Spiritual Bypassing: Ten completely B.S. practices of supposedly spiritual people

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“My vibration is so high, man. My chakras are so aligned. Fuuuckkkk, I’m a spiritual beast, bro.”

No one ever told me spirituality could be a self-sabotaging ego trap.

I spent about three years reading about spiritual teachings and incorporating them into my life before ever learning that spirituality has a dark side.

Naturally, I was taken aback. I felt kind of betrayed.

How could something that seemed so pure and good be harmful?

The answer has to do with something that psychologists call spiritual bypassing. In the early 1980s, psychologist John Welwood coined the term "spiritual bypassing" to refer to the use of spiritual practices and beliefs to avoid confronting uncomfortable feelings, unresolved wounds, and fundamental emotional and psychological needs.

According to integral psychotherapist Robert Augustus Masters, spiritual bypassing causes us to withdraw from ourselves and others, to hide behind a kind of spiritual veil of metaphysical beliefs and practices. He says it "not only distances us from
our pain and difficult personal issues, but also from our own authentic spirituality, stranding us in a metaphysical limbo, a zone of exaggerated gentleness, niceness, and superficiality."

Painful Realizations: My Own Spiritual Bypassing


"Aspects of spiritual bypassing include exaggerated detachment, emotional numbing and repression, overemphasis on the positive, anger-phobia, blind or overly tolerant compassion, weak or too porous boundaries, lopsided development (cognitive intelligence often being far ahead of emotional and moral intelligence), debilitating judgment about one's negativity or shadow side, devaluation of the personal relative to the spiritual, and delusions of having arrived at a higher level of being."

I encountered the concept of spiritual bypassing for the first time in Masters' work. Although I was reluctant to admit it, I immediately knew on some level that this concept applied to me.

As I continued to reflect on spiritual bypassing, I noticed more and more shadow aspects of spirituality, and I realized that I had unknowingly been enacting many of them at one time or another.

Though painful, these were some of the most important realizations I've ever had. They've helped me to stop using a warped form of "spirituality" as an ego boost and to begin taking greater responsibility for addressing my psychological needs and the issues that arise in my life.

10 "Spiritual" Things People Do That Sabotage Their Growth

The best way to understand spiritual bypassing is through examples, so now, it's time for some tough love.

I'm going to go into detail to describe ten specific shadow tendencies of spiritual people.

Caution: Some of these may hit pretty close to home.

Remember: You need not feel ashamed to admit that some of the items on this list apply to you. I suspect some of them apply to everyone who has ever taken an interest in spirituality. Most of them applied to me at one point or another, and some I'm still working through.

The goal here is not to judge, but to increase self-awareness in order to progress toward a more honest, empowering, useful spirituality. Let's get into it.

1. Participate in "spiritual" activities to make themselves feel superior to other people.

This is probably one of the most pervasive shadow aspects of spirituality, and it takes
many forms. Some people feel superior because they read Alan Watts. Or ride their bike to work. Or refrain from watching TV. Or eat a vegetarian diet. Or use crystals. Or visit temples. Or practice yoga or meditation. Or take psychedelics.

Note that I'm not saying anything about the value of partaking of these activities. I love Alan Watts and think meditation is quite beneficial. What I'm saying is that it's alarmingly easy to allow your spiritual ideas and practices to become an ego trap—to believe that you're so much better and more enlightened than all those other "sheeple" because you're doing all of these rad #woke things. Ultimately, this sort of attitude toward "spirituality" is no better than believing you're better than everyone else because you're a Democrat or a Lakers fan. This dysfunction actually inhibits genuine spirituality by causing us to focus on one-upping other people, rather than cultivating a sense of connection to the cosmos and feeling poetic wonder at the sublime grandeur of existence.

2. Use "spirituality" as a justification for failing to take responsibility for their actions.

The essence of the point is that it's very easy to twist certain spiritual mantras or ideas into justifications for being irresponsible or unreliable.

"It is what it is," or "The universe is already perfect." or "Everything happens for a reason." can all function as excellent justifications for never doing much of anything and never really examining one's behavior. I'm not commenting on the truth or untruth of the above statements. I'm just saying that if you're consistently hours late for appointments, if you frequently neglect your close personal relationships, and your roommates can't count on you to pay rent, you
might want to stop telling yourself, "Whatever man, reality is an illusion anyway." and start becoming someone others can depend on.

In a similar vein, it's surprisingly easy to deceive yourself into thinking that anytime someone has a problem with your behavior, it's because that person "isn't honoring my truth" or "just needs to grow spiritually." It's much more difficult to acknowledge the moments in which we act brashly, selfishly, or thoughtlessly and inflict suffering upon someone else. It's much more difficult to admit that we too are far from perfect, and that growth and learning are never-ending processes.

3. Adopt new hobbies, interests, and beliefs simply because they're the latest "spiritual" fad.

Human beings want to fit in somewhere. We all have a deep need to feel that we belong. And we form groups of all kinds to satiate this need. Spirituality is one interest area around which people form all sorts of groups. This is potentially a great thing, but it also has a shadow aspect.
Meme disclaimer: These memes are not meant to have any connection to an actual person. This person should be considered an actress posing as a spiritual bypasser. For many people, "spirituality" is little more than a hip thing that a lot of people seem to care about. These people get the idea that they want to jump on the spiritual bandwagon, so they start practicing yoga, wearing New Age fashion items, going to music festivals, drinking ayahuasca, etc., and they tell themselves that this makes them "spiritual." These "spiritual scenesters" dilute the significance of genuine spiritual inquiry, contemplation, experience, and realization. They also, in my experience, tend to be the "spiritual" people who are using "spirituality" as a reason to feel superior to others.

4. Judge others for expressing anger or other strong emotions, even when it's necessary to do so.

This is one of the first patterns I noticed in myself after being introduced to spiritual bypassing. I realized that when people became upset or angry with me, my response was to say things like, "Getting angry doesn't help anything." or "I feel we would have fewer problems if we could remain calm." Internally, I would silently judge the other person, thinking, "If only they were more enlightened, we could avoid this drama." In many situations, this was my way of avoiding deep issues that needed to be addressed.
When you become interested in spirituality, one of the first quotes you're likely to encounter is: "Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of harming another; you are the one who ends up getting burned."

This quote is commonly misattributed to the Buddha, though it's actually a paraphrase of a statement made by Buddhaghosa in the 5th century. The subtle point of the quote is that we shouldn't hold on to anger; we should feel it, express it if necessary, then let it go. However, it's very easy for the lay person to assume that this means that anger, in any form, is a sign that one is unwise, un-spiritual. This is untrue. Anger is a natural human emotion and a perfectly justifiable response to many situations. Often, anger is an indicator that there are serious issues that need to be countenanced within oneself or one's relationships.

Ironically, many spiritual people repress all "non-spiritual" emotions and artificially heighten "spiritual" emotions/trait such as compassion, kindness, and equanimity. This leads to inauthenticity. One struggles to constantly present oneself as calm, gentle, nice, and in a state of perpetual peace, and ultimately ends up looking and feeling like a fraud.

5. Use "spirituality" as a justification for excessive drug use.

A lot of people, myself included, believe that psychedelic drugs can occasion mystical experiences and enhance (secular) spirituality. That's all fine and good, but some people take this realization too far, using it as a way to rationalize self-destructive patterns of drug use and to blind themselves to the dark sides of various substances.
In the most extreme cases, "spiritual" people end up "performing cannabis ceremonies" during all their waking hours; taking psychedelics too frequently or in unsuitable contexts; and completely denying that these substances have any negative effects. Now, HighExistence tends to be pro-psychedelics, but let me give it to you straight: **Psychedelics, including cannabis, have a definite dark side.** If you're irresponsible or simply unlucky, stronger psychedelics such as LSD or psilocybin mushrooms can occasion traumatic experiences with long-term negative ramifications. And cannabis, a mild psychedelic, is a seductively habit-forming drug that will subtly cloud your mind and erode your motivation if you indulge too much, too frequently. Respect the substances, and **utilize them wisely.**

**Comment:** ...or don't utilize them at all. They aren't necessary.

6. Overemphasize "positivity" in order to avoid looking at the problems in their lives and in the world.

"Just be positive!" is often employed as a deflection mechanism by "spiritual" people who would rather not do the difficult work of confronting their own internal issues, wounding, and baggage, let alone the problems of the world. The "positivity" movement has exploded in Western culture in recent years. The Internet is overflowing with seemingly endless memes and articles repeating the same inane messages: "Think positive thoughts!" "Just be positive!" "Don't focus on the negative!"
Though there is surely value in cultivating gratitude for the many marvels of the human experience, this movement seems to overlook something critical: **The darker aspects of life do not disappear, simply because they are ignored.** In fact, many problems in our individual lives and on the global scale seem only to worsen or complexify when they are ignored. In the same way that it would seem absurd to offer a heroine addict the phrase "Just think positive!" as a solution to their problem, it is absurd to believe that positive thinking offers any kind of solution to major global issues such as climate change, poverty, industrial farming, and existential risks.

This is not to say that we ought to take the world’s problems onto our shoulders and feel shitty about them all the time. It's healthy to recognize and feel optimistic about the fact that in many important ways, **the world is getting better**. However, we need to balance that optimism with a willingness to confront real issues in our personal lives, our communities, our world.

7. Repress unpleasant emotions that don't fit their "spiritual" self-narrative.

"No way, I can't possibly be depressed or lonely or scared or anxious. I love life too much, and I'm too [Zen / wise / enlightened] to allow that to happen anyway."

I ran into this issue when I moved to South Korea to be an English teacher for a year. I thought I had cultivated an unflappable chill, a Lao Tzu-esque ability to just "go with the flow" and float, bobber-like, atop the rising and falling waves of destiny.
Then I experienced culture shock, crushing loneliness, and acute homesickness, and I had to admit to myself that I wasn't some kind of Zen master after all. Or rather, I had to realize that the ability to "go with the flow" and accept whatever is happening is perennially valuable, but that sometimes that will mean accepting that you feel like a steaming pile of shit.

It's easy to delude oneself into believing that spirituality is going to make life feel like endlessly floating upon a cloud, but in practice, this is not the case. Life is still full of suffering, and in order to really grow and learn from our experience, we need to be honest with ourselves about what we're feeling and let ourselves feel it fully. In my case, my desire to always be "Zen," to "go with the flow," and to project an image of inner peace to myself and others prevented me from seeing the truth of various situations/experiences and taking responsibility for dealing with them.

8. Feel deep aversion and self-loathing when confronted with their shadow side.

I noticed this in myself pretty quickly after learning about spiritual bypassing. I saw that my narcissistic image of myself as a wise person who had attained "higher" realizations was causing a ridiculous amount of cognitive dissonance. I judged myself scathingly and felt colossal, crushing guilt over any less-than-virtuous decisions.

When you become interested in spirituality, it's easy to idolize people like the Buddha or the Dalai Lama, and to believe that these people are Perfect Humans who always act with complete awareness and compassion. In actuality, this is almost certainly not the case. Even if it's true that some humans reach a level of realization at which they uphold "right action" in all circumstances, we need to acknowledge that such a thing is reserved for the very few. I personally suspect that such a thing does
In actuality, we're all fallible humans, and we're all going to make mistakes. The deck is stacked against us. It's virtually impossible to live even a few weeks of adult human life without committing a few blunders, if only minor ones. Over the course of years, there will be major mistakes. It happens to all of us, and it's okay. Forgive yourself. All you can do is learn from your errors and strive to do better in the future.

Paradoxically, the seemingly spiritual lesson of self-forgiveness can be especially difficult to internalize for people interested in spirituality. Spiritual teachings can leave one with stratospherically high ideals that result in immense guilt and self-loathing when one fails to live up to them. This is a major reason why it's so common for spiritual people to deflect responsibility—because being honest about their shortcomings would be too painful. Ironically, we must be honest with ourselves about our mistakes in order to learn from them and grow into more self-aware, compassionate versions of ourselves. Just remember: You're only human. It's okay to make mistakes. Really, it's okay. But admit to yourself when you've made a mistake and learn from it.

9. Find themselves in bad situations due to excessive tolerance and a refusal to distinguish between people.

This is me, 100%. For a long time, I've taken very seriously the idea that every human being deserves compassion and kindness. I don't disagree with that idea nowadays, but I've realized that there are numerous situations in which other considerations should temporarily override my desire to treat every other human compassionately.
In multiple foreign countries, I’ve found myself in potentially **life-threatening situations** because I was overly trusting of people I did not know or overly kind to people who I should have recognized as shady characters. Luckily, I’ve never gotten hurt in these situations, but I have been robbed and swindled several times. In every case, I wanted to believe that the people I was interacting with were "good" people at heart and would treat me with kindness if I did so for them. That line of thinking was terribly naive, and I’m still trying to re-condition myself to understand that in certain contexts, being warm is not the answer.

**Comment:** Though the author doesn’t mention **psychopathy** directly, believing that everyone is good and kind deep down is a blind spot for many people. Recognizing pathology in every day life and realizing that the world is run by psychopaths should be required lessons for all human beings. Here are just a few sources:

- [On the Nature of Psychopathy: A Thought Experiment](#)
- [Interview with Sandra L. Brown on psychopathy and pathological love relationships](#)
- [SOTT Podcast: Organic Portals and Psychopathy](#)
- [See no Evil: Why is there so little Psychopathy Awareness?](#)

The sad fact is that although you might be insulated from it, the struggle for survival is still very real for vast numbers of people on this planet. Many people have grown up in poverty, surrounded by crime, and have learned that the only way to survive is by preying upon weakness. **The majority of people worldwide seem not to have this mentality,** but if you find yourself in a city or country in which poverty is fairly prevalent, you should take certain common-sense precautions—basic things,
like:

1. Don't walk anywhere alone after dark.
2. Try to stay away from vacant areas.
3. Don't stop to engage with people who try to sell you things.
4. Make distinctions between people; let yourself know that it's okay to trust your brain's highly evolved pattern-matching mechanism when it tells you that someone looks like they're on drugs, deranged, desperate, or dangerous.

10. Want so badly for various "spiritual" practices to be correct that they disregard science entirely.

There's a pretty heavily anti-scientific streak in a lot of the spiritual community, and I think this is a shame. It seems to me that many spiritual people become hostile toward science because certain beliefs and practices they find valuable are considered unproven or pseudoscientific within the scientific community. **If a belief or practice is unproven or pseudoscientific, this only means that we have not yet been able to confirm its validity through repeatable experimentation in a lab setting.** It doesn't mean that it isn't true or valuable.

The **scientific method** is one of the best tools we have for understanding the mechanics of the observable universe; it allowed us to discover the profound truth of biological evolution, observe the far reaches of space, extend our lifespans by decades, and walk on the moon, among other things; to discard it entirely is to lose one of our most powerful lenses for understanding reality.
Probably our most badass tool for understanding existence.

As Carl Sagan memorably put it:

"Science is not only compatible with spirituality; it is a profound source of spirituality. When we recognize our place in an immensity of light years and in the passage of ages, when we grasp the intricacy, beauty and subtlety of life, then that soaring feeling, that sense of elation and humility combined, is surely spiritual. So are our emotions in the presence of great art or music or literature, or of acts of exemplary selfless courage such as those of Mohandas Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr. The notion that science and spirituality are somehow mutually exclusive does a disservice to both."

Bonus: Miss out on material success because of a belief that money and capitalism are evil.

A lot of "spiritual" people sabotage their own ability to succeed materially. This is because they are seemingly allergic to wealth, associating money with greed, impurity, and general malevolence. Capitalism is viewed as an engine of inequality and corruption that must be dismantled.

I used to hold a version of this view myself, so I realize how seductive it is. If you're drawn to spirituality, it feels natural to scorn "materialism." In truth, though, this narrative is too simplistic. The truth about capitalism is complex. Yes, capitalism has some very real downsides, but in many ways, regulated capitalism has been a force for tremendous good, spurring massive innovation and pulling billions of people out of poverty globally. In 1820, 94% of the people on Earth were living in extreme poverty.
poverty. By 2015, that figure had dropped to a mere 9.6%, largely thanks to economic growth catalyzed by regulated capitalism:

![Share of World Population Living in Extreme Poverty, 1820-2015](image)

© Our World in Data

Perhaps the most uplifting chart in existence. Furthermore, let me give it to you straight again: **There's nothing inherently wrong with wanting to make money. Money is an amazing tool.** Billionaires like [Elon Musk](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elon_Musk) and [Bill Gates](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Gates) who are using their wealth to help the world in momentous ways prove that money can be used benevolently or nefariously. Consider also the 139 billionaires and hundred-millionaires who have pledged to donate a total of $732 billion to charitable causes in their lifetimes. We actually need more compassionate people to gain substantial wealth, so they can use it **effectively and altruistically** to improve the world.

**Comment:** Bill Gates helping the world? Hah!

- [Bill Gates, hypocritical fossil fuel investor, wants us all to pay carbon taxes](https://www.asiatimes.com/2019/06/bill-gates-hypocritical-fossil-fuel-investor-wants-us-all-to-pay-carbon-taxes/)
To clarify, I am in favor of regulating/refining capitalism to make it work for everyone and the planet. For example, I think regulations need to be in place to protect the environment and to prevent abuses like rent-seeking and regulatory capture. Ultimately I am in favor of an economic system which incentivizes innovation and entrepreneurship while also being sustainable and meeting everyone's basic needs. I am not sure of the best way to meet these lofty aims, but our current forms of capitalism are doing a better job than many people seem to think, given the immensity of the challenge.

I'm all for further methodical, data-driven work to refine and improve our economic systems, but let's be sure to notice and acknowledge all the things capitalism does really well before we dismiss it. If you're curious to think more about this, I highly recommend this extremely balanced, incisive lecture by Jonathan Haidt, exploring the pros and cons of capitalism.

We're All Learning...

**I think that in order for the various interconnected global spiritual movements to be maximally impactful and useful, they need to address their shadow aspects.**

In this essay, I have attempted to illuminate some of the blind spots that seem to be prevalent in the spiritual community. As I’ve said, most of the items I discussed applied to me at one point or another. It’s decidedly easy to fall into some of the traps of spirituality and to harbor various limiting beliefs and behaviors while feeling like one has reached a "higher" level of being.

The lesson here is that growth and learning are unending processes. If you think you
have nothing left to learn, you're probably sabotaging yourself in a number of ways. It can be profoundly difficult to admit that for a long time one has been incorrect or misguided, but the alternative is much worse. The alternative is a kind of **spiritual and intellectual death**—a state of perpetual stagnation in which one endlessly deludes oneself into thinking that one has all the answers, that one has reached one's Final Form. In a rapidly changing world, continual learning is of paramount importance.

At its best, spirituality is a force that can help humanity realize our common identity as sentient beings, gain **ecological awareness**, feel connected to our cosmos, and address **the most pressing issues of our time** with compassion, ingenuity, equanimity, and what Einstein called a "holy curiosity."

**At its best, spirituality is a force which propels us toward a more harmonious, cooperative, sustainable future. Here's to refining our collective spirituality and co-creating a more beautiful world.**

**Comment:** Mostly spot on. Unless one can master the basic ins and outs of everyday living, control one's emotions and be capable of maintaining decent relations with others (just to name a few) any claims of ultra-spirituality are false.