



Hello, I'm Kurt Spellmeyer and this is the fourth and final installment of my teaching, *Waking Up by Breaking Down Barriers*. Human beings secrete ideas like an oyster secretes a shell—to protect itself from the unexpected, the unknown, and the uncontrollable. The self emerges from the split between the world we believe to be real and the experiences that challenge that world. When we achieve a breakthrough and experience unity, we create an image of that unity, which ultimately becomes a new obstacle. Thus, the practice of waking up is interminable.

In the Zen tradition, we believe in *daikensho* (great awakening). It refers to the experience of seeing *buddhanature* in a direct, unobstructed way. In some schools of Zen, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the daikensho experience. This is the gold standard for Zen practice—people talk about their daikensho experiences, and all are expected to have them at some point. Almost every teacher that I studied or have been affiliated with has had daikensho experiences. I had a chance to meet a Chinese master, and he asked me about my own daikensho experience. I described it to him, and he was very pleased with what I told him. Yet, even daikensho is not the end of the process.

My daikensho experience lasted about a week and was unexpectedly mind-opening. After this experience, I imagined that I would leave the *sesshin* [an intensive Zen meditation retreat] with my world completely transformed. On my way home, however, I got into a car accident. I found myself angry and anxious as I waited for the tow truck. I went back to work feeling a lot of resentment about certain pressures I was under. I thought it would be easier to communicate with my sister on the phone, yet I still had a hard time with that.

I realized that having a daikensho experience doesn't resolve all contradictions. There remains plenty to work on. I went to my teacher and said, “I've been practicing Zen for ten years. I always believed that this would be a total transformation of the human being.” My teacher said, “You formed an image of daikensho in your mind. If you cling to that image, it's going to



become an increasingly more remote memory and its radiance will drain away until you have nothing left.” Ultimately, the practice of Zen is about embracing those contradictions.

In traditional Zen teaching, we are taught about the way up the mountain and the way down. The way up the mountain is the koan practice of working with contradictions until you have a daikensho experience. But the way down the mountain is integrating all of the new challenges of your life into this awakened mind.

It took me a while to appreciate why my experience of daikensho didn’t resolve all of my contradictions or remove all the barriers I experienced subsequently.

When I was working with my second teacher, Webb Roshi, I had a chance to practice the koan “Mayoku Comes to Shokei” with him. It goes like this:

Mayoku came to Shokei carrying his bell staff with him, walked around Shokei’s seat three times, shook his staff, ringing the bells, stuck it in the ground, and stood up straight. Shokei said, “Good.” Mayoku then came to Nansen, walked around Nansen’s seat, shook his staff, ringing the bells, stuck it in the ground, and stood up straight. Nansen said, “Wrong.” Mayoku said, “Shokei said, ‘Good.’ Why do you say, ‘Wrong’?” Nansen said, “Shokei is ‘good,’ but you are wrong. You are blown about by the wind. That will lead to destruction.

In this koan, Mayoku experienced daikensho. He visits his old teachers to show off his accomplishment, carrying with him a pilgrim staff with bells. Mayoku walks into the zendo, goes up to Shokei, his old dharma teacher, and hits the ground with the shaft of his pilgrim staff. The teacher looks up and says, “Good.” He then visits another dharma brother, Nansen, does the same thing, but this teacher says, “Not good.”



What Mayoku has discovered is that out of his awakening experience, he has created another barrier. The creation of this barrier is intimately related to his own egoism and sense of self. *Manas* [the self-referencing mind] is at work. Mayoku created a new barrier from his awakening experience. That barrier prevented him from discovering the most important lesson of all—not how to leave the self behind, but how to use the self in a liberating way.

The self, which we think of as an obstacle to awakening and the barrier between ourselves and other people, now plays a new role. It's the *manas*—the self-referencing—that allows us to move forward into the final phase of our Zen practice. Now, self-referencing is our way of connecting with other people. The final phase of the Zen path is the exchanging of self and other. My enlightenment is no longer mine, but belongs to all of us. Your karma is no longer yours, but belongs to me as well.

The final phase of Zen practice is expressed by Huineng's *Four Great Vows*:

Sentient beings are numberless. We vow to save them all. Delusions are endless. We vow to see through them all. The teachings are infinite. We vow to learn them all. The Buddha way is inconceivable. We vow to attain it fully.