

The Fifth Applied Precept

I bear witness to the reality of delusion and the desire to evade the painful truths of life in myself and in the world, and aspire to experience Reality directly with clarity and kindness to self and others.

If the previous three precepts have been concerned in their different ways with ‘truth’, then this one is basically about our bullshitting. Working with this precept gives us an unparalleled opportunity to watch and listen as we spin stories founded in delusion, stories that shape the experiencing of our world and our actions in it, stories to justify the otherwise unjustifiable. Things we’d never believe if we weren’t already in the grip of deep delusion. It’s the kind of thing Joko has in mind when she asks (rhetorically) *why we don’t practice?* Why we avoid and stumble over the slightest obstacle, why if obstacles are lacking, we will cheerfully invent them. Why we’ll even come up with an absorbing activity we *call* practice that we can use as another strategy of avoidance, of turning away. Why won’t we practice? Joko’s answer is clear: because we don’t *want* to! Or to take this a step further, because we do *and* don’t want to...because we are multiple: I am still determined that I am giving up smoking as my hand reaches for the cigarette... The object of our investigation with this Precept is our turning away from the experiencing of our life as it is, and the direct experiencing — the bringing to awareness — of that turning away.

I’ve found much insight in listening to the responses of new students and the world at large to thinking about this Precept, and most specifically those related to its original subject: the use of alcohol. For many — and I think actually for most people — suggesting their use of alcohol may be problematic both for themselves as an individual and part of much wider social problem brings out their resistance (always a red flag in our practice), and even if this is something they can appreciate in theory the suggestion they might want to reduce or eliminate their ‘drinking’ as part of Buddhist practice evokes reactions that swing between panic, confusion, incredulity and outright hostility. The traditional interpretation of this Precept does ask us to do exactly that: stop using alcohol. Our Ordinary Mind approach is more interested in why even the idea of stopping ‘drinking’ seems so difficult for us, and asks us to become curious about our *resistance*, and what that might tell us about the ways in which we actually use alcohol. What we are really doing... We *see at once* that lying, stealing, killing and so on are wrong, and if we find it hard to entirely match our behaviour to these standards, then we don’t challenge the standards themselves. We’re not looking for get-outs. ‘Do I have to give alcohol up entirely to be a Buddhist? How much is ok? Is it ok to have a beer with a meal? Is it ok as long as I don’t get drunk?’ People never ask: ‘do I *have* to stop stealing? How *much* am I allowed to steal a day if I’m a Buddhist?’ ‘How many lies *can* I tell, and how *big*?’ ‘Can I kill someone slightly, or if it’s only on Tuesdays? Is that OK?’

Anyone who *gives up* drinking for whatever reason will be familiar with the implicit challenge this poses for those around you: and that may include your family. It will definitely include your friends, co-workers, people you meet for the first time at a party or other ‘social drinking’ context. They will probably assume you are an alcoholic or on serious medication, or if you do try to explain about Buddhism, then they will be clear in their own mind that you have definitely joined some kind of cult, intent on *forcing* you to stop. ‘*Why aren’t you drinking?*’ Exactly those mechanisms or social inclusion and exclusion we looked at in the previous precepts apply here: your decision to not-drink contradicts the stories I tell and am told around alcohol: that its use is ‘normal’ and for most people benign or even helpful. That it’s my ‘free’ choice as to whether I drink and when, and how much. ‘I don’t have a drink problem, I just like the taste/use it to relax/enjoy myself with friends/because I just like a drink!’ Those of us of a certain age will remember the first government campaigns linking the newly recognised AIDS (HIV) to drug use. They featured a stereotypically derelict junkie (pale and sunken-eyed) huddled in the corner of a bare room saying: ‘I’m not an addict — I’ve just got a touch of flu today!’ I think the copywriter nailed the key delusion of addiction, and one that fits perfectly our society’s use of alcohol. Not of ‘alcoholics’, but of all of us as a culture. Since at least the time of Hogarth (mid 18th century) there have been campaigns against the all-too-obvious social and personal costs of our society’s addiction, culminating in Prohibition in the United States in the 1920’s and 30’s. These have always been represented (part fairly and part unfairly) as moralising intervention by the middle classes, trying to spoil the innocent fun of the common man. Doing so plays into a rhetoric of pleasure and resistance — my *right* to a drink if I want one! This is of course the same rhetoric which in more extreme form has given us the populism of the far right. It’s no co-incidence that figures such as Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage have so often had themselves pictured ‘pint’ in hand (note that I don’t have to tell you ‘pint of what?’). So: ‘*drink*’... no I don’t mean water, and the euphemism itself tells us so much. Do you still think we don’t have a ‘drink problem’?

Practice question: How do you feel reading this?

What physical and emotional reaction do you have?

What thoughts come up?

What do you think I’m telling you to do?

To give up all alcohol?

Would this be a problem for you?

Re-read it. (No, actually do re-read it.) Repeat...

Investigation, Not Prescription

For the record: our work with this precept is *not* telling you that you *have to*, or *should* stop drinking, or even that you should feel *guilty* about it (guilty is just another feeling to investigate...) Our work with the precepts is ongoing investigation, *not* proscription or limitation. It may be difficult, it may sometimes make us wince or cringe, but it should have the character of liberation, not self-punishment or self-denial. We investigate our reactions, our resistance, and the language and arguments we use. Those reactions I mentioned above, and the reactions to my or your *not ‘drinking’* — the perplexity, even hostility — show us we are close to something important and painful for us: you wouldn’t

feel the same if I told you not to lie, to steal, to kill: 'nobody tells *me* not to kill someone!' Doesn't sound quite right, does it? That's because we're talking about addiction here, about delusion and the way it distorts our perceptions. But just to make it clear, I'm *not* in any way telling you to give up alcohol ('drink'), just inviting you to investigate our language, our responses, our experiencing.

So if alcohol really isn't your thing, if 'take it or leave it' really *is* how you feel, then this is the moment to shift your attention to whatever *does* bring up feelings of irritation, anger, fear, panic when you think of giving it up, stopping, doing without. Any of those of our supports that demand something of us and keep us coming back for more: smoking, gaming, newsfeeds, gossip... it might even be arranging my shoes...whatever.

*Practice Questions: What do I turn to when I'm feeling low, stressed out, or I simply want to 'relax'?
Are they an important part of 'me', or do I think of them as 'guilty pleasures'?
How would I describe my involvement with them to someone else?*

The Immediate Experience

This is where our practice with this precept begins. As always it is *investigation*, and as the result of this always-ongoing investigation we may find that our behaviour in the world has changed, that our ideas, our thinking, our views are different, and we may want to make intentional and rational choices about what we do. But in this context *nothing* is 'allowed' or 'forbidden'. Let's turn as usual to Diane Rizzetto's chapter on the precept. Her approach, as always is broad, and non-judgemental:

Originally this precept focused on the use of alcohol, but later it was expanded to include the use of other substances like marijuana, tranquillisers, hallucinogens, and so forth. Today we can think of more subtle ways we turn from being present by using and abusing not only mind-altering drugs, but also caffeine, cigarettes, food, and activities like exercise, TV watching, internet surfing, work, sensory highs, or anything that can turn us from the immediate experience of our minds and bodies.

It is this immediate experiencing that is the heart of our practice, both as body sensations and emotions felt in the moment, but also as the patterns of thought, and deeper connections that become apparent over time. If the aim of our practice is (at one level) to maintain this continuity of experiencing, then *why* — to return to Joko's initial question, do we find ourselves so often turning away from it? So...

...in exploring this precept, we focus not so much on what particular drugs or activities are acceptable to use, but rather what our intention is and how we can use any substance or engage in any activity that drives us further into our habitual ways of meeting the events and circumstances of everyday life. My point is that alcohol, drugs, TV, whatever, are not escapes in and of themselves. What makes them escapes is how we use them. (WUTWYD 94)

This is an important point of our practice: in our initial investigations we suspend, as always, our judgment of ourselves and others. We observe our habitual turning away and its pattern of connections.

Our approach to this precept is not to determine how, or to what extent a substance or an activity may cloud or alter our experience, but rather to point to how we may use and abuse them by obscuring the wisdom and intelligence present in life as it is in any moment, any event, and in any place... This precept is about the ways we use whatever substance to alter or escape our experience... (WUTWYD 95)

Which brings us back to the 'why?' with which we began. *Why* don't we want to be present? *Why* don't we want our experiencing of 'life as it is'? *Why* do we turn away? The experience of one of Diane's students can take us to the heart of this. He's not an addict or an alcoholic, just a regular guy or gal coming home from work to their family:

Student: As I work with this precept I realise that I have expectations that I *should* experience certain feelings around certain situations. For example, I *should* feel happy when I get home from work at night and see my partner and kids. When I don't, I often reach for a beer or glass of wine so that I can relax and loosen up in order to enjoy them more. I know my intention is to relax, but would that be such a bad thing if it allows me to be there and enjoy my family more? Would you call this addiction?

Diane: But are you really there? Would there be another way to be there and honour the tenseness, rather than ignoring it? This is what your practice can offer you. There's a...way of talking about addiction much like what you might be describing here...a requirement that causes us to act in body, speech, and mind in a certain way in order to alter our experience. What is your requirement here?

Student: That I will always be relaxed and enjoy coming home and being with my family.

Diane: Where is it written that you must always be relaxed and enjoy your family? This question is your point of entry... Grab this question with your life — before you reach for the bottle of beer. You'll learn something. I don't know what that will be. This is your discovery. Own it. Your addiction is your *requirement* — not the beer or the wine. (WUTWYD 95)

Absolutely, though I'd like to take this a little farther. Diane's use of *requirement* here offers us a powerful tool, though not one without its own dangers. Recognising our *requirement* is a vital step: *I* need it to be *this* way, not *that* way. In order to feel like *me*, in order to feel comfortable (or less uncomfortable!) being *me* in this situation, *I* need things to be this way. So, first point: if we are aware of it at all, our requirement will normally be felt as a tug, a need, an intimate and personal distress that brings me into self-consciousness as lacking, inadequate...back to all our usual stuff. So 'requirement' links this experience to the experience of 'self': of being separate and lacking. This is the experience we can talk about

as 'selfing': my construction of my sense of being *this* self, and the delusion involved in so doing. Important point! Yet 'requirement' also has that same whiff of a *moralising, personalising* sense that, to be honest, I often pick up from Joko, and which I think finally weakens her teaching. It's all about *me*, and *my* foolish, wrongheaded 'requirement'! So why don't I just *drop* it and act like a grown-up? Well, maybe. I think instead it's more interesting always to ask, ok, where did this requirement come from? Not in the sense of trying always to chase back to my personal trauma or core beliefs, but instead letting the circle move gently outwards from my self in isolation to ever broader circles of relationship... I'm not looking to pin blame, or find the 'answer', but instead just map the territory, as I did first with my 'own' feelings and thoughts. This is something we can each do with our dis-ease in our becoming aware of it, simply allowing ourselves to open to the social fields that shape our experiencing.

So, I don't know the 'truth' of this student of Diane's, any more than I did with those in her previous case studies that we have looked at, but we *can* easily map some possible points of reference. I assume s/he's coming home in the evening from 'work': an intense time of focused activity on specified tasks and in hierarchical relationships. Maybe s/he's put upon by their boss, who's being leaned on by their boss in turn, and while it's stressful at least the rules of being at work — what's part of it and what's not — are relatively closely defined. S/he is used to deferring at work, and largely being ignored, and now they are needing some validation, the deference or admiration of the children, recognition by their partner of the valuable contribution they're making to the family under difficult circumstances. Or...maybe s/he *is* the boss, used to giving orders, receiving the deference of others, their PA anticipating their every need... And then s/he arrives home to the chaos and differing priorities of family... their partner too may have been at work all day, or at home juggling the infinite varied tasks of family life, while the children will probably be, according to their ages, dispositions and own social experience (*'how was your day at school?'*) a mixture of need/raw energy/stonewalling insecurity and probably also...*love*. All of them will have different 'requirements': requirements which are actually perhaps better seen as their assumptions and expectations of family life. Where do these come from, for any of us? Our own home, as positive or negative model, figures large. The images we pick up from films and TV... conversations with friends and coworkers. How *should* it be, how is it *supposed* to feel? A 'sanctuary' from the outside world? That my family are the 'meaning of life' for me? That they 'expect' me to work all day and then come home to work *another* shift? We can't think about any of this without asking questions about work/life balance, employment conditions, domestic arrangements, and the explicit and implicit hierarchies within and between traditional and non-traditional gender roles. We might finally get to another key binary inequality, the distinction between *public* (the world of work and social life) and *private* (my family, my home) and how our society understands the relation between the two as experientially hermetically sealed spheres, each making their own demands, each offering us different possibilities of 'who I really am', and often being in competition. This isn't 'human nature' but the choices that have been made for us about how our society is organised — and over which we have relatively little significant personal 'choice' — and about our collective values.

*Practice Questions: What situations do I find my 'requirements' showing up in?
What do these tell me about myself, and my 'selfing'?
What do they tell me about my relationships with others and the wider world?*

It's Not Me...It's Us

If we see Diane's student's requirement as *their* business alone, their problem in 'requiring' their situation to be other than it is, then we see them as 'separate', and failing to engage with their 'life as it is'. Or, we can also see their experiencing emerging out of a whole field of different relationships that place stresses and demands on them that are sometimes explicit and sometimes tacit but 'understood'. Why does s/he open the fridge to get a beer? Because coming home, experiencing this sudden shift of being between one set of relationships and another is painful, it hurts in its difference and in its demands and in the uncertainty of what will be asked of them by their partner and the children. Where I think Diane is exactly right is in her question: 'would there be another way to be there and honour the tenseness, rather than ignoring it?' Which is to ask them to take life *whole*, to see that their desire to turn away and the discomfort that provokes it, are both part of 'life as it is', both part of this complex of relationships. How does this *actually* feel, and what are the feelings *beneath* which s/he (and we) are working so hard *not* to feel? To remind ourselves of another of Diane's excellent practice questions: 'what's the worst that could happen?' If I *allow* myself this feeling, and meet my family without the 'support' of beer or wine, what's the worst that could happen? My guess is we're not too far from exactly the kind of feelings we explored in relation to the Sixth Precept: those around our identity, our relation to gender, and finally the experience of shame. How do we address this? As *relationship*, both with our own fears and fantasies, our own shame, and through genuine relationship with *exactly those others in relation to whom* we feel the need to hide from our own wholeness: in Diane's student's case, their family. How do *both* partners feel when the other gets in? We need to ask exactly the same questions around their partner's experience as we did of theirs. And the *children*? Ditto. *All* this is life as it is, and it is as relationship that it needs to be worked through. The sixth precept is clear what the process needs to be: can each come to meet the others with 'openness and possibility'? Our practice is towards making this happen.

To see this as only being 'my' business, to see it as 'my responsibility' is to come perilously close to falling into exactly that pit of shame that gives us the illusion of our isolating and individual separation from others, an illusion the more destructive and perverse in that it is always *socially* constructed: I can only be my shamed and separated self *in relation to* a world of others. It's also to offer me a fantasy of control I can never make real: the whole point about our practice with 'life as it is' is to recognise not simply the limits to my ability to control my life, but to problematise the notion of *control* itself: we do not need to compound our existing delusions in this area.

Taking myself whole is to expand my limited notion of 'self' to include all aspects of my self (selves) and my relationships as they show up as my *experiencing*. I have to include, to make space for, to *allow*, the 'painful truths of the world' to be recognised *as* and *in* my self (selves). Joko's basic image of practice as fostering our growth in becoming 'A Bigger

Container' in our ability to *be with* what is painful to us is central here. For all of us this is hard, and for most of us this will *sometimes* be impossible, but even recognising this impossibility is something. The whole point about what I painful to us is that it is not easily managed, for the very reason that it isolates us from ourselves, and automates and makes reflexive our reactions to what are always in reality complex and nuanced situations.

In my turning away from aspects of my experiencing, there is also always a turning *towards*, as I *displace* and *limit* the fullness of my awareness and attention by *dissociating* from what I experience as painful. I may wish instead to soothe myself, to numb out or excite. Or I may wish simply for myself to vanish, be it for an hour, or *forever*. In reality all of these 'solutions' are problematic. Whatever self-states I enter (become?) are inevitably shaped, configured in relation to what I have dissociated from as 'not me'. I may recognise it as the 'here be monsters' of *terra incognita*, or the 'not me' may instead function far more dangerously, like the blind spot on my retina: something of which I am completely unaware in what appears to *me* as a full, consistent and coherent vision of the world. At which point we have to ask again: what forces shape these self states, and are these self-states purely 'individual', or to common patterns? We have become aware over our previous work with the precepts of the ways in which the habits and preconceptions of our societal norms seem to offer us easy 'answers' to life's hard questions. That we consequently come to judge and shame (and are judged and shamed in our turn) *as if* we were each thoroughly self-consistent and entirely separate individuals engaged in a permanent competition of all against all. In so doing we become unwittingly complicit in our self-limitation and the limitation of all beings. This is where we return to Diane Rizzetto's framing of this precept as pointing to how we may come to obscure: 'the wisdom and intelligence present in life as it is in any moment, any event, and in any place.' Easy 'answers' for life's harder experiences and questions, that separate ourselves from both the wholeness of ourselves and of our relationships with others, a wholeness which of course always includes our pain, our resistance, our dis-ease. Many of our turnings away are harmless, or at least not actively damaging to ourselves or others. We are often simply 'too much' for ourselves, both in ourselves and in our relationships to others. There is no simple line dividing harmless and harmful evasions, hence the need for thorough and sustained investigation in the direction of becoming more open and self-honest. The difficulty is that it is of the nature of the very process of dissociation that it excludes aspects of our own experiencing, and so leads us in the direction of self-states that make sense of and appear to justify the unjustifiable. We become blind to the harming that we suffer, and to the harming that we do.

Thich Nhat Hanh talked of the 'collective body' as one aspect of interdependence and Interbeing, and Zen teachers often speak of us all being 'one body'. This idea is very relevant to how we think about and practice with the precepts, though it's easy to get mystical with it. We need to examine how the collective body shows up as 'us' in our everyday lives and in the broader patterns of our society. So I need to put my 'liking a drink' or 'needing a drink' in context. We began to do this looking at Diane's student's situation: why might they feel that they 'need' a drink, or that one will 'help'? We could

extend the investigation to note that alcohol is a socially sanctioned mood adjusting drug, produced and promoted by a massive industry, and that its advertising is ubiquitous and relentless. We have learnt to associate using alcohol with 'good times', with 'sharing with our friends and family', with 'being ourselves' and 'letting our hair down'. This industrial product is marketed as an essential part of our personal expression, of our exercising our ability to discriminate and judge, and even as a subversive and transgressive blow against a straight-laced and moralising society. It promises freedom: freedom from our cares and responsibilities, freedom just to be our true selves (however we imagine them...) Whereas the Friday night drunk, the solo drinker, the driver who lost control, the night that ended in a fight or in sex they didn't really want or weren't even able to consent to, and let alone the alcoholic... these are all someone else, an *other* who whether we pity or damn them 'can't cope', can't 'take their drink', perhaps has an 'addictive personality' related to personal trauma or 'poor genes'. Either way, *they* are nothing to do with *us*, and their existence is no reason to spoil our own fun.

Of course we also know — if we care to investigate even minimally — that as a result of the sheer scale of its use, alcohol is the world's most dangerous drug. It is a disinhibitor, allowing violence of all kinds an active expression it would otherwise lack. The links between alcohol use and domestic violence of all kinds are particularly well established, as are alcohol's effects on our collective violence, for example that of sports fans, weekend revellers, or those of us who get behind the wheel of a car being 'only one over the limit'. Some of the health consequences of both its acute and long-term use are well known, from depression to liver failure, but others are only becoming apparent. *My* seemingly unique and personal wish to avoid the more potentially painful moments of my own life is part and parcel of all this: a world of human beings engaged in billions of moment by moment turnings away that both produce and are produced by our relationship to the dissociation strategies we use and their associated self-states. We are not '*separate*' from any of this.

I'm Not an Addict, I'm Just...

I'll bring us back to the 'bullshit' around with which we began. Alcohol helps us turn away not only from the immediate experiencing of our life as it is, but from the actual effects of our individual and collective consumption. We find ourselves in self-states where our using makes sense and appears completely rational to us. An example of the mental gymnastics involved in using a different 'substance' might help clarify this. Philippa Perry, the Guardian newspaper's resident psychotherapist, each week takes a reader's question as her subject for a short piece. Here's one from September 2023:

The reader's question: I'm a woman in my late 50s. In my teens I took a great many drugs – among them heroin. ...every few years I feel the irresistible urge to go back – and I do, using a few times a month over a six-month period. Then I become afraid and I'm able to stop. However, I honestly feel my use is not problematic or doing me any harm... Should I just stop worrying about this and accept this is me? I know about other people who use in this way. I am an educated, well-off professional in a stable relationship. My upbringing, although privileged, was very unhappy and pretty messed up. My parents both had major mental health problems and alcohol

dependency, and both eventually died by suicide. I was cared for by multiple other family members/nannies/boarding schools. I wasn't close to either of my parents, and didn't feel affected by their deaths. I've just come out of a period of using – I actually feel good, although full of angst about it all. I feel this is happening to someone else, not me.

Perry replies: You say, "I honestly feel my use is not problematic or doing me any harm," and I honestly think if you really thought that you would not have written to me. But this is what the Addiction Monster does, it tells you that your habit is not a problem. It lies to you. It makes excuses, it squirms, wriggles and manipulates to keep you using. It tells you other people do it and are fine. It will always be able to make up convincing arguments as to why it is a good thing. One of its favourite messages to addicts of drugs and alcohol is saying you don't have a problem as you are not waking up in the gutter every morning. That's the Addiction Monster for you, always finding a reason to carry on.

One thing an addiction does, and especially heroin, is to fill the void where relationships should have been. I'm sorry you did not have a strong feeling of belonging and being loved while growing up. You were passed around, sent away. It sounds like a strong bond was missing for you. The price of love is the pain of bereavement and you have been spared that, but I think the cost to you is greater. It is hard to learn to love yourself when you haven't had a secure, loving home to come from. Heroin obliterates the need of love.

Filling an emptiness inside yourself with an addiction may be a pattern you inherited from your parents. Such a void is often the result of a lack of an early bond. I can't help but be suspicious that not being parented as you needed to have been will have left a wound and that it is easier for you to use heroin to disconnect from it rather than use sobriety to face it and to heal. The past always affects the present and it's good to know how so that you can control it rather than be controlled by it.

Your life, your heroin use, is not happening to someone else, it is happening to you. It is an illegal drug, so you are committing a crime by being in possession of it and supporting crime by buying it.

For now, perhaps you feel in control of your habit as you feel you can periodically pause your usage. This proof of control may become more difficult to find in the future as demonstrated by the fact that you are thinking about when to use again.

I think Perry's description perfectly expresses both the sense of our turning away and of the resulting self-states of the 'user' (by which I mean *us*). I don't know whether Perry chose to use this example in any kind of conscious relation to the annual campaign — now in October, it used to be 'dry January' — for the UK to pause its 'drinking' for a month. As usual this has produced a plethora of articles in the media from journalists and others about their personal experience of the alcohol shaming (my term) they have experienced at

the hands of their own friends and family — if you stop or simply attempt to reduce your drinking you have violated our societal norm around alcohol, and you will be shamed as a result. One writer describes the anonymous WhatsApp group she joined where would-be non-drinkers can share the guilty secret of their desire to stop, and the shaming they face when they try. We *demand* the assent of others to our world-view, best understood not so much as a set of explicit ideas, but as patterns of dissociation: for others to fail to dissociate along similar pathways challenges the coherence of our own self-states, resulting as they do from exactly those patterns of dissociation. To reprise our major theme: it's not so much about 'right and wrong', about 'do or don't' as about the *causes* of our turning away and the *consequences* of our doing so. Our delusive self-states will tend to blind us to both.

Delusion

I'm specifically linking *self-state* and *delusion* here, and for a particular reason. I've been talking since the beginning about the 'assumptions' and 'preconceptions' that cause us to shape our seeing the world. I've also linked this to the Buddhist concept of the *samskāras*: the 'mental formations' and their affective content. We can too easily think of these as '*things*' that 'I *have*', as 'ideas' or some kind of mental '*contents*' of an independently existing '*mind*'. Bromberg's idea of shifting self-states returns us directly to our immediate experiencing, and to its *wholeness*. *This self-state is who I am* right now. Bromberg talks of our sense of self as the ability to construct the idea of a continuous and unified '*self*' — my '*me*' — out of the reality of discontinuous and constantly shifting self-states, which we move between in relation to the needs of the moment. There is no simple way I can ever stand back from these to get a '*true*', '*objective*' view, and in fact this idea itself makes no sense. Each self-state feels like '*me*', and each is experienced as '*whole*', as consistent with itself, despite each being the product of *dissociation*. But some self-states are more inclusive than others, some can come to include what has previously been experienced as '*not me*', as bad, dangerous or completely other. So if we can come to understand delusion neither as a failure or kind of madness, nor as a departure from some imagined initial or final clarity, then we can claim it and own it as what we all are: embodied, mortal, vulnerable beings experiencing ourselves as the selves we have fabricated out of this moment by moment experiencing. We turn towards and we turn away, we see the world in the ways we do, and we tell stories of why this is the way it always was and will be. It is the nature of our delusion to be invisible to us *as delusion*. The world really *looks* that way, *feels* that way. It *makes sense* that way. If I'm walking along the road and suddenly there's a large pink elephant stood in front of me, addressing me by name, and telling me God wants me to do...well...whatever, we *might* hope that reason will kick in and I'll go: *something not quite right about this...* But nevertheless, I do actually *see* the elephant, *hear* the elephant, and if, in this self-state of mine pink elephants that talk *do* have a possible place in Reality — they *make sense* — then I may well listen and do whatever it is I'm told to do...

We first met this phenomenon in thinking about 'conspiracy' delusions: if my *samskāras* ('mental formations') predispose me to experience the world and myself in this or that way, then I will so experience it. These arrangements work as *wholes*, I can't just randomly change one element of it without reframing the whole as all other elements have to shift to accommodate. So whether it is that the world is ruled by space-lizards, or that my heroin

use just 'is me' and harms no-one, I really do *experience* the world this way. BUT! I can never be *free* of delusion any more than I can be free of being *this* self-state in *this* moment. As Barry Magid never tires of saying, there is no delusion so deep as that delusion that I can be free of all delusion: as we have said, as embodied beings, and hence mortal and vulnerable, this is our nature. But not all delusions are equal. Philip Bromberg argues that the function of psychoanalysis is to help us 'stand in the spaces' between self-states: to experience their shifting nature and the unnoticed inconsistencies and contradictions within and between them. By so doing we may come to allow ourselves — to feel safe to — *experience* ourselves more inclusively, more *whole*, less subject to the specific dissociations which have formed the coping strategies that serve us so poorly.

Our approach through Zen practice is in many ways analogous to this, that by paying attention to the shifting moment by moment play of experience which we each are, we may come to see ourselves as less separate both within ourselves and between each other. We may come to experience more and experience more fully, and experience ourselves as more whole with the world, and whole within ourselves. And this inevitably involves turning *outward* to the world of which I am a part, to the causes of my turning away, and the consequences of my actions. None of my engagement is, in this sense, 'neutral', or without consequence. Our practice is exploration: not to determine in advance, not to tell us how we *must*, or *should* think or behave. But this absolutely does *not* mean it doesn't matter what choices we make, or that it's all 'relative'. If a popular working definition of 'madness' is to keep repeating the same actions and expecting a different result, then by this standard we are all clearly 'mad', but equally clearly our investigations can lead us in the direction of becoming less so. While we can never stand back to get a 'view from nowhere', our patterns of dissociation clearly allow us to see aspects of our world more and less whole, and to act in ways that are more and less harming both to ourselves and to others, whether those others are our intimate relationships, or the 'collective body' of which Thich Nhat Hanh speaks.

This Body

We are embodied beings, and this body which I am is not something separate from an independently existing 'me'. So, for example, to say that somebody is 'hormonal' is generally meant as a criticism, and when — as it so often is — applied to a woman, might be considered an actual slur. And yet, of course, we are *all* and *always* hormonal, this is simply how our bodies run themselves. My excitement, arousal, relaxation, distraction, boredom, sleep and all the rest of my modes and moods are accompanied by a cocktail of hormones circulating in my bloodstream. My very experiencing of 'my' emotions is, at least in one sense, the registering in awareness of the subtle and not-so-subtle gradients of the many different hormones as they are secreted and dispersed. My body chemistry, and with it my mood, clarity and focus, are actually influenced by all those substances and activities we might wish to include within the field of this precept, and not only those with a direct, bio-chemical action. All that passes through what Buddhism describes as my 'sense gates' — my sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, memory and thought — will arouse a hormonal response of some kind, will arouse emotion in me, and quite possibly dissociation also. No wonder traditional Buddhism regarded all of these 'sense gates' as

potentially dangerous and stressed the need to guard them well. For the monk or nun these are distractions that should be, and by choice are, reduced to a minimum. But for we who live 'in the world' there's no such simple choice, and nor should there be. Our senses are how we experience our world, with all its loves and desires, fears and loathings. This is my life, so do I embrace or evade it?

We do, though, perhaps have more varieties of sense experience available to us than any culture that has ever existed. My choice of virtually any stimulant, depressant or psychoactive substance is available at most within a mile or two, if I know who to ask, and failing that there's always the internet. Talking of our screen culture, streaming services will bring a literally endless flow of TV, films and music specifically designed to capture my attention in whatever mood/self state I might find myself. Although some of the statistics often quoted for the percentage of internet traffic devoted to pornography are (apparently) wildly exaggerated, even the more conservative estimates are surprising to many of us: perhaps 4% of sites and 14% of searches. Then there are gambling and gaming, or simply, for that matter, scrolling. Here's a different modern statement of this precept from the Plum Village tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh:

We are committed not to gamble or to use alcohol, drugs or any other products which bring toxins into our own and the collective body and consciousness such as certain websites, electronic games, music, TV programs, films, magazines, books and conversations. We will consume in a way that preserves compassion, peace, joy, and good health in our bodies and consciousness and in the collective body and consciousness of our families, our society, and the Earth.

Practice Questions: Does from this list help me see the breath of my turnings away?

Which are most significant to me?

What stories do I tell myself about what I am turning towards?

How do these two sides relate?

What's Your Poison?

How useful is it to think in terms of 'toxins' here? It's an obvious step from the idea of 'the collective body', but one that plays against the approach of 'it's not the substance it's the use we make of it!' we have seen with Diane. And at the initial level she's absolutely right, though we must also be careful here: 'It's not guns that kill people, it's people that kill!'... or at least that's what the National Rifle Association always says. Actually, it's the combination of the two which is dangerous, and rather than locking up or executing all of the potential human killers (which is all of us), sanity suggests it might be more humane and effective to tackle the availability of the guns. You (hopefully) see my point? But in what way is this the same as, or different from banning heroin and crack cocaine, or in *not* banning or more severely restricting the use of alcohol? How do we find the line between substances and activities I can reasonably make choices about, and what are matters of public health, public safety? What do 'we' require 'protecting' from, and where do we feel that misuse by 'others' should *not* be allowed to interfere with our own use? But what if it's actually *me* I'm talking about here with the big stuff? We stress the *nonjudgemental*

attitude, and if we are to find any degree of self-honesty then this is essential. But there *will* be a time to judge, though often simply to let me find my own way forward in my own time. But what if it *is* two bottles of vodka a day, or my shooting up? What if it's spending my days on Incel websites, or gambling away my family's home without them knowing, or downloading child porn every night? What then?

For most of us, most of the time, it's not that, but instead any or all of those plethora of activities that clearly are neither good nor bad in themselves: playing and watching sports, exercise, even the food we eat... In fact most of us lift our mood or counteract stress by eating. Chocolate, cookies, foods that remind us of childhood or happier times, or just the buzz of sugars and the satiety of fats. The pleasures of looking, smelling, tasting, and chewing, of contrasting textures in the mouth. Is this in any way wrong or worrying? And yet we know that in the West obesity is a massive and growing problem. We know that if we 'comfort eat' too much, we may well end up comfort eating because we are 'so fat', or simply that it becomes our go-to response in any difficult situation. Clearly this too is 'evading the painful truths of our life'? Whatever the particular form or the individual circumstances, underlying it all is this mechanism of turning away from my life without being aware that that's what I'm doing. Despite what I consciously believe, and despite all the teachings pointing in the opposite direction of mindfulness and awareness, I obviously want to lead myself into 'ignore-ance', into dissociation. Or at least a part of me does. There is a turning away from what hurts, or from what this part of me assumes is going to hurt...

Perhaps the most severe and widespread social and chemical addiction in our culture has actually been nicotine, traditionally in the form of tobacco, but now increasingly as vaping. A lot of what goes for food goes for tobacco also. There's the action of holding between the fingers, the ritual, often social, of lighting the cigarette, and then the inhaling, the feel of the filter between the lips, the warmth of smoke, its trailing off into the air. The fall of ash, the hand positions of our 'smoking *mudras*'...All this quite apart from the actual hit of nicotine... *Who* reaches for the cigarette? If I am happily a smoker this might seem an easy one to answer. Okay, but when it's my fifth go at quitting, and all my previous attempts have collapsed after a week or a month, the just *who* reaches for the cigarette? The nicotine? My body? My weakness? My badness? My...*will*, my *intention*? Where will I land my judgement? And what's *really* going on? Likewise, when I'm pouring a beer? Opening the biscuit tin/cookie jar? *Who*? Any of these will show me, if I pause to notice, that I'm never simply 'one thing', a whole, undivided, unitary 'person'. Different 'parts' of me want different things, often in the same moment. Our relationships with our habits show us this very clearly and intimately. 'Habit' is of course itself a long-standing slang for addiction...I need to feed my habit... How many of our habits are connected with evasion, momentary or sustained?

Why was it so cool to smoke? Ask Hollywood! Long gone are the days when advertising depicted every smoker as a handsome cowboy or with the gold braid of an airline pilot, but the principles have not changed. In what ways do these stories become our own? What do they reveal about ourselves and about our world, and what do they hide? This product

will make me look good and feel good, and give relief from the truths that worry me, and in some small way I'll become a different me, if only for a moment or two. There's no simple escape from these stories, of course. This is the culture, the society, which I inhale with every breath...

And what when the stories themselves become the habit, the addiction? I might have got the idea that the real problem is the distraction offered by the sense pleasures, but the world of ideas can be equally, and in some ways *more* involving. Any and all firmly held ideas that demand our unswerving belief: political, religious, and of course Buddhist ideas can affect us very powerfully and over long periods of time. Political or ethical views that offer us any degree of certainty about how the world is — or should be — can in fact narrow and restrict our view of life, while at the same time creating a passionate conviction that we are correct and that only fools or devils could disagree with us. Displaced onto a great leader or an ideal, our desire for identity and certainty ceases to seem 'selfish' in the conventional sense, and we may even offer ourselves up for metaphorical or even literal martyrdom for the cause.

'Using' Buddhism

Buddhism is not different from any other practice, and its ideas, ideals and rituals are certainly included here. Even the technicalities and sense of purpose of practice itself can become habitual and relied on in ways that may be both damaging and supportive. In prison, for instance, possessions are extremely few and there's little or no opportunity to control an environment where the smells of confinement, of ageing buildings with limited access to hygiene and accumulated frustration combine to create a pervasive cocktail of odours. Here the burning of incense takes on a major importance. The ability to create a familiar and welcome fragrance through one's own ritual and at a time of one's choosing can be hugely comforting and grounding. But where's the line between being supported by this and dependent on it? Its use can become obsessive, and even the prospect of its absence traumatic. In this way incense assumes a significance impossible to imagine for those outside the system.

Even precept practice itself and the sense of purpose and identity created through it can become a turning away rather than towards my life. If I'm convinced that this is the 'right' path and everyone else is 'wrong', then I'm clearly caught up in the world of views... There is also the pervasive idea found in many Buddhist schools that what I'm looking for is the 'right' state of mind, whether that be 'pure consciousness', 'calm' or 'equanimity'. Even mindfulness and awareness can come to be seen in this light. There is 'Happy' Buddhism, the kind that suggests that if I just do the practice right then I'll get to see reality as it is and inevitably be happy as a consequence; hence if I'm not happy right now then I'm clearly *not* doing it 'right'. Or 'Unhappy' Buddhism that sees all of us as hopeless slackers who will never attain the level of constant and concentrated mindfulness of, say, an Ajahn Chah, and so we will never finally transcend the suffering of our present state of delusion and defilement — which is the whole purpose of our practice itself. In either case, what is on offer is a version of *control* and *safety*... searching to find, or giving up hope of finding *the* mental state that would put *me* in *control*, and that has the sanction of those I

truly believe are my spiritual superiors. There is a particular rigidity and inflexibility that may come with this kind of sustained intensity as a result of the effort of will required and the striving for (always incomplete) mastery. A striving which may at any point collapse under its own weight, leaving the complementary experience of failure and self-recrimination, an experiencing of self-judgement from which we will be only too happy to turn away in order to continue our search for the next product, fix, demagogue or spiritual leader... By which we only can only ever compound our real experience of suffering.

*Practice Question: Has my own practice ever produced this kind of search in me?
How did/does it end?*

The Rights and Wrongs of Right and Wrong

We talk — rightly — of being non-judgemental in our awareness. ‘Should’ and ‘should not’ are death to self-honesty. *I feel* the way I feel, *I want* what I want... And I feel and want *differently* from day to day, moment to moment. In my exploration of what appears as ‘me’ I feel and I follow my feelings as they unfold, the thoughts arising and fading that accompany them. My investigation itself is not a neutral or distanced activity, and if I sustain my practice it can and will change *how* I feel, *how* I think, and so also how I consequently act. It’s not that ‘right and wrong’ — or as modern Buddhism likes to say ‘wholesome and unwholesome’ actions — don’t figure, but that we can’t assume them in advance, or derive them *a priori*. Being what looks like ‘right’ may prove very ‘wrong’ in this particular context. And the attempt to distinguish one from the other may itself lead directly to harming born of deepening our delusion, of our moralising separation into *good* and *bad*, *us* and *them*. Righteousness is rarely appropriate, and our attempts to imagine we can get on the ‘right’ side of any issue are always problematic. We’ve touched on many ways of ‘evading the painful truths of life’, and one of these painful truths is that our need to know — to be right, and so to be safe from shame and from other harm — is itself a cause of suffering and harming. And yet. Both as individuals and as a society we need to *act* and hence to judge, and realise that our *inaction* is always also an *action* and a judgement in itself. No escape! We are part of this world, down and dirty with it...

I chose to use Philippa Perry’s response to her heroin user because in this case the issue is crystal clear: heroin use places us squarely on the wrong side of the law. We know that the use of any illegal drug goes directly to fund organised crime and the exploitation and violence that is part and parcel of that illegal trade. Without question, *true*. Though we might well ask, why are heroin and cocaine illegal when we can and do freely use alcohol in such collectively damaging ways? In reality, of course the situation is complex. The history of alcohol use in Western culture is very different in its breadth and scope from that of the drugs we make illegal: we are not starting from year zero, day one, and should not pretend we can do. Yet the majority of the consequences of illegal drug use are as a direct result of their illegality. Complete lack of quality control and reliable information, the miserable lack of treatment centres and effective management lead to longer and more dangerous addiction. The illegal trade in drugs produces horrendous levels of violence and exploitation. But the *existence* of this trade is itself the direct *consequence* of the illegality of the proscribed substances. The ‘War on Drugs’ has been in full swing

internationally for a little more than a century, and in its own terms of reference has been a catastrophic and chronic failure. A failure too — and this time admitted as such — was the United States attempt to include strong alcohol within that ‘war’ during the Prohibition years that ended in 1933. As it became clear that the measures enjoyed only limited popular support, the legislation was repealed and an amendment to the Constitution added. The traditional ubiquity of alcohol made it impractical to ban, although all states do exercise some controls over its (legal) production and consumption, and get considerable tax revenue by so doing. The case was very different for other drugs, to which Western governments have complex relationships. Opium — the source of heroin — was used by nineteenth century British governments as a directly socioeconomic and political weapon against Imperial China. Opium grown within the British Empire was imported into China to produce millions of addicts as eager consumers, and to destabilise Chinese society sufficiently to make it politically and militarily incapable of resisting the drug’s importation. Chinese hegemony in East Asia was thereby broken, and the ensuing warfare and societal collapse ended only with the Communist victory following the Second World War. The memory of Britain’s part in this is one important strand in China’s continuing fear of and hostility towards the West. So in the short term this proved a highly effective strategy, and one that was, in Europe and the US, accompanied by the demonisation of all Chinese as being a ‘drug-crazed’ opium addict who posed an existential danger to civilised (Western) society, and specifically to White women.

It was this same racial stereotype that, as Johann Hari has shown in *Chasing the Scream* (2015), was in the early years of the twentieth century used as the rationale behind making opioids illegal in the United States — a ‘racial panic’ used as a political control (parallel to the limiting of Chinese immigration) of the rapidly growing population of Chinese-Americans. As Hari further shows, this same strategy criminalising specific drugs — but in this case those favoured by Black communities — was an important component of the racism of the Jim Crow era, as one part of the response to the fears of White elites following on from post Civil War reconstruction. To come closer to the present, Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* (2010) showed conclusively that the intensification of the ‘War on Drugs’ from the 1980s onwards was organised, promoted and funded with the covert — and often not so covert — intention of undermining the advances won by the Civil Rights movement. Alexander demonstrates exactly how the creation and disciplining of a huge Black underclass of ‘law breakers’ — fabricating the symbolic equation of Blackness with criminality — the majority of Black Americans would thereby be effectively denied the political, economic and social equality they were now formally and legally guaranteed.

As a strategy of racial and class control the War on Drugs has been and remains effective. While driven by domestic American and European demand, much drug production has been effectively outsourced to countries such as Colombia, Mexico and Afghanistan (remembering too that the most effective campaign *against* heroin production was that carried out by the Taliban...). It seems incontrovertible, whatever intentions we place in the minds of those involved, that the ‘War on Drugs’ has created far more harm than it has ever prevented, and that this was so from its beginning. Our images of the ‘other’ have

been shaped by this. In terms of our OM way of looking at the Precepts it's clear that in defining a section of our society as dangerously and differently other — the addict, the dealer, potentially everyone who is Black, Chinese, hispanic — our governments have created a collective delusion far more dangerous than any clouding of my individual consciousness that I might bring about, although this is the context in which we normally discuss this Precept. It's interesting that this plays to racial stereotyping of the worst sort: non-Whites are irrational and devious, and 'we' (Whites) need to resist at all costs being polluted by them. (Or if Black, to shown by our words and actions that we are the 'right' sort of Black woman or man.) This is the argument for slavery, and for colonialism and exploitation of every kind, even for genocide. By separating off our own collective badness in the figure of the other, we obscure the real issues of our society. This is a misdirection of our collective attention, and while we are all to some degree complicit in this, for some it has been and remains their cynical and direct intention to deflect our attention, to misdirect us in our perception and understanding of our world.

We can actually widen this argument into a more general one about the social and political effects of our turnings away. The poet Juvenal coined the phrase 'bread and circuses' two thousand years ago to describe a Roman populace whose political apathy, and even loyalty to their masters' interests could be bought by a dole of grain and lavish public entertainments. When Marx wrote of religion as 'the opium of the people' he too was pointing to the turning away from the direct experiencing of our difficult and often painful collective reality towards the 'other' worlds of heaven and drug use. Our distractions are not simply our turning away, our dissociation from our individual dis-ease (whether that be rooted in trauma or simply the difficulties of 'this moment') but from the collective social, political and yes, *personal* consequences of a society based in the generation of inequality and insatiable competition. This has served some of us unimaginably well, and many of us all too poorly. It's towards looking this reality in the eye that our attention will turn with the next Precept.

We turn away, and we turn away. There is much to turn away from, far more than any of us can bear. We *can* at least Bear Witness to this turning, and investigate it as best we may as for each of us it shows up as and in 'me'. I cannot step outside my culture or my 'self'. I am always and forever a part of it: back to Vimalakirti's 'I am sick because the world is sick'. Hence this investigation of ourselves and the world needs to be gently, and kindly, and generously done: there is far more to turn away from than any of us can bear. If we persist in our investigations, if we come back, and back, and back we may begin to gain insights about ourselves as we are in the present, and as we have been in the past. These insights may, hopefully, help us to see and to experience ourselves as 'not-separate' from our embodiment as social beings. We may come to see the dependence of the patterning of our turnings on our collective delusion and dissociation, manifesting in our collective 'requirements', assumptions and ideas. The precept won't ever tell you the purpose or the consequences of your or my opening the fridge, scrolling on the sofa, turning on the TV. Your *practice* and my practice will do this, if we allow it to develop and to deepen. My investigation of my own patterns of reaction and response will definitely bring about changes, though exactly what these will be I'll have to find out as I go: my behaviours shift

and adjust, my thinking acknowledges the full complexity of the given situation in which I or we or the world find ourselves. Placing my own responses in this broader context can show me on the one hand my own complicities, cowardices and heroism, *and* that it's not about 'me' at all, but the way we find ourselves thrown into a world which is not of our choosing, and yet is still *our* world, and our *only* world. The world we love.