# Zenkai

The Zenkai are Zen's practice of ethics. I'll say 'practice' rather than 'teachings', because the Zenkai are fundamentally about *doing* rather than *understanding*, although understanding clearly is one important aspect of our practising them. We might think that ethics is a matter of taking individual decisions about what is 'good' or 'bad', 'right' or 'wrong', or we might think in terms of a set of abstract rules of conduct, some kind of moral code. Practised deeply, the Zenkai are not like this at all, but rather, beginning from our direct moment to moment experiencing of 'life as it is' help us to shape the course of our lives in response to the Dharma as we experience it, in and as each other.

We live and act in this world as *selves*, as centres of feeling, awareness and intention. The Dharma, and if we will allow it to, our own experience teaches us that *as* selves we are nothing more than momentary points of intersection of infinitely complex interactions of interactions that are without definitive beginning or end. My awareness and intentions, my thoughts, feelings, desires and emotions, my experiencing itself are nothing but this process, as too is my experience of myself *as* myself. 'I' am by no means a *separate* and entirely autonomous and self sufficient individual whose every act is 'intentional' and the result of conscious choice, but neither am I an automaton 'blind' to anonymous mechanical forces that direct me. This *neither-nor* is what it is be a self in a world that is 'empty' in the Buddhist sense, a world in which I am 'not-separate' with myself, with other people, with the world itself.

The Zenkai are a set of practices that invite us to live out this paradox of experiencing and understanding directly as our 'life as it is', in the intimate realities of the everyday. In a deep sense, there is no aspect of our practice that *isn't* part of the Zenkai, they are, rather, specific ways of focussing our awareness and the responses this awareness calls forth in us. Just as our practice is always ongoing, and as such inevitably becomes a way of forming, of shaping the self I am in each moment, so the Zenkai are a way of bringing a more conscious awareness to this process, to shape a self-in-the-world, to shape a life to be lived: as the Greeks called it, an *ethos*, a form-of-life.

## Bearing Witness, I Aspire…

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

2. 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.

3. I bear witness to the power of sexuality and its potential for both love and for harm in myself and in the world, and aspire to engage respectfully with an open heart in intimate relationships.

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

5. 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.

6. I bear witness to the reality of blame and the avoidance of responsibility in myself and in the world, and aspire to speak of others with openness and possibility.

7. I bear witness to the elevation of the self and the denigration of others by myself and in the world, and aspire to meet others on equal ground.

8. I bear witness to the reality of possessiveness and the withholding of love and resources, in myself and in the world, and aspire to give generously and appropriately.

9. I bear witness to the reality of my own ill will and the pain of divisiveness in the world, and aspire to respond caringly when difficult situations and emotions arise.

10. I bear witness to my own lack of faith in the power of living in accordance with the reality of life as it and aspire to live each moment with mindfulness and caring.

Each of these ten Zenkai have two parts, we might almost think of them as a call and response. The first part, 'bearing witness to…', gives rise to the second, 'I aspire to…'. My bearing witness is itself a response to my awareness, the awareness of what I feel directly in my body and how I experience those feelings as emotion. This bearing witness is always *both* to self and to the wider world — *not-separate*. I bear witness (say) 'to violence in myself and in the world'— self and world are witnessed *together*, posing at once the obvious question: how is the violence I become aware of 'in myself' related to violence 'in the world'? We know that *as* selves, as 'subjects' we may be *held responsible* by others for what we do, and we also know that we wish to *act responsibly.* These are not at all the same thing. How I come to experience and understand this relationship of self and world

*together* will call forth in response the particular form that the aspiration towards practicing *non*-violence will take for me in each moment.

As my experience and awareness, and with it my understanding of violence 'in myself and in the world' evolve and develop, so will my aspiration, and the action that results from it. In fact this process is circular, because it's the putting into practice of my aspiration as I continue to Bear Witness that will move forward my awareness and understanding. So here too the Zenkai are *not-separate*: without beginning or end, always 'in process', but always also 'this present moment'.

A third aspect of this being *not-separate* is in the interrelationship of each of the Zenkai with all of the others, for example in the way we can see each of the Zenkai as concerned with a specific form or aspect of violence; when all are seen together they give us a fuller and wider awareness and understanding of violence, and a better grounding for our aspiration towards *non*-violence. But above all the Zenkai are a means of connecting our formal practice, whether on the cushion or as 'zen-study', more intimately with the full range of our lives, of 'life as it is' for us here, in each moment, as *not-separate*.

## The Practice

Working with the Zenkai is rooted in our basic *practicing* of zazen. We might want to describe this as simply *experiencing* our bodily sensations and our feelings and thoughts as they are in this moment; or as *being-with* these feelings; or simply as *being* them: experiencing not as an *observer* separate from what is being observed, but experiencing them as *not-separate* with my self. None of these descriptions are perfect, and you may well feel that your own sense of zazen shifts between them (or others) as your practice develops.

Jōko Beck's key image of practice allowing us to become A Bigger Container (ABC) for our experiencing (and hence for our *self)*, of being able truly to *be with* our experiencing instead of *turning away* from it is central here. Jōko's endlessly repeated rhetorical question, of 'why *don't* we do this practice in this way?' is to remind us of the uncomfortable truth that we don't do it because we don't *want* to, and we don't want to because it hurts. Whether felt as a gut punch to the stomach, or just as a vague sense of dis-ease or even boredom, we don't want to sit with our experiencing when it is painful. Sooner or later zazen always brings us to actually experiencing (as far as we are willing to) the fullness of our deepest suffering: our *duhkha*, to use the original Sanskrit term.

Which brings us to *affect*, the 'scientific' term for what we usually tend to call 'feelings'. To be clear: affect in this sense *isn't* our simply be *affected* by things or the *effect* they have on us. Our *affect*, as I am using it here includes all our bodily sensations, our feelings and accompanying positive and negative emotions; as such our affect governs both what catches and holds our attention and what we ignore or actively avoid. I react *both* to what attracts me and what frightens or angers me, turning *towards* to enjoy it, turning *away* from what I experience as painful. Or rather, precisely because it too attracts and holds my attention, I may initially turn *towards* what makes me fearful or angry, but then turn *away* from actually *experiencing* the anger or fear, instead pushing it away as acting out, as distracting myself, or as angry speech or actions. Other potentially painful things that experience has told me *don't* pose any immediate threat, I turn away from by *actively ignoring* them, 'it just feels safer not to go there'. Regardless, all this affect still affects me,

in everything from the tension I hold in my body, my body posture, intrusive or recurring thoughts, how I 'read' what other people say and how I react to it. And hence, how I contribute to the care of, or suffering of both myself and those other people, and 'the world' more generally. We'll examine all this (and more) as we work through the Zenkai.

The first aspect of our bearing witness is simply to this *affect* itself: to feel, to really experience honestly and to whatever degree I am able in each moment, these bodily experiences. It's the ebb and flow of our affect that makes a nonsense of the idea that we are purely or even primarily rational, self-responsible, separate selves. We might think of these reactions as 'instinctual', and their basic pattern is perhaps something that we share with, at least, all mammals. But of course *what it is* that gives us pleasure or causes us fear is shaped by many factors — our personal history and the social norms within which I live, as well as the active soliciting of my attention and affect by social media, whether or not *directly* as advertising. But at this first level we are simply experiencing our experiencing, feeling our feelings, becoming better aware of our *affect*.

## Telling Stories

Our affect exists in a circular relation with the *stories* we tell and the way that we tell them, how we construct the narrative arcs of our life, and how these are *scripted* for us — not just in what purposes they serve for us, and what effect their telling has on the world, but how and why these stories come to us in the first place. We tell stories to ourselves to make us feel good or feel bad, and to feel good or feel bad about our actions, about what we *do*. We tell stories to other people to make them feel good or feel bad, in order to make them feel good or bad about what they do, and so to encourage or change their behaviour. These are all aspects of *scripting* in this sense, and the same in principle whether it's a politician looking for my vote, or my trying to persuade my partner where we should go on holiday, or what to have for dinner. Very often this isn't at all a matter of logic, of trying to establish some truth or a coherent point of view, as simply 'creating a vibe' — that we are inviting or invited by others to *share* this feeling, that this is *a good way to feel*. We don't have to consciously agree with or sign up to anything, and in fact I'm not normally very aware of this intimate connection between affect and story, because so much of it exists at the *transindividual* level, below and beside what I think of as the conscious 'me' — this too is another of the ways in which we are all *not-separate*.

Our stories are always accompanied by affect. Jōko's use of the idea of 'core beliefs' asks us to identify which are our 'core', our *key* stories, by the *depth* of their affect: the gut punch, nausea. The theory of core beliefs asocially individualises and limits our awareness of the range and nature of the web of interconnected stories about self and world that left unquestioned tend towards running our behaviour, but in strongly emphasising this fundamental connection of *story* and *affect*, and of the potentially transformational power of simply *sitting* with the experiencing of that affect, her insight is profound. This sitting with our affect moves us towards becoming A Bigger Container for our experiencing, but will also allow us to become aware of how one feeling changes into or leads onto another, or opens to a different story, perhaps an entirely 'new' story, or perhaps one with which we are all-too-familar, but a story that shifts the way we *feel* — gives rise to *new* affect. As our stories shift we come to understand both present and past differently, and to *feel* differently about what and where we have been, what and who we are now. With this shift

in feeling comes the possibility/inevitability of a shift in how we *act* in the world, in ways that may be trivial or profound. This is where our bearing witness connects with our aspiration to live differently and with greater awareness. Our aspiration is itself a story accompanied by its own (hopefully positive) affect, and scripted towards allowing us better to question those other stories that, by the affect they call up in us, give rise to violence, to inequality, to anger and the rest.

This is a slow, an endless process, sometimes with flashes of insight, sometimes agony or despair, sometimes boredom or blankness. The Zenkai offer a dynamic structure to support and frame this process of 'care of the self', of becoming a self in relation to an *ethos*, a form-of-life. Important to stress again that where this process will lead us is *not* specifiable in advance, and in this sense not knowable or describable, but *open* to the world and to the unfolding of this particular, unique 'life as it is'.

## Vow

It might seem regrettable that, just like our initial attraction towards Zen, our aspiration to practise the Zenkai is subject to our *curative fantasy*, to what we think practice will 'fix' in us. Does this mean our aspiration is 'compromised', 'impure', 'for the wrong reason'? Well, in a sense, obviously yes! But we need to learn and accept the lesson this offers us: because violence, greed, anger and the rest are a part of the world, they are a part of you and me, *not-separate*. Our practice is not to try to eliminate them (we never will!) but to practise with them as we practise with our curative fantasy and all other aspects of our vulnerability as being the embodied and mortal beings we are. Experienced in and as my body, we offer violence, greed, anger and the rest 'a seat at the table'. *Not-separate!* Our aspirations towards non-violence and generosity hence become — to use Thich Nhat Hanh's image — like the Pole Star: an *orientation*, an *inclination* that guides us, not a goal we are attempting to reach. This is the sense in which we have to understand the Zenkai as 'vows'. We are familiar with the *Four Great Vows* we regularly chant together. We vow to free all beings, to embody the Buddha Way… but these are clearly not tasks to be ticked off on a checklist. Here in the West we tend to imagine a vow as something between a formal promise-that-must-be-honoured and a legal contract, something that can be judged as being 'kept' or 'broken', and that there will be… consequences! Our Zenkai vows are not about judging ourselves or anyone else, not an obligation to ourselves or to anyone else, but vows of aspiration that are in themselves our continuing practice. So to see the Zenkai as a set of vows is to see them as ongoing — indeed lifelong — aspirations we maintain that shape our actions, and so shape our life into a form-of-life. When we chant the *Four Great Vows* we say '*we* vow', because we each offer our vow *together* with each other — in this sense this is what Sangha *is*. The Zenkai are a lifetime practice, and we can practise them both on our own independent of any particular sangha, or directly sharing the experience with others. We can practise them both formally and informally, and whether or not we frame them as 'vows' in the sense discussed here, in the years, the decades, of our practice they simply become a part of us.

## Jukai

At some point, it *may* become helpful as a support to our practice to make a formal declaration of the Zenkai vows in front of our Sangha — this is the ceremony of *Jukai*. This is first and foremost a shared recognition of the sincerity of our own ongoing aspiration, and *not* that we have 'completed', 'mastered' or in any way 'attained' the Zenkai, or, as discussed above, taken on any kind of binding obligation that should make us feel guilty or fearful about 'breaking' it. I stress this because some students do find that the prospect of Jukai brings out exactly their sense of lack, of unworthiness, that is presumably at the origin of all our curative fantasies about Zen practice. Jukai is about *vow* and about *aspiration*, it is about *sharing* our practice — it's not in any way 'all about me'. So you will be asked whether you will 'maintain' the Zenkai — whether you will hold your bearing witness and your aspiration together as an ongoing part of your life and practice. I've never known anyone to regret taking Jukai, and the question of 'am I ready?' is really only that of how far you feel you have really engaged with the Zenkai as part of your practice.

I think Jukai is at once deeply personal and communal. In prisons I used to offer Jukai specifically to those *leaving* the prison sangha, as a mark of *personal* commitment to their aspiration that was independent of that specific sangha, but nevertheless a commitment to finding and making sangha 'on the out', to practicing *together* with others. Our Jukai is taken with *this* sangha, as part of our shared practice. But it is a commitment to the ongoing practice of the Dharma with the other people life brings me to share this practice with, wherever and whatever the setting. So for some of us Jukai will be an affirmation of recognising ourselves as 'being a Buddhist', while for others simply an acknowledgement that this is a is good and appropriate way to practise and to live. Either way, we will be invited (no obligation!) to sew a rakusu that symbolises the Buddhist robe, and which will be presented to us as part of the Jukai ceremony as marking our adoption of the Zenkai. Barry Magid has suggested that we see the rakusu as more like being given a 'greeter's badge' — "Hi! My name is Malcolm, how can I help you today?" — than a sign of belonging or authority within the Sangha. Jukai is an opportunity to draw on the collective energy of the Sangha to support our practice of the Zenkai, but we can certainly begin, or continue to practise them without any commitment to taking Jukai.

## Care

A form-of-life is not simply a life of contemplation — our experiencing and our understanding are always also the the beginning of our action. It is never determinable in advance, but *open* to our experiencing of ourselves, of each other and of the world — the experience of relationship in all its forms. This openness is in itself the manifestation of the emptiness of 'emptiness' — of all things as being *not-separate*. It is by living out this openness that we best come to develop an *embodied* practicing of 'emptiness', of the *not-separate*. This open, empty practice is always an expression of *care*, a term we'll explore in all its different senses as we work with the different Zenkai, but always as care of self, care of others, care of the world as *not-separate*. In living our 'life as it is', the Zenkai are there as our companions and our guides. How might we best make use of them?

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## Afterword: An Evolving Tradition

'*Kai*' is the Japanese translation of the Sanskrit '*śīla*', for which 'ethics' is probably the best English term, hence my describing the 'Zenkai' as the 'Zen ethics'. Their origin is in the *bodhisattva-śīla*, the 'ethics of the bodhisattva', closely related to the bodhisattvas' *Four Great Vows* we chant. Over the centuries the Zenkai have been practised in many different forms, always being taught within the wider practice context of individual traditions and sanghas, so there is no single 'correct' or even 'traditional' way of working with them. As the *Bosatsukai* they are the *only* vows of conduct made by ordained Sōto Zen priests and monastics, in a tradition that dates back to Dōgen's returning from China to Japan with them in 1227/8. Understood as the deepest of koans, they have been given to senior students completing their koan study and Zen training. Seen more in the spirit of the Five Precepts traditionally offered to laypeople across the Buddhist world, they have been taught to beginners as simple rules of correct moral behaiour. They have even, for a small fee, been transmitted to large gatherings of laypeople as a 'remission of sins' — the direct cancelling of all bad karma accumulated over eons(!)

While Jōko Beck studied the Zenkai, she didn't make them a formal part of her teaching, although as Barry Magid has pointed out, they are in many ways at its heart. While the wording we use is Barry's, several of Jōko's other heirs have also revived the use of the Zenkai, and our versions are closely related to the wording Diane Rizzetto uses in *Waking Up to What You Do*. The way we in Ordinary Mind use the Zenkai as strategies for self-investigation is closer to their use in the koan tradition than as being simple rules of conduct, but what makes our practice of the Zenkai so powerful is its emphasis on remaining grounded in the moment by moment experiencing of our body, to experience the responses at the level of feeling/affect that shape our actions and the stories we tell about them. Just as Jōko replaced formal koan study with a deep engagement with the ongoing koan of our 'life as it is', and Barry has reinstated a more flexible and open-ended form of 'psychologically minded' koan work consonant with this, so our practice of the Zenkai builds upon the fundamental strength of Jōko's practice as rooted in our bodily experience. I referred above to the way in which the Zenkai have been 'understood as the deepest of koans', in the way they can engage us directly with the central Buddhist teachings on emptiness as lived in our actual experiencing of our everyday lives. Our Ordinary Mind practice of the Zenkai offers a unique way of exploring these teachings in an immediately *embodied* way, very far removed from abstract metaphysical speculation.

If you read around (as you should) other accounts of practicing the Zenkai (which you will often find described as the 'Zen Precepts'), you will come across descriptions of the different 'levels' at which they are to be understood and practised: 'literal', 'absolute' and 'compassionate'. *If* you see the Zenkai as fundamentally a list of do and don'ts (which the unhelpful English term 'Precepts' clearly implies) then the practical impossibility of being able to 'keep' them '*literally*' becomes a potentially shame-inducing self-contradiction or at least a koan-like paradox, the more so as the 'normal' monastic precepts of Buddhism (which number a couple of hundred!) cleary *are* meant to be taken in this way. The corollary to this is the ongoing question of what meaning the Zenkai taken in this way can possibly have in the light of the teachings on of 'emptiness': if we see the level of the '*absolute*' as meaning that by definition there *can* be no killing, no stealing and so on at this level, then how does this affect our practice of the Zenkai? (We'll return to this question

later…) Faced with these internal problems, the response was to invent a third 'level' — the '*compassionate*' — whereby what are seen as the 'literal' *rules* are allowed to be modified by the actual situation in question — the 'bigger picture' that 'real life' inevitably involves. I've always felt this makes the 'compassionate' level look rather weak, half-hearted, a fudge… 'oh, just do what seems best, don't take the rules *too* seriously!'. Of course that's not the intention, and really the 'compassionate' level is where most of the real *work* of practicing with the Zenkai as 'precepts' does or doesn't get done. In fact it comes very close to seeing the Zenkai as about developing an evolving, situated ethical response to the world: what we have already described as an *ethos*, or form-of-life. In fact, *if* we understand and more importantly practise the Zenkai in *this* way as we have already outlined it, then the whole tripartite structure of literal/absolute/compassionate collapses in on itself: the 'literal' level is simply our doomed attempt to abstract a permanent formal code from the ongoing chaos of lived experience, while the 'absolute', depending on how we interpret it, is either the curative fantasy that we can transcend the real world of ethics, or more helpfully the realisation (already central to practicing the Zenkai as a form-of-life) that we are always already a part of the violence, the suffering of the world — no escape! And in fact, the traditionalist account even of the formation of the *monastic* precepts themselves points in a similar direction: not as being some fully formed code handed down and endorsed by the Buddha à la Ten Commandments, but the post-mortem aggregation by his followers of his particular situational judgements about what conduct was, or was not appropriate in a given context. Whether practised as the Zenkai or not, there is really only ever the ongoing practice of 'compassion', or, as I have argued it is more helpful to see it, of *care*.