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## Inequality and Greed

*I bear witness to the reality of inequality and of greed in myself and in the world, and aspire towards equality and sharing freely of all that I can.*

Why do we put inequality and greed together here? Does greed *cause* inequality, or inequality *cause* greed, or both? Is my greed 'my' business alone, or is it always to do with 'all of us', because if inequality is by definition *relational*, then does that apply to greed as well? 'Inequality', like every word and thing we meet, is *empty* in the Buddhist sense — not *one thing* but very many *different* interwoven and changing strands of *relationship*. Hence I live out my life — this life as it is — through relationships of inequality that frame both *how* and *what* I experience. These inequalities show up as both the 'walls of my mind' and the physical and social walls I encounter. I can't simply stand *outside* inequality, any more than I can ever see *without* delusion (and the two are intimately interrelated). To become aware of my life as it is, to come to *respond* appropriately with more care and less harm, is to bear witness to the multiple and multi-factored concrete inequalities I embody as *this person* in *these* circumstances at *this* time. How best to aspire to 'equality and sharing freely'? We have already framed the beginnings of an answer in relation to the three 'speech precepts' and the precept on delusion: in *relationship* and *recognition*, in our meeting 'with openness and possibility' on equal and open ground, and as the foundation of mutual *care*.

### Feeling Greedy?

'Greed' is one of the traditional 'three poisons' or 'three fires' of Buddhism: those qualities that are held to keep us bound to suffering, both the suffering we ourselves experience and the suffering we bring to others. We 'know' greed is bad — in the Christian tradition it is a deadly sin — and is clearly something we think we should *feel* bad about ourselves for feeling. So what makes *you* feel that you're being greedy? Is your experience of greed one of the overwhelming flood of *need*? Or is it rather to be in the grip of *desire* — I *want* that! — or do I simply feel it as the inclination to take a little too much? But then what is *too* much anyway? How do we know? Is it simply 'more than I need'? (How do I know?) More than my 'fair share' or my 'just deserts'? (Shared with whom, and who gets to say?) We *can* and do upbraid ourselves for wanting *more* things, for being demanding of others, whether for their compliance, attention or affection. We may notice the way we self-justify: 'I *deserve* this!'. But...we should also be wary of taking the opposite path: our tendency to indulge our sense of being just *so* selfish, self-centred, *bad*. Because that's still keeping the story all about me... So let's rephrase this question in the terms we keep returning to throughout these commentaries: is this greed '*in me*' as some bad seed, as 'karma', as simply 'human nature'? Or, is it *relational*, is it about how we lead our lives *as* relationship with each other and with the multiplicity of our own selves?

It's hardly news that we live in what we are supposed to believe is a dog eat dog world, and so hardly surprising that we all tend to want a little more than the next guy, or something for nothing from our boss or the government, or want to feel that even blind chance has or will actually favour me in the lottery draw. As always, Diane Rizzetto asks us to pay close attention to how I *actually* behave. It is always beneficial and insightful to become more aware of our actions, and of the thoughts, feelings and emotions that accompany them. So, to begin with some of her examples, if I take home stationery from work, when I don't flag up the checkout assistant's error in *my* favour, or simply pocket the money I find the street, then what exactly are my thoughts, feelings, emotions? Where does my sense of entitlement to do any of these things come from? Do I feel triumphant (I've got one over on them!), or guilty (I know I shouldn't...but!), resentful (this is payback!), or simply entitled by default (why the hell shouldn't I...*they* should have paid more attention/*they* make enough out of me anyway!)? And as I remember all this of catch myself in the act, is my body clenched tight or relaxed, buzzing or calm?

*Practice Question: How DO I behave, actually?*

*Where have I noticed myself self-justifying?*

*On what grounds?*

*Has working with the precepts already changed my self-perception in any way?*

## **Entitlement**

All this is useful, essential in its way. Come to know myself better in my complexity and my contradictions, and it should begin to become obvious that I am never really the entirely free and independent 'moral agent' both Western philosophy and law imagine me to be. To investigate more deeply we need to understand how our actions are always part of a complex whole, and so, for instance, we need to add some different examples that point to the actual inequality within our relationships: what does my employer really think he's 'bought' of me for £10 an hour, and why does the government impose such harsh conditions on my simply trying to get the benefits to which I am entitled and need to feed my children? ...And so on. Diane Rizzetto herself writes: 'I'd steal a loaf of bread in a wink if I had no money and I knew it would ward off starvation for myself or my children'. (WU 117) The sense of entitlement of the casual worker or benefits claimant is not of the same kind as the company director, and it is disingenuous to pretend otherwise.

A traditional way of stating this precept is 'not taking what is not freely given', and this is a particularly useful way of looking at one aspect of our greed that's not about property or ownership and which we might not immediately recognise as greed: the immediate physical and psychological impact of our presence in the world as embodied beings. How do I occupy physical space in relation to other people, how do I take up their time, their attention and affection? To take two small but telling cases that have only recently come to be part of our shared conversation: the phenomena of 'manspreading' and 'mansplaining': gendered attitudes that assume masculine entitlement to *most* of a shared seat, the *authoritative* (or even only...) voice in a conversation. 'Entitlement', knowing or unknowing, might offer us an insight into a wider sense of what is meant by greed in the context of this precept. We only normally notice entitlement when we are the victim of

other people's assumptions about *their* entitlement, or when we are challenged on what others see as our *own*: in which case we experience our own rising resistance... 'but I was only...!' How much *do* I take? And *how* do I set my measure? Our answers are obviously *individual* responses that have much to do with our 'self' in the everyday sense, but a self formed within our *collective* habits, assumptions and responses. In both sides of this process — the assumption of entitlement and the experience of its imposition — we can become aware of the coming to be of the experience of self as *separate*, of our 'selfing', to use the verb form that highlights the self as a *relational process* rather than a 'thing' I am or have. *Entitlement* is a central aspect of how we live with inequality: why do you or I act as if we have a right to space, to time, or to any of the resources our society offers, *more than* or *instead of* someone else? This question echoes through all of our discussion of inequalities here, whether that's my unconscious reflexes, or of my 'rights', 'fairness', 'justice' or whatever other rationalisation I or others may offer either for our individual actions or the status quo. Our individual 'freedom' is always a social obligation the nature and limits of which are socially constructed and defined. This obligation is always embodied in relationships that are never simply those of 'equals', but always express specific inequalities in a particular context. So on the one hand we have our individual and collective greed, and on the other the inequalities through which this is produced, channelled and expressed.

#### ***Practice Question:***

*What is my felt and thought experience of entitlement when I see or suffer from that of others?  
...when I am called out for what others see as my own?*

### **The Dream of Mastery**

Because we begin from our experiencing of our thoughts, feelings and emotions both on and off the cushion, we naturally tend to talk in *psychological* terms. But any attempt to understand the deeper workings of greed and inequality must connect up our individual experiencing with the structural forces — cultural, economic, social — that seem less immediately connected with how I 'feel' or experience my world. Hegel's *dialectic of the Master and the slave*, as we have already begun to explore, can offer us insight into this connection. The regime of *Mastery*, to remind ourselves, is the privileging of a *self* fantasised as both *separate* and *autonomous*, and hence one that is justified in treating all other beings purely *instrumentally*, and so denying *their* own agency and autonomy. We can say that the Master *matters*, the Slave does not. Or rather, the Master only *asserts* himself as *matter*ing, because by denying the equal existence of any actual Other, there is no one to *matter* to, no-one to recognise and be recognised by. Mastery separates *everything* into *self* and *other*, where self is at the *centre* and *foregrounded* (I matter!), and other is *backgrounded* or even made invisible at the *periphery* (doesn't matter!). Mastery establishes a *dualism* where the foregrounded and centred self, the *subject*, is contrasted with the hyper-separated other as peripheral, backgrounded *object*. *Subject* acts upon and uses its *objects*, which it will consume, exploit or incorporate. The slave has no *intrinsic* value to the Master, they are worth only what they can produce for his benefit, and will simply be replaced if a 'better' alternative presents itself. That the Master really *relies* completely on the labour of the slave is *backgrounded* and doesn't affect the slave's actual treatment. The

slave is rendered invisible, their labour taken, and taken for granted. The slave *sees their own invisibility*, and sees also the Master in his *appearance of self-sufficiency*. The Master is someone — The One — while the slave is a nobody, a zero. How can the slave not come to want what the Master has, or at least what he *appears* to have?

This drive towards mastery is in many ways the dominant, though often unarticulated, ideal of our contemporary society. Mastery supports both patriarchy and colonialism, and played an essential role in the development of capitalism. In her groundbreaking *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), Australian philosopher Val Plumwood shows how mastery produces a dualistic separation of 'man' from a 'nature' seen as the ultimate Other, an other that is only ever an object of instrumental *exploitation and expropriation*. 'Man' asserts himself over a 'nature' that must be controlled and dominated, a nature that can never be seen as having any independent purpose or 'end' of its own, but exists only to meet the end to which man wishes to put it. Crucially this 'nature' comes to include *all those other beings* who may be seen as 'closer' to 'nature' than 'man' himself. They are the women, peasants, servants, workers, the enslaved, the indigenous, all those who are directly engaged with *maintaining and producing life*, rather than with *domination and control*. Hence this separation of human from non-human beings is in practice not so much to do with humanity as a species, but of degrees of separation from a 'nature' defined as inert, passive, unthinking and in urgent need of ongoing containment and control. This applies as much to the 'lower orders' and 'lower races', and so to women, children, madmen and fools, as much as it does to the breeding of livestock, the cultivation of crops, and the flow of rivers. Also crucially, because it can only ever be a *means* to the Master's *ends*, all that is held to be a part of 'nature' can come to be *owned*, can become private property assigned a value to be traded, sold, or otherwise disposed of at the Master's pleasure. This obviously applies to land and 'natural resources', but it can come to be applied also to *human* others insofar as they are seen as 'natural'. *All* the world outside the Master comes to be seen as purely instrumental and indifferently substitutable, having no value *in* or *for* itself. This *othered* 'nature' even comes to include our own 'human nature': ourselves as we are in our embodiment, our animality, the physical limitations inherent to being bodies of flesh and blood. It includes too the unruliness of our minds: our intrusive thoughts, desires and all our feelings and emotions insofar as they are not in conformity with a 'reason' that prides itself on its objectivity and dispassion. The drive towards mastery encourages a *disengagement* and *disembedding* from our actual *embodiment* as flesh and blood, and from the physical world in general. Or this is at most a relationship to the physical that is abstracted, quantified rather than actually *experienced*. The greater our fantasised or proxy reach in the world, the stronger the sense of our self-expansion into and over it, then the greater and more damaging this disengagement from it becomes, both to ourselves and others.

***Practice Question:***

*Do we, in our life or Zen practice attempt to become masters of our own bodies and minds?  
How does mastery relate to my ideas about Zen practice, my expectations and fantasies of it?*

## Greed

We could argue that *greed* is best thought of as a reflex to my experiencing my own 'failure' to make good on the collective injunction to strive for mastery. Hence that this perceived failure is both cause and effect of my own punishing sense of being *separate* and *lacking*. The world stands open to me as both taunt and challenge, its very existence as (in my own and our collective fantasy) *separate* being both the index of my actual individual failure and holding out the offer of a fantasised final 'success'. Experiencing myself as *centre*, all that I perceive and understand as *not-me* becomes an outside that has to be mastered. Greed is the reflex movement towards this outside, expanding 'my' space of action and control. Just like the experience of anger or fear, greed is a pain that requires me to *do* something to make it go away, to act (in fantasy or reality) by expanding my self outwards, to control whatever I experience as now being in 'my' space.

While the pain of my greed may extend into outer space (and a Musk or a Branson may indeed make the physical expression of this nightmare fantasy a reality), greed operates on every mode and register: physically, psychologically, socially. It begins through my posture, my movements, my gaze, the sound of my voice, the words I choose. Do I invite you closer or tell you to keep your distance? Do I show that I recognise you as an equal Other, or that I regard you as an instrument of my self-expansion? How I clothe this (my) body will accentuate how I fill space and the quality of this space. Clothing is among the most important of the *commodities* onto which our greed is *socially* focussed, and through which we also expand more fully into *social* and *physical* space, whether through the car I drive or the presentation of my home and its furnishings. There is also my ability to shift my centre through space: it is no accident that *travel* (both virtual and actual) has become a key aspect of leading a 'successful' life (whether as 'business' or 'pleasure'). And finally there is my *proxy* reach, the ability to command commodities at a distance, or if I hold capital, to command flows of raw materials and human bodies to serve that capital. While the individual commodity itself is important, it is always first and foremost a stage in my self-expansion in fantasy or reality to the *next* limit and beyond. So intimately is greed experienced that it will often be felt as overwhelming *need*, as being *necessary* for the preservation of my self-sense of being the *centre*, the *Master*. For me to fail to expand in this desired direction would be to truly experience myself as *limited*, as *lacking* in relationship to what is outside myself, and hence expose myself to the complex and often devastating emotions we describe as *shame*.

That our greed is felt so often in relation to *commodities* is the product of capitalism, and this in two related senses. Firstly, that these commodities exist at all is due to the development of a capitalist mode of production — *before* capitalism there simply were no objects to be desired in this sense — and secondly that the production of these commodities relies on the creation and manipulation of new *wants* that are experienced as *needs* that can be met by capitalism's products, though that any gratification they offer is short-lived. Obsolescence is essential to capitalist production and central to the regime of Mastery: what is *familiar* to me no longer excites me, but is now just 'used' and ready to be excreted. I need always to expand myself further into what is still outside me: a year on, and my *new* car is simply no longer new, it no longer smells new, and lacks — to those that

have eyes to see — the newest features. It can no longer satisfy my need for self-expansion in the way it did. (NB: for ‘new car’ please substitute whatever corresponds in your own fantasies or real life...) This greed I experience and call ‘mine’ is in this sense nothing more than the experiencing and acting out at a personal psychological level of the *working* of capital itself, it is the experiencing of capital *in* and *as* my own feelings, thoughts and emotions. ‘My’ self-expansion is a part of that infinite self-expansion of capital. As capital exists *only* to expand (because this is what marks it out as capital!) it requires ever greater flows of raw material to be processed (animal, vegetable, mineral, human, data...). To continue to expand requires a *growth* without any limits that extends outwards across the entire globe and beyond it out into space, and with the birth of the surveillance economy even burrows down into ‘my’ most intimate experience. This process is anything but ‘natural’ or ‘inevitable’, let alone ‘necessary’. It requires that leaders and populations continue to be willing to separate out the *economy* as an entirely separate sphere of life having priority over all our other values, and recognised as being both *objective* and *outside* the field of ethical behaviour. Plumwood shows the crucial role in its development and justification played by Western ‘Reason’ and the regime of Mastery. To allow economics to set the basic ‘rules’ to which all our lives must conform requires ongoing *political* licensing, a licensing we are collectively free to revoke, despite our being endlessly told that ‘there is no alternative’.

**Practice Question:** *this is a very different way of looking at my ‘greed’...  
How does it change how I think about ‘me’ to see my thoughts, words and actions as,  
from this perspective, the expression of ‘impersonal’ forces?*

## Growth

What of ‘Nature’ itself? Our still-dominant view of nature is a fiction brought into being as the *Other* of Mastery: this ‘Nature’ has no value in itself, and is seen to exist only as *means* to serve ‘man’s’ *ends*. So it is viewed *instrumentally*, as an infinite source of potential and actual flows of raw material free for the taking and using. It can hence appear to offer an alibi by which greed can come to appear *rational*, and mastery appear to transcend its all-too-obvious internal contradiction. The *idea of growth* is an attempt to square the circle of greed and fairness: if we have the *promise* that there will be more to be shared out *in the future*, then our *present* inequality does not finally matter, as it is only a *temporary* point on our collective journey to wealth and happiness. As the endlessly exploitable *other* of mastery, this ‘Nature’ appears to make unlimited *growth* possible. In the second half of the twentieth century during what the economic historian Thomas Piketty and others have called ‘the Great Redistribution’ (the greater sharing of the wealth of expropriation and production within Western countries that established the principle of social welfare), it seemed that this was actually happening. But in reality this (to us) welcome development relied in turn on the increased expropriation both of marginalised peoples and of all-too-finite ‘natural’ resources. Despite our collective fiction that there is always some ‘new’ resource that can be brought in to the cycle of exploitation, or that technological innovation and increasing productivity and efficiency can indefinitely postpone our coming to terms with the real effects of this socially constructed greed, the ideology of unlimited growth in fact requires the ‘natural’ world to be freely offered up as *both* the

source of an unending supply of raw material, *and* as an equally infinite sink for the disposal of waste product as pollution. *This planet on which we live is, and can be, neither.* Our current and worsening ecological catastrophe shows that the physical limits to our planet are in fact only too real. The 'solutions' we have been offered to the problems created by the drive to mastery are fantasies, precisely because they maintain the fictions of our separation and ultimate independence from each other and all embodied beings. If, on the contrary, we do genuinely accept our finitude: both our own vulnerability and mortality, and that of All Beings and hence of all ecosystems and even of the planet itself as a living system, then we will end our unquestioning drive for economic growth. We will recognise that we have, finally, to acknowledge each other's real existence and our absolute mutual dependence, the absolute mutual dependence of all beings.

As we each experience it, greed is the displaced attempt to satisfy our unmet emotional needs. Greed for things, greed for control, greed for respect, greed for the self-regard engendered through being envied (whether in reality or fantasy) by others. Greed which is our endless search for security, and the endless warding off of our vulnerability, even as far as the search for immortality itself. However this greed I feel and act out is not 'mine' in any fundamental sense, but the expression of the social and economic organisation of our individualist competitive society as it shows up *as* 'my' sense of lack and need. Greed is something I directly experience in this body and in my own thoughts and emotions, but that is simply the playing out *as me* of the contradictions of our society and economy. To really allow ourselves to admit this may well itself be difficult, even emotionally challenging, but will help *de-centre* us, allow us better to experience ourselves as 'world', rather than a self that is always and only self. I would hope that the predominant taste of this, even if perhaps bitter-sweet, will be one of *liberation*. I won't ever stop *wanting*, and wanting *more*, but I may find I come to want differently, or even that my work with this precept confirms the direction my 'life as it is' is already taking towards a sense of *enough*, of a shared sufficiency, of an ending of our experience of ourselves as being always 'a day late and a dollar short' to borrow one of my own teacher's favourite phrases. How, as individuals, communities and globally, do we move towards a meaningful and liveable sense of what is *enough*?

*Practice Question:* How does my own sense of 'the future', of the possibilities of my life, that of my family, children and our society, relate to the dream of Mastery, and its alibi as 'growth'?

### **Poverty: Want and Need**

Writing here in the increasingly unequal UK of late 2023 there is much talk of a tidal wave of shoplifting running through our shops and stores, so much so as to threaten the viability of those businesses. In a society which suffers from highly competitive social ranking, our *need* to compete is endlessly reinforced by ever more pervasive advertising for commercial products. So that when collapsing public services undermine *collective* values at the same time as living standards for the majority of the population are falling, then clearly simply *taking* the products to which I have been led to believe I am entitled (I'm worth it!), or through possessing which I aspire to prove to myself and others that I am 'a somebody not a nobody' becomes increasingly attractive. If I know no collective

values or sense of belonging beyond my immediate circle, if the dominant voices in my society consistently seek to mask the hypocrisy and exploitation fundamental to our economic system, why should I do otherwise? I think this importantly qualifies a distinction normally made in the context of this precept between *wanting* and *needing*. Diane Rizzetto's comment about the loaf of bread was made in connection to this:

We should not speak glibly about want versus need here. This is an important point and one that we should all consider as we face the rising numbers of homeless families both in the United States and around the world. Swollen bellies and wounds of exposure scream out loud and clear — *lack and need*. I'd steal a loaf of bread in a wink if I had no money and I knew it would ward off starvation for myself or my children. But what we're talking about here is a different hunger. It is not a need arising out of basic survival. Rather we're talking about a misunderstanding that the self is separate and lacking in some basic way. It is a poverty of mind that grows out of perceiving oneself as lacking. It's a poverty in which we convince ourselves that life leaves us out because others have more than we do and we feel compelled to get our share. It is the mind of lacking that gives rise to envy, desire, greed and a closed heart. (WU 117)

While at face value it's obviously perfectly true, I find this passage difficult. It's tone and scope seem to imply a purely individually centred morality. If there's 'misunderstanding' about a separate self here, then it's a misunderstanding that is cultivated *in* us by our social order of permanent compulsory competitive ranking, not *by* us as independent individuals. And the explanation offered here returns us only to our 'bad' emotions, conflating envy, desire and greed as the proximate 'cause' of our behaviour, a cause itself understood as generated by our *self*-created misattribution of individual separateness. The effects of the dominant regime of Mastery and the daily bombardment we each experience within this hyper-individualist and media dominated, capitalist society are entirely bracketed out in this account. *Of course* I can become more aware of a working distinction between *wanting* and *needing*, and the more aware I am, the more I can work with and refine it at an individual level. This is part of precept practice, and to be in every way encouraged. But it is equally important to understand the way in which we are constructed, *fabricated* as selves to respond in the ways we do. The feeling of pervasive *lack*, of *missing out* that Rizzetto refers to a large degree comes about precisely *because* of this competitive ranking through which our society orders itself, and it is misleading, even hypocritical to ignore this connection. On the one hand, our society defines us as selves *through* our lacking, as selves *needing* more status, more mastery. On the other it tells us — *you don't need these things, you merely want them, they are really for others more deserving than you* (deserving because they *already* enjoy higher status and greater access to resources). Competitive ranking fabricates each of us as being both lacking and jealous in relation to others' 'success', and this is as true for a Trump or a Biden as it is for someone on welfare.

This touches into the important question of *relative* and *absolute* poverty. We don't need to get too technical here. If I can't afford to feed my children, if I can't afford a roof over our



heads, then our poverty is pretty *absolute*. Similarly, if I can't afford shoes for them to wear to school. But this slides incrementally into... *needing* the 'right' shoes the school approves of (or else they'll get told off, even sent home)... into the 'right' shoes because they are what 'everyone' else is wearing and they feel they truly *need* them because socially they can't afford to be left out...into the 'right' shoes because this is what the aspirational (and wealthy) cool kids are wearing, and they *want* to be like them. Where does the *experienced suffering* end? What suffering is 'allowable', what demands action, and what do we choose to or are told to dismiss? In a *more equal* society such distinctions become less urgent, in a *less equal* one the *experienced* suffering increases dramatically because competitive ranking becomes far more important, itself a source of suffering no less intense in its way than hunger. *Relative* poverty is real poverty, despite what I have heard some Buddhists say to the contrary. And relative poverty is always contextual, situational, relational. None of which should blind us to the massive increase in *absolute* poverty in the UK as elsewhere: as of early 2023 more than 4 million children (of a total 14 million) in the UK alone are defined as living in *absolute* poverty, almost one in three. **How is this possible?**

*Practice Questions: Please pause here.*

*How do you FEEL reading this?*

*What emotions rise?*

*What thoughts?*

*And in the experiencing of your body?*

## **Inequality and Inequalities**

Inequality turns out to be not so much about your having 'more' or 'less' than I do as about our having different possibilities of life. Where we are meeting face to face this might be experienced as deference, an expectation of service, or simply of the right to occupy *this* space right *here*. But the reality of inequality includes everything from access to food, education and healthcare to our personal safety and even the right to life itself. From the right to choose whom and how to love, to the age and manner of our death, and even whether and how we are to be mourned after our passing. These differences will affect not just *our* lives, but those of our children and our children's children.

We've already discussed the *durable* inequalities that are formed of *binary* opposites. These are forms of inequality that persist through time, and which structure not only our ideas about the world but our feelings, responses and actions, and where one term of these pairs is always 'normal', *unmarked*, and *privileged*. All these relationships are *culturally* determined: *which* of a myriad of mere differences between us come to operate as binary inequalities, how we are assigned membership to them, and the relationships between the different binary pairs. The effects are always political, as so often is the explicit and/or implicit motivation behind their operation. Looking at all this from the perspective of 'separate' and 'not-separate' we can see the same patterns emerging. *Empty* categories ('man'/'woman', 'black'/'white'...) are imagined to be *really* separate, to be *really* different things with different *properties* which we invest with different *value*. We then say 'this is simply the way things *naturally* are', or perhaps, that this is 'God's Plan'. Because we treat all this as *really* real, as simply the way things are, we feel entitled, and even obliged, to

behave as if this were so, and to demand that other people do the same. To question this in any way becomes to go 'against nature', or against tradition, or 'our way of life'. But in our investigation, in our questioning, we move towards the realisation that the framing of the pairs themselves is *empty*. *Empty* does not mean imaginary or irrelevant. It means that neither the oppositions and their terms, nor the qualities and values assigned to them, have any *independent* reality, but only ever a *relational, contingent* one. But these most definitely *are* the very *real* inequalities by which much of your and my actual life is channelled, and our practice has to involve our intentional awareness of them (insofar as we are able in each moment) as they affect our turning *away* and turning *towards* the experiencing of our individual resistance to life and suffering in the world as we meet it.

We also need to recognise those more abstract-seeming inequalities that will figure increasingly in our awareness and understanding as we proceed with our precept practice. Again, these represent the pairs as separate and non-communicating, privileging one side over the other, and that this privilege is 'natural' or inevitable. All model themselves after the pattern of *self* and *other*. So we have subject/object, centre/periphery, foreground/background. One other to which we will return is that of *public* and *private*.

It is through these inequalities that we frame our relationships to others: those we know personally, those we know only by the identity given to them (illegal immigrants/famine victims/benefit cheats/the metropolitan elite), and those billions of humans who are entirely *unknown* to us. We dissociate and displace: who merits my empathy? My money? My contempt? My ignore-ance? *Turning towards and turning away*, we dissociate and displace as individuals, but, as always, within the collective possibilities that frame our culture. How do I set limits to my caring, to my concern, to my awareness?

*Practice Question: What is the experience in my body as I ask and reflect on these questions?  
What feelings and what thoughts arise?*

### **More or Less**

Much of the inequality framed by these dualistic binaries actually expresses itself through differences of *wealth* and *income*. This is not surprising: while in a society with a rigid caste structure everyone does literally 'know their place', in our relatively more fluid capitalist society those on the privileged side of inequalities will always tend to find themselves with higher incomes and/or more wealth. Men, on average, earn more and are wealthier than women, White families earn and hold more wealth than Black, those with higher education than those without, and so on... The wider effects of these quantitative inequalities can be measured: I mentioned Wilkinson and Pickett's *The Inner Level* (2019) in the commentary to the Seventh Precept; that book is actually the sequel to their highly influential *The Spirit Level: why more equal societies almost always do better* (2009), which showed how across a huge range of different fields, inequality in one area amplifies inequality in all others. We might think differences in income and particularly wealth are simply about having a more comfortable or luxurious lifestyle, or just 'having something to pass on to my children', and hence entirely different from, say, racial apartheid, or legal or customary restrictions to the rights of women. Yet, as Wilkinson and Pickett

demonstrate in one field after another (and it's the consistency between these very diverse fields that finally makes their argument so irrefutable), access or lack of access to financial resources means that the poorer will suffer more and more serious diseases, that they will die younger, and that their children will be physically smaller, their educational possibilities will be fewer, and their overall life choices dramatically restricted. It is also no accident that those subjected to discrimination of all forms find themselves on average consistently within the 'have nots' rather than the 'haves' — something not contradicted by the exceptional example of a Barak Obama or a Beyoncé. Even when, for example, equal rights legislation guarantees equal pay for equal work, then still on average women, non-Whites, those with disabilities or in any other way *seen* as lesser will find themselves, generation to generation comparatively less well resourced. *Existing* inequality guarantees that not only present but *future* 'equality of opportunity' is really only ever a convenient fiction promoted by those who find themselves on the 'have' side, and so also that the supposed good of 'social mobility' is also largely fictitious. The greater the existing inequality, the more competitive society becomes, and the more extreme the consequences.

Does the vast economic inequality of an enormously wealthy country such as the UK exist by natural law ('the poor are always with us!'), by accident ('it just worked out that way!'), or because of our collective 'greed, desire and envy'? A moralising reading of Buddhism would clearly suggest the last of these, with maybe some reference to 'karma' thrown in for good measure. Yet, as we have already explored in relation to the regime of Mastery, the greed that leads to our present vast and increasing inequality is anything but 'natural' or inevitable, and cannot be understood as simply or primarily a matter of our individual or even collective *psychology*, but acts through our economic and social organisation. As wealth accumulation has come to be prioritised over all other values, extreme and growing inequality seem now to be too often viewed as inevitable or even beneficial. Thomas Picketty's monumental *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2013) demonstrates in forensic detail how the political choice to unmoor capital from ethics guarantees the growth of social inequality arising directly from capital's own internal logic, and the tendency for capital to become concentrated into fewer and fewer hands. Under these conditions individual competition can only ever become more intense, with the disastrous material and psychological consequences that Wilkinson and Pickett have so comprehensively described. Those who are unable or unwilling to 'win at life' under these conditions are held to have only themselves to blame for their failure, a failure finally seen as *moral*: according to our myths of self-reliance and opportunity, they simply did not work hard enough, or were unwilling to, otherwise they must inevitably have succeeded. This is the trap in which we all are caught, the final motor for our moralising judgements of each other and ourself, and also of the invitation to *care less, relate less* to others, especially those we are encouraged to dismiss, to background. This is a direct *politicisation* of the economic, paradoxically promoted by those who would exclude all *ethics* from business practice and the state's regulation of it. But the economic cannot ever be disconnected from politics, from our ethics and hence from any 'spiritual' practice we do not see as separate from and transcending our 'life as it is'. As Picketty writes: 'Economic questions are too important to be left to others. Citizens' reappropriating of this knowledge is an essential stage in the battle for equality.' (BHE 244)

*Practice Questions: here it's really NOT 'all about me'.  
So how does this sit with my perception of MY 'life as it is'?  
How does it connect to my sense of what 'Zen' is or isn't?*

## **My Just Deserts?**

What do I 'deserve'? To what am I legitimately 'entitled'? However we answer this question, in reality it is the *location of my birth* that has the greatest predictive power regarding my income and wealth, as it does my health, my education and all other of my life's possibilities. This is most true at the international level: being born into a 'rich' country vastly increases the average resources available to me. But this is also true at a more granular level: was I born into effectively segregated zones — the Projects, the 'sink' estates, the banlieue — or into a wealthy middle class neighbourhood? Can we talk of 'fairness' or 'justice' in any sense in a world where the chance location of my birth has so great an influence over the shape and very possibility of my life? What would justify such dramatic inequality of outcome, whether that's through discrimination and bias, or simply as income inequality or the possibility to accumulate wealth? (Let us not forget that these three — discrimination, income and wealth — are always intimately related.) Why do we link ideas of 'success' — of having wealth and exercising power — with those of 'virtue', and so implicitly say to the majority of the world's population (including most of those in our own countries) that in effect 'we are simply *better* than you'? In English we still have the phrase 'the Great and the Good' that points to this equivocal identity asserted between power and virtue, and by extension that of virtue and wealth.

How does this relate to the regime of Mastery? For mastery there is only ever the centred self, seen as the *subject* opposed to the instrumental *objects* outside itself, objects which may be 'things', beings or people. We have seen the necessary relation between mastery and greed, and so it should be no surprise that orthodox economic theory both expects and demands that to be rational is to be selfish, and to act purely in the interest of a 'self' imagined as a 'me' atomised and separate from all other beings. In a move whose origins are actually directly theological rather than rational, it even argues that such an attitude will unwittingly help *all* beings, in effect *alibiing* our greed, which hence becomes not only *rational* but *necessary*. So in what can be taken as the founding text of modern economics — Adam Smith's 1776 *The Wealth of Nations* — the market regulates our natural and necessary greed to the ultimate benefit of all, working as an 'invisible hand' to execute God's plan for the world. Given that this was an argument given *to* those who controlled the wealth of nations *by* those who participated in that wealth, it was indeed reassuring. Greed is good. I and all others will, if the market only be allowed to do its work, inevitably receive my *just deserts*. In the competition of all against all, hard work and talent will be rewarded, idleness and stupidity will be punished, 'as if' by the hand of God. *My fate* is in my *own* hands, and society must oblige me to assume full and sole responsibility for it. This is the doctrine of *meritocracy*.

At face value the idea of meritocracy seems to have much to recommend it: the 'best' person for the job should do it. Who could disagree? So, who should become a brain surgeon? You certainly want a particular kind of intelligence, high level manual skills, a

willingness to work long, long hours and to continue to study and question indefinitely. You'd probably argue that they should have a hand in how things were run, organised. Because their skills are rare, you might say that in one sense they were more 'important', more valuable to both to the hospital and to society than those who only clean the operating theatre, or the health care assistants on the ward. But in reality all are equally vital to the business of healing. And even if this were not so, why would their skills necessarily translate into their being *paid* more, *rewarded* better, and why in turn would this be seen as in many respects making them a *better, more deserving* person, one to whom should be accorded more respect, or whose views on areas outside their speciality should be listened to? The 'merit' in meritocracy embodies that ambiguity in carrying both the sense of ability and moral goodness. As a child at school I received two marks for each subject on my termly reports: one for 'achievement' and one for 'effort', by which was meant working hard, having 'good' conduct. 'Merit' has tended to conflate these, perhaps increasingly so. The gospel (and these arguments are, as I've suggested above, theological in origin) of talent and hard work, of 'you can make it if you really want to' has come to define our society and our sense of self, and more importantly how our sense of self frames our individual and collective actions in the world.

In *The Tyranny of Merit* (2020) the philosopher Michael Sandel dissects the arguments for meritocracy, from their origins in the Protestant Reformation to the Presidency of Donald Trump. Although not coming from a Buddhist perspective, his analysis makes it very clear that these arguments rely on a concept of *self* as being *separate*, the centre of an active and *free* and *independent will*, and therefore uniquely *self-responsible*. He describes:

'...the harsh meritocratic logic that runs from the Puritans to the prosperity gospel: if prosperity is a sign of salvation, suffering is a sign of sin. This logic is not necessarily tied to religious assumptions. It is a feature of any ethic that conceives human freedom as the unfettered exercise of will, and attributes to human beings a thoroughgoing responsibility for their fate...' (TM 48)

The ethic of merit actually relies on denying the reality of our interconnectedness, our non-separation. Who *deserves* what? What *would* make groups or individuals 'deserving' or 'undeserving'? What can we say from a Zen point of view? While Sandel does not write from a Buddhist position, many of his questions are exactly those we should ask ourselves, and the answers he finds are consistent with the lines of thought we have been developing so far. So...I *might* argue that it is *my* intelligence, *my* drive, *my* willingness to work hard that is responsible for my 'success', or perhaps some unique and special talent that entitles *me* to have more than others, and for this more not to be limited to material things, but include *all* my life possibilities and those available to *my* children and even *their* children. We have seen, though, that the importance of any such factors is dwarfed by the simple fact of the location of my birth. Am I in *any* way 'responsible' for this 'success' or 'failure' of having been born in an affluent country or a wealthy neighbourhood? But what goes for the location of my birth goes equally for my *genetic inheritance*, for the *wealth or lack of wealth* of my parents, for their *level of education* and the support they did or do offer me (or not), along with that I get from friends, peers and colleagues. If I have learnt to work hard,

then hooray! But *how* have I? If I am super-smart, then *what made me that way*? What of any of this could mean that 'I' therefore *deserve*, am *entitled* to more pay or wealth, and more particularly the deeper inequalities that follow from this? Is it as a result of my innate virtue that the talent I have cultivated is 'in demand' in the society in which I live? Can I in *any* way argue that many known and unknown factors did not either foster or stifle my talent, my energy, my confidence, my ability to 'work hard'? Seen from a different viewpoint, could my 'work ethic' or 'determination' themselves be seen as lack of awareness of others and my connection to them, a narrowing of focus that stifles important areas of my empathy? Is my determination to succeed actually, by another measure, ruthlessness? In short, what would it mean to claim that 'I' am more *deserving* than you? On what could any such claim be based? And without it, what then? Is it all just down to luck? The Lottery of Life? We might take the case of professional footballers, whom we need not regard as being more or less talented, motivated or hardworking than they were fifty years ago. The incredible sums they are today paid actually relate exactly to the sale of the media rights and sponsorship deals that were undreamt of then, rather than their 'virtue' in the sense of either goodness or talent. For market economics this of course makes perfect sense: they are highly successful at success, at having the right talent in the right place at the right time, and should be lauded and held up as an example of what individual effort (or more honestly random chance) can achieve. But this is of course completely to background the complex social conditions that produced this as a possibility. Without football as a professionalised sport the ability to kick a ball, to pass and tackle is literally 'worthless'. Nothing about 'me' finally differentiates me from anyone else in terms of worth or deservingness. This is one aspect of the 'emptiness' of my self and of all things: our value, in whatever sense is only ever relational, contingent. But this demands that we ask, investigate: *what is the outcome* of organising our social values in the way we do? Who benefits? Who suffers?

Standing back, we can see that the whole idea of 'deserving and undeserving' has been used primarily as a political tool to justify the sharing or withholding of what society produces. On the one hand there are the self-styled great and good whose material 'success' is itself a demonstration of their deservingness and goodness. Below these sit 'the *deserving* poor' who have long been a stock item of political rhetoric, and one that had by the time of Tony Blair and Bill Clinton morphed into 'hard-working families'. Their acceptance of the status quo is of course their principal virtue. At the other extreme are those chosen to embody the *undeserving*, the feckless and idle poor, with the purpose of this distinction being to assign blame and responsibility to each of us by establishing that the 'undeserving' merit neither empathy or aid. These lines of demarcation are, however, always fluid (because finally 'empty') and can be moved as the economic and political situation demands. The treatment of marginalised groups such as those with disabilities is instructive here, in their transformation from having been perceived as *less* than human insofar as they are 'unproductive' in conventional economic terms, to instead being regarded as *symbols of deservingness*. Because their disabilities are 'undeserved', they are *blameless*, and hence 'deserving' in this sense. Whereas before they were contrasted *negatively* with the 'productive', more recently they have been contrasted *positively* as against the 'idle'. While this is one sense a welcome shift in social attitudes towards those

with disabilities, it actually serves the purpose of further justifying the *exclusion* of others, the 'truly' undeserving. Writing in late 2023 we see that this use of disability is once more being differently politicised, as our Chancellor of the exchequer contemplates real terms benefit cuts and harsher qualification criteria for disability benefits, in order to fund tax cuts for the 'productive' wealthy — those with disabilities are once more being targeted as a 'drain' on 'our' taxes, their utility as a political weapon once more reversed by the will to view *all* social benefits as undeserved.

And what of the children of the 'undeserving'? Are they *also* undeserving, whether by association, by contamination, or by blood? We have already mentioned the broad fictions of social mobility and equality of opportunity. We shouldn't forget the alliance between classism and racism. While 'poor' or 'working class' Whites are enlisted as *True Englishmen* or *Patriotic Americans* in order to divide them from alliance with migrants or existing ethnic minorities — most notably in the US South against Black Afro-Americans — these same Whites have been consistently labelled by their 'betters' with the *same* racist tropes of inferiority: idleness, moral degeneration, stupidity, and criminality have been, and still are used to describe the 'lower orders' in the exact same terms once used of 'lower races'. We must surely be aware of the absolute insult to those holding down multiple insecure and poorly paid jobs in the attempt to make ends meet, and who often also having demanding caring responsibilities such as looking after children or ageing parents, if we say they are poor because they 'do not work hard enough'.

*Practice Questions: What are MY assumptions about merit and meritocracy?*

*Do I personally feel 'deserving' or 'undeserving'?*

*Why?*

*How does this relate to how I feel about OTHERS?*

### **My Country 'Tis of Thee...**

The true effects of this logic of merit can only be understood when we examine this on the international scale. *Why* is America the richest, most powerful nation in the world? Because it is the most *good*, and has been rewarded (by God, or natural law, or whatever governing force we wish to assign responsibility) for its goodness by becoming the most rich and powerful! Sandel tracks these arguments in a way I do not have space to detail, through the speeches of figures as seemingly diverse as Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump. He shows how the *nation* can be seen as having virtue in exactly the same terms I would claim it for myself, and that the national border hence functions as a boundary of *virtue* as much as it is of legal responsibility. My country is richer and more powerful than yours because 'we' are more virtuous than 'you' foreigners, (both more talented and harder working, perhaps also because of our religion, our political and economic systems...) which hence makes us *better*, than you, and hence *deserving* of our better fortune. American *exceptionalism* parallels American *individualism*, as does the Greatness of Britain stand or fall with the uniqueness of the British Character, and so on... Individual nations come to be seen almost as independent and self-sufficient national 'selves', in a way even more separate, unique and permanent than our individual selves. We all know that as individuals we will die, but we can and do fantasise that 'the American People' or 'This

Island Race' will survive us, and live far, far into the future... Our collective history of Empire, conquest, genocide, slavery, and the continuing exploitation of less powerful individuals and nations are unfair and irritating distractions from the simple and self-evident fact that 'we' are *great* because we are *good*. We *deserve* it. We are *entitled*. Simply by the fact of being British, or American, or whatever, I share in this virtue. And of course I have been told down the generations that my highest purpose is to serve this country to which I 'owe everything' and for which others have made 'the ultimate sacrifice', to *feel* for it, to make *its* priorities *my* own.

Each human being has come to be assigned a unique citizenship — 'belonging' to one and only one country — and this has important consequences (let's put aside the ability of the rich to buy the citizenships and hence also the rights they choose to). All those who are not citizens of *my* state and live beyond its borders are of no concern to the state, except insofar as they are potentially useful or threatening to its aims: they are instrumental 'means' *not* 'ends'. 'Our' country has no *responsibility* whatsoever to those beyond its borders. Individuals may be invited as migrant labour (cleaners or brain surgeons, depending on what is thought to be required), or other governments will be paid to keep them from our shores. They may or may not be sent food to relieve their famine, or tents in which to shelter after an earthquake. But this is largesse, and will be reneged on for any number of reasons (witness the UN's perpetual difficulties in getting donor nations even to honour the 'pledges' they have made for disaster relief...) Most 'aid' is anyway designed to shape the receiving country's institutions, economy and infrastructure in the direction desired by the donor country, and preferably also involve the awarding of lucrative contracts to the donor's own companies and corporations. 'Our' country, like all others, is clear that it has no *responsibility* whatsoever to those who are not its citizens, except as it serves its 'own' ends (but *whose* ends, really?) to do so. The *boundary* of the nation-state creates a literal *dissociation* of space, of responsibility, of care, that not only *allows* to exist, but has actively *brought about* and *fought to maintain*, the greatest, and most generalised inequalities across borders. To some degree this can be expressed quantitatively — in numbers — but it is always as human experience and reality that it becomes manifest. Avoidable disease, poisoning of the environment, malnutrition, famine, exploitation and premature death are only the more obvious markers. Every aspect of human possibility is diminished and distorted by this. We might reflect on how 'migrants' — simply those who for whatever reason cross borders and do not return — are *created* in both senses by this system: without borders there could be no crossing of borders and hence no 'migrants'. If there were no borders creating and perpetuating the conditions that oblige people to leave their home and all it represents, then the real human individuals concerned would not need to cross continents. Without these structures, would our collective empathy become as dissociated, backgrounded as it is, and fall so far short of what is required? Could it?

**Practice questions:** How do I feel about 'my' country: in my body, my emotions, my thoughts?

Which of my compatriots do I think of as 'we' and which as 'them'? (Be honest...)

Why?

Are people from 'other' countries 'different'?

How?



## The Inequality of Inequality

The preservation of inequality has been both an organising principle and a major outcome of the regime of Mastery. Mastery works within existing binary inequalities which overlap and are mapped onto each other: that between 'man' and 'nature', between 'male' and 'female' spheres, between 'white' and 'non-white'. Between that which may be owned and that which may not, between that which must be 'paid for' and that which may be simply 'taken'. Between the 'developed' core and 'developing' periphery, between the 'public' world of politics and the 'private' world of the home. Between 'objective knowledge' and 'subjective sentiment', between capital and 'free' labour, and, as we shall explore further, between 'productive' work that is paid for, and 'reproductive' (care) work that is not. These find expression in turn through differentials of income and accumulated wealth, as well as in custom, regulation, law, and simple habit. So binary inequalities are an organising principle of mastery, and their expression as material and status inequality are both by-product and fuel for mastery's continued self-expansion. As Wilkinson and Pickett have shown, existing inequality feeds back to produce increasingly isolated subjects whose language and actions manifest a separation from others experienced and acted out as ever more total. An increase in our physical and emotional separation tends to our offering less empathy and support to others, and becoming on the contrary more aggressively competitive. Inequalities are both a *measure* of our imagined self-separation, and the cause of our separating ourselves still further. Inequalities are similarly both a measure of backgrounding, of marginalisation, *and* the reason for that backgrounding. So we do not *see*, and if we *do* see we do not notice the suffering of inequality, and even that suffering we do notice does not *matter*, it is simply too far away, 'beyond the pale' on the other side of the binary, and so just too *other*, too different from *us*. Paradoxically, modern communications technology and the growth of international trade and travel have connected each of us to every other in new ways, but in our increasing sense of isolation we have few means of responding to this interconnectedness effectively.

Inequalities are not equal. The consequences of one might simply be to hurt my pride, but those of another be the stifling my life's possibilities, even leading directly to my death. We might usefully think in terms of *inequalities of harming*, and *inequalities of suffering*. We all harm, we all suffer, but we do not do so by any means equally. To take the case of ecological harming —the damage we do to the biosphere as a whole — that directly attributable to the entirety of world's poor or subsistent is trivial, that of the super-wealthy (the '1%') obscene, with the middle section (in which I imagine we all, dear reader, find *ourselves*) crucial but with us appearing to have little individual agency. The situation is complex, and perhaps especially so for those of us who are 'ordinary' citizens of rich developed countries. There is no simple position of virtue available: we are the polluters, the would-be Masters, the beneficiaries of continuing exploitation; and we are ourselves exploited and alienated by systems not of our devising or consent. The overall benefits accrue to the very few, and and sharing the social and environmental costs with all, though by no means equally so. The idea of individual *responsibility* born of the fictions of separation and individual *autonomy* is completely inadequate to address either harming or suffering in this sense, we have to accept that our responsibility and autonomy are both *relational*, relative, and respond accordingly.

## Care and Inequality

To come to see both responsibility and autonomy as *relational* highlights the importance of another inequality: inequality of care. *Care* includes all in our lives that directly *addresses* our individual and shared vulnerability, rather than *denying or avoiding it*. Mastery works to *background* our vulnerability and render it invisible, whether that vulnerability is that of the Master himself or the fragility of an entire ecosystem. Our caring is where we encounter *nature* in its core sense — the actual limits of our embodiment, and our total physical dependency on others from birth to death.

Of course, economic and political inequality as always provide organising principles in relation to care too: how far do I meet my *own* care needs? Do I help meet those of *others*, whether those of my family or community, and if so am I *employed* to meet them? Do I do this directly — body to body with those I care for — or do I *pass on* this work to others whom I *pay* to do it? Joan Tronto talks of the '*privileged irresponsibility*' that men have traditionally assumed (and on the whole still do so) as a *right* earned by their historic role as 'breadwinners'. As part of a structuring inequality, money buys privilege with regard to care, what Tronto describes as a 'care pass' to outsource it to others. Suppose, for instance, I am a woman with a family who wishes or finds herself obliged to enter the 'public' (and hence still male coded) sphere of the 'free' labour market. If I am already well-resourced or can become so by my employment I will probably employ others to carry out many of the family care responsibilities seen as 'private' (and so 'naturally' still female coded) such as child-care and housework of all kinds. Those I employ will be less well resourced than I am, probably also women, quite possibly non-citizens, and obliged to accept much lower rates of pay than mine. But they too will have caring responsibilities, which they must somehow meet. They may be sending the money they earn 'back home' where average rates of pay are lower still, or they may be relying on other family members for care work. And so the chains of care extend indefinitely, down into the lives of the poorer and poorest of my own society, and outwards across the globe to those in poorer countries, and especially the global South. The 'crisis of care' talked about in the West is as a direct result of our collective undervaluing of caring work that reflects a contingent binary division between 'unproductive' (non-commodity producing) work that maintains and reproduces the labour force, and 'productive' work that yields an economic return to further the expansion of capital. This separation and ranking, corresponding roughly to our public/private distinction is a profoundly *political* choice, and one made both for us and without our awareness. If I have talked in previous commentaries about care as the expression of mutual relationship (and it is truly and importantly so), and hence in our present terms as the *inverse* of mastery (and in a sense its antidote), then it has equally to be understood that the regime of Mastery frames, limits and organises the reality of actual care within my life and all our lives. Mastery *relies* on intimate and personal relationships to provide an infinite-seeming reservoir of unseen and under- or un-paid caring, without which the system of mastery simply could not function. Just as it relies on the infinite exploitation of *all* 'Nature', requiring always new supplies of raw material, of energy, and of labour.

**Practice Question:** *we ALL care, and we ALMOST all practice 'privileged irresponsibility' ...  
How does caring and its evasions show up in my life? (NB: NO judgement!)*

## Caught in a Self-Centred Dream, Only Suffering

We have (too) briefly surveyed some of the many, many forms inequality takes in our societies, some of the forms as which the lines of *being* and *not being*, *having* and *not having*, *speaking* and *being silenced*, and *living* and *dying* are drawn. If we accept the reality of our being 'not-separate', of both our selves and our identities being empty of substance, then despite our collective and frequently professed good intentions, neither the explicit nor implicit principles on which our current societies are organised can be seen as in any significant respect 'just', 'fair', or 'compassionate'. This is true whether we are speaking of politics, economics, or of social attitudes, and true both within and between our nations. We have seen the way the drawing of these lines itself feeds back to amplify existing inequality and provides an understanding of the links between social inequality and the psychological level of our collective and individual greed. At the same time (and inextricably) this drawing of lines provides a whole series of *alibis* for the withholding of our empathy, our active and passive ignore-ance, the making invisible of those on the *other* side of the lines from us. Our forms of *selfing* directly concern the hardening of dissociation not just around an idea of 'me', but come to include a 'mine' that may be 'my' family, 'my' possessions, 'my' beliefs, 'my' country. Even the idea of equality itself, of attempting to *legislate* these lines out of existence (legislate literally or figuratively, in the law of the land or in my own attitudes and responses), may provide one more alibi or evasion in the fantasy that this is now 'job done'.

The consequences of these (empty) lines of inequality our societies draw are lived out *in* and *as* our daily lives. These lines have both a physical and a mental component. Physically, these are our national boundaries, our gated communities and our ghettos, industrial and residential zoning, entrance to and achievement at our schools and universities, access to public and private transport routes... to name only a very few of the myriad instances. And then too the 'walls of our minds' that frame and limit our thinking, that are one key aspect of our deludedness in delusion. We cannot function as individuals or societies *without* distinction or boundaries, but this does not mean we have either to passively accept or actively approve them in anything like their current form. To extend our discussion of the Seventh Precept, it is here, in the real-life forms of inequality we experience and encounter, that our '*elevation of the self and the denigration of others by myself and in the world*' finds both its physical expression and its psychological cause in the insecurity of this circularity of inequality and greed.

It's in the exposure of our alibis of elevation and denigration that we might find pause to hold our 'selves' and self opinions more lightly. Whether in the form of an aristocracy that imagines itself born superior by virtue of its ancestry, or in a meritocracy concerned only with 'personal' merit (ambiguously blurred between virtue as goodness and virtue as ability), we find ourselves engaged in an endless game of entitlement, deservingness and the fear of being found lacking in either. Moment by moment, do I find myself feeling *superior* because of my nationality, ethnicity, faith, spirituality, or politics? Superior because of my intelligence, hard work, achievements, education, family background, income, or wealth? *Inferior* because of my lack of 'achievement', my 'failure' to conform to the fantasies or expectations placed upon me? Inferior because I see clearly that I do not

'matter', because my wellbeing and potential happiness appear to me to be blocked at every turn? Whatever the real life material or psychological consequences, we have to understand that this is all *empty* in the sense of having *nothing* to do with essence or substance, or with any virtue (in either sense) *inherent* to my *self*. This is simply the working of our shared world that is *not-separate*, the world of *Interbeing*. Neither self-satisfied pride nor self-deprecating shame have any rights here, although I will doubtless long continue to experience something of both. Hopefully I may come to hold this self more *lightly*, and with greater care and kindness to myself and to the world.

*Practice Question: notice the symmetry here: to release others from MY judgement is also to release MYSELF. This is liberation — how does it FEEL?*

### **Waking To A Dream Within a Dream**

Whether the Master shows up as a particular individual or an entire class, with the unfolding of the Dream of Mastery the whole world and All Beings in it come to figure as nothing but potential *means* to his *ends*. From North Pole to South, no ocean, no desert, no ice-cap or glacier, no mountain top or the air we breathe on that mountaintop, but it has been and is being transformed by the direct exercise of his (our?) mastery. What might be the ways to offer resistance to this destructive and all-consuming Dream?

We can begin, as always, with our Zazen. How do I approach it: is 'my' (note the possessive) *mind* an Other in need of control, of discipline? Is my *body* an instrument that serves 'me' well or poorly, that I need to train as I would a servant or a dog, or 'tune up' as a mechanic does a car engine? Do I imagine a possible 'upgrade' replacement on either? Do 'I' wish to be my 'own' Master? (And just who would be Master of just whom?) Simply to sit with open awareness, curious and questioning, is itself a profound act of resistance to the demand of mastery. Sitting not as a counter-pressure, or setting of self *against* mastery, but as non-instrumental (in-)action, a process of no-process that in this sense is not *for* anything at all. As my own teacher Barry Magid says: this is the only truly pointless thing you'll ever do! It is in relation to our desire for mastery that the vital importance of this can become apparent: a knowing, an understanding, an *experiencing* that is not primarily about subject and object, about domination and appropriation, but of *letting be*. From this basic practice, I can take my investigation off the cushion (in both imagination and reality) and out into the world of my 'life as it is'. In what ways, trivial or great, do I manifest the Dream of Mastery? How does all this show up in my words, my thoughts, my actions? We might observe how we and others practice *backgrounding*: what aspects of the world (human or non-human) as it presents itself to me, or within my investigations into it, do I remain *unaware* of, or *if* aware of, act as if they *don't matter*, *don't count*? Why? Whose interests does this serve?

I can bear witness to my own greed, and to the greed of others. I can bear witness to my own experience of inequality both from the side of power and the side of powerlessness. I can make sure I hear the testimony of others and do not actively practice ignore-ance, but instead listen with ears that are open, even open to what I do not want to hear. I can also bear witness to my own and to our collective *failures* to do these things, but, hopefully, I

will do so without the judgement of self or others that brings separation. Of course we will continue to talk and act in our everyday lives in terms of 'deserving' and 'undeserving', just as we will talk of our successes and failures, our intentions and responsibilities. We will carry on wanting 'more' and 'better'. But hopefully we will do so without imagining that these have any final reality, or any relation to a separate and unchanging 'self'. These are useful, everyday ways of thinking, speaking and acting. Even to recognise *this* much and to *live* in this recognition is a huge ask, a perpetual work in progress. But to recognise is to invite our change, our openness. To invite us to unfold into relationship, rather than contract ourselves in (paradoxical) pursuit of the self-expansion of mastery. From the base of our zazen we bear witness to all of this, and in our honesty there is indeed liberation.

### Equal within Inequality

We all meet intimately the inequalities of age: in caring for our children and having been cared for as children; in caring for elders and being cared for as we in turn grow older. When we care well, these real inequalities of capacity are not frozen into rigidity as fixed dualistic roles of *carer and cared for*, of *knower and known*, *doer and done to*. To care for my child or my parent, or equally importantly to receive care from them, I do it best by meeting them 'with openness and possibility', with mutual empathy each of us recognising the fully human being in front of us. Their needs and desires matter to me, and mine to them, and our caring addresses these needs and desires. While the actual inequalities between us frame this relationship as, say, one of 'parent and child', it doesn't freeze into a rigid binary of *carer and cared-for*, and moments of breakdown melt again back into empathy as the rupture is repaired. Important, though, to remember that any real relationship requires *both* sides to be prepared to offer this, however imperfectly. If this isn't so then *this* relationship, at least temporarily, has become impossible and possibly dangerous to one or both.

Our tendency to dissociate from our empathy for others and so to relate to them in terms of strict binaries is undermined by our *caring*. Any act of direct caring (as opposed to the proxy care of the 'care pass') is always to acknowledge — however enthusiastically or desultorily — both the reality of our *embodiment* and the truth of our *non-separation*. Given that our lives are in one sense formed *within* greed and inequality, it is nevertheless true that without our collective and individual active caring for others the lives of every one of us would be and would always have been unliveable. Beyond even this evident truth, we have to recognise the mutual dependence of *all* life: the sense in which we are 'cared for' even in the existence of sunlight, water, and of the near infinity of other beings on which we rely both *within* what we think of as 'my' body, and *beyond* that body as the planet as a whole. It is within this greater frame that we have to ask the question of how our societies should have come to produce and reproduce greed and inequality with such catastrophically damaging effects, a question that can only really be addressed by us *collectively*. We could suggest that to see ourselves as not-separate rather than separate is to recognise our shared vulnerability and the consequent universality of suffering, and that this recognition could itself lead us towards the co-creation of a culture that prioritises mutual care over competition. To understand that to care for each other and the world is to

care most surely for our whole selves also, as all is Interbeing, all is connection, relationship.

As always, there is difficulty navigating the gap between the scale of the intimate and personal, of *my* world, and that of the *collective*, whether at a local, national or global scale. Between the practical immediacy of the kind word spoken, the proffered hand, and what all too easily becomes the abstracted and vague wish that All Beings Be Well. Of course we *do* wish that, but we can't *respond* in the same way to all, and to imagine that we should would in itself be delusional. And it is our actual and active response that is vital: we all *matter* and must all matter, and if our caring must extend down to the scale of microbes and up to that of the planet, then we must value all as the beings they are — sentient, mortal, vulnerable — and respond accordingly at each level of distancing from ourselves, whether that distancing is one of form or space. I'd suggest that a growing awareness of both how we ourselves and that whole world of beings are structured by inequality is an essential step in framing our response to each. My hope is that the framework developing here will allow us to see the ways in which the anthropocentrism that threatens to make our planet unliveable and the series of inequalities — especially those major ones of gender, race and class — *inter-are* to borrow Nhat Hanh's term. That they are *the same but different*: generated out of specific and particular circumstances, and none of them 'reducible' to any of the others, but still intersecting, compounding, generated from the same basic contradictions inherent in our societies, and understandable within the overall pattern described here as the regime of Mastery.

When (as it always is) care is required I will look first to the needs and suffering of *this* body, of *my* family, friends, and others, as those needs and that suffering present themselves to me. But I will do so with (hopefully) awareness that I am not the *centre*, that I am not special in myself but only special in terms of relationship. I am a deluded and partial creature, an embodied and encultured being, but through my practice as *zazen* and in relation to the precepts, the practice itself *changes* my reactions and responses. *This* body-mind, *this* family, *this* community, *All* Beings in this world. What is it to respond to each with appropriate care?