



Hello, I'm Kurt Spellmeyer and this is the second talk in my series on *Waking Up by Breaking Down Barriers*. Last time, I talked about my early experiences in Zen practice and my understanding of Zen practice as the path to absolute transcendence—the idea that I would finally be liberated from my suffering. I imagined enlightenment as a state beyond the experience of barriers. As I practiced more, I began to realize that everytime I had a breakthrough, there was another barrier waiting for me. I didn't fully understand that. I believed that if I just kept practicing, there would be a final barrier and a final liberation.

I'd like to start today's talk with an experience that I had 15 years ago. I was involved in regular Zen training with Takabayashi Genki Roshi. I remember going into the *dokusan* [interview] room at a *sesshin* [Zen retreat] and expecting him to give me a new koan from the *Mumonkan* text. Instead he said, “I'd like you to just try this. There are all these birds outside the zendo; I just want you to listen to the sound of a bird. Try to pick out a sound of a bird that repeats itself over a long period of time.”

At that particular sesshin, there was a cacophony of birds outside the Zendo. I didn't know what to expect, but I picked out a bird and I just followed the sound. All of a sudden, as I was listening to that sound, it felt as though I had just dropped off a cliff. It wasn't a bad experience at all; it was awe-inspiring. Then, it was as though I was hearing everything around me in a new way. At first, I didn't understand what was making it different. But I suddenly realized that there seemed to be no self in this experience. As I was walking around after the sit during the break period, it was as though there was an empty hole where my self used to be. It was the most amazing and delicious experience. I felt so clear and transparent.

I went back to Genki Roshi and said, “Roshi, I have really left the self behind.” I went to sleep and when I woke up the next morning, to my surprise, there was my self-referencing again. That was confusing to me because like so many people who practice Zen, I was told that losing the self or forgetting the self is the essence of the Zen practice. I understood that enlightenment was



a selfless state, and it was possible for me to enter these selfless states, but my self came back again and again. Later in my practice, I was able to remain in the selfless state for a fairly long period of time, but no matter what happened, the self came back. Many people who have this experience think they're doing something terribly wrong. Yet, I invite you to try to leave yourself behind permanently—I don't believe you'll be able to do it. This is an important lesson for Zen practitioners. If you misunderstand the nature of your mind and how it works, you are going to feel like a perpetual failure. Yet this is just another example of a breakthrough creating a barrier.

Dogen, whom I greatly admire, said, “To practice Zen is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to become one with all things.” Indeed, that day I forgot my self, I truly felt one with all things. I came away from the experience of being back in my self feeling that I had somehow failed in my Zen practice—that I had made some terrible mistake. I think many people feel that way.

Later on, I had the opportunity to study Zen history and the ideas behind the Zen tradition. This was a new vista for me as a practitioner. One way to understand Zen is that its roots are in the Yogachara tradition, which is slightly different from, say, the Madhyamaka tradition. In early Buddhism, there was a great thinker named Nagarjuna (c. 150 – c. 250 CE). Nagarjuna fundamentally said that nothing has its own being—everything is empty. Zen is indebted to Nagarjuna in many ways: when we meditate, we enter *mushin*, the experience of emptiness. If you're in mushin when you drink a cup of tea, or you hear the sound of buses outside, you experience those as empty, too. In mushin we understand that emptiness is the true nature of all things.

After Nagarjuna, certain questions were left unanswered by Buddhist thinkers. Yes, it was true that emptiness was the fundamental nature of everything, but why didn't we experience that emptiness all the time? About a century after Nagarjuna, there were two brothers, Asanga and Vasubandhu, who were accomplished meditators and philosophers. Unlike Nagarjuna, they were



interested in explaining from a psychological standpoint why we don't experience everything as empty all the time.

They developed an understanding of the way the mind works, believing it to be a complex system. They said that there are forms of consciousness that are woven together by the unconscious mind to make the experience of reality that we have from moment to moment. That weaving together involves eight threads—the five senses, thinking intellect, memory, and one more. In observing their own minds in meditation, they noticed one other thread that contributes to the fabric of our experience from moment to moment. They called that thread *manas* —the self-referencing mind.

If you sit down on a cushion and watch your breath or focus on the events around you, you'll notice that self-referencing isn't there all the time. Self-referencing is intermittently present and at times, your consciousness is more fully absorbed by what you see or hear. At moments when we're intensely absorbed in the senses or even intensely absorbed in our thoughts, the self-referencing almost stops altogether.

This image of the mind was different from any model developed by that point. This model believed that the self-referencing mind was what created the boundary between the self and the world. This idea created a revolution for Buddhism and, personally, reading about it was a revolution for me. In my Zen practice I have experiences of meditating on sound, just watching the breath, and have moments when the self disappears. Beyond this experience, the implications of what they're saying are important. Self is never going to go away. It's always going to come back. The problem isn't that we're creating a self, the problem is that we're clinging to it.

To better understand what Asanga and Vasubandhu meant to tell us, we can consider the following: We almost constantly experience a babbling ocean of sensations within us that are so overwhelming that we have to screen them out. If we didn't screen them out, if we didn't limit



our inputs, our lives would be utterly chaotic and incoherent. Unconsciously, the mind creates patterns that allow us to recognize repetitive features of our everyday life, making it possible for us to live. The problem is that those patterns which serve this wonderful purpose also become imprisoning, and ultimately those patterns become barriers, too.

What we call the self arises from the contradiction between the world we create in this moment and the world that's coming in the next moment—the now, and the future that's going to be different from now. As we're moving from our familiar image of the world to a situation we don't understand, when our image of the world is challenged by something new, those are the moments when the self arises. In your own meditation, you can see that happen as you're transitioning from one moment to the next—the self arises from that inconsistency or incoherence.