

Spiritual Bypassing: What It Is and How to Work with It - Class 1 of 2

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Introduction

Good morning everyone. I'd like to add my welcome to Rob's. I'm very happy to have this chance to be with you today and to explore this topic of spiritual bypassing that I see to be of particular importance at this time in our country and on our planet.

Opening Reading

I'd like to begin with a reading that's been a part of my own practice for many years, a piece of writing that Jack Kornfield offered that for me sets a tone for our gathering today and enables us to just take a brief moment to remember why we're here, perhaps, in terms of some of the deeper reasons. He writes,

"My simple prayer is that in all things I learn to love well, that I learn to touch the ever-changing seasons of life with a great heart of compassion, that I live with the peace and justice I wish for the earth. That I learn to care fully and let go gracefully. That I enjoy the abundance of the earth and return to it from the natural generosity that is our human birthright. That through my own life, through joy and sorrow, 'In thought, word, and deed,' I bring benefit and blessings to all that lives, 'that my heart and the hearts of all beings 'learn to be free.' "

Format of the Gathering

With that in mind, I'd like to say just a few words about the general format for our gathering today, which is pretty simple and straightforward. We're gonna begin with a period of silent meditation shortly. At the conclusion of that meditation period, I'll ring the bell to bring it to a close, at which point I'll share a Dharma reflection on the theme and topic of this program, Spiritual Bypassing.

When that's completed, we'll take a short break to be kind to our bodies and take a moment to relax and take care of ourselves and take a break. Then we'll come back, do some experiential work, have some time for discussion, questions and responses, and eventually close with a dedication of merit.

Reflections on Spiritual Bypassing

I'd like to share some reflections now in relation to the theme of this retreat, the topic of spiritual bypassing. This is a topic I've been fascinated by for many years. I'm beginning in the early 1970s when I was first getting involved with spiritual practice and I came across a book by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche called *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*. It was a very important book for me on a number of different levels.

I'll talk a little bit about that further as I get into this talk, but this phrase, spiritual materialism arose as a result of observations that Trungpa Rinpoche made of the ways in which some of his western students were working with the Buddhist teachings. And there were certain ways in which he could see that were so clear to him that the ego was co-opting the teachings in service to itself.

So that rather than the function of the teachings in some of the lives of his students being to dissolve the identification with the ego in service to the realization of true nature, what was actually happening was that the people were misusing the teachings in a particular way that was actually bolstering and solidifying the identification with the ego rather than allowing insight into the nature of the ego and our true self to arise.

John Wellwood's Contribution

I began to see some of this in my own practice after a few years and then I came across the topic again in some writing by John Wellwood, a Buddhist meditation teacher and psychologist familiar to some of you, who in 1984 coined the term spiritual bypassing, which was essentially another way to talk about what Rinpoche had called spiritual materialism.

Wellwood was a student of Trungpa Rinpoche, as well as a Zen student in his own practice. And he saw the same thing that Trungpa Rinpoche was seeing in his work with his psychotherapy clients who were meditators and spiritual practitioners. And he felt the same concern that Trungpa Rinpoche felt for the likely suffering people would experience as a result of not wisely understanding how to use spiritual practices and beliefs.

Wellwood's definition of spiritual bypassing is worth our consideration. So he said,

“Spiritual bypassing is the use of spiritual practices and beliefs to avoid dealing with our painful feelings, unresolved wounds, and developmental needs.”

So let me read that again so that we can just take it in. Spiritual bypassing is the use of spiritual practices and beliefs to avoid dealing with our painful feelings, unresolved wounds, and developmental needs.

Personal Experience

One of the reasons I have a passion for this topic is because I also worked as a psychotherapist. When I first got involved with practice in the early 70s, I was an undergraduate psychology student. I later went on to do graduate training and some additional training with a particular emphasis on gestalt therapy, which was popular back in the 70s and 80s.

And when I started to work in private practice in Boulder, where for a small city, there were quite a large number of spiritual communities, I began to see the same things that Trungpa Rinpoche and John Wellwood had talked about in their writing and teachings. I didn't just see these in other people, these tendencies, I also saw them in myself.

Here's an example that comes to mind that I hadn't thought about for quite a long time until I sat down to prepare this particular material. When I first got involved in practice, I was a 21-year-old undergraduate at Tulane University in New Orleans. And as you might surmise, I didn't choose New Orleans because it was one of the spiritual centers of the universe.

It was well known as a party town and a convention city. And I had a significant number of oats I wanted to sow, and it seemed like the perfect place, particularly if I could also get a bachelor's degree in the process. For the first two years, I was wholeheartedly committed to a particular path called hedonism, essentially.

I really played with gusto in terms of spending late nights in the French Quarter and getting to know the city and occasionally going to classes and things like that. What was not expected in that process was how unhappy I would become, chasing after what the culture had told me would bring happiness and didn't turn out to be at all true.

So after a couple of years of that, I had become quite depressed and anxious and was very emotionally upset, much of the time. And I was ripe in a certain sense for what happened on my 21st birthday when I visited a friend's apartment and I noticed a book on meditation and yoga on his bookshelf and I said, quote, "Hey, Billy, okay if I borrow this book?" To which he said, "Sure, just bring it back when you're done."

That was in January of 1971. And essentially I never looked back. It was so clear to me that what was being taught in this book was more life-affirming and more skillful and a wiser way to live that could actually bring me the kind of joy and happiness I was seeking in my hedonistic pursuits that I left most of my friends behind and committed myself quite wholeheartedly first to mantra practice, meditation, doing yoga asanas, cleaning up my diet.

I stopped smoking cigarettes and drinking and getting high and things like that, and I was actually set on a course that has maintained since that time, which is quite a while at this point.

Meeting a Teacher

I found myself a yoga teacher because I realized after another book I read about yoga and meditation that I needed more guidance as I was developing my meditation and spiritual practice. And I had the good fortune to meet a valuable teacher, Swami Satchidananda, who had come to New York in 1966 and begun establishing yoga and meditation centers across the United States.

So after graduating from college, I went on to train as a yoga teacher and got very involved with teaching yoga and meditation and starting on what became a lifelong path. Now some of you know who have been involved with yoga, part of the subculture in the classical yogic tradition of India involves the practice of brahmacharya or celibacy.

So here I was at 23, 22, admiring the teachers and the committed celibates who were the senior students of Swami Satchidananda, and in a subculture in which that way of living was considered to be wiser and higher than living in a conventional manner that involved intimate partnerships and things of that sort.

So for a couple of two and a half, three years, I committed to celibacy, finished the yoga teacher training, and then moved out to Boulder when they opened Naropa University, well then Naropa Institute before it was accredited in 1974.

Therapy and Realization

It was at that point that I decided to do some work as a client in psychotherapy. I also was no longer enamored of celibacy, being in a place like Boulder and being at Naropa, which was like the spiritual version of a miniature Woodstock event in many ways.

The planners for Naropa's summer of 1974 planned on two to 300 participants in these workshop gatherings that they were planning and turned out to be about 22 to 2300 people who showed up. So they were not at all prepared for the onslaught that occurred and it made for a pretty fascinating summer to really abbreviate that story significantly.

When I went into therapy, I pretty quickly saw what was going on in regard to the celibacy, which a part of me had a certain kind of subtle, but not so subtle spiritual pride about, as if that were a better way to live and a higher state of consciousness and so forth, right?

What unfolded in the course of my work as a client in therapy was coming to see honestly and directly how absolutely terrified I was of intimate partnership, sexual expression and opening my heart in a vulnerable way to another human being.

So what I was actually doing in my choice to be celibate was just what Wellwood talked about in that definition I shared with you a few moments ago. I was unconsciously avoiding something that was a

very important part of my life that was too scary and painful for me to have the courage or wisdom to approach and explore in a way that would have been wiser and more skillful.

I don't fault myself for that at this point in time. However, when I first came to that realization, I was quite judgmental of myself because I suffered from a lot of the same kind of perfectionism that many of us grow up with in this culture, as if, quote, "I should have known better. I should have seen through that woundedness and vulnerability," what Wellwood calls the wound of unlove that leads us to have these unconscious blind spots in our consciousness and our spiritual lives.

So that's simply one example in a more concrete sense so that spiritual bypassing is not something just conceptual, but something that we can actually come to see as an integral part of the spiritual path.

The Journey of Awakening

I wanna emphasize the point here that we don't expect ourselves not to occasionally lapse into one of these sand traps on the spiritual path. It's a normal part of what Ram Dass would call the journey of awakening. What's helpful, however, is that if we have an understanding of these kinds of processes, we can recognize them when they occur, or at least more quickly than we would otherwise. And we can see them as part of the curriculum of awakening.

The more conscious we become of the unaddressed wounds that we carry and the way that they influence the way we move through the world, the more awake we are and the less at effect we are to unconscious influences from what Carl Jung would call the shadow of our consciousness.

Part of what brought this topic up for me at this particular time is what's happening in our country right now in terms of the painful political polarization we're living with, and what's happening around the world in terms of the environmental crises that we're living with and largely ignoring much of the time, the war between Ukraine and Russia, the degree of intense suffering that is happening on this planet right now feels supercharged in some sense to me.

And because like a lot of you, I've been working with these practices that are designed to open my heart to the 10,000 joys and the 10,000 sorrows, as they're called by the Taoists, I'm feeling the resonance of what's going on in our country and around the world in a way that's incredibly painful at times.

Working with Suffering

How to work with that is the koan that I found myself exploring and currently continue to explore, because it's clear to me that if I open my heart to what's happening and really let it all in, there's a point at which I become emotionally disabled, just overwhelmed by the degree of suffering.

On the other hand, it's easy to fall off on the other side. I see certain friends of mine basically saying, I just don't watch the news. I don't wanna hear about it, right? I'm just gonna go about my life and

disregard what's happening because it's too painful and difficult. I don't know what to do about it. And I'm done. I'm gonna act like it's not there, right?

For me, that feels like falling off the other side in an unskillful way. How do we actually live in the world as it is? Which for many of you, perhaps you recognize, that's a common phrase in the world of vipassana practice and insight meditation. The word vipassana is sometimes translated as seeing things clearly or seeing things as they are.

So how to do that when the world's in the state that it's in without going under or becoming emotionally overwhelmed, without checking out and becoming desensitized and numb?

And so I saw this, the impulses towards some of this spiritual bypassing activity in my own consciousness in the course of working with this koan of understanding what emotional balance and presence look like when our planet is in the sad and painful shape that it's in right now.

The First Noble Truth

What's true, I think, that we all recognize is the first noble truth, that life does involve suffering for anyone who incarnates as a human being. I think the Buddha was onto something, if you will. The question is, what's a wise way to work with what's happening that allows us to use a Tibetan phrase—to turn poison into medicine.

Jack Kornfield talked about a variation on this concept in *A Path with Heart* years ago, when he said, "What we need to learn to do is turn straw into gold." Because in a certain sense, the greater the difficulties, the more powerful the potential teachings can be on the level of insight and the realization of seeing reality how it is and seeing our true nature as it is also.

Andrew Harvey's Perspective

The writer Andrew Harvey talked about this at one point with these words. He said,

"Spiritual life has nothing to do with evading suffering. It has everything to do with opening to the full effects of suffering, and by that wild act of opening to suffering, not only in our own lives, but in the lives of every being around us, by that act, discovering the mystery of the presence in and beyond suffering.

"This takes courage. This takes an absolute honesty. This takes a ferocious commitment to truth."

So what's being advocated here that's so important, a part of Buddhist practice and other authentic contemplative traditions, is counteracting the impulse to be aversive to any kind of suffering and

become unaware of it and rather to turn toward it and go into it in skillful and appropriate ways so that it can become the kind of teaching that I referred to a moment ago when I talked about turning poison into medicine.

Rachel Naomi Remen's Insight

Rachel Naomi Remen, a beautiful physician and spiritual practitioner familiar to some of you, who's written some wonderful books, particularly one called *My Grandfather's Blessings* and one called *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, described it in these words—this notion of turning toward and opening into and through the challenges in our lives rather than spiritually bypassing them.

“Those who don't love themselves as they are rarely love life as it is either. Most people come to prefer certain of life's experiences and to deny and reject others, unaware of the value of the hidden things come wrapped in plain or even ugly paper. In avoiding all pain and seeking comfort at all costs, we may be left without intimacy or compassion. In rejecting change and risk, we often cheat ourselves of the quest. In denying our suffering, we may never know our strength or our greatness, or even that the love we have been given can be trusted.

“It is natural, even instinctive, to prefer comfort to pain, the familiar to the unknown. But sometimes our instincts are not wise. Life usually offers us far more than our biases and preferences will allow us to have. Beyond comfort lie grace, mystery, and adventure. We may need to let go of our beliefs and ideas about life in order to have life.”

Normalizing Spiritual Bypassing

So this notion of turning toward is a central element in a wise understanding of spiritual bypassing. And so I want to normalize this in the sense that I mentioned a little earlier—this is a normal part of practice, not something that shouldn't be happening.

When I was in my early 20s, I was quite naive about the process, but I've noticed it coming and going over many years of practice at this point—more than 50 years. I've seen occasions upon which the inclination towards spiritual bypassing arises in my heart and consciousness.

Even people like Ram Dass, who many of us consider to be highly realized and evolved when he was alive, yeah? Ram Dass talked about the same potential issue of self-deception and delusion that we all lapse into from time to time. Here's an example that he gave from a short piece he wrote called *Roommates*:

“I was taking a meditation course,” he writes, “and I arrived five minutes after the course began. You go in silence. You’re not allowed to talk to anyone else during the course. I had a roommate and he was very neat. He did hospital corners on his bed.” Right?

“I decided that he didn’t like me, that I was a slob and he didn’t like me. I spent the entire week of the retreat mostly staying out of the room because I felt like he didn’t like me. I figured maybe I snore, maybe that was it. But I just got a feeling that he was so clean and so neat that he couldn’t possibly like somebody like me. I built up this incredible feeling that this guy hated me.

“When the course was over, he walked up to me and said, ‘I want to introduce myself and tell you that just knowing I was in the same room with you and sharing this retreat with you helped my meditation so much. Thank you. I feel so much love for you. I wish I could have told you.’”

Right? And then Ram Dass reflects on the experience and said,

“I suddenly saw my own mind. I had created this incredible mountain of paranoia and spent a whole week worrying about it, and it was all in my mind.”

So he turned it into a teaching, right? That’s what we want to do when we see ourselves getting caught up in various forms of spiritual bypassing.

Common Forms of Spiritual Bypassing

So with this in mind, I’d like to go through some of the more common forms of spiritual bypassing. This is not an exhaustive list at all. And I will mention some resources for those of you who want to take a deeper dive into this topic a bit later.

Unity Consciousness

The first example, though, is what we could call **unity consciousness**. That is, many of the great wisdom traditions talk about and make reference to our capacity as human beings for unity consciousness—knowing ourselves to be one with the entire universe in a very real and literal and felt way. And that’s certainly something that we human beings have within us as an innate capacity.

What sometimes happens, however, with this kind of notion is that it’s understood in a very naive way.

Another Ram Dass story comes to mind. He wrote about, at one point, living in a commune in the late ’60s. And it was a fairly good-sized group of people. Probably this was when he was involved with Tim

Leary after they'd left Harvard, I would suspect. And there was a point at which he was on the rota—the kitchen rota—to take his turn on certain days of the week to clean up the kitchen. There were several people in that group. One of them was a young woman who, of course, since this was the 60s, was named Sunflower, right?

And he described at one point when dinner had been completed and he was getting ready to leave the dining area, and Sunflower, who was on duty, so to speak, to help clean up the kitchen that night, started to leave. And he asked her where she was going. And she said she was gonna go off to an event. And he said, “But you're on for kitchen cleanup tonight.”

To which she replied, “Well, yeah, but anyone could do that. So—and I've got to go to this.” And Ram Dass, you know, like I know, we're all one anyhow, right? So it's okay, don't worry about it.

At which point, Ram Dass got rather stern and said, “Just a minute, Sunflower. I agree with you that we are all one.” And then he paused and very directly looked at her and said, “It's still your turn to do the dishes,” right?

It doesn't exempt you. That kind of naive understanding is quite problematic, but there's no short amount of it. I mean, when I came to Boulder initially in 1970, that kind of thinking was everywhere.

There was a lot of love-and-light consciousness. There were a lot of perspectives that spirituality was all about the positive and had no place for the shadow—a lot of naive spirituality, yeah?

So yes, there is a kind of unity consciousness that we experience when we mature in the spiritual life. When it happens, we recognize that it's quite transformative. And it literally, to coin a Zen phrase, it turns us inside out and upside down in terms of how we understand ourselves and the world.

Let me give you an example of an actual experience of unity consciousness. This is from an email that someone sent me a few weeks after coming to a retreat I taught here in Boulder several years ago at our center called the Rocky Mountain Eco-Dharma Retreat Center at about 8,500 feet up above Boulder. He gave me permission to share this.

“A glimpse?

On silent retreat two weeks ago, during a period of walking meditation, a sudden fluttering appeared in front of my face. A hummingbird.

I became so instantly still that even my pupils shifted to focus on what was happening.

After a moment, it flew up close into my beard and was poking around on my chin. Gentle, yet firm and with the same pressure each time. Then it pulled back, paused, and it went right up my left nostril.

It poked around up there five or six times and again pulled back and paused before going up my right nostril.

Up until that point I had had no thought whatsoever. Total stillness.

Awareness was experiencing the process I call hummingbird as not separate from the totality, as awareness was also not separate.

After a couple of pokes up the right nostril, a thought—“Will it move up to poke my eye?”

In this moment, the hummingbird moved back, took one last look and flew away.

I imagined that when I, in quotes, wondered if it, in quotes—so we’re back to dualistic experience versus non-dual—I imagined when I wondered if it was going to poke my eye, a thin layer of identity and separateness had been created, leaving me in awe.”

That’s a glimpse of non-duality.

Another example that comes to mind—this one by the poet Elizabeth Herron. You can see the same quality of transformational energy in what she describes. She writes:

“I was depressed. The world had gone flat and colorless. I had withdrawn. I was a tiny kernel inside my body, adrift amid necessities and obligations, oppressed by my separateness and cut off from the wellsprings of my soul.

I walked up to the pond, took off all my clothes, and plunged into the water.

A sudden shock—cold against my skin.

Floating to the surface, I heard a bird call across the meadow.

Suddenly I was at the still point. The bird’s call was my voice. We were separate and yet one. I was out there and in here. All things converged in me and radiated from me. The center of the circle is everywhere, the circumference nowhere.

I recognized this, knowing it had always been so, though I had been cut off from my experience of it.

My head filled with poetic images. The dimension of the infinite was everywhere.”

So even when that experience passed, you can well imagine how that would have reshaped her understanding of what reality actually is.

It’s as if I go to the top of Longs Peak, the 14,000-foot mountain that overlooks Boulder Valley where I live, and I see how everything interconnects from the point of view of 14,000 feet. There’s a kind of understanding I have that there’s no way I can experience when I’m in the midst of a traffic jam on Highway 36, going from Boulder to Denver.

However, even after I come down from Longs Peak, I know what I saw and experienced, and I’m changed by it. That’s why these breakthrough experiences that in Zen are called *kensho* and *satori* are so transformative and so powerful.

So yes, there is such a thing as unity consciousness. And in a spiritually mature understanding of the journey of awakening, what we come to see is that our task is to learn to live on two levels of consciousness simultaneously. One level being that of the small egoic self, which itself is sacred, and

another level which is the unitive consciousness that we sometimes call Buddha nature or true nature. Other traditions call it Christ consciousness. Suzuki Roshi called it *big mind* at the San Francisco Zen Center.

And once we discover that we have innate within us this true nature, we still express ourselves as an individual personality and ego and body in the world. And now we're suffused by the wisdom and compassion of our true nature. And we become an instrument of something much greater than our own self-interest.

That's what St. Francis was talking about in the contemplative Christian tradition, when he prayed, "Lord, make me an instrument of thy will."

Other teachers have used different language and different metaphors to talk about the same process.

So that's unity consciousness.

Exaggerated Detachment

Let's look at some other forms of this kind of spiritual bypassing.

Another one that we see in spiritual communities—where we're vulnerable in relation to it—is what could be called **exaggerated detachment**.

I noticed when I started to teach and travel to different centers and venues that, particularly in certain venues, there was a tendency for people to want to imitate their teacher. And there was a subtle but not-so-subtle negative value on emotional expression. Somehow we were supposed to be calm regardless of the circumstance and not make emotional waves, because wise people were calm in absolutely every circumstance.

And there's an element of truth in that in terms of understanding wise equanimity, which is a kind of emotional balance—it's being able to stay on the surfboard even when the waves get really high or very choppy. And there are many stories, as I think many of us know, in the Buddhist world about great masters staying calm in extreme circumstances.

Well, that's wonderful if it's authentic. And for certain people, I believe that it is. What's not wonderful is suppressing all of our emotions or flattening our affect, or desensitizing and numbing ourselves because we have a model in our head that we're supposed to be calm in every circumstance.

That's a form of spiritual bypassing. We don't want to feel the anxiety or the fear or the pain or the anger or the sexual desire or whatever it might be. And so to avoid that pain, we shut down our heart, we desensitize and numb our body, and we actually don't even much live in our body at that point.

There's a beautiful line in a story by James Joyce, one of the few things I remember from my freshman English class when I was an undergraduate, from a story called *The Dubliners*. He describes this one character by saying,

“Mr. Duffy lived a small distance from his body.”

And that’s a real tendency that we have when we don’t want to feel what’s going on for us. It’s just not wise. We end up tightening our muscles in order to not feel. It has negative impacts on our immune system and our overall health because the energy of those numbed emotions is not insignificant. It has an effect.

So what we want to watch out for is what in Buddhist teachings we call **the near enemy of equanimity**. It’s a state that appears to be equanimity, but it’s not authentic. It’s really a kind of posturing that we see in certain people and communities.

And I’m not excluding myself from any of this. I was very, very numb in the early years of my spiritual practice. And it was only because of being able to afford good psychotherapy and pay for Rolfers to open up my physical body, that I actually began to learn to live in my body and not be so afraid of it and its impulses and its desires.

So this is a second kind of spiritual bypassing: exaggerated detachment.

Overemphasis on the Positive and Aversion to the Negative

A third kind that’s related very directly to the one I just described, I would describe as an **overemphasis on the positive and an aversion to the negative**.

The giveaway for this one is people who talk about, quote, “*positive and negative emotions*,” as if certain emotions are okay—compassion, loving-kindness, joy, happiness, generosity—what we call the *paramitas* in Sanskrit, *paramis* in Pāli—perfections of the heart. Then there’s the *negative* quote-unquote emotions—anger, resentment, lust, so many feelings that we put in a category of undesirable, and ideally we shouldn’t even be feeling, right?

So here’s another excuse for suppressing and ignoring and avoiding, right?

This is often how the Jungian shadow gets created, because we have a conceptual model in our mind that some emotions are good and okay and can be expressed, and others are bad and make us bad people if we experience them.

Quite the contrary—for those of us who are sincerely interested in spiritual awakening, we need to have the courage and the bravery to explore this realm of so-called *negative* emotions. Because here again, if we can turn toward them and open into them, we can come to befriend them. They then become much less likely to influence us from the wings in a way that we don’t know or understand.

Here’s an example that comes to mind from Jack Kornfield in his book *A Path with Heart*. He writes:

“In my earliest practice as a celibate monk, I had long bouts of lust and images of sexual fantasy. My teacher said to name them, which I did, but they often repeated.

Accept this, I thought, but then they’ll never stop. But still I tried it. Over days and weeks, these thoughts became even stronger.

Eventually, I decided to expand my awareness to see what other feelings were present. To my surprise, I found a deep well of loneliness every time the fantasies arose. It wasn’t all lust—it was loneliness. And the sexual images were ways of seeking comfort and closeness.

But they kept arising. Then I noticed how hard it was for me to let myself feel and accept the loneliness. I hated it. I resisted it.

Only when I accepted this very resistance and gently held it all in compassion did it begin to subside.

By expanding my attention, I learned that much of my sexuality had little to do with lust. And as I brought an acceptance to the feeling of loneliness, the compulsive quality of the fantasies gradually diminished.”

So what we see here is a maxim that applies both to good Western psychology and to mindfulness training: **awareness precedes choice**.

We have to bring awareness to a phenomenon in order to have it come into the realm of choice. And then our behaviors become a matter of skillful choices rather than habitual stimulus-response reactions.

What actual spiritual awakening is about, if you think about it, is just the opposite of shutting down the “negative” quote-unquote emotions. It’s about **opening to all of what’s involved in being human**. Hence you have phrases like *the 10,000 joys and the 10,000 sorrows*.

Joseph Campbell, in talking about the nature of the spiritual life, captured what I’m talking about now in these words:

“People say that what we’re all seeking is the meaning of life.
I don’t think that’s what we’re really seeking.
I think that what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive,
so that all our life experiences on the purely physical plane
will have resonances with our own innermost being and reality,
so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.”

Right?

Think about the phrase “*waking up*.” It’s waking up to our aliveness in the present moment. That’s why books like *Be Here Now*, when Ram Dass wrote it in 1970, and *The Power of Now*, that Eckhart Tolle

wrote, and why philosophers throughout history have talked about the **eternal now**—that’s where our lives happen.

And when we wake up, we open to all of it—the full spectrum, if you will.

I love the way the writer L.R. Knost captured what it means to be really awake, spiritually and alive in some basic human sense:

“Life is amazing.
And then it’s awful.
And then it’s amazing again.
And in between the amazing and the awful,
it’s ordinary, mundane, and routine.

Breathe in the amazing,
hold on through the awful,
and relax and exhale during the ordinary.

That’s just living.
Heartbreaking, soul-healing, amazing, awful, ordinary life.
And it’s breathtakingly beautiful.”

Diluted Notions of Compassion

A couple more of these, and I’ll save some for our next meeting next week too.

How about **diluted notions of compassion**?

Sometimes people express compassion in such confused ways. A friend of mine refers to it as what he calls *terminal niceness*. One of my Tibetan teachers talked about what he called *idiot compassion*. And when I was training as a Gestalt therapist, Fritz Perls used to talk about *chicken soup*—when people were expressing what they thought was compassion, and it really wasn’t.

True compassion is rooted in **wisdom** and **clear seeing** of a situation, so that our intuitive wisdom comes into play and is actualized in such a way as to help us understand what a truly compassionate and skillful response would be.

But I think we’ve all lived long enough to know that the possible range of skillful responses in our efforts to be compassionate can be quite extreme.

At one extreme, for example, sometimes just **holding another person in presence** and conveying to them with your silence and your presence that it’s fine for them to be where they are and who they are at that moment is a great healing gift and blessing. I’ve experienced that with several amazing

teachers who just would sit with me. And I felt that I could finally release some of the self-judgment that I had brought from my childhood into my adult life.

On the other hand, there's a place for what we on the street call **tough love**, right? Or what in Tibetan practice is called *vajra anger*, where sometimes I might need to get in someone's face.

Say, hypothetically, I have a 17-year-old teenage son who's getting into hard drugs. I may need to get into that young man's face and say in no uncertain terms, *you are going to rehab tomorrow and I'm not gonna let you ruin your life. And there's no discussion that we're gonna have about that. You are going tomorrow.*

And even if that young man doesn't want to hear that, if what's in my heart is primarily compassion and love for him, the message will get through. He'll be much better off than if I let him experience what some parent educators call *natural consequences*. Not in that situation, thank you.

So what do I mean by **confused notions of compassion**?

Let me give you an example from my book, actually—from *Life Part Two*—in relation to something that happened. I used to lead a lot of Gestalt groups back in the '80s when I was a Gestalt trainer. And this is one example that came up in one of those groups where you can see someone with a misguided understanding of compassion.

In the late 1970s and early '80s, I was fascinated with the kind of personal growth work that was done in groups. I was teaching Gestalt therapy, leading several personal growth groups a week.

The groups had a wildness and unpredictability about them, qualities that often pushed both the participants and me beyond our comfort zones into places that were exciting, vulnerable, and fully authentic.

I often felt like I was privileged to be seeing people when they were being as real as human beings could ever be.

In one meeting, we did an opening check-in and everyone took a few minutes to update the group on their experiences of the past week.

Julie, a woman in her mid-30s, was the last person to speak that day. She was normally extroverted and quick-witted. Today, however, she seemed shy and withdrawn, almost whispering what she was saying so that I could hardly hear her.

I leaned in and concentrated on both her words and her nonverbal communication. Her shoulders were rounded, she slumped forward a bit, and her lower lip was trembling ever so slightly.

"I just can't believe it," she said. "I just can't believe it."

"Can't believe what?" asked Rick, a group member sitting next to her.

“It’s over. Rob called off our engagement,” she said. “We sat down to plan our wedding for this summer and he didn’t seem into it at all. I asked him what was going on and he became very quiet and looked away from me.

Then he said he did not want to get married. He said he’d been thinking about it for the last months and he realized that it wasn’t the right thing, that he wanted to remain friends, but he didn’t want to be romantically involved any longer.”

At that point, Julie began to cry. At first, she wept quietly, tears streaming down her cheeks. Then the dam broke and she began to sob, to let herself feel the deep grief and huge disappointment of her loss.

It was excruciatingly painful to witness. The room became still, and almost everyone in the group opened their hearts to silently create a space of compassionate refuge for Julie.

There was one person, however, who was unable to maintain the silent, caring environment the group was creating.

Allison, who was sitting on a meditation cushion across the room, stood up and started walking toward Julie.

I intervened immediately and said, “Stop, Allison, what’s happening for you right now?”

“I can’t just sit here like the rest of you. Can’t you see Julie needs a hug and some comfort? Don’t any of you care about what she’s feeling?”

“Please go back to your seat and sit down,” I said.

She remained standing for a few moments and looked at me with anger in her eyes. Then she returned to her seat and joined the rest of the group in giving Julie their healing attention and support.

Perhaps you’ve already guessed what was going on.

All of us in the room that day, except Allison, understood that Julie **feeling her grief** was a necessary step in her healing process.

When I later met with Allison individually to talk about the incident in the group, she told me that the previous year, her own fiancé, Richard, had called off their wedding the day before it was to take place. I could see from the tears in her eyes that her feelings about her own loss were still painfully raw.

And I helped Allison to understand that she’d been unable to tolerate the emotions triggered in her own heart by what Julie was sharing with the group.

Unaware of her unconscious agenda when she stood up in the group, Allison had perceived me as a heartless and unskillful psychotherapist. She had convinced herself that she was the only person in the room who had the courage to reach out when Julie was in need.

Near the end of our debriefing session, Allison and I talked about her own need to mourn and to heal.

“When I feel brave enough, I’d like to follow in Julie’s footsteps,” she said. “Maybe at one of our group sessions coming up.”

So you can see what we mean here when we’re talking about **unskillful expressions of compassion or deluded notions of compassion**. This is another form of spiritual bypassing that we’ll see—not infrequently, actually.

Poor Boundaries

We’ll talk about one more of these and then we’ll take our break and continue after that.

The last one I want to talk about for today involves what, in clinical vocabulary, we call **poor boundaries**—not being able to set healthy boundaries with other people. This has to do, for example, with the tendency that some of us have, largely rooted in our family-of-origin experience, to be a *pleaser no matter what*.

Being more invested in **pleasing other people** and seeking **other people’s approval** than we are concerned with our own needs or what’s actually true for us.

The skill that comes into play here is what I call learning to express **honest yeses and noes**.

I noticed in the early years of my psychotherapy practice, when I was also one of the guiding teachers for the Insight Meditation community here in Boulder, and then I also started to volunteer as a hospice volunteer in my late 20s, I was so enamored of the path of service and people who inspired me onto that path that I often **overextended myself** and said yes to things that I really didn’t have the capacity to do.

It would usually take something like a cold or a sore throat to slow me down and make me realize I was being extending beyond my capacity and not being willing to offer myself the same kind of compassion and self-care I aspired to offer to others.

Many of us have had the experience of knowing how uncomfortable it is to say *no* when someone asks us to do something.

At the same time, in a mature relationship, there’s a respect for an **honest no**. There’s a place for it. It might mean our needs are in conflict and we have to have some discussion about that, but there’s an integrity about the exchange that’s maintained in the relationship.

This is something that we can perhaps talk about in the discussion period, because I suspect I’m not the only person who has ever wrestled with this particular challenge.

Most of us are very aware that when someone asks us to do something, they would much prefer a yes response than a *no*. If we're self-aware, however, and if we're mindful, and if we're self-compassionate, we will take into consideration what's going on for **us** at that moment, as well as what's going on for the **other person**.

And we will tap into our **intuitive wisdom** to intuitively understand what kind of response is appropriate.

This word *appropriate* is something I've become quite enamored of lately. I found out some years back when I was studying with a Buddhist scholar who came to a meeting of meditation teachers that the word that's translated as *right* when we talk about the Noble Eightfold Path—right speech, right mindfulness, right livelihood, and so forth—is a Pāli word: **sammā** (S-A-M-M-A).

This scholar's feeling was that *right* was not a very good translation for Westerners, because most Westerners, as soon as they hear the word *right*, think in terms of *right and wrong*. Some teachers, you might have noticed, will talk about *wise speech*, or *wise concentration*, or *wise view*—to try to take it out of that context of right and wrong.

This particular scholar said that he felt a better translation—maybe the best translation—of the Pāli word *sammā* was the word **appropriate**.

And what piggybacked on that was hearing a Zen story from my friend David Loy, who's a Zen teacher who lives here in Boulder, in which he told a story about the great Zen master Yūnmén (or Ummon in Japanese), whose senior disciple approached him at one point and asked a question.

He said, "Rōshi"—which, if you're not familiar with it, is an honorific in Zen like *reverend* or *rabbi*—"Rōshi, what is the **fruition** of a lifetime of practice?"

I would have expected a long answer.

Yūnmén looked at this person and said,

"An **appropriate** response."

And he stopped.

So what we're looking for here when it comes to setting boundaries involves **honoring ourselves and our needs and our current situation** at the same time that we're open to hearing and honoring and respecting the person we're engaging with.

And then developing a kind of intuitive wisdom—like our own inner teacher—who helps us to understand the **appropriate response** in that particular situation.

Saying yes on autopilot and then later resenting it or regretting it is just one more form of spiritual bypassing.

Summary and Conclusion

So let me see if I can summarize this for a moment and maybe pull it together.

Let me just go back to the definition once more. So what I said about spiritual bypassing is that it's **the use of spiritual practices and beliefs to avoid dealing with our own painful feelings, unresolved wounds, and developmental needs**. And for that reason, it's often an unconscious process.

I'm also saying, though, the good news is that as we develop our mindfulness and self-compassion, when we get caught in that kind of sand trap and we do something that's of that nature—**as we deepen our practice**, our mindfulness, and our self-compassion—we will **notice** when we've done it. We will explore it briefly and **learn** from it so that we'll recognize it **sooner next time**. And then we'll get back on the path and begin to continue on our way.

We won't excessively judge ourselves in super harsh ways because we understand that this is a **natural part of human consciousness** and how it comes to full fruition in terms of wisdom, mindfulness, and love. These are natural processes.

I'm also suggesting that there's a value and importance to what I have called **turning toward** rather than unconsciously avoiding and being aversive to these areas of discomfort.

There's a way in which the **painful parts of our lives**, when approached with appropriate skill, appropriate mindfulness, and compassion, become very important and **transformative aspects of our spiritual lives**. We can actually begin to recognize their value, even though we wouldn't choose to suffer or wish suffering on anyone else.

We come to understand a comment I heard Ram Dass make way back in the early '70s, when he said something I really didn't want to hear at the time. He said,

“From the standpoint of spiritual awakening, **suffering is functional**.”

It's not desirable. We wouldn't choose it and we wouldn't wish it on anyone. But because the **First Noble Truth** is true, we want to actualize our amazing potential to **turn poison into medicine** and **straw into gold**.

Recommended Resources

So I'll close with a quote from another book on spiritual bypassing that I'll recommend to you, called *Spiritual Bypassing: When Spirituality Disconnects Us From What Really Matters*. This one's by a writer and spiritual teacher named **Robert Augustus Masters**. And I'll mention that again so that those of you who want to go deeper—this is one resource I'd recommend.

Spiritual Bypassing by Robert Augustus Masters. The other is a book by **John Welwood**—W-E-L-W-O-O-D. And that one's called *Toward a Psychology of Awakening*. So if this material rings a bell in some cases and feels like something you want to unpack further, both of these I consider to be very helpful resources.

This is near the end of Robert Masters' book:

"Spiritual bypassing is worth outgrowing.

All we have to do is stop turning away from our pain and consciously enter it.

This means an end to disembodied living

and an end to spiritual dissociation,

an end to emotional illiteracy and relational immaturity.

As we commit ourselves to a full-blooded awakening

rooted in the cultivation of intimacy with all that we are,

we find a willingness to bring whatever we have kept in the dark out into the open.

And from this newfound openness, we emerge with the gifts of our hard work:

firsthand wisdom that benefits one and all."

Break

So I want to thank you for your kind attention.

Let's go ahead and take a short break. So you can stretch, do something kind for your body if you'd like, or take care of personal needs, have something to drink.

Let's come back at—well, my clock... I guess let's go with California time, huh? Since that's where Rob is hosting us.

Let's see. Let's come back at 11:15 Pacific time, 12:15 Mountain time, 1:15 Central, I guess 2:15 Eastern.

I'll see you back here in the Zoom room at **quarter past the hour**.

Exploring Personal Relationships to Spiritual Bypassing

Welcome back, everybody.

I think we'll go ahead and continue at this point.

What I'd like to do is create an opportunity for those of you who would like to—to explore your own relationship to some of these aspects of spiritual bypassing that I've been talking about.

You can choose one of two ways to do this.

For those of you who are open to it and would like to do so, I'd like to invite you to **go into a breakout room with another person**—meet a fellow spiritual traveler and have some discussion with another person.

If that's not something you want to do, or that's uncomfortable for you for any reason, you could use this time for some **journal writing** and reflect upon these aspects of what I've been talking about.

For the moment, I'd like you to have something to write. I want to give you the—I want to list for you the types of spiritual bypassing I've talked about so far, so you can review them either in your writing or with the person you talk to.

So if you don't have something to write with, find something for a moment.

List of Spiritual Bypassing Types

Here's the list:

1. **Unity consciousness**
2. **Exaggerated detachment**
3. **Overemphasis on the positive and aversion to the negative**
4. **Diluted or confused compassion**
5. **Poor boundaries**

Reflection Questions

What I'd ask you to think about is:

- To what extent, if any, do you relate to any of these forms of spiritual bypassing I've spoken about?
 - And is there one or two that really jump up or speak out to you, that you notice would be worthy of your attention and could be a fruitful area of growth for you to pay attention to?
-

Discussion and Reflections

Welcome back, everyone.

Given the *Star Trek* nature of what we just did, you might want to take a moment to count your fingers and toes—see if everything came back with those of you who were in breakout rooms.

Questioner

The breakout room was very helpful.

David Chernikoff

Uh-huh. Say a little bit more, Kathy, if you would.

Questioner

Just the woman I talked to, who's in a very different circumstance than I am, we had a lot in common, or a lot of understanding of each other's circumstances. And it was very nice.

David Chernikoff

Thank you. Let me open it up. and just see if any of you would like to say a few words about what it was like to go into the breakout room or where your reflection that you shared took you or just those of you who could use extra credit for class participation. Anybody? What was that like? Go ahead, Judy. Oh, you're muted, Judy.

Questioner

Yeah. It was a good experience. We came up with two spiritual bypassing issues that we talked about. And the first one was aversion to the negative. And that was in relation to what's happening in the United States right now. David, when you mentioned people who don't watch the news, I could agree with that. I decided to stop watching the news, but I do read the Washington Post and the New York Times headlines every day. Sometimes, often I don't read the article and I find it very upsetting. And I think the two women I spoke with who were in my group were feeling the same way. So how do you use those strong feelings and that aversion into a teachable moment?

David Chernikoff

Well, I mean, that's the koan that I was talking about a little earlier that led me to want to explore this topic in a fresh way with people like yourself, right? So it's not like there's one prescription, as I understand it, that everyone should follow.

I can say a little bit about what I'm doing, just in terms of my exploration of how to work with the emotional complexity of our current situation. I do something similar to what you described in terms of, I get the *New York Times* summary. I like the BBC because they're not here in the United States and

they have a less biased perspective on the United States. But I follow some of the main events so that I have some understanding of what's happening.

I notice the difficult emotions you're talking about that get triggered, but I don't experience them as overwhelming or disabling. I see them as part of what one of my teachers called **the tender heart of sadness**—that we human beings really have some significant issues that we haven't really learned to work together on.

And I look at it in a very broad perspective, as well as in the immediate sense. So for example, if you think in terms of evolutionary biology, what's happening on our planet right now has a very different light to it than what happens if you look at it only from the standpoint of the present moment.

All right, I mean, human beings have been—there's really a paradox here. On the one hand, you have someone like King Solomon in the book of *Ecclesiastes* saying, "There's nothing new under the sun," right? Buddhist teachings would say, human beings have always been vulnerable to the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion. Right? So on that level, there's nothing new under the sun.

Paradoxically, what's also true is, as Noam Chomsky put it, this is the first time on our planet when the viability of life continuing on our planet is called into absolutely serious consideration. There's a very—there's a real possibility that this planet may not remain habitable if we human beings don't learn how to live together in a different way than we currently are.

So on one level, this is nothing new. I suspect it wasn't easy to be on earth when Genghis Khan was roaming around, right? Or during the Crusades, for that matter, or during the Black Plague. So I take a real—one part of me takes a really long view and tries to understand the situation in that regard.

And at the same time, I try to not ignore or disregard the pain that I feel when I read the latest news report about something that seems completely inappropriate and violates my deepest core values.

Yeah.

But part of the spiritual path, as I understand it, is learning how to expand our **affect tolerance** so that we can actually embrace as fully as possible what—that phrase I used previously—the 10,000 joys and the 10,000 sorrows.

I have a friend, for example, who had surgery for brain cancer yesterday. I have another friend who's preparing to exercise their right to die in accordance with Colorado law and medical aid to dying. I also have beautiful things happening in my life.

How to hold **all of that** is one of the major challenges that we're all being presented with if we're interested in spiritual awakening.

So I don't have solutions. Those are some of my reflections on what I've been doing to work with our common situation.

Yeah. Does that...

Questioner

Thank you so much.

David Chernikoff

You're welcome. You're welcome. Other comments or reflections? Please, Tamara.

Questioner

Hi, thanks so much. I'm really grateful for this retreat.

Spiritual bypassing is something that is—it's something I think about a lot and that I notice a lot. And something that I was thinking about, that you mentioned kind of briefly but that I also think about a lot, is that—and I'm looking on the web page right now—**using spiritual practices and beliefs to avoid dealing with painful feelings, unresolved wounds, and unmet developmental needs.**

And that's so normal. It's so normal to avoid painful feelings, and unresolved wounds, and unmet developmental needs.

And the ability to face those requires **so much support**. And **a lot of resources**. A lot of resources.

You know, you mentioned having the privilege of the risk, having the resources for therapy and for bodywork. And then the development—you know, you talked about the development of all the skills, **so many skills** that are necessary in order to live life **open to those painful feelings**, and working with those unmet developmental needs and healing them and, you know, and those unresolved wounds.

And so I guess I just wanted to give voice to that—how much it requires, and how normal it is that, you know, the culture in which we grow up is all about, you know, keeping that all buried.

David Chernikoff

Oh, we, our culture has raised distraction to the level of ritual. We're masters at distraction. Yeah, absolutely. I gave a talk years ago about this called "Weapons of Mass Distraction" actually.

So I mean, I appreciate your point. And what's also true is those of us who do have the good fortune to be resourced in such a way as to open our hearts and quiet our minds and aspire to be bodhisattvas on the spiritual path, there's a real need for people who have the good fortune to have access to authentic teachings and the resources to develop, to do so for the benefit of both ourselves and the collective. And that's a lot of what gets me out of bed in the morning, frankly.

Yeah, so thank you. Joyce, would you go ahead, please?

Questioner

Sure. This is something that has been on my mind recently. I live in an area, and I suspect you do too, where there's a lot of access to nature and it's very, we're very privileged.

And, you know, the thing I don't sort of get, I hear so much about that people have their transformative breakthrough experiences in nature. But what about people who don't, who live in the slums of Mumbai or people who live in a very urban area and they don't have access to that, they're not privileged. privilege. There's so much emphasis on nature.

And to me, that just seems inauthentic in a way, you know, as part of the consciousness, and it's just something a lot of personal.

That makes sense?

David Chernikoff

Yeah, so in other words, say a little more about what bothers you about that. I want to see if I can understand it a little better.

Questioner

Well, it's kind of like people can't have a transformative breakthrough experience unless they're in a beautiful forest. Yeah, see, traffic, you know.

David Chernikoff

Yeah, my experience is really quite different than that. Right. I mean, for a lot of people, it's true that nature is a place where we can ground ourselves, where we're reminded of the larger order of things that I was talking to Judy about a little bit ago, right? And it's very nourishing for a lot of people who have the good fortune to have access to natural environments, right?

At the same time, it's quite possible, and it does happen quite often, people do have experiences that are breakthrough insights in Grand Central Station and on the street in Mumbai, frankly. I had an experience in Mumbai, actually, walking down the street, seeing families of three and five living in cardboard boxes from discarded refrigerators, right? And there was an experience of feeling connected to those people in a profound way. That was quite extraordinary, right?

Sometimes in the emergency room or in a traumatic crisis, right, people will have these breakthroughs. So that's also something that does happen. You don't hear as much about it, you know, and people like Ralph Waldo Emerson don't write about those experiences, right?

What's also true though is that for some people, the path isn't about breakthrough experiences. It's just a gradual unfolding, like the parting of veils that are very thin. I remember reading a comment of a teacher, a very respected Western Dharma teacher, said that in her 35 years of practice and study, she'd never had a breakthrough experience. She just felt like gradually, she just, her life unfolded and got more and more harmonious, and she felt better able to cope with it and work with it.

And in her early days as a teacher, she was jealous of people who came in at her retreats to talk about their breakthrough moments, right? And then she realized that that just wasn't her way of unfolding. Hers was more gradual.

So it's interesting territory, certainly. And Maslow's work with peak experiences and what he called plateau experiences kind of contributed to some of our understanding of these kinds of issues.

Questioner

Thank you, that's helpful.

David Chernikoff

Yeah. We've got a few more minutes to be together. if anyone has any other general comments or reflections or questions. What else might be on our mind? Go ahead, Heidi.

Questioner

I'm trying to articulate this succinctly, but we had a conversation about where the, like was the term spiritual bypassing, what was it coined, you know, more in a psychological and therapeutic people creating that because for example, like in Tibet, they talk about psychological, you know, like Buddhist psychology, and they have a different approach to looking at trauma or healing through meditation.

So we're kind of wondering like, is it partly because we come in a culture that does not see spirituality as the foundation of who we are we raise children as its primordial space of we are spirit beings and from there, you know, certain experiences happen to us.

So I'm just curious of like where that falls.

David Chernikoff

Yeah, I think it's an interesting issue. I do think it's in a large part related to our particular culture. Yeah, I think it's not exclusively so, but for example, if you look at a Tibetan culture, it's fundamentally a spiritually oriented culture, right? Ours is fundamentally a scientific materialistic culture, right?

Those are very different environments in which to grow up and have your formation occur both psychologically and spiritually. So I think it's a point well taken and it'd be interesting to explore it.

It's a little bit like in India, people who would be hospitalized as psychotic in our country are oftentimes held to be divinely mad and they're taken care of by the village if they're not grounded but they seem to be highly spiritually developed. You know, they're not looked at as psychopathological problems.

Sometimes they're actually looked at as a blessing in a small village community. So culture, my point being culture does come into play here I think in a significant way. Yeah, yeah, thank you. Diana, go ahead and unmute if you would. We'll take this, we'll take Diana here and then I think we'll wrap up for today.

Questioner

Yeah, I'm just kind of bringing up a kind of a question and an issue we pondered in my small group and it's something that it's going to maybe take a lot of depth, but kind of in a lot of spiritual communities

and teachings though, like there is kind of a bias against bringing up some of those really dark, heavy, painful emotions. And that's like, you're not equanimous enough.

David Chernikoff

Exactly.

Questioner

And then it kind of makes it like, you kind of like, oh, well, I failed at that too. You know, I just wanted to bring it. And like, even like, I'm just gonna kind of bring up, you know, like wrestling with depression or some other mental distress that kind of pathological diagnosis.

And you kind of touched on this in the last question, which is really great. But I think it's something that a lot of people come to Buddhist teachings to resolve that suffering, but sometimes it's just stays, as you say, on that esoteric level with the spiritual bypassing, but not knowing like it's a big concept that you hardly ever hear about.

So I really appreciate your teaching.

David Chernikoff

You're very welcome.

I think you're seeing something clearly—that some Buddhist meditation sanghas and communities do create subcultures of the kind that you're talking about, where equanimity and calm is very highly valued and emotional pain or emotional expression, especially if it's strong, is discouraged. That's real.

And I've been in those environments as a participant and also taught in some environments of that sort, right?

For myself personally, I'm not interested in sort of dumbing down my emotional experience of life. I'm interested in becoming emotionally intelligent and becoming wise and compassionate in relation to my emotions and the emotions of others.

And for me, you know, the most mature and wise teachers I've had the opportunity and the blessing to sit at the feet of have seemed to understand that in a way, 'cause they seemed to accept all of me. And I could open up in those situations without having to posture or pretend that I was calmer or more equanimous than I actually felt.

For me, that's not particularly a helpful or supportive atmosphere.

So just because a community claims to be a spiritual community doesn't necessarily mean it has a wise understanding of all the issues that we're talking about here today.

Yeah. So I appreciate you bringing up that point.

Closing

Since we're at our closing time, I thought I'd close for today with just a short reading that comes to my mind because I so appreciate getting together with people like yourselves who have a sincere interest in exploring these kinds of issues.

And as Deanna just mentioned, there's something really important and valuable about the Sangha. There's a reason the Buddha made the Sangha one of the refuges, yeah? And coming together with people of like heart and like mind is really nourishing and supportive in a way that many of us are really needing right now, given how difficult it is to be in our country.

So I'll close with this poem by a yoga teacher and writer named Dana Falls, and her poem is simply called *Sangha*.

"Teach me what I cannot learn alone.
Let us share what we know and what we cannot fathom.
Speak to me of mysteries and let us never lie to one another.
May our fierce and tender longing fuel the fire in our souls.
When we stand side by side,
Let us dare to focus our desire on the truth.
May we be reminders, each for the other,
That the path of transformation passes through the flames.
To take one step is courageous.
To stay on the path day after day,
Choosing the unknown and facing yet another fear,
That is nothing short of grace."

And that's how this feels.

So I wanna thank all of you for your attendance and participation today and hope there was something of value for you here, and I'll look forward to reconnecting next week with those of you who make it to the live event, or perhaps we'll meet in the recording.

Everybody be well, have a good week. See you next time.

And one big thanks and a bow to Rob for being our Zoom guru and for organizing this whole event, because we wouldn't be here if it weren't for Rob and the wonderful people at the Sati Center.

Bye bye now.