



Hello, I'm Kurt Spellmeyer and this is the third talk in my series, *Waking Up by Breaking Down Barriers*. Like many people who practice Zen for a long time, I went through a period of disappointment when I discovered that my moments of wholeness didn't last. I continually had breakthroughs in my practice which led me to feel deeply connected to the world, only to find soon after that a new barrier presented itself. It took me a long time to realize that the experience of opening involves creating a barrier. We need barriers in order to open up again.

The essence of Zen practice is about pursuing contradiction—the road to wholeness is through contradiction. From the Zen standpoint, you're never farther from unity than when you think you're whole, and you're never closer to unity than when you think things are falling apart. The essence of koan practice is to embrace contradiction again and again. Every experience of contradiction presents us with the opportunity to rediscover the unity that our own mind prevents us from recognizing. As soon as we have a breakthrough, the mind creates an image of our breakthrough. That image becomes an obstacle to any further breakthrough.

In my own teaching, I have seen this happen again and again. Students at *sesshin* [an intensive Zen meditation retreat] will come to me and say, “I'm having an experience on the cushion where I feel the electricity surging through my body. I feel totally alive.” I always say, “That's wonderful, but please don't cling to that experience.” The next day, the student will come in, this time dejected, and I'll say, “What's the trouble?” The student will reply, “The electricity is gone.” They had an experience of feeling deeply connected to everything, feeling that the world is their own body, but the next day the feeling was gone. What happened was that they had an experience of wholeness, created a mental image of that wholeness, which ultimately became an obstacle. There's no stopping this process.

If Vasubandhu and Asanga are right, the mind creates images of the world that are enabling and become imprisoning. The way to experience that wholeness is to constantly place ourselves right in the middle of contradictions, because the contradictions are what allow us to experience



wholeness. This is why all koans involve some kind of contradiction. For example, “If you have a staff, I will give you one. If you have no staff, I will take it away,” or, “Show me your original face before your parents were born.” The method is to intensify our awareness of contradiction.

In this process we have an ally—the deep unconscious mind or “the big mind.” According to Yogachara teachings, there is an intelligence at the core of our awareness which knows only wholeness. This is known as *buddhanature* or *buddha mind*. By confronting contradictions, we learn how to activate this buddhanature. The koan “If you have a staff, I will give you one. If you have no staff, I will take it away” intellectually makes no sense.

Experientially, too, this koan doesn’t make sense. When working with a koan like this, most people recall life experiences where they were slighted by a parent, or abandoned by a friend. Some of my students who are working with this koan say to me, “My mother *really did* love my brother more than she loved me, and I’m still mad about that.” There’s no way to make that right, and in working with this koan it is necessary to sit with that contradiction.

At certain moments in your work with a koan like this, you feel that the contradiction is insoluble—it can never be worked through. However, something keeps you going. What keeps you going is the intelligence of wholeness at the heart of consciousness. This intelligence of wholeness reassures and guides us. Really, this intelligence is present all the time. We trust it constantly, even when we aren’t aware of it.

When you walk outside of your house in the morning, you may hear the sound of a dog barking. There may be 20 sounds, so why did you hear *that* sound? Then you go to your car, look up, and see leaves shimmering in the light. Why did you see *that* instead of something else? The mind is creating a world for us all the time and we trust it completely, even when we feel the most uncertain. The buddha mind is building this beautiful world for us all the time. We count on it—we don’t even need to think about it.



When you're working with a koan and you're in a deep state of contradiction, your conscious mind tells you that there's no way out. But this is when that deeper unconscious mind, the one that weaves together the world for us, does its work. In this process there's a shift of perspective. Our unconscious mind tells us that things will make sense and things will come together, and this urges us on.

Suddenly, there's a gestalt change and the world is bigger. This is the method of Zen—the practice is all about embracing contradictions as opportunities to continue through this process. This method tests your big mind at every turn.

Living in Zen means seeking out contradictions and internalizing them, but also trusting the big mind to take us beyond those contradictions. There's a wonderful koan that illustrates this point. It's called "Zuigan calls Master." Every morning, Zuigan Osho would get up and say, "Master, are you there?" Then Zuigan would say to himself, "Yes, I'm here." Then Zuigan would say, "Don't let the problems get you down." Then Zuigan would say back, "No, no, I won't."

This koan is an illustration of the relationship between small mind and big mind. Zuigan has learned how to communicate with and trust his unconscious mind. In doing so, he allows it to guide him through the contradictions and barriers he experiences every day, letting it restore him to unity.