

The Fourth Applied Precept:

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

Traditionally, The Fourth Grave Precept: *I vow to refrain from false speech.*

Why begin here, with what is traditionally the Fourth Precept, why take things out of order? Our companion book for this work is Diane Rizzetto's *Waking Up to What You Do*. Diane is a Dharma Heir of our school's founder Joko Beck, and her approach to the precepts offers us a very direct and embodied way to begin our precept work, along with real insight into our Ordinary Mind practice as a whole. I recommend reading her book alongside these commentaries, which quote her freely. Diane based the ordering of the precepts in *Waking Up* on the responses of her own students over decades of practice: where to begin, and where to follow on. This is because the precepts, like all investigations, tell us a story, and the order in which we tell what happens is itself a major part of what the story *means*. In the version told here, this is a journey from 'me' to 'we', where *we* is in actual fact 'All Beings'. *All Beings* as in: my parents, my partner, my children, *and* my neighbour, the government and Google, *and* the birds, the beasts, the bugs, the mountains stripped of their forests, the last glaciers melting into oceans filled with bobbing plastic. The world that is at the same time that of our collective suffering, *and* of experiencing our most intimate and transforming joys. The traditional first and second precepts ask us to look squarely at the violence and inequality of the world as it shows up as *us*, but also as the child buried under the rubble of a bombed-out building, the migrant drowning on their voyage to a hoped for better life, the parent in our own town who's gone without dinner *again*, and *still* can't afford to put food on the table for her children. To focus on all this right here at our beginning, is I think emotionally just *too much*. The temptation to zone out or intellectualise (and we all endlessly do both) just too great. So we'll begin in the immediacy of our own encounters as we meet each other through our *words*.

The first three precepts we will investigate are about our words: why we might speak with the words we do, and what we hear when others speak. Our study of the precepts will itself use words, and words too will come unbidden to fill the space of our zazen. What are they/we trying to say, what do they all *mean*? I suppose we would all like to think we are the master of our words, that we say what we mean and mean what we say. We like to think that words describe and represent 'in' our thoughts a reality that is 'out there', and that the words we use should be able simply to state the 'facts' of any event or experience. Yet this isn't really how words work at all. Language, as any linguist will tell you, works more like a thesaurus than a dictionary: words never have a single precise meaning, let alone one that endures unchanged through time. Instead words cluster and connect, swarming in fields of association and metaphor, of expression and connotation. Remembering back to Nagārjuna, we can remind ourselves that words—like absolutely everything else—are *not-separate, empty, impermanent, interdependent*. In terms of the seamless continuity of reality, to the extent that *all* our words invoke a language of

fullness, fixity and generalisation, they are *all* lies. My words don't have any core or essence to them, and hence no fixed or essential meaning: when I speak and release them into the world they will *find* their meaning in your ears according to *this* context here and now. Just as we want to believe in an impossible world of separate, fixed things, we make the same error in relation to our words. Words *only* gain their meaning relationally: by the patterns they form and the contexts in which they are used. 'Black' and 'white' form a pair, but am I talking about truth and falsehood, the clarity of a moral argument, someone's ethnicity, a chess match, or old-fashioned TV? Or all of these at once? Words are one of our primary means of dealing with the world: to describe, persuade, intimidate, control and soothe. And so too we use them to describe, persuade, intimidate, control and soothe the many aspects of *ourselves*.

This leads on to another important way we tend to misunderstand what our words do and what they are for. We tend to imagine that the basic form of our words is simply to *describe* the world, and at it's simplest to name things: 'cat', 'horse', 'dog'... But our words always have an *effect* on the world, and not always in the way I think I intend. The most *explicitly* intentional things we say are *performative* (in the linguistic sense): 'I now pronounce you man and wife', 'I arrest you in the name of the law'. They *do* exactly what they *say*. But pretty much all saying implies or asks for a doing: 'I love you' is never a simple statement of feeling, it implicitly asks for a response: 'I love you too!' But 'I love you!' can be said as the expression of anticipation or despair, of possibility, confidence or complacency, and whatever response you offer will take its meaning from the specific context of *us*, in *this* moment. Or I speak to you when I'm angry or feel hurt and say something 'in the heat of the moment' that may be hard or impossible to unsay. Although, in one sense what I said was truly 'my truth' in *that* moment, it may well not be how I 'really' feel, and I now see it was an exaggeration, a distortion, or even simply...false. The famous 'Freudian slip' is a saying which I do *not* intend consciously, but which I *do* intend subconsciously: I am many, 'I contain multitudes', and to be honest I'm not *aware* of much, let alone most, of what I am.

Continuing to ask about what our words *do*, what they are *for*, we could say that the real point of 'gossip' (often seen as an 'enemy' within Buddhism) is to *bond* us, to build a shared space of knowledge, opinion and experience. I might argue we could distinguish this approximately from 'banter' which has an additional social *spacing* function, we bond together *within* a 'pecking order' of assigned roles or identity which every individual 'bant' reaffirms or challenges. It's also true that probably far more of what we say than we realise involves *judgement*. This is true both of our endless internal monologue—'why am I always so *stupid/bad/hopeless/wrong* (delete as applicable), or 'why are *they* always so *stupid/bad/hopeless/wrong* (delete as applicable)—and of our conversations with each other over the dinner table, beside the water-cooler, or increasingly *online*. Our judgements are one of the major ways we draw our lines between the 'me' and 'not me' parts of ourselves, between 'me' and 'you', and very importantly between 'us' and 'them'. We space ourselves as righteous individuals—'I am not like *that!*', and as righteous groups—'we are not like *them/her/him!*'. Inside and outside. Separate.

So beyond what I see as the literal meaning of what I say (itself often more ambiguous than we might imagine), and beyond what I now imagine I 'meant' when I said it, there is the whole question of what my words actually *do* in the world, of the real effects they

have, whether consciously or unconsciously intended or simply 'accidentally'. Language is a toolkit through which we fabricate both each other and ourselves. These tools are not of our own making: I speak a language which pre-existed me, and it is largely *through* using it that I *became* the self I am. My words may over and over again claim objective and independent truth—'the whole truth and nothing but the truth!'—but the reality is that these words cannot help but embody my whole approach to the world: an approach made up as much of my hopes, fears and desires, my assumptions, habits and preconceptions, as it is of things and persons in any sense 'out there'. Our speech always carries *value*.

If words never *only* describe or name, then everything depends on *how* we actually use them. I've already pointed to *dissociation* as a key psychological process: my separating off the various aspects of myself, *either* as a strategy to enable me to focus on the task at hand, *or* to build walls of separation *within* ourselves and *between* ourselves and others. I might ask 'why do you *always* do that!', or say 'you *know* what *those* people are like!': these statements are clearly intended to have an effect on you, to demand your agreement, and to change or reinforce how you behave towards me or other people. And I practice the same with myself: 'I know it will all work out fine in the end!', 'I didn't really *mean* to do that...', or my favourite, the final self-justification of most murderers on TV cop shows: 'I didn't have a choice, I *had* to do it!' Do I 'really' *believe* myself in any of this, or am I trying to *persuade* myself? Or is one aspect of me (what we'll later explore as a 'self-state') trying to understand, rationalise or disown *another* part ('self-state')? We may say these things to make ourselves feel better and relieve the anxiety of living, and it can even relieve our anxiety to reinforce a fixed negative view of ourselves: 'I am such a *loser*!' As we'll look at later on, our anger is always safer to experience than the fear of uncertainty. I am impermanent and inconsistent, divided within myself, pulling in different directions at once. The more I try to deny or ignore this complexity and self-contradiction, then the less I understand my own actions, and the more likely they are to miscarry.

What forces shape my words and how they are heard? My word-choices will tell you a lot about my social class, my education, and the kind of relationship I see *ours* as being. Is one of us speaking in a professional role...(teacher, police officer...)? Are we in an emotional relationship (parent, friend, lover...)? In one sense we speak from a different place with every different relationship and person that we encounter... it's not quite the same 'me' speaking as a parent with my child, or together with my partner, or with my boss or meeting a stranger on the street. I am *all* of these. While in one sense we all use 'code switching', this term is used primarily to describe how as a members of a 'minority' community I may intentionally change all aspects of my speech to 'White' codes—my vocabulary, phrasing, pitch, emotional expression—when I'm outside my own community. This has its own complex motivations and politics. Is either of these the 'true' me? Do I experience myself as split? Or do I refuse to switch, and ask you just to 'take me as I am'? These are all *social* aspects of relationship that both determine and are affected by the words I choose, with their own ways of speaking, their vocabulary and idioms, their rules of what is sayable or not. All speech is relationship: so how does your speech place me? As an inadequate subordinate? As your beloved? In *this* conversation or interaction, what is the self-state from which I speak, and within which I hear?

Listening to my *own* speaking—if I am really willing to bring my awareness to it—will show me a lot about what is happening beneath the apparent meaning: the tone I use, the loudness or quietness of my speech, the speed at which I am speaking, the pitch of my voice and its changes in pitch—like the rising pitch at the end of a sentence indicating a question. My posture as I speak, the role my hands play, where I am looking. All these can also be as or even more important for the effect my speech will have on others as the ‘literal’ meaning of the words. So what is my body communicating while I say *these* words? If I say ‘sorry’... do I do this with a smile or a sneer or a snarl? With a posture that’s cowed or defensive or even aggressive? Or with open face and open arms? Why did I say *these* words to you and in *this* way?

‘Truth’ and Lies

So when this precept speaks of ‘honesty’ it is far more complicated than it might appear. ‘Honest’ here has to begin with my response to the truths of my actual thoughts and emotions, my body sensations: how I *really* feel in this moment. To ‘own’ my own words I need to speak from this place of honesty, from recognition of how I do actually feel, and not how I would *like* to feel, or how I think I *should* feel.

Provided that we can suspend the inevitable process of self-judgement that always threatens to intervene and short-circuit our investigation, the ‘literal’ is not a bad place to begin, and simply observing all the lies and half-lies we tell, all the white-lies and omissions of an average day might surprise us. I do meet people whom I have no choice but to believe when they say they never lie, and hence that this precept is ‘difficult’ for them to engage with. But *I* tell lies, I know I do. Almost always with the ‘best of intentions’, and with results from the mildly beneficial to the disastrous... Work in progress... What about you? In fact the ability to lie is an astonishing power of language, and the real-world effects of our lies dramatic. ‘Lying’ might seem to require a conscious intention, or at the very least a recognition that what I’m saying is less than truthful, yet in reality even this recognition may itself be hard won. As always, dissociation plays an important part here. Unless I actually set out to tell a specific lie (I don’t think I *ever* actually do that), then coming to recognise what’s involved will show us both the limitations of a too-literal approach, and the complexity of our actual relationships. What might I be doing that is less than truthful in the way that it goes against the apparent meaning of my words? I might notice my exaggerating the truth, or minimising it... choosing only the facts that support my point of view ...lying by omission (what I leave out)... passing on gossip and stating hearsay as truth,... or keeping silent when there’s a truth that needs to be told. I might be ‘not talking’ to someone, showing someone disrespect by withholding recognition of them as a person. Or not *listening*, blocking my ears, or only hearing my own interpretation of what you are saying.

We’ll look at Diane Rizzetto’s approach to these questions as a way to begin practicing with this precept, so please read the whole of Chapter 5 of *Waking Up* in conjunction with this commentary, preferably several times(!) Let’s take a look at it here:

Begin your practice of this precept by observing the ways in which you do not speak truthfully. Remember to keep the observing stance of the science researcher, paying close attention to when you find yourself distorting truth. You might try by limiting your inquiry to specific situations...but you may also keep it broad. The key is to *listen* to yourself as you speak, I mean *really* listen to the words, the tone of your voice the pauses and silences, at work, at breakfast with your partner, at the supermarket, in the the doctor's office. WU, 58-9

She mentions a female student of hers, a nurse, who had found herself 'silent' in situations at work where she knows she 'should' have spoken up to question or challenge:

In the example...in which my student watched the ways in which she handled her work in the hospital, she noticed that indeed she wasn't always just silent. In fact, she often did speak, responding to her supervisor with the compliant words, "That's fine." As she really began to listen, she heard those two little words—that's fine—in many situations, not just at work. WU, 59

It's interesting that Diane's example here is not what we'd imagine: not a *self-serving lie*, but a failure to say what needs to be said: being made *complicit* in your being silenced. Her student finds she is using the same habitual response—"it's fine"—in very different contexts. As we all experience, and as Rizzetto points out, we don't always see straight off what's going on in situations like these, we may only get it later—minutes, hours, days or even months later. But the practice remains the same, whenever this is:

Now, at whatever point you realise you've engaged in a deception, turn your awareness inward and feel your body. Are there any sensations like heart pounding, dry mouth, blushing, or a sinking feeling? See if that sensation wants to name itself as guilt, shame, fear, or whatever. Don't demand an answer. Just invite it. Notice what sort of thoughts are present and notice if they string together in a story line. What is that story? ... It's not necessary to catch all the thoughts. Just one. Then just repeat it to yourself: "Having a thought that..." You've just spoken truthfully!... This can be a difficult time when our self-judging guilt mind takes over. But we handle the judging mind as we do any other thought/emotion/body reaction. Label. Feel. Breathe and move on. WU, 60

This is a beautifully and powerfully put description of Ordinary Mind practice. It's in the persistence, in our returning over and over again to it, that insight occurs as an embodied, visceral understanding that happens deep within us:

Eventually... when you are ready, an insight will begin to emerge. You will not only know it in the gut, you will feel it and breathe it in its complete presence. My student who is the nurse worked with this precept for several months before she began to have a sense that what she was trying to keep silent was the belief that if she said what was on her mind she would be rejected. She allowed herself to experience the

rising and falling experience of rejection whenever it came up by feeling it in her body, opening for as long as she could to it. WU, 60-61

Within Jōko Beck's practice this is where we would say we touch upon our core beliefs: those ideas acquired in early childhood that we hold and maintain as stories and coping strategies long after they have ceased to offer us any benefit at all. *Rejection*. I unconsciously believe that to speak the truth of my experience will mean that I am rejected by others, that I will not be recognised, and that my safety lies only in my compliance to their wishes. But, if we can allow ourselves simply to *sit* with this experience:

At first just a moment or two, and over time, longer and longer periods of time—pounding heart, closed chest, just breathing in and out. Over and over, she paused in open stillness, allowing the sensation labeled rejection to rise and fall away—moving, changing, constant flux.

'What we experience ...is the groundlessness of our belief that we must be untruthful to our experience. It is the truthfulness of Just This. What we think of as an unbearable experience, one that must be avoided by engaging in silence or falsehoods, is really not much more than energy manifesting in a certain way in our bodies and thoughts. We come to know intimately the many subtle ways we intentionally deceive in an attempt to escape deeply held assumptions about our identity—our dream of self. When we can experience for ourselves the transitory nature of the belief, then it no longer has us in a strong hold. We are a little freer from our requirements—freer to speak truthfully.' WU, 61- 62

So far, so excellent! But it's also at this point that I think Diane, very traditionally and following Jōko, makes an important omission. It's now 'all about' her student: this nurse and mother has formed a coping strategy in her childhood she now *misapplies* to domestic and professional situations alike. Her childhood fear of rejection is messing up her adult life, but sitting in the quiet of zazen will show her the error of her ways, and how to change things. There's a usefulness in thinking in these *individualistic* psychological terms, but it misses the wider and deeper context within which we speak and are spoken to, within which we listen and are listened to (or not...) Diane's student does not live in isolation from the world but as part of it, and her silences are not simply those of a frightened adult child, but silences within actual relationships of social hierarchy and convention.

The two things we are told about this student are that they are a *woman* caring for children, and a *nurse* (a traditional *woman's* role) working in a hospital. Both are complex social relationships in which it is routine for women to be silenced by others, and so to come to silence themselves. The professional situation is specifically hierarchical: doctors tell nurses what to do, doctors *know*, and *speak*, nurses are *spoken to*, *listen*, and *execute* their orders. In addition to this basic doctor/nurse dualism, senior nurses do the same with juniors and care assistants, senior doctors with their own juniors: hierarchy is established and explicit. Within these relationships it's entirely unsurprising that she should experience unease at the disjunction between what she *knows* (this is *not* good care!) and what she feels able to *say*, a disjunction that will itself be distressing, and which will tie

directly to whatever began this conditioned self-silencing in childhood (which itself may well have been conditioned by what was expected of her as a 'girl'). She *may* be able to negotiate the space to speak out more within her team, and so command more respect, or there might equally be pushback, or reprimands... Life back home parallels that at work (*probably...I obviously don't know...and please forgive my heteronormative assumptions*): deferring to husband or children, and still doing most of the housework despite having a responsible and demanding job. In *this* context, it's probably more about not getting/doing what she wants or needs, and instead just 'going along' with partner or children. It ties into her stories about how 'I don't deserve things, I'm less important'. Clearly, these are *gendered assumptions* about providing care and about parenting, and what these two different situations share is the silencing of a woman's *own* voice as being somehow lesser. We'll explore this in detail as we go on, but for now we'll note that this insight about rejection isn't the *end* of the process, but ripples out through the different real relationships within which she finds herself placed as *this* woman in *this* society. One of the deepest 'core beliefs' in our society is that as *separate individuals* we are always individually both the *cause of* and solely *responsible for* our actions, and hence too for the resulting social situation in which we find ourselves. It's unsurprising therefore that an *individualising* psychology should be our current default mode of thinking about the self, and unsurprising too that our Zen should often speak in similar terms. Such an attitude is however in fundamental conflict with the infinitely complex causal chains of the 'interdependent origination' of our actual *non-separation*: our impermanence and interdependence, the *Interbeing* as Thich Nhat Hanh calls it, of *all* beings. I am both an individual *and* a non-separate part of a society and of the wider world. So that if we begin with *any* aspect of our actual experiencing of the world, that awareness will take us to *relationship*. To return to the theme of rejection, what is at stake here is the *fear* of the *breaking* of relationship, the internalised but unspoken belief that her relationships in the world *require* her silence over what *matters*: her *caring* as the *self-care* of naming her own needs and desires, and as the care-for-*others* needed by her patients. It is less distressing, less painful for her to *turn away* from *saying* these things out loud, than to face the uncertainty—the *not-knowing*—of possible rejection. And that's not *her* failure.

No 'Me' without 'We'

For a woman (and for each of us) to find or lose her voice is much more an issue of our patriarchal culture—that culture which is reproduced in us, and which we find ourselves both resisting and being complicit with—than it is of her 'self' in isolation. As noted above, our culture always attempts to refer us back to the *individual* both as cause and as solely responsible, and not to challenge this idea is to confirm ourselves within delusion. Let's emphasise right here that beyond questions of gender, so many other silencings happen within our society for structural reasons: my ethnicity, my class, if I'm cognitively different, my accent even... the list goes on and on. These may compound or cancel each other, or may intersect, but gender remains the most universal, most sharply drawn and perhaps best understood of these 'fault-lines'. So how does Patriarchy show up as 'me': as what I say, how I say it, and to whom? The feminist and classicist Mary Beard has written in *Women and Power* (2017) of the antiquity and ubiquity of the silencing of women in the

public sphere, and that for the Greeks and Romans this silence was in fact part of the definition of what a woman *is*. To transgress this was to attract incomprehension and hostility, to *betray oneself as woman* in the understanding of the times. Beard points to how far contemporary attitudes maintain this view—for example in social media trolling—but extending far more widely into every aspect of our professional, social and family relationships. She talks of the difficulty of being heard as a woman speaking in public: talked over, dismissed, or simply ignored. To *silence others*, intentionally or unintentionally (and is there any clear dividing line?) is how patriarchy shows up, to *be silenced* (whether we experience it as outrage or fail even to notice it) is how patriarchy shows up. So I can ask of my own speaking and listening:

*As I listen, do I give the same value to women's words as men's?
Why do I accept the authority of some speech and not of others?
Do I expect myself to be heard when I speak, or not?
What value do I give to my own words?*

*As a woman, do I experience being 'talked over'? How do I react, how do I feel?
As a man, do I find myself 'talking over' others of any gender?
As a woman, do I experience men explaining to me what I already know, or know better?
As a man, do I find myself 'mansplaining'?
As a woman, what must I do to be heard?
As a man, how is it to be silenced or ignored? How do I react, how do I feel?*

*When I speak, where does my sense of authority come from?
What must I know in order to speak and be heard?
Who holds my words to be of value, and who does not?*

My self-honesty *here* is only possible with an awareness of how I actually feel in *this* moment, and as *this* body. As always, I try to experience my own points of resistance: 'I've never had any trouble being heard!'...'I would never do that kind of thing!' Judgement is not my friend in this process: I'll get lost in 'good' and 'bad', and only strengthen my resistance. But even my judgement isn't 'bad', just another layer in my response, to be heard, gently noted, and let go.

And in my own life? Already as a child, I recognised the need to *know* in order to feel able to speak, to have facts, an argument, the truth. In some ways this has served me well. But of course my understanding of *knowing*, of facts and of value, was largely/entirely framed within the strongly patriarchal assumptions around speaking that are still only beginning to be challenged. Both my mother and her own mother were highly articulate—and forceful—and yet in a sense both 'knew their place' as women... But there was also the example of my godmother Audrey and of her partner Joan: political, engaged, knowledgeable in all kinds of areas, the smartest and most aware people with whom I spent time as a child. They formed, from my earliest memories, and before I was even dimly aware of it, the possibility of a different way of being in the social world.... I value their having been a part of my childhood ever more deeply as the years have passed.

In a world of absolute interdependence it's our *collective* suffering and the dissociations, the repression, the evasion, the denial through which we attempt to avoid it that best show us the specific structures of violence, inequality and exploitation of which we are all a part. Our self-honesty has to extend to an awareness and understanding of what it is to be not just 'me' but 'we'. So that rather than always looking to an *individual* explanation for the assumptions, ideas and emotions—both conscious and subconscious—that lie behind our actions, we need to see how they are shaped by these structures, and this investigation has to extend to what we think of as 'truth' itself.

The Whole Truth

'I promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.' *Separate...* but is 'truth' really *one* or *many*? The criminal justice system relies on a singular notion of truth: factual, objective and 'beyond reasonable doubt'. This last phrase is a hedge: while it *acknowledges in theory* that certainty may be impossible, it then *acts as if* it had been clearly established, and 'reasonable', while invoking the authority of philosophy and science as 'reason', will actually mean whatever the court *decides* it means. The justice system makes judgements it claims to be *universal*, acting on an established and pre-existing body of law, to apply to all people at all times and in all places within its jurisdiction. An action is either 'right' or 'wrong', either true or false, either legal or illegal. With the result that you or I, as an individual person, are 'found' (which is really to say *labelled as*) either innocent or guilty, as *either* a member of the 'law-abiding public' or a 'criminal'. This label which will have life-long consequences.

Our Zen practice and understanding might lead us to question this approach. The 'whole' truth? By restricting itself to the specific actions it defines ('did you or did you not...?') the justice system abstracts and de-contextualises these actions from the complex reality of our lives, so making then the subject of *universal* judgements claiming *objectivity*. These judgements are made on us as *individuals*, held to be solely and uniquely responsible for what the law chooses to define as 'our' actions: we are fabricated as *moral agents* in order to justify our meriting the law's punishment of us. This is separate-think at its most extreme, the social consequences of which continue to be disastrous: by ignoring the real but complex causality of violence and harming we perpetuate the cycles of suffering, damaging or destroying the life-chances of those caught up within the criminal justice system, this ever-extending web including the children and wider families of victims and witnesses as well as those of those accused.

An essential part of this process is the total control the judicial system exercises over *speech* and the *silencing* of speech: just *who* may speak, and *when*, and with what *authority*, and what *consequence*? Speech and silence are orchestrated to demonstrate the absolute authority of the court, and of *its* version of the truth: the truth is finally only what it *allows* to be so. Recent high profile trials in the UK have involved the legal silencing of protestors wishing to give their own truth as evidence in their defence, while to bear witness to the law itself simply by holding up a placard outside the court can lead to your arrest for *contempt*. Meanwhile, the granting of *super-injunctions* to wealthy individuals or companies makes it illegal even to say that such an injunction has been granted. Here as always, silence and truth have an uneasy relationship. Legal judgement exemplifies *performative*

speech: "I sentence you to ten years imprisonment!". The judge's words actually *perform* the separation, the enforcement of the bar between right and wrong, legal and illegal, public and criminal. The purpose of this bar is to legitimate and make lawful the coercion applied to us and the violence it imposes on us. In whatever way any judicial system might wish to justify itself and its actions, all are ultimately based in violent coercion, a coercion legitimised by the performative action of the judge's speech. Although we face very different consequences, we are fundamentally in the same position as the First Peoples of sixteenth century South America to whom the invading Spanish soldiers read out loud the *Requerimiento* (the 'Requirement in the name of God' issued by the Spanish monarchy). For this to have been *performed* was enough to make any resistance that of a *rebellious subject* of the Spanish crown, and hence the legitimate victim of any punishment or violence decided on by the invaders in the name of God himself. Their resulting enslavement and deaths became a genocide.

We do not share their fate, but we equally, and merely by being born within our nation's boundary, are held to have agreed to any and all laws enacted previously or in the future by our State, and so liable to whatsoever punishment it decrees. Unsurprisingly, our laws and punishments have evolved to reflect the priorities and requirements of those who wield most influence, albeit supposedly justified by claims to universality and objectivity, as was the *Requerimiento*. The voice of authority—of God, or of the State—is held as absolute, and its statements as objectively and universally true, an authority in reality based only on their ability to carry out their final sanction of violence. It is almost always the poor and those who to appear to be 'other' in any way that are placed in danger of this coercion and violence. Who is *allowed* to speak, and, *when* they speak, who do we actually *hear*?

The judge speaks in the name of the State ('The King', 'the People'). In whose name do I speak, *who* or *what* stands behind what I say? How often do we bring this juridical model into play at moments of tension, of our resistance to experiencing our lives in this moment? Blame, guilt, shame... We too easily become barristers in our own impromptu courtrooms, and are happy to move from there to being both judge and jury. Abstracting and decontextualising, assigning individual responsibility. Making our universalising judgements. Separating. We pass judgement not only on particular others, but on whole groups of other people, and of course on *ourselves* too, relentlessly, either to declare *our* hands clean because *theirs* are dirty, or that *we too* are guilty and must be punished. Of course in the complex reality of our lives there is and absolutely must be a place for holding to account, for setting boundaries, for bearing witness to the unacceptable. For saying 'No! This is *not* OK!' But we need to be aware of the wider setting, of what is at stake and what is in play in both our individual and collective judgements, by being aware of the part our own resistance to our experiencing plays. We need to become better aware of *how* we do this, of our own subtle motivations and the complexities of relationship involved, as of the actual practical consequences. We might usefully ask of anything we say: in *whose* interest do I speak, and what are the *consequences* of saying this? When we speak to command, or ask, or question, or protest, then on what authority, what understanding of truth, do we do so? Just who (or what) do I imagine stands behind what I say? And with what form of sanction?

Each nation's legal system offers us a perfect example of the use of 'truth' as *power*: the power to allow or deny speech, and to *perform* truth through speech, a performance always guaranteed by the final threat of violence. What is so established is a truth that aspires to being *certain*, to being *universally valid* and *prescribed in advance* of the specifics of *this* context; one whose purpose is control: control both of its population as a whole and of the permissibility and management of our individual actions. But is this enforced separate-think really appropriate to the actual complexity of this not-separate, impermanent, infinitely interconnected world? Legalistic truth embodies a kind of understanding very different from the *self-honesty* that slowly reveals itself through our continuing practice, a self-honesty that is in itself always a form of caring. What about coming to embrace our... *not* knowing?

Not-Knowing

'Not-knowing' has an important place in Zen. Not-knowing is not *simply* uncertainty about what will happen next—our ignorance about the future—but the *irreducibility* of this uncertainty. To *embrace* our not-knowing is to move beyond the paralyzing fear of uncertainty, and the efforts we all make to avoid the experiencing of that fear (I say this as having been a supreme master of such avoidance). Our uncertainty about the future is one that may well extend into the present and past also. The revelation of, say, a partner's infidelity will dramatically redefine both present and future as uncertain: where do *we* go from here? In the prevailing illusion of my separateness the temptation will always be to grasp at the spectre of control: I must *master* the other, or the world(!), I *need to know* what has gone on and what is going on, and so control what will happen *next*. Such control will always be at best partial, and often completely illusory: being based on the (fearful) premise of separation, such efforts are often deeply damaging to both self and other, and so too to all relationship.

This also applies to myself, *myselfes*(!) The illusion of my being-separate requires that I am only ever *one* thing, not the many, the 'multitude' which my growing self-awareness shows me to be. And I am hence *not* transparent to myself, not inherently self-aware. Bodhidharma, when asked directly by the Chinese Emperor 'who are you?' finally replies 'I don't know!' When the young monk Fayán, making the rounds of teachers and temples on his pilgrimage, is asked by the Master Dizang 'why have you come?', his reply echoes Bodhidharma: 'I don't know!' 'Ah,' says Dizang in response, 'Not knowing is most intimate!' *Not knowing* is—looking forward to the Sixth Precept we'll study next—the space of *openness and possibility*. Not-knowing reminds me that all my knowledge, all my ideas, all my certainties, are always limited, approximate, relational. This is the importance of Bodhidharma's and Fayán's not-knowing: each is a chance to re-form my experience and hence my understanding of this moment, of myself, of *this* person, of 'life as it is', of the world. We have already begun to explore the practice of Bearing Witness, which is itself a response to not-knowing, and is both a listening and a telling. What these share is an opening, and an openness, a bringing to light. To what will we bear witness? What truth will we find? Or will our words tie us only more deeply and more damagingly to our delusion?

Just as Diane's student's silences were not simply 'about her', but rather about her relationships and the *place* of those relationships within our contemporary society as a whole, so too our 'not-knowing' is never solely our 'own' affair. I was writing an earlier version of this commentary when the world moved into the COVID 19 pandemic, a 'not-knowing' that made practicing with the three speech precepts seem more urgent and relevant than ever. From the beginning of this crisis everyone struggled to appear to be 'in control', and in doing so inevitably to turn away from the overwhelming and conclusive proof of our *not*-knowing that the pandemic provided. Politicians (often falsely) claimed they were 'following the 'science'', while government announcements, scare stories, imagined 'cures' and unsupported reassurances all adopted the same authoritative tone of certainty.

Our not-knowing is the fundamental condition of our lives, but we run instead towards certainty, and the greater the uncertainty, the greater the craving to *know*, and to maintain the self-sense and appearance of control. Let's be quite clear here: this only makes sense in terms of our reflexive, intuitive-seeming, sense of *closure* and *separation* from each other and from the world. To maintain this sense of separation, we need the certainty of *belief*, however nonsensical, and so would rather believe the *worst* of others—and of ourselves too—rather than face the fear of our not-knowing: the recognition of our *actual* openness to a world of possibility. So we believe what we have *become pre-disposed* to believe, and the comfort of our certainty closes us off to not-knowing, and so too to reality itself. The ideas of conspiracy fantasists still persist as their 'truth' for an astonishingly large minority of people around the globe: once formed we allow our views to *shape our perception of the world* and hence how we form our future views. In their way conspiracy fantasies both reject and mimic the structure of our legal systems, which in the search for a truth of certainty also bring a closed way of perceiving and conceiving to bear upon a world whose complexity vastly outstrips it.

This sense of separation is, however, not innate or inevitable, but a reflex conditioned by our collective social practices. We need instead to come to *embrace* our not-knowing by bearing witness to the deep fear at the base of our collective craving for certainty, and the real effects this craving has in us and in our world. In *certainty* we also separate ourselves from ourselves, by not experiencing the *perfection* of 'this moment'—which is simply *being* the uncertainty of the embodied and hence vulnerable creature I am. This moment *is* uncertainty, and this *is* too its perfection, one that is not in any sense a completion, but an opening onto infinite possibility *as* impermanence, *as* interdependence. There is much talk in Zen of 'beginners' mind': approaching our practice (or any other aspect of life) 'as if' for the first time, open and without preconceptions, and so without the blinding and numbing effects of routine and over-familiarity. 'Beginners' mind' is to *embrace our 'not-knowing'*.

Truth, Relative and Absolute

So what of the *truth* of Buddhism, of Zen? Asked about the eternal truth of Buddhism one teacher replied 'it just *changed*.' All that is distinctive about a Zen or Buddhist approach to ethics—all that takes it away from being finally simply another account of how to balance the interests of one person or group against those of another—depends on our experiential understanding of non-separation, or as it is more literally and usually

translated, *emptiness*. Non-separation/emptiness entails both the identity and difference of *relative* and *absolute*, of *conventional* and *ultimate* truth. Let's think about this as it applies to our speech. If there are ultimately *no* separate and substantial 'things' of any kind (and no separate and substantial me either), then no words whatsoever can ever *truly* describe the wholeness of the reality of our lives or the world in which we live. As the Heart Sutra repeatedly insists, even central Buddhist concepts such as the Four Noble Truths, the Five Aggregates, and the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination are nothing more than human-made schemes of classification that can never adequately *represent* life itself or the reality of my experience. Because there are no separate things, no separate me and you, every word I speak that *names* and hence limits is already a lie, and betrays reality as it is. Far better to keep a noble silence! Far better to have never written this!

But it is equally true that because *all* separation is only ever *relative, conventional*, that in this sense I cannot ever actually lie. There's ultimately no separate 'me' to speak, and no separate 'things' about which to make true or false statements. So my 'lie' is itself not-separate with the truth of this moment. Words are *just* words, sounds in my ear or squiggles on a page, sounds and squiggles that are themselves not-separate! In Zen the teacher always urges the student on to 'Speak! Speak! Say a word of Zen!' Not... 'try *really hard* to get it right!', but, realise you can't go wrong. Say your truth, whether it stutters, simply expresses your confusion, or flashes with insight... Speak! Speak! In this sense, words are simply a particular kind of (empty, not-separate) thing, of event. In this sense there is nothing that *can* be said, not because words are finally inadequate to the ultimate truth of an *unsayable* reality, but because emptiness is itself empty (non-separation is itself not-separate). Nothing *to be* asserted, nothing *to be* true or false. No absolute, ultimate ground on which we might be able to found our truth: the *only* absolute truth is that there is no absolute truth. Which far from making the relative/conventional 'unreal', leaves the relative as the *only* reality, and *all* truth as relative. The *only* truths are the truths of this relative world: truths like my headache, or quantum physics, or this keyboard. The 'takeaway' is *just this*. So what is the (relative) truth of this moment, my experience of writing this for you, your reading this? Truth is always relational, because life is.

One Truth To Rule Them All?

'Truth' is finally only the truth of *this* relationship: of particular speakers in a given context. To assert the *universality* of a truth—that a 'truth' is true in all contexts—is itself a particular kind of practice of power. It is now becoming more generally appreciated that the universal aspirations of Western philosophy and science from the eighteenth century onwards—'The Enlightenment'—were themselves an important part of the parallel Imperial projects of global invasion and colonisation, and of the development of capable and compliant populations at home. The language of 'objectivity' spoken by the educated, 'independent' (in the sense of able to *command* the labour of others), White male observer would henceforth be the standard by which the whole world would be judged and would come to judge itself. Science itself 'proved' the superiority of men over women. It 'proved' too that of (some) White Europeans over all other ethnic groups, and provided the ships and the firepower to establish this superiority *de facto* across the entire globe.

So is 'science' itself not 'true'? Contrary to what is sometimes assumed, the 'scientific method' at the heart of all science produces truth which is always contextual and highly specific, and within which any claim to universality is always subject to testing and vulnerable to falsification: this is what makes it science. Precise conditions must be observed, and repeatability and consistency with other accepted results are essential to establish the *consensus* that scientific truth finally is. What are produced are *descriptions* of regularities from which probable conclusions can be inferred and others discounted. The 'things' of science—atoms, forces and the rest—are useful descriptions, neither real nor unreal beyond this. Science too has its moments of 'not-knowing': in the critical moments of change in our understanding we characterise as paradigm shifts (Kuhn) or a new episteme (Foucault), and perhaps too in any seeing-through of an insoluble-seeming paradox.

Scientific truth also always emerges from a lived social context: just what will be researched, funded, and recognised as true? Oil and drug companies know this well, as did the tobacco giants fifty years ago. Beyond this, science is framed within our broader goals as a society, and the understanding of the world offered by philosophy, psychology, economics and the rest. Science is never simply 'neutral', and the truths of science are always *relative* and never *absolute*: we forget this at our peril. But in its own relative terms science *is* 'true', even though the 'laws' of physics *will* change as our understanding evolves. So this is absolutely *not* an argument for '*relativism*': the idea that as all views are in a sense subjective, my view of anything is as good as yours or anyone else's.

In many ways what we do in our zazen and precept practice is similar to 'science': we map our feelings, emotions and thoughts in our body, testing the painful inconsistencies between my lived experience and how I think the world is or should be. Here, my *self-hatred* turns out to be as significant as what I might think of as my *selfishness*. My sense of my own self is not something fixed or independent, but part of the flow that is the world, and I can come to distinguish something of the currents, ripples and eddies which comprise it, and of their interactions, sources and destinations. Returning to my felt experience will test for me the different truths and insights within the complex and inconsistent whole that 'I' 'am': a life lived in a world of violence and inequality and exploitation—of *suffering*—which is the great subject of our practice, and our work with the precepts.

We seem to have come a long way from the complicit/enforced silence of Diane's student, but perhaps not so far after all. We can begin to see the way her 'own' fear of rejection links to our common need for closure and control and our fear of not-knowing, and the role these play in the *constraining* of our relationships that we see in the always-present social structures of hierarchy and domination.

It is our own uncertainty, our not-knowing, that if we pay attention to it will allow us to hear what we may come to recognise as 'a different voice'. In one sense this is actually the voice (perhaps one of many?) of *silence*, the silence of not-knowing, the silence of experiencing, the silence of our zazen. Buddhism talks of 'Noble Silence': the silence we keep on sesshin that maintains an open space for *...whatever...* to arise. It's the silence each time we return to the cushion, a silence that fills with a pop tune, my neighbours' dog barking, the cramp in my foot... 'whatever'. It's also the famous silence of Vimalakirti, when asked about the non-dual nature of reality: 'the absolute'. There is nothing that can

be said about this nature that is finally adequate or accurate, nothing that can circumscribe or contain it: in this sense Vimalakirti's silence is a supremely 'honest' response, though no more *ultimately* 'true' than any other. Hence Bodhidharma's short commentary on this precept:

'Self-nature is inexplicably wondrous. In the intrinsically pure Dharma, not expounding a word is called "not lying" '.

Bearing Witness to Myself, Bearing Witness to Each Other

I bear witness to others in myself, and I bear witness to myself in others. So to study myself is, in this sense, to study the world, and to study the world to study myself; it is by recognising first of all the separation 'within' myself that I can be not-separate from you when we speak. We share this world that brought us into being, a world of which we are all impermanent parts. We have shared, do share, and will always share in the making and shaping of each other, and this inevitably places us deep in a complex set of relationships of power and powerlessness. All these take their form in the major and minor verbal violence circulating in our culture, and we have no natural immunity from them. The many thoughts, stories and ideas that emerge from my mouth do not magically originate from a place deep within myself (though it may feel incontrovertible that that is so) but are a part of the world around me responding to itself, and are made with the resources I have to hand. We receive the opinions of our parents and teachers, our playmates, workmates, our heroes, and of the media. We pass these opinions on to others, and often pass them off as our own. How much of what I say is actually just something 'people like me' say, or perhaps even something my father always said when I was a child? Sometimes if we reflect we can actually hear in our minds the voice we first heard saying those words. Our speech, as I have emphasised endlessly, is always social. I bear witness to the speech of my culture and of myself, understanding that my awareness will never let me step outside this culture to see it purely 'objectively'. I am a part of that culture and will reproduce it, even as I dissent, challenge or disagree with what others say and do.

If there is *no* absolute truth then we are left with the always-correctible, revisable, provisional and conventional truth of the relative. This truth is always subject to being tested by the evidence, by argument and the establishing of consensus and coherence: the makings of our everyday sense of truth. We need to be able to see *both* that we inevitably distort and misrepresent, *and* how this misrepresentation further misleads us. Embodying this understanding changes both how we think and the actions we take in the world. We will never 'see the world as it truly is', but we may come to see our delusion more clearly, and this is indeed a lot!

Listen!

As with all the precepts, self-observation is at the core, and the heart of self-observation is our experiencing of the non-separation of this self and world. This should really begin with noticing how we *listen*. In one sense we can say listening is our whole practice: listening to self and other. Listen to my heart, my muscles, my gut. Listen to my tone, inflection, pauses and silences. Listen. Listen with my ears and my understanding, with

my eyes and the responses of *my* own body to *your* body posture, your expression, your gestures. Listen with the whole of me listening with the whole of you. Listen *through* my awareness of my own excitement, delight, anger, disgust, despair at what you're saying. Can I listen beyond my judgement of you for saying exactly this? Am I *open* to hearing and understanding what you are saying, whether or not I agree with it? Can I see how it makes sense from your point of view, even if not from mine? Can we disagree with each other without communication and openness breaking down? Perhaps our willingness to *listen* is the precondition for all honest and caring speech: all of what we will look at with the next precept as mutual *recognition*. Could we say that 'caring' speech is simply that which in any particular situation acknowledges and originates in our non-separation? Caring speech is not about commanding or demanding assent, but must be able to hold the non-violent resolution of our disagreement, hold both our anger and the others' anger, and our frustration and despair. Jōko Beck talked of needing to criticise from a position of *love*, and we might frame this as disagreeing *within* recognition of the other: keeping relationship and dialogue open, speaking honestly and undefended, listening actively. It is not about becoming '*one*', but rather of recognising that , without eliding or erasing our difference, we are '*not-separate*'. It is only by hearing the voices of all those who are tacitly censored (which includes all those implicitly or implicitly excluded from 'power') that we can come to any understanding of the real issues within our society. So it is no coincidence that women have often been denied the right to speak in public, and still face frequent criticism for doing so. What it is to be a child, a migrant, a 'minority', 'lower' class, cognitively different, having a physical disability, unemployed, convicted of a crime...? Without listening *with* (the better to understand) those leading very different lives, what hope have we of any kind of justice, equality, truthfulness? Only in this way can we find and expand elements of both individual and collective caring within our society. Recognition is the precondition of genuine care of any kind, and is *in itself* to offer a form of actual care.

I meet the *other* at home, at work, on the street. We may speak to offer words of love, to inspire each other, to share knowledge, or simply to recognise ourselves in each other. Offering a word, a look, a gesture that meets — perhaps unexpectedly — the other, and lets each see themselves mirrored as human, as active subject, as vulnerable. Although our words always move in the direction of *both* separation and non-separation, speech is one of our most important ways to *realise* our actual mutual non-separation. Working with the precepts that follow, we will examine in more detail how our speech comes to embody the mutual recognition central to the not-knowing of real relationship, or how by our judgements we present a damagingly fixed view of others that is in itself a form of violence.