



Welcome back to the third week of this four part series on spiritual bypassing. Spiritual bypassing, as we've been talking about, is the use of spiritual beliefs and practices to avoid, side step, or get around painful emotional experience, interpersonal conflict, and wounds from the past. We've been talking about two ways that that primarily happens.

One is, trying to transcend, or get beyond, these emotions and experiences using meditation practice. The other way is, to try to use absolute truths, or Buddhist ideas, to just dismiss the experience of what's happening. In this talk we're going to talk about how to notice when spiritual bypassing is actually happening. We've talked about what it is, and what it is that we're trying to avoid, and today we're going learn more about, how do we know when we're doing it, because most of us do it pretty regularly.

Spiritual bypassing is about numbing out, avoiding pain, avoiding something that's unpleasant, a hallmark of it is that we are avoiding feeling. When we find ourselves avoiding emotions, which often takes the form of being really up in our head and disconnected from our body so we don't feel our physical bodies. We know that they're there, but we're really not paying very much attention to them. We may find ourselves avoiding physical practices that we do often and enjoy, like exercise or yoga. We're not aware of it, but for some reason we're avoiding those practices, and it might be because there are sensations, and emotions, and thoughts that we really don't want to experience.

It might be that we notice, when we do come into our body after a period of being away from it, that we're tight, uncomfortable, kind of frozen. That may be a sign that there are things that we've been avoiding. We might also notice, or become aware, in a given meditation practice, in a given meditation setting, that we're not really very comfortable in our body. Or not really feeling our body. It's sort of like we have a head floating at the top, but there's really no body. No body underneath there that we're connecting with.

Another form this may take is, really notice that we're caught up in over analyzing situations and feelings. So, one way that that can happen is, you have a painful emotion, or a challenge, a conflict with somebody else, and you immediately go running to your shelf of dharma books to take out a book and read a philosophy that's going to make sense of what's happening, and kind of think it away, rather than actually feel what's going on. You may find



yourself calling up friends from your sangha, and talking a lot about what's going on, and really over analyzing it using the Buddhist philosophical concepts. That can definitely happen. Also, just generally finding yourself in a very mentally anxious, obsessive kind of state, because you're really trying to get away from something.

So the disconnection and trying to move away, in a kind of obsessive way, from your thoughts, is another way that we bypass. You might find yourself overly relying on certain kinds of meditation practices. So you may find that as soon as you sit down to meditate, you're automatically choosing practices that are going to distance you from feelings, where you notice that you're really trying to get away from them. Or you may find yourself emphasizing practices that feel really warm and fuzzy, that you know that you tend to feel good when you're doing them. So reaching out, almost for medicine of what's going make you feel better. And really trying to avoid those practices that you find challenging, that bring up challenging feelings about yourself, that help you avoid feelings of self criticism, or trying to avoid practices that you've noticed that you have a lot of thoughts and emotions about what's going on in your life when they come up.

These are all ways that we could really start to notice that we're spiritually bypassing. The good news is that once we start to notice that this is happening, that we're up in our head, that we're not feeling our body, that we're obsessing, or anxious, or over analyzing things, or really just trying to feel good, that means we have an opportunity to wonder about what it is that's going on. What is it that's going on, that I'm trying to get away from? What is it that I'm trying to explain away, or not feel?

We actually have a choice to then, if we want to use a mediation practice, to sit down and go into feelings. To close our eyes and sit down and say, "Okay, I know that there's a lot of anger rising right now, what does anger actually feel like?" Not just, "I'm gonna let it arise and fall, but what does actually anger feel like?" To move closer towards that. What are the sensations that happen, what is the reactivity that I have to it? To really just start to become very curious and explore it. Even allow ourselves to feel the desire to get away from it, the avoidance of it. To become familiar with what that feels like too.



I once heard a meditation teacher talk about how most of the work happens before you ever get to the cushion. Just getting there can be the hardest part. The whole process of coming to notice the resistance that we're feeling to meditation practice is pretty important information. Sometimes we really just avoid sitting down and meditating completely, because there's content that we're trying to get away from. I've heard people ask meditation teachers, and ask this meditation teacher, "So, I'm struggling with all this resistance to meditation, like what do I do? What do I do about it?" They suggested, you know, sit down and meditate on resistance. Meditate on resistance, welcome it into your experience. What does resistance feel like? How do you notice it arising? What is it really about?

I remember having an experience in meditation once, where I actually meditated on boredom, which was the first time that I really tried to do that, because I attributed my resistance to meditation to boredom, I just find it boring. And I was surprised to discover that underneath that boredom was a lot of self-doubt. Was a lot of, "I don't know if I can actually do this. I don't know if I can meditate, I don't know if I have the capacity to change my attention and concentration to get to know and work with other qualities within myself." It was fascinating, and very liberating actually, to realize that that's what was going on, that there was something else there. Of course sometimes we're bored, boredom actually happens, but when we can become curious and interested in our experience, and move towards it, we can really start to explore it in a way that's totally missed when we bypass it.

As we've mentioned, bypassing is all about distancing, and trying to get around. The tragedy of bypassing is that we actually miss out on the richness of our experience. I mentioned before, recently experiencing the loss of a teacher, and it was a very interesting experience to allow myself to really sit down and experience the sadness and grief that came from that. That my initial impulse was really to start rationalizing and think, "Okay, well, this is okay, being sad, but, you know, it's samsara, and it happened, and, you know, maybe in next lifetime we'll meet, et cetera." Then I felt this overwhelming, powerful desire to cry.

And so I sat down and actually had that experience, to let myself go into the feelings of grief and the feelings of loss, and talked with friends who also had experienced this teacher, and actually had a friend come over and we talked about what the teacher had meant to me, and how



he'd been important in my life, and in a way really honored him. And then I was surprised to discover that, as our grief was being worked through, that naturally those feelings of appreciation, of recognizing that every time I did the practice that I learned from him, that he would be there. That I had taken him into my heart-mind and he really would be there, that the most important parts of what I needed from that relationship had really been received and were with me. But if I had tried to skip to that, and move around the pain and the grief, those feelings of appreciation wouldn't have arisen in that really natural way. But what had happened in the moment is, I was able for some reason to catch myself trying to rationalize my way out of the feelings.

That is one of those times that we notice we're spiritually bypassing: when we can catch ourselves trying to logic our way out of feelings. Then it becomes this opportunity to go towards. The experience I had, of grieving this loss, and the connecting deeply with a fellow practitioner, and sort of honoring him, was incredibly rich and deep, and felt like a very kind of profound lesson, being able to tolerate painful feelings, but also have this spiritual meaning there also. If I had just tried to bypass those feelings, that richness wouldn't have been available to me.

The irony is that when we're bypassing, we're doing our best to try to help ourselves avoid pain and suffering, but we're actually cheating ourselves out of the real richness of spiritual practice that is available to us. We talked and said, [when it comes to] spiritual bypassing, the only way out is through. There's a wonderful book on spiritual bypassing by Robert Masters that I really recommend, and he talks about that the way to forgiveness, actual forgiveness, is through feelings of anger and hatred. It's really true, that when we allow ourselves to go through the painful feelings, it's amazing what can arise on the other side that's really genuine.

I think it's important to talk about mindfulness meditation in terms of spiritual bypassing, because mindfulness meditation can either be really a friend, in terms of helping us work with spiritual bypassing, or it can become a mechanism by which we actually bypass. And what happens with mindfulness meditation, especially with the simple meditations is we really can find ourselves trying to avoid the pain of this self-criticism, and the judgment, and the self-doubt that we feel about ourselves, by trying achieve perfect concentration. By trying to be a perfect practitioner and get past the messiness of all the feelings about ourselves in our minds, really just

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constantly trying to fix our mind, and make it perfect, in the meditation, rather than watching our experience, tolerating our experience.

We might get into that mode of striving for a blissful state, and skipping from practice to practice until we manage to achieve feeling really good, that's another thing that can come up with meditation. In lovingkindness meditation, people often talk about how hard it is for them to send love and kindness to themselves. They kinda just want to forget that part, forget the part at the beginning where I send the love and kindness towards me, saying "I'm gonna move right onto a loved one, to a focusing on sending that love and compassion to other people." Noticing that skipping over is a bypass, a way of avoiding. You might try and rationalize focusing on ourselves as indulgent, unnecessary.

These are all, those are some of the ways that we can act out bypassing in mindfulness meditation practice. But the flip side is that we can also use mindfulness meditation to help us go towards experience, to help us delve into and become curious about our experience. In the last talk of this series, we're going to explore how we can use mindfulness meditation to help ourselves get out of the habit of spiritually bypassing, and to notice when we're doing it.