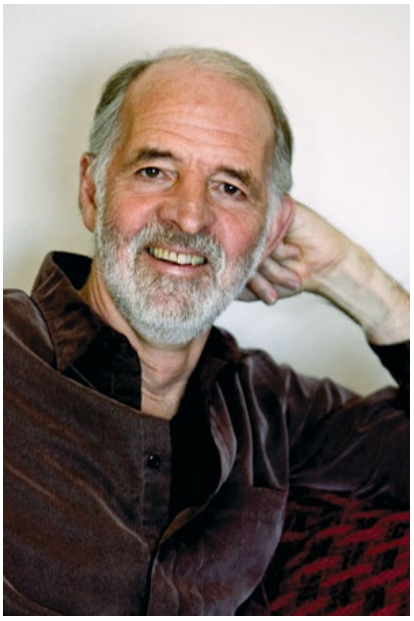
HUMAN NATURE, BUDDHA NATURE:
INTERVIEW WITH JOHN WELWOOD*

Therapist Tina Fossella talks to John Welwood and discusses how his "*"spiritual avoidance"*concept since he published it thirty years ago In the 1980s, John Welwood emerged as a pioneer in exploring the relationship between Western psychotherapy and Buddhist practice.



John Welwood**

He served as the director of the Eastwest Psychology Program at the California Institute for Integral Studies in San Francisco, and was the executive editor of the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology. Welwood has written numerous articles and books on relationships, psychotherapy, consciousness, and personal growth, including the best-selling Journey of the Heart. His idea of "spiritual avoidance" has become a key to what many understand to be the dangers of spiritual practice.

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Tina Fossella: Thirty years ago you coined the term "spiritual avoidance." Could you explain what it is for those who are not familiar with the concept?

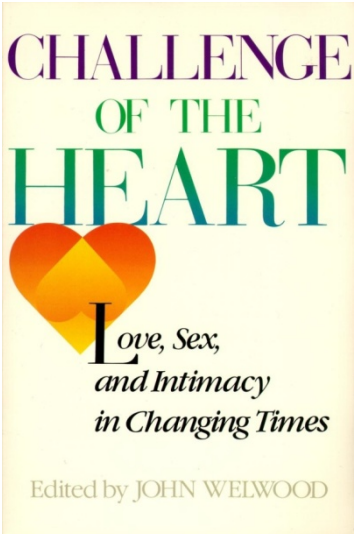
John Welwood:*Spiritual avoidance*is a term I coined to describe processes I observed in the Buddhist community I was in, as well as in myself. While most of us sincerely try to work on ourselves, I have noticed a widespread tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to circumvent or avoid unrecognized emotional problems, psychological wounds, and unresolved developmental stages.

When we are trying to avoid something through spirituality, we start using the goals of enlightenment or awakening to rationalize what I call premature transcendence - attempts to rise above the raw and dirty side of our humanity in advance, before we have fully accepted and come to terms with it. In this case, we tend to use absolute truth to minimize or deny the relative needs, feelings, psychological problems, relationship difficulties, and developmental defects of the person. I see this as a kind of**spiritual path** "production risk", in the sense that through spirituality we actually seek to overcome the vision of the current karmic situation.

TF: What are the risks associated with that?

John: Trying to transcend one's psychological and emotional problems by avoiding the danger of encountering them. This creates a debilitating gap between the Buddha and the human within us. It also leads to a conceptual, one-sided understanding of spirituality, in which one level of life is exalted at the expense of its opposite: absolute truth is exalted over relative truth, impersonality over personality, emptiness over form, transcendence over embodiment, and alienation over sensuality. For example, one may try to practice non-attachment by denying the need for love, but this leads to this need being pushed aside, and therefore often unconsciously and impulsively replaced in a secret and harmful way.

TF: Can this explain the problems we are seeing in our spiritual communities?



John: Exactly. It is easy to use the truth of emptiness unilaterally: "Thoughts and feelings are emptiness, a mere play of samsaric visions, so there is no point in paying attention to them. Accept their nature as emptiness and just overcome them at once." In the course of practice, this can be valuable advice. However, in life situations, the same words can be used to suppress feelings and concerns that need our attention. I have observed such situations many times.

TF: What interests you most in spiritual evasion today?

John:I wonder what role this plays in relationships, where spiritual avoidance is particularly damaging. If you were a cave yogi, immersed in retreats for years, your psychological wounds might not be as painful, and you could focus your practice in an environment that doesn't exacerbate your relationship wounds. It is in relationships that unresolved psychological issues manifest themselves most intensely. This is because psychological wounds lie precisely in relationships: they are formed in and through relationships with primary caregivers.

The main human wound prevalent in today's world is shaped around the feeling that we are unloved or not loved to the level we deserve. **Inadequate love or cohabitation shocks and traumatizes a child's development and their highly sensitive nervous system.**And when we internalize how we were raised, our ability to value ourselves, which also becomes the basis for judging others, is compromised. I call it**""relationship wound"**or**""heart wound"**.

TF: Yes, that's something we all know.

John: There is a wealth of research and scientific evidence in Western psychology that demonstrates the critical impact of bonding and loving attunement, known as “secure attachment,” on every aspect of human development. Secure attachment has an incredible impact on many aspects of our lives, well-being, and ability to function effectively in the world: how our brains form, how our endocrine and immune systems function, how we interact with our emotions, how we overcome depression, how our nervous system functions and adapts to stress, and how we interact with others.

Unlike traditional Asian indigenous cultures, modern parenting has left most people suffering from insecure attachment symptoms: self-pity, physical closeness, lack of "grounding," chronic self-doubt and anxiety, a hyper-reactive mind, a lack of solid trust, and a deep sense of inner deficit. As a result, most of us suffer from an extreme degree of detachment and alienation that was not typical of previous eras - from society, community, family, older generations, nature, religion, tradition, our bodies, our feelings, and our humanity as such.

TF: And what does this mean for how we practice dharma?

John: Many of us, myself included, initially turn to the dharma, at least in part, as a way to try to overcome our psychological and relationship-related wounds. But we often deny or remain unaware of the nature and depth of those wounds. We just know that something is wrong, and we want to be free from suffering.

TF: Can we approach dharma (spirit – my clarification) from a space of vulnerability that you don't even suspect?

John: Yes. We turn to the dharma to feel better, but then we unconsciously start using spiritual practice to change our psychological needs.

TF: So how do our psychological wounds affect spiritual practice?

John: Spiritual practice can become what I call**compensatory identity**, which encompasses and protects against a systemically unhealthy (or flawed) identity in which we feel dissatisfied with ourselves, feel inadequate, or lacking in something. Then, even though we may practice diligently, our spiritual practice is used for purposes of denial and defense. And when spiritual practice is used to avoid problematic areas of our real human lives, it is separated from our lives, remains unintegrated into our overall existence.

TF: Can you give more examples of how this manifests itself in Western practice?

John: In my psychotherapy practice, I often work with dharma students who have been practicing spiritually for many decades. I notice how beneficial this practice is for them. And yet, despite the sincerity of their practice, what they practice unfortunately does not permeate their lives. They seek psychological help because their wounds are not healing and they have not resolved any emotional/interpersonal/intrapersonal relationships - they can act out their wounds in quite destructive ways.

They often make eloquent statements about the fundamental goodness and inherent perfection of our true nature, but they are difficult to trust because psychological wounds still hurt. Often, dharma students who have developed kindness and compassion for others are cruel to themselves for not living up to their spiritual ideals, which makes their spiritual practice dry and lifeless. Their service to others becomes a kind of duty or a way to improve their self-esteem. Others may unconsciously use their spiritual insight to feed their own narcissistic inflation, devalue others, or use them for manipulative purposes.

People prone to depression, perhaps raised with a lack of love in childhood, which makes it difficult to value themselves, may use teachings about the lack of material things in themselves to reinforce a sense of deflation. They not only feel worse about themselves, but they also believe that their vulnerability in this regard is another mistake - a kind of self-fixation, the antithesis of dharma, which further intensifies their shame or guilt. In this way, they get stuck in a painful struggle with themselves, and try to deconstruct themselves.

The Sangha often becomes an amphitheater where people act out their unresolved family issues. It is easy to project something onto mentors or teachers, to perceive them as parental figures, and then to want to win their love or rebel against them. It is quite common to transfer sibling rivalry into relationships within the community, as well as competition with other members of the community over who is the teacher's favorite.

Meditation is also often used to avoid discomfort and unresolved life situations. Those who deny their personal feelings and wounds may use meditation to reinforce a tendency towards coldness, detachment on an interpersonal level. They become confused when it comes to directly showing their feelings or expressing their personality transparently. The need to overcome their vulnerability, emotional dependence, or basic need for love may be perceived as something threatening.

I have often seen people try to demonstrate detachment in order to distance themselves from their human and emotional vulnerability. In fact, identifying with the image of a spiritual practitioner encourages them to avoid personal contact with others who might revive old wounds and longings for love. It is painful to watch some people adopt a stance of alienation while deep down they remain hungry for the experience of attachment and connection they desire.

TF: So how might we reconcile the ideal of non-attachment with the human need for attachment?

John: That's a good question. If Buddhism wants to fully adapt to the Western psyche, I think it needs to learn more about the dynamics of the Western psyche; to understand their psyche, which is very different from the Asian psyche. We need a broader perspective that can recognize and embrace two different paths of human development - what we might call growth and awakening, healing and liberation, becoming a truly human person, and generally transcending the person. We are not just humans striving to become Buddhas, but Buddhas who have awakened in human form, learning to become truly human. And these two paths of development can enrich each other.

While the fruit of dharma practice is awakening, the aspiration of a fully developed person is the ability to engage in an "I-thou" relationship with others. This means that**you need to risk being completely open and transparent to others**, while being able to appreciate and be interested in what the other person is going through and how they are different from you. The ability to express yourself openly and deeply is quite rare in this world. It is especially difficult to show it if you have wounds in the sphere of relationships.

In short, dharma is too often used as an excuse to deny one's own humanity. Here's what a Western Zen teacher interviewed by The New York Times advised one of his mentors:**"What you have to do is to reject all human feelings."**When he went through psychotherapy decades later, he realized that this was wicked advice, and it took him decades to figure it out.

But if you maintain a perspective that includes two paths of development, then we will not use absolute truth to devalue relative truth. Instead of the logic of "either/or": "Your feelings are empty, so just reject them." It is better to take an "and/or" approach: Although feelings are empty, sometimes you need to be attentive to them too. In the light of absolute truth, personal needs are insignificant, like a mirage, and fixation on them leads to suffering. Yes, and at the same time, if a relative need arises, simply rejecting them can lead to additional problems. From the perspective of relative truth, a clear understanding of where you are and what you lack is one of the most important principles of healthy interpersonal communication.

The great paradox of being both human and Buddha is that you are both dependent and independent. Part of us is completely dependent on other people for everything from food and clothing to love, connection, inspiration, and help in our development. While our Buddha nature is independent—an absolute truth—our human incarnation is dependent on relative truth.

Of course, in the deepest sense, absoluteness and relativity are completely intertwined and cannot be separated: the more deeply we realize the absolute openness of who we are, the more deeply we recognize our relational connection to all beings.

TF: So we can be both attached and unattached at the same time?

John: That is true. Non-attachment is the teaching of your absolute nature. Buddha nature is completely and inherently non-attached. Attachment in the Buddhist sense has the negative connotation of “clinging.” When we are free and open, our Buddha nature does not require attachment.

And yet, in order to become**healthy person**, we need a secure basis of attachment, both in the psychological and literal sense of the term: close emotional connections with other people are necessary for coexistence, rootedness in this reality, and well-being. /.../

That is why it is natural to feel deep sorrow when we lose someone close to us. When Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche attended the funeral service for his close friend and colleague Suzuki Roshi, he could not control his deep sobs and burst into tears. He acknowledged his close relationship with Suzuki Roshi, and it was remarkable that he allowed his feelings to express themselves in this way.

Since it is impossible to completely avoid attachment to others, the question arises: "Are we connected in a healthy or unhealthy way?" People who grow up with a secure attachment show greater trust - they are less likely to cling to others. Perhaps we could call this "independent attachment."

I am afraid that many Western Buddhists practice attachment avoidance techniques. But attachment avoidance is not freedom from attachment. It is the perception that the human need for love is negative - it stems from a disbelief that love can serve as a secure support.

TF: So attachment avoidance is another form of attachment.

John: Yes. In the field of developmental psychology known as "attachment theory," one form of insecure attachment is called "avoidant attachment." The avoidant attachment style develops in children whose parents have been consistently emotionally unavailable. As a result, such children learn to take care of themselves and not demand anything from others. This is their adaptive strategy, which is reasonable and useful. Obviously, if your needs are not being met, it is too painful to feel them. It is better to turn away from them and "do everything yourself" - to develop an alienated compensatory identity.

TF: So we see a tendency to use Buddhist ideas to justify the denial of the natural desire for connection and attachment?

John: Yes. Many of us who are drawn to Buddhism are attachment-avoidant types. When we are introduced to the doctrine of non-attachment, we think, "Oh, that sounds familiar. I feel comfortable enough with this teaching." In this way, the faithful dharma begins to serve as a defensive bulwark.

But I want to be very clear that I am not trying to pathologize anything. All of this needs to be accepted with sincerity and compassion. This is one way we can overcome the wounds of the heart. Not wanting to communicate with people allows us to survive and cope with emotional emptiness. However, later, as we mature, a person who avoids attachment will have difficulty forming deep relationships with others, which can lead to deep isolation and a sense of alienation - this is a painful state.

TF: What is happening in the sangha community where most people avoid the attachment style in relationships?

John: Relationship Avoiderstypes tend to deny other people's needs because they deny their own needs as well.

TF: And what happens then?

John: Sometimes people feel justified in disregarding each other's feelings and needs. It's no wonder that "need" has become a dirty word in many spiritual communities.

TF: And what happens then?

John: Sometimes people justify disrespecting each other's feelings and needs. The word "need" becomes a dirty word in many spiritual communities.

TF: And people feel constrained when it comes to expressing what they want.

John: Yes. You don't say what you want because you don't want to be judged as poor. You try not to get attached. But it's like an unripe fruit trying to break off the branch too early and fall to the ground, instead of gradually maturing to the stage where you can naturally let go of the branch. /.../ Our dharmic wisdom and compassionate practices really help to ripen it.

TF: Becoming a full-fledged human being. Is that what you mean by "maturing"?

John: Yes, becoming a real person, honestly dealing with emotional, psychological, and interpersonal relationships, allows us to grow fully in our humanity. Being a real person means communicating openly and transparently with ourselves and others.

If there is a big gap between our practice and our humanity, we are not yet mature. **Our practices may bear fruit, but not life.**And there is a certain point at which this gap becomes very painful.

TF: In other words, you are saying that spiritual avoidance not only corrupts Dharma practice, but also blocks our personal growth?

John: Yes. One way that blocks growth is by turning spiritual teachings into prescriptions: what*need*to do as*need*to think about how to speak, how *need*feel. Then our spiritual practice captures what I call**""spiritual superego" -**A voice that whispers in our ear, "I need to." This is a major obstacle to growth because it magnifies our shortcomings.

The Hindu teacher Swami Prajnyanpad, whose writings I admire, said that**""idealism is an act of violence"**. Trying to live up to an ideal rather than being authentically where you are can become a form of internal violence, tearing you in two and pitting one part of you against another. If we use spiritual practice to "become good" and deny our deep-seated feelings of lack and inferiority, we become like the "crusaders."

TF: So denying your feelings can have dangerous consequences.

John: Yes. And if the ethos of a spiritual organization leads to a denial of your feelings or needs in a relationship, that can lead to major communication problems, to put it mildly. It's also not a good solution for a marriage if one or both partners are in denial of emotional needs. So it's no surprise that Buddhist organizations and married life are often just as dysfunctional in interpersonal relationships as non-Buddhist organizations. Marshall Rosenberg teaches that honest and open expression and listening to the other person's feelings and needs form the basis for nonviolent resolution of interpersonal conflicts, and I completely agree with him.

From my perspective as an existential psychologist,**feeling is a form of intelligence, of reason**. It is a direct, holistic, intuitive way of the body to learn and respond. Very harmonious and intelligent. It accommodates many factors, while our conceptual mind can only process one thing at a time. Unlike emotionality, which is outwardly directed reactivity, feeling often helps us connect with deep inner truths. Unfortunately, traditional Buddhism does not distinguish between feelings and emotions more clearly, so there is a tendency to confuse them as something samsaric and something to be overcome.

TF: In a way, there is a tendency to underestimate the need to take feelings seriously, for example, when we avoid exploring what is going on inside us when we are hurt by our partners.

John: Yes. The truth is, for most of us, nothing is as fulfilling as a romantic relationship. So if we resort to spiritual avoidance, trying to avoid confronting the wounds of those relationships, we are missing out on a special area of practice. Practicing relationships helps us develop compassion in the “trenches” where our wounds are most deeply felt.

In addition to compassion, we must develop a sense of feeling for the other: the ability to see and experience what another person is experiencing - what we might call "true empathy." Coexistence is the essential basis of "I-Thou" relationships, but this is only possible if we first learn to live with ourselves and trace what we are experiencing.

TF: What tools or techniques have you found to be most effective in working with difficult feelings and relationship issues?

John:I have created a process that I call**"unconditional presence",**which involves connecting, allowing, discovering, and even returning to what we experience. This process grew out of my Vajrayana and Dzogchen practice, as well as my psychological training. It led me to the assumption that everything we experience, even the worst samsaric phenomena, has its own wisdom. If we fully and directly confront our experience, we can discover this wisdom and separate it from the distorted forms of its manifestation.

For example, if we delve deeper into the experience of ego inflating, we can find a more authentic essence of it,
– that it is the wounded person's intention to declare their goodness, to remind us and affirm that we are fundamentally good people. In the same way, in the darkest depths of all human beings there is a seed of wisdom that, when revealed, can lead to liberation.

TF: Can you elaborate on your psychological approach?

John:I help people explore their deepest experiences and allow them to unfold step by step. /.../ I have found that when people engage in both psychological and meditative practices, they complement each other in a mutually beneficial, synergistic way. Together, they discover a journey that leads to healing and awakening. /.../

TF: So, it's all about compassion.

John: Yes. The word "com-passion" literally means "feeling with". It is impossible to feel compassion if you are not ready to feel it yourself. It opens up a certain nakedness and tenderness, what Trungpa Rinpoche called "the place of softness", which is*bodhichitta*seed.

TF: It's vulnerable.

John: Yes. This is a sign that you are getting closer to*bodhichitta*. This nakedness also has a restraining effect. Even after decades of spiritual practice, we can still find these big, raw, shameful feelings within ourselves, perhaps in a reservoir of deep sadness or helplessness. But if we are able to acknowledge these feelings and be open about them,

to reveal themselves to them, we move forward in the direction of greater openness, so that it may be embodied in our humanity. /.../

TF: It gives you a certain freedom.

John: Yes, relative freedom: "I want to feel everything I feel. I am ready to experience everything I experience." Sometimes I call this "applied presence," the presence that we have discovered through meditation, our sensory experience.

TF: In our practice, after meditation.

John: Exactly. It helps us bring the perception of emptiness into our lives as complete openness. In the case of spiritual avoidance, emptiness is not integrated into our sense of life. This can turn into a personal “dryness” in which we can no longer truly feel like ourselves.

TF: What could help our sangha communities develop in more emotionally honest ways?

John: We must work on relationships. Otherwise, the wounds we receive in relationships will be unconsciously projected onto the sangha. We must recognize that everything we react to in others is a reflection of what we do not face or recognize in ourselves. These unconscious projections and reactions are always impulsively played out in the external space of groups.

For example, if I fail to take responsibility for my own needs, I tend to deny other people's needs and view them as a threat, because the fact that they need to be met subconsciously reminds me of my own rejected needs. And I will condemn others, use some kind of "dharma logic" to show them injustice or elevate myself above them.

TF: So people have to do their own personal work?

John: Along with my spiritual practice. Unfortunately, it is not easy to find psychotherapists who work with body-centered experiences rather than conceptual interpretations. Perhaps in Western Dharma communities we need to develop some simple ways to help people work through their personal material.

TF: How can we become more conscious in our sangha?

John: It is important to acknowledge that spiritual communities are subject to the same dynamics as other groups. The sobering truth is that spiritual practice often does not heal deep wounds in romantic relationships, nor does it translate into skillful communication or interpersonal coexistence.

I believe that relationships are the most advanced point in human evolution in the current historical period. Although humanity discovered enlightenment thousands of years ago, we still have not fully illuminated the field of interpersonal relationships. The manifestations of group dynamics are quite complex, as they inevitably affect the reactivity and wounds experienced by people. By honestly recognizing this, we can contribute to overcoming the difficulties of communication in the sangha.

TF: How could we work with that?

John: Realizing that we inevitably project our unconscious experiences onto other members of the group can be a good place to start. We also need to learn to talk to each other personally and honestly, based on our current experiences, rather than repeating teachings about what we think we should experience. And it takes what Thich Nhat Hanh calls**""deep listening"**, based on the ability to hear one's own experiences. Listening is a sacred activity, a kind of humility, acceptance, and letting in. We must recognize it as part of our spiritual work.

TF: Thich Nhat Hanh said that to love is to listen.

John: That's right. We also need to develop extraordinary tolerance and acceptance of different styles of dharma embodiment. Otherwise, if we establish the attitude that **"one way fits all"**(dharma), we will be condemned to endless competition of "I am holier than you" and "who will surpass whom".

While we all respect the dharma, each of us has a different way of embodying and expressing it. As Swami Prajnanpada said, "All are different, none are separate." So, let there be differences, that's great. Celebrating individual differences will go a long way in reducing strife in the sangha.

TF: The last question about attachment in relationships is this: to be truly non-attached, do you first have to be attached?

John. The Dzogchen master Chagdud Tulku /.../ made a startling statement about the relationship between attachment and non-attachment. He said: "People often ask me whether lamas have attachments. I don't know how other lamas would answer this question, but I have to answer in the affirmative. I admit that my disciples, my family, my country have no original reality... [Here he is stating an absolute truth.] And yet I remain deeply attached to them. [Here he is stating a relative truth.] I admit that my attachment has no original reality. [Absolute truth.] And yet I cannot deny my experience of this attachment. [Relative truth.]"

And he concludes with this statement: "In any case, knowing the despicable nature of attachment, I know that my motivation to serve the good of sentient beings must transcend this knowledge."

I think this is a great formulation of the "and/or" of selfless attachment and attitude. It combines absolute and relative truths, spreading them into the widest possible context. Everything is included.

This is what is sometimes missing in Dharma communities: acknowledging and accepting one's humanity while also striving to transcend oneself. Combining these two aspects can be very fruitful.

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* The original interview with John Welvood in English was published in the magazine "Tricycle" in the spring of 2011. I translated from the Russian with the magazine's*Eros and Cosmos*" Slightly abridged by permission

Here is the Author's website.https://www.johnwelwood.com/