

SPIRITUAL BYPASSING: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY

by

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This dissertation is dedicated to all lovers of truth. May all beings everywhere find their way through the dense forests of spiritual materialism and into the pure realm of the heart. In the words of Wallace Stevens, “The way through the world is more difficult to find than the way beyond it.”

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Spiritual Bypassing: A Phenomenological Inquiry

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This study explores the phenomenon of *spiritual bypassing* and the ways in which spirituality can be used defensively in the lives of those committed to personal growth, psycho-emotional healing, and spiritual transformation. In the words of psychologist John Welwood (2002), who coined the term in 1984, spiritual bypassing involves the use of spiritual beliefs and practices to avoid dealing with painful feelings, unresolved emotional wounding, and unmet developmental needs. With many millions each year taking up traditional practices such as yoga, prayer, mindfulness, meditation, and self-inquiry, it remains critical that practitioners—as well as those teachers and mental health professionals serving such populations—cultivate an awareness of the dynamics of spiritual bypassing and the myriad ways in which spirituality may be serving a defensive function. The purpose of this research is not to pathologize the expression of spiritual bypassing, but to bring it out of the shadows, so that practitioners can see for themselves the ways that spiritual bypassing may be influencing and affecting their spiritual development. From this place of a more illumined

and intelligent fashion. This researcher, along with many of the theorists and clinicians cited in this study, feels it is important to de-pathologize spiritual bypassing, noting its normative expression amongst practitioners of all levels and maturation, and to explore it as a natural unfolding in an overarching developmental process.

One of the guiding assumptions behind the study is that it is only through an *integral* approach to human maturation (Wilber, 2000a, 2007, 2012)—defined as one which incorporates multiple developmental lines and perspectives (and not an exclusive focus upon the spiritual)—that authentic psychospiritual transformation can firmly take root in the modern world. By bringing greater awareness to the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing and the specific ways its can affect authentic spiritual development, we contribute to a new kind of holding environment (Winnicott, 1965) in which genuine transformation can flourish in contemporary society.

CHAPTER 1—PROBLEM FORMULATION THE PHENOMENON OF SPIRITUAL BYPASSING

Introduction

Over the last 50 years, a pioneering effort has been underway to bridge developmentally-oriented, therapeutic, depth psychological approaches to growth and healing, with contemplative, spiritual approaches to transformation and self-realization. Psychologists, psychotherapists, and spiritual teachers such as A.H. Almaas (2000a, 2000b, 2000c), Tara Brach (2004, 2011), Mariana Caplan (1999, 2009), Brant Cortright (1997), Jack Engler (2003, 2006), Mark Epstein (1999, 2004, 2008), Stan Grof (1985, 1988, 2000), Jack Kornfield (1993a, 1993b, 2001), Robert Augustus Masters (2010b, 2013a, 2013b), Jeffrey Rubin (1996, 2004, 2011), Bruce Tift (2011a), Frances Vaughan (2005), John Welwood (1984, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2007, 2010, 2011, 2012), and Ken Wilber (1993, 2000a, 2001a, 2001b, 2007) have dedicated their personal and professional lives to exploring the importance of emphasizing both psychological *and* spiritual work as part of the journey of any mature human unfolding. Research and clinical observation in the field have pointed to two guiding discoveries: 1) Spiritually-based, contemplative practice does not necessarily address psychological wounding, early failures to receive empathic attunement, attachment insecurity, somatically- and pre-verbally-derived trauma, and other unmetabolized psychodynamics arising out of conflict and interpersonal struggle within a person's family of origin (Battista, 1996; T. Brach, personal communication, February 14, 2003; Caplan, 2009; M. Caplan, personal communication, January 25, 2013; Cashwell, Bentley, & Yarborough, 2007; Engler, 2003, 2006; P. Jennings, personal communication, March 18, 2013; Kornfield, 1993b; J. Kornfield, personal communication, February 28, 2013; Masters, 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2012; R. Masters, personal communication, March 6, 2013; Mathieu, 2011b; I. Mathieu, personal

communication, April 12, 2013; Neale, 2012, 2013; M. Neale, personal communication, January 9, 2013; L. Palden, personal communication, February 8, 2013; Welwood, 1984, 2002; White, 2011; C. Whitfield, 2003; Wilber, 1993, 2000a, 2007; K. Wilber, personal communication, February 15, 2013; Wilber, Engler, & Brown, 1986); and 2) Most forms of psychotherapy, well-equipped (at least in principle) to respond to important developmental issues as listed above, are not designed to adequately address the more transpersonal dimensions of being, including those regions of human consciousness which are rooted deeper within the developmental spectrum (M. Caplan, personal communication, January 25, 2013; Cortright, 1997; Epstein, 2008; Forman, 2010; Grof, 1985; Wilber, 1993, 2000a, 2007; K. Wilber, personal communication, February 15, 2013).

Over the last several decades, there has been an increasing interest in spirituality and contemplative practice in contemporary culture, with those raised in Judeo-Christian traditions seeking more experiential forms of spiritual exploration from non-Western sources. Traditional practices such as yoga, meditation, self-inquiry, centering prayer, and indigenous forms of healing can easily be accessed in any major city around the world, offering seekers hundreds of powerful, effective, and seductive doorways into the rich forests of the contemplative life. While such access has contributed in many positive ways to the actual, lived possibility of a deeply spiritual life in the modern world—including all of the benefits that such a life might confer—it remains important for those interested in authentic spiritual growth to be aware of one of the primary potential pitfalls, detours, and challenges along the way, collectively coming to be known by the term *spiritual bypassing*.

Spiritual bypassing, a term first coined by psychologist John Welwood in 1984, involves the use of spiritual practices and beliefs to avoid dealing with painful feelings,

unresolved emotional wounds, and unmet developmental needs (Welwood, 2002). Put another way, spiritual bypassing occurs when clients seek to use their spiritual beliefs, practices, and experiences to avoid genuine contact with their psychological “unfinished business” (Cashwell, Bentley, & Yarborough, 2007). More often than not, such unfinished business is interpersonal in nature, interwoven within the subtle and complex regions of intimacy, attachment, and emotionally-charged personal relationships. A number of researchers and clinicians have described how transcendent-oriented spiritualities provide fertile ground for “bypassing” or otherwise unconsciously not attending to critical developmental tasks, fears around intimacy, and other psychodynamics which have not been fully digested from one’s early environment (see, for example, Battista, 1996; Caplan, 2009; Cashwell, Myers, and Shurts, 2004; Cortright, 1997; Engler, 2003, 2006; Kornfield, 1993b; Masters, 2010b; Mathieu, 2011; Vaughan, 2005; Welwood 1984, 2002; C. Whitfield, 2003; Wilber, 1993, 2000a, 2007). Others have reported from their own experience—and in observing clients and students—the ways in which contemplative practice is often “not enough” to adequately address early developmental wounding, noting how “even the best meditators have old wounds to heal” (Kornfield, 1993b). Over the years, an increasing number of mental health professionals—along with a growing number of spiritual teachers—have discovered that spiritual practice alone is not able to address these wounds in a comprehensive way (Caplan, 2009; Cashwell, Bentley, and Yarborough, 2007; Dass, 1982; Engler, 2006; P. Jennings, personal communication, March 18, 2013; Kornfield, 1993b, 2001; Masters, 2010a, 2010b, 2011; I. Mathieu, personal communication, April 12, 2013; L. Palden, personal communication, February 8, 2013; Welwood, 1984, 2002, 2010; White, 2011; Wilber, 1993,

2000a, 2007). Because most of these developmental challenges occurred within the context of interpersonal misattunement, many clinicians believe that they must also be unraveled in the same climate—in and through an empathic, attuned dyadic (or group) environment, e.g. counseling, psychotherapy, or intimate relationship (Atwood and Stolorow, 2001; Badenoch, 2008; T. Brach, personal communication, February 14, 2013; Buirski, 2005; Buirski and Haglund, 2009; Caplan, 2009; M. Caplan, personal communication, January 25, 2013; P. Jennings, personal communication, March 18, 2013; Kohut, 2009a, 2009b; J. Kornfield, personal communication, February 28, 2013; Masters, 2010b; Orange, 2005; Orange, Atwood, and Stolorow (2001); L. Palden, personal communication, February 8, 2013; Siegel, 2001, 2008, 2010; Stolorow and Atwood, 2002; Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood, 2000; Wallin, 2007; Welwood, 1984, 2002; Yalom and Leszcz, 2005).

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing and its essential qualities, essences, and characteristics, including the most common ways it manifests in the lives of contemporary spiritual practitioners. Data was derived and analyzed from interviews conducted with 14 respected theorists, psychotherapists, and researchers familiar with the phenomenon, including guidance on how practitioners, teachers, and mental health professionals might develop greater awareness of the phenomenon and the challenges it engenders—as well as suggestions on how to most skillfully and effectively respond to spiritual bypassing when it presents in themselves and in the lives of clients, patients, and students under their care. The other primary source of data was this researcher's seven-year immersion in the area, via personal observation, informal interviews with hundreds of practitioners and spiritual teachers, and hundreds of hours of dialogues with authors, teachers, and psychotherapists who have come across the phenomenon in their personal and

professional lives. Through exploration and application of the data, it is this researcher's hope that this study can help those interested in psychospiritual growth to more skillfully navigate the shadowy paths, pitfalls, detours, and cul-de-sacs which are part and parcel of any authentic inner journey. It is this researcher's deeply rooted belief that the greater the awareness of the phenomenon and its varied expressions, the more effectively an integral approach to psychological wellbeing and spiritual growth can take root, honoring all levels and dimensions of the human being and human experience.

Fundamentally speaking, spiritual bypass emerges when the spiritual line of development is emphasized at the expense of attention to other, critical developmental lines (T. Brach, personal communication, February 14, 2013; C. Cashwell, personal communication, March 4, 2013; Cashwell, Bentley, & Yarborough, 2007; Masters, 2010b; R.A. Masters, personal communication, March 6, 2013; Forman, 2010; Ingersoll & Zeitler, 2010; Neale, 2012; Welwood, 2002; Wilber, 2000a, 2007; K. Wilber, personal communication, February 15, 2013). Consequently, it is through awareness of and experiential work within other lines of development, e.g. somatic, cognitive, affective, and interpersonal, that spiritual bypassing may be starved at its source. While the relative priority of developmental levels in a person's life will shift both temporally and situationally, the underlying notion remains: if a person allows any of the developmental lines to overshadow others, pushing them into the background, ignoring, or "bypassing" them, they do so at their own peril (Caplan, 2009; Masters, 2010b; Neale, 2012; Welwood, 2002; Wilber, 2007). In turning away from any of the fundamental lines of development, practitioners create fertile soil in which spiritual bypassing can take root. For example, in some spiritual communities, be they Eastern or Western, emotional and interpersonal development is usurped by an

emphasis on cognitive and transpersonal experience, with the former relegated to a “lower” status as compared with “purer” and “more advanced” spiritual work. In many of these communities, activities such as interpersonally-oriented psychotherapy are not encouraged—or are even frowned upon—leaving some members struggling to address developmental needs which are not able to be met through exclusive reliance on traditional spiritual practice (Caplan, 2009; M. Caplan, personal communication, January 25, 2013; Kornfield, 1993b; J. Kornfield, personal communication, February 28, 2013; Masters, 2010b; Masters, personal communication, March 6, 2013; Neale, 2012; M. Neale, personal communication, January 9, 2013; Welwood, 2002; Wilber, 2007; Wilber, personal communication, 2013).

For the purposes of this study, the term “integral” does not refer to a strict adherence to the philosophy and orientation of the pioneering theoretician Ken Wilber. More specifically, “integral,” as referred to throughout this study, does not denote an “all quadrants, all levels, all lines, all states, all types” (“AQAL”) approach as advocated by Wilber in his writings (2000a, 2007). While this study acknowledges the profound influence Wilber and his colleagues have had in this area of inquiry (see, for example, Forman, 2010; Ingersoll and Zeitler, 2010; Wilber, 2000a, 2007; Wilber, Patten, Leonard, and Morelli, 2008), the term “integral” is utilized here in a much wider, more general, and less technical way. For the purposes of this study, “integral” shall refer to a theoretical awareness and experiential response which seeks to be as attentive as possible to a multiplicity of essential developmental lines, primarily including somatic, cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, intrapersonal, moral, and transpersonal. Or, more simply, attention to personal, interpersonal, and transpersonal domains of experience. Application of other critical dimensions of the integral model (e.g. quadrants, states of consciousness, and psychological types), while recognized by this

researcher as important in understanding the subtle interweaving between psychological and spiritual development, is beyond the scope of this study. In cases of spiritual bypassing, it can almost always be observed ways in which one (or more) of these developmental lines are being ignored, set aside (either consciously or unconsciously), or not engaged with in any meaningful way. In so doing, practitioners “bypass” these important domains of human experience en route to the transpersonal, to the Buddha, and to God itself.

As Wilber and his colleagues have discovered (see Forman, 2010; Ingersoll and Zeitler, 2010; Wilber, 2000a, 2007), development in one line does not necessarily correlate with development in others. The often stark (and disillusioning) reality of this discovery is evident in the all-too-frequent falling of spiritual teachers over the years caught with “pants or halo down” (Masters, 2010b; R. A. Masters, personal communication, March 6, 2013), mired in scandals involving money, power, and sex (M. Caplan, personal communication, January 25, 2013; L. Palden, personal communication, February 8, 2013). Many of these teachers appeared to be quite evolved in certain developmental lines (e.g. spiritual or meditative) while quite lacking—or even pathologically developed—in other critical lines, e.g. interpersonal, moral, psychosexual, and emotional. While the development of multiple lines is imperative for an integral approach to growth, healing, and transformation, research has suggested that cognitive development serves as a type of pre-requisite for development in other areas (Wilber, 2000a, 2007). Such research notwithstanding, an over-emphasis on cognitive development (as with an over-emphasis in any of the lines to the exclusion of others) can just as quickly result in a tumble into the dense forests of spiritual bypassing.

In short, an integral response to the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing is one which must at its very core address the personal (developmental needs, unmetabolized pain and

trauma, core wounds and vulnerabilities, internal working models), interpersonal (relational woundings; attachment dynamics; object relations), and transpersonal (the ground of being, consciousness itself; who a human being is beyond his or her conditioned narratives) dimensions of experience. It is this researcher's observation that it is through such an integral approach that the arising and flowering of spiritual bypassing can be brought into focus and its problematic expressions prevented or lessened, for the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing can only take root in the soil of disintegration and disassociation, in an environment characterized by a lack of awareness of and attention to each of the essential dimensions of human experience.

Although researchers have not yet determined the prevalence of spiritual bypassing, many believe it occurs frequently in the lives of those pursuing a spiritual path (T. Brach, personal communication, February 14, 2013; Caplan, 2009; M. Caplan, personal communication, January 25, 2013; L. Corbett, personal communication, March 22, 2013; Masters, 2010a, 2010b; R. A. Masters, personal communication, March 6, 2013; Mathieu, 2011; I. Mathieu, personal communication, April 12, 2013; Welwood, 1984, 2002). For many of these researchers, spiritual bypassing emerges organically as way to defend against the experience of pain of all kinds. In this way, it functions similarly to other defense mechanisms, such as repression, denial, and reaction formation (A. Freud, 1979). Researchers such as Caplan (2009; personal communication, January 25, 2013), Masters (2010b; personal communication, March 6, 2013), and Mathieu (2011; personal communication, April 12, 2013) have attempted to normalize the movement of spiritual bypassing, coming to see it as an ordinary part of a developmental trajectory. If a practitioner is willing and able to explore it with care, attention, and kindness, they are able to discover important data regarding their

own psychospiritual development; in this way it is a powerful tool for those seeking growth, healing, and lasting transformation. Though its expression becomes more and more subtle as a practitioner evolves in important developmental lines, the question remains: does a practitioner ever grow beyond spiritual bypassing in a wholesale way? As noted in the introduction to this study, there is no empirical test to measure the influence of spiritual bypassing in a person's life; therefore, it is possible that this question cannot be answered with any certainty at this time.

Common problems emerging from spiritual bypass include compulsive goodness, repression of undesirable or painful emotions, spiritual narcissism, extreme external locus of control, spiritual obsession or addiction, blind faith in charismatic leaders, abdication of personal responsibility, and social isolation (Cashwell, Bentley, and Yarborough, 2007). Caplan (2009) has created a list of ten “spiritually transmitted diseases,” which are intimately related to the movement and expression of spiritual bypassing, and include “the spiritualized ego,” mass production of spiritual teachers, spiritual pride, group mind, the “chosen-people complex,” and what she identifies as “the deadly virus”—“I have arrived.” Masters (2010b) categorizes the manifestations of spiritual bypassing in the following ways: being negative about our negativity, “blind” compassion, unhealthy transcendence, seeking spiritual shortcuts, avoidance of the shadow, the anatomy of magical thinking, the unwise use of anger, and spiritual gullibility.

Spiritual teacher Adyashanti (2009) addresses a number of common pitfalls, cul-de-sacs, and traps along the path of spiritual awakening, for example when practitioners make use of spiritual language to avoid certain less-than-wholesome aspects of themselves, e.g. “there is no person,” “nothing is happening anyway,” or “it is all an illusion.” While this sort

of absolute—or nondual—language can point to some of the highest states of spiritual realization, when it remains merely conceptual, it provides practitioners with a myriad of ways to bypass certain important dimensions of their experience. In another common example, Adyashanti has seen how the ego can easily and often unconsciously take refuge in the “witness” position, detaching from experience as a way to avoid what is actually happening in one’s life—all in the name of an absolute awakening.

Jeffrey Rubin (2004), a psychoanalyst and Buddhist meditation teacher, has observed the movement of spiritual bypassing in the lives of clients and practitioners for several decades. He describes the essence of spiritual bypassing in this way:

Illusions and pitfalls abound on the spiritual path. The pursuit of spirituality rarely stands up to the pure image we have of an individual attempting to reach a higher plane of awareness and understanding. Instead it may be used to bypass, circumvent, or attempt to heal emotional trauma. It can allow us to avoid conflict that we would be better off dealing directly with, or forestall growth by masking developmental arrests or lacunae. (pp. 73 – 74)

For those dedicated to authentic and mature psychospiritual growth—and for those who serve populations with these interests—cultivating greater awareness of spiritual bypassing provides a valuable lens through which to approach and understand the human journey of wholeness, healing, and personal transformation. This researcher believes it is possible—and incumbent upon those in the mental health community—to educate ourselves and others regarding the challenges of spiritual bypassing and, through an integral approach which includes awareness of multiple developmental lines, to bring increasing awareness,

kindness, and compassion to the lives of spiritual aspirants, meeting at the deepest levels their heartfelt longings to live wise and free lives.

Statement of the Problem

When discernment of the subtle dynamics of spiritual bypassing remain outside awareness, those interested in psychospiritual growth, healing, and transformation will inevitably become caught in its varied expressions, thereby thwarting the full realization of their psychological and spiritual goals. Therefore, it is critical that those who counsel, teach, and otherwise work with populations committed to spiritual growth deepen their understanding of and experience with the many faces of spiritual bypassing—as well develop integral, effective responses to the challenges associated with it.

Problems related to spiritual bypassing occur with frequency in the lives of spiritual practitioners, usually in the form of dissociation or splitting off from unwanted feelings, bodily sensations, emotional states, and habitual patterns of cognition. As Masters (2010b) so directly asserts, the ultimate reason a person bypasses is *to avoid pain*. All sentient beings are wired, conditioned, and habituated to turn from that which is painful, unpleasant, and anxiety-provoking. While the stated goal of most religious and spiritual systems is the reduction of suffering and the increase of freedom and peace, their various beliefs, teachings, and practices can nonetheless be utilized to avoid aspects of self-experience and self-organization which are too painful or anxiety-producing to confront directly. Because the dynamics and expressions of spiritual bypassing can be quite subtle—and often unconscious—its movement frequently goes undetected. Consequently, without adequate training and experience, mental health professionals who work with spiritually-interested populations will likely not be aware when spiritual bypass is activated in their clients. As a

result, a clinicians' evaluation, assessment, and diagnosis will remain incomplete, thereby leading to treatment plans and alliances which may be partial and ineffective. In order to respond effectively to the problem of spiritual bypassing—and its many symptoms and manifestations—mental health professionals must learn to recognize when the phenomenon is active and how to work skillfully and sensitively with clients who are caught in its subtle dynamics.

Background of the Study

Over the last 50 years, spiritual teachings and contemplative practices have been made available to the general public in a widespread way. With spiritual books appearing frequently on *The New York Times* bestseller list and being featured on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, spirituality has emerged into the mainstream contemporary culture. In and around nearly every major city throughout the world, those interested in yoga, meditation, centering prayer, shamanic journeying, spiritual healing, and dozens of other transformative methodologies are able to access teachings and practices that were once available to small numbers of people, and then usually only with a lifelong commitment to a monastic or secluded life. Along with an in-depth exploration of these systems of spiritual transformation, contemporary researchers, theorists, and clinicians have simultaneously explored the importance of somatically-grounded, emotionally-literate, psychological work as a complement to spiritually-oriented, contemplative practice. From these explorations a rich literature has emerged, offering insight, perspective, and experiential discoveries as to the relationship between these two streams of wisdom and understanding. A number of respected spiritual practitioners—many who are also trained as psychotherapists—have noted that, while ultimately complimentary, these two domains of inquiry address different dimensions of what it means to be human, including distinct aspects along the “spectrum of consciousness”

(Wilber, 1993). The work and discoveries of these pioneering researchers and clinicians will be documented in this study's Literature Review, as well as through data gathered through interviewees who have agreed to be part of this project.

Further, many of those who have spent their professional careers studying and generating first-hand, personal experience within these areas have come to see that spiritual work which does not honor personal and interpersonal dimensions of experience—exclusively focusing upon the spiritual or transpersonal—not only thwarts spiritual progress, but can lead to psychological difficulties and struggles in love and work (Caplan, 2009; Cashwell, Bentley, and Yarborough, 2007; C. Cashwell, personal communication, March 4, 2013; L. Corbett, personal communication, March 22, 2013; P. Jennings, personal communication, March 18, 2013; Kornfield, 1993a, 1993b; Masters, 2010b; R. Masters, personal communication, March 6, 2013; Neale, 2012, 2013; M. Neale, personal communication, January 9, 2013; Welwood 1984, 2002; Wilber, 2000a; K. Wilber, personal communication, February 15, 2013). The recognized need to create a psychologically-, emotionally-, and somatically-aware spirituality lies at the background to this study, in general, along with an increasing depth of awareness of the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing, in particular.

In summary, as the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing takes root and expresses in the lives of those committed to psychospiritual development, it presents an array of problems which limit the growth, healing, and transformation of those under its influence. Through a clearer and more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of spiritual bypassing and developing a greater awareness of the ways in which it expresses in the lives of their clients, teachers and mental health professionals become better equipped to serve the communities they represent. Further, by understanding the importance of multiple lines of development,

they can more deeply honor and skillfully address not only the spiritual dimensions of their clients' and students' lives, but also the somatic, emotional, interpersonal, and cognitive, thereby facilitating an integral and comprehensive approach to overall health and well-being.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing and its often unconscious influence in the lives of those engaged in psychological and spiritual work. This phenomenological research project will involve presentation of data illustrating the dynamics of spiritual bypassing as observed over the last seven years of this researcher's study, practice, and professional work. It will explore definitions of the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing, its essences and ways of expression, the difficulties and problems such lack of awareness can engender, and the primary methods and approaches that can most skillfully address the problems which arise from the phenomenon's expression.

The study will also present and analyze data collected through personal interviews of 14 leading theorists, clinicians, and writers with specific expertise in the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing and the defensive use of spirituality. Such data describes the qualities and essences of the phenomenon, as well as the variety of ways in which the interviewees have observed the phenomenon moving in the lives of their clients and students. Data also discloses preventive measures and other remedies to the problem of spiritual bypassing, and the ways in which such remedies provide a skillful and valuable contribution to the lives of those seeking authentic, mature psychospiritual growth and transformation.

Research Hypothesis

What is the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing—its definitions, essences, and common forms of expression—and what is the nature of an effective, skillful, and integral response to its presence in the lives of contemporary spiritual practitioners?

Importance of the Study

With millions worldwide seeking effective approaches to spiritual growth and personal transformation—often outside familial-based religions—it is critical that they are provided with as much guidance as possible along the way. The spiritual journey is one of the most profound vehicles human beings have discovered for lessening suffering and for responding to the rampant existential confusion, anxiety, isolation, meaninglessness, and depression that plagues so many. By developing increased awareness of the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing—and the many detours, cul-de-sacs, and shadows which are inevitably part of any authentic path of transformation—we can contribute in a very direct way to the reduction of human suffering while simultaneously supporting authentic and life-changing personal growth, healing, and spiritual awakening. Our world is hungry for ways of being which emphasize connection, compassion, understanding, and freedom. By becoming more aware of how psychological methodologies and spiritual practice can work together in an integrated, wholesome, and impactful way, we contribute to the expression of such a vision.

Scope of the Study

From November 1993 to the present date this researcher has worked closely with hundreds of well-known and respected spiritual teachers, psychological researchers, bestselling authors, and psychotherapists in his capacity as Associate Publisher, editor, and curriculum designer for the multimedia publishing company, Sounds True, based in Boulder, Colorado. Further, this researcher has engaged his own in-depth study and practice of

psychological and spiritual methodologies in an intensive way over the last 22 years. Over the course of such personal and professional work, this researcher was in contact with many hundreds of practitioners, dedicated to personal growth, psycho-emotional healing, and spiritual awakening. Moreover, this researcher has worked over the last seven years as a spiritual counselor and director to hundreds of individuals during times of spiritual emergence (Grof and Grof, 1989), through the experience of profound and challenging spiritual states of consciousness, during existential anxiety and confusion (Yalom, 1980), and through “dark nights of the soul” (Moore, 2005; May, 2005; St. John of the Cross, 2003). Throughout this course of study and experiential immersion with fellow travelers and clients, this researcher has gathered a rich body of experience regarding the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing. Such data has been reflected upon extensively, in both personal and professional capacities, and will be explored and analyzed as part of this research study.

In addition to conducting nearly 1000 hours of interviews with subjects as part of the aforementioned professional work, this researcher has engaged in an in-depth study of his own relationship with spiritual bypassing—and the many ways it has been and remains active in his own experience, despite at least a modicum of awareness regarding the phenomenon and its most common expressions.

As the primary means of data collection, personal interviews were conducted with 14 respected theorists, clinicians, and practitioners familiar with the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing, including the psychologist who coined the term spiritual bypassing in 1984, John Welwood, PhD. Also participating in the study was Robert Augustus Masters, PhD, the author of the first full-length book on the topic (*Spiritual Bypassing: When Spirituality Disconnects Us from What Really Matters*, North Atlantic Books, 2010). As part of the interviews, these

theorists and clinicians described their understanding of the phenomenon—its definitions, essences, and primary ways of expression—as well as offered suggestions as to how individual practitioners and mental health professionals might develop a greater awareness of spiritual bypassing in their lives and in the lives of their clients and students.

Limitation of the Study

This researcher recognizes that there is no quantitative test or statistically-verified means to measure the presence or absence of spiritual bypass, or to what degree the phenomenon may be active in the life of a given person, at a given time, in any empirical sense. Therefore, this qualitative study will make use of the actual direct experience, clinical observations, and personal reflections reported by the researcher and the interviewees who are the subjects of this project. Such a study, focused upon the subjective experience of a group of persons concerning a particular experiential phenomenon, utilizes that research method known as phenomenology.

Further, it is acknowledged that a large portion of the data gathered as part of this study has been derived by interviewees, clients, researchers, clinicians, and theorists who are versed primarily in Eastern-based contemplative traditions. While the clinicians interviewed as part of this study have worked with clients whose primary religious or spiritual expression was based in Judeo-Christian tradition, the clinicians' own writing, personal practice, and knowledge base leans toward Eastern contemplative traditions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, including related scientific exploration of these traditions, for example, in the area of mindfulness and neuroscience. Future studies in the area of spiritual bypass would benefit by exploring the nature of the phenomenon as it manifests in practitioners of diverse religions and spiritual traditions.

Finally, this researcher recognizes that there exist many personal biases and assumptions which will inevitably become part of this study. This researcher remains committed to disclosing, in as transparent a way as possible, these biases and assumptions as they arise in the course of the project.

Summary

Chapter 1 provided an introduction to the problem of spiritual bypassing and the importance of cultivating greater awareness of it in support of those seeking psychological and spiritual growth, healing, and personal transformation. Chapter 1 also detailed the nature of the research study, a phenomenological exploration of this researcher's experience with the phenomenon over a 22-year period, as well as an analysis of data gathered from 14 qualified, expert interviewees. Data will be presented to illustrate the core essences or dynamics of the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing, the ways it commonly expresses itself in the lives of those under its sway, and ways both practitioners and mental health professionals can skillfully respond to its movement in the lives of those dedicated to spiritual growth.

Through a review of the literature, Chapter 2 examines the nature of psychological and spiritual growth—and how these two streams of wisdom work together and separately to catalyze inner transformation. It also explores the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing and the nature of an integral path of growth, healing, and transformation—one that includes awareness of, attention to, and experiential application at somatic, cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and spiritual dimensions of human experience.

CHAPTER 2—REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The term *spiritual bypassing* first appeared in the literature in 1984 in response to a series of observations made by clinical psychologist John Welwood, concerning a tendency he noticed for practitioners to make use of spiritual ideas and practices in a defensive fashion, in order to avoid unresolved emotional wounding. During the time he first conceptualized his observations, Welwood was in contact with a variety of spiritual communities that, although providing a supportive environment for its members to develop spiritually, were unconsciously encouraging a propensity for its practitioners to use the spiritual path itself to bypass or sidestep personal and interpersonal challenges. In his early reflections on these dynamics, Welwood (1984, 1999, 2000, 2002) was starting to see how an approach to spirituality which focused exclusively on transpersonal growth—while excluding (or limiting) personal and interpersonal dimensions of human development—inevitably resulted in the expression of the phenomenon which came to be known as spiritual bypassing. In more colloquial terms, spiritual bypassing occurs when a person’s involvement with spiritual beliefs and practices disconnects them from “what really matters” (Masters, 2010b).

Over the nearly 30 years since its first use, the term “spiritual bypassing” has appeared only semi-frequently in the literature, primarily through the work of Mariana Caplan (2009), Craig Cashwell and colleagues (2004, 2005, 2007, 2009), Robert Augustus Masters (2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2012, 2013a), and John Welwood (1984, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2010, 2011). While the term itself is relatively new, the phenomenon it describes is not. From the time of Freud, researchers and clinicians have observed the many ways that spiritual beliefs, teachings, and practices can be used defensively to protect practitioners from confronting unmetabolized

psychological and emotional wounding from the past. Such use of spirituality to avoid certain difficult, challenging, and unwanted aspects of personal experience is the hallmark of spiritual bypassing.

In his pioneering work in the field, Welwood (1999) defines spiritual bypassing as “the use of spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep personal, emotional ‘un-finished business,’ to shore up a shaky sense of self, or to belittle basic needs, feelings, and developmental tasks, all in the name of enlightenment” (p. 137). Unpacking Welwood’s primary definition, it may be helpful to explore what he and others mean by the term “developmental tasks.”

Developmental tasks are those normative milestones that researchers have observed unfolding in the lives of human beings as they grow, age, and mature. Such tasks include, for example, the forming of a healthy self-image and cohesive self-structure, the ability to adequately defend against overwhelming unconscious material, and the balancing of attachment and differentiation in interpersonal relationship.

Heinz Kohut, founder of the psychoanalytic approach which came to be known as *self psychology*—a clinical methodology which grew out of the “relational turn” in psychoanalysis (Mitchell and Black, 1996)—asserted three, primary developmental needs which are necessary for a healthy psychological life. One of these needs was what Kohut (2009a, 2009b) called “mirroring,” and is widely accepted as a critical component in the development of an infant’s brain, nervous system, and sense of self-cohesiveness. What Kohut discovered was that young children needed to have their self-worth “mirrored” back to them, through attuned and empathic validation on the part of their caregivers. Without such mirroring, the development of the child’s healthy sense of self will be thwarted. In environments where such attunement and validation were not provided, a developmental wounding is said to occur,

resulting in a range of affective challenges throughout the cycle of life. For those who did not receive such mirroring within their families or origin, they will look for opportunities for mirroring as adults to complete this developmental cycle, including through relationships with intimate partners, psychotherapists, friends, and with a religiously-oriented attachment figures such as a spiritual teacher or some other representation of the divine (including God him/her/itself).

Extending Welwood's principal definition of spiritual bypassing, Cashwell, Bentley, and Yarborough (2007) note that "spiritual bypass occurs when a person attempts to heal psychological wounds at the spiritual level only and avoids the important (albeit often difficult and painful) work at the other levels, including the cognitive, physical, emotional, and interpersonal" (p. 140). Here, these researchers are pointing to the importance of an integral approach to psychospiritual growth, one which seeks to honor and incorporate not just the spiritual, but *multiple* lines of development.

One of the most important themes emerging from this literature review is the assertion that spiritual work, on its own, *may not* be "enough" to provide a person with the entirety of tools and resources needed for optimal health and well-being. Rather, the research suggests that those seeking authentic, mature, and lasting personal transformation cultivate awareness of and work experientially in such a way that honors not only spiritual development, but also psychological, emotional, moral, cognitive, and interpersonal domains of experience (T. Brach, personal communication, February 14, 2013; Caplan, 2009; Cashwell, Bentley, and Yarborough, 2007; C. Cashwell, personal communication, March 4, 2013; Forman, 2010; Ingersoll and Zeitler, 2012; Masters, 2010a, 2010b; R.A. Masters, personal communication, March 6, 2013; Tift, 2011a; B. Tift, personal communication, March 25, 2013; Welwood,

1984, 1999, 2000, 2002; Wilber, 2000a, 2007; K. Wilber, personal communication, February 15, 2013). In this way, these researchers have come to observe that attention to multiple lines of development is perhaps *the* most important precaution practitioners can take to prevent the flowering of spiritual bypassing in all its forms, for it is through the unexamined assumption that spiritual work is the remedy to all problems and challenges faced by human beings that spiritual bypassing flourishes. In the words of psychotherapist and researcher of contemporary spirituality Mariana Caplan (2009):

It is important to recognize that most contemporary spiritual traditions simply were not designed to penetrate the cellular, psychological wounding caused by the type of trauma that is so prevalent in Western culture that arises from broken homes, disconnection from our bodies and nature, and alienation from authentic sources of spiritual wisdom. (p. xxxi)

In summary, this literature review will focus upon those researchers, teachers, and clinicians who have addressed spiritual bypassing directly—as well as others who have described related phenomena in their personal and professional work. It will also present an admittedly less-than-comprehensive review of the relationship between psychotherapeutic and spiritual work in general, the full treatment of which is beyond the scope of this study. In particular, those sources will be cited which recognize the importance of engaging in therapeutic work (including somatic, affective, and brain-based therapies) as a critical antidote to the varied expressions of spiritual bypassing. Through an informed awareness of the theories, goals, and methodologies of these two great streams of healing and transformation, those involved in psychospiritual growth—whether practitioner or clinician serving spiritually-oriented populations—will better position themselves to hold in awareness the

dynamics and problems of spiritual bypassing, while more effectively and comprehensively helping to reduce suffering, guiding themselves and others toward their psychological, emotional, interpersonal, and spiritual goals.

Definitions and Essences of Spiritual Bypassing

The first book dedicated to the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing was written by psychotherapist and spiritual teacher Robert Augustus Masters (*Spiritual Bypassing: When Spirituality Disconnects Us from What Really Matters*, 2010b). In it, Masters describes spiritual bypassing as “a very persistent shadow of spirituality,” referring to both its prevalence and the assertion that it operates unconsciously, often outside the awareness of even the most experienced teachers, clinicians, and practitioners (p. 2). In his work with thousands of individuals and couples over the last 30 years, Masters has identified the following common forms in which spiritual bypassing expresses in the lives of those committed to psychospiritual growth:

... [an] exaggerated detachment, emotional numbing, and repression; overemphasis on the positive, anger-phobia, blind or overtly 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. (p. 2)

While these forms are many, Masters (2010a, 2010b; personal communication, March 6, 2013) asserts that there a consistent thread which unites them all: they are movements, in one way or another, to avoid pain. Simply put, the reason a person spiritually bypasses is out of a belief, conscious or otherwise, that such activity will reduce their felt-sense of suffering.

While there are endless ways to distract oneself from the challenges of daily life, the study of spiritual bypassing concerns itself with the ways in which spiritual beliefs, ideas, and practices are used in the avoidance of pain (Caplan, 2009; Cashwell, Clarke, & Graves, 2009; Masters, 2010a, 2010b; Neale, 2012; Welwood, 1984, 1999, 2002). In order to begin to work with spiritual bypassing, Masters (2010b) contends that a person must first come to recognize its movement in his or her life (often through the help of a teacher, counselor, or therapist) and to name the phenomenon in an explicit way as it becomes known in direct experience. It must be seen clearly, as it is, before effective steps can be taken to counter its movement; each person must see for themselves the very specific ways that they employ “spiritual beliefs to avoid dealing in any significant depth with... pain and... developmental needs” (Masters, 2010b, p. 9). By seeing it and naming it, practitioners are then able to relate *to* it rather than *from* it (Masters, 2010b). In order to perceive the ways spiritual bypassing is active in their lives, practitioners must take a journey which is, in many ways, deeply “counter-instinctual” (Tift, 2011a, 2011b). This journey requires that a person resist the habitual tendency to move away from that which is difficult, and to turn “toward the painful, disfigured, ostracized, unwanted or otherwise disowned aspects of ourselves” (Masters, 2010b, p. 13). Rather than use spiritual teachings and practices to “transcend” the inevitable challenging, painful, and messy aspects of human life, Masters (2010b) encourages practitioners to cultivate an intimacy with all aspects of their experience, including those which are the most shameful, dark, and embarrassing.

As integral theorist Ken Wilber (in Masters, 2010a) avows, the fruits of contemplative practice take time to manifest, and unfold with time and deepening experience (both on and off “the cushion”). As beginning and intermediate-level aspirants frequently discover, the

journey isn't so much a matter of working with exotic, overtly spiritual, or transpersonal content, but rather with "plain old ordinary variety shadow material." This can be disappointing for eager practitioners who enter the practice of spirituality with pre-conceived ideas about the nature of spiritual development. Rather than consistent and transformative experiences of love, bliss, peace, and tranquility, practitioners are often surprised by what is revealed in the light of prayer, inquiry, or meditation—those many "negative" aspects of oneself which have been ignored for so long.

To work with spiritual bypassing, practitioners must learn to lean into exactly that which they've spent a lifetime avoiding (T. Brach, personal communication, February 14, 2013; Chodron, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2012; Foster, 2012; J. Foster, personal communication, February 12, 2013; Kornfield, 1993a, 1993b; Masters, 2010b; R.A. Masters, personal communication, March 6, 2013; Tift, 2011a, 2011b; B. Tift, personal communication, March 25, 2013). By learning to touch suffering directly, to explore it at its deepest somatic and energetic levels, practitioners cut into the lifelong habit of a certain aggression toward lived, embodied experience, welcoming it into a new holding environment of openness and kindness (Tift, 2011a, 2011b; Winnicott, 1965). Within a field of a radical "lovingkindness" toward self-experience (Skt: *maitri*), practitioners are able to metabolize—or digest—even the darkest, most unwanted aspects of experience (Chodron, 2012; Tift, 2011a; Trungpa, 2010). Masters (2010b) cautions practitioners from relegating so-called "negative" experiences to a "lower status" than spiritual ones, thereby keeping the former in the dark (p. 20). When practitioners turn toward the entirety of their experience in this way, they cut the momentum of spiritual bypassing, ceasing to pathologize painful experience, and recognizing that the only way out is through.

Barbara Whitfield (1995), a psychotherapist specializing in spiritual awakening and spiritual emergence, has seen many clients engage in spiritual bypass as a way to avoid the emotional work required to heal from early trauma. She has also discovered that even profound spiritual experience itself can carry a certain traumatic effect to it, which must be worked through, not bypassed through more spiritual practice. In working with many clients who have undergone powerful spiritual transformation, only to avoid the follow-up work that it takes to integrate such experiences, Whitfield notes that these clients seem to be “trying to live in a less painful spiritual realm where [they] could ‘hang out with God.’” (p. 40).

In the aftermath of a powerful spiritual awakening, a person may be drawn to focus exclusively on the transcendent dimension of experience—in Indian parlance, on the “upper chakras.” In this situation, the practitioner does not want to be “dragged down” from the heights they have recently discovered, as to do so would require relating with the “lower chakras” and the potentially “less-than-spiritual” energies they represent. As long as the lower chakras are avoided, however, in preference for the higher energies, the possibility of spiritual bypass is increased (B. Whitfield, 1995). Whitfield has found it important to work carefully with clients who have had transformative spiritual encounters to help them to stay grounded and to fully integrate their experience. She explains:

When we talk about getting grounded we mean staying with issues of this reality, coming back to practical issues and common sense. Experiencers and spiritual seekers in general have a tendency to intellectualize and fantasize, or go into their heads and indulge in wishful or magical thinking. A great many New Age concerns can turn into escapist delusions. This danger can be averted by solid grounding—getting down to basics, or first chakra issues. (1995, p. 71)

Moreover, Whitfield (1995) has discovered that when practitioners bypass nonintegrated material that remains unresolved within the totality of their being that their overall development will ultimately be held back until their particular unfinished business is worked through. She clarifies:

If we try to ignore our pain and achieve the higher levels of our consciousness, something, usually our false self/negative ego or shadow self, will hold us back until we work through our particular unfinished business. Trying to bypass the work that needs to be done on our negative ego/shadow backfires. This is called spiritual bypass, premature transcendence, or high-level denial. Spiritual bypass can be seen in any number of situations, from being born again in the fundamentalist sense, to focusing only on the Light, to becoming attached to a guru or technique. The consequences often are denial of the richness and healthy spontaneity of our inner life: trying to control oneself or others; all-or-none thinking and behaving; feelings of fear, shame, and confusion; high tolerance for inappropriate behavior; frustrations, addictions, and compulsions; and unnecessary pain and suffering. (p. 76)

Whitfield (1995) cautions practitioners to remain aware of the propensity to become overly attached to so-called “positive” experiences, thereby neglecting other kinds of experience which become labeled “negative.” It is through an embrace of all experience that growth occurs most rapidly, as the spiritual journey must ultimately encompass all of what a human being is. When practitioners seek to hold onto the positive by pushing away the negative, they end up obstructing the movement of the life energy (Skt: *kundalini*) within. Whitfield further describes this process, and the dangers of this form of spiritual bypass:

Holding onto the bliss of a Kundalini arousal and not processing the painful feelings is spiritual bypass, and a kind of high-level denial. It brings about a big imbalance and may be dangerous. The false self or shadow thereby becomes even stronger, exaggerating mental development as it controls the process, and in so doing, the ego becomes more inflated. In these extreme cases, what started out as personal transformation becomes a crisis and eventually, if the momentum continues, a psychotic break. If we feel our painful feelings, process them and let them go, our energy blocks are freed and we can experience endless energy. The more we are in touch with our Kundalini energy while remaining grounded, the easier time we will have being guided through our own process of wholeness and awakening. (p. 82)

Dr. Charles Whitfield (in C. Whitfield, 1995), a physician and researcher in the area of spiritual experience and addiction, warns practitioners about a series of common “traps” which can occur alongside genuine spiritual experience. One of these traps Whitfield explicitly names as spiritual bypassing, occurring when a practitioner seeks to avoid yet-to-be-processed pain and wounding by “jumping from an earlier stage of healing directly into the most advanced stage” (p. xv). Whitfield, Whitfield, Park, and Pevett (2006) have observed how in an attempt to circumnavigate the darkness, to short-circuit the required psychological and emotional work that often is required in the wake of profound spiritual experience, it is common for a person “to be pulled back down.” Whether through an encounter with the Jungian shadow or via Freud’s repetition compulsion, until the practitioner works through all previously undigested unfinished business, they will not be able to stabilize and ground what they have realized. Further describing the consequences of spiritual bypassing—which he also refers to as “premature transcendence” or “high-level denial”—Whitfield explains:

Its consequences are often active co-dependence: denial of the richness of the richness of our inner life; trying to control oneself or others; all-or-none thinking and behaving; feelings of fear, shame, and confusion; high tolerance for inappropriate behavior; frustration, addiction, compulsion, relapse, and unnecessary pain and suffering... The way out of this trap is to work through the pain of wherever we may be, or just enjoy the joyous feelings. (pp. xvi – xvii)

Brant Cortright (1997), a professor and integral psychotherapist, has observed how those who have recently experienced a spiritual opening can tend toward spiritual bypassing, as they attempt to establish a new identity which is capable of encompassing what they have learned or realized.

New converts and people who have recently experienced a spiritual opening are perhaps the most striking examples of spiritual by-passing. As people try to incorporate a new spiritual worldview into their lives, a certain amount of wholesale introjection and spiritual by-passing can even be viewed as a developmental stage as they try to accommodate to a new vision as to how they “should” be and want to be versus how they are. (p. 213)

Generally speaking, spiritual bypass involves making use of spiritual ideas, beliefs, practices, and content for psychological purposes or, in the words of Cortright (1997), “in the service of neurotic conflict” (p. 213). Oftentimes, practitioners will choose a spiritual path that in some way matches their own native psychology. In so doing, their spiritual pursuits become so intertwined with their overall psychological make-up that it is difficult to tease the spiritual bypassing out as a discrete development of the client’s organization. In responding to clients who present signs of spiritual bypass, Cortright encourages therapists to proceed with caution,

meeting the bypass on its own terms, while at the same time cultivating empathy and respecting the importance and meaning of the client's specific beliefs and practices. He suggests that transpersonally-oriented therapists are in a unique position to work with spiritual bypassing as they have been trained to honor psychological organization as well as higher spiritual motivations and values; whereas traditional therapists may subtly, unconsciously, or even overtly disparage the client's spiritual framework, discounting the bypassing as merely neurotic or a pathological defense which must be interpreted and worked through. He explains:

Because a person's spiritual beliefs are often so central, intimate, and so precious to a person, directly challenging them or confronting them can be therapeutically risky.

It can alienate the client from the therapist, puts the therapist in the unfortunate position of implicitly asserting that the client's beliefs are somehow wrong or bad, and removes the therapist from the empathic vantage point of trying to understand from within the client's worldview. The very labeling of a client's belief or spiritual practice "spiritual by-passing" tends to have this effect. (p. 213)

By being sensitive to a client's defensive use of spirituality—holding it in a container of both awareness and empathy—the therapist stays close to the subjective world of her client, and creates a container for spiritual bypassing to unfold, encouraging meaningful exploration and potential transformation (Cortright, 1997). Cortright illustrates:

For example, a therapist might check to see if in trying to maintain a positive attitude toward a newly diagnosed cancer there are any other feelings that it would be important to acknowledge. This can help reframe the issue into the best strategy for keeping a positive attitude, whether this comes by pushing feelings away or by

including all feelings. Much of the time, what is needed is for the therapist to simply see the spiritual by-passing and work with it indirectly through the entire process of psychotherapy. As the defenses erode and the deeper needs and feelings of the client emerge in the safety of the therapeutic space, the by-passing changes automatically as the entire psyche shifts. (p. 213-214).

As part of an exploration of the entirety of a client's relationship with spirituality, Cortright (1997) encourages a comprehensive inquiry into the lived actuality of the effects of certain beliefs and practices. For example, a person must examine carefully

whether certain spiritual beliefs and practices enlarge our world, expand our possibilities, increase our self-esteem, support us, help us to connect with others and nature, and nourish us. Or on the contrary, do they shrink our world, diminish our self of self and self-esteem, limit our contact with others and the world? When spiritual beliefs shrink a person's world, it is likely that spiritual by-passing is occurring.

However, there cannot be too rigid a rule about all this. (p. 214)

A clinician must not only be on the lookout for spiritual bypassing, but also for the dangers of identifying too much with a psychological perspective; a well-grounded, transpersonally-oriented clinician must walk this line carefully, asserts Cortright (1997), for it is not always easy to discern whether certain behavior of psychic organization is "healthy" or "unhealthy," adaptive or maladaptive. Cortright explains:

This makes the issue considerably more complex, for what may be very healthy from a purely psychological perspective may, from a spiritual perspective, be quite unhealthy and distracting. While it is important to be cognizant of the potentially repressive and damaging effects of spiritual practice on the psyche, as inner development proceeds

there may be equally significant, spiritually damaging effects of “healthy” indulgence. What if the distractions of satisfying an emotional need result in spiritual costs? A transpersonal perspective brings into view not only the dangers of spiritual by-passing but the possible dangers of psychological fixation as well. For example, a period of minimal social contact and no sexual involvement may be a great help to a person’s inner development. Additionally, we must consider the possibility that it may even be psychologically healthy as well, perhaps leading the person to feel better about his or her inner resources and enhancing self-esteem. (pp. 214 – 215)

In an ideal situation, a practitioner would engage in their inner life in an integral way, honoring both psychological and spiritual dimensions of their experience; there are times, however, when a trade-off must be made, when one aspect becomes emphasized over another. In this situation, the result is not spiritual bypass, per se, Cortright (1997) clarifies; rather, what is most important is the degree of awareness the practitioner brings to the choice and to the environment in which it arises. These types of situations can prove challenging to both practitioners and to their therapists and teachers and require a very careful evaluation of the right steps to take, based on the practitioners’ values and goals. Cortright explains (1997):

There is no external yardstick by which to measure such things, for at one point in a person’s evolution the answer might be one thing and at another time for the same person the answer might be just the opposite. It may be that only as a person tries such experiments and learns from mistakes that a consciousness develops that can discriminate wisely. Beyond this it is important to see how understandable spiritual by-passing is in anyone’s life, given the defenses we all have along with our aspirations for a more spiritual life. Of course our ego and neurotic “stuff” will wrap

themselves around our spiritual beliefs, just as with anything else in our life, generating worldviews and using spiritual rationales to enforce emotional positions. Discerning when something is psychologically healthy or repressive, when it helps or hinders spiritual growth, and when it is either/or rather than both/and requires a high degree of self-awareness. The concept of spiritual by-passing may be of most value when we see the subtle and not so subtle ways it comes to most everyone on the spiritual path. (p. 215)

In addressing the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing, Whitfield (2003) cautions practitioners against “jumping up” to the spiritual as a way to avoid a direct relationship with challenging feelings and emotions. In short, there is no “arrival” in the spiritual without an embodied exploration of feeling. Whitfield has observed a trap which can occur following a powerful awakening experience where a person “leaps” from the ordinary, physical world and into the spiritual, sidestepping important parts of themselves along the way. What Whitfield has discovered, however, is that when a person bypasses in this fashion, they will inevitably be called back to address what he calls the “True Self,” that dimension of experience where unresolved emotions and feelings are stored. Even after a radical spiritual awakening, according to Whitfield, a practitioner must “go back” and heal this True Self, by way of integrating those aspects of self-organization which can so naturally be “jumped over” in the wake of a powerful spiritual experience.

One particular form of spiritual bypass occurs when a person becomes “addicted to the false self” (Whitfield, 2003, p. 90). Because the nature of the false self is that it wants to be right and in control, it will make use of whatever it must, including a person’s spiritual beliefs and practices, to survive. Whitfield explains:

It doesn't care how it does it. And it will use all kinds of tactics, both subtle and overt, to try to convince our True Self that it has the answers for us. And since it helped us survive as kids and as adults, we have become quite attached to it. It's hard to let it go. It's also hard to let go of our need to be right all the time, to be in control, to push down all of our feelings, not just painful ones, but joyful feelings too. Those are some of the ways that we can be attached to our false self. And of course, as we move through our recovery and evolve, we get closer and closer to living a life of co-creation. We make the discovery that the false self is not real. It's an illusion. That takes a lot of courage to begin to let go of our false self. To see that and experience it, and know it. And to know that our false self is not God. (p. 119)

David Matteson (2008), a clinical psychologist, suggests that individuals are particularly at risk of engaging in spiritual bypass during times of developmental transitions, especially those which require an expansion of current identity. He urges spiritually-sensitive counselors and therapists to become aware of the ways that both they and their clients unconsciously shy away from darker, so-called "negative" aspects of human experience. By becoming more familiar with the tendency to move quickly to the spiritual by glossing over the more messy aspects of life, the movement of spiritual bypassing can more easily be met in the here and now as it arises.

It is important, Neale asserts (2013), for meditators to take a careful approach toward their traumatic wounding, rather than merely circumventing it through further practice. Noting a tendency in some meditators to devalue personal traumas "in pursuit of more exalted and seductive spiritual values," Neale reports it is not uncommon for a practitioner to have profound spiritual insights, while at the same time neglecting emotional, psychological,

interpersonal and somatic dimensions of experience. He explains:

Frequent scandals involving so-called spiritual masters who have had inappropriate relations with their students as well as students who see little psychological progress after years of spiritual practice stand as testaments to the deleterious effects of neglecting basic human needs. Indeed it may be possible to have profound spiritual insights, and at the same time neglect other areas of our complex being—including emotional, psychological, interpersonal or somatic dimensions. If we don't take all of these dimensions seriously and incorporate them into "the work" of human development—then the shadow-side of our split identity can reemerge outside of conscious awareness, when we least expect it and with painful consequences. (p. 1)

Spiritual bypassing occurs when a practitioner makes use of spiritual ideas, beliefs, and practices in the attempt "to avoid pain, shame, and the unpleasant side of our humanity" (Neale, 2013, p. 1). Over the years, Neale has observed a number of common forms in which spiritual bypassing expresses in the lives of practitioners, in both his own life and in his clinical work with yogis and meditators. Some of these forms he describes as follows:

... when fear of rejection, fear of burdening others or conflict-avoidance masquerade as being easygoing, patient and accommodating; when co-dependency poses as caregiving and compassion; when guru-devotion leads to subservience and conceals unresolved childhood dynamics such as over-idealization or fear of reprisal; when the spiritual virtue of detachment is misunderstood as disinterest and one attempts to avoid pain by disconnecting from feelings and relationships; when spiritual success and accomplishment end up reinforcing narcissism and the very inflated self-images they were designed to see through; when ultimate truths such as selflessness and emptiness

are misunderstood and privileged over relative truths and one consequently falls into the nihilistic extreme of self-denial or apathy. (p. 2)

While the forms of spiritual bypassing vary, they do share one thing in common, Neale (2013) contends: “they are unconscious adaptations of pain-avoidance concealed in the fabric of spiritual practice” (p. 2). Neale further asserts that because spiritual bypassing operates for the most part unconsciously, it is helpful for practitioners to work with a skilled, objective observer—such as a therapist or teacher—in coming to understand how the phenomenon might be active in their lives. Otherwise, they may miss it altogether, “just as... the blindspot in a rearview mirror” (p. 2).

When practitioners remain split off from painful feelings and emotions, their practices (and their communities) can reinforce “early childhood traumas, maladaptive coping strategies, and unconscious family dynamics” (Neale, 2013, p. 2). In order to embrace—rather than dissociate from—these difficult affect states, practitioners can often benefit from Western-oriented, therapeutic work, as a complement to their spiritual practice . Neale explains:

One of the contributions of psychotherapy is to help us meet each moment of our relative reality with greater self-care, grace, humility and honesty rather than perpetuating the cycles of unconscious self-denial, shame-blame, or emotional avoidance that impersonate spiritual piety, emotional-transcendence and selfless realization. (p. 2)

For many on the spiritual journey—especially in its early stages—the “ego” or the personal sense of self tends to be viewed as an enemy, the primary obstacle to attaining the fruits of spiritual realization. As integral theorist Ken Wilber (personal communication, February 15,

2013) clarifies, it is not the ego in and of itself that is an obscuration; in fact, egoic process is a necessary and important dimension of human experience. Rather, it is the *exclusive identification* with the ego as the entirety of identity that must be explored through contemplative practice. Nearly all of the theorists and clinicians cited in this study extol the value of working skillfully within the personal domain of human experience—in tandem with the transpersonal—as part of an overall program of psychological and spiritual growth. Much of the work cited in this study points back to the same essential discovery: When the personal and interpersonal are neglected in favor of the transpersonal, some form of spiritual bypassing will inevitably ensue. Frances Vaughan (2005), a clinical psychologist and early pioneer in the field of humanistic and transpersonal psychologies, explains the importance of balancing the personal and the transpersonal:

Neither the world of the ego nor the world of soul can be ignored in contemporary life. To deny one and affirm the other is to fall into the illusion that we can live exclusively in the outer world or the inner world, which is obviously impossible. Both are real, and both have value and relevance to the spiritual path. To believe that I can find fulfillment in retreating into the world of soul and avoid the world of ego is to imagine that by creating a separate reality I can escape the world of nature into which I have been born. This is what many young people who chose to leave the secular world and devote themselves to religious life have discovered. Painful though it may be, one way or another, many of them have returned to living in the world. (p. 41)

Vaughan (2005) offers two examples from her clinical practice to illustrate how spirituality can be used to escape personal challenges and other “difficulties in the world of ego”:

One man who had been living in an ashram for nine years spoke of his life after leaving the ashram as being filled with shame, pain and struggle. Feeling like a spiritual failure, as if abandoned by God and cursed as a traitor by his guru, his task was to reclaim his identity in the outer world. This he characterized as “reawakening the real self instead of posturing as this fiercely transcendent spiritual being.”

Another young man who went to Asia to practice intensive meditation for several years told me he felt a persistent sense of deprivation while living as a monk. This eventually led him out of monastic isolation back to the world. He recognized that his own demands for perfection had sabotaged his sense of well being, and his efforts had avoided some deep psychological issues. In retrospect he realized that his quest for liberation meant coming to terms with the totality of his personal life. (p. 41)

Reflecting on over four decades of teaching and practicing Buddhism in the West, clinical psychologist Jack Kornfield (in Bodian, 1993) notes it is critical for spirituality to penetrate into all aspects of human experience, not merely producing an encounter with the transpersonal. When Eastern teachings first came to the West, many became lost in its esoteric and colorful underpinnings, and seduced by spirituality’s other-worldly aspects. Kornfield reflects:

Initially, for me and many others, Eastern spirituality was esoteric and colorful. Later it translated into techniques of practice borrowed from a foreign culture. What I’ve struggled with over the years is how to live the teachings for the Dharma with my wife

and children, with the community in which I live, with the ecological and political realities around me. What does it mean to live a spiritual life as a modern Westerner? This I see as the fundamental spiritual question for us all here in the West. We're all maturing together. Our notions of spirituality were initially quite romantic and inspiring. But after psychedelics, followed by yoga techniques, deep breathing, and intensive meditation retreats, you have to live your spirituality day to day, at home, at work, in your car. Otherwise, it won't transform you, and in the end you won't benefit and transform the world around you. (p. 59)

According to many of the theorists and writers cited in this study (see, for example, Adayshanti, 2006, 2009, 2011; Almaas, 2000b, 2009, 2012; Engler, 2006; Epstein, 2008; Fenner, 2007; Foster, 2012; Grof, 1988; Kyabgon, 2004; Wilber, 2007, 2012), spiritual awakening involves a fundamental shift of identity, a transformation of the way a practitioner sees herself in the largest sense. Through contemplative practice, a near-death experience, while out in nature, or even through a seemingly random event, such a shift can take place. Kornfield (in Bodian, 1993) warns practitioners, however, that the full ramifications of such a shift must be integrated into the entirety of one's life. Otherwise, the transformative nature of the shift will likely wear off over the days, weeks, and months to come.

Kornfield (in Bodian, 1993; personal communication, February 28, 2013) describes how, despite best efforts, even the most dedicated practitioners can use the spiritual journey to end-run the messiness of human incarnation, including the challenging areas of sexuality, the body, relationships, and money. In working with meditation students over the years, Kornfield describes two paths commonly trodden in response to the arising of difficult psychological and emotional material:

As it turns out, there seems to be two paths people take. Some people, when they undertake spiritual practice, find that the unfinished business they carry, the wounds of their heart and spirit, is so great that it quickly arises and must be attended to before anything else. Without a healing of the heart, the rest of the path becomes like an artificial layer of ice on a deep pool that no one ever touches. The other progression I've seen occurs among equally wounded people, like myself, who have successfully used spiritual practices to skip over their human problems. They have very genuine realizations, insights, openings of body and mind, they fill themselves with light and bliss, only to find, a year or five years or 10 years later, in their next relationship or in their search for right livelihood, that all the unfinished business is there waiting for them. (p. 59)

One of the common themes which emerged during the course of this literature review was the assertion that a genuine spiritual maturity requires equal attention to both personal *and* universal dimensions of experience. The full fruits of spiritual practice require that both levels are attended to and honored; otherwise, a lopsided realization ensues. Kornfield (in Bodian, 1993) shares an example to illustrate:

If one only attends to one's ethics but doesn't address the question "Who am I?", there isn't any true awakening. If, on the other hand, one has fantastic koan practice with a Zen master or great yogic visualizations but does not integrate these into heart and body and action, then one's spiritual life will be filled with pain and fear. (p. 60)

Author and spiritual teacher Jeff Brown (2009) describes spiritual bypass as "the tendency to jump to spirit prematurely, usually in an effort to avoid various aspects of earthly reality." That reality, Brown contends, includes all forms of suffering, discomfort, emotional

distress, interpersonal struggles, and economic pressures. In short, via the movement of spiritual bypassing, a person will strive to avoid any aspect of their lives which is producing pain and suffering. Brown explains:

In a world of pain, the spiritual bypass is an ongoing temptation. It gives us something to believe in and a vision of what we are missing in our localized reality. Without it, many of us would have to suffer unbearable situations. At the same time, it can be a detour on the path to genuine spirituality. In our efforts to leapfrog to something better, we often avoid something crucial. Spirit becomes the crutch rather than the expression of a natural unfolding. (p. 37)

It is common, when caught in spiritual bypass, to wall off one's "spiritual" life from other aspects of experience that are labeled "non-spiritual" or otherwise less-than spiritual. But as Brown alleges, "'Spirituality' is just another word for reality, and the truly "spiritual" person embraces all aspects of life simultaneously—the emotional, the material, and the subtle realms." He further elucidates:

Although appearing spiritual, bypassers are actually cut off from various aspects of reality. By turning away from old pain, they shackle themselves with their unresolves. With their head in the clouds, they cannot see where they are walking. This may be a temporary tool for survival, but real growth demands that we come back down to earth and face our demons. We have to grow down to grow up. (p. 38)

Describing the unfolding of spiritual bypass in his own life, neuroscientist and spiritual teacher Joseph Dizpenza (2006) recalls a time when he believed he could pursue his spiritual aspirations while not paying much attention to well-being in other parts of his life. He assumed, as do many affected by spiritual bypass, that if he dedicated himself to his

practice, that all of those other “non-spiritual areas,” for example, psychological and emotional health, would take care of themselves or be taken care of by God. Over many years, however, despite progress in his spiritual life in many ways, Dizpenza was unhappy, spiraling into a deepening and chronic depression. As he began to explore his life more carefully, he discovered that he was made up of several “bodies,” each housing a particular dimension of human experience. He began to uncover the realizations of the great yogis that alongside the physical body, there existed equally important emotional and spiritual bodies, each of which must be related with and made part of any genuine growth and development. He observed:

While I was working so hard to advance my spiritual life, I allowed my emotional and psychological bodies to fall increasingly out of balance with the rest of me. It was a classic case of what I learned later is called the “spiritual bypass,” an attempt to forge a personal spirituality without going through the process of healing the wounded psychological and emotional parts of myself. (p. 95)

As he became increasingly aware of how spiritual bypass had been prevalent in his own life, Dispenza (2006) came to understand the phenomenon as the ways he had “used spiritual practices to try to step over unassimilated childhood experiences and other painful biographical events” (p. 96). He began to see how very effective spiritual tools and technologies—such as prayer and meditation—could easily (and unconsciously) be used to cover over out-of-balance thoughts and behaviors. He explains:

We imagine that God will take care of this depression, this phobia, this guilt complex, this eating disorder, this toxic family dynamic, this chronic physical ailment. The angels will fly down from heaven and dissolve my anger, my anxiety, my feelings of loneliness and alienation, the pain left from my early-life traumas. But of course it

does not work. Psychological and emotional wounds need to be addressed at their own level. If they are left unhealed, the progress of your spiritual development eventually slows to a halt and breaks down—and then it may seem that nothing can save you from the distress you are feeling, not even God or the angels. (p. 96)

Mark Epstein, a Buddhist-oriented psychiatrist, has explored the relationship between psychological and contemplative work for decades. While not making explicit use of the term “spiritual bypass,” Epstein (2008) points to the phenomenon throughout his writing, here through his observation of how spiritual realization is vulnerable to “recruitment” by egoic process:

... the extent to which the experiences associated with meditation can be used as a psychological defense can be significant. Any realization is vulnerable to narcissistic recruitment. It is precisely those areas that appear therapeutic that are, I would argue, potential obstacles to spiritual development for those of us who seek and set up a psychotherapeutic model for what is being sought. (p. 73)

Some researchers (see, for example, Engler, 2003, 2006; Kornfield, 1993b; Masters, 2010b; R.A. Masters, personal communication, March 6, 2013; Wilber 1993, 2000a, 2007; K. Wilber, personal communication, February 15, 2013) have cautioned practitioners to explore carefully the ways that meditation practice can subtly encourage the movement of spiritual bypass. While opening a person to important dimensions of awareness, these researchers have observed how the practice of meditation can also be used to avoid equally critical aspects of self-experience. For those lacking a cohesive self-structure, for example, meditation may even be contraindicated, as some meditative practices require the suspension of important, albeit conventional, egoic functioning. Many classical meditative disciplines discourage

practitioners from becoming involved in specific content which inevitably arises during practice, which can prove challenging and even problematic for some. Epstein (2008) explains:

Censoring of any kind is discouraged; one is asked simply to note, without criticism or fancy, whatever arises in the mind or body. Multiple self-images, self-feelings, memories and self-concepts all surface, and only the synthetic ego function, or observing ego, is empowered. The danger here is of self-fragmentation, of a kind of “rupture of the self” brought on by the uncovering of defended material, the loosening of ego structure or the inability of the observing ego to “sit with” that which arises. Just as the not dissimilar psychoanalytic method has been known to encourage fragmentation, anxiety or even psychosis, so, too, can the preliminary practices of meditation prove overpowering for some. Reports of psychotic or borderline crises in beginning students of meditation indicate, in most cases, a result of this process. Those who have the most difficulty seem to lack a sufficiently strong synthetic ego function from the beginning. Meditation is not necessarily contraindicated for such people, but meditation, as it is usually taught, is not structured enough for them. In fact, they would probably do better with what beginning practices of meditation offer, the development of the observing ego, but with the method adapted for their use. (pp. 77 – 78)

Epstein (2008) reports that it is not uncommon for meditators he sees in psychotherapy to have a tendency to dissociate from that which they deem unwholesome in themselves, such as aggression, sexual longing, or even rationality. Identified as impediments to spiritual realization—mere egoic tendencies that must yield to the realization of egolessness—these

and other “non-spiritual” qualities are often not worked with, but rather repudiated in a wholesale fashion, resulting in the rejecting of vital ego functions. Epstein further explains:

Dissociating themselves from their own capacity for *activity*, while maintaining the view of egolessness as a state to be released *into*, creates an unending reliance on the power of another to bestow the needed state of grace. The result is often submission, either in interpersonal relationships or in large spiritual groups. Because the aggression, or desire, is, in fact, still present but is being dealt with defensively, such people often find themselves irresistibly attracted to powerful others who come to contain essential ego functions that are otherwise disavowed. Couched in defensive gentleness and indecisiveness, such people often present themselves as ephemeral or transparent, while at the same time they depend on those who encompass just what they have forsworn to complete their worlds. The “spiritual” person who submits to an abusive spouse or a charismatic leader exemplifies this dynamic. Clearly, this is a perversion of the basic teachings of mindfulness, which *is* about the capacity to surrender to the moment, but is not, in its pure form, about surrendering unwanted qualities or about throwing anything away. (pp. 87 – 88)

One of the longstanding dialogues between contemplative and psychological traditions is that concerning the nature of the self. It is a common misunderstanding that the Buddhist doctrine of no-self, for example, implies that there is no self at all, when what is being pointed to is the merely relative nature of the self. What the contemplatives of many traditions have discovered is that what is often referred to as the “self” is not nearly as solid and continuous as it appears. When the realization of no-self or selflessness remains conceptual, or does not penetrate to its deepest meanings, practitioners can easily dismiss the relative needs of the

personal self, with no one there to be hurt, to have needs, or to be healed. This error—common in Buddhist, Hindu, and other nondual traditions—lays the groundwork for the emergence of spiritual bypassing. Neale (2013) explains:

Selflessness is not an invitation to deny our relative needs and experiences as if they were utter delusions or inconsequential matters relative to the high pursuit of enlightenment. This is classic spiritual hubris. Selflessness is a medicine to heal the mind that holds, fixates and identifies itself with particularly narrow, restricted, or traumatic views of self and other. When we rigidly identify ourselves and others, we limit and confine the potential in each of us to learn, grow and change. The narcissistic person needs the teachings of selflessness to see through their grandiose-self, as much as the co-dependent person needs to see through their worthless self-identification... For even after the pinnacle breakthrough of non-dual wisdom, the spiritual work remains unfinished and the Buddhist meditative literature articulates a continued process of habituating one's mind to these glimpses of ultimate reality. (p. 4)

Neale's concern is that by holding too firmly to a doctrine of no-self, practitioners open the door to ignoring the actual developmental and other needs of the self, an entity that *appears* to be real and is experienced *as* real by most people most of the time. Finding some middle ground between the relative and absolute nature of the self allows for the self to be cared for in a relative sense, however not identified with from the perspective of absolute reality. Neale (2013) clarifies:

Indeed there is someone home, who needs love and deserves care as much as the next person, but that someone isn't a fixed someone in and of itself, that someone is

constantly changing and infinitely evolving process. You might say there is a *selfless self*, if a middle-way helps prevent you from falling into either extremes of self-fixation or self-annihilation. Can we validate the self enough to supply it the love and attention it deserves, without becoming blindly engrossed in who we think we are, thus cutting ourselves off from all that we can be? (pp. 4 – 5)

Many of the theorists and clinicians cited in this study have worked for decades to explore how these two great traditions (therapeutic and contemplative) can work together to provide the most skillful and effective means of lessening human suffering. Each has an important piece of the puzzle, a unique contribution to make, in large part originating out of their respective views of “the self.” Neale (2013) shares what each have to offer the other and how both are critical components of an integral approach to human freedom.

The long standing dialogue between Buddhism and psychotherapy continues to intrigues me, and as I learn about what each has to contribute to the other tradition, I'd hate to minimize or idealize either tradition along the way. Psychotherapy can teach Buddhism to be more loving to the relative self that we do have, so as not to fall prey to spiritual bypassing and its consequences. On the other hand, Buddhism can teach psychotherapy more about the self that has never existed, exposing the insidious mental-reflex to reify and fixate upon self-concepts and self-images, which lead to suffering. This dialogue points to the tolerance of cognitive dissonance that is required for authentic psychological development and spiritual progress. We must train to hold these two truths simultaneously, our relative human needs and wounds with our ultimate open nature. (p. 5)

Sharon Mijares (2005), a transpersonally-oriented psychologist practicing in both the United States and Costa Rica, observes that clients will at times attempt to adopt spiritual ideas and beliefs that are not yet fully integrated as authentic expressions of their deeper emotional and somatic states. Mijares shares an example where prematurely adopting a stance of forgiveness “can backfire when clients attempt to force themselves to forgive when they are just beginning to access their repressed rage” (p. 64). This form of spiritual bypassing, Mijares shares,

is one of several ways that spiritual principles can be distorted and become obstacles to the greater awareness that we strive for in psychospiritual therapy. It can lead to the repression of feelings deemed unacceptable within the spiritual parameters clients have chosen, as well as providing additional fuel for anxiety when they are unable to eliminate those feelings. (p. 64)

Richard Potter (2006), a professor and author, speaks of spiritual development as a process of “shifting perspective.” He asserts that there are three primary directions for consciousness to move as it shifts and changes: “high, broad, and deep.” Spiritual growth, for the most part, implies the movement of “going high,” adopting a perspective that takes a person above their ordinary lives and troubles. While transcendence is an important dimension of an overall approach to personal growth, healing, and transformation, Potter warns against the dangers of overly attaching to such an approach as a way of avoiding critical aspects of development along the way.

We seek to get above those things so that we may see the overall picture of our lives, or maybe the interwoven causes behind events, or possibly the greater purposes of our lives. The perspective of height helps us to detach from the pull of a life, and

especially from emotions, so that we can temporarily understand the demands of life without being overwhelmed by our location in the midst of life. It is useful to get high through the use of spiritual practices in order to set priorities and to avoid being overwhelmed by the pressing demands of life. Going high may become a cop-out—often called a spiritual bypass—if we use it to avoid dealing with the inevitable messiness of everyday life. For this reason, going high needs to be only one of the ways in which you work to change your perspective. (p. 21)

A more integral view of spiritual growth, asserts Potter (2006) involves both “getting high” and what he calls “going deep.” While individual practitioners may favor one or the other, it is important to incorporate both methodologies into an overall approach to psychospiritual growth. Potter remarks that one of the most confusing yet essential aspects of the spiritual journey is coming to understand the relationship between psychological and spiritual approaches. By developing greater awareness of these two streams of development and how they interweave and support one another, a practitioner will be better able to see the ways that spiritual bypassing may be operating in his or her own life. Potter explains:

Psychology seems to play a bigger role in carving out a deep and wise personality structure than it does in getting high. The psychology of going deep is different from the spiritual practice of “mining the treasures within,” because it often involves dealing with roadblocks and hang-ups rather than the discovery of the beauty within. These hindrances often prevent us from being able to touch our depths. As a matter of fact, one of the pitfalls of sky-oriented spirituality is that people can easily engage in the “spiritual bypass” of the more nitty-gritty aspects of psychological life. When engaging a spiritual bypass, we can become unbalanced and also project that which we

cannot integrate onto the world around us. Understanding, expressing, and mastering your emotions keeps you in contact with your roots. As getting high became the only acceptable spiritual direction, the emotions that keep us in touch with our depths generally were relegated to the forbidden world of the feminine. (p. 85)

Author Robert Roskind (2004) describes spiritual bypassing as the application of a particular concept or belief as a “spiritual Band-Aid” to cover an emotional wound (p. 86). When caught in spiritual bypass, rather than moving toward challenging and painful internal feeling and emotional states, a person might just pray more, say more affirmations, meditate more, apply the appropriate spiritual cliché, or read more spiritual books. In this process of avoidance, there is a deep-seated hope that somehow the pain will be removed without any real inner work. Without an exploration of these core perceptions and beliefs, practitioners will not be able to get at the root of the pain and suffering in their lives. Roskind explains:

Often we offer others a quick spiritual bypass in our attempts to help them.

They come to us with their pain and their despair and we quote them a spiritual or psychological cliché, rather than just being with them in their pain. We believe all we really have to do is replace the painful feelings with the appropriate spiritual truth and the work is done. It is understandable how we would arrive at this conclusion. Many spiritual teachings seem to imply this would work. However, it does not. The inner work of searching out all our unhealed wounds, all our barriers to joining, must also be done. (pp. 86 – 87)

Ronald Hulnick (2011), president of the University of Santa Monica, a graduate school of spiritual psychology, notes that spiritual bypassing usually arises during the early stages of a person’s journey, as “a form of denial of unresolved issues by claiming a level of mastery

that's yet to be achieved" (p. 28). Describing the process of "holy man's disease," Hulnick observes that spiritual bypass often follows from an unexamined belief (often unconscious) that it's fundamentally not okay to have feelings. Other researchers cited in this study have echoed Hulnick's observation as to how common it is in spiritual practitioners to conclude that the mere presence of so-called "negative" thoughts, feelings, and emotions are, in and of themselves, simply not spiritual, signs that one is not living a truly "spiritual" life. In response to this conclusion, practitioners will tend to avoid such material rather than resolving and integrating it. This movement of avoidance forms a pillar of spiritual bypassing, resulting "in the spouting of spiritual principles that do not ring true but rather resound as empty platitudes." In other words, Hulnick clarifies, "one mistakenly believes oneself further along than one is" (p. 28).

While praising the contemplative traditions for so carefully charting the territory of the transpersonal (in its subtle, causal, and nondual dimensions), Wilber (2000b) also cautions practitioners against a devaluing of the more personal, relative dimensions of human experience. In the "rush to the formless"—in the quest to move beyond the limited nature of the relative world—important aspects of being and consciousness are (and were historically) left behind. He explains:

The aim was to find a nirvana divorced from samsara, a heaven that is not of this earth, a kingdom that is not of this world, a One that excludes the Many. The paradigm, the exemplar, of these axial approaches was nirvikalpa samadhi, ayn, nirodh—in other words, pure cessation, pure formless absorption. The goal, in short, was the causal or unmanifest state. The path was purely Ascending and otherworldly,

and almost everything identified with “this world”—sex, money, nature, flesh, desire—was pronounced sin, ignorance, illusion. (p. 126)

Wilber (2000b) agrees with the contemplative traditions that practitioners must not become overly caught up in the lure of the sensory world, in a way which obscures discoveries within the formless and more subtle dimensions of experience. When caught in spiritual bypass, however, practitioners can easily come to deny the relative reality of the world of form, thereby not able to in fact touch and be vehicles for the nondual, that “radical estate that includes *both* the One and the Many, otherworld and this-worldly, Ascending and Descending, Emptiness and Form, Nirvana and Samsara, as equal gestures of the One Taste” (p. 126). Wilber describes the evolution from formless to Nondual realization, as it emerged cross-culturally around the sixth century BCE:

The advanced religions of that period were all dominated by yogic withdrawal, purely ascending practices, life-denial, asceticism, bodily renunciation, and the “way up.” They were, almost without exception, deeply dualistic: spirit divorced from body, nirvana separate from samsara, formless at war with form. But by the second century CE, the limitations of a causal and dualistic nirvana were becoming quite apparent, and the growing-tip (or most-advanced) consciousness began a great movement beyond the causal unmanifest, a movement that would transcend yet include the causal Abyss. Spirit, in other words, began to recognize its own pure Nondual condition, and it first did so, most especially, in two extraordinary souls, Nagarjuna in the East and Plotinus in the West. (pp. 126 – 127)

Whereas the merely Ascending paths saw the world of form as an expression of defilement, illusion, and sin—to be transcended through spiritual practice—the Nondual

traditions recognized the many varieties of form as “radiant gestures of Spirit itself” (Wilber, 2000b, p. 127). From Plotinus in the West to Tantra in the East, the ultimate non-separation of form and formless was realized and reported:

As Plotinus put it, the Many are not apart from One, the Many are a manifestation of the One (not as a theory you think about with the eye of mind, but as something you directly perceive with the eye of contemplation). Thus one’s spiritual practice was not to deny all things manifest, but rather to “bring everything to the path.” According to Tantra, another flower of the Nondual revolution, even the worst sin contains, hidden in its depths, the radiance of its own wisdom and salvation. In the center of anger is clarity; in the middle of lust is compassion; in the heart of fear is freedom. (p. 127)

Wilber (2000b; personal communication, February 15, 2013) has named spiritual bypass as one of the real obstacles to a truly integral approach to psychospiritual growth. The essence of spiritual bypassing, in his experience, is the foundational view that if a person “realizes Spirit or Goddess or their Higher Self, that everything else will magically take care of itself” (p. 128). When caught in spiritual bypass, practitioners believe that spiritual realization will automatically do away with challenging and anxiety-provoking life circumstances in the area of work, career, relationships, family, community, money, food, and sex. Wilber (personal communication, February 15, 2013) notes that it takes most practitioners ten or twenty years to discover that this is not in fact the case, a process which often results in quite a bit of bitterness and resentment.

Because the realization of ultimate reality is fully available right here and right now, Wilber (2000b) explains, practitioners at any level of development can have a glimpse of their

true nature regardless of their level of development in other lines. Often when a person has a direct experience of this “always-already” awareness, it can be followed by a fall into spiritual bypassing, where certain unfortunate consequences can follow. Wilber explains the nature of this process:

On the one hand, they are, in some profound ways, liberated from the binding nature of the lower levels of the bodymind. On the other hand, that doesn't mean these lower levels cease to have their own needs or problems, relative though they may be. You can be in One Taste consciousness and still get cancer, still fail at a marriage, still lose a job, still be a jerk. Reaching a higher stage in development does *not* mean the lower levels go away (Buddhas still have to eat), nor do you automatically master the lower levels (enlightenment will not automatically let you run a four-minute mile). In fact, it often means the opposite, because you might start to neglect or even ignore the lower levels, imagining that they are now no longer necessary for your well-being, whereas in fact they are the means of expression of your well-being and the vehicles of Spirit that you now are. Neglecting these vehicles is “spiritocide”—you are neglecting to death your own sacred manifestations. (p. 129)

Wilber (2000b) clarifies that practitioners do not have to *master* a lower stage before they can move higher, but a certain baseline competence is required. What often happens, however, is that a person “can arrive at some very high stages of development yet still have all sorts of problems at various lower stages. And simply plugging into the higher stage is not necessarily going to make those lower problems go away” (p. 129). The challenge, as Wilber sees it, is that after a strong glimpse of one's Absolute nature, all motivation can be lost to “fix those holes in your psychological basement” (p. 130). He further elucidates:

You might have a deep and painful neurosis, but you no longer care, because you are no longer identified with the bodymind. There is a certain truth to that. But that attitude, nonetheless, is a profound violation of the bodhisattva vow, the vow to communicate One Taste to sentient beings in a way that can liberate all. You might be happy not to work on your neurotic garbage, but everybody around you can see that you are a neurotic jerk, and therefore when you announce you really are in One Taste, all they will remember is to avoid that state at all costs. You might be happy in your One Taste, but you are failing miserably to communicate it in any form that can be heard, precisely because you have not worked on all the lesser vehicles *through which* you must communicate your understanding. Of course, it is one thing if you are being offensive because you are engaged in angry wisdom or dharma combat, quite another if you are simply being a neurotic creep. One Taste does not communicate with anything, because it is everything. Rather, it is your soul and mind and body, your words and actions and deeds, that will communicate your Estate, and if those are messed up, lots of luck. (p. 130)

Wilber (2000b) clarifies that it is not that the “One Taste” or “always-already” schools are wrong or mistaken; rather, that they must be complemented with work at other levels and stages—through, for example, psychotherapy, diet and exercise, interpersonal relationships, and vocational development—in order for a truly integral orientation to emerge. Not only is this attention to multiple developmental lines necessary for a person’s own growth and development, but it is the only way through which the nondual can be communicated to others, the majority of whom who “live mostly on lower domains and respond most readily to

healthy messages addressed to those domains, not higher messages strained through neurotic and fractured lower realms” (p. 130).

Ram Dass (1982), the Harvard professor formerly known as Dr. Richard Alpert, depicts the ways he made use of the spiritual path to reinforce his specialness, eventually becoming what he called a “phony holy” (p. 173). He portrays a process whereby he wanted and needed to “be high” at all times—for both himself and for those around him—playing the “holy man role” which required him to repress those parts of himself that did not conform to this role. Diagnosing himself as a “vertical schizophrenic,” Dass describes his own journey through what came to explicitly be known a few years later as spiritual bypassing:

You see, what happened was that the spiritual identity played right into my hands psychologically. Psychologically there were whole parts off my being that I was afraid of and didn’t accept. I had a justification for getting rid of them by becoming holy, and I was using my spiritual journey psychodynamically in order to get free of things that I couldn’t acknowledge in myself. But after a while I began to feel as if I was standing on sand. I had to live with my own horror, and the predicament was that I was trying to live in the projection that other people were creating for me. But every now and then I had to be alone, and when I was alone I’d go into very deep depressions which I hid. (p. 173)

What Dass (1982) came to discover, along with many theorists and clinicians cited in this study, was that spiritual practice was not a cure-all that would transform all aspects of what it means to be a mature, individuated human being. As Wilber (2000a, 2007) has clarified, this is not a fault of the great contemplative traditions; others have noted that spiritual practice was simply “not designed” to address all dimensions of human experience

(Caplan, 2009; M. Caplan, personal communication, January 25, 2013; P. Jennings, personal communication, March 18, 2013). Ram Dass explains:

My theory was that if I did my Sadhana hard enough, if I meditated deeply enough, if I opened my heart in devotional practices wide enough, all that unacknowledged stuff would go away. But it didn't, and it has taken me years to understand what the teaching was in all of this. I was busy going from the two into the one... from dualism into nondualism, from the multiplicity into unity. All yogic techniques are designed for that purpose; Yoga means union. I could huff and puff in pranayam, control my breath to go into a trance state, and in that trance state all of Dick Alpert would be gone completely. But I always came down again, and down had a pejorative connotation for me. I kept wanting to get high. I didn't want to come down. But I indeed did keep coming down, even with Yoga techniques. (pp. 173 – 174)

Describing his experience with a “disembodied” entity named Emanuel, Dass (1982) was encouraged to let go of his exclusive focus on the transcendent, and to take some time to learn the unique lessons offered within human incarnation. Emanuel's advice to Dass is good counsel for those with a proclivity toward spiritual bypass:

Emmanuel's advice... So accept the distortions in you. Because when you accept them you can transform them. That's what life is about. You're here to find these areas of imperfection, to understand them, to love them, and to educate them into reality, which is truth, light, love.... When I said to him, “Emanuel, what work do I have to do now?” he said, “Ram Dass, you're in a school, why don't you try taking the curriculum? You took a human birth. You're so busy being holy... why don't you try

being human?” Funny, I’d never thought of that. Somehow being human meant less than perfect. (p. 174)

As will be addressed later in this study, the movement to transcend human limitations, rising up into a spiritual reality where one is no longer bothered with the messiness of difficult emotions, feelings, and interpersonal relationships, is one of the hallmarks of spiritual bypassing. Many spiritual traditions encourage becoming “non-attached” to challenging content which arises in the mind and body. While non-attachment can be an important spiritual practice and experiential realization, it can also lead to a distancing or dissociation from experience, an effective means of avoiding important aspects of a person’s life. Ram Dass (1982) illustrates:

So these past few years I found myself opening up to a relationship and I was like a post-pubescent. I found myself sitting in the bathtub crying with jealous rage. I couldn’t believe it! I thought, “This couldn’t be me.” I said, “My God, Ram Dass, what are you doing? How absurd!” And there was this part of me that was giggling. And I was crying and the pain was excruciating. Now, there’s something called non-attachment and there’s a psychodynamic called dissociation. One often masquerades as the other. So while I was busy being non-attached, I’d say, “This depression... ha! Ha! Ha!” It looked like non-attachment, but actually, it was dissociation. (p. 175)

In the course of the spiritual journey, the experience of ordinary human feeling and emotion can at times be seen as problematic, as a distraction from the “higher” realms of pure love, consciousness, and causeless joy. Recognizing the tendency to remain in a state where only these so-called “higher” qualities would emerge, Ram Dass (1982) began to notice how

hard he was trying to leap into cosmic love without coming to terms with his emotionality, which he saw as “just a little too human.” He explains:

What I experienced was that I had pushed away my humanity to embrace my divinity. When I wanted to be intuitive, the intuition, the impeccable warrior intuitive action, had to come from a blending of humanity and divinity. Until I could accept my humanity fully, my intuitions weren't going to be fully in harmony with the way of things. When I went into my sixth Chakra, everything looked absolutely perfect. I could look at suffering and see that way in which it was grace. I could see death as grace. It was a place that was clear, but with that clarity there was no warmth. If someone fell down in front of me I could say, “Karma.” But when I come down into my human heart, it would hurt so bad because I opened to the suffering of the universe. The easiest way to handle it is to go up. It's much harder to stay down and stay open. It's excruciating. (pp. 177 – 178)

Gwen White (2011), a clinical psychologist and chair of the Counseling Psychology Department at Eastern University, has written about spiritual bypassing and the ways it appears in the lives of the predominantly Christian population in which she serves. As a result of her experience with the phenomenon, White argues for the inclusion of spiritual bypass in training programs for mental health professionals, especially for those professionals who will work with spiritually-sensitive populations. In her practice with clients suffering from a range of psychological and emotional difficulties, White has noticed that while offering tremendous support for a person's life and development, there are times when religion can also serve, paradoxically, to block further growth. She cites an unfortunate tendency in the history of psychology to pathologize faith (e.g. see Freud, 2011), resulting in many devout Christians

turning away from mental health services which might otherwise serve as a useful adjunct to their spiritual beliefs and practices. Many Christians, according to White, have come to be deeply suspicious of conventional psychological work and consider psychotherapy a worldly pursuit, unable to see how it could fit into their life of faith. In some cases, psychological and emotional problems have come to be labeled as “a sign of spiritual unfaithfulness,” where “biblical truth is the only spiritually sound practice a devout person can turn to in addressing emotional difficulties” (p. 3). The challenge with this sort of thinking is that it often leaves clients who are struggling with painful emotions stranded when unable to manage their symptoms through prayer and faith alone. The idea that spiritual practice in and of itself is (or should be) able to address all types of psychological and emotional difficulty is one of the quintessential beliefs which provide the foundation of spiritual bypassing.

In the face of psychological and emotional trouble, it is common for spiritual teachers, East and West, to urge practitioners to re-double their efforts, increase their faith, and to practice more. Wilber (2000, 2007, personal communication, February 15, 2013) and Masters (2010a, 2010b; personal communication March 6, 2013) have both cautioned against such guidance, noting that further practice may actually deepen a practitioner’s entrenchment in unresolved emotional material. Similarly, White (2011) reports that Christian clients are often admonished to pray and read the Bible more, to trust more in God, to confess more, to count their blessings, and to serve more. While these practices are admirable and may confer an array of benefit to seekers, they are often unable to get at the root of the psychological and emotional healing which a particular client desires. In these situations, where a client is unsuccessful in overcoming their emotional difficulties through prayer and other spiritual practices, they often plunge even deeper into self-doubt and feelings of failure, inadequacy,

and worthlessness. It is White's assertion that denying these feelings in an effort to be more faithful can produce dangerous outcomes. She specifically cautions counselors to become more aware of how "unconscious processes can be at operation that provide for the avoidance of painful psychological wounds, but at the cost of bypassing needed attention to issues that are impacting mental health and decision-making" (p. 4).

A person will engage in spiritual bypass, White (2011) contends, to maintain a sense of personal equilibrium and to protect the established sense of self that has been constructed over a lifetime. Like other defense mechanisms, spiritual bypassing can serve an adaptive function, helping a person to manage the breaking through of anxiety that would ordinarily overwhelm the person's ability to cope. When spiritual beliefs and practices are used in a more rigid way, however, the adaptive nature of the defense is overshadowed by maladaptive processes that actually inhibit rather than serve as a foundation for growth. White explains:

For devout Christians it is possible that the good, faithful practices and convictions that served them well at one point in their lives become obdurate beliefs and/or practices that block their ability to adapt and grow in the midst of stressful or challenging life experiences. These individuals can become marooned in patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting that inhibit or prevent growth in the personality and/or adaptive change in behavior, while remaining unaware of the contribution that this rigid application of spiritual practice makes. What was good and, on the surface continues to appear to be good, has in reality been spoiled and becomes bad. (p. 5)

Several researchers and clinicians cited in this study view spiritual bypass as one of many possible *defense mechanisms* (A. Freud, 1979) which can be employed to manage overwhelming anxiety in day-to-day life (see, for example, C. Cashwell, personal

communication, March 4, 2013; L. Corbett, personal communication, March 22, 2013; Mathieu, 2011; I. Mathieu, personal communication, April 12, 2013; P. Jennings, personal communication, March 18, 2013; K. Wilber, personal communication, February 15, 2013; B. Tift, personal communication, March 25, 2013). In her work as a counselor, White (2011) has seen how devout clients can unconsciously use spiritual bypass as a defensive and coping strategy, as a way to avoid confronting uncomfortable feelings about themselves, others, and God. By so doing, the client will often interfere with needed psychological growth and healing. White describes the usage of defense mechanisms and their relation to spiritual bypass:

For devout clients who are encountering psychological symptoms that they cannot manage, the challenge of bringing unconscious material into consciousness can be interpreted as allowing “unfaithful” thoughts or feelings to surface, a threatening enterprise to many of these individuals. This is particularly threatening from a psychological perspective because the client’s view of self and view of safety in the world are consciously related to Christian belief. Unconscious material that contradicts or deviates from orthodoxy shakes the foundation of the person’s identity and “feels wrong.” So according to psychodynamic thought the devout individual could not only defend against becoming aware of this material, but could reinforce the prohibition through further religious practice in order to bypass all confrontation with the painful internal experience. (p. 7)

White (2011) has observed how the maintenance of a client’s self-organization can be intimately connected with his or her spiritual beliefs. As a result, when certain life experiences require that a person adapt or modify outmoded models of self and other, some will inevitably

defend against becoming aware of the mechanisms of their self-organization, the awareness of which would likely trigger tremendous anxiety and confusion. White explains:

Theoretically these clients bypass the opportunity to understand themselves more deeply because they have attached their defensive processes to their religious practice or belief. To reflect more deeply on his/her motivations becomes interpreted as doubting or challenging God or even as sin. This rigid orientation then keeps the devout client together in the truest psychological terms; however, it may not serve the client well as experiences (perhaps orchestrated by God) challenge the individual to transform the understanding of the self s/he holds and to transform the inner object relations as seen in the client's view of others and possibly of God Himself. (p. 10)

Spiritual practice, Welwood asserts (2002), "involves freeing consciousness from its entanglement in form, matter, emotions, personality, and social conditioning" (p.1). "In a society like ours," Welwood continues, "where the whole earthly foundation is weak to begin with, it is tempting to use spirituality as way of trying to rise above this shaky ground. In this way, spirituality becomes just another way of rejecting one's experience" (p. 1). Here, Welwood describes how spiritual practice can quickly turn into a compensatory mechanism to respond to feelings of low self-esteem, loneliness, and a variety of emotional problems. Looking to the teachings and practices of spirituality to perform functions that they are not designed to do dishonors spiritual traditions and places an unnecessary burden upon them.

Trained in both psychodynamic and cognitive approaches, White (2011) has explored the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing through each of these lenses, as a way to understand it from different vantage points. While coming to understand spiritual bypass

psychodynamically, through seeing the ways that the phenomenon expresses in a defensive fashion, White notes that cognitive theory on the other hand

would conceptualize spiritual bypass as another form of maladaptive cognition that is shielded from transformation by the faulty information processing of the client's mind which has developed a bias connected to the individual's spiritual beliefs or practices. Spiritual bypass would be related to unreasonable assumptions held in place by a lack of reality testing. (p. 17)

White (2011) encourages therapists in training—as well as experienced, devout counselors—to pay careful attention to the importance of their clients' religiously-oriented thinking, feeling, and behavior. She notes that oftentimes pious clients and therapists who serve them will “overlook the exploration of the unconscious meanings the client associates with God and leave hidden the processes of spiritual bypass that operate against the client's growth” (p. 56). White believes that training therapists to be on the lookout for spiritual bypass and working with clients to understand the unconscious meanings and motivations that have attached themselves to their conscious practice of religion is a key element of treatment with religiously-inclined persons. She explains:

The process of uncovering and resolving spiritual bypass with devout clients requires a delicate hand in the therapy work on the part of the therapist. To develop such skill the therapist must also have taken this inward journey him or her self and must continue to trace the reoccurring impact of spiritual bypass in his/her own inner world. My hope is that my classroom will offer a safe place for both these processes to move forward in my trainees. Identifying where the good of our faith practices has spoiled into spiritual

bypass will mean new freedom for our selves and in our clients through the therapy we offer. (pp. 57 – 58)

Richard Beck (2004), a professor of psychology at Abilene Christian University, describes two modes of religious motivation: defensive and existential. Through an analysis of theoretical and empirical evidence, Beck illustrates how religion can function as a defense mechanism, shielding the aspirant from overwhelming anxiety and other challenging affect states. In addition to serving merely a defensive function, however, Beck proposes a second major function of religion, to serve as a vehicle through which a person can non-defensively approach the great existential questions which have bewildered humans for millennia. Beck believes this distinction to be an important one, and an inquiry that will further a critical dialogue on both the promises and the pitfalls of spiritual endeavors. He clarifies:

Specifically, it is suggested that aspects of religion do appear to function largely as defensive existential buffers. For example, none of us want to die, and a belief in the afterlife does provide existential comfort. However, it is also argued that there also exists a religious type who is less invested in solace and who displays greater existential awareness... Admittedly, the use of defensiveness is only one method by which religious motives might be characterized and described. However, the defensive versus non-defensive distinction is a fruitful line of inquiry that allows us to ask some specific questions: How might a defensive orientation manifest itself in belief, practice, and religious experience? And, alternatively, how might a less defensive believer *differ* in belief, practice, and religious experience? (p. 208)

In further unpacking these two domains of religious functioning, Beck (2004) defines “defensive religion” as “religious beliefs that are motivated primarily by the goal of providing

existential comfort and solace” (p. 208). Alternatively, “existential religion” refers to “a type of orientation where the believer has greater awareness of the existential functioning of her beliefs” (p. 208). Noting how religion can serve a defensive function, Beck illustrates:

Given that a person must live with a lifetime with death looking him/her squarely in the face, it seems reasonable that a person might adopt beliefs that “resolve” this dilemma by positing an afterlife governed by a loving caregiver. If so, then the deep motive for the adoption and maintenance of the religious belief would be existential defensiveness. Again, as worked out by the existential theorists, this motive need not, and probably is not, conscious. Further, as with many defense mechanisms, the role of existential defensiveness is denied by believers when they are confronted with the suggestion that defensiveness might be playing a role in maintaining their faith. (p. 209)

Defensive religion, according to Beck (2004), “is characterized by religious beliefs whose main function is to repress existential realizations and terror. Consequently, the believer reaps the rewards of peaceful conviction and sanguine optimism. However... there are costs involved with this orientation” (p. 213). While Freud and many early pioneers tended to believe that such defensiveness was the motivating factor behind all religious belief, others have come to identify religious motivations which are non-defensive in nature, “faith stances that fully recognize our existential situation but which actively refuse to believe as a means to repress existential terror” (Beck, 2004, p. 210). Beck (2004) has referred to such motivations as comprising what he calls “existential religion.” He contends that existential religion must be distinguished from mere agnosticism or atheism, for the former often involves deep faith and may even be orthodox in its expression. A critical component of existential religion, Beck

asserts, is the practitioner's willingness to confront and struggle with doubt. When approaching religion in this existential mode, the practitioner refuses to allow her beliefs to provide existential solace, or at least consciously struggles with the potential reality that faith is unable to easily resolve existential predicaments. Further describing this mode of religious expression, Beck shares:

[What we find in some of these existential thinkers] is a remarkable convergence upon a phenomena that Freud appears to have overlooked: the reality of a non-defensive existential religious motivation. There are many other points of convergence as well. First, they agree that much of humanity uses religion as a defensive existential shield. Second, this defensive orientation is in some sense "blind" in that it chooses to avoid confrontation with existential predicaments. That is, the existential problems are either repressed or distorted. Third, there does, however appear to exist an existentially aware religious motivation. Also, this motivation appears to be relatively rare and exceptional... Belief persists, but the existential honesty exacts a significant emotional tool. (p. 212)

Beck (2004) cites another discourse in the psychology of religion between what are known as "mature" versus "immature" religious strivings. Like the dialectic between "defensive" and "existential" religion, this distinction offers another lens through which to explore the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing. "Defensive" or "immature" religious expression involves ways of being in relationship with spirituality which evidence qualities of spiritual bypassing, that is, the use of religious belief and practices as a way to avoid certain aspects of a practitioner's life. Beck explains:

Some religious individuals appear naïve, simplistic, fanatical, childlike, or rigid in their faith. Others appear more honest, flexible, tolerant, curious, and complex. These differences seem worth of understanding. This article agrees with many theorists who consider the distinction between defensive versus existential religion to be a powerful tool in describing religious motives. However, we should leave behind labels such as “immature” and “mature,” which imply value judgments which obfuscate the empirical issues. Rather, this article focuses on the *consequences* of religious motives. There are consequences associated with defensiveness and consequences associated with existential awareness. That is, people displaying these orientations thrive and suffer in distinct ways. Which orientation is “best” is a question that probably cannot be answered definitively. (pp. 212 – 213)

Bogart (1991) echoes a number of researchers in this study who have reported the ways in which meditation (and other traditional practices) can be engaged in both adaptive and regressive ways. Cultivating a more subtle understanding of the nuances inherent in the relationship between psychological and spiritual work will inevitably provide greater skillful means in which to help a person to grow, heal, and develop in a holistic and integral way.

Citing Epstein (1989), Bogart explains:

... some meditators need a therapeutic framework in which to work out the unresolved unconscious issues which may emerge in the form of an upsurge of fantasies, daydreams, precognitive mental processes, or visual, auditory, or somatic aberrations during meditation. They also note that many of the phenomena that often occur during advanced stages of meditation-such as visions of bright lights, feelings of joy and

rapture, tranquility, lucid perceptions, feelings of love and devotion, kundalini experiences, etc. must not be interpreted simply as pathological symptoms.

Jungian and other psychoanalytic practitioners have cautioned against replacing psychotherapy with meditative practices as to do so would be to do away with the exploration of psychological and emotional issues stemming from an individual's personal history—the hallmark of therapeutic work (Bogart, 1991). These clinicians warn against a fall into spiritual bypassing where meditative and other spiritual states of consciousness serve to enable a practitioner to avoid relating directly with unresolved emotional, interpersonal, and intrapsychic conflicts. Citing Russell (1986), Bogart reports the discovery that while many of the world's great meditative systems offer great insight into conscious experiences and states of mind,

they do not demonstrate any understanding of the unconscious, emotional conflicts, the existence of defensive mechanisms, or the operation of emotions like anxiety, anger or guilt operating outside of awareness. Nor do they acknowledge the effect of childhood trauma and parental treatment on the adult personality. While Eastern psychologies may occasionally refer to unconscious contents, they invariably view these as an intrusion and an obstacle to meditation that must be removed—for example, through concentration techniques for suppressing the unconscious.

Again citing Russell (1986)—and also Welwood (1980)—Bogart (1991) addresses the differing intentions, areas of exploration, and techniques of therapy and meditation:

Meditation is not a method to alleviate psychopathology, Russell states, and "in recent years the expectation that meditation would be an effective psychotherapy has largely been reversed." Meditation helps one achieve higher states of consciousness, but is not

focused on resolving emotional problems. Therapy, however, aims at exploration of the unconscious, rather than the higher states of consciousness sought in meditation. Welwood summed up this view when he wrote that the aim of psychotherapy is self-integration, while the aim of meditation is self-transcendence.

Further analyzing the differences between contemplative and therapeutic approaches, Bogart (1991) points to the different aspects of consciousness that each address. For example, where therapy seeks to uncover unconscious material—so that it may be explored, analyzed, interpreted, and expressed—meditative practice is more concerned with the ground of consciousness itself, without regard to specific content. Bogart further clarifies:

... therapy generally uses uncovering techniques designed to elicit unconscious material and bring it into awareness, where it is actively engaged through free association, interpretation, and analysis of transference. Only in cases of severe psychopathology (in which structure building and the development of adequate personal defenses are necessary and desirable treatment goals) does therapy employ covering techniques. Eastern spiritual disciplines do not examine unconscious material closely, and often use covering methods to eliminate obstacles to attainment of higher states of consciousness... Concentrative meditation does not attend to emerging unconscious material, but rather utilizes selective inattention toward it. Moreover, although a technique like vipassana can be viewed as an uncovering method in that unconscious material does arise, this material is dealt with differently than in Western therapy.

Despite the many differences between psychological and spiritual work, Russell (as cited in Bogart, 1991) argues that there is not a complete opposition between meditation and therapy.

Bogart explains:

[Russell] argues that spirituality and psychology are both concerned with enlarging the area of consciousness, either by bringing unconscious material into consciousness, or by exploring higher states of consciousness. These two approaches to expanded consciousness can be but are not necessarily explored simultaneously. Increased access to unconscious material does not always lead to an increase of higher states of consciousness. Alternatively, higher states of consciousness could occur without increased awareness of unconscious material. However it is also possible to increase awareness in both directions concurrently. Moreover, solving personal problems through awareness of unconscious material may improve meditation. Conversely, meditation may sensitize a person to the inner world and thereby increase openness to emergence of unconscious material in therapy.

While the term “spiritual bypassing” has been used predominantly by transpersonally-oriented researchers and clinicians, an increasing number of spiritual teachers have addressed a similar tendency in their students to use spiritual teachings as a way to avoid psychological, emotional, and interpersonal challenges. While these teachers generally do not convey their observations in traditional therapeutic language, they nevertheless point to a similar phenomenon. For example, Tibetan meditation teacher Chogyam Trungpa (2008) described *spiritual materialism* as involving “numerous sidetracks which lead to a distorted ego-centered version of spirituality” (p. 1) and how practitioners “can deceive [themselves] into thinking [they] are developing spiritually when instead [they] are strengthening [their]

egocentricity through spiritual techniques” (p. 1). Spiritual materialism, as elucidated by Trungpa, could be seen as a close cousin to spiritual bypassing—its essence, dynamics, and expressions part of the same family. Addressing the relationship between the two concepts, Caplan (2009) refers to spiritual bypassing as “an aspect of spiritual materialism that specifically addresses the way in which spiritual concepts and practices are unconsciously used to avoid, rather than pierce, our psychological wounds and challenges” (pp. 109 – 110).

In a personal communication, Caplan (2009) cites the words of Judith Lief, a close disciple of Chogyam Trungpa, on the nature of spiritual materialism. Here, Lief, a longtime student of Vajrayana Buddhism, cautions practitioners against the dangers inherent in the ego’s uncanny ability to co-opt spiritual teachings as a way to keep itself alive.

Spiritual materialism is an attachment to the spiritual path as a solid accomplishment or possession. It is said that spiritual materialism is the hardest to overcome. The imagery that is used is that of golden chains: you’re not just in chains, you’re in golden chains. And you love your chains because they’re so beautiful and shiny. But you’re not free. You’re just trapped in a bigger and better trap. The point of spiritual practice is to become free, not to build a trap that may have the appearance of a mansion but is still a prison. (p. 111)

Reggie Ray (2010), a scholar of religion trained at The University of Chicago—and senior student of Trungpa—notes that for many practitioners, spirituality has become a matter of attaining a “high” or elevated state—of peace, clarity, or bliss. According to Ray, however, spirituality is also the embrace of neurosis, our own darkness, and the primitive aspects of being. The view that spirituality involves only the light and the positive is what Ray calls “ego’s version” of spirituality and is the essence of both spiritual materialism and spiritual

bypassing. According to this version of spirituality, Ray asserts, “we would have to leave behind most of what we are.” Ray describes spiritual materialism as that approach to spirituality that attempts “to create an enhanced ego.” Spiritual materialism involves a certain kind of ambition to use spiritual ideas, beliefs, and practices to fortify a sense of specialness and solid ground. Ray explains that a true spirituality includes the light *and* the dark, positive *and* negative, as well as “every mistake we’ve ever made.” Everything we have experienced up to this point is included within the spiritual journey and is alive within us. Ray continues:

The normal view of spirituality is that we leave all that [darkness] behind. But true spirituality is when we make our mind so big and we’re willing to give up our ambition; we can include everything that we have ever been. And then in spiritual practice we run up against all of what we have kept a lid on because it was inconsistent with what we wanted. And then we start to break down; we have a certain kind of mental breakdown. But it’s a very positive and very good mental breakdown. Because now things are coming in that we’ve been holding at bay for a long time... so that we may find out what it is that we’ve been sitting on all this time.

American Buddhist nun and bestselling author Pema Chödrön (2011), also a senior student of Chogyam Trungpa, describes spiritual materialism as the use of spiritual teachings to “build up” a sense of ego, or limited sense of self. When a practitioner is under the sway of spiritual materialism, they use the teachings as a way to secure ground and certainty, “rather than seeing spiritual teachings as stepping into groundlessness.” To avoid spiritual materialism, Chödrön instructs, requires an open mind and willingness to question and explore—to be inquisitive and curious when it comes to our concepts about who we are and what reality is. It is this fundamental openness is what counteracts spiritual materialism.

“People use clothes and furniture and cars and everything you can think of to comfort themselves or to feel secure,” Chödrön asserts. We can use spirituality in the same way, to create a sense of security or comfort, instead of spirituality “being something that introduces you to the true nature of reality, which is unfixed, impermanent, and changing.”

Independent spiritual teacher Adyashanti (2009), originally trained in the Zen tradition, describes “common delusions, traps, and points of fixation” that many encounter on the path of spiritual awakening (p. 81). In his work with thousands of students over the last two decades, Adyashanti has found it important to point out the pitfalls and cul-de-sacs that can “un-enlighten” a person along the way, including “the trap of meaninglessness,” the many and subtle ways the ego can “co-opt” realization for its own purposes, the illusion of superiority that can accompany intense spiritual breakthroughs, and the danger of becoming “drunk on emptiness.” “Full awakening,” Adyashanti (2009) cautions, “comes when you sincerely look at yourself, deeper than you’ve imagined, and question everything” (p. back cover). In his own unique way and through his own particular language, Adyashanti is addressing the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing through an exploration of the subtleties of how even the most sacred teachings and practices of spiritual awakening can be used to further entrench practitioners in duality, separation, and suffering.

Jeff Brown (2009), author and spiritual teacher, speaks of spiritual bypass as “the tendency to jump to spirit prematurely, usually in an effort to avoid various aspects of earthly reality.” It is tempting, says Brown, to use spiritual teachings and practices to ease what might otherwise be unbearable suffering. While it has an adaptive function, it can also serve as a real detour on the path to genuine spiritual development. “In our efforts to leapfrog to something better,” Brown asserts, “we often avoid something crucial. Spirit becomes the crutch rather

than an expression of a natural unfolding.” Here he describes the difficult nature of lasting spiritual growth:

“Spirituality” is just another word for reality. The most spiritual person lives in *all* aspects of reality simultaneously—the emotional, the material, and the subtle realms... Although appearing spiritual, bypassers are actually cut off from various aspects of reality. By turning away from old pain, they shackle themselves with their unresolves. With their head in the clouds, they cannot see where they are walking. This may be a temporary tool for survival, but real growth demands that we come back down to earth and face our demons. We have to grow down to grow up.

In the consumer-driven culture of the modern West, it is no surprise that the need for speed, fast results, and an inner directive to avoid pain at all costs seeps into the relationship with the spiritual journey. When caught in spiritual bypass, practitioners become convinced that there exists some way to “fast-track spiritual progress, [to find] a shortcut through delusion to enlightenment” (Masters, 2010b, p. 37). Masters elucidates:

The real delusion here, of course, is the very idea that one can actually cut corners in spiritual practice. All our attempts to dodge the messy world of difficult relationships, unpleasant emotions, and whatever else we would rather avoid only sidetrack and obstruct us, eventually generating enough suffering to draw us back to the steps we skipped or only partially took—of honoring, digesting, embodying, and integrating the essential lessons in our lives. (p. 37)

The idea that the spiritual journey will be a swift and easy one, filled with only positive qualities of love, peace, and beauty is one that fuels the unfolding of spiritual bypassing in many of its most common forms. Over the last 20 years, Caplan (2009) has witnessed what

can happen when authentic spiritual teachings enter the fast-paced, contemporary spiritual landscape:

Mix spirituality with a culture that celebrates speed, multitasking and instant gratification and the result is likely to be fast-food spirituality. Fast-food spirituality is a product of the common and understandable fantasy that relief from the suffering of our human condition can be quick and easy. One thing is clear, however: spiritual transformation cannot be had in a quick fix. (p. 32)

Ingrid Mathieu (2011a), a psychotherapist who wrote a doctoral dissertation in the area of spiritual bypassing as it unfolds in the lives of those in recovery from alcohol addiction, speaks of the phenomenon as a defense mechanism, serving the same purpose as other defense mechanisms such as denial, reaction formation, and repression. She refers to spiritual bypass as “an equal opportunity” defense mechanism, in that is more related to what practitioners *do* with spiritual practice than something inherent within the practice itself. She explains:

As a quick point of reference, spiritual bypass is a defense mechanism. Defense mechanisms are unconscious, psychological strategies that we all use to protect ourselves from emotional distress, threats to our self-esteem, and unwanted thoughts or experiences. Most of us are familiar with the defense mechanism of denial, when we refuse to acknowledge an issue in our lives. The defense mechanism of spiritual bypass protects us from underlying feelings by covering over or suppressing them via spiritual beliefs or practices. (p. 9)

In her research, Mathieu (2011b; personal communication, April 12, 2013) has noted how people have gotten progressively more skilled in their ways of trying to “endlessly feel

good”; for example, turning away from drugs or alcohol to alter consciousness and toward things like self-help books, meditation, yoga, prayer, and special diets. Through these methods, while certainly more “healthy” in some ways, she notes how spirituality can quickly become yet another way to distract a person from their feelings. In this way, spirituality can serve to actually shield a person from the truth, according to Mathieu, disconnecting them from their feelings and helping them to “avoid the big picture” of their lives. The movement of spiritual bypassing can be so subtle, she notes, that often people don’t even know they’re doing it. In this way, spiritual practice can serve the same function as any other repressive modality, enabling a person to avoid those thoughts and feelings they wish to split off from. She explains:

There is a shadow side to almost every positive thing we can do for ourselves, including spiritual practice. All spiritual and psychological tools can be used in a "willful" way. For example, sometimes self-care is actually about taking care of ourselves: unplugging from too much work and plugging in to more balance and harmony. But sometimes, under the guise of self-care, we are really just checking out: denying what's happening and how scary it feels to show up for life.

Practitioners and clinicians alike must learn to discern, Mathieu (2011a) argues, between the ways that spiritual and psychological tools encourage development, on the one hand, and thwart it on the other. Spiritual bypass involves the belief that spiritual technologies will act as a panacea, giving us everything we want in life and will keep us from the messiness and challenges inherent in a life of growth and transformation. She urges practitioners to look carefully at the belief that the true spiritual life is one in which they are supposed to “rise above it all” and to consider that the spiritual life is not about achieving a

particular quality of feeling “good” all the time. Rather, it is about embracing whatever arises in the present, including the entire spectrum of thoughts, feelings, and emotions, being fully there with each one without allowing any one of them to define who and what a person is. She explains:

There is something very necessary about being who and where you are. I understand that this is a tall order. If I become present to who I am, *all of me*, there is a lot there that I usually don't want to see. For most people this consists of shame, anxiety, anger, loneliness, self-loathing, our "dark" side, and the list goes on. Come on, who really wants to be present to all of that? But the more that I have tried to rise above it, or turn my back to it—the more it has lingered there, waiting, almost growing in size. So finally, I had to turn around and face it. And the most amazing thing happened (and continues to happen). It didn't swallow me whole like I thought it would. In fact, by recognizing the "dark" stuff that was there, I could finally experience and own what was "light." I could really believe the good stuff once I took responsibility for the stuff that didn't look quite as shiny on the outside. These are the real fruits of spiritual and psychological development. We stop running from ourselves, and start loving ourselves.

In her book *Recovering Spiritually*, Mathieu (2011b) defines spiritual bypassing as “a defense mechanism by which we use spiritual practices or beliefs to avoid our emotional wounds, unwanted thoughts or impulses, or threats to our self-esteem” (p. 2). As an example, she shares a common belief that if a person prays hard enough, or in the right manner, that they will escape their painful feelings. Spiritual bypass, then, involves the expectation that spiritual practices will “fix” a person’s emotional problems, rather than helping a person be

with them, learn from them, and transform within them. Here, Mathieu reflects upon how common it is to fall into the belief that the purpose of the spiritual journey is to provide greater control over life:

When I realized there was language for this experience, I could not stop thinking about it. I was both curious about and dumbfounded by the fact that so many of us have been trying to walk a spiritual path—whatever that means to each of us, whether religious or not religious—only to get tangled up in the illusion that spirituality is a method for controlling obstacles and outcomes. We were earnestly and openly doing our spiritual work without realizing that the ways in which we were using the tools were actually in service of perpetuating our shortcomings. Consciously, we wanted to evolve.

Unconsciously, we wanted to stay comfortable and in control. (p. 3)

In her research in the area of spiritual bypassing, Mathieu (2011b) came to discover a number of fundamental questions which were important in exploring the phenomenon and the ways it had affected her and her clients. By inquiring into these areas, she was able to gain a better understanding of how spiritual belief and practice was being used defensively, and the implications of this for those interested in psychospiritual transformation.

If I was unintentionally using spirituality to avoid hurt and pain or to control a particular outcome, was it really detrimental? How does spiritual bypass affect people? Is there such a thing as an unhealthy practice? Is spiritual bypass harmful? And if it is, what are the repercussions? If not, how might it be serving people in some way? (p. 5)

One of the common themes which emerged in the course of this research project is the discovery that spiritual bypassing, like other defense mechanisms, has both adaptive and maladaptive expressions and qualities. For example, the practice of meditation may be

undertaken to reduce anxiety—and thus may be said to defend against the experience of anxiety—however this can be seen as adaptive for certain practitioners in certain situations (L. Corbett, personal communication, March 22, 2013). Using spiritual practice to defend against overwhelming affect states is not a problem, in and of itself, and thus even spiritual bypassing can be appropriate and in a practitioner’s best interest at times. The point emphasized by these researchers is that bringing clarity and awareness to this process is important in helping clients and students to meet their deepest goals and longings. Mathieu (2011b) clarifies the adaptive and maladaptive nature of defense mechanisms in general, and spiritual bypassing in particular:

All defense mechanisms have adaptive and maladaptive attributes. *Adaptive* simply means flexible. We all experience adaptive defenses that help us to navigate the world. An example of an adaptive defense might be when we use humor to overcome an anxiety-provoking situation. We might laugh when we are terrified or tell a joke when we feel insecure. In general, defense mechanisms are adaptive until they lead to behaviors that threaten our emotional or physical well-being. When this occurs, they become *maladaptive*. Maladaptive defenses are likely involved when behavior is rigid and inflexible. If humor becomes the only tool for managing anxiety, one may have a difficult time in relationships or in fully functioning in life. (p. 11)

Mathieu (2011b) urges practitioners and clinicians to use discernment when making a determination as to the adaptive or maladaptive nature of certain behavior and practices. For example, a practice that is maladaptive to one person in one particular situation may be adaptive to someone else in a different situation. This is the case, Mathieu notes, as beliefs

and actions in and of themselves do not define something as adaptive or maladaptive; rather, the underlying drive and outcome of the action determine its function. She clarifies:

For example, prayer in and of itself is not a defense mechanism. When you pray as a way of avoiding uncomfortable feelings or the truth of your reality, however, prayer serves as a spiritual bypass. If prayer carries you through a painful time to a place where you are better able to cope, this is an adaptive form of spiritual bypass. If prayer keeps you unconscious about your reality and leads to detrimental circumstances, this is a maladaptive form of spiritual bypass. (p. 11)

Mathieu (2011b) unequivocally states that there is no “right” or “wrong” way to go about spiritual practice, and no empirical way to know if a person is—or is not—engaging in spiritual bypass. Life is all-encompassing, she asserts, and will always offer a wide range of experiences, from tremendous joy to deep sorrow. While engaging in spiritual bypass can help temporarily to shield a person from the more challenging and painful dimensions of human experience, it will not be able to do so in any permanent sort of way. She explains:

When we favor one end of the spectrum over the other, we lose the appreciation for, and experience of, the whole. As spiritual bypass conceals the more painful experiences of life, the very nature of the defense is not a sustainable one. It is as though we are on a teeter-totter stuck in the up position—eventually we either land with both feet on the ground or we slide blisteringly to the other side. This sentiment is reflected in the saying “What we resist, persists.” (p. 29)

In her work in the field of recovery, Mathieu (2011b) suggests that persons who exhibit narcissistic tendencies may prove more vulnerable to spiritual bypass than the general

population. Owing to the defensive nature of narcissism, Alcoholics Anonymous (“AA”) members, for example, may use the program as a way to avoid unresolved feelings:

This [narcissistic] wounding can lead to a pattern of trying to relate through performing or showing greatness rather than through vulnerability. The person with narcissism finds himself in a terrible bind, because he is desperate to connect but can only conceive of connection by domination or by trying to prove himself. Because vulnerability invites too much shame and humiliation, he is more likely to use spiritual tools and ideas to defend his true self than to show it to others. He might be able to articulate the spiritual aspects of the program without having an ability to personally apply them, or he might work the Steps in a way that supports a desire for invincibility rather than open-mindedness and honesty. The narcissist’s attempts to protect himself can make it impossible to truly surrender, because doing so would present a terrifying opportunity to be hurt again. (p. 47)

While an advocate for AA in a general sense, Mathieu (2011b) has expressed concern over some passages in AA literature which might inadvertently encourage spiritual bypassing. For example, language such as “spiritual principles would solve all my problems” could be understood to mean that any difficulties one may experience—psychological, emotional, or interpersonal—can be solved through spirituality alone. Mathieu cautions that such teachings must be understood in context and conjunction with the entirety of the material offered, and not taken on their own as a way to avoid challenging inner work. Further, she notes how addicts often have an expectation that they should feel good all the time. Other researchers (e.g. Masters, 2010b) have reported that practitioners of many spiritual traditions hold this same view, whether consciously or otherwise. The notion that the purpose of spiritual practice

is to make one feel good is a primary underlying building block of spiritual bypassing, and one that must be explored in all its subtleties as part of any in-depth inquiry into the phenomenon. As it will inevitably occur, even the most diligent practitioners or AA members will confront difficult feelings along the way. If they are caught in the belief that the arising of these feelings is a sign that they are not devoted enough or practicing diligently enough, they will tend to shame themselves, coming to believe that have done something fundamentally wrong. Mathieu explains:

In other words, if someone is feeling sad or angry, he might believe that he is not working a successful program. He could mistake the absence of “happy, joyous, and free” feelings as evidence that he is missing something vital in his recovery. If someone is afraid, he might think he isn’t “turning it over” enough.” The truth is that we are all meant to know and experience the full range of human emotions. Sadness and fear are healthy expressions and essential guideposts for what we are going through. Experiencing these feelings is just as much a “gift” of the program as “happy, joyous, and free”—because sobriety gives people the opportunity to experience all of their feelings and to make choices about how they wish to navigate life with an abundant consciousness. Most recovering alcoholics drank with an underlying desire to mask their feelings, so the opportunity to experience the broad spectrum of human emotions can be perceived as one of the most valuable aspects of sobriety. (pp. 60 – 61).

Related to the discourse around the potential adaptive nature of spiritual bypassing is the discovery that it is not merely as a defense which must be eradicated for the true spiritual journey to flourish, but is in fact a natural part of an important developmental sequence. Seen

through this lens, spiritual bypass is not just a pitfall along the way, but a very organic occurrence in a person's pursuit of spiritual depth and maturity. Mathieu (2011b) has observed that as a person grows and develops they are presented with a variety of opportunities to make use of spiritual bypassing in adaptive ways that are actually supportive of an overall approach to the spiritual growth. Especially in the earlier stages, Mathieu contends, spiritual bypass can help to provide a certain foundation required to even begin spiritual work in the first place, such that they can stay with the rigors which the spiritual life demands. As a person evolves, they must eventually come to terms with the darkness within—with all of that material which has yet to be integrated—and must incorporate this into their overall spiritual path, rather than merely using spirituality as a buffer from the anxieties of undigested emotional content. Mathieu explains:

This discussion of the development of faith and spirituality is relevant to our topic of spiritual bypass in recovery because, although the defense can be detrimental, we cannot claim that it is always harmful. Spiritual maturity is just like physical and emotional maturity; it is a process that lasts a lifetime. We have to accept that at any given moment we are somewhere in that ongoing process. We might be brilliantly navigating one area of our life and oblivious in other areas. We might have learned an immense amount about ourselves only to discover facets that we never knew existed. We might be engaged in spiritual bypass at one point and recognize it as bypass only after we have grown out of need to defend that part of ourselves. To identify the impact of spiritual bypass may have in our lives, it is useful to understand that bypass does indeed have a softer side, one that doesn't define us as "less than" or "immature," but as mortal and ever evolving. (p. 91)

Another common (and again related) theme which has arisen in this study is that of a movement toward the de-stigmatization and depathologizing of spiritual bypass, or an emphasis on what Mathieu (2011b) refers to as the phenomenon's "softer" side. In this discourse, spiritual bypass is normalized and embraced as a potentially necessary part of one's process of spiritual growth, providing a needed transition to "a new phase of development in which growth and exploration can begin to be realized" (p. 93). Referring to what she calls "adaptive bypass," Mathieu speaks of "a fluid, flexible experience that [does] not preclude further growth and development (p. 115). She contrasts this with "maladaptive" bypass, where a person is forever trying to avoid the truth of who he is and his present circumstances. She elaborates:

Adaptive experiences of spiritual bypass can provide you with a sense of protection from relapse and a safeguard from emotions that might be too overwhelming to feel at a particular time. If we were faced with the Truth (with a capital 'T') or realizing all of our dreams in one sitting, we would probably become psychotic. Defenses are defending us from that potential. The slower portion of the adage "Sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly" tends to be the more sustainable of the two. So using spiritual practices or ideas defensively can be a useful experience in recovery: a person can maintain physical sobriety long enough for deeper issues to be addressed at a later time. This adaptive experience of spiritual bypass can be reexperienced throughout one's recovery as more layers of protection and resistance are removed—primarily through gaining humility and acceptance. From the perspective that all defense mechanisms can be helpful to some degree, spiritual bypass can positively contribute to a person's recovery in Twelve Step programs... A defense mechanism becomes

maladaptive when it has overstayed its usefulness, when it becomes rigid and is getting in the way of a person's development. (p. 167)

Mathieu (2011b) urges practitioners to inquire mindfully into their motivation for engaging in spiritual practice, not assuming that such motivation is always what it appears. Cautioning those in recovery, for example, about the way spiritual beliefs and practices can be used in the avoidance of unresolved psychological and emotional wounding, Mathieu shares:

Just as with prayer, meditation or chanting can be used defensively in the service of bypassing underlying painful feelings. For this reason, it is important to ask yourself whether you are using these practices to check *in* or to check *out*. Prayer, meditation, and chanting can be extraordinary practices that support a person in the context of the human condition, while making more space for one to feel and access his experiences. However, when these practices are used to check out from life, someone can actually resemble what he looked like when he was still using drugs or alcohol. He does not have more space to access his feelings because his practices are in service of deflection and denial. He is therefore not much better equipped to show up for "life on life's terms." (p. 121)

When a practitioner comes to believe that the purpose of the spiritual journey is to remove certain "lower" feelings and to replace them with other "higher" feelings, they open themselves up to the many expressions of spiritual bypass. Again, Mathieu (2011b) illustrates this observation through her work with those in recovery from addiction:

Because spiritual bypass is an attempt to avoid one's painful feelings, a way to break through the defense is by accepting everything that you are experiencing and feeling. This point cannot be highlighted enough. If a recovering alcoholic believes that

sobriety, or spiritual practice, should produce “happy, joyous, and free” feelings all the time, she will need to redefine discovery to include the darker aspects of emotional experience. It is by honoring her feelings that a personal experience of “this too shall pass” becomes possible. It is also through experiencing one’s feelings that growth, development, and self-acceptance can occur. Tools that promote acceptance of one’s feelings are attendance at meetings when others are sharing the truth of their experience rather than only the positive highlights, sharing one’s own struggles as they are happening, becoming vulnerable with others, and praying for the willingness to see and know the truth about oneself no matter what it looks like. (pp. 151 – 152)

Offensive and Defensive Spirituality

Whether spiritual beliefs and practices are being used to further a practitioner’s growth or to encourage defensiveness and avoidance is an inquiry that is essential in understanding and working with the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing. One useful lens in furthering this analysis is suggested by John Battista, a spiritually-oriented psychiatrist and editor of the *Textbook of Transpersonal Psychiatry and Psychology* (Basic Books, 1996). In his article, he (1996) proposes the terms *offensive* and *defensive spirituality* to illustrate how a practitioner’s relationship with spiritual teachings and practices might play a role in thwarting optimal growth and development. In his research, Battista explored a simple question: When are spiritual beliefs, practices, and experiences healthy and when are they unhealthy? Defensive spirituality tends to involve what Battista calls “masochistic” organization while offensive spirituality is more narcissistic in nature. He explains:

Some people suffer masochistically because they use concepts to disavow their true self and to conceptualize weakness, need, and emotionality as shameful and immature:

something to be overcome by spiritual behavior and action. These masochistic, spiritual defenses commonly include (1) submission to the other, or to authority, rationalized as the practice of lovingkindness and spiritual humility; (2) failure to ask for or receiving nurturance from another human being, rationalized with statements such as “God is the true source of all bounty and all that I need”; (3) failure to deal with interpersonal or sexual needs, rationalized as ascetic practice; and (4) failure to deal with biological, psychological, or interpersonal dimensions of problems such as depression, rationalized as “spirituality deals with everything—life is a spiritual teaching.” Such spiritual defenses are distinguished from offensive spirituality, or narcissistic spirituality, in which a person asserts that he or she is spiritually evolved, hence entitled to special rights and privileges that others should recognize and support. The spiritual narcissist presents himself as evolved or complete, without need for transformation, or as a misunderstood victim who deserves affirmation.

In contrast to approaching spirituality either offensively or defensively, Battista describes a relationship with spiritual teachings and practices which he calls “true” or “transformative” spirituality. In this approach, spiritual beliefs and practices themselves lead the practitioner to perceive and directly confront the ways that their psychic organization may be defensively or inauthentically constructed. He explains:

The thrust of spiritual work is to help people give up their false images and concepts of themselves and accept themselves as they are: human, unique, but not better than. Spiritual life is not life beyond the body, the emotions, the mind, and people. It is embodied, ordinary life that transcends the ordinary because the transcendent is found in ordinary life experience. In practice we may know true life, the true nature of who

we are, but this task involves accepting and transforming our limited nature. This is something to be embraced, not avoided. (pp. 259 – 260)

Battista (1996) encourages clinicians to pay close attention as to how spirituality is functioning in the lives of their patients, helping them to distinguish “between spiritual practices and beliefs that further the development and transformation of personality and spiritual practices and beliefs that have been incorporated into a psychopathological personality that resists them” (p. 251). One of the important tasks of the transpersonally-oriented clinician is to discern “true” or transformative expressions of spirituality from “false” or defensive uses. “False spirituality,” as conceived by Battista, is characterized by both spiritual defenses and offensive spirituality.

The term *spiritual defenses* refers to spiritual beliefs that keep people from expressing their actual, embodied, emotional self. Such authentic expression would be perceived as incongruent with appropriate “spiritual” behavior. For example, a practitioner of Hinduism, Buddhism, or Christianity may not express anger or assert herself in relationships because she believes that such behavior opposes the precepts of her religion. From the viewpoint of her clinician, however, this inhibition may be a way in which she maintains a self-denying, masochistic stance that is part of an abiding dysphoria about life. Spiritual defenses provide a rationale to disavow parts of one’s self. They prolong the suffering of an individual rather than transform it. (pp. 251 – 252)

Battista (1996) distinguishes these spiritual defenses from an “offensive spirituality” which involves “the assertion of one’s self as spiritually developed as a means of constraining

another person to be supportive” (p. 252). When engaged in offensive spirituality, a fragile ego is bolstered narcissistically. He explains:

The assertion of a false, spiritual self may thus serve to avoid contact with a disavowed “true” self that may include feelings of need or unworthiness or fears or rejection. Such an assertion serves a defensive function. It is called *offensive* because it is experienced by the other, clinician or not, as an offense. The “offense” is that one is constrained into an uncomfortable role by the subject: the role of a supporting audience for this self-deception. Commonly, if one interrupts such a person to express one’s own point of view, hurt feelings, anger, and resentment follow. If one remains quiet and implicitly accepts the other, the experience is often exhausting and anger provoking as well as nontransformative. (p. 252)

Offensive spirituality involves the use of spiritual teachings and practices for narcissistic purposes, which is ironic, given that many spiritual traditions are rooted in teachings such as egolessness and selflessness. Battista (2006) illustrates:

Commonplace forms of offensive spirituality involve spiritual name dropping or spiritual testing. For example, some “spiritually identified” people appear to test the “spiritual development” of others using a “higher consciousness scorecard” that includes frequency of meditation, depth of experience, status of teacher, adherence to vegetarianism, and spiritual demeanor. Alternatively, some fundamentalist Christians simply insist on acceptance of Christ as one’s personal savior as the prerequisite for association. Such standards are thinly disguised forms of narcissism. (p. 256)

Citing Battista’s conception of “defensive spirituality,” integral psychotherapist Mark Forman (2010) encourages therapists and practitioners to recognize that the fruits of authentic

spiritual practice do not always manifest in a way that looks positive or “sunny side up.” Engagement with authentic spirituality, in addition to providing access to more classically-described spiritual states of consciousness, can also often uproot certain aspects of the psyche and shadow, and can even be destructive from the perspective of the ego. In his clinical work with spiritually-oriented clients, Forman has seen firsthand how spirituality can “support defensiveness, narcissism, and self-denial in the client, in addition to supporting growth and well-being” (p. 216). It is important to address the presentation of defensive spirituality when it arises in the course of therapeutic work, contends Forman, so that the client has an opportunity to see for himself how his relationship with spiritual belief and practice may not ultimately be serving his highest goals and aspirations. He explains:

How to work with defensive spirituality? The first rule, as with other pathological patterns, is simply not to support it. The therapist can listen to spiritual beliefs that promote self-denial, but not validate them or give signs of nonverbal approval. Often, the client already is aware on some level that these beliefs are incongruent with his or her authentic needs and desires. By allowing the client to vent and express such beliefs without mirroring and validation—not feeding the demons, so to speak—the person may gain the necessary space to question the pattern. (p. 217)

Like other clinicians in this study (e.g. see Caplan, personal communication, January 25, 2013; Corbett, personal communication, March 22, 2013; Jennings, personal communication, March 18 2013; Mathieu, personal communication, April 12, 2013), Forman (2010) argues for a normalizing of spiritual bypass, where its presence in the life of a practitioner is not automatically assumed to be something negative which must be removed at all costs. There are times in a client’s life, during certain developmental transitions, for

example, where spiritual defensiveness can actually be an intelligent response and positive force in a person's life. Forman explains:

Sometimes a client takes a defensive stance—ignoring certain personal issues, such as sexuality or relationships—as a way to rest or marshal strength that might (ONTO p. 219) later be used to address pressing psychological issues. This is seen commonly in clients who have had trying childhoods, struggle consistently with psychological problems, then later have spiritual conversions or potent spiritual experiences. Such breakthroughs may be among the first respite they've had from an ongoing battle with depression, anxiety, or self-doubt. My experience is that this spiritual “time out” eventually runs its course—the person realizes he or she needs to move on or circumstances force change—but it is often quite beneficial overall. Whether a client is really experiencing a necessary break or whether he or she is stuck in a defensive rut is an issue that the client and the therapist might consider together. (pp. 218 – 219)

When it comes to “offensive” spirituality, the practitioner is not making use of spiritual beliefs and practices masochistically (as in “defensive” spirituality), but rather in a narcissistic fashion (Forman, 2010). Here, spirituality is used to bolster the client's sense of self, providing a feeling of specialness—propping up what otherwise may be a fragile self-image and sense of self-worth. In Forman's clinical experience, working with offensive spirituality is more subtle and even more difficult than the defensive approach. He explains:

The main reason being that it appears to provide more obvious benefits (feeling good about oneself) than does defensive spirituality (denying oneself). If the offensive spirituality is on the milder side, however, one can work with it by pointing out contradictions in the person's story. Usually clients have some outstanding failures in

their lives that sit alongside feelings of spiritual superiority. “How do you understand that here you are advancing so much spiritually, and yet you can’t seem to have dinner with your father without getting into a conflict?” If the client is open, these sorts of questions can be quite impactful. (p. 219)

Further, Forman (2010) reports that the expression of offensive spirituality tends to run its course over time, especially if it is organized around a “missionary” or “fundamentalist” phase which is often seen in new practitioners. Mature communities, teachers, and teachings will often end up frustrating these sorts of inflations, according to Forman, as well as life transitions, loss, and other growth opportunities that naturally come throughout the life cycle. If life itself does not cut through a practitioner’s spiritual inflation, it is unlikely that they will seek therapy.

In his exploration of the experience of unconditioned, nondual awareness—considered by many traditions to be one of the most advanced stages of the spiritual journey—author and teacher Peter Fenner (2007) has discovered that in order to purify and deepen the subjective experience of this state of consciousness, practitioners must address all dimensions of their lives, including the material, social, emotional, and spiritual. He cautions practitioners about giving priority to unconditioned awareness in a way that results in spiritual bypassing, or what he refers to as “bypassing the relative.” Fenner defines spiritual bypassing as “an engagement with the nondual perspective that disconnects people from their emotions, relationships, and social responsibilities” (p. 214). Practitioners are prone to this sort of disconnection, in Fenner’s experience, when the understanding of absolute awareness remains conceptual only, rather than a living, embodied reality. He explains:

If people are relating to the ultimate only through a discourse of nonduality, they're seeing only part of the picture, the part that's framed in negations. If they don't have the direct experience of unconditioned awareness, they can infer that there's no finite self, no choice, etc., and that they're relieved of the need to take care of themselves and others at the relative or conditioned level... The possibility of bypassing the relative is compounded by the fact that some nondual traditions include yogic practices designed to propel people into disidentified states—different types of *samadhis*—in which people aren't even aware of the phenomenal world. These states have nothing to do with unconditioned awareness, or emptiness, or *shunyata*, as this is understood and experienced in Buddhism. (p. 214)

When a practitioner is in a state of unconditioned awareness—in an embodied, non-conceptual way—it is not actually possible to avoid any aspect of experience, Fenner (2007) asserts. He argues that unconditioned awareness does not actually have the capacity to repress, bypass, or suppress any dimension of experience as it is the ground of all experience itself. Therefore, it is not possible for unconditioned awareness to be used as “an escape route” or as a means by which a practitioner could engage in spiritual bypass. Because it is an absolute state of consciousness in which the practitioner is fully present to whatever is arising, In this way, it is not possible, assuming a practitioner's experience of it is genuine and authentic, for it to be used as “an escape route” or as a way to fuel the movement of spiritual bypass.

Spiritual bypassing operates at all levels of development and in all spiritual practitioners, Caplan (2009) contends, from beginning seekers to advanced yogis and spiritual masters, affecting saints and sinners alike. When the defensive use of spiritual beliefs and

practices remains outside of conscious awareness, practitioners limit the depth of realization that would otherwise be available to them. Caplan cautions practitioners as to the dangers of an unintegrated approach:

Access to spiritual truth, when not integrated, is a very dangerous weapon whose primary hazard is that we can effectively fool ourselves into believing we are more realized than we are and miss the deeper possibility that is available to us. And if we are in a position of power, we are likely to bring this confusion to other people. (p. 115)

While one of the most important aims of contemplative practice is to see through the apparent solidity of an independent, continuous, separate self (commonly referred to in spiritual literature as “the ego”)—Caplan (2009) reminds practitioners of the intelligence and cleverness of the ego, and of the “absolute efficiency with which it carries out its task of obscuring the recognition of our deeper nature, thus protecting its identity” (p. 115). Despite the assertion that spiritual practice is designed to free a person from “the stronghold of egoic identification and domination,” Caplan explains that it is this same egoic mechanism that manages and guides a person along the spiritual path. Recognizing this predicament and paradox, Caplan describes how the ego “co-opts the language and concepts of truth and transformation to ensure that this transformation does not happen, but it does so *in the name of truth*” (p. 116).

This process of “co-opting” is one of the primary essences of the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing, describing the process whereby spiritual beliefs, teachings, and practices are used to sabotage authentic growth rather than catalyzing it. Citing Welwood, Caplan (2009) explains that the term spiritual bypassing was introduced “as a way to help people

understand how the ego can, and does, co-opt spiritual ideas and practices by attempting to bypass, rather than work through, the wounded, confused, and even damaged aspects of our psyches” (p. 115). Caplan describes this process as a normative one and as a natural part of the transformational process:

As the soul experiences the glory of awareness of its deeper nature, the ego simultaneously experiences the possibility of authentic transformation as a literal death threat. In its great intelligence, the ego co-opts the language and concepts of truth and transformation to ensure that this transformation does not happen, but it does so in the name of truth. Its very defense structure... is made of concepts, ideas, and even unconsciously concocted imitations of spiritual auras, energies, and insights. This is the domain that the principle of spiritual bypassing addresses... (p. 116)

Caplan (2009) counsels practitioners to respect the demanding nature of the spiritual journey, and the necessity of confronting challenging material along the way, as it arises out the unconscious. When caught in the grip of spiritual bypass, practitioners tend to turn away from such material, focusing instead on so-called “positive” qualities and attributes (e.g. love, truth, peace, or bliss). By doing so, they hope to transcend the “lesser” or “darker” aspects of human experience. Caplan elucidates:

Real, embodied spiritual development happens through a relentless process of self-confrontation that requires us to move through all our fears and resistances. This involves the purification of obstacles—all the old wounds, defenses, pretences, demands, fixations, addictions, and denials we carry with us from the past. (p. xvi)

One of the most important areas of inquiry in understanding spiritual bypass is the relationship between profound spiritual experience, in and of itself, and how spiritual

realization unfolds in the psychological, emotional, and interpersonal life of the experiencer. Over the last several decades, researchers have observed that while genuine spiritual experience can deeply affect a practitioner's way of perceiving themselves and reality, such experiences more often than not will be unable to transform all aspects of a person's life. In the words of Caplan (2009):

We cannot assume that simply because we have had profound experiences of spiritual illumination or enduring insights, all aspects of our psychology have been touched by our awareness. It is a great temptation to imagine this, but it is rarely the case. (p. 116)

When caught in spiritual bypass, practitioners tend to be influenced by the belief that spiritual realization will automatically spill over into *all* areas of life, healing all developmental deficiencies, interpersonal challenges, and unresolved traumatic wounding. Many of the researchers cited in this study, however (see, for example, Caplan, 2009; Masters, 2010b; Neale, 2012; Welwood, 1984, 1999, 2002; Wilber, 1993, 2000, 2007, 2012), note that this is not usually the case. Caplan (2009) explains:

Our increased awareness can certainly impact our psychological dynamics, offering us a wider perspective on our conditioning or giving us the courage to go deeper into that which is still unilluminated within us. But rarely does heightened awareness take the place of the necessary and humbling task of learning to feel and digest our own psychological pain, or of the gritty challenges of dealing with human relationship, self-hatred, shame, sexuality, and intimacy with others. Spiritual insight can, but often does not, penetrate psychological conditioning. When we have not *learned to*

manage our psychology, our psychology will continue to manage us. (p. 116, italics in the original)

In the aftermath of powerful spiritual experiences, it is not uncommon for practitioners to confront feelings of grandiosity, ego inflation, and a sense of superiority. If this material is not worked through, it will inevitably seep into the practitioner's way of seeing the world and relating to others. Barbara Whitfield (in Walters et. al, 2009) cautions practitioners to consider the frequently reality that even the most impactful spiritual experiences may not result in healing on all levels. In her experience, it is common for practitioners, after a life-changing spiritual experience, to bypass or ignore lower levels of consciousness, attempting at all cost to remain only at the higher. Referring to this phenomenon as spiritual bypass, "high-level denial," or "premature transcendence," Whitfield has observed that these practitioners will almost always be "pulled back down" until they are able to work through their particular unfinished business. She explains:

The consequences of taking a spiritual bypass are often active codependence or conflict, including: denial of the richness of our inner life, trying to control ourselves or others; all-or-nothing thinking and behaving; feelings of fear, shame, and confusion; high tolerance for inappropriate behavior; frustration; addiction, compulsion, and relapse; and unnecessary pain and suffering... Our reward for working through ego inflation and spiritual bypass is recognizing and using the power of *humility*: the solid foundation of an authentically spiritual, healthy, and whole human being. We can begin to define humility as *having openness and willingness to learn more about our relationship with ourselves, others, and God.* (p. 149)

It has been suggested that certain spiritual practices can be chosen unconsciously with the purpose of protecting the practitioner from confronting aspects of their experience which remain un-integrated. When specific beliefs and practices are compatible with a person's preexisting egoic structure and habitual tendencies, they are said to be egosyntonic with respect to that person (Caplan, 2009). Caplan advises practitioners to look carefully as to how the teachings and practices they are most drawn to might be egosyntonic with their personalities, and therefore how such practices might support the practitioner in the avoiding of important dimensions of experience. By investigating how prayer, devotion, ritual, yoga, or meditation can be used to escape life rather than to become more intimate with it, practitioners can begin to unravel the unique forms in which spiritual bypassing might be expressing in their own lives.

One of the hallmarks of spiritual bypassing, contends Buddhist-oriented psychotherapist Miles Neale (2012), is the avoidance of difficult emotional states, where practitioners come to conclude that any form of anger, conflict, or struggle is a symptom of some degree of spiritual failure. Both Neale (2012) and Masters (2010b) counter a widespread belief that those who are spiritually advanced simply do not experience these sorts of affective material. When a person habitually avoids conflict—whether through spiritual bypassing or other defensive means—they lose the ability to set limits and boundaries, and can obscure the development of other essential skills required for healthy personal and interpersonal lives (Masters, 2010a, 2010b; Neale, 2012). Clinicians familiar with the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing note the importance of honoring and turning toward even the most disturbing or seemingly “unspiritual” emotional content (Caplan, 2009; Masters, 2010b; Neale, 2012; Tift, 2011a). As Neale asserts (2012), spiritual practitioners can become so concerned with not

becoming attached to unwholesome or non-spiritual states of mind that they fall prey to the opposite—denying or repressing so-called “negative” feelings as a way to rise above or remain free from their influence. In a truly integral approach, clients are encouraged to make full and direct contact with whatever arises in their immediate, embodied experience (Tift, 2011a). For Masters (2010b), a middle path is recommended where practitioners are guided to become intimate with whatever presents itself in their experience, while at the same time not fusing or identifying with it, or becoming lost in its intensity. Having some distance from difficult or painful emotions can be helpful in the working through process, “but not too much,” maintains Masters.

As a way of seeing how even the most pristine spiritual teachings can be used to avoid less-than-fully-developed aspects of self-experience, Adyashanti (2009) encourages practitioners to vigilantly explore the specific ways they “unenlighten” themselves. Through deep reflection and honest self-inquiry, practitioners can start to become aware of layers of unconscious assumptions and patterns of belief that continue to operate alongside even authentic spiritual transformation. In his work with students seeking the highest stages of spiritual realization, Adyashanti has observed that aspects of a person’s unconscious conditioning and unresolved conflicts often survive “even the explosive nature of awakening,” reconstituting outside conscious awareness. It is critical, according to Adyashanti, for practitioners to remain aware of this possibility and to observe with care the specific ways that they can fall back into “the trance of separation” (p. 41).

Even as aspirants begin to realize some of the fruits of authentic spiritual work, it is likely they will at some point face old conditioning arising from the past, activated in large

part through “the rumble and tumble” of interpersonal relationship (Adyashanti, 2009, p. 90).

Adyashanti explains:

We are in relationships with situations and people, interacting with lovers and friends and children and all the rest. It is this gritty fabric of life where the spiritual rubber hits the road. What is required is the willingness to let life impact you; to let yourself see when life impacts you; to see if you go into any sort of separation about it, if you go into judgment, if you go into blame, if you go into “should” or “shouldn’t” if you start to point the finger somewhere other than at yourself. (p.43)

In his work with thousands of dedicated spiritual seekers over many years, Adyashanti has witnessed “a strong tendency in the egoic structure to use awakening as a reason to hide from all of one’s inner divisions” (p. 49). This tendency exemplifies one of the common essences of the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing, where practitioners make use of the spiritual journey in such a way that allows them to avoid those unresolved “inner divisions” which would require a painful inquiry into their own emotional wounding. Adyashanti counsels his students to inquire as deeply as possible into everything that is still unresolved within them, seeing very clearly exactly what has the power to cause them to go back into division and conflict. It is only when practitioners are able to “come out of hiding,” he alleges—willing to explore every nook and cranny of their bodies, concepts, emotions, feelings, and self-images—that spiritual realization can express in all areas of their lives in a fully transparent way.

When Welwood first became aware of the phenomenon he came to call spiritual bypassing, he observed “a widespread tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished

developmental tasks” (Welwood, 2011, p. 1). He saw how practitioners could use the goal of spiritual awakening to rationalize what he calls “premature transcendence,” a dynamic whereby a practitioner “rises above the raw and messy side of [their] humanness before [they] have fully faced and made peace with it” (p. 1). Referring to what he calls an “occupational hazard” of the spiritual path, Welwood has observed how

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. (p. 1)

When spiritual development is overemphasized to the neglect of personal, psychological, and emotional growth, a practitioner’s overall progress becomes lopsided. As a result, spiritual realization is not able to express itself in the relative world of love and work, where it could be argued it is needed most. Welwood (2011) clarifies:

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. (pp. 1 – 2)

Many of the world's traditional religions, especially in their original expressions, advocate the importance of "transcending" the impermanent, flesh-bound, limited nature of earthly existence. Whether entering the Kingdom of God of the Judeo-Christians, returning to *Brahman* as a devoted Hindu, or stepping off the wheel of *samsara* in early Buddhism, there is a deeply-rooted movement in early religious traditions to find release from the world of form, from the earthly, human structures of the body, relationships, karma, and matter which were seen as obscurations to the highest levels of realization (Welwood, 2002). In such an environment, Welwood explains, there is a propensity to favor spiritual development over the more chaotic domains of the personal and the interpersonal. The practitioner then strives to rise above emotional pain and challenging personal material, avoiding at all costs the messy and unresolved content of life as a human being in the relative world. It is this tendency to avoid or prematurely transcend basic human needs, feelings, and developmental tasks that Welwood originally termed "spiritual bypassing."

Spiritual bypassing is especially tempting for those navigating developmental challenges, especially given "what were once ordinary landmarks of adulthood—earning a livelihood through dignified work, raising a family, keeping a marriage together, belonging to a meaningful community—have become increasingly elusive for large segments of the population" (Welwood, 2002, p. 137). When a person engages in spiritual practice prior to the completion of certain critical developmental tasks, they may be more susceptible to the influence of spiritual bypass in their lives. This is not to say, of course, that a person must "complete" or attain a certain prerequisite emotional development before beginning spiritual work, but only to encourage practitioners to remain aware of how these dynamics might be related to one another. When spiritual practice is taken up by a person who is underdeveloped

in other lines, the relationship with spirituality can be used to create a new compensatory identity. While this personality appears new, upon closer examination it is revealed to be an old, dysfunctional identity, formed out of the avoidance of unresolved psychological issues, and repackaged in a new guise (Welwood, 2002).

When practitioners sidestep these very important personal and developmental issues, their involvement in spiritual work can, from its inception, become yet another way to “rationalize and reinforce old defenses” (Welwood, 2002). If, for example, a practitioner learns about the doctrine of “no-self,” while true on the Absolute level of experience, this teaching can lead to the denying of relative, human needs for love, affection, and care.

Welwood notes how

those who need to see themselves as special will often emphasize the specialness of their spiritual insight and practice, or their special relationship to their teacher, to shore up a sense of self-importance. Many of the ‘perils of the path’—such as spiritual materialism (using spiritual ideas for personal gain), narcissism, inflation (delusions of grandiosity), or groupthink (uncritical acceptance of group ideology)—result from trying to use spirituality to shore up developmental deficiencies. (p. 12)

The Swiss psychoanalyst, Carl Jung (1976), described the journey of what he called *individuation* as “... the process by which individual beings are formed and differentiated [from other beings]; in particular, it is the development of the psychological individual as being distinct from the general, collective psychology.” The journey of individuation is a critical aspect of the evolution of the human being, a unique contribution of Western psychology to the overall spectrum of development spanning pre-personal to personal to transpersonal (Wilber, 1993). One of the more common expressions of spiritual bypassing

occurs when a person uses spirituality “to make up for failures of individuation—psychologically separating from one’s parents, cultivating self-respect, or trusting one’s own intelligence as a source of guidance” (Welwood, 2002, p. 208).

The phenomenon of spiritual bypassing is one that plays out not only in the lives of individual practitioners, but also within spiritual communities. The dynamics which govern relationships among those in the same spiritual community can have much in common with those that play out in a practitioner’s family of origin. Welwood (2002) has observed the ways that

Spiritual communities can become a kind of substitute family, where the teacher is regarded as the good parent, while the students are trying to be good boys or girls by toeing the party line, trying to please the teacher-as-parent, or driving themselves to climb the ladder of spiritual success. And spiritual practice becomes co-opted by unconscious identities and used to reinforce unconscious defenses. (pp. 208 – 209)

In exploring how spiritual bypassing can lead to a reinforcement of unconscious defenses, Welwood (2002) cautions against an approach to psychospiritual growth that does not adequately address the metabolization of early personal history. Especially where teachings on selflessness, detachment, and renunciation are part of a person’s training, practitioners must become aware of how such teachings—while offering liberation at the spiritual level of development—can encourage avoidance of important personal and interpersonal issues. He argues that

people who hide behind a schizoid defense (resorting to isolation and withdrawal because the interpersonal realm feels threatening) often use teachings about detachment and renunciation to rationalize their aloofness, impersonality, and

disengagement, when what they really need is to become more fully embodied, more engaged with themselves, with others, and with life. Unfortunately, the Asian emphasis on impersonal realization makes it easy for alienated Western students to imagine that the personal is of little significance compared with the vastness of the great beyond. Such students are often attracted to teachings about selflessness and ultimate states, which seem to provide a rationale for not dealing with their own psychological wounding. In this way, they use Eastern teachings to cover up their incapacity in the personal and interpersonal realm. (p. 209)

According to Masters (2010b), the first step in working with spiritual bypassing is to see it for what it is—the employing of spiritual beliefs to avoid dealing in any significant depth with pain and developmental needs. When a practitioner is able to recognize spiritual bypassing as it arises—naming it and penetrating awareness into its multifaceted expressions—they are then able to relate *to* it rather than *from* it. If a person is not able to see clearly how the spiritual journey is used defensively to circumvent difficult feelings and unmetabolized pain, Masters cautions, it will forever remain under the radar, unconsciously influencing the lives of those under its sway. A common indicator of the presence of spiritual bypassing, Masters asserts, is the “spiritually rationalized avoidance of feeling deeply,” especially with regard to challenging and difficult emotions, such as profound sadness, grief, fear, or feeling unloved. (p. 10)

As addressed earlier in this literature review, one of primary essences comprising the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing is the use of spiritual beliefs and practices to keep pain, confusion, and discomfort at a distance. Masters (2010b) describes a process where the need

to identify as a “spiritual” person can express through the establishment and maintenance of a compensatory self-identity:

The greater the pain of our unresolved wounds, the greater the odds that we—if we are invested in being “spiritual” or in being viewed as “spiritual”—will manifest some kind of compensatory self-inflation (however humble its robes) and involve ourselves in spiritual bypassing in its grosser forms, wherein spiritual practice and attainment are used to avoid directly and unguardedly feeling the raw reality of suffering, keeping us disassociated or otherwise “safely” removed from our pain, especially the pain stemming from the more troubling times of our past. (p. 10)

A critical assertion made by Masters (2010b) and echoed in the work of Tift (2011a) and Caplan (2009) is that the primary purpose of spiritual engagement, despite widespread belief to the contrary, is *not* to make a person feel better. When a practitioner looks to spirituality to provide “positive” feelings and experiences instead of so-called “negative” ones, they open themselves to splitting from vital aspects of themselves. Many practitioners become stuck, Masters (2010b) alleges, in the assumption that if their spiritual practice is not producing the feelings they hope to experience that they have somehow failed—or their practice has failed them—and that their only recourse is to “redouble their efforts” and practice more. When practitioners turn the blame inward, overly critical of their relationship with spiritual practice, this often serves to further distract them from the work that is truly being summoned—that of turning directly toward their core wounding and vulnerabilities.

As the public discourse around spiritual bypassing is a relatively recent occurrence, it is often the case that spiritual teachers, clinicians, and practitioners are not aware when the phenomenon is active; its appearance can be quite subtle and often requires training and

experience to spot. Welwood (2002) has observed how some Asian spiritual teachers, coming from a vastly different psychic organization, are not always aware as to how the phenomenon might be expressing in their lives or in the lives of their Western students. Without some basic psychological training, Welwood contends, it can be difficult to see how a person is spiritual ideas and practices to avoid unresolved psychological and emotional unfinished business; or to belittle basic needs, feelings, and developmental tasks. One of the all-too-common and problematic results of this lack of awareness is that both teachers and students continue with teachings and practices based in self-transcendence and rooted in the transpersonal when what is being called for is more personal and interpersonal ground to stand on.

As psychiatrist and meditation teacher Jack Engler (cited in Wilber, Engler, and Brown, 1986) stated many years ago, “you have to be somebody before you can be nobody.” While Engler has refined his position on this over the years—and our collective understanding of the personal and transpersonal journey has matured and deepened—his essential point is relevant here: before a person can go beyond the self, there must be some grounding in who they are as separate individuals. In *Psychoanalysis and Buddhism: An Unfolding Dialogue* (Wisdom, 2003), editor Jeremy Safran summarizes Engler’s position: “Engler discusses how spiritual practice can be used for defensive reasons and suggests that some of these mixed motivations may persist even after one has advanced some way along the spiritual path.” Citing an example offered by Engler, Safran references the ways that some practitioners derive a sense of meaning and specialness in relation to their spiritual teacher or path, which often covers a sense of underlying unworthiness. Summarizing several decades of research and hard-won experience as to the relationship between spiritual practice and

psychological development, Engler (in Safran, 2003) asserts: “Deep spiritual realization may co-exist with a certain degree of clinical psychopathology.”

Reflecting upon his original notion of “becoming somebody before becoming nobody,” Engler (2003) shared an early observation as to how those new to spirituality often discovered that progress was a lot slower than they thought it would be, and that spiritual practice in and of itself “was not enough to manage problems in day-to-day living or provide direction in love and work” (p. 35). While Engler has refined his thinking about the relationship between psychological and spiritual work over the years (and about someone and no one, respectively), he still maintains the importance of being “somebody”—that is, “facing crucial or developmental life tasks head on instead of attempting to avoid them in the name of spirituality or enlightenment” (p. 36). After decades of reflection on these matters, Engler argues that spiritual practice does not exempt a person from normal developmental tasks—many of which may not have been an issue in traditional (Buddhist) cultures. He argues that one of Buddhism’s attractions to Westerners, at least as it first began to come into contemporary American society, is that it appeared to offer a way to “circumvent the developmental tasks and challenges of identity formation that are inherent in certain stages of the life cycle, especially young adulthood and the mid-life transition” (p. 36). He illustrates using the Buddhist teaching on selflessness:

The Buddhist teaching that one has no enduring self (“emptiness,” “no-self”) is open to a fateful misinterpretation in our Western context, namely, that I do not need to struggle to find out who I am, what my desires and aspirations are, what my needs are, what my capabilities and responsibilities are, how I am relating to others, and what I could or should do with my life. The no-self doctrine seems to relieve me of the

burden of these tasks and to justify their premature abandonment: if I am (spiritually) nobody, then I don't need to become (psychologically) somebody. (pp. 36 – 37)

While the realization of “no-self” is considered one of the highest attainments in many of the world's contemplative traditions, Engler (2003) cautions that the doctrine can serve as a rationalization—or even legitimization—of “a felt lack of integration, feeling of inner emptiness, feelings of not being real, of not having a cohesive self” (p. 37). He explains:

“No-self” in this (non-Buddhist) sense seems an apt term for what a number of practitioners actually feel. Ontological “emptiness” becomes confused with psychological emptiness. Subjective feelings of inner emptiness are mistaken for the experience of shunyata, or the absence of inherent existence; and the experience of not feeling inwardly integrated for anatta, or selflessness. Epstein (1989), for instance, describes seven states of subjectively felt “emptiness” that are actually pathological. Intrapsychically, each reflects a debilitating *loss of self*, either through grandiose autonomy or symbiotic merger. The teaching of nonattachment can also be heard as rationalizing an inability to form stable, lasting, satisfying relationships. (p. 37)

Further, Engler (2006) describes how a relationship with a spiritual teacher or community can provide a longed-for mirror or idealizing type of selfobject transference (see Kohut, 2009a, 2009b). Engler cautions that many of these relationships, especially with Asian teachers who are often perceived as powerful beings of special aura, status and worth, remain impermeable to reality testing for far too long. In their presence, Engler notes, “one can feel special oneself, thereby masking actual self-feelings of inferiority, unworthiness, and shame or, even worse, feelings of being defective or flawed at the core.” (pp. 37 – 38).

Engler (2006) argues that there is no way to engage in spiritual practice which is immune from the dynamics of a practitioner's character structure, separated from their own anxieties, needs, and cognitive-emotional styles. As such, it follows that spiritual practice can—and often does—serve defensive aims. As a result, Engler urges practitioners to explore the possibility that teachings such as those on “no-self” or “egolessness” do not imply that psychological work can be set aside, that attention need not be paid to the personal self, character issues, or interpersonal relationships. This type of work remains critical, Engler asserts, both in terms of future growth and development, as well as a remedy for unfinished business from the past that continues to get in the way.

Engler (2006) cites an exchange between Zen teacher Philip Kapleau Roshi and a student to illustrate one of the many facets underlying the relationship between spiritual experience and psychological development:

QUESTIONER: But doesn't enlightenment clear away imperfections and personality flaws?

ROSHI: No, it shows them up! Before awakening, one can easily ignore or rationalize his shortcomings, but after enlightenment, this is no longer possible. One's failings are painfully evident. Yet at the same time a strong determination develops to rid oneself of them. Even opening the Mind's eye fully does not at one fell swoop purify the emotions. Continuous training after enlightenment is required to purify the emotions so that our behavior accords with our understanding. This vital point must be understood. (p. 38)

Referencing traditional Buddhist understanding, Engler notes a “group of factors” which are said to be extinguished as part of the journey of awakening, the first of which comprise core

beliefs about the self, “maladaptive cognitions” or “core assumptions” in the language of cognitive psychology—pathogenic beliefs about who we are and how we become free. Engler further elucidates this process:

The most important of these is the representation of the self as a singular, separate, independent, and self-identical. This is not recognized as illusory, a construct or representation only. But insight in meditation doesn't immediately change behavior any more than insight does in psychotherapy. Modification or abandonment of this basic self-belief doesn't automatically shift the underlying reactive states—conditioned motivations, affects, and impulses—that can still influence the practitioner to act in unwholesome, selfish, and uncompassionate ways. (p. 40)

Just because a teacher or practitioner has had a deep experience of “no-self” or profound insight into the nature of reality does not mean that other areas in their life will fall into line. Engler (2006) has found that teacher misconduct offers an important insight into the relationship between spiritual and psychological work. He explains:

Misconduct certainly occurs in Buddhist Asia, but my experience in India and Burma was that cultural norms and expectations as well as centuries-old social role requirements impose constraints on behavior that is often mistaken—by teachers themselves—for spiritual attainment, even the “extinction” of samyojans. In Western settings, when these constraints are removed and Asian teachers by necessity are thrown more onto their own resources and have to be much more self-determining, particularly around issues involving money, sex, power, and the idealized projections of admiring students, none of which they have been trained to handle except in the most cursory way, my impression is that they themselves—not to mention their

students—are surprised by what they find themselves doing. It is important to understand that certain misconduct, by itself, does not mean that they do not have deep understanding about the nature of reality. It doesn't mean they haven't experienced enlightenment. It means that freedom from the maladaptive beliefs, the identifications, the inner conflicts, and the narcissistic investments that create suffering for ourselves and others aren't extinguished—even granting you accept that notion—all at once.

First enlightenment is still first enlightenment. Much work remains. (pp. 41 – 42)

A rich discourse has surfaced in the literature exploring the nature of spiritual work as related to psychological growth and development. According to many researchers cited in this study, both psycho-emotional and contemplative inquiry are *usually* required for any given practitioner to realize the deepest levels of growth, development, and transformation. In the words of Jack Kornfield (1993a):

Only a deep attention to the whole of our life can bring us the capacity to love well and live freely.... If our spiritual practice does not enable us to function wisely, to love and work and connect with the whole of our life, then we must include forms of practice [he specifically refers to psychotherapy] that heal our problems in other ways” (pp. 249 – 250)

Engler (2006) maintains, however, that this relationship is not simply a matter of applying spiritual insights to the rest of one's psychological, emotional, and interpersonal life. As Wilber (2000, 2007, 2012) and Masters (2010a, 2010b) have asserted, practicing more meditation or more yoga as a way to address certain psychological, emotional, and interpersonal issues is most often not effective; contemplative practice is not a cure-all for all types of difficulties, challenges, and suffering. Simply meditating more, according to Engler,

will not necessarily unfold and transform character flaws, personal conflicts, and difficulties in love and work. Wilber and colleagues have asserted for decades the discovery that awareness in one area of life (here: spiritual) does not automatically transfer into others.

Engler further argues:

Spiritual awareness, as Buddhism and other traditions defines it, does not automatically yield psychological and emotional awareness in a Western sense. The profound need to defend against trauma and threats to bodily and psychic integrity, as well as our capacity for horizontal and vertical “splits” in personality (Kohut, 1977), leave sequestered departments where the memories of past injury and the anticipation of future hurt are deepest. Entrenched characterological defenses and flaws can remain untouched. So we can encounter teachers who have deep realization into the nature of self and reality, but who sleep with their students, encourage dependent relationships, need uncritical admiration, are intolerant of criticism or dissent, and insist on an authoritarian structure in their community. Or more simply, teachers who are powerful in front of a meditation hall, but who can be anxious, confused, immature, or withdrawn in their personal interactions with others. (p. 42)

Engler (2006) has observed that even the most dedicated spiritual practitioners will in fact face emotional and relational difficulties over the course of their lifetime. The need to deal directly with these problems, in ways that aren't necessarily effective via spiritual practice alone, is more the rule than the exception. One of the reasons this is the case, Engler asserts, is because contemplative practice itself has a way of uncovering and exposing unresolved personal issues. He explains:

Some issues close to awareness can suddenly emerge: a conflict we've been feeling all of a sudden becomes clear. Or repression may be lifted and we confront recovered memories long dissociated or repressed, buried affects, unconscious grief or longing, or intense fantasy and imagery encoding wishes and fears in the primary process. No doubt this occurs in part because, like psychodynamic therapies, mindfulness is an "uncovering technique" based on the same procedures that guide psychodynamic inquiry: removal of censorship on mental content and affect, suspension of judgment, abstinence, and the injunction to observe experience while experiencing it—Sterba's "therapeutic split" in the ego (Sterba, 1934; Engler, 1986). Especially when practiced intensively in retreat settings, it cannot help but eventually force the practitioner to confront areas of deep pain, confusion, and constriction in his or her personal life. (p. 43)

A similar notion is expressed by Father Thomas Keating (1994), in his observation of how contemplative practice often results in what he calls the "unloading of the unconscious." In this process, a certain type of "interior purification" is set in motion, which often involves a direct meeting with material that has yet come into conscious awareness. Referring to this unfolding as a kind of "divine psychotherapy," Keating explains how this movement serves to empty out the unconscious, freeing the practitioner "from the obstacles to the free flow of grace in our minds, emotions, and bodies" (p. 93). He explains:

Empirical evidence seems to be growing that the consequences of traumatic emotional experiences from earliest childhood are stored in our bodies and nervous systems in the form of tension, anxiety, and various defense mechanisms. Ordinary rest and sleep do not get rid of them. But in interior silence and the profound rest that this brings to

the whole organism, these emotional blocks begin to soften up and the natural capacity of the human organism to throw off things that are harmful starts to evacuate them.

The psyche as well as the body has its way of evacuating material that is harmful to its health. The emotional junk in our unconscious emerges during prayer in the form of thoughts that have a certain urgency, energy, and emotional charge to them. You don't usually know from what particular source or sources they are coming. There is ordinarily just a jumble of thoughts and a vague or acute sense of uneasiness. Simply putting up with them and not fighting them is the best way to release them. (p. 93)

Keating (1996) alleges that with the daily practice of contemplative prayer material from the unconscious will inevitably “emerge into clear and stark awareness” (p. 94).

Moreover, he describes how the practice fosters the healing of unresolved emotional wounding from the past, and how silence itself is the ground in which the divine can move in a practitioner's life.

In psychoanalysis the patient relives traumatic experiences of the past and in doing so, integrates them into a healthy pattern of life. If you are faithful to the daily practice of contemplative prayer, these psychic wounds will be healed without your being retraumatized. After you have been doing this prayer for some months, you will experience the emergence of certain forceful and emotionally charged thoughts. They don't normally reveal some traumatic experience in early life or some unresolved problem in your present life. They simply emerge as thoughts that arise with a certain force or that put you in a depressed mood for a few hours or days. Such thoughts are of great value from the perspective of human growth even though you may feel persecuted by them during the whole time of prayer. (p. 95)

It is common in the course of regular contemplative practice that a practitioner come to believe that they are going backwards, where “the unloading of the unconscious” makes it seem that further growth is impossible (Keating, 1996). For practitioners of many types of meditation, including Keating’s centering prayer, material arising from the unconscious can be seen as nothing other than an unending flow of distractions. Keating explains how even the appearance of distraction is an integral part of the process:

When the unloading of the unconscious begins in earnest, many people feel that they are going backwards, that contemplative prayer is just impossible for them because all they experience when they start to pray is an unending flow of distractions. Actually, there are no distractions in contemplative prayer unless you really want to be distracted or if you get up and leave. Hence, it doesn't matter how many thoughts you have. Their number and nature have no effect whatever on the genuineness of your prayer. If your prayer were on the level of thinking, thoughts that were extraneous to your reflections would indeed be distracting. But contemplative prayer is not on the level of thinking. It is consenting with your will to God's Presence in pure faith. (pp. 95 – 96)

As previously unconscious material rises to the surface in meditation, even if the practitioner is aware and mindful of that which arises, such awareness does not automatically result in therapeutic insight (Engler, 2006). Whether a practitioner will work directly with this material depends on the tradition he or she is involved with. Engler explains:

The meditation traditions themselves discourage working with any mental content, at least when doing formal practice. Zen, for instance, dismisses most of these phenomena, particularly altered-state phenomena, as *makyo*, or manifestations of

delusion. The student is encouraged to dismiss them as a distraction and to avoid getting caught up in them at all costs. But whether explicitly worked with or not, practice will often access some of this material. (pp. 43 – 44)

Engler and Dan Brown conducted a Rorschach study of *vipassana* meditators before and after a three-month meditation retreat and found that the majority of practitioners “continued to be dominated by primary process thinking, as well as by significant fantasy, daydreaming, reverie, imagery, spontaneous recall of past memories, depression of conflictual material, incessant thinking, and emotional lability, including dramatic swings in mood” (Engler, 2006, p. 44). Citing Kornfield (1993b), Engler further elucidates:

Kornfield’s (1993) observation a decade later was still much the same: about half of the practitioners during the same intensive three-month retreats found themselves unable to sustain mindfulness practice in its traditional form because they encountered so much unresolved grief, fear, wounding, and unfinished developmental business with parents, siblings, friends, spouses, children, and others. This then became the focus of their practice. As it needed to. Attempts to get them to redirect their attention to note the simple arising and passing away of objects in the field of awareness are usually unsuccessful. The press of personal issues and confusion is just too great. (p. 44)

Further exploring the relationship between psychological and meditative approaches to development and transformation, Engler (2006) cites an observation from Kornfield as to how even advanced Western meditation students have reported “that periods of powerful practice and deep insight will often be succeeded by periods in which they re-encounter painful patterns, fears, and conflicts in other parts of their lives.” Kornfield (in Engler, 2006) has also

noted how while meditators may come to profound insights and understanding during their meditative practice—for example while on retreat—that ordinary, everyday life can challenge them in unexpected ways, in ways that were not revealed during formal practice sessions.

Engler explains:

Or they may come to some important understanding and balance in formal practice, but find that when they return home to the problems of day-to-day living, visit parents, fall in love, or change jobs, suddenly old neurotic and dysfunctional patterns of behavior are as strong as ever and have to be faced. If not, there is a strong likelihood that practices will be unconsciously used in part to avoid dealing with them. If that becomes too salient a motive, meditation itself will eventually become dry or sterile and feel increasingly unrewarding, like a therapy in which therapist and patient unconsciously collude to avoid the real issues or unwittingly collaborate only through the patient's false self system. (p. 44)

One of the primary discoveries made by Engler (2006), which has been referenced by many other contemplatively-oriented researchers and clinicians (see, for example, Masters, 2010a, 2010b; and Wilber, 2000, 2007, 2013) is that personal issues which are uncovered during meditation practice are not worked through or healed simply by spiritual practice alone. Both Engler (2006) and Wilber (personal communication, February 15, 2013) have shared that this reality was very difficult to accept as the traditions entered into American culture in the 1960s and 1970s; the belief at the time was that these practices offered a path of total liberation, from suffering, confusion, and difficulties of all kinds. According to these researchers, this simply proved not to be true. Engler clarifies:

But specific problems such as early abuse, addiction, conflicts in love and sexuality, depression, problematic personality traits, and certainly mental illness require specific attention, and probably ongoing personal, professional, and communal support to resolve. Problems in love and work, and issues around trust and intimacy in relationships in particular, can't be resolved simply by watching the moment-to-moment flow of thoughts, feelings, and sensations in the mind. Thirty years of watching students try this approach bear that out. Kornfield notes that many students leave ashrams or monasteries or meditation centers after years of devoted practice and find, with a great deal of confusion and discouragement, even disillusionment, that they still have not faced the core anxieties and conflicts that constrict them. (p. 45)

Engler (2006) points out that traditional Buddhist texts, while addressing the mental factors which define discrete states of consciousness do not, for example, focus upon what Western psychology would view as sadness, except as a kind of unpleasant feeling that might tinge other mental states. Further, Buddhist psychology does not address depression, mental illness, or psychiatric disorders as understood in the clinical traditions in the West. Even more importantly, there is no significant mention of the influence of personality, family, or interpersonal relationships in these texts, at least the way they are understood in the West.

Engler explains:

In the Theravada Buddhist meditation centers where I practiced in Asia, students typically do not present “psychological” problems to teachers. Why they don't is a complex issue. If you observe teachers working with their students, it is clear that they don't cue for personal issues or become involved in [onto p. 46]... the content of

students' experience. Their emphasis is exclusively on noting objects of the end of awareness simply in their arising and passing away. (pp. 45 – 46)

One of the concerns inherent in the notion that spiritual practice is capable of serving as a panacea for all mental suffering is that it prevents both teachers and practitioners from making use of other resources (Engler, 2006; Masters, 2010b). Another unfortunate result of this thinking is that students who are struggling are often led to believe that it is due to a lack of faith, dedication, or commitment to their practice that is the cause of the suffering in their lives. As a result, practitioners can become racked with guilt and shame, adding to whatever other difficulties they may be experiencing. Engler (2006) explains:

There is a second serious problem with this approach. Not everyone is capable or ready to devote themselves exclusively to spiritual practice, or to pursue it single-mindedly to its depth. If they try to force themselves, or are encouraged to by their teachers or fellow students, there is risk of serious disorganization, decompensation, regression, and loss of function. Most will simply give up, but may then carry the burden of shame and guilt for “failing.” Others will get discouraged, quit, and give up a practice and a community that could have been immensely helpful to them. (p. 46)

Engler (2006), along with many of the researchers and clinicians cited in this study, believe that psychological and spiritual approaches to growth and development can be undertaken in a complimentary way; they need not be at war. It is often noted that each of these great traditions explores a range of functioning that the other simply does not. Engler illustrates:

Buddhism assumes a relatively intact ego and structured sense of self and does not investigate the type and range of functioning, particularly the self-disorders and

narcissistic deficiencies, that we address in Western clinical practice. Psychodynamic psychology equates optimal functioning with the attainment of psychological selfhood and has no concept of the type and range of functioning and well-being that accompany the realization of the self's constructed nature. Hence my originally calling the integration of these perspectives a "full-spectrum" model. This "full-spectrum" view also makes it clear that enlightenment and the associated experience of no-self is neither a return to the child's pre-intellectual, pre-rational experience of immediacy and oneness, nor a regression to some oceanic state of primary narcissism as Freud (1930) and the early analysts (Alexander 1931) thought. But the notion of a "spectrum" still carries the developmental connotations that do not apply (p. 49)

There are many motivating factors which propel a person to explore spiritual or therapeutic work—some conscious, some unconscious, some adaptive, some maladaptive. Oftentimes, according to Engler (2006), the motivations which a person begins with will stay with them throughout their journey. It is important to consider these motives along with way, and to clarify what it is that is in fact fueling one's spiritual ambition.

Individuals inevitably begin practice, as they do therapy, with a mix of motives, some conscious, some unconscious, some adaptive, some maladaptive... One or more of these motives often continue to influence practice for a long time. It takes effort and courage and a willingness to look at one's motives before this gradually becomes apparent. Often it requires the guidance of a teacher or a therapist. Or it may take some disillusionment or disappointment in one's progress, or feeling stuck for a long time, or some painful event like a teacher's betrayal of trust, to wake up and force one to look and see. (p. 67)

One of the ways that Engler (2006) has come to understand the difference between meditation and therapeutic exploration is by noting how analytic inquiry is concerned with the contents of consciousness, while meditation with the ground of consciousness itself. In exploring this relationship, he has observed how

Mindfulness meditation differs from psychoanalytic inquiry in that the *contents* of consciousness—the specific representations of self and other and their configurations—are not attended to or analyzed. Instead, by direct attention to the *process* whereby all manifestations of self arise and pass away, are constructed and deconstructed, moment by moment, irrespective of content, mindfulness leads to insight into the nature of all representations of self and reality as constructions only and as ungraspable in any real or definitive sense. (p. 68)

Jeffrey Rubin (1996), a Buddhist-oriented clinician, sees tremendous value in both psychoanalysis and Buddhism, noting that neither provides a complete picture of human nature, transformation, and liberation. In his experience, both offer an important, yet incomplete perspective, and each neglects indispensable elements included in the other. For example

Buddhist models of health could teach psychoanalysis that there are possibilities for emotional well-being that far exceed the limits described by psychoanalytic models, which psychoanalysis could help Buddhists understand some of the unconscious interferences to meditation practice and the growth process. Buddhists could teach psychoanalysts about states of dereified, decommmodified, and non-self-centric subjectivity. Psychoanalysis could teach Buddhists about the recurrent, unconscious psychological conditioning and restrictive patterns of relating to others arising out of

one's past that shape and delimit human life. It could also elucidate the psychological dangers of neglecting human agency. (p. 8)

While recognizing the many benefits of a regular meditative practice, Rubin (1996) agrees with researchers such as Wilber and Engler that meditation “may attract individuals with self-disorders, by which I mean people who experience themselves as brittle, fragile, worthless, vulnerable, and prone to self-esteem fluctuations” (p. 47). For those practitioners who experience issues of this sort, Rubin argues that they “may confuse their experiences of identity diffusion and depersonalization with genuine spiritual realization” (p. 47). With these individuals, Rubin echoes Engler and Wilber's recommendation that such an individual supplement their meditation practice with traditional therapeutic work in order to shore up a shaky sense of self before pursuing additional meditative practice.

Further citing Engler, Rubin (1996) has observed how some come to spiritual practice “with self-disorders and pathology; that is, a fragility and disturbance in their sense of self, fluctuating and impaired self-esteem, a feeling of not being real, cohesive, or temporally continuous” (p. 166). As a result, these practitioners tend to “relate to their teachers in ways that are characteristic of their personalities, self-deficits, unconscious conflicts, patterns of relatedness with others, and modes of caring for or neglecting self” (p. 166). Some practitioners who are attracted to meditation come with powerful unresolved yearnings for acceptance and love from childhood, feeling bad about themselves. These individuals are naturally attracted to Eastern doctrines such as “no-self,” which fit like a glove for those who experience themselves as “empty, hollow, or unreal; as having no self” (p. 166). For Engler,

The doctrine of “no-self” not only resonates with a student's own experience of inner emptiness, lack of self-cohesion, and the absence of a sense of temporal continuity, it

can be an attempt to repair a vulnerable self through grandiose achievement. One “achieves” the summum bonum, Enlightenment, a state of perfection, invulnerability, and self-sufficiency. (p. 166)

In an integral model of spiritual development, attention must be given to personal, interpersonal, and transpersonal levels of experience. Historically, the great spiritual traditions have not emphasized relational work, at least not in the same way as is understood in the post-modern analytic traditions. When a person is caught in spiritual bypass, spirituality can be utilized to avoid relationship. Rubin (1996) explains:

One avoids fears and risks associated with involvement in relationships, dangers such as rejection, abandonment, engulfment, and suffocation, by remaining “detached” and uncommitted to anyone except the spiritual teacher, community, or practice...

Spiritual practice is sometimes is used to ward off grief and mourning as well as intimacy. Through meditation practice, one can quiet the mind, detach from disturbing emotions, and thereby momentarily obviate the need for experiencing or working through disturbing feelings. (pp. 166 – 167)

Further, Rubin (1996) has discovered many ways in which developmentally-oriented, Western psychological work can complement meditative practice. The analytic relationship itself can help to repair early developmental failures, providing a person with a “second chance” to work through important, albeit failed selfobject and attachment relationships. For students with these developmental shortcomings—for example, where there may only be an inchoate sense of self—contemplative practices which focus upon deconstructing the self can leave practitioners “directionless” while at the same time opening greater awareness and

tolerance of and nonattachment to thoughts, feelings, fantasies, and so forth (Rubin, 1996).

Illustrating from the life of one of his clients, Rubin notes that

Since it omits the crucial task of self-construction, Buddhism's model of working with self-experience was a necessary but incomplete way of healing the fault line in his personality. He needed self-creation and self-amplification as well as self-deconstruction. Since his life was haunted by absence, emptiness, and virtuality, not misplaced desires and attachments, he needed to build a new life based on his own relational and avocational interests and ideals, not simply detach from a bad one, one based on attachments to illusory notions of self and reality. Working through a self-void and building a meaningful life is very different from letting go of illusory conceptions of self. He thus needed psychoanalysis as well as meditation in order to work through his directionlessness and build an alternative life to the normotic world. (p. 182)

In short, Rubin (1996) argues that both psychoanalysis and Buddhism may be necessary for a particular client at a particular time. In his work with the client above, who he called "Albert," this was the case. In order to help Albert to keep his tenuous hope for a life that might feel more authentic and alive. Rubin utilized both systems together, in order to provide healing and transformation and multiple levels of experience. He summarizes as follows:

As I hope my work with Albert has suggested, psychoanalysis and Buddhism were *both* necessary to keep alive his tenuous hope for a life that might feel more authentic and alive. Psychoanalysis' illumination of the historical sources of his difficulties in living, such as the effects of unempathic parenting on self-development (cf. Kohut,

1971, 1977, 1984) and unconscious commitments to old and restrictive interpersonal ways of being (e.g. Fairbairn, 1952), helped Albert loosen the grip of his limiting past. Buddhism's elucidation of the sources of suffering in the present, such as his attachment to restrictive conceptions of self, also aided Albert in breaking free from an imprisoning life. Through his experience in analysis and meditation, Albert was able to relate to affect differently, become less self-critical, improve his self-care, learn new skills and pursue new avocations, and relate more authentically and sensitively to others. (p. 185)

One of Rubin's (1996) principle observations in understanding the relationship between developmental and contemplative work is expressed in his idea of "non-self-centric subjectivity" (p. 186). With this concept, Rubin suggests a way of viewing and exploring the nature of subjective experience (the aim of psychoanalysis) while simultaneously seeing into the inherent insubstantiality of a solid and continuous sense of self, as revealed in the Buddhist teachings on selflessness. He explains:

Buddhism's view of non-self-centric subjectivity tempers psychoanalysis' egocentricity and widens its moral purview. Psychoanalysis illuminates some of the deleterious psychic consequences of Buddhism's evading of subjectivity. Psychoanalysis teaches Buddhism that there is a hidden and pernicious cost to absolutizing its view of the fictionality of the self, especially a "return of the repressed" that may generate pain in its wake. (p. 186)

Referring again to his client Albert, Rubin shares the story of Albert's early life, where he grew up in an environment where it was as if he had no subjective existence; he felt completely invisible, with no voice and no impact. Albert came to be deeply attracted to the

Buddhist doctrine of no-self as it resonated very organically with his experience of self-nullification. While the realization of no-self is one of the most profoundly liberating experiences within the contemplative traditions, Rubin cautions practitioners to remain aware of how this class of teachings can be used defensively.

The self-evasion that Buddhism fostered for Albert was a defense against his own sense of nonbeing. Believing in the doctrine of no-self also rationalized away and artificially disavowed his sadness and grief about an unlived life. It is not that he didn't live or missed out on life; there is no subject to experience subjective existence.

Several years ago a patient of mine who was a student of Zen said to me:

“Psychoanalytic treatment helped me with *self*-realization, not *nonsel*f derealization.”

(p. 76)

Rubin (1996) argues that developmental and meditative conceptions of subjectivity would be enriched “if the understandings obtained from their different ways of investigating subjectivity were integrated into a more encompassing and inclusive framework” (p. 186). In other words, neither psychoanalytic nor Buddhist understandings of the self are able to get at the multiplicity that is the self on their own; by understanding the self and no-self dimensions of experience, practitioners and clinicians are able to work more skillfully with the manifestations of each, offering clients and students a fuller understanding of what it means to be human in all its dimensions. Rubin believes a revision is being called for, which encourages the analytic traditions to consider the role of spirituality and health, while at the same time a better understanding of “subjectivity, affective life, and historicity” in Buddhism. Again citing his work with Albert, Rubin unfolds this core idea:

Adopting such a complementary bifocal framework about self and nonself enabled Albert to recognize that states of self-centeredness and unselfconsciousness were both part of his attempts to live a full and meaningful life. The former was necessary to help him fixate the self and view it as a concrete, substantial entity. This helped him reflect on his life and conduct, delineate what he felt and valued, assess situations, formulate plans and goals and choose among potential courses of action. It helped him ultimately find an alternative to the suffocating normotic world of his parents. Sensitivity to states of non-self-consciousness enabled him to live less self-centeredly, more fluidly and gracefully. The view of the self as a process facilitated his appreciation of art, his capacity to listen to his students, play music, and experience love. (p. 186)

For Rubin (2004), psychoanalysis and spiritual traditions are both necessary for “the art of living.” Sometimes, practitioners will encounter psychological conflicts that impede their spiritual development. In such cases, therapeutic work may prove invaluable in helping to resolve psychological and developmental material that has yet to be metabolized. In Rubin’s experience, this sort of analytic resolution of emotional struggle can directly bring about a deepening in one’s spiritual practice; in fact, these two streams often work together.

Living in the present moment is a teaching espoused by many of the world’s wisdom traditions, as well as their contemporary offshoots. When a person worries excessively about the future or torments themselves about the past, they become “disconnected from the actual texture of their lives in the present” (Rubin, 2004, p. 74). It is by learning to keep one’s attention in the present that the habitual tendencies which are the cause of suffering are naturally liberated. Rubin (2004) cautions practitioners, however, about “glorifying” the

present moment in a way that dismisses the relative importance of both past and future. He explains:

A heightened capacity to reside in the moment can lessen these destructive tendencies. But glorifying the wisdom of the moment can become a way of avoiding earlier trauma or conflictual or terrifying developmental crossroads. Even blissful oceanic experiences do not solve ethical dilemmas or the challenges of growing up and becoming a unique individual. The spiritual quest can be a defense against embodied living, against tackling life's basic issues and everyday problems, including loss, intimacy, alienation, getting out of a bad relationship, confronting a stagnating career, or coping with one's mortality. (p. 74)

For Rubin (2004), a "psychoanalysis of the spirit" is one that remains aware of the ways the spiritual quest can be used defensively, as well as to its genuine transpersonal dimensions. Like any human experience, spirituality has multiple meanings and serves multiple functions "ranging from the adaptive and transformative to the defensive and psychopathological" (p. 74). Rubin explains:

Psychoanalytically informed reflections on spirituality could offer tools to deidealize spiritual experiences and elucidate pathologies and illusions of spirit. In working psychoanalytically with several Buddhists and students of yoga, a rabbi, numerous nondenominational spiritual seekers, and several spiritually inclined artists, I have observed a variety of pathologies of spirit including using the spiritual quest or spiritual experiences to inflate oneself, evade subjectivity, deny emotional losses, shield one from the painful vicissitudes of everyday experience, and neglect ethical responsibility. The spiritual path has allowed its devotees to engage in masochistic

surrender, schizoid detachment, and obsessional self-anesthetization, and to pathologically mourn traumatic experiences. (p. 74)

Like others in this study, Rubin (2004) makes use of phrases such as “pathologies of spirit” to point to the ways that spiritual belief and practice can be used defensively, in a way that involves avoidance, denial, or repression of “non-spiritual” aspects of a person’s life. Spiritual experiences, Rubin asserts, “can be used in the services of a variety of ends, ranging from the constructive to the defensive” (p. 75). For example, Rubin addresses how narcissism can infiltrate the spiritual journey:

Narcissism haunts our culture, generating self-inflation, ruthless self-centeredness, and intolerance and hard-heartedness toward those who suffer or are less fortunate. I have repeatedly observed a great deal of narcissism in people on the spiritual quest. While Buddhism offers a powerful critique of narcissism as well as strategies for addressing it, it may sometimes inadvertently foster rather than resolve self-disorders and egocentricity. (p. 75)

While authentic spiritual experience can create deeply transformative change in a person’s life, it is possible to idealize such experience in a way that encourages spiritual bypassing. Rubin (2004) shares the story of a client who had a series of “oneness and bliss” experiences as a result of his practice of meditation. In addition to bringing about a newly felt sense of freedom in his client’s life, his experiences also offered him an opportunity to avoid—rather confront and work with—excruciating sadness and pain over his recent divorce. Rubin explains:

[As] an experienced meditator, Ron had developed an unusual facility for cultivating states of deep focus and prolonged concentration. He said he felt peace, rather than

sorrow, while experiencing these nonordinary states of unity and bliss. While this immediately translated into a feeling of confidence and a detachment from his stressful emotions, he acknowledged that the underlying issues that contributed to his wife's decision to end their relationship, and his inability to cope with it, remained untouched. The feelings of fragmentation had recently escalated and Ron could no longer escape them by meditating. (p. 77)

In working with this client, Rubin (1996) discovered that the client's meditation practice was helping to manage his emotional life, which was important at the same as the client had no other emotional resources. As part of the therapeutic process, however, the client began to see how meditation was simultaneously serving to "anesthetize powerful feelings of loneliness and grief that unwittingly resulted in his avoiding and prolonging the necessary process of mourning and healing" (pp. 77 – 78). Throughout his clinical work, Rubin has seen the ways in which spiritual experience "can all too often be an unwitting form of pathological mourning," where traumatic experience of loss, abuse, or neglect becomes sealed off (p. 78).

In his work in the fields of meditation and psychoanalysis, Rubin has witnessed the many ways that the spiritual journey "can be recruited to enhance one's stature of self-esteem" (p. 78). Echoing the sentiments of Trungpa (2008), Rubin has observed how spirituality can provide another "badge of specialness. He cautions practitioners as to the consequences of dividing the world into "spiritual" and "non-spiritual" dimensions. Once this split occurs, ordinary, human life is automatically de-sacrilized. Rubin explains:

Many of us divide the world into the ordinary and The Extraordinary, the secular and The Sacred, the profane and The Holy. We take the first term in each binary opposition for granted, hardly noticing it. We treat the second one with reverence.

Once we divide the world into two in this way and then idealize one facet of life and neglect the other part we desanctify ordinary existence. We establish a special realm of experience—that often includes passion, carnality, afflictive emotions, interpersonal conflicts, and so forth—that is the true and only province of the spiritual. We imagine that this region is beyond or divorced from ordinary, mundane, everyday existence. Getting to this realm or having experiences associated with it (“spiritual” experiences) makes us feel we are part of something larger and elite justifies our existence. While Zen offers a counterpressure to this—emphasizing the importance of *being-in-the-world*, many spiritual seekers... are particularly prone to this sort of devaluing of the quotidian world, desanctifying everyday experience. But daily life does deserve our attention and our gratitude. We need to “sanctify the ordinary,” for it is a “treasure and a gift.” (p. 79)

While the value of spiritual experience is recognized almost universally by transpersonally-oriented researchers and clinicians, many caution against a spiritual life organized around having more and more “special” experiences. There is also the ordinary world and the endless opportunities it offers for growth, healing, and transformation; in this way it can come to be seen as far from ordinary. Commenting on the nature of spiritual experience and that of “ordinary” life, Rubin (2006) shares:

Such spiritual experiences, from my Winnicottian-inspired perspective, are not possessions we have/own or ends to which we strive or even facets of our personalities, but ever-present possibilities of being involving the intersection of self and the larger world. And we must embody spiritual insights in how we live, how we treat ourselves and others. Is our empathy and compassion deepening and expanding?

Are we becoming more connected to life? The sacred is all around us. We can experience it in our daily activities, at work, in our homes, and in our relationships, as well as in altered states of consciousness like those I depicted playing basketball. (p. 80)

Rubin (1996) argues for a rapprochement of psychoanalysis and spirituality, and reflects on the many ways they have been segregated historically. As a result of this split, each has come to believe that they have uniquely discovered the deepest truths about human experience. As a way of moving toward such rapprochement, Rubin argues for what he calls a “contemplative psychoanalysis,” one which “would appreciate the constructive as well as the pathological facets of spiritual experiences” (p. 81). For Rubin, it is important that these two wisdom traditions come together and learn to be more receptive toward the light that the other might shed on the art of living. He explains:

If it is antianalytic to treat spiritual experiences as inherently psychopathological, as the majority of psychoanalysts have done, it is unanalytic to take spiritual claims at face value, without inquiring into the complex and multidimensional meanings and functions they uniquely possess in the mind and heart of a particular person in psychoanalytic treatment. There needs to be a close encounter of a new kind between psychoanalysis and the spiritual quest, in which neither discipline is presumed to have unique access to the sovereign truth and they are neither segregated from each other nor assimilated into one another. Psychoanalytic imperialism emerges when it tries to conquer spiritual experiences; when it has a “nothing but” attitude toward them; when everything spiritual is explained by and reduced to psychoanalytic categories. But spiritual traditions need to avoid their own brand of intellectual (or

spiritual) imperialism in which a spiritual text or meditational practice is treated as if it is the final truth about reality. Psychoanalysis and the spiritual quest have different, although at times overlapping, concerns. If they are too separate and autonomous, then fruitful contact is precluded. No meaningful cross-pollination is possible when they are segregated and isolated. If they are too merged, then important differences are eclipsed. (pp. 81 – 82)

In an article in *The New York Times Magazine* (Brown, 2009), an accomplished Zen teacher is interviewed about his psychological work with Rubin, illustrating the dance between developmental and meditative approaches. After describing the trauma and abandonment suffered in his family of origin, an important question was raised about the role of Zen practice in his life: did it help him respond skillfully to the pain and alienation from his past, or did it somehow make the situation worse? Did his practice help him to confront his past and the emotional wounding which occurred, or did it allow him to avoid it? While the Zen teacher explained that his meditation practice helped “put him back together” and to overcome the split between body and mind, he was still unsure “what to do with [the] emotions and the self.” For Brown’s part, he reported that the Zen master had “sought to protect himself against the trauma of further abandonment *by pre-emptively abandoning himself*” [italics added]. “If he wasn’t there in the first place,” Brown reflected, “he wasn’t in a position to be cast away. The Zen concept of no-self was like a powerful form of immunity.” In sharing his experience with Rubin in therapy, the Zen teacher explains:

“The Zen experience of forgetting the self was very natural to me,” he told me last fall. “I had already been engaged in forgetting and abandoning the self in my childhood, which was filled with the fear of how unreal things seemed. But that forgetting was

pathological. I always had some deeper sense that I wasn't really there, that my life and my marriages didn't seem real. In therapy with Jeffrey I began to realize this feeling of invisibility wasn't just a peculiar experience but was maybe the central theme of my life. It was connected to my having 'ability' as a Zen student and to my being able to have a precocious enlightenment experience. In a sense it was as if Zen chose me rather than that I chose Zen."

One of the most charged and argued-about concepts in the entirety of transpersonal studies is that of the "ego," at once serving both as a critical developmental milestone, while also seen as the final hurdle which stands in the way of full spiritual realization. Over the last few decades, two different understandings of the term "ego" have emerged—one from the developmental, Western psychological perspective; and one from the Eastern-based, yogic and meditative traditions. Jack Engler (in Cohen, 2000) reports that the ego has a very positive connotation in the therapeutic traditions, "a collective designation for a whole set of important psychological functions." From thinking to feeling to reality testing, Engler describes a set of capacities which he argues are essential to human life. Further, it is within these areas of functioning that people develop deficits which must then be worked out in therapy. He clarifies:

In therapy, one thing you're trying to do is develop what's traditionally called "ego strength." As a psychologist, part of my effort is to help people develop capacities that may be underdeveloped or may have been derailed earlier in development or may have been compromised by subsequent trauma. So ego, in this sense, is a *positive* thing. That's the way I think of it in psychology.

A more spiritual, yogic, or meditative understanding of ego, however, has led to the ego being seen as the enemy of the aspirant. It is the force—or the separate self-sense—within a person that stands in the way of his or her union with God or realization of spiritual awakening or enlightenment. Engler (in Cohen, 2000) cautions practitioners against viewing ego in this way, as some sort of independently existing “alternate personality within me that is bad... that I have to do battle with, that I have to transcend.” He explains and offers his own understanding of the term from a more transpersonal perspective:

I think spiritual language reinforces a lot of dualistic thinking when we talk about ego that way—unless we're really careful in how we define it. Now instead of "self versus other" it's "self versus ego." And so the struggle just continues in another guise... If you ask me what I think ego is in a spiritual sense, I guess I would say it's our attempt to grasp ourselves. It's the myriad forms of self-grasping that are doomed to endless frustration and disappointment. I think that's the root of what ego is, and everything else follows from this, whether it's preoccupation with self-image or whether it's attempts at self-aggrandizement or whether it's experiencing self as separate and over/against others. The core of it seems to be this attempt to grasp the self and fix it. Or fixate it, that's a better word. And where does the self-grasping come from? I think it mostly comes out of fear, out of this core, chronic, anxious sense that we don't exist in the way we think we do.

When asked if he still stands behind his provocative statement that “you have to be somebody before you can be nobody,” Engler (in Cohen, 2000) explains that his thinking has evolved, though in a general way the statement still stands. He asserts that to plumb the depths of Buddhist mindfulness practice requires certain psychological capacities, or what the

psychoanalytic traditions refers to as certain basic "ego strengths." These ego strengths provide a stable, cohesive sense of self, and a structured enough identity from which to explore deeper spiritual realities. For example, one critical ego strength that is required for advanced meditative practice "is the capacity to tolerate aversive feelings and emotions without becoming undone by them—what in psychology is called 'affect tolerance.'" Engler (in Cohen, 2000) explains that he made the original statement in response to a movement he had witnessed in himself and others which involved an "attempt to use meditation practice to do an 'end run' around normal tasks of human development." This end run, of course, is none other than spiritual bypassing. Engler explains:

Thinking that spiritual practice alone can substitute for normal psychological development; that somehow by going deep in practice and getting enlightened, that's going to solve all the nagging neurotic problems that have continued to plague one. So, "You have to be somebody before you can be nobody" was also meant as a cautionary statement to pay attention to *all* basic tasks, not just spiritual ones.

Engler (in Cohen, 2000) describes how practitioners are able to avoid facing parts of themselves by focusing their attention exclusively on enlightenment and spiritual practice. That being said, Engler notes that while he original came to understand the relationship between psychological and spiritual work in terms of a linear developmental model that his understanding has evolved over the years. He sees the two streams as "much more interwoven" and no longer believes in a model which is so structured, where a sense of self must be developed first, and then seen through.

Engler (in Cohen, 2000) has observed a common belief if spiritual practitioners that engaging in psychotherapy will inevitably strengthen self-grasping or ego, thereby taking

them further away from their goals of egolessness, no-self, and spiritual awakening. What Engler has discovered, however, is that when therapy is successful and “done well” that it tends to have the opposite effect. He explains:

It doesn't bring you to the point of seeing through the inherent illusion of seeing yourself as a separate entity, and it doesn't bring you to the kind of total freedom that spiritual practice promises. That's clear. And it doesn't pretend to. But if it's done well and it's successful, I think it really does relativize the way you hold yourself. You don't hold yourself so tightly and you're not so wedded to concepts of who you are. It begins to loosen up all your fixed ideas of self and in that way can contribute to growth in spiritual practice also. So I don't see one as tightening the ego and the other as loosening it. I see them both working in the same direction. And I see it much more as an interweaving of personal work and spiritual work. It's just that therapy doesn't take it to the depth that spiritual practice does.

Many of the researchers cited in this study argue for the importance of working at personal *and* interpersonal dimensions of experience as part of a complete approach to human evolution and transformation. When a person avoids or bypasses either the personal or the interpersonal, essential aspects of what it means to be human remain unaddressed. In unpacking the dance between these two critical domains of inquiry, Engler (in Cohen, 2000) describes work at the personal level as that which is related to a person's own individual life history, their individual narrative, and whatever unfinished business they're still carrying. This level of inner work involved with personality and social functioning, relationship issues, and matters of work, family, and career. These personal-level issues inevitably arise in the context of contemplative practice, with each specific tradition relating to them in their own

way (if at all). Some traditions—for example Zen Buddhism—do not explicitly work with material of this sort. Engler argues that this is not indicative of a deficiency with Zen tradition; rather, it is simply not the goal of Zen to work at this level of experience. Ultimate spiritual goals, Engler contends, do not always involve explicit work with personality and personal functioning. Instead, they are focused upon liberation from the deep-rooted causes of suffering in the mind, e.g. fear, greed, anger, self-deception, shame, and doubt. Of course these causes do not just exist in the abstract, but are expressed through personality and personal history, “exert[ing] an influence at a level prior to their elaboration in individual behavior.” They are universal afflictions, not unique to any one particular individual. Engler explains:

But facing universal issues means facing personal and particular issues. As I've understood it in my own work and as I've seen it in clients who come to me for therapy as well as students in the meditation hall, it basically means, in the simplest possible way, facing whatever we haven't been able to face. Spiritual practice demands that we do that in one way, and personal work and therapy demand we do it in another. To the extent that anything hasn't been faced, it's going to continue to plague us and cause problems for ourselves and others.

Charles Tart (2010), one of the early pioneers in the humanistic and transpersonal psychology movements, urges practitioners to remain open to the ways that spiritual beliefs and practices can be used to create distance from human feelings. It is common to use spirituality in this way as spiritual practice often leads to a certain kind of peacefulness or felt sense of freedom, but repression of challenging material does not usually produce the longer-

term goals that most practitioners are seeking. In this way, the spiritual path can and does serve as a very effective defense mechanism. Tart describes how it is

easy to use spirituality as a way to not deal with your ordinary psychological problems. Now that doesn't mean, at the extreme, that you must be an absolutely, perfectly psychologically functioning person before you dare to spend a moment on anything spiritual. But I think it does mean that if you've got significant psychological problems, you've got to be real careful about not using spirituality to bypass them. It's commonly done but it doesn't work.

Like Wilber (2000, 2007, personal communication, February 15, 2013), Masters (2010b, personal communication, March 6, 2013) and others, Tart cautions those involved in the practice of meditation to remain aware of ways that it can, ironically, serve as a technique of distraction rather than one of mindfulness, thereby encouraging spiritual bypass. He explains:

You can do something to reduce the suffering. One way is some sort of distraction technique. Here's the pathological use of concentrative meditation. The situation bothers you. You concentrate so strongly on neutral sensations, like your breathing, you don't notice the situation at all. So it doesn't bother you... Your life situation is poor, getting worse. You can't get a job. You don't have any friends. You don't feel good about yourself. Concentrative meditation. Get into these abstracted states where you're beyond any kind of suffering. Ahh!... You come back out of a meditative state. All these things that make you suffer are still there. Damn! Pee quickly, have a bite to eat, and go back into meditation again. And maybe, if you're lucky, you can spend your whole life meditating. Maybe you can join a monastery or a nunnery or an

ashram, or somebody else will take care of all the physical stuff and you get to spend all your time meditating; distracting yourself. So in that sense, meditation can be a distraction, a spiritual bypass.

Rather than distracting a person from what bothers them—even through the use of meditative or other contemplative practice—Tart (2010) encourages practitioners to explore the various techniques which have arisen out of Western-based psychotherapy. Having developed an understanding of psychopathology, these approaches can complement meditation in providing a variety of skillful means by which practitioners can come to work with whatever arises in their experience. Tart reminds practitioners and clinicians alike that all of the defense mechanisms—repression, sublimation, rationalization, and so forth—are by nature tools to avoid the direct experience of suffering and discomfort. When a person engages with these defenses, however, including the defense of spiritual bypass, the core problems are not solved. Through the use of defense mechanisms, a person might be able to better manage their suffering, or even generate temporary joy and happiness, but they are not able to solve the root core of the problem.

Jungian analyst Lionel Corbett (2011) cautions practitioners about the many ways that a person can use spiritual teachings and techniques “to avoid psychological difficulties and everyday problems of living” (p. 101). Whether a person goes off to live in a monastery to avoid or contain a sexual problem or suppresses anger because it is not spiritual to become angry, there are a variety of ways through which spiritual belief can be used to avoid unresolved emotions and feelings. Corbett describes how

[n]onattachment may conceal emotional withdrawal and lack of the capacity for intimacy, while “letting go” or forgiveness may be a disguise for masochistic

submission. Some religious people are intolerant of their own neediness or selfishness, which they interpret as moral or spiritual failures. To deny these feelings, they become compulsive helpers of other people. They rationalize their self-sacrifice as a spiritual obligation, often to the extent that they ignore their own legitimate needs. For others, spiritual practice is used narcissistically, to enhance the self of self, to allow one to feel superior to those who do not practice. In other words, the spiritual search has unconscious motivations, and our spirituality may actually be a disguised container for our emotional difficulties. In therapy, this situation can be dealt with the way we deal with any other defensive operation: tactfully and sensitively, not too early or too bluntly. The therapist has to wait until the self-selfobject tie is secure enough to address the defense. (pp. 101 – 102)

Spiritual Bypassing and the Movement of Transcendence

It was noted earlier that those spiritual approaches which encourage transcendence of personal limitations are ripe for the expression of spiritual bypassing. While most genuine paths of spiritual transformation involve transcending and moving beyond habitual, conditioned, and limited perception, “unhealthy” transcendence is a hallmark of spiritual bypassing (Caplan, 2009; Masters, 2010a, 2010b). The term “premature transcendence” describes the process whereby a practitioner attempts to transcend or move beyond a limitation, obstacle, or unpleasant experience before such experience has been fully met, digested, metabolized, and integrated into the entirety of the self-structure (Masters, 2010b; Welwood, 2002; Whitfield, 2003). Charles Whitfield, a medical doctor and psychotherapist specializing in trauma and recovery speaks of this process of “premature transcendence” as synonymous with spiritual bypassing. He (2003) explains that

[premature transcendence] can occur in many situations, such as participating in cults, born-again experiences, guru addiction, by using all sorts of methods and jumping too fast into advanced spiritual techniques and paths. In short, even otherwise authentic spiritual experiences can at times distract us from living as our True Self. Spiritual seeking and practice can itself at times become a trap. Being a successful human being requires a delicate balance and an integration of all our levels of consciousness, awareness, or being. These include the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. (p. 119)

Michael Dubois, in his description of “the pitfalls on the path,” describes premature transcendence as “high level denial” on the spiritual journey. Further, it is the avoidance “... of painful psychological issues by immersing oneself in a rigorous spiritual practice, or focusing on experiences of transcendence within the Kundalini phenomena to the exclusion of processing trauma from the past.”

Psychotherapist and author Jacquelyn Small (2003) cautions against spiritual paths that suggest a split between being human and being divine, implying that to be spiritual a person must “stamp out their humanness.” As a consequence of this type of approach, in the face of natural human desires and needs, practitioners can be shamed in their humanity. Small observes that many look to spirituality to provide a way to rise above the challenges inherent in living; they are looking to spiritual teachings to take away their pain. she explains:

Our unresolved needs and fears trick us into false beliefs that actually lead to more suffering. Some believe being spiritual means they must always be positive. This is inauthentic. Others, that their particular path to Spirit is the only path. A needy ego

trapped in its wounds is how the shadow dances in all relationships... We've seen that a premature transcendence is no transcendence at all, and will eventually fail us. (p. 7)

In response to the movement of premature transcendence, Masters (2010b) guides students and clients to develop an embodied intimacy with all aspects of self-experience. He sees transcendence as a process which occurs naturally as practitioners come to know in a deeply intimate way that which is moving within them. If a practitioner attempts to transcend difficult material too quickly, it is split off from awareness, and relegated into the shadow, only to surface unconsciously throughout the practitioner's life. It may appear that the undesirable material has been transcended and left behind when in actuality it has only been placed outside conscious awareness. Masters elucidates:

When transcendence of our personal history takes precedence over intimacy with our personal history, spiritual bypassing is inevitable. To not be intimate with our past—to not be deeply and thoroughly acquainted with our conditioning and its originating factors—keeps it undigested and unintegrated and therefore very much present, regardless of our apparent capacity for rising above it. Instead of trying to get beyond our personal history, we need to learn to relate to it with as much clarity and compassion as possible, so that it serves rather than obstructs our healing and awakening. This also means relating in a similar fashion to our tendency to spiritually bypass, casting a lucid, caring eye upon the part of us who buys into it. (p. 12)

“True spirituality is not a high, not a rush, not an altered state,” Masters (2010b, p. 3) asserts, and “will always bring things to the surface that we have long disowned or suppressed.” In order to cultivate and deepen awareness of the movement of spiritual bypass, practitioners are counseled to stay vigilant to the specific ways they sidestep their pain,

especially when doing so in the name of spirituality. Working with spiritual bypassing requires a commitment to turn directly into those very thoughts, feelings, and emotions that have been avoided for so long, deemed “unspiritual,” or just too painful to explore. As practitioners learn to become more aware of challenging material as it arises in the here and now, they can then make a choice to set it aside, or to become more intimate with it. When caught in spiritual bypass, there is a tendency to prematurely transcend unwanted somatic, psychological, and emotional content and to distance oneself from it. This distancing can be employed in a variety of ways, through an assortment of defense mechanisms, including the use of spiritual techniques. While on the surface, spiritual practices such as mindfulness, meditation, and “remaining as the witness” can provide practitioners with important understandings about the ultimate nature of thought, feeling, and emotion, it must be ensured that these practices do not become yet another way to remain distant from difficult or otherwise unwanted experience. It is important that those engaging in meditative practices do not do so in a way which leads to dissociation with challenging material, but rather a movement to its core, “facing and entering and getting intimate with whatever is there, however scary or traumatic or sad or raw” (Masters, 2010b, p. 4).

When a practitioner is able to stay with whatever arises in their immediate experience, despite its intensity and even disturbing qualities, they are practicing what Masters (2010b) refers to as “healthy” transcendence. In order to remain vigilant to the many faces of spiritual bypassing, it is important for practitioners to learn to skillfully discern between healthy and unhealthy transcendence. When we “transcend” something, contends Masters (2010), we “go beyond it to the point of ceasing to identify with it, so that it becomes an object of our awareness” (p. 29). In the process of healthy transcendence, “what’s been transcended is not

excluded from our being... but rather is ‘repositioned’ and related to in ways that serve our well-being” (p. 29). When transcendence is unhealthy, on the other hand, that which has been transcended is *excluded* or shut out of our being, split off from the totality of awareness, resulting in “escapism and disconnection” (p. 29).

For example, if a practitioner makes use of spiritual practice to help them rise above certain challenging aspects of life, the mere presence of “impure” thoughts, difficult emotions, or painful feelings will present a dilemma. Instead of turning toward these difficulties and unintegrated aspects of the self, there can be a tendency to rise up, “floating above our hurt, disconnecting from it to the point of barely feeling it, while conceiving of our flight as a spiritual and legitimate going-beyond” (Masters, 2010b, p. 30). Many spiritual techniques and methodologies unknowingly encourage this sort of ascension into “higher” states of consciousness, leaving all that is “lower” behind in the shadow, potentially bypassing an opportunity for deeper work. Masters clarifies (2010b):

Descending into our darker elements may be construed as a “downer” or a slippage, a failure, a dropping into the “lower.” We tend to either pathologize down-ness (especially when it shows up as negativity, fear, depression, shame or contraction) or keep it at a considerable distance, as if it is just some sort of noxious or unwholesome substance. To those of us enmeshed in spiritual bypassing, “up” almost always represents expansion and freedom and positivity—the “higher”—and “down” is contraction and entrapment and negativity—the “lower.” (p. 30)

While the spiritual journey offers the opportunity for practitioners to experience “positive” and highly-desired qualities such as light, love, peace, and bliss, it is also through a direct

encounter with the darker aspects of human nature that an integral transformation is revealed.

In the words of Carl Jung (1983):

Filling the conscious mind with ideal conceptions is a characteristic of Western theosophy, but not the confrontation with the Shadow and the world of darkness. One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious. The latter procedure, however, is disagreeable and therefore not popular. (p. 265)

Far from being a distraction on the path, learning to explore the “darker” or “lesser” qualities of oneself opens a practitioner to the totality of what they are, and provides an important opportunity for integration. Many of the researchers cited in this study are united in their assertion that one of the primary ways of cutting through the problematic expressions of spiritual bypassing is through the willingness to touch and create a home for those parts of oneself which have been deemed unwanted and unworthy. For example, Masters (2010b) encourages his clients and students to get

more intimate with [their] “lower” qualities—all those things that we may think we should be transcending—is not a particularly popular topic for those of us enamored of spiritual bypassing. In fact, it’s such a downer that it’s usually only handled with spiritual tongs, lifted and dropped into sterilized vats brimming with affirmations, meditational tranquility, and other uplifting strategies, as if there’s nothing to be done with the “lower” other than converting it to something “higher.” (p. 31)

For many spiritual seekers, those darker aspects of being—the many ways the spiritual superego is let down in the face of imperfections and less-than-enlightened thoughts, feelings, and behaviors—are turned from and set aside, deemed a distraction and obstacle on the quest

for spiritual awakening and transformation. This setting aside, of course, is yet another manifestation of spiritual bypassing—and another missed opportunity to excavate the gold that exists within the shadows. Masters (2010b) reminds practitioners that it is within the shadow itself “where so much of our genuine growth takes root, waiting for our participatory recognition of its value. Through aligning ourselves with such recognition, meeting and embracing what we have turned away from in ourselves, we make room for real transformation” (p. 32).

Further discerning between healthy and unhealthy forms of transcendence, Masters (2010b) addresses the importance of a close intimacy with whatever arises in a person’s awareness, while not getting too close where it is fused or identified with, thus losing the larger perspective of their transpersonal identity as awareness itself. When caught in spiritual bypass, practitioners fail to realize that transcendence does not equate with fleeing from experience, or moving beyond it in a way that excludes it entirely. Through a “radical inclusion” of what is being transcended, a practitioner can move beyond limitation while not dissociating or denying parts of themselves. Using an example of anger and reactivity, Masters illustrates:

For example, if we are reactively angry, right at the edge of hostility, we can step back from it, almost as if engaging in dialogue with that angry aspect of ourself. We do not exclude that angry “I” but are sufficiently expansive now to include it without letting it overcome us. We are both apart from that angry “I” and connected to it. We have not fled it, but have rooted ourselves in a perspective that allows us to see our anger clearly and to work with it more cleanly. (p.33)

The process of healthy transcendence, an essential dimension of both psychological and spiritual work, enables the practitioner to move beyond conditioned ways of perceiving and interacting with self and others, while at the same time guarding against an unhealthy distance from experience through avoidance and disassociation. The type of detachment that characterizes healthy transcendence is not at all dissociative, keeping us close enough to whatever is being transcended to know it well and just far enough away to be able to see it clearly, to bring it into lucid focus. By contrast, spiritual bypassing keeps us so removed that we are unable to cultivate any significant intimacy with our experience. For various reasons (likely rooted in our early years), we may have a preference for such distancing, but sooner or later, the need or ability to maintain that distance usually lessens, and we come into closer proximity with what we have avoided. (Masters, 2010b, p. 34)

In response to the arising of difficult material, practitioners can become discouraged and dismayed at their progress, even shaming themselves in response to the mere presence of certain “unspiritual” thoughts, feelings, or emotions. As Masters (2010b) clarifies, the process of transcendence does not necessarily eliminate the appearance of challenging feelings and emotions. When such material is transcended in a healthy way, however, it becomes “energetically repositioned” within the totality of experience, where it can be integrated rather than overly identified with. Further elucidating this process of reintegration, Masters explains:

What was subject is now object; before, we were acting and speaking as if we were it, and now we are aware *of* it. That is, we have gone beyond it without losing touch with or excluding it from ourselves. By bringing some caring into this process, some love, we achieve intimacy with that quality in us. Thus, we do not simply detach from

an emotion like fear but remain lucidly engaged with it. Holding our fear (and our fearful self) with both spaciousness and compassion serves us well. (p. 34)

Ken Wilber (2001a) describes the process of healthy transcendence as one which inevitably involves *inclusion* as part of the transformational journey. In the process which he describes as “transcend and include,” a practitioner is able to avoid the type of unhealthy transcendence which inevitably accompanies the movement of spiritual bypassing, where aspects of self-experience are shut out and repressed. Wilber explains:

As the higher stages of consciousness emerge and develop, they themselves include the basic components of the earlier worldview, then add their own new and more differentiated perceptions. They transcend and include. Because they are more inclusive, they are more adequate... Wherever there is the possibility of *transcendence*, there is, by the very same token, the possibility of *repression*. The higher might not just transcend and include, it might transcend and repress, exclude, alienate, dissociate. (pp. 98 – 99)

When the process of transcendence is healthy, Masters (2010b) asserts, that which a person has transcended—be it an outmoded cognition, inaccurate perception, or maladaptive self-concept—is not excluded in any wholesale sort of way, “any more than clouds are excluded from the sky” (p. 29). Rather, it is “repositioned” and related to afresh in ways that serve development and integration. When transcendence is unhealthy, however, what has been transcended becomes excluded from the totality of self-experience, resulting in escapism and disconnection. Healthy transcendence, in the view of both Wilber (2001a) and Masters (2010a, 2010b) involves an “integral embrace” of that which has been transcended. An unhealthy relationship with transcendence, on the other hand, avoids that which has been

transcended, excluding it from awareness. It is through the manifestation of spiritual bypassing, then, that a spiritual virtue is made out of rising above that which has been deemed lower or darker, a “pre-mature” version of transcendence which is, in reality, what Masters (2010b) refers to as “dissociation disguised in holy drag” (p. 29).

Masters (2010a) describes a number of clients he has encountered in psychotherapy who have become “lost in spiritual practice” to the degree that they’ve “risen above everything,” as a result having become dissociated. The first step in working with such clients, Masters has discovered, is to help them to re-embodiment, guiding them into a somatically-grounded awareness of the movement of feeling and emotion. As they develop a greater intimacy with the entirety of who they are, along with a real grounding in their bodies, they can then continue with spiritual practice in a way where they do not just space out and dissociate.

Exploring the subtleties of “transcending” unwanted aspects of being, Adyashanti (2009) believes it is critical to inquire into the commonly held idea that spiritual realization refers to a condition of complete happiness at all times, with feelings of continuous bliss and joy, and a seamless experience of freedom in the face of even the most challenging situations. Addressing the importance of facing even those most unwanted or “unspiritual” aspects of experience, Adyashanti cautions those who

believe the misperception that enlightenment is only about happiness, bliss, and freedom ... [they} will be motivated to transcend or escape those areas of life that feel less than fully functional. Sooner or later, as we become more awake, we find that there is more and more pressure to encounter and deal with those areas of our lives that we have been avoiding, where we are less than fully conscious. (p. 76)

For Adyashanti, the discovery of spiritual awakening does not involve a mere transcendence of life, but a movement all the way *into* it. Like Masters' (2010b) emphasis on intimacy over transcendence, Adyashanti contends that spiritual growth does not usually occur as a smooth trajectory, into a safe haven where a person is never bothered again by the arising of "less-than-spiritual" thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Rather, spiritual development requires that practitioners come out of hiding and into a state of being "in which [they] find the capacity to deal with [their] lives as they actually are" (p. 79). The process of "coming out of hiding" requires practitioners to come face to face with all those areas of their lives that have previously been avoided, including those parts which have been avoided through involvement with spirituality. By so doing, a person very directly begins to counter the problematic effects of spiritual bypassing.

Several researchers cited in this study have argued that spiritual bypass is active in much greater frequency than is often believed (Caplan, 2009; Cashwell, Bentley, and Yarborough, 2007; Masters, 2010b; Neale, 2012; Welwood, 2002). An important area of exploration in understanding the dynamics of spiritual bypass involves an inquiry into the reasons why a particular person would utilize spiritual teachings to avoid aspects of their experience. In other words, what is the cause of spiritual bypassing; why does it happen? And why is it so common? While the reasons for spiritual bypass are many, one characteristic that ties them together is that they are all ways of avoiding pain, of defending against all that is unwanted. In this way, spiritual bypassing may be seen as one of many defense mechanisms a person utilizes to shield themselves from increasing anxiety and psychic disturbance (Wilber, personal communication, 2013). For Masters (2010b), the essential reason any given practitioner engages in spiritual bypass is to avoid pain. He explains:

Pain comes with life, closely accompanied by our “solutions” to it, most of which are all about getting away from it, whether through alcoholic, narcotic, erotic, intellectual, material, egoistical, or spiritual means. The fact that these “solutions,” despite their analgesic/ anesthetic capacity, only end up catalyzing more pain usually does little to stop us from pursuing them. (p. 51)

Masters (2010b) argues that it is through a direct meeting with pain—confronting and coming into relationship with the “dragon which is guarding the treasure”—that a practitioner is able to cut through the habitual movement of spiritual bypassing, opening themselves to a more mature relationship with the spiritual journey. In turning toward and

becoming intimate with our pain, we cut through suffering—and by suffering, I mean the dramatization of pain—realizing not only that if we really want the treasure we will have to face the dragon, but also that our encounter with the dragon ensures that we will be ready or sufficiently mature to truly appreciate and make good use of the treasure. As such, the dragon is not blocking our path; it is an essential part of the path. (pp. 51 – 52)

In order to become more aware of the dynamics of spiritual bypassing, practitioners and clinicians must learn to carefully observe the ways they and their clients subtly turn from pain, making use of spiritual teachings, beliefs, and practices to avoid that which is unwanted within. Turning toward pain is far from masochistic, as convention might suggest, but rather the expression of a genuine love and care of the entirety of who we and our clients are.

Masters (2010b) explains:

Turning toward our pain is an act of radical caring—and not just caring for ourselves – because in doing so we cease to fuel our avoidance and those addictive behaviors

we have used to keep ourselves removed from pain. In turning toward our pain, we also, however indirectly, turn toward others' pain, both on the personal and collective level, and so our compassion for others deepens and widens. Turning toward our pain is about bringing into our heart all that we have rejected, ostracized, disowned, neglected, bypassed, shunned, excommunicated, or otherwise deemed as unworthy in ourselves. Our heart has room for it all. (p. 53)

When teachers and clinicians are not able to move toward and touch their own pain, not only will their growth, healing, and development be thwarted, but they will also be unable to be fully with the pain of their students and clients. If they cannot be intimate with their own pain, they will not be able to empathically attune to the discomfort and darkness of another. Masters clarifies:

We may find ourselves very uncomfortable with the presence of others' pain, especially emotional pain, because it resonates, however quietly, with our own submerged pain, pulling it closer to the surface. When we are caught up in spiritual bypassing, our reluctance to acknowledge and feel our own pain, keeps us standing apart from the pain of others. (pp. 53 – 54)

One of the core foundations of spiritual bypassing is the belief that involvement with spiritual teachings and practices will solve all of life's problems, including the resolution of long-ingrained psychological pain and wounding. Auman (2010) argues that some very well-meaning spiritual teachings can encourage a deficient understanding that by somehow focusing only on the positive that growth, healing, and development will flourish. She explains:

You cannot make progress on the spiritual path if you're ignoring your pain. Pain, in fact, is an indication of where you need to grow—by pretending we're happy all the time, we miss the lessons our suffering and humanity are trying to teach us... When we have unmet needs, they will clamor for our attention and divert us from what we want to be our path. Hence, we end up battling addictions, psychological issues, and not living our right life, rather than making the spiritual progress we hoped. Failing to discriminate between pseudo-spirituality and true inner transformation, we can get lost for years or life times.

Not all manifestations of spiritual bypassing involve an overt attempt to avoid pain; many meditative practices, for example, provide an opportunity for a practitioner to meet directly all variety of thoughts, feelings, and emotions. While practices such as mindfulness and other forms of meditation do not inherently encourage spiritual bypassing, Wilber (personal communication, 2013; 2007), Masters (2010a, 2010b), and Kornfield (1993b) caution against becoming an overly passive or impersonal observer, as well as describe the ways in which meditation can lead to an excessive sense of detachment or withdrawal. If the practice of meditation is used to distance oneself from what is arising within immediate experience—or as a way to stand apart from it or to dissociate from it—then it can become yet another vehicle for the expression of spiritual bypassing. Masters (2010b) explains:

We might find a sense of reassuring comfort in doing such practices, which make a spiritual virtue out of standing part from what is occurring, safely removed from any significantly close contact. Of course, this is not the fault of the practice but of how it is being employed and perhaps taught. As meditators, we may assume we are sitting with our pain—observing it moment-to-moment—when we in fact may just be

sitting *on* it, using our witnessing capacity to keep it at a distance rather than becoming more intimate with it. (p. 54)

Masters (2010b) clarifies that the use of spiritual practice to ease pain or to reduce its intensity is not indicative of spiritual bypassing, *per se*, if it is not the primary purpose of the practice. As alluded to earlier in this study, many researchers and clinicians have noted the innate tendency in the human being to move away from pain; this in and of itself need not become problematic. By allowing a practitioner to relax, expand, and soften—providing a more spacious environment in which to explore experience in all its dimensions—techniques which lessen pain can be used in service of a greater end. What many meditators come to discover, Masters observes, is that by becoming more embodied and intimate with pain, the result may be less suffering overall. He explains:

Often when we say we are in pain, we are not really in pain, but only close to it than we would like. We are then in fact still outside it, still removed from it, still keeping our distance. By consciously and compassionately entering into our pain and cultivating intimacy with it, we begin to find some real freedom from our suffering. Our hurt may remain, but our relationship to it will have changed to the point where it's no longer such a problem to us, and in fact may even become a doorway into
What Really Matters. (p. 55)

In order to cut through spiritual bypassing, a person must be willing to tolerate a significant degree of discomfort, anxiety, and vulnerability; such tolerance is required in order to turn “toward the painful, disfigured, ostracized, unwanted, or otherwise disowned aspects of ourselves” and to cultivate as much intimacy and awareness as possible with them (Masters, 2010b, p. 13). As a practitioner becomes more “comfortable with our discomfort,” Masters

asserts, “[they] can see and feel what first drove [them] into spiritual bypassing” (p. 14). Therefore, the primary remedy to spiritual bypassing is a fearless commitment to stay with direct, immediate, embodied experience as it is, resisting the habitual tendency to turn away. “As long as we are consciously and skillfully turning toward our pain and difficulties, staying close enough to them to work with them effectively,” Masters explains, “we will be less easily seduced by the desire to sedate ourselves (p. 14). As a practitioner learns to stay with direct experience, including that which is deeply painful and uncomfortable, they do so knowing that it might never “feel good.” But if a person truly desires to heal, they come to see that “the only way out is through,” and that their wounds, painful emotions, and challenging feelings can be met as allies on the path, as paradoxical as that may seem.

The tantric traditions—exemplified by a number of the researchers and clinicians in this study (see, for example, Caplan, 2009; Tift, 2011a, 2011b; Trungpa, 2005, 2008; Wegela, 2010; Welwood, 2002, 2010, 2011)—state unequivocally that there isn’t any such thing as a “negative emotion.” Seen from a tantric perspective, *any* arising phenomenon, when deeply and directly experienced as it is, reveals itself to be none other than an intelligent and creative energetic expression. This discovery is not something that can be arrived at conceptually, as the traditions caution, but must be realized experientially, in the depths of the body, heart, and mind. While these traditions recognize that certain emotions, when not fully understood, can lead to profound confusion, interpersonal conflict, and suffering, it is not the mere presence of the energetic movement called “emotion” that is problematic in and of itself. Sharing his observations in this area, Masters (2010b) explains that while emotions at their core are neither negative nor positive, there are, however, “negative things that we *do* with our emotions” (pg. 15). Hatred, for example, an emotion that is far from welcome in most

spiritual communities, is not really an emotion, but rather something that a person *does* with emotion, how it is conveyed (Masters, 2010b). When a practitioner learns to work with emotional energies in a skillful way, staying with the intensity of the experience, neither repressing nor acting it out, emotion is revealed as an important doorway to exploring the self at the deepest levels. For example, working directly with the energy that is labeled “hatred,” in an open and curious manner, not shutting it out and not identifying with it, creates an environment which results in the practitioner being “far more capable of real forgiveness than those who keep their hatred locked in or try to rise above it prematurely, leaving a considerable woundedness unhealed beneath their forced equanimity” (Masters, 2010b, p. 17).

The Importance of Psychological *and* Spiritual Work: Developmental and Contemplative Approaches

In contemporary psychospiritual literature, researchers and clinicians have differentiated between those approaches which focus on the personal and interpersonal dimensions of human experience—working directly with early childhood wounding, unprocessed painful emotions, attachment trauma, and challenges with intimacy and relationships—and those focusing upon the transpersonal domains, exploring a person’s larger identity as Spirit, Self, or God (Almaas, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2009, 2012; Brach, 2011; Caplan, 1999, 2009; Cashwell, Bentley, and Yarborough, 2007; Cashwell, Myers, and Shurts, 2004; Cashwell and Young, 2005; Cortright, 1997; Engler, 2003, 2006; Epstein, 1999, 2004, 2008; Forman, 2010; Germer and Siegel, 2012; Germer, Siegel, and Fulton, 2005; Gleig, 2012; Grof, 1988; Ingersoll and Zeitler, 2012; Kaklauskas, Nimanheminda, Hoffman, and Jack, 2008; Kornfield, 1993a, 1993b; Kornfield and Siegel, 2009; Masters, 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2012; May, 2005; Neale, 2012; Safran, 2003; Siegel, 2010; Tift, 2011a, 2011b;

Trungpa, 2005; Vaughan, 2005; Wegela, 1994, 1996, 2010; Welwood, 1984, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2007, 2010, 2011, 2012; White, 2011; Wilber, 1993, 1997, 2000a, 200b, 2001a, 2001b, 2007, 2012; Wilber, Engler, and Brown, 1986; Wilson and DuFrene, 2011). The former approaches are primarily associated with the fields of Western psychology and psychotherapy, while those focusing upon the supra-personal (or “transpersonal” or “spiritual” dimensions) are most directly addressed by meditative-oriented contemplative traditions. While both areas of inquiry are concerned with the relief of human suffering, each offers unique theories, perspectives, and methodologies for the catalyzing of personal growth, psychoemotional healing, and spiritual transformation. The underlying claim made by integral or transpersonally-oriented theorists and clinicians is that the problematic effects of spiritual bypassing are best ameliorated by an approach which includes both psychological *and* spiritual work, which addresses both developmental *and* contemplative dimensions of human experience.

While an in-depth exploration of the subtleties of psychological and spiritual approaches is beyond the scope of this study, it is important to touch on these two perspectives, especially as they relate to the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing. Psychologists, psychotherapists, and spiritual teachers have suggested that the causes of suffering, in all of its many manifestations, can be isolated and identified—and thus explored, illumined, and transformed through skillful awareness, commitment, and application. Each system of psychotherapy (whether cognitive, behavioral, psychodynamic, humanistic, feminist, etc.)—as well as the various contemplative traditions—offers theoretical bases from which to understand and work with suffering, as well as a series of applied injunctions, in the forms of exercises, practices, or other experiential vehicles through which a person may

change and transform the way they perceive self and reality. It is here that we start to see some divergence between the two approaches. In an ideal world, a proficient therapist or spiritual teacher would work skillfully with these divergences in creative and effective ways, offering clients and students a truly integral pathway to personal growth, psycho-emotional healing, and spiritual awakening. While some theorists believe the two approaches to be essentially non-different (Almaas, 2009, 2012), a “dance of polarities” (Duchane and Katz, n.d.), or even ultimately “unresolvable” (Tift, 2011a, 2011b), most trained in both psychological and spiritual methodologies believe they may be implemented in a way that honors the particular gifts of each, working together to relief suffering in the most skillful, intelligent, creative, and effective ways.

The view of contemporary psychotherapy is that suffering arises out of unresolved issues from a client’s early history, as a result of unmetabolized, primarily unconscious somatic, cognitive, and affective material (Tift, 2011a). Moreover, it is in the understanding and organization of this early experience, much of which was overwhelming to the client’s developing brain and nervous system, that the client comes to organize his or her experience in ways that lead to the experience of suffering (Bowlby, 1998; Buirski and Haglund, 2009; Gabbard, 2010; Mitchell, 1995; Shedler, 2006, 2010; Siegel, 2001; Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood, 2000; Summers and Barber, 2009; Tift, 2011a; Wallin, 2007). Consequently, it is through “the illumination, unfolding, and transformation” of the way a person organizes and makes meaning of their experience that they are able to experience less distress, more freedom, greater satisfaction, and deeper fulfillment (Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood, 2000). Citing Orange, Atwood, and Stolorow (2001), Buirski (2005) further elucidates the therapeutic view:

Our words of affective experience become subjectively organized into patterns. The patterns or organizing principles may be described as the emotional conclusions that a person derives from lifelong experiences in their emotional environment, particularly those experiences in the early relationships with primary caregivers. (p. 112)

Buirski further describes the healing, change, and transformation possible in psychotherapy as “a process of supplanting old organizing principles with new ones that are formed in the context of an attuned selfobject relationship with the therapist” (p. 112). Citing Orange (1995/2005), Buirski asserts that “the intersubjective field formed by the therapeutic pair provides a developmental second chance by exploring, identifying, and articulating the person’s subjective world of experience within the safety of an attuned selfobject relationship” (p. 112).

In contrast, a contemplative approach to reducing suffering and increasing freedom focuses less upon *what* is/was experienced—whether earlier in a person’s family of origin or at any other time—and more upon *how* a person relates to whatever content arises within immediate experience (Almaas, 2009; Brach, 2011; Chodron, 2005, 2012; Fenner, 2007; Foster, 2012; Germer and Siegel, 2012; Norbu, 2003; Reynolds, 2010; Tift, 2011a, 2011b, Trungpa, 2005; Wegela, 2010). The contemplative approaches—especially those which express through a nondual perspective—do not deny the relative importance of positive, conventional experience such as good health, having an adequate amount of money, workable interpersonal relationships, and the experience of constructive emotions such as joy, happiness, and an overall sense of well being. Their fundamental view, however, is that it is

how a person relates to *any* experience that is more impactful on their state of mind and quality of life.

In the words of Chogyam Trungpa (2005), “traditional Buddhist psychology emphasizes the importance of direct experience in psychological work. If one relies on theory alone, then something basic is lost” (p. 3). The process of psychological discovery is a way of making friends with oneself, according to the contemplative view, encouraging *maitri* (a warm, genuine, nonjudgmental love and kindness) and an overall environment of “non-aggression” (Chodron, 2002, 2004; Tift, 2011a; Wegela, 1994, 1996, 2010). Generally speaking, the contemplative approaches are more concerned with “moment-to-moment awareness” than the archeologically-based, uncovering approaches of Freud and his successors. Such emphasis on “the here-and-now” is also found in existential-phenomenological approaches to psychotherapy (e.g. Yalom, 1980, 2009, 2010). What Buddhism has to teach the Western psychologist, notes Trungpa, “is how to relate more closely with his own experience, in its freshness, its fullness, and its immediacy” (p. 5). Psychological work, according to Trungpa (2005), is not just about understanding neurosis intellectually—exploring its historical dimensions, causes, and symptoms—but rather requires an exploration in the here and now of its texture, dimensions, and qualities. In this way, “when problems arise, instead of being seen as purely threats, they become learning situations, opportunities to find out more about one’s own mind, and to continue on one’s journey” (p. 10).

According to contemplatively-oriented clinicians, the most challenging (and alive) dimension of work as a psychotherapist is not found in diagnosis or through making insightful interpretations (as in more traditional psychoanalysis), but in being present with another

human being who is experiencing pain and distress (Brach, 2011; Corbett, 2011; Cortright, 1997; Germer and Siegel, 2012; Kaklauskas, Nimanheminda, Hoffman, and Jack, 2008; Matteson, 2008; May, 2005; Mijares and Khalsa, 2005; Siegel, 2010; Wegela, 1994, 1996, 2010; Yalom, 2009). It is of the utmost importance that clinicians attune with what is going on inside their own bodies and minds, for to truly be present for another requires that clinicians are able to tolerate the basic anxiety and contradictions within (Tift, 2011a). There is a natural tendency, as has been noted earlier in this study, to move away from pain, unpleasant feelings, and challenging emotions; this movement is, in fact, the driving force behind the various expressions of spiritual bypassing. In countering this movement, a contemplative approach to psychotherapy involves the willingness and ability to sit in the fires of discomfort, uncertainty, groundlessness, and suffering; it is only through meeting a client in this way that the therapist can provide a holding environment (Winnicott, 1965) required for authentic psychospiritual transformation.

Generally speaking, Western, developmental approaches emphasize working with a client's personal history, seeking some sort of change in the quality of a client's experience (Beck, 2011; Bowlby, 1998; Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood, 2000; Summers and Barber, 2009; Tift, 2011a, 2011b, Wallin, 2007). Developmentally-oriented practitioners work skillfully with the *content* of experience, exploring outmoded habitual patterns and out of date narratives, disputing inaccurate thinking, creating a home for dysfunctional emotions, and unraveling maladaptive behavior (Baugh, 2012; Beck, 2011; Gabbard, 2010; Summers and Barber, 2009). As a person comes to understand their lives more deeply—through interpretation, analysis, and insight—they learn how and why they are the way they are, and discover important and effective ways to “improve the display of their lives” (Tift, 2011a)—

experiencing less anxiety and depression, more joy, deeper intimate relationships, less anger, and so forth.

The contemplative, or *fruitional* view (Tift, 2011a, 2011b), on the other hand, emphasizes the experiential discovery that we are “always already free,” (Wilber, et al., 2008, p. 359) that the journey of transformation is not so much about “improving the display of our experience,” but rather a radical meeting of reality as it is, however it appears (Fenner, 2007; Foster, 2012; Kaklauskas, et. al, 2008; Tift, 2011a, 2011b). “Fruitional” approaches to freedom from suffering are less concerned with the *content* of experience (e.g. constructed narratives, historical memories, the meaning of particular thoughts, feeling, or emotions) than with entering immediate experience as it is. For example, if a person comes to notice that they are experience profound sadness, the fruitional approach would guide them into the heart of sadness, in a direct, immediate, and embodied way. They would not be so concerned with *understanding* the sadness, discovering its historical roots, or coming to insights about its expression in their lives; rather, they would encounter it in a deeply experiential and somatic way. As the person continues to meet whatever arises, in a non-conceptual way, eventually the deeply rooted belief in a “subject” who experiences an “object” can vanish, the person being left with the energetic qualities of sadness, but without a “person” there who is experiencing the sadness. In short, there is no longer a “sad one” that can be found (Foster, 2012). Of course, this level of experience is one that is beyond language and beyond all dualities, as it is impossible for the mind to understand how it would be possible for there to be thoughts without a thinker, feelings without a feeler, sights without a seer, and so forth (Epstein, 2004).

Another primary difference between the developmental and the contemplative approaches has to do with the way each understands the nature of the “ego.” In Western, developmental psychotherapies, ego refers to representations of self—who a person thinks they are, and how they organize our experience (Wilber, 1993). Such representations can be relatively accurate, healthy, workable, “good enough,” or they can be maladaptive or pathological, resulting in unaccepted parts of the self being split off into the unconscious, into the shadow (Wilber, 1993). The Eastern, fruitional view is of ego as an unexamined, yet seemingly solid sense of self as a separate entity, continuing through time; here, ego is the root of the entire dualistic world of “self” and “other” (Adyashanti, 2006, 2009, 2011; Brach, 2011; Caplan, 2009; Fenner, 2007; Foster, 2012). Through meditation and spiritual inquiry, a person might come to an experiential discovery of the insubstantiality of the separate self, and the interconnectedness of all form. In the wake of such an experience, many of the causes and conditions of suffering and discontent naturally become liberated in the realization of a person’s true nature as “open awareness” itself (Tift, 2011b; Welwood, 2007, 2012).

Another important distinction between the developmental and the fruitional approaches has to do with their respective views as to the ultimate cause of human suffering and dissatisfaction. For most conventional forms of psychotherapy, there exists a fundamental understanding that it is the experience of so-called “negative” thoughts, feelings, or emotions which leads to suffering and discontent. What the contemplative traditions have discovered, however, is that there is nothing inherently problematic about the arising of *any* particular thought, feeling, emotion, or sensation (Adyashanti, 2006, 2009, 2011; Brach, 2011; Chodron, 2004; Fenner, 2007; Foster, 2012; Masters, 2010b; Neale, 2012; Tift, 2011a, 2011b; Welwood, 2002). Rather, it is the *resistance* to these forms, the moving away from them, and

the belief that they should not be there that leads to the experience of suffering in all its forms. When a person is able to stay embodied and present with immediate experience—not resisting it, but exploring it intimately—the possibility is there to discover the true nature of any form as it arises in the body-mind. Therefore, a large part of contemplative work is to stay present with immediate experience in the here-and-now, penetrating it to its depths, allowing it to “self-liberate” in open awareness (Kyabgon, 2004; Norbu, 2003; Reynolds, 2010).

Over the last few decades, spiritually-sensitive theorists and clinicians have discovered that each of these streams of wisdom offers an important part of the puzzle of human growth, development, and transformation (Caplan, 2009; Tift, 2011a, 2011b; Masters, 2010b; Wilber, 1993, 2001a). Practitioners need not choose between these paths, but rather strive to make use of what is most skillful, true, and useful in each. When a person treads the noble path toward the reduction of human suffering—in a way that is integrated and takes into consideration each of the important dimensions of being—they bring together and interweave both psychological and spiritual approaches. By so doing, the various expressions of spiritual bypassing are cut at their root.

In unfolding his early observations in the area of spiritual bypassing—and in the intersection of psychological and spiritual approaches—Welwood (2002) introduced the concept “psychology of awakening” to point to what he saw as a critical need to “bridge and bring together two previously separate domains: individual and interpersonal psychology, as studied in the West, and the path of awakening, as articulated by many great spiritual lineages, especially the meditative traditions of the East.” Historically, conventional Western psychology has devalued, ignored, and even pathologized transpersonal development, beginning with Sigmund Freud and the early psychoanalytic movement. For Freud (2011),

spiritual longing represented the need to return to the “oceanic feeling” experienced in the womb or at the mother’s breast. The limitless, oneness, or expansiveness experienced during heightened states of transpersonal awareness was, for Freud, merely descriptive of the feeling the infant has before he or she learns it is a separately-existing self. In Freud’s model—laying the groundwork for decades of psychological understanding—aspiration for spiritual or transpersonal growth was viewed as primarily regressive in nature.

From the other side, it has been asserted that many of the world’s great wisdom traditions lack an up-to-date understanding of psychological dynamics (Wilber, 1993; Almaas, 2009, 2012). Transpersonal theorist and spiritual teacher A.H. Almaas (2009) argues that it is only in the last 100 years that the tradition of Western psychology has influenced contemporary understanding of human growth and development. When the wisdom traditions were coming into being—and for most of their evolution—the great saints and sages were not aware of, for example, depth psychology and the importance of the unconscious. They were not up-to-date on attachment theory, interpersonal neurobiology, or recent discoveries in neuroscience, empathy, and mirror neurons. While this sort of knowledge is not required in order to access profound transpersonal states of consciousness (Wilber, 1993), it can be tremendously useful in navigating the messy human reality of the personal and interpersonal levels of development (Caplan, 2009; Masters, 2010b; Neale, 2012; Tift, 2011a; Welwood, 1984, 2002). As such, developmentally-oriented psychological work—especially those methodologies which emphasize somatic and emotional lines of development—can be helpful in thwarting the many expressions of spiritual bypassing (Masters, 2010a, 2010b).

As an example, Almaas (2009) makes reference to the momentous formulation by Freud of the personal unconscious, and the discovery that there are forces operating outside

awareness that can affect conscious experience. Additionally, through discoveries within the field of depth psychology, it has become accepted that experiences which occur early on in a person's family of origin can have a profound effect on the way that person perceives themselves, others, and reality itself in the here and now. Even though many versed in contemporary psychospiritual work take this discovery for granted, theorists such as Wilber (1993) and Almaas (2009) remind us that this is actually a relatively new idea that wasn't accessible (at least in its modern, developed form) during the time the great contemplative traditions were emerging. While it may be argued that the traditions had their own systems of psychology—and sophisticated understanding of the working of the mind—some theorists (for example, Almaas, 2009; Wilber, 1993, 2000, 2007) contend that such knowledge was not as detailed, specific, and up-to-date as discoveries made over the last century. Helping a person to see in detail how the past affects the present, for example, in a way they can understand, appears to be a modern revelation, one that wasn't available in its contemporary, subtle, and sophisticated forms prior to a hundred years ago (Almaas, 2009).

One of the most groundbreaking discoveries of modern, Western, developmentally-oriented psychology concerns the importance of the infant's relationship to its caregivers—and how formative this connection is to the developing mind and brain (Almaas, 2009, 2012; Badenoch, 2008; Bowlby, 1976, 1982, 1983, 1998; Schore, 2012; Siegel, 2001, 2008, 2010); Stern, 2000; Wallin, 2007). Further, contemporary psychology has discovered ways of understanding how the sense of self arises, develops, and is structured, in detail that simply wasn't available during the time the world's wisdom traditions were emerging (Almaas, 2009; Wilber, 1993, 2000, 2007). While the traditions had their own types of psychology, for example Buddhist *Abhidharma*—which revealed a sophisticated system of classification of

mental content—there was no precise understanding of how the interaction between infant and mother led to the *specific* content which was experienced; the paradigm just wasn't there. Almaas (2010) acknowledges that the contemplative traditions had some general understanding regarding the relationship between child and caregiver(s), however argues that the subtleties and the laws governing these processes were not known until research emerged from contemporary discoveries in the fields of psychology and neuroscience.

The aforementioned discoveries are part of modern, Western science, expressed through contemporary psychological research and clinical practice. Freud attempted to apply the scientific method to understand the mind, originally through neurology, to learn more about how the mind functions. But his findings—including the notion of the unconscious, the influence of early psychodynamics, and of defenses/ resistances to being aware of the unconscious—became available to researchers and explorers only in the last 125 years or so; they were simply not available to the trailblazers of the great wisdom traditions, and therefore did not become a part of the knowledge base of these traditions. Since the time of Freud, psychological understanding has deepened and matured, evolving through pioneering discoveries in object relations theory (Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983; Kernberg, 1995), self psychology (Kohut, 2009a, 2009b), attachment theory (Bowlby, 1976, 1982, 1983, 1988), and intersubjectivity theory (Atwood and Stolorow, 2001; Buirski, 2005; Orange, Atwood, & Stolorow, 2001; Stolorow and Atwood, 2002; Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood, 2000). With Bowlby's attachment theory, for example, the understanding of early dynamics between infant and caregiver become much more refined, beyond more general notions that there existed some type of influence. The history of psychology is one of "momentous discovery," alleges Almaas (2010), which spiritual teaching can utilize to "bring it up to date" with the

modern world. One of the primary arguments being made by these researchers is that one of the most important ways contemporary teachers and clinicians can guard against the unchecked expression of spiritual bypassing is by using all of the tools available—from both ancient spirituality and modern psychology—to ensure that as many developmental lines are being addressed in their students and clients as possible.

Addressing the relationship between psychological and spiritual work, Buddhist-oriented psychoanalyst Pilar Jennings (2010) describes a process whereby these streams of wisdom work together to offer practitioners an integral and comprehensive approach to the inner journey. She writes:

For many people who practice both traditions, there is a truly winning combination of building up our sense of self, of developing more self-confidence through therapy, while simultaneously softening our grip on a particular identity or an inflated ego position through our Buddhist practice. This is only one example, but I think it speaks to how these traditions can help each other. Buddhism is such a powerful tradition and practice that helps people understand why we struggle with ourselves so much, why we so often feel that we're lacking something we should have or be. It really gets to the core of our chronic fears of being too insubstantial. At the same time, we do need a conventional self in order to negotiate our lives skillfully. It's helpful to have some ego strength, to feel that we're deserving of a meaningful professional life, that we have enough confidence to seek experiences—even spiritual experience—and relationships that are fulfilling. Without this ego strength, which is largely the domain of psychotherapy, it can be difficult to ask for help, and to seek friendships and professional opportunities. So I think for many of us American Buddhists, it's useful to

have a practice that helps us feel less tethered to our conventional identities, with all the anxiety associated with these identities—whether it's being a great writer, lover, or mother—while also understanding the ways in which these identities can have real meaning and offer fulfillment.

While the analytic and contemplative traditions can work together to offer such an integrated approach, it is important not to allow either to be watered down or to assume they take practitioners to the same places, teach them the same things, and have the same aims and goals. Jennings explains:

It's not uncommon for serious meditators, particularly for people practicing in places like NYC where they are aware of psychotherapy, to suggest that they don't need therapy because they have their spiritual practice. And for some, this may be true. But these statements often indicate an assumption that one's spiritual practice necessarily addresses the same issues/dynamics that are explored in therapy. There's a great deal of synergy between the traditions, but their tools and primary objectives are radically different. Buddhist practice is not a system designed to explore our early childhood experience, the particular nuances of our family system, or our sexual behavior. It can shed tremendous insight into our relationship and our struggles with addiction, etc. But it has no early childhood doctrine, nor is it intended to be a system focused on the particularities of the individual, his/her social location, her psychological constitution. Psychotherapy, in contrast, goes in close and seeks to explore the individual experience, how a particular patient has been influenced by particular caretakers with very specific histories and attributes. In this way, it seeks to build up a client's ego, their sense of self, their subjectivity. Buddhism, in contrast, challenges our ego

position, and tries to cultivate a deeper sense of inter-being, of sharing the same basic human markers as all others. This is just one example of many in how the traditions differ.

Further, Jennings (2010) addresses the compatibility of Buddhism and psychotherapy, and argues there are many ways they can benefit from one another. Psychotherapy offers an opportunity to build up the sense of self, of developing greater levels of self-confidence and self-acceptance, while Buddhist and other contemplative practice can work simultaneously to soften a person's grip on a particular identity or inflated ego position. She further explains:

Buddhism is such a powerful tradition and practice that helps people understand why we struggle with ourselves so much, why we so often feel that we're lacking something we should have or be. It really gets to the core of our chronic fears of being too insubstantial. At the same time, we do need a conventional self in order to negotiate our lives skillfully. It's helpful to have some ego strength, to feel that we're deserving of a meaningful professional life, that we have enough confidence to seek experiences—even spiritual experience—and relationships that are fulfilling. Without this ego strength, which is largely the domain of psychotherapy, it can be difficult to ask for help, and to seek friendships and professional opportunities. So I think for many of us American Buddhists, it's useful to have a practice that helps us feel less tethered to our conventional identities, with all the anxiety associated with these identities—whether it's being a great writer, lover, or mother—while also understanding the ways in which these identities can have real meaning and offer fulfillment.

Jennings encourages practitioners and clinicians to develop awareness of the various pitfalls which Western practitioners of Buddhism and other Eastern-based religions are likely to face. For example, one of the primary hazards is the use of meditation practices and doctrines such as “no-self” to avoid strong emotions. By understanding some of the challenges faced by Western practitioners, teachers and clinicians can educate themselves and their students and clients on many of the underpinnings of the movement of spiritual bypassing. She explains:

It's almost become a cultural joke - the Western spiritualist who has a saccharine smile constantly plastered on their face, who seems to deny the reality of anger, and whose aggression tends to come out passively. One of the great Buddhist teachings is mindfulness, which simply means bringing our awareness to each moment of our lives without trying to change it. Now, this teaching can unconsciously get translated into a wish to sit lofty above the muck and mire of strong feeling, because feelings can be embarrassing and a real assault to our spiritual personas. In this way, Buddhism can become a place of hiding the truth of our minds rather than really getting to know our minds, as is intended. Some of the core teachings—no self, emptiness—etc., can similarly be used to bypass the mess of relationship by appropriating these teachings as fuel for isolation or generally disconnected behavior. I have heard of more than one story of such and such a family member who is a long-term Buddhist, has received many high teachings from great teachers, and is generally a pain in the neck to deal with—they're arrogant, and almost slightly autistic, and they don't even know it.

Despite a growing interest in Buddhist meditation and other contemplative practice in the West, it is important to address some of the common misperceptions that are relevant to the psychological experience of Western practitioners. For example, Jennings (2010) alleges

that for many American Buddhists, there is an underlying belief that Buddhist practice will make life easier, that they'll become more peaceful, exceptionally patient, and deeply wise. While the cultivation of these and other related qualities are important aspects of any authentic spiritual practice, Jennings cautions practitioners against a one-sided view of the reality of the spiritual life. She has discovered that

practicing Buddhism puts into stark relief the reality of our neuroses and our tremendous struggles in the relational realm. As we practice the dharma, it simply becomes harder to ignore what fruitcakes we tend to be. This, I think, is a primary misconception. And it would probably be helpful if more people attracted to the dharma had some sense of this, so that they're less inclined to walk away from the practice when it becomes unpleasant, which invariably it is.

As has been noted previously in this study, many in the analytic community have been antagonistic toward the role of religion in a person's life. Seen as a childlike yearning to be spared from the existential matters of life and death, the religious and spiritual quest has come to be seen as largely made of fantasy and wish-fulfillment. Jennings (2010) argues, however, that the common denominator in people of faith is not the wish for salvation, but rather to transcend the interests and trapping of the self. She explains:

This, I think, is the very nature and purpose of religion—to help people find ways to soften our tendency to be hugely invested in ourselves, at the expense of our ability to notice the reality of others. Let's face it, if you could sneak into people's thoughts, you would not hear a pervasive worry about how that other guy over there is going to handle his child's medical crisis, or how the woman sitting next to me will manage to feel better about herself. What we'd hear is a constant drone of self-obsession—how

can I get rid of my insane partner, how can I lose ten pounds before I die, how can I have more sex with a more interesting and dazzling partner, how can I show the world that I have special insight, how can I kill myself and somehow stay alive at the same time...these are the questions we ponder. And religion is meant to help us put ourselves into perspective. With all due respect, it's possible that the Dawkins and Hitchens amongst us, have not had personal experience with this self-transcendence that is at the heart of all the worlds' religions.

Forms of Spiritual Bypassing

Those theorists and clinicians familiar with spiritual bypassing—or the defensive use of spirituality more generally— have observed a number of forms or expression in which spiritual bypassing takes in their own lives and in the lives of practitioners they have come in contact with. Both Caplan (2009; personal communication, January 25, 2013) and Masters (2010b; personal communication, March 6, 2013) allege that every person who has ever been interested in the spiritual journey has had some relationship with spiritual bypassing, has fallen prey to one (or likely more) of these means of expression. The reality of this is not cause for shame, embarrassment, or self-condemnation, they note, but rather as ground for humility and openness moving forward. For example, Masters (2010b) identifies a common expression of spiritual bypassing that he calls “exaggerated detachment.” Here, a practitioner witnesses what is happening in their lives from “too far away,” missing important data that would require a more intimate engagement. Masters elucidates:

Many of us want to get past certain things in our lives without having really gone into them. And when transcendence of our personal history takes precedence over intimacy with our personal history, spiritual bypassing is inevitable. To truly transcend

something means we need to be intimate with it, so that when we go beyond it we don't, in a sense, turn our backs on it; we have included it and are including it in the circle of our being. (p. 12)

Another form of spiritual bypass, notes Masters (2010b) is “emotional dissociation, or numbing.” Here, the practitioner separates from feelings out of the belief that difficult, uncomfortable, and challenging emotions are somehow obstacles to lasting spiritual freedom, rather than doorways into it. Masters has long observed the ways that this sort of dissociation can masquerade as desirable spiritual qualities such as equanimity, kindness, or patience, thus fitting the image of the way a spiritually-evolved person would look and act. Once a feeling or emotion is deemed “negative,” it then becomes natural to turn from it. Unfortunately, Masters argues, doing so does not transform or heal the emotion or feeling, but simply pushes it “into [the] shadow lands.”

Masters (2010b) has noted that one of the most pervasive expressions of spirituality bypassing involves an overemphasis on being positive. When a practitioner seeks at all cost to appear and in fact feel “positive,” they become “marooned from their darkness and its riches.” Masters refers to this approach as a kind of “sunny side up” spirituality, filled with an exaggerated optimism, and often laced with spiritual platitudes such as “it’s all perfect” or “that’s just your karma,” and so forth. He describes the problem with this sort of approach to spiritual development:

This sense of being so positive, so upbeat, so unrelentingly optimistic, keeps us removed from what’s really going on, keeps us disconnected emotionally and psychologically from what’s occurring. And really makes us divided... We’ve been talking Oneness and how wonderful it is; not really getting at that point that we are

actually far from Oneness, because we are dividing everything into positive and negative; treating the positive as worthy of our attention and focus and the negative as not worth of our attention and focus. When in fact there's so much energy in what we call "negative," so much possibility of depth and openness and healing therein... So when we overemphasize being positive, we're making it very difficult for ourselves to truly explore shadow.

Related to an overemphasis on the positive, Masters (2010b) has discovered how adverse many spiritual practitioners are to the experience of anger, causing him to name one of the primary expressions of spiritual bypassing "anger phobia." He contends that anger has a very poor reputation in spiritual circles as is equated with such negative states such as aggression, ill will, hostility, and even hatred. The challenge with such thinking is that when a person views anger as a hindrance to spiritual awakening and psychological wholeness, its energy cannot be used as a resource. When a practitioner represses his or her anger, trying to keep the peace at any cost, an opportunity is lost. Masters urges practitioners to become intimate with their anger, rather than immediately moving to transcend it. He explains:

Anger is not the problem here; the problem is what we are *doing* with our anger. When we take the presence of anger as a sign that we're not doing well spiritually, we're making an error. Everyone has anger and if we have anger and we're on a spiritual path that doesn't equate anger with anything good or valuable, we're probably going to feel shame that we still have anger, because it signals that we are not evolving spiritually according to our path or teacher. We get stuck, we may try harder and harder to do our practices, blaming ourselves for not moving along the spiritual path;

when in fact the real problem lays with the teaching and/or the teacher, insisting that anger is not a good thing. (p. 83)

Another common form of spiritual bypassing is what Masters (2010b) calls “blind compassion.” Here, a practitioner seeks to avoid confrontation at all costs, putting forward an exterior veneer of love, kindness, and patience while an avalanche of anger, hatred, and aggression are looming just under the surface. For example,

if we’re caught in blind compassion and someone treats us badly, abusively even, we will probably make it all about us: What did *I* do to draw this to me? What does this say about me? We will turn all the heat on ourselves and will leave the other one unaccountable for their actions, and we won’t deal with the relationship we have with this one either, other than to make them perhaps feel more kindly towards us because we’re taking all the heat. And in this we make far too many excuses for the other. (p. 24)

Masters has reported that blind compassion arises out of a fear of confrontation, which was likely formed early in one’s developmental history. In spiritual traditions or communities which do not welcome psychotherapy or the exploration of a practitioner’s past, these regions of consciousness are usually left unexplored and unexamined, often resulting in a continuing “to cave in when we need to take a stand with something or someone.”

Related to both anger-phobia and blind compassion, Masters (2010b) has observed that those caught in spiritual bypassing are often quite confused when it comes to setting and maintaining boundaries. The more cut off a practitioner is from his or her anger, the weaker their boundaries will be as Masters argues that “anger is the emotion that allows us to keep our boundaries firm and in place.” Without anger, Masters alleges, a person’s boundaries will

end up being “weak, porous, or even seemingly non-existent.” This can become problematic for the practitioner as not being clear about boundaries is often confused with being “open or spiritually mature.” An advanced practitioner, for example, is seen as someone who has no boundaries at all, just accepts life as it comes, and goes with the flow no matter what. Masters explains:

This is such a clear sign of spiritual bypassing, to equate having weak, weak boundaries with being really open, with being spiritually evolved; when in fact the lack of such boundaries indicates some unresolved issues from our past, when we had our boundaries trashed by an abusive parent or difficult circumstances and did not ever heal that, did not ever learn to say the kind of “no” that made the reforming of healthy boundaries possible. (p. 90)

With the value that is given in spiritual traditions to the ultimate realization of emptiness or no-self, practitioners often walk a slippery slope. At the level of the absolute, the insubstantiality of the personal self is revealed; at the relative, however, there is the very vivid appearance of a personal self, with needs, desires, and wounds, which interacts with others and the world. When the personal dimension of experience is devalued—with an overemphasis on the transpersonal—the ground is laid for the activity of spiritual bypass. Practitioners are told “it’s just your story” or “just stop your story,” implying that personal history is irrelevant and an impediment to spiritual evolution. They are admonished to “see through the ego” and to let go of this limited sense of self. As Masters (2010b) argues, however, this is not necessary, nor is it possible. The personal sense of self is a part of the human experience and until it is fully integrated into the entirety of a practitioner’s life, ultimate realization will remain out of reach.

Another common expression of spiritual bypassing occurs with the belief that one has “landed” in some sort of “final” awakening or other ultimate state of consciousness, where they become deluded about their actual level of realization. For example, a practitioner may have had a truly authentic awakening experience—a direct knowing of who and what they are at the deepest levels—only to conclude that they have reached some endpoint on the journey, with no possibility of any further refinement. Masters (2010b) has seen how practitioners can mistakenly assume that just because they had a certain state experience that this is where they are now more permanently taking up residence. It is not easy for practitioners to see the ways that they can and do fall from such a high realization; admitting this can be difficult and can induce shame and even despair. Both Masters and Wilber (2000) make the distinction between the experience of a certain *state* of consciousness and a more permanent establishment at a *stage* of development. Understanding this distinction can be important in working with spiritual bypass.

Along with anger, the experience of judgment is one that is not looked upon favorably in many spiritual circles. For many practitioners, there is a deeply rooted belief that a spiritually-evolved person is one who would not judge, either another person or any sort of situation. When under the influence of spiritual bypass, practitioners make judging wrong; in other words, they judge themselves for judging (Masters, 2010b). But judging is an inherent quality of the mind, Masters argues, for even when a person evaluates something as beautiful or wonderful, they are making a judgment. It is not that judgment and evaluation are inherently problematic, but that practitioners must learn to navigate these energies more skillfully. Masters explains:

When we make [judging] wrong, when we really believe that it is wrong, what torture will ensue from that in that we will feel so bad about ourselves whenever we notice ourselves judging. There's no compassion here. We need to have compassion for our judgmentalness. My job is not to be free of judgmentalness, my job is to be aware of it and to handle it skillfully, responsibly. One can do a practice here, when we are feeling harshly judgmental of another, I've done this many times; immediately, silently, say to yourself something that blesses the other. So in a sense you're blessing them as an antidote to the harsh judgmentalness you were just experiencing. Then this I'm not making it wrong, I'm simply taking a more life-affirming action; in fact, my judgmentalness is spurring me into a greater sense of compassion for others. (p. 23)

Another common expression of spiritual bypass involves a practitioner wanting to receive the full fruits of the spiritual journey without having to face the difficulties or darkness within. Through the use of the metaphor of a dragon who guards the treasure, Masters (2010b) explains that the only way to authentic spiritual realization is to face the dragon within, whatever it happens to be for any given person. When caught in spiritual bypass, it is tempting to avoid, seduce, bribe, or otherwise step around those darker and less-than-awakened aspects of oneself however they must ultimately be faced. If not, the practitioner will not be able to make full use of the fruits of the path. For it is the

very presence of the dragon, the very encounter with the dragon, readies us to make wise use of the treasure. If we were plunked down with the treasure immediately, we would probably not use it well, much like lottery winners often do with very large cash ins... Simply to notice that we want this is a sign that we are starting to awaken to our spiritual bypassing tendencies. We have to face the dragon. We need to face our pain.

Spiritual bypassing is so focused on bypassing pain, and it makes a spiritual virtue out of doing so; calling transcendence, calling it going beyond. There may be a sense of let's just dissolve the pain, let's let go of the pain, maybe with the implied sense that it should be easy to let go of it and if it's difficult that just means we're being resistant; having a lot of resistance to it. Which of course leads to more shaming of us for not living up to what we think we should be living up to spiritually. (Masters, 2010, p. 52)

In her research over the last two decades, psychotherapist and professor Mariana Caplan (1999, 2009, 2011) has observed many ways in which contemporary spirituality has become "infected" by "conceptual contaminants," having the effect of "compromising a confused an immature relationship to complex spiritual principles" (2009, p. 28). Noting a number of common "spiritually transmitted diseases," Caplan explains that these "diseases of ego" are subtle and can go undetected for years. These observations by Caplan illustrate the all-too-common reality as to how spiritual bypassing can seep into the lives of contemporary practitioners, often going unnoticed unless pointed out by someone familiar with the phenomenon. When in the throes of these "diseases" of spirituality, ego intertwines with genuine spiritual longing and insight; if left unattended, they tend to interfere with authentic spiritual growth. Where these diseases go misdiagnosed, "the ego co-opts the insights and perspectives of the greater Self" (2009, p. 31).

The most widespread "spiritually transmitted diseases" are listed below, representing Caplan's reflections on the most common ways in which spiritual bypassing can manifest in the lives of even the most dedicated spiritual practitioners. While the list is diverse, touching on many different aspects of the spiritual life, each specific "disease" serves in its own way to

facilitate the use of spirituality as a way to avoid working at one of the critical developmental lines, e.g. somatic, psychological, emotional, interpersonal, or moral.

The 10 Spiritually-Transmitted Diseases as organized by Caplan (2009), with short descriptions, appear below, with the permission of Caplan's publisher, Sounds True, Inc.

1. Fast-Food Spirituality: Mix spirituality with a culture that celebrates speed, multitasking and instant gratification and the result is likely to be fast-food spirituality.

Fast-food spirituality is a product of the common and understandable fantasy that relief from the suffering of our human condition can be quick and easy. One thing is clear, however: spiritual transformation cannot be had in a quick fix.

2. Faux Spirituality: Faux spirituality is the tendency to talk, dress and act as we imagine a spiritual person would. It is a kind of imitation spirituality that mimics spiritual realization in the way that leopard-skin fabric imitates the genuine skin of a leopard.

3. Confused Motivations: Although our desire to grow is genuine and pure, it often gets mixed with lesser motivations, including the wish to be loved, the desire to belong, the need to fill our internal emptiness, the belief that the spiritual path will remove our suffering and spiritual ambition, the wish to be special, to be better than, to be "the one."

4. Identifying with Spiritual Experiences: In this disease, the ego identifies with our spiritual experience and takes it as its own, and we begin to believe that we are embodying insights that have arisen within us at certain times. In most cases, it does not last indefinitely, although it tends to endure for longer periods of time in those who believe themselves to be enlightened and/or who function as spiritual teachers.

5. The Spiritualized Ego: This disease occurs when the very structure of the egoic personality becomes deeply embedded with spiritual concepts and ideas. The result is an egoic structure that is "bullet-proof." When the ego becomes spiritualized, we are invulnerable to help, new input, or constructive feedback. We become impenetrable human beings and are stunted in our spiritual growth, all in the name of spirituality.

6. Mass Production of Spiritual Teachers: There are a number of current trendy spiritual traditions that produce people who believe themselves to be at a level of spiritual enlightenment, or mastery, that is far beyond their actual level. This disease functions like a spiritual conveyor belt: put on this glow, get that insight, and -- bam! - you're enlightened and ready to enlighten others in similar fashion. The problem is not that such teachers instruct but that they represent themselves as having achieved spiritual mastery.

7. Spiritual Pride: Spiritual pride arises when the practitioner, through years of labored effort, has actually attained a certain level of wisdom and uses that attainment to justify shutting down to further experience. A feeling of "spiritual superiority" is another symptom of this spiritually transmitted disease. It manifests as a subtle feeling that "I am better, more wise and above others because I am spiritual."

8. Group Mind: Also described as groupthink, cultic mentality or ashram disease, group mind is an insidious virus that contains many elements of traditional co-dependence. A spiritual group makes subtle and unconscious agreements regarding the correct ways to think, talk, dress, and act. Individuals and groups infected with "group mind" reject individuals, attitudes, and circumstances that do not conform to the often unwritten rules of the group.

9. The Chosen-People Complex: The chosen people complex is not limited to Jews. It is the belief that "Our group is more spiritually evolved, powerful, enlightened and, simply put, better than any other group." There is an important distinction between the recognition that one has found the right path, teacher or community for themselves, and having found The One.

10. The Deadly Virus: "I Have Arrived": This disease is so potent that it has the capacity to be terminal and deadly to our spiritual evolution. This is the belief that "I have arrived" at the final goal of the spiritual path. Our spiritual progress ends at the point where this belief becomes crystallized in our psyche, for the moment we begin to believe that we have reached the end of the path, further growth ceases.

For Caplan (2009), the most effective means to combat these spiritually transmitted diseases (and thus prevent the spread of spiritual bypassing) is through the cultivation of "spiritual discernment," known in Sanskrit as *viveka khyātir*, or "the crown of wisdom." The term *viveka*, Caplan explains, "refers to the capacity to discern between the real and the unreal," and *khyātir* is "an outlook of knowledge or consciousness" (p. 41). This type of inquiry is critical to the seeing and uprooting of spiritual bypassing, encouraging practitioners to stay ever-alert and vigilant to the many pitfalls along the path, including the defensive use of spirituality to ward off the experience of psychological pain and emotional wounding. Many contemporary spiritual practitioners—whether through committed daily practice, retreat, or even spontaneously—have experienced profound openings, insights, and realizations. These experiences of a shift in the practitioner's *state* of consciousness can provide a sense of freedom, awe at the mystery of life, and can show the practitioner in a very clear and experiential way some of the fruits of the spiritual journey. It is important, however,

to realize that heightened or alternative states of consciousness are not necessarily the goal of spiritual growth and development, at least for most of the great contemplative traditions. As the historian of religion Huston Smith noted (cited in Paine, 2012, p. 244), it is not so much altered states that we are after, but rather “altered traits.” Speaking to the relationship between psychological and spiritual work, especially as it relates to the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing, Caplan (2009) cautions that

We cannot assume that simply because we have had profound experiences of spiritual illumination or enduring insights, all aspects of our psychology have been touched by our awareness. It is a great temptation to imagine this, but it is rarely the case. Our increased awareness can certainly impact our psychological dynamics, offering us a wider perspective on our conditioning or giving us the courage to go deeper into that which is still unilluminated within us. But rarely does heightened awareness take the place of the necessary and humbling task of learning to feel and digest our own psychological pain, or of the gritty challenges of dealing with human relationship, self-hatred, shame, sexuality, and intimacy with others. Spiritual insight can, but often does not, penetrate psychological conditioning. When we have not learned to manage our psychology, our psychology will continue to manage us. (p. 116)

As noted earlier in this literature review, spiritual bypassing involves the use of spirituality to avoid undigested, historical wounding, much of which arose within a practitioner’s family of origin. Because spiritual bypassing grows out of the very natural drive to avoid pain (Masters, 2010b), it is not uncommon for a person to be attracted to spirituality with the hope of transcending pain and suffering leftover from difficult childhood experience. Caplan (2009) contends that

authentic transformational work can, should, and in many cases does help alleviate this suffering. By learning how the conditioning of the mind functions, we gain an increasing capacity to observe and disidentify with its incessant repetition of thought patterns and to see that we are something other than our perceived identity and familiar story. But there is a very fine line between practicing the necessary process of nonattachment and falling prey to a neurotic detachment from life that is more a protective mechanism based on fear than an expression of spiritual clarity. (p. 117)

It can be helpful for practitioners to explore how the specific practices they are drawn to might in fact be supporting them to avoid certain areas of their lives which may need extra attention. Caplan (2009) describes a behavior, attitude, or practice as *egosyntonic* if it is compatible with preexisting egoic structure and tendencies. For example, a practitioner may choose a certain type of meditation practice which unconsciously enables them to escape from challenging emotional states. Caplan urges practitioners to look carefully to see if this dynamic might be at play in their lives, and to inquire with questions such as: “Do we use our meditation practice to escape life or become more intimate with it?” and “Do we use spiritual concepts to avoid feeling or to help us feel more deeply (p. 118)?”

In her interviews with hundreds of spiritual teachers, psychotherapists, and psychologists, Caplan (2009) reports that the single most frequent case of psychological breakdown among spiritual practitioners, as well as among renowned teachers and even monks and nuns, results from issues involving intimate relationship, sexuality, heartbreak, and betrayal. It is these circumstances that most powerfully open up the unhealed wounds from childhood around love, survival, and basic needs. (p. 140)

Rather than viewing the surfacing of unhealed wounds as a sign of the ineffectiveness of spiritual practice, Caplan (2009) suggests that it might be the *result* of such practice, offering the practitioner an important opportunity to go deeper. Spiritual emergency, dark night, and other extremely difficult spiritually-oriented ordeals, while harrowing on many levels, can serve as an initiation like none other into the depths of realization. Caplan clarifies:

Breakdown offers the possibility of allowing false structures to be disassembled so deeper discernment and clarity can emerge, particular if we have a context of spiritual teachings, practice, and community to support us in mining the spiritual possibilities of breakdown. During such times in our lives, a doorway opens that may not stay open for long, and whether the crisis is respected and worked with from a context of spiritual transformation or it is seen as a pathology that must be suppressed, hidden, or rejected will often determine whether it is an ordinary crisis or a healing one that presents a doorway to greater discernment. (pp. 140 – 141)

Sharing her vision for a union of psychological and spiritual work—one which would provide a natural buffer to the far reaching effects of spiritual bypassing—Caplan (2009) encourages practitioners to imagine a psychology which embraced the full potential of a human being, touching on the greatest dimensions of transpersonal awareness. At the same time, it would work skillfully within relative reality, addressing with care the psyche and its wounds, weaknesses, and blind spots, honoring the individual and their development within the overall spectrum of consciousness. She envisions a new sort of spirituality

that did not deny or prematurely transcend any corner of our existence: a spirituality that offered a window into a vast mystical vision and provided a context in which to address the dark, hidden, and challenging cobwebs of the psyche with penetrating

clarity and compassionate perspective. Whereas some people will approach this possibility through formal psychotherapy, and others through a variety of forms of internal and interpersonal inquiry, such an integration requires keen discernment into the psychological aspect of our experience. (pp. 219 – 220)

Ultimately, psychology and spirituality do not need to be distinct, clarifies Caplan (2009), but “it can be helpful to make distinctions between them in order to understand the primary function of each in relation to the other” (p. 222). By understanding the differences between the various perspectives and methodologies, practitioners can better come to see how they complement and support one another, working together to offer a more comprehensive and integral approach to understanding the human journey. Caplan asserts that

spiritual understanding comes from a direct perception of a greater intelligence, force, or power. Some people call it nonduality; others call it Christ, Allah, spirit, or God. Spiritual technologies help us access an experience of consciousness itself, and sustained spiritual practice supports us in learning to anchor ourselves in a more abiding sense of that greater reality. Meanwhile, psychological work helps unravel the complex strands that constitute our personal psyche—patterns and wounds that, if not tended to, can impede our growth and block our perception of spiritual realities. (p. 223)

In a similar way, Welwood (2002) explains that psychological work can serve as an “ally” to spiritual practice, “by helping to shine the light of awareness into all the hidden nooks and crannies of our conditioned personality, so that it becomes more porous, more permeable to the larger being that is its ground” (p. 196). One helpful framework by which to

understand the differing functions of psychology and spirituality is through the distinction between the *content* and the *context* of a person's lived experience (Caplan, 2009):

Psychology addresses the content of our consciousness. It helps us understand the familial and even ancestral or karmic forces that inform our egoic, or personality, structure. It looks at the stories, relationships, patterns, and perceptions that make up the life of the unconscious—the powerful unconscious decisions we've made so long ago that we no longer remember them, yet they continue to run our lives. Spirituality addresses the context of consciousness. It helps us access and experience the field of consciousness from which all manifestations arise. This is a very important distinction. (p. 225)

As noted earlier in this study, a primary goal of psychological work is to help a person to see the ways they organize and make meaning of their experience (Buirski, 2005; Orange, Atwood, and Stolorow, 2001; Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood, 2002), including the ways they limit themselves through repetitive, self-destructive patterns (Caplan, 2009). Further, psychological work helps to unravel “the defensive structures we formed in childhood that once kept us safe and helped us survive emotionally in our environment but that now block us from further development or from opening to our deeper potential” (Caplan, 2009, pp. 225 – 226). Without this unraveling, it is easy for spiritual practitioners to assume they have transcended their psychological dynamics, “at least until repeated failures in relationships, parenting, and working with their own emotions remind them that they have not” (Caplan, 2009, p. 226).

With respect to Welwood's “psychology of awakening” (2002), any system of psychospiritual growth and transformation which does not integrate the personal, the

interpersonal, *and* the transpersonal domains of human experience will open itself to the possibility of uneven development. As noted in the introduction to this study, such uneven development is the soil in which spiritual bypassing takes root and flourishes. Contemporary spiritual culture has witnessed a number of spiritual teachers who appeared to be deeply proficient in meditative or transpersonal lines of development, only to come crashing to the Earth in personal and interpersonal scandals, wreaking havoc of all kinds (Masters, 2010b; Wilber, 2007).

For Welwood (2002), it is important to inquire into how psychologically-oriented personal work and interpersonal practice can support, serve, and further spiritual awakening. When caught in spiritual bypass, psychological work is granted a lesser status, set aside, or even viewed as in opposition to the deeper work of the spirit. For Almaas (2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2009, 2012), Caplan (2009, 2011), Masters (2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2012), Neale (2012), Welwood (1984, 2002), Wilber (1993, 2000, 2007), and other transpersonally-oriented theorists and clinicians, this is a very shortsighted view—and one that must be explored carefully. As cited earlier by Caplan (2009), Welwood (2002) has observed that many who are drawn to the spiritual life are moved to do so in part by unprocessed early psychological wounding. Unfortunately, as Welwood (2002) and so many others have discovered, most forms of spiritual practice were not designed to work with unmetabolized psychodynamic material in the ways necessary to transform it. In fact, applying spiritual methodologies as antidotes to psychological difficulties can further entrench the material into the practitioner's unconscious, where it will eventually resurface in unexpected and problematic ways (Masters, 2010a, 2010b; Wilber, 2000, 2007).

Exploring the relevance of working at both the psychological and spiritual dimensions of experience, Welwood (2002) raises the question as to whether it is even possible to achieve genuine spiritual realization without first coming to terms with important psychological dynamics such as defensiveness, emotional reactivity, and narcissistic proclivities. Further, Welwood alleges that any mature form of psychospiritual work must include the interpersonal dimension of human experience, deeming relationships with others as the ultimate litmus test of a person's spiritual development. There is no aspect of human life, Welwood (2011) argues, where spiritual bypassing can wreak as much havoc as in the area of interpersonal relationship, for it is in the context of intimacy that a person's unfinished business plays out most obviously. He explains:

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. (p. 2)

While early, unresolved wounding manifests in myriad ways, Welwood (2011, 2012) has identified what he calls “the basic human wound,” that of feeling unloved or intrinsically unlovable as one is. “Inadequate love or attunement,” argues Welwood (2011), “is shocking and traumatic for a child's developing and highly sensitive nervous system” (p. 2).

Contemporary research in interpersonal neurobiology (Badenoch, 2008; Siegel, 2001, 2008, 2010) and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1998; Wallin, 2007) confirm Welwood's assertion. As a result of early developmental misattunement, a person can internalize how they were

parented, forming a template through which they will tend to view subsequent relationships. In this way, their capacity to value themselves (which is also the basis for valuing others) becomes impaired. Welwood (2011) refers to this process and outcome as “the wound of the heart” (p. 3). Further, Welwood references contemporary research in the field of attachment theory which points to the powerful influence of close bonding and loving attunement on a variety of aspects of human development. In an environment of “secure attachment,” the baby is provided with the psychological, emotional, and neurobiological support needed for healthy growth and development. Welwood reports that

[s]ecure 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. (p. 3)

In contrast to indigenous cultures of traditional Asia, for example, Welwood draws a connection between modern child-rearing practices and the potentially harmful effects of insecure attachment. These harmful effects, Welwood asserts, include “self-hatred, disembodiment, lack of grounding, chronic insecurity and anxiety, overactive minds, lack of basic trust, and a deep sense of inner deficiency” (p. 3). As a result of such insecure attachment, many 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” (p. 3).

As noted earlier in this study, a significant number of those who are drawn to contemplative practice come with the hope of healing unresolved pain from the past.

Moreover, according to Welwood (2011), many “originally turn to the dharma, at least in part, as a way of trying to overcome the pain of [our] psychological and relational wounding” (p. 3). Further, he has observed that most are in denial of this reality, or otherwise unconscious regarding the nature and extent of their wounding, and its role in their spiritual aspirations. It is important for those interested in authentic psychospiritual growth to explore the specific ways in which unresolved psychological wounding is affecting their relationship with spiritual practice. By so doing, practitioners can start to see exactly how they are bypassing, thus creating the possibility to work with these dynamics more consciously as they arise.

Welwood (2011) describes how a person’s efforts to become a “good spiritual practitioner” can quickly form what he calls a “compensatory identity” (p. 4). In the creation and maintenance of such identity, a person covers up and defends against an underlying sense of deficiency, lack of self-worth, and feelings of lovability. Under the spell of spiritual bypassing, despite tremendous effort and noble intentions, spiritual beliefs and practices often continue to be utilized “in the service of denial and defense” (p. 4). Even with some modicum of awareness of these dynamics, it is still possible to use spiritual beliefs and practices, albeit in more and more subtle ways, to bypass personal, interpersonal, emotionally-rooted material. When a practitioner’s relationship with spirituality is not incorporated into all aspects of their day-to-day living, it becomes “compartmentalized in a separate zone of ... life, and remains unintegrated with ... overall functioning” (p. 4). As a result, despite some clear benefits derived from spiritual practice, it does not fully penetrate one’s life. In this scenario, integral and transpersonally-oriented counselors and psychotherapists generally suggest adding some somatic or emotionally-based psychological work to their clients’ overall path of growth and development, to begin to address the core wounding that is not being transformed through

spiritual practice alone. Despite the ability to access transpersonal states of consciousness or to enter experiences of oneness or absolute love, a mature practitioner may come to see the specific ways that they are not fully developed on the personal, emotional, and relational levels.

When spiritual ideas and language are used to devalue or “move beyond” a person’s actual, embodied experience, they are caught in spiritual bypass. It is very common for practitioners to be hard on themselves when they fall short of their spiritual ideals, when they cannot express in the relative world their conceptual understanding of that which they have realized (Brach, 2004; Masters, 2010b, Welwood, 2002). Those practitioners with a tendency toward depression, for example, arising out of an early environment characterized by misattunement and lacking in validation, can struggle to find their own innate sense of self-worth and self-love. As a natural result of such developmental failures, these practitioners can gravitate like a magnet to transpersonal teachings on “no-self,” for example, as a way of reinforcing their early wounding (Masters, 2010b; Neale, 2012; Welwood, 1984, 2002). These teachings feel right because they have both neurological and psychological correlates in the person’s unresolved emotional makeup (Neale, 2012). “Not only do they feel bad about themselves,” observes Welwood (2011), “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” (p. 5).

Spiritual concepts such as “nonattachment”—while on the one hand pointing to a profoundly advanced state of realization—are easily grabbed onto by those lacking in interpersonal skills. Welwood (2011) has “... often seen how attempts to be nonattached are

used in the service of sealing people off from their human and emotional vulnerabilities” (p. 5). He has observed how self-identifying as a spiritual practitioner can be used as a way of avoiding a depth of personal engagement with others that might stir up old wounds and longings for love. Reflecting personally, Welwood has shared his own pain in seeing a person respond in this way, “maintaining a stance of detachment when underneath they are starving for positive experiences of bonding and connection” (p. 6).

As asserted by Caplan (2009) earlier in this study, spiritual bypassing is active not only in the lives of individuals, but also in groups. For example, Welwood (2011) has observed how spiritual communities can become an arena where practitioners play out their unresolved family issues. Specifically, Welwood describes the ways practitioners project onto teachers and gurus, relating to them as parental figures capable of giving and withholding love. In response, group members will mirror behavior originating in their families of origin in order to win affection, or to rebel against the withholding one. Welwood has also commented on the many ways in which sibling rivalry and competition play out within spiritual communities, where students struggle over being seen as the teacher’s favorite, more lovable than the others, or better able to please the teacher.

Echoing Welwood’s observations, noted group psychotherapy researcher Irvin Yalom (2009, 2010; Yalom and Leszcz, 2005) argues that it is within a vibrant, dynamic interpersonal environment that unresolved, early wounding will most vividly rise to the surface. Spiritual communities are not immune to group process and are often organized around unconscious templates arising from family of origin dynamics. As has been noted earlier in this study, spiritually-informed clinicians have cautioned practitioners about 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” (Welwood, 2011, p. 17).

Welwood (2011) sees interpersonal relationship as the “leading edge of human evolution at this time in history” and notes that although humanity discovered enlightenment thousands of years ago, it still hasn’t brought that illumination deeply into the area of interpersonal relationships. Group dynamics are especially difficult, Welwood alleges, because “they inevitably trigger people’s relational wounds and reactivity” (p. 17).

Meditation and the Expression of Spiritual Bypassing

While research has elaborated on the many benefits associated with a regular mindfulness or meditation practice (Brach, 2011; Davis and Hayes, 2011; Germer and Siegel, 2012; Germer, Siegel, and Fulton, 2005; Goleman, 1996; Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 2005, 2006; 2013; Ryan, 2012; Smalley and Winston, 2010; Wallin, 2007; Wilson and DuFrene, 2011; Wolters Kluwer Health, 2012), clinicians familiar with spiritual bypassing have observed that such practices are also “frequently used to avoid uncomfortable feelings and unresolved life situations” (Welwood, 2011, p. 5). 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. (p. 5)

Masters (2010a, 2010b) has observed that even with advanced meditative practices—where practitioners are dispassionately and calmly observing whatever is arising in their immediate experience—there can be a tendency to not sit *with* difficult emotions, but rather *on* them. In this way, concentrative- or awareness-based meditation practices can be used as a means to

subtly distance a person from previously unresolved emotional material. It is thus critical that those engaged in regular contemplative practice develop as much awareness as possible as to how they might be misusing their practice to avoid unmetabolized wounding. Moreover, Masters (2010b) notes that it requires a mature degree of psychological awareness to notice that this is happening, especially in “real-time” on the meditation cushion. It can easily appear to even an experienced practitioner that they are relating carefully with material arising from the unconscious when in reality they may be using meditative techniques as a way to separate themselves as the “witness” of their experience, thereby not making full contact with it. Whenever a practitioner makes *transcendence* of their personal history a higher goal than *intimacy* with their personal history, Masters (2010b) asserts, they are likely setting themselves up for an encounter with spiritual bypassing.

As Engler (2006) stresses, freedom from personal issues cannot be achieved simply by prescribing more meditation or other forms of contemplative practice. Especially where a person is struggling with matters of trust and intimacy in relationships, turning inward with meditative equipoise is not always the most skillful response. Such interpersonally-rooted material, Engler suggests, must be worked out through relationship itself, rather than through solitary inquiry and practice. Many of these issues, Engler clarifies, simply cannot be resolved “by watching the moment-to moment flow of thoughts, feelings, and sensations in the mind. These problems arise in relationships; they have to be healed in relationships” (p. 45).

Former Buddhist monk Jack Kornfield, who is also a clinical psychologist, shares his personal experience as to how spiritual work, in and of itself, was not sufficient to heal developmental failures at psychological, emotional, and interpersonal levels (Kornfield, 1993a):

Although I had arrived back from the monastery clear, spacious, and high, in short order I discovered, through my relationship, in the communal household where I lived, and in my graduate work, that my meditation had helped me very little with my human relationships. I was still emotionally immature, acting out the same painful patterns of blame and fear, acceptance and rejection that I had before my Buddhist training; only the horror was that I was beginning to see these patterns more clearly now... The roots of my unhappiness in relationships had not been examined. I had very few skills for dealing with my feelings or engaging on an emotional level or for living wisely with my friends or loved ones. (pp. 6 – 7)

Kornfield (1993a, 2001) has written in depth on the importance of both psychological and spiritual work in liberating a person from suffering in all its various forms. In *A Path with Heart: A Guide through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life* (1993a), he reflects that the most profound lesson learned in his many decades of practice is the importance of honoring the personal *and* the universal—the spiritual, transpersonal dimensions of being along with the very personal qualities of one's unique individual human incarnation. Consequently, Kornfield (2001) calls for an "embodied enlightenment" that integrates profound meditative attainment with the insights of western psychotherapy and the challenges of householder life in the area of interpersonal relationship.

After training as a Buddhist monk in the monasteries of Thailand and Burma, Kornfield (1993b), while receiving enormous benefit through the practice of meditation, describes two important discoveries related to spiritual bypassing and the importance of an integrated approach to psychospiritual growth.

First, there were major areas of difficulty in my life, such as loneliness, intimate relationships, work, childhood wounds, and patterns of fear, that even very deep meditation didn't touch. Second, among the several dozen Western monks (and lots of Asian meditators) I met during my time in Asia, with a few notable exceptions, most were not helped by meditation in big areas of their lives. Many were deeply wounded, neurotic, frightened, grieving, and often used spiritual practice to hide and avoid problematic parts of themselves. (p. 67)

When he returned to the West, Kornfield completed a doctoral program in clinical psychology, while continuing to practice and teach meditation. In his experience as a meditation teacher, he observed that “at least half” the students who attended his longer-term retreats were unable to undertake the many hours of “bare attention” meditation practices “because they were holding a great deal of unresolved grief, fear, woundedness, and unfinished business from the past” (1993b, p. 67). Even when spending time with colleagues who had spent many years in intensive meditative practices, including those who had developed what Kornfield deemed “deep insight” into the nature of the Buddha’s most profound teachings, he was struck how many of these same practitioners “continued to experience great difficulties and significant areas of attachment and unconsciousness in their lives, including fear, difficulty with work, relationships wounds, and closed hearts” (p. 67). Over time, it became clear to him how the practice of sitting meditation, “with its emphasis on concentration and detachment, often provided a way to hide, a way to actually separate the mind from difficult areas of heart and body” (p. 67).

When Buddhism first began to take root in the 1960s, Kornfield and his colleagues believed that meditation alone would be enough for practitioners to transcend their painful

psychodynamic history (Gleig, 2012). However, as Gleig cautions, “addressing the personal in practice is essential because whatever meditative heights are reached, one can never fully transcend the personal self” (p. 134). It is the side-stepping of one’s painful psychological and emotional history—all in the name of deepening transpersonal realization—that forms the bedrock of spiritual bypassing. The unfortunate reality remains that a practitioner can achieve profound spiritual experiences and access to genuine transpersonal states of consciousness, while simultaneously acting in unhealthy and neurotic ways in their personal and interpersonal lives.

As reported to Ken Wilber (in Masters, 2010a), psychiatrist and meditation teacher Roger Walsh noted that over 80% of the students who consult with him on meditation retreats are seeking help with psychological issues, not spiritual ones. Similarly, Kornfield (1993a) and Engler (2006) have observed the difficulties students of meditation can have while on retreat, whereby they become deluged by unresolved psychological and emotional material. As cited by Gleig (2012), Engler and his colleague Dan Brown conducted a Rorschach study of meditators before and after a three-month meditation retreat. What they discovered was that around half of participants could not sustain their practice as a result of becoming overwhelmed by challenging developmental conflicts. Engler (2006) summarizes: "Trying to get them to redirect their attention to note simple arising and passing of phenomena is usually unsuccessful. The press of personal issues is just too great" (pp. 23 – 24). Summarizing her research, Gleig (2012) has identified a movement within contemporary Buddhism where both teachers and practitioners are integrating depth psychology into contemplative practice, with the goal of addressing multiple lines of development. In so doing, these practitioners are limiting the expression of spiritual bypassing by providing students with tools across “the

developmental spectrum” (Wilber, 1993). What these teachers and practitioners are discovering, Gleig contends, is that psychological and emotional issues arising out of personal and interpersonal domains of experience are not necessarily addressed by Buddhist practice and, in fact, may even be aggravated by them.

Many researchers have pointed out the ways in which meditation practice might not “be enough” to fully liberate a person from suffering, confusion, or contraction at all levels of being (for example, see Caplan, 2009; Kornfield, 1993a, 1993b; Masters, 2010a, 2010b; Neale, 2012; Welwood, 1984, 2002; Wilber, 1993, 2000, 2007). In the words of Kornfield (1993a) meditation, at best, is “one important piece of a complex path of opening and awakening” (p. 68). Many of these same researchers originally believed meditation to be a “higher” practice, resulting in the realization of deeper and more universal truths, while psychological work—with its emphasis on the personality and personal dramas—was somehow lesser in importance and significance (Kornfield, 1993a). Over time, however, Kornfield (and others) saw that this simply was not the case. Revising his understanding after many years of experience, Kornfield stated that he wished “it worked that way, but experience and the nondual nature of reality don’t bear it out. If we are to end suffering and final freedom, we can’t keep these two levels of our lives separate” (p. 68).

With intensive training in both meditation and psychotherapy, Kornfield was uniquely qualified to speak to issues of spiritual bypassing and to the importance of an integral approach to psychospiritual growth and healing. One of the keys to working skillfully with students and clients, as Kornfield and others have discovered, is to know when to employ psychological methods and when to engage in spiritual work—and how these might interweave in a person’s life and overall development. There are times, for example, when a

Western, developmental approach may be more effective in helping than traditional meditative practice. For example, there are

many areas of growth (grief and other unfinished business, communication and maturing of relationships, sexuality and intimacy, career and work issues, certain fears and phobias, early wounds, and more) where good Western therapy is on the whole much quicker and more successful than meditation. These crucial aspects of our being can't just be written off as "personality stuff." Freud said he wanted to help people to love and work. If we can't love well and give meaningful work to the Earth, then what is our spiritual practice for? Meditation can help in these areas. But if, after sitting for a while, you discover that you still have work to do, find a good therapist or some other way to effectively address these issues. (Kornfield, 1993a, p. 68)

Growing Up Versus Waking Up

One of Welwood's principal assertions is that for Eastern-based contemplative practice to firmly take root in contemporary Western culture, the traditions must "become more savvy" with respect to the dynamics of the Western psyche. Welwood (2011) and Caplan (2009) both allege that the Western psyche is markedly different from the mind of the East, where the great Asian traditions were born and developed. In the process of exploring these very distinct ways of understanding the nature of the self and its place in the larger world, Welwood (2011) put forward an important dialectic, which turns out to be useful in the study of spiritual bypass. Some teachings and practices—namely, those which arose out of developmentally-based, Western psychology—are more geared toward a person's *growing up*, while others—in large part originating out of Eastern, contemplative traditions—are more

focused upon *waking up*. Welwood explains the importance of bringing these two streams together in a comprehensive path of human liberation.

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. (p. 6)

While the fruit of contemplative practice is the realization of awakening, oneness, Self-Realization, or union with God, Welwood (2011) describes the goal of psychological growth as the capacity to engage in *I-Thou* relatedness with others. It is by way of this distinction that Welwood begins to unfold the two streams of development which he refers to as “growing up” (spiritual awakening) and “waking up” (psychological maturity). Through understanding the interweaving of these two approaches, practitioners (and clinicians) are better able to navigate the terrain of spiritual bypassing, which might be seen as the inevitable consequence of a methodology which emphasizes “waking up” at the expense of “growing up.” As a result, then, of unrecognized spiritual bypassing, a practitioner may to some degree “wake up” to his or her true, impersonal, infinite, eternal nature, while simultaneously remaining less than “grown up” (personally individuated and interpersonally skilled) at other levels of development. As a result, the realization of true nature will not be able to flow through the relative vehicle of the human being, in the world of time and space.

The “I-Thou relatedness” that Welwood considers critical to the “growing up” aspect of development originates out of the work of existential philosopher Martin Buber. Buber’s

essential thesis was that it is only when a person is able to relate to another as a subject in their own right that they are engaging in actual relationship (Buber, 2000). Usually, Buber asserted, the other is related to merely as an object arising and appearing in the perceiver's own consciousness. For Welwood (2011), "I-Thou relatedness" 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" (p. 6). Further, Welwood has observed that the capacity for relationship at this level—for "open expressiveness and deep attunement"—is "very rare in this world" [and] especially difficult if a person is relationally wounded (p. 6).

When a practitioner lacks an awareness of the subtleties of spiritual bypassing, otherwise profound teachings can be used to deny the very human side of the spiritual journey (Welwood, 2011). To illustrate, Welwood shares a story of Western Zen teacher profiled in *The New York Times* who was advised by a senior teacher: "What you need to do is put aside all human feelings." When entering psychotherapy decades later, the junior teacher recognized how unhelpful this advice had been. As so many of the clinicians in this study have reported, practitioners can sit for decades in meditation, centering prayer, or immersed in the daily practice of yoga and not necessarily metabolize psychodynamic material left over from their families of origin. This is not to say spiritual practice cannot support deep psychological work, however most transpersonally- and integrally-oriented researchers and clinicians have come to see that "even the best meditators have old wounds to heal" (Kornfield, 1993b).

Further elucidating the two-tiered process of "growing up" and "waking up," Welwood (2002) addresses the necessity of both approaches as a safeguard against the

unchecked expression of spiritual bypassing. By working directly with early conditioning, unexamined beliefs, and maladaptive relational patterning, practitioners do not deviate from the path of spiritual liberation, but rather move toward it. In fact, this kind of psychological clearing

is central to the process of individuation—the development of the genuine individual, who can embody and express the larger dimensions of being in his or her person. In addition to learning how to open and surrender to the divine or ultimate, we also need to understand how the maturation of the genuine individual, at least for Westerners, can help us integral our spiritual realization into the whole fabric of our personal life and interpersonal relations. Another way to say this is that in addition to *waking up* to our ultimate spiritual nature, we also need to *grow up*—to ripen into a mature, fully developed person. (p. xviii)

Spiritual practitioners hear absolute-level teachings on nonattachment, for example, and aspire to “be” nonattached, despite the fact that unresolved emotional wounding remains alive and well within their somatic-neurobiological reality. Confusing nonattachment and disassociation is a common form in which spiritual bypassing can emerge, where practitioners seek to distance themselves from unprocessed emotional material. Welwood (2011) argues 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. (p. 8)

When emotions, feelings, or relational needs are dismissed or seen as inherently “unspiritual,” clear and attuned communication between intimate partners, family members, and those in community of all kinds is impaired (Welwood, 2011). Where emotional sharing is discounted or discouraged—often in the name of spiritual transcendence or nonattachment—the relational life of those involved suffers, leading to a lopsided development and realization.

From Welwood’s perspective as an existential psychologist, feeling is a form of intelligence, “the body’s direct, holistic, intuitive way of knowing and responding” (Welwood, 2011, p. 12). Feeling-intelligence is able to take account of many factors all at once, Welwood explains, unlike the conceptual mind, which can only process one thing at a time. As such, Welwood argues for clarity around distinguishing between what he refers to as “feeling” and “emotion,” the subtlety of which he believes is often missing from the contemplative traditions. Unlike “emotionality,” which he defines as an outward-directed reactivity, feel can help a person to 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” (Welwood, 2011, p. 12).

In some spiritual communities, Welwood (2011) has observed a de-emphasis on taking feelings seriously. In situations where a person becomes triggered by a difficult emotion, for example, they may set it aside prematurely, not willing to honor and explore it, owing to an underlying (and often unconscious) belief that “getting caught” or “distracted” in feelings and emotions is somehow less-than-spiritual. Devaluing the personal and interpersonal domains of experience—while elevating the transpersonal—is a common organizing factor underlying the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing. When a practitioner avoids feelings and emotions, they miss out on a very important opportunity for growth, healing, and transformation. Working

directly with difficult emotions, especially in the context of interpersonal relationship, “helps us develop compassion ‘in the trenches,’ where our wounds are most activated” (Welwood, 2011, p. 12).

One of the most important areas of inquiry for spiritually-oriented counselors, therapists, and teachers is to determine, along with their clients and students, what is most useful at any given time. For example, does a particular situation call for personal healing work? Interpersonal dialogue and engagement? Transpersonal methodologies to access and explore the supra-personal (or spiritual) dimensions of experience? In the language of Buddhism, each of these methods might be seen as “skillful means” (*upaya*) for engaging whatever is most beneficial for a specific person at a particular moment in time. Welwood (2011) notes that the word “compassion” literally means “feeling with.” Further, he explains that a practitioner cannot actually have compassion (for themselves or another) unless they’re first willing to meet the feelings that are there. If instead they make use of spiritual beliefs and practices to avoid this meeting, they will most likely not be able to stay with the suffering of others or otherwise work with them in the most helpful ways.

Much of Welwood’s work has been an extended inquiry and reflection of the nature of personal growth, healing, and transformation, as it manifests through spiritual practice, on the one hand, and psychological work, on the other. Are they the same thing? Do they overlap? Are they completely different? In seeking to understand how the various types of inner work related with one another and came together to offer a comprehensive approach, Welwood (2002) discovered that three primary domains of experience which must be addressed in order for genuine, lasting transformation to occur. He called these the “personal,” the “interpersonal,” and the “supra-personal.” In investigating these three areas, Welwood (2002,

2010) has observed that most human beings tend to spend the majority of their time in one of these realms of experience, with a bias toward it over the others. For example, many who are interested in meditation or other forms of contemplative spirituality are focused upon supra-personal realization, a way to rise above (or bypass) the messiness of the personal and the interpersonal, which is often conceived of as *samsara*, or a realm of continuous suffering (Welwood, 2010). On the other hand, those who are called to psychological work have a deep interest in the personal dimension of experience—working directly with the content of their experience, going more deeply into feelings and emotions, and understanding how their past is affecting their present. They may not be called to move beyond the personal sense of self to the exploration of transpersonal material. Finally, there are those whose primary work is that of relationship—marriage, family, friends; being with others provides the primary expression of meaning in their lives. For Welwood, it is through these three realms of experience that a person grows, heals, and transforms. When a person is caught in spiritual bypass, it is almost always the case that the personal or interpersonal dimensions of experience are being neglected, with the super-personal being overly emphasized. In fact, this lopsided developmental environment may be said to be a breeding ground for spiritual bypassing. In order to realize lasting, authentic psychological and spiritual growth and development, each of these domains must be adequately addressed; if not, spiritual experience and realization can become split off from a practitioner’s personal, emotional life, and from their interpersonal relationships.

One of the common questions which presents to those committed to spiritual practice, as they start to inquire into an integral approach to psychospiritual growth and transformation is: In what way is my practice not enough? Would it be helpful to supplement it with body

work, training in emotional literacy, shadow work, or psychotherapy? In what ways might my practice not provide the tools I need to meet my goals and aspirations? In exploring this area of inquiry, Caplan (2009), Masters (2010b), Welwood (2002, 2010), and Wilber (1993, 2000, 2008) contend that in many ways contemplative practice wasn't "designed" to address each and every critical area of development. As Welwood (2010) argues, meditation was designed for liberation, not necessarily for improving one's intimate relationships or helping them to process early family wounding. As noted earlier, Welwood (2002, 2010) has associated practices of liberation—such as yoga and meditation—with the process of "waking up," in contrast with the "growing up" that occurs with personal and interpersonal work. For Welwood (2010), growing up is about becoming a full human person, while waking up is about going beyond being a person altogether. This dance between the personal, the interpersonal, and the transpersonal is one of the most important inquiries to be undertaken by those seeking authentic psychological and spiritual transformation. When the interrelationship between these domains remains outside of awareness and practice—when it is not honored and explored in embodied way—spiritual bypassing in one of its many forms will almost always follow.

Further unfolding the relationship between therapeutic and contemplative approaches, Welwood (2010) introduced the concepts of "horizontal" and "vertical" work. Here, Welwood argues that the great wisdom traditions are not particularly oriented toward a practitioner "becoming a person" or the process of individuation as it is understood in Western psychological terms. Rather, in his view their purpose is to catalyze liberation from personal conditioning, karma, and the fixation on a self or ego altogether. Consequently, spiritual practices such as yoga and meditation are not necessarily going to help a person understand or

know the personal self in greater depth. That type of exploration falls into the realm of the therapeutic, or what Welwood calls “horizontal work.” Horizontal methodologies involve a process of unfolding the content of the psyche and clarifying it, a process of intimacy rather than transcendence (Masters, 2010b). An overemphasis on transcending personal material can quickly devolve into spiritual bypassing, as this study has suggested. In comparison, meditative and other contemplative practices might be seen as “vertical” in nature—cutting through whatever arises in immediate experience and penetrating its essence. In summary, when it comes to vertical approaches, awareness is primary; content is secondary. The wisdom traditions have referred to the discovery of this essence or this ground of being as “pure awareness,” Buddha-nature,” the “Mind of God” or “nondual consciousness.” The purpose of such meditative awareness is to peer into and reveal the innate nature of consciousness itself, which might be said to be the essence of “vertical” work.

Welwood (1999) makes another orienting distinction between what he refers to as *realizing* spiritual truth and *actualizing* it; skillfully navigating the two is important when exploring the dynamics of spiritual bypassing. Coming to some degree of spiritual realization is a critical milestone along the path, however is relatively easy when compared to the difficulty of fully integrating such realization into the relative world of intimate relationship, family, and work. In exploring these two dimensions of experience, Welwood refers to *realization* as “the direct recognition of one’s ultimate nature” (p. 169). *Actualization*, on the other hand, refers to “how we live that realization in all the situations of our life” (p. 169). He notes that it is

It is one thing to open to the spiritual dimension of being when on a retreat or otherwise during a period of intensive practice, but often something altogether

different to maintain that which has been realized when we are triggered emotionally, faced with unresolved psychological issues, or habitual defensive behavior. In the face of such difficulties—despite profound spiritual realization—many practitioners find that their realization has “barely penetrated their conditioned personality, which remains mostly intact, generating the same tendencies it always has. (pp. 169 – 170).

To the degree that a practitioner makes defensive use of prior realization as a way to avoid the reality of that which is still unresolved, they are caught in spiritual bypass. Even for those who have had powerful realizations which have changed the entire course of their lives, there may still be certain “unexamined complexes of personal and cultural conditioning, blind spots, or areas of self-deception... remain[ing] intact within the pure stream of their realization” (Welwood, 1999, p. 170). In fact, authentic realization can often be used unconsciously to “reinforce old defenses and manipulative ways of relating to others” (p. 170). In order to cut through the many expressions of spiritual bypassing, the light of awareness must be shone brightly into all areas of a person’s somatic, emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal development—in addition to the spiritual itself. As many familiar with the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing have discovered, it is quite possible to enter luminous states of transpersonal awakening, beyond personal conflicts and limitations, without having to address or work through specific psychological issues and conflicts. Yet while this kind of realization can certainly provide access to greater wisdom and compassion, it often does not touch or alter impaired relational patterns which, because they pervade everyday functioning, interfere with integrating this realization into the fabric of daily life (Welwood, 1999).

Further exploring the relationship between spiritual realization, on the one hand, and how that realization flows through the relative world, Welwood (1999) conceives of realization as a movement from “personality to being”—leading toward liberation from the prison of the conditioned self. What is truly transformative, however, is the process of drawing on the realization itself to “penetrate the dense conditioned patterns of body and mind, so that the spiritual can be fully integrated into the personal and the interpersonal, so that the personal life can become a transparent vessel for ultimate truth or divine revelation” (Welwood, 1999, p. 170).

One of the principal expressions of spiritual bypassing occurs when a practitioner takes refuge in the impersonal absolute (whether as God, the Self, or as Buddhanature) as a way to avoid dealing with their personal psychology, feelings, and historical wounding (Welwood, 1999). Welwood refers to this dynamic as “premature transcendence,” noting that such a process can leave behind monstrous shadow elements with devastating consequences to those involved (p. 170). The remedy for such situation—and the antidote to spiritual bypassing in a more general sense—is the integration of work at somatic, psychological, emotional, and interpersonal levels, in addition to spiritual practice. Through attention to multiple developmental lines (Wilber, 2000, 2007), practitioners can “shine the light of awareness into all the hidden nooks and crannies of . . . conditioned personality, so that it becomes more porous, more permeable to the larger being that is its ground” (Welwood, 1999, p. 171).

Welwood (1999, 2002) argues that a complete path of inner development is one that addresses the personal, interpersonal, and transpersonal aspects of a human being. It is only through such an approach that a person can most effectively guard against the varied

expressions of spiritual bypassing. In addition to contemplative practice—such as yoga, meditation, or centering prayer—Welwood (2002) argues that some type of psychological inquiry is extremely helpful for “addressing the unconscious patterns and emotional complexes that interfere with living more authentically, with groundedness, openness, and heart” (p. 19). Where psychological approaches offer a lens through which a practitioner might step back from their experience, derive meaning from it, explore its content, and engage in dialogic inquiry around it, the contemplative approaches “involved a more radical opening to whatever experience was at hand” (Welwood, 2000, p. 86). Over time, Welwood (2000) became curious as to

how these two kinds of self-knowing might work together as part of a larger dialectic of awakening that could include and bring together the two poles of human experience—conditioned and unconditioned, relative and absolute, psychological and spiritual, personal and universal. (p. 90)

The Importance of Psychotherapy and Multiple Developmental Lines

Masters (2010b) has questioned spiritual teachers who are not willing to recommend psychotherapy to students “even when it is obvious that the spiritual practices and teachings they prescribe are not working very well” (p. 10). Masters and others (e.g. Caplan, 2009; Engler, 2006; Kornfield, 1993; Wilber, 2007) encourage spiritual teachers to consider the possibility that more spiritual work may not necessarily address their students’ deeper wounds, developmental needs, and psychological difficulties. Masters (2010a, 2010b) has observed that many spiritual teachers view psychotherapy as a “lesser undertaking” than spiritual work, “little more than wallowing around in one’s personal history” (p. 11). Holding this view, spiritual teachers can end up shaming and “spiritually bullying” their students who

could really benefit for the personal and interpersonal work that is more directly encountered in contemporary forms of psychotherapy.

There is a common view in spiritual communities, Masters (2010b) reports, that psychotherapy should not be needed by those who are deeply committed to spiritual practice. Underlying this view is the deeply-rooted belief that the right effort at the right practice should be enough to adequately respond to any problem or difficulty which might arise. If problems are not taken care of through practice, practitioners often question whether they're "doing it right." Both Masters (2010b) and Wilber (in Masters, 2010a) have observed how many spiritual teachers—especially those with limited or no training in Western psychology—see psychotherapy as a means by which the ego is reinforced, thus ultimately serving as a distraction to spiritual practice. In this situation, where the ego comes to be seen as a hindrance to spiritual realization, the personal and interpersonal domains of experience can get thrown out with the bath water. Masters (2010b) argues that spiritual teachers could best serve their students by educating themselves about the potential of quality psychotherapy and the ways it can serve awakening *and* healing, working together to support one another. When spiritual teachers remain unaware of the importance of psychological work as an adjunct to spiritual practice, they can end up misdirecting their students "who are struggling with issues like emotional expression and regressive behavior" (p. 69). For example,

To tell students that directly expressing anger, regardless of how it is expressed, is not a good thing, as some spiritual teachers are inclined to do, is a disservice to their students, who may then muzzle and mute their anger in the name of spiritual correctness (especially if their early history predisposes them to do so), believing they are sitting with their anger when in fact they are just sitting on it. (pp. 69 – 70)

Masters (2010b) contends that the freedom yearned for by practitioners will never be found in escaping limitation, or in prematurely transcending unresolved psychological and emotional content. As this study has suggested, it is precisely this movement of avoidance that is one of the essential hallmarks of spiritual bypassing. Masters and others have continued to find that it is *through* limitation that the fruits of the spiritual journey can be realized. “In turning toward our limitations and allowing them to serve our awakening,” Masters explains, “we could not find a better team of allies than integrative psychotherapy and spiritual practice” (p. 73).

Despite the profound benefits that can accrue through regular, disciplined meditative or other contemplative practice, practitioners must be willing to see if and how they are using these practices as ways to “tranquilize rather than illuminate and awaken” (Masters, 2010b, p. 14). Masters cautions practitioners to consider the possibility that they may be engaging in spiritual beliefs and practices in a defensive fashion, as a way to split off from painful or disturbing sensations, feelings, and emotions.

Despite their undeniable calming and relaxing effects, meditative practices that sedate the mind can serve a detrimental purpose; feeling greater calm and relaxation is not necessarily always a good thing, particular when it doesn’t coexist with discernment and insight. Tranquilizers, meditative or otherwise, simply numb us, and if we have any investment in being numb, we may be drawn to meditative practices that keep us distant from our pain. As long as we are consciously and skillfully turning toward our pain and difficulties, staying close enough to them to work with them effectively, we will be less easily seduced by the desire to sedate ourselves. (p. 14)

Much of the literature focusing on spiritual bypassing is organized around an important theoretical underpinning: the primary line of defense against spiritual

bypassing's problematic expressions is an approach to growth, healing, and transformation which encompasses "multiple developmental lines." Whether through Wilber's integral model (2000, 2007); Welwood's emphasis on "the personal, interpersonal, and supra-personal" (2002); or Cashwell and colleagues' "Healing at Five Levels" (2007), the underlying notion is that healthy human development must be approached from multiple perspectives; and that in the throes of bypass, spiritual or contemplative approaches are over-emphasized, while somatic, emotional, interpersonal, or cognitive dimensions of experience are neglected.

Clinicians and researchers familiar with the phenomenon have observed that when a basic awareness of spiritual bypassing is lacking, core issues may be misdiagnosed or misunderstood, leading to interventions that ignore—and thus fail to effectively treat—the client at the deepest levels (Cashwell, Bentley, and Yarborough, 2007). Moreover, assessments and treatments which fail to recognize how a client may be defensively using spiritual teachings, beliefs, and practices to avoid important emotional or interpersonal issues will inevitably end up unconsciously further entrenching a client in the grip of spiritual bypass. For example, a client who is struggling with issues of anger may be guided by a spiritually-oriented counselor to transcend or otherwise "move beyond" his anger, all the while assisting the client to "bypass" deeper psychological needs. In this way, a counselor who is not aware of the dynamics inherent in spiritual bypassing unconsciously works in tandem with the client to enable avoidance of the actual reasons underlying his distress. Spiritual bypass

exists in concert with other aspects of functioning, just as our spiritual and earthly selves coexist. Thus, by treating only the psychological maladjustment, or even the

spiritual issues, in isolation from other characteristics of one's personality, we, as professional counselors, risk encouraging both the development and the continuance of bypass. Metatheoretical perspectives that incorporate spiritual functioning as a component of normal developmental processes are needed to foster an integration of all aspects of the self. (Cashwell, Myers, and Shurts, 2004, p. 406)

Spiritual bypass may be conceptualized as an over-emphasis of the spiritual line of development, where other lines remain ignored, blocked, underdeveloped, or even pathological in expression (Wilber, 2000, 2007; Masters, 2010b; Welwood, 2002). Such lopsided development has been observed, as noted earlier in this study, in the lives of dozens of spiritual teachers over the last few decades who, while evidencing profound evolution in spiritual or meditative lines of development, have simultaneously acted in ways that were less-than-profound in areas of interpersonal relationships, unseen power dynamics, and psychosexual development. A fundamental belief that all issues are ultimately “spiritual” can create an environment where emotionally-rooted personal and interpersonal issues become neglected. Poitou (2007) asserts that

Bypass occurs when personal emotional issues are avoided by diverting energy and attention to what amounts to a spiritual tranquilizer, avoiding the problem by ... any activity related to the spiritual or religious that they feel gives them permission to avoid dealing with personal issues, For the individual in a spiritual bypass, all things are of a spiritual nature and any problems can be solved through spiritual means. (p.

6)

The key discovery here is that by engaging clients and students at multiple lines of development, their spiritual realizations can be integrated with important material and issues

at personal and interpersonal levels of experience, “resulting in new experiences of the self and new perspectives on their patterns of behavior, cognition, and feelings” (Cashwell, Myers, and Shurts, 2004, p. 408). From the perspective of traditional approaches to therapy, Cashwell and colleagues (2004) contend that client problems “may be incorrectly assessed and treated in ways that leave their wounds intact while allowing them to function in ways that seem, from an external perspective, to be satisfactory if not spiritually healthy” (p. 407).

Referencing the developmental counseling and therapy approach (DCT) an example of a multiple-line integral psychotherapy, they note that DCT

provides an alternative perspective for dealing with these issues, promoting experiencing of emotional pain from multiple perspectives, with the potential outcome of greater meaning attached to one's internal experience. The outcome of greater self understanding includes insights into the nature of spiritual bypass and the development of new interventions to promote healthy spirituality. (p. 407)

Neale (2013) urges practitioners to consider that human beings are hardwired to avoid suffering at all cost. Therefore, the notion that even spiritual practices and teachings would be used to sidestep the darkest and most painful aspects of human experience should not take anyone by surprise. There is nothing inherently pathological about this, but rather a natural movement to protect oneself from that which is perceived as overwhelming. Accepting that this is the case, how might a new view of spiritual practice provide an environment in which human pain and suffering could be met and held, rather than avoided? Neale asks:

But what if our spiritual practice was grounded in the bedrock of our ordinary human suffering, and transcendence wasn't about overcoming painful experiences as much as it was about transforming our relationship with them? If we could redirect our attitude

and approach in this way, perhaps we would become more adaptable, realistic, and mature, and the reprehensible side effects of spiritual bypassing would significantly decrease. (p. 2)

Neale encourages meditators, for example, to consider that the purpose of their practice may not be to help them to rise above difficult emotions and challenging feelings, but may actually contain information and wisdom for the journey. By opening to this possibility, everything that comes into a practitioner's experience can be seen as an expression of the path itself, taking a person deeper into the nature of who and what they are. Neale suggests that meditators

might benefit from developing an attitude in which all feelings—not just pleasant ones—are invited to arise, with the aim of building a new relationship with emotions that recognizes they have something to teach us, rather than dismissing them because they are fleeting or somehow superficial. While there is always the possibility of becoming obsessed or preoccupied with our feelings (a common reason why meditators don't pay much attention to them), this has less to do with the nature of feelings themselves than with the habit of mind to reify and fixate. Rather than throwing the baby of emotions out with the bathwater, some have argued, we could allow feelings to serve their evolutionary function as messengers, pregnant with meaning, use our critical intelligence to decode that meaning and apply our discriminating awareness to appropriately modulate the extremes of psychic fixation and denial. (p. 2)

Often in meditation, practitioners will move into witnessing their feelings and emotions, but are taught not to engage, for fear they will become identified or caught by them.

Citing the work of Dr. Jeffrey Rubin, Neale (2013) recommends Rubin's advice that meditators take the time "to analyze feelings as they arise rather than suppress or dismiss them," thereby learning about "what our human hopes, fears, needs and wants might be alerting us to" (p. 3). By so doing, the practice of meditation can be used to support psychological and emotional development, rather than thwarting it. From this ground of deep acknowledgment and even honoring emotion and the intelligence it carries, practitioners are then in a more integrated and grounded place to then begin to inquire into the impermanent and insubstantial nature of the energy of emotion itself (Neale, 2013, p. 3). Masters (2010b) cautions against any approach to spirituality which does not incorporate multiple lines of development, especially somatic, psychological, and emotional: "Any spiritual path, Eastern or Western, that does not deal in real depth with psychological issues, and deal with these in more than just spiritual contexts, is setting itself up for an abundance of spiritual bypassing" (p. 4).

A person caught in spiritual bypass will tend to be attracted to a counselor or therapist who incorporates spirituality into their practice (Cashwell, Bentley, and Yarborough, 2007). In cases where the clinician is not aware of the dynamics of spiritual bypassing, they may inadvertently encourage the client's defensive use of spirituality to avoid needed work within psychological, emotional, or somatic lines of development. For those counselors and psychotherapists who are interested in issues of spirituality themselves, they must be on particular guard not to encourage the belief that spiritual work will take care of all of the client's presenting problems and concerns. In this way, the spiritually-oriented counselor must be aware of his or her own countertransference with regard to the scope of spiritual work and where it fits within an overall approach to health, healing, and transformation, especially in

those relationships where counselor and clients hold similar beliefs, belong to the same spiritual community or lineage, or engage in similar spiritual practices.

In Mahayana Buddhism, the “two truths” doctrine describes two levels at which a person can perceive and engage with reality; confusing these levels can lead to a particularly troublesome expression of spiritual bypassing where a practitioner makes use of absolute truth to deny or disparage the relative (Welwood, 2002). Welwood describes absolute truth as “what is eternally true, now and forever, beyond any particular viewpoint” (p. 209).

When we tap into absolute truth, we can recognize the divine beauty or larger perfection operating in the whole of reality. From this larger perspective, the murders going on in Brooklyn at this moment, for instance, do not diminish this divine perfection, for the absolute encompasses the whole panorama of life and death, in which suns, galaxies, and planets are continually being born and dying. However, from a *relative* point of view—if you are the wife of a man murdered in Brooklyn tonight—you will probably not be moved by the truth of ultimate perfection. Instead you will be feeling human grief. (p. 209)

Welwood cites two common ways in which practitioners confuse absolute and relative truth. As a result of this confusion, practitioners can very naturally fall under the sway of spiritual bypassing, making use of spiritual teachings, beliefs, and practices to deny the importance or impact of relative experience. For example,

If you use the murder or your grief to deny or insult the higher law of the universe, you would be committing the relativist error. You would be trying to apply what is true on the horizontal plane of *becoming* to the vertical dimension of *being*. The spiritual bypasser makes the reverse category error, the absolutist error: he draws on

absolute truth to disparage relative truth. His logic might lead to a conclusion like this: Since everything is ultimately perfect in the larger, cosmic play, grieving the loss of someone you love is a sign of spiritual weakness. (Welwood, 2002, p. 210)

This “absolutist error” is one that is committed all-too-frequently by practitioners and communities caught in the grip of spiritual bypassing. In this environment, the expression of genuine, human emotion can be viewed as evidence as to how a person is too “attached to the ego,” “lost in their story,” or otherwise unable to cut through, on the spot, any challenging feeling or emotion which might arise. When a practitioner disparages the personal, human, somatic-feeling dimension of their experience, in favor of absolute or ultimate spiritual truth, they are engaging in spiritual bypass. An integral approach, in contrast, contains room and healing space for the emerging, expression, and eventual dissolving of personal, interpersonal, *and* transpersonal experience. Nothing is excluded (Foster, 2012; J. Foster, personal communication, 2012).

The revelation from the world’s great mystics is that the human person lives within multiple levels of reality simultaneously, and that it will never be possible to reduce the entirety of human experience to a single dimension. The two truths doctrine, utilizing the teachings on absolute and relative nature, is one way of understanding the multiplicity of human experience, and provides a useful scaffolding in which to understand and explore the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing. As Welwood (2002) skillfully describes:

We are not just this relative body-mind organism; we are also absolute being/awareness/presence, which is much larger than our bodily form or personal history. But we are also not just this larger, formless absolute; we are also incarnate as this particular individual. If we identify totally with form—our body, mind, or

personality—our life will remain confined to the known, familiar structures. But if we try to live only as pure emptiness, or absolute being, we may have a hard time fully engaging with our humanity. At the level of absolute truth, the personal self is not ultimately real; at the relative level, it must be respected. If we use the truth of no-self to avoid ever having to make personal statements such as “I want to know you better” to someone we love, this would be a perversion. (pp. 210 – 211)

Welwood (2011) makes a critical distinction between staying with the absolute in the context of contemplative practice and retreat, while remaining skillful and aware of when to focus instead on the relative in everyday, relational life. He cautions practitioners to stay vigilant to the ways that absolute-level teachings can be used to dismiss relative-level phenomena, through teachings such as “everything is empty,” “there is no personal self,” “it is all an illusion,” and so forth. While in the context of practice, these teachings can be quite profound and important to explore to their depth, but the same guidance in another context “could also be used to suppress or deny feelings or concerns that need our attention” (p. 2).

In reviewing the literature on spiritual bypassing and how an integral approach to psychospiritual growth and transformation might serve as a natural response to its unwanted consequences, researchers cannot help but recognize the pioneering contribution of Ken Wilber and his colleagues (Forman, 2010, Ingersoll and Zeitler, 2012; Wilber, 1993, 2000a, 2001a, 2001b, 2007, 2012). Here, I would like to explore, albeit it in a very simplified way, the influence of Wilber’s integral model in understanding and working with spiritual bypass—and how Wilber’s “all quadrants, all levels, all lines” (AQAL) approach can offer clinicians and practitioners an important lens through which to explore the journey of psychological growth, healing, and spiritual transformation. Within the field of Integral Psychology, Wilber

(2000, 2007, 2012) recognizes a dozen or so developmental lines, including cognitive, moral, emotional, psychosexual, interpersonal, kinesthetic, self, values, and needs. The salient point here as it relates to the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing is that a person can be quite evolved in the “spiritual” line of development, however not as developed, at a low level of development, or even pathologically developed in others, for example interpersonal, psychosexual, or emotional/ affective. When a person’s developmental “psychograph” tilts to the spiritual, at the neglect of other important lines and intelligences, the ground is laid for the movement of spiritual bypass. Therefore, by exploring each of the core developmental lines— noting where a person might remain underdeveloped—they are able to begin to work with the unwanted expression of spiritual bypass and its problematic consequences.

A number of researchers and clinicians cited in this study (see, for example, Caplan, 2009; Masters, 2010b; Wilber, 2000, 2007) believe that authentic shadow work is essential for cutting through spiritual bypassing. One of the important contributions of Wilber’s Integral model in approaching the phenomenon of spiritual bypass is its emphasis on understanding of what Carl Jung called “the shadow,” the repository for those aspects of self which are defensively excluded from awareness. Through the use of both theory and experiential exercises, Wilber (1993, 2000, 2007) provides a context by which a person can begin to unmask the unconscious processes which create the shadow, especially as they play out interpersonally in intimate and other relationships. Unfolding this process of shadow and its relevance in psychospiritual work, Wilber (1993) contends that

Those things which most disturb us in other people are really unrecognized aspects of ourselves; our carping criticisms of other people are really nothing but unrecognized bits of autobiography. If you want to know what a person is really like, listen to what

he says about other people... When we survey other people and are horrified by all the evil we “see” in them, we are but gazing unerringly into the mirror of our own souls... The accusations which A hurls at B are embarrassing bits of A’s autobiography. (p. 191)

Each human being has blind spots, Wilber argues, including unwanted tendencies and character traits that they are unable or unwilling to accept. When these parts of one’s self are not owned and taken responsibility for, they are flung “into the environment,” projected onto others and life circumstances more generally. In this process, a person is “blinded by [their] own idealism to the fact that the battle is within and the enemy is much nearer home” (p. 200).

In Wilber’s writings (1993, 2000, 2007), he seeks to demystify the notion of the “shadow” as well as the “unconscious” itself, showing how these dynamics play are less mysterious than they have been presented, and can be identified in simple ways in everyday life. He has argued that the shadow in large part consists of all the memories and feelings that were too intolerable to feel, too threatening to consciously remember, or simply beyond the developing psyche’s capacity to digest. Although repressed, these images, emotions, and bodily sensations remain recorded in the psyche, sometimes reemerging with such vivid clarity that they seem to be occurring in the present. For example, in dreams people are encountered who may no longer be alive, and places from the past that have not been seen in decades, as if frozen in time. Powerful moments of love, fear, and trauma remain etched in the timelessness of the psyche, bundled up within the shadow, waiting to be resurrected and owned. By consciously working with shadow material, Wilber alleges (personal communication, February 15, 2013), practitioners are able to curtail some of the problematic effects and consequences of spiritual bypass.

Masters (2010b, 2013) has referred to spiritual bypass as one of the shadow sides of spirituality, comprised of everything that drove a person to the path other than a genuine wish for spiritual transformation. For example, if by trying to appear “spiritual” to friends and family, a person is seeking to be seen as special or important—as natural as this might be from a developmental perspective—the attitudes and driving forces behind such behavior if often occurring outside conscious awareness. As the spiritual journey is in large part equated with light instead of darkness, practitioners often fall into the trap of assigning a negative connotation to anything which presents in experience as undesirable. In this process, that which is deemed “negative” or “dark” is then equated with “non-spiritual” and standing in the way of spiritual development. As a result, spirituality can then very naturally become yet another way to escape from life rather than a means by which to radically embrace it. Masters (2013) explains:

Some of us may be enamored at the notion that we need to get rid of ego, that we need to transcend ego, rather than simply seeing ego as a natural arising that is not a problem at all once we become intimate with it. In fact, spirituality no more needs to get rid of ego than the sky needs to get rid of its clouds. Some of us may assume that if we’re having a hard time, we’re slipping, we’re getting mostly reactive, getting stuck in relational hassles, we’re not being spiritual. But real spirituality makes room for such difficulties, using them to further our healing and awakening.

In Freud’s *New Introductory Lectures* (1990), he states that the therapeutic intent of psychoanalysis is “to strengthen the ego, to widen its field of perception and enlarge its organization, so that it can appropriate fresh portions of the id. Where id was, there ego shall be” (p. 99). Or, as Wilber (2007) argues, a more literal (and useful) translation from the

German: “Where *it* was, there *I* shall be” (p. 123). Inspired by this assertion of Freud’s, Wilber elucidates the essence of the psychoanalytic process—and of all modern shadow-informed approaches—to re-own those aspects of the ego that have been split off, bring them back into conscious awareness, and to integrate them into a cohesive self structure. Even for those clients working at transpersonal or more overtly “spiritual” states and stages of development, this core work at the level of the ego cannot be ignored or “transcended” prematurely. If sidestepped, practitioners can easily lose contact and awareness with the entirety of the spectrum of consciousness, thereby opening the floodgates to the myriad expressions of spiritual bypassing.

One of the primary ways to curtail the flowering of spiritual bypassing is by including shadow work in any overall approach to personal growth, psycho-emotional healing, and spiritual transformation. The concept of the shadow was formally introduced into the contemporary world by Carl Jung (1976, 1981, 1983), described as those unknown aspects of the unconscious which express themselves through interaction with others and the world. Modernly, “shadow work” has become a core component of an integral approach to psychospiritual development, as outlined by Ken Wilber and other leading transpersonal theorists and clinicians (see, for example, Caplan, 2009; Forman, 2010; Ingersoll and Zeitler, 2012; Masters, 2010a, 2010b; Wilber, 2000, 2007; Wilber, Patten, Leonard, and Morelli, 2008). Neale (2012) asserts that the foundation of successful psychological and spiritual work is the gaining access to, recognizing, compassionately accepting, and skillfully integrating the full range of human experience. As such, Neale echoes other researchers referenced in this study who argue for the necessity of working with the shadow and thereby opening fully to unwanted or otherwise challenging aspects of self which have placed outside awareness.

Caplan (2009), Masters (2010b), Neale (2012), Tift (2011a) and other clinicians have observed that just underneath the surface of conscious experience—despite whatever spiritual realizations which may have accumulated—exist a practitioner’s core vulnerabilities, unmetabolized pain, and some degree of traumatic narrative. In order to effectively work with the dynamics of spiritual bypassing, practitioners must be willing (and helped) to explore everything that is unresolved within, including and especially undigested somatic and emotional pain. As Neale (2012) has observed, these are not the sorts of issues that many practitioners wish to speak about or explore. If they do not take this material seriously, however, it tends not go away on its own. The reality of the situation, as discovered by many researchers and clinicians, is that spiritual practice does not usually dismantle traumatic organization in its entirety (Caplan, 2009, personal communication, January 25, 2013; Corbett, personal communication, March 22, 2013; Jennings, personal communication, March 18, 2013; Kornfield, 1993a, 1993b; Masters, 2010b; Neale, 2012). In the wake of even profound spiritual experience, large portions of practitioners’ trauma and undigested emotional wounding remain alive in their neural network and brain memory. As a result, practitioners continue in subtle way to hold on to their traumatic history and interpretations of who they think they are (Neale, 2012). When practitioners and teachers dismiss the ways in which spiritual practices are not able to touch each dimension of being, they open themselves to the many faces of spiritual bypassing. As Neale (2012) contends, however, it is not actually possible to hide from our brains and nervous systems.

It is an all-too-common belief that committed spiritual practice, especially over long periods of time, will of itself heal old relational wounds. Over the last 50 years, transpersonal theorists and clinicians have discovered that, while contemplative disciplines can help to

provide a context of awareness in which these interpersonal templates and schemas can be explored, there is no guarantee that these patterns will be uprooted through awareness-based disciplines. Caplan (2009) argues that

The imprints we received in relationship to our mothers and fathers, and to a lesser extent our siblings, in the first few years of our lives form the basis of the emotional reality that most of us will carry throughout our adult lives. We would like to believe that ten or twenty years of meditation or spiritual studies would irrevocably alter our emotional patterning, yet the testimony and example of thousands of spiritual practitioners in the Western world demonstrate that it does not. For many of us, one of the valuable fruits of long-term dedicated practice is the appreciation of the depth of emotional wounding to which we remain enslaved, the acknowledgement of which provides a powerful motivation to understand the nature of emotion itself and to learn effective ways of working with it. (pp. 90 – 91)

Both Caplan (2009) and Welwood (2002, 2007) reference a contemporary Indian spiritual teacher, Swami Prajnapad, in elucidating the limitations of contemplative practice to fully penetrate the Western psyche. Caplan notes how Prajnapad came to realize, as he worked over time with Western students, a “dense layer” of emotional wounding which arose out of early experience in a person’s family of origin. This unmetabolized wounding, Prajnapad discovered, blocked his students from accessing the further reaches of their spiritual nature. Even in early environments which provided a relatively adequate measure of validation and attunement, most encountered at least some experiences that were overwhelming for their developing psyches and nervous systems—unable to be processed, metabolized, and integrated into the totality of their being. Caplan (2009) contends that

As children, we were not permitted to experience our feelings in a raw, immediate way—allowing them to arise, be sustained for their natural duration of time while we were held, and then subside within a safe context in which we were understood.

Unable to digest our experience, we contracted around the feeling by employing a variety of defense mechanisms: repressing the feeling, fleeing into fantasy, blaming ourselves or God, or simply numbing ourselves and erecting invisible barriers in our psyche. (p. 92)

Like a knife which can be used to make a lovely dinner or to hurt someone, Neale (2012) analogizes that spiritual practice can function in a similar way. A practitioner can use meditation, yoga, or prayer to uncover the deepest truths about themselves, or to avoid unresolved psychological, emotional, and somatic material from the past. When a person is caught in spiritual bypass, they make use of spiritual truths to prematurely transcend their experience, rather than using it to become more and more intimate with all aspects of who they are (Masters, 2010b). One of the most effective ways a practitioner can begin to “reclaim” these lost pieces of themselves is through working directly with the shadow. Masters (2010b) defines shadow work as “the practice of acknowledging, facing, engaging, and integrating what we have turned away from, disowned, or otherwise rejected in ourselves” (p. 43). While shadow work has emerged out of psychological discoveries since the time of Freud, researchers have noted that it is not significantly taken into account in contemporary spirituality especially, as Masters observes, by those that “marginalize or insufficiently address the psychological and emotional aspects of experience” (p. 43). This is not to say that practitioners and clinicians should expect traditional contemplative study and

practice to do the work of psychotherapy, but to at least be aware of and supportive of it, where appropriate.

For Masters (2010b), one of the most important ways teachers and clinicians can curtail the problematic effects of spiritual bypass is to help clients in a skillful way to embrace those unwanted and previously unmet thoughts, feelings, and emotions. It is this unwanted material that becomes lodged in the shadow, those

qualities which are most often kept in the shadows: that we typically keep in the dark and project onto other, both at the personal and collective level, creating the convincing illusion that such elements don't belong to us. Exposing this illusion and reclaiming the rejected elements of our being is the essence of shadow work. This practice asks a great deal of us, including an emotional openness and transparency that may be largely foreign to us. If we are genuinely engaged in such work, we will likely feel very uncomfortable at times, as old wounds surface and our sense of identity shifts in unexpected or challenging ways, perhaps asking for authentic answers to the question of who and what we actually are. (Masters, 2010b, p. 44)

Shadow work is not generally very pleasant, as it requires direct confrontation with those aspects of self that have previously been excluded from awareness. When engaged in spiritual bypass, this process of going into the shadow is one that is often avoided, or at least greatly diminished. Masters (2010b) contends that shadow work is not a neat and tidy process and one that involves a real willingness on the practitioner's part to get messy and to set aside many conceptions about the nature of the spiritual journey. Entering into the shadow exposes the pain we've been fleeing most of our life; the psychoemotional breakdowns it catalyzes are the precursors to hugely relevant breakthroughs; the doors it opens are

doors that have shown up year after year in our dreams, awaiting our entry. Real shadow work not only breaks us down, but breaks us open, turning frozen yesterday into fluid now. (Masters, 2010, p. 45)

When engaging in authentic shadow work, it is important to stay close to immediate, lived experience and to resist the temptation to stand back and “observe” the arising of challenging emotional material from the distance of a witness. While accessing the witness state of consciousness is a profound and useful realization in the meditative traditions, it can be counterproductive when engaging in deep emotional work. It is by learning to become intimate with even the darkest regions of the psyche, however, that a person can enter into the alchemical process of psychological transformation. Masters (2010b) urges practitioner to resist the temptation to engage in shadow elements from an emotionally safe distance, but rather to look it directly in the eye. Getting up close

to a particular shadow element is every bit as important as witnessing it and relating to it. This is often quite an emotionally rocky ride, especially given that we may find ourselves without our usual adult skills, at least for a time, because the wounded child in us has surfaced to such a degree that we are looking through those eyes and feeling those feelings. The key is to get as close as possible to that part of ourselves without getting lost in that old worldview, staying emotionally raw even as we name and illuminate what is occurring. When we skillfully meet our wounding and can understand its context, lucidly connecting our past and present, our healing is well underway. Our shadow is then no longer in the dark. Courage deepens. Now the fire supplies not just heat but also light. (Masters, 2010b, pp. 46 – 47)

Integrating shadow work into an overall approach to psychospiritual growth and transformation can be an effective way to guard against the unchecked expression of spiritual bypass. As this study has suggested, when practitioners focus exclusively on spiritual or transpersonal levels of development, important material from the personal and interpersonal domains tend to remain frozen and unmetabolized, eventually manifesting in unconscious and problematic ways. When engaging in authentic shadow work, a practitioner is not able to utilize cognitive or spiritual realization to “override, repress, or trivialize emotion” (Masters, 2010b, p. 48). Going deeper into one’s experience means, in part,

fully encountering and fully feeling our pain, entering and moving through it with open eyes and heart, becoming more and more intimate with it. Once we are well on our way to doing this, giving voice to a particular shadow element will no longer be from a “safe” or emotionally removed distance, and will therefore carry much more authenticity. Its cries will be our cries, its reaching will be our reaching, its rejection by us now just a piece of history, a souvenir of a more fragmented time. (Masters, 2010b, pp. 48 – 49)

Authentic shadow work requires attention, care, and awareness at all levels of being, Masters (2010b) asserts, “incorporating ... physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and social dimensions” (p. 49). For many transpersonally-oriented researchers and practitioners, psychological work is essential to an integral approach to psychospiritual growth, even if a given practitioner’s goal is explicitly stated as spiritual in nature, e.g. awakening, enlightenment, Self-Realization, or God-Realization. Masters clarifies that it is not conventional talk-therapy that will serve an effective crucible through which this necessary psychological work can be completed. Rather, he calls for an approach to psychotherapy

which values and honors emotional life, is attuned to the somatic dimension of human experience, while simultaneously open to the spiritual and transpersonal domains. For example, certain types of bodywork, Masters alleges, “intuitively and sensitively done in conjunction with emotional opening and therapeutic direction and insight, is highly useful in working with shadow material, not only because it works, but also because it usually works in a short time” (p. 49).

One of the reasons that many spiritual teachers do not recommend shadow work or other emotionally-based forms psychotherapy is simply due to the fact that they are not sufficiently familiar with shadow territory in their own lives (Masters, 2010b). As a result, these teachers may end up marginalizing such work as they do not recognize its value, thereby doing their students—and themselves—a disservice. Often when a student comes to a teacher struggling with a psychologically or emotionally-rooted difficulty, if the teacher is not familiar with the subtleties of psycho-emotional work themselves, the student will be directed simply to “practice harder,” to pray or meditate more, or to engage in deeper self-inquiry. For example, the student may be guided to simply observe or witness the difficult material as it arises, a common practice in the meditative traditions. Kornfield (1993), Masters (2010a, 2010b), and Wilber (2007) have cautioned against a simplistic understanding of these dynamics, however, and have argued dispassionately observing the painful feelings, challenging sensations, and difficult emotions is not always enough to liberate them. It is important that if a person is unable to access and work skillfully with unresolved shadow material through contemplative practice—which is often the case—that other options, such as psychotherapy, be seriously considered (Masters, 2010b).

When the Eastern contemplative traditions first came to America, during the time that humanistic and transpersonal psychologies were being developed, it was commonly believed that these practices would completely eradicate shadow issues (Wilber, in Masters, 2010a). While much evidence and personal experience has suggested that this simply isn't the case, Wilber notes that it is nonetheless an "astonishingly widespread notion." Over the last few decades, however, these early beliefs have proved to be overly simplistic and idealistic. Through the falling of many spiritual teachers—as well as the difficult personal journeys of many leading researchers and teachers—it has been acknowledged by many that not even decades of intensive spiritual practice is likely to completely eliminate unconscious, shadow elements. Contemplative practice, Wilber (in Masters, 2010a) asserts, is simply not able to "clear out the basement entirely" and that it is spiritual practice combined with emotionally-literate shadow work which provides the ground for an experience of "genuine maturity." The hard-won truth discovered by many of these early theorists, practitioners, and clinicians was that spiritual practice, on its own, while tremendously beneficial in so many ways, does not (for most) adequately address the shadow at the depth required for an integrated realization.

The goal of an integral spirituality, as Wilber asserts (in Masters, 2010a), is to be in touch with *all* aspects of being, including the authentic, individuated, finite self—as well as the infinite, limitless, boundless Self. For those committed to a journey which addresses the relative and the absolute dimensions of being, all methods and approaches must be considered, not merely the overtly "spiritual" ones. It is critical, if practitioners and clinicians wish to curtail the limiting effects of spiritual bypassing, that they cultivate awareness of and a willingness to work at multiple lines of development (Wilber, 2000, 2007). To leave any core domains of experience out of the exploration—including the lowly, the unwanted, the

dark, the shameful, and the angry—will likely result in an impartial realization and expression of an authentic human spirituality.

Spiritual Bypassing, Anger, and Authentic Compassion

One of the most common expressions of spiritual bypassing occurs in the area of anger (Masters, 2010a, 2010b; Neale, 2012). For many on the spiritual path, anger has become *the* representative of what must never be felt—and certainly never expressed. The underlying implication is that if anger is present, the practitioner must be failing on some level; the mere presence of anger is equated with the need for deeper and more spiritual practice (Masters, 2010a). Often, in the name of absolute spiritual teachings, a practitioner will avoid relating directly with unprocessed anger, concerned that engaging with it will only reinforce the tumult within. In working with a woman who was making use of spiritual teachings in this way, Welwood (1999) observed:

While the understanding [of the empty nature of anger] may be true in the absolute sense and be valuable for helping dissolve attachment to anger, it was not useful for this woman at this time. Instead, she needed to learn to pay more attention to her anger in order to move beyond a habitual pattern of self-suppression, to discover her inner strength and power, and to relate to her husband in a more active, assertive way. (p. 72)

Through application of the two-truths doctrine as described earlier in this study, Welwood (2002) explains how he works with spiritually-oriented clients who are caught in spiritual bypass as related to their experience of anger. From the relative side, the work is to help a person acknowledge their anger and to relate to it more fully. It does not help to pretend it's not there or to use spiritual teachings to repress it or not experience it directly. From the

absolute, however, if we turn toward the anger and experience its essential qualities, at the somatic-sensation level of experience, we might come to see, using Buddhist language, that it is ultimately empty of any inherent existence; it is merely a wave arising in the ocean of consciousness, without any solidity or inherent meaning (Foster, 2012; Welwood, 2002).

In instances of spiritual bypassing, a person can impose spiritual truths and accomplishments upon themselves that “lie far beyond [their] immediate existential condition” (Welwood, 1999, p. 72). For example, Welwood’s client noted above made an attempt to move beyond her anger and into a state of compassion, sidestepping it and not relating directly to its energetic, somatic, and emotional qualities. In Welwood’s observation, such attempts “were not entirely genuine because they were based on rejecting her own anger” (p. 72). As a general principle, spiritual practitioners are guided to let go of anger and to be kind, compassionate, and forgiving. Of course, these qualities are praised and cultivated cross-culturally in all spiritual traditions and the benefits of these states of consciousness are innumerable and worthy of deep honor and respect. When a person becomes caught in or overly identified with their anger, it can lead to devastating consequences and further entrenchment in states of suffering. Welwood (2010) cautions, however, that it is common to make use of spiritual beliefs and practices to repress anger, to disown and dissociate from it, all in the name of the highest spiritual teachings. Practitioners fall down a slippery slope into spiritual bypassing when they do not own what is actually moving through them. It is quite possible, as Welwood (2010) and Tift (2011a) suggest, that anger (and other intense affective experience) contains the seed of intelligence within it, offering guidance and important information for the practitioner to encounter. Given this radical possibility, therapists and teachers might help their clients and students to meet their anger, to learn from it, and to

discover the ways in which it might be carrying critical information for their growth and development. Welwood (2002) clarifies that it is not that anger need be acted out—in an overly aggressive way, shouting and screaming—but rather that it be allowed to reveal itself, to unfold, illuminate, and transform within the practitioner’s experience (Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood, 2000). In this way, practitioners can learn to become intimate with even their most challenging emotions, a process which goes a long way toward curbing the expression of spiritual bypass. Once anger is allowed into consciousness, met with loving awareness, and explored intimately, it is then able to be integrated into the entirety of one’s being, no longer split off into the shadows, where it will inevitably come into expression in the most unexpected ways.

When a practitioner is able to meet even the most difficult thoughts, feelings, and emotions—in an environment of curiosity and lovingkindness—a natural process of letting go can emerge. This is not a letting go in a conceptual way, in an attempt to follow a particular teaching, but rather a natural unfolding which occurs as a result of allowing what is there to unfold without interference and resistance. Welwood (1999) maintains that in most religious traditions, practitioners are admonished to not be angry, but rather to be generous, to be devoted, to turn the other cheek, and to be compassionate. While these are important principles to aspire to, the reality for many is that these ideals run counter to their direct experience; inside themselves, they *do* feel angry (or jealous or fearful and so forth). In the face of this contradiction, practitioners tend to “stuff” the anger, to repress it, or to “spiritualize” it away. Welwood cautions that this reaction lays the ground for spiritual bypassing, where teachings and practices are followed, but they are not fully integrated into the entirety of the practitioner’s life. Welwood refers to this dynamic as a “shadow problem,”

where aspects of the self are denied and dissociated from, only to emerge at a later time in unconscious ways. Welwood notes that

Spiritual teachers often exhort us to give up selfishness and aggression, but how can we do this if our habitual tendencies arise out of a whole system of psychological dynamics that we have never clearly seen or faced, much less worked with? People often have to feel, acknowledge, and come to terms with their anger before they can arrive at genuine forgiveness or compassion. That is relative truth. (pp. 72 – 73)

One of the challenges arising out of the bypassing of anger is when certain absolute-level spiritual teachings confirm a schema or template derivative of a developmental injury suffered as an infant or young child (Welwood, 1984, 2002). For example, spiritual teachings such as “just put down the ego,” “think about someone other than yourself,” “convert the anger to love”—while deeply true and transformative at the absolute level of experience—often end up habituating a person to a maladaptive storyline or to their own traumatic organization (Neale, 2012). Because these dynamics usually remain outside conscious awareness, authentic feelings such as anger, fear, and resentment are made into enemies that the practitioner must now go to war with (Foster, 2012). In this way, spiritual teachings replay experience from earlier times where embracing certain feelings required tremendous risk of potential misattunement from early caregivers. Rather than opening to such feelings—moving toward and exploring them—they are avoided or bypassed, in the name of spiritual process.

As both Neale (2012) and Masters (2010b) have observed, anger is the least accepted emotion in many spiritual communities; it is simply not allowed. When the very natural somatic-emotional experience of anger arises—which it inevitably does for most—those caught in spiritual bypass are presented with two potential responses: to disperse the energy,

thereby acting the emotion out; or to suppress it, thus relegating its energies into the unconscious, where it may express at a later time in the form of unwanted shadow material. By choosing the latter approach—a common one for the anger-phobic practitioner who has received teachings on the destructive nature of so-called “negative” emotions—the conditions are created for the unprocessed material to express in unconscious ways, often in the form of aggression toward oneself (Neale, 2012).

Just because the anger is repressed or otherwise set aside, Neale (2012) explains, it does not disappear. The “middle way” response to the arising of anger is to turn toward it, open and become intimate with it, resisting the habitual tendencies to suppress or act it out. This is the contemplative approach that is advocated in most transpersonal forms of psychospiritual work (Masters, 2010b; Tift, 2011a; Welwood, 2002). As noted earlier, many practitioners have been habituated, since the time of early childhood, to fear or suppress anger, believing that if it is truly allowed in and met directly that it will destroy them or otherwise cause them to do something crazy (Neale, 2012). What many contemplative-oriented practitioners and clinicians have discovered, however, is that within the world of feeling and emotion is a tremendous intelligence—and even creativity (Tift, 2011a, 2011b; Welwood, 2002, 1984; Neale, 2012). When a person is able to stay with the arising of experiential intensity—not falling prey to the habituated tendencies to act it out or repress it—it is possible to discover the intelligence, and the information, which resides within. From a more meditative perspective, the emotion is able to then reveal itself to be of the fundamental nature of empty space, luminous and alive with energetic qualities that the practitioner can work with as skillful means in relating to their own and others’ experience.

As Masters (2010b) asserts, anger has been made to be unspiritual. Therefore, if a practitioner finds themselves experiencing anger, they are often driven to repress it, so as not to be condemned by their teacher, community, or themselves. In spiritual bypassing's "cosmology," Masters contends, anger is "heavy-duty negativity, about as far from love and enlightened living as you can get; something that the spiritually advanced do not express" (p. 75). He notes how

Getting openly angry—or even being angry—is considered to be spiritually incorrect in more than a few circles, especially in those that view anger as a hindrance or impurity (this being true of most Buddhist teachings, for example). According to this thinking, anger is no more than aggression or hostile reactivity; it is something that needs to be converted into a "better" state, such as compassion. But, in truth, anger and compassion can coexist; wrathful compassion is not an oxymoron. (Masters, 2010, p. 75)

When caught in spiritual bypass, practitioners seek to transcend the experience of anger, to move beyond it and into the expression of those qualities and characteristics which are more acceptable, e.g. kindness, forgiveness, and compassion. For many practitioners, it is simply not natural or acceptable to explore their anger directly, as it is often viewed as "a sign of negativity or spiritual slippage" (Masters, 2010b, pp. 76 – 77). It is important for practitioners to discover, however, that it is not the mere presence of anger that is problematic, but rather how a person "uses" or relates to it. For example,

Do we blame our anger for clouding or befuddling our reason—pleading victims to our passions being one of our oldest alibis—or do we assume responsibility for what we do with it? Do we turn our anger into a weapon, hiding our hurt behind its

righteously pumped-up front, fueling and legitimizing our defensiveness, or do we instead keep it as transparent and permeable as possible, remaining vulnerable even as we allow its full, appropriate expression? Do we use our anger to get even, to score points, to overpower, or to out-debate? Or do we use it to deepen or resuscitate our intimacy with our partner, to compassionately flame through pretense and emotional deadwood? (Masters, 2010b, p. 77)

In confronting the expression of spiritual bypassing as it relates to the experience of anger, practitioners must learn not to reject anger outright, but rather to pay close attention to it, explore its subtleties, and learn from its messages. Masters encourages practitioners to cultivate intimacy with their anger, which runs counter to many spiritual teachings. He advocates

Getting close to its heat, its flames, its engorged intensity, without losing touch with our basic sanity, asks much of us. But if we do not ask—and ultimately demand—this engagement of ourselves, we will surely miss knowing not only the heat of anger’s fire, but also its light. As much as anger can injuriously burn, it can also illuminate; it all depends on what kind of relationship with anger we choose to cultivate. We can treat anger as an ally, an enemy, an inconvenience, or a means of deepening intimacy – it’s our choice. We’re not here to outgrow anger but to outgrow our dysfunctional ways of using it, and this begins with knowing anger well. (Masters, 2010b, pp. 77 – 78)

In working directly with anger, practitioners must observe carefully the ways it arises and expresses in their lives, coming to know the specific combination of sensations, thoughts, feelings, and emotions which are its foundation (Masters, 2010b). In distinguishing between

anger and aggression, Masters has observed that aggression is the result of *avoiding* anger and associated underlying feelings of woundedness and vulnerability. Anger, for Masters, can be lit up from within by kindness, compassion, and clear awareness, and “can function in the service of compassion and vulnerability” (p. 79).

When approached in a more holistic an integral way—as a catalyst for further growth and development, rather than an obstruction to it - anger might be seen as “moral fire” (Masters 2010b, p. 83). Anger is not inherently destructive or constructive, but becomes so through the ways it is related with and responded to. Masters guides students and practitioners to explore the possibility of what he calls a “clean” anger in which “passion and compassion coexist” (p. 83). He urges practitioners to respect the energetic movement of anger and to cease viewing it as a problem or hindrance on the path; when it is met directly and its energy harnessed, it provides fuel for psychological, emotional, and spiritual development. He explains:

Anger that is denied compassion easily becomes anger delivered, however indirectly, without compassion. But how do we bring compassion to our anger? To neither suppress nor indulge in our anger is a far from easy undertaking; the challenge is to meet our anger with mindfulness and genuine caring. First of all, we need to approach anger without aversion, which means becoming more intimate with whatever judgment we might have toward it. The degree of caring with which we approach our anger is the degree of caring we can bring to the anger we express to others. Not to explore anger, not to be intimate with it, is a dangerous choice, leaving us cut off from the positive potential of the very energies that can so easily become twisted into aggression, hatred, and mean-spiritedness. Not to know our anger is to keep ourselves

in the dark, in danger of becoming aggressive or violent instead of simply angry.

(Masters, 2010, pp. 83 – 84)

Moreover, Masters (2010b) has observed a common belief amongst practitioners that as a person evolves and awakens spiritually that anger will inevitably disappear, that it will once and for all be eradicated from one's experience altogether. In Masters' experience, however, this is not the case; rather, as a person further develops spiritually anger may become "even more fiery, but burn more and more cleanly, clearing the temple of what does not belong there and serving the well-being of all involved" (p. 87). He admonishes practitioners to become more and more aware of the ways they bypass anger and to "aspire to something far more life-giving; a clean, conscious, fully alive anger, anger that both flames and bleeds, anger with heart" (p. 87).

The virtue and practice of compassion is praised by all religions and spiritual systems, the cultivation of which remains paramount for the contemplative traditions. It is important, however, to inquire into the nature of this energy and how much of what is called "compassion" may in fact be an expression of spiritual bypassing in disguise. Whether described as "blind compassion" (Masters, 2010b) or as "idiot compassion" (Chodron, 2007; Trungpa, 2008), when in the throes of spiritual bypass, ideas and behaviors which appear compassionate on the outside can in actuality be ways of avoiding unresolved psychological and emotional material within. When a person is driven by such "blind compassion," they cut everyone far too much slack, making excuses for others' behavior and making nice in situations that require a forceful NO, an unmistakable voicing of displeasure or a firm setting and maintaining of boundaries. These things can and often should be done out of love. But blind compassion keeps love too meek, sentenced to wearing a kind

face. This is not the kindness of The Dalai Lama, rooted in courage, but rather a kindness rooted in fear. And not just the fear of confrontation, but also the fear of not coming across as a good or spiritual person. Blind compassion reduces us to harmony junkies, and trapping us in unrelenting positive expression. (Masters, 2010b, pp. 21 – 22).

Given the importance of compassion on the path of psychospiritual growth, it is helpful for practitioners to explore the ways that the understanding and practice of compassion might be related to the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing (Masters, 2010b). Or, in other words, how does the expression of something as pure as compassion become tainted or used in a defensive or unconscious manner? To understand the nature of compassion, practitioners must also cultivate an awareness of its “imitators,” of those activities which appear to be an expression of authentic compassion on the outside, but are actually ways of avoiding conflict, fear, anger, or other unwanted emotions. Some of these imitators of compassion include “pity (a condescending, fear-infused, let’s-keep-the-suffering-others-at-a-distance concern), and blind compassion (an exaggeratedly tolerant, confrontation-phobic, indiscriminating attempt at caring)” (Masters, 2010b, p. 21). Further, Masters argues that when “anger is confused with aggression, forcefulness with violence, judgment with condemnation, caring with exaggerated tolerance, and moral maturity with spiritual correctness,” the result is what he refers to as “blind compassion” which, upon investigation, is revealed to not be compassionate at all (p. 22). One important argument made by Masters (2010b) is that there are times when deeply compassionate behavior and expression must be fiery; compassion is not always expressed through wearing a smile or being “nice.” There are times, especially in interpersonal relationship, when the most compassionate action is to firmly set a boundary, express a need,

or to otherwise challenge the other. Masters makes clear that he is not advocating some sort of “mindless” anger, in the confrontation or boundary-setting process, but an anger that is conscious, clean, and caring. The expression is still “anger,” but it is an anger which arises from the heart.

What Neale (2012) has observed in working with yogis and meditators in psychotherapy is that compassion can often be mistaken for codependency, the latter of which he defines as “taking care of someone to your own detriment.” Neale encourages practitioners to look carefully at what is inspiring their acts of “compassion” and what their intentions truly are. Perhaps, for example, a person is acting in a compassionate way as a result of some unexamined need, out of fear, or shame. If a person is focused upon another’s need in order to cover over some unmet feeling or pain inside, what is being practiced may not actually be true compassion. Within nearly all of the great contemplative traditions, teachings are given which admonish practitioners to give selflessly to others, even to the giver’s own detriment. Moreover, practitioners are cautioned to set aside their own needs when giving to another; for if they consider themselves in the act, their giving may not be pure and can easily become tainted by personal, egoic dynamics. In order to guard against spiritual bypass infiltrating the practice of kindness and compassion, Neale (2012) argues that a practitioner’s own needs must be recognizing, resisting the habit amongst spiritual aspirants to dismiss personal needs as somehow indicative of a lack of realization. There is a pervasive, albeit often unconscious belief in spiritual communities that realized practitioners shouldn’t have needs (Neale, 2012; Welwood, 2002). In these communities, to have needs is to be “lost in the ego,” self-centered, and a movement in the opposite direction of love and awakening. The reality for most, however, is that they do have personal needs—food, water, clothing, shelter, affection,

attention, connection, and so forth. Neale (2012) explains that it is not problematic or in any way “less-than-spiritual” to have and assert needs, as long as a practitioner can be honest about it. What happens, however, when under the grip of spiritual bypassing, is that having needs is seen as narcissistic and self-absorbed. As a result, when genuine, human needs arise, they simply get buried and repressed, destined to express in other, less conscious ways.

It is important to distinguish between compassion and what Tibetan meditation master Chogyam Trungpa (in Chodron, 2007) called “idiot compassion.” Similar to what is known in psychological language as “enabling,” idiot compassion involves the “general tendency to give people what they want because you can't bear to see them suffering” (Chodron, 2007). When caught in the grip of idiot compassion, the motivating factor is not to authentically benefit another, but to avoid the anxiety generated in the bearing of another's suffering. In other words, what appears as compassionate on the outside has very little to do with the other, but rather what the practitioner is facing within himself. Chodron encourages practitioners to cultivate the willingness to sit in the uncomfortable feelings that often arise in the wake of true compassionate action, for example when a situation calls for the practitioner to stand up for themselves and to not allow a friend or loved one to act in a destructive and aggressive way. She explains:

It's the compassionate thing to do for yourself, because you're part of that dynamic, and before you always stayed. So now you're going to do something frightening, groundless, and quite different. But it's the compassionate thing to do for yourself, rather than stay in a demeaning, destructive, abusive relationship... And it's the most compassionate thing you can do for them too. They will certainly not thank you for it, and they will certainly not be glad. They'll go through a lot. But if there's any chance

for them to wake up or start to work on their side of the problem, their abusive behavior or whatever it might be, that's the only chance, is for you to actually draw the line and get out of there... We all know a lot of stories of people who had to hit that kind of bottom, where the people that they loved stopped giving them the wrong kind of compassion and just walked out. Then sometimes that wakes a person up and they start to do what they need to do. (para. 4)

Conclusion

Over the last 40 years, as Eastern and other contemplative spiritualities have shared the psychospiritual landscape with psychodynamic, somatic, cognitive, humanistic, and transpersonal modes of personal growth and psycho-emotional healing, the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing has been investigated in a more overt way. The purpose of this literature review has been to explore those direct sources which address the phenomenon as well as literature which addresses the greater context in which these dynamics arise and affect the lives of those committed to spiritual growth. In particular, it is this author's sincere hope that this review has offered some perspective, insight, and skillful ways for clinicians and teachers of all kinds to better serve the populations they work with, encouraging and catalyzing a mature and authentic approach to a life with less suffering, greater awareness, and a flowering of the human heart.

CHAPTER 3—RESEARCH METHODS

Overview/ Approach

Data was collected and analyzed through personal interviews with 14 leading theorists, writers, and clinicians familiar with the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing, including John Welwood, the psychologist who coined the term in 1984. Additionally, data in the form of personal observation will be reported by the author, gathered over a seven-year immersion in the phenomenon, via self-observation and through hundreds of hours of dialogue with psychologists, psychotherapists, spiritual teachers, and practitioners from contemplative traditions around the world.

Data Collection

Over the last seven years, the author has collected data through two primary sources: 1) through phone interviews with 14 expert theorists, researchers, and clinicians; and 2) through the use of self-observation, participant-observation, formal (clinical) interviews, informal interviews, dyadic dialogues, and group processes, gathering hundreds of pages of data in the form of written notes. Such data will be analyzed and presented in an exploration of the qualities and essences which make up the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing, how practitioners and clinicians might become more aware of its functioning in their lives and in the lives of their clients, and recommendations for responding to the problems which a lack of awareness of the phenomenon may engender.

Research Design and Subjects

As part of the study, this researcher will draw on data collected through interviews and dialogues with hundreds of subjects, over the course of seven years in personal, business, and clinical settings. The study will also focus upon the author's own lived,

experiential observations of the phenomenon under investigation and its many expressions in his own life and in the lives of interviewees, clients, professional colleagues, and fellow travelers. Finally, the study will analyze and present data gathered from interviews with the following 14 writers, theorists, and clinicians familiar with the phenomenon and its importance in the fields of psychological and spiritual growth: John Welwood, PhD; Jack Kornfield, PhD; Ken Wilber; Tara Brach, PhD; Mariana Caplan, PhD; Mark Forman, PhD; Robert Augustus Masters, PhD; Miles Neale, PhD; Lionel Corbett, MD; Craig Cashwell, PhD; Ingrid Mathieu, PhD; Pilar Jennings, PhD; Lama Palden, MA, LMFT; and Bruce Tift, MA, LMFT.

Summary

Chapter 3 outlined the research methodology that will be employed in this study, that of a phenomenological analysis of spiritual bypassing—the defensive use of spiritual ideas, beliefs, and practices—as it was studied by the author over a seven-year period.

Chapter 4 will present the results and the analysis of the research.

CHAPTER 4 - RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Overview

Chapter 4 shall discuss and analyze the study's hypothesis, which is stated below.

Hypothesis

What is the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing—its essences, forms, and consequences—and what is the nature of an effective, skillful, and integral response to the presence of spiritual bypassing in the lives of contemporary spiritual practitioners?

Results and Analysis

The data which comprise the study's results was derived from 14 interviews, conducted between January and May of 2013, with expert psychologists, psychotherapists, and spiritual teachers familiar with the nature and dynamics of the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing. Each of the interviewees has researched and written in the area of the phenomenon under investigation and has also explored its movement in their own lives and/or in the lives of their clients and students. Interviewees include Dr. John Welwood, the clinical psychologist who coined the term “spiritual bypassing” in 1984, Dr. Robert Augustus Masters, who wrote the only full-length, published book on the topic, and the following teachers, writers, and clinicians: Dr. Mariana Caplan, Dr. Jack Kornfield, Dr. Tara Brach, Ken Wilber, Lama Palden Drolma, Dr. Miles Neale, Bruce Tift, Dr. Craig Cashwell, Dr. Mark Forman, Dr. Pilar Jennings, Dr. Lionel Corbett, and Dr. Ingrid Mathieu.

General Comments

According to Mariana Caplan (personal communication, January 25, 2013), spiritual bypassing is generally described as “the ways that people use spiritual practices, processes, ideas, and concepts to avoid dealing with themselves—with developmental tasks, with self-

esteem, with life [and] with relationships.” Spiritual bypassing involves all of the ways that a person can make use of spiritual practice to separate—from themselves, from others, from life, and from truth itself. Over the course of her teaching and research in the area of yoga and transpersonal psychology, Caplan has come to see first-hand the many faces of spiritual bypassing, and its nearly universal presence in the lives of contemporary spiritual practitioners. She has observed that learning about spiritual bypassing can be a “key awakening” for practitioners as it provides language and a framing for an experience that many recognize intuitively. As a person learns the language and the conceptual underpinnings of spiritual bypassing, they are then better able to start to see in an experiential way how the phenomenon might be playing out in their own experience. It is of course this insight and direct seeing that provides the foundation for working with spiritual bypass and its potential problematic consequences.

While greater awareness of the phenomenon provides great benefit in the lives of the practitioners, Caplan (personal communication, January 25, 2013) cautions that as the concept of spiritual bypass becomes more prevalent in contemporary discourse that practitioners can “shrug it off,” assuming they already know what it is and how it might be present (or not) in their lives. In Caplan’s experience, however, the phenomenon unfolds in degrees of subtlety and nuance, traveling with practitioners through all stages of their journey: it is not something that a person discovers in one moment of time, applies a quick remedy, only to be done with forever. For Caplan, it is an ongoing developmental process to see the ways in which spiritual belief and practice can be used defensively, as a way of avoiding challenging and unwanted aspects of human life.

Several of the researchers cited in this study (e.g. M. Caplan, personal communication,

January 25, 2013; R. Masters; personal communication, March 6, 2013) have asserted that the seeds of spiritual bypassing are alive in each and every human being, differing only in the degree to which the phenomenon functions and the quality of awareness from which it is seen. In other words, it is not a dynamic that affects only those new to the spiritual life, or those less developed; rather, it is present to some degree in even the most advanced practitioners and teachers. For this reason, much of the more recent discussion related the phenomenon addresses the importance of normalizing spiritual bypass, exploring its adaptive role in the lives of practitioners during certain developmental phases and transitions. This trend will be addressed later in this paper.

As a practitioner becomes aware of the movement of spiritual bypassing in their own life's, such discovery need to be taken as bad news, but rather as an invitation or opportunity for deeper realization (M. Caplan, personal communication, January 25, 2013). Robert Masters (personal communication, March 6, 2013) feels strongly that spiritual bypassing not be pathologized or used to shame a practitioner, but normalized and met with kindness, care, and awareness, to learn from these tendencies and ways of moving away from what which is unwanted. Responding to spiritual bypass in this way adds fuel to a person's inner journey and uses even defensive organization in the service of healing and transformation.

Over the several decades since the phrase "spiritual bypass" was coined, some practitioners and observers have expressed dislike of the term, noting its negative connotation in implying that a person was "doing something wrong" by relating to spiritual practice in a way that could be deemed defensive in nature. This concern encouraged a richer dialogue around the phenomenon, Caplan (personal communication, January 25, 2013) contends, as it

deepened a collective understanding of spiritual bypass and the valuable information it contained for those willing to explore it in depth.

In order to explore these deeper dimensions of spiritual bypass, Caplan (personal communication, January 25, 2013) believes it must cease to be seen as pathological in nature. As noted earlier in this study, the movement to depathologize spiritual bypassing represents a strong current trend in the discourse on the phenomenon. If spiritual bypassing is defined as *any* way that a practitioner makes use of spirituality to split off from aspects of self-experience, others, with truth, or with God itself (as Caplan does), a strong case can be made that all human beings, to some degree or another, fall prey to the phenomenon at some point in their lives. This sort of understanding of spiritual bypass has led to much discussion in spiritual communities about whether a “fully awakened,” “fully realized,” or “fully enlightened” teacher would nonetheless be influenced, to some degree, by the movement of spiritual bypass. This sort of inquiry calls into question one of the most common beliefs and assertions made by practitioners and spiritual communities, that spiritual practice is capable of attending to each and every dimension of human experience. Most of the researchers cited in this study, including Caplan, have come to discover that this is simply not the case, has not been borne out in research and experience over the last few decades, and seen the ways that such belief has formed a foundation of the entire phenomenon of spiritual bypass. Rather, it has been demonstrated time and again that a “master” practitioner could possess deep knowledge and have attained profound spiritual realization, yet not be able to integrate this wisdom and discovery into critical areas of their lives. Caplan asserts that while such integration is of tremendous value and benefit to many, it was (and is) not always the case that great spiritual luminaries hold similar interest or intention. Some, for example, are called to share their

knowledge and transmission as widely as possible, without recourse to “integrating” it in any sort of psychological, somatic, or emotional way. While most of the practitioners Caplan has encountered over the years have sought to integrate awakening and enlightenment into all areas of their lives, the reality on the ground is that it is not always possible for any individual human being “to get to it all.”

In striving to make sense of how an obviously realized teacher or practitioner could evidence such low levels of development in other critical areas (e.g. interpersonal, psychosexual, emotional), Caplan (personal communication, January 25, 2013) suggests practitioners to “rearrange” and “deconstruct” their views of spiritual teachers, inquiring into and eventually withdrawing the projections that have placed onto them. Further, she encourages practitioners to carefully explore the disappointment experienced when spiritual teachers fail to demonstrate the kind of integration that it is believed they should. It does not mean anything inherently—or take anything away from a spiritual teacher—Caplan alleges, if they are not psychologically integrated. It does, however, allow for an important opportunity to clarify projections which have been placed onto others and onto the spiritual path itself. Moreover, the sort of disillusion which emerges when the real messy, human aspects of the journey shine forth serves as a “wonderful vehicle” for deepening one’s own understanding and development; this “shattering of one’s projections” can become powerful allies on the path, not merely obstacles that must be removed (Caplan, personal communication, January 25, 2013).

One of the questions posed in this study is whether the accomplished saints, siddhas, and yogis of the past engaged in spiritual bypassing. In other words, is spiritual bypassing a phenomenon that is especially prevalent in the contemporary spiritual world, or is it inherent in

any human approach to the numinous, regardless of time and place? In exploring this question—and in discussing the role of the saint in spiritual traditions—Caplan (personal communication, January 25, 2013) argues that it is “not necessarily a saint’s job to be psychologically integrated.” In unfolding her position, she shared an example of a famous yogi in India that became one of her primary teachers, Yogi Ramsuratkumar. In her direct engagement with the saint—and in speaking with those close with him—Caplan came to see that he was simply not concerned with psycho-emotional integration; rather, his work involved “planetary, cosmic-level healing and reorganization” (M. Caplan, personal communication, January 25, 2013).

When asked about the great saints and yogis from the past—and whether they, too, engaged in some degree of spiritual bypass—John Welwood (personal communication, April 26, 2013) responded both “yes” and “no.” On the surface, it can certainly appear so, though the entirety of a person’s familial, social, and cultural context must be brought in to any informed assessment. In elucidating his position, Welwood cited the example of the great modern-day sage Ramana Maharshi, considered by many to be a *prima facie* example of an enlightened being in the modern world. While it may look on the outside like he was bypassing, Maharshi was part of an ancient tradition with a recognized place in the culture in which he lived, a respected and honored way in which he was fulfilling an important cultural archetype. While he was living on a mountain or in a cave by himself—and not engaging in work, family, or interpersonal relationship as we know it in the West—there was an established (and respected) place for such activity in the society in which he lived. Welwood believes that an evaluation of spiritual bypassing, like anything other psychological phenomenon, must take into account societal and cultural factors; it cannot be analyzed in a vacuum. In Maharshi’s case—as with

much of classical Indian spirituality—there is a tendency toward the transcendent and the other-worldly, which is not easily translatable to Western culture. If a person in the modern West, for example, shed all of his clothing to live in the mountains, blessing people that came to see him, not speaking for months at a time, and so forth, such person would likely not be respected and honored, but rather sent in for psychiatric evaluation. Therefore, what might be conceived of as spiritual bypass in one culture may not be so in another.

Jack Kornfield (personal communication, February 28, 2013) cites the example of the great Tibetan yogi Milarepa who was required to work through a tremendous amount of unwholesome material in his earlier life before receiving the most advanced teachings in his tradition. Kornfield notes that for some practitioners, the path can unfold in a clean and straight-forward manner, providing relatively easy access into transcendent realization, without traversing through mental and emotional turmoil. But there are also stories like Milarepa, where a person was made to fully come to terms with their past, metabolizing tremendously difficult psychological and emotional material before receiving the deeper transmissions and realizations. Kornfield reports that even in hagiography of saints and yogis who did not struggle intrapsychically, that their families and others around them were often affected deeply. For example, the great Sufi poet Rumi, who attained a very high level of spiritual realization with his teacher Shams—composing the ocean of poetry known as the *Mathnawi*—created quite a bit of conflict around him within his immediate family. In fact, many scholars believe that the disturbance was so great that it was his family that ended up murdering Rumi's teacher. Similarly, Devadatta, the Buddha's cousin, attempted to kill him due to conflict within the family brought on at least in part by the Buddha and his teaching. Kornfield reminds practitioners that a careful investigation into the lives of respected spiritual leaders such as the

Buddha, Jesus, or even more modernly Mahatma Gandhi, will reveal very difficult challenges in the families of these teachers. While many have made the case that it was necessary for the Buddha to “leave his home” in order to attain enlightenment—only then to return and enlighten his family—Kornfield’s point is that everyone is embedded in some sort of interpersonal system. It is quite possible for a given practitioner to transcend confusion and suffering while the system around them remains deeply affected by unfinished business from the past.

As the historical contemplative traditions were forming, they came to prioritize the importance of transpersonal discovery, often to the neglect of psychodynamic and interpersonal dimensions of experience. Tara Brach (personal communication, February 14, 2013) explains that it is quite possible for a practitioner to reach profound states of *samadhi* or *jhana* in her meditative disciplines—realizing deep insight into the moment-to-moment arising and passing nature of self and reality—while at the same time “not being able to name their feelings to their wife,” thereby acting out in a way that is aggressive and unkind. In Brach’s view, spiritual bypassing has probably always existed, as there has always been a psyche which has been wired to protect itself in certain ways. Brach contends that there has likely always been unevenness in development, lack of integration, and the absence of certain types of developmental maturity which have existed side by side with authentic spiritual realization; it is only in contemporary times, however, that a more precise language has emerged to describe these dynamics.

Pilar Jennings (personal communication, March 13, 2013) suggests that as long as human beings have existed, “the psyche has been active” and likely engaged in “an internal struggle to manage the experience of being human.” Jennings points to a natural tendency in

human beings to personalize the many challenging ordeals encountered along the way, accompanied by an instinct to avoid certain aspects of personal experience. She hypothesizes that this dynamic was likely present even in the great masters of old, concluding that it is more likely than not that anyone who has attempted to explore the deepest realms of self and reality would at some point have used spiritual teachings, practices, and discoveries to avoid certain difficult experience.

Caplan (personal communication, January 25, 2013) alleges that many of the great spiritual teachers emerged out of relationship structures that involved either leaving their families behind or otherwise not engaging deeply in relationship as part of their overall path of realization. She suggests that many of the great masters from Asia, for example, were not concerned with the direct engagement and processing of material that Western researchers would label as psychological or emotional in nature, at least not in the ways emphasized by contemporary clinicians. As a result of not directly working such material, many of these teachers, especially as they came into a more modern and post-modern Western culture, became mired in scandals involving money, sex, and power. Without a concern for integration—and an emphasis on only one line of development (namely, the spiritual or transpersonal)—some teachers were unable to manage challenging emotions and dynamics as they arose in their work with students.

In investigating the dynamics of spiritual bypassing cross-culturally, Caplan (personal communication, January 25, 2013) has reported important differences between the nature and expression of the psyche as it appears personal and collectively in the East and the West. In her research, she observed that the Eastern psyche is grounded in a “collective base” with an individual’s ego structure built around the family, not so much organized around the individual

person. Historically, Asian culture was not faced with the levels of divorce, trauma, broken families, and alienation seen in the contemporary Western world. For Westerners engaged in Eastern-based practices, Caplan urges practitioners to not dismiss these cultural differences, lest they set themselves up for the possibility for “lopsided and confused” development. Anyone who is serious about the path, asserts Caplan, will eventually encounter the reality that spiritual insights by themselves do not always translate into other areas of their lives. As such, she sees working with spiritual bypass as part of a larger developmental process, from which “nobody escapes.”

A number of the researchers interviewed in this study (see, for example, T. Brach, personal communication, February 14, 2013; M. Caplan, personal communication, January 25, 2013; J. Kornfield, personal communication, February 28, 2013; R. Masters, personal communication March 6, 2013) have argued for the importance of interpersonal/ relational work in addition to traditional solo-oriented contemplative practice. In so doing, they have cited psychotherapy research which has suggested that because most of a person’s early wounding occurred within the context of an interpersonal environment that it is best worked through in relationship. Consequently, if a practitioner devotes all of his or her time to solitary spiritual practice, they may not be able to penetrate the depths of this wounding on their own.

John Welwood (personal communication, April 26, 2013), who coined the term “spiritual bypassing” in 1984, has come to see the phenomenon as an organic part of the process of spiritual development, which should not be pathologized. Part of the challenge inherent in the movement of spiritual bypass, argues Welwood, is that a critical dimension of spiritual development is the process of transcendence, of moving beyond limited ways of perceiving oneself and the world. As a result, spiritual teachings in large part lay out a vision

of what life might be at some point in the future, once the teachings are made alive in a person's direct, immediate experience. Therefore, practitioners are forced to often "start ahead" of themselves, seeing where they *could* end up down the road, once their spiritual work starts to bear fruit. While an overemphasis on the transcendent dimension of the journey is one of the hallmarks of spiritual bypassing, Welwood cautions researchers and clinicians from throwing the baby out with the bath water. He urges practitioners to cultivate and honor moments of transcendence to along the way, emphasizing the essential nature of the transcendent as a critical and valid part of the path. At the same time, practitioners must see the ways that that movement of transcendence can be used in service of a "covert, hidden agenda," to avoid or lessen the impact of unresolved psychological and emotional material.

According to integral psychologist Mark Forman (personal communication, April 25, 2013), bypassing occurs when spiritual beliefs, experiences, and ways of seeing the world are "absorbed into the personality structure" of the practitioner. As a result of this absorption, the practitioner is then able (in part) to protect herself from unwanted material that would otherwise emerge as part of a normal developmental trajectory. To illustrate, Forman offers an example of a person who takes up contemplative practice, precepts, and ethical codes while at a developmental stage which would ordinarily involve exploring their personal voice, getting in touch with anger, engaging in appropriate boundary setting, and so forth. In this situation, spiritual beliefs and practices provide a shield which protects the person from having to engage with certain developmental processes.

One of the common issues raised in the study had to do with responding to spiritual bypass when it arose within the context of the client-therapist relationship. While some clinicians had a style of directly confronting spiritual bypass—as well as other defensive

activity emerging on the part of their clients—others (or even those same clinicians at other times) tread more carefully, allowing the defense to unfold in the therapeutic relationship before encountering it head on. Mark Forman (personal communication, April 25, 2013) argues that it is a “false presumption” to suggest that those engaged in spiritual bypass could or should always be thinking or acting differently. In his clinical practice, Forman has observed that, yes, there are times when a person can be re-directed towards a more authentic developmental trajectory or set of experiences. But sometimes, Forman cautions, spiritual bypass is simply “the person’s way of coping with things that are too difficult for them to handle in the current moment.” Recognizing the sensitivity and subtleties in diagnosing and responding to the presentation of spiritual bypass, Forman does not use the term in his own work; he notes that if he did that most of his clients that would be labeled as such. In his clinical experience, spiritual bypass almost always serves some sort of adaptive purpose, where the client makes use of their relationship with spirituality to cope with major life issues, often in the best way they know how in a particular moment. For Forman, it is important that a client’s developmental situation be treated with a certain level of respect, rather than immediately or automatically assigning them to the category of “spiritual bypass.” Forman has expressed concern with an oversimplification of the phenomenon and encourages practitioners and clinicians to cultivate a mature understanding of its nuances and subtleties.

Forman (personal communication, April 25, 2013) has come to experience the psyche as “remarkably adaptive,” capable of adopting beliefs and other supportive factors it deems necessary for its own health and survival. The undoing or changing of these factors is a process which must be engaged carefully, skillfully, and with compassion, according to Forman. He cautions clinicians against moving hastily to disassemble a person’s defensive organization,

including that of spiritual bypass; to do so in an unskillful way would be unkind and potentially harmful to a practitioner's development. Before cutting away the client's defensive use of spirituality, Forman advises clinicians to ensure—to the degree that they can—that some supportive structure is in place to meet the client. Because most of the discourse in the area of spiritual bypass—at least historically speaking—has focused on its pathological dimensions and getting rid of it as quickly as possible, Forman urges clinicians to take into consideration the overall developmental situation of each client versus a one-size-fit-all approach.

The goal of spiritual practice, Kornfield argues (personal communication, February 28, 2013), is “to become conscious, integrated, and liberated, in mind and heart.” Over several decades of involvement in the study and practice of contemplative spirituality in the West, Kornfield has witnessed first-hand the many ways in which spirituality can serve a defensive function. When engagement in the spiritual life provides a means by which to avoid important aspects of a person's experience and self-organization, healing and integration is thwarted. In their orientation toward transcendence (whether of the body, feelings, emotions, or interpersonal needs), Kornfield contends that many traditional spiritual approaches, both East and West, can unwittingly encourage spiritual bypass. In many of the cultures which gave birth to the great wisdom traditions, there was a general acceptance of the denial of the body, along with a view that emotions and personal history are irrelevant or even polluted. While not becoming identified with the forms that arise in experience is an important milestone along the journey of awakening, too much distance from the personal life can lead to uneven development and an expression in the relative world that is lopsided and incomplete.

According to Buddhist-oriented psychoanalyst Pilar Jennings (personal communication, March 18, 2013), the ways that spirituality can serve a defensive function are

extensive, context-specific, and can manifest in different ways at different times in the lives of her patients. Jennings describes a “shadow” side of spirituality where practitioners “lose sight of their subjectivity,” those very particular nuances of their psyches that they bring to spiritual practice. One of the primary reasons that spirituality offers so much comfort and support is that it provides some relief from what Jennings calls the “burden of subjectivity.” It enables practitioners to “join in a much larger human experience,” to find a bit of “wiggle room” from the ways they might feel weighed down by their specific life challenges. This relief, while important and a source of true healing, also provides an extraordinary opportunity to dismiss or dissociate from subjectivity and the attention that the particulars of a person’s life might actually require. This dismissal or disavowal is the very movement of spiritual bypassing, which Jennings describes as those ways in which spiritual beliefs and practices can offer “a sanctioned form of neglect” from subjectivity and from the psyche itself.

Jennings personal communication, March 18, 2013) has observed younger Asian teachers from the Buddhist tradition, many of whom are growing up in the West, as more psychologically-oriented than their elders, seeing the importance of becoming more attuned to the psychological content of their students. For example, she shares how her Tibetan teacher—similar to a clinician on the receiving end of a barrage of unconscious projection—has seen for himself the ways students can avoid addressing psychological struggles, addictions, and difficulties of all kinds. In Jennings’ observation, students look to him to “wave a wand,” transmitting the state of awakening to them so they do not have to struggle with that which remains unresolved within them. Her teacher has even come to see aspects of his own experience that do not appear to be fully addressed by his spiritual practice. For Jennings, to be able to engage in psychological inquiry with her spiritual teacher is meaningful, for in

communities where the teacher is unable to look honestly and openly at his or her own psyche, addictions, or interpersonal struggles, it can be that much harder for students in the community to do the same.

Bruce Tift (personal communication, March 25, 2013) sees spiritual bypassing as one of an almost endless number of ways a person can avoid the truth of their experience. While it is a unique version of avoidance, in its essence spiritual bypass is not any different from the habitual use of relationships, exercise, drugs, or pornography to move away from disturbing thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Among the endless variety of ways to distance from one's "immediate, embodied experience"—an important dimension of the larger dynamic Tift refers to as "neurotic process"—he sees spiritual bypassing as a movement to achieve an ongoing and continuous positive state of mind. Like an alcoholic who seeks temporary relief from difficult feeling states—or a partner in relationship who uses chronic conflict as a way to avoid the experience of vulnerability—those involved with spiritual bypass make use of spiritual beliefs and practices to provide relief from certain so-called "negative" mental and affective states. Tift analogizes the state of mind sought by a person caught in spiritual bypass with what is referred to in Buddhist tradition as a "god realm," a state of being characterized by increasing levels of comfort, at all cost. God realm experience is impermanent, however, and requires a certain degree of trance to maintain. Tift refers to clients he has worked with who had become quite adept at accessing trancelike states of consciousness where they were able to maintain a sense of non-disturbance, as if they were beyond being able to be touched by life and others around them. Unfortunately, however, life has a way of breaking through the trance and dismantling the illusion of comfort that avoidance can engender.

Integral philosopher Ken Wilber (personal communication, February 15, 2013) refers to spiritual bypassing as a process whereby a person circumvents certain fundamental, core problems by “re-labeling them as spiritual.” Instead of exploring unconscious shadow material, for example—or embracing unresolved emotional problems or core vulnerabilities—a practitioner might “re-label” such material as spiritual in and of itself. When caught in the movement of spiritual bypass, spiritual beliefs and practices are used to fundamentally sidestep serious psychological and emotional issues, “which spiritual practice can’t really address all that well.” If a practitioner is struggling with difficult feelings of despair, grief, or anger, for example, they may redefine these experiences as “going through a dark night of the soul,” “in deep experience of spiritual emergency,” or otherwise “spiritualizing” them rather than seeing that they have actual psychological and emotional work to do.

While the term “spiritual bypass” has only been in use for a few decades, the dynamic it points to has likely been at play for thousands of years (R. Masters, personal communication, March 6, 2013). Especially in Eastern traditions, Masters argues, the pushing aside of the personal to focus on the transpersonal was “an unquestioned good” and even the stated aim of many of the great wisdom traditions, East and West. Over the last few decades, with contemporary culture becoming more and more psychologically astute, Masters has found that practitioners are better able to notice spiritual bypassing when it is activated within them and those around them. In his view, the time is ripe for practitioners to explore the phenomenon, as many have now had first-hand experience of the dissolution of the belief that spiritual teachings and practices will ultimately be able to “save them from themselves.”

Craig Cashwell (personal communication, March 4, 2013), a psychologist and professor at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, has written about the phenomenon

of spiritual bypassing over the last decade as he has observed its movement in the lives of his clients. In his clinical work he has become interested in “how people move away from the places where they’re hurting,” and the ways they turn away from the direct experience of fear, anxiety, and shame. One of Cashwell’s research interests has been the integration of spirituality into the counseling profession, which has catalyzed his writing of a number of journal articles encouraging mental health professionals to learn about the dynamics of spiritual bypassing. While the profession is doing a lot to promote the integration of spirituality into counseling, he is concerned that if counselors are not educated about spiritual bypass, then they will likely end up contributing to the avoidant coping that many spiritually-oriented clients have incorporated. Cashwell cites the approaches of “psychological contact” from Gestalt therapy and “experiential avoidance” in acceptance and commitment therapy as helping to unfold his own understanding of spiritual bypassing and the inability or unwillingness to come fully into contact with the entirety of one’s experience. It is this use of spirituality as a coping strategy, to “lock away” difficult aspects of self-experience that Cashwell sees as the essence of spiritual bypass.

Ingrid Mathieu (personal communication, April 12, 2013), a clinical psychologist and researcher in the field of recovery and addiction, has come to understand spiritual bypassing as the totality of the many ways a person “latches onto positive aspects of self-experience.” Through this process, which serves to defend the person from the direct experience of unbearable pain and discomfort, unwanted material is kept at bay and avoided. In her observation, practitioners want so badly to “do” spirituality properly or to become perfect through their involvement with spiritual beliefs and practices, but will inevitably have to experience the disillusionment that the true purpose of spirituality is not to make them into a

perfect person. The inescapable realization that spiritual practice simply isn't going to deliver everything the practitioner thought it would—or was told it would—can awaken a real grieving process, which can be quite healthy according to Mathieu. The more clinicians and teachers can recognize this movement in themselves, the better they can help their clients see and respond effectively to it, using the discovery to deepen their development, rather than remain an obstacle to it.

Forms, Signs, and Expressions of Spiritual Bypassing

In his clinical practice with meditators and yogis, Miles Neale (personal communication, January 9, 2013) has described eight primary ways in which spiritual bypass expresses, each characterized by a common set of beliefs and behaviors. By providing a map of spiritual bypass and the common forms it takes, Neale presents a framework which practitioners, clinicians, and spiritual teachers can consult to understand how the phenomenon might be active in their own lives and the lives of their clients and students. These eight forms of spiritual bypass are listed here, along with associated qualities, characteristics, and consequences of teach.

1. Conflict avoidance in the guise of being “easy going” or “virtuous”

- leads to repressed anger
- makes excuses for others' behavior
- fails to acknowledge that others are being neglectful, or even hurtful
- devalues one's own experience of being hurt or disappointed
- not helpful to others who are neglectful, by not mirroring reality back to them
- uses patience and tolerance to bypass human hurt or anger

2. Co-dependence in the guise of being “compassionate”

- helping or caring for others out of fear, guilt, shame, or obligation
- focusing on others to the exclusion of oneself/ one's own needs
- engaging in passive communication, e.g. "By focusing on you I secretly hope you'll focus on me" (but I won't ever say anything)
- encouraging an "80-20" relationship; but who's being left out?
- using concepts of selflessness and compassion to bypass human needs
- caring for others because we want to feel good about ourselves, when underneath we think we are bad

3. Who's your Daddy?—Acting out childhood dynamics with the Guru

- pleasing the guru to feel special, validated, important, or loved
- competitive feelings toward other members of the *sangha*
- feeling invisible, shame, blame, or unworthy in the shadow of the exalted guru who is idealized and placed on a pedestal; a reinforced separation and sense that something is wrong with me if I still have "human" feelings or experiences
- thinking the guru has something to give that I don't already have in potential
- "give a man a fish, feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, feed him for life": taking some measure of attention from the guru and feeling good is akin to eating the fish, whereas one can learn what the guru is teaching and embody the presence of the guru in one's relationship with one's self; this akin to learning how to fish to feed for the rest of one's life

4. Detachment as a suppression of needs for love, connection, and desire

- avoiding love, intimacy, and relationships in general out of misunderstanding the meaning and relevance of detachment
- because of pain of disappointments and failed relationships, people become emotionally

detached, hollow, un-empathic, aloof, and self-centered

- disinterest in life, no passion, no desire because of the teaching that desire is the root of all attachment; unhealthy desire, devoid of understanding, is seen as the root of suffering

- being seen as “needy” is bad—so don’t have any needs!

- citing Welwood: “What 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.”

- citing Welwood: “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. “

- citing Welwood: “Many Avoidant personalities are attracted to Buddhist teachings on nonattachment... Avoidant types tend to be dismissive of other people’s needs because, guess what, they’re dismissive of their own needs.”

5. The Spiritual Super Ego

- the tyranny of the “shoulds”: do this, don’t do that; blind or strict adherence to doctrines or protocols (i.e. yamas and niyamas) without critical understanding or emotional flexibility

- perfection is a standard for one’s aspiration, but when it is taken as a fixed goal we always fall short and feel inadequate.

- Swami Prajnanpad said that “idealism is an act of violence.”

- Using renunciation as a justification for self-denial and emotional anorexia
- Encouraging pain and harsh discipline and rejecting the needs of the body
i.e. self-mortification out of masochism
- not listening to your body in yoga, but just being hard on yourself, always pushing, denies the reality, awareness and love of the self/body in the moment in favor for some imagined construct or mental image.

6. Using absolute truth to deny relative truth

- Mistake: Emptiness means nothing conventional is important
- Mistake: There is no self so I shouldn't pay undo attention to my feelings nor should I have any needs or wants
- Mistake: Desire is the problem, so just don't have any desires
- Mistake: Your feelings are empty, so just observe them and let them go. But what if feelings have important information to tell you? Then an opportunity is missed for discovery.
- Mistake: Believing that Emptiness or ultimate truth somehow denies the importance of the relative truth of feelings and interactions: this is lopsided and forgets the interdependence between form and emptiness.

7. Over-compensatory identity

- I feel inadequate in my ordinary life, so I will work towards being a perfect practitioner in my spiritual life.
- We use spiritual practice to suppress unwanted feelings of inadequacy and unlovability, masqueraded in a spiritual persona.

8. Spiritual goodies that feed narcissism

- Gaining experience or insights inflates the sense of self as important or better than others
- By contrast we can then pity others or disparage them for being “worldly” or “not as spiritually evolved”
- “closeted narcissism” as opposed to inflated or grandiose narcissism, when we are self-absorbed or pre-occupied about our failures and deficits
- This is common in depression, and then we can use teachings on selflessness to feel even more ashamed and inadequate in a double layer of self-punishment.
- Recent scandals with guru’s who self-importance, self-inflation denial of real human needs, denial of their limits or shadow, caused widespread pain in their communities.

Jack Kornfield (personal communication, February 28, 2013) refers to what he calls an “emptiness bypass” whereby practitioners make use of the very subtle teachings on the absence of self to devalue personal history: If the self is empty of independent existence, then why bother engaging with its very vivid appearance. Further, he has observed how practitioners separate the psychological from the spiritual, believing that spiritual work is more important, dismissing psychological work as a lesser form of healing and awakening. As a consequence of these fundamental beliefs about the importance of the personal, spiritual communities can devalue working with the body, emotions, and conflict, as not important or not necessary on a “true” or “pure” spiritual path.

Brach (personal communication, February 14, 2013), Masters (personal communication, March 6, 2013), Wilber (personal communication, February 15, 2013), and Kornfield (personal communication, February 28, 2013) each address the ways that even authentic meditative experience can be used to avoid aspects of the inner life. One of the functions of concentrative practice, Kornfield contends, is to suppress conflict and hindrances

in the mind, providing access to very pure, beautiful states of consciousness. When a person returns from those heightened states of concentration or illumination, however, they do so carrying all of what unfinished business which has not yet been integrated into their overall being. Another form of spiritual bypass can take is what Kornfield refers to as a “monastic bypass,” where practitioners are directed to leave the world of emotions, human relations, and bodily experience, as these are seen as hindrances to spiritual development. By avoiding these obstacles, it is believed that a more direct spiritual realization can be encountered. While such activity can be beneficial and supportive for some, for isolated periods of time, an overall approach to psychospiritual growth which neglects core aspects of what it means to be human tends to result in lopsided development, emotional difficulties, and interpersonal struggles.

In his clinical work, Craig Cashwell (personal communication, March 4, 2013) has come across the phrase “going through” which some clients use to describe their response to a particularly difficult situation or transition in their lives. As he began to explore the phrase and its deeper meaning, he discovered that these clients were using the idea of “getting through” as a way to avoid going into the actual embodied experience of the feelings and emotions that were there. Rather than saying to him, for example, that they were sad or anxious or grieving, these clients would state that they were “going through.” While this idea provided some level of relief for his clients, he saw how it acted as a shield around them, which safeguarded them from what they were actually feeling. They believed that by keeping alive the narrative of “going through” that they would eventually be delivered from their suffering. From a psychological perspective, they were using their theological belief system to minimize their pain and to avoid needing to come in direct contact with it. For Cashwell, this is one of the forms he sees spiritual bypass take in his clinical work.

One of the most common expressions of spiritual bypass is an overemphasis on the maintenance of a “positive” or “spiritual” personality, one which overflows with feelings of compassion, kindness, and detachment (P. Jennings, personal communication, March 18, 2013). In order to consistently identify as a “positive, spiritual” person, a practitioner will split off from anger and other so-called “negative” qualities. When spiritual bypass is operative, aggression is almost always an issue, observes Jennings; it’s either overtaken the practitioner in ways they cannot see or has been repressed to the degree that it cannot be worked with skillfully. In addition to splitting off from so-called “negative” or “non-spiritual” emotions, another common form of spiritual bypass is what Jennings refers to as “the terror of attachment” or “the terror of dependency.” In unfolding her understanding, Jennings suggests a possible relationship between spiritual bypassing and insecure attachment. For those with an insecure caregiver-infant attachment history, there is simply “too big a price to pay to risk dependency.” For practitioners who grew up in early environments characterized by insecure attachment, Jennings has observed a tendency toward dependence-phobia, where experience becomes organized around not needing another to get one’s needs met. For those practitioners with an insecure attachment history, teachings on emptiness, no-self, and detachment can feed into an organization of experience which devalues self-worth and personal cohesiveness.

Jennings (personal communication, March 18) urges clinicians to learn more about spiritual bypassing so that they are better able to help patients navigate both the opportunities and the pitfalls which inevitably are part of the spiritual journey. In a healthy spiritual community, for example, practitioners will regularly encounter situations which offer emotionally corrective opportunities, where practitioners can engage in and learn from the experience of dependency in a safe context. But if clinicians do not understand the dynamics of

spiritual bypassing—and especially if they tend to pathologize or minimize spiritual longing and interest—they will not mine the practitioner’s spiritual life for these opportunities.

Jennings further contends that adults who come to the spiritual life with a secure attachment history are not hindered by “the terror of dependency” and are better able to access the benefits of practice and community, especially the relational aspects offered therein. In sum, Jennings’ experience has led her to suggest that practitioners with early insecure attachment are more prone to spiritual bypassing. Further research in this area would be of great benefit to practitioners.

Tara Brach (personal communication, February 14, 2013) has noticed a tendency for some spiritually-oriented clients to put forward a false air of equanimity—or detachment—as a way to avoid difficult emotions, especially ones that are stirred up in interpersonal relationships. Certain core spiritual teachings on the importance of equanimity and non-attachment can easily be used as “an excuse for distancing,” or otherwise protecting oneself from unresolved feelings. Brach also speaks of a related dynamic which she calls “premature forgiveness,” involving the common belief that a “spiritual” person should be forgiving and compassionate in response to the suffering of others; if other, less desirable feelings or behaviors emerged, then this would call into question the degree of the practitioner’s faith, practice, or realization. Brach has noticed a common phenomenon where practitioners develop a conceptual relationship with teachings such as lovingkindness and compassion as a way to avoid unresolved woundedness, sidestepping the actual hurt and vulnerability that exists within them. By bypassing these underlying feelings—often in the quest to engage the “right” spiritual behavior—a person’s relationship with the spiritual journey remains conceptual and not fully embodied.

Brach (personal communication, February 14, 2013) has also observed practitioners who can speak clearly about profound experiences of emptiness or no-self while actually remaining at least in part in a disembodied or dissociative state. Lest they become attached to the body or to the mind—or caught in attachment, anger, or reactivity—it is possible for practitioners to simulate spiritual qualities such as detachment, equanimity, and peace. Similarly, with respect to personal hurts or needs, when caught in spiritual bypass, practitioners tend to regard the body and emotions as existing at a “lower level” than “pure consciousness,” no-self, or awakened awareness. This dynamic is in large part a result of a common belief amongst practitioners that paying attention to an emotion will feed it. Because the body, emotions, and sexuality, for example, are seen as “lower” energies than purely “spiritual” ones, practitioners rationalize not paying attention to them and not listening to the messages they often provide. As a result, the practitioner will dissociate and split from them, so that they do not become caught in their grip. For example, Brach has seen some practitioners choose the path of celibacy fueled by the belief that it is a “higher” path than sexuality. Brach contends, however, that while celibacy can be a positive choice for a specific person at a specific time, if it is made in a mature and grounded way; but in her experience it is often made in order to avoid having to face the intensity of one’s longing, unmet needs, and fears of true intimacy. One of the greatest consequences of spiritual bypassing, argues Brach, is the way it encourages dissociation from the body. When the body is not honored and is seen as “lesser” or “lower” than pure spirit, feminine energies become feared and split off from; sexuality, intimacy, relationship, and intimacy are perceived as distractions on the path, rather than vehicles through which spirit moves.

The form of bypassing that Brach (personal communication, February 14, 2013) finds most disturbing is when spiritual teachings are used as a reason not to engage in working to heal the world. If everything is the result of karma, or is “already perfect,” or is the will of God, then why bother to relate directly with harm to the environment, human rights violations, social justice, and so forth? Apathy and ambivalence are often encouraged (consciously or otherwise) by a relationship with spiritual teachings which assert that it is only “the ego” which is unable to see the perfection of things as they are. In this way, the relative world is avoided and bypassed, with practitioners becoming attached to and lost in the absolute, leading to the expression of spiritual bypass in its many forms.

Spiritual Bypassing: Ways of Responding

For Bruce Tift (personal communication, March 25, 2013), responding to spiritual bypassing is not really any different than working with any other form of neurotic organization. Whether a person is using food, alcohol, exercise, the internet, or the practice of meditation to avoid aspects of themselves, the basic process remains the same. As for the specific avoidance strategy that has come to be known as “spiritual bypassing,” Tift is on the lookout when a client reports that they have no problems, that they’re basically always happy; these clients also usually present themselves in relationship as the “one up” person, rarely as the one who’s down. Moreover, such clients are usually the one in relationship who is trying to help the other person to “wake up,” taking the unofficial “teacher” or “giver” role. In most cases, a person exhibiting this style of avoidance, according to Tift, is quite uncomfortable with anger, as well as with feelings of being selfish, hurtful to others, or insensitive. In Taft’s experience, not everyone who tends to avoid these experiences are engaged in spiritual bypass, but those who do make use of the defense probably tend to elude those types of feelings.

In working with a client who Tift (personal communication, March 25, 2013) believes is avoiding the experience of certain feelings or emotions, he will often invite them to verbalize externally a phrase which may trigger that which is being evaded. For example, he might ask them to say: “Well, perhaps I really am an incredibly selfish, arrogant, hurtful, angry person.” He will then gauge the client’s reaction, both somatically and emotionally. If he has a sense that a person is organizing their experience around not feeling certain feelings, he will ask them to voice these feelings out loud, in front of him. Over time, Tift has observed that those engaged in spiritual bypass tend to move awareness into their heads, into the thinking process, as the entire phenomenon of spiritual bypassing must, on some level, be maintained conceptually. For example, with a client who is anger-phobic, Tift might ask them to verbalize externally, “I’m really actually an angry person...” What often happens is that the client does not actually repeat the phrase, but rather moves quickly to say, “That’s not true. I don’t think that’s true about me. It just doesn’t fit.” Tift will then remind the client that it is just an emotional exercise they are exploring, not an actual description of reality, and encourage them to just give it a try. If they’re willing to move forward, what often happens is that their energy becomes disembodied, their voice becomes really thin, they become tentative, and so forth. If they’re a little less defended and willing to actually try the exercise, they may evaluate it by stating how bad it felt to say what they said, or how shameful they felt to embrace the feelings around the words. This is a positive sign for Tift as it means the client is coming closer to their developmental history and their present way of organizing experience. For someone who is fearful of dependency, for example, Tift will suggest they say out loud something along the lines of, “Underneath it all, I’m actually a really needy, dependent, and weak person.” For someone who identifies as strong and powerful, they will undergo a similar process as

described above. What Tift is trying to do here is to invite a person into a direct experience of the dissociative energy, the resistance, the discomfort, and the anxiety that arises when invited to take ownership of those energies they've been using to avoid certain aspects of themselves.

In confronting spiritual bypassing—or subtle defensive organization in general—Tift's style is to “generate an experience of claustrophobia” in his clients (B. Tift, personal communication, March 25, 2013). He does this not in any sort of physical way, of course, but in a cognitive-emotional way to help clients come to an experiential discovery that the anxiety they are defending against might in fact not be what it appears; and that they may be able to tolerate a lot more than they have come to believe. For Tift, until a person finds out for herself that a direct experience of whatever feeling or emotion is there may not be the problem it was assumed to be that a person will be very motivated to exit their experience when the problematic feeling or emotion arises. Influenced by tantric Buddhist tradition, Tift has come to see that what a person considers most disturbing in their experience offers the most direct path into the freedom that they seek. It is not that disturbance is somehow special or curative in itself, but it often indicates a real “insult to... egoic process” as well as cutting into the common belief in the fantasy of a life of invulnerability (B. Tift, personal communication, March 25 2013). When a practitioner is alone—on the meditation cushion or on retreat, for example—there is great control over their physical environment, as well as, to some degree, their inner environment. If a disturbing thought or emotion arises, it can just be let go, returning to the body or the breath depending upon the instructions one has received. Unfortunately, argues Tift, the more a person becomes accomplished at creating a life without any disturbance, the more insulated from life that person becomes. As a result of this insulation, and of ongoing feelings of being stuck and of things being stale, many will seek out

intimate or other relationship. The “other” person becomes a concentrated representation of “Other,” of life, and by bringing this other into their world, the idea is that a person might discover more aliveness and spontaneity. What is often forgotten, however, is that simultaneously they will encounter more disturbance, because the other is ultimately uncontrollable. While a practitioner can control their shrine rooms and personal altars, chides Tift, they’ll never actually be able to control their partners.

As previously noted, a common theme in this study reflects a view from clinicians that great care must be taken not to pathologize a client’s engagement with spiritual bypass. Forman (personal communication, April 25, 2013) contends that there are developmental phases in a client’s life when involvement with spiritual teachings can be adaptive and supportive for the client’s overall development, even if used in a defensive manner. He urges clinicians to consider the entirety of a person’s life situation and inner world instead of coming to a quick decision that the client’s defensive use of spirituality must be called out and dismantled. Further, he urges careful consideration on the part of clinicians and respect for their clients’ organization. In his exploration of this territory over many years, Forman has seen how a person can be labeled as a “spiritual bypasser” while at the same time seeing how their beliefs and behaviors were nonetheless supportive in an overall way, perhaps serving a purpose at a particular stage in a person’s life. There are times when it is appropriate—and other times when it is not—to redirect a client toward more typical developmental lessons, but this must all be held in balance and the clinician must learn to explore these matters subtly and carefully. Many of the clinicians cited in this study have noted that it is difficult to approach the subtlety that is required to work with spiritual bypass effectively and skillfully unless these dynamics have been deeply explored within their own lives.

In response to the presentation of spiritual bypass, Welwood (personal communication, April 26, 2013) always directs his clients back into there here and now, into what is actually occurring in their immediate, lived experience. He cites the example of working with a couple who were very caught in spiritual bypass, where neither were relating to what they were actually experiencing in the moment or what was going on between them. For one member of the couple, he came to view the relationship as a phenomenon that inherently disturbed his spiritual practice; in short, he felt that he was unable to enjoy the fruits of his spiritual practice because the relationship kept bringing him down. His partner, on the other hand, was using spiritual teachings to justify why she should act in certain ways. The bottom line was that each was using their spiritual ideas and beliefs to avoid seeing what was actually happening between them in the here and now. In these sorts of situations, Welwood does not usually speak directly about spiritual bypass, but will work to guide practitioners into their felt experience in the here and now; it is from this environment which their disturbance may be explored. And it is out of this exploration that the dynamics of spiritual bypass can very naturally unfold and become illuminated.

The Importance of an Integral Approach

Over the last few decades, Welwood has pioneered a dialogue between psychological and spiritual approaches to healing and awakening, emphasizing the importance of attention to personal, interpersonal, and transpersonal domains of human experience. While spiritual traditions have explored the transpersonal dimension in depth, an integral approach to human freedom and maturation must also involve work at the personal and interpersonal levels. In particular, Welwood (personal communication, April 26, 2013) has come to see the importance of interpersonal work for spiritual practitioners, noting that it is very difficult to adequately

address one's relational wounding through solitary contemplative practice alone. It is Welwood's allegation that all psychological wounding is relational in nature; and that the best way to heal relational wounding is in relationship, not in solitary practice. Of course, solitary practice can be very important for the practitioner, in many ways; it's just not designed to heal relational wounds or to work with unresolved psychodynamic material. For practitioners (and communities) who do not value doing psychological or relational work, these sorts of practices are often seen as "lesser-level" work or even as an evasion of true spiritual practice.

An integral response to the movement of spiritual bypassing is one that relies on an understanding of developmental levels (M. Forman, personal communication, April 25, 2013). In other words, when people are spiritual bypassing, they're doing so from a particular level of development. Part of the job of a sensitive clinician is to not merely label a person as a "spiritual bypasser," but to inquire and explore the subtleties and nuances of a person's overall development and psychic environment. Forman's concern is that if spiritual bypassing is "diagnosed" in a quick and general way—and especially if the client's organization becomes pathologized, even subtly—the client's level of development also becomes pathologized. Forman's contribution here is important and unfortunately his understanding is not widespread, at least in the public discourse on the topic. Spiritual bypass is still seen by many as primarily neurotic or narcissistic in nature, rather than typical, normal, and expected in certain people at certain developmental levels. This is not to say that spiritual bypassing is automatic and is inevitable at specific stages and transitions; the salient point is that clinicians should not be surprised, knowing the structures of identity development, when a person organizes their personality around a relatively rigid set of beliefs, and then has a difficult time moving out of such organization. In summary, Forman contends that an integral response to spiritual bypass

is a non-pathologizing response, one that honors the developmental level of the practitioner, and integrates this understanding into the overall clinical picture.

Forman (personal communication, April 25, 2013) argues for the importance, when exploring the dynamics of spiritual bypass, of distinguishing between a practitioner who is contact with genuine transpersonal states of consciousness (e.g. a kundalini awakening) and another who might simply be “zoning out” in their meditation practice, involved in the outer trappings of spirituality, while using spiritual practice to avoid difficult feelings, emotions, or other important aspects of life experience. External behavior can emerge from either scenario which can be labeled “spiritual bypassing” though the dynamics involved with each are quite different. Forman notes the compelling (or even overwhelming) nature of esoteric spiritual experience, such as kundalini awakening, which do not always occur in ways that allow a person to simultaneously engage in normal developmental processes. Forman’s point here is that in these sorts of situations, where there are an entirely different set of stimuli in effect, if a practitioner “gets a little lost” in the spiritual side of things, or in the overemphasis on the transpersonal domain of experience, clinicians could have some empathy for this. In other words, it may not be the kindest or most skillful or help response to immediately label such behavior as “bypassing,” but to allow the process to unfold a bit.

Forman (personal communication, April 25, 2013) cites a series of kundalini-oriented experiences he had in his own life which greatly interfered with certain aspects of his day-to-day living. As a result, he was forced to adjust his lifestyle, in order to compensate and meet the demands of these experiences. Forman felt compelled to spend his time and energy exploring that which was unfolding within him and, as a result, could have easily been labeled as a spiritual bypasser, unable to attend to certain dimensions of his experience. What was

happening simply took up too much of his energy and resources, and was too compelling to set aside. Forman urges clinicians to consider the context in which practitioners can have very powerful, even destabilizing spiritual experiences, when addressing issues of spiritual bypass. These states of consciousness are generally not supported in Western culture, and it is important to find ways to encourage genuine spiritual experience in a way that is honored and as integrated as possible. Many individuals seek to actualize a drive within them to complete a particular spiritual process, and it is important for teachers and clinicians to find ways to support this journey, despite the challenges it can bring into a person's life. Forman urges clinicians to bring this sort of empathy into the overall discourse on spiritual bypass, and to be willing to explore the subtleties and nuances of the dynamics at play in these situations.

Clinicians have long struggled with the most skillful way to respond to the presence of defensive organization in their clients and each must explore their own ways of addressing spiritual bypass as it shows up in clinical work. For Mathieu (personal communication, April 12, 2013), responding to spiritual bypass is always challenging and requires real openness and attunement. Rather than confront it directly—explicitly pointing out to the client how they are using spirituality to distance themselves from their lives—she encourages her clients to make room for whatever emotions and feelings are there. By taking her clients directly into their embodied experience—and helping them to see that they need not enter into some spiritual process or otherwise apply spiritual beliefs and practices—they are able to allow previously unwanted material into their experience for metabolization. In Mathieu's experience, people do not bypass randomly; there is always an adaptive or developmental reason why they move away from intense experience. When a client knows it is safe to fully feel what is there—and that the clinician will stay close even during intense emotional upheaval—the client learns

to tolerate more and more intensity, and start to see that whatever arises is ultimately workable. As they begin to have experiential realization of this, they will be less prone to bypass challenging material and can learn to process it through awareness and self-compassion. Moreover, over time, they might come to see that their efforts to use spiritual beliefs and practices to avoid unresolved emotional material is not a pathological process and is, in fact, both normal and adaptive; in the face of this sort of awareness, the entire process can be explored much more openly. Many of Mathieu's clients have come to appreciate the language of spiritual bypassing, and have expressed an interest in learning more about how it might be active in their lives.

As noted by Mariana Caplan (personal communication, January 25, 2013) earlier in this study, a conceptual understanding of spiritual bypass has proved helpful for many of her clients and students who sensed the presence of the phenomenon in their lives, however did not have a language with which to speak about it. An in-depth exploration of spiritual bypass in the therapeutic relationship is one that unfolds over time, observes Ingrid Mathieu (personal communication, April 12, 2013), as it usually takes a while for a client to be able and willing to question beliefs and they have held tightly for so long and, for some, have literally reached the importance of life or death. For Mathieu, it is important to be careful not to alienate her clients through an unskillful intervention around spiritual bypass before the client is ready. Many clients come to her exactly because of her sensitivity to spiritual issues and interests; to lack empathy or attunement to these areas would likely not be helpful and could push her clients away. In short, as with any defensive organization, spiritual bypass must not be uprooted prematurely and great care and skill must be taken in understanding its role, developmental implications, and adaptive benefits in a person's life.

In exploring spiritual bypass, the culture and worldview which forms the framework for the specific beliefs and practices involved must be examined carefully (J. Kornfield, personal communication, February 28, 2013). One of the most important discoveries over the last few decades, according to Kornfield, is that the human journey must include the physical body, interpersonal relationships, one's personal history, and the capacity to work with difficult emotions. These dimensions of experience are not optional add-ons to include if time permits; rather, they are integral parts of the spiritual journey itself. Without integration of these aspects of experience, the practitioner will never be able to move through the world with a liberated heart. In many communities, these aspects of training have been given a lesser status than the more overtly "spiritual" areas such as meditative awareness and the cultivation of compassion or virtue. As has been noted several times in this study, one of the hallmarks of spiritual bypassing is an overemphasis on transcendence, on moving as quickly as possible beyond the messy world of the body, emotions, and relationships, and into the illuminated realms of pure spirit. What Kornfield has seen, however, is that it is *through* the body, *through* emotions, and *through* relationships that realization and illumination can actually become manifest. These areas of experience are not impediments to awakening, but rather the vehicles through which awakening expresses itself. It is thus critical that teachers frame the larger spiritual journey in a way that is integral and inclusive.

When working with a client or a student, Kornfield urges clinicians and teachers to cultivate awareness of the many ways that a person might be using spiritual teachings and practices to deny or repress aspects of their experience. These can then be addressed honestly and skillfully, through both meditative and therapeutic approaches. For even experienced spiritual practitioners, there can be a deeply-rooted, fundamental distrust in the possibility that

disturbing emotions and challenging life situations are workable and, ultimately, impermanent. Similarly, there is doubt in many practitioners that the trauma they carry from the past can actually be resolved and healed. As a result of these conclusions, when faced with developmental trauma or anxiety-provoking emotions and feeling states, practitioners can naturally lean into spiritual beliefs and practices to provide a buffer from unresolved somatic and emotional material. It is important, contends Kornfield, for practitioners to come to a mature understanding of what healing the past actually entails; namely, that it does not mean that charged material is eradicated entirely, but rather that it becomes illuminated and more transparent. The most important quality necessary to engage in this sort of integral work which brings together the personal and the transpersonal is that of self-compassion (J. Kornfield, personal communication, February 28, 2013). Without a firm ground of lovingkindness and compassion, turning toward and integrating difficult material will not be sustainable. By learning to extend compassion to one's own humanity and unique human incarnation, a practitioner is able to come to a degree of healing and awakening that does not require them to leave ordinary life in the relative world; rather it is seen that the relative world is a perfect vehicle through which awakening and healing can occur and flow.

In working with clients, including those presenting signs of spiritual bypass, it is important for Cashwell (personal communication, March 4, 2013) to honor the client's right to "self-determine." Therefore, if a person makes use of spiritual beliefs as a way to help them avoid more difficult aspects of their life, it is ultimately their right to do so. He does not see his role as a clinician to change or exact change in clients who are caught in spiritual bypass, but rather to remain open to the reality that the best next phase for the client may involve holding onto the bypass, taking advantage of whatever adaptive advantage it offers at a particular time

in their developmental journey. When he first became aware of spiritual bypassing, Cashwell found himself “playing God” with his clients, convinced that he could and should help them to immediately work through it, and to change their relationship with spirituality altogether. But over time he began to see how certain clients were in a fragile, coping place where their relationship with spiritual beliefs, notwithstanding his labeling of “spiritual bypassing,” was all that they have keeping them afloat, psychically speaking. He has come to see that holding a space for change and transformation, without trying to force change per se, is the most effective, kind, and ethical way to approach clients who he may deem as caught up in spiritual bypass. By respectfully entering this space together with his clients, even if they are not prepared to dismantle their defensive organization, there is room to offer some possible alternative conceptualizations, or help them touch their embodied experience a bit more directly. Cashwell makes every attempt to work within his clients’ faith tradition, making use of scripture or other sacred texts to penetrate as deeply as possible into the meaning of the traditions’ teachings. Even in situations where a client might be said to be bypassing through their relationship with spiritual teachings and practices, Cashwell believes it is critical for clinicians to respect their clients’ religious proclivities and to embrace the many ways they are benefitting from them. When he first became familiar with the phenomenon of spiritual bypass, Cashwell (personal communication, March 4, 2013) “saw it everywhere” and even had an urge to “save the world from it.” Over time, however, Cashwell found himself softening his stance and becoming more open and curious about its role in their clients’ lives. In his earlier days, his intensity around the phenomenon only pushed his clients away, interfering with his intention to enter into attuned, empathic relationship with them. It requires a willingness to be vulnerable to commit to therapy and to speak to a stranger about one’s deepest spiritual beliefs

and inclinations; finding ways to support clients in this journey requires a commitment to understanding the client's subjective world. As a phenomenologically-oriented therapist, heavily influenced by emotional-focused therapy, a large part of Cashwell's work is to help his clients move closer to the feelings and emotions that they usually move away from. When clients are caught in spiritual bypass, they make use of religious and spiritual language as a way to push away from those feelings that have been avoided for a long time. For example, after losing a close family member to death, one of Cashwell's clients proclaimed that she didn't need to cry because the family member "was in a better place." While she was explaining this to Cashwell, everything about her countenance, her visage, and her disposition demonstrated that she was deeply sad. Exploring the use of religious belief to move away from intense experience was something that Cashwell became very interested in researching further.

An integral approach to psychotherapy is one which provides development and healing at physical, cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, *and* spiritual levels (Cashwell, Bentley, and Yarborough, 2007). While it is usually not possible to work through each of these levels with every client, Cashwell (personal communication, March 4, 2013) has observed that the more the whole person can be brought into the therapy room the less likely that spiritual beliefs and practices will be used in an avoidant fashion. A large part of Cashwell's clinical work is dedicated to exploring with clients exactly what feelings and emotions they are avoiding, consciously or otherwise. For Cashwell, the thread that runs through each of the levels of healing is mindfulness, which he deems critical as an orienting principle in all of his work. Through the application of mindfulness in the clinical setting, Cashwell is able to help clients to reflect upon their experience, in a spacious and non-judgmental way. As a result, his clients

are better able to embrace all dimensions of their experience, without automatically turning away from that which is difficult or disturbing.

When a client makes use of spiritual teachings to defend against the experience of unresolved emotional material, Jennings (personal communication, March 18, 2013) responds slowly, creating an open space in which the client can discover their own sense of spiritual bypass over time. When she has attempted to intervene or interpret the defense prematurely, she has noticed that her clients will usually dig in deeper and end up feeling misunderstood and unmet. Jennings has observed that even when clients are engaged in spiritual bypass that they are often simultaneously benefitting from the same spiritual beliefs and practices that have helped them to avoid an aspect of their lives; therefore, an attempt to dismantle the defense in any sort of wholesale way is often not the most skillful, effective, or kind response. While with some spiritually-oriented borderline or schizoid patients, Jennings is tempted to interpret the defense more aggressively, she has noticed that by staying “open and curious”—holding a space for the unfolding of the patient’s subjective experience—that the patient will eventually come to see the ways their spiritual beliefs are being employed defensively, or in ways that are less than integrated into the entirety of their lives.

In the right empathic environment, Pilar Jennings (personal communication, March 18, 2013) has discovered that many of her patients will come to see for themselves how their terror of yet more pain—whether resulting from abandonment or some other interpersonal struggle—has led them to “live inside” their spirituality and to become encapsulated by it, as a means of protection. For most of her patients, it is not her own interpretations which led to this self-discovery; rather, it emerged naturally out of an attuned, empathic environment. What her patients need when caught in spiritual bypass, Jennings has observed, is not further analysis,

per se, but her understanding that something was being enacted, a non-judgmental, empathic space, and a respect for the complexity of their experience. When these conditions are present, the patient can then move forward with their spiritual lives in a way that is healthier and better integrated into their overall development.

Robert Augustus Masters (personal communication, March 6, 2013), has noticed a common tendency for practitioners to feel deep shame when confronted with the reality of spiritual bypass in their lives, as if they were doing something wrong. When exploring the movement of spiritual bypass, it is thus critical for Masters to take this tendency into consideration, helping his clients and students to reframe their views of spiritual bypass and to normalize its movement in their lives. Even if the practitioner is engaging in deeply addictive and harmful behavior, they can meet as they are—even forcefully if necessary—but in a way that is not shame-inducing. A skillful therapist or teacher can help a person to see the specific ways that their behavior is an attempt to generate a solution to profound pain and trauma that was generated in their early environment. Within a trusting therapeutic relationship, the dyad can then begin to explore the relevant dynamics together—inquiring into its origins, seeing the specific ways it manifests, and working directly and compassionately with its unfolding and transformation. By reminding clients and students that each of us feels shame and are affected by addiction at one level or another, they are given permission to dig into the here and now to do the work necessary to unravel their addiction, rather than become lost in shame about it.

When Masters (personal communication, March 6, 2013) becomes aware that a student is spiritually bypassing through an attempt to “rise above their feelings,” he can almost always trace this avoidance back into their early history. By so doing, he and his client/student can make sense of the situation together, and explore why they might be continuing to enact these

dynamics in relationship. By inviting clients into an environment of exploration and curiosity, Masters helps them to turn toward those places that they have previously turned away from. Then, through bodywork and guided experiential processes, Masters' clients invariably experience some sort of relief and release, such that the previously stuck feeling and emotion can now flow.

Masters (personal communication, March 6, 2013) urges clinicians who work with spiritually-oriented populations to familiarize themselves about the various forms that spiritual bypass takes, such as “blind compassion,” anger-phobia, fear of confrontation, and through attempts to rise above so-called “non-spiritual” thoughts, feelings, and emotions. In addition to learning the basic expressions of spiritual bypass, clinicians are encouraged to refine their understanding of spiritual bypass over time, so that they can begin to see the real subtleties and nuances that it can take. For example, Masters has seen many longtime, accomplished meditators in therapy who, despite having access to profound spiritual states of consciousness, nevertheless bypass in ways that are quite subtle. Perhaps they're overly attached to the “witness” state of awareness where they are so detached from their experience that they are not able to intelligently and creatively work with it. The ability to disidentify—and rest as the witness—is an important realization, however can also be used to distance and avoid uncomfortable aspects of experience.

In spiritual traditions which emphasize the absolute dimension of experience (over the relative or interpersonal, for example), it is believed that engaging with one's personal “story” is likely to further entrench a practitioner in the illusion of a personal self. While the direct realization of “no-self”—or the self's lack of inherent, solid, continuous existence—is one of the most profound illuminations coming out of many of the great wisdom traditions, Masters

(personal communication, March 6, 2013) argues that attention and awareness be given at both personal and non-personal dimensions of experience, as each contain critical information and data useful on the overall psychospiritual journey. As has been stated many times in this study, any approach which emphasizes transpersonal awareness at the expense of personal or interpersonal domains of experience will inevitably lead to one of the many expressions of spiritual bypass. In Masters' experience, there is a way of engaging with one's own and others' personal narratives without overly identifying with them—paying close attention, mining important information, and honoring the reality of personal experience while not becoming lost in it. Over several decades of work as an integral psychotherapist and teacher, Masters has discovered time and again that “connecting the dots” of one's personal history can help clients to realize profound new levels of freedom and healing. Such historical inquiry, while often shunned in certain spiritual communities, need to take long, contends Masters, with insight and transformation at this level occurring in a relatively short period of time if a clinician is trained properly. Through this work, clients can start to see in detail and with new clarity how and why they project certain feelings, qualities, and behaviors onto their partners or children, for example, or why it is so terrifying to say “no” to another person or to assert a healthy boundary. Through an embodied, open exploration of story and narrative—careful not become lost in it or to give it some absolute status—clients can start to see, for example, that saying “no” as a child simply was not safe or that evidencing dependency caused anxiety in those around them. And now, as adults, when certain challenging emotions arise in the present, they can start to see how automatic a freezing reaction is, for example, and how this has become the default in their lives. When a person can come to these direct realizations, even if the details are not clear, then they become more receptive to doing embodied work which opens up the

diaphragm, throat, and the voice in ways that everything begins to flow in a new way for them (R.A. Masters, personal communication, March 6, 2013). They are able to turn toward difficult, unmetabolized feelings and emotions, rather than follow the habitual pattern of turning away, including through the use of spiritual beliefs and practices.

As noted previously in this study, many experienced meditators are able to embody advanced states of consciousness such as that of “the witness,” where they are able to dis-identify with painful thoughts and feelings. While this is an important development milestone as a practitioner, it can also signal a movement into dissociation and bypass. It is important that clinicians and teachers who work with meditative-oriented populations to be able to enter these subtle areas of experience with their clients, as best they can, so that if spiritual practice is being used to avoid feeling or emotion that this can be addressed. Masters (personal communication, March 6, 2013) has observed that certain advanced meditators appear to be living “away from their experience,” creating distance between themselves, others, and their own bodies. From the perspective of lines of development, it is not uncommon for an advanced yogi or meditator to display developed spiritual intelligence, while lagging behind in emotional, moral, psychosexual, or interpersonal development. When working with practitioners evidencing these sorts of lopsided psychographs (Wilber, 2007), Masters begins somatically, guiding practitioners to fully inhabit their bodies and to re-engage with their emotional experience. He will ask his clients to move into the witnessing state of consciousness, for example, and report to him the nature of their experience. At a certain point, however, especially when confronting a particularly painful image, memory, feeling, or emotion, the witness can “get in the way” (R.A. Masters, personal communication, March 6, 2013). While learning to witness one’s experience can offer deep insight into the impermanent

and insubstantial nature of the phenomenal world, it can also serve as an avoidant buffer to the experience of challenging feelings and emotions. In the process of re-embodiment and making actual content with material they have previously split off from, Masters has found that his clients must often tunnel down through many levels of experiencing before reaching the core of any particular emotion, image, or memory. For example, in working with a man who was experiencing deep shame, Masters went with the client down into the shame, which unfolded into deep hurt, then profound anger, and then into unbearable grief. When a person is able to resist the temptation to too quickly transcend difficult feelings—by cultivating instead an embodied intimacy with their experience—they are able to metabolize that which has yet to be processed from the past. In sum, Masters encourages his clients and students to develop the capacity to witness their experience—and to realize the great freedom such realization can provide—while at the same time helping them to discern when this faculty is no longer engendering freedom but is being used as a mechanism of avoidance. This discernment can be subtle and requires a nuanced approach to working with the dynamics of spiritual bypass, evolving through hard-won experience and experimentation. When a practitioner's witnessing capacity is used to further a process of integrating personal, interpersonal, and transpersonal realization, it curtails the expression of spiritual bypass and goes a long way to catalyzing mature growth and development.

For Masters (personal communication, March 6, 2013), it is important for practitioners to learn to become intimate with their experience, moving toward it and engaging with it in a full and complete way, while at the same time not fusing or identifying with it. This approach to self-experience is more art than science, and is something which must be experientially—and not merely conceptually—explored. Tara Brach (personal communication, February 14,

2013) believes this balance—between a full embodied exploration of experience, on the one hand, and not becoming fused and identified on the other—is “the art of spiritual practice.” When it comes to the ways that practitioners become distracted from their true essence, Brach describes two primary ways that human beings “fall into trance,” losing contact with who they are at the deepest level: 1) by turning away and dissociating from lived, embodied experience; and 2) by merging with experience and taking it to represent the entirety of what we are. Citing the traditional metaphor of the ocean and the wave—where the ocean represents the entirety of what a person is, or consciousness itself, and the wave represents turbulent thoughts and emotions—Brach argues that turning away from any particular wave merely creates an opposing energy and a narrowed sense of identity. If, on the other hand, the wave is merged with (i.e. the thought or emotion is fused with), identity is lost altogether and all perspective dissolves. Thus the question remains: how to remember identity as the ocean (awareness) itself while simultaneously making real contact with each wave that arises; how to strike that balance? Ultimately, just as there is no actual separation between the ocean and the waves that arise within it, there is no separation between consciousness and that which arises within it. Difficult thoughts, feelings, and challenging emotions are part of the human being, but doesn’t define or limit it.

In her clinical work, Brach (personal communication, February 14, 2013) seeks to attune to where a person is “leaning” in a particular moment, and will then work with the client to more fully understand what is happening in the here and now. As part of this process, Brach guides clients back into the body to deeply connect with whatever sensation, feeling, or emotion is present. As they deepen below a merely conceptual relationship with their immediate experience, touching somatically what is alive in the here and now, they are able to

make a direct connection with whatever “wave” is arising for them in the moment. By helping her clients to explore the particular qualities of the waves that are present—while at the same time not losing touch with the ground or the “ocean” that they are—they are able to relate directly to both the relative and absolute dimensions of experience. Brach helps her clients to touch the actual emotions and feelings that are there, but in a way where they do not lose touch with the vastness and space in which all experience comes and goes. In engaging with challenging experience in this way, the client learns to not pull away from the feelings or emotions that are there, while at the same time staying connected with their nature as the ocean itself, so that they can touch and experience the wave while not becoming lost or drowning in it.

In Brach’s experience as a clinician and meditation teacher (personal communication, February 14, 2013), the real art of working with a person experiencing difficult feelings and emotions is to explore whether more contact and engagement is needed, or whether to focus on the ground of experience itself, rather than the particulars of the specific content that is arising. By asking the right questions and holding an attuned space, a gifted clinician can guide the client into the relational field and into a holding environment that allows the client to touch very difficult material, without getting caught in it. Finding this balance between engaging with content while not becoming fused with it is the art of spiritual practice as well as good therapy, according to Brach. Masters (2010b) refers to this balance in his guidance to practitioners to become intimate with difficult psychological and emotional material, while not becoming overly identified or fused with it. When a practitioner is able to turn toward their experience, touching it deeply and becoming intimate with it—while simultaneously maintaining an enlarged sense of being as the space in which all experience appears—a

“middle way” is reached between the relative and the absolute. The more a practitioner is able to stay embodied and intimate with all experience—while not overly-identifying or fusing with it—they lessen their susceptibility to the more problematic expressions of spiritual bypassing.

One of the most difficult emotions to work with, especially for spiritual practitioners, is that of anger. The mere presence of anger is often seen as direct evidence that a person is slipping spiritually, and there exists a deeply-rooted belief that anger would simply not arise in a spiritually-realized person. For Masters (personal communication, March 6, 2013), however, one of the critical dimensions of anger is the ability and skill required to say “No.” Many practitioners, however, believe they should only be saying “yes”—that, in fact, one of the clearest signs of a spiritually-evolved person is the ability to say “yes” to even the most disturbing and destructive situations. Especially when it comes to a spiritual teacher or the teachings themselves, questioning or saying “No” is often discouraged, however can end up disempowering students over time. Without anger, Masters argues, it is not possible to create and maintain healthy boundaries; anger-phobia can so quickly lead to a fusing with another (or a spiritual teaching), creating a childlike absorption and developmental difficulties. The fear of anger amongst spiritual practitioners, Masters contends, has to do with the fact that anger can overwhelm a person and take them over, and many fear that sort of loss of control.

If, in relationship, for example, one person is deeply angry at another and is unskillful in the way they relate to their anger, they will likely lose control and destroy the relationship. The opposite, however, is equally problematic, where the anger is “swallowed” and the person who is angry simply makes as if everything is okay. For Masters (personal communication, March 4, 2013), a practitioner’s job is to convey his or her anger skillfully, to communicate what is going on while at the same time maintaining some degree of care, presence, and

compassion. With friends, for example, the person who is angry would be encouraged to take the risk to let the other know how she is feeling, which requires a real willingness to be vulnerable. Vulnerability is present because there is always some loss of control when opening to another to share a difficult feeling or emotion, especially if it is directed toward them. Anger is not destructive or “negative” per se, contends Masters, and can be worked with skillfully to being a necessary energy into a particular situation where that sort of response is called for. Masters has observed that nearly all of his clients who suffered from early trauma also have issues of unresolved anger which must be worked through as part of the healing process. In working with these clients, Masters came to see that anger had to be held back as it was unsafe to feel—let alone express—in the moment. When his clients can learn to open and turn toward the pain within—in a safe therapeutic environment—the anger will begin to flow, and must be worked with skillfully, rather than shut down. The thoughts and feelings related to the anger may be very intense, but in the right therapeutic environment these energies can be worked with, and even encouraged and explored as they are no longer tied up in unconscious reactivity.

Masters (personal communication, March 4, 2013) argues out that many of the world wisdom traditions look upon anger as a hindrance, an unwholesome state, and a true obstacle to spiritual awakening and healing. He has come to see this as an unfortunate misunderstanding of the importance of anger and one that has supported the experience of spiritual bypass. Researching certain Buddhist texts, for example, Masters discovered that the same word in the Pali and Sanskrit languages was originally used to describe anger, ill will, hatred, and aggression. In many spiritual traditions, anger and aggression are viewed as synonymous, which Masters believes evidences an incomplete understanding and an error that

has many untoward consequences. In his own clinical and teaching experience, Masters has discovered that what a person *does* in response to anger can certainly be deeply harmful, but that there is nothing inherent in the actual embodied experience of anger that automatically leads to negativity. “True” anger, for Masters, is not the same as aggression, hatred, or ill will; rather, it can involve a real vulnerability when allowed, touched, and explored. If a person is really angry—while simultaneously deeply in touch with what is happening in his body and open to his own vulnerability—tears may be close to the surface; it is quite possible for even the heart to be fully integrated with the embodied experience of anger. On the other hand, if a person is aggressive, hostile, and reactive—and the object of their behavior does not feel any warmth or heart—the other has a right to put up their hand and say “Stop,” I do not wish to take this type of attack. In Masters’ opinion, however, if the “angry one” is able to stay vulnerable, caring, and warm, even in the face of the anger, a creative process can often result.

As discussed earlier in this study, most of the great world wisdom traditions value transcendence as one of the hallmarks of the spiritual journey. For Masters (personal communication, March 4, 2013), it is inarguable that transcendence of personal limitations is critical, however he seen the importance in discriminating between what he calls “healthy” and “unhealthy” transcendence. “Unhealthy transcendence,” according to Masters, is nothing other than “dissociation in spiritual robes”: it is premature and usually involves an escape from unwanted experience, rather than an exploration of it. In true transcendence, the practitioner is not “escaping” or seeking to avoid that which is difficult or disturbing. In the process of healthy transcendence, that which is transcended is not “finished with” or left behind; rather, it is allowed, touched intimately, and integrated into the entirety of a person’s experience. For Masters, true transcendence is connected with intimacy. It is the case that something is “gone

beyond,” but it has not been abandoned. It is not looked down upon from “a higher place,” but integrated into the totality of one’s life. Whatever it is that has been transcended may still be there in a certain sense, however it is no longer capable of gripping a person, for they are no longer identified with it in any exclusive sense. To transcend anger, contends Masters, does not mean that anger no longer arises, that a person would never again become angry. Rather, it is pointing to an experiential discovery of a certain amount of space between the person and the anger, where the practitioner can keep his or her eye on it, and where reactivity around anger is caught very quickly.

In order to recognize the subtleties of spiritual bypass in others, it is critical to first see the ways it might be active within oneself. Until the nuances of the movement of spiritual bypass are embraced within one’s personal experience, it is difficult to work skillfully with its manifestations in the lives of clients and students. Miles Neale (personal communication, January 9, 2013) urges clinicians and teachers to

look at your own mind first and see all the ways you run from your own fear, hide from your own shame, puff up from your own inadequacy, become envious from your own sense of deficit, become judgmental from your own self-hatred and yes use religion or spiritual matters to mask, side step or deny the painful reality of your own humanity, fragility, and limits—even while that humanity is momentary and evolving.

Further, Neale cautions practitioners and spiritual communities to remain aware of “the ideal projection that liberation is a solo affair of one person sitting on the cushion or on the yoga mat or some yogi in a cave striving for enlightenment, entirely on their own.” His assertion is that as interdependent beings, it is preposterous to believe that a person could become liberated “on their own.” He encourages practitioners to work diligently to balance their solitary efforts with

humble reliance on others, willing to embrace their own vulnerability, and committed to working through the traumas of past failures and disappointments emerging out of reliance on those who were neither ready nor capable at the time. He clarifies that he is not speaking of a passive dependence or “a return to childhood,” but “a realistic interdependence, a healthy give and take.”

For Neale (personal communication, January 9, 2013), it is critical that practitioners and communities be educated about the phenomenon of spiritual bypass and the subtle (and not so subtle) ways that most everyone is engaged with it. Like others cited in this study, Neale believes strongly that teachers and clinicians must “depathologize and destigmatize psychological trauma and wounds that are masked by spiritual bypassing.” He explains:

Somehow we give preference to spiritual enlightenment, thinking psychological wounds are lesser, inferior, or even unreal. When you have a heart attack do you pray to the bodhisattvas for relief or try some tantric visualization or do you just go to the ER? Exactly, because the body has its own domain, psychology and the mind have its domain, and spiritual awakening or transcendence has its domain...granted they all overlap and interrelate but they all have to be taken seriously. Spiritual practitioners can have a kind of hubris about spiritual matters, which can be really detrimental to themselves and others.

Some spiritual teachers discourage the use of medication and therapy, which Neale (personal communication, January 9, 2013) believes “is not only beyond the scope of their expertise but... flat out dangerous.” In contrast, he suggests a “top down approach in which spiritual leaders and teachers model vulnerability and use real life examples to show how

common it is to have blind spots and use spirituality to escape them.” Citing an example from the experience of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Neale argues that

When the Dalai Lama reports that anger and lust arise in his mind, it creates an atmosphere of relief...because everyone who idealized him as an enlightened being—puts him on a pedestal then secretly feels inferior and inadequate and ashamed, now can say, well yeah even enlightened beings have these things feelings in their mind—and its ok, it’s part of life, of being human, we don’t have to fake it or push these ugly or painful or human things away, we just have to use our awareness and methods to understand them.

Sharing a vignette from his own life, Neale (personal communication, January 9, 2013) describes growing up with a father who was “highly narcissistic and an alcoholic,” and a mother was “often anxious, overwhelmed and co-dependent.” Growing up with an avoidant attachment style, Neale did not feel loved unconditionally by his father and felt the need to take care of his mother to keep her feeling at ease. In response to this early environment, he learned to stuff my emotions, because my father wasn’t interested in them, and they would only upset my mother. I grew disconnected from my emotions and my internal needs, reinforcing a personality that was ridged, aloof, anxious and depressed. I had a lot of internal, unexpressed shame-rage and inadequacy-need. I compensated by becoming extremely compliant to my father’s every demand and learned to care-take my mother - expertly listening for the queues of her every need. I though by taking care of others I would get the love and validation I so desperately needed—without having to ask or risk being rejected.

Neale notes that when he found Buddhism at age 20, he “unconsciously slipped into using spiritual teachings on ethics, compassion and serving others, particularly the guru, through my default habits created in childhood.” Further, what he discovered was that he “was no happier, freer, or more in touch with my inner being in the spiritual world as I had been in the secular world as I had been in my own depressive childhood.” At age 24, however, Neale met a man that would become his mentor, Joe Loizzo, a Buddhist psychotherapist, who helped Neale to explore past trauma and the ensuing interpersonal dynamics and rigid defensive structures of his personality. Further, they investigated together the ways that Neale “had co-opted spiritual technologies and philosophies to support [his] ego defenses.” Over the course of his work with Loizzo, it became obvious to Neale why things had not really changed, and why he continued to feel stuck. He explains:

Through a long process of working in a dyad with my teacher, getting vulnerable, and honest and digging up the past and having to express my shame and my need and my anger and my sadness, while watching my transference reactions with Joe—how I would either placate him like I did my father or care take him to my own detriment like I did my mother—and he was so kind and patient and firm, insisting all the while that he didn’t need me to do those things for him and that I was free to experiment doing life and relationship a different way - that I finally felt my life begin to move in a more positive direction. The secret I learned was that while the true nature of the self is fundamentally open, our habitual overcompensations and defenses keep us stuck and our true nature obscured. I finally knew that all my meditation study was about learning how to use awareness, recognition, love and choice to undo the patterns of the past and

forge new neural pathways and new ways of being with others that were more honest and spontaneous.

Through the course of his clinical work and own personal development, Neale (personal communication, January 9, 2013) discovered that a person cannot simply “choose” to be free; they must first “undo the knots and tendencies” which have accumulated in their body and psyche, thereby creating wiser and more skillful habits that allow them to live in a new way. In order to do this sort of work, unresolved pain and trauma from must be engaged with; as long as a person is using spiritual beliefs and practices to avoid this undigested material, the freedom that is sought will not likely be found. As suggested several times in this study, Neale echoes his own discovery that it is very difficult to unwind these old habitual tendencies on one’s own. As these patterns and organizing principles emerged in intersubjective contexts, they are best access and unwound in the environment of attuned interpersonal relationship. Spiritual bypassing, Neale argues, arises out of a very natural desire to avoid trauma and pain; as the Buddha noted in his first noble truth, however, suffering is not an obstacle to freedom, but is the doorway to it.

For Brach (personal communication, February 14, 2013), part of the challenge inherent within the various expressions of spiritual bypassing lies the way that the word “spirituality” is understood, namely as some thing or dynamic that is separate from or apart from ordinary life. Rather than being an obstacle to realization, so-called “ordinary” life is the vehicle through which a practitioner is able to achieve realization. It is important for Brach to convey this to her clients and students, to help them to see that there is no need to escape life in order to realize the freedom they long for; there is not freedom from, but only a freedom within even the most disturbing feelings, emotions, and life situations (Foster, 2012). In fact, Brach has

discovered that those ways of seeing the world which are the most contracted—those habitual patterns that are calling out the most for a person’s attention—are often “the most powerful portals to realizing wholeness,” if of course they are allowed and embraced.

Over her many years of clinical work and in teaching meditation, Brach (personal communication, February 14, 2013) has seen that most of the issues confronting her clients and students are relational in nature. For many, intimacy and interpersonal relationships are profoundly challenging and raise lifelong issues of self-worth, shame, and self-aggression. There is a common, very deeply-rooted belief, contends Brach, that the spiritual journey exists apart from these sorts of relational issues, that they are somehow “less spiritual” and therefore of lesser importance for the spiritual practitioner. Further, they can even be seen as overt distractions or obstacles to spiritual realization itself. In working with clients and students over the years, however, Brach has discovered that meeting these relational issues head on are just as necessary and transformational than “advanced” spiritual practices such as meditation and the exploration of *samadhi* states. Brach urges teachers and clinicians to pay careful attention to whatever specific form suffering is taking in a particular person’s life and to be willing to engage directly with it; it is her view that a person’s immediate experience can be trusted and will reveal what is needed to be worked with at any given time. The important point here is that the goal of authentic and effective psychospiritual work is to help a person to unfold in a more spiritually mature way, not believing that spirituality has to do with just a narrow realm of experience. When spirituality is seen as somehow removed from the body, relationships, intimacy, and creativity, the seeds are planted for the future expression of spiritual bypass.

There is a common idea among spiritual practitioners that if a challenging emotion is present then this must automatically mean something about a person’s practice or level of

attainment. For example, if anxiety arises, or sadness, or anger, then it must signal, in one way or another, that the person does not have enough faith, isn't disciplined enough, not clear on the teachings, or otherwise failing as a practitioner. It is as if the spiritual superego is right there to meet any arising "non-spiritual" feelings and emotions, causing the practitioner to become aggressive to their self-experience, convinced that they should try harder, practice more, become more devoted, and so forth. In working with this very common dynamic, Brach (personal communication, February 14, 2013) references the animal-headed deities that appear at the entrance to Asian temples or as guardians in certain Hindu and Buddhist mandalas.

These deities represent emotional energies such as passion, rage, and wrath, and point to the discovery that it is only by engaging directly with these archetypes that the pathway home can be found, that a practitioner can come to realize who and what they are at the deepest levels. From the perspective of awakened mind, it is not problematic that these energies arise—as the deities themselves are only aspects of pure awareness in its different expressions. It is important for teachers and clinicians to reframe the understanding of these very challenging energies and emotional states: they are not bad, they are not wrong, they are not something which must be "fixed," but they are exactly what each practitioner must engage with, meet and allow, and must actually be invited into one's experience, as they are none other than the path themselves. It is through these energies that a practitioner can discover their own natural being, if they worked with directly. When practitioners come to see these "lesser" thoughts, feelings, and emotions as the obstacle to spiritual realization, rather than material for the path of transformation itself, they open themselves to the many forms of spiritual bypass.

To further illustrate this process, Brach (personal communication, February 14, 2013) cites a teaching from the Buddha on the "second arrow." The metaphor arises from a story told

by the Buddha where a man was unexpectedly shot by an arrow, who eventually realizes that there are two responses available to him: to spend his time and energy learning about the person who shot him, why they shot him, where they might find this person, what family the shooter came from, and so forth. Or, he could simply take out the arrow and move on. When a person experiences suffering in the form of a difficult feeling or emotion, it might be said that they are in the same predicament: to “shoot the second arrow” by judging themselves, blaming others, endlessly searching for why a particular situation had to happen; or, to meet the energetic movement directly, to turn into it, and to allow it to reveal its nature. Brach has come to see that one of the most important realizations along the spiritual path—as well as in therapeutic work—is learning “not to shoot the second arrow,” but rather instead to pause and to pay attention to what is actually unfolding in immediate, embodied experience. This turning toward experience, staying embodied, and countering the habitual tendency to move away from difficult experience describes the process of cutting through the momentum of spiritual bypass. Brach reminds practitioners that there is an innate intelligence and creativity within every emotional state, and that coming into the purity of what a person is at the deepest levels occurs *through* difficult experiences, not by going *around* them.

Caplan (personal communication, January 25, 2013) has also observed a tendency for practitioners to draw conclusions about their spiritual realization based on the mere appearance of certain “non-spiritual” experiences such as anxiety, depression, grief, or confusion. It is important, Caplan contends, for teachers and clinicians to normalize the experience of powerful feelings, emotions, and sensations in the body. Further, practitioners can be guided to see that they are not “less than awakened” simply because strong emotions are arising in their experience. In this way, spiritually-educated psychotherapists and psychologically-grounded

spiritual practitioners can help to re-contextualize the collective view of the path, such that some of these unexamined ideas can be re-worked in a new light. In her research of contemporary spirituality, Caplan has come to see that no one, not even the greatest masters, are exempt from the movement of sensation, feeling, and emotion. She cites an example of her visit with an experienced American lama in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition who so openly articulated a seasonal depression that he experienced annually, writing poetry and speaking so beautifully about his loneliness and despair. What was so meaningful to Caplan was that in the same talk this teacher was simultaneously expounding the most advanced tantric teachings of Tibetan tradition, clarifying to those present that just because he has attained a certain degree of spiritual realization that this does not mean that he doesn't experience anxiety or depression, or that he does not have difficulties in relationships. He stated clearly to his students that he is interested in all of what life has to offer, and not some sub-set of only "spiritual" experiences. This more tantric understanding of the spiritual journey has much to offer in countering the problematic expressions of spiritual bypass.

According to Caplan (personal communication, January 25, 2013), it is only through turning *toward* difficult experience that it can become illuminated and worked with. She cites a principle from the *somatic experiencing* work of Dr. Peter Levine which alleges that if a person can turn toward the "top 3-5%" of even the most challenging unresolved material, that this is all that's required to begin the process of healing and transformation. In actuality, attempting to "take it on all at once" can be its own form of spiritual bypass, Caplan cautions, where a practitioner prematurely engages with material they are not prepared for or ready to confront, all in the understandable effort to get rid of it as quickly as possible. Similar to Brach's "pre-mature forgiveness"—where a practitioner moves into healing and

transformation before doing the internal and external due diligence required to digest the feelings that are there—this “rush to healing” can be yet another form of spiritual bypass. This movement to healing, even if “premature,” is understandable and normal, and can at times lead to positive results, but is unlikely to integrate in a lasting way in a person’s life. To summarize Caplan’s essential point, if a person experiencing anxiety is able to “touch its top layer”—and spend even 30 seconds there—they can start a process of metabolization and healing of early, unresolved material. Further, Caplan urges clinicians and teachers to help clients and students to see that difficult, challenging, and even disturbing emotional material is not “less-than-optimal” or “unspiritual”; in fact, according to the tantric tradition, these energies are expressions of enlightened qualities in and of themselves, if they are met without rejection. While the practices on entering difficult experience represent some of the more advanced teachings from the various traditions, they can be addressed with clients and students in a simple way that exists outside religion and complex spirituality altogether. Despite its simplicity, this sort of work is never easy, requiring tremendous courage and support to go directly into those emotions that have been avoided for a lifetime.

The most effective way for clinicians and teachers to cultivate more awareness of the phenomenon of spiritual bypass is to inquire deeply (and consistently) into their own psyches (M. Caplan, personal communication, January 25, 2013). Even if the teacher or clinician is not currently struggling psychologically or emotionally, the nuances of spiritual bypass (and defensive avoidance more generally) can be observed and studied in the context of one’s own life and relationships. Caplan admires spiritual teachers who talk freely about their own involvement with psychotherapy, and encourages anyone who serves a teaching or counseling role to be humble enough to work on blind spots that may be affecting their perception of

others and reality. To the degree that a teacher or clinician is unaware of their own defensive organization—or the ways they are unwilling to meet their own loneliness, depression, or anxiety—they will be less able to skillfully help others to face these same issues (M. Caplan, January 25, 2013). Moreover, until this work is engaged by the teacher or clinician, there will always be a “subtle distancing” from the individuals and populations they serve, via countertransference dynamics. Citing a conversation she had with American Buddhist teacher Lama Palden (also interviewed as part of this study), Caplan recalled Palden referring to a teaching in Tibetan tradition where teachers are put through challenging life circumstances so that they will be better prepared to guide students facing similar difficulties. It is quite common, Caplan has observed, for practitioners to encounter both shame and pride in having to admit that they are in psychological or emotional crisis, and that they may actually need therapy or medication to manage their situation. Practitioners can move into severe self-judgment—and even self-hatred—in response to the fact that they (or their practice) are not able to adequately handle overwhelming feelings and emotions, concluding that they have lost their sense of spaciousness or equanimity. It is important, argues Caplan, for practitioners to confront the all-too-common fantasies that difficult emotions, for example, would never arise in the life of a spiritually realized person. These ideas are very widespread and continue to create unnecessary suffering for many, and serve as one of the very important foundations for the movement of spiritual bypass.

Caplan (personal communication, January 25, 2013) cites the example of a female client whose husband wished to experiment sexually with another woman, as part of his spiritual practice. Caplan’s client was struggling with the fact that she was unable to be spacious (or spiritual) enough to be open to the situation and was so thrown off by it. Despite

the fact that this woman was a mature practitioner, she was unable to accept the reality that she had certain needs for safety and structure, which could be seen as intelligent and in her best interest developmentally. She had a difficult time seeing that asserting boundaries and honoring her needs could be part of her journey rather than some neurotic aberration or “unspiritual” behavior. As she worked this through, she began to feel enormous relief, coming to see that she was not failing in her spiritual life merely by asserting her own need for boundaries and a safe container.

In another example from her clinical practice, Caplan (personal communication, January 25, 2013) described a couple she worked with where both members were deeply committed to their spiritual lives. She notes that the man had a rich history with spiritual bypass and in fact had “almost become a pathological bypasser” as he had made use of his spiritual practice to avoid many difficult aspects of his life. In a session where they explored issues of intimacy and sexuality, the man claimed that he could not engage in sexual behavior with his partner more than twice a week or he would lose his “jing,” his vital energy. Caplan worked with him to explore the possibility that he might be using this teaching he found in the Daoist tradition as a way to avoid a history of difficult sexual challenges.

Caplan’s best advice for cultivating awareness of how spiritual bypass might be at play in a practitioner’s life is to remain humble (M. Caplan, personal communication, January 25, 2013). She urges new therapists and practitioners especially (those who have been on the path for less than 20 years) to stay humble in their recognition that the tendency to avoid difficult experience through spiritual practice exists within everyone, is natural, and if related to skillfully and compassionately, can provide additional fuel on the journey. These dynamics need not be rejected by practitioners as a sign that they have failed or are failing, but rather

embraced as an expression of the path itself, as an opportunity to deeper realization. She reminds practitioners that working skillfully within the psyche—both one’s own and another’s—is a subtle process that requires many, many years of experience. She urges clinicians to “reign in their spiritual pride,” to not assume that they know everything they think, and to realize that they’re probably not all that different from the clients they are seeing.

Spiritual Bypassing as a Defense Mechanism

As the phenomenon of spiritual bypass emerged into the awareness of transpersonally-oriented clinicians and researchers in the mid-1980s, it was initially viewed as highly undesirable, if not outright problematic. Since that time, a discourse has evolved which has refined the way spiritual bypass is considered, including an exploration of its adaptive function. As with any defense mechanism, spiritual bypass can both support and thwart development and healing. One of the major decisions faced by clinicians is how to respond to it when it presents in the lives of their clients. For example, is it seen as a “problem” which must be confronted, interpreted, and gotten rid of, or is it natural aspect of development that may be serving the client developmentally, to be explored in a more indirect way over time and through the therapeutic relationship itself.

For Bruce Tift (personal communication, March 25, 2013), spiritual bypassing is not inherently problematic. Just about everyone, Tift contends, must engage in creative ways to protect themselves from overwhelming experience, especially as infants and children in early family environments. Being at the mercy of others and the world at large, children must learn to adapt to others’ expectations and preconceptions. For example, for a child growing up in a family that was phobic around sadness, it was incumbent upon the child to figure out how not to be sad, in order to have her needs met for love, safety, and affection. It is important to

realize, Tift argues, that these early defensive strategies and structures are usually quite accurate, necessary, intelligent, and healthy, and take a lot of effort to maintain. On the positive side, these strategies are often effective in that they do provide protection from very difficult and disturbing experience that would otherwise be likely to overwhelm a young child. The challenge, however, is that because these strategies work so well they tend to get internalized as character structure, persisting intact into adulthood. Those engaged with therapeutic or spiritual work tend for the most part to have adequate enough ego functioning in the healthy Western sense, observes Tift, and are able to tolerate increasing levels of intense experience that they could not metabolize as a child. As adults, while it is possible some healthy level of defense will still be needed—such as when a loved one dies or in response to a divorce or loss of a job—a person will generally have capacities they did not have as a child, to defend themselves spontaneously in response to very specific, current issues. But most come into adulthood, Tift asserts, with “chronic states of defensive structure.” As an infant or young child, it does not make sense to “re-invent” one’s defensive style each moment, but rather to embed it within a structure that remains for the most part intact through the passing of time. As an adult, on the other hand, there is a developmental capacity to shift one’s response into the here and now of current reality. The net effect, however, is that most adults engage with the world through embedded defensive organization which is now several decades out of date.

Tift (personal communication, March 25, 2013) sees his role as a therapist, at least in part, to help clients to tolerate increasing levels of anxiety, as well as to guide them, if they are interested, in the dismantling of old defensive structures. Such work must be done very skillfully as for many clients their defensive organization is all they have holding them together. In Tift’s experience, even with very mature clients who outwardly wish to confront

and remove defensive structure, they will almost always experience profoundly contradictory feelings about doing so. The essence of Tift's work is to invite his clients to stay embodied as a way to start to dissolve or loosen up stuck energy, although he is never sure where the energy will go on its own. For example, when working with a couple, the goal is to free up the energy so the couple is not stuck, so they are free to experience whatever sensations, feelings, and emotions are present. They may get divorced or they may stay together, but they're no longer frozen or stuck in old habitual energy and unmetabolized experience. The quickest and most effective way to do this work, according to Tift, is to invite a person to go directly into their immediate experience of panic or rage or grief or whatever they've been organizing their life around avoiding, and to find out for themselves: Is there a problem? Where's the damage? Where's the threat? Where's the evidence about self-worth? For Tift, when a person is willing to increase their tolerance of experiential intensity, they can then stay embodied and ride the inevitable "waves of intensity" that are already occurring, and find out for themselves if they are being harmed. They can start to see that maybe they don't actually have to defend against intense experience and that it might be the resistance to it that is what is causing suffering and discomfort, rather than the actual sensations, feelings, or emotions in and of themselves.

Tift (personal communication, March 25, 2013) gives the example of a person who is spiritually bypassing via an organization around not wanting to feel anger or to identify as "an angry person." In this type of situation, Tift would begin by inviting his client to practice staying embodied with exactly what they don't want to feel, and to see for themselves if feeling the anger is actually going to harm them. Because the anger is actually there, Tift argues, why not practice having a more conscious relationship with it, rather than avoiding it? The real choice, for Tift, is whether to have a conscious relationship with the truth of one's

experience, or an unconscious relationship with it. Or, using Buddhist language, a relationship that is oriented around kindness (*maitri*) toward self-experience or one of self-aggression. When a person is spiritually bypassing, Tift contends, they are engaging in a certain kind of aggression in relation to their experience, toward some feeling or emotional state that they do not wish to acknowledge. Tift sees spiritual bypass as “a more accomplished defense” than earlier, more primitive ones, which can be quite subtle in its expression, often involving a practitioner’s “idealized self-image.” When Tift encounters a client who is struggling to maintain a particular image—often as a spiritual person who is never disturbed, always at peace, or never angry, for example—he will try to reframe the situation and explore with the client whether “they’re at a point in their life where they could tolerate a more complex sense of themselves,” rather than a more simple, defended sense of self that they had to develop when they were young. He has found that clients, even those caught in overt forms of spiritual bypass, often soften in response to this sort of exercise and are willing to begin to explore dropping the struggle around the maintenance of any particular identity.

In researching and clinical work with the phenomenon over several years, Mathieu (personal communication, April 12, 2013) was surprised to discover that while spiritual bypassing could be seen as merely defensive in nature that it was also part of a very natural developmental sequence. While it certainly had maladaptive consequences in her clients’ lives, it was also engaged with in a ways that were adaptive, necessary, and even helpful. Mathieu conceives of the spiritual journey as a container, which holds the entirety of what the human experience offers. In her view, spiritual bypass—and defensive activity more generally—is necessary for certain practitioners at certain times, offering an effective way to manage very difficult experience. Without the developmental capability to adequately defend against

overwhelming experience, psychosis would result. Mathieu argues that the developing human person must be shielded from the full intensity of certain experiences at certain times, in order to build enough ego strength and structure so that they can eventually turn toward experiential intensity when they are developmentally ready. Seen in this way, Mathieu sees spiritual bypass as a natural aspect of development and human evolution, as the capacity to stay with and metabolize challenging experience does not happen overnight or “all in one shot.”

In exploring the ways that spirituality can be used defensively, Jungian analyst Lionel Corbett (personal communication, March 22, 2013) believes any meaningful discourse in the area must first clarify what is meant by the term “defensively.” Corbett notes much variance in the conceptualization and understanding of defense, much of it carrying negative or maladaptive connotation. In Corbett’s experience, defensive behavior is not inherently problematic, but is merely a way of responding and coping to internal, psychological pressures; it is way of protecting the integrity of the self in the face of intense emotional experience. It is critical, argues Corbett, for defensive organization not to be conceived of as merely pathological in nature. Human beings need the capacity to defend, for without adequate defenses, they may become too fragile. Therefore, Corbett urges clinicians and researchers to enter any discussion of defense mechanisms—including that centered upon spiritual bypass—outside the realm of mere neurosis and pathology.

For Corbett (personal communication, March 22, 2013), the word “defense” is an unfortunate one, linked “to Freud’s fondness of military metaphors.” While the term has been widely adopted in psychotherapy literature, it is useful to understand its historical roots. In his clinical work, Corbett has observed many ways “that spiritual practice can be used to bolster or shore up a sense of self.” It is quite common, in fact, for spirituality to be utilized to help a

practitioner feel stronger, more important, and even “holy.” For example, Corbett describes how spirituality is often used as a vehicle to compare oneself with others, to demonstrate one’s superiority—or even inferiority. In these and other ways, spirituality can quickly become “a narcissistic experience,” utilizing beliefs and practices in the service of one’s self, rather than as a means of connection to the sacred. While most are familiar with obvious examples of spiritual bypass—for example a person with a sexual problem who becomes celibate and enters into a monastery to avoid it—Corbett is more disturbed with “how much spirituality and spiritual practice is really the ego in disguise.” For example, a person can make use of the spiritual journey to say: “Look how spiritual I am, look how much I meditate, look how much I give to charity,” and so forth. This is why Jesus urged his disciples, argues Corbett, to “pray in secret.” For Corbett, despite the fact that many of the great teachers and traditions have cautioned against doing so, the spiritual journey is used for narcissistic and self-centered reasons, with very little to do with a genuine call to the sacred.

Citing Jiddu Krishnamurti, Corbett (personal communication, March 22, 2013) reminds practitioners that all spiritual practices and rituals emerge out of conceptual thought; Krishnamurti was keen to note that a person could not get to that dimension of experience which is beyond thought, by using thought. Or, in other words, you “can’t get there from here.” “Over there,” the other side, the holy, can come to you, Corbett contends, but it cannot be reached through the application of a technique. It can come in the form of various kinds of religious experience, but cannot be accessed through effort in the ordinary sense. Spiritual practice can be used, though, to soften oneself, to relax the small sense of self, in order to make one receptive and available for the numinous. Spiritual bypass is more the rule than the exception, Corbett has observed, with many of his clients and students running from one

retreat to another, learning new meditation techniques, going from church to church, workshop to workshop, and so forth. While many of his clients are genuinely committed to healing and transformation, he just as often observes that clients are looking to spiritual teachings and practices to “bolster their sense of self” or to “shore themselves up” in a developmental sense. It is important to not pathologize this relationship with spirituality, argues Corbett, for even though it may be serving a defensive function, engagement with spiritual practice can nonetheless offer important identity and structure for a person, at important developmental junctures in their lives. For example, if a person suffers from anxiety and finds relief from the practice of prayer or meditation, this can be encouraged and supported on the part of clinicians and teachers. Similarly, if a client is calmed through a belief that they can trust in God and that everything will be okay, there is nothing inherently problematic about this and need not be related to as such.

For Corbett (personal communication, March 22, 2013), working with spiritual bypass requires a clinician to confront their own views as to how to respond to defensive organization more generally: namely, what is the therapist’s approach to defensive behavior when it presents itself in the context of therapeutic work. There are many schools of thought on this; some ignore it, some confront it directly, some allow it to unfold, and some interpret it. In Corbett’s experience, it is most often the case that acting to dismantle defensive behavior is not the most skillful or effective approach, including in working with spiritual bypass. Many clients simply need their defensive strategies, at a particular time, for specific reasons, and it is serving a positive, adaptive function for them, at least in the short term. Citing Kohut, Corbett cautions clinicians against prematurely cutting through needed defenses, lest a client become “unglued.” On the other hand, there are defenses which are clearly not helpful to the person

that may require interpretation and intervention. In these situations, the client can either agree or disagree with the analysis, at which time the clinician must determine how far to push. Responding skillfully in this sort of situation requires therapeutic tact and sensitivity; it is important that the clinician take in the entirety of a client's development and life situation in working with spiritual bypass and other defensive organization

There is no question for Corbett (personal communication, March 22, 2013) that spiritual belief and practice can support developmental inadequacies and, via Kohut, Corbett urges clinicians not to judge this process if and as it arises in a client's life. Echoing the view of transpersonal psychologists Forman (personal communication, April 25, 2013) and Mathieu (personal communication, April 12, 2013), Corbett argues for the importance of normalizing spiritual bypass as it is simply "what certain clients need to do at certain stages in their lives," and must be honored as such. If, for example, a person is drawn to find a guru to look up to because they are "idealization hungry"—emerging from early childhood with no idealizable selfobjects (Kohut, 2009a)—if such idealization helps to repair this early developmental failure, this could be helpful up to a certain point. The problem with idealizing a guru, Corbett argues, is that at some point the disciple is likely to have a crashing de-idealization when it is discovered the guru has "feet of clay." In the therapeutic relationship, on the other hand, when the therapist is idealized, the idealization can gradually be withdrawn, interpreted, and worked through; with a guru it is very rare that the disciple would be have this same opportunity. Over the last 30 years, the contemporary spiritual landscape has witnessed acting out on the part of beloved gurus, sexually or in the context of drugs, alcohol, or in their quests for money and power. While many of these gurus are in contact with a very authentic stream of transcendent wisdom, in many cases their "personal self is obviously quite sick" (personal communication,

March 22, 2013). These teachers were able to access profound levels of transpersonal realization, however their practice was not so helpful with personal and interpersonal domains of experience, supporting the personal sense of self. As a result, they ended up creating a lot of conflict and confusion in these areas. Corbett sees these unfortunate behaviors—sexual acting out, alcohol abuse, the need for power and control—as attempts to “shore up a fragile sense of self,” though this is not actually consciously seen or embraced by the practitioner. It is very possible, Corbett argues, that a person could engage in regular spiritual practice for many years but not change all that much internally. This is a difficult reality for many practitioners to allow in, especially if they are part of traditions which view the spiritual life as a panacea for “all of the ills of the soul.” Corbett cites the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard who, in his own way, spoke to the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing, in his observations of the Christianity of his time. Kierkegaard observed many around him who were outwardly very active in the practice of their faith, however for the most part remained unchanged. Without this inner shift (which he called “inwardness”) he was doubtful about the ultimately effect and purpose of religious undertaking.

While nearly all of the clinicians cited in this study view spiritual bypass as one of many possible defense mechanisms, another in the long list of those originally elucidated by Anna Freud (1979), Masters (personal communication, March 6, 2013) prefers to view the phenomenon as a “solution to pain and suffering.” As a young child, Masters contends, it was important to experiment with a variety of solutions and responses in the face of overwhelming experience. For example, there are those who become “harmony junkies” as adults, as a strategy to remedy a lack of harmony experienced in early childhood. The spiritual journey can be co-opted to help produce and maintain a sense of harmony, argues Masters, even if it results

in splitting off or dissociating from important aspects of self-experience along the way. In this way, spiritual bypass is not merely a defense against overwhelming anxiety, but is actually a detailed strategy and overall solution to pain. The many innovative solutions which a person employs to this aim—“erotic, neurotic, and electronic”—help to cut into psychological, emotional, and existential pain (R.A. Masters, personal communication, March 6, 2013). What tends to happen in the process, however, is that these short-lived solutions do not actually embrace the source of a person’s pain, but only temporarily numb it, pushing it deeper into the body where it will emerge in a variety of ways in the future. Like many of the contemplatively-oriented clinicians cited in this study, Masters has come to see that the only true, lasting solution is to turn toward pain, rather than away from it, regardless of how embarrassing or ego-crushing it may be to do so; for it is only through a willingness to be vulnerable that unresolved feelings and emotions can come to the surface to be worked with. When a practitioner is engaged in the various forms of spiritual bypass, however, they are doing just the opposite: doing whatever they can to move away from difficult emotional material. Like any other form of addictive behavior, spiritual bypass will always reveal itself to be an ineffective and unskillful solution to pain in the long run.

Multiple Developmental Lines

The importance of including multiple developmental lines into one’s approach to psychospiritual growth was discussed in this study’s literature review. According to Tift (personal communication, March 25, 2013), when a person engages with psychological and spiritual work—something “so alive and impossible to give definition to”—it can be very helpful to do so from many different angles. Approaching the path with this in mind will not necessarily eliminate the many pitfalls and blind spots sure to be encountered along the way,

but can help a practitioner to stay aware of the many dimensions of human experience. It is not uncommon for a practitioner to take refuge in or to even hide out in one dimension of experience, to the neglect of others; this is, in fact, the hallmark of spiritual bypass. When a practitioner makes effort to work at multiple lines of development (e.g. emotional, interpersonal, psychosexual)—in addition to the spiritual or transpersonal—they very naturally cut into the momentum of spiritual bypass in their own lives. While it is likely not possible, contends Tift, to remain “fully integrated”—holding a 360-degree perspective at all times—staying open to the many dimensions of human experience tends to help “to increase the claustrophobia of not being able to pretend to compartmentalize.” For example, if a person spends a lot of time in retreat or alone, they may not be confronted with interpersonal material which remains unresolved within them. In Tift’s experience, it can be quite helpful (though not easy) to address the complexity of relative experience in a variety of ways, e.g. through parenting, intimate relationship, career, or community work. In intimate relationship, for example, “a sense of claustrophobia” is often activated very naturally, which can provide a tremendous amount of material for the practitioner to work with and integrate. Such material is unlikely to arise in solitary meditation retreat, for example, and provides the practitioner with a unique opportunity to further their own development.

Brach (personal communication, February 14, 2013) also looks to a developmental model in understanding spiritual bypass, suggesting the use of multiple lines to address the various tasks and capacities that are a normative part of human development. As Wilber (2000, 2007, personal communication, February 15, 2013) and his colleagues have discovered, developmental arrests can occur at any stage of life and within any given line of intelligence, be it cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, or spiritual. In Brach’s clinical work, she has

observed a variety of types of arrests where clients have not been able to successfully navigate developmental lessons required for them to “unfold to the next level of understanding.” Each practitioner enters the spiritual path, Brach alleges, with their own unique mix of uneven development. Some are quite advanced spiritually, for example, but evidence lower levels of emotional or interpersonal intelligence. The conclusion here reached by Brach and many of the other developmentally-oriented clinicians and teachers in this study is that one of the most important ways to curb the negative consequences of spiritual bypass is to pay close attention to those lines of development which are not as mature as they could be. Helping clients and students to explore these less-than-awakened lines is a critical part of working with spiritual bypass. As practitioners come to see the ways in which they might be unevenly developed, they then have the opportunity to train their attention in a way that leads to a more integral realization (T. Brach, personal communication, February 14, 2013). If a person is not paying attention to the different ways that suffering presents, contends Brach—somatically, emotionally, and interpersonally, for example—while they may be able to access certain spiritual states of consciousness, these realizations will not be able to penetrate the entirety of a person’s life as they will remain un-integrated with wisdom from other lines.

In addressing the relationship between developmental lines and the phenomenon of spiritual bypass, Wilber (personal communication, February 15, 2013) clarifies that it is not the goal for practitioners to be “fully” developed in all forms of intelligence. His principal argument is for the importance of paying attention to lines that are poorly developed, as these will inevitably “slow down” a practitioner’s overall growth if they remain unrelated with. Unfortunately, Wilber has observed, instead of working on those two or three lines of development that “are broken,” practitioners often bypass these and take up a spiritual practice

that will aid them in avoiding these developmental inadequacies. His essential point is that all practitioners have certain areas of development that could use extra attention; such is the nature of the immensity of the path. Over the last several decades, tools and practices have emerged designed to address developmental inadequacies and to help practitioners to “establish fluency in a particular intelligence” (K. Wilber, personal communication, February 15, 2013). It is not so difficult to access even the most advanced spiritual states of consciousness, Wilber has long argued. The challenge, though, is these states come and go, and are accessible by anyone, at any level of spiritual development or maturity. Simply because a practitioner has come to experience a profound state of consciousness does not mean that they have transcended or worked through unresolved somatic, psychological, or emotional material. In fact, practitioners can become identified with or attached with these states as they do provide temporary relief from psychological or emotional difficulties, covering over them, yet not transforming them in any lasting way. Wilber urges practitioners not to overlook emotional, shadow, or other developmental inadequacies, through the use of spiritual beliefs, practices, and experiences. It is one thing to access profound states of consciousness, Wilber is fond of saying; it is another for the implications of these experiences to move through the relative world of the body, relationships, and cultural institutions. It is the relative vehicle through which enlightenment is expressed and communicated, Wilber argues, and if the relative vehicle is broken, only a partial enlightenment will reach out into the world.

Wilber (personal communication, February 15, 2013) urges practitioners to exercise discernment in exploring the ways they might be bypassing shadow elements or avoiding unresolved emotional experience, despite believing they have risen above it. He suggests that practitioners make a commitment to receiving regular feedback from their peers as others tend

to be more aware than oneself of unprocessed shadow material. For example, Wilber shares a common example of a person who believes they have attained perfect enlightenment, while at the same time acting in ways that are far from awakened. A “partial enlightenment,” Wilber argues, “when passed off as total, complete, and integral” is not helpful and can in fact be dangerous when teachers simply transmit this incomplete realization to others. Because “the vehicle through which they’re communicating is broken,” contends Wilber, they will communicate “a broken version of enlightenment” which, in the end, tends to lead to more suffering.

Wilber (personal communication, February 15, 2013) speaks of spiritual bypass as behavior which ignores fundamental psychological and emotional issues, “re-labels them ‘spiritual’,” and enables a person to avoid critical aspects of their own development. The real problem with spiritual bypass, argues Wilber, is that like all defense mechanisms, it will fail over time. Defensive activity in general, including spiritual bypass more specifically, involves strategic beliefs and behavior to help a person avoid suffering, discomfort, and what is seen to be unmanageable anxiety. While some minor, short-lived relief may be found through engagement with spiritual bypass, in the long run “symptoms, shadows, and problematic sub-personalities” will always emerge (K. Wilber, personal communication, February 15, 2013). Ironically, Wilber alleges, the enacting of defense mechanisms will tend to bring about exactly that material which they originally attempted to ward off. As a result, the practitioner will often be drawn to using more and more subtle forms of bypass, creating “a pothole in the road” that the person must drive over day in and day out.

From the perspective of multiple intelligences, spiritual bypass may be said to involve an emphasis on transpersonal development to the detriment or even neglect of other important

lines, for example the emotional, interpersonal, and moral. While Forman (personal communication, April 25, 2013) understands how and why spiritual bypass is generally understood in this way, he expresses skepticism about conceiving the phenomenon in such a black and white way as it relates to developmental lines. In contrast, Forman prefers a “middle approach” to thinking about developmental lines as he believes the research is not yet conclusive enough and has a long way to come. For example, Forman is not fully comfortable with the notion of a standalone spiritual line of development. When a person takes up an authentic spiritual practice, Forman contends, they inevitably engage a variety of developmental areas, including self-identity, needs, morals, and so forth. In Forman’s own words, “... spirituality doesn’t stand up in the person and just say, ‘I’m spirituality’ and the rest of it is ‘other lines’.” In other words, developmental lines overlap and are not nearly as separable in practice as they are in theory. Forman is more comfortable with “a gentler metaphor” which points to the ways human beings can engage in development which isn’t integrated and which de-emphasizes certain developmental areas. In his own exploration of spiritual bypass, Forman favors more holistic, circular-type metaphors over a more linear depiction of development. The potential exists for a very full life—with many different components and dimensions of human experience—but when some of these domains are underemphasized, some of this richness remains out of reach.

Despite his concern with a strict application of developmental line theory to spiritual bypass, Forman (personal communication, April 25, 2013) agrees in a general sense that an overemphasis on spirituality can lead to neglect of other important areas of a practitioner’s personal and interpersonal life. In unpacking his understanding of the phenomenon, Forman distinguishes between spiritual bypass that is biased to the *transcendent* and that which is

biased to the *descendent*. Many of the more obvious cases of spiritual bypass involve an overemphasis on the transcendent dimension of life, however it can express also in a descending fashion. For example, a practitioner who is undergoing a painful transition or experiencing hurt over the end of a relationship might assert that “everything is perfect as it is.” While from an absolute perspective, this sort of statement can be reflective of a profound level of realization, its temporary use to cover over challenging emotions is unlikely to promote any lasting growth or healing. Forman notes a woman he knew who regularly wore a shirt which stated: “Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional.” While this teaching can be helpful to certain people in specific situations, it demonstrates how spiritual principles have found their way into a consumer-oriented culture, showing up as catchy slogans and quick one-liners. This particular woman was in her early 20s, Forman continues, very attractive, no major health issues, and engaged in work that she really enjoyed. She did not have any family responsibilities or financial difficulties, and was in a “cushy part of her karmic course.” So while she was not using spiritual practice to necessarily “rise above” in a transcendent way, she was engaged in a certain descending energy that was very much tied up in wishful thinking. But, from another perspective, this way of perceiving herself and the world around her was typical and made sense at the stage of development in which she found herself. She was putting her ideas out there and identifying with them very strongly, not really questioning them until a future time when it might be necessary to do so. In this way, her ideals were part of a normal developmental process and indicative of where she wished to be identified. Even wearing the t-shirt is a way to externally support ego development in this area; akin to a teenager wearing a shirt proclaiming their favorite rock band.

Using the language and lens of Wilber's (2000, 2007, personal communication, February 15, 2013) integral theory, how might spiritual bypass express at second-tier/integral or higher stages of development? While the literature does not yet address this, as more and more practitioners reach post-green structures of development, there will be increasing opportunity to explore how spiritual bypass will present at higher levels of development. When asked about this, Forman (personal communication, April 25, 2013) confessed that this was an area that researchers are currently unclear about, however he did offer some speculations. Citing research in the field of trauma in the area of structural dissociation, Forman asserts that even at higher levels of development, there are subtle aspects of the personality that can split off. It is therefore possible for a person to reach an integral level in most developmental lines, yet still have aspects of their psyche that are "walled off" due to early traumatic wounding, presenting in attachment issues and interpersonal conflict. Over the last few decades, transpersonally-oriented researchers and clinicians have discovered that even in the presence of otherwise mature spiritual realization, early unresolved traumatic material can continue to influence the practitioner. While such early material may not prevent a practitioner from accessing advanced states of consciousness, it is believed that it can in fact skew how such realization expresses through the relative vehicle or personality of the practitioner. Even in those who have progressed to advanced levels of meditation, early attachment issues, for example, can and often do remain untouched. Regardless of the ability to hold a particular spiritual perspective—or even to access deep levels of witnessing awareness—practitioners can and do become overwhelmed by "early, oceanic feelings of fear and loneliness" (M. Forman, personal communication, April 25, 2013). In order to engage directly with and explore this early material, contends Forman, it often takes a tremendous amount of motivation

and often a push in a person's outer life, such as a divorce, major loss, or other transitional crisis. Forman illustrates with an example of the life of another researcher cited in this study, Robert Augustus Masters, who "essentially went mad" for eight months, in an outpouring of early and other transpersonal material into his everyday life. During these times of profound spiritual crisis, even the most dedicated practitioners, including Masters, report that their spiritual practice is not able to touch the avalanche of material which is being unleashed into conscious awareness. Forman cites the example of Masters as one which so clearly illustrates an alternative movement to spiritual bypass, where a person is forced to engage material at all levels of being, which had previously been split off. It simply will not work to remain compartmentalized.

As a person proceeds through higher stages and levels of development, spiritual bypass begins to express more in the second-person dimension, involving very potent material originating from early childhood, inter-generationally, or even karmically (M. Forman, personal communication, April 25, 2013). As an example, Forman cites hagiography of Gotama Buddha, where at the end of his life he had to confront the fact that he left his family. This sort of personal and historical material has very deep roots and illustrates how even at an advanced stage of development there can still be a struggle with the major emotional and existential matters of being human.

The Importance of Somatic Work

For Caplan (personal communication, January 25, 2013), integrating the body into spiritual practice can be an important component of an integral path of psychospiritual transformation. Noting the ways meditation and other spiritual practices are often taught "from the neck up," many of the researchers cited in this study have come to emphasize somatic work

in ensuring that a practitioner is covering all aspects of growth and development. In her own life—and in her work with clients and students—Caplan reports that when a practitioner is able to begin to shift the “location of consciousness” from the mind into the body, mental activity and chatter will naturally be reduced. While the mind is nearly always in motion, when there is even a small shift from being a “head-centered” to a “body-centered” practitioner, a person’s experience becomes more grounded. Perhaps ironically, as a person becomes less rooted in the movement of the mind, the mind can work more effectively, naturally becoming clearer and more focused. The reason this is so important to Caplan, especially in the context of working with spiritual bypass, is that she has seen how a person can engage in many years of therapy or meditation without any fundamental change or shift in their lives. In fact, it is possible for a person to become even more defended if the knowledge they have accumulated has become solidified or overly identified with.

Caplan (personal communication, January 25, 2013) has discovered that even for clients who are not naturally drawn to somatic-oriented work that through it they are able to quickly access feelings and emotions that have been locked up for years. Conceptually, they may have had a difficult time understanding their experience, however as they are able to explore the actual sensations in their bodies, they are able to make a new and deeper connection with their experience, touching in on it as dynamic, moving, and ever-changing. Through somatic exploration, they are able to see experientially how every thought, feeling, and emotion has a corresponding physiological component in the body. What Caplan has observed is that this experiential discovery create the conditions for an embodied transformation of old psychological and emotional material that was much less accessible when her work with her clients remains at a mere conceptual level. Somatic work such as the

process Caplan describes here can be of tremendous benefit in working with spiritual bypass; the more a practitioner can stay embodied with what they are experiencing, the less likely they are to use spiritual ideas and beliefs to avoid their emotional life. In Caplan's clinical experience, it is common for a person to become unsure in the face of challenging emotions, unsure as to what it is they are actually feeling. By dropping down into the body—and setting aside even temporarily conceptual engagement with difficult material—Caplan is able to help her clients to access the deeper truths of a particular situation. What they discover may of course prove to be unpleasant, scary, or uncomfortable, but through the body a person can come to new levels of clarity and immediateness that can help them in the healing process. They may still feel anxious or unclear, or be full of projections and self-judgment, but the anxiety and other difficult feelings and emotions can finally be touched, held, and ultimately digested in a more grounded, somatic way.

Several clinicians cited in this study (see, for example, Caplan, personal communication, January 25, 2013; Masters, personal communication, March 6, 2013; and Tift, personal communication, March 25, 2013) encourage engagement with somatic-oriented therapies and methodologies as a way for practitioners to stay embodied with their present experience. By “learning to stay” in this way (Chodron, 2005), practitioners very naturally cut into the habit of spiritual bypass through the application of certain beliefs and practices to avoid pain. By becoming curious and intimate with emotional experience, rather than merely attempting to witness or transcend it, practitioners are developing new levels of emotional intelligence, a faculty that is being seen as greatly supportive of overall psychospiritual growth (Masters, 2013b; personal communication, March 6, 2013). Caplan has noted that even advanced spiritual practitioners—including those able to access deep states of consciousness

through yoga and meditative disciplines—often need additional training and guidance in the area of emotional literacy.

Many believe they are deeply in touch with their feelings, contends Caplan, because they experience tremendous upheaval and overwhelm in their emotional life. What is often thought of as “feeling,” however, is “a layer on top of the feeling” and actually a subtle resistance to it (M. Caplan, personal communication, January 25, 2013). It is very natural, Caplan alleges, to bypass in the face of overwhelming emotion. She analogizes this movement to that which can happen in the practice of yoga: when a person experiences resistance in a particular *asana* (posture), a choice is often made to avoid the posture which evokes that particular feeling of discomfort. Human beings are conditioned to move away from pain, a reaction which has been supported by natural selection for hundreds of thousands of years. Because this response is so deeply wired in, it can be helpful to work with a therapist or counselor to support this process of “turning toward.” When a client is resisting the immediate, embodied experience of fear, for example, a layer of anxiety and tension builds up “around” the core experience. Though the person may believe they are in direct contact with the fear—noting the profound discomfort and tension as evidence—it is quite common that they are actually in contact with the resistance to the fear, in the form of anxiety, and not the fear itself (M. Caplan, personal communication, January 25, 2013). In order to move below the anxiety and tension and into a direct experience of the fear itself—to “unlock the next level”—the person must be held in an environment of safety, love, gentleness, and compassion. While many spiritual traditions speak about “piercing through” and even “killing” the ego, these strategies can quickly move into dissociation and disembodiment, and are generally not effective in unlocking that which has become stuck within the body. In Caplan’s experience,

those places that are traumatized and frozen will only unravel in context of safety and love, not aggression.

Spiritual Bypassing, Meditation, and Contemplative Practice

One of the important areas of inquiry in the field of transpersonal psychology over the last few decades is whether traditional spiritual practice, in and of itself, is “enough” to address the many varieties of suffering a person can experience in the course of their lives. This area of investigation is vital to researchers interested in the phenomenon of spiritual bypass as it raises important questions about the nature of spiritual practice and of the degree it can reach into all critical dimensions of human experience. Though a full exploration of the relationship between psychological and spiritual work is beyond the scope of this study, a survey of the landscape can be helpful in understanding some of the core dynamics of spiritual bypass.

In an interview about the relationship between contemplative practice and psychological investigation, Ken Wilber (cited in personal communication, February 15, 2013) was asked, somewhat tongue in cheek, “What do you know that the Buddha doesn’t?” Wilber replied, “How to drive a jeep.” Asked what contemporary psychology knows that wasn’t contained in the vast body of teachings from the great contemplative traditions, Masters (personal communication, March 6, 2013) is unequivocal in his reply: how to work with the personal, and how to honor the personal dimension of experience. For Masters, as for many of the clinicians cited in this study, any integral approach to psychological growth, emotional healing, and spiritual awakening must equally honor the personal, the interpersonal, and the transpersonal domains of human experience. Masters refers to a common tendency he has seen in practitioners, including in many spiritual teachers, to devalue the personal, whether consciously or otherwise. For example, many practitioners believe that engaging with one’s

“personal story”—their conceptually- and emotionally-organized narrative—will simply further entrench them in the “ego,” thwarting their ultimate goal of spiritual realization. For Masters, it is important to listen to a person’s story, not so that it can be indulged in or overly-identified with, but so that he can connect a person’s early history with their current organization of their current experience. Otherwise, the cathartic work he offers his clients would simply become “emotional masturbation,” where a client may be able to “blow off some steam” and “feel good for a little while,” while there not being any lasting transformation or development.

In recent years, Masters (personal communication, March 6, 2013) has observed more spiritual teachers becoming aware of spiritual bypass and being willing to at least consider supplementing their work with emotional, somatic, and other therapeutic interventions. This being said, he is also aware of a resistance to doing so, as psychological and emotional work is still viewed in many spiritual communities as somehow “lesser” than more traditional spiritual practice. It requires a tremendous vulnerability and nakedness to enter into somatically-oriented, depth psychotherapy, argues Masters. For many long-time practitioners—including those that have emerged as teachers to others—there has been a movement away from this sort of raw openness, in which Masters has observed it being “very difficult to de-crystallize the apparent stage they’re at and start doing the work they skipped over to get there.” Masters urges spiritual teachers especially to engage in personal work and to remain committed to those areas of personal and interpersonal development which may still be less than mature. If not, these developmental shortcomings and blind spots will inevitably be transmitted to their students, even if quite subtly.

A critical theme explored within the area of spiritual bypass, as it relates to the importance of psychological and emotional development, is found in Jung's concept of the "shadow," those unknown and hidden aspects of self-experience which have been disowned or otherwise excluded from awareness. Shadow work is essential for any authentic path of psychospiritual growth, contends Masters (personal communication, March 6, 2013), and has become an integral part of his clinical and teaching practice. To the extent that a practitioner hasn't dealt with their conditioning," he asserts, the ramifications of this will appear as their shadow. The shadow, for Masters, consists of every aspect of a person's experience that they have kept in the dark, neglected, or "ostracized." It is not a minor matter, argues Masters, an optional part of the path that can be engaged in or not. Rather, it is essence of any deep inner work, covering both psychological and spiritual ground, and involves a confrontation with unresolved material which has been avoided for a long time, bringing it out into the open where it can finally be integrated into the totality of being. Masters goes so far to say that "everything" he does with clients and students is in its essence "shadow work," even if not advertised as such. As spiritual bypass is most fundamentally defined as an overemphasis on spiritual development to the neglect of important somatic, psychological, emotional, and interpersonal material—material which could be said to be relegated into the shadow—its relevance to this study cannot be overemphasized.

As to whether spiritual practice alone is able to fully liberate a person from suffering, Forman (personal communication, April 25, 2013) believes it is possible, but only with an incredible amount of dedication. For most practitioners in the contemporary world, it is not possible to devote the entirety of their lives to practice and inner work; given the reality of practice remaining for most a part-time endeavor, Forman believes it is unlikely that such

engagement will be effective in addressing all of the stuck places and developmental areas which need attention. For those within a very robust tradition, engaged in regular retreat and practices that not only increase mindfulness but are also meant to transform a person's psycho-emotional state, Forman does believe it is possible to work through most if not all of one's developmental material necessary to achieve full spiritual realization. For those with heavy amounts of developmental trauma, however, even the most dedicated spiritual practice may not be able to address these levels of experience, and may require other types of (therapeutically-oriented) approaches. For Forman, it is also critical to consider sociocultural factors in exploring the full potential of spiritual practice. For example, the life of a celibate Tibetan monk is a very different context in which to pursue spiritual realization than a businesswoman in New York City raising three children. For the most part, the Buddhist monk does not have to worry about where his next meal is coming from, or how he is going to provide for his dependents. Out of these sorts of sociocultural issues come much of a practitioner's early survival and attachment dynamics, which greatly influence their overall developmental path. Accordingly, Forman suggests that this is very likely why the monastic systems were created in the first place, to remove any and all "distractions" to a "clearer shot" at transcendent revelations and states of being. To illustrate, using more colloquial language, Forman cites an often-described scenario where a Zen master is removed from the monastery, given two kids, placed in the suburbs, and given a stressful job. What would the result be? How much of the master's realization would flow through into the demands of the relative world? In other words, it is possible that much of what is understood as spiritual realization is contextually-embedded and even socially constructed?

Some transpersonal and integral psychologists suggest that the great wisdom traditions were simply not aware of shadow material, as it is understood in a current, more psychologically-sophisticated landscape, and as a result were not able to address this important dimension of human experience. Forman (personal communication, April 25, 2013), however, believes this to be overstated and argues that if the original texts are explored carefully that it is clear that these early practitioners were paying very close attention to these “subtle levels of human negativity.” For example, in their ethics and in their descriptions of enlightenment, the realized person is seen to be radically free from negativity of all kinds. In fact, standards for what this actually means when it comes to actual behavior in the world tend to be much higher than conventional psychological thinking, especially when it comes to experiential realizations such as lovingkindness, compassion, and the extinguishment of selfishness and pride. In Forman’s understanding, the traditions were very much in tune with unconscious, shadow-oriented material, although they did have the psychological language and lens through which it was seen and expressed. Throughout the great contemplative traditions, Forman asserts, “they wouldn’t look kindly on shadowy abuses of power or terrible interpersonal relationships or skills”—rather, these would naturally be explored with the purpose of remedying and transforming them. While there exist traditions of “crazy wisdom” which make use of nonconventional behavior to transmit the essence of their teaching—some of which could certainly drift into the area of spiritual bypassing—the important point here is that the historical contemplative traditions offer sophisticated and nuanced understandings of mental and emotional processes, encouraging an ultimate realization leading to practitioners who are warm, compassionate, and open hearted, who very naturally put others before themselves, and

manifest profound levels of love, kindness, and skillful means in the reduction of suffering around them.

This being said, Forman (personal communication, April 25, 2013) does acknowledge that the therapeutic traditions have developed a vaster array of technologies to explore psychic and emotional reality—based on up to date findings in neuroscience—and also have evolved to respond to a much more complicated world. The struggles of modern society—with extremely high levels of stress and depression—have required modern ways of responding which are able to meet the times. One of the most important contributions of modern, contemporary psychotherapy is a nuanced understanding of the influence of early childhood on the organization of reality of the adult. Rather than just write this material off as irrelevant to the entry into transcendent reality, the therapeutic traditions have contributed an understanding which has proved immeasurably useful for working within conventional stages of development.

In Forman’s experience (personal communication, April 25, 2013), many of the great contemplative traditions have been delivered to the modern West in “very filtered forms.” For example, when *vipassana* is taught in the West, it is often done so devoid of the teaching and experiential discovery of *jhana* (advanced meditative) states; these are, for a variety of reasons, often left out of contemporary training. While the basic practice of meditation is taught, these more advanced states are not, nor are the ethical precepts and accompanying worldview from which they derive. Practitioners will then naturally take this filtered version, react to it, and makes claims about it, believing they have received the entirety of what the tradition knows or has to offer. Forman shares that his own training was in a much more traditional religious setting where all aspects of the tradition were discussed. While there was the sort of meditative

state training that is found in most communities, there was also a tremendous emphasis on values and how a practitioner should be in the world. In exploring how the traditions approach areas such as the shadow and psychological and emotional negativity, it is important to look deep into the traditions and their texts, and to not assume that a cursory look will reveal the depth of what they have discovered and have to contribute in these areas. Teachings on how the traditions address negativity and how they direct practitioners in the actual living of their lives are important in order to understand their views on these matters. In investigating this, Forman urges practitioners to ask the important questions: How did the traditions define right, ethical behavior, and how might this understanding relate to a practitioner's emotional life? Did they actually address what the therapeutic approaches would call the "shadow"? Did they have any terms which pointed to the hidden or unconscious dimensions of a person's life? For example, the Sanskrit notion of *samskara*, found in both Hindu and Buddhist tradition, refers to past impressions carried in the practitioner in a very subtle way, and comes very close to the idea of the unconscious in depth psychological literature. The notion that a person carries impressions in a "subtle body" which impact their perception of self and others, burned up through rising subtle energy (*kundalini*), may be seen as a psychological process as much as one of physical cause and effect. For Forman, it is important to explore the traditions in as deep as way as possible, taking a careful look at what they have actually said, and how they have sought to address aspects of human development and experience that correlate with psychological concepts such as "shadow" and "unconscious." Upon doing so, contends Forman, it is possible that practitioners and researchers will discover that the traditions did in fact focus on this territory—in their own ways—and originated effective methods for working with shadow negativity and cultivating states of consciousness which uncover and transform

shadow material. And then arising out of this more subtle exploration, researchers and clinicians can include more contemporary understandings which can be added or updated to more traditional conceptualizations. Perhaps it will ultimately be discovered to be the case, notes Forman, that contemporary therapeutic approaches do in fact offer a more robust way to work with this material, but this must be an educated conclusion, after a careful analysis of what has come before. Forman's concern here is a valid one: that researchers can quickly and emotionally conclude that the contemplative traditions have very little to say about earlier stages of development, as their focus was only on higher or transpersonal stages. In Forman's experience, it is just not this black and white in reality, and as a person trained in both psychological and transpersonal inquiry, he has come to discover much overlap between the approaches and their respective realizations.

Despite Forman's concern (personal communication, April 25, 2013) with some of the more rigid conclusions which assert the wisdom traditions' lack of insight in areas considered the principal domain of depth psychology, he believes that the traditions can work together. The integration of psychological and spiritual discoveries is the safest and most skillful approach, argues Forman, and will be commonplace for the psychologist and spiritual teacher of the future. He believes this is where the discourse is headed and that practitioners will become more and more "cross trained" over time, as the benefits of such are recognized by more and more clinicians, researchers, and practitioners. For those who believe that spiritual teachings, in and of themselves, will address all dimensions of a person's experience, important domains of development tend to become neglected. Often asked to meditate more, pray harder, or to become more devoted, practitioners miss out on the opportunities offered by a more integral approach. Based on much research, clinical observation, and practitioner self-

reporting, “the cat is now out of the bag,” notes Forman, and the way moving forward seems clear: psychotherapists are more effective with spiritual state training, and spiritual teachers will be more skillful with some clinical training in emotional intelligence, interpersonal development, shadow work, and the importance of early, childhood experience.

As for whether contemplative practice is “enough” to fully liberate a practitioner from all forms of suffering, Kornfield (personal communication, February 28, 2013) reflects on the early days when Hindu and Buddhist teachings started to become widespread in the West. He recalls being criticized for bringing in “low-class Western psychology” to something that was as noble as “the Divine,” nirvana, or spiritual liberation. Several decades later, Kornfield chides, he can provide “the names of the therapists of half the Buddhist teachers in America!” What has become clear over the last few decades, Kornfield argues, is that it is necessary to pay careful attention to those personal and interpersonal dimensions of human experience that are commonly bypassed on the way to spiritual liberation. Further, that it is Western psychological tools and therapeutic interventions—alongside the profound practices of mindfulness and compassion—that can best help a person to go into the areas of trauma, conflict, pain, and emotional wounds that are very difficult to do on one’s own. Not only is this type of material difficult to access as a solo practitioner, but that it does not even arise, for the most part, when a person is alone. Like other clinicians cited in this study, Kornfield argues that the core of human emotional wounding arises in the context of relationship with another person or persons; and, generally speaking, must be unwound in this same milieu. Regardless of when the trauma or conflict occurred—or the nature of its precise form—it is usually evoked only in a relational field, especially within those relationships which are emotionally charged and vulnerable, e.g. within one’s spiritual community, family, intimate partnership, or

in a therapeutic relationship. What Kornfield has seen over his many years observing these dynamics is that there is a healing that needs to take place in spiritual communities, and that the practice of realization needs to be a realization *in relationship*. In fact, he sees the “whole game changing in the West.” The relevant question here is not: “Is Jesus enough?” or “Are the Buddhist teachings enough,?” but how are they actually applied to their fullest? These teachings of liberation, according to Kornfield—those of mindfulness, compassion, and love—must be applied to conflict, emotion, and trauma, to the entirety of one’s humanity; practitioners must be willing to go into it all so that a more integrated and whole expression of the liberated heart and mind can come through.

In the early years of the arrival of the Eastern wisdom traditions in the West, there was an excitement and a widespread belief that meditation and other practices would serve as a “cure” for the entirety of the forms of human suffering (J. Kornfield, personal communication, February 28, 2013; K. Wilber, personal communication, February 15, 2013). But over the next few decades, the discourse has evolved to a generally accepted notion and experiential discovery that there may in fact be some places “that meditation practice can’t touch” (J. Kornfield, personal communication, February 28, 2013). This being said, Kornfield encourages researchers not to take this discovery as some sort of absolute truth. In the context of spiritual bypass, it is important to see that there are many who use spiritual practice to cultivate very deep healing and awakening and not as a way to avoid critical dimensions of human experience. On the other hand, for many practitioners, “it turns out that sitting quietly is not enough,” that important unresolved material does not get evoked in silent, solo-oriented practice; or, even if it does, help is needed as there is too much unconsciousness around the material or it is otherwise too difficult or painful to open to. Simply put, according to Kornfield

(personal communication, February 28, 2013), there is certain early developmental material that arises only in the context of interpersonal relationship, which does not present itself to be illumined and transformed within most forms of traditional contemplative practice. For many Westerners, Kornfield has observed, some form of interpersonal healing is critical—whether via traditional psychotherapy or in other ways—and can work hand-in-hand with meditative inquiry to provide a grounded and effective approach to psychospiritual growth and healing.

Kornfield (personal communication, February 28, 2013) refers to the Korean Zen teacher San Sunim who spoke about the great meeting between East and West, where the technology of the West is finding its way to the East, while the contemplative practices of the East are coming to the West. There is a way in which each culture is learning from one another, Kornfield notes, with the West contributing an “understanding of how to bring healing into the psyche” through the use of therapeutic approaches. Interestingly, much of what underlies therapeutic modalities, especially modern therapeutic approaches, are the same tools of mindfulness, compassion, and love awareness; they have simply been adapted to fit into a more interpersonal context. This bridging of cultures—and of the intermingling of the wisdom found in each—is a very positive sign, according to Kornfield, and could go a long way to cut into the problematic expressions of spiritual bypass.

For Mathieu (personal communication, April 12, 2013), what is most important is not a conceptual idea that psychotherapy is able to offer something that, for example, Buddhism does not, but rather what it is that human beings *do* with their spiritual practice. If their engagement with spirituality enables them to avoid addressing important psychological issues, then the practice is not ultimately serving the practitioner. In her experience, Mathieu does not find a bright-line distinction between “spiritual” and “psychological” work and feels it is

unfortunate that these two domains of experience have been split off from one another. Whether one engages primarily in what may be called “spiritual” practice or one is more drawn toward “therapy” is not the core issue, for Mathieu. Rather, if a person is present and grounded and able to use whatever presents in their lives as a vehicle to grow and transform, these distinctions can gradually be allowed to fall away. For Mathieu, the specific methods and the labeling of them are much less important than what a person actually *does* with them and what expresses *through* them in their lives.

For Jennings (personal communication, March 18, 2013), analytic work—or therapeutic approaches more generally—is largely concerned with honoring and exploring personal, subjective experience. Certain practitioners can “luck out,” notes Jennings, and work with a spiritual teacher who’s psychologically oriented or be a part of a community which includes mental health professionals; a teacher or community which is more “attuned to the psyche” can be very helpful, especially when it comes to seeing and responding to the dynamics of spiritual bypass. In such an environment of at least some attunement to the reality of the psyche, Jennings contends, it will help members to individuate and become more integrated. One of the most striking comments made, during the course of conducting the interviews which became much of the data of this study, was the following, made by Jennings:

... generally speaking spiritual practice is not designed to help us understand our subjectivity. While many of the researchers cited in this study have suggested as much, Jennings has encapsulated in one sentence one of the most critical themes in the discourse around contemplative practice, psychodynamic work, and spiritual bypassing. In her unpacking of this statement, she suggests that the unfolding of subjective experience was never the intention of traditional spiritual practice and simply not why they were designed. If a

person has suffered as a result of early insecure attachment or from traumatic loss, for example, this will have a profound impact on their psyche. While in the course of spiritual practice a person might experience psychological healing, for the most part it will not help the person to work through traumas that resulted from interpersonally-oriented trauma and wounding. In describing this process, Jennings echoes other researchers cited here who have suggested that wounding which emerges from an interpersonal matrix must be worked through in a relational field; this might be said to be, in fact, the underlying theory of healing in the therapeutic traditions. In Jennings' own words, this type of relational wounding is best healed not in solitary practice, or even in noting the impermanent nature of all thought and feeling, but rather in a "curative interpersonal holding environment." In her experience both as a psychoanalyst and as a practitioner of meditation, she is not aware of any traditional spiritual practice or approach that directly addresses the here and now of two people in relationship in the way that she has found unique to the analytic process.

In depicting her own journey of psychological healing and spiritual development, Jennings (personal communication, March 18, 2013) described how her neuroses and struggles were underscored as she engaged in contemplative practice. Contrary to what she might have thought going into it, her neuroses did not "go away" in the wake of increasing spiritual practice; rather, they were illuminated by it. On her first trip to India, Jennings became "painfully aware" of how much fear was inside her. During a powerful Tibetan Buddhist ritual, she saw that the purpose of her practice was not to wish the fear go away, but to aid her in its integration. She saw the ways that she tended to split off from her pain and to become locked in aversion to it. She came to see that this integration and re-owning of that which was alive

inside her was the gift of her spiritual practice, to see even more clearly the content that was moving within her psyche vying for her attention.

Another very important insight offered by Jennings (personal communication, March 18, 2013)—with respect to the relationship between therapeutic and contemplative approaches and how the relationship is relevant to the dynamics inherent in spiritual bypassing—is that the purpose of meditation and other spiritual practice is not necessarily to “help a person to parse their psyche, or their psychological content.” The intention behind psychoanalysis, on the other hand, is to “do justice to the nuances of [the] psyche and psychological development.” Even from a Jungian perspective, Jennings alleges, a person must first “get through the wealth of personal experience before they get to the collective.” Therapeutic work, then, is a method for holding space to explore the very specific affective and interpersonal experiences which arise in the details of a person’s life. They are encouraged, analytically speaking, to become deeply curious about the details of the personal journey, and not merely to transcend or rise above them; clearly this dialectic of engagement-transcendence is of great importance in the context of exploring and understanding spiritual bypass. Contrasting the analytic view with the traditional contemplative approach, Jennings contends that for most spiritual traditions the idea is to do just the opposite; to, in fact, “relieve ourselves of the burden of those details and enter into the collective. This movement into and discovery of the collective is “extraordinarily enlivening and healing,” both in terms of its demonstration “that reality is composed of more than our personal experience” and also in providing a “place of respite, freed from the weightiness of everything personal that we’re going through.” The methods and the goals of therapeutic and spiritual work are different, argue Jennings, but “that is a wonderful thing”; what’s important is whether teachers and leaders in each of the traditions understand and make

use of these differences to help others to meet the wide variety of their psychological and spiritual goals.

Many contemporary yogis and meditators, Jennings (personal communication, March 18, 2013) maintains, still hold onto the “compelling fantasy” that spiritual practice will inevitably and adequately address all dimensions of their lives. Noting that she herself has held onto and invested a lot into this fantasy in her life, Jennings is grateful that in the area in which she lives and practices, it has become part of the culture to engage in both spiritual and therapeutic work. She does acknowledge, however, that this is not the reality in most communities, where there may not be a prominence of other analysts, psychologists, and clinical researchers involved in spiritual practice; she notes that this sort of integration has been deeply helpful to her and to her *sangha* brothers and sisters. Despite the possibility of this sort of integration, Jennings is also aware of “a deep wish for dharma practice to be salvific, and to somehow undo the various ripple effects of our personal complexity.” Sometimes, according to Jennings, this wish can express as “a very beautiful devotion,” while at others it is no more than “collective bypassing”: it is incumbent upon each individual practitioner to look carefully at their own relationship with these dynamics. Despite a growing recognition of the importance of psychological, emotional, and interpersonal work for those committed to a spiritual path, Jennings continues to see a split occurring in most dharma communities, a “real struggle to truly own the reality of the psyche.” In order to own the psyche in this way, practitioners would need to actively explore their capacity for aggression, their dynamics around sexuality, and their fears of intimacy and vulnerability; these dynamics are often avoided, however, as they can be dissociated from along the spiritual journey. To illustrate, she cites a recent conversation she had with another analyst who asked Jennings her view of

happiness. In the course of her response, Jennings and her colleague addressed the many ways that dharma practice can be undertaken in a very disembodied way. As a result of such disembodiment, issues around sexuality and aggression, for example, tend to be dissociated from and split off. For Jennings, “happiness” is meaningful only in the context of psychic integration or, in other words, where a person is not caught in unconscious bypassing of developmental or other affective material.

For Jennings (personal communication, March 18, 2013), to some extent spiritual bypass is a natural part of every spiritual journey. Like Masters (2010b), Jennings sees spiritual bypass as the shadow side of spirituality, and all human beings “dance with their shadow.” Therefore, it is to be expected that practitioners will explore shadow elements through spiritual engagement. Echoing the chorus of other clinicians cited in this study, Jennings urges teachers and mental health professionals to remember that spiritual bypassing is a natural, oftentimes adaptive response which must not be pathologized. In fact, it is the normalization of the process of spiritual bypass, in Jennings’ experience, that allows for a more empathic and skillful exploration of the defensive process. If, on the other hand, it is held in shame and is pathologized, there will not be a supportive environment in which to compassionately explore the dynamics as they present themselves. Citing Jung, Jennings reminds clinicians that within every symptom may be the potential for its transformation, a teaching that is directly relevant in the context of spiritual bypass. Rather than pathologizing it, clinicians can “lean into it” with their clients and explore at the deepest levels what’s there, because whatever’s being bypassed is usually what’s calling for attention. When defended material is embraced and integrated, Jennings has observed how it can bring new meaning and zest to her patients’ lives.

For Corbett (personal communication, March 22, 2013), Almaas (2009), Mathieu (personal communication, April 12, 2013) and other researchers cited in this study, the distinction between “psychological” and “spiritual” work is artificial, “like a line drawn on a map between two countries” (L. Corbett, personal communication, March 22, 2013). Nature does not pay attention to this human-derived distinction, argues Corbett, but simply continues. For Corbett, a person’s psychological work *is* their spiritual work; it has to do with meaning, purpose, and values, which are the essence of spiritual work. It’s all psychological work, according to Corbett, regardless of what it is called; it’s a “turf distinction.” In helping a new clinician or meditation teacher learn more about the dynamics of spiritual bypass, Brach (personal communication, February 14, 2013) encourages that practitioners clarify first what it is that is meant by “spirituality.” When “spirituality” is understood as something which exists apart from everyday living, referring to a dimension of experience transcendent to ordinary life, the possibility of using spiritual practice to escape from difficult experience is greatly increased. In order to understand spiritual bypass at the deepest and most subtle levels, Brach contends, the conception of “spirituality” must become much more grounded and integral. Citing an oft-quoted expression from contemporary spiritual literature, Brach posits that it can be helpful to explore the possibility that practitioners are not human beings on a spiritual path, but rather “Spirit or Awareness realizing itself through every part of this human incarnation.” For Brach, life is always delivering opportunities to discover the deepest dimensions of what we are as human beings, and as Pure Spirit or Pure Awareness itself. In fact, it is through those most difficult and challenging emotions and life situations that we appear to grow the most.

In her clinical work and teaching practice, Brach (personal communication, February 14, 2013) has discovered, for example, how difficult it is for people to be truly intimate with

one another. She has seen firsthand the tremendous fear that underlies so many human relationships, and the ways this fear is often rooted in a fundamental sense of unworthiness. Accompanying this lack of self-worth and the deep fear of intimacy is often tremendous shame and an inability to “be real” and to let one’s vulnerability show. Brach’s point here is that while these sorts of issues are often considered psychological or emotional in nature, they are nonetheless a direct pathway into spiritual awakening itself. There is a bias, Brach has discovered, in believing that “spiritual” endeavors are limited to profound states of concentration, meditation, and powerful insights into the nature of reality. While these dimensions of experience are certainly part and parcel of what might be conceptualized as the “spiritual,” they are only aspects of the entirety of what ultimately might be deemed as such. Any experience, when allowed and entered into with loving awareness can serve a person’s spiritual growth and development, argues Brach, a sentiment which is directly relevant to a greater understanding of the dynamics of spiritual bypass. As a result of her discoveries in this area, Brach recommends that therapists pay close attention to the whole of a person’s life, not just one or two specific areas, and to sense life and to sense carefully where a client’s suffering is emerging, and exactly what part of their lives is calling for attention. It is critical, argues Brach, for clinicians to learn to trust what appears in their client’s immediate experience, so that it can be honored, met, and allowed, and so that a therapeutic space can be created which will foster an integrated development. What Brach has discovered is that what is conventionally considered “spiritual” needs to be widened and made more inclusive.

There is a common, albeit often unconscious notion in many spiritual practitioners that if a difficult or challenging feeling or emotion is present—for example, anxiety, depression, sadness, or anger—that this automatically reflects upon the practitioner’s spiritual

development, faith, understanding, or discipline. It is as if when these sorts of feelings arise, the “spiritual superego” is right there to meet them, judging and admonishing the practitioner to engage more effort, cultivate more devotion, and practice more diligently. In understanding and working with these dynamics in her clinical and meditative teaching work, Brach (personal communication, February 14, 2013) referred to imagery prevalent in Asian culture, especially in Hindu and Buddhist art, illustrating animal-headed deities guarding certain aspects of the temple or *mandala* that are being depicted. These various deities represent the emotional energies of passion, rage, wrath, and so forth—symbolic of all disturbing and challenging energies that arise in the minds of human beings. According to these traditions, the journey to mature spiritual realization can only be completed by engaging *with* these energies, not by turning *from* them. Like the most disturbing emotions of anger, hatred, and greed, the mere arising of these deities is not “wrong” or problematic, *per se*, for when they are met fully and explored contemplatively, they are revealed to be none other than wisdom-energies, of the nature of awareness itself. In working with clients and students, Brach seeks to reframe a conventional understanding of difficult emotions and feelings states as follows: these experiences—even those that are most disturbing—are not wrong and they are not bad; rather, they are the path itself. By engaging directly with these energies, turning toward them and allowing them to reveal their fundamental essence—by inviting and honoring them—it is possible to discover the radiance and love of what Brach calls “natural being.” Though it may appear to be the case, true spiritual freedom is not found in ridding oneself of these challenging energies, but rather by staying with them and discovering what they are at their core.

To further illustrate, Brach (personal communication, February 14, 2013) cites a traditional teaching on the “second arrow” as presented by the Buddha. Very often when a

difficult life circumstance leads to challenging feelings and emotions—rather than engage directly with the disturbing material by deepening one’s attention to it—a “second arrow” will be engaged which involves shaming or judging oneself, blaming others, or otherwise avoiding the core experience by becoming involved with secondary content. The metaphor is a useful one in understanding the habitual tendency to turn from experiential intensity through engagement with additional narrative and analysis. It’s not that such analysis is inherently unhelpful, but when it is used to avoid core vulnerabilities, feelings, and emotional experience, it can easily slip into the territory of spiritual bypassing. In addition to this metaphor from the Theravadin Buddhist tradition, Brach finds a similar teaching from Tibetan tradition where “there is such a respect for the innate intelligence of every emotion.” According to the tantric tradition, the purity of the “natural state” (*rigpa*) is found not by ridding oneself of difficult emotions, but by working through them; it is said, in fact, that enlightenment itself is found at the core of every emotion. This is very challenging work, however, Brach alleges, which takes incredible courage and presence “to contact the fire that is there.” By doing so, though, the practitioner is able to unlock the power to transmute and transform their experience.

The Buddha taught that there were three “jewels” which were required for liberation. In addition to the teachings and the teacher (*dharma* and *Buddha*), the Buddha also was unambiguous in his belief that *sangha*—or community—was essential for complete spiritual realization. Interpreting this teaching through a psychological lens, Brach (personal communication, February 14, 2013) suggests that this was the Buddha’s way of conceptualizing the importance of “the relational field” in spiritual awakening and maturation. In other words, without an experience of the ultimate non-separation from others and how all other life forms are influencing each living being at all times, full realization cannot be

achieved. The process of being with others, Brach contends, and having “the relational container that can help hold us when we’re caught in the sense of separateness” is an integral part of the healing and the awakening process. For Brach, the therapeutic relationship is a “version of sangha,” a specific type of sangha that has the intention of healing and the metabolization of one’s past. This dimension of the therapeutic relationship is critical in that it forms a requisite holding environment (Winnicott, 1965) in which highly charged somatic and affective material may finally be metabolized. One of the great gifts of the therapeutic environment is that, at its best, it can provide a developmental “second chance” to receive previously thwarted mirroring and attunement. Brach cites recent research in the field of neurobiology and attachment in arguing for the importance of early mirroring and attunement. “All the synapses start clicking,” notes Brach, when mother and child are attuned and responsive to one another; this same type of attunement can be replicated in the client-therapist relationship, as well as in that of teacher-student, creating the relational field which Brach has come to see as essential for emotional healing. Moreover, an attuned therapeutic relationship provides the foundation for the “unpacking of tangles and wounds” (T. Brach, personal communication, February 14, 2013). An attuned therapist, according to Brach, offers a close supporting consciousness to keep a person’s attention focused on exactly where the wounded places are, which is critical given the very natural and habitual response to avoid those painful areas. This added resource of having help in staying with difficult experience—as well as bringing loving attention to it—is one of the most important dimensions to the therapeutic relationship, whether a formal dyad with a mental health professional or less formally with a spiritual teacher or close friend. Having a “wider field” of another person to “co-therapize” with helps a person to access the resources that are often necessary (and not easily accessible

on one's own) to begin to metabolize past experience. These other resources—including feelings of love, kindness, care, and curiosity—can be stimulated in the relational field, and can provide support that isn't always available to the solo practitioner.

One of the areas of ongoing inquiry for the researchers cited in this study is the relationship between accessing spiritual states of consciousness during practice and how these realizations filter down into the practitioner's relative experience into areas such as intimate relationship, physical health, money and career, and parenting. For Brach (personal communication, February 14, 2013), in many cases those practitioners who are accessing spiritual experiences and deep states of meditative awareness are engaging in "directive" forms of meditation and concentration that require a specific kind of environment and lack of external stimuli. In this sense, their experiences are dependent upon certain conditions and control of the external world. In contrast, other forms of practice emphasize an opening to all phenomena, "letting everything come and go, resting in awareness itself." The former types of practices are "compartmentalized" and involve the accessing of "very fragile states," Brach alleges, states which are "not easy to integrate into daily life." As a result, when the practitioner receives a "trigger" from life—or the requisite external conditions change, as they always do (i.e. leaving retreat, returning to the village, etc.)—life has a way of showing the practitioner how unstable (or temporary) their state of concentration or equanimity really is. While these states of consciousness have their use and can be important along the way, for most modern practitioners, Brach argues, a practice that can more seamlessly integrate into daily life may be more useful and ultimately beneficial for the practitioners and those around them. Through the cultivation of presence, understanding, and love, a practitioner's realization penetrates into the relational field which is where nearly all of the triggers are; this is where

most practitioners are wounded and therefore where the essence of their healing will likely need to occur. If a practitioner remains misattuned with that “quality of heart-mind that senses that there’s really only one of us here,” then spiritual practice does not ever truly get integrated into the totality of life (T. Brach, personal communication, February 14, 2013). It is therefore by observing and feeling where the armoring is—and where there are still deep needs for approval—that a practitioner can be encouraged to fully integrate all unhealed dimensions of their self-experience, and by doing so cut into the various forms in which spiritual bypass will manifest within them.

One of the primary discoveries in the field of psychospiritual research in the past 30 years, according to Wilber (personal communication, February 15, 2013), is that practices such as meditation, as profound as they are, are not “a cure all.” When the great contemplative practices first came to the West, transpersonally-oriented psychologists and researchers believed that meditation would “cure and de-repress everything,” that it would take care of all a person’s “shadow elements” and integrate everything into the totality of one’s being. As a matter of fact, it didn’t (K. Wilber, personal communication, February 15, 2013). Mindfulness, for example, can easily drift into “a type of distancing practice,” Wilber provocatively asserts. When practicing mindfulness-based meditation, a practitioner is often directed to “stand back from” their experience and label it, for example, “pain, pain, pain.” By so doing, they are distancing and separating from the feelings and emotional states which are emerging into their experience. This practice of dis-identification is an important capacity and realization, known in Sanskrit as “neti-neti,” notes Wilber, involving a process of realizing (and even verbalizing) “I’m not this, I’m not that,” and so on, in response to the arising of thoughts, feelings, emotions, images, and bodily sensations during meditative training. While this type of practice

can catalyze a certain sense of inner freedom and spaciousness, the problem with it, according to Wilber, is that “I’m not this, I’m not that” is “also the structure of dissociative, neurotic phenomena.” What happens in this form of dissociation is that practitioners can easily (and often unconsciously) disown a portion of themselves *before* they’ve owned and taken responsibility for it. This can lead to the leaving behind of a trail of un-integrated shadow material that will inevitably express in less-than-ideal ways in a practitioner’s life over time. When a practitioner is engaging in *neti-neti* type practice—“I’m not this, I’m not that,” say, in the face of arising anger—much of what they are doing is dissociating from their anger, and potentially “making it worse and worse and worse.” This dissociation can occur with virtually any arising emotion, impulse, or quality, where a practitioner prematurely attempts to transcend their experience, to spiritually bypass the unwanted material, and to do whatever they can to “get around it.” By dissociating in this way, Wilber argues, it’s just the opposite of what a practitioner should be doing—owning and taking responsibility for what arises—not trying to transcend or distance from it through their spiritual practice. In most of the psychotherapy that has been developed in modern times, Wilber argues, the actual goal is to *identify* with the emotion that has been split off and projected; the idea being that the dissociated material must be “taken back” and re-identified with. All of this unresolved material must be re-owned, says Wilber, because as long as a person is split off and projecting disowned parts of themselves, they “are creating shadow elements which will eventually manifest as painful, neurotic symptoms.” Standing back and asserting *neti-neti*, “I’m not this, I’m not that,” Wilber contends, merely increases the dissociation, entrenching it deeper and deeper into the practitioner’s unconscious organization.

It is critical, Wilber (personal communication, February 15, 2013) argues, not to alienate shadow material, and for practitioners to learn how to integrate it; otherwise, their spiritual practice will be sure to include elements of spiritual bypass. First, a practitioner must discover what shadow elements, if any, that they have disowned in their own experience. By way of an experiential process that has come down through Wilber's Integral Institute, a core part of what is called *Integral Life Practice* (Wilber, Patten, Leonard, and Morelli, 2008), a simple process is taught to help a person become aware of these elements. In this "3-2-1 process," a person first comes to see the ways in which a shadow element or impulse becomes split off in their experience. It begins as a "first-person" impulse, however is pushed away as "second-person" and then even further as "third-person." It is by way of this movement into "third-person" that what is called "projection" occurs. As a result the person may be aware that anger, for example, is present, but do not relate to it as "my" anger; rather, they may conclude that their boss is really angry all the time: "Someone is angry, but since I know it's not me, it has to be someone else!" What happens in this situation, Wilber contends, is that first-person anger ("I am angry") becomes "converted" into third-person anger *out there*, and is attributed to someone else. Thus, the shadow is born.

In the 3-2-1 shadow process, a person is asked to reflect upon whatever most irritated or annoyed them during the day, for practice at night before going to sleep. Or, the process can be done upon waking, making use of any dream element that stood out as particularly strong, annoying, irritating, or even deeply attractive. For example, say a person was very irritated by their boss on a given day; the boss is third-person, something "out there" that was irritating. Once the irritation or annoyance has been identified, the next step is to begin a dialogue with it: it is converted back into second-person ("you") so that it may be engaged in conversation.

For example, in the case of a challenging dream which involved the person being chased by a monster, step one would be to identify the monster, bring to mind an image of it, and then sit down and speak with it. A person could say, for example: “Why are you chasing me? Why are you trying to frighten me?” After addressing the monster, the person would then switch roles and become the monster herself, to see what the monster has to say. The person would go back and forth in this way, between first and second person, identifying with the monster, with the goal of re-owning what the monster represents. Through this sort of process, according to Wilber (personal communication, February 15, 2013), a person can “begin to ‘take back’ the emotions they had split off, projected, alienated, disowned, and converted into shadow or sub-personalities.”

Unfortunately, Wilber (personal communication, February 15, 2013) argues, meditation “doesn’t get at” this shadow material and in some cases actually makes it worse, as it enables the practitioner to too quickly transcend and set aside important, unresolved material. If a practitioner has not first, however, owned these difficult emotions which have remained unprocessed since early childhood, they will often be repressed as they are triggered, and will inevitably show up as shadow in the various emotionally-laded areas of a person’s life. For example, Wilber describes a situation where a young child—say, age 4 or 5—is unable to process anger felt toward a parent. The anger ends up being repressed and can then show up later as depression; in Wilber’s words, “... mad becomes sad when repressed.” What often happens, Wilber contends, is that this person may take up a spiritual practice later in their life and end up using it to avoid the unprocessed emotion, rather than confronting it, especially if they engage with a distancing-oriented practice such as *neti-neti*. These types of practices, if

not engaged with carefully, can end up providing the ground for further dissociation of unresolved emotional states, and can quickly devolve into varieties of spiritual bypass.

The essence of spiritual bypass, alleges Wilber (personal communication, February 15, 2013), is the use of spiritual techniques to get around or avoid fundamental crucial emotional issues that need to be faced. Very often, those caught in spiritual bypass will simply re-label their emotional or psychological challenges as a “spiritual” matter, reframing them so they do not appear as neurotic as they actually are, or are causing as many problems as they in fact are. Also, it can sound very “spiritual” to reframe psychological challenges in this way, to label them as “spiritual” issues, which is much easier to let in for some. In short, Wilber has found that as East and West have come together the ideal situation for those seeking psychospiritual transformation is to combine meditation with psychotherapy, for “they see different things and they’re both needed.” To set aside one to the exclusive focus on the other is done at the practitioner’s peril.

The Western therapeutic traditions aim to establish in the client a “whole and healthy self-concept,” or “ego” (K. Wilber, personal communication, February 15, 2013). The term “ego”, Wilber alleges, is one that must be defined clearly when speaking about psychological and spiritual processes, as many practitioners automatically equate “ego” with that movement within them that is the enemy and must be transcended to achieve spiritual realization. But the great wisdom traditions (as well as contemporary therapeutic traditions) unequivocally note that a healthy, conventional ego, or sense of self, is necessary and in fact required as it is what allows a person to relate to the conventional world as well as to “operate in the manifest realm.” In addition to the conventional self—or ego—there is what Wilber calls the “True Self” or, as Zen puts it, “body-mind dropped.” Here, the exclusive identification with the

conventional self is “dropped” leaving a direct experience of “the pure ‘I-am-ness,’” which has never “entered the stream of time, is unborn and undying, is your ‘original face’ before your parents were born and before the universe itself was born.” This timeless, unchanging, transcendental Spirit is the same in every sentient being, notes Wilber. Wilber urges practitioner to learn to recognize these “two selves” which are a part of them, equally radiant manifestations of pure spirit: there is the True Self *and* the “small” or conventional self, the latter of which is often referred to as “the ego.” With respect to the small, conventional self, it is the aim of the therapeutic traditions to make this self “whole, accurate, and functional.” Whereas, with the spiritual traditions, the goal is to transcend the conventional self and to “let go of it entirely,” thereby opening the discovery of the True Self. The important point which Wilber is making is that what the practitioner lets go of when they let go of the ego is not the ego, per se, but the *exclusive identity* with the ego. Or, in more positive language, by letting go of the ego, they identify with *everything*, and not just the ego. In this realization, the practitioner is “identified with the entire manifest world, moment to moment”—they’re identified with the All, with everything; this is the “real” Self. The real Self is the mountain, the sun, the stars, the Earth—all of it. And the practitioner at this level of realization feels that, a sense of oneness with *everything* that’s arising, moment to moment. This “everything” of course also includes the “ego,” but the ego is just one of thousands of appearances that the practitioner is identified with. The problem is not the mere appearance of the ego, Wilber clarifies, but the narrowing of identity exclusively to the ego. When a person identifies who and what they are exclusively via the ego, a deep sense of self-contraction results, and it is this experience of self-contraction that is the cause of all human pain and suffering, not the ego in

and of itself. When a practitioner is caught in spiritual bypass, they are “bypassing the ego”—attempting to avoid the ego entirely, instead of bypassing their exclusive identity with it.

Caplan (personal communication, January 25, 2013) cites Arnaud DeJardin who said that while most come to the path thinking what they want is truth, when they really get down to it what most actually want is simply to be happy. In the contemporary West, this “happiness” generally refers to a happiness which exists within relationship. Caplan has observed many practitioners over the last couple of decades who have given their lives to God and to the path—not getting married or partnered or having children—who have really suffered for this. Why should a path articulated by men in a different time period in the East, Caplan asks, be able to attend to the relational wounds and the needs of contemporary Western men and women? There is nothing wrong with these original teachings, Caplan clarifies; the fact that they do not attend to the sort of integrated development sought in the “crazy modern Western world” is no fault of the path. But it is the responsibility, she contends, for teachers, clinicians, and practitioners of all kinds to recognize this and to work with all of the tools that have been given, so that the actual needs of contemporary people can be addressed. A “spirituality of the future,” for lack of a better term, is one that integrates psychological understanding; it is only through such integration that the most effective tools and methods will emerge which are capable of catalyzing tremendous “union and congruence” (M. Caplan, personal communication, January 25, 2013). In yoga classes, it is often said, “Now you must take what you’ve learned ‘off the mat’ and into the world.” The way this is done, argues Caplan, by “attending to your own psychology.” Spiritual practices do work, Caplan contends—they are brilliant in this way, and they do accomplish “what they’re supposed to.” She notes that all of the spiritual scandals and disillusionment rarely occur because the

practices are ineffective. Rather, they happen because, despite the effectiveness of the practices, practitioners continue to get “stuck in their psychological material.” It is possible to help new generations of practitioners to see this, how important it is to attend to their psychological and emotional development, alongside their spiritual yearnings. Caplan believes that refined understanding of phenomenon like spiritual bypass can help practitioners to avoid unnecessary suffering through education and awareness, and it is incumbent upon more mature teachers, practitioners, and researchers to share what they have learned with others.

As noted earlier in this study by Pilar Jennings, Caplan (personal communication, January 25, 2013) reminds practitioners that it is common for layers of unconscious material—including even profound anxiety, depression, and psychotic organization—to arise as a result of spiritual practice. It is very important not to immediately conclude that this material is problematic or an “obstacle to the path,” but rather part of a natural developmental process. This was revealed to Caplan first hand during an experience she had of very challenging emotional material arising in close relationship with her spiritual teacher. Rather than pathologize the presence of this material, he reminded her that it was in fact the fruit of her practice. Many great researchers and yogis have suggested that most human beings are for the most part unconscious, obscured from awareness of most of the processes and dynamics which affect perception on a moment by moment basis. Most of those who come to the spiritual path do so saying that they wish to become more conscious, to awaken consciousness, and to be less obscured and damped down in their relationship to totality and to life. As consciousness and the body are opened, it is not only one’s psychology that is unlocked, alleges Caplan, but karma is unfurled as well, as well as the psychology of a person’s entire lineage—of their parents, grandparents, and so forth. Along with what emerges in this unlocking is all of a

person's conditioning. Many practitioners, note Caplan, expect their spiritual practice to involve the flow of joy, bliss, and pleasantness only. But as many have come to experience, this is not the case; there is often quite a lot of darkness and discomfort that one must face along the way. It is important to normalize this process of increasing anxiety, depression, anger, grief, and sadness; there is nothing wrong in the arising of these uncomfortable energies—it is merely part and parcel of the path itself.

Authentic spiritual practice—when it is fully grounded in the body and in contact with what is arising moment to moment—will not create the conditions for spiritual bypass (L. Palden, personal communication, February 8, 2013). In working with many meditation students over the years, Lama Palden (personal communication, February 8, 2013) has observed that sometimes when people meditate, they find themselves drawn to move into some “other” state of consciousness—a nice, safe place; or a beautiful or blissful environment—and how this movement can be something that becomes “built into” the practice, where it becomes the goal (conscious or otherwise) of the practice in which they are engaging. The movement into a peaceful, relaxed, or beautiful state of body and mind is not problematic, per se, and in fact can be helpful for those with anxiety and trauma. But from a more spiritual point of view, it is not the purpose of practice to cultivate these particular states of mind, especially from a Buddhist perspective. Rather, the essence of most contemplative practice is to be present with whatever arises in the here and now, and to be in direct contact with it. In other words, Lama Palden clarifies, the goal is “to have one's awareness completely clear and directly in touch with what's arising in one's entire perceptual field.” There are gross forms of spiritual bypass, notes Lama Palden, for example when a practitioner seeks to enter a certain meditative state so that they can avoid confronting disturbing thoughts, feelings, and emotions. In her experience,

though, a lot of spiritual bypassing is much more subtle. When these more subtle forms of spiritual bypass are in play, it is important to remember that it is almost never a result of the conscious intention of the practitioner, and in many cases they are not aware it is happening. The reality is that for almost all human beings there is a natural tendency to move away from pain and discomfort, and because spirituality can provide some relief, it can be used in ways that are often less than conscious. There is a slight splitting off that has to occur for spiritual bypass to be active, contends Lama Palden, for example when a meditator rests in a very positive or expansive state in mind, while simultaneously distancing themselves from other material which may have the effect of taking them out of such states. Additionally, there may be characterological issues such as arrogance, addictive tendencies, or a devaluing of the self which a practitioner might believe will automatically be addressed through spiritual practice. While spiritual practice can be profoundly healing—and can have a deep impact on even these most entrenched psychological issues—it can also be used as a way to avoid dealing with one’s psychological and emotional life; this is one of the true hallmarks of spiritual bypass. In her tradition of Vajrayana Buddhism, Lama Palden describes the importance of all three *yanas*, or vehicles which carry one along the path to complete realization; if one of these is left out, the realization will not penetrate throughout the entirety of one’s life. In the “earlier” *yanas*—the *sravakayana* and the *Mahayana*—core character issues are addressed, in Lama Palden’s experience—in terms of one’s behavior, the quality of their thoughts, the way they utilize their speech, and so forth. For some practitioners, there can be a premature leap into the more advanced realizations without first having a grounding in the fundamental teachings that provide support for further work.

Lama Palden (personal communication, February 8, 2013) has observed a common tendency for some spiritual practitioners to view spirituality as somehow “better,” “deeper,” or “more advanced” than psychological and emotional work; in fact, it is considered by many to be akin to admitting defeat to engage in therapeutic work. In this sort of environment, practitioners can feel shame about seeking therapy and can come to conclude that there must be something seriously “wrong” with them should they look to add coaching, counseling, or therapy to their spiritual practice. For Palden, however, what often happens as a result of intensive and authentic spiritual practice is that deeply ingrained habitual patterns and psychological issues come unearthed. When this material emerges, it is not indicative, asserts Palden, of something being “wrong” with the practitioner—or that their practice has failed them; rather, it is an opportunity to address unresolved wounding and suffering from the past, which might be best suited to unravel within a therapeutic relationship. If this undigested material is not engaged, it is likely to provide additional obstacles to realization over time. She gives an example of a spiritual teacher who may be deeply realized when it comes to their ability to access and navigate within transpersonal realms of experience; additionally, they may have a very refined capacity to speak about the teachings they are communicating to their students. In some cases, however, it is quite possible that, concurrent with this level of transpersonal maturity, a teacher could remain cut off from feelings and emotions. Unfortunately, splitting off from charged psychological and emotional material does not generally lead to its dissolving, even as a result of dedicated spiritual practice. Rather, it will often resurface in troublesome and more subtle ways in the areas of intimate relationship, money, and power. It is not uncommon for teachers and practitioners to dismiss the feeling and emotional world, Palden contends, instead putting forward an image of themselves as the

archetype of the great realized aspirant. The consequence of such dismissal, however, is none other than the activation of spiritual bypass, and the inevitable return at a later date of that material which has been split off. Even though it is difficult and challenging to confront emotional material, it is far better than the alternative, to become dissociated from that which is influencing the practitioner behind the scenes. Working with the ego and its various expressions is like “parenting a child,” Palden has observed: as long as a person is aware of what is happening, it can be met and worked with. But if a practitioner is unaware of this material there will be no wisdom or skillful means available that can be brought to bear on the situation.

It is a common belief, Palden (personal communication, February 8, 2013) has observed, that practitioners in the East do not engage in spiritual bypass to the degree it is found in their Western counterparts. But spiritual bypassing is a universal process, she argues, that is present at least potentially anytime a person engages with spiritual belief and practice. While there are major cultural differences between East and West, the tendencies associated with spiritual bypass are human and not exclusive to any particular cultural, society, or religion. Palden believes that spirituality has been used to serve defensive ends since human beings began the spiritual quest, with examples seen thousands of years ago in Buddhist literature, warning of behavior and a relationship with the dharma that might now be labeled spiritual bypassing. In helping teachers and clinicians to cultivate greater awareness of spiritual bypass, Palden distinguishes between what in Tibetan tradition is known as *dharmā* and that which is referred to as *dharmatā*. In the Mahamudra school of Tibetan Buddhism, discernment must be made between “phenomena” and “true nature”; otherwise, a practitioner will not be able to penetrate to the deepest understanding of the nature of self and the

phenomenal world. For example, if a practitioner has a powerful experience in meditation—be it a *kundalini* awakening, entering a state of deep absorption, or an overwhelming feeling of oneness or non-separation—these are still considered “phenomenon” which come and go, are ever-changing, and ultimately unreliable. Ultimately, for both Zen and Mahamudra, these sorts of experiences are not emphasized and are not considered all that relevant with respect to ultimate realization; in fact, they can become an obstacle as they often become identified with and attached to. It is easy for powerful experiences to become mistaken for the path itself; according to Palden, however, they are not the main point. Because they are so compelling and extraordinary they tend to be overemphasized and can distract practitioners from realizing the quintessential goal of the contemplative path, that which does not come and go.

If the phenomena which arise in the context of contemplative experience are not the essence of the path, then what is? For Palden (personal communication, February 8, 2013), the point of spiritual practice is “to fully realize and understand the nature of reality and of our own minds.” Such realization, according to Palden’s Tibetan tradition, has very little to do with particular phenomenal experience. Powerful spiritual experiences—whether arising in meditation or otherwise—can be corrective and healing and thus shouldn’t be discounted, but according to Palden are not liberating in and of themselves. A practitioner is not liberated through experience, Palden contends, but through realization of the true nature of self and phenomena, which is “unchanging, unborn, and undying”; a practitioner’s true refuge is in what is always here, not in that which comes and goes. Palden’s advice for practitioners is to pay attention to spiritual experiences, but not to overvalue them. In her own life, she has had very deep spiritual experiences, only to have them dissolve, throwing her into profound psychological suffering. The important point here is that spiritual experience can be used just

like anything else to bypass psychological and emotional difficulties and challenges. In Palden's Mahamudra and Dzogchen traditions, spiritual experiences can be inspiring and deeply profound, however even the most subtle experiences come and go. If a practitioner does not understand the nature of reality, beyond what comes and goes, they will never be free.

It is important for teachers and clinicians to conduct an ongoing examination of the difference between "egoic activity" and behavior which emerges from outside the domain of the ego (L. Palden, personal communication, February 8, 2013). A number of researchers cited in this study have observed that even those teachers and practitioners who have achieved profound spiritual realization can have aspects of their personalities that have not been integrated. As a result, practitioners develop in a "lopsided" fashion, with parts of themselves not integrated into the entirety of their being. It is critical that teachers and practitioners be honest with themselves about where they actually are, according to Palden, and how deeply their realization has flowed into their relative lives. For example, Palden makes it a point to ask her students about their marriage and other interpersonal relationships, their career, their friends, and their children; it is important for her to get a "whole picture" of where they are, not just how they're doing spiritually. When a student describes to her an awakening experience, she questions them carefully to see how deeply the realization has permeated the student's relative life—his relationships, work, and family structures. If realization is not grounded in relative reality, it doesn't really mean all that much for Palden; it can easily remain within the realm of fantasy. Palden encourages her students to fully embrace their humanity, for it is through such embrace that the human self becomes liberated. Being fully committed to a path of spiritual realization does not mean that a person cannot simultaneously live a healthy and full life; it is not necessary to choose one over the other. For Palden, "off the

cushion” practice is just as important as “on the cushion” meditative training , for how a person lives their life, how they treat themselves and others, and how they engage in the world is just as important as realization in meditation. Because Palden emphasizes the psychological and emotional aspects of development alongside the spiritual, she hypothesizes that those deeply entrenched in spiritual bypass do not seek her out as a teacher as much as they would a teacher who did not emphasize these things.

The most profound spiritual growth in her life, Palden (personal communication, February 8, 2013) reflects, has come through sitting with the most painful and difficult situations, practicing right in the middle of it all. These are the times when her realization most noticeably increased and she was able to deepen into her true nature. Whether there was something wrong with one of her children or someone close to her died or whether her community was struggling through a difficult time, these situations all provided unique opportunities to meet life directly, revealing the true nature underneath. It is through the situations of ordinary life, argue Palden, that practitioner are able to liberate old latent tendencies and habitual patterns, turning directly into their suffering and penetrating into its true nature; for it is through this movement of “turning toward” that karma from the past can be purified.

This “turning toward” can even be applied to meeting physical pain, Palden (personal communication, February 8, 2013) contends, sharing an example from her own experience with appendicitis. For much of her life, Palden was afraid of physical pain. During this particular experience, however, she was able to apply her practice right in the middle of the pain; in doing so she discovered that she could actually find a place of rest within it, and that it was in fact workable. It was not turning away from and resisting the pain that helped her to

reach a sense of freedom in relationship to it, but rather through facing it and seeing its nature beyond habitual conditioning of the mind. This example is an important one for Palden as demonstrates the reality that freedom and liberation is not dependent upon any external condition, whether that condition be a quiet space for practice, a silent mind, or a healthy body. Practitioners will never be able to fully control the outer world, so learning to work within a multiplicity of outer and inner environments is critical in realizing lasting and mature realization in the world. Spiritual realization does not always present within an environment of peace and equanimity; life circumstances are infinite and difficulties in one's outer circumstances can and usually do arise at the least opportune times. If realization cannot be found in the center of a practitioner's most challenging experiences, the depth of such realization might be questioned, argues Palden.

For some, in Palden's (personal communication, February 8, 2013) experience, spiritual practice in and of itself can be enough to liberate them from all forms of suffering; even in the face of profound psychological and emotional material, these lucky few are ripe enough or practiced enough to meet and transform whatever arises along the way. Perhaps in the past, in other historical periods, it was easier for practitioners who may not have had as much unresolved psychological material to work with. In modern times, however, life is more complicated and even in those dharmic societies such as those found in Bhutan, for example, there are tendencies to ignore certain characterological issues. For most of her Western students—at least at some point along the way—Palden has encouraged her students to explore psychological and emotional work that may not be accessible as part of their spiritual practice. Therapeutic work is often necessary to illuminate and transform a practitioner's blind spots, especially as they are related to psychological and emotional content; the sort of relational

environment provided by therapy can be tremendously helpful in the working through of this material, which is not always accessible in solo-oriented meditative or other spiritual practices. Historically, Palden contends, this sort of relational work was available, at least in some communities, however in contemporary times most do not have a close, personal, trust-based relationship with a teacher who can create a relational container to work through undigested psychological material. Especially in working with trauma, while it is possible that it can be healed through a traditional spiritual path, it is likely only those paths which offer a very close personal relationship with a highly realized and attuned teacher where this healing could take place. It is certainly possible for the guru-disciple relationship to provide the ground for this type of healing, though it is just not that common; it is in fact very rare in the contemporary spiritual landscape. One of the greatest gifts offered in the therapeutic traditions is the relationship between client and therapist, where this type of healing can occur.

Palden (personal communication, February 8, 2013) does not believe therapeutic work is absolutely necessary, but does see it as a “big blessing” in many people’s lives. When she first entered a traditional three-year meditation retreat, she saw the need to engage in a certain kind of psychological inquiry that was not part of her original training, in order to address difficult material which was emerging for her. It was through this inquiry that she was able to approach the material and its sources, and to “trace it back inside” herself until it was resolved. For her, this sort of psychological inquiry, in combination with traditional spiritual practice, was extremely valuable, and helped her to release “psychological knots,” fear, terror, and other challenging feelings and emotions which were alive within her. It was through the coming together of the great insight she touched through her spiritual practice—including the

meditative capacity to stay present with what whatever arose in her experience—and profound psychological inquiry that she was able to come to deeper and deeper levels of realization.

One of the most important realizations to emerge out of the exploration of the interface between psychological and spiritual work is that when a practitioner begins to awaken to their own true nature—and the nature of all arising phenomena—they do not suddenly become skillful or adept in the area of interpersonal relationships, or able to handle certain characterological issues that had embedded in their conditioned history (B. Tift, personal communication, March 25, 2013). The reality is that a person can achieve a certain level of spiritual realization while still having unresolved character or personality issues operating in the background. For Tift, there are different levels of experiencing, each involved with a different domain of understanding, each approached by a different series of practices or injunctions. Each human being has a unique set of capacities which must be attuned to in order to work skillfully with them. There is no universal method, practice, or teaching for everyone, at all times. Even when a practitioner starts to consciously participate more in an absolute way of experiencing reality, this does not necessarily change the way relative experience is engaged with. This observation is one that has profound implications for the way the phenomenon of spiritual bypass is understood and worked with. Citing a classical metaphor, Tift describes the nature of being as like space; it's not space, but it *like* space; and space accommodates everything. Space even accommodates neurosis, with no bias. From the point of view of awareness, Tift argues, there is no automatic preference for sanity or neurosis, wisdom or confusion. Tift suggests that a practitioner can shift their “psychic center of gravity” out of being identified with the relative (with the senses, thoughts, feelings, and emotions) so that they are “consciously located in awareness itself.” When this happens, the relative world does

not change, however the practitioner's attitude and relationship *toward* the relative can shift dramatically. When a person believes in a very fundamental way that they are separate from others—and from the phenomenal world—then it is very natural to be in competition to ensure survival. As a consequence of this drive for survival, most human beings experience a tremendous amount of anxiety. When a person becomes captured by this experience of being a separate self, in some unresolvable sense of cooperation and competition with everything else, a sorting process begins into what is liked, not liked, or that which is neutral. From an absolute point of view, however—from the perspective of open awareness—there is no sorting and no position. Further, asserts Tift, within the absolute there is no position about the fact that there is a position within the relative; and within the relative there is a position about the fact that there is no position. Therefore, if a practitioner shifts into being situated more in the nature of absolute awareness itself—which of course is already the truth of their experience in the most fundamental sense—they will naturally have no position, really, regarding relative experience, including the fact that within relative experience it appears that there are multiple positions; even this is seen as something that need not be changed. In this situation, where a practitioner is living from a more absolute perspective, out of open awareness itself, there can be a certain lack of motivation to improve relative experience, as from the absolute perspective, even dying is just as valid as continuing to live. Tift cites an experience he had earlier in his life when he was traveling in Nepal and met a man who had a very infected leg. Despite his pain and the trauma of the situation, the man was speaking from the absolute, noting that it was all perfect and even the rotting leg was a part of the overall situation, not needing to be changed or further related with. On the external level, of course, it was clear he needed to go the hospital as soon

as possible. It was not that this man was actually in the absolute, but was likely in a mix of absolute awareness and some spiritual bypassing.

In Tift's (personal communication, March 25, 2013) experience, it is common when a person begins to experience this transition—or shift in location of awareness—for there to still remain a subtle type of dissociative split between what appears to be the relative and the absolute. From the absolute point of view, such a practitioner may not experience being caught by whether a certain appearance is positive or negative, or limited in any way. Unfortunately, cautions Tift, if a person is in a position of being a teacher—or otherwise affecting others directly, as a parent or intimate partner—these others are still being affected if they are not yet free of the appearances. If a practitioner is off in a cave on retreat, of course there is no problem. But if they're interacting with others, it is important that they continue to engage in personal work on the relative level.

According to Ken Wilber (personal communication, February 15, 2013), human beings have “two fundamental selves,” both of which must be operating in a healthy and functional sense. One of these selves is the conventional self that can be observed as weighing a certain amount, having particular friends and interests, named in a certain way, and working at a particular location. These things can be said about this self, certain things can be known about this self, and this is how most people relate to the sense of self. But, Wilber clarifies, all of these qualities are objects in awareness; they are not subjects in their own right. While a practitioner is aware of this conventional, “smaller” self, when they inquire deeper into what they truly are, they will see this self as an object, that there is an observing self that is witnessing the many appearances. In other words, there is a self that is actually doing the seeing. There is a witness that is witnessing the small self; a “big” self that is aware of the

“small” self. This big self, according to Wilber—this observing self—is the sense of “I am-ness,” of pure awareness, which is aware of the conventional self as an object. The whole point of spirituality, alleges Wilber, is to explore this “case of mistaken identity,” where a person identifies with the small self and not the big Self. This is not to say that the small self is “not there” and could just be set aside; for this is the path of spiritual bypassing. The small self is there, conventionally, and must be apprehended accurately and function adequately, because it is the actual vehicle through which a person communicates in the conventional realm. When it comes to the various spiritual practices, alleges Wilber, there are those that work directly with the big Self, or the observing self—and these are primarily meditative in nature—resting in awareness itself or a more active self-inquiry. The latter was demonstrated by the great Indian sage Ramana Maharshi, who referred to the big Self as “I-I,” noting the “big” I that was aware of the “small” I. So, for Maharshi, there was the “I-I” (big Self) and simply the “I” (conventional, or small self). Many who become involved with spiritual practice, especially once they come to know the big Self through direct experience, disregard the small self, and this can lead to a whole assortment of symptoms and problems, many of which fall under the umbrella of spiritual bypassing. The small self is there for a reason, argues Wilber, and is the “communication vehicle of the conventional realm.” Furthermore, this conventional self can “get broken” in the ways the big Self simply cannot. On the other hand, there are problems with the big Self that are not found in the small self. The point here, contends Wilber, is that any integral growth process requires that both of these selves be related with and explored—through meditation *and* psychotherapy. Therapy is designed to help the small self to be adequate, functional, and conventionally healthy, while meditation helps to awaken a

practitioner to the big Self, or True Self. The main point here, according to Wilber, is that both of these are needed; one without the other will only ever result in a lopsided development.

When looking at the overall map of growth, healing, and spiritual awakening, these two primary pathways stand out: the contemplative (which works with the Big Self) and the therapeutic (which works with the small self). Each of these approaches, Wilber contends, recognizes and focuses upon one of the two selves addressed earlier, to the exclusion of the other. The contemplative path tends to value only the observing self, the transcendental self, the big Self, and it is not necessarily all that skillful in the handling of the conventional self, especially when the conventional self “gets into trouble, becomes broken, and needs fixing.” This is not a fault of the contemplative traditions, according to Wilber, as they were simply not designed to work with the subtleties of the conventional, or relative self. Traditional psychotherapists, on the other hand, “are largely aware of the big Self” (K. Wilber, personal communication, February 15, 2013). Most therapists, Wilber asserts, are simply unaware of Maharshi’s “I-I,” of the “unborn and undying spiritual Self.” Consequently, they focus their therapeutic efforts on “the small, finite, conventional self.” This is the great contribution of the therapeutic traditions—to “help make the conventional self work.” Likewise, what the meditative traditions do with the big Self is critical, helping practitioners to get in touch with the essence of what they are at the most fundamental level. Generally speaking, however, they do not know what to do with the conventional self; similarly, the therapeutic community has not historically known what to do with the big Self. Again, Wilber’s essential point is that it is critical for teachers and clinicians to understand and to get the point across that awareness of and working with both of these selves is mandatory for any sort of integral growth and development. Otherwise, only half of truth (relative or absolute) is guiding a practitioner’s life.

Ultimately, however the truth is nondual, the union of the relative and the absolute. When a person has a problem at the relative level of experience and they utilize spiritual practice as a way to avoid this, they are engaging in the most basic form of spiritual bypass. On the other hand, Wilber asserts, there is an equivalent process which might be called “conventional bypassing,” where a person becomes caught in conventional shadow and neurotic material, bypassing deeper, spiritual needs and dimensions of experience. In each case, the practitioner is not paying adequate attention to one of the important aspects of human growth and development.

The Importance of the Interpersonal

One of the common areas addressed by the researchers interviewed in this study is the relationship between interpersonal work, intimacy, and spiritual bypassing. It is not so difficult to access spiritual states of consciousness while on retreat or otherwise in isolation, but what about while in the midst of family life or a practitioner’s work in the world—as a husband or a wife or a parent or a businessperson? Caplan (personal communication, January 25, 2013) cited two conversations she had with respected spiritual teachers who named “parenting and intimate relationship” as the “highest spiritual practices” available for most contemporary practitioners. For Caplan, accessing the transcendent is just not that difficult; dedicated yoga practice each day for a few years, for example, can produce “bliss every morning.” It’s much harder to practice, however, when there is little control over external reality, which is the environment of family and other intimate interpersonal relationships. As many practitioners have come to discover (the hard way), there is very little control to be had over our spouse’s or children’s thoughts, emotions, and behavior. Many practitioners have reported emerging from a deep state of peace in prayer, yoga, or meditation, only to have it “removed” by a difficult

conversation or interaction with another. Citing a conversation she had with Reggie Ray, a teacher in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, Caplan describes the gift of relationship as being particularly adept at “showing us all the places within us that are not integrated.” Caplan shares that while she has had many spiritual experiences in her life which have been deeply meaningful for her that she has had less experience of what she refers to as a kind of “unified intimacy” in relationship. As a result, she is more drawn to a spiritual life which includes relational intimacy versus one which is predominantly solo-oriented. Caplan refers to conversations with many long-term practitioners who have achieved profound states of consciousness, yet could not hold a relationship together. For many, this has caused great suffering for them and those around them. For Caplan, intimate relationship is a powerful tool that can be integrated into (or even as) one’s spiritual life; to not be willing to partake in such a tool, because of some sort of spiritual idea or pride, is yet another form of bypassing.

For Masters (personal communication, March 6, 2013), if a person’s intimate relationship is deep and relatively conscious, everything that is unhealthy and neurotic in them will be brought to the surface; this is the gift of intimacy for those committed to growth and healing. This material may not always be worked with skillfully, but it is awakened, which is a prerequisite to engaging with it in a way that is healing. Another important contribution of intimate relationship is that it invites a practitioner to be vulnerable, both with themselves and others, which often requires entering into some very difficult and scary territory. Many are attracted to the idea of vulnerability, but when it arises in the context of intimate relationship, it can be terrifying. In an intimate relationship—or in any interpersonal relationship with any depth—there will be a call to “open the heart and the guts,” and “blowing the whistle on oneself,” will become very raw (R.A. Masters, personal communication, March 6, 2013).

When unresolved material from the past surfaces, during intensive spiritual practice or otherwise, it is important that the practitioner not frame what is happening as merely spiritual—rising above or holding it at a distance—but rather become intimate with what is presenting in their experience (R. Masters, personal communication, March 6, 2013). The metaphor of intimacy is one that consistently runs through Masters’ work, encouraging direct engagement with even the most difficult feelings and emotions. He encourages his students and clients to be willing to stay close enough to their experience so that they can truly come to know it, while at the same time maintaining just enough distance to keep it in clear focus. So much psychospiritual work, according to Masters, does not address the emotional life deeply enough; he believes emotional intimacy to be a requirement for any lasting transformative work. In his experience, it is through intimate relationship that emotions are most powerfully evoked. For many of the researchers cited in this study, there is something unique about intimate relationship in its way of triggering unresolved emotional material, of catalyzing its display in the psyche of intimate partners. These undigested wounds are not necessarily activated on the meditation cushion or during other solo-oriented activities. Intimate relationship, for many, is the context in which a person will naturally become most vulnerable, suggests Kornfield (personal communication, February 28, 2013). Whether it’s in a love relationship, within the context of a family living together, or in the intimacy of a spiritual community, inner psychic patterns and structures will be touched which activate that which remains unfinished and unresolved within. Through this evocation of all of the old feelings, trauma, and wounds, healing is accessible in new ways.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing or, more generally, the ways spiritual beliefs and practices can be used defensively in the avoidance of unresolved psychological and emotional wounding. The hypothesis under investigation in this study was this: what is spiritual bypassing, what are its common forms and essences, and why it is important for both individual practitioners as well as spiritual teachers and mental health professional to cultivate greater awareness of its dynamics in their own lives and in the lives of those they are in a helping relationship with. Spiritual practice has so much to offer those in the modern world, as a direct means by which to respond to the great suffering in the world and the increasing feelings of meaninglessness and anxiety brought on by an ever-expanding sense of separation between human beings. Because its light is so bright, however, it is critical to consider some of the shadow elements of spiritual belief and practice, so that we can come to a more integral understanding of what it means to be a human being and how we can best work together to alleviate suffering and catalyze awakening, healing, and transformation. When spirituality is used to avoid other challenging areas of life—especially personal, relational, and interpersonal domains of experience—its value is lessened and it ends up adding to a culture and society that is un-integrated and split off.

The study was undertaken and data was generated in two primary ways: 1) through this researcher's own seven-year immersion in the area, including informal interviews with several hundred spiritual practitioners, transpersonal- and integral-oriented clinicians, and well-known spiritual teachers and authors from around the world. Much of this informal data was gathered

through the researcher's 20-year employment with spirituality publisher Sounds True, Inc., out of Boulder, Colorado, and the many opportunities such employment provided to engage in in-depth conversation and dialogue with some of the most knowledgeable clinicians and teachers in the interface of psychological and spiritual methods of personal growth, emotional healing, and spiritual awakening. 2) Data was gathered through telephone and in-person interviews with 14 leading researchers, theorists, and clinicians familiar with the territory of the phenomenon under investigation, including the psychologist who coined the term "spiritual bypass" (John Welwood, PhD, University of Chicago) and the only researcher/ clinician to write a full-length book on the topic (Dr. Robert Augustus Master, PhD, Saybrook University). Through both informal and formal interviews, participant observation, and phenomenological inquiry, this study was conducted and its data collected.

The results of the study will be described in more detail below, in the Discussion and Recommendation sections of this study. For the purposes of this summary, however, three critical points will be made, each which will be unpacked in further detail later in this section:

- **The frequency of the phenomenon and the call for normalization.** The majority of the interviewees which formed the basis of this study stated unequivocally that where there is spirituality, there will be spiritual bypass. The phenomenon is found, to varying degrees, in nearly all practitioners, from novice to master, and no one is excluded from its influence. While the forms, essences, and expressions of spiritual bypass become subtler and more nuanced as a practitioner matures and develops, remnants remain throughout the lifespan of the practitioner. In the early days of research into spiritual bypass, when humanistic and transpersonal psychologies were being born and starting to influence both clinical work and the literature, spiritual bypass was viewed as

problematic, at least to some degree, and as an anomaly which was best “corrected” as quickly as possible. Over the last several decades—and especially in the last 10 years—researchers and clinicians have reported on the adaptive advantages of spiritual bypass, its non-pathological nature, and its normal expression as part of an overall developmental process.

- **The importance of multiple lines of development.** From the perspective of integral-developmental psychology, spiritual bypass involves an overemphasis on the spiritual line of development, while neglecting other critical lines, such as the emotional, interpersonal, psychosexual, intrapersonal, and somatic. Therefore, any integral response to spiritual bypass must address the many dimensions of what it means to be human, not just those involved with “spirituality.”
- **The importance of an ongoing, evolving dialogue between contemplative and therapeutic approaches to personal growth, somatic-emotional healing, and spiritual awakening.** Over the last 50 years, researchers and clinicians have explored the similarities and differences—in theory, method, and approach—between psychological and spiritual ways of knowing. This researcher believes this dialogue is still in its very early stages and will and should continue to evolve, for example by integrating the latest research in fields such as interpersonal neurobiology and other integrally-informed discoveries.

Discussion

As noted above, there were three principal observations made in the course of this study, each contributing in a unique way to the response to the study’s hypothesis regarding the nature and expression of the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing. In this session, these

observations will be discussed in greater specificity, providing the reader with a more detailed summary of the data that was derived.

I. The frequency of the phenomenon and the call for normalization

One of the most common calls from the researchers and clinicians cited in this study was the importance of depathologizing spiritual bypass. When the phenomenon was first named and explored—and throughout first couple of decades it was being written about and investigated—there seemed to be a bias, at least subtly, towards devaluing and dishonoring its expression, and to do whatever it took to call it out and eradicate it. Like the “ego” itself, spiritual bypass was seen by many to be the new “enemy,” providing a new obstacle and obscuration to mature spiritual unfolding. As the discourse has evolved over the years, researchers and clinicians are seeing the ways that spiritual bypass, like any other defensive activity, can be met with kindness, compassion, and empathy. While it can lead to problematic consequences in a practitioner’s life, it can also be function in an extremely adaptive way, providing a person with needed protection, safety, and developmental support. Like any egoic activity, spiritual bypass is not the enemy, but rather a rich source of information and critical component of the path itself. It need not be demolished, but rather understood and explored with care, curiosity, and attuned kindness.

For example, Caplan (personal communication, January 25, 2013), Masters (personal communication, March 6, 2013), Kornfield (personal communication, February 28, 2013) and Wilber (personal communication, February 15, 2013) have all observed how the practices of yoga and meditation can be used in both adaptive and maladaptive ways. While these practices provide a refined lens through which a person can access deeper levels of being and perception, they can also be used to avoid painful aspects of human experience, such as

unresolved emotions, feelings, and early trauma. Corbett (personal communication, March 22, 2013), for example, describes the ways that meditation and other practices can be undertaken to reduce the experience of anxiety and, as such, may be said to provide the practitioner a defense from unmanageable affect. Rather than concluding such use of spiritual practice as “positive” or “negative” per se, Corbett suggests that the context must be considered in a much more nuanced way. Spiritual practice, like any meaningful activity, can be adaptive or maladaptive, depending on a wide variety of circumstances and contexts. All defense mechanisms, Corbett (2011) contends

have adaptive and maladaptive attributes. *Adaptive* simply means flexible. We all experience adaptive defenses that help us to navigate the world. An example of an adaptive defense might be when we use humor to overcome an anxiety-provoking situation. We might laugh when we are terrified or tell a joke when we feel insecure. In general, defense mechanisms are adaptive until they lead to behaviors that threaten our emotional or physical well-being. When this occurs, they become *maladaptive*.

Maladaptive defenses are likely involved when behavior is rigid and inflexible. If humor becomes the only tool for managing anxiety, one may have a difficult time in relationships or in fully functioning in life. (p. 11)

What Corbett (2011; personal communication, March 22, 2013) and others are asserting is that the use of spiritual belief and practice to defend against overwhelming affect is not a problem in and of itself, however it can be important to bring clarity and awareness to this process, so that it can be illuminated in a way that ultimately serves the goals of practitioners and clients. For example, prayer in and of itself is not a defense mechanism. When a practitioner prays as a way of avoiding uncomfortable feelings or the truth of a challenging

aspect of their self-experience, however, prayer serves as a mechanism of spiritual bypass. If prayer carries a person through a painful time to a place where they are better able to cope and manage their experience, it might be said that this form of spiritual bypass is serving an adaptive function. If, however, prayer keeps a person unconscious about aspects of their experience, leading to further behavior which is harmful to themselves and others, this might be seen as spiritual bypass in a more maladaptive expression.

As part of this new discourse which has emerged over the last couple of decades, researchers and clinicians are embracing a reality where spiritual bypass is not something which must be eradicated so that a more “pure” journey may be engaged with, but rather that the phenomenon emerges as a natural part of an important—and even unavoidable—developmental sequence. In this way, spiritual bypass is being conceptualized less as merely a “pitfall” along the way, but as a very organic unfolding in a practitioner’s pursuit of spiritual depth and maturity. Mathieu (personal communication, April 12, 2013), for example, has observed that as a person grows and develops that they are presented with many opportunities to make use of spiritual bypass in new and adaptive ways that are supportive of a mature approach to the spiritual journey. Especially in the earlier stages of engagement, spiritual bypass can help to provide some ground to begin the process of contemplative work in the first place.

II. The importance of multiple lines of development

One of the most critical discoveries confirmed by this study was the relevance of embracing multiple perspectives—or developmental lines/ intelligences—as a natural curative to the problematic aspects of spiritual bypass. Whether conceived as “the personal, interpersonal, and transpersonal” (Masters, 2010b, personal communication, March 6, 2013;

Welwood, 2002), “multiple developmental lines” (Forman, 2010; Ingersoll and Zeitler, 2012; Wilber, 2000a, 2007, 2012), or as “the five levels of healing” (Cashwell, Bentley, and Yarborough, 2007), the researchers and clinicians cited in this study have come to discover that an approach to growth and development which emphasizes one line of development to the exclusion of others will not in the end be likely to meet the ultimately goals of practitioners. From this perspective, spiritual bypass can be said to involve an approach to human unfolding which (over) emphasizes spiritual/ transpersonal growth to the neglect of other critical lines, such as cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, intrapersonal, psychosexual, somatic, and moral. When the psychograph (Wilber, 2007) of a practitioner is investigated, who is believed to be engaged in spiritual bypass, it is almost always evident that certain vital areas of development are operating at less than ideal, or at even pathological levels.

Associated with these findings, researchers and clinicians have attempted to clarify over the last several decades the ways that spiritual practice “was never designed” to respond to certain developmental shortcomings. While spiritual engagement may be the royal road to the transpersonal, it is not necessarily the most effective way to respond to interpersonal heartbreak, midlife career failure, or early traumatic wounding. Welwood (2002), for example, describes how even committed spiritual practice can become a compensatory mechanism by which a practitioner responds to feelings of low self-esteem, loneliness, and a variety of emotional problems. One of the vital observations shared by the researchers in this study is that looking to spiritual teachings and practices to perform functions they are not designed to do dishonors the traditions and places an unnecessary burden upon them. Additionally, it creates a ripe environment for the flourishing of spiritual bypass, where practitioners neglect personal

and interpersonal domains of experience, believing that spiritual practice will inevitably address the entirety of their psychological, somatic, and emotional worlds.

The other essential point made by researchers in this area is that while spiritual traditions have not historically tended to focus too much attention on the body, emotions, and interpersonal relationships, it is through these vehicles that any spiritual awakening must ultimately flow. According to Kornfield (personal communication, February 28, 2013), for example, practitioners can no longer allow these dimensions of experience to atrophy on the way to the transpersonal, for it is only by way of these that transcendence and illumination can become manifest in the relative world. The researchers here urge practitioners to consider the possibility that these often-deemed “lesser” lines of development (e.g. somatic, emotional, psychosexual, interpersonal, moral) are not impediments to spiritual awakening, but illumined pathways through which the most profound spiritual discoveries can unfold and respond to the great suffering in the world. As Wilber (personal communication, February 15, 2013) poetically states, “[Spiritual] realization expresses through the relative vehicles [of relationship, emotion, and the body]. And no one is impressed with a broken vehicle.”

III. The importance of an ongoing, evolving dialogue between contemplative and therapeutic approaches to personal growth, somatic-emotional healing, and spiritual awakening

Over the last 50 years a rapprochement has been underway between the great spiritual traditions and contemporary therapeutic discoveries, concerning their respective theories, goals, and methods of human growth and development. While it was beyond the scope of this study to review this literature in its entirety, certain aspects of this exchange were explored as they related to the phenomenon under investigation. Each system of psychotherapy (whether

cognitive, behavioral, psychodynamic, humanistic, feminist, etc.)—as well as the various contemplative traditions—offers theoretical bases from which to understand and work with human suffering, as well as a series of applied injunctions, in the forms of exercises, practices, or other experiential vehicles through which a person may change and transform the way they perceive self and reality. In an ideal world, a proficient therapist or spiritual teacher would work skillfully with these divergences in creative and effective ways, offering clients and students a truly integral pathway to personal growth, psycho-emotional healing, and spiritual awakening. While some theorists believe the two approaches to be essentially non-different (Almaas, 2009, 2012), a “dance of polarities” (Duchane and Katz, n.d.), or even ultimately “unresolvable” (Tift, 2011a, 2011b), most trained in both psychological and spiritual methodologies believe they may be implemented in a way that honors the particular gifts of each, working together to relief suffering in the most skillful, intelligent, creative, and effective ways.

One of the researchers, Pilar Jennings, a psychoanalyst and committed student and teacher of Buddhism and Buddhist meditation, made a statement while being interviewed for this study which provided a very helpful lens through which to understand the relative importance of psychological work and its relation to spiritual growth and development.

... generally speaking, spiritual practice is not designed to help us understand our subjectivity. (P. Jennings, personal communication, March 18, 2013)

For Jennings—and echoed through many of the researchers and clinicians cited here—the unfolding of subjective experience is simply not what the methods of spiritual practice were/are designed for. If a person has suffered as a result of early insecure attachment or from traumatic loss, for example, this will have a profound impact on their psyche. While in the

course of spiritual practice such a person might experience psychological healing, for the most part their practice will not necessarily help them to work through traumas that resulted from an interpersonally-oriented experience. This is not a fault of the spiritual traditions, but rather evidence of the importance of an integral approach to the complex nature of human development.

For the researchers and clinicians who participated in this study—and who were cited in this study’s literature review—the most effective approach toward lasting, mature, and authentic personal growth, somatic-emotional healing, and spiritual transformation is one which emphasizes both Western, developmental work as well as contemplative perspectives and practices. The common view coming from the researchers cited here is that therapeutic, developmental, clinical work, in many cases, is the most direct and skillful way to work within the personal and interpersonal domains of experience. These methodologies specialize in the “metabolization of a person’s past” (J. Welwood, personal communication, April 26, 2013), whole contemplative practices are the gateway into the transpersonal. By working with students and clients in a way that honors multiple lines of development and intelligence, teachers and clinicians are best able to meet the goals of those they represent.

Recommendations

More research is needed in the area of spiritual bypass, especially as it takes expression in non-Eastern forms of spirituality, including in Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Much of the research to date, empiric and otherwise, has unfolded within the Eastern traditions, notably Buddhism and Hinduism. It is possible that studying spiritual bypass within these other traditions, which are much wider practice in the Western world than Eastern traditions, will

reveal new and important data which can be skillfully employed by practitioners, teachers, and clinicians of all kinds.

Additionally, a much larger-scale interview with spiritual teachers and mental health professionals around the world could prove quite helpful in further understanding the nature of spiritual bypass and the many ways, gross and subtle, it takes form in the lives of spiritual aspirants. There are many opportunities for more refined research, incorporating gender, socioeconomic, and cultural factors to further the understand the dynamics of how the phenomenon manifests, and how the problems it engenders can be responded to in the most effective ways.

CONCLUSION

The golden chain of spirituality

Like any activity, spiritual practice can be used as a means to unfold and illuminate the mysteries of the sacred world, but it can also be used to avoid emotional pain, to shield oneself from unresolved feelings of all kinds, and as a way to stay safe from the unyielding realities of intimacy. Ironically, spiritual belief and practice can provide fertile ground in which we can escape the wild, untamed dimension of immediate embodied experience. This is not to suggest that you discard your most sacred spiritual beliefs and practices, but only to encourage you to engage in them with eyes wide open. There are an infinite number of ways that spiritual beliefs and practices can be used to secure ground for the ego, and endless, very subtle ways that ego can and does co-opt even the most sacred teachings and practices to fortify itself, to make up for early developmental failures, misattunements, and unresolved trauma, especially for those who lacked a holding environment where their emotional world could be mirrored and allowed to unfold.

Of course, many spiritually-oriented people dismiss the somatic-emotional world altogether, believing they are manifesting some sort of pure, transcendent, awakened reality rather than merely expressing their own unresolved trauma and organization. As a result, what is then transmitted, through these practitioners as well as their enlightened gurus and in the name of awakening and enlightenment, is simply more traumatic organization, and half-baked realization. It is not that difficult to look out into the contemporary spiritual landscape to see these dynamics in full force. The spiritual path has become a commodity, bought and sold on the open marketplace, with its endless fantastical promises and alluring siren songs of specialness.

It requires tremendous courage to look carefully at the subtleties of your relationship with spirituality as doing so often takes you directly into the end of your world, where a cosmic house of cards stands ready to crumble, taking down everything around you, including your most precious spiritual identities. In the wake of this revelation, many find themselves in profound disillusionment. But this is a most sacred disillusionment and it is none other than love breaking through, coming alive to restructure your reality with its movement. For many spiritual practitioners, to see the ways that the path has become yet another means by which to fortify a separate sense of self (all in the name of “having no self,” of course) is just well, not very fun, and is just not that interesting to many; there are just too many ego-level needs being met to allow this in. It is, in my experience, however, the most radical act of kindness, to yourself and others, to take the risk to see how these dynamics may be operating in you (as well as very much alive in your gurus). The path is endlessly seductive, can so easily and unconsciously support egoic process, and can be used to meet important developmental needs which were not able to be met in our early years. None of this is “bad” or inherently problematic; nor is it something that needs to be judged or something we need to become aggressive toward; again, it can be held and explored with compassion, care, and an open curiosity—fueled by the call to know what is true, what is real, more than *anything*. This holding, this kindness, this love, this awareness, can be and often is curative in and of itself.

Of course, what I’m suggesting here is not new. Many of the great siddhas, yogis, researchers, and clinicians have reported on this phenomenon for many years. As Chogyam Trungpa warned a few decades ago, guidance I believe worthy of frequent re-consideration, and in his ever-poetic style: “As long as we follow a spiritual approach promising salvation, miracles, liberation, then we are bound by the ‘golden chain of spirituality.’ Such a chain

might be beautiful to wear, with its inlaid jewels and intricate carvings, but nevertheless, it imprisons us. People think they can wear the golden chain for decoration without being imprisoned by it, but they are deceiving themselves. As long as one's approach to spirituality is based upon enriching ego, then it is spiritual materialism, a suicidal process rather than a creative one."

I'd like to end this section with words from Dr. Robert Augustus Masters (2010b), a longtime spiritual teacher and psychotherapist, and the author of the only full-length book on spiritual bypass, entitled "Spiritual Bypassing: When Spirituality Disconnects Us from What Really Matters." I believe that these parting words offer great solace to the spiritual seeker who wishes to know themselves at the deepest levels, and to become clear and translucent vehicles through which spiritual and teachings can flow into our modern, contemporary world.

Life after spiritual bypassing and spiritual correctness is the beginning of authentic spirituality. No fireworks, no applause, no need to advertise ourselves as someone spiritual. No grandiosity, to fake humility. That which is supposedly unspiritual will no longer automatically be shunned or bypassed. The longing to be fully awakened will still be present but without the desperation and ambition that once characterized it.

Where once we were in a hurry to achieve an idealized goal, we are no longer rushing or pushing, having resolved that we are in it for the long haul, that the journey is the teacher.

What are we to do with spiritual bypassing? First of all, learn to recognize it and name it. Keep it far enough away to keep it in focus and close enough to feel its contours. Over time, our increasing familiarity with the inner dynamics of spiritual bypassing helps us understand what we have been avoiding and why. As this wisdom grows, we

no longer split ourselves into antagonistic factions. Instead of being at war with our weaknesses, we bring them into our heart. Instead of trying to get rid of what we don't like about ourselves, we develop a better relationship to all that we are. Thus intimacy rather than transcendence becomes our path.

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