

Mindy Newman
Acknowledging the Spiritual Bypass
Week Two: "Identifying Spiritual Pitfalls"
May 8, 2017



Welcome back to the second week of this four part series on spiritual bypassing. Let's start by reviewing what spiritual bypassing is. It is the use of spiritual practices—because we're talking about Buddhism in particular, dharma practices and beliefs—to try to avoid, sidestep, get around painful emotions, conflict with other people, and wounds from the past that haven't yet been healed. In these talks, we're particularly naming and exploring two different ways that we have a tendency to spiritually bypass using our dharma practice. The first is trying to transcend experience, so trying to rise above painful emotions or challenges that we're having with other people, particularly using our meditation practices. The other way is using absolute truths or philosophy to try to dismiss or get away from what's really going on inside of ourselves and with other people.

The question that we're going to answer today is, what is it exactly that we're trying to avoid? What is it that we're trying to bypass? As I keep referring to, the biggest thing that we are trying to get around is difficult, painful emotional experiences happening inside of ourselves. In many ways, we're trying to avoid ourselves. This is something that comes up again and again in Buddhism, in part because we have identified these destructive emotion, a big part of the teachings that we often hear about destructive emotions and how we should be working with them.

We can all probably list right away what those emotions are and when they show up for us and how much we really dislike them. The first one is anger. Some of the teachings that I've heard a lot on anger is that a moment of anger can destroy infinite amounts of merit. We're taught again and again that anger is something that is really, really dicey in terms of spiritual practice. It makes sense that we want to avoid it, not only for that reason, but because the experience itself of anger can feel very scary. It is very strong. It arises very quickly. It can be very hot. It can be very intense. It can feel very out of control.

We can be very startled by our capacity to feel intense anger. After all, we're spiritual practitioners. The Buddha is a peaceful person. The teachings advocate peacefulness and trying to cultivate compassion for all living beings. Somehow becoming very angry feels very wrong. It feels like we're doing something bad, and yet, it happens. It's a very human experience. When anger arises, we tend to struggle a lot.

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I don't know if you've been to, and I certainly have been within, Buddhist communities where everybody is really, really well behaved. Everybody's very, very nice. Everybody's smiling all of the time. Everybody's really calm. You would never think that anybody ever had an angry thought or feeling. Of course, they are. Of course, all of us are because it's human, but sometimes the way we bypass is just trying to look like these things are not happening, just really trying to not even appear as though we're ever getting irritated or angry at all.

There are some different strategies that we use to do that. One is one that I referred to in the last talk, which is using meditation to try to watch the feeling happening, but not get engaged with it. Really try to create some space from ourselves and the feelings. I'm going to watch the anger arise, but I'm going to get really far away from it and just try to watch it rise and fall. I think what's happening when we try to create a lot of space between ourselves and the emotion, because as we talked about before, a healthy kind of detachment involves staying connected so you're still feeling it, but there's just a little bit of space around it, enough space to really both feel what's going on, but also watch it and learn from it and understand it more. When we're really trying to create a lot of distance from it, we're almost in a way stifling the feeling. It's like as soon as we feel the feeling arise, we retreat really far away from it, "I'm going to watch it for a second and hope it goes away really quickly."

There's definitely a way that we can try and use a meditation practice to get really far away from our emotions, but the other way that we can do that is to use philosophy to do that. If we start to feel angry, we might tell ourselves, "I can't do this. This is bad karmically. This is really bad karma. There's going to be horrible repercussions for myself and for others if I feel this anger," and so we just really start to suppress it. We start to believe, "If I'm a good Buddhist, I don't get angry at anybody. I'm supposed to be peaceful and calm," and so we really start to stifle the feeling. I think we do this because there's a part of us that realizes that even when we're adults that there's a part of us that's very young. When we get angry, it can feel like we're a toddler having a tantrum, it can feel very out of control. Feelings can seem to just explode out of us.

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The safest thing to do seems to try and squash it with spiritual beliefs, to just prevent the anger from coming up completely, but the truth is that anger provides us with really important information, that it's worth actually getting to know. For one thing, anger can arise at times when our boundaries have been violated or somebody else's boundaries have been violated. It is appropriate to get angry when you have been treated in a way that violates your boundaries. That's an appropriate response.

We're uncomfortable with it because it doesn't seem compassionate. We have a view of compassion that is always supposed to be gentle, that it's never intense, but there are in fact forms of compassion where you're putting your foot down, where you're naming something as not okay. For example, a time when compassion is very strong could be a time when loved ones intervene and confront someone with an addiction and try to wake them up from the trance of the addiction by telling them: "This is the impact that your behavior's having on me. This is the impact your behavior's having on all of us." In that moment, they still love the person that they're intervening with. In fact, it's because of strong love that they're doing that, but there can be a very firm and clear message that this is unacceptable, your behavior is unacceptable. There can be anger. If you have had a loved one in your life who is struggling with an addiction, the ways that acting out happens to all of us when we're in the throws of our addiction, the way we act out, has an impact on other people, and people, including us, feel angry when that happens. It doesn't necessarily feel good to be angry, but it has an important power. It names when things are wrong.

Another thing that we really try to spiritually bypass and get away from is the feeling of jealousy. Personally, this is definitely my go-to, this is the feeling that I would like to sidestep as much as possible. We're often taught that jealousy is a kind of theft, that it is wishing others to not have something that we feel we're entitled to, that we feel like we're supposed to have.

Spiritual practices and spiritual communities are actually perfectly designed to create feelings of jealousy in us. Sanghas, Buddhist communities, are spiritual families where we can form very deep connections with other people. Like any other family, we can have a sibling-like relationship with our peers. When we feel like they're doing more advanced practices than we are, when we feel like they have a closer relationship with the teacher, jealousy arises.

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I don't know if you've had the experience of being in a meditation class or a room with people meditating and you come out of your meditation practice and you assume that all of these other people had this blissful, wonderful, productive experience and you're so frustrated that you were really struggling with your mind jumping all over the place and painful emotions arising. There can be a strong feeling of jealousy and, "It looks so easy for them. I should be able to do that. Why can't I do that?" It's very painful. It's very painful when jealousy arises. That is definitely a feeling that there can be a tendency to want to hide, to not be expressed out loud, to feel like we're the only one having it, to cover it up, to not communicate to our friends, to our fellow spiritual practitioners about it, to feel intense shame around, and to really try and get away from it, like notice it is arising and try to get away from it as quickly as possible because it is so intensely uncomfortable.

It is very tied to shame because when shame arises, there's a feeling that we're bad, that we're really bad and we need to get away from people and hide. When jealousy shows up, shame can be really, really close by.

One thing that's really interesting about jealousy is that it often arises as a result of unmet needs. That doesn't mean that just because someone else is having a closer relationship with a teacher, is doing practices that you're not doing, that you have a need for that practice or that relationship. Particularly when jealousy arises around teachers, you wonder when are the other times in ones life where they haven't felt recognized by someone in authority. Maybe there's a complicated relationship with parents, a complicated relationship with teachers in school, complicated relationship with other people in our lives that were there to take care of us that we didn't feel close enough to, that we wanted to be seen by more. Maybe when we're jealous of other people doing more advanced practices, we're missing out on the feeling of self-confidence, that what we're doing is okay, that we're exactly where we are and that's totally fine, that we're not okay with ourselves so we want this other thing to feel better about ourselves. There's an unmet need for validation for recognition.

There's a lot of important information in jealousy when it arises. When we spiritually bypass it, we miss learning a lot about ourselves and actually what's happening. Maybe there have been a lot of times where we actually felt invisible. In terms of meditation, again, as we

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keep talking about, this is something that we try to notice arising and get away from, but we really will have a tendency to try and squash jealousy quite quickly and not admit that it's even happening, maybe even more so than anger.

Another thing that we're really trying to get away from in ourselves with spiritual bypassing is low self-esteem. I think it's an unspoken truth that a lot of people come to spiritual practice because they don't feel good about themselves and there hope is that spiritual practice will help them feel better. That can take a lot of really healthy forms of working closely on patterns and things that are happening inside of us that need healing, that need transformation, but it can also take the form of trying to overcompensate by being a perfect spiritual practitioner.

Certainly for me, I've had the experience in meditation of judging myself very harshly for not doing it perfectly, for really, and in particular, starting off in mindfulness meditation with rather than being able to settle in and watch the experience, like when meditating on the breath instead of letting the breath happen and letting myself drift away and then come back, there was this hyper sense of control: "I have to stay on the breath all of the time. I can't drift away even at all. I have to do this perfectly. If the breath's not working, then I'll meditate on sound or I'll meditate on something else or, in the same given sitting, I'm going to try and find the practice that I can do where I can feel like I'm getting it totally right." God forbid I get it wrong.

This is certainly something that happens, not only to me, but to many different people. We start to really feel badly about how we're performing, how well we're meditating, how well we're concentrating during teachings, whether we're progressing. We might alternatively become really attached to perceived spiritual realizations and accomplishments and then find ourselves judging other practitioners. "Why aren't they listening more closely? Why can't they meditate every day? Why are they asking these questions that seem really simple?" It's really because we're projecting our own fears about ourselves onto other practitioners a good amount of the time. We have low self-esteem, so we're trying to cover it up by being a good practitioner, and then it's impossible to tolerate everybody else's shortcomings, even though we obviously have them too. It's sort of like they're confirming our worst fears about ourselves. We definitely try to get away from that by covering up, by being perfect.

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Interpersonal conflict is another thing that we definitely, definitely try to use spiritual bypassing to get away from. Conflict between people is very challenging to learn how to navigate skillfully. We live in a society where people are exploding in anger, exploding in rage. There's a lot of violence because of unchecked, unmanaged, unprocessed anger and aggression. We see reality TV shows or people on social media or whatever engaging in really dramatic feuds, or we have the alternative, which is, one version of the alternative, which is really suppressing our conflicts with other people with saying it's okay when somebody wrongs us, forgiving everybody all of the time. That can easily happen.

Actually having someone apologize to you can feel intensely uncomfortable. It can feel kind of embarrassing. There can be a desire to try and get past the discomfort very quickly by saying, "No, no, no. It's fine." Particularly, I think as dharma practitioners where we want to be truly compassionate, we want to care about others, we really don't want to inflict harm, those desires are very genuine, it can very challenging to learn how to face conflict with other people and navigate it in a way that's really authentic, but also caring, towards ourselves and them.

One way we do this I think can happen a lot in loving kindness meditation and also *tonglen* [Tibetan meditation practice of giving and receiving compassion]. Lovingkindness meditation is where you learn how to share love towards other people, starting with people that are close to us and then kind of graduating to more challenging people and then encompassing the whole world. Tonglen is a practice where we learn how to remove suffering, or to imagine that we're removing suffering, from other people. Sometimes what we might have a tendency to do is to imagine people that we're really not ready to cultivate that deep love and compassion for because we haven't yet fully processed our feelings about whatever the conflict there is with them. We try to force it really quickly and then we find ourselves locking down and resistant and not able to open up. These are very challenging practices anyway.

There's a reason why many teachers, when they talk about lovingkindness meditation, you get to the challenging person, they say, "Don't choose your worst enemy. Don't choose the person you struggle with the most. Start with somebody who just kind of annoys you a little bit." That's because it's very, very hard to learn how to open up to people that we feel hurt by. We can't get there faster by moving around the hurt that we actually feel. We have to move through

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it. A very advanced, somebody who's been practicing for a very long time and is also a teacher now said to me just this week that compassion arises after we go through the intensity of our negative feelings about others, that when we allow ourselves to go through them, really genuinely feel them, that we can find a softening on the other end will just kind of arise a little bit more effortlessly. There's real value in letting ourselves feel the negativity that we do feel towards other people.

Another version of trying to sidestep or get around interpersonal conflict is the version where we draw an absolute reality and we blame ourselves for having these destructive emotions and this negative karma and it's our thing to work out that we're feeling frustrated with someone, rather than acknowledging that they've really hurt us in some way. Sometimes we can even start to draw other things in. I've heard people start to get very new-agey about things and think that there's some struggle that they're having with someone else and say, "Well, this is a lesson. This is a lesson that I need to work through. This is an opportunity. Being hurt like this is an opportunity." In a way, that's really true in the sense that any experience we're having is one that we can delve into and learn from, but there's a way that taking that language on very quickly is getting around the anger or the frustration, all of the other pain that we feel because of someone else.

Another version of avoiding interpersonal conflict with spiritual bypassing is to never express our needs to other people, to be really nice, or to never have any needs. "It's fine if you take the last cushion. It's fine, whatever. Everything's totally fine. Last meditation cushion in a sitting. Whatever. I don't need anything because I'm a really nice person." We don't want to be perceived as anything other than very compassionate, very kind, so we can kind of be self-denying. That's really just another form of bypassing. It's in a way a really false kindness because it's not a true act of generosity where we want to offer something to someone else or we choose to give up something that we would prefer to have in service of someone else. It's a very self-denying, getting around, trying to seem really, really nice. We all definitely do this from time to time, but it's important to be aware of.

The last thing that we often try to avoid is content from the past. I talked in the first talk about experiencing the loss of a teacher recently and having someone say to me, "You know, this

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happens to everybody. It's part of samsara." Grief is something that we can carry around for a very long time, that there may be losses of people earlier in life that [bring us] sadness. In meditation, we can find that really intense feelings of content from the past can arise. I read somewhere once, and I wish I could remember where, that if you haven't cried on your meditation cushion, you really haven't been meditating. I think that's really true. Grief, sadness can arise, but also there may be significant traumas from earlier in life that haven't really been attended to. When people become involved in meditation and spiritual practice and they sit on the cushion and they open to their own mind, that content really can start to arise. We can tune into sensations in the body and we can really be surprised at thoughts and images and memories that start to come up.

There can be a really powerful desire to get away from it, to create a lot of space between it, to numb out from it. Actually, it's really a time to go towards it, and it's really a time where meditation and spiritual practice is not enough. Spiritual practice and meditation can tap into places inside of us that have yet to be healed and that's really an opportunity to seek help, like psychotherapy, and manage and work through that content that's coming up so that we can actually delve into our spiritual practice in a deeper way. It's really important for us to pay attention to when those wounds are coming up and not try and use meditation to get around them, not blame ourselves for the fact that these things happened using karma or some other concept, to not too quickly forgive what's happened in the service of being really compassionate, but really an opportunity to go into what's happened, to learn more about it, and to integrate it for full healing.

The irony of it is that we try and bypass things, but our spiritual practice is almost perfectly designed to have us experience the exact things that are difficult for us because they need to be worked through and they need to be experienced. Meditation, spiritual communities or places where, almost by definition anger, jealousy, painful emotions, conflict with other people are going to arise, and when it does, it really is an opportunity for us to go deeper. First, we have to get past this tendency to try and use the teachings in our practice to get around it.

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In the next talk, we will talk more about how to notice in the moment that spiritual bypassing is happening, and then in the last talk, we will do a practice for working with it when it does arise.