — persisted as an article of faith for a surprisingly large minority of people around the globe. Once we are *committed*, emotionally invested in a belief such as this, every possible shred of evidence that can appear supportive of the belief will confirm it to us (which in other contexts would be called 'confirmation bias'), while every contrary piece is seen as evidence of the deception practiced upon us. We desperately want to believe in *something* — however nonsensical — rather than face the reality of an infinitely complex and uncertain world. If we set aside the manipulators — those with an existing alt-right agenda and those simply out to get money or attention — then these stories were honestly spread because people wanted others to share their belief, and so to better believe themselves. How easy is it to suspend all rational judgement when our *desire* is involved? For each of us, our own relationship with love and sex in all their myriad forms should remind us of how easily we can delude ourselves and suspend our rational judgement. My *desiring to believe* is a 'self state' (which may itself derive from many different sources) *dissociated* from the rational, reality-checking thinking of other of my self-states. I can *only* believe if and when this dissociation happens, and I henceforth *intentionally* turn away from engagement. We can talk about this in more Buddhist terms as being *delusion*: a self state that is internally consistent but is based on false premises. More generally here we can speak of the power of particular persistent *sankharas*: those 'mental formations' that are literally ways of seeing the world, and which shape our actual perceptions and understanding. Ideally *sankharas* are both *shaper* and

shaped: responding to new experience by evolving or changing, allowing us to see the world in new ways. My *certainty* fixes my reaction, and disconnects me from the complex and uncomfortable in the experience of 'life as it is'.

In the age of 'Fake News' it's never been more important to understand the complexity of this world. If we surely were once collectively too trusting of the authority of the voices of politicians, scientist and the media, we have now learned to doubt, and not always to doubt wisely. Collectively we have come to look for foolishly simple answers to inherently complex problems, answers tending to cynicism or paranoia — or at the least a disabling inertia — all of which in their very different ways still offer the tempting comfort of *certainty*. Genuine debate, and engaged disagreement have seemed increasingly rare as entrenched and antagonistic viewpoints are adopted and maintained, while the manifestly untrue has been endlessly repeated as *fact*. COVID has challenged many certainties, not least some aspects of the 'lawfulness' (in the sense we will explore in the ideas of analyst and theorist Jessica Benjamin) of some of our most important relationships. 'I never imagined that he/she could believe something like that!' ...old friendships and family ties can be thrown into questions when those closest to us speak in ways that show that our assuming that we *share* a common sense of 'being in the world' just doesn't apply. How far, how deep does this go? Can our mutual recognition be restored, repaired?

We need to accept, more, we need to *own* the actual and permanent uncertainty of our lives as we live them in each moment. This isn't simply coming to terms with not knowing how this or that situation will turn out, even apparently life-or-death ones like the COVID pandemic. Our uncertainty in each moment is total: this is simply what it is to live as an embodied, vulnerable, mortal being. It is also what it is to live *in* time. It is in *denying*, *turning away* from this basic reality of our lives that our collective craving for certainty and resulting dissociation arise. COVID has demonstrated to us both our real uncertainty and the effects that our craving to *avoid* that uncertainty have on us. In *certainty* we separate ourselves from ourselves, from the reality of our uncertain lives, and from each other. This is one important aspect of the lesson of the Two Truths of *absolute* (*ultimate*) and *relative* (*conventional*). If, as we will argue, there is *no* absolute truth then we are left with the always-correctible, revisable, provisional, and so conventional truth of the relative. We need to be able to see *both* that we inevitably distort and misrepresent, and *how* this misrepresentation further misleads us. Understanding that this is so — '*seeing*' this — affects both how we think about the world, and the actions we take in the world. We will never simply 'see the world as it is', but we may come to see the dimensions of our delusion more clearly, and this is a lot! Further, this absoluteness of our uncertainty, of our not knowing, is itself the precondition for what it is to be 'just this moment' or to truly *recognise* each other, or, for that matter, myself. This is the *not-knowing* of which the koans speak, the not-knowing that is 'most intimate', that is itself 'not separate'. 'Who are you?' the Chinese Emperor asked of Bodhidharma: '*I don't know!*'

Practice Question: *Has the pandemic, whether in its reporting, or how it has affected my own life, changed my experience and the way I think and feel about my body, my life, the world?*

Has it changed the way I think about the stories I tell, and those that other people do?

Like any narrator, I am always telling a story — to myself, to you — a story about the world. Unlike a narrator, I am a part of the story I am telling, I am always already an actor in it. How far do I understand the story I tell, the words I find placed in my mouth? How far do I understand the motivation of my character, the levels of intention, the historical sediment framing my habits and assumptions? In these commentaries I will explore the connections between the levels we separate out from our experience of reality to think of as ‘the personal’ and ‘the social’. To put it more intimately, to explore the way our society shows up as ‘*me*’. We are never the unified, self-consistent and hyper-individualised beings that so much of the way the world is framed for us might lead us to believe. So while ‘don’t tell lies!’ is an excellent starting point, we need to look deeply at what what we might mean by both ‘truth’ and ‘honesty’.

In *Waking Up To What You Do*, Ordinary Mind teacher Diane Rizzeto points both to the importance of coming to understand our intention, and to the difficulty of actually doing this. I myself might prefer to talk about ‘intentions’ — plural, multiple — and add an ‘and how!’ Since at least the time of Freud we know that intention is rarely straightforward or single layered: I can intend different and even contradictory things at the same time, coming from different places, the different ‘self-states’ which I am. And in reality I am anything but an open book to myself. Walt Whitman knew this well...‘Do I contradict myself? Very well, I contradict myself...I contain multitudes’. I am impermanent and inconsistent, divided within myself, pulling in different directions at once. The more I try to deny or ignore this complexity, this self-contradiction, then the less I understand my own actions, and the more likely they are to miscarry. So perhaps ‘honest’ here has to begin with the truths of how I actually feel in this moment, my actual thoughts and emotions, body sensations. To ‘own’ my own words I need to speak from a place of honesty, from how I do actually feel, and not how I would *like* to feel, or how I think I *should* feel. Hence, from the very beginning of working with this Precept we are back at our zazen practice...how does this present feeling actually *feel*? Quite possibly my feelings in this single moment are complex and contradictory...on the one hand...on the other hand... How do I even know what I feel, and what happens when I try to put all this into words? And what happens when the words simply flow from my mouth, as if unbidden? There’s often a kind of honesty in this, but one that may itself cause hurt to others if these are not words framed in kindness. And when I hear these words fall from my mouth do I feel vindicated, and that I have said my *truth*? Or perhaps that I have let slip my secret self? Or that I have said something ‘in the heat of the moment’ that I don’t ‘truly’ mean? What *do* I mean? Where did these words really come from? This is never some pre-written script I am reading: our speech is always context, relationship, and never a game of solitaire I’m playing by myself. Diane Rizzeto points at how best to approach these questions. Please read the whole section on ‘The Practice’ in her chapter on this Precept, preferably several times (and then do the practice, for days, weeks, months, years, your lifetime...) Meanwhile, let’s take a look at some of what she says:

‘Begin your practice of this precept by observing the ways in which you do not speak truthfully. Remember to keep the observing stance of the science researcher, paying close your inquiry to specific situations...but you may also

keep it broad. The key is to *listen* to yourself as you speak, I mean *really* listen to the words, the tone of your voice the pauses and silences, at work, at breakfast with your partner, at the supermarket, in the the doctor's office.'

She mentions a female student of hers, a nurse, who had found herself 'silent' in situations at work where she knows she 'should' have spoken:

'In the example...in which my student watched the ways in which she handled her work in the hospital, she noticed that indeed she wasn't always just silent. In fact, she often did speak, responding to her supervisor with the compliant words, "That's fine." As she really began to listen, she heard those two little words — that's fine — in many situations, not just at work.' WU, 58-9.

It's interesting that Diane's example is not of a self-serving *lie*, but of a failure to say what needs to be said — a willingness effectively to be silenced — as her student finds she is using the same habitual response — '*it's fine*' — in very different contexts. In terms of traditional Buddhist psychology this is a *sankhara* that has become too rigid, and that can't adapt well to different situations. And these *are* different situations. Over the kitchen table it's probably more about not getting/doing what I want or need, and just going along with others instead: it ties in to stories about how I don't deserve things or am unimportant. But in the professional context it becomes about my feeling unable to offer proper care to others through allowing my voice to be silenced. At home this nurse may (I obviously don't know...and please forgive my heteronormative assumptions) be deferring to husband or children, and probably still doing most of the housework and cooking despite having a responsible and demanding job. Clearly, *gendered assumptions* about providing care and about parenting would be highly relevant here. At work it becomes more about institutional culture: about hierarchy, protocols, how decisions are made and challenged, why we offer *doctors* a higher level of authority and respect, and also in how race and class show up. Of course what these different situations share is the silencing of a woman's *own* voice as being somehow lesser: a central part of the hierarchy of patriarchy, a theme to which we shall return.

As we all experience, and as Rizzetto points out, we don't always see straight off what's going on in situations like these, we may only get it later — minutes, hours, days or even months later. But the practice remains the same, whenever this is:

'Now, at whatever point you realise you've engaged in a deception, turn your awareness inward and feel your body. Are there any sensations like heart pounding, dry mouth, blushing, or a sinking feeling? See if that sensation wants to name itself as guilt, shame, fear, or whatever. Don't demand an answer. Just invite it. Notice what sort of thoughts are present and notice if they string together in a story line. What is that story? ... It's not necessary to catch all the thoughts. Just one. Then just repeat it to yourself: "Having a thought that..." You've just spoken truthfully!... This can be a difficult time when our self-judging guilt mind takes over. But we handle the judging mind as we do any other thought/emotion/body reaction. Label. Feel. Breathe and move on.' p. 60

This is a beautifully and powerfully put description of Ordinary Mind practice. It's in the persistence, the return over and over again to it, that insight occurs as an embodied, visceral understanding that goes deep within us:

'Eventually... when you are ready, an insight will begin to emerge. You will not only know it in the gut, you will feel it and breathe it in its complete presence. My student who is the nurse worked with this precept for several months before she began to have a sense that what she was trying to keep silent was the belief that if she said what was on her mind she would be rejected. She allowed herself to experience the rising and falling experience of rejection whenever it came up by feeling it in her body, opening for as long as she could to it.' p. 60-61

Within Jōko Beck's understanding of our practice this is where we touch upon our core beliefs: those ideas acquired in early childhood that we hold and maintain as stories and coping strategies long after they have ceased to offer us any benefit at all. *Rejection*. I unconsciously believe that to speak the truth of my experience will mean that I am rejected by others, that I will not be recognised, and that my safety lies only in my compliance to their wishes. But, if we can allow ourselves simply to *sit* with this experience:

'At first just a moment or two, and over time, longer and longer periods of time — pounding heart, closed chest, just breathing in and out. Over and over, she paused in open stillness, allowing the sensation labeled rejection to rise and fall away — moving, changing, constant flux.

'What we experience ...is the groundlessness of our belief that we must be untruthful to our experience. It is the truthfulness of Just This. What we think of as an unbearable experience, one that must be avoided by engaging in silence or falsehoods, is really not much more than energy manifesting in a certain way in our bodies and thoughts. We come to know intimately the many subtle ways we intentionally deceive in an attempt to escape deeply held assumptions about our identity — our dream of self. When we can experience for ourselves the transitory nature of the belief, then it no longer has us in a strong hold. We are a little freer from our requirements — freer to speak truthfully.' WU, 61- 62

I'd agree absolutely with this, but I think there are ways in which we *can*, and *need* to go further. Put at it's simplest, Jōko's practice aims to show us our core strategies, and by sitting with the experience and awareness of them, to lessen their hold over us. To the degree we *can* do this we escape the 'dream of self', seen in classical Zen terms as the journey to 'no-self', 'not-self'. From this perspective it's purely a question of removing the negatives that give rise to a 'dream of self' — our self-stories of *lack* and *insufficiency* that give rise to the very idea of self, and hence lead us to act 'self-ishly'. It's my perfectly normal inability to bear the pain of these stories and their accompanying feelings that leads to my desperate need to escape — at any cost to myself or others. Once I've come to be at ease with these feelings, discovered that they are really no more than patterns of 'energy', I can and will simply *respond* to the situation, and I'll always have an *appropriate* response because there will be no 'dream of self' clouding my perception and judgement.

No 'Me' without 'We'

There are, though, several problems with this idea — though none of them in any way negate or lessen the value of the practice itself. Firstly, it leaves both the problem and its solution as 'all about me'. Diane's nurse *may* be able to renegotiate her compliance with her line supervisor and her husband and children, but the deeper issues for her, as for everyone, really *aren't* around her core beliefs, but around the organisation of *our* shared society. Even if *everyone* studied Zen and got to a point of real clarity in their self-understanding (how wonderful!), we still wouldn't simply and spontaneously collectively know what do about the institutional culture of a hospital, how best to relate to each other as lovers, parents, friends. These questions are never simply *technical, objectively logical*, but are always questions of *value*, and hence both *ethical* and *political*. Whatever literal 'selfishness' I might shed through my years of practice was only ever the beginning of the problem — my 'self' shows up as the assumptions and habits that make up the self I am right here and now — woman or man, nurse or doctor, child or parent. Unless we conceive of a 'true self' somewhere *beyond* the realities of everyday life, this is simply — in a very immediate sense — the truth of who I *really* am.

So our practice has to address the 'we' of our lives at every level. There's the 'we' of my first relationships, the shared delight of learning to *recognise myself in you* and *you in me*, and the social situation into which I was born and in which I grew to be 'me'. There's the reality of 'me and you' — these words reaching out to you and asking for you engagement, or the two of us sat together in a café over coffee. There's the wider 'we' of how we arrange, or how we would *want* to arrange our world, extending from the most immediate practicalities to the big issues of politics and ethics. It's not just about 'me', it's about 'us' in every sense. To return to Diane's student: for a woman (and for each of us) to find or lose her voice is much more an issue of the patriarchal culture in which we have come to be ourselves — which is reproduced in us, and which we find ourselves both resisting and being complicit with — as it is of her 'self' in isolation. Patriarchy, importantly, always attempts to refer us back to the *individual* both as *cause* and as solely *responsible*, and not to challenge this is to confine ourselves within delusion.

So how does Patriarchy show up as 'me', or for the purposes of this precept, as *what* I say, *how* I say it, and to *whom*? The feminist and classicist Mary Beard has written in *Women and Power* of the antiquity and ubiquity of the silencing of women with the public sphere, and that for the Greeks and Romans this silence is in fact part of the definition of what a woman *is*. To transgress this was to attract incomprehension and hostility, to betray oneself *as a woman* in the understanding of the times. Beard points to how far contemporary attitudes maintain this view, for example in social media trolling, but extending far more widely into every aspect of our professional, social and family relationships. She talks of the difficulty of being heard as a woman speaking in public: talked over, dismissed, or simply ignored. To silence, intentionally or unintentionally (and is there any clear dividing line?) is how patriarchy shows up, to be silenced (whether we experience it as outrage or fail even to notice) is how patriarchy shows up. So I can ask of my *own* speech and my *own* listening:

Do I give the same **value** to women's words as men's as I listen?
 Why do I accept the **authority** of some speech and not of others?
 Do I **expect** myself to be heard when I speak, or not?
 What **value** do I give to my own words?
 As a woman, do I experience being 'talked over'? How do I **react**, how do I **feel**?
 As a man, do I find myself 'talking over' others of any gender?
 As a woman, do I experience men explaining to me what I already know, or know better?
 As a man, do I find myself 'mansplaining'?
 As a woman, what must I do to be **heard**?
 As a man, how is it to be silenced or ignored? How do I **react**, how do I **feel**?
 When I speak, where does **my** sense of **authority** come from?
 What must I **know** in order to speak and be heard?
 Who holds **my** words to be of value, and who does **not**?

As always, self-honesty is only possible with an awareness of how I *actually* feel in this moment, and *as* this body. As always, I try to feel my own points of resistance: 'I've never had any trouble being heard!'...'I would never do that kind of thing!' *Judgement* is not my friend in this process, I'll get lost in good and bad, and only strengthen my resistance. But even my judgement isn't 'bad', just *another* layer in my response, to be heard, gently noted, and let go.

And me? Already as a child, I recognised the need to *know* in order to feel able to speak, to have *facts*, an argument, the *truth*. In some ways this has served me well. But of course my understanding of knowing, of facts, of value, was largely/entirely framed within the strongly patriarchal assumptions around *speaking* that are still only beginning to be challenged. Both my mother and her own mother were highly articulate, and yet in a sense both 'knew their place' as women... But there was also the example of my godmother Audrey and her partner Joan: political, engaged, knowledgeable in all kinds of areas, the smartest and most aware person with whom I spent time as a child. They formed from my earliest memories, and before I was even dimly aware of it, the possibility of a *different* way of being in the social world.... I value their having been a part of my childhood ever more deeply as the years have passed.

So to return to Jōko's basic theme: surely it is actually far stronger as a *general* argument applying to us *as a culture* rather than as individuals? In a world of absolute interdependence it's our *collective* suffering and the dissociations, the repression, the evasion, the denial through which we attempt to avoid it that have created the specific structures of violence, inequality and exploitation of which we are all a part. A little self-honesty is an absolutely necessary first step, but it is and can only be a beginning. To develop it further requires our awareness and understanding of what it is to be not just 'me' but 'we'.

Saying What I Mean, Meaning What I Say

It's primarily through *language* that we can come to agree, disagree, struggle and fight around all these issues without physical coercion or violence. Our language always *embodies* the status quo in its widest sense, and contains too the means of *resisting*, changing it. Buddhism, and within it Zen, was always supposed to be a revolutionary social movement, not a mechanism for producing more compliant family members and citizens. When we talk of 'Saving All Beings' as part of the Bodhisattva Vows (and these are the *Bodhisattva* Precepts which we are engaging with in our practice), this is not about some imagined future paradise, but in *this* moment, right *here*, and beginning with *us*. Self-honesty is vital, but also complicated. We have already asked questions about intention, about whether and how we can be said to own our thoughts, words and actions, and in what sense we can be said actively to take responsibility for them, bearing in mind both that all these are causally determined, and that ultimately both self and actions are *empty*. Yet hopefully you and I both 'know what we mean' by 'say what I mean and mean what I say'? We also have to understand why this is always something of an aspiration, and can never be taken for granted. I mentioned above the idea thinking of words as things as much as simple meanings. The vocabulary I choose, the word-choices that say a lot about my class, my education. So, the tone I use, the loudness or quietness of my speech, the speed at which I am speaking, the pitch of my voice, the changes in pitch: (like the rising pitch at the end of a sentence indicating a question?) My posture as I speak, the role my hands play, where I am looking. All these can be as or even more important for the effect my speech will have than the literal meaning of the words. So what is my *body* communicating while I *say* these words? If I say 'sorry'... do I do this with a smile or a sneer or a snarl? With a posture that's cowed or defensive or even aggressive? Or with open face and open arms? Why did I say *these* words to *you* and in *this* way? It is said (?) that deaf people can often tell when someone is lying by observing their body language, one way we can show our truth despite our conscious intentions.

*Practice Question: When do my words say one thing and my tone or body language say another?
Are either, both or neither 'true'?
In what way?*

'Meaning what we say' and 'saying what we mean' clearly go way beyond the literal 'meaning' of words. What forces shape my words and how they are heard? Am I speaking or being spoken to by someone in a professional role...(teacher, police officer,...)? In an emotional relationship (parent, friend, lover...)? In one sense we speak from a different place with every different relationship and person that we encounter...it's not quite the same 'me' speaking as a parent with my child, or together with my partner, or as a teacher with a student. My ethnicity too: 'code switching' is a universal aspect of social interaction, but of course is used primarily to describe how members of minority communities may intentionally change all aspects of their speech — vocabulary, phrasing, pitch, emotional expression — to 'White' codes when in situations 'outside' their own community. This has its own complex motivations and politics. Is one of these the 'true' me? Do I experience myself as split? Or do I refuse to switch, and ask you just to 'take me as I am'? These are all social aspects of relationship. There are also the more psychological aspects, as with the

different voices within myself when I might be speaking as the 'wounded child', the 'martyr', the 'punitive parent', the 'saviour', the 'victim'. All of these, both social and psychological, have their own ways of speaking, vocabulary, idioms, rules of what is sayable or not. The two can and perhaps always do interact: what happens when I speak as or to a police officer who is also speaking as a wounded child? All speech is relationship of a kind. So how does *your* speech place *me*? As a naughty child? As your beloved? As an inadequate subordinate? As your guru? In this conversation or interaction, what is the self-state from which I speak, and within which I hear?

Practice Question: What voices, roles seem to speak through me? How do I tell?

Do these feel like they are 'really' me?

How do these change depending on who I am talking with?

So where actually do my words come from? Do I find them, or do they find me? Thinking about all these roles can show us partial, moment by moment answers. In what sense can I call them 'my' words at all? And what do my words say about what it is to be 'me', the event of being this person in this place at this time speaking to you? It's in our closest relationships, those with our partners, parents, children, that we can feel and hear most clearly the flickering of recognition — of true mutuality — and of its opposite of disconnection, in the constant object/person shift of finding and losing each other and ourselves. It's simply untrue to think that if we establish a real relationship with someone, then short of a major argument that relationship just automatically continues. We misunderstand each other, misinterpret a question or a tone of voice, realise that in this moment we want something different from each other, or just come to see unexpectedly that I understand the world significantly differently from you. In this instant we don't feel met, or recognised, or valued, or loved. And then, ten seconds later, we may find each other again, share a look or a joke, and relationship re-establishes itself.

To run through some of the things I might notice about the way I speak...There's exaggerating the truth, or minimising it...choosing only the facts that support my point of view...lying by omission (what we leave out)...stating hearsay as truth...passing on gossip... or keeping silent when there's a truth that needs to be told, or 'not talking' to someone, showing someone disrespect by withholding recognition of them as a person. Or not listening, blocking my ears, or only hearing my own interpretation of what you are saying. Why might I be doing any of these things? Maybe I want to influence you, get you to give me something. Maybe I want you to think badly of someone else... But maybe I'm just being one of the gang, or wanting a bit of sympathy or attention. And maybe that's because I'm wanting to feel better about myself than I do right now... to hide all those worries and fears that lurk around the edges of my awareness, to distract myself and forget them for a while. Or... maybe the opposite... because I'm indulging in holding myself to account, listing my failings and weakness, convincing myself of my great badness...spinning myself a story about myself. Most likely at different times it will be a mixture of all of these...

The Whole Truth

'I promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.' The criminal justice system relies on a singular notion of truth: factual, objective and 'beyond reasonable doubt'. We could say that its aim is to map onto each other a series of 'binary inequalities'. I've put it in this way because inequality in general is a theme to which we will return over and over again, and because many of the most significant inequalities in our societies take the form of long lasting ('durable') *either/or* categorisations. So: the justice system makes *universal* judgements of *true/false*, which it then maps to *legal/illegal*, deriving in turn from ideas of *right/wrong*. The result is that you, as a person, are then explicitly labelled either *innocent/guilty*, and hence your being either *the public/a criminal*. You remain a 'criminal' in perpetuity, at least in our thought and speech. In the United States you may or may not permanently lose the right to vote, to benefits, to housing, to an education. There is a further binary pair we should take note of: the sole exception to being held to account for your actions is to claim 'diminished responsibility': that you are, or were at the time, *mad not bad (mad/bad)*. What is happening here is to 'map' judgements of *fact* that claim universality onto a *morality* that similarly claims universality, at least at this point in time (both laws and beliefs can and do change!). Our Zen practice and understanding might lead us to question this approach in different ways. The 'whole' truth? By restricting itself to specific actions ('did you or did you not...?') the justice system *abstracts* and *de-contextualises* from the complex reality of our lives, which acts themselves are further abstracted and de-contextualised by being subject to *universal* judgements claiming *objectivity*. The subject of these judgements is then restricted to *individuals* held to be solely and uniquely responsible: we invent ourselves as selves to punish ourselves and others. This is separate-think at its most extreme: the actual impossibility of realising our fantasies of objectivity and universality leading us to double down in the attempt. The social consequences of this have been and continue to be disastrous: by ignoring the real causality of violence and harming we perpetuate the cycles of suffering, while damaging or destroying the life-chances of those caught up within the criminal justice system (this ever extending web including their wider families and even possible future victims).

I'll pause a moment here to bring us back to our own lives, our own relationships. How often do we bring this juridical model into play at moments of tension, at points of our *resistance* to experiencing our lives in this moment? Blame, guilt, shame... We too easily become barristers in our own impromptu courtrooms, and are happy to move from there to being both judge and jury. Abstracting and decontextualising, assigning individual responsibility. Making our universalising judgements. *Separating*. *Of course* in the complex reality of our lives there is, and absolutely must be, a place for *holding to account*, for *setting boundaries*, for *bearing witness* to the unacceptable. For saying *No!* But we need to be *aware* of the wider setting, of what is at stake and what is in play. Aware of the part our own resistance to our experiencing plays. We need to become aware of how we do this, of our own subtle motivations, of the complexities of relationship involved, and of the actual practical consequences.

We might usefully ask of anything we say: in whose interest do I speak, and what are the consequences of saying this? We might take the example of *performative* speech as useful

here — speech that in itself makes something the case — ‘I sentence you to ten years imprisonment!’... the judge enacts the separation, the enforcement of the bar between right and wrong, legal and illegal, public and criminal. The purpose of this bar is to licence, to make lawful, our coercion and, if deemed necessary, our violence. Whatever any judicial system might wish to *say* about itself, the institution of the prison is its very heart, and hence all existing judicial systems are based in *coercion*. But this coercion is licensed by speech. The judge speaks in the name of the state (‘The King’, ‘the People’). In whose name do I speak, *who* or *what* stands behind what I say? For the First Peoples of sixteenth century South America, it was enough that invading Spaniards read out the the *Requerimiento*, the requirement in the name of God issued by the Spanish monarchy, to sanction whatever enslavement or destruction was enacted on them. It could be read in the Spanish they could not understand, or at night when they were asleep indoors, or simply muttered under the breath. To resist was to become a rebellious subject, and hence liable to any punishment of which the community could be deemed worthy. And this in the name of the Absolute, of God himself.

There is no possible comparison between the harm of the genocide carried out in South America and our own situation in modern Western democracies. And yet...merely by being born within the national boundary (and what a privilege in most senses that is!) we are held to have agreed to any and all laws enacted by the state, and liable to whatsoever punishment. Unsurprisingly, our laws and punishments have evolved to reflect the priorities and requirements of those who wield most influence, albeit dressed in universal garb, as was the *Requerimiento*. To be poor, to appear to be ‘other’ in any way is hence to be placed in danger of coercion or violence. Who is *allowed* to speak, and when they *do* speak, who do we actually *hear*? The voice of authority, of God, of the State, is held as absolute, its statements objectively and universally true, if only because they carry with them the sanction of violence. For very many years this has been justified to us as simply inevitable, the *natural* evolution and extension of the absolute authority of the *pater*, the family head, to the organisation of a complex society. Yet contemporary anthropology suggests that in reality very many societies have not embodied this patriarchal version of the family, and have in fact evolved sophisticated strategies *avoiding* basing their societies on coercion and violence. Debate, consensus, multiplicity. Other models are possible.

So to return to our own immediate experience (and assuming we have not suffered becoming homeless, do not have significant mental health issues, have not been criminalised for drug use or have had any similar direct encounter with state coercion), when we speak to command, or ask, or question, or protest, then on what authority, what understanding of truth, do we do so? Am I, in whatever sense, ‘the ruler in my own home’? Do I speak with the voice of ‘fairness’, ‘justice’, ‘reason’? Do I assume, whether it is deciding our national asylum policy or just whose turn it is to empty the dishwasher, that I speak as ‘the man on the Clapham omnibus’ was once held to, or with the voice of the ‘silent majority’? For all men? For all women? Just who (or what) stands behind what I say? And with what sanction?

Can we imagine a different sense of 'lawfulness', one built on relationship and mutuality rather than coercion? Relational analyst Jessica Benjamin has argued that such a sense has to underlie all genuine connection with each other, a sense of lawfulness we build together with others, from our experience with our first caregivers onwards. We'll explore this in relation to other precepts. This lawfulness lies in shared experience and shared values, trusting that we are on 'the same page', that past experience shows that disagreement can actually deepen our shared understanding. This is not the voice, the speech, of the Pater, of absolute authority. In our real relationships within our family, at work, among friends, we may find ourselves switching voices as we go: now fully in relationship, and then demanding assent, now revisiting what we see as unreasonable demand, before refinding connection.

The Whole Truth

Criminal justice and its prisons shows us clearly some of the aspects of our *own* lives of which we are normally less aware. Those at the margins of our society experience the full force of the instrumental use of 'truth' to control and deny recognition, and to silence them, to deny their speech. To deny the *meeting* that requires of us our *not-knowing*, and hence of our mutual recognition as vulnerable, mortal, embodied beings. Reminds us that all 'truth' is relative and relational, and hence all relations are, to some degree or another, relations of power. Whether as an individual or as representatives of institutions, each and every time we speak, or are spoken to, we are a part of all of this. So prison shows us writ large the consequences both of *our* not being recognised, and of our failing to recognise *others*. All this is the 'we' of which we are a living part in our families, our jobs, our activity as citizens. How far do we establish and maintain a sense of *lawfulness* (in Benjamin's sense) in our immediate and wider relationships and across society as a whole? How and who do we trust, not just in the sense of 'telling the truth', but in the wider sense of a shared space of mutuality and mutual understanding in which differences can be aired and resolved? Finally only the truth of *this* moment of relationship, of a specific speaker (author...) in a specific context with a specific other or others as audience.

Part of the shared 'lawfulness' of a relationship is our implicit common consent as to what counts as truth and how that may be affirmed or challenged. All relationships are relationships of power, whether that is balanced, or benign, or exploitative. To assert the *universality* of a truth — that a 'truth' is true in all contexts — is itself a practice of power. It is now becoming more generally appreciated that the universal aspirations of Western philosophy and science from the eighteenth century onwards — 'The Enlightenment' — were themselves an important aspect of the Imperial project of *global* invasion and conquest, as also a part of the development of capable and compliant populations at home. The language of 'objectivity' spoken by the educated, White, independent (in the sense of being able to *command* the labour of others) male would henceforth be the standard by which the whole world would be judged and would come to judge itself. Science itself 'proved' the superiority of men over women. It 'proved' too that of (some) White Europeans over all other ethnic groups, and provided the ships and the firepower to establish this superiority *de facto* across the entire globe. So is 'science' itself not 'true'? Contrary to what is sometimes assumed, the 'scientific method' at the heart of all science

produces truth which is always contextual and highly specific, and within which any claim to generality is subject to testing and falsification. Precise conditions must be observed, and results able to be repeated. These must be *consistent* with other accepted experiments, so that an informed *consensus* may be established. What are produced are *descriptions* of regularities from which probable conclusions can be inferred and others discounted. The ‘things’ of science: atoms, forces and the rest, are useful descriptions, neither real nor unreal beyond this. Hence we can never (for instance) finally ‘*prove*’ the human causation of climate change, despite the overwhelming *probability* of this established by the actual evidence. Scientific truth also always emerges from a lived social context: just what will be researched, funded, acknowledged? Oil and drug companies know this well, as did the tobacco giants fifty years ago. But this extends more widely to how all research is framed within our broader goals as a society and the understanding of the world generated by philosophy, psychology, economics and the rest. Science is never simply ‘neutral’, and the truths of science are always *relative*, never *absolute*.

In many ways what we do with our own Zen practice is similar to ‘science’: we map in our bodies, our feelings, emotions and thoughts, testing the painful inconsistencies between my lived experience and how I think the world is or should be. Here, my *self-hatred* turns out to be as significant as what I might think of as my *selfishness*. My sense of my own self is not something fixed or independent, but part of the flow that is the world, and I can come to distinguish something of the currents, ripples and eddies which comprise it, and of their interactions, sources and destinations. My repeated felt experience will test for me the different truths and insights within the complex and inconsistent whole that ‘I’ ‘am’. And that will encompass in turn all the complexities of a life lived in a world of violence and inequality and exploitation.

Truth, Relative and Absolute

So what of the *truth* of Buddhism, of Zen? Asked about the eternal truth of Buddhism one teacher replied, ‘it just *changed*.’ All that is distinctive about a Zen or Buddhist approach to ethics — all that takes it away from being finally simply another account of how to balance the interests of one person or group against those of another — depends on the understanding of non-separation, or as it is more literally and usually translated, *emptiness*. Non-separation/emptiness entails both the identity and difference of *relative* and *absolute*, of *conventional* and *ultimate* truth. Let’s think about this as it applies to our speech. Among the short commentaries put in Bodhidharma’s mouth, that on this Precept says:

‘Self-nature is inexplicably wondrous. In the intrinsically pure Dharma, not expounding a word is called “not lying” ’.

At the level of absolute/ultimate truth, all separation is only an illusion: there are *no* finally separate and substantial ‘things’ of any kind, so no words whatsoever can ever *truly* describe the wholeness of the reality of our lives or the world in which we live. As the Heart Sutra repeatedly insists, even central Buddhist concepts such as the Four Noble Truths, the Five Aggregates, and the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination are nothing more than human made schemes of classification that can never adequately represent life itself, or the reality of my experience. In this sense, because there is no separation —

because there are no separate things, no separate me and you — every word I speak that names and hence limits is already a lie, and betrays reality as it is. Far better to keep a noble silence! Far better to have never written this!

On the other hand, it is equally true that because at the level of the absolute, *all* separation is only an illusion, that in this sense I cannot ever actually lie. There's no separate 'me', and no separate 'things' about which to make true or false statements. More, I completely and perfectly express and reveal myself in each moment, my 'lie' is itself simply an aspect of the truth of that moment. Words are just words — sounds in my ear or squiggles on a page — how foolish to think of them in terms of precise meanings! In Zen the teacher always urges the student on to 'Speak! Speak! Say a word of Zen!' Not, 'try *really hard* to get it right!', but, realise you can't go wrong. Say your truth, whether it stutters, simply expresses your confusion, or flashes with insight... Speak! Speak! In this sense, words are simply a particular kind of thing, of event, that are empty (not-separate) like everything else. At the level of the absolute/ultimate there is hence nothing that *can* be said. Not because words are finally inadequate (meaning reality is *unsayable*), but because emptiness is itself empty (non-separation itself not-separate), so there is finally nothing *to be* asserted, nothing *to be* true or false. No absolute ground on which we might be able to base our truth. This lack of any final ground is Bodhidharma's *not-knowing*. To cut to the chase: the only absolute truth is that there is no absolute truth. Which far from making the relative/conventional 'unreal', leaves the relative as the *only* reality, and *all* truth as relative. The *only* truths are the truths of this relative world: truths like my headache, or quantum physics, or this keyboard. OK, so over the last two thousand years many thousands of pages of discourse and commentary have attempted to clarify this core of Zen thought and practice, and I've hardly 'proved' or clearly demonstrated it here. The takeaway is just that conclusion: the only absolute truth is that there is no absolute truth. So what is the (relative) truth of this moment, my experience of writing this for you, your reading this? Truth is always relational, because life is.

What would it mean to speak the truth of *this* moment? Shall I tell you something I 'know', or can I offer you living words? What would be the difference? Bodhidharma, asked by the Emperor 'who are you?' finally replies 'I don't know!' When the young monk Fayán is making the rounds of teachers and temples on his pilgrimage, and is asked by the master he is visiting 'why have you come?', his reply echoes Bodhidharma: 'I don't know!' 'Ah,' says master Dizang in response, 'Not knowing is most intimate!' Not knowing is the space of openness and possibility. *Not-knowing* reminds me that all my knowledge, all my ideas, all my certainties, are always limited, approximate, relational. This applies equally to what I think about the world, and what I think about my 'self'. This is the importance of Bodhidharma's and Fayán's not-knowing: each is a chance to re-form my experience and hence my understanding of this moment, this person, of 'life as it is', of the world. We have already begun to explore the practice of *bearing witness*, which is itself a response to not-knowing, and is both a listening and a telling. What these share is an opening, and an openness, a bringing to light. To what will we bear witness? What truth will we find? Or will our words tie us only more deeply and more damagingly to our delusion?

Bearing Witness to Myself, Bearing Witness to Each Other

I bear witness to myself in myself, and I bear witness to others in myself. I bear witness to others in others, and I bear witness to myself in others. We are always *this* 'me', 'me' not in isolation from a world 'out there', but *as* a moment of this world that encompasses *everything*. *This* configuration of world. So to study myself is, in this sense, to study the world, and to study the world to study myself. Hence, strangely, it is by recognising first of all the separation 'within' myself that I can begin to be not-separate from you when we speak. Following from this, it is by understanding that the many thoughts, stories, ideas that emerge from my mouth do not simply originate from a place deep within myself (though it may *feel* incontrovertible that that is so) but are part of the world around me responding to itself, made with the resources I have to hand. We share this world that brought us into being, a world of which we are all impermanent parts. We share, and will always share in the making and shaping of each other. And this inevitably places us deep in a complex set of relationships of power and powerlessness. All forms of the direct and indirect violence of insult and discrimination, exclusion and exploitation play their part in this. Misogyny, our many racisms (including anti-semitism), Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, credentialism, and not forgetting the omnipresent but so hard to define effects of 'class' — the list seems endless as we recognise more and more that what once seemed to many of us as only 'normal' and 'natural' is in reality cruel and damaging for both the individuals targeted and for our society as a whole. All these take their form in major and minor verbal violence as they circulate in our culture, and we have no natural immunity from them. We receive the opinions of our parents and teachers, our playmates, workmates, our heroes, and the media. We pass them on to others, and often pass them off as our own. How much of what I say is actually received opinion, something 'people like me' tend to say, or perhaps something my father always said when I was a child? Sometimes if we reflect we can actually hear in our minds the voice we first heard saying those words. Our speech, as I have emphasised endlessly, is always social. I bear witness to the speech of my culture and of myself, understanding that my awareness will never let me step entirely outside this culture to see it purely 'objectively'. I am a part of that culture and will reproduce it, even as I dissent, challenge or disagree with what others say and do.

Democracy?

I said above that no amount of personal clarity and self honesty will intuitively tell us how to run a hospital, or even my family relationships. But speech *is* the major means through which we take, or excuse our failure to take, *collective*, action. From the symbolic speech of *voting* (secret speech...) to debate over the dinner table, to the collective action of protest, speech is our most direct form of public action. Jōko Beck talked of needing to criticise from a position of *love*, and we might put this in our terms as disagreeing *within* our *recognition* of the other: that we keep relationship open, dialogue open, speaking honestly, listening actively. This self-evidently does not routinely happen in 'politics', but it is only in this way that we can find and expand elements of real democracy within our society. We allow simple *majoritarianism* to pass for *democracy*, majoritarianism measured in arbitrary ways and at arbitrary intervals, and in ways too that take no account of the interests and influences active creating this alleged majority assent. In its attempts to remain 'above' the

mundane world of difference, of disagreement, of dissent, our practice of Zen has too often failed to take account of this reality and necessity of our actual lives. In a world where the abbot or the teacher is always right, and where 'spiritual' people 'don't worry about the government', spiritual superiority simply functions as tacit social conservatism. Such an attitude towards practice will also tend to produce a well-known Buddhist stereotype: the 'nice' Buddhist whose constant smile and relentless happiness hide passive-aggressive behaviour that can make life a lot less than pleasant for those around them: I remember the always entertaining and insightful Zen teacher Martine Batchelor describing the silent wars fought over the sink and the washing up of cups in one Buddhist community where she had lived. Democracy is not about commanding or demanding assent, it is the non-violent resolution at the collective level of our *difference*, our *disagreement*, our mutual *anger*, *frustration* and *despair*. It is not about being 'one', it is about finding ways of recognising that we are '*not-separate*' — ways that do not function to elide or erase our difference. We will examine this further with the other two precepts dealing with speech (the Sixth and Seventh), and the significance of this pre-eminent role of speech in our *public* lives cannot be over-estimated. It is no coincidence that women have often been denied the right to speak in public, and still face frequent criticism for doing so. It is only by hearing the voices of all those who are tacitly or explicitly censored (which includes all those implicitly or explicitly excluded from 'power') that we can come to any understanding of the real issues within our society. What it is to be a child, a migrant, a 'minority', 'lower' class, cognitively different, having a physical disability, unemployed, convicted of a crime...? Without hearing from and coming to understand those leading different lives, what hope have we of any kind of justice, equality, truthfulness?

Listen!

As with all the Precepts, self-observation is the core, and the heart of self-observation is to experience the non-separation of this self and world. For this precept the invitation is to investigate our own responses, noticing all the little ways that I habitually distort the truth, speak more harshly than I might, fail to show caring. And perhaps this should really begin with noticing how we *listen*. In one sense we can say listening is our whole practice. Listen to my heart, my muscles, my gut. Listen to my tone, inflection, pauses and silences. Listen. So do we, can we, do this equally with *other* people? Do I really *listen* when you speak? Listen with my ears and my understanding, with my eyes and the responses of *my* own body to *your* body posture, your expression, your gestures? Listen with the whole of me to the whole of you. Listen *through* awareness of my own excitement, delight, anger, disgust, despair at what you're saying? Listen beyond my judgement of you for saying this? How can we have a genuine conversation — a real conversation — if I'm not really listening to you? Am I *open* to hearing and understanding what you are saying, whether or not I agree with it? Can I see how it makes sense from your point of view, even if not from mine? Can we disagree with each other without communication and openness breaking down? Perhaps our willingness to *listen* is the precondition for all honest and caring speech, all *recognition*, based as it is in our mutuality. Could we say that 'correct' speech is simply that which in any particular situation acknowledges and originates in our non-separation, whereas 'incorrect' speech attempts our separation through some form of violence?

Practice Question: *How thoroughly do I actually listen?*

Can I become more aware of the attention I do or do not offer as I listen to you?

How far is my listening shaped by my preconceptions about you?

What else might get in the way?

Bearing Witness in my speech is complex and multifaceted. Speech is, quite naturally, the major mode in which I bear witness to all aspects of my life, to my relation to all the Precepts. I bear witness to what seems most 'inner', most intimate and personal, which reveals itself also to be the complex of social forces acting through me, and as which I act. I bear witness through my speech to the actions of others in the world around me. And however complex, difficult, contradictory, *we* — you and I and everyone — do *relate*, relate as family and friends, allies and adversaries. We may choose to speak only of our own truth, and perhaps even only to ourselves. Or we may speak out loudly about the many and manifold injustices we see around us. We may speak to offer words of love, to inspire each other, to share knowledge, or simply to recognise ourselves in each other, and each other in ourselves. In whatever way — and although our speech always moves in the direction of *both* separation and non-separation — speech is one of our most important forms of *realising* our mutual non-separation. We need to be aware of all of this, and still we very much need simply to open our mouths and 'Speak! Speak!'

Bearing witness is to share our presence, to join with the other person in mutual recognition without either trying to change them or be taken over by their viewpoint or emotions. Recognition is the precondition of genuine care of any kind, and is *in itself* to offer a form of actual care. Recognition is what *undermines* the binary of carer and cared for, of 'knowing' care giver and mute object of care. True caring can only be based on mutual understanding, and our speech is central to this, whether we are a lover, partner, co-worker, parent, nurse or other care-worker... So is this something we need to cultivate actively? Of course! But caring 'speech' can also be much simpler than this: offering a word, a look, a gesture that meets — perhaps unexpectedly — the *other*, and lets each see themselves mirrored as human, as active subject, as vulnerable. Recognition. I meet the *other* at home, at work, on the street. Meet them on the news, meet them through their unseen labour embodied in every single thing I consume or use, meet them even through their aggregation into mere 'statistics'. How can I best bear witness to these *others*, to each and all? How offer and receive recognition as best we may?