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Inequality

The Second Applied Precept: *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.*

Feeling Greedy?

What makes *you* feel greedy? Does it feel like an overwhelming flood of *need*, or simply as the inclination to take a little too much? But then what is *too* much anyway? How do we know?

Practice Question: please do think about your 'first impressions' before we start...

'Greed' is one of the traditional 'three poisons' or 'three fires' of Buddhism: those qualities that keep us bound to suffering, both the suffering we experience and the suffering we bring to others. It's easy to image the greedy person — and perhaps easy to access an image of my own greed. This is the kind of greed that we *know* is bad, in the Christian tradition is a deadly sin, and is clearly something we think we should *feel* bad about ourselves for feeling.

Monastic Buddhism takes this approach very straightforwardly, at least in principle. All desire, partiality, attachment of all kinds related to my 'self' *is* what holds me in the round of repetitive existence. Renunciation is the path to liberation. The ascetic strain within Buddhism points to there being no obvious limit to what can be renounced, what we are able to live without, and it is perfectly true that as biological organisms we 'need', at base level, very little. But of course, we can become attached to renunciation itself... and it is equally true that the Buddha was explicit about his Path being a 'middle way' between the extremes of asceticism and indulgence. Raised, according to tradition, in the lap of luxury that he then rejects, he then *also* rejects as unhelpful the extreme asceticism he practiced in the years before his awakening. I've always liked the gloss on 'renunciation' that Shunryo Suzuki gave: renunciation is not about giving things up but understanding and accepting that they will go away anyway. This includes the loss of loved ones, all we have worked to achieve, and our mortal selves...everything. We don't want this to happen. This is impermanence in its negative aspect. This is the reality of suffering.

So we can bring this back to fundamentals right here: *suffering*. We could, instead of simply labelling it 'bad' or 'evil', see our greed as a *response* to the experience of suffering. We turn away from our suffering, towards what we think will give us pleasure. We often treat that *turning away* and *turning towards* as reactions which are 'just me', but I hope the previous sections have shown that besides trying to experience our turning towards and turning away honestly, we always need to ask...*why, what's going on here?* We need to try to *not* turn away from that turning away...but instead to experience this resistance to our 'life as it is' (and even our resistance itself as a part of that life)... Perhaps the most obvious example of this, and one I'm prone to myself, is 'comfort eating'. Faced with the experience of ongoing stress, of circumstances or situations I would rather not think about, not *experience*, I can change my mood and my focus by ...eating. Or, for that matter, the contemplation or anticipation of eating. Interestingly, this involves those same processes of dissociation and displacement discussed in relation to violence: I *displace* the concern and resolution of the (real) stress onto something available and achievable. Of course this leaves the real stress unresolved... But the hunger, the need I feel *is* real, although its *cause* lies elsewhere. We all use this kind of strategy all the time, often unconsciously, sometimes knowingly. Like all 'coping strategies' it works — up to a point — while failing to address the underlying issue. Where these become pathological is when they lead to greater suffering for ourselves or others. There is a fine line between distraction, coping and addiction, one we all walk and cross at different moments. The Fifth Precept will look at this process in detail. The Third Precept looks specifically at one of the ways we commonly do this through one of our most powerful feelings — our sexual expression — and the forms of harming that can result from the ways this is channelled within our society. 'Sex addiction', the use of and debates around pornography, changing notions of 'consent': there is much to be discussed.

Bringing intimate and non-judgemental moment by moment awareness to our actual experiencing of all of these activities, activities of self-distraction through dissociation and displacement, we can come to better understand ourselves as we are. We may come to experience our 'greed' differently, and perhaps more caringly.

Practice Question: does this idea of greed resonate with you, or bring up resistance of its own?

Another traditional way of stating this precept is 'not taking what is not freely given', and this can allow us access to another dimension of our greed which feels very different: the immediate physical and psychological impact of our presence in the world. What is it to live as a *shared* world? This formulation of the Precept is often just taken to refer to respecting rules of ownership: don't steal!', but we can take it in a much wider sense too. Beyond legal ownership there is the question of *use*: why do I assume I have the right to use this or that thing *regardless* of who 'owns' it? And the things nobody 'owns'? It's worth asking in what ways I *don't* respect the 'property' of others, and Rizzetto makes telling points about the micro-details of our behaviour in the street, out shopping, or at work. We can learn a lot about ourselves we might not have noticed... But the real power of this way of framing this Precept comes when we open this initial question *wide* to investigate how I

act on a broader tissue of assumptions that I am often barely even aware of. How I occupy the physical space I do in relation to other people, how 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 ‘man-spreading’ and ‘mansplaining’: gendered attitudes that assume masculine entitlement to *most* of a shared seat, the *authoritative* 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 the 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 our *own*: when we experience the displeasure of our own rising resistance... ‘but I was only...!’ How *much* do I take? And *how* do I set my measure? The answers to these questions are obviously *individual* responses to our *collective* habits, assumptions and values, responses that finally have much to do with our ‘self’ in the everyday Magidian sense, and so too with our self image, and our socially constructed identity. 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 huge subject in itself: we’ll revisit it in relation to gender with the next Precept and in different forms in the following ones, but it echoes through all of our discussion of inequalities here, whether that’s at the level of unconscious reflex, my ‘rights’, ‘fairness’, ‘nature’ or whatever other justification I or others may offer.

Practice Question: what is my own experience of this sense of entitlement, from both sides?

‘Freely’ is also worth investigating further. We looked a little at the idea of ‘freedom’ in relation to violence: as an individual self I am told I am ‘free’ and therefore assumed to have ‘freely’ given my consent to whatever rules the state enacts on my behalf, my ‘freedom’ to dissent being limited to whatever that state determines is ‘legitimate’ protest. I am also *obliged* to ‘freely’ compete with all others for the goods and services I need, and will be penalised or criminalised if I am unwilling or unable to. Most workers are obliged ‘freely’ to enter into employment contracts they have no say in framing, and little chance of influencing except by the threat of withdrawing their labour. The nuances of exactly how much police ‘pressure’ may be applied to a suspect to gain a confession that counts as ‘freely given’ is the subject of endless legal debate and a key element in countless police dramas. Our individual ‘freedom’ is a social obligation, and one the nature and limits of which are, of course, socially constructed and defined. As such it always embodies relationships which are never simply that of ‘equals’, but always express inequality in a specific context. This is the connection between the two elements of the Ordinary Mind framing of the Precept, on the one hand our individual and collective greed, and on the other the inequalities through which this is produced, channelled and expressed.

‘Greed Is Good!’

But is greed actually so ‘bad’? Isn’t it just about wanting more of what life is all about, anyway? In reality our society is clearly highly ambivalent — ‘conflicted’ — about greed. If traditional morality (and Buddhist psychology and soteriology) tell us that greed is bad

for ourselves and for the world, we are, paradoxically, relentlessly also told that 'greed is good'. Take Gordon Gekko's famous speech from the 1987 film *Wall Street*:

'The point is, ladies and gentleman, that greed – for lack of a better word – is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms – greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge – has marked the upward surge of mankind.'

This is an elegant statement of the ideology behind what is often called 'neoliberalism', or 'free market economics', advocated for in the 1940's by Friedrich Hayek and famously in the 1980's by such influential economists as Milton Friedman, a favourite of both Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. However, writers such as Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations*, had long recognised how central greed was and would continue to be to the development of Capitalism. Greed for money and what it can buy (essentially the power to command others), is *naturalised* (ie being made to seem simply 'natural' and hence inevitable) as being one major aspect of the highest of human aspirations, and that *my* greed as an individual will hence, in and of itself, contribute to the 'upward surge of mankind' as a whole. In fact this greed is further seen as *essential* to 'growth', where the well-being of society as a whole is seen as being expressed by the growth in one single economic measure, the Gross National Product (GNP). *My* greed is the best thing I can offer to the world. This is a reassuring doctrine: I need not concern myself with others except as it benefits me or pleases me to. If I have more and you have less, this is simply... what? The nature of things? The law of the market has spoken: things are as they are and could not be otherwise without a conscious interference that will disrupt the 'natural order' of the market's self-regulation, and contribute to the frustration of the evolution of mankind and human progress itself.

This is actually a very interesting claim, and worth thinking through and deconstructing a little. It's true that the strict monastic version of renunciation regards *all* desire other than our aspiration to practice as holding us to the wheel of suffering, and the logical consequence of adopting a fully monastic viewpoint (including of course its vow of celibacy) is the end of human kind, period. Desire, as our Ordinary Mind practice reminds us, *is* simply a part of life, and yes, that involves suffering. The task, again as Joko reminds us, is to 'suffer intelligently', to live rich and full lives while reducing the suffering of all beings, ourselves included. Understanding our greed, and how it functions to harm all beings, ourselves included, is an important part of this. Gekko's speech conflates all aspects of desire into a binary choice: *either* I embrace greed in all its aspects, including the inevitable and unequal suffering that it creates, *or* I frustrate the cause of human evolution. It mirrors perfectly the monastic argument. We might possibly see this speech as being simply the expression of a natural, innate human selfishness allowed to run riot. However, it would be more useful to understand under what conditions it could come to be made...

Desire, *tout court*, is first dissociated from its real effects in the world (suffering), and then displaced onto financial greed. The state-regulated trading in stocks and shares — which is both the setting for the movie and the real-life highest expression of the functioning of 'the

market' — is far from being in any way natural or 'free'. It relies on concepts of legal ownership completely divorced from the actual production of goods and the carrying out of services. It operates according to strict internationally agreed codes that make transactions legal or illegal, and also serve to frame the grey area between these two extremes, the exploitation of which will yield the highest profits. It embodies the reality of 'private property' not as personal *possessions*, but as the exercise of the power to command. This is the power of Capital, that force which entered into alliance with military power to form the modern world of national states, and exists in uneasy and ambivalent relation to that power: supportive as military power creates and opens new markets and opportunities for its growth, antagonistic as that same state power seeks to limit or regulate its profits. It is this alliance, as was pointed out in the previous chapter, that creates us as the individuals possessed of skill and discipline and the motivation to compete against all others for a share in this private property, property that *validates* me (gives *value* to...makes *true* and real...) as an individual, but only, of course, in comparison to *others* who have less. I can only *become* the truly individual self I have been told I am by having *more* than anyone else, this is 'winning at life'. In this game the final prize, the alibi for the whole system, is perhaps the office of President of the United States. While *any* citizen born in the United States *may* become President, only one *is* the President, and the odds against nearly all of its individual citizens actually becoming President are hundreds of millions to one. It is worth remarking that POTUS' authority finally rests explicitly in being Commander in Chief of the American military. For all this the power of the Presidency is in reality far from unlimited, and even the actual winning of this game guarantees nothing in terms of personal wellbeing or happiness. Most Presidents understand this well, and perhaps Donald Trump's final failure is not to have understood that this ultimate prize would offer him nothing either to salve his personal suffering or allow him an unlimited power to loot the state or settle old scores. If symbolically only *one* can win — as witnessed by every 'competition' show from *Strictly Come Dancing* to *The Great British Bake-Off* — then *all* forms of inequality are necessitated, guaranteed and enshrined by this. It's only natural, only logical. In *this* sense, Gekko speaks nothing but the truth.

We glanced at the the idea of the *social contract* in relation to violence, but it is also of central importance in relation to inequality. There we noted that as *citizens* we are held to have given all rights over to the sovereign in exchange for the protection of the state from the threat of violence, a guarantee that can only be made by the sovereign/state itself claiming the absolute right over each and all of us to use whatever violence it deems necessary. It should, however, be remembered that the concept of *personal property* is also central to the theory of social contract. On the one hand the sovereign state guarantees that it, and *only* it, has the right to kill us or harm our bodies, but on the other it explicitly guarantees our right to hold private property, and that it will enforce and arbitrate this right against all comers. According to this view, *private property is as central to the establishment of society itself as is freedom from the threat of murder and physical violence*. Of course this is simply not true historically: across time and space societies have organised themselves in infinitely varied ways, however dominant our present idea of private property has become. But *this is* the reality of the societies in which we live today. Social

contract theory, like modern economics, was developed to explain and justify the then-current organisation of society by those close to both power and wealth: the key source in English is Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, written in the aftermath of the English Civil War. It hence expresses that alliance of capital with those in military and political power which allowed/forced the development of modern nation states. The English Civil War, with its execution of a king, its experiments in free-thinking religion, and the surfacing of radical ideas of democracy and egalitarianism, had all contributed to the previously unimaginable social turmoil. The idea of the social contract was to provide a justification for something approximating the re-establishment of the status quo ante — the naturalness, inevitability and justice of absolute rule by a sovereign who took to themselves the absolute right over life of their subjects, in exchange for guaranteeing the right of those subjects to hold, acquire and dispose of 'private' property. This was in many ways a modernisation of the distinction between the *public* and *private* realms that we saw in ancient Rome. It's also worth noting that while 'private property' suggests the defence of something we already have, throughout this period there was an ever-increasing *extension* of private property through the appropriation of what had always been common property: the enclosure of the 'commons' in England to the benefit of already powerful landowners is a crucial example. Depriving people of their traditional access to land destroyed the livelihoods of real individuals, and created a reservoir of abstract *labour* obliged to compete for whatever wages were on offer. This is a kind of *internal* colonisation that parallels the exploits of Empire *overseas*.

Gekko's speech embodies this world imagined as a single universal human drive — 'greed', but in reality it is the expression of a highly specific form of social organisation. My greed *is* culturally necessary to motivate me to compete to acquire the power and material trappings of wealth. That greed is perpetually stimulated explicitly by advertising and implicitly by the images that I am offered of what my life *could* be, *should* be, to fulfil my destiny as 'the one' ... the 'centre of the universe' ... *special, loved, safe*. This is one more manifestation of experiencing the core tension between my being the individual subject of my life (source of will, freedom and agency), and the individual subject of my life (subjected to sovereignty, individualised as one among millions...). This tension touches into very universal human experiences of insecurity, but always in a culturally specific form. Buddhism analysed the *basic* process millennia ago, as what we could today call 'New Car Syndrome'. A car is sold on what it *represents* and the *experience* of this representation, whatever compromises are made when we purchase it, in terms of what it actually is required to *do*. We are probably all familiar with the connection between freedom, power, sexuality, the envy of others and other qualities the car is represented as embodying (always providing we *dissociate* from our knowledge and experience of traffic jams, pollution, the degrading of public transport, consumption of fossil fuels, destruction of the local and global environment). I'll just point to 'new car smell' ... not exactly innately attractive, but representing in and of itself the 'good life'. So much so that I can buy it in aerosol form to 'restore' the *experiencing of it* in my ten year old car... Because I *displace* these different elements of my fantasies onto the new car it will never finally *deliver* them, and as these are *only* fantasies they are themselves the displacements of my basic insecurities: the tension of my *subjectivity*, my need for love, and my fear of death, along

with whatever other traumas and experiences have shaped me. And the new car will not long remain the dream it was: UK number plates change every six months, a newer model is released, the upholstery gets marked, the paint is scratched. For those who can afford to, the car will now need replacing. Or, if I am rich enough, I can always add to my 'collection' of automobiles... Nothing *can* or *will* finally satisfy, because the real issues are never addressed. I may of course congratulate myself that *I* personally am 'immune' to all this. But while I have no actual desire for a brand new Lamborghini or a Rolls Royce, the basic pattern is universal and applies to every possible object of greed, from money itself through sex, food, distinctive clothing, living space, gadgets, knowledge, morality... the list is endless. In a way each is a displacement of the others: food represents sex, sex represents power... The closest *I* can get to the reality of the 'good life' that I believe will end or ease the heart of my suffering, may well in this moment be to buy and eat another Mars bar...

(I hope it is self-evident that this *doesn't* in any way invalidate my *enjoying* a Mars bar...or food in general ... or sex...(!) That is *not* the argument here. It's rather about how every aspect of our real pleasures are shaped and framed within the needs and lacks we experience simply by being *this* being, in *this* society, at *this* time...)

And so the struggle of all against all to *become* the fantasy of being 'the one', the unique real centre, plays out in our displaced and desperate greed, a greed that is, as Gordon Gekko and Adam Smith would both agree, essential to fuel the growth upon which both Capital and the projects of our national states rely. Within this game inequality is not an unfortunate by-product. For the system as a whole within this model, inequality is like the voltage in an electric circuit: absolutely necessary for any current to flow, and like voltage, presumably the higher the better. For the individual players involved (and we are all players in this game) inequality is itself the *prize*, the *point*. There's the well-known bumper-sticker from the '80's attributed to Malcolm Forbes: '*He who dies with the most toys wins.*' Cliché? Yes, but still relentlessly sold to us as the only game in town: 'simple economic necessity'.

Practice Question: *how does all this sit with 'me'?*

We all like to imagine we are immune from such capture by greed, how far is that really so?

How is it to experience my 'selfing' in this way?

Is there a quality of 'selfing' in my resistance to this capture as well?

Inequalities

We can sketch out the many and various forms that inequality takes. At heart these are relationships of unequal power. Inequalities turn out to be not so much about your having 'more' or 'less' than I do as our having different possibilities of life, where that includes everything from our personal safety and the right to life itself, to access to food, education, healthcare, the right to love whom and how we choose, to the very possibilities of our imaginings, and finally to the age and manner in which we will die, the right to be mourned after our passing. Some of these effects can be directly measured: inequalities of

income and (more importantly) wealth; other outcomes rely more heavily on statistical analysis of available data and the way that analysis is interpreted. Yet there is a more visible and direct meaning too: the *durable* inequalities that are formed of binary opposites, where one term is always 'normal', *unmarked*, and *privileged*. I grew up in the south of middle class England speaking what was then called 'received pronunciation', and was taught that unlike everyone else on the planet, *we* spoke English *without* any accent. We were 'normal' and hence the yardstick by which all others should and would be judged. *All*. So: 'man' and 'woman': and hence 'mankind', the 'first man on the moon'... 'White' and 'non-white'/'BAME'/'ethnic'. 'Citizen' and 'non-citizen', 'able' and 'dis-abled', 'educated' and 'uneducated', (mentally) 'competent' and 'incompetent'. Less grammatically evident are the 'assumed to be "normal" until proven otherwise' binaries, for example: 'gay'/'queer'/'homosexual', and 'trans'. Here even being able to put a name to the normally unmarked term is a small victory: gay or 'straight'? ... trans or 'cis'? ... the backlash over the existence of the latter term showing how resolutely 'we' cling to our unmarked status. The relationship of the terms within each pair may vary through time and by place, but the core binary oppositions remain. Importantly, *membership* of them varies too: these are not the immutable categories of human life, but culturally assigned *designations*. The most obvious of these is that around race: 'whiteness' has at different times and in different places been taken to include or exclude southern or eastern Europeans, Catholics and Jews. In the United States, according to the 'one drop rule' the very many millions who are of *any* degree of 'mixed' heritage' are explicitly excluded from being considered 'White'. As applied to any actual human being, these inequalities will stack and multiply, or indeed may qualify or compensate for each other, or partially cancel each other. *Intersectionality* studies the complications of these multiplier effects on each other, effects that are never simple additions or subtractions. All these relationships are deeply *cultural*: the binary inequalities themselves, how membership is assigned, and the relationship between each pair. The effects are always political, as so often is the explicit and 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 *reified*: imagined to correspond to *really* separate kinds of *really* existent things, to which we assign different *properties* and 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, we feel entitled, even obliged to behave in accordance with this supposed reality, and worse, demand that other people also behave in accordance with this version of 'reality'. To question this in any way is hence to go 'against nature', or against tradition, or 'our way of life'. We can question the *values* given to each term: 'being a woman and being Black doesn't make me inferior'... (...to the White man to whom I'm implicitly compared). We can question the *qualities* assigned to each term: 'being a woman and being Black doesn't mean I'm less rational, less intelligent'... (...than the white man with whom I'm implicitly compared). We can question the way membership is *assigned*: ('Black trans women are women!'). We can question the ways in which the inequalities themselves are constructed, socially fabricated: 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman...' as Simone de Beauvoir famously says in *The Second Sex*.

Resistance to this questioning will be encountered at each of these levels, often in unexpected quarters, and no less in the questioners themselves. Whenever my sense of *self*, as it manifests in how I think the world *is* or *should* be experiences a challenge then I will experience it in my bodily feelings, my emotions and thoughts. I will construct arguments and adopt those of others to reassure myself and lessen this sense of discomfort. I 'need' the world to be this way, I need as always to be right and to be good, and for the world to reflect this back to me, because it is only ever (some part of) the world that has told me what is right and good in the first place.

Practice check: *where do I encounter resistance in others, and where do I encounter it in myself?*

The closer we move down through these levels of questioning, towards the realisation that the framing of the pairs *themselves* is *empty*, the stronger the resistance will be, both in others and in ourselves. *Empty* does not mean imaginary, or irrelevant. There is a tendency within Zen (as within Christianity: just substitute 'God' for 'emptiness') to say 'in emptiness there is no male, no female, no Black and no white... so let us rise above these distinctions in the experience of Oneness!' *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. They are not '*really real*', (to use a suggestive but still highly ambiguous phrase, and I only wish I could find a better one). But these most definitely *are* the inequalities but which much of my actual life is mapped out and channelled, and our practice has to involve turning towards them and not away from them, as we turn towards our individual resistance to life and suffering as we meet it in each moment.

Turning towards and turning away. It is through and by 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), 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? We dissociate and displace as individuals, but, as always, within the collective possibilities that frame the commonplaces and resistance within our culture. How do I set limits to my caring, to my concern, to my awareness? These are all vital subjects to investigate.

Practice Question: *take a few minutes to begin to examine these questions.*

What is the experience in my body as I ask these questions and reflect on them?

What feelings and what thoughts arise?

Empathy, anger, justification?

But of course there's still one question I haven't actually asked up to this point. The Precept certainly states that I will aspire towards equality and sharing freely... but, *why?* Is

inequality really so bad? Shouldn't I just look to my own spiritual welfare, man up, and buckle down along with the rest? What's wrong with that? Well, it's the defining characteristic of the Bodhisattva Path, of which these Precepts are the principal means, that we address the suffering of *all* beings by whatever means are available to hand, that we live our lives in the acknowledgement of that suffering. I hope I've shown, or at least pointed to, the way in which greed offers us only the fantasy of satisfaction for displaced suffering and need, and the way this greed both relies on and actively drives inequality of all kinds. That inequality is always an inequality of power, and perhaps always too of human possibility. So, what can be said about the actual linkage between suffering and inequality? Clearly, specific discrimination based on prejudice and misunderstanding causes immense suffering, and hopefully it's clear that even the less immediately apparent manifestations as bias and structural discrimination are equally problematic. But simply the radically unequal distribution of income, wealth and all that goes with it? What kind of problem is that, *really*?

We don't normally do statistics in Zen, justifiably so, on the whole. But statistics *can* point us to realities of which we are otherwise unaware. So if you have never done so, I'd recommend at least a cursory look at *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* by Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson. Published in 2009, the book highlights the "pernicious effects that inequality has on societies: eroding trust, increasing anxiety and illness, (and) encouraging excessive consumption". It shows that for each of eleven different health and social problems: physical health, mental health, drug abuse, education, imprisonment, obesity, social mobility, trust and community life, violence, teenage pregnancies, and child well-being, outcomes are significantly worse in more unequal rich countries. Not simply the outcomes for the poorest, but for the population as a *whole*. There's a wide field of research confirming and widening Pickett and Wilkinson's findings, the strength of which is the *consistency* of the correlation of suffering and inequality across such apparently different fields: a confirmation of the *not-separate* nature of our social existence. This is one of the ways *emptiness* shows up as *real-life*. (The Equality Trust website: equalitytrust.org.uk has an excellent overview of this work.) Equally, recommending the several thousand pages of the world's leading economic historian Thomas Picketty's *Capital and Capitalism and Ideology* might seem excessive, although both made the New York Times' bestseller list. But his recent *A Brief History of Equality* does demonstrate in more accessible form the *interdependence* of all struggles towards equality and the central importance of addressing economic inequality in these struggles. How? Picketty himself points to the central role of the development of non-commercialised sectors such education and healthcare: what we might think of as examples of a developing culture of *care* rather than *competition*. He also points out the absolute necessity for *collective* action, that none of these issues are possible to address solely at the level of the individual:

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)

My Fellow Citizens

Did I mention that the single most accurate predictor of your life expectancy/overall health/income/level of education/much more besides, is the nation into which you were born? The issue of citizenship may seem remote, at least for those of us who are comfortably established in a politically and economically stable and (relatively) prosperous nation, and who do not find ourselves subject to unliveable oppression as the inferior term in one or another of the binary inequalities. Citizenship has come to play an increasingly important role in the provision of services, the offering of rights. And with this growth have come previously unimaginable restrictions on freedom of movement: passports themselves were only introduced as a temporary measure in the years following the trauma of the First World War in order to guarantee safe passage. However, it was within years of their initial use that they came to be used instead to restrict and deny entry, so that to be born was to be born *as* the citizen of one nation, and to be tied to the possibilities and limitations of life within that nation. As has the idea of democracy itself, citizenship, has always had *exclusion* at its heart. In ancient Athens — ‘cradle of democracy’ — the electorate comprised *all* citizens, but *only* those adult males who had completed military training and who were themselves the sons of Athenian citizens (adult males who had completed...and were the sons of...) could claim the right of citizenship. This seems to have been between 10% and 20% of the actual population. ‘All’, and ‘we’, always come with *exclusions*. This is also the logic by which new groups fight for and *gain* rights as citizens: the ‘good’, hard-working, morally upright worker, the ‘good’ woman who combines raising her family with a career, the ‘good’, hard-working immigrant who now wishes to see immigration halted and ‘bad’ migrants deported... We move from being *outsiders* to *insiders*, but leave the wall intact. To be ‘us’ *requires* defining ourselves against a ‘them’. Even a ‘universal’ franchise requires an inside and an outside: the question of ‘competence’. At what age do children become ‘competent’ to take their own decisions? (And which?) It’s an important question, and one to which there is no consistent answer. But to stay with our democratic theme: should the voting age be lowered to sixteen? Or to the age of six, as has recently been seriously proposed (not by government, of course!) Why not? If we feel our resistance rising intuitively over the question of their competence to choose, it should be remembered that the issue of *competence* was key to all arguments against the extension of the franchise in modern states: workers had neither the time nor the inclination to become politically competent, and most importantly of all lacked any *interest* — meaning any financial or property interest — that would entitle them to participation. Which is to say they could not be relied on to vote in the interests of those who did have such interest... Similarly, it was women’s inferior intelligence, their irrationality, and (relative) lack of direct involvement in economic activity (through their actively being excluded, of course) that made them ‘incompetent’ to participate in the shaping of society. Again, for the ‘inferior races’, congenital irrationality and lack of intelligence should naturally disbar them... And so on, and so on. Today we are still in the same basic position, as disability rights groups remind us that those whom the philosopher John Locke referred to as the ‘idiots’ to be excluded from any possible

franchise — those with various forms of cognitive difference — are still on the ‘final frontier’ of questions around competence. We’ll return to this later. For now let us note that ‘inclusion’ always seems to imply ‘exclusion’ also, to result in a shifting of the boundary, but also the preservation intact of that boundary itself. We might close this section with a quote from one of the ‘founding fathers’ of American democracy: President-to-be John Adams. This is from his letter replying to his wife Abigail Adams’ declaration of her belief in universal natural rights:

‘We have been told that our struggle has loosened the bands of Government everywhere... that Indians slighted their guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters. But your letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerful than all the rest were grown discontented... Depend upon it, we know better than to repeal our Masculine systems... We have only the name of Masters, and rather than give up this, which would completely subject us to the Despotism of the Petticoat, I hope General Washington and all our brave Heroes would fight.’ (letter of April 14th, 1776.)

It is clear who ‘we’ are, and how far ‘all’ does, or should, extend.

Did I mention that the single most accurate predictor of your life expectancy/overall health/income/level of education/much more besides, is the nation into which you were born? (Rhetorical question...) The concept of each human being having unique citizenship, of belonging to one and only one country, has another important consequence, which can bring us back to our earlier questions and to our *own* reactions and responses, thoughts and feelings. All those who are not citizens of *my* state and live beyond its borders are of no concern to that state, except insofar as they are potentially useful or threatening to its aims. Our country has no *responsibility* whatsoever to those beyond its borders. They may be invited as migrant labour (cleaners or brain surgeons, depending on what is thought to be required), 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 reeled back for any number of reasons (witness the UN’s perpetual difficulties in getting donor nations to honour ‘pledges’ 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 to do so. We are ‘free’, as individuals or groups, to show care and concern for those beyond our borders, and many of us choose to do so, in greater or lesser ways. But 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. But our anger and outrage at recognising this does not need justification by insisting that life on the ‘other’ side of the border is unliveable or horrific, even when for very many it actually is. It should be

argument enough that the lines perpetuating *any* inequality *do* exist along this infinity of different axes, and receive so much active and passive support from so many. We might reflect on how 'migrants' — simply those who would cross borders and remain — are *created* in both senses by this system: without borders there could be no crossing of borders and hence no 'migrants'. Without borders creating and perpetuating the conditions that oblige people to leave home and all it represents, the real human individuals concerned would not need to cross continents. Without these structures, would our collective empathy become so dissociated, and fall so far short of what is required? Could it?

How can and how do we justify this state of affairs, both as a society and individually? What is the effect of this structure of nation-states and of citizenship upon *my* assumptions, reactions and responses, my feelings, thoughts and actions? Do I turn away, practice ignore-ance? Do I decide to 'Feed the World' as only a White Saviour can? Argue for reparations for centuries of exploitation? Or actively seek to *justify* things being as they are?

Practice Check:

To ask again about those on the 'other' side of these durable inequalities:

Who merits my empathy?

My money?

My contempt?

My ignore-ance?

How does each of these responses feel: In my body?

As emotion ?

In the thoughts that arise?

My Just Desserts

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? But what *would* justify such major inequality, whether that's in the discrimination and bias expressed as durable binary inequality, or as simple level of reward or the ability to accumulate wealth? (And let's not forget that these two are always intimately related.) Historically, an uneasy equivalence of *force* and *entitlement* justified the status quo. The inherited privilege of kings, princes and nobles entitled them to the respect and obedience of others within the existing social hierarchy. Any usurper would be resisted to the utmost, but, if successful, would themselves become legitimate as and when their armies and intrigues stamped their authority over rivals and inferiors. In English we still have the phrase 'the Great and the Good' that manifests this equivocal ambivalence asserted between *power* and *virtue*. (Asserted, that is, by those still largely in authority over us.) But following on from this, partly as both consequence and perversion of the Protestant Reformation, partly as the result of a growing middle class increasingly prosperous from the influence of Capital, came a similarly equivocal assertion of the equivalence of *virtue* and of *wealth*. This was at first of wealth seen only as the *outward* sign of God's *spiritual* favour towards those who would be saved at the Last Judgement, but slowly wealth came to be seen simply as an expression of *virtue* in itself.

To understand this better, we can return here to our first theme of *greed*. As remarked earlier, it is by no means obvious that, and despite my own intentions, by acting purely in my own self interest I would unwittingly help *all* beings, and yet this is the thinking underlying modern economic theory. It is now a familiar argument, but it is not often recognised that it is actually rooted in changes in theology. In the mediaeval period God was still largely seen as intervening directly in human affairs, but the rise of science, and perhaps specifically the combination of Cartesian philosophy with Newtonian mechanics marked a radical shift. In the new understanding God had arranged creation to function autonomously and without any need for his *direct* intervention. Creation was, in effect one giant and perfect *mechanism*, functioning according to rules that were precise, rational, and could be discovered by science. The infinite goodness and justice of God guaranteed that this was therefore literally, and despite all appearances to the contrary, the ‘best of all possible worlds’, in the words of the philosopher Leibniz. It is this thinking that underlies what can be taken as the founding text of modern economics — Adam Smith’s 1776 *The Wealth of Nations*. The market functions to regulate our natural and necessary greed for 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 desserts*. 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 I must assume full responsibility for it. This is the doctrine of *meritocracy*.

The idea of meritocracy seems to have much to like: the best person for the job should do it, regardless of all other factors. To stay with archetypes of the skilled worker: who should become a brain surgeon? You certainly want a particular kind of intelligence, high level manual skills, compassion, and a willingness to work long, long hours and continue to study and question indefinitely. You’d probably agree 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 all are equally vital to the business of healing. And why would this 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? The ‘merit’ in meritocracy is a wonderfully ambiguous word 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* the philosopher Michael Sandel examines and 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 an idea of self that is *separate*, the centre of an active and *free and independent will*, and therefore uniquely *self-responsible*, in short the billiard ball of fantasy rather than the whirlpool of reality. 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 religion 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

This is the fantasy of control writ large. The ethic of merit actually relies on denying the reality of our interconnectedness, of our non-separation. It denies too that relationships are always relationships of inequalities of power, and that economic relationships are no exception to this.

Who deserves what? What *would* make groups or individuals 'deserving' or 'undeserving'? What can we say from a Zen point of view? As I said above, Sandel does not write from a Buddhist position, but many of his questions are exactly those we should ask ourselves. So...we might argue that it is my intelligence, my drive, my willingness to work hard, or perhaps some special talent that entitles me have more than others. We have seen, though, that the importance of these factors is dwarfed by the simple fact of the nation of my birth. Am I in *any* way 'responsible' for this 'success' or 'failure' to be born in an affluent country? But, equally, can I really argue for *any* personal merit in my genetic inheritance, in the wealth or lack of wealth of my parents, in *their* level of education, in the support they did or do offer me (or not)? Is it my doing that the talent I have cultivated is 'in demand' in the society in which I live? Can I in *any* way argue that these and many other known and unknown factors did not either foster or stifle my talent, my energy, my confidence, my ability to 'work hard'? In short, what would it mean to claim that 'I' am more *deserving* than you (or, of course, vice versa)? On what could any such claim be based? And without it, what then? Is it all just down to luck? From the Zen perspective of 'not separate', where we acknowledge the absolute interrelation of all things, we aren't forced into such a stark (and false) choice, but the *conclusion* is still clear. I can be happy and self-confident in what 'I' have achieved without drawing the conclusion that I am in any way 'better' or *more deserving* than anyone else. Equally, I can feel sad, and quite possibly a whole range of other emotions too, about what I see as my 'failures', whether or not I attribute them to myself, to 'the system' or to blind chance, *without* seeing myself as in any way 'worse' or *less deserving* than anyone else.

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: 'the deserving poor' being a stock item of political rhetoric from before the nineteenth century through to Tony Blair and Bill Clinton (in the modern version it has usually morphed into 'hard-working families'). The primary purpose has been to

distinguish the 'deserving' from the '*undeserving* poor' who merit neither empathy or aid, and there is a whole school of philosophy, the 'luck egalitarians' who have followed this line. The treatment of 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*. So, the argument goes, their disabilities are 'undeserved', they are *blameless*, and hence 'deserving' in this sense. But note that this has been part of a generalised political argument: whereas before they figured to be contrasted *negatively* with the 'productive', they now figure to contrast *positively* with the 'idle'. While this is a welcome shift in social attitudes towards those with disabilities themselves it is important to understand that exactly as with the expansion of the democratic electorate, it has proceeded by way of further justifying the *exclusion* of others, the '*truly*' undeserving. (It is of course also true that for many of those with a cognitive difference, while they may be seen as entitled to our sympathy and even some measure of support, achieving a voice in their own care and other aspects of their lives may still prove highly difficult, or impossible.)

Practice Question: do I feel 'deserving' or 'undeserving'?

Why?

How does this relate to how I feel about others?

The scale and rigour with which this logic of merit has been applied is breathtaking. It's true effects can only be understood when we examine this on the *inter-national* 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 diverse as Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump. He shows that 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. Just as I am richer than you (my compatriot) because I am more talented and work harder (and hence am *better*) than you, so my country is richer and more powerful than yours because 'we' are more talented and work harder than you foreigners, which hence makes *us* better than *you*. American *exceptionalism* stands or falls with American *individualism*, as does the Greatness of Britain with the nobility of the British Character, and so on... Individual nations are seen as being as independent and self-sufficient as individual 'selves', and in a way even more *separate, unique* and *permanent* than our individual selves. We all know that as *individuals* we all 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... Empire, conquest, genocide, slavery, and the continuing exploitation of less powerful individuals and nations are...irrelevant...distractions... Distractions from the simple and self-evident fact that 'we' are *great* because we are *good*. We *deserve* it. 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', to *feel* for it, to make *its* priorities *my* own.

Practice Check: on whose behalf are such arguments actually made?

To whose benefit?

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

From the standpoint of Zen, there is and can be no absolute ethical basis that would let us honestly distinguish between 'deserving and undeserving', and in our continued collective obsession with doing so, we see clearly the alibi, the smokescreen behind which power operates to preserve and extend real inequality. We could summarise: the world as it is, rife with dramatic inequalities of every sort and the consequent incalculable human cost, has not come to be this way through the inherent or acquired virtue of individuals or groups. Power and wealth are not the reward of virtue, although we have been and are still encouraged to treat them as is they were. The 'Great' nations of Europe (in which we include the United States) came to be what they are through the successful alliance of military elites with developing Capital, and their continuing development required the ever increasing exploitation of the world's population and natural resources by conquest and unequal contract. But the productive development of these nations' 'home' populations created the conditions for powerful social movements to be successful in demanding the sharing of at least some of the profits of this enterprise more widely, and to challenge many of the long lasting inequalities on which it relied. Economically, this process seems to have reached its apogee around 1980, since when there has been considerable slippage backwards, while in other respects emancipation has actually continued and even accelerated. We each and every one of us share the benefits *both* of global exploitation, *and* the counter-pull of economic redistribution and the parallel challenging of 'durable' inequalities of all kinds. Ideas of universal 'virtue', 'justice', and 'fairness' have played on both sides: while these were always *initially* framed as applicable only to wealthy and powerful White men, they are also the banners under which inequality and domination have been challenged. It is this that has given such challenges their partial quality: 'we' too are good, competent, and mostly just like you, O powerful ones! We too are *deserving*, unlike *those* people, the *undeserving*... There is the power of elites, and the counter-power of populations. An infinite play of forces and of interests, and each of us born into and held within their ever-shifting alignments. Greed is good...or bad. Am I deserving or undeserving, or ...entitled? There is ambiguity and ambivalence throughout the system. I have argued here that all of the arguments on which we reflexively fall back, by assuming that we are entirely *separate* beings *independently* making *free* and rational *choices*, lack any coherence from a Zen/Buddhist position. In reality we are not-separate, relational and deluded beings working with tools and ideas that are neither independent of us or of our own making.

It has been argued that even the idea of a universal and objective *justice* is, in a greater sense, unjust. We can see this in the actual effects of prioritising legislating for *formal equality* over addressing issues of *actual inequality*. Formal equality is of course necessary and useful, but is only effective 'all things being equal' in other respects, which the very fact of existing inequalities demonstrates they are not. In the absence of these ideal

conditions, *formal* equality may only serve to perpetuate or even deeper entrench existing inequality, for example by imagining that our societies now function as ‘colourblind’, or by working against affirmative action, or by the creation of work-arounds that effectively guarantee the continuation of the status quo. Or simply that creating a formal right of access to, for example, education or healthcare will never compensate for the lack of the resources necessary to make this access a reality for all. In the wider sense of our theories of justice and fairness a similar principle applies: they may be ‘fair’ when applied to a society created afresh from nothing, but in any real and presently existing society any universal approach to justice will always *in practice* tend to favour those with existing wealth and privilege. The economist and philosopher Amartya Sen — a highly sane but hardly radical voice in either field — has pointed to the traditional Indian judicial distinction between a justice that aspires to universality, and one that is situational and contextual, addressed to righting specific *injustice*, rather than establishing universal principles. This latter form might seem more aligned to our Zen approach, and that of Ordinary Mind in particular: we work with and from what *is*, from the reality of the situation in front of us, in all its complexity and immediacy. This does not mean we neglect the bigger picture, but accept that our wish for absolutes, for final and abstract answers is itself an aspect of the problem of ‘life as it is’ in all its messiness. In a sense this is to frame our bearing witness to ourselves and to others as a form of perpetual critique and auto critique: to ask, without looking for a final answer, what are the real effects in our lives of our stories, our beliefs, our actions?

So what are we left with *after* we have made this bonfire of absolutes, when we have ‘seen through’ the smoke? 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 individual ‘self’. They are useful, everyday ways of thinking, speaking and acting. Even just to recognise this, and to live in this recognition, is a huge ask, a perpetual work in progress.

There is also one final alibi we have only touched on so far, but it’s the alibi by which greed can *appear* to transcend its all-too-obvious internal contradiction. In reality it is the point at which we do hit something like a definite biological, chemical and physical barrier. *Growth*. Both as an idea in itself, and in the reality of its manifestation in the world, growth is an attempt to square the circle of greed and fairness. If we are all equally enamoured of greed, then the exercise of *my* greed will be at *your* expense, and at the expense of *all* others. If I want all or most of the cake then you don’t get to eat it. The classic get-out for this is the idea that our greed will actually promote the baking of more cakes, and that cakes will therefore become cheaper, better and available for all! Win win! So the answer to the self-evident contradiction of *greed* is *growth*. This in fact became something of a reality in the second half of the twentieth century in what Thomas Piketty and others have called ‘the Great Redistribution’: the greater sharing of the wealth of expropriation and production, and the birth of ‘consumer culture’ that brought about a significant lessening of economic inequality across Europe and the United States. But its

realisation in this form relied on continued sustained growth: as long as ever *more* is produced, as long as there is ever more to share, then *all* shall eat cake...at some point. As long as we can bake always more cakes, in fact bake enough cakes to persuade enough people that one day there will be cake for all, then I can go on amassing a personal mountain of cake to attempt to shore up my own displaced fears and insecurity as the separate self I believe myself to be. Growth is in this sense required to be both permanent and unlimited, because there will never be 'enough' growth either for me as an individual or for humanity as a whole to satisfy our socially-induced greed. Greed is the displaced attempt to satisfy our unmet emotional needs as channelled through individualist competitive society. 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 to the search for immortality itself. This has been, in effect, the whole strategy of Western nations in the modern period: there is always some new resource — human, animal, vegetable or mineral — that can be brought in to the cycle of exploitation, to defer coming to terms with the real effects of this greed. To point to any natural limit to this process of incorporation has been countered by the invocation of *technology* as trumping nature, as abolishing any natural limits to growth. Technology is the 'get out of jail free' card to the very obvious issues of diminishing resources, continuing exploitation and increasing environmental degradation: the famous 'technological fix' which promises to solve all problems *tomorrow*, but in reality creates still more in the attempt. Nuclear power was to have by now been 'too cheap to meter', and the promise is that whatever the scarcity encountered, it can be circumvented... tomorrow. The current and impending ecological disaster is the demonstration that these limits are in fact only too real. The 'solutions' we have been offered to the problems created by inequality and greed are solutions in fantasy only, because they maintain the fiction of our separation, of our ultimate independence and total individual agency. So far we have looked at a whole series of these alibis, of master-stories we collectively tell to avoid looking at a reality to which we do not wish collectively to bear witness. Growth is the last of these. If we do end our unquestioning drive for growth we have, finally, to acknowledge each other's real existence, and our absolute mutual dependence, the absolute mutual dependence of all beings.

If we abandon the fantasy of infinite *growth*, we have to turn to face the reality of the question of *distribution*: who gets what, and for what reason? Any attempt to look to a specific *programme* is way outside our aim here, though not of course beyond our actual practice of the Precepts. If our understanding of the Precepts has to be rooted in emptiness, in the absolute lack of absolutes, it still has to show up as *us*, as our individual and collective actions in the world in relation to other beings. So in what terms can we frame *some* kind of answer?

Suffering: my suffering, your suffering, the suffering of all beings. In a world of *not-separate* these demand to be addressed, they are simply each and all our collective responsibility. What we *can't* do is establish an absolute, universal or external *hierarchy* of suffering or need, or for that matter of *obligation*. But negatively we *can* and I think *must* challenge and

keep challenging the lines upon which our real, contingent, partial, and local judgements are made: bearing witness as continuous critique. *Of course* I will look 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) some awareness that I am not the centre, that I am not special *in myself* but only special in terms of relationship, and that I will frame my actions out of this awareness that can only emerge from the challenging of my preconceptions. To avoid any misunderstanding here: it's absolutely not a case of attempting to treat all beings the *same* or with absolute *objectivity* and *impartiality*. I am a deluded and partial creature, an embodied and encultured being, and we simply do not work that way. But as with all awareness practices, the practice *itself* changes reactions and responses...

Greed and inequality are intimate and infinite: both are socially produced, and both have profound social and individual consequences. Just as we examined in relation to the First Precept, there is a violence in our turning away, in our understandable, inevitable, but calamitous ignore-ance of real effects, in this case the effects of our collective greed and the real inequality it has produced and continues to produce. At their core are the same processes of dissociation and displacement we looked at previously: on the one hand my displaced fantasised gratification showing up as greed, and on the other my dissociation from the real suffering underlying that greed. Worse still, my dissociation from the suffering of *all beings* as a consequence of the form of the social production of that greed, centred as that production is on a very particular understanding of 'private property'. That this dissociation can, and perhaps in practice must, lead to my allowing others to be treated as barely human: their lives ignored, their deaths unmournable. In all of these respects we are in the world of Uncare, of separation *within* ourselves, *from* ourselves and from *each other*. To return to the practice of the Precept we can, at least, begin to *bear witness* to this.

I can *bear witness* to my own greed, and to the greed of others. I can bear witness to my own experience of inequality from the side *both* of power and powerlessness, and I can make sure I hear the testimony of others and not actively practice *ignore-ance*, but instead listen with open ears. I can also bear witness to my own and to our collective *failures* to do these things, but do so without the judgement that brings separation, that will turn our anger, frustration, sadness, compassion and despair into blaming and recrimination, or perhaps even into guilt.

But even before this we can also see the ways our *caring* actually addresses inequality of all kinds, and how our bearing witness is in itself a form of care. For example: we address and ameliorate most 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 grow older. When we care well, these inequalities are *real*, but not *reified*. Let me explain: to care for my child or my parent I do it best by meeting them 'with openness and possibility', with complete empathy for the fully human being in front of me. Their needs and desires *matter* to me, and my caring addresses these. While the actual inequalities between us frame this relationship as one of 'parent and child', it doesn't freeze into a rigid binary, it doesn't *reify*,

or rather it does so only at moments of breakdown in relationship, and melts again back into empathy as this rupture is repaired. We could generalise this idea, and argue that it's the *reification* of partial and particular differences into rigid binaries embodying structures of power that is the central problem. *Caring* undermines our tendency to dissociate from our empathy for others and relate to them in terms of these strict binaries. Any act of caring is always to acknowledge — however wholly and enthusiastically or partially and desultorily — our actual non-separation. If all our lives are in one sense *formed* within greed and inequality, the fact of our very existence also argues definitively to the contrary, and to the reality of this non-separation. Without our collective and individual active caring for self and for other, the lives of every one of us would be and would always have been unliveable, and we ourselves would never have come to be. Beyond even this we have to recognise the mutual dependence of all life, the sense in which we are 'cared for' by there even being sunlight, water, and the near infinity of other beings on which we rely both within what we think of as 'my' body, and beyond it to 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 — to see ourselves as whirlpools rather than billiard balls — is to recognise our shared vulnerability and the consequent universality of suffering, and that this recognition should 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. This is the collective working through of our coming to understand our individual greed not as some inner and innate *failing*, but as the socially constructed expression of displaced and dissociated suffering, of unmet need and unrecognised trauma. Our suffering is always both individual and collective, and any meaningful strategy to address it must be *both* individual and collective.

Buddhism has the very traditional practice of the Brahmaviharas — translated as 'divine abidings' or some such — which encourage us to extend the field of our friendship, our care, our joy in others, by imaginative meditation. While this is not part of the Zen or Ordinary Mind traditions, if we take the practice of the Precepts seriously this extension is exactly what we aspire to achieve by our own means. This Precept asks us to investigate and to soften our experience and practice of all binary oppositions — most significantly between what is seen as 'self' and 'other' and 'us' and 'them' — as they show up at every level from our own immediate experience to that of the social construction of inequality as a whole. The challenge to greed and to inequality (*never* a challenge to our desire itself, to our pleasure or active enjoyment) is towards, to say it again, meeting each other and meeting ourselves with 'openness and possibility'. What begins with an examination of 'my' greed takes us outwards to consider and offer our empathy to ourselves, to all people and to all beings, and to our whole world as itself a whole. Our shared planet in its entirety. This is to begin to understand what aspiring towards 'equality and sharing freely of all that I can' means in our life as it is.

