

## Spiritual Bypassing

Adapted from the writings of Lone Wolf, Aletheia Luna

*Spiritual bypassing is a very persistent shadow of spirituality, manifesting in many forms, often without being acknowledged.*

– R. Augustus

Very commonly, with clients and friends, when I ask them what images come to mind when they hear the word “spirituality” they respond with reminiscences of temples or ethereal instruments or chanting, Buddha statues, gardens or nature scenes, forests, mountains, oceans, sunsets and sunrises, enlightened masters, angels, and many other amazing images.

Generally, it seems people, including myself, tend to associate spirituality with transcendental and heightened states of being that are invariably associated with the feelings of happiness, joy, deep inner peace, and contentment.

While spirituality can include these beautiful and good-feeling things, there can develop a kind of intoxication, even a kind of addiction . . . and the highly attractive images we hold of spirituality can become a way of avoiding the darker, painful, and more exhausting dimensions of the spiritual journey.

Spiritual bypassing, like any other form of avoidance, gives us a false feeling of security and happiness, while undermining a deeper opportunity for self-awareness and transformation.

## Spiritual Bypassing: An Enticing Form of Escapism

What you resist, persists.

– C. G. Jung

Many people struggle with understanding what ‘true’ spirituality looks and feels like. Newspapers and the internet have all kinds of ads from kooky looking psychics promoting their services. There are the alluring internet courses dedicated to finding your ‘guardian angel’. There are books about “optimism” and articles about casting spells to attract love and prosperity.

But as many of us have discovered, most of these offerings can feel somehow shallow . . . something, *somehow*, seems off; we intuitively sense that these are superficial answers to very deep and profound personal inquiry.

What I have discovered is that it is not the practices themselves, for the most part, that are suspect or superficial . . . but it is more about my intention and what I am looking for that determines whether I have a meaningful, transformative or superficial experience. I discovered

that I could turn something that might be inherently very deep and meaningful into a distraction or a diversion.

*Spiritual bypassing is a term I coined to describe a process I saw happening in the Buddhist community I was in, and also in myself. Although most of us were sincerely trying to work on ourselves, I noticed a widespread tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks.*

~ John Welwood, 1984

Spiritual bypassing is largely about *avoiding* or *escaping* from difficult insight or self-awareness. To spiritually bypass is to use spiritual processes and circumstances to avoid, suppress, or escape from uncomfortable issues in life.

Issues one might want to avoid could include the death of a loved one, a relationship breakup or divorce, job loss, family problems, childhood abuse, loneliness, low self-esteem, shame, self-hatred, self-sabotaging behaviors, fear, mental or emotional health issues, or any other real and painful life processes.

For many people, spirituality may be a sort of support or resource used as a way of standing up again in the face of life's challenges – and very often this kind of supportive backing is *necessary*. We all need to be able to rely on tools and techniques as well as communities and belief systems stronger than ourselves at some time or another in our lives. The problem is when spirituality becomes like a drug on which we depend in order to circumvent or avoid the darker elements of our lives.

When spirituality is used as a defense mechanism to ward off the pain, anger or grief of our existence, it actually becomes our greatest hindrance. Spiritual bypassing prevents us from developing authenticity; true courage and wholeness . . . truly spiritual qualities that refine and evolve our consciousness. Spirituality can be a hiding place, of sorts, but using it to remove ourselves from the full spectrum of our feelings traps us in an all-is-happy-and-perfect prison of illusions.

## **Types of Spiritual Bypassing**

*What gives light must endure burning.*

– V. Frankl

Pursuing the light and living a purposeful and deeply interconnected existence is about setting yourself on fire!

Living a spiritual life is about creating an inferno of your false beliefs and illusions, your separating desires, ideals, and prejudices. It is about living with the falling away and ultimate

destruction of every limiting thing you ever thought and felt about yourself, other people, and the world. Spiritual evolution and transformation is not always pretty. In fact, it is the most shattering, tumultuous, and testing experience a person can go through in life.

It is in emerging from the ashes of old beliefs and unworkable, untrue identities that we can be truly born into life – open to new awareness and clarity of purpose for this human existence.

There are several types of spiritual bypassing . . . Below are some of the most common. Certainly, there are many other forms of spiritual bypassing, but here I offer some pointers to the very common ones that are easily observable in everyday life.

### **I) The Optimistic Bypass**

We've all come across people in life who love to laugh and smile yet seem to be forcefully optimistic. "Focus on the positive!" "See the glass as half full!" "Don't let a frown get you down!" are some of the catch phrases of people who tend to use optimism as a way of avoiding the more somber and troublesome realities of life. The optimistic bypass is often a side product of anger-phobia or conflict avoidance, or the inability to deal with negative emotions.

### **II) The Grandiosity Bypass**

This is a type of self-delusion that some spiritual seekers use as a way of masking their perceived deficiencies and insecurities. The aggrandizement bypass might be adopted by those who seek to feel enlightened, superior or having reached higher planes of existence; covering for a sense of inadequacy or insignificance. It is sometimes used by self-proclaimed masters, leaders, spiritually awakened teachers, and gurus.

### **III) The Victim Bypass**

When one becomes a victim of "special gifts" or of other people, this takes away the pressure of responsibility for shaping a satisfying life and taking responsibility for one's happiness – such is the case with the Victim Bypass. This type of spiritual bypass is often used by spiritual seekers who believe they have extrasensory gifts of some kind, but due to their specialness they are unable to feel happy or healthy. Identifying as an empath, for example, is sometimes a way of bypassing. One can blame others for their discomfort, justifying self-destructive and volatile reactivity because others are so unconscious. Other labels, like being a clairvoyant, indigo child, starseed, gifted healer, and so on, can often fall into the Victim Bypass trap.

### **IV) The Psychonaut Bypass**

Many spiritual seekers explore the frontiers of the mind, the soul, and reality through the use of psychedelic drugs such as LSD, DMT, psilocybin mushrooms, mescaline, and other entheogens that expand the mind and perceptions of existence. While this is an ancient and effective way of exploring reality, entheogens, like any other drug, can sometimes be used as a way of escaping reality and avoiding a commitment to personal responsibility and conscious choice for their experience.

## V) The Horoscope Bypass

When we frequently look outside of ourselves for help and guidance, as may be the case with Horoscopes and Psychics, we are failing to tap into our inner wellsprings of wisdom and strength and are allowing external predictions to control the outcome of our lives. The Horoscope Bypass is derived from fear and mistrust of ourselves, our inability to make decisions, and our inability to deal with anything tough that comes our way. While all such resources can be extremely supportive, it is in the dependency on them in lieu of developing one's own inner knowing capacities wherein lies the bypass trap.

## VI) The Saint (Martyr) Bypass

As children, we were conditioned to believe that a “spiritual person” is always kind, compassionate, and saintly. In adulthood, we continue to repeat this story to ourselves, and sadly, it can cause us tremendous suffering. The Saint Bypass is a reflection of extreme “black or white” thinking, promoting the underlying belief that spiritual people can't have dark sides because that would make them “unspiritual.” This type of bypass is essentially avoidance of one's shadow self or dark side by overcompensating with the guise of a sweet, heavenly, exterior. Self-sacrifice or martyrdom is a major symptom of this type of bypassing.

## VII) The Spirit Guide Bypass

In some spiritual traditions, it is a God who protects, in others an angel, an animal spirit or an ascended being. No matter who or what the Spirit Guide is, the belief that they are there to “protect” us is pleasing to the mind but may be constricting to the maturing of our consciousness. When we place our faith in an external being's power to ward off danger and keep us safe, we are committing a classic spiritual bypass: avoiding responsibility for ourselves and our lives and sidestepping the tough development of courage and resilience. We are not children, but when we give our creative power away we mold our lives in such a way that we fail to develop strength of spiritual character. Spirit guides exist to collaborate with us, but not to babysit us.

## VIII) The Prayer Bypass

Similar to the Spirit Guide Bypass, the Prayer Bypass circumvents personal responsibility by putting off-loading responsibility to a higher being to solve our problems and issues or rescue us from the consequences of our actions. While praying can be a powerful practice of alignment and collaboration with many forms of energy, it can easily become a misguided attempt to be saved from seeing those parts of ourselves we would rather avoid.

## IX) The Guru Bypass

Often it is beneficial to follow a guru, shaman or spiritual teacher to learn and grow. However, becoming too attached to them can rapidly turn into another form of spiritual bypassing. The temptation to begin worshiping (knowingly or unknowingly) these teachers means that we eventually forget the purpose of listening to them: **to integrate the essence of their teachings into our own lived experience.** By treating the words of a guru or master as the irrefutable truth,

by making them the authority of our lives and failing to develop our own sense of agency, we remain unconscious of our own unique life purpose and cannot have true spiritual growth or transformation.

## X) The Finger-Pointing Bypass

On our spiritual quests, we begin to see through the lies, delusions, and crazy behaviors committed by our fellow human beings and this can make us angry, downhearted, and frustrated.

However, when we get caught up in “everything that is wrong” with the outside world and other people, dedicating our lives to the self-righteous quest of finger-pointing, this can be another form of spiritual bypassing. Finger-pointing instills in us a false sense of righteousness, taking away our responsibility for looking *inside* and working on *ourselves*. At its roots, the Finger-Pointing bypass is sourced from fear and avoidance and is a powerful form of procrastination.

Certainly, there are many other forms of spiritual bypassing, but here I present the most common ones that are easily observable in everyday life.

## How to Stop Spiritual Bypassing

*Without deep and honest self-acceptance, the spiritual life rests on a dangerous psychological foundation and is nothing more than escape into a world of illusion. Humble self-knowledge is the most basic condition for any true spirituality.*

– John Monbourquette

The spiritual bypass is slippery, deceitful, manipulative, cunning and devious! It is often disguised in robes of light. It can take a lot of intentional, unrelenting self-honesty to see through the lies we’ve been conditioned to believe or have told ourselves.

Below are some generalized methods that can be applied to the identification and resolution of spiritual bypassing:

### 1. Cultivate an Open-Minded Attitude

Before uncovering any forms of spiritual bypassing that have wheedled their way into your life, you need to be open. **You need to be willing to be wrong, misguided, or totally off the mark.** Without that willingness, you’re fooling yourself. There’s almost no point in even *trying* to call yourself out unless you are willing to feel some shame and humiliation. So, cultivate an open-minded, willing, courageous and humble attitude. Notice that being imperfect is not a death sentence. Consider the possibility that you are redeemable.

Most spiritual seekers – in fact, I’d dare say ALL seekers – go off into some kind of bypass at *some* point. The path is so incredibly demanding and rigorous. When one has not learned how to take refuge in Divine Love, one will take refuge in old stories or beliefs that offer temporary relief. Just noticing, becoming more aware of the tendencies for bypass and the circumstances

that trigger us . . . keeping an open mind . . . allows for the space in which alternative experiences and behaviors can emerge.

## 2. Examine the Light and Dark Side of What You Do

There is a light and dark side to everything. Even if you struggle to find what's wrong with the spiritual activities or commitments you're dedicated to right now, **create *hypothetical scenarios***. For example, if you follow a spiritual teacher that you love and adore, create a hypothetical scenario where that teacher betrays your trust or does something against your ethics. What then?

Ask questions such as, *"What could go wrong here?" "What am I not seeing?" "What would my best friend say?" "Has this teacher ever betrayed anyone's trust in the past?" "What red flags have I been ignoring or rationalizing?" "Is anything I am doing hurting me or harming others in some way?" "Am I bypassing, avoidant or dependent?" "What am I able to escape, not see or do, as long as I keep my attention focused on the teacher's experience rather than my own?" "Is there an opportunity for me to be taken advantage of here?"*

**Listening to your doubt is intelligent.** Blind faith creates sheep, not self-aware, autonomous spiritual vessels. Dare to look at *both* sides of your spiritual life. Honor the duality (yin/yang – masculine/feminine – light/dark) of existence. Explore the energy of both Shiva (the destroyer) and Shakti (the creator).

## 3. Dare to Face Your Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive dissonance (CD) is a state of being where a person's beliefs and behaviors do not align. CD also happens to people who hold *two contradictory beliefs*. The result is a sense of underlying uneasiness, anxiety, guilt; the feeling that "something is not quite right."

**Those who carry a lot of cognitive dissonance tend to "explain away," their behavior (or that of others) and live in denial.** Facing the truth is too painful, so reality is avoided, and a false reality is created instead.

CD often happens to members of cults but can also occur in the general spiritual community. For example, a person might experience CD when they follow the principle of compassionate non-harming but overeat, drink too much alcohol, overuse marijuana, neglect to exercise or maintain a diet that causes inflammation or indigestion.

Other examples of CD include following a narcissistic spiritual teacher who says one thing and does the other, claiming to be a healer with special abilities but on some level knowing that it's a pretense (and placebo), following a non-dual philosophy but being dogmatic about it, and so on. Facing CD involves deep self-examination and personal honesty; doing some shadow work and becoming responsible for personal behaviors that don't add up. This is not about shaming or being "more perfect," but being honest and clearing away any self-delusion.

#### 4. Ask Others for Their Honest Opinions

If you have any close friends or family members (with whom you have a healthy, respectful relationship), talk to them about this topic. Ask them if they have noticed any spiritual bypassing tendencies within you. Brace yourself (and your ego) by taking a slow, soft, deep breath for their response. If, at any point, you feel overwhelmed with an emotion like anger or defensiveness, thank them and tell them that you need a minute or two to process what they've told you.

**Feedback from other people (who genuinely care) is invaluable.** But make sure it's from people you trust to be honest, not people who will just tell you what you want to hear! Also, don't go someone with whom you have a complicated connection to divulge your concerns or insecurities about spiritual bypassing tendencies. If there is a possibility that they will use it as an opportunity to hurt you in a backhanded way, notice this possible inclination to set yourself up for shame or humiliation. If you don't have an objective and loving resource, try a spiritually informed counselor or therapist who is familiar with spiritual bypassing. Sometimes in an online group of kindred spirits whom you trust you may find receptivity. A twelve-step sponsor can be a safe and reliable resource.

#### 5. Face and Feel Your Pain

Why does spiritual bypassing occur? The answer is that it helps us to avoid facing painful emotions such as grief, shame, rage, hatred, and terror. **Everyone wants to enjoy a sparkly spiritual high (that is ultimately short-lived) but no one wants to do the hard work of facing inner pain.** Ironically, facing these feelings without reactivity or resistance is the defining principle of a spiritual life! It is *through* being truly human, with all the messy experiences and challenges of being in bodies that we find those “also human” (divine human) moments of joy, fulfillment, and peace.

Facing and feeling pain is not simple. Many require the help of a spiritual counselor or therapist – and ideally, such a resource will be *trauma-informed*. When pain is avoided or bypassed that is usually an indication that wounds from a very early developmental period of life is waiting to be resolved. This is not a fun prospect for most people, hence the avoidance of reflective therapies and use of spirituality as a Band-Aid.

Practices that can help to face and feel old patterns of pain and anger might include breathwork, bodywork, meditation, mindfulness, journaling, art therapy, expressive dancing, catharsis, inner child work, and the list goes on. Go to [annelisamacbeanphd.com](http://annelisamacbeanphd.com) for more information.

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*Real redemption or enlightenment, as much as it can be achieved in this world, comes through hard work that does not skirt tough personal issues. It can be a deeply unsettling, even terrifying experience to tear down the veneer of illusion from our lives and stare into the face of truth. But the spiritual path is a process of destruction and purification. It requires you to set afire all hidden*



*illusions and falsities so that life becomes clearer, deeper,  
expansive, liberating, and joyful.*

– Elaine N. Aron