Recognising Pseudo Spirituality: Certainty, Purity and the Guru Trap

What Pseudo Spirituality Looks Like in Practice

Spiritual communities offer something rare: a space where people feel seen, where inner experience matters, and where belonging is real. Yet the same warmth that draws people in can also mask patterns that undermine the very growth these spaces promise. Pseudo spirituality - the use of spiritual language and authority to avoid genuine accountability - shows up in predictable ways. Once you know what to look for, you can spot it before it takes hold.

The Allure of Certainty

One of the first signs is a tone of absolute certainty. A teacher, facilitator or group leader speaks as if they have access to a truth that others simply cannot grasp. Statements come without qualification: "this is how energy works", "the universe responds this way", "you attract what you are". There is no room for doubt, no acknowledgment that spiritual insight is often partial and shaped by personal bias. Certainty feels reassuring, especially when you are navigating confusion or pain. But in a healthy setting, wisdom comes with epistemic humility - the recognition that knowledge is limited and that other perspectives may hold value. When certainty replaces curiosity, the ground is laid for guru dynamics to grow.

Purity Claims as a Control Mechanism

Purity culture within spiritual circles operates similarly. The group draws a sharp line between those who are "awake" or "conscious" and those who are not. Practices, diets, or beliefs are presented as the only path to genuine transformation. Anyone who questions them is seen as resistant or spiritually immature. This binary thinking - pure versus impure, enlightened versus unenlightened - creates an in-group that polices itself through shame. Members learn to suppress doubt and conform to the group's language, even when something feels off. Purity claims are not about growth; they are about control.



Extraordinary Claims and the Burden of Proof

Another hallmark is the presence of extraordinary claims made without evidence. A leader might describe miraculous healings, past-life revelations, or direct communication with higher beings. These stories can be moving and even transformative for those who witness them. But in pseudo spirituality, such claims are used to elevate the speaker's status and discourage questioning. Asking for evidence becomes a sign of low spiritual development. Critical thinking is framed as a block to transcendence. In reality, genuine spiritual traditions have always made room for inquiry. The demand for blind faith is a red flag.

Guru Dynamics and Informal Power

Guru dynamics emerge when one person holds disproportionate influence over a group's emotional and spiritual life. This does not always look like a traditional guru with robes and a following. It can happen in a local workshop, a weekly circle, or an online community. The leader becomes the sole interpreter of spiritual truth, and members gradually lose touch with their own judgment. Decisions about relationships, health, and life direction start to run through the leader. This informal power is rarely named or discussed openly, which makes it harder to resist. The group may develop a ritual language - phrases and concepts that only insiders fully understand - which reinforces the boundary between those who belong and those who do not.

Spiritual bypassing often accompanies this dynamic. Difficult emotions like anger, grief, or jealousy are dismissed as lower vibrations or ego attachments. Members are encouraged to

stay positive, forgive quickly, and transcend conflict rather than work through it. This sounds noble but it prevents real healing. Accountability becomes impossible because there is no room for disagreement. When someone raises a concern, they are told they are not ready for the work. Over time, the group's focus shifts from personal sovereignty to loyalty to the leader and the community's image.



Within the context of embodied practices, these patterns can be especially hard to spot because the body itself becomes a source of authority. A facilitator might say they can feel your energy or read your trauma through your movement. The experience can feel profound, but it also places the facilitator in a position of unearned knowledge about your inner life. In spaces like Ecstatic Dance UK, where vulnerability and openness are part of the practice, the line between genuine support and subtle control can blur. That is why understanding these dynamics matters not just for personal safety but for the health of the community as a whole.

How to Protect Your Personal Sovereignty

The antidote to pseudo spirituality is not cynicism but discernment. Here are a few practical ways to stay grounded:

- **Notice how questions are received.** If asking a simple question about a practice or claim leads to deflection, shame, or a status-based answer, pay attention. Healthy

teachers welcome thoughtful inquiry.

- **Watch for language that divides.** Phrases like "you are not ready", "your vibration is too low", or "only those who truly understand" are markers of gatekeeping. Real spiritual work includes everyone at their own pace.
- **Trust your body's signals.** If a situation leaves you feeling smaller, more anxious, or more confused than when you arrived, that is data. Your nervous system often registers discomfort before your mind can name it.
- **Maintain outside connections.** Groups that discourage contact with friends, family, or other communities are isolating you. A healthy practice enriches your life; it does not replace it.
- **Check for accountability structures.** Does the group have clear policies about conduct, complaints, and boundaries? If not, informal power has no check. This is especially important in spaces where touch or emotional disclosure is involved.

What This Means for Community Governance

Recognising these patterns is not about blaming individuals or dismissing the value of spiritual communities. Many people find genuine connection and healing in spaces that also contain some of these dynamics. The point is that communities function better when they name and address the risks of informal power. Clear governance - transparent decision-making, accessible feedback channels, and a willingness to examine the group's own culture - protects everyone, including the leaders. It also preserves the integrity of the practice itself.



For anyone involved in a spiritual or embodied practice, from yoga studios to ecstatic dance gatherings, the most important skill may be the ability to hold two things at once: deep openness to experience and a clear-eyed awareness of how power operates. Pseudo spirituality thrives when people give away their authority in exchange for certainty. Real spiritual growth, by contrast, asks you to stay awake - not just to the transcendent, but to the ordinary dynamics of trust, doubt, and accountability. That is the harder path, and it is also the one worth walking.