

Not Separate: *Working with the Zen Precepts*

Caught in a self-centered dream, only suffering,
Waking to a dream within a dream.
Each moment, life as it is the only teacher,
Being just this moment, compassion's way.

What are the Precepts?

We all want to be good, we all want to be right. We all want both ourselves and others to know we are good, and right. We all want that safety and security. The Zen Precepts might seem to offer us exactly that: a formal code of *dos and don'ts* to govern our words and deeds. But in typical Zen fashion, the Zen Precepts are really more about their own *impossibility*, or rather the impossibility of establishing abstract and universal rules for living our lives, whether we call those rules 'laws', 'morals' or simply 'common sense'. Traditionally the Precepts were indeed expressed in the form of rules of conduct (don't do this, and don't do that either!), but Zen thought is clear that we can never, as embodied beings living in a world of impermanence and Interbeing, *either* keep them, or break them, *absolutely*.

If I say 'ethics' — that the Precepts are Zen's approach to ethics — then we most likely think it's to ask: 'tell me, am I doing this right or doing it wrong?' What should I do in this or that situation? But Zen is really much less concerned with what I think I should be doing than what I am *actually* doing right now...what I'm actually thinking or saying, how I am acting. Working with the Precepts isn't about deciding hypothetical situations in advance (even if this is how we tend to treat them at the start) but instead begins in observation of myself and of the world...in what we can call *bearing witness*. To study the Zen Precepts is hence to conduct an investigation into what I believe myself and the world to be, in the sense in which Dogen, Soto Zen's founder, suggests that 'to study the self is to forget the self'.

The phrasing of the Precepts given here points to the way in which each of us is embedded in the world: I 'bear witness to the world and to myself', and so to my relationships and interactions with others and also to the complexity and multiplicity which I myself am. And I also *bear witness* to the world's worlding: so that I am aware that whether I appear to have any direct connection to this or that event — the state of the world at my door or what's happening ten thousand miles away — I always stand in relation to *all* of it.

Bearing Witness

The core practice of Ordinary Mind could be said to be 'not turning away from life as it is', whether sitting in Zazen or filling in a tax return. This is hence also the foundation of working with the Precepts, in the form of our *bearing witness*. In bearing witness I resist the automatic reflex to turn away from the suffering I find within myself or in the world at large and instead hold it in my awareness, and respond as appropriate. I can bear witness in many different ways, and the Precepts offer us a structure within which to explore and develop these.

The first form of bearing witness, is to myself as I am in my complexity and contradictions. The Precepts ask us to examine how we show up in the world, and to develop our awareness of how we actually behave in our day to day lives, and the relationship of our behaviour to our thoughts and feelings and to our resistance to 'life as it is'. This is the focus of much of Joko Beck's teaching, and of Diane Rizzetto's book 'Waking Up to What You Do'. Joko Beck pointed to the ways our day-to-day resistance to life connects to stories about ourselves and the world that we learn in childhood and continue to tell ourselves throughout our lives: what she refers to as 'core beliefs' which are often concerned with some version of our own imagined inadequacy faced with a world seen as harsh and uncaring. Barry Magid's teaching has further refined and deepened the psychological understanding of our practice, for example in his discussion of the role of our 'curative fantasies' about practice itself, and our tendency to repress or deny those aspects of ourselves we do not find wholesome.

But without needing to dive deep into our personal psychology, developing this kind of awareness will also show us that the stories we tell about the world are always social as much as personal, part of the way in which we collectively co-create the embodied self-worlds of our experience. From our most intimate relationships to how we think about 'those people' (whoever 'those people' are for us), from the way in which we literally *see* the world to our conscious views and opinions, the stories and ideas we share about the world shape both our experience and our actions. Working with the Precepts is a way to explore *how* we co-create these embodied self-worlds, how we form our sense of self and identity, and the real effects of this on ourselves, on other people, and the wider world of which we are always a part. This is the second aspect of bearing witness: seeing and understanding the *social* roots both of my own suffering and the suffering I inflict, roots that may find expression in the acting out of misogyny, racism and other forms of oppression in ways that may seem trivial or be deeply damaging.

Understanding this process within our own experience leads to the third aspect of bearing witness, becoming aware of and not turning away from the suffering in the world where I have no *direct and immediate* stake or involvement, and yet to which I am still related as part of an infinitely interconnected world of human and other living beings. What response is called forth in me by the visible and invisible forms that structural oppression takes? At one extreme there is the unimaginable horror of the Holocaust, at the other, the daily and ongoing suffering of micro-aggressions, implicit bias and lost opportunity. How do I respond?

Caring

In reality, we could place the whole of bearing witness under the sign of 'Care'. All of bearing witness, all of awareness as we practice it, is first and last about care, about practising caring. To become aware of *this* body in all its complexity is to bring care to it, to bring care to myself. To become A Bigger Container, to use Joko Beck's memorable term, is to offer care to the experience of suffering as I encounter it, and by so doing to cause less suffering as I go. To embrace the neglected and rejected parts of me is to offer care to myself, and so once more, to decrease the suffering I bring to others. To bear witness is also to become more alive to the suffering of others, and offer them the care of my awareness, my attention, my concern, and perhaps my direct care also. If bearing witness is an activity of *understanding*, of coming to see and understand the causes, conditions and remedies of suffering, it is always with the aim of offering *care* in any of its myriad possible forms.

So to bear witness is to practise awareness of ourselves and our world, and focus that awareness on a particular aspect of our experience; to become more conscious of our own and other people's ways of thinking, speaking and acting. To bring our awareness to the specific and concrete ways that we are embodied and embedded beings: each of us a unique product of the society in which we live, a society to which every one of our acts also contributes... hence, right at the beginning of this practice, we're asked to look at our interdependence with the world not in the sense of some vague spiritual abstraction of oneness, but in every aspect of our everyday lives. Bearing witness doesn't stop at awareness, it asks us to act in response to what we see. We might need to name it, speak out about it, or take action, though that might well be privately and silently. Bearing witness generates aspiration ... *I aspire to* ... I want to do things differently. This is how we put our awareness into practice, always with the implied question...how does being more actively aware of myself and my world affect how I actually feel and act in the reality of this moment? The Precepts as presented here all have two parts, awareness and aspiration. Of course these aren't really sequential, except in the sense that becoming aware of how we and the world behave helps us to put our aspiration into practice, to really *be* non-violence, generosity, honesty. To live the reality of non-separation.

'Not Separate'

So I will take 'not separate' as our guiding theme. This means looking at all the different ways in which I separate myself off from others, and from the world. But also, and hugely importantly, how I separate off different aspects of myself to applaud, punish or deny. And that everyone else is doing exactly the same thing in their own unique way. Reading Zen books it's easy to get the idea that because we are not, ultimately, separate from each other or the world, that instead 'it's all just really One, man!' and that our practice is basically trying to see this one-ness in all times and places. This is misleading at best, and at worst hugely destructive. Paradoxically it is by becoming consciously aware of, recognising and acknowledging the reality of our (relative) separation that we become less separate from those aspects of ourselves and of life that are most problematic to us. Separation is part of life, in one sense we could say that all life *is* the ebb and flow of separation and bringing together. This can be seen, for example, in the complexities of any real relationship, but within the ground that this separation is always local, relative. So we need to explore

thoroughly how and why separation occurs: in what way it's a vital aspect of our life, and in what ways it limits us... I am one, and I am many. You too...

One of the real insights of the Ordinary Mind approach has been to take seriously the destructive effects of this separation we tend to make *within* ourselves. We all have aspects of ourselves we know we would like to change, and for many if not most of us this is our initial reason for beginning some kind of practice. As mentioned above, it will involve the beliefs about how the world is that we formed in early childhood or infancy, beliefs that seem so self-evident and part of our life experience that they go unquestioned, and many of which we are unaware. Joko Beck, who founded Ordinary Mind, talked about these in terms of 'core beliefs', while Barry Magid has explored this in great detail within a psychoanalytic frame. 'Knowing' myself to be 'bad', 'inadequate', 'selfish'...whatever specific forms it takes for me, I split myself unconsciously into a 'good' part to which I aspire and a 'bad' part I want to deny, disown, or change. Perhaps Buddhism and Zen in particular attract those of us in whom this is particularly strong. Taking up the Precepts may well attract us because then we can show how truly 'good' and 'serious' we are, but this motivation comes at the price of disowning our wholeness, and the reality of who we are and how we function in the world. So studying the Precepts seriously *will* show us things we don't like about ourselves, and so increase the danger of splitting ourselves off from ourselves in this way. The answer? Just fully to *be* this splitting itself, and through being it (I was going to say ... 'observe it' .. but that is already simply too separate) realize that disliking or denying aspects of myself is just part of the self-hatred game that we all play, just another set of stories I tell about myself, nothing special, nothing to get hung about... But it is only through patient, persistent, persevering awareness that we *become* this: that we become capable, (to frame a perplexing metaphor) of containing ourselves and the world, however inadequately.

Self as Other, Other as Self

Fundamental to Zen is the idea of impermanence, and this applies to our sense of self just as much as to objects in the outside world. I have no single, simple permanent self. 'I' can want contradictory things at the same time, be one kind of person in one context and another in a different setting. I can want to give up smoking, and find myself reaching for a cigarette...and then judging myself or making excuses for doing so. I can love some things about me, and hate others. I can have a core sense of my own goodness or badness, and then pretend that this doesn't colour how I live my life. In short, I'm multiple, and have complex relationships within and between these different aspects of myself (myselfes!) I am both self and other to myself... So it can be useful to look at the precepts from the position of Self as Other, and Other as Self.

Any judgement I make about anyone in the outside world, I have probably already made about myself, consciously or unconsciously. Just as I can separate myself out from other people and the world at large, I can and do separate, split, dissociate one part of me from another, relatively or entirely. While this basic mechanism can be useful if not essential to us, we can and do use it to do violence to ourselves. Can we instead accept all that we are, all the feelings, thoughts, behaviours that we dislike or want to reject in ourselves? If we can accept these things in ourselves, hold them in relationship, then we may be able to hold relationship with other people we would otherwise

condemn or judge harshly. If we can accept and have compassion for our own internal differences, then we can have genuine compassion for those people whose difference from us would otherwise make relationship impossible. So if, for example, I can accept the reality of my own violent feelings (and this does not mean acting on them), then I have a point of relationship, of empathy, with those who struggle to control their own violent feelings. If I dismiss these feelings as simply bad, or deny I have them, or congratulate myself for rising above them, then I separate off from both myself and the other person, and make compassion for either impossible.

And so on with each aspect of the Precepts... To emphasize it again, these Precepts are not presented as rules to follow. In fact in some ways they are anti-rules...they are a structured invitation to explore the rules we have already (and usually unwittingly) set ourselves as habit, assumption and reaction, and how these relate to how the rest of the world behaves.

To work with the Precepts is not finally to struggle to be good, or to be better than anyone else. We bear witness to our participation in a world of violence, greed, lust, deceit and heedlessness. But within this world we have moment by moment choices, in the direction either of relationship or of separation. The Precepts point up the ways in which our actions become the expression in the outside world of our non-separation from all of life. Clearly, black and white have no place in this way of seeing things, but instead there are infinite shades of grey.

Literal, Compassionate, Absolute/Ultimate

The Precepts all inter-relate and to a degree overlap. They explore different aspects of the ways in which we try to separate ourselves off from life, whether that separation is from another person, our society, our environment, or even parts of ourselves. To understand how this can happen even when we are intending to do the opposite is difficult. It's complicated! One way we can begin to make this clearer is to talk about the different *levels* at which the Precepts can be seen to function, and it's helpful to bear these in mind when working with them. There is traditionally a distinction between three different levels, the *literal*, the *compassionate*, and the *absolute/ultimate*.

(NB for purely historical reasons, within Zen we tend to talk about the 'Absolute' rather than the 'Ultimate', which is the term used as the English translation within most Buddhist traditions.)

The *literal* level: for example, if I think it's important not to lie, then my aspiration is just to make sure I never do. Experience, though, will tell us that this is more easily said than done. Working with our resistance to truth-telling, our excuses for lying, our blindness to whether we tell the truth or not, is a valuable discipline that can show us much about ourselves. Unsurprisingly the Buddhist monastic tradition emphasises this level, and my own chaplaincy supervisor, a Theravadin, is absolutely insistent that there are no circumstances whatsoever under which he would ever allow himself to tell a lie. But what if the result of truth-telling would be the harming of others? What then?

So there is also the *compassionate* level, at which we look at 'bigger picture' of what's involved, the welfare of all concerned. The compassionate level will almost always turn out to follow the same

direction as the literal, as taken as general guides to life the Precepts point to non-separation and the welfare of all. *But*, there are always multiple factors in play in every situation, and it's always useful to examine these. To take the example of not lying again, I might look at my motives for needing to tell my version of the truth at this time and in this way (even if that is simply 'not to break the Precept'). Who will benefit, and in what way? Would it be better to stay silent, or even to tell an untruth? A friend within the Tibetan tradition asked his (monastic) teacher about whether he would knowingly lie to his students if he believed it was in their best interests: '*Of course I would!*' was his reply. And of course there is danger here too... I can potentially justify *anything* to myself, and the compassionate level should never be seen to simply set aside the literal, which at least has the benefit of clarity. If there is no resistance to run up against, then there is no opportunity to practice. It comes down to self-honesty, always a central concern of the Precepts, and working with this tension between levels is also an important part of Precept practice. As the final consequences of any action, or inaction, on our own part are both infinite and unknowable, we need to own our limitation and finitude, our ignorance and our not-knowing. But equally the imperative to act, to speak, to *be* life itself, in this moment, in this place. The compassionate level can help us see that there is no way in which we can live our human lives without breaking the Precepts in the purely literal sense, and that 'holding' them involves the recognition of this...we are all complicit in, and benefit from the exploitation and delusion of our own society.

Let me offer a small example from my own life of the complexity and intimacy of this work. Early in my practice when I had first taken the Precepts (as the Mindfulness Trainings of the Plum Village Tradition) I was impressed by Thich Nhat Hanh's describing how in his own home he would *always* ascend or descend the dozen steps of his stairs as a practice itself: *very* slowly, carefully and mindfully. The sculpture workshop I share with my wife is on the second floor of an old mill building, maybe thirty steps up the enclosed stairwell. What a wonderful opportunity to practice...so many steps! So this is what I would do, regardless of whether my wife and I were together or I was on my own, slowly, and mindfully. To her, this quickly came to epitomise all her many reservations about my practice: that by becoming a 'good' Buddhist I had, literally, separated myself from her, as she now had the choice of taking forever to walk up behind me, or waiting at the top for me to arrive. The person I was closest to in the world felt separated, secondary, marginalised. I felt ... misunderstood, hurt, and, yes, somewhat angry. Didn't she understand that I was doing this to become a better person, and that partly for her sake? So by *trying* not to be separate from the present moment, from the seamless continuity of my practice, I had unintentionally created so many levels of separation from her, from myself, and of course in doing all this, separation from 'this moment' too...

The third level we talk about with the Precepts is that of the *absolute/ultimate*. Traditionally this is the level at which by complete contrast we say we 'cannot' break the Precepts. This is a tricky idea, and one where misunderstanding can lead to dangerous consequences. So, I *cannot* kill, because at the absolute level, there is no-one to kill, and no-one to be killed. No liar, no lie, and no-one lied to...and so on. This way of speaking relies on an understanding of the concept of 'emptiness' and that all things of whatever nature are ultimately, as the Heart Sutra insists, 'empty'. This, as has to be made totally clear (and even at the cost of patronising repetition), does *not* mean that things

don't exist, but that nothing in the world has a distinct, final or permanent identity, but instead only a conventional ('imputed' as the philosophers say) existence. Hence *all* our ideas and statements about the world, including even our perception of the world itself, are actually only ever *conventional* ... they rely on our analyzing our experience of the world into separate 'things' which we then understand as 'interacting' with each other. The *absolute/ultimate* by contrast is our recognition that *all* our names for things, *all* our structures and classifications, even and especially our experience of 'me' and 'mine', are useful and necessary means to help us understand the world and act as part of it, but are finally only our own collective creations, *not* the nature of reality itself. (NB Zen usually says '*relative*' for '*conventional*', in the same way it substitutes '*absolute*' for '*ultimate*'. 'Relative' is not wrong, but it doesn't have the force of collective fabrication that '*conventional*' does, so I prefer the latter.) At the absolute/ultimate level reality is boundless, there are ultimately no isolated and self sufficient separate things, but instead complete interrelationship, 'Interbeing' as Thich Nhat Hanh calls it. This is the specific sense in which we can talk of 'no birth and no death', no coming no going, no cause and no effect, no time passing... and of course no 'present moment' either. Reality exceeds and undercuts all our efforts to describe and contain it. It's at the level of the absolute/ultimate that we begin to understand that the interconnection, interdependence, and impermanence of ourselves and everything in the universe are the frame within which all our actions take place.

We can study and reflect on this, and allow ourselves to see and experience ourselves and our world as less bounded than we have done in the past, but can we directly experience this sense of absolute/ultimate reality? 'Enlightenment' experiences in this sense are sudden and overwhelming insights into this boundlessness and interconnection, that lead to me experiencing my 'self' in a different way - more decentered, more accepting of 'life as it is' at a deeper level, more seeing myself always in relation to others and the world. But it's also easy to get lost here...to imagine that any sense of mystical union, the oneness, or the perfection of all things is more 'true' than the ache in my back or the washing up. The level of the absolute isn't some super-rule to trump the other levels; the literal, the compassionate and the absolute have to be held in balance together. Frequently, they are not. There is a deep transcendental impulse within Buddhist thought that betrays not only the wisdom and understanding of our tradition, but above all its care and compassion. In the name of 'the Absolute' — the idea that no harm will, or has 'really' been done — Japanese soldiers in the Second World War were exhorted to kill in the name of the Dharma, and closer to home 'wise' Zen teachers have continued to abuse their students and betray their trust.

So is the level of the Absolute beyond all morality and ethics? The teachings on emptiness should rightly make us wary of all universal and absolute judgements, but to blind oneself to the reality of actual harming and suffering is both to deeply misunderstand the teachings and betray the roots of all practice in care and compassion. Better far to let our understanding of the Absolute/Ultimate make us wary of those judgements we do make, and our strong tendency to take as natural or self-evident truth what are in reality only ever abstractions from the reality of non-separation. Do I privilege one level of life at the expense of another, one part of myself over another, one gender, tribe, religion, species over another? Inevitably, we do separate things off, sometimes wisely,

sometimes at the cost of real suffering and harm. This is why from a Zen perspective these Precepts are not simple rules to be followed. At the level of the absolute there can be no ultimate separation, and yet the very act of creating rules appears to be doing exactly that...is this right or wrong, good or bad? Are you one of us (the Faithful, the Righteous, the Law-abiding...), or one of them (the heretics, the infidels, the untouchables, the criminals...)?

This Body

There is hence major importance to Joko Beck's idea that the basis of our practice of Zen as Ordinary Mind is to find the *absolute* in *each and every moment*. And that we do this simply by *not* separating ourselves off from *this* moment. And *this* moment, and *this*... As Joko says, it's not hard, we just don't want to do it. By being my anger in this moment, my fear in this moment, experienced fully and honestly. By simply being the Buddha that I am, impermanent, and perfect. 'Being my anger in this moment' ... 'experience my anger in my body...' and so on. What does this actually mean? It would be possible, and perhaps tempting, to work with the Precepts purely as a psychological tool, using them better to understand how our feelings relate to our thoughts and actions. Perhaps much of what I've written above suggests that this is what is meant. But this is *not* our practice. Zen is perhaps first and most importantly a practice of the body. When we say 'experience in the body' we mean... experience the actual physical sensations you feel...the pain, aching, tension, relaxation, warmth, cold, trembling, shivering, 'electricity', 'energy', numbness, 'nothing', strength, weakness... We mean...exactly *where* do I feel it? What *shape* is this feeling, is it fuzzy, or sharply defined? Is it constant? Is it changing as I'm aware of it?

Is this physical 'feeling' linked to an emotional 'feeling'? If I'm feeling 'angry', how do I know that's what I'm feeling? Where *exactly* in my body do I feel it? Is this feeling constant? Does this feeling connect up with other emotions? What was I thinking when I noticed it? What am I trying not to feel, to think about, to hide from at this actual moment? Sometimes these feelings may be strong to the point of overwhelm, sometimes so subtle they are barely detectable. But my emotion, my thought, always lead back to my body, whether in happiness and joy, or in anger and despair. Even the extremes of what we might think of as 'mental' pain are unbearable because of our *felt* responses ...that my head or heart or entire body will literally explode, that I have been stabbed with a knife of ice, that I am suddenly giddy to the point of fainting or collapse. Not turning away from this, not distracting ourselves or trying to numb out our feelings, are the actual core of our Ordinary Mind practice, moment by moment. This is how we honour ourselves and each other, this is how we meet the absolute, how we meet life... And this is how we work with the Precepts, in my actual experience of being *this* body.

Formal Study: Jukai

We can study the Precepts formally or informally, and at any stage in our practice. Studying them formally we can work towards a public making of vows to 'uphold' or 'keep' the Precepts (which is definitely not the same thing as 'obeying' them) in the ceremony of Jukai. This is less a symbol of completion than of aspiration: the Precepts are a lifetime's practice, and Jukai represents an acknowledgement of a new stage in our engagement with them, our determination to deepen that engagement over time. It can be seen as a hinge in our practice, a turning point where it stops

being primarily 'about' and 'for' me, and begins to be 'for' the world of which I am a part, about how I act here and now, and the relation of that to our shared tradition and past, and to what will come to be in the future. About what on earth it might mean to be... 'saving all sentient beings...' Barry Magid points out that Jukai isn't about joining some exclusive club, but is more like being presented with a 'greeter's' badge at Sangha: *'Hi! My Name is... How can I help You Today?'* The Precepts are where 'I' —that bundle of habits, desires, dislikes, and ideas that I and other people recognize as 'me'—meets a practice that has roots that extend back at least two and a half thousand years. Where the 'I' that was thrown into being in this culture at this time, takes on a place in an ancient but still evolving tradition. Where I get to look at all my stuff in the light of the *bigger* picture. And what all of that has to do with the suffering and joy of this world of which I am a part.

The Way of Care: The Ten Applied Precepts, or Aspirations

Most schools of Buddhism hold precepts in some form. The story goes that the original Precepts were developed on a situational, case by case basis, and hence as rules of thumb to address a perceived wrongdoing within the Buddha's Sangha. The Precepts of our school, Ordinary Mind, are the *Bodhisattva Precepts* that were framed in perhaps the fifth century of our era, and put into their current form by Dogen, the founder of Soto Zen in the thirteenth century. They are given here using the wording of my own teacher, Barry Magid, and reflect the approach of our school that takes the Precepts not as rules to be followed, but subjects for investigation; that their aim is not a setting apart of ourselves as the Righteous, but is instead an admission that we are always all in 'life as it is', and down and dirty with it. Truly: 'this is where the shit hits the fan!'

1. I bear witness to the reality of violence and abuse, in myself and in the world, and aspire to practice 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.