

# Avoid 'pious' pitfalls

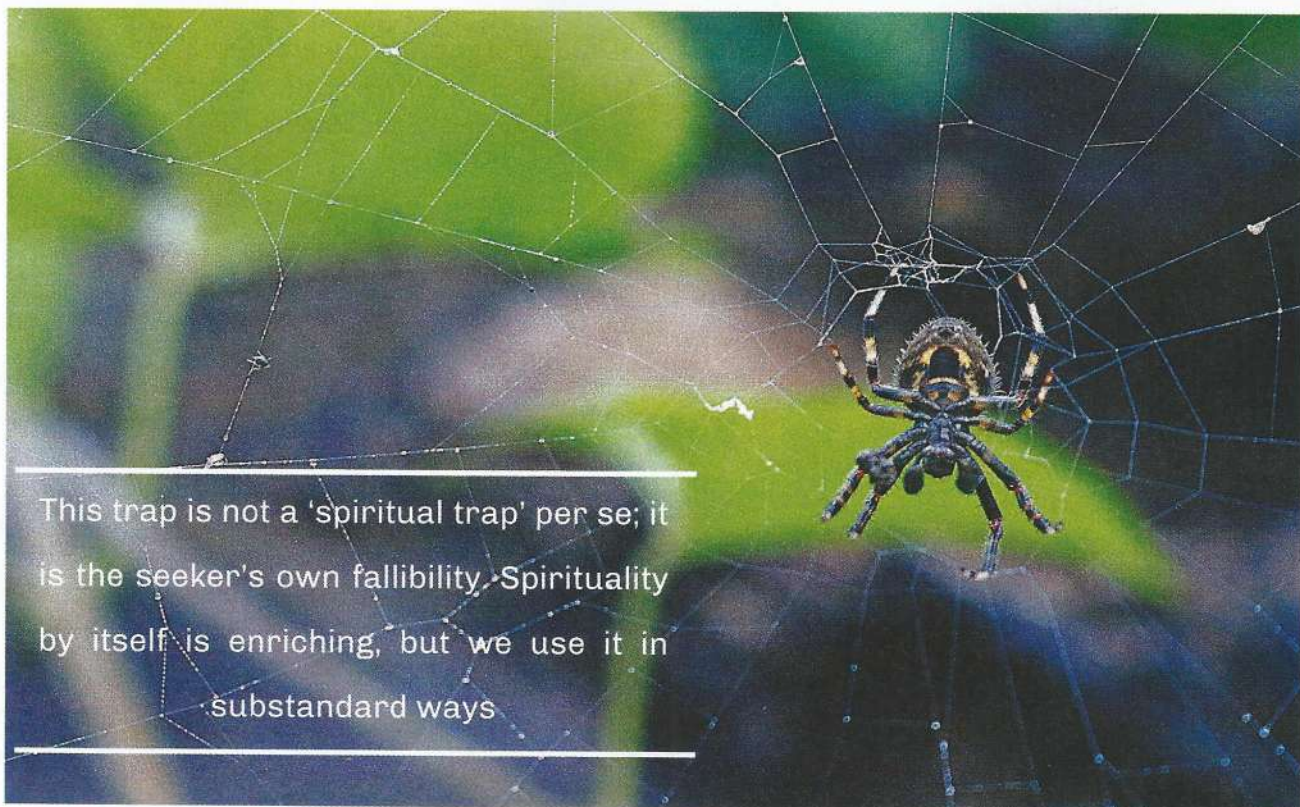


**Bhaavin Shah** explains how a casual spiritual shopper conveniently furthers his own agenda through 'spirituality', while a genuine and alert seeker will see through his own deceptions on the journey

I have been a passionate spiritual coach for more than a decade now, besides being an intense student of spirituality for upwards of two decades. Hence, I know that, despite all its miraculous benefits, spirituality too, just like many other pursuits in life—like success for example—tends to become a trap. Rather, a seeker makes a trap out of it, out of his own unconsciousness, and gets stuck in it. Each of us does that in different degrees with spirituality and at different stages of the journey.

**To portray the same, here are some instances from my past:**

- Feelings are meant to be consciously felt. Because meditation often blisses me out, I have successfully (and unsuccessfully) used meditation as an escape from consciously experiencing my murky emotions, my messy-yet-beautiful humanity and the dark-yet-fascinating present moment.
- I have often indulged in self-growth training sessions though it came in the way of fulfilling some of my important family obligations.
- I have refused to develop my muscle to confront (and hence have remained a frightened child somewhere) by choosing compassion over confrontation, where confrontation was called for. Such fake compassion just became my cover-up for not turning into a self-protective adult.
- I have so often judged my near and dear ones because, owing to my spiritual education, I always thought that I knew more than them.
- I have effectively neglected my physical health because indulging in a blissful meditation always won over doing a strenuous workout.
- While my soul always yearned for the pleasurable things of life, my spiritual ego settled for a fake form of simplicity because simple is how one is exhorted to be.
- In my early spiritual journey, I often handed over my personal power to a Guru rather than owning it with the support of my Guru. The former helped me surrender but kept me obsequious, while the latter (when it happened) allowed me to be devoted and yet left me empowered.



#### As with me, so with my seeker-friends:

- I have a friend who chooses to do nothing about his low-quality marriage because he feels it is all an illusion anyway.
- I have another friend who, influenced by the positive thinking movement, manages to always wear an ear-to-ear smile on his face and yet comes across as inauthentic, as he uses it to cover up his discontent.
- I have many noble friends who overextend themselves and help a lot of people but do so in an attempt to feel better about themselves.
- Each of you could cite many more examples of how spiritual-sounding ideas and behaviours, applied out of context, deprive an aspirant of genuine spiritual (and emotional) growth itself.

#### Who caused the trap?

This trap is not a 'spiritual trap' per se; it is the seeker's own fallibility. Spirituality by itself is enriching, but we use it in substandard ways because we can never be any different than what we are in a particular moment. A chain of iron continues to remain a chain even if somebody turns the iron into gold. I recall this anecdote I once heard where a serial killer, when jailed, would convert the wall of the prison cell into a canvas of sorts; he would make a sketch of two human beings on it, one killing the other mercilessly. We continue to be who we are, who we always have been, even while the context and setting changes.

By the same token, when we move from the mundane world towards spirituality, we tend to perpetuate our limitations but from under a mask. The human ego now becomes a spiritual ego. The ego which was ambitious for money now becomes

ambitious for *moksha*. The ego which saw no value in the spiritual experience now sees little value in the human experience. The ego which took pride in 'more' holidays abroad now takes pride in helping 'more' people—'more' being the trap here. The personality is the same, the domain is different.

Perhaps, the spiritual ego is more caught-up than the mundane ego. That is because the spiritual ego is more subtle; its defence mechanisms wear a holy garb and with all the additional knowledge, it has become a master at doggedly rationalising wherever it stands. It is only in this context that one can fathom Lord Shiva (in the *Shiv Sutra*) giving this radical caveat '*Gnanam bandhanam*'; meaning 'knowledge is bondage'.

### **Have I made any progress then?**

So, it almost makes one wonder if one was better off earlier. I recently saw a poster on Facebook where a tribal asks a priest: "Would I be guilty of all these sins if I didn't know they were sins?" To which the truthful priest replies, "No." And the tribal questions back, almost rhetorically: "Then why did you have to tell me that they are sins? I was better off the way I was."

Thankfully, all this business of getting trapped is not as bad as it appears to be. It serves a certain

purpose; it is an important pit stop in the journey. It is a part of the maturation process. We can't not go through it. We can't bypass it. The journey to the ascent is convoluted and rocky. It is important to be bound by knowledge so that we viscerally experience the importance of freedom from it. It is a rite of passage. It is the downward arch of a spiral moving upward. It is there for a reason, a part of the grand design. We should honour it rather than curse it.

### **What does one do about this trap?**

However, honouring the spiritual trap doesn't mean that we do nothing to bust it. The key to coming out of the trap is to see the trap for what it is. When I saw that I was using meditation to escape from my emotional discomfort, I would postpone my meditation until I developed the muscle to stay with my emotions and also learn all that they were trying to teach me. And when I saw that I was being unreasonably kind to some people who were bullying me emotionally, simply because I was subconsciously afraid to confront them, I kept my kindness at bay until I learnt how to confront.

While the solution—seeing the trap for what it is—is simple, it is not easy. One needs to be open enough to see that one is not as evolved as one would like to believe and to acknowledge that

one has been fooling around for quite a few years, going seemingly nowhere. One needs to be intelligent enough to penetrate through these fine nuances and see one's self-deceptions. But whatever it is, the trap needs to be busted. A genuine spiritual seeker will see through it sooner rather than later. While a casual spiritual shopper, perhaps, doesn't want to ever see it at all.

### **Beyond the trap**

It helps to ask oneself these challenging questions: How come my issues refuse to budge even though I have been attending a whole host of workshops, devouring a variety of books, and practising a dozen techniques? How come the pace of my life refuses to slow down even though I meditate and pray? How come my relationships—which are supposed

to improve as I improve—haven't improved significantly? While the scriptures declare that everything comes from God (including money), how come my cash flow has dwindled even while I commune with God? How is it that my passion and zest for life isn't getting any better? Is my meditative peace and detachment eating at my passion rather than enhancing it? How is it that my body isn't reflecting the sort of improvements that it should if my consciousness—which shapes the body—is supposedly evolving?

Based on my own journey, I can guarantee you that a sincere probing through these discomforting questions can give you some deep insights into your personality. Insights, when clear enough, will cut through all of these mental cobwebs, initiating you into that pure spiritual domain, which is free of all gross and subtle traps. And what a delight that would be, as you can imagine.

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We welcome your comments and suggestions on this article.  
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