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Dangers on the Path: Spiritual Bypassing and Wound Worshipping

How spiritual concepts and therapeutic culture impede living

For many of us on a path of inner development and consciousness growth, there are two extremes that are equally injurious. The first is well known, often called by the general term “avoidance” or the more specific terms “spiritual bypassing” and “process skipping”. The second tendency, less well known and needing attention, I have given the name, “wound worshipping”.

Spiritual Bypassing and Process Skipping

Spiritual Bypassing is a particular instance of avoidance behavior that one sees in many teachers and spiritual seekers. This manifests when transcendent experience and its concepts are used to avoid facing challenging emotional and relationship issues. “Everything is perfect as it is”, “feelings are just temporary and not ultimately real”, “everything happens for a reason” and “it’s all God’s will” are typical slogans that, though embedded in ultimate truth, can be used as an avoidance strategy. The unwillingness to acknowledge and learn from one’s historic, self-protective reaction patterns keeps these habitual mechanisms under the surface. Even if one has experienced genuine moments of awakening to higher consciousness, when these experiences become fixated in memory, they can be used by defensive, egoic structures to hide. To deny “negative”, constrictive mind states because they are undesirable to a “higher” self-image is a very ineffective and life-alienating strategy.

“Process skipping” is an avoidance habit in which we do not want to experience, in a tangible, bodily felt way, the reality of a given moment. To be in touch with one’s “process” is more than being in touch with emotions, it is to experience the way we carry our life situations physically, mentally, emotionally and in relationship. We “skip the process” when we shut down or skip over the freshly felt reality of our living moment. Often this means jumping to an action strategy- “what can I do about it”- or to a mental conclusion- “this is not for me” or “its all your/my fault”- without experiencing the various feelings or inner voices that might contribute to a

more complete understanding of the situation. So much is missed when we have a habit of process skipping, we lose the deeply felt and nuanced flavor of our life. In addition to denying ourselves access to this textural richness, we also miss out on key information that is essential for effective living. The variety and depth of our inner life becomes unavailable to our relationships, leaving them repetitive, rote, superficial and dry.

The same kind of avoidant strategies can be used in relation to medical issues. As a young, athletic man I learned to deny any pain or injury for the good of the team. This attitude was taught as a kind of right of passage into masculinity. “Don’t complain, deny the pain” was the mantra. Similarly, some people are taught that if they do not give a bodily symptom any attention it will go away. While sometimes this can be a helpful approach, when it becomes habitual, there is often an unhealthy denial of important bodily messages. Not seeking medical care when it is truly needed can be a life threatening strategy.

One of the great obstacles to meaningful, satisfying relationship is the habit of avoiding challenging conversations and/or sharing our pain with others. In an effort to be positive or not a burden, we sometimes choose not to share what is most important or difficult for us, even with our closest relations. This pattern also appears in certain ways of listening whereby the listener immediately offers advice or diverts the topic due to their own discomfort. In my experience, this kind of avoidance is the greatest challenge to deep connectedness.

We probably can all see that spiritual bypassing and process skipping are self-protective, fear-based strategies for avoiding life rather than living it fully. The opposite habit “wound worshipping” can be equally injurious.

Therapeutic Culture and Wound Worshipping

It is very recent, since the early twentieth century, that “therapy” for emotional or relationship problems came into the world. Before this, such matters were the province of the church, shaman or the medical doctor. Many of the people reading this article live in what I term “therapeutic culture” in which challenging or uncomfortable states are considered “problems” that need solutions. This attitude can be related to physical, mental, emotional and relationship issues. While this ideology can

sometimes lead in helpful, life-giving directions, it can also lead to this phenomenon of “wound worshipping”.

To be clear, my purpose is to highlight a cultural ideology, a way of perceiving, that is often unconscious or under our radar. As implied in the previous section of this paper, I believe strongly in the value of listening deeply to our wounds as well as to the suffering of others. Signs of distress in our bodies, minds and relationships are invitations for growing compassion and depth in our hearts. The question is one of balance. When living with “wound worshipping” ideology, we are encouraged to focus attention on any painful feeling or unsatisfying experience as if there is something wrong that needs changing. It also suggests that if a challenging feeling or thought arises it must be inherently significant.

Some examples include:

Mild to severe hypochondria, where each sensation in the body is taken as a sign for some malady. The underlying assumption is that if one is healthy, then temporary, unexplainable sensations will not arise. I remember my brother-in-law, as a medical student, in a true panic that he might be dying due to anoxia while driving through a long tunnel. He seemed to truly have almost every disease that he studied. Many of my clients have minor discomforts that come and go which are distinct from the more significant kinds of phenomena that really benefit from focused attention. Over many years of inquiry, I see that the human body has many passing symptoms that are not indicative of any underlying pathology. Many insignificant sensations will come and go in the course of a week. Differentiating these from more meaningful messages is important for healthy living.

In an analogous way, sometimes our historic emotional or relationship patterns can arise with very little implicit energy or true importance. They are neighbors of familiar, painful and meaningful patterns. I see these “copy-cat” states as seeds without roots. They have the same surface structure of more deeply rooted patterns but can simply arise from the historical habits of our nervous systems without much implicit value or importance.

These “attractor patterns” are easily activated, hair-triggered, due to past frequency. Habitual patterns in the nervous system tend to recur yet they do not necessarily carry much life force or deep meaning. If one assumes these patterns are important, one might water these seeds with concern, attention

and life-energy until they grow roots. Then, through a self-fulfilling prophecy, one does have a “problem” to work with. For example, if one tends toward melancholy or toward anger, small moments will arise where these states are mildly activated. If these moments are approached as having underlying significance then the momentary, passing state can grow into something that really does need attention.

Therapeutic ideology carries the implicit assumption and belief that once one “deals” with a core issue, once it heals, that it will vanish. I believe this is a false assumption. When an issue is worked with effectively, it can lose most of its energy but, as Moshe Feldenkrais emphasized, old patterns are not eliminated in the brain, they become less active and compelling. Healthy systems do not throw out old patterns, there is important information and life energy in every experience. Feldenkrais used to say that with the invention of electricity it is still wise to keep candles in your house. In a similar way old, even dysfunctional patterns have some gift for the person, when carried in its right place.

Can you see the importance of this distinction? If one believes, as do many in the therapy business, that all arisings of old patterns are implicitly significant and indicative of unresolved difficulties, one will have these issues forever. The alternative is NOT denial. Rather, we need to cultivate a finer level of differentiation in which one listens freshly to the energy of the pattern without assuming its significance (potential wound worshipping) or its insignificance (potential process skipping).

Another type of “wound worshipping” happens when one develops a habit of looking for what is wrong in a situation. Built into our DNA is an evolutionarily important bias that sorts for danger. When this capacity is calibrated realistically to our life situations it is protective in essential ways. When this mechanism gets exaggerated, one is always looking for problems. Within the body it is called hypochondria. When one is on a path of inner development, it leads to consistently feeling inadequate. When in a relationship it leads to constant discontent with one’s partner.

The implicit assumption that a relationship should be “just right” leads to much suffering. When we are constantly attuned to the little annoyances in a partner or friends behavior, we will always find something to be upset about. Similarly, in life, when we allow sensations of being a little too cold or too

hot, a little hungry or thirsty to dominate our perception we will rarely be content. The organism constantly seeks balance and homeostasis yet we are almost always a little away from the ideal. If we internally demand that life be “just right” before we are willing to enjoy ourselves or be at peace, the path of satisfaction becomes very narrow. Learning to laugh or at least smile at these tendencies is an effective antidote.

Depending on how we organize our attention, most moments can be lacking something. Whereas avoidance strategies lead us to ignore important signs that truly benefit from our attention, sorting for wrongness leads to a chronic sense of discontent because, almost always, *something* could be better. It is the opposite of the life-giving strategy of sensing the gifts that are alive in the moment, which spontaneously evokes gratitude.

Learning to be in right relationship with our lives means to live somewhere between avoidant behavior, including “spiritual bypassing” and “process skipping” and its polar opposite of “wound worshipping”. To navigate this middle way, we need three qualities: 1) warm-hearted clarity, 2) a capacity for self-observation and 3) outrageous humor, especially when looking in the mirror of our own behavior.