

HUMAN NATURE, BUDDHA NATURE
On Spiritual Bypassing, Relationship, and the Dharma
An interview with John Welwood by Tina Fossella

TF: You introduced the term “spiritual bypassing” 30 years ago now. For those who are unfamiliar with the concept, could you define and explain what it is?

JW: 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.

When we are spiritually bypassing, we often use the goal of awakening or liberation to rationalize what I call *premature transcendence*: trying to rise above the raw and messy side of our humanness before we have fully faced and made peace with it. And then we tend to use absolute truth to disparage or dismiss relative human needs, feelings, psychological problems, relational difficulties, and developmental deficits. I see this as an “occupational hazard” of the spiritual path, in that spirituality does involve a vision of going beyond our current karmic situation.

TE: What kind of hazard does this present?

JW: Trying to move beyond our psychological and emotional issues by sidestepping them is dangerous. It sets up a debilitating split between the buddha and the human within us. And it leads to a conceptual, one-sided kind of spirituality where one pole of life is elevated at the expense of its opposite: Absolute truth is favored over relative truth, the impersonal over the personal, emptiness over form, transcendence over embodiment, and detachment over feeling. One might, for example, try to practice nonattachment by dismissing

one's need for love, but this only drives the need underground, so that it often becomes unconsciously acted out in covert and possibly harmful ways instead.

TF: Might this account for some of the messiness in our sangha communities?

JW: Definitely. It is easy to use the truth of emptiness in this one-sided way: "Thoughts and feelings are empty, a mere play of samsaric appearances, so pay them no heed. See their nature as emptiness, and simply cut through them on the spot." In the realm of practice, this could be helpful advice. But in life situations these same words could also be used to suppress or deny feelings or concerns that need our attention. I've seen this happen on a number of occasions.

TF: What interests you most about spiritual bypassing these days?

JW: I'm interested in how it plays out in relationships, where spiritual bypassing often wreaks its worst havoc. If you were a yogi in a cave doing years of solo retreat, your psychological wounding might not show up so much because your focus would be entirely on your practice, in an environment that may not aggravate your relational wounds. It's in relationships that our unresolved psychological issues tend to show up most intensely. That's because psychological wounds are always relational — they form in and through our relationships with our early caretakers.

The basic human wound, which is prevalent in the modern world, forms around not feeling loved or intrinsically lovable as we are. Inadequate love or attunement is shocking and traumatic for a child's developing and highly sensitive nervous system. And as we internalize how we were parented, our capacity to value ourselves, which is also the basis for valuing others, becomes damaged. I call this a "relational wound" or the "wound of the heart."

TF: Yes, something we are all familiar with.

JW: There is a whole body of study and research in Western psychology showing how close bonding and loving attunement— what is known as “secure attachment” — have powerful impacts on every aspect of human development. Secure attachment has a tremendous effect on many dimensions of our health, well-being, and capacity to function effectively in the world: how our brains form, how well our endocrine and immune systems function, how we handle emotions, how subject we are to depression, how our nervous system functions and handles stress, and how we relate to others.

In contrast to the indigenous cultures of traditional Asia, modern child-rearing leaves most people suffering from symptoms of insecure attachment: self-hatred, disembodiment, lack of grounding, chronic insecurity and anxiety, overactive minds, lack of basic trust, and a deep sense of inner deficiency. So most of us suffer from an extreme degree of alienation and disconnection that was unknown in earlier times— from society, community, family, older generations, nature, religion, tradition, our body, our feelings, and our humanity itself.

TF: And how is this relevant for how we practice the dharma?

JW: Many of us— and I include myself here— originally turn to the dharma, at least in part, as a way of trying to overcome the pain of our psychological and relational wounding. Yet we are often in denial or unconscious about the nature or extent of this wounding. We only know that something isn't right and we want to be free from suffering.

TF: We may turn towards the dharma from a wounded place that we're not even aware of?

JW: Yes. We turn to the dharma to feel better, but then may unwittingly wind up using spiritual practice as a substitute for facing our psychological issues.

TF: So how does our psychological wounding affect our spiritual practice?

JW: Being a good spiritual practitioner can become what I call a *compensatory identity* that covers up and defends against an underlying *deficient identity*, where we feel badly

about ourselves, not good enough, or basically lacking. Then, although we may be practicing diligently, our spiritual practice can be used in the service of denial and defense. And when spiritual practice is used to bypass our real-life human issues, it becomes compartmentalized in a separate zone of our life, and remains unintegrated with our overall functioning.

TF: Can you give some more examples of how this shows up in Western practitioners?

JW: In my psychotherapy practice I often work with dharma students who have engaged in spiritual practice for decades. I respect how their practice has been beneficial for them. Yet despite the sincerity as practitioners, their practice is not fully penetrating their life. They seek out psychological work because they remain wounded and not fully developed on the emotional/relational/personal level, and they may be acting out their wounding in harmful ways.

It's not uncommon to speak beautifully about the basic goodness or innate perfection of our true nature, but then have difficulty trusting it when one's psychological wounds are triggered. Often dharma students who have developed some kindness and compassion for others are hard on themselves for falling short of their spiritual ideals, and, as a result, their spiritual practice becomes dry and solemn. Or being of benefit to others turns into a duty, or a way of trying to feel good about themselves. Others may unconsciously use their spiritual brilliance to feed their narcissistic inflation and devalue others or treat them in manipulative ways.

People with depressive tendencies who may have grown up with a lack of loving attunement in childhood and therefore have a hard time valuing themselves, may use teachings on non-self to reinforce their sense of deflation. Not only do they feel bad about themselves, but they regard their insecurity about this as a further fault—a form of me-fixation, the very antithesis of the dharma—which further fuels their shame or guilt. Thus they become caught in a painful struggle with the very self they are trying to deconstruct.

The sangha often becomes an arena where people play out their unresolved family

issues. It's easy to project onto teachers or gurus, seeing them as parental figures, and then trying to win their love or else rebelling against them. Sibling rivalry and competition with other sangha members over who is the teacher's favorite is also common.

Meditation is also frequently used to avoid uncomfortable feelings and unresolved life situations. For those in denial about their personal feelings or wounds, meditation practice can reinforce a tendency toward coldness, disengagement, or interpersonal distance. They are at a loss when it comes to relating directly to their feelings or to expressing themselves personally in a transparent way. It can be quite threatening when those of us on a spiritual path have to face our woundedness, or emotional dependency, or primal need for love.

I've often seen how attempts to be nonattached are used in the service of sealing people off from their human and emotional vulnerabilities. In effect, identifying oneself as a spiritual practitioner becomes used as a way of avoiding a depth of personal engagement with others that might stir up old wounds and longings for love. It's painful to see someone maintaining a stance of detachment when underneath they are starving for positive experiences of bonding and connection.

TF: So, how do we reconcile the ideal of nonattachment with the need for human attachment?

JW: That's a good question. If Buddhism is to fully take root in the Western psyche, in my view, it needs to become more savvy about the dynamics of the Western psyche, which is rather different from the Asian psyche. We need a larger perspective that can recognize and include two different tracks of human development— which we might call growing up and waking up, healing and awakening, or becoming a genuine human person and going beyond the person altogether. We are not just humans learning to become buddhas, but also buddhas waking up in human form, learning to become fully human. And these two tracks of development can mutually enrich each other.

While the fruition of dharma practice is awakening, the fruition of becoming a fully developed person is the capacity to engage in I-Thou relatedness with others. This means risking being fully open and transparent with others, while appreciating and taking an interest in what they are experiencing and how they are different from oneself. This capacity for open expressiveness and deep attunement is very rare in this world. It's especially difficult if you are relationally wounded.

In short, dharma is all too often used as a way to deny our human side. As one Western Zen teacher profiled in *The New York Times* told of being advised by one of his teachers: "What you need to do is put aside all human feelings." When entering psychotherapy decades later, he recognized this had not been helpful advice, and it had taken him decades to realize this.

But if we hold a perspective that includes the two developmental tracks, then we will not use absolute truth to belittle relative truth. Instead of the either/or logic of, "Your feelings are empty, so just let them go," we could take a both/and approach: "Feelings are empty, *and* sometimes we need to pay close attention to them." In light of absolute truth, personal needs are insubstantial like a mirage, and fixating on them causes suffering. Yes, *and* at the same time, if a relative need arises, just shunting it aside can cause further problems. In terms of relative truth, being clear about where you stand and what you need is one of the most important principles of healthy communication in relationships.

The great paradox of being both human and buddha is that we are both dependent and not dependent. Part of us is completely dependent on people for everything—from food and clothing to love, connectedness, and inspiration and help with our development. Though our buddha nature is not dependent— that's absolute truth— our human embodiment is — that's relative truth.

Of course, in the largest sense, absolute and relative are completely interwoven and cannot be kept apart: The more we realize the absolute openness of what we are, the more deeply we come to recognize our relative interconnectedness with all beings.

TF: *So we can be both attached and nonattached?*

JW: Yes. Nonattachment is a teaching about our ultimate nature. Our buddha nature is totally, intrinsically nonattached. Attachment in the Buddhist sense has the negative meaning of *clinging*. Being free and open, our buddha nature has no need to cling.

Yet to grow into a healthy human being, we need a base of secure attachment in the positive, psychological sense, meaning: close emotional ties to other people that promote connectedness, grounded embodiment, and well-being. As John Muir the naturalist wrote: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find that it is bound fast by a thousand invisible cords that cannot be broken, to everything in the universe.” Similarly, the hand cannot function unless it is attached to the arm—that’s attachment in the positive sense. We’re interconnected, interwoven, and interdependent with everything in the universe. On the human level we can’t help feeling somewhat attached to people we are close to.

Thus it’s natural to grieve deeply when we lose someone we’re close to. When Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche attended the memorial service for his dear friend and colleague Suzuki Roshi, he let out a piercing cry and wept openly. He was acknowledging his close ties to Suzuki Roshi, and it was beautiful that he could let his feeling show like that.

Since we cannot avoid some kind of attachment to others, the question becomes, “Are we engaging in healthy or unhealthy attachment?” What is unhealthy in psychological terms is insecure attachment, for it leads either to fear of close personal contact or else to obsession with it. Interestingly, people growing up with secure attachment are more trusting, which makes them much less likely to cling to others. Maybe we could call that “nonattached attachment.”

I’m afraid that what many Western Buddhists are practicing in the relational area is not nonattachment, but avoidance of attachment. Avoidance of attachment, however, is not

freedom from attachment. It's still a form of clinging— clinging to the denial of your human attachment needs, out of distrust that love can be reliable.

TF: So avoidance of attachment needs is another form of attachment.

JW: Yes. In the field of developmental psychology known as “attachment theory,” one form of insecure attachment is called “avoidant attachment.” The avoidant attachment style develops in children whose parents are consistently unavailable emotionally. So these children learn to take care of themselves and not need anything from others. That's their adaptive strategy, and it's an intelligent and useful one. Obviously if your needs aren't going to be met, it's too painful to keep feeling them. It's better to turn away from them and develop a do-it-yourself, detached compensatory identity.

TF: So there's a tendency to use Buddhist ideas to justify dismissing the natural inclination to want bonding and attachment?

JW: Yes. Many of us who are drawn to Buddhism are avoidant attachment types in the first place. When we hear teachings on nonattachment it's like: “Oh that sounds familiar. I feel really at home here.” In this way a valid dharma teaching becomes used to support our defenses.

But I want to be clear that I'm not trying to pathologize anyone. All of this is just something to understand with kindness and compassion. It's one of the ways we try to cope with the wound of the heart. Not needing anyone allows one to survive and manage in an emotional desert. But later on, in adulthood, the avoidant attachment type has a hard time developing deep ties with others, and this can lead to a deep feeling of isolation and alienation, which is a very painful state.

TF: What happens in a sangha community if the majority of people have an avoidant attachment style of relating?

JW: Avoidant types tend to be dismissive of other people's needs because, guess what, they're dismissive of their own needs.

TF: Then what happens?

JW: What happens is that people feel justified in not respecting each other's feelings and needs. Not surprisingly, "need" becomes a dirty word in many spiritual communities.

TF: And people don't feel free to say what they want.

JW: Right. You don't say what you want because you don't want to be seen as needy. You're trying to be nonattached. But that is like an unripe fruit trying to detach itself prematurely from the branch and hurl itself to the ground instead of gradually ripening to the point where it's naturally ready to let go.

The question for dharma practitioners is how to ripen so that we become naturally ready to let go of clinging to self, just as a ripe fruit naturally lets go of the branch and falls to the ground. Our dharma practices of wisdom and compassion definitely help with this ripening. But if we're using our practice to avoid our feeling life, this will definitely stunt the ripening process, rather than support it.

TF: Becoming a full human being. Is that what you mean by "becoming ripe"?

JW: Yes, becoming a genuine human being through working honestly with emotional, psychological, and relational issues that prevent us from being fully

present in our humanness. To be a genuine person is to relate to ourselves and others in an open and transparent way.

If there's a large gap between our practice and our human side, we remain unripe. Our practice may ripen, but our life doesn't. And there's a certain point when that gap becomes very painful.

TF: So you're saying that spiritual bypassing not only corrupts our dharma practice, it also blocks our personal ripening?

JW: Yes. One way it blocks ripening is through making spiritual teachings into prescriptions about what you *should* do, how you *should* think, how you *should* speak, how you *should* feel. Then our spiritual practice becomes taken over by what I call "the spiritual superego"—the voice that whispers "shoulds" in our ear. This is a big obstacle to ripening, because it feeds our sense of deficiency.

One Indian teacher, Swami Prajnanpad, whose work I admire, said that "idealism is an act of violence." Trying to live up to an ideal instead of being authentically where you are can become a form of inner violence if it splits you in two and pits one side against the other. When we use spiritual practice to "be good" and to ward off an underlying sense of deficiency or unworthiness, then it turns into a sort of crusade.

TF: So dismissing how you feel can have dangerous consequences.

JW: Yes. And if the ethos of a spiritual organization leads to dismissing your feelings or relational needs, this can lead to big communication problems, to say the very least. It's also not a great setup for a marriage if one or both partners is dismissive of emotional needs. So not surprisingly, Buddhist organizations and marriages often turn out to be just as dysfunctional interpersonally as nonbuddhist ones. Marshall Rosenberg teaches that honestly and openly

expressing and listening to feelings and needs forms the basis for a nonviolent resolution of interpersonal conflicts, and I would agree with him.

From my perspective as an existential psychologist, feeling is a form of intelligence. It's the body's direct, holistic, intuitive way of knowing and responding. It is highly attuned and intelligent. And it takes account of many factors all at once, unlike our conceptual mind, which can only process one thing at a time. Unlike emotionality, which is a reactivity that is directed outward, feeling often helps you contact deep inner truths. Unfortunately, traditional Buddhism doesn't make a clear distinction between feeling and emotion, so they tend to be lumped together as something *samsaric* to overcome.

TF: There's a de-emphasis on taking feeling seriously on some level, Like not exploring what goes on inside us when we become triggered by our partners, for example.

JW: Yes. The truth is, most of us don't get as triggered anywhere in our lives as much as in intimate relationships. So if we use spiritual bypassing to avoid facing our relational wounds, we're missing out on a tremendous area of practice. Relational practice helps us develop compassion "in the trenches," where our wounds are most activated.

And beyond compassion we also need to develop attunement: the ability to see and feel what another person is going through— what we could call "accurate empathy." Attunement is essential for I-Thou connectedness, but it's only possible if we can first of all be attuned to ourselves and track what we are going through.

TF: What kinds of tools or methods have you found effective for working with difficult feelings and relational issues?

JW: I've developed a process I call "unconditional presence," which involves contacting, allowing, opening to, and even surrendering to whatever we're experiencing. This process grew out of my practice in Vajrayana and Dzogchen, as well as my psychological training. It presupposes that everything we experience, even the worst samsaric things, has its own intelligence. If we meet our experience fully and directly, we can begin to uncover that intelligence and distinguish it from distorted ways in which it manifests.

For example, if we go deeply into the experience of ego inflation, we may find a more genuine impulse at its core—that it's a wounded way of trying to proclaim our goodness, to remind ourselves and affirm that we are basically good. Similarly, at the heart of all the darkest human feelings and experiences there is a seed of intelligence which, when revealed, can point in the direction of freedom.

TF: Can you say more about your psychological method?

JW: I help people inquire deeply into their felt experience and let it gradually reveal itself and unfold, step by step. I call this "tracking and unpacking": You track the process of present experiencing, following it closely and seeing where it leads. And you unpack the beliefs, identities, and feelings that are subconscious or implicit in what you're experiencing. When we bring awareness to our experience in this way, it's like unraveling a tangled ball of yarn: different knots are gradually revealed and untangled one by one.

As a result, we find that we're able to be present in places where we've been absent or disconnected from our experience. Through reaching out to parts of ourselves that need our help, we develop an intimate, grounded kind of inner attunement with ourselves, which can help us more easily relate to others where they are stuck as well.

I've found that when people engage in both psychological and meditative practice, the two can complement each other in mutually beneficial, synergistic ways. Together they provide a journey that includes both healing and awakening. Sometimes one way of working is more appropriate for dealing with a given situation in our lives, sometimes the other is.

I take some encouragement in this approach from the words of the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa, who has made a point of saying that we need to draw on any teaching or method that can be of help to sentient beings, be it secular or religious, buddhist or nonbuddhist. He even goes so far as to suggest that if you fail to engage in methods that are appropriate just because they do not conform to Buddhist philosophy, you are actually being derelict in your bodhisattva duty.

TF So all of this is about compassion.

JW: Yes. The word “com-*passion*” literally means “feeling with.” You can’t have compassion unless you’re first willing to feel what you feel. This opens up a certain rawness and tenderness— what Trungpa Rinpoche spoke of as the “soft spot,” which is the seed of bodhicitta.

TF: It's vulnerable.

JW: Yes. That’s the sign that you’re getting close to bodhicitta. That rawness is also quite humbling. Even if we’ve been doing spiritual practice for decades, we still find these big, raw, messy feelings coming up --- maybe a deep reservoir of sorrow or helplessness. But if we can acknowledge these feelings, and open ourselves nakedly to them, we’re moving toward greater openness, in a way that is grounded in our humanness. We ripen into a genuine person through learning to make room for the full range of experiences we go through.

TF: How do you know when you're indulging or wallowing in feelings?

JW: That question always comes up. Wallowing in feelings is being stuck in fixation fed by going over and over stories in your mind. Unconditional presence, on the other hand, is about opening nakedly to a feeling instead of becoming caught up in stories about the feeling.

TF: Not creating a story around a feeling.

JW: For example, if the feeling is sadness, wallowing might involve fixating on a story like “poor me,” rather than directly relating to the actual sadness itself, which may allow it to loosen up.

So delving into feelings might sound like indulgence, but I would say that the willingness to meet your experience nakedly is a form of fearlessness. Trungpa Rinpoche taught that fearlessness is the willingness to meet and feel your fear. We could expand that to say fearlessness is the willingness to meet, face, include, make room for, welcome, allow, open to, surrender to whatever we’re experiencing. It’s actually quite brave to acknowledge, feel, and open to your need for healthy attachment and connectedness, for example, especially if you’re relationally wounded. Indulgence, on the other hand, means fixating on the need and being run by it.

TF: That brings a certain freedom.

JW: Yes, the relative freedom of, “I’m willing to feel whatever I’m feeling. I’m willing to experience whatever I’m experiencing.” I sometimes call this “applied presence” — applying the presence we’ve discovered through meditation to our felt experience.

TF: In our post-meditation practice.

JW: Right. This helps to integrate the realization of emptiness— as complete openness— into our life. With spiritual bypassing, emptiness doesn't become integrated with our feeling life. It can turn into a personal dryness where we can't actually *feel* ourselves.

TF: What would help our sangha communities develop in more emotionally honest ways?

JW: We need to work on relationships. Otherwise our relational wounds are all going to be played out in the sangha unconsciously. We need to recognize that everything we react to in others is a mirror of something we're not facing or acknowledging in ourselves. These unconscious projections and reactions always become played out externally in groups.

For instance, if I'm not able to own my own needs, then I will tend to dismiss others' needs and see them as a threat because their neediness subconsciously reminds me of my own denied needs. And I will judge others and use some kind of "dharma logic" to make them wrong or make myself superior.

TF: So people need to be doing their personal work?

JW: In conjunction with their spiritual practice. Unfortunately, it's not easy to find psychotherapists who work with present experiencing in a body-based way, rather than conceptually. Maybe we need to develop some simple ways in Western dharma communities to help people work with their personal material.

TF: How can we become more conscious in our sanghas?

JW: We could start by recognizing the fact that spiritual communities are subject to the same group dynamics that every group is. The hard truth is that spiritual

practice often does not heal deep wounding in the area of love, or translate into skilful communication or interpersonal attunement.

I see relationship as the leading edge of human evolution at this time in history. Although humanity discovered enlightenment thousands of years ago, we still haven't brought that illumination very fully into the area of interpersonal relationships. Group dynamics are especially difficult because they inevitably trigger people's relational wounds and reactivity. Honestly recognizing this might help us work more skillfully with communication difficulties in the sangha.

TF: How can we work with that?

JW: Being aware that we inevitably project our unconscious material on other group members would be a good start. We also need to learn how to speak with each other personally and honestly, from our present experience instead of parroting teachings about what we think we *should* be experiencing. And there needs to be what Thich Nhat Hanh calls "deep listening," based on learning to listen to our own experience. Listening is a sacred activity— a form of surrendering, receiving, letting in. We need to recognize this as part of our spiritual work.

TF: Thich Nhat Hahn said that to love is to listen.

JW: Yes. We also need to develop a tremendous tolerance and appreciation for different personal styles of embodying the dharma. Otherwise, if we settle for a one-size-fits-all dharma, we are doomed to endless holier-than-thou competition and one-upmanship.

While we all venerate the dharma, we will all have different ways of embodying and expressing it. As Swami Prajnanpad said, "Everything is different, nothing

is separate.” So *vive la difference*, it’s a beautiful thing. Honoring individual differences would go a long way toward reducing sangha in-fighting.

TF: One last question about attachment in relationships: Are you saying that to be truly nonattached, one has to be attached first?

JW: In terms of human evolution, nonattachment is an advanced teaching. I’m suggesting that we need to be able to form satisfying human attachments before genuine nonattachment is possible. Otherwise, someone suffering from insecure attachment is likely to confuse nonattachment with avoidant attachment behavior. For avoidant types, attachment is actually threatening and scary. So healing for avoidant types would involve becoming willing and able to feel their need for human connectedness, instead of spiritually bypassing it. Once that happens, then nonattachment starts to make more sense.

The late Dzogchen master Chagdud Tulku made a powerful statement about the relationship between attachment and nonattachment. He said, “People often ask me do Lamas have attachments? I don’t know how other Lamas might answer this, but I must say yes. I recognize that my students, my family, my country have no inherent reality... [Here he’s speaking absolute truth.] Yet, I remain deeply attached to them. [Here he’s speaking relative truth.] I recognize that my attachment has no inherent reality. [absolute truth]. Yet I cannot deny the experience of it” [relative truth]. And he ends by saying, “Still, knowing the empty nature of attachment, I know my motivation to benefit sentient beings must supersede it.”

I find this a beautiful articulation of nonattached attachment and the both/and approach. It joins absolute and relative truth while situating it all in the largest possible context. Everything’s included.

This is what is often missing in dharma communities: acknowledging and embracing our humanness alongside our aspiration to go beyond ourselves. Bringing these two together can be tremendously powerful.