

1 Between Heaven and Earth

Principles of Inner Work

AS A PSYCHOTHERAPIST and meditation practitioner, I am continually faced with questions about the relationship between psychological and spiritual work—in my own experience, as well as with clients, students, and friends. Over the course of thirty years of considering these questions, I have gone back and forth between two different perspectives—sometimes regarding the psychological inquiry into self as diametrically opposed, even antagonistic, to the spiritual aim of going beyond self, and at other times seeing it as an extremely useful complement to spiritual work. This is a complex issue that we will consider in detail throughout this book. We can begin with a basic consideration of the essential challenges of inner work common to these two paths, and the different directions they take in addressing them.

Spiritual Bypassing

Starting in the 1970s I began to perceive a disturbing tendency among many members of spiritual communities. Although many spiritual practitioners were doing good work on themselves, I noticed a widespread tendency to use spiritual practice to bypass or avoid dealing with certain personal or emotional “unfinished business.” This desire to find release from the earthly structures that seem to entrap us—the structures of karma, conditioning, body, form, matter, personality—has been a central motive in the spiritual search for thousands of years. So there is often a tendency to use spiritual practice to try to rise above our emotional and personal issues—all those messy, unresolved matters that weigh us down. I call this tendency to avoid or prematurely transcend basic human needs, feelings, and developmental tasks *spiritual bypassing*.

Spiritual bypassing is particularly tempting for people who are having difficulty navigating life’s developmental challenges, especially in a time and culture like ours, where 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. While still struggling to find themselves, many people are introduced to spiritual teachings and practices that urge them to give themselves up. As a result, they wind up using spiritual practices to create a new “spiritual” identity, which is actually an old dysfunctional identity—based on avoidance of unresolved psychological issues—repackaged in a new guise.

In this way, involvement in spiritual teachings and practices can become a way to rationalize and reinforce old defenses. For example, those who need to see themselves as special will often emphasize the specialness of their spiritual insight and practice, or their special relation 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.

Welwood, John. *Toward a Psychology of Awakening* (p. 11-12). Shambhala.