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Chapter 1



What Is Spirituality Anyway?

*There is no question that there is an unseen world.
The problem is how far is it from midtown
and how late is it open?*

—WOODY ALLEN, *Without Feathers*

When I was nineteen years old and on an airplane to Mexico City to apprentice with a renowned Aztec shaman—fancying myself an up-and-coming neo-Carlos Castaneda—I wrote in my diary, “I am confident that if I practice really hard, learn all the rituals, and do everything the shaman suggests, I will be enlightened within three years.”

In addition to exposing me to powerful Aztec rituals and introducing me to exceptional people, my shaman, Kuiz, turned out to be an alcoholic who repeatedly and aggressively attempted to extract sexual favors from me as the price for his teachings. When I demonstrated my unwillingness to pay in

the commerce of sex, he tried to coerce me into giving him the remaining three hundred dollars I had saved for the rest of my summer in Mexico. Needless to say, I learned more about spiritual “endarkenment” than spiritual enlightenment on that trip, and that was only the beginning.

Kuiz was my first formal spiritual teacher. Fortunately, I did not give up on teachers after that shocking disillusionment, nor did I give up after disappointment with the next one—or the one after that. I went on to study with transpersonal psychologists, self-proclaimed goddesses and witches, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and Native Americans. Even at a young age and with little experience, I knew that the human psyche and spirit were vast and complex and that one needed a profound and rare quality of guidance to learn to navigate the labyrinth of the inner world and become a person of knowledge and wisdom.

Although I did not have a term for it, I somehow understood that I must learn what I later came to understand as the need to cultivate spiritual discernment. I learned that there were well-developed teachings and methodologies to guide one along the spiritual path. But as a young person with a hungry heart, I didn’t yet have a road map that would lead me to the elusive destination where I wanted to arrive but had no name for. I had no instruction manual to help me understand how to “do” my life. *Enlightenment* was a term that was tossed about freely in my circles, but what it was, who could help me find it, where it was best to look for it, who and what should be avoided along the way, and what subtle traps lay within me all remained utter mysteries. Discernment was something that would be discovered by trial and error.

It is now two decades after that first trip to Mexico, and I eventually found a spiritual teacher of integrity whom I have

studied with most of my adult life. Through as many errors as I have had trials, I have learned something about discernment and how to make distinctions among various paths, practices, teachers, and internal processes. Whereas each human journey is unique—and no one can walk the path for another or guard others from making their own mistakes and learning their own lessons—we can learn how to cultivate discernment. In so doing, we learn to make increasingly intelligent and effective choices for ourselves and minimize unnecessary detours and suffering caused by a lack of education and awareness. The “sword of discernment,” depicted in many spiritual traditions, is our greatest protection on the spiritual path.

As contemporary spiritual movements continue to evolve in Western culture, there is an increasing number of spiritual schools and approaches that focus on different aspects of spiritual integration. Drawing on the wisdom of many traditions and practices, this book offers an integral model of transformation applicable to practitioners of all religions and spiritual traditions—a model that specifically takes into account the challenging times we are living in, the subtleties involved in working with the egoic mind and Western psychology, and the imperative of integrating our transformation on all levels.

In the course of this book we will consider a wide variety of processes, perspectives, and principles that most people who engage a spiritual path over a long period of time are likely to encounter. Regardless of the tradition in which they practice, sincere spiritual aspirants will face challenges such as self-deception, breakdown and healing crises, and disillusionment with the dream of enlightenment and the teachers who proclaim to be enlightened. The immense task of navigating the complexity of working with the psyche and ego alone requires a fine-tuned capacity for discernment.

“Keen perception and judgment,” “the quality of being able to grasp and comprehend what is obscure,” “the trait of judging wisely and objectively” are a few of the ways in which discernment is defined by world dictionaries. Our task as spiritual practitioners is to learn to see with clarity, to keep our eyes wide open, to distinguish truth from untruth, and to bring to the light of awareness that which is unconscious within us.

In these times, navigating the spiritual path with clarity and wise judgment can be a daunting task, and every human journey comes with its own unique needs. The spiritual supermarket is brightly lit and packed with an overwhelming quantity of merchandise. Making choices that are healthy, nourishing, and economical at any point on one’s journey can be challenging. Even those who have been engaging spiritual practice for many years will inevitably be faced with the challenge of discerning which of the plethora of practices and teachers available is the most effective option to deepen their practice at a given stage of their lives.

To initiate our consideration of discernment as an essential tool on the spiritual path, we begin with a survey of the state of contemporary spirituality in the Western world. How have spirituality and enlightenment changed from a search of the soul to big business? What propaganda about spirituality and enlightenment are we being sold in the spiritual marketplace? Why have so many great gurus risen to fame and then catapulted into scandal, leaving once-devout aspirants disillusioned by the spiritual path and opting for ordinary lives? Why has the Dalai Lama captivated the world, and why is Buddhism such an attractive and popular path? What *is* enlightenment anyway? And what is it that we really want?

Nothing is so hungry as the human heart. A craving and longing for spiritual as well as human fulfillment stirs so deeply within us that most of us do not dare acknowledge its presence for fear it will consume us. We sense a volcano of stored potentiality stirring beneath the surface of our own consciousness. We sense that universes exist within us. We intuit our own subterranean existence. We are dying to be born: to release the unharnessed potential within us, to transcend our limitations, to discover an intimacy within ourselves that we have tasted through our life experience or intuited through dreams. This longing lives in the very fiber of our cells.

Unable to even name this hunger, most of us simply suppress it and go on about our predictable, mechanical lives. As my friend Zak, a Bollywood film producer, once told me, “I do not dare to ask the first question of myself, because I know that it would open the door to thousands—millions—more questions, and I’m afraid it would destroy my life as I know it.”

And it might. But for many of us there comes a point at which we cannot deny this hunger. Our personal suffering is too great. Our minds torment us; our lives are not working out as we imagined, or they’re working out on a mundane level, but we still have not found the deeper joy we sense is possible. Our conscience gnaws at us, and we can no longer deny the need to know what our yet un-lived potential consists of. And so we go in search of some form of guidance or practice that will help us feed our hungry hearts, and we find ourselves on what is loosely referred to as “the spiritual path.”

For others of us, it seems that the path reaches toward us, inserts itself into our lives. We are just going about our ordinary lives when some person, book, or experience arrives in the midst of it and rocks our world, speaking to us too loudly to deny. It comes as a great revelation yet feels so intimately

familiar. The spiritual path is often like that. Something seemingly “new” arrives in our lives, and yet we sense that it has always been with us.

Whether we were searching knowingly or not, finding the spiritual path is often a time of great celebration in the human heart. It comes as a private and intimate rite of passage: *I have been found*. Often it brings with it illuminating experiences or insights. The path seems easy and obvious. All we must do is study, understand, quiet the mind, and do some practices, and in time, enduring peace of mind and self-knowledge will be ours.

“And God is amused you once tried to be a saint,” writes the Persian mystic Hafiz. If we are fortunate, the initial insight of spiritual life, the great spiritual honeymoon, will last as long as the honeymoon phase of a great romance: months, perhaps years. Eventually, a commitment is made between one’s limited self and one’s limitless self, or between oneself and God, or Truth, and then the profound work of the path begins.

The Spiritual Marketplace

When we initially become interested in the spiritual path, we are wise to heed the caution, “Buyer beware,” as authentic spirituality is often co-opted and manipulated into a commodity that is bought and sold in the marketplace. Spirituality is not only a path to liberation, truth, and compassion; it is also big business. Spirituality has mixed with capitalist culture to such a degree that there now exists a literal “economy of spirit,” which is surprisingly easy to mistake for genuine spirituality.

In his article “Yogis Behaving Badly,” journalist Paul Keegan writes that in 2002 there were an estimated 18 million practitioners of modern yoga in the United States, and the market for healthy, environmentally friendly products

was estimated to be about \$230 billion. Yoga mats can be purchased at Kmart and Wal-Mart and even in many supermarkets and roadside service stations—perhaps for those who wish to practice yoga *āsanas* in their cars? Many large spiritual retreat centers offering classes in everything from conscious divorce to mindful knitting are working with multimillion-dollar budgets. Plastic buddhas can be won out of gumball machines, and in Sedona, Arizona, savvy marketers have professed to have actually bottled the special spiritual vortex energies that are said to be found there. As a result of the East-West encounter and trends in globalization, aided by the consumerism that characterizes American culture and its increasing impact on the rest of the world, a plethora of spiritual movements has sprung up and is spreading throughout the world as quickly as McDonald's and Starbucks.

If you are not aware of how vast the scope of the spiritual marketplace really is, go to a large mind-body-spirit conference or a New Age expo and allow yourself to be shocked, titillated, appalled, and allured by the thousands of surprising and not-so-surprising products you will find there. There are enormous markets for goddess-ware, “spiritual” clothing, and meditation and yoga paraphernalia, including Zen alarm clocks, crystal pyramids to place on your head to activate your chakras, and plastic contraptions to help you spread your toes for your yoga practice. The list is endless, and then there is the spiritual book market, which is oversaturated with everything from spiritually oriented romance and mystery novels to self-help books that promise to teach you everything from how to become a shaman to how to have spiritual sex.

Spiritual “tourism” has also become big business—not only the kind that takes you to Maui to study dolphin tantra or to the Brazilian rainforest to do shamanic rituals, but the more

common and less easily recognized form of whirlwind tours through different paths, teachers, workshops, and practices. It has become rather hip to be spiritual, and we would serve ourselves well to be clear about whether our interest in spirituality is due to its being a socially “in” hobby or whether it results from a deeper hunger—not because one approach is better or more noble than the other, but because it will help us to accurately orient ourselves as we enter the spiritual marketplace.

As is wise when we shop for anything of value and import in our lives, becoming a discerning consumer is essential when it comes to spirituality. Just because a charismatic guru skillfully uses the language of enlightenment to sell himself and his teaching doesn’t mean the product or service he offers is genuine or of high quality. Fast-food franchises sell “food,” but the nutritional and health benefits they offer are far from what the consumer gets from free-range poultry, grass-fed beef, and organic fruits and vegetables. We need to be as knowledgeable and discerning when we enter the spiritual marketplace as when we enter the supermarket. The spiritual equivalent of fast food is slickly marketed and readily available—ranging from weekend seminars that promise lifelong transformation to so-called “enlightened” masters who readily declare tens, or even hundreds, of their students enlightened at the first sign of spiritual insight and experience.

Not all spiritual paths, practices, and teachers offer the same quality of spiritual instruction. Particular practices and processes may be helpful at certain times in your journey—they may even to introduce you to the fact that there *is* a journey—but it is important over time to learn to make clear distinctions between the variety of paths, practices, and teachers available. It is also important to scrutinize your own motivation to engage with spiritual subjects. If we hope to

discover the real wealth spiritual practice has to offer, we must first learn to discern the rhinestones from the diamonds in the literature, paths, practices, and teachers who are vying for our attention. “Fool’s gold exists,” says Rumi, “because there is real gold.”

The Rise and Fall of Great Gurus and Great Students

As a result of my research, the kinds of books I write, and a counseling practice that often attracts individuals who have been disillusioned by spiritual life in one form or another, I have found myself privy to an uncommon body of spiritual data—what we might call the “underbelly of enlightenment.” This is the kind of spiritual gossip that would make any serious aspirant to the path quiver. If taken seriously, it reveals that absolutely no one, including teachers and ourselves, is exempt from the pitfalls one inevitably encounters on the spiritual path.

I have heard harrowing tales of how some of the most admired, “enlightened” teachers of our time have abandoned their children in their pursuit of spirituality; how they have used spiritual practice to avoid human connection and to mistreat their intimate partners, often justifying their behavior with spiritual terminology and concepts. Scandals about sex, money, and power pervade the contemporary spiritual scene like a lewd virus that spreads undetected until it has caused irreparable damage.

Nearly every time I give a public presentation, somebody approaches me and begins, “I’ve got a story the likes of which you have never heard . . .” and then proceeds to tell me a relatively common story about how “X” teacher, a self-professed celibate, slept with countless students, claiming they were receiving a “tantric initiation”; or how he cheated on his wife

and had sexual relationships with the young women and/or men in the community; or how he or she forbade women in the community to have children, telling them it would cause too much attachment or that it was impossible to raise a healthy child before one was enlightened oneself. People download stories of how self-proclaimed enlightened teachers manipulated their students into giving them large sums of money or how teachers' narcissism ran rampant and they ended up lying, cheating, and abusing their students and loved ones on a physical, psychological/emotional, or spiritual level.

All I need do is open my e-mail inbox to find more stories of spiritual scandal than I want to know about. It is no wonder that so many people have a reaction to the term *spirituality* that is characterized by a string of curse words rather than a feeling of love and compassion. As Theravadan Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield is fond of saying, "If you want to know how enlightened somebody is, ask their husband/wife."

Understanding the multifaceted causes of scandal and disillusionment with regard to spiritual teachers is a highly complex topic that was addressed thoroughly in my previous book, *Do You Need a Guru? Understanding the Student-Teacher Relationship in an Era of False Prophets*. I provide a brief consideration here as a baseline for understanding what is involved in creating an empowered, nonscandalous path of spiritual learning and growth in your own life.

First, it is important to acknowledge the pervasiveness of scandalous behavior on the spiritual path. While life-threatening instances of abuse do occur, they are the exception. Most of the infringements are milder—and therefore less visible—including psychological, financial, and sexual coercion. Even more common is the phenomenon of spiritual mediocrity, which occurs when unprepared individuals prematurely place