Kurt Spellmeyer
Waking Up By Breaking Down Barriers
Week One: “Ride like the Buddha”
September 3, 2018

Hello, my name is Kurt Spellmeyer, and I'm a Zen priest. I direct the Cold Mountain sangha in Central New Jersey, based in Piscataway. Our wonderful community is now in its twentieth year. I have been practicing in a Rinzai Obaku lineage for 40 years now. I am just beginning my second 40 year term of practice and I look forward to it a great deal. The first 40 years were wonderful; I'm sure the next 40 years will be great, too.

The title of my talk is *Waking Up by Breaking Down Barriers*. Breaking down barriers is an intuitively interesting subject that everybody involved with Buddhism will understand. The idea is that we have these barriers, these inner obstacles, that we break through to access insight through practicing the dharma.

This is Buddhism 101, and the first installment of my series today is “Barrierology 101.” Barriers are an interesting subject, especially in Zen. The major text we use for teaching is called the *Mumonkan*. This is often translated as “the gate of no barrier,” but if you look at the actual Chinese characters, the first character basically means anthology. The second character means gate, and the character for this looks like a little gate. The third character looks like a little gate too, but it has vertical zig zags barring the way.

The book is often translated as “the gateless barrier,” “the gate of no gate,” or “the checkpoint of no barrier,” but actually, it’s “anthology, gate, barrier.” The relationship between gates and barriers is ambiguous. In early Buddhism, when people were interested in the subject of barriers, they would have made an exhaustive account of all the different kinds of barriers that existed. Then, they would attempt to categorize them and, in each case, provide a solution to that barrier. For example, one barrier in your practice might be that you stayed up too late and now you're falling asleep on the cushion. Buddhists would say, “This is a barrier and here's what you need to do for it.” Another barrier might be eating too much before sitting, but there's a solution for that, too. That's the early Buddhist approach.

The Prajnaparamita approach says that a barrier is just an idea; it’s not real. The Zen approach is a bit different from both of those. We can agree that Zen is about breaking through barriers, but the Zen approach asks, “What exactly is a barrier? What exactly is a breakthrough? Who is breaking through?” This is the distinctive style of Zen practice. A lot is at stake in this issue. We might think of enlightenment as a permanent state, so we could imagine Zen practice as working like this.

One way that we can imagine working through our barriers is that we break through one barrier after another until we reach an ultimate barrier and an ultimate breakthrough, which is called enlightenment or *daikensho* (great awakening). This is a widely held opinion about the nature of enlightenment.

Another way of thinking about enlightenment is that we have several barriers and we pass through them, one after another. But this time, the process never ends. We often think about barriers as things we want to overcome. If you look at those two characters—gate and barrier—you say, “They're enemies and they're fighting it out, and we want to resolve the issue in favor of the open gate.”

Another way to think about the relationship between gates and barriers is that somehow the two need each other. Breaking through barriers is an interminable process. It's a little bit like *The Matrix*. Neo takes the red pill and then he's in reality, but what would happen if Neo took the red pill and realized he *wasn’t* in reality? He took the pill again and found himself in another place. One may decide that this is the very essence of samsara—that it's a hellish situation. But it actually might not be. The unending breaking through of barriers might be what waking up is all about.

To recap, the first view of enlightenment is that we work through our barriers and we reach enlightenment. The other view is that we're constantly encountering barriers that make

awakening possible, and this process goes on forever. I am partial to the second view of Zen practice and working through barriers. I know that people might disagree with me, so I'd like to talk a bit about my own initial experiences on the cushion.

Forty years ago, when I began to do Zen, I definitely had barriers. I had many problems in my life. I came from an unhappy, dysfunctional family, as so many people do. I was working in a dead-end job. I got married when I was very young and, because of my dysfunctional family, I had no idea how to have a relationship with another person. I had anger issues. I had an anxiety disorder. I wasn't clinically depressed, but I wrestled with depression at times.

I had the chance to go and sit at what was then called the Seattle Zen Center. I remember sitting down for the first time and feeling a little better. I went back to the Zen center even though sitting was physically difficult for me. A couple of weeks went by, and eventually I had an interesting experience. One Saturday afternoon I went out into a little forest near my home and sat down on some leaves or pine needles. I started watching my breath, and I had an amazing experience. I felt so at ease and so connected to everything around me.

It was such a palpable change from my usual consciousness that I was really in awe. The next time I had a chance to see my teacher, Genki Roshi, I said, “What was that?” He laughed and said, “That is *samadhi*.” I understood. Samadhi, that's what I wanted. It is a beautiful experience. I began to practice more regularly and I got to a point where I could enter samadhi quite easily. I would come in, sit down on the cushion, and after 15 or 20 minutes, I'd be in that beautiful, blissful state. For a while I thought, “This is what Zen is all about. This is wonderful. I've gone through my barriers and now I'm liberated from my obstacles. What a beautiful experience.”

But among the many problems that I had, I was living in a very small apartment. Below my apartment lived two young Iranian men who would play rock music as soon as they got up in the morning. I got up really early to meditate one morning, sat down on the cushion, and began to

enter deep samadhi when all of a sudden, the rock music started. I was furious. I remember getting up, going downstairs and banging on their door and saying, “What the hell are you doing playing this?” I was enraged.

They turned it down and I went back upstairs. I realized the absurdity of it all; I thought of myself as a practicing Buddhist yet I was ready to punch them because they had taken away my beautiful samadhi experience. What felt like a breakthrough—passing through a barrier—now became a barrier. I realized that I was very far from being awake. I talked to my teacher about this and he understood. He said, “What you need to do now is to practice emptiness meditation.” In Zen tradition, we call this *mu* meditation. In mu meditation, you move from the breath into focusing on the sound of the word *mu* which means emptiness.

I'll never forget the first time I entered deep *mushin*—deep emptiness. Absolutely everything disappeared. I could feel there was residual sensation in my face and in my hands. My mind was empty, and the inputs from outside weren't really affecting me. At first, it was a little bit strange, but then it felt so liberating. I eventually passed that koan. I went to my teacher and I said, “I really think now I'm there. I've entered emptiness and I think this is really what the path is all about.” I became very attached to meditating on emptiness. My teacher must have understood my attachment so he gave me another koan. It's not in the *Mumonkan*—the collection we normally teach from. The koan goes like this: Samantabhadra rides the elephant and Manjushri rides a lion. What does the Buddha ride?

If you know anything about Zen temples, it's often the case that at the center of the altar, there's a Buddha. On one side, there's an image of the bodhisattva Samantabhadra riding an elephant. There's also an image of the bodhisattva [of wisdom] Manjushri, who is so important for Zen tradition. Manjushri rides a lion, Samantabhadra rides an elephant—what does the Buddha ride? So I sat down on the cushion and I said to myself, “Buddha rides. Buddha rides. Buddha rides.”

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I found it very difficult to work with this koan. I didn’t know how to answer it and I felt like I was making no progress. In fact, I actually cheated. I went to the University of Washington Art Library and looked through all the books on Zen art trying to find an image of Samantabhadra and Manjushri and the Buddha. I wasn’t successful. I remember going to one *sesshin* [an intensive Zen meditation retreat] trying to work through this koan. I couldn’t do it and I went home feeling defeated.

Then I went to a second sesshin. If you know anything about Zen practice, to terminate the *dokusan*—a student’s interview with their teacher, the teacher will ring a little bell. I came in and I said, “Genki Roshi, I'm sitting in the deepest mushin. Everything disappears. My answer is that the Buddha rides deep emptiness.” Genki Roshi said, “How can the Buddha ride emptiness? That doesn’t make any sense.” *Ding*. Then I came back and I said, “No time and no space.” *Ding*. Answer after answer, I couldn't get it right. Finally, I went to the teacher and told him how discouraged I was. I felt defeated by this, and every time I went to Genki Roshi, he said, “The answer is right there. It's right in front of you.” I came back and I still couldn't find it.

I left the dokusan room feeling very frustrated. I had been sitting for two sesshins in the deepest emptiness. As I was approaching my cushion, I looked down and I saw my zafu. I realized that the Buddha rides a zafu. The next time I had an opportunity to see the teacher, I brought my zafu with me. I sat down with Genki Roshi and I put my zafu right on the ground. He had a big smile, but I did not. I was furious. In fact, I went back to my cushion thinking, “Zen is a scam. This is a fraud. This is my last sesshin.”

I was so bitterly disappointed to be back in this world of barriers again. I had been practicing deep mushin and I experienced a tremendous feeling of real release, real liberation. And now, with this koan, I was right back to thinking about my lousy apartment, my unpaid bills, my inability to get along with my lovely wife. It made me furious. I didn’t understand then that

every breakthrough becomes a barrier, but also that every barrier has the possibility of becoming a breakthrough.