

Ethan Nichtern
Week Two, *Overcoming Spiritual Bypassing*
May 11, 2015
“Defining Spiritual Bypassing”
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So welcome back, everyone. I'm Ethan Nichtern. This is the second part of our series on overcoming spiritual bypassing. So I hope you've had a nice time since the last talk, and I want to go a little further in defining spiritual bypassing, and also talk about it in relationship with this notion of ultimate truth, or emptiness, and how we could actually further unpack an understanding of emptiness to illuminate our daily life experience, rather than trying to transcend it.

Hold on one second. I'm just going to get this page. So again, it was the Buddhist psychologist, John Welwood, who coined this phrase, “spiritual bypassing,” because he was seeing, as I think many of us who, in our own practice, and many of us who work with students, he was seeing it in his psychotherapy practice, as well, that people who took on study of different eastern spiritual philosophies, especially in his experience Buddhist philosophy, had a tendency to sometimes use the teachings as a method for avoiding the difficult relationships, or difficult situations of their life. And he also, there's a quote from him where he talks about how spiritual bypassing often works, and he says, “Spiritual bypassing often adopts a rationale based on using absolute truth to deny or disparage relative truth.”

And so when we're talking about absolute truth in Buddhism, we're talking about, when you say something is absolutely true, you're talking about the qualities of all experiences, or the qualities of all phenomena. And when we're talking about relative truth, we're talking about that which exists in relationship to causes and conditions. So the fact that this interaction between us is happening is very much a relative truth, the fact that whatever happens in this talk is impermanent, and by definition will not last, impermanence would be one example of ultimate truth, because it describes any talk that could be given, whereas the specific talk, the specific interaction, the specific topic, the specific clothing that I wear, could be described as relative truth.

In some Buddhist philosophies there's a further description of relative truth, which is sort of false or confused truth, ideas that we take to be true about reality that aren't true at all, thoughts that we have in our head that don't describe reality. Like, so one example of false relative truth is thinking somebody hates you, and then you go and talk to them about, and it turns out they actually like you, which is always a nice thing to find out. Most often what happens when we think somebody hates us is we find out they weren't thinking about us at all, which is a little more disappointing than finding out that they like us, but that would be an example of false relative truth, because the thought that's in our head doesn't even describe relational reality.

And then there are various Buddhist philosophies, such as a tradition called “The Mind Only” tradition, there's a sense of real dependently arising truth, where the fact that this interaction for this moment in time that's come about because of causes and conditions, and there are many that bring this moment into being, it's a real moment of relative truth. But the fact that this moment,

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like all other experiences, is impermanent, that would be an example of ultimate truth. So what Welwood is saying is that often in spiritual bypassing, rather than looking at a way that ultimate truth and relative truth can work together as two sides of a coin, which is what they're intended to do for our experience of our life, rather than that we kind of use ultimate truth to sort of shut the door on relative truth.

So in other words, we say this moment is impermanent, therefore it doesn't even matter. That would be an example of using ultimate truth, which is the impermanence, to disparage relative truth. It's a kind of apathetic approach. It's a bypass. It's an avoidance. So I've really, in my own life, because I did from my teenage years like to study Buddhist, I really feel like I've had a lot of personal experience with just moments of spiritual bypassing, and talking with a lot of folks about it.

And in this chapter in *The Road Home*, that I wrote about spiritual bypassing, I listed sort of some hypothetical, or not so hypothetical examples of situations where we might be spiritual bypassing, where we might be using some idea of ultimate truth, either in terms of impermanence, or emptiness, or egolessness, to not have to pay attention to relative truth. And I wrote down a list, and if you've ever had any of these experiences, or you've witnessed other people you think having these experiences, then that's good to note, but it's meant to be experience with a sense of humor, a sense of kind of playfulness about the mistakes we make along the path, and just to kind of illuminate what we're talking about here with sort of avoiding relative truth. I just wrote this list. And the list in the chapter is called, "I might be spiritual bypassing if."

So I might be spiritual bypassing if I have credit card, mortgage, or student loan debt, and I avoid opening the envelope, because the numbers on the statement are just abstract symbols, all, quote, "empty" anyway. I actually have a friend who said that when he started studying the Mahayana teachings on emptiness, he was in his early twenties, and having misunderstood the teachings, he just didn't pay his credit card bill for a while, and it got him into a lot of debt, so that's a real one.

I might be spiritual bypassing if I avoid taking care of my body through daily nutrition and exercise, because the body is, quote, "just a vessel." So that's an example of viewing the body's impermanence, or life's impermanence, as a reason to not take care of our body. I refuse to make my bed for exactly the same reason. I might be spiritual bypassing if I shy away from any political discussion, because the mere thought of actually holding any political positions strikes me as, quote, "dualistic." So that's an example of using the interdependent and emptiness teachings on non-duality as a way to avoid actually the ethical dilemma of who do we want to support as leaders in the world.

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I might be spiritual bypassing if I know what the phrase, *Madhyamaka*, *Sautrantika*, *Svatantrika* means, which is one of these emptiness philosophies, for those of you geeks, but if during a tea break at a meditation workshop someone asks me how I'm doing, I freak out on them. I might be spiritual bypassing if I am completely in love with my spiritual teacher, but wish all of my fellow students would just go away. So that's an example of how devotion can be taken as a kind of ultimate truth that actually causes us to not treat the people around us with respect and compassion.

I might be spiritual bypassing if I avoid pursuing creative or entrepreneurial projects that might benefit people, because whatever I accomplish is, quote, “illusory.” I might be spiritual bypassing if I experience loss, heartbreak, or grief, but attempt to dismiss feeling such a sadness, anger and loneliness as not, quote, “truly existing,” rather than bringing mindfulness and compassion to the necessary grieving process. I might be spiritual bypassing if I sabotage the process of forging intimacy with potential friends or lovers because I know that any new relationship I enter is just, quote, “impermanent” anyway. Why should I call him again? We're all just going to die eventually.

So in each of these cases the connection is that we are misinterpreting the relationship between some aspect of ultimate truth and the interdependent situation of the present moment, which is actually the only place that we can see ultimate truth. So I just want to talk about this, again going back to this linguistic issue that we have with translating Buddhist concepts into our own language and further translating Buddhist concepts into our own experience, that there's this really interesting thing that happens in Buddhist teachings, which is we can always highlight some kind of wrong view or confused perception about reality, confused experience.

We can always look at what we're not seeing clearly. So one example of this is to say, just to take the notion of impermanence, the idea that all experiences that our own life, that whatever comes into being in this world is impermanent, is basically a negation of this very pervasive wrong view that things last, that people last, that experiences are stable. And so when we talk about impermanence, we're talking about using language to say no to a false view about reality, and many teachings on ultimate truth do that. They undercut, or cut through some false view about reality.

There are a lot of different [things] that emptiness is saying, and there are many different Buddhist philosophical systems that talk about it, but simply put, one way of saying it is that no phenomenon is happening separately of all other phenomenon. Right? It's cutting through the idea that this experience right now is independent of other experiences. Obviously, I'm not having an independent experience because the whole reason I'm here is because you are

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there to interact with this. Otherwise I would just be a crazy person talking to a camera. So I am not independent of you right now, even if you're watching this after the fact.

So emptiness is saying, one way of looking at emptiness is saying, and I'll explore another way of looking at emptiness in our third session, is saying let's cut through the notion, or the idea of our independence. Let's undermine that. Let's say no to that. But the thing that's really important to understand when we're studying Buddhist teachings is that's only one side of the coin, saying no to false views. The other side of the coin, which I think is really interesting in terms of Buddhist teachings, is what are we saying yes to? So in that view of there's no such thing as our independence, what is there? There's our interconnectedness. Right? So there's always something in a Buddhist teaching that's a false view that's being said no to, and then there's a true experience that's being affirmed.

The fact that things exist interdependently is being affirmed. Right. And that's the whole reason you would want to take care of your body, because your body, in itself, is an interdependent system, and your body exists interdependently with other bodies. So it's be nice to have a healthy body that we care about, and treat well, and treat with a sense of nourishment, and health, and also with an interdependence with the planet we inhabit. So it's interesting to go back and look at Buddhist teachings in terms of noticing what the teachings are saying no to, and what they're saying yes to, because sometimes we only focus on what the teachings are saying no to, to the false views that are being undercut.

But if we only focus on that side, which is one way to talk about ultimate truth, is to say what is really being cut through here. If we only focus on that side, we miss the real awareness of what is being said yes to, which is what does experience look like when we undercut the false view of our independence? Why would you want to engage in a romantic relationship after you've cut through the false view of your independence? Well, actually, if you're holding the view of interdependence, romance becomes possibly even more important. You would want to move closer to a relationship. You would want to understand another human being more. You would want to share the interdependent and impermanent time and space you have together even more fully.

So I think it's really important that we all become our own translators of Buddhist teachings into our own life. And just as a homework exercise for this week, what I would really encourage is if you could go and look at a Buddhist text. You know, I talk about this in *The Road Home*, so if you already have that book, that could be the text. But I think it would make even more sense if you go and look at any classic text that you love in translation, especially if it's a classic text that talks about emptiness, so you could think about something from the Zen tradition, or you could

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think about one of the sutras, like the *Heart Sutra*, or the *Lotus Sutra*, or the *Flower Ornament Sutra*, which is an incredibly long sutra, or you could look at *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, which is a classic text you may have, or Pema Chodron’s interpretation of that, *No Time To Lose*, if you want a certain text to look at, or it could just be an article you find online.

But what I would encourage you to do is look at how this teaching uses “yes” language, and how it uses “no” language. In other words, “no” language means what is this Buddhist teaching trying to cut through in terms of a false understanding, like permanence, or independent, solitary existence, a separate existence. And on the “yes” side, what is this teaching trying to affirm, such as compassion, such as in the Shambhala tradition we talk a lot about basic goodness, which would be an affirmative teaching, a “yes” teaching on ultimate truth, or affirming our awakened nature, and just spot in the text what is the balance between the use of “no” language and the use of “yes” language.

And what often will happen is if we overuse “no” language, we end up suppressing relative truth. We end up avoiding relative truth. We end up using spiritual teachings as a way to sort of imprison our self away from our human situations, right, because it’s very hard to use affirmative language and not open the credit card statement. It’s very hard to use affirmative language and not call the person that you want to have another interaction with. It’s very hard to use affirmative language and not give those difficult life situations another shot.

So that’s what I would contemplate. If you could kind of do a close reading this week of any Buddhist text, either a short article online by a modern teacher, or one of the classic sutras, or commentaries. Just see if you can see this, what the balance is between “yes” language and “no” language. Cutting through false views is the “no” language, and affirming our awakened nature, or our awakened potential, affirming the need for compassion and empathy is the “yes” language.

And then next week I’m gonna talk about emptiness in a different way, talking about specific phenomenon versus generalization and bias. And that will lead us deeper into a discussion of emptiness, and with the intention of giving us some tools for overcoming spiritual bypassing. So thank you so much, and see you next time.