

Mindy Newman
Acknowledging the Spiritual Bypass
Week One: "What Is Spiritual Bypassing?"
May 1, 2017



Hi, my name is Mindy Newman. I am a psychotherapist and a hypnotherapist in private practice. I'm also a member of the meditation-teaching faculty at the Nalanda Institute in New York City as well as a Tibetan Buddhist practitioner. And I'm here today to talk about a new topic that I think is extremely important for all spiritual practitioners, which is spiritual bypassing.

So, welcome to the first week of this four-part series on spiritual bypassing. Spiritual bypassing is a topic that is really important for all spiritual practitioners to become aware of. It's something that we're all actually doing on a regular basis, most of the time we're not totally aware of it. Most of the time we'd also like to *not* become aware that it's something that we're doing because it's kind of the shadow side of our spiritual life.

Spiritual bypassing is a process of using our spiritual practice to try to get around some of the most difficult aspects of human life. Our most painful emotions, our most difficult conflicts and challenges with other people and also the stuff from the past that we'd really rather ignore. And what we have a tendency to do as spiritual practitioners is to try to use spiritual theories, aspects of the dharma, but also our meditation practice as a way to either try and transcend or push past or just get rid of this content because we'd really rather not deal with it.

By becoming aware that it's something we're engaging in and really learning about what spiritual bypassing looks like, we can start to recognize when we're doing it. And what's important about recognizing that we're doing it is it allows us to enrich our spiritual experience more. The problem with spiritual bypassing is when we're engaging in it, we're really not engaging in spiritual practice in an authentic way. We're really missing some of the richest parts of our spiritual experience by avoiding the stuff that we don't want to deal with.

So, the first thing that we need to know is what spiritual bypassing is. So, spiritual bypassing was defined by John Welwood who is a psychologist in the 1980s, and he refers to it as a widespread tendency to use spiritual beliefs and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unresolved developmental tasks. And it's something that we really do with both ourselves and others, and it happens in ways that are very obvious and it also happens in ways that are more subtle and less obvious. We really have to tune in to notice when it's happening.

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A really concrete example is in my work as a psychotherapist, I find people bypassing all of the time. My office is located in a wellness center and that's wonderful because by being located in a wellness center just by coming for those kinds of services to a place that has wellness in the name, people have some idea that they're coming to work on their mental health in a way that's very positive, that it doesn't mean that they're crazy or that they're sick but they're actually engaging in something that's about healing, about trying to function in their daily life at really optimal levels, at improving and striving for something that's better.

This is a contrast to how we feel a lot of the time when we think about mental health, which is something that's negative, depressing, there's a problem, if we're even referring to our mental health. However, even being in a wellness center has kind of a shadow side to it. On the one hand, there's this very positive aspect where helps people think more positively about the idea of working on themselves, but the negative side is that I've noticed that people who come to a wellness center to work on some of their mental health stuff, often really want to sidestep or bypass the past and their most negative emotions and just really focus on things that are lighter.

An example would be people who really want to focus on positive thinking or retraining their mind in really positive ways. Now, there's nothing inherently wrong with that. It's a wonderful thing to start to access more positive thoughts and to feel hopeful about the future but what often happens, particularly when people want to try and do that through hypnosis is that what they're really trying to do is avoid looking at the painful emotions they're experiencing in the present, the patterns that have been going on in their past that they're repeating over and over and over again. And they want to just avoid that and go directly into looking at what's going really well and focusing intensely on that.

I often work with people on addiction and I find that there are a lot of people that want to come in and use hypnosis to retrain themselves so that they can continue to use drugs or alcohol but just use it in a moderate way. What really needs to happen is that they need to look deeply at the destructive patterns that they're engaging in with this substance and how it's hurting themselves and others. But it's very hard for them to do, understandably, so they prefer to kind of talk about things like, if they could only just have one drink and the positive thoughts they're going to use to coach themselves into doing that and just sort of sidestep all the stuff that's very

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painful. That's one version that bypassing takes place.

Bypassing is a very human thing to do. It's really about avoiding shame, feelings of badness, feelings that there's something deeply wrong with us. So we try to just get around it. But the problem with it is that it doesn't actually solve the problem so that is true whether it's our spiritual life or whether it's mental health concerns. When we're talking about spiritual bypassing, we're really talking about these two things coming together. The good news is that as people, as all of us are supported to move past bypassing and confront what's really going on in our lives, we're able to really heal what's going on that's problematic and delve more deeply into our spiritual practice and change on even more deeper and more rewarding levels.

Let's talk about how spiritual bypassing happens in our day-to-day lives. And there are two really obvious ways that it often happens. There are two things that spiritual practitioners often use as a strategy to try to spiritually bypass painful content. The first is the idea of transcendence. What we try to do is we try to rise above feelings and content and this primarily happens with our meditation practice.

An example would be when we use our meditation practice to detach from feelings that are really painful or difficult. And when we're talking about Buddhist practice, we're thinking of the things that are often labeled by teachers as destructive emotions. Anger. Jealousy. Pride. These are some of the things that we really are trying to work through skillfully with Buddhist practice. But, instead of going into them and exploring them and understanding what they're about, sometimes we can get caught up with in meditation is, trying to really detach from them.

Another example would be when we're sitting in a mindfulness meditation practice and feeling really intense feelings of jealousy or anger arise and having an immediate distancing from them. So, really taking a huge step back, trying to detach and trying to just watch them rise and fall. Now that really has some important utility to it. It is important for all of us to learn that emotions and sensations are things that they come and they go. To learn that we can identify with them less, that we can become less blended with them. The purpose of becoming less blended with them is so that we don't have to struggle with them so much. But, we can feel the discomfort of the painful emotion, but that we don't have to attach to it and have judgments about it which tends to make it stronger.

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It is a really healthy and positive thing to try to get some distance from painful emotions. However, when we're spiritually bypassing, that's not really what we're doing. We're taking it a step beyond, where we're really trying to create a huge space between ourselves and the emotion. We see the emotion rise, we take a huge step back—the emotion is something that's over there, it's really distant from us, and we watch it rise and fall. But in that space that we create, that really large space that we create between ourselves and the emotion, we wind up actually becoming kind of numb or detached, which is a really different experience than staying in meditation, having a feeling arise, and really feeling it rise and fall. Feeling the sensation in our body, feeling the energy and the charge of it, really feeling it strongly and *then* feeling it pass away. That is us creating some space from the emotion, but it's a reasonable distance.

In spiritual bypassing, you can healthfully detach from feelings, but a healthy kind of detachment is one in which there is some space, but you're also connected and feeling it. You know that detachment's become too big, that you're really spiritually bypassing, when you're creating a really large space and you're stopping feeling the emotion so much that you're becoming numb.

Another way that Buddhist practitioners often use meditation practice to try and get away from painful feelings is what happens into that in Buddhism with purification practices. So, there are a variety of practices that are used to purify karma, to purify imprints that are in our mind from the past, to purify tendencies that we have, negativities that we have been carrying around with us. However, this is a really complex practice and when we're not engaging in it skillfully, when we're engaging in it in a bypassing kind of way, what we're doing is just trying to get rid of the feelings. Just absolutely get rid of them. This is when, in our lives, we feel strong anger, strong jealousy come up, and we decide we're going to sit down and purify ourselves of them and then just get rid of them. That's another way of really numbing or detaching from the feelings and creating a lot of distance from them.

Meditation, which is a really important tool for us as Buddhist practitioners, is something that we can use to help us learn more, go into experience, move through experiences that are challenging, and really learn from them. It can be incredibly rich. Or, if we're engaged in spiritual bypassing, what meditation becomes is a tool of avoidance, a tool of getting away. This

Mindy Newman
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May 1, 2017



is incredibly human. We don't want to suffer. As the dharma says, we all want to be happy, we all want to be free from suffering. But, the only way that we really are able to do that in the long term is by becoming familiar with suffering, with getting to know it. With really understanding what it is that we're trying to change and transform. Getting rid of it is not really the way that is going to be the most helpful to us.

Another way that spiritual bypassing tends to show up, in addition to meditation practice, is the use of absolute truths to try and avoid messy and uncomfortable feelings. So this takes the form of someone noticing there's feelings or conflict going on and really drawing on Buddhist philosophy or concepts to again try to get rid of the feelings.

One thing that can often be used is the notion of emptiness. So, we have feelings that are really intolerable and we rationalize to ourselves, "Well, why do I need to get so worried about this? There's no inherent existence to these emotions. They're not real, so to speak, so I just have to remember that they're not real and then they'll go away." Of course, the truth is that in emotions, conflicts with other people have a huge impact on our life and just because we tell ourselves that they're not real doesn't mean that we stop having consequences because of them or that we stop experiencing their impact on us.

I've seen as a psychotherapist that when people really have a hard time getting in touch with anger, when they really struggle with anger and they try to not feel it, that what tends to happen is they become highly anxious. They might have a lot of somatic sensations, a lot of pains, aches, discomfort, symptoms in their body. This doesn't mean that they're responsible for their symptoms or they're responsible for their anxiety or they're purposefully trying to create them or they're doing something bad. It just means that those feelings that are hard for them to experience are still showing up. They're still showing up in their body. They're still showing up in their minds. They're taking on a slightly different form, but they're still actually there. We really can't get rid of these feelings or these conflicts, whether we're trying to meditate them away or whether we're trying to use Buddhist philosophy or concepts to do that.

The one about saying it's all emptiness, it's an easy one to try and use because we can really try and fall back on that any time something happens—not just a painful emotion arising within us, but also when we're troubled by something someone else is doing. I can testify from

Mindy Newman
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Week One: "What Is Spiritual Bypassing?"
May 1, 2017



personal experience, I have definitely tried that one. I remember having a difficult relationship with someone who had a tendency to say negative things and who would spread them around and tell other people about them. I knew before I had a conversation with them that inevitably, probably something I said was going to get twisted and turned and shared with other people and I was really frustrated with the powerlessness of having to tolerate that. I could not control what this person did, what they said about me, and who they said it to. I remember very well rationalizing to myself, well, it's empty anyway what they're saying, what their sound, their words, it's empty. It doesn't mean anything. But the truth was that of course I still had feelings. I still had that feeling of anger, of being wronged. The pain of having a human ego that dislikes being talked about negatively, just like everyone else. It was all still there.

So the thing about spiritual bypassing is it's ultimately not very successful. It's a temporary fix, not a long-term solution to the problem that we're all dealing with in the human realm of just struggling with the painful emotions and the interpersonal conflict that comes with life. It's interesting the way that it's very easy to co-opt Buddhist concepts in order to spiritually bypass. "Everything's empty" is one of them. Another one is this notion of ultimate reality and relative reality: both of these things are happening at the same time. We have an interesting way of when we're not liking what's going on in relative reality, of trying to focus on the big picture of absolute truths to get away from it.

Spiritual bypassing happens both with ourselves, when we're trying to bypass our own feelings and conflicts, but as a consequence of it, we also start to bypass other people's conflicts, other people's struggles. We also become detached and numb to them.

I'll also use a personal example that I experienced recently. Recently, a very important Buddhist teacher who is very special to me and had had a profound impact on my life, though we'd never met in person, passed away. It was incredibly sad. I remember really mourning the loss of never getting to meet this person in person, and being grateful for the teachings that I'd received and for the way this person had deeply, deeply impacted my life in profound and special ways, but also feeling tremendous sadness that in this lifetime, we would not meet, face-to-face, in person.

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Week One: "What Is Spiritual Bypassing?"
May 1, 2017



I was at an event recently and ran into someone who had also been at empowerment with this same teacher and I was saying to them, "It's so sad that they passed away." And the answer that I got was, "Well, you know, we all die and look what they accomplished in their life." Both of those things are true. Both of those things are absolutely true and that person wasn't trying to invalidate my feelings, but what they were doing was getting away from the messiness of it. We have these teachers in our lives. They're very important to us. We become attached to them. And when they pass away, it is painful. And as grateful as we are for what we've received from them, we also feel tremendous loss because we're human and we cared about them deeply. In fact, caring about them and that feeling of loss is a sign that it was a relationship worth having and it was important.

But, grief is challenging. And there is a way that we can try and sidestep it and, in this case, spiritually bypass it by acknowledging this is some sorrow, we all die in this realm. It's going to happen to all of us and anyway, there were these wonderful things that happened. All of those things are true but they coexist simultaneously. Yes, death will absolutely come to all of us and that's one of the things that we really struggle with as a part of Buddhist practice is coming to terms with that and working towards being prepared for it. And yes, it's wonderful that there are these profound teachers that, in their time on this planet, contributed in such deep ways. We can feel grateful for that. At the same time, we really can feel that deep grief and loss. This would be an example of trying not to bypass, of letting all of those realities coexist at one time.

The thing about spiritual bypassing that is really important to name is that absolutely everyone does it. It's not a question of if you do it. It's a question of when and becoming aware that it's happening, because we all struggle with suffering. We all absolutely struggle with suffering. That's why we're drawn to a spiritual path. That's what we're trying to develop is our ability to face suffering. To transform our world, ourselves, and to be able to help transform others. We naturally fall into this because we experience pain, it's difficult trying to get around it. So, if you are a spiritual practitioner, then at some point, you are spiritually bypassing. It's absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. It's a totally human endeavor. It's motivated by a very strong desire to avoid pain. As I mentioned, we know from the dharma that we all want to be happy and be free from suffering. Spiritual bypassing is really an attempt to do that. To be happy

Mindy Newman
Acknowledging the Spiritual Bypass
Week One: "What Is Spiritual Bypassing?"
May 1, 2017



and be free from suffering. And that desire to be happy and avoid suffering is natural to all living things. We all want to avoid pain whether it's physical or emotional so we try different strategies to do that.

The challenge of having a mature spiritual practice is to recognize when we are trying to get around things and to develop the self-awareness and the maturity to acknowledge that we're not perfect. From time to time, we're trying to get out of dealing with the raw material of suffering and to just kind of rein ourselves back in and take a look at what's going on, to have compassion even for the fact that we're trying to bypass.

When we are engaged in spiritual bypassing—a problematic thing for us to face—we're not really achieving all of the feeling that we need and want with our spiritual practice. Spiritual bypassing is ultimately a way of detaching and numbing. Numbing out to both the suffering of ourselves and the suffering of other people. We hear a lot from Buddhist teachers that we're interdependent. That as beings, that we're all ultimately connected with each other and that when the day comes that we are able to truly realize emptiness, truly realize interdependence and experience it directly, it will be intensely liberating. The other side of that is that when we deny our own suffering and try and get around it, we absolutely wind up having difficulty facing other people's problems and helping them with it. And for people who identify as Mahayana Buddhist practitioners, that is the path. Is liberation, Buddha-hood for the sake of ourselves and all other beings. That is the motivation that we're trying to cultivate. Those two things are intimately tied together. So, by spiritual bypassing what we're doing is preventing ourselves actually from being able to be more sensitive and reach out more and care more about other people. And also, of course, ourselves. And then we're not allowing change to happen on really deep levels.

The good news is that spiritual bypassing is definitely something that we can move past. We can learn how to identify when it's happening and how to move past it. That is, in fact, the purpose of this four part series. To learn to identify times when we're using spiritual bypassing to avoid painful emotions, interpersonal conflicts, and wounds from the past. To learn to recognize when it's happening and then also to learn how to work with it. How to actually work with this process of the spiritual bypassing so that we can bring ourselves back and work with ourselves in a more skillful and deep way.

Mindy Newman
Acknowledging the Spiritual Bypass
Week One: "What Is Spiritual Bypassing?"
May 1, 2017



In the last part of the series, we'll also learn a meditation practice to help us move toward suffering in a deep way instead of moving away from it. Throughout these four parts, to normalize it, I will try to use examples from my own life as I did in this one, to really illustrate that this is a totally normal thing that's happening. There's absolutely no shame in it. The more that we can talk about it with each other, with our sangha members, and with our teachers, the more skillful we'll become at transcending past it. I really appreciate you being here and look forward to doing these next three talks and delving more deeply into this subject.