

Not Separate

Introduction to Working with the Zen Precepts

*Creatures are numberless, we vow to free them.
Delusions are endless, we vow to transform them.
Dharma doors are countless, we vow to enter them.
The Awakened Way is unsurpassable, we vow to embody it.*

What are the Precepts?

The Zen Precepts are our experience *of* and *as* relationship. Not simply relationship to each other, and to the wider world, but also, importantly, about relationship to what we think of as ourselves — we could even say to relationship ‘within’ ourselves. In *Genjokoan* Eihei Dōgen, the founder of the Sōtō tradition, famously wrote that ‘to study the self is to forget the self’. This sounds mystical, but it is not. Unless we study the ‘self’ as Dōgen recommends, we continue to experience ourselves as the uniquely real point of origin of our experience and intentions, acting on a world of objects external to us. Seeing ourselves as separate, we attempt to push out into the world, or else we withdraw from it, building walls around us. This is the origin of suffering. Instead we need to see, to experience directly and to Bear Witness to the way we ourselves *come-to-be* as part of this world, a world with which we are *not-separate*. Through this study we can come to understand, see, experience ourselves as *relationship*: as limited, impermanent, vulnerable embodied beings, who are, exactly by being such, ‘not separate’ from each other, and from the world. Our study is never abstract, and is the work of the body as much as the mind. It is not against thought, or without thought, but greatly exceeds what we normally think of as ‘thinking’. This study is never ours alone, because it is always, in itself, relationship.

Before we begin, it’s worth asking, what do we *want* of the precepts? How do we imagine they will contribute to our life? 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 the safety and security we imagine this offers us. If I say that the Precepts are Zen’s approach to *ethics* then we most likely think it’s to ask: ‘just tell me, what am I *allowed* to do and what not?’ What should I do in this or that situation? We might imagine this is exactly what The Zen Precepts are *for*: a formal code of dos and don’ts to govern our words and deeds. But these Precepts are really more about the *impossibility* of establishing abstract and universal rules for living our lives, whether we choose to call those rules ‘laws’, ‘morals’ or simply ‘common sense’. Zen thought is clear that we can never, as embodied beings living in a world of impermanence and Interbeing, *either* ‘keep’ or ‘break’ them in any absolute sense, so while traditionally the Precepts were indeed expressed in the form of rules of conduct (don’t do this, and don’t do that either!), 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 feeling, experiencing, thinking or saying... how I am acting. To study the Zen Precepts is hence to investigate what I believe myself and the world to be, how I came to think it’s that way, and the real-life consequences of so thinking. 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 my awareness of experiencing myself in relationship with the world and with myself...in what we can call Bearing Witness.

The phrasing of the Precepts used here may be unfamiliar to those who know them from other traditions, but points to the way each of us is always embodied and embedded in a world, in relationship with myself, with other beings and with the universe. I 'bear witness to the world and to myself', and so too to my relationships and interactions with others and to the complexity and multiplicity which I myself am. I also bear witness to the world's worlding: so that I am aware that whether or not 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. Our received wisdom too often invites us to think in terms of separation, either 'the world is fine, but I'm such a disaster!', or 'there's nothing wrong with me, but the world is shot to hell!' Against this we could put Vimalakirti's famous answer when the Bodhisattvas are sent to ask him why he's sick: 'I am sick because the world is sick.' Not-separate. Working with the precepts we have to ask many questions of our selves, and listen deeply to the answers. Equally we have to ask questions of the world, of all those other suffering beings, and listen deeply to their answers too. Listen to the poor, the oppressed, to the animals and insects, to the trees and plants, to the rivers and oceans, to the air itself. Listen, and make certain that we hear. Bear witness, and respond.

Bearing Witness

The core practice of Ordinary Mind could be said to be 'not turning away from life as it is', whether that is when sitting in Zazen, cleaning the toilet, or filling in a tax return. This is hence also the foundation of working with the Precepts, and 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 (in you?) and instead hold that suffering in my awareness, and so am better able to respond as appropriate. That response might be sitting still, or speaking out: I can bear witness in many different ways, and the Precepts offer us a structure within which to explore these. When I talk of 'levels' here it's just as a handy way of looking at things: because it's *all* relationship, these levels are not in any real way distinct from each other, but it can help to focus on their different aspects.

The first level of our bearing witness is to what I think of as 'myself', myself as I am in all my complexity and contradictions. The Precepts ask us to examine how we show up in the world, 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 importantly, 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 or a world seen as harsh and uncaring. Barry Magid has brought his work as one of America's most respected psychoanalysts to refine and deepen this psychological understanding of our practice, for example in his discussion of the role of our 'curative fantasies' about practice itself, or our tendency to repress or dissociate from those aspects

of ourselves we do not find wholesome. Over recent decades psychoanalysis itself has taken a 'relational turn' — understanding that it is through and in relationship with others that we come to be and act as the selves we are, being from our very beginning social and utterly interdependent beings: for better and for worse it was never only 'about me'. Hence in developing our awareness we are shown that the stories we tell about the world are always social as much as personal, that they are a part of the way in which we collectively co-create our experiencing of the world and that pattern of thinking and doing we can call our *form of life*. All these social stories and ideas we share about the world shape both our experiencing and our actions: from our most intimate relationships to how we think about 'those people' (whoever 'those people' — the *others* — are for us), from the way in which we literally see the world to our conscious views and opinions. Working with the Precepts is a way to explore how we form and perform our sense of self as relationship, and the real effects this has on ourselves and other people in the wider world of which we are always a part.

This is the second 'level' of bearing witness: seeing, understanding and responding to the collective roots both of my own suffering and the suffering I inflict, roots that find expression in the acting out of the myriad forms of *othering* — the ways we become active or complicit in the domination, oppression, exploitation or exclusion of 'the other' — in ways that may appear trivial to us, or which we may come to recognise as deeply damaging.

Understanding this process within our own experience leads to the third 'level' of bearing witness, becoming aware of and not turning away from the suffering in the world where I seem to 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 to each?

Hence the Precepts as presented here all have two parts: the awareness that is the beginning of our *bearing witness*, and the following through of our bearing witness as our positive *aspiration* for our practice and our life. Of course these aren't really separate or even properly sequential, except in the sense that becoming aware of how we and the world behave helps us to put our aspiration into practice, to move in the direction of really *becoming* non-violence, generosity, honesty. To live better the reality of non-separation. 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, and of the consequences of so thinking, speaking and acting. To bring our awareness to our experiencing of ourselves as an interdependent part of the society in which we live, a society to which every one of our acts also contributes. As mentioned, we are fundamentally embodied and embedded beings, and so we are asked to look at our interdependence with the world not in the sense of some vague spiritual abstraction of oneness, but in every specific and concrete aspect of our everyday lives. Bearing witness doesn't stop at awareness, it asks us to act in response to what we see, though that might be only privately and silently. Or we may need to name it, speak out about it, or take decisive action. Bearing witness generates aspiration in us: 'I

aspire to...' ... I want to do things *differently*. This is how we begin to put our awareness at the service of our wider practice, always with the implied question... how does being more actively aware of myself and my world affect how I *feel* and *act* in response the reality of 'life as it is' in this present moment? But our awareness, our bearing witness, our aspiration and action are, and remain, *not-separate*.

'Not Separate'

So we will take 'not separate' as our guiding theme. How do I come to separate myself off from others, and from the world, and how do I separate off different aspects of myself to applaud, punish or deny? These are in effect the same question, because self and other are fundamentally not-separate, and so we see not simply the same processes as work on the *interpersonal* and *intrapersonal* levels, but that each responds directly to the other. A word of caution through: 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 experience this one-ness at all times and in all situations. This is misleading at best, and at worst deeply delusory. Paradoxically it is only by becoming consciously aware of and acknowledging the reality of our (relative) separation within ourselves and between each other that we in practice become *less* separate from those aspects of ourselves and of life that are most problematic to us. 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 the separations 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 of which we may well not be consciously unaware. 'Knowing' myself to be 'bad', 'inadequate', 'selfish'...whatever specific forms it takes for me, I split myself unconsciously into the 'good' parts I want to see as 'me', and the 'bad' parts I want to see as 'not-me' and that I want to deny, disown, or change. Perhaps Buddhism and Zen in particular attract those of us in whom this desire to be 'good' is particularly strong. Taking up the Precepts, we think, will allow us to show how truly 'good' and 'serious' we are! *Or*, we decide the precepts are 'not for me!' because of the sense of inner 'badness' we fear is our 'true self'... Either way, such a view disowns our *wholeness*, and so denies the reality of the complexity and inconsistency of who we are and how we function in the world.

Studying the Precepts with any degree of seriousness will inevitably show us things we don't like about ourselves, and so increase the potential danger of further splitting ourselves off from ourselves in this way: 'now I really know how awful I am!' The answer? To learn fully to rest our awareness in — we might say actually to *be, become* — this splitting itself, and through being it (I was going to say ... 'observe it' .. but that is already simply *too separate*) to realise 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... This is what we mean when we talk about being non-judgemental in our investigation, in our practising awareness. If the core of our practice is

not turning away from our self-experience, then to make such self-judgements is *already* a turning away, an attempt to push away the experience itself by labelling, compartmentalising it. When Joko Beck talked of each of us becoming 'A Bigger Container' it is of our becoming capable, (to frame a perplexing metaphor) of containing both ourselves and the world, however inadequately, in the truth of that experiencing. It is only through patient, persistent, and sometimes painful awareness that we become this.

Self as Other, Other as Self

Fundamental to Zen is the idea of impermanence: that *nothing* endures, that *everything* changes, that beginnings are *always* followed by endings. And equally, that nothing is ever truly separate — cut off, isolated independent from the world as a whole — that nothing has an *essence* that sets it apart and makes it just what it is in isolation from every other thing. That 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, I 'contain multitudes' in Whitman's words and have complex relationships within and between these different aspects of myself (myselfes!) We'll explore the idea of 'self-states' as we go along: the many different 'me's' that seem to function as almost independent selves, and of how unaware I am of my sudden switching between them. That there are parts of 'me' of which I am normally or permanently unaware (which we may or may not wish to call 'the unconscious') should alert me to the fact that — despite my persevering illusions to the contrary — I am not and can never be 'self transparent', I can never see myself, know myself through and through. 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 (I *don't* want to be thinking about my recent break-up when driving my car, or tightrope walking...) our universal tendency to dissociation can and does do violence to ourselves and to others. 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 *as* 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 *care for* our own internal differences, then we can better *care about* those people whose difference from us would otherwise make real 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 even congratulate myself for rising 'above' them, then I separate off from both myself and the other person, and make building appropriate relationship with them impossible. This isn't

about 'feeling sorry for them', but feeling *with* them, which we might call empathy. There is an old use of the word 'sympathy' which I've always found helpful here: when you raise the dampers on a piano and press a key, not only that string will sound, but every other string that is harmonically related to it will vibrate also. Not the *same* tone, but its *own* note, and according to its harmonic relationship to the key pressed. Empathy is in itself relationship, and our relationship to the suffering of others is always in our relationship to our own. It is the beginning of *caring*, and of knowing *how* to care.

This Body

Does this sound as if we are 'just' talking about psychology? Joko Beck's understanding of our practice of Ordinary Mind Zen is that each and every moment presents us with what she and the Zen tradition call the 'absolute', but that in our reflexive turning away from our experience of 'life as it is', we fail to recognise it. To recognise ourselves as this absolute, to 'be' it, is simply *not* to separate ourselves off (by *turning away*) from this moment. And in *this* moment, and *this*... As Joko so often said: it's not hard, we just *don't want* to do it! So we need to come to see that the heart of our practice *is* in not turning away, *not* separating ourselves off by anger, distraction or dissociation, but instead 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: 'angry' Buddha, 'sad' Buddha, 'bored' Buddha! 'Being my anger in this moment' ... 'experience my anger in my body...' and so on. What does this actually mean? While it would be possible, and perhaps tempting, to work with the Precepts purely as a psychological tool, by using the *ideas* we are discussing to better understand how my feelings relate to my thoughts and actions, 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? 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 emotions, my thoughts, 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 only because of our felt responses in our our own body ...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, that my stomach is literally going to turn inside out, that I must run and run *now*, to escape the danger. *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 as the absolute, how we meet life... And this is how we work with the Precepts: in my actual experience of being this body.

'Holding', not 'Obeying'

The first Buddhist Precepts began, at least according to tradition, as the Buddha's situational responses to actual events within the group of his early followers, the first Sangha. So it would seem that what we know as the precepts were not originally intended as an overarching scheme of judgement by universally applied rules, but rather to resolve specific problems as they emerged. Such an ongoing and evolving process would have shared many of the characteristics we will later come to recognise as an *ethics of care*. However, these were subsequently elaborated into the monastic codes that with relatively minor variations still govern all aspects of monks' and nuns' behaviour: the *pāṭimokkha* or *pratimokṣa* that form part of the *vinaya*. If, as according to tradition, this transformation happened in the years immediately following the Buddha's death it's hard not to see in it a response that at once expresses both the trauma of this catastrophic loss, and the attempt to consolidate the Sangha in its new form by preventing potential disagreement and schism (which nevertheless proliferated regardless). Although the *vinaya* contains what are in many ways sets of *rules* to be strictly adhered to, most transgressions of these precepts require merely a formal apology in front of the sangha as their atonement, and many of these rules are not even about ethical and unethical behaviour: for example precisely how to wear and adjust one's robes. What all share is being seen as ways to develop the discipline of self awareness and self-control, and, in some senses, of *denial* of self in deference to the teachings and community: we *obey* the rule simply because it is a rule of the community.

By contrast, the precepts we study in Zen are the *Bodhisattva* Precepts, a later development that is a part of the Mahayana movement, the renewal of Buddhist practice in the turn from an 'inward' to a more 'outward' focus, as also expressed in the Four *Bodhisattva Vows* we chant to embody the Buddha Way and to 'save' or 'free' or 'carry across' all beings. The Bodhisattva Precepts are hence our *aspiration* offered towards *all* beings. These precepts were given to both lay and monastic communities, and when Dōgen brought what was to become Sōtō Zen from China to Japan, rather than adopting the *vinaya* code he made the Bodhisattva Precepts its core ethical practice. So while it's perfectly possible to use these precepts as basic 'rules of conduct' to living a better life, this would be to miss their real point. In their deeper practice they are rather about our coming to express the nature of reality — the emptiness of all things, or as I would prefer to express it, our fundamental non-separation — as our thoughts, words and actions. Understanding, caring, and caring action are all a part of this, and all utterly interdependent and mutually reinforcing. It is in this way that we can come to experience the precepts as a *description* of our awakened action rather than a *prescription* for it, and so as being a process of continuous open-ended investigation that is one aspect of what Dōgen talks of as our *practice-realisation*. Hence we talk of 'holding' and 'maintaining' the precepts rather than 'obeying' or 'breaking' them. To stress their practice as a process of self-development and to deflect from the idea of judgments and punishments based on abstract rules, Thich Nhat Hanh renamed the precepts as practiced within the Plum Village tradition as 'Mindfulness Trainings'. In the same spirit, we might think of the Bodhisattva Precepts in our practice as 'Awareness Investigations', though I won't suggest renaming them. As has already been stressed, the Bodhisattva Precepts as they are

presented here are emphatically not simple rules to be followed, and developing a sense of how we 'hold and maintain' these precepts as part of our practice of the Awakened Way is the very opposite of obeying a predetermined external rule. They can better be thought of as *anti-rules*: a structured invitation to explore the rules we *already* obey (and usually unwittingly) as habit, assumption and reaction, and the real-world consequences of following them. These precepts are hence *not* Commandments, and they will *not* bless us with the goodwill of a deity, What we perceive as our 'failure' to keep them will invite *no* shame or punishment. But neither are they merely pragmatic guides to living a better life. To work with the Precepts is not to struggle to be good, or to be better than anyone else. We bear witness to our own participation in a world of violence, greed, lust, deceit and heedlessness. Within this world we have moment by moment choices, in the direction either of relationship or of separation. Our conditioning, our habits, the 'walls to our mind' predispose us one way, often or even usually without any real awareness. The Precepts point up the ways in which our actions are in reality (and whether we are aware of it or not), the expression in the 'outside' world of our non-separation from all of life. We have to come to 'own' these precepts in the sense of *making* them our own, to *become* them, become *not-separate* with them.

The Precepts explore different perspectives on the ways in which we try to separate ourselves off from life, whether that separation is from another person, from 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, and I'll offer an example of this difficulty from my own practice. I first took the Precepts as the Mindfulness Trainings of the Plum Village Tradition, and I was hugely 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. Be aware, be mindful in each moment! 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, slowly, and mindfully... and regardless of whether my wife and I were together or I was on my own. 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... I was *obeying* a *rule*, albeit one of freely adopted by me, and in so doing had failed to understand that practising the precepts is fundamentally *relationship*.

This failure of understanding was directly damaging to our relationship, but by becoming aware of what I was doing I was able to change my behaviour. What about deeper and more subtle delusions? What when these are embedded in the way the precepts themselves are normally taught and discussed? Our precepts have traditionally been said to have three different levels in the way they can be understood and practiced:

literal, *compassionate*, and *absolute*, but in this tripartite division there is a danger of serious misunderstanding.

The *literal* level is how we probably all begin: the precepts are seen as *rules* to be *obeyed...or not*. We 'keep' them or 'break' them. This is to treat our Bodhisattva Precepts as in effect no different from the monastic codes of training: either you 'behave' or you don't, no ifs no buts, black or white! Such an approach generates its own resistance: 'I' don't want to *obey* them, so 'I' resist, and in time my resistance becomes broken down, worn away. This, as I've suggested is the basic monastic method: we dissolve any sense of individual autonomy or self-responsibility into the monastic whole under the *authority* of the Abbot. My own Buddhist chaplaincy supervisor, a senior Theravadin monk, was absolutely insistent that this was the *only* way to treat the precepts: all else was an invitation to laxity, backsliding and self-delusion. There were, for example, no circumstances whatsoever under which he would allow himself to tell a lie (Fourth Precept!). But what if truth-telling would lead directly to the harming of others (the 'Jews in the attic' thought experiment)? He would simply stay silent and let the authorities draw their own conclusions...

Zen, however, has traditionally allowed for the modification of this approach under extenuating circumstances: the *compassionate* level. Let's take the *bigger* picture... what are the real consequences of acting or not acting in this situation, *beyond* any sense of 'my' personal integrity in acting in accordance with the rule? The story of the two monks at the river ford is a case in point here: one monk is chided by the second for having carried a young woman across the river to escape a flood: 'how could you break your training vow?' The first monk's answer: 'I put her down as soon as we had crossed, why are *you* still carrying her?' tells us all we need to know. As a contrast to my Theravadin supervisor's position, 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 the best interests of their practice? 'Of course I would!' was his reply. But the compassionate level is still seen within the basic scheme of the training rule, as an exception to, or qualification of it. So what if instead of an external rule, we were to take our own *awareness* and *aspiration* — as evolving and maturing in us, *as us*, as *practice-realisation* — as the foundation of our ethical responsiveness to our life as it presents itself to us? This is the path we will explore through these commentaries. But first we'll consider how the third level, the *absolute*, cuts away the very basis of the literal level's authority...

The third level (perhaps 'perspective' is a more useful word here) is that of the *absolute*, called the *universal* in most other traditions, and sometimes the *eternal*, but the reference is always the same. It is this 'level' which invites dangerously deluded misunderstanding of both the nature of our practice and the reality that underlies it... so please forgive me taking a little time here in explanation! This is a theme we will return to several times as our exploration of the precepts evolves, and with it, hopefully, our understanding also. The *absolute* refers to the sense in which we can say that as *everything* — you, me, mountains, Higgs bosons, happiness, adverbs, unicorns, time itself, Buddhas, the Dharma — is impermanent and utterly *interdependent*, that there is *nothing* that is ultimately *independent* or separate, nothing that has a unique *essence*. Hence, I am born, I live and then I die: in *absolute* terms nothing has changed, *essentially* nothing has happened. It's in this sense that the Diamond Sutra says, for example 'sentient beings are not sentient

beings, that is why they are called sentient beings...’, and of course that *absolutely*, although the task of the Bodhisattvas (us!) is to ‘save all sentient beings’ (also us!)...‘no sentient beings have been saved’. It should also be pointed out, although I don’t recall the Diamond Sutra mentioning it, that Bodhisattvas too are ‘not Bodhisattvas, that is why they are called Bodhisattvas...’ Strange? Certainly! Nonsensical? Not at all...

There is, according to the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, ‘unanimous agreement that Nāgārjuna (ca 150–250 CE) is the most important Buddhist philosopher after the historical Buddha himself and one of the most original and influential thinkers in the history of Indian philosophy.’ Nāgārjuna’s great achievement was to clarify and make explicit the relation of absolute and relative, and while his means of argument are both exhaustive and subtle, some of the conclusions are (relatively) straightforward, if surprising. He shows that things having no *essence* — no separate and individual self-sufficient identity — far from meaning they do not ‘really’ exist, is the *only possible* way of existing. That it’s not that things *happen* not to have essences, but that they logically *cannot*: that for things to be things at all is to be *relative, contingent, interdependent* and impermanent. That there is hence *no* higher, truer, transcendental world behind or above our experience of the relative world of appearances. And hence too that between the worlds of absolute and relative there is, to use the Zen image, ‘not a hair’s breadth of difference’: that ‘relative’ and ‘absolute’ are simply different ways of approaching the *same* world, and that neither is *truer, deeper, more ‘real’* or *transcends* the other. Our talking and seeing of separate ‘things’ — you, me, mountains, Higgs bosons, happiness, adverbs, unicorns, time itself, Buddhas, the Dharma — is as a result of our being embodied beings who perceive, think, speak and act in particular ways (and so too that *this* description of ‘us’ as ‘beings’ who ‘think, speak and act’ is itself is a part of the relativity of this relative world). Other *differently* embodied beings might think, speak and act in differently particular ways, equally relative, and that it is only in such relative, contingent, conventional and *differing* ways that anything can be said to exist at all. The final, highest, absolute truth turns out to be that there is no absolute truth...

However...there has remained a consistent tendency within Zen to behave as if the culmination of our practice is exactly to realise the fantasy of lifting the veil, drawing back the curtain behind which we will be able finally to see clearly the world as it *truly* is, without distortion or delusion. It is the implicit claim of many teachers that their own realisation consists exactly in this, and there is probably no more dangerous delusion. Two examples. First example: it can be thought that in my ‘seeing the world as it truly is’ I *transcend* conventional, *relative* notions of ethics such as the precepts. My *unethical* behaviour then seems to me simply my obeying a different, higher standard — the ‘absolute’ — which I will probably further muddle in my own and other people’s minds by declaring my alcoholism or sexual predation to in fact be my ‘compassionate’ action, and that as I now act at the level of the *absolute* how they appear at the level of the *relative* is in any case simply irrelevant. Such examples within Zen have been only too common, and although Ordinary Mind was in part founded to counter exactly this tendency, some Ordinary Mind teachers too have not been exempt. I will stress over and again how central to our practice the cultivation of self-honesty is: that so many well-respected and in many ways insightful teachers should have deluded themselves so thoroughly as to both the origin and human consequences of their own lust, anxiety, need for recognition and other

perfectly 'normal' vulnerabilities, speaks to both the limitations of any ideas about 'enlightenment', and the need permanently to question any and all of our 'certainties'. 'But are you *sure*'?

Second example. It is commonplace to say that at the level of the absolute there can be 'no killing', because there is no killer to act, no-one to receive the death blow, and no blow to fall... Hence, if I imagine that if I act 'at the level of the absolute', then my action becomes 'actionless' and hence without ethical consequence (I may intone something about karmic purity or some such), or even that I thus fulfil some higher Dharmic purpose... Such a vision of the 'absolute' suited well the Japanese samurai who were prominent supporters of Zen: manifesting the perfect 'flow' state in the moment of mortal combat epitomised their ideal of the aim of Zen. It also suited the aggressive nationalism of interwar Japan, and the increasingly fascist government's Imperial aspirations. A majority of senior Zen teachers were happy to allow or even actively support the idea that in killing and/or dying for the emperor, the kamikaze pilot or humble infantryman were actively furthering the Dharma by spreading Japanese values across Asia and the Pacific. No guilt was to be had thereby, and to do otherwise would itself be shameful in the highest degree. Rather than thinking that ours is some timeless and politically neutral spiritual practice, it should not surprise us that fascist times produce fascist Zen. What Zen do *our* times bring forth?

In both these examples the error is central to the teaching: it is simply to imagine the relative and absolute as 'separate'. The Heart Sutra speaks of 'No ignorance and no end to ignorance; No old age and death, and no end to old age and death'. The absolute is simply the perspective to which *ethics* (or space, time, living, dying...) does not *apply*, but not that ethics is ever in any way 'transcended', any more than our own death is. In terms of the absolute there is no old age, but also no youth, no death and no eternal life, no 'body' and no disembodied 'consciousness'. No action, and no non-action. And as there is not a 'hair's breadth' between absolute and relative, *everything* we do or say has its ethical content at the level of the relative and *only* at the level of the relative. Killing *is* killing, harming *is* harming, suffering *is* suffering. To think otherwise is (self-)delusion.

To put it truthfully but paradoxically: the true teaching of the absolute is of the relativity of the relative: that all our certainties are necessarily delusion, but that it is only *as* deluded beings that we *live* at all. Without exception our names for things, 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 (collective) creations, not the nature of 'reality' itself. Reality exceeds and undercuts all our efforts to describe and contain it. 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? Our understanding of absolute and relative should make us wary of those judgements we do make, and of our strong tendency to take as natural or self-evident truth what are in reality only ever abstractions from the reality of non-separation. This, again, is why from a Zen perspective these precepts are not simple rules to be followed. In terms of relative and absolute there can be no 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...)?

The *literal* level is always and only an abstraction, one both useful and dangerous. It becomes problematic when we are unaware of the *relative* nature of its claim to being *universal*. Following its rules may alert us, protect us, challenge us certainly, but we may equally well cling to its certainty, in order to evade (consciously or unconsciously) the real complexities of our relationship with self or others, and so may blind ourselves to the sense of openness and possibility that a genuine responsiveness to *this* specific situation requires of us. We invite too the resistance, the back-pressure a rule creates, and to the sense of failure, guilt and shaming to 'breaking' that rule. Most importantly though, we thereby hold the precepts at a distance from us: what will they *allow* me to do, what will they *prevent* me doing?

Caring

So what of the 'compassionate' level, if we don't see it simply as an exception *within* the literal? The Sanskrit term normally translated as 'compassion' is *karunā*, but the Buddhist philosopher Jay Garfield (among others) has argued that it is better thought of as 'care'. To think in terms of 'care' and 'caring' immediately invites us to ask about how we *learn* to care, and the different senses in which we *do* care (care *about*, care *for*, care *with*...). It also invites us not to think in terms of rules, judgement and 'right and 'wrong' so much as *responding* to the situation with appropriate care. *Care Ethics* is the branch of contemporary thought spanning sociology, psychology, politics, economics, healthcare and beyond, that is showing us a path beyond abstract and rule-bound ways of thinking and acting, one that is surprisingly congruent with Buddhist thought, while bringing new understanding to our practice. Care Ethics has drawn attention to the way our individual ethical awareness develops through our actual lived relationships and actions in the world, and as such is often not 'speakable' or able to be conceptualised in any simple way, and certainly not taking the form of abstract and universal judgements. It 'thinks' in terms of possibilities and potential, of unfolding, and not of limitation, sanction and punishment. It holds the importance of our particular embodied and felt connections — the 'emotional' side of our caring-for and caring-about — together with both the practical aspects of caring *and* the acknowledgement of a shared responsibility of all for all: 'saving all beings', in Zen terms. This ethical awareness comes to be an aspect of what the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein called our *form of life*: the sense in which how we organise the world, communicate, and share cultural values can be seen as a *whole*, something of the same sense in which the French term *arrière-plan* ('background') is also used in philosophy. Rather than being a series of discrete and isolated (or even theoretically coherent) judgements or beliefs, our form of life expresses our moral/ethical 'stance' as a *whole*, and so, rather than being made up of abstract ideas of how we believe we or others 'should' live, is both *formed* by and *forms* the individual events and experience of how we live our *actual* lives. As Zen students, we can recognise that this needs both insight into the *nature* of non-separation and our growing *applied* understanding of non-separation that experience brings us (and to which our working with the precepts hopefully also contributes): how to care in just *this* situation. The final consequences of any action or inaction on our own part are both infinite and unknowable, and we need to own our limitation and finitude, our ignorance and our not-knowing, as part of our caring. And equally to recognise the imperative to act, to speak, to be life itself, in this moment, in this

place. Understanding our practice of the precepts as an aspect of our mutual *caring* 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 exactly this recognition: we are all complicit in the harming and suffering of the world.

In reality it would be true to say that all our work with the Precepts is first and last about *care*, about our practising *caring*. We care about, we care with, and we offer care to. The precepts ask us to experience the counter-intuitive relationship between *vulnerability* and *caring*: that it is only by acknowledging our own vulnerability by risking our exposure to the world, that we become truly capable of caring for ourselves and others. In caring I recognise both *my* and *our* vulnerability, and so come better to understand our dependence on others and our interdependence with them. It's in this sense too that the precepts are held as having an important *protective* function: recognising our own shared vulnerability is the vital first step to avoiding repeating cycles of harming both ourselves and others. Responding out of that recognition is to offer care to myself and the world.

To become better aware of my body in all the complexity of its responses is to bring care to myself. To embrace the neglected and rejected parts of me is to learn to care for myself... differently. To become *A Bigger Container* (to use Joko Beck's mnemonic) for my own suffering selves is to offer care to the experience of suffering as I encounter it, and by so doing to cause less suffering as I go. In offering this care it may be that I will even find myself more able to accept the caring offered me by others. In becoming more alive to the suffering of others, my Bearing Witness allows me better to care about them, and so better to understand and care with them. It is to offer them the care of my awareness, my attention, my concern, and perhaps my direct care also. If bearing witness is an activity of coming to see and understand the causes, conditions and remedies of suffering, then it is also in itself a caring responding, a response extending our caring in any of its myriad possible forms. 'To study the self is to forget the self'. 'I am sick because the world is sick.' Not-separate. Asking questions of our selves, asking questions of the world, and listening deeply to the answers. Listening to our 'selves', listening to this body, and listening to the poor, the oppressed, to the animals and insects, to the trees and plants, to the rivers and oceans, to the air itself. Listening, and making certain that we hear: Bearing Witness, and responding.

Some questions:

Here and now, how am I responding to reading this?

What thoughts, what emotions are coming up for me?

Is there any physical response I am noticing in my body?

Does all this seem inspiring, or perplexing (or both)?

Is it 'too much' to ask of me, or what I already 'know' anyway?

Too much like 'religion', or an invitation to engage differently with the world?

Formal Study: Jukai

Working with the precepts is a whole-lifetime practice. Barry Magid once said that although Joko never mentions the precepts, pretty much the entirety of her teaching is concerned with them. We can begin *formal* study of the Precepts at any stage in our practice, and our experiencing of them will continue to evolve as our practice deepens. We never ‘finish’ or ‘complete’ our work with them but *if* we wish, we can work towards a public making of vows to ‘uphold’ or ‘keep’ the Precepts in the ceremony of Jukai (I hope it is clear by now that this is definitely *not* the same thing as ‘obeying’ them, or promising not to ‘break’ them). So Jukai is *not* a symbol of any kind of *completion*, but rather it is to affirm publicly the importance of our *aspiration* to practice the Awakened Way as a continuing part of our lives. Jukai performs the acknowledgement of a new stage in our engagement with the Precepts and our determination to continue and to deepen that engagement over time. In this way Jukai can actually be seen as a ‘hinge’ in the development of our practice: a turning point where practice stops being primarily about and for ‘me’, and begins to be for the world of which I am a part: the world of ‘All Beings’. We take Jukai if and when we feel ready to, and I might question myself about this: ‘am I *really* worthy, am I up to this?’ — Absolutely! — Firstly, because its *not about* being worthy or good, but more importantly because we don’t do this alone as individual and isolated selves, but as *Sangha*: the OMUK sangha, which is a part of the Ordinary Mind family, which is a part of the great sangha of Buddhist practitioners across the world and through time, and finally as part of the *non-separation of all beings*. *We aspire, we vow... together.*

So to ‘hold’ the precepts is about how we act here and now, and the relation of that here and now to our shared tradition, and so to the past, and to what will come to be in the future. About what on earth it might actually mean to, as the first of our Great Vows says, *save or free* all ‘sentient beings’. Barry Magid points out that Jukai isn’t about joining some exclusive club (not-separate!), but is more like being given a greeters’ badge to wear when you help out 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 recognise 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 life in this culture and at this time, takes on a place in an ancient but still evolving tradition. Where we get to look at all ‘our’ own stuff in the light of the bigger picture, and so come to see better what all of that has to do with the suffering and joy of this world of which we are a part. Jukai is a Bearing Witness to our aspiration, and so of *realising* the precepts *as* relationship: with sangha, with myself, with the world.

Four Great Vows

Creatures are numberless, we vow to free them.

Delusions are endless, we vow to transform them.

Dharma doors are countless, we vow to enter them.

The Awakened Way is unsurpassable, we vow to embody it.

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

The Bodhisattva Precepts are given here (slightly modified by me), in the wording of my own teacher, Barry Magid. They approach the Precepts not as *rules* to be obeyed, but as subjects for investigation; they aim not to set us apart as 'special', but instead acknowledge that, compromised and complicit, we are all always simply a part of 'life as it is'.

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.