

DENKAI TALK

NEW YORK, NOVEMBER 15TH 2014

Good Evening. My name is Andrew. For those of you who don't know me I have travelled many thousands of miles from the Land of Oz to be with you tonight. It's lovely to be here with you all. This is the third full day of sesshin and I know if your body's anything like my body then you're beginning to say hello to some old friends, those little niggly pains in the back like someone screwing their finger in, so just soften with that and succumb to it.

Tonight I'm going to blend a jukai talk and a denkai talk. Back in my hometown, in my sangha, we did do a precepts discussion group a couple of years ago, very similar in format to yours, however we didn't have a teacher who was able to do jukai ceremony, so it's wonderful doing both ceremonies at the same time with you today.

I have been marinating slowly since September in the Ordinary Mind Zendo in New York, and I had the good fortune to participate in the final two jukai classes with my jukai brothers and sisters and precepts teacher, Claire. It was wonderful to be in this sacred space and to have that experience. Thank you. I also want to thank my sangha, my family here,

for your warm hospitality and especially those sangha members who have taken me out for breakfast, lunch and dinner, who have also invited me back to their homes for a wonderful home cooked meal which is a lot better than the stuff I was cooking for myself. Also, some trips to the art gallery is very much appreciated. This extra time here has been wonderful in deepening my connection with you all.

The precepts I'm going to discuss have a kind of theme running through. I'm always struck by the way we can look at the precepts from the affirmative or positive point of view, or the point of view of the bodhisattva way. The precepts are a manifestation of that, so what I've been contemplating over the past few days is to cherish life, to love life, and to practice appreciation and gratitude for what we freely receive. The most recent incarnation of the awakened one, whom we meet every day, is to love our food that we eat and enjoy, the clothes that we wear, our relationship with inanimate objects, to love them, to love the shower in the morning, and to take delight in each other's company and relationships. Our whole life is a gift.

I also want to express gratitude to my teachers tonight. There are thousands and thousands of teachers, so I'm only going to mention a few tonight. A few special ones. It's now become the tradition here to do some

heart-to-heart sharing in the jukai talks so I thought I'd better do some of that as well, and then finish with something about what the teachings mean to me.

So gratitude from the very beginning, where nothing is lacking. But speaking of the Land of Oz, I guess we might start off with something like Dorothy and the Scarecrow and the Lion, searching for that which we think is missing, and even though it's been present all the time, sometimes it does require a lot of heartbreak, trials and tribulations, to finally arrive at an understanding of that which we thought was missing has been there all the time. This kind of fits into the theme of sudden and gradual awakening, so from the southern perspective, every time we sit down on our cushion, as Barry says, we say hello to our original face. It's each moment, and on the other hand, there's this gradual process we go through called life, where if we're lucky, our courage matures along the way. There's something I want to say about Barry's teaching about that, about the way this sangha works in terms of opening up to our vulnerabilities and expressing those, and softening as we go, until our hearts break, so to speak.

But like Dorothy and the boys, Sydney, in Australia, is affectionately referred to as the Emerald City. As you know, we can get quite distracted

in the Emerald City, and the Emerald City can also contain lots of false prophets and snake oil salesmen, and we're very fortunate indeed to be able to find a good teacher, someone who can help us to step off the treadmill of self-deficit and self-improvement and arrive at a place of self-acceptance. Joko Beck once described the process of the stages of Zen as going from doing harm to self and others to not doing harm to self and others. It's very simple and I think what Barry has helped me understand is a process of going from self-rejection to self-acceptance.

Gratitude can sometimes come up in us like grace and can be quite unexpected. I remember once about twenty years ago I was on a ten day insight meditation retreat in the mountains near Sydney, and probably on the ninth day, having gone through all the various stages of painful sensations, and sitting through long periods of time and experiencing some blissful sensations and thinking, now -- this must be it. Then leaving the meditation hall one evening and just seeing this insect that had been injured and it was being eaten by other insects, and I had this wave of compassion come over me, and intense feelings of gratitude for everything and everyone. What I've realized over my years of working with Barry, is that that feeling of gratitude -- we don't necessarily have to spend hours and hours of intense meditation practice to actually experience that, it

might not be so intense, but just acts of appreciation, leaves on the trees, the flowers, each other, even that shit stick in the toilet, so to speak, in the old koan. It doesn't necessarily require long arduous hours of going through pain, meditation. It can be just a matter of putting our hearts to what is. And of course our experience of gratitude is very much interconnected with the fleetingness of life and the transience of life. We all know that. We all know we are going to die, but I think unconsciously we still think our days are numberless.

I was reading Normal Fischer, the Zen teacher, about the subjectivity of time. He calculated that time speeds up as you're getting older, so by the time you're fifty years old you've used up 90% of your time. It's scary. I'm already past fifty. So I have an appreciation for the finiteness of our existence, which helps us to experience our finitude. We sometimes say at the end of the day of sitting, Do not squander this precious life. So it's probably easier to appreciate life and feel gratitude for life when we're out in nature, have a picnic, spend time with loved ones, do things we enjoy doing, go for a walk in the woods. I've really enjoyed hanging out in Central Park. It's been glorious watching the slow change of the trees and I did spend hours -- I was privileged to have some solitude, like a Zen sabbatical. I'd actually sit in the park and do some reading which I haven't

done since I was an adolescent, like what you call playing hooky here.

Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer. Just watching life go by, watching the leaves fall, reading a book, and just enjoying my own company.

It's very easy to appreciate gratitude at those times. Your Thanksgiving Day, which unfortunately I won't be here for, is a lovely celebration of the bounty of life and the harvests, but what about when the harvest or the crops fail and the harvest is bitter, and our hopes and dreams don't work out as we'd like them to work out? How do we still experience gratitude or gifts in those situations? Being human we're more than likely to see these things as misfortunes that happen to us. But I think you'd agree with the benefit of hindsight. Often when we look back at those misfortunes which happen to us, we can see the alternative story, maybe not when we're in the midst of it's happening, but with a good bit of hindsight, we can see how they're what we initially perceived as misfortunes, We could see them as learning experiences or we could see how they led us to practice, and how all that comes, all the interconnections, brought us all here together today. Like the Buddha said, it's much better to be in the human form rather than the heavenly abodes because a little bit of suffering is necessary. Hopefully not too much. These preliminaries, which, if we're fortunate, help us to find this path. We've all experienced four versions of

those, whether it's physical illness or mental illness with ourselves or our families, whether it's financial hardship, loss or separation, or these universal human experiences, old age, sickness, or death, which all eventually, if we're fortunate, bring us to this path.

So as is the custom, I'd like to share a couple of personal stories. First of all, I want to express my gratitude to my mother and father and my sister. My father, a World War II veteran, served in North Africa and Burma. He was away for the whole of the war, five or six years, so my Mum never saw him when she had her first child. God knows what traumas he went through, like all the veterans. Of course he never spoke about them, but growing up -- he had these old photographs of his time during the war, these old black and white photographs of the pyramids of Egypt. He was in the tanks, he was a navigator, so as a child I would play with tanks, as a soldier, make models of battleships and things, and Dad also loved sport. In England it's football and cricket, and as he got older it was lawn bowls. His way of connecting with me was usually through sport. That was fine, it was wonderful to spend time with him. Sometimes he would take me to Manchester to see the Manch United play, They were special occasions Other times I'd take myself to the . . . Club and watch them get beaten.

Special credit to my mother for birthing me and for nurturing me and for being at home for me, and my sister who's about six or seven years older than me who also spent a lot of time playing with me. So I think I was very fortunate to have a fairly safe and warm and loving house to grow up in. There were things in the outside world, like fights with other kids and I had the usual anxieties sometimes at nighttime, fear of not being able to breathe. Fear of a martian invasion. But these are normal kids' experiences and the family was nominally Church of England, fairly secular. I think Santa Claus was the most important religious figure in my life. These presents would miraculously appear. That was pretty magical for a while.

I have fond memories of the time I was taken to Australia when I was thirteen because my sister had migrated to Australia. That was wonderful. It was a five week voyage for a thirteen year old. I was old enough to see all the factories around me. I could see it wasn't a great place to grow up, once all the childhood fantasies disappeared. The trip to Australia was, again, a new adventurous start, for me. It was quite spectacular and wonderful. Adolescence went well. You know, the usual ups and downs, falling in love, getting rejected, experiments with alcohol and drugs and so forth. But basically my parents gave me the freedom to make my mistakes, discover my values, and because of that, I never had any aversion to

religion. When I was having those night fears as a kid, I found a little crucifix on the road, and I put it under my pillow and that seemed to help for a while. In my adolescence in the town where I grew up in Australia named Wellington near Sydney, in the early 70s, there was a little book shop down this alleyway, called the Inner Light Bookshop. You walked into the Inner Light Bookshop, Madam Blavatsky Books and this and that secret doctrine, it was all very fascinating, and I thought I must go to the Himalayas one day. Unfortunately I never got to India. That was one of the things I wanted to do. I came to New York instead. That was much better.

In my late thirties I actually followed a Christian priest in the Anglican Church. I actually enrolled for a couple of months but I just couldn't relate to the scriptures. I thought I could do an Alan Watts and become a Christian priest and do Christian meditation, but I just didn't quite fit into the sangha very well. So there's always been a part of me. . . . I guess denkai in the Zen tradition is as close as you can get to becoming a priest. You get to wear a black shirt.

My life fell apart after high school, after adolescence. It started with my sister, when I finished high school. My sister had actually moved back to England for a little while, which upset my mother a great deal. We went back on a holiday, so I had some time in London on my own, and we were

spending Christmas with my sister, and just prior to Christmas day, my sister and my brother-in-law, who I was very close to, sat me down and told me about something. I know my dad had not been well during my first year in Australia. I knew he was very homesick but also he had to go to hospital. I think at the time I'd been told he had a tumor on his brain, so I would go with Mom to the hospital in Sydney and I would navigate for her. He had a few months in hospital. It didn't affect me at all. I continued with my life as if nothing had happened. I enjoyed my visits with my mother, I enjoyed my visits with my Dad. When he came home he had to change jobs but I didn't think much about that and I accepted that. He had initially been a lecturer in one of the colleges and then he started working in the steel works as a clerk, but I was too young to think much about that.

So they sat me down one night and they actually explained what happened. They told me with explicit details what happened. Dad had a pretty major psychiatric disorder. He had a breakdown. He had behaviors which were totally out of character, which I won't go into, but needless to say they were quite shameful. So that was the first thing that happened. I didn't realize at the time that that was quite traumatizing for me. It was something I've worked through over the years, and I think I'm OK with that now.

It was a shock, though, to find out about this side of my dad, which I couldn't comprehend. I'm grateful to my parents. They protected me and I could get on with my adolescence. My mother, she's an amazing woman. She didn't really even know her own father, who was sent to an asylum when she was a child, and he never came out. In those days you often didn't come out. Her mother worked. She was basically raised by her brother and one sister. So mum lost her father to mental illness and her husband went through this. In a way, she kicked it all together. She was the rock of the family. She still is. She's currently in a nursing home, she's 92 years old. So anyway I thought, well, I'll get on with my life, my dad thing, this won't affect me, I'm invincible, I'll go down to the University. I enrolled in the Australian National University in Canberra, the capital. I was a very serious shy man in those days, and I probably still am. So I enrolled in existentialism and 19th century Russian literature. I wanted to do my project on suicide.

Very early I was living in a college, and as a Catholic college, it was strange. There I was with these two gals and formal Sunday dinners and we're all living in these little rooms. And of course we had these parties, and I met this young woman, like you do. She was looking depressed and I went over to talk with her and very soon we became friends and then

lovers and then one night before we were due to go on the Easter holiday break, I went round to see her and we had our first argument, an argument fueled by my jealousy over something and some alcohol, and I said some quite hurtful words to her. And I left the next day to go to my parents' place for the holidays, not knowing that that was the last time I would ever see her again.

I arrived back at the university after the holiday break and this friend came running up to me and he says Andrew! Andrew! Where have you been? We thought you were with . . . Her car had spun off the road and hit a tree. She probably died immediately. I went to the funeral and gave a eulogy, packed my bags and dropped out of the university. I went back to my parents' place and got a little flat on the beach where I got a job at the steel works with the intention that I would go to Paris and be a writer.

And then I met the woman who was to become my first wife, who was two years older than me and had a couple of kids. I thought she was a safe harbor. I should have known when she told me she'd been in the mental health unit herself, but being young and invincible I thought I could handle anything, but I couldn't handle her very well. She had two lovely little boys and I did my best to be a kid myself and try to be a father and stay up Friday nights watching Kung Fu. I wouldn't mind being a Kung Fu Zenny

kind of person, kind of wandering around. The funny thing is, when I started to correspond with Barry, I used to end my email with, Gassho, Andrew. You know how your font sometimes changes the word -- this is true -- it would change gassho to grasshopper. So I thought, if that's the way it's going to be, I'll just sign it Grasshopper.

The other night Barry held out his hand and I grabbed it. Unfortunately I haven't got to do the Chinese dragon thing, but who knows, Karen might be doing that tonight. The marriage is on the rocks, we can see the child issue is too, America is on the rocks, so I thought, You know, I just read this book, The Three Pillars of Zen, Kaplaeu's book. Maybe I'd better start sitting zazen. That might help me deal with the situation. Might help me be a better father. So I went along to the Sydney Zen Center, which is the Diamond Sangha, started sitting zazen, and things went all right for a couple of years and things were all right for a while. The little boy, Joshua, was loved by everybody and it probably united everybody, but after a couple of years things fell apart again. But it was the birth of that little boy, the beautiful little Buddha baby, you know, at three months, just perfect. So those first two keys events in my life - my father's illness and the tragic death of the young woman, who knows what kind of inputs the course of my life took?

Certainly my father's illness probably motivated me to eventually get involved in mental health work as a social worker and then as a therapist. It's probably the reason why I got into personal therapy for myself to work through all that stuff with my father, one of the reasons that led me to Barry. The death of the young woman, the confrontation with death, I want to be careful with what I say, it's taken me a bit more along the way to finally be as honest as I can and not to hurt people but it still happens. That led me to marriage and then to having Joshua and to practicing zazen. So there are all these funny circuitous routes that bring us to this practice, which for me I think saved my life.

I want to acknowledge and pay homage to a few more teachers. I started working with Barry just after I'd left Australia and was living in New Zealand for a while, and when I returned from New Zealand we moved to this -- we didn't know where we were going to live, but we lived in this little town called Bellingen on the Mid North Coast of New South Wales, and I first started sitting with a friend, Vince Jenson, who used to sit in San Diego with Joko for many years and we would sit together in my house. And I got Vince's name from Jeff Dawson in Sydney when I did a session with him. He's my other teacher in the city. Me and Vince started sitting together.

Then I got to know about this other teacher in town called Sexton Bourke who'd just become a roshi in the Diamond Sangha. So we decided to join forces and we sat with Sexton and Sexton was in various stages of cancer. He knew he was dying but he wanted to teach as best he could with the time he had left. So he would sit in the mornings because that was the time he had the greatest level of energy and he would sit from six to seven am every morning except for Sundays when we started at 9 am and he started doing some talks on the Mumonkan. We would get up at 5:30 and drive into town. Those beautiful mornings when the stars were still out, the birds were just beginning to sing, and we'd sit for an hour with Sexton, and everyone would go and I would stay behind and do dokusan with him. We'd start working on the introductory koans. I always remember his eyes. He had blue eyes, eyes like a compassionate ocean, which indeed was his dharma name, given to him by his teacher. It was just tremendous seeing the world through Sexton's blue compassionate eyes, just seeing this dew drop existence that he had even more deeply.

We enjoyed the playfulness of the koans and dancing in the mountains and it was wonderful. He taught for as long as he could. I always remember we used to sit in the yoga studio so walking back down the alley that led from the yoga studio to his home, always wondering if this was the last fall we

would have together. One day he could no longer come any more. He was at home and he would sit. I went to say my last good-by to him, he was sitting by the fire. It was winter. Hi eyes were still sparkling. He was still appreciating and enjoying each moment of his life. So I send my gratitude to Sexton too. I hope I can go through my final days like he did.

Before Sexton died, he arranged for our little group to have Ellen Davison, a teacher, come down. It was about a three and a half hour drive from where she lived, and Ellen was very gracious in coming down. I've got to acknowledge Barry's graciousness here as well because Barry's always been my primary teacher, my root teacher. Because of the distance, Barry gave his consent for me to work with Sexton and then with Ellen. So Ellen would come down and I continued my koan work with Ellen. So I'd also like to acknowledge Ellen and thank her for helping me through some of the subtle nuances of the koan work. She did a great job filling Sexton's big shoes. He did have big feet. So thank you, Ellen, for that.

Barry, it's been lovely digesting you all these years. I hope I can continue digesting you for a few more years yet. There's a famous haiku by Issa that goes like this:

this dewdrop world

is a dewdrop world

and yet, and yet

So we all know we're dewdrops. Everything's transient, but it's the "and yet, and yet" bit. He must have had a lot of loss in his life. Lost his mother when he was very young, lost young children. Had a lot of grief. But I think Barry's teachings speak to this "and yet" and he helps to make sense out of it. He helps us to realize what it means to be a human being, all the emotions that we go through. This is about enjoying our lives, loving our lives, loving each other, and we can't do that unless we also hurt. It's been a wonderful gift that you've given me, Barry, showing me how Zen works like that, that it's not about becoming detached from things, but embracing our attachments, to the people and things we love in this world. We call that soul-making. Call it whatever you like. That aspect of the Zen practice I really love and you taught me that.

I'd also like to acknowledge the great teacher, my wife Annie.

Unfortunately she didn't stay very long so you didn't get a chance to know her very well, but she's a very natural Zen master. She's taught me how to be honest, she's taught me how to meet each other on a level ground.

She's punctured my self-importance when it needed puncturing, she's made me aware of the dangers of trying to teach something as if I've got it

and they or she hasn't. And she's brought my attention to that. Sometimes we talk in Zen about the reality with a capital R and truth with a capital T, and discourse about truth and reality being beyond discourse, which is another discourse. Annie's helped me to be aware of truth with a capital T. So thank you Annie.

To finish, Barry's given me this beautiful gift, a green rakusu like the rainforest of Belgium. I hope he doesn't regret his decision. What am I going to do next? I'm not quite sure. I'll probably need to set up a zendo. I'm happy for that to be a little boutique zendo with very rich students. But I'll also be open to other students as well because that's how I got started and I need to honor that. Of course I want to follow in the footsteps of Barry and Joko. I was thinking about no gain, and how I could make that into my own unique teaching, and I was thinking, well, maybe we could set up a no-gain scale, so I could say, Oh, out of the ten on the no-gain scale, what am I here? Oh, about five, Andrew? How does that feel? What do you have to say about that? What if you got a ten on the no-gain scale. How would that feel? Now we're really talking. I will do my best to maintain this wonderful no-gain dharma and share this dharma with all those who want to be with it and see it. I hope I can continue teaching for as long as my physical body and mental body will allow me.

So Barry, thank you for this precious gift. I know how precious it is to you. I just want to finish by reading out a very ancient koan which some of you may be familiar with:

“What is Real?” asked the Rabbit.

“Real isn't how you are made,' said the Skin Horse. 'It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.'

'Does it hurt?' asked the Rabbit.

'Sometimes,' said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. 'When you are Real you don't mind being hurt.'

'Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,' he asked, 'or bit by bit?'

'It doesn't happen all at once,' said the Skin Horse. 'You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things

don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.”

— Margery Williams Bianco, *The Velveteen Rabbit*