



A Meditation on Discernment: The Crowning Wisdom of Yoga

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vivekakhyāti □ *aviplavā hānopāya* □

II: 26 Through the cultivation of unbroken discriminative awareness, wisdom progresses through seven phases until it extends to its fullest realm

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

In addition to exposing me to powerful Aztec rituals, my shaman 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. Although I did not have a term for it, I somehow understood that I must learn to cultivate what I would eventually come to understand as “spiritual discernment.”

Shamanism was my first formal entry into spiritual studies, the beginning of a long and winding road that would soon bring me into the vast body of the yogic traditions and a lifelong study of psychology. It was as if somewhere within me, even at a young age and with little experience, I knew that the labyrinth of the human psyche was vast and complex, and would require a refined capacity to learn to navigate it with wisdom and clarity.

Known as *viveka khyātir* in Sanskrit, the capacity for spiritual discernment is described in the *Yoga Sūtras of Patanjali* as the “crowning wisdom of the spiritual path.” Spiritual discernment is so powerful, it is said, that it has the capacity to destroy ignorance and address the very source of suffering. Those who have learned this skill in relationship to spiritual matters can consistently make intelligent, balanced, and excellent choices in their lives and in relationship to their spiritual development along the yogic path.

According to Merriam-Webster, 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.” In *Light on Yoga Sūtras*, 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

Every human journey is unique, and whereas 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

¹ Iyengar, B. K. S., *Light on the Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*. New Delhi, India: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2005 (first edition, 1993), p. 132.

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 discernment.

Discernment is not a one-time thing. A person is not either discerning or undiscerning, but rather is in a lifelong process of refining their capacity to discern and perceive clearly, and respond accordingly. Patanjali says that discernment is so powerful that it can pierce all the *koshas*, or bodily sheaths, of our experience, including the physiological, energetic, mental, wisdom, and bliss levels of experience. As our capacity for discernment deepens, we are able to penetrate new levels of our experience and bring increasing refinement, dignity, and clarity to our lives.

Meditation

One particular aspect of discernment that can be particularly challenging is to learn to navigate through the complexity of our emotional experience. Yoga *asana*, as it is commonly taught in the West, rarely provides us with the tools needed to work with the emotions that the postures give rise to. There are aspects of the Western psyche that classical yoga does not always penetrate, simply because the tradition arose in a different cultural context and the technology was not designed to penetrate the specific psychological wounds and challenges so prominent in Western culture, including self-hatred, physical and emotional trauma, self-esteem, and body issues. There can be a tendency to use yogic practice to prematurely bypass or transcend our emotions, rather than to understand and integrate them, a process referred to by author John Welwood as *spiritual bypassing*.

What does it mean to cultivate awareness of our emotional body through yoga? First we become aware that all emotions correspond with physical sensations in the body. We learn, through meditations such as the one described here, to experience our emotions in the context of their corresponding physical sensations in our body. As we become tuned into our emotional body, we become able to digest our emotional experience through our bodies and through our practice of asana.

To explore discernment on the emotional level of your experience, you can experiment with the following two-part exercise. Repeating the exercise frequently over an extended period of time will gradually deepen your capacity to digest your own emotions and reveal a deeper experience of embodiment.

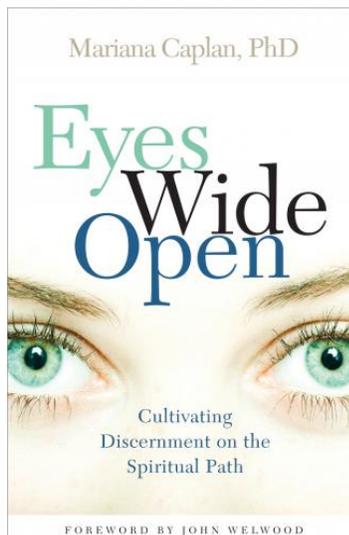
To begin with, either sit or lie down in a relaxed, meditative posture. Breathe into the body and become aware of the general emotional flavor of your experience. Sometimes it is difficult to know what we are feeling. Am I “mad, sad, glad or scared?” is an easy way to begin your inquiry, referring to the primary emotions of anger, sadness, happiness, and fear. As you begin to tune into your emotional reality, pay close attention to the sensations in your body that correspond to those emotions. Where in your body do you experience emotion? You may look for heat or cold, tightness, energy, spaciousness, movement, numbness. Emotions may be experienced in the back, front, middle, or subtle levels of the body. Whatever you discover, diligently refrain from judging it, and instead to stay with it as a meditation, and discover how it moves and changes through your willingness to place awareness on it.

As you become increasingly comfortable with this exercise and with learning to experience emotion as sensation in your body, you can deepen this exploration by bringing this same inquiry to your asana practice. To do this, choose an asana that you sense has some

emotional charge or resistance for you. In a quiet and safe setting, move into that posture very slowly. As you touch the edge of discomfort, engage a similar process of inquiry into the nature of your emotional experience in that asana. Rather than trying to burn through, shake out, or disidentify with the emotion, let the posture reveal to you the nature of the emotional content within your body. Gently and in very small increments, move into, and then out of, the sensations and emotions stored there.

Through these exercises, we become increasingly discerning in relationship to the emotional level of our experience. We become our own best physicians and psychologists.

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