The Science of Spiritual Narcissism

Self-enhancement through spiritual practices can fool some of us into thinking we’re evolving and growing when all we’re growing is our ego.

By Scott Barry Kaufman on January 11, 2021

“Ego is able to convert anything to its own use, even spirituality.”—Chögyam Trungpa

A purported benefit of mind-body spiritual practices such as yoga, meditation and energy healing is that they will help “quiet the ego,” providing an effective antidote to the exalted self. Indeed, such practices do have the potential for such an awakening, allowing us to get more in touch with reality as it is right here and now, including the qualities we don’t like about ourselves. Spiritual practices also have the potential to help us cultivate compassion, concern and unconditional positive regard toward others—things that can truly evolve our consciousness as a species.

However, this is all much easier said than done. As has been observed by many spiritual leaders, spiritual practitioners and psychologists over the years, the
ego has an incessant need to be seen in a positive light, and will eagerly hijack whatever flow of consciousness it can use for its own enhancement. As the Indian philosopher Sri Aurobindo noted:

“At every moment [the seeker] must proceed with a vigilant eye upon the deceits of the ego and the ambushes of the misleading Powers of Darkness who ever represent themselves as the one source of Light and Truth and take on them a simulacrum of divine forms in order to capture the soul of the seeker.”

Likewise, in his classic book *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, the Tibetan Buddhist spiritual leader Chögyam Trungpa wrote:

“Walking the spiritual path properly is a very subtle process: it is not something to jump into naively. There are numerous sidetracks which lead to a distorted, ego-centered version of spirituality; we can deceive ourselves into thinking we are developing spirituality when instead we are strengthening our egocentricity through spiritual techniques.”

Psychologists have also pointed out the potential for spirituality to serve as a tool of self-enhancement. According to William James, the “father of American psychology,” any skill that increases its centrality in the self-system is likely to breed a bias toward self-enhancement. As it turns out, no domain of human skill has been found to be exempt from this “self-centrality principle.” It seems to be an inextricable part of human nature.

This includes the domain of spirituality. Self-enhancement through spiritual practices can fool us into thinking we are evolving and growing, when in fact all we are growing is our ego. Some psychologists have pointed out that the self-enhancement that occurs through spiritual practices can lead to the “I’m enlightened and you’re not” syndrome and spiritual bypass, by which people seek to use their spiritual beliefs, practices and experiences to avoid genuine contact with their psychological “unfinished business.” In my recent book *Transcend*, I call it "pseudo-transcendence"—transcendence built on a very shaky foundation.

Just how much of a problem is all this, really? Perhaps on the whole, spiritual practices really do help quiet the ego, and spiritual narcissism isn’t that widespread. What do the empirical data actually have to say on one of the greatest paradoxes of our time, which is: *If a major point of yoga is quieting the ego and reducing focus on self, why are there so many yoga pose pictures on Instagram?*

**SELF-CENTRALITY AND SPIRITUALITY**

In the past few years, a number of high-quality studies have started to unearth the existence of spiritual narcissism and self-enhancement among spiritual
practices that purport to quiet the ego. In one set of high-powered studies, Jochen Gebauer and colleagues looked at both yoga and meditation practices.

In their first experiment, they followed 93 yoga students for up to 15 weeks. They repeatedly assessed self-enhancement levels among people directly after participating in yoga and among people who had not practiced yoga within the past 24 hours. Self-centrality was measured by items such as "Focusing mindfully on the exercises across the whole yoga class is...," measured on a scale of 1 (not at all central to me) to 5 (central to me). They measured self-enhancement though a standard measure of self-esteem, as well as by asking people the degree to which they perceived themselves as better than the average yoga student in their yoga class. They also included a measure of "communal narcissism," an often underdiscussed form of narcissism in which one thinks that they alone will save the world and that they are the most helpful person of them all (e.g., "I will be well known for the good deeds I will have done"). Research shows that communal narcissism is correlated with grandiose narcissism and all of the entitlement, arrogance and overconfidence that goes along with it (just applied to a helping domain). The researchers found higher levels of self-centrality as well as self-enhancement (higher self-esteem, better than average judgments, and communal narcissism) among those who had just completed a yoga class compared to those who hadn’t engaged in any yoga class in the past 24 hours. They also found suggestive evidence that the augmented self-enhancement of the yoga practice played a key role in the well-being benefits of yoga through increases in self-esteem. This finding hinted at the idea that the well-being benefits of this spiritual practice may actually come through boosting self-esteem, not through ego quieting.

In their second experiment, they followed 162 meditation practitioners for up to four weeks. They repeatedly assessed meditation’s self-centrality and self-enhancement directly after meditation and in the absence of prior meditation. This time, they directly measured well-being, including a comprehensive battery of measures of hedonic well-being (happiness and high life satisfaction) as well as eudaemonic well-being (higher levels of autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life and self-acceptance). Their self-centrality questions included items such as “How central is it for you to be free from envy?”; and their self-enhancement scale included items such as “In comparison to the average participant of this study, I am free from envy.” Again, they included a measure of communal narcissism. The researchers found that, after meditation, self-centrality in meditation-relevant domains was exacerbated, not diminished, and self-enhancement in
meditation-relevant domains was augmented, not curtailed. Additionally, increased levels of self-enhancement explained the effect of meditation on higher well-being (both hedonic and eudaemonic).

It’s important to point out that they sampled Western participants, and the yoga and meditation practices the participants engaged in—which included engagement in hatha yoga and loving-kindness meditation—don’t necessarily generalize to all yoga and meditation programs and practices. Nevertheless, the researchers did find greater self-enhancement in the yoga and meditation conditions even among very advanced mind-body practitioners. These findings suggest that, contrary to the purported benefits of mind-body practices as “quieting the ego” and reducing focus on self, they may actually boost self-centrality and self-enhancement. Furthermore, and intriguingly, it seems as though it is precisely those self-related boosts that contributed to the well-being benefits of the spiritual practices.

**SPIRITUAL SUPERIORITY AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICES**

In a more recent set of studies, Roos Vonk and Anouk Visser conducted an exploration of “spiritual superiority.” They interviewed several psychologists, spiritual trainers and lay people, and asked them to describe people who use spirituality as a self-enhancement tool. They then translated these qualities to six items:

- I am aware of things that others are not aware of.
- I am more in touch with my senses than most others.
- I am more aware of what is between heaven and earth than most people.
- Because of my education and experience, I am observant and see things that others overlook.
- Because of my background and experiences, I am more in touch with my body than other people.
- The world would be a better place if others too had the insights that I have now.

In three studies, they assessed the relationship between their scale of spiritual superiority and other variables. In study 1, they focused on people who engaged in some form of spiritual training. Participants were recruited via mindfulness schools and energetic training centers, which aim to train skills that classify as paranormal, such as reading auras and regressing to previous lives. In studies 2 and 3, participants were recruited via a popular psychology magazine with a broad audience interested in psychological and spiritual development. The comparison was with people without any spiritual training. Overall, the researchers found that the correlation of spiritual superiority with self-esteem was lower among the no-training group than those participating in
any of the spiritual training groups. Their measure of spiritual superiority was related to “spiritual contingency of self-worth,” the degree to which people derive higher self-esteem from their spiritual practices (e.g., “I feel better about myself when I notice I develop myself spiritually”). According to the researchers, this illustrates that the self-enhancement function of spirituality is similar to other contingency domains of self-esteem. Interestingly, their scale of spiritual superiority was more strongly correlated with communal narcissism than self-esteem, providing evidence for the notion of “spiritual narcissism.” Indeed, it’s important to distinguish between healthy self-esteem and narcissism. The problem isn’t with self-esteem but with the pursuit of self-esteem. Healthy self-esteem—comprising a positive evaluation of one’s self-worth and mastery—emerges naturally and organically through the engagement of authentic mastery and positive relationships, rather than by pursuing self-esteem as the goal. Increases in healthy self-esteem as a result of spiritual practices may be a good thing, and are not necessarily indicative of spiritual narcissism, which is why it’s good that the researchers were able to tie their measure of spiritual superiority to a specific form of narcissism: communal narcissism.

The researchers found differences depending on the form of spiritual practice, however. Spiritual superiority scores were consistently higher among those who came from energetic-training centers than the mindfulness trainees. In fact, those who underwent energy training were more likely to claim special knowledge of mindfulness, more so than those who were actually in the mindfulness condition! The energetic healers were also especially likely to score high in “supernatural overconfidence,” scoring high in items such as “When I randomly open a book on a page number that is meaningful to me, this is no coincidence,” “I can send positive energy to others from a distance” and “I can influence the world around me with my thoughts.”

While their study is correlational, it’s likely that there is a bidirectional relationship among these factors. It’s likely that spiritual practices can be used as a tool to bolster the narcissistic self, enhancing one’s feeling that one is special and entitled to special privileges. But it’s also likely that some spiritual training programs attract people with strong personal development goals that are related to Western narcissistic culture. As the researchers note, the idea of exploring one's own personal thoughts and feelings and becoming an “enlightened being” may be particularly attractive to people with high levels of both overt and covert narcissism.

Taken together, the researchers concluded: “Our results illustrate that the self-enhancement motive is powerful and deeply ingrained so that it can hijack methods intended to transcend the ego
and instead, adopt them to its own service.... The road to spiritual enlightenment may yield the exact same mundane distortions that are all too familiar in social psychology, such as self-enhancement, illusory superiority, closed-mindedness, and hedonism (clinging to positive experiences) under the guise of alleged ‘higher’ values.”

**HEALTHY TRANSCENDENCE**

Is there any way around the allure of spiritual narcissism? It’s all well and good that gurus espouse the importance of quieting the ego (often while driving in their Rolls-Royces), but in practice can we ever really override the universal self-centrality principle and transcend spiritual narcissism?

I think we can, but I believe the first step is simply awareness that it’s incredibly difficult to do so. One serious obstacle to healthy transcendence, as I see it, is how spiritual practices are “sold” to the masses. Yoga and mindfulness are big businesses in America. The purported benefits of mindfulness meditation have generated a billion-dollar industry (see here, here and here). Yoga is the most popular mind-body practice in Western societies. Many of these programs offer a long list of promises, including the reduction of stress and anxiety, along with greater confidence, creativity, focus, achievement, success, eating habits, sleep and even happiness.

But here’s the thing: Healthy transcendence doesn’t stem from an attempt at distracting oneself from displeasure with reality. Healthy transcendence involves confronting reality as it truly is, head on, with equanimity and loving kindness. As I put it in *Transcend*, healthy transcendence “is not about leaving any parts of ourselves or anyone else behind or singularly rising above the rest of humanity. Healthy transcendence is not about being outside of the whole, or feeling superior to the whole, but being a harmonious part of the whole of human existence.... Healthy transcendence involves harnessing all that you are in the service of realizing the best version of yourself so you can help raise the bar for the whole of humanity.”

This involves seeing reality as clearly as possible. As Nancy Colier, author of *The Power of Off: The Mindful Way to Stay Sane in a Virtual World*, notes, the point of mindfulness “is to be able to see what is happening inside ourselves, without ownership, judgment or action. And simultaneously, to lose our great belief in and reverence for the productions of our mind.... The dangerous habit is this: The mindful witness itself is becoming yet another form of ego, a new identity, a new somebody that we wear with pride.”

Don’t get me wrong: I genuinely enjoy looking at all the varied and intricate yoga poses on Instagram. But from my reading of the yoga literature, it doesn’t seem as though the theoretical intent of yoga is primarily for physically attractive people to display with pride their ability to twist themselves into a
pretzel. Rather, it seems that the most growth-oriented benefits of mind-body spiritual practices occur when we aren’t using them as a tool for satisfying any of our basic needs—such as our needs for security, belonging and self-esteem. Instead, such practices seem to lead to greater maturity, wisdom, compassion, acceptance and unconditional positive regard toward others when we repeatedly attempt to cultivate the ability to be witness to our mind and behaviors so that we can catch when our crafty ego has hijacked the system in a way that is detrimental to our own self-actualization and self-transcendence.

Which has me thinking: Perhaps it's time for all of these yoga and mindfulness centers to chill on all of the extrinsic purported benefits they are claiming (“Better heath!” “Better sex!” “Amazing concentration!” “Great success at work!”), and just focus on the benefits of such spiritual practices for allowing us to realize that such concerns of the ego are just the ego doing its thing. That awareness, in and of itself, is enough of a benefit to last an enlightened lifetime.