

## *Susan Bridle's responses to Yonatan Levy's questions re: Andrew Cohen & EnlightenNext*

First, I want to say a couple of things about where I am coming from. I am not an apostate rabidly committed to “bringing Andrew Cohen down,” as he seems to view former students who have criticized him. I am on the whole grateful for what I learned in my ten years in Andrew’s community, and I take responsibility for my decision to join the organization and for my choices and actions while there.

I appreciate the *What Enlightenment?!* blog’s efforts to provide a forum for former students to speak about their experiences, and I respect Hal Blacker’s work to bring to light important facts about Andrew’s teaching style. Andrew has suggested that the blog represents the views of only a few angry, disgruntled students who are either wildly distorting the facts or are simply lying in order to cast aspersion on Andrew. This is not true. I know a number of people who contributed unsigned posts, and many who appreciated the forum—having had many similar criticisms and concerns themselves—but who chose not to post written contributions. A great many of the experiences described on the blog are experiences that dozens of people can attest to. In the past Andrew or his representatives would not deny many of the allegations made by his critics but would say instead that the accounts were exaggerated or lacked the crucial “context” that justified the events. Now it seems that he is flat-out denying that many of these events even took place. This is a bald-faced lie, not a subtle prevarication. Although I am quite busy with the demands of my current life and am not interested in following Andrew’s affairs, when I saw EnlightenNext’s replies to these questions, I was pretty shocked, and therefore have made a little time to offer a response.

I find Andrew Cohen one of the many great mysteries of the *dharma*. He had a profound enlightenment experience and has a passionate commitment to the *dharma*; these have enabled him to inspire many people to plunge wholeheartedly into the spiritual path. That is no small thing. At the same time, I believe that he has a number of blind spots that make him in many ways an ineffective, immature spiritual teacher. (Metaphorically speaking, he seems to see almost every challenge that any student faces on the spiritual path as one that should be addressed with a hammer—and larger and larger hammers—rather than, say, a screwdriver, or a feather, or a bright light, or some other kind of tool.) Part of the problem, I think, is that Andrew’s interpretation and understanding of his own enlightenment experience is that it destroyed all the “dust on the mirror,” burned up all of his *karma*, nullified all blind spots, leaving him in a condition in which he simply wouldn’t/couldn’t ever again act out of ignorance in ways that cause suffering for others. This being the way he understands his own enlightenment, he can’t question himself, his actions or his intentions in any meaningful way, because that would throw the whole thing up in the air. To question anything seriously would be to question everything—his very enlightenment—and so I think he lives in an impossible, and actually very painful, situation.

I think that for many people, exposure to Andrew’s teachings through his publications and retreats is a very powerful and positive thing. However, I think that once one becomes more deeply involved, it is hard not to get mired in many of the cultish trappings of the organization. Further, I think that the more one is *personally* involved with Andrew, the more complicated and compromised the situation becomes. That is certainly my experience, and I know that many others share the same feeling. Below I try to address your specific questions.

***As EnlightenNext has refused to answer questions about the physical assaults described in the What Enlightenment?! blog, I would like to know just how severe they were, and whether they were more symbolic than physical. Was slapping, for example, something that people could expect as they became formal students, or was it used only on students who had been involved for a longer period?***

I would say that slapping and physical assaults were pretty infrequent. I have heard of a number of incidents over the years, but on the whole I would not say it was something that formal students came to expect. Perhaps it was more so for the very small group of “Committed Students”—the few, perhaps three to seven most senior students who led Andrew’s communities. I can personally attest to being instructed one time to go to Craig Hamilton and Carter Phipps, co-editors with me of Andrew’s magazine *What Is Enlightenment?*, shout an angry message, and slap

them both, *hard*. Andrew emphasized that I must really mean it and hit them hard. I did this. He also had me do the same thing to Amy Edelstein (who sent the replies to you from EnlightenNext). For the record, I also witnessed Amy Edelstein herself slapping Craig and Carter under similar circumstances. In the incidents I witnessed or participated in, no one was physically harmed. Nevertheless, I find it abhorrent, and this event was one of the “final straws” that helped me to realize that Andrew, and now I, had crossed a line that should not be crossed.

***Could you confirm and elaborate about the frozen lake incident, another issue that EnlightenNext refuses to answer questions about?***

For a period of time, Andrew occasionally sent close students, individually, to the lake to chant some affirmation or repentance while repeatedly submerging themselves in the water. I had done this two times before the incident described in the blog. One time it took one hour, and the other time it took over three hours to complete the assigned number of chants/submersions. Both of these incidents were in the warm summer months. So, while very challenging (especially the time it took—three-plus hours!), it was not dangerous. (Reflecting on it now, though, I find both of those teaching directives from Andrew very unhelpful responses to what was happening with me at those times.)

The lake incident recounted in the blog was different in that it involved many women at once, and it was in October. The lake was not yet frozen but it was very, very cold. Fall and winter come quickly in the Berkshires. I believe the blog does a pretty good job of describing the situation. The women were “in trouble” for an indiscretion, and we were falling all over ourselves to come up with a gesture of apology and repentance to Andrew. One of the women suggested that we go *en masse* to do prostrations in the lake. A message was sent to Andrew that this was our intention. He accepted and then sent a couple of directives about it. So while he did not exactly order us to do it, once we had offered to do it he became quite involved. Women who did not complete the exercise were ordered to go back and do it again—supervised, to make sure that they remained in the lake the whole hour. At least one woman had to go back a third time. Because I was one of the few women who had already done this, twice, I just gritted my teeth and tried to muscle through it. However, I was immediately shocked by how cold the water was.

At that time in the community, when you received word that Andrew wanted you to go do “prostrations” in the lake, you went immediately in whatever you were wearing. I was wearing cotton pants and a cotton shirt, neither of which provided any warmth. I also had a shaved head. I believe that the women with shaved heads had a bit more difficulty with the cold. I just forced myself to continue even as I found it harder and harder to keep my balance and was becoming increasingly “blank.” I then have a very vague memory of being pushed into a car. The next thing I remember was regaining consciousness propped up in a shower stall with three other women, all of us standing under the hot water trying to regain enough feeling in our hands to unbutton our clothes and pull them off of us. I had lost consciousness at about 50 or 55 minutes, just shy of the full hour. I am told that one woman who was watching and didn’t go in because she was recovering from a bad chest cold (Alka, Andrew’s wife), and a couple of women who had said “enough!” and had come out early (and therefore had to go back and repeat the exercise a couple of days later), noticed that I was losing consciousness and had me pulled out of the water.

It took two days for me to feel normal again. I do feel that this was one of the more dangerous things that Andrew had his students do. Many of the women who participated say it was one of the most extreme things they have ever experienced in the community. I think it may have been worse for me because I had been in a serious car accident less than a year earlier and had suffered a severe concussion. I was continuing to have regular follow-up doctor’s appointments and EEGs for a year following the accident, which included the period of the October lake incident. I find this one of Andrew’s most ham-handed responses as a teacher, subjecting a large group of women to the same giant hammer without regard for what would be appropriate and useful for *individuals*. I also acknowledge how stupid and sheep-like it was for me to participate.

***As you can see, EnlightenNext denies any use of pressure to secure donations or large gifts.***

I suppose Andrew is using some creative definition of “pressure” and “large gifts.” First, it was routine to buy Andrew expensive designer clothes in conjunction with sending a letter of apology or gratitude. It was very common to buy articles of clothing that cost \$200 or \$300. I once bought Andrew a pair of Armani pants that cost \$800. And this should be seen in the context that most of us had very little money. We spent the vast majority of our time working for the organization; most people worked part-time to make money to make ends meet and support the community. A number of us, including myself, were employed by the organization and did not have outside jobs, so Andrew knew exactly what financial means we possessed. Andrew would at times return a gift for cash if he could not use the gift, but the gift-giver never knew that.

Also, I cashed out a \$60,000 IRA (Individual Retirement Account) and gave it to Andrew under severe pressure. These are the circumstances: In July of 2000 I left the community—snuck out and ran away. I rented a car and just started driving, in a pretty distraught state. I ended up in New Orleans. Andrew tracked me down (that’s a long story in itself) and I was persuaded to return to Massachusetts. Still in a pretty volatile state, I was assigned to stay off-campus (or “off the property”) with two other women who were also “in trouble.” We rented a room in a boarding house. Over the next weeks, with daily messages and input from Andrew and his representatives, I came to be persuaded that I had made a horrible mistake in trying to leave, and I came to believe that Andrew was showing unfathomable generosity in trying to “save me from myself.” I came to genuinely want to return to community life. We were living as pariahs in a kind of no-man’s-land. I was told that in order to return, I had to give everything. I responded in various ways, offering what I thought was everything—spiritually, mentally, emotionally, physically. I offered some money, a few thousand dollars, thinking I would take it off my credit card. But I was told that it was not enough: “Everything means *everything*.” I had an IRA that my father had been putting money into over many years. It was in my name, but my father was in control of it. It was to be a retirement account—exactly what the name says—because my father knew I wasn’t making or saving any money and wasn’t likely to, given the life I had chosen. Andrew was aware that I had an IRA; he knew everything about us. I eventually realized that this was what Andrew was asking for. After some inner struggle, I finally offered it. It was accepted, but then there was another message: “Everything is *everything*.” It was then that I also offered any future inheritance I would receive from my family.

I was allowed to return to the community. I told Andrew’s representative that it would take some time to make the arrangements. I had to persuade my father to turn the management of the account over to me. (I lied to him and told him that I wanted to put the money in more socially responsible investments.) Andrew followed up through his rep (who has recently left the community) numerous times to pressure me to speed up the process. Andrew’s rep did say when I finally turned over the money that if I left the community again within the next year, I could get the it back. At that time, I definitely did not think that I would ever leave the community again, and so I refused the offer, which I believe had been suggested by Andrew’s rep in light of Bill Jenner’s request (recent at that time) for the return of his inheritance.

Here is how I feel about it now, and why I did not try to get the money back when I did finally leave the community. It’s tricky. First, I feel that Andrew’s very strong pressure on me for the large donation when I was in an *extremely* vulnerable position was totally wrong. Such gifts must be given freely and not coerced, but coercion is exactly what Andrew did. Second, at the same time, I was a spiritual student who was celibate and had in a real sense “renounced the world.” I was much like a nun in any tradition, and many spiritual paths require vows of poverty; so, in the scheme of the history of spiritual practice, being expected to give up everything is not so unusual. Third, the actual experience of giving up everything was very profound for me. I really did abandon the future and surrender much more deeply to my commitment to the spiritual path. Fourth, when I considered asking for the money back within the first year of my leaving the community, I was still too traumatized by the experience of finally leaving to have the strength and clarity to ask for the money to be returned. And, although I felt that Andrew’s pressuring me to give the money was wrong, I felt that what I personally came to when I finally “gave everything” was something that I wanted to honor and stand behind. I rejected Andrew’s coercive actions in the matter, but wanted to honor and take responsibility for my own intentions and actions.

### ***Could you describe Cohen's treatment of women?***

That could take a whole book. Andrew did have some powerful insights into the challenges that women face on the spiritual path and typical features of “women’s conditioning.” However, these are insights that just about anyone would come to if they looked into it. One *major* problem with Andrew’s approach is that he reified the “woman’s ego,” making it into a kind of larger-than-life monster to fight with. However, this was his approach to dealing with the ego in general—a very dualistic approach, doomed to failure.

Andrew constantly berated and shamed individual women and groups of women for expressing “women’s ego” or “women’s conditioning.” All kinds of expressions of fear, hesitation, self-concern, rebelliousness, impatience, pride, jealousy, failure to surrender, resistance, wanting to stay in control, etc. (the typical human stuff), became not just challenges that human beings were dealing with on the spiritual path but *women’s treachery*. Although he asserted that he believed that women could transcend their deep conditioning as women, he often said that women by their very nature undermine the *dharma* (echoing an early Buddhist scripture) and have a deep and possibly insurmountable resistance to enlightenment. He often accused women of trying to destroy him and his teachings, of trying to “quell” his “revolution.” All of this is what was illustrated in the women’s sauna at Foxhollow (see below).

In the context I’ve just described, Andrew saw himself (and perhaps still does) as the first and only true liberator of women because he is willing to help women—and force them if necessary—to face this truth about themselves. Motivated by this vision of himself as a liberator of women, he subjected individual women, and especially, groups of women, to many extreme exercises in “facing the truth” about themselves. These included treating the women as pariahs, the lake episode, and having them recount and record together over the course of many days all of the ways in which they had acted over the years in ways that “quelled the revolution.” (Mimi Katz still has this document.) The women were given a *mantra* to recite for forty-five minutes or an hour a day, something like, “The liberation of women solely depends on my unconditional willingness to surrender my compulsive need to relate to each and every thought, feeling, experience, and event as a vehicle for my own reflection.” (There is some insight here into the *human* tendency to self-reference, but another very ham-handed and ego-reifying approach to the phenomenon.) And during long stretches of time, there were relentless series of hours-long meetings (often lasting almost all night, with women struggling to make do on almost no sleep) that were far worse than the most extreme encounter groups of the 1970s, with Andrew sending messages to the group about their “betrayal.” There were also numerous retreats that were like 24/7 encounter groups that went on for a week, with numerous women simply breaking down and many women leaving the community altogether.

At the same time, groups of men also would occasionally come under similar pressure. On the whole, however, I would say that Andrew’s treatment of women was consistently more extreme, and characterized by his particular convictions about women. (As an aside, I worked closely with Andrew on issues of *What Is Enlightenment?* magazine on the subjects of “women and enlightenment” and “sex and spirituality,” and witnessed the almost fanatical fervor with which he fixated on the subject of women and women’s sexuality.)

### ***Do you remember any of Cohen's remarks concerning his spiritual status, especially in comparison to great teachers such as Ramana Maharshi, Jesus or Krishnamurti?***

No, not explicitly. It was always implicit. I heard him many times describing these and other teachers’ enlightenment as “personal enlightenment”—whereas “impersonal enlightenment,” Andrew’s unique gift to the world, is a further, more evolved manifestation of enlightened consciousness.

### ***Has Cohen himself ever advised, recommended or approved using his photographs as part of the prostration practice? Did he comment on it?***

I did prostrations for years in the community, up until I left in September, 2001, and everyone had pictures of Andrew in front of their prostration boards. The men and the women generally did prostrations together, in separate rooms with the boards lined up in rows. There was

a picture of Andrew at the head of every board. I don't really have a problem with this in the context of a guru tradition, but I do have a problem with Andrew denying it.

***EnlightenNext denies that Cohen ever emphasized the need to absolutely surrender to him. Could you comment on that?***

That is completely ridiculous. Absolute surrender to Andrew was not just implicit, it was explicit for all close students.

***Could you describe from your experience just how and when the Foxhollow sauna was used as a "powerful teaching tool"?***

The walls of the sauna were covered with blown-up messages from Andrew, letters to him from women, passages from texts, and huge cartoons depicting women acting out the horrors of the "women's condition," including images of specific women in the community gleefully pulling out Andrew's entrails, burning his books, and engaging in sadomasochistic acts. A video of the films *To Die For* and *Black Widow* and a recording of Bob Dylan's "Just Like a Woman" were to be kept running 24/7. Spatters of red paint symbolized Andrew's blood that the women were spilling. The "context" of all of this is what I described above—Andrew trying to liberate women through forcing them to face the truth about themselves ("The truth will set you free"). We were required to spend an hour a day in the sauna, and ideally more, reading and reflecting on its contents as part of our daily spiritual practice. I find this to be one of Andrew's most bizarre "teaching" gestures. I doubt if it helped anyone; I certainly think it did more harm than good.

***EnlightenNext denies that a circle of men was ordered to stand around Cohen's house for two days without moving, describing the event as a volitional gesture.***

I was working with Andrew on the magazine inside his house for most of the two days it was going on, so I can report only from that perspective. The men were in the midst of being really "pushed" and challenged by Andrew as a group—for the first time, the men were put under the kind of pressure that the women had been under for years. I do not remember how it was initiated. I'm guessing it may have been initiated much like the women's lake incident was, where the women offered to do something as a gesture of repentance to Andrew in a situation of severe pressure, and he not only accepted but got directly involved. I remember Andrew talking about how it was good that the men were finally "putting their attention on me." The men stood in a circle around the house, several feet apart, without moving, and stared at the house (with Andrew inside). I know that they were once brought sandwiches, but I don't think they were given food more than once. My friend told me that at least one person urinated in his pants because he was afraid to move to go to the bathroom. I do believe that they went home to sleep, but it was at most a very few hours.

Of course, the other half of the story is that even while there were extended periods of all this horrible stuff going on, we were sharing depths of intimacy and joy with our fellows on the spiritual path and were often very inspired about what we were experiencing and trying to accomplish. How complicated human beings can be!