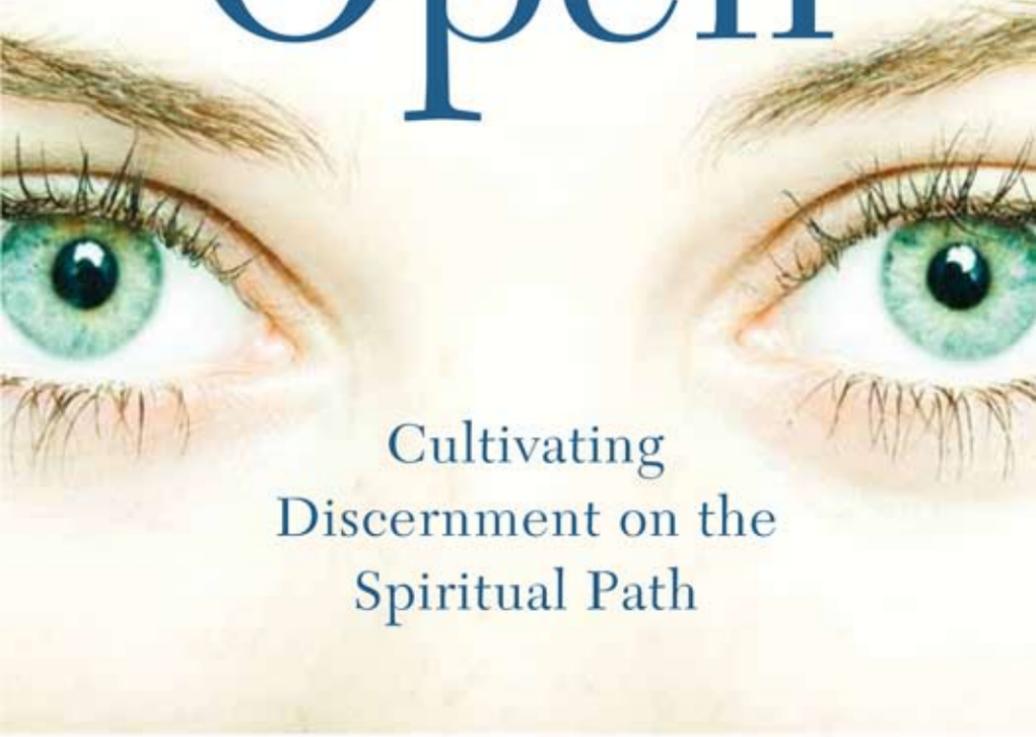


Mariana Caplan, PhD

Eyes Wide Open



Cultivating
Discernment on the
Spiritual Path

FOREWORD BY JOHN WELWOOD

Introduction

Eyes Wide Open—The Path of Discernment

Everything we shut our eyes to, everything we run away from, everything we deny, denigrate, or despise, serves to defeat us in the end. What seems nasty, painful, evil, can become a source of beauty, joy, and strength, if faced with an open mind.

—HENRY MILLER, *Tropic of Capricorn*

I was nineteen years old and in my sophomore year of college in Ann Arbor, Michigan, when I finally learned there was such a thing as a spiritual path. Like so many young people who long for something greater, I had searched for years through whatever means were available to me—from alcohol to political activism to travel. I had begun my travels when I was fifteen, and by the time I hit college I had traveled through much of Central America and Europe, yet my thirst was not quenched—it had only increased. I was not finding the deep answers I was looking for.

The summer before my nineteenth birthday, while traveling in Central America, I met a man who had been traveling the world for twenty years—something I had dreamed of doing—and I was curious to know if he had found the answers he sought. At the end of several long days of conversation, I asked him, “Why do you travel?”

“To find freedom,” he told me.

“Have you found it?” I persisted. “Does the freedom to go wherever you want and do whatever you want make you free?”

“Not really,” he confessed.

When I returned to college I discovered what was then Ann Arbor’s only spiritual bookstore. I clearly remember the first time I walked into the shop. My eyes darted quickly from shelf to shelf. I was dazzled and astonished by the subjects of the books: meditation, psychology, Tibetan Buddhism, Zen, Sufism, mature mysticism, shamanism, self-help, metaphysics, and more. I understood for the first time that there was a spiritual path; in fact, there were many of them. And I understood I was not alone. People throughout the world thirsted for something greater, and there were many well-trodden paths that one could follow. I was home . . . or was I?

On the one hand, I did feel I’d come home. On the other hand, I had no idea where to begin. There were hundreds of paths and thousands of books before me—how was a human being to begin this journey? Once embarked, how could one proceed with intelligence and clarity? How could I discern between this seemingly endless array of choices, how could I know what was right for me, and how could I know if I was fooling myself?

As I was to learn over the next twenty years, these questions do not necessarily get any easier to answer. Instead, they ripen into increasing degrees of subtlety. As my commitment to the spiritual path deepened, it became increasingly critical that I learn to see clearly, with my eyes wide open, so I could move through the journey of life with passion, creativity, and meaning—in a way that makes a difference. Spiritual discernment, called *viveka khyātir* in Sanskrit, is said to be the “crowning wisdom” on the spiritual path.

The *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali* say that the cultivation of discernment is so powerful that it has the capacity to destroy ignorance and address the very source of suffering. According to *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, to discern is “to recognize or identify as separate and distinct.” Discrimination, its synonym, “stresses the power to distinguish and select what is true or appropriate or excellent.” Those who possess spiritual discernment have learned this skill in relationship to spiritual matters, and they can consistently make intelligent, balanced, and excellent choices in their lives and in relationship to their spiritual development. Their eyes are wide open, and they see clearly.

Viveka khyātir is believed to be such a powerful tool that it has the capacity to pierce all levels of the physical, psychological, energetic, and subtle bodies of the human being. In *Light on the Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, B. K. S. Iyengar explains that through this unbroken flow of discriminating awareness, the spiritual practitioner:

conquers his body, controls his energy, retrains the movements of the mind, and develops sound judgment, from which he acts rightly and becomes luminous. From this luminosity he develops total awareness of the very core of his being, achieves supreme knowledge, and surrenders his self to the Supreme Soul.¹

This book is an attempt to go deep into the labyrinth of the spiritual path, to consider the possibility of a truly integrated, embodied, psychospiritual transformation. Together, we will explore how to meet the inevitable roadblocks we will encounter on the spiritual path, so we might live bold, intelligent, radiant lives of spiritual transformation. We will learn how investigating and evaluating different practices, paths,

and teachers can help us make intelligent spiritual choices. And we will learn to distinguish between truth and falsity, between passion that binds us and passion that frees us.

When we were young children beginning to become curious about the big questions of life—such as death, how we got here, and the challenge of human emotion—few of us had a parent who sat us down and lovingly said, in essence:

You have come into a great mystery of immense joys and vast sorrows. You yourself are an expression of that great mystery. There are so many ways in which people learn to understand themselves and life, but what is most important is that you grow up and learn how to make your own choices—and that you make bright and radiant choices that will fulfill you and contribute to the world. I want to help you learn to make wise decisions in your life, particularly with respect to your spiritual journey. When you are old enough, I will introduce you to different spiritual and religious paths and practices. Meanwhile, while you are young, I will help you learn to navigate the emotional challenges that come with being human.

Most of us never received such a wise and mature introduction to the immense challenges, privileges, and possibilities of the life we entered into. The adults in our lives didn't teach us how to make wise spiritual choices because, with rare exceptions, they didn't know how to do it themselves. Our schools didn't teach us how to manage our emotions because most teachers didn't know how to manage their own. In high school, there was no class offered that taught us how to understand our spiritual choices because there was no collective acknowledgement or appreciation of the value of educating the soul and spirit. If we have been fortunate enough to learn these

things, we have either learned them on our own or have had the rare fortune to be guided by wise and mature elders.

Developing discernment doesn't prevent us from making mistakes, but it does help us learn life's lessons more clearly and quickly, turn challenges into opportunities, and avoid unnecessary obstacles. Discernment teaches us to live well, and when we die, we can do so feeling *I have lived a good life. I have gained as much self-awareness as I was capable of, and I have fulfilled a purpose on earth.* We can know that our lives have not been in vain, that we have touched—and have been profoundly touched by—life.



One of my mentors, the sociologist and bestselling author Joseph Chilton Pearce, says that when he wants to learn about a subject, he writes a book on it. He then waits to get his readers' feedback about his mistaken viewpoints, as well as the personal stories the book elicits. In 1999, I published my fourth book, *Halfway Up the Mountain: The Error of Premature Claims to Enlightenment*. Frankly, I was surprised by the widespread positive response to the book. I could not have imagined that people would be willing and eager to read more than five hundred pages of information about how we deceive ourselves and are deceived in the name of spiritual life. My next book, published in 2002, was titled *Do You Need a Guru? Understanding the Student-Teacher Relationship in an Era of False Prophets*, and it directly addressed the intricate challenges and complexities of the student-teacher relationship in contemporary Western culture.

Since these two books were published, I have met and received letters from hundreds of individuals who have dedicated their lives to the spiritual path. They have inevitably

encountered self-deception and disillusionment—whether with themselves and their own tendencies toward egoic confusion, or with their spiritual teachers and communities. Opening my e-mail inbox, I routinely encounter moving stories of human beings who long for happiness, meaning, fulfillment, and truth, and who are boldly willing to face the obstacles to that truth no matter how much it hurts. They are warriors of the spirit—fellow travelers on the spiritual path who are committed to creating a better world and using their lives as an opportunity to understand themselves in endlessly deepening ways. No matter what they have been through, they have not given up their optimism or their desire to grow spiritually. They see that disillusionment itself has awakened them to deeper levels of truth, and they have learned that discernment is a necessary skill to cultivate on the spiritual path.

Since I wrote those two books, some of my perceptions have changed, and others have not. What has not changed is my perception of the pervasive self-delusion, confusion, superficiality, and materialism that permeate much of contemporary Western spirituality, especially the New Age variety. I have allowed my heart to be broken many times over by the hundreds of stories of disillusionment and betrayal I have heard: stories about betrayal by a teacher, about spiritual scandal, and about people discovering the depth of their own psychological wounding and the ways in which they have hurt others through their own spiritual confusion. I have also watched my own life unfold, and I continue to discover ever subtler layers of blindness that obscure clarity in many important aspects of my life. I have seen that, in the name of spirituality, I continue to deceive myself at increasingly refined levels. I see this tendency in myself as well as in the lives of spiritual teachers, psychotherapists, seekers, and practitioners. Life on the spiritual path in no way exempts us from human

error, and it ideally teaches us to be more accountable for our confusion and mistakes.

The defining distinction between this book and the previous two is that in this one the finger is pointed not outward, but wholly toward ourselves. This book is not about gurus and spiritual teachers, it's about you and me—though “you and me” includes those very same gurus and spiritual teachers, because absolutely no one is exempt from the pitfalls and trappings that are part and parcel of the spiritual journey. This book is about taking full responsibility for the whole of our lives, including our intrinsic radiance and our greatest spiritual potential—as well as our confusion and undeveloped knowledge.

Self-deception unfolds with increasing subtlety as we move from our false selves toward the more authentic, truer aspects of our experience. The slipperiness of the spiritual path cannot be underestimated; its pitfalls are as numerous as the steps that can be taken, and all of us fall into them. Still, the more we know about the road, the more able we are to avoid its potholes.

The Italian psychiatrist and founder of psychosynthesis, Roberto Assagioli, suggests that a complete psychotherapy would not only treat psychopathology but also foster spiritual awakening, and then deal intelligently with the difficulties and new levels of challenge that such an awakening brings. As we unearth new levels of our consciousness, we inevitably also uncover that which is unwhole and unhealed within us at personal, familial, cultural, and historical levels. This is not a problem to be feared or a wrong to be righted, but a necessary and healthy aspect of spiritual unfolding that must be met with increasingly potent and effective discernment.

Several years ago, I went to visit the Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield. “I have a question for you,” he said. “Are *you* half-way up the mountain?” He was not the first to have posed

this question to me over the years, and my internal response has always been the same: I am so much *less* than halfway up the mountain! It would be wildly presumptuous to claim to be even halfway up, much less to claim any type of “arrival.” I have come to understand that the possibilities of spiritual unfolding are literally endless, and the mountain of spiritual possibility does not have a summit.

I believe that most of us live our lives playing in the foothills of the metaphorical spiritual mountain. Regardless of whether we have been labeled “spiritual teachers,” have had hundreds of spiritual epiphanies, or have been sincere spiritual practitioners for thirty years, we are all still learning to tie our shoelaces and step carefully. Sometimes we get high enough on the “mountain” to have some view, but we also trip and fall continually. The path is infinite, and human integration is an awesome and laborious task. There are a few extraordinary masters and saints—some of whom are mentioned in this book—who have seen and learned to abide in a truly great vision. But the rest of us are left with the humble task of deep and lifelong self-study and the creation of spiritual alliances so that together we can learn how to walk this path with diligence and passion.



For a human being who hungers for truth, what is most beautiful is that which is most truthful. If the road to truth means having to learn what is untrue and to face unconsciousness and obstacles within ourselves, the lover of truth gladly accepts this challenge. Each time we expose and face that which is untrue, we are that much closer to what is true.

This book is intended to support seekers and serious spiritual practitioners from all traditions. Through my personal and professional research I have had the privilege of meeting and

spending extended periods of time with many individuals whom I consider to be the world's greatest spiritual teachers, psychologists, yogis, healers, and religious leaders. Many of the quotes you will read here are from personal interviews and conversations with these individuals. The teachings included in this book come from research, experiments, and experiences with many different spiritual traditions and paths, including Sufism, yogic traditions, Tantric Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Taoism, Fourth Way traditions, Shamanism, and the Diamond Approach, as well as the Western Baul tradition under the guidance of my teacher, Lee Lozowick. I have also immersed myself deeply in Western psychological traditions—both traditional approaches and cutting-edge body-centered psychotherapies. My deep wish is that this book will be relevant to people from all religious and spiritual traditions as well as from many psychological schools, and that the gaps in my knowledge of certain religious traditions will not eclipse the relevance of the basic principles of spiritual discernment considered here.

A book about discernment is one of questions rather than answers. It attempts to address some of the most challenging questions on the spiritual path from a variety of perspectives, so we can learn how to ask the right questions at the right times and to discriminate truth from falsity. We are called to “live the questions,” in the words of poet Rainer Maria Rilke, so that we may “gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”²



“May you be born in interesting times,” says a purported Chinese expression. Whether this is to be interpreted as a blessing or a curse, we have indeed been born into “interesting” times. The planet’s resources are disappearing, and the fate of

the earth itself is in question. There is widespread crime, poverty, and ignorance. Religions are breaking down, and many young people are choosing not to follow their parents' religions. We are born in a time in which there is little or no education about the body, emotions, or spirit. When the renowned Buddhist teacher and peace activist Sister Chân Không came to America for the first time, after having helped countless orphans in the Vietnam War, she exclaimed that nothing she had seen in her years of work with orphans neared the poverty of spirit and spiritual alienation she found in Western culture. Those who have walked the spiritual path in cultures throughout the world over many centuries have not been exempt from scandal, disillusionment, and the very challenges that being human brings to the path, but different cultural conditions and historical eras do bring with them distinct challenges.

According to Sufi sheikh Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, one of the unique characteristics of our era is that “we have forgotten that we have forgotten”: not only have we lost touch with our deeper spiritual nature, but often we do not even know that this is the case. How can we remember who we really are and discern how we need to grow if we do not even know that we have forgotten something?

The psychologist Abraham Maslow wrote, “Certainly it seems more and more clear that what we call ‘normal’ in psychology is really a psychopathology of the average, so undramatic and so widely spread that we don’t even notice it ordinarily.” We are living in confused times when we are so misguided in our values that we do not even realize how imbalanced we have become.

Still another aspect of the “interesting times” we are living in has to do with the mass importation of non-Western techniques into Western culture. The new and important

vistas these spiritual possibilities offer us also bring with them their own set of challenges. Each mystical tradition arises from a particular cultural context that includes family and social structures, language, and relationship to the earth. The Western psyche is markedly different from either the Eastern or indigenous psyche, and not all aspects of a given Eastern or shamanic tradition will be applicable to the Western psyche. In the case of tantra, yoga, and many popular shamanic practices, the greater spiritual context is frequently “lost in translation” during the importation process.

It is important to recognize that most contemporary spiritual traditions simply were not designed to penetrate the cellular, psychological wounding caused by the type of trauma that is so prevalent in Western culture that arises from broken homes, disconnection from our bodies and nature, and alienation from authentic sources of spiritual wisdom. Any attempt to transplant Eastern-based and indigenous spiritual technologies—as transcultural and objective as their wisdom appears to be—must take into consideration the sometimes radically different psychological, cultural, and historical circumstances in which those technologies arose and were appropriate.

Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee says of the interesting times we are living in:

*There is a veil that humanity has created that distorts everything. Even if you look inward, everything is distorted. There is nothing you can do about it. It's like a hall of mirrors. If you say anything, it becomes something else. Human beings have created this veil, and people do spiritual practice in this veil, and they make spiritual paths in it.*³

The presence of veils is not in itself a problem; rather, it is a challenge that needs to be addressed by cultivating discernment and becoming conscious of the complexity and the variables involved in this process. Interesting times require creative solutions. If the veils that obstruct our clarity are many, the cultivation of discernment is that much more important. This book addresses many of the distinct challenges that we as spiritual seekers and practitioners in the Western world face during these interesting times, and it considers the subtle distinctions we must make to navigate the possibilities and potholes of the spiritual path more effectively.



Chapter 1, “What Is Spirituality Anyway?” begins with an overview of the contemporary Western spiritual supermarket and considers basic issues such as why there is such a prevalence of spiritual scandals today and whether enlightenment is really the point of the spiritual path at all. Chapter 2, “Spiritually Transmitted Disease,” catalogs many of the common traps the contemporary spiritual seeker is likely to encounter along his or her journey, while Chapter 3, “The Posture of the Mind,” considers the attitudes we must cultivate in order to travel the spiritual path with discernment.

Chapters 4 and 5, “The Psychology of Ego” and “Spiritual Materialism and Spiritual Bypassing,” offer an inquiry into the relationship between ego, psychology, and karma—and the traps that arise when our development in these areas is uneven, confused, and out of balance.

The following chapters explore the value of discernment as a transformational tool that helps us turn crises, as well as all other aspects of life, into opportunities for spiritual development. Chapter 6, “The Healing Crisis,” reveals how the

journey of descent, which most people who commit themselves to the spiritual path eventually encounter, leads them to the capacity to discern and penetrate broader and deeper aspects and dimensions of their experience. Chapter 7, “The Tantric Principle,” considers how the careful application of discernment can literally turn internal and external poisons into medicine and ordinary experience into the extraordinary. Chapter 8, “Pandora’s Secret: Demystifying the Shadow,” further illustrates how the application of discernment to our shadow selves reveals a radiant possibility for potent and integrated spiritual transformation.

Chapters 9 and 10, “The Body as Bodhi Tree: The Imperative of Embodiment” and “The Union of Psychology and Spirituality,” explore the living integration between psychology and spirituality and how we assimilate and express this integration through the body.

A book on discernment would not be complete without considering its application to the student-teacher relationship, which is one of the most difficult aspects of spiritual life to navigate with clarity. Chapter 11, “The Question of the Teacher,” attempts a balanced view of the unique spiritual benefits of working with a teacher as well as the psychological challenges this relationship presents to both student and teacher. Finally, in Chapter 12, “Om Mani Padme Grow Up!” we close our consideration of discernment by reflecting on what it means to grow up—both psychologically and spiritually—and move toward authentic spiritual maturity.



When I was twenty-two and just beginning to explore topics in spirituality more deeply, I went to a seminar taught by Buddhist teachers and writers Stephen and Ondrea Levine. They were

heroes of mine, dedicating their lives to self-knowledge, consciousness, and service to humanity. Throughout the weekend I drank in with great thirst the wisdom they had clearly earned through intense and uncompromised lives of spiritual practice, ceaseless study and experimentation, and hard-won humility. Toward the end of the weekend, a woman raised her hand and lamented that, whereas Stephen and Ondrea had become such model practitioners, she herself was too screwed up from her past to ever achieve such depth and wisdom.

Stephen looked at the young woman with such tenderness, and then, to our great surprise, he shared the story of the harrowing pasts he and Ondrea had each lived. By the time they met, he said, they were both in rehab—one of them for alcohol abuse, the other for drug addiction. One spent afternoons hitting their head on a rock; the other suffered deep psychotic states. Then Stephen looked straight out into the audience, as if speaking to each of us individually, and said, “Look. It’s pretty simple: Buddha and Jesus were Joe and Mike down the street. The only difference between them and you is that they made a powerful decision about their lives and stuck to it. You’ve got to believe me. If we could come this far, *anybody* can.”

“I teach what I need to learn,” said T. Krishnamacharya, the forefather of modern yoga. I offer this consideration of spiritual discernment so that I, and all of us, can move toward greater spiritual clarity in our lives. May the fruits of our shared study and inquiry make even a small contribution to the decrease of suffering and the increase of peace on the planet.

The spiritual path is like any other road—it's going to have its share of potholes and detours. Safe travel requires a quality rarely taught yet critically important in today's world: discernment. In *Eyes Wide Open*, Mariana Caplan supports us in cultivating the acute judgment and discrimination that will help us to live a spiritual life with intelligence, clarity, and authenticity.

Is enlightenment less about fireworks and bliss and more about dismantling illusions? How do we fully integrate our practice into daily living? What's the best way to work with the ego and the shadow? *Eyes Wide Open* explores these questions and more, offering practitioners from any tradition—or those just getting started—a traveler's guide through "the labyrinth of increasing subtlety" that defines a genuine spiritual life.



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