

Spiritual bypass (1 of 2)¹

At some point in our recovery process from some emotional problem or life issue, or even as we grow up, we are likely to consider the “spiritual.” Not many of us are happy with this term, as it has been abused and misused by various “new age” or transcendental ventures or some gilded guru or tartuffe.

Words should not be condemned; only their wrong usages should be exposed and rejected. A word like “spiritual” and its various forms can regain their sense of beauty and truth that relate to the essence or “spirit” or “soul” (in an aesthetic sense) of life – what makes life meaningful and purposeful. This vibrant and liberating quality does not come readily: spirituality is not a fixed idea. It is a “feeling” in the sense of a personal and direct experience, a vital sense of the Pali term *kāyena* (“with the body”), as used in a meditative or awakening context.²

In our experiences or ideas of the holy, or in our process of recovery from some pain, we can easily get caught up with an idea of some external agency, or even “Higher Power.” In other words, we attribute our healing process to something or someone, without really understanding how our unconditional self-acceptance and self-effort are at work. This condition is called “**spiritual bypass**,” a state where we, consciously or unconsciously, *avoid* dealing with the difficult issues, and so avoid completing or effecting the recovery process.

The term, “spiritual bypass,” was coined by John Welwood, psychotherapist and spiritual practitioner, in his book *Toward a Psychology of Awakening* (2000). There, he defines it as “using spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep personal, emotional ‘unfinished business,’ to shore up a shaky sense of self, or to belittle basic needs, feelings, and developmental tasks, all in the name of enlightenment.” (207)³

Buddhism teaches us to see and accept ourselves as we truly are. However, when we are unwilling or unable to see ourselves for what we are, we easily get blindsided by a self-identity view (*sakkāya, diṭṭhi*). The reality is that we are deeply unsure of ourselves, of almost everything in our life. So, we create a kind of “ritual self,” a body of routines in body, speech and mind. This is our “religious” self or “spiritual” identity. According to Welwood, this “is actually an old dysfunctional identity based on avoidance of unresolved psychological issues.” (12)⁴

Once we have created this false self-identity, wrong mindfulness does the rest for us. It makes us look for whatever fuels our self-image. We look for teachers who confirm our views or give us positive strokes. We reject or ignore what we see as a threat to our views and visions. We simply suppress or avoid any kind of feeling, and escape from difficult areas of our life. In short, we live incomplete and inauthentic lives.

¹ This is part 1 of a two-part reflection. For part 2, see [R475](#).

² The term, *kāyena* (“direct experience”) is best expressed in the phrase, *kāyena phassitvā* (or *phusitvā*), “having felt with the body.” The suttas mention “the body” (*kāya*) intentionally: eg, through the formless attainments, the arhat is freed from his body, ie, he is not subject to his 5 physical senses. His mind is freed through self-realized wisdom. See **Samāṇa-m-acala Sutta** (A 4.87,3), [SD 20.13](#).

³ I have not strictly followed Welwood’s theoretical or psychological structure of his term, but only borrowed it as a convenient vehicle for presenting the early Buddhist method of self-healing.

⁴ This paragraph applies the teaching of the “3 fetters,” which when broken, brings us to the very first stage of the path of awakening: see **Emotional independence**, [SD 40a.8](#).

Honest mindfulness is the light that shines in the dark corners of our lives revealing that there are no phantoms there, and to free our minds of them. Prayers alone cannot help us in problem-solving: if they could, who would not use them, reasons the Buddha.⁵ Meditation, too, by itself, may not help us free ourselves from identifying with a self – a fixed idea of oneself or a fixation to an idea of oneself.

The Buddha instructs us to ask appropriate questions to reveal which parts of our lives are awake, which still unawake. We can probe our minds, during quiet personal moments, by mindfully asking ourselves whether such questions arise to us:

“I am such and such.”

“I am like this”

“I will be such and such.”

“I will not be such and such.”⁶

Once we have seen and known that false self-image, we carefully and patiently reflect on how and why such an identify-view has arisen. Once we can see the conditions that bring about such a self-view, we are then in a position to remove those conditions. We begin dismantling these false projections by reflecting on them as they really are: “This is mind-made, constructed What is mind-made is impermanent ... What is mentally constructed is unsatisfactory”

The principle is clear and simple: what we can see with our mind, we tend to accept; what we have accepted as unwholesome, we can remove or at least weaken. The idea is not to fear facing our demons; they are, after all, our own creations. If we close our eyes to them, they persist in the darkness of the closed mind. What we resist, persists.

Here’s a case to consider. Let’s say we are discussing the psychological background of Singapore’s enfant terrible. Teenager Amos Yee, renowned for his public venting of vulgar language and violent ranting against religion, and who was imprisoned as a result. A critic then insisted that, despite his being a teenager, he deserved his punishment because he had been “given his chance to reform.”

This intolerant critic should then apply the above questioning array to himself. It may go like this: “Why am I intolerant of him?” “How has my memory of my own past abuses by my parents or teachers contributed to my intolerance?” “Will I continue to be intolerant whenever such a situation arises again?” “How will this affect my relationship with others, especially loved ones, when I perceive them as erring?”

During quiet moments, each of these questions (or similar ones) should simply be asked but not answered. Let the questions sink in, and, in due course, as we “hear” the answers arising in our mind, note them, and question them again in a similar way, until we feel the matter resolved. This self-healing method is called “thought reduction” (*vitakka,saṅṭhāna*) in the **Vitakka Saṅṭhāna Sutta** (M 20,8).⁷

In simple terms, “spiritual bypass” is negative, especially when it becomes a ritualization of a learning or healing process. When such an effort is “ritualized,” it means

⁵ See (**Pañcaka**) **Iṭṭha Sutta** (A 5.43), [SD 47.2](#) & **Alabbhaniya Thāna Sutta** (A 5.48) [SD 42.1](#).

⁶ See **Samanupassanā Sutta** (S 22.47,5-7), [SD 26.12](#) (4); also **Pārileyya Sutta** (S 22.81,12-30), [SD 6.1](#); & [SD 40a.8](#) (3.3).

⁷ **Vitakka Saṅṭhāna Sutta** (M 20/1:120) section 6, [SD 1.6](#).

that we have externalized it (we see its benefits as coming from *outside*, from something or someone), or objectified (we see it *as* something or someone). Instead, it should properly be an internalizing process, fully and wisely attending to a difficult situation.

Hence, an act of “letting go” would not work properly if it is ritualized, merely done “for itself.” We need to define – clearly see and accept – what really is troubling us. We can only let go of what we know experientially and see with insight. Only when we know our heart can we fully and truly feel in a wholesome way.

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