Simeon Alev's responses to Yonatan Levy's questions re: Andrew Cohen & EnlightenNext

Amy Edelstein's document is the first official denial of specific *What Enlightenment??!* blog content by Andrew Cohen's "EnlightenNext," and it is unfortunate that a so-called spiritual organization would resort to such wholesale dishonesty—presumably in the interest of damage control. The likeliest practical reason why such denials have not appeared on Andrew's blog or his organization's official public forums is his awareness of their falsehood and the flimsiness of their credibility. In the present circumstance, he appears to believe that by accompanying these misrepresentations with thinly veiled legal threats they can be prevented from finding their way into the media and the public sphere, where they are unlikely to withstand genuine scrutiny. But it may also be that Andrew actually believes these things never happened (even though he knows otherwise) simply because this alternative version of reality better serves the preservation of his personal worldview; this is admittedly both speculative and bizarre, but stranger things have happened—many of them in Cohen's community.

While the motivation underlying the *What Enlightenment??!* blog postings was never to "discredit Andrew Cohen" so much as to reveal actual events, it does seem clear that Edelstein's responses are specifically designed both to conceal these events and to "discredit" the (in fact) relatively large number of ex-students who have come forward with firsthand accounts of the incidents in question. Cohen is on record (in his "Declaration of Integrity") as describing students critical of his practices as spiritual "failures," and also as suggesting that this characterization of them is sufficient to explain their misgivings about his conduct. It is, however, the facts themselves that raise serious questions about his credibility as a spiritual authority—while also revealing his evident willingness to lie about some of the most basic elements of life in his community, as there is really no other way to describe what, through Amy Edelstein and his lawyers, he is now attempting to do.

On students buying Andrew Cohen expensive gifts

Not only, for example, does Edelstein know perfectly well that Andrew received all manner of expensive gifts from students as a matter of course; she once accompanied me on a shopping excursion in Lenox, Massachusetts, to pick out an expensive vest for him, which he later wore in our presence—and took us to task for neglecting to acknowledge his having done so. (In his words, which I clearly recall, we had failed to be "real" about the fact that he was wearing our gift—his way, I suppose, of expressing appreciation.) In the time that I was associated with him, Cohen accepted and accumulated so many gifts of expensive clothing that every few months a gathering of the male formal students was scheduled in order to distribute his cast-offs so as to make space for new additions to his wardrobe.

The largest gift that the student community as a whole made to Cohen was a fully equipped Volvo sedan for which funds were specially solicited—a specified amount per student—at a meeting convened in part if not entirely for that purpose. Jane O'Neil calculates having spent thousands on gifts of clothing for Cohen *in addition to* the donation of her house in Marin County and the proceeds of a two million dollar trust toward the purchase of the Foxhollow property. I mention these as illustrations of the fact that gifts of expensive clothing were part of a pervasive culture of gifting, cultivated and encouraged by Andrew himself, that over time made all manner of solicitations of any magnitude seem perfectly reasonable. It is common knowledge among longstanding members of Cohen's community that everything I have outlined here with respect to gifts is absolutely and entirely accurate, and those currently active students who are aware of this will have to square Edelstein's claim to the contrary not only with their consciences but with their direct knowledge of the facts. In many cases, they will themselves remember having purchased such "non-existent" gifts.

On pressure to donate large sums of money

Similarly, Edelstein's assertion that students were not pressured to give large sums of money is patently false. Like everyone who was part of the community during the transition from Marin County to the Foxhollow property in Massachusetts, $1000 for each year of participation as a formal student was required; in my case this amounted to $3000 which I could ill afford. In a gathering at the Moksha Foundation headquarters in San Rafael, this solicitation was made ostensibly in response to a) the need for renovations to some of the Foxhollow infrastructure, and b) the community's collective failure to express gratitude for Cohen's heroic efforts to secure the down payment—which it later turned out was a euphemism for the extortion of this money from Jane O'Neil by means of intense and focused psychological pressure. Clearly, the use of guilt to elicit contributions of pre-designated amounts is not "reliance on" (Edelstein's words) but manipulation and enforcement of generosity, and donors and philanthropists attracted by EnlightenNext's evolving fundraising strategies would be well advised to look into how the castle got built in the first place. If an escalating donor base ends up giving Cohen a broader platform from which to lure "evolutionaries," the number of casualties resulting from deeper personal involvement will only increase.

The "gag order"

Bill Yenner, another former student, has described the "donation" of his $80,000 inheritance to Cohen, the circumstances surrounding it, and his securing of the return of this money from EnlighenNext in 2003 under contractual obligations enjoining him from publicly criticizing Cohen or his organization for a period of five years. Edelstein's denial of the existence of this contractual "gag order" is based on a disingenuously narrow and legalistic definition of the term such as to include only a court-imposed order. However, the term "gag order" is also commonly used to describe any private contractual agreement whereby the silence of a person is required such that a breach of the contract will lead to financial liability. Hal Blacker's reference to Yenner's gag order on the What Enlightenment??! blog made it clear that it was precisely such a private agreement, entered into as a condition of the return of Yenner's "donation." In their response, Cohen and Edelstein are splitting hairs in an attempt to mislead the press and the public. Yenner, whose gag order expired on July 4, 2008, is now in a position to publicly verify its existence, and he is of course in possession of a copy of it (available **here**). It is clear from the document itself that he was induced to sign it as a precondition for the return of his $80,000.

On Andrew Cohen's estimation of his spiritual attainment

Regarding Andrew's assessment of his own spiritual attainment, I had a private conversation with him (while walking to a celebration of his birthday at a restaurant in San Francisco) in which he told me that as his student I had everything I needed to become enlightened—that is, in his words, "the *Triple Gem:* Buddha [Cohen himself], Dharma [Cohen's teaching] and Sangha [Cohen's community]." It seems unlikely that Cohen holds "the Buddha" in lesser esteem than Ramana Maharshi; from this readers may draw their own conclusions regarding his self-appointed position in the pantheon of historical and legendary "realizers." In one of his books he relates that his teacher Poonja detected a power in Cohen's eyes he'd seen previously only in Ramana's and his own; here, too, the obvious implication is difficult to ignore.

Crazy wisdom

On the subject of crazy wisdom, Andrew is fond of insisting that he is perhaps its highest practitioner, having taken it to a level that he himself refers to (in the "Declaration" mentioned above) as "acts of outrageous integrity." As this is not something that he has been secretive about, it is somewhat disingenuous of his representative to be asking for clarification of the term "crazy wisdom." Many of the excessive austerities he prescribed for his students could only fall under this

rubric—as well as, in many cases, that of simple sadism. Regarding the latter, I am well aware that Cohen does not see himself in this way; it seems likely, however, that he lacks objectivity in this area, paving the way for abuses subsumed by the crazy wisdom rationale. One of my own accounts on the blog is of a student who was required to submerge himself in a frozen lake 100 times while screaming "I am an asshole!" (I was later able to confirm that the number had actually been 1000.) At that time, in the company of some of his committed and senior students, I witnessed Andrew proudly describing this type of *sadhana* (practice) as "the kind of thing that only happens around me," because no other teacher had the "outrageous integrity" to prescribe and enforce it.

On the question of "confessions"

The term "confession of sins" is not an idiomatically correct description of what took place in student meetings, but these gatherings (monitored by Cohen through informants and written reports) did often include extremely long stretches of confrontation of a single student by the rest of the group over some failure in action or attitude of which the student may or may not have been initially aware. For the student in question, the most "advisable" course under such circumstances was to acknowledge the validity of the group's (i.e., Cohen's) perception—although this in itself was almost never a guarantee of a quick resolution, as the authenticity of one's responses was also subject to a penetrating and at times mystifying scrutiny. This points to a pervasive underlying goal of the whole procedure, which was to precipitate a personal crisis that required extensive soul-searching and self-abnegation to resolve. To those who fully accepted the community's ambient spiritual rationale, this experience of personal crisis could be exhilarating as well as humiliating, as theoretically it brought one face to face with one's ego and represented an opportunity to do battle with it and emerge aligned with a higher force. In practice, however, it created a climate of fear, inhibition and conformity, probably because in the end there were only two possible outcomes—a continuing and excruciating downward spiral that ended in indefinite exile, or "coming through," followed inevitably by flowers and a submissive letter of gratitude to Cohen.

I am aware even now that this interpretation appears cynical next to the community's idealistic understanding of the forces involved in "spiritual evolution." The bottom line for me personally, however, is that the environment fostered in Cohen's community represents an overly simplistic and authoritarian distortion of its spiritual ideals that is possibly reflective of distortions in Cohen's own personality. I say this based on the many examples that have since emerged in other students' accounts, and also on my own experience. In one instance, the students at Foxhollow were required to watch the film *Fallen,* in which a demon is depicted as moving from host to human host, causing in each case of possession an instantaneously visible (i.e., facial) transformation from innocence to evil; this was described as representing Andrew's painful experience of us, his unreliable students—good one day and evil the next. Later, after leaving the community, I heard that he had taken to being driven around Foxhollow in a golf cart with a video camera in search of recordable examples of "the smile of the ego." In this and other accounts it is difficult to avoid the perception of an authoritarian pathology that ill serves the ideal of "spiritual growth" however it is conceived. It is also extremely difficult to imagine such an environment being a safe or healthy one in which to "confess" anything.

Where I'm at now

Like the others who have responded to Yonatan Levy's questions, I have struggled to make sense of many of the things I witnessed and experienced in Andrew Cohen's community. All talk of "natural hierarchy" aside, for me the central point here is that the act of holding others to an "absolute standard" can be one of inspired leadership or of compulsive domination; thus it is important for the participants in any such contract to understand which of these motivations is actually being manifested in a communal (or "intersubjective") context. In the issue of *What Is Enlightenment?* magazine published not long after I and some other staff members had left the

community, we discovered that our faces had been photoshopped into a rogues' gallery of vampires and monsters used to illustrate the issue's introductory section; obviously, this amounts to public defamation of character, and gives the lie to any notion that Cohen wishes his ex-students well. Others who stayed longer found themselves similarly depicted in cartoons they were forced to contemplate for hours in Foxhollow's basement sauna, and I can personally attest that even before this became common practice, such cartoons occasionally appeared in what was at that time still the men's locker room. By contrast, Andrew's similarly caricature-like perception of his own flawlessness extended to his taste in movies, which he considered to be "enlightened" and thus perfectly objective. In another example, recounted to me by Kathy Bayer, she was personally taken to task for having answered affirmatively when Cohen asked if she thought he had "put on a little weight." And when alerted that his drumming could be heard by students sitting quietly in the meditation hall a short distance from his residence, the bearer of this news informed me that she had been told by Cohen's attendant that he wanted her to "mind her own business."

Although it seems to be an easy one to lose sight of, the central question in all such recollections must be whether incidents like these are consistent with the endeavor to which Cohen professes to be devoted: that of manifesting and helping others to manifest an evolved, enlightened relationship to life in the cosmos and, closer to home, the global human community. To what extent can an organization like Cohen's, riddled with rather primitive in-group/out-group dynamics and uncritically beholden to the guidance of a leader blind to his own human failings, effectively fulfill such an agenda? And how much self-delusion on the part of its members is required to sustain the belief that this noble mission is fueled by their blind faith and unquestioning participation?

Why—particularly in the West—some organizations devoted to the pursuit of spiritual growth end up exploiting rather than fulfilling the idealism of their adherents is a question I can explore only briefly here, though with the necessary time and energy it may be possible to do it justice in a more appropriate forum. What is clear is that there is a major disparity between EnlightenNext's answers to the questions raised by Yonatan Levy and the accounts of former students who have worked hard to articulate accurately their experiences in Cohen's community. Since one would not expect such divergent recollections from colleagues once bound by a passionate mutual interest in "the truth," I believe there must be some explanation beyond a cynical desire on the part of either side to knowingly distort it for the advancement of its own agenda—and more broadly, some way of analyzing this situation that accounts for the replication of these types of dynamics across a spectrum of similar situations.

The best attempt at such an analysis that I've so far come across is Len Oakes's *Prophetic Charisma.* The particular points I adapt from it here in no way do justice to the broad scope of Oakes's investigation, as my purpose is only to recall a few remaining incidents that may be relevant to the present reckoning. These memories were spurred by the following passage (and others like it) from Oakes's book:

> What the charismatic leader most lacks is a sense of the humanity of other people. He may accurately diagnose their problems and brilliantly solve them, he may even genuinely love the followers—loving them quite literally as he loves himself—yet they remain unreal to him because he must not acknowledge what it means to be a fellow sufferer, to feel alone and to have to adjust to an indifferent world, to have to reach out in trust to another for help. He may have actually been alone and had to trust and adjust, but he is rigidly fortified against the meanings of such events. They occur to him as strange, inexplicable interludes on a continuum of mastery and dominance, of self-sufficiency and control; he is "phobic" about recognizing any emotional vulnerability. Any outright opposition is countered with vociferous energy—what Kohut calls "narcissistic rage"—a rage that shows by its extremity and persistence that he is more deeply wounded by injuries to his worldview than by any physical injury (Kohut 1972). Hence he is fondest of the true believers who enthusiastically mirror his ego; those who don't are resented. Despite the leader's wisdom, his acceptance of

> others exists only as long as his own needs are being fulfilled. When they behave contrary to his wishes, he may respond with incomprehension or even paranoia. For what he really empathizes with is shades of himself, and he attracts only those who are in tune with him. He is unable to empathize with people who are indifferent to him, whose needs do not mesh with his own. His inability to experience himself as vulnerable is like a chasm between himself and others. For vulnerability is a vital part of human reality—we are not gods—and anyone who cannot experience it remains fundamentally out of rapport with ordinary people, no matter how successful his manipulations and wisdom may appear. Because of this lack the leader is not a great man; he is a great actor playing the role of a great man.

This is not a flattering picture, but it does explain the necessity for secrecy and lies.

It is also worth noting that the inherently *relative* nature of the ideological claims made by authoritarian spiritual figures—both cosmological and self-referential—is central to Oakes's (and probably any) analysis of this phenomenon. What I mean by "relative" in this case is that no matter how confident and "absolute" their pronouncements, there is no possibility of *all* such figures being "right," and only a slightly larger one that they are *all* "realized" or "enlightened." It is thus at least equally likely, given the variety of claims and ideologies regarded as universally true by their respective followers, that some factor other than "enlightenment" accounts for the power and conduct characteristic of such figures in the context of community life. If so, what is implied is a decoupling of enlightenment from charismatic authoritarianism—a sundering that many ex-community members (myself included) have been at times viscerally reluctant to consider: "Cohen is a narcissist, but an enlightened narcissist," "It was good in the beginning, but something went wrong," etc. To me, these sentiments appear to represent persistent attempts to retain something of value from an undeniably profound early experience, but in the cold light of reality it becomes apparent that Cohen's alleged "realization" has never prevented him from manifesting profoundly unenlightened and at times childish behavior that entitles one to ask whether he could ever have been enlightened in the first place, and whether it isn't just as likely that his elevation to the status he occupies, and the devotion he inspires in his followers, are the overdetermined result of a certain set of psychological conditions preexisting in all concerned.

These days it sometimes seems to me that Cohen's entire teaching is a universalized code for the reification of a narcissistic personal worldview (to which I can of course relate because my own psyche bears traces of the same condition). This is a perspective that, among other things, locates Cohen and the fact of his existence at the "leading edge" of cosmic evolution. Meanwhile, anyone who has interacted with Andrew personally could certainly be forgiven for hearing his assertion that "Your feelings don't matter" as "Only mine do." When I first began working with him on *What Is Enlightenment?* magazine, I "got into trouble" for reacting with less than ecstatic approval to a cover design about which he was enthusiastic. After all the smoke had cleared—flowers, a letter of apology, etc.—he explained to me, as if I were a killjoy parent with the effrontery to have rained on his parade, "See, *I'm* allowed to have fun." I was reminded of an episode of *The Twilight Zone* in which a seven-year-old is given supernatural powers that enable him to threaten all the unsolicitous adults in his life with instant annihilation. This impression was further reinforced by an unexpected and extremely confrontational grilling I was subjected to by one of Cohen's lieutentants—with Andrew himself likely listening in via speaker phone—because he didn't like the selection of possible publicity photos of him that I'd made from a poorly stocked archive; and also by his reaction when he realized, after a portrait I'd made of him had been used on the cover of *Freedom Has No History,* that his mustache was out of focus. In both cases, my heart sank as I contemplated the impossible task of responding to the notion that somehow my ego was to blame (a pretty good indication of how pathetically pliable I was at the time).

When Tami Simon of Sounds True, Inc., reneged on a promise to release her recorded interviews with Cohen—precisely because while conducting them she had reached the conclusion that he was an extremely inflated character—he arranged to have $3000 worth of flowers delivered

to her office so that a spy could describe her facial expressions via cell phone when she realized, with the final bouquet, who they were from. This was necessary, Cohen explained, because Simon had committed an offense not against "Andrew personally" but against the "the *dharma* itself." And a final recollection is of the evening the finalization of the Foxhollow purchase was announced at a community gathering in Marin County: Cohen, wearing sunglasses, was lying theatrically beside a Christmas tree; and after everyone was seated, Michelle Hemingway, dressed as Santa, declaimed that since little Andrew had been such a good, good boy, he was now going to receive what he'd always wanted—an *ashram* of his very own. (Again, this karmic fable is supremely ironic given the provenance of the "donation" that had made Cohen's dream come true.)

I've heard that Andrew is now, more than a decade later, planning a book about his ex-students. Whatever he intends to say about any of us, it seems clear that as someone whose credibility suddenly seems questionable at best he has some serious housecleaning of his own to do—for which, unfortunately, lawyers aren't of much use, no matter how much of his current students' money he is prepared to pay them. And one could say that those of us who dedicated years of our lives to *following* Cohen's teaching, only to be pronounced "failures" according to his paradigm, deserve the satisfaction of knowing that he has given a fair hearing to an alternative analysis that implicates him equally in his role as a *leader*. After all, if we are to be held accountable for a "failure" in our interaction, then so, at least possibly, is he. So if Cohen is reading this, I suggest that he could do worse than to check his own experience against Oakes's template to see what insights it offers into the present situation. (If nothing else, he and his current inner circle could enjoy it as fodder for self-righteous mockery.)

But of course this will never happen. As Jung wrote of Freud: "In a crucial talk with him I once tried to get him to understand the admonition: 'Try the spirits whether they are of God' (I John 4:1). In vain. Thus fate had to take its course. For one can fall victim to possession if one does not understand betimes why one is possessed. One should ask oneself for once: Why has this idea taken possession of me? What does that mean in regard to myself? A modest doubt like this can save us from falling head first into the idea and vanishing forever."