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Halfway Up The Mountain: The Error of Premature Claims to Enlightenment

By Mariana Caplan



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Halfway Up The Mountain: The Error of Premature Claims to Enlightenment

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Caplan (TO TOUCH IS TO LIVE) asserts that "the reality of the present condition of contemporary spirituality in the West is one of grave distortion, confusion, fraud, and a fundamental lack of education." She claims that, as positive as the tremendous rise in spirituality is, there is not any context for determining whether any particular teaching, or teacher, is truly enlightening. Caplan compiles interviews with such noted spiritual masters as Joan Halifax, Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee and Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi on the nature of enlightenment. In the first section, Caplan examines the motivations people have for seeking enlightenment and contends that very often they seek this state as a means of gratifying the ego. This "presumption of enlightenment," she says, often afflicts teachers masquerading as spiritual leaders. These teachers sometimes look down on their students and gloat over how far they have come and how far the students have to go. A second section focuses on "The Dangers of Mystical Experience," in which Caplan claims that many seekers mistake the mystical experience itself for enlightenment; she and the teachers she interviews all assert that enlightenment always involves gaining some knowledge about self and others. The third section, "Corruption and Consequence," focuses on the nature of power and corruption; the fourth section, "Navigating the Mine Field: Preventing Dangers on the Path," provides a survey of the ways in which practitioners can avoid the "pitfalls of false enlightenment." A final section, "Disillusionment, Humility and the Beginning of Spiritual Life," concludes that "the Real spiritual life [is] the life of total annihilation and the return to just what is." Caplan's illuminating book calls into question the motives of the spiritual snake handlers of the modern age and urges seekers to pay the price of traveling the hard road to true enlightenment.



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