

## Spiritual bypass (2 of 2)<sup>1</sup>

Observant students and teachers of religion and its healthy practitioners will, at some point, notice some kind of disparity between the truth and reality in how their colleagues perceive or practise their religion. Or, if we are ourselves honest, we may see such a disparity within our own practice of our faith and examine it. In other words, there is a healthy or true spirituality, and an unhealthy or false spirituality.

In other words, there are spiritual beliefs and practices that further our development and transformation of personality, and spiritual beliefs and practices that we incorporate into our unhealthy personality. The unhealthy tendencies in spiritual behaviour can often be identified as forms of “**spiritual bypass**.”<sup>2</sup> There are two kinds of false spirituality or signs of spiritual bypass: the defensive and the offensive.<sup>3</sup>

### Defensive spirituality

Defensive spirituality is the use of religion, whether as belief or in practice, to keep us from fully expressing ourselves. A common example is that, we, as a Buddhist, reject our anger because we think that Buddhism teaches that it is wrong to be angry or show anger. Our mind of spiritual defence rationalizes that we should reject that part of ourselves instead of investigating and resolving it.

When we reject a negative aspect of ourselves, it only persists. Denying our anger only serves to prolong suffering. It is present but we simply refuse to see it. When we refuse to see what is really there, we do not resolve it. So, it persists and hurts.

Spiritual defensiveness also occurs when we blindly or forcibly submit ourselves to an authority, rationalizing that it is an act of humility or holiness. With this defense, we then avoid taking responsibility for our own life. We claim that “we are moved by the spirit” of our teacher or some holy figure, God, even Buddha.

One of the most tragic cases of such a spiritual defensiveness was seen in the mass suicide of the Jim Jones’ cult of the Peoples Temple. In 1978, Jones convinced and coerced his followers to commit mass suicide by drinking Kool-Aid laced with cyanide and sedatives.

Another form of defensive spirituality is that of losing our sense of individuality – of personal decisions and aspirations – and surrendering ourselves (our time, strength, even body) to an authority figure. The most notorious example of this was that of the women who voluntarily submitted themselves as the personal servants and sex

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<sup>1</sup> This is part 2 of a two-part reflection. For part 1, see [R474](#). See esp John R Battista, “Offensive spirituality and spiritual defenses,” in Scotton et al (eds), *Textbook of Transpersonal Psychiatry and Psychology*, NY: Basic Books, 1996:250-260 (ch 24).

<sup>2</sup> If this is the first time you are reading this, it helps to first read part 1 of “Spiritual bypass”: [R474](#).

<sup>3</sup> See John R Battista, 1996 (id). It should be noted that even where some approaches here may coincide with Battista’s ideas and methods, my intention is merely to highlight the early Buddhist self-healing approach.

slaves of Sogyal Rinpoche and his like, under the delusion that this “Crazy Wisdom” would bring them quick enlightenment.<sup>4</sup>

A dehumanizing effect of spiritual defensiveness is when a person is afraid of love, intimacy or friendship, rationalizing that that “God loves me; I only need God,” or that “From love comes grief” (misquoting Dhammapada 212). This same rationalization can be extended to our sexual needs and wants, refusing to acknowledge them with the notion that “sex is evil or impure”; that abstinence or asceticism is the only way to religious purity or spirituality.

Abstinence and celibacy in early Buddhist monasticism are based on a complex structure of helpful rules, supported by the spiritual friendship of experienced teachers, and a wholesome ambience of proper training and meditation. It is a choice we freely make to healthily sublimate our sexuality from being physical (of the physical senses, the body as a physical whole) to the enjoyment of a supersensual or extra-sensory (that is, a purely mental) joy of dhyana.<sup>5</sup>

However, when celibacy is taken up without the proper spiritual training, support and ambience, that denial might then degrade into the defence of reaction formation – we behave in just the opposite way, being supremely pious and pure, but out of touch with reality. Or, we might rationalize (wrongly concluding) that only sex with the opposite sex is immoral, but it is all right to have sex with the same sex. A sad case was the predominance of homosexuality and pederasty in Japanese Zen Buddhism.<sup>6</sup> Even worse, it plagues us as today the “Catholic clergy syndrome,” that is, rampant child sexual abuse in religion.<sup>7</sup>

Spiritual defence can also exist on a simple, daily level, when we fail to address physical and psychological problems, such as depression. Instead of investigating and resolving the conditions from which they arise, we rationalize them as that “all of life is the Dharma.” Our life is both body and mind, the religious and the spiritual – both need to be investigated and understood.

## Offensive Spirituality

Battista states that “offensive spirituality may be considered the narcissistic use of a spiritual persona or spiritual identification” (255). Such false spirituality are found in the guru (such as Sogyal Rinpoche quoted above) who sexually exploited his follow-

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<sup>4</sup> **Sogyal Rinpoche**, a Dzogchen master and writer of the best-selling *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*: see <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2011/jul/01/lama-sex-abuse-sogyal-rinpoche-buddhist>; “In the name of Enlightenment – Sex scandal in religion” about Sogyal Rinpoche (UK Guardian): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWhlivvmMnk&feature=youtu.be>. For a psychological study of sexual problems regarding Sogyal Rinpoche, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yYpuYePJEZo>.

<sup>5</sup> See **Dhyana**, [SD 8.4](#).

<sup>6</sup> See, eg, “Kukai and the tradition of male love in Japanese Buddhism,” in J I Cabezon (ed) *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, New York: SUNY, 1985:215-230. For bibliography, see Dharmachari Jñanavira, “Homosexuality in the Japanese Buddhist tradition,” <http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol3/homosexuality.html>.

<sup>7</sup> See **Bad friendship**, [SD 64.17](#) (10) & [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman\\_Catholic\\_sex\\_abuse\\_cases](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Catholic_sex_abuse_cases).

ers or spiritual seekers with a “higher consciousness scorecard,” measuring their frequency of prayer and meditation or their spiritual development against that of another.

Offensive spirituality works to induce a false sense of superiority, whether through some measurable religious achievement (like a total duration of meditation or a tally of mantra chants) or being conferred some religious status by the teacher. These serve as markers for spiritual status, but which also works in making us avoid the real emotional and moral issues. When we are caught up in offensive spirituality, we feel as if we have, at least temporarily, risen above all vulnerability, that the Buddha, God, the gods, are on our side.

Both the defensive and the offensive aspects of false spirituality can induce us to avoid the fullness of our humanity because they act as spiritual bypass. To live the spiritual life, then, is to live our experiences, accepting ourself unconditionally, being kind to ourself in self-healing, rejoicing even in the smallest goodness we are capable of, and accepting the present as it comes, fully living it, knowing well that it is but a moment. We are our own best gift, to be accepted fully, joyfully and unconditionally – this is to live spiritually, to live in Dharma.<sup>8</sup>

R475 Inspiration 308  
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<sup>8</sup> See also Ingrid Mathieu, *Recovering spirituality*, Center City, MN: Hazelden, 2011. Preview: [http://www.hazelden.org/web/public/recovery\\_spirituality.page](http://www.hazelden.org/web/public/recovery_spirituality.page)