

Ethan Nichtern
Week One, *Overcoming Spiritual Bypassing*
May 4, 2015
“Where Are You Trying to Get?”
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So hello, everyone. Welcome to this four-part Tricycle retreat. I am Ethan Nichtern. I'm a senior teacher of Shastri in the Shambhala Buddhist tradition, also the founder of the Interdependence Project, a multi-lineage Buddhist community based in New York City, but online around the world. I'm really happy to be here with Tricycle, hosting this four-part retreat, and the topic that I wanted to discuss is something that I think has become really relevant to my own path as a practitioner, and also working with a lot of students—something that I think a lot of us see as an issue, as an obstacle, or as a problem to take interest in.

The phrase that we're going to be working with for the next four weeks is “spiritual bypassing,” which is a term that was coined a while back by a Buddhist psychologist named John Welwood. And the notion of spiritual bypassing, which we'll get into in much more detail, is basically noticing our tendency to use spiritual teachings, in this case Buddhist teachings, and especially the ideas, the more lofty ideas of what are called “ultimate truth teachings,” using those as a way to avoid the difficulties, discomforts, and issues that arise in real life situations, especially the real life situations of our human relationships.

So the notion of spiritual bypassing is even though we all have the wonderful intention to use our spiritual practice to work with our life to attain some kind of awakening and compassion in our life, there's often a tendency, especially with teachings in translation, to frame or utilize the teachings in a way that allows us to avoid, to bypass difficult situations. This is one of the topics I cover in my new book, *The Road Home: A Contemporary Exploration of the Buddhist Path*. I'm going to share some of the ideas from that section of the book, and we're really going to specifically focus on how this issue of spiritual bypassing comes up when we're focusing on Buddhist teachings on how to deal with our human relationships, how to be compassionate towards our self and others in relationships.

So I think one way of getting into this topic in our first session is to really look at the idea of where we're trying to get with our path. And, you know, one of the things that I notice, as a practitioner and teacher, is that we inherit a lot of foreign language when we read the Buddhist teachings in translation, and we often inherit the choices to define teachings that were made by specific translators who had their own relationship to language and certain words resonated with them. And one way of thinking about this is thinking about where are we actually trying to get on this path? What is the outcome we're trying to achieve? Obviously various Buddhist teachings and teachers look at this notion of trying to get somewhere in very interesting ways, because I think everybody is watching this because we're trying to get something, even if it's just more presence, more mindfulness, more compassion. Those are things to try to get, but if

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you really look at certain themes in ancient Buddhism, you can see that the whole problem that's presented by these teachings is the sort of psychological or existential dilemma with trying to get somewhere other than here at all.

So when you look at the word *samsara*, which is the classical Pali and Sanskrit word for “the cycle,” the total cycle of our destructive habits, confused behaviors, wrong views of ourselves and others, self-aggressive views, that word literally means something like “wandering around,” the Tibetan form of that word gives it a circular feel, so there's a sense of wandering around in cycles. And then if you look in the Tibetan tradition, there's a word for a confused sentient being, *drowa*, which literally means something like go, or always on the go, which is why in my book, *The Road Home*, I took this word to mean something like commuter. We're always in commute. We're always trying to get somewhere. And it's a really interesting question.

Where is a human being actually trying to get to? What I propose is that we're trying to find home. That's why we're commuting. We're trying to find a place where we feel like we belong, where we feel safe, where we feel fulfilled, where we feel happy, where we feel connected to other sentient beings. But the commuter is, you know, those of us who commute a lot for work, or in life, who travel a lot, or those of us who are just in between stable life situations, if you're watching this at a time in your life when things have fallen apart for you, the commuter really experiences this idea, and this kind of existential dilemma of never arriving, never actually getting to the place where we feel like, “Oh, here's where I can be at home. Here's where I can feel supported. Here's where I can rest and relax. Here's where I can feel fulfilled.”

And so this idea of trying to get somewhere is really interesting when you think about having a path, because a path is the same thing as a commute. So there's a kind of ironic trick in talking about the Buddhist path, because what Buddhism is saying is rather than trying to get home to somewhere else, or rather than trying to get home within the objects of our experience, like a new apartment, or a new house, or a new job, or a new relationship, or a new identity, or a new spiritual practice, rather than trying to do all that, the Buddhist practitioner is trying to arrive at home in his or her, in our own mind or heart, which is really interesting.

It's the idea of we're trying to get home, which is here, which is being here fully and completely in a way that's awake, in a way that's open, in a way that's available to others, in a way that's not resisting life, not resisting the dishes in the sink, not resisting the credit card bill that just came in, not resisting engaging in one's community politically, etc. So it's an interesting irony to think about this notion of getting somewhere, and this notion of getting somewhere is both the problem that Buddhism proposes, that we're always uncomfortable. We're always in transit.

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We're always in commute, but it's also the way the path is described—as “we have to get to a state of awakening.”

We have to arrive home in our own heart and mind in an awakened way. And I think it's really important to take this irony of language to heart, because there's so many teachings in Buddhism that use this irony of trying to get somewhere. And so I think with spiritual bypassing that irony of trying to get somewhere becomes really important. I often think of this word, “transcend,” or “transcendent,” or “transcendental,” which in certain Buddhist teachings is a word that's used in translation. It's also a whole kind of meditation, transcendental meditation. But there's that question of, like, what are we actually trying to transcend? Where are we actually trying to get?

I have one teacher and mentor, who's a teacher in the Shambhala tradition, Dr. Gaylon Ferguson, who likes to point out that the foundational practice of Buddhist meditation, mindfulness of body, meaning being in one's body right here, right now, with whatever sensations and whatever environment we actually inhabit, from the standpoint of a lot of spiritual traditions, and some meditation traditions, that, the idea that we even have a body, he says, is sort of a bummer, because wouldn't it be better if we could transcend our body, take our mind to some other, more blissful realm, and find peace there? So from that standpoint, if you really examine what Buddha, the paradigm of Buddhist meditation, you could say that Buddhist meditation is anti-transcendental meditation. It's “don't transcend anything” meditation.

I don't know about the tradition of transcendental meditation to comment on it, and a lot of these are just linguistic difference, or somatic differences. But I think it's really important that we think about how we are using this language of getting somewhere else, because from a certain standpoint, that idea of looking for a path that's going to allow us to be somewhere else is our whole problem. And it's actually, this is one of the moments where I think Buddhism kind of takes the air out of our tires, so to speak, and says, “If you're going to awaken, you're going to have to awaken to your life as it is.”

As Pema Chodron says, “Start where you are,” which I think sometimes we take the “start where you are” message as sort of, like, a letdown. It's like we think it means because we are not really great practitioners, if we were better at this, if we were more transcendent, if we were more exalted practitioners, we could start somewhere else in a more bliss realm. But because we're mundane, neurotic, you know, flawed people, we have to start where we are, so it's sort of like it almost feels like the bunny slope at a ski resort. But really the notion of “start where you are,” is that's where the path is. That's where awakening is.

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So when we start to apply this notion of non-transcendence to this question of “What is the path all about?” it starts to reframe a lot of the teachings that seem to think that enlightenment, or awakening, is about getting to some other state of mind, or even some other state of life, or inhabiting a different cultural experience, or inhabiting a different livelihood, or inhabiting a different family. I know a lot of people feel that way—“If I was from a different family, then I could be enlightened.” And my teacher, Sakyong Mipham, likes to call this “always wanting there to be another now.” And so I think the notion of spiritual bypassing is first really asking us to very intimately contemplate the ways that we are trying to translate meditation, or practice, or study the Buddhist teachings as a way to try to leave our life behind.

Now, obviously, when we do a meditation session, or we do a meditation retreat, we have to leave our life behind a little bit, but not because we’re trying to get away from it. In my tradition, the Shambala tradition, we really focus on the idea that a retreat, or a meditation session, is preparation for life. It’s not escape. There is no escape from being a human being. And, for me, what Buddhism, and what the Buddhist example was, is how could I be an awakened human being, which means awake in the life situation that we have.

So in the coming weeks, we’re gonna start to examine some of the ultimate truth teachings of the Buddhist tradition, so teachings you may have heard of, or may not have heard of before, like emptiness, which is considered an ultimate truth teaching, because it’s referring to a universal quality of all of our human experiences, and of all phenomenon, which is that they can’t be held onto, and they can’t be pinned down with conceptual frameworks, or labels, or narratives can’t really describe them, and also talking about a very related teaching to emptiness, egolessness, or non-self, or anatta, anatman in Sanskrit, and looking at how we might rather than using these ultimate truth teachings as a way to get away from our everyday experience of the dishes, the credit card bill, the family, the friends we have, the difficult relationships we have, the society that we engage in politically, whether we want to, or not, how these ultimate truth teachings could actually make us more available to the down to earth details of our human relationships, how we could unbypass, which I know might sound a little unsexy.

You know, that’s the thing about the ultimate truth teachings is from a certain existential philosopher standpoint-- I remember when I started studying emptiness, it was at the same time that I was also studying a lot of postmodern thought in college about deconstructing language, and deconstructing dominant narratives, and there’s something very sexy about this idea of not being able to pin down reality. But from the standpoint of being a worldly practitioner of awakening, the point of all of those teachings is actually to lead us to this very, many less dazzling, or less mesmerizing place of just how does that change our day-to-day, mundane

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approach to the details of life? How does it help us stop spiritual bypassing our moment-by-moment experience?

So that's what we're going to look at in the coming weeks. And I guess I just encourage you all this week, if you're going forward with the coming weeks of the class, if you have a meditation practice, I would really encourage you to look at how you handle the boredom and the discomfort of just being present in your body and with your thoughts in meditation practice, and just look at the ways that you might be using spiritual concepts, ideas like there is no self, or concepts do not adequately describe reality. Ideas such as those, how you might be using those to try to just subtly avoid the fact that you are uncomfortable in your experience in the present moment, the fact that something is happening that you're resisting, or that you don't want to have happening, because we're going to look more into how we can change our relationship to these spiritual teachings, so that they don't lead us into a place of trying to get away from our mundane life, that they actually illuminate our mundane life.

They actually allow us to become more open to our own resistance, more open to our human relationships, which is really the important part of the practice from my way of looking at these things, that we use philosophy, and we use spiritual teachings to actually open up to our life in 2015 on planet Earth, wherever on planet Earth you're listening to this, or watching this. So I would really encourage you, if you're meditating this week, to really look at how those spiritual thoughts might take you away from just the basic resistance you experience to the present moment, and also how spiritual thoughts might actually make you more able to be present with uncomfortable moments in your practice, and also throughout the rest of the day.

So that's the contemplation I would encourage, just how we work with discomfort, and how we experience this notion of always wanting there to be another now, and whether or not we're using spiritual teachings to exacerbate that wanting to get somewhere else, that wanting to transcend. So I hope to see you next time, and next time we're going to be really be talking about shunyata, emptiness, and different frameworks for what that actually means, and to really see if we can unpack the idea of relative and ultimate truth, as they're sometimes called, in a way that actually makes our day-to-day life make more sense, rather than making us want to transcend our day-to-day life. So thank you very much, and see you next time.