

WHAT IS ENLIGHTENMENT?

Volume 3, Number 1

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"I have found and continue to find that there is so much confusion, misunderstanding and misinformation as to what Enlightenment actually is and what it really means.

That is why I have encouraged my students to publish this journal as a vehicle to present our ongoing investigation into this question, and to share our discoveries with those who are also interested in this vast and most subtle subject."

Andrew Cohen

Cynicism

The Modern Spiritual Predicament

by Andrew Cohen

RECENTLY I DISCOVERED A SECRET. Something that I never knew before. It is that most people are lost in the clutches of a cynicism that is profound. What is profound about this cynicism is that most people don't seem to know about it. Indeed, most are shockingly unaware of how little true faith they actually have in the possibility of finding emancipation in this very life. The cynicism that I'm speaking about is not superficial—it runs deep in the hearts and minds of so many people these days. What is more shocking is that even many of those who seem to be living spiritual lives, when challenged, more often than not reveal that they don't take the possibility of succeeding in liberating themselves in this life very seriously. For underneath many inspired declarations that "all is perfect" lie unresolved questions, fear of the unknown and potentially overwhelming doubt. The fact is, few people truly believe that it is possible to be free.

But there is more to the secret...As long as the individual does not believe that it's possible to be free, *they don't have to take the possibility of becoming free seriously*. And when the individual doesn't have to take the possibility of becoming free seriously, they're off the hook, which means that they are then relieved of the burden of having to dare to face into the possibility of actually succeeding. What is

so surprising is that very few people actually *want* to succeed. Why is that? Because the individual who seriously intends to succeed in liberating themselves from fear and delusion must be willing to question everything that they believe in. And in order to question all that one believes in and assumes to be true, one *must* be willing to allow oneself to become unusually vulnerable. Indeed, vulnerability becomes the crux of the matter when one sincerely desires to realize the Truth, because by allowing oneself to be vulnerable, one soon discovers a profound relationship with all of life. But there is more...The only way to discover this profound relationship with all of life, to become deeply in touch with all of life, is through allowing oneself to trust. The individual who intends to succeed in liberating themselves from fear and delusion *has* to find a way to trust. For trust is the passageway that every individual *must* pass through in order to discover the whole. There is no other way.

That which has become familiar, safe, secure and known must be left behind in order to make room for that which is unfamiliar, unsafe, insecure and unknown. The intense vulnerability and raw intimacy that need to be embraced by the individual who is sincere in their desire for liberation is usually too much for most people. Indeed,

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IT IS A STRANGE PHENOMENON in the modern spiritual world, just how much seems to be accepted or rejected unquestioningly by so many. All manner of ideas and beliefs about ourselves and about the nature of reality are all too often never seriously examined to find out to what degree, if any, they reflect actuality. Yet such inquiry is crucial for the person who genuinely seeks enlightened understanding and real emancipation.

Andrew Cohen, in his extensive travels, teaching and meeting with many seekers and teachers all around the world, is always investigating and trying to clarify such key issues. Through his constant challenging of the boundaries of accepted spiritual knowledge he has discovered what appears at first to be a very startling fact. That is, that most people are actually deeply cynical about the possibility of their own liberation in this life. The role that cynicism plays in the modern spiritual life reveals itself to be an intriguing and challenging one. Why would a seeker after Truth be cynical? And if one indeed was cynical about spiritual possibilities, what kind of shadow would that cast on the kind of conclusions that individual would draw about the way things are?

The theme of cynicism is particularly addressed in this issue of *What is Enlightenment?* In the cover article, Andrew goes as far as to state that cynicism is the modern spiritual predicament, and yet it is an almost totally unrecognized predicament. It is also addressed in other articles in the context of various subjects, such as: the meaning of true independence as opposed to commonly held notions of independence; one's relationship with the greatest spiritual masters is examined in "If You Meet the Buddha on the Road...Follow Him!" and illustrated with a hypothetical modern-day discussion between a student and his teacher; the diametrically opposing views regarding Andrew and his teaching are explored in "Through the Looking Glass."

At the same time there are also articles in this issue which point to the opposite of cynicism. Andrew has a far-ranging discussion with Dr. Amit Goswami on the nature of consciousness and objectivity, finding a convergence between true spiritual life and science. There is also an account of a trip to Russia made by two of Andrew's students, where one of the most striking impressions of the Russian seekers they met, was of their innocence and heartfelt interest to find out what is true.

Each of these articles, from different perspectives, illuminates and penetrates the cynicism which pervades the outlook of so many spiritual aspirants. The thrust is towards a deep inquiry and fearless investigation, through which there is the very real possibility of coming to a complete end of all such limiting views.

We hope to stimulate further inquiry into and discussion about these important matters and always welcome responses and comments from our readers.

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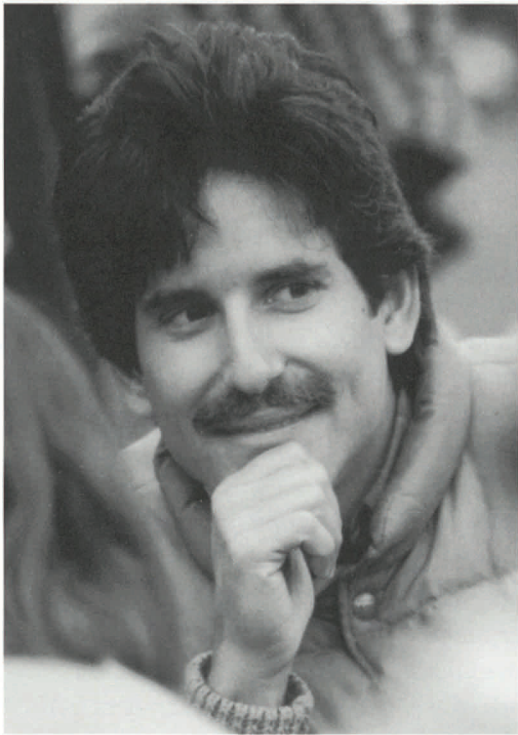
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BY STEVE BRETT



SPIRITUAL TEACHER and author Andrew Cohen was born in New York City in 1955. He began teaching in 1986 after a profound spiritual awakening deeply transformed his life. What makes Andrew such a unique and powerful voice in the modern spiritual world is his absolute and unwavering pursuit of what is actually true. In his attempt to come to a fully comprehensive and utterly unambiguous understanding of the enlightened condition,

he continuously reveals and calls into question ideas and beliefs that have gradually become the status quo in the modern spiritual arena.

For the past seven years, Andrew has been traveling throughout North America, Europe and Asia to teach. In his quest to deepen his understanding of the awakened condition he has initiated meetings with spiritual teachers from many different traditions and spoken with countless spiritual seekers. His intention has been and continues to be, to inspire others into a profound discovery of and passionate investigation into the Real.

Andrew stresses that success in spiritual pursuit is entirely dependent upon the depth and seriousness of one's intention to be free and that spiritual life is not a casual endeavor but demands great maturity and commitment. He speaks constantly about the importance of realizing an *objective* perspective, which reaches beyond the limitations of individual preferences and beliefs. He claims, in fact, that an end to the conflict and division within and between human beings depends upon the realization of and abidance in such a view. Andrew's teaching has always been characterized by the continuous momentum with which it presses beyond established boundaries. It is considered radical by many, perhaps because of its directness, immediacy and uncompromising call to awaken that challenges anyone who truly wants to be free.

Presently based in northern California with his community of students, Andrew spends the majority of his time on the road teaching, his larger community of students reaching throughout the world.

WHAT IS ENLIGHTENMENT?

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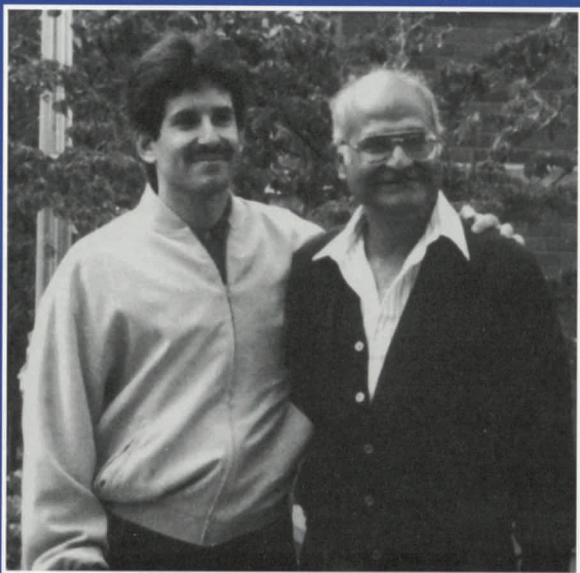
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THE TRUTH IS AN OBJECTIVE FACT

*Excerpts from a Talk on
Science and Spirituality*

with

*Andrew Cohen and
Dr. Amit Goswami*



INTRODUCTION

*I*N RECENT YEARS, the long-standing wall between science and spirituality has begun to crack. Polarized for centuries into objective vs. subjective, observable vs. immeasurable, these two approaches to understanding are beginning to find common ground. The reasons for this meeting are many. In the light of mystifying discoveries in particle physics and a growing body of research in alternative healing, scientists have begun to question some of the fundamental assumptions of their approach—including even the very basis of modern science: materialism. Similarly, with the merging of eastern and western approaches to transformation and the rise of comparative religious study, considerable work is also being done to look objectively at the spiritual process independent of tradition. While over the past thirty years several prominent scientists and commentators have taken an interest in the mystical ramifications of their findings, few researchers with hard scientific training have fully considered the radical implications of these discoveries for human life. And while many spiritual teachers encourage some form of objective inquiry, few have abandoned all tradition-bound assumptions to embrace a truly scientific view of the process and significance of radical transformation. The following article thus presents a unique meeting: Andrew Cohen, a teacher of Enlightenment dedicated to exploring the profound possibilities of a demystified spiritual path, and Dr. Amit Goswami, a physicist seeking to interpret the significance of the quantum mechanical revolution for humanity.

Dr. Goswami is a professor of physics at the University of Oregon's Institute of Theoretical Sciences. Driven by a scholarly interest in empirical investigation and a personal desire for spiritual transformation, he has spent the past ten years exploring the revolutionary implications of recent discoveries in quantum physics, his research culminating in the publication of his new book: *The Self-Aware Universe: How Consciousness Creates the Material World*. His work is founded on the observation that the paradigm-shattering discovery of quantum mechanics early this century, and the chain of baffling experimental findings in its wake, can seemingly only be explained by a non-dual view of reality akin to that expressed by mystics throughout history. As a result,

THERE IS ONLY ONE TRUTH

Dr. Goswami feels that the scientific world may be on the verge of a breakthrough into a new paradigm in which consciousness, rather than matter, is seen as the foundation of reality. One consequence of such a shift, he suggests, would be that scientists and spiritual teachers could at last meet in an objective view in which the long-held assumptions of both approaches could give way to a comprehensive understanding of the universe that equally accounts for both observable reality and the full range of human experience. In the spirit of this pursuit, Dr. Goswami recently founded the Institute for Research in Idealist Science (IRIS), a round-table forum geared to bring about discussion between scholars and mystics.

In the seven years since he began teaching, Andrew Cohen has also been ceaselessly calling for a shift in context. That shift in context is the direct experiential discovery of the fact of unity. In Andrew's teaching, this shift represents not the end but the beginning of the spiritual path, for it is the recognition of unity that sets the stage for a fearless investigation into the complex nature of reality, and in particular, of the profound implications of this fact for the way we live our lives. Andrew feels that the process of spiritual awakening is a truly evolutionary occurrence that goes far beyond the relief of individual suffering. The very significance of enlightened understanding, he teaches, lies in its ability to reveal an alternative to the conflict and mistrust that almost universally characterize human relationships. This profound evolutionary possibility, however, can only become manifest when individuals begin to recognize and respond to the broader context in which their lives are occurring. Convinced that the process of spiritual transformation is an objective matter, he has initiated meetings with numerous spiritual teachers over the years to explore the truth about the human condition beyond tradition and dogma.

Aware of their mutual interest in objectivity and evolution, I arranged for Andrew Cohen and Dr. Goswami to meet this past September in California. The following excerpts are taken from their lively two-and-a-half-hour dialogue.

by Craig Hamilton

Andrew Cohen: The foundation of my teaching is based on the ancient fact or teaching that there is only one Truth, which as you may or may not know, at least in the common spiritual world, is kind of an unpopular notion because people are very attached to the new age idea that we all have our own truth. To me that one Truth is not an object, it's not a thing and it's also, in the way I'm using it, not the Self either with a capital S. But it is a perspective that is undistorted. So the foundation is an agreement that the Truth itself is an objective fact and it's possible then to realize a perspective of reality, thought and experience that is undistorted and uncorrupted by fear, desire and memory.

Dr. Amit Goswami: Absolutely.

AC: Now the reason why this is significant and what I'm constantly trying to emphasize is the impersonal nature of all of this. In my teaching and in my understanding, what's important is not just if one person can become realized or can become transformed, but to me the truly evolutionary implications in spiritual realization only become manifest when two people are able to meet in the discovery of this objective fact. And the objective fact is not just that there is this substratum which is an ocean of conscious love/bliss that both acknowledge through their own experience, but that there's an objective perspective based on that substratum. There's an objective perspective that can enable the individuals to come to a clear recognition of understanding of what the relationship between the objects that arise in consciousness actually is, and in this way come to the end of conflict within the individual and within the race collectively. And to me this is the real significance of the whole spiritual process.

AG: It's good, well stated. I have a name for this perspective. I call it consciousness. But it is very important to recognize that consciousness is the context in which all phenomena happen.

AC: Exactly.

AG: You cannot define it any better. And then, of course, a variety of questions arise because how does the subject/object separation arise? So this is the kind of question that scientists are very interested in. But there is this other question of what is the responsibility and what is the prerogative of the individual human being, and there you couldn't put it any better. Because how could the individual's prerogative be separate from the social, from the prerogative of the whole?

AC: Precisely.

AG: So obviously we have to go towards an evolution of the whole human race.

I CHOOSE, THEREFORE I AM

As captivated as we are with thoughts and feelings, they derive from old, fixed, learned contexts. Is the same true of free will? Our choices set the context for our action, thus the possibility of a new context arises when we choose. It is just this possibility of jumping out of the old context and into a new one at a higher level that makes us free in our choice...Is it the capacity for choice, then, that makes us conscious of the experiences that we choose? In every moment, we literally face myriad alternative possibilities. From these we choose, and as we choose, we recognize the course of our becoming. Thus our choosing and our recognition of choice defines our self...I choose, therefore I am.

Dr. Amit Goswami
The Self-Aware Universe

THE EVOLUTIONARY IMPULSE

AC: What I'm trying to do is to inspire people to no longer be interested in or tempted by compromise, but to be interested in cultivating an uncompromising relationship to their own deepest insight and revelation into the nature of Truth.

AG: Yes, I put the same thing in the language of creativity; that is, we must be creative whatever the cost is.

AC: Right, but you see for this to work—we're speaking theoretically here—the willingness in the subjects has to be there. Unless a subject is willing to put their own self at risk in order to understand these things themselves, it won't really have any meaning for them. Nothing much can happen.

AG: There is certainly conditioning, there is certainly the urge to create empires, but there is also this urge—

AC: Yes, I call it the evolutionary impulse. It's an impersonal fact of nature. Just like the desire for sex and food, there's an evolutionary impulse that is active in the race.

AG: Evolutionary impulse is a good term for it, and it is there fortunately. And so the point is how to purify that impulse.

AC: Isolate it. What I do when I work with people is I make them aware that it's an impersonal fact, and once the individual discovers that it's already active in them (that's probably why they came to a spiritual teacher in the first place) then to give their conscious awareness to the fact that this impulse has already been activated within themselves. And then they begin to give it more attention. It's brought out of the closet and it becomes stronger and stronger, and then a certain momentum is generated that becomes very powerful.

AG: Right, and the proper teaching also must consist of recognizing how these two other drives, the ignorant conditioning and then also generative conditioning in a sexual relationship, are constantly, constantly creating an obstruction to this.

AC: Constantly distracting, yes. The way I think about this is that the race as a whole has always been trying to evolve—it's part of the evolutionary impulse constantly active within the race. And let's say of the millions of people that are actually even beginning to become aware of this impulse and beginning to respond to it to a certain degree, how many people decide to give themselves unconditionally to a full flowering of this impulse? Very few. And of all those who decide to go that far, how many

actually succeed? Even fewer. But to me when one person has succeeded in truly doing so, the race has evolved. Evolution has occurred. Because to me this whole idea of a collective movement of evolution is something that I don't think is realistic.

AG: What can happen is a change in context that hasn't happened before. I mean we have had changes of context before which were global, although not totally global. It is very interesting that isolated people such as Native Americans here, people in India, people in China, people in Europe, how completely isolated they were and yet they discovered ethics. Ethics has not always been with us. It was only discovered six hundred years before the birth of Christ and that's an amazing finding.

AC: Very amazing.

AG: That we have discovered a context of living globally—this is what quantum physics is all about. I mean it's telling us that in the transcendent realm we are all one, so this ability to discover global truths is there irrespective of geography, time, origin and race...So in this nonlocal domain, if we wake up, then it is very possible that the next global context of living can take a real shift. I don't know which form it's going to come in. It might be unprecedented nonviolence if we really could wake up to the fact that violence is just not acceptable for the human condition. It's not necessary. It may be some sort of unprecedented recognition of idealism that's the basic philosophy, like never making the mistake again about doubting that consciousness is fundamental. So it could be one of these things, but I'm quite confident that unless one of these global perspectives dawns on us, we'll just self-destruct.

AC: Absolutely, unless it happens the self-destruction is obviously inevitable in the not too distant future.

THAT MOST PROFOUND EVOLUTIONARY IMPULSE

I had always been wary of the form and structure of organized religion. It appeared to be suffocating, life-inhibiting and always seemed to ultimately stifle the unconditional and absolute expression of the Truth itself. But after teaching for three years, I began to observe the fact that when a significant number of human beings have come together to experience and manifest the force of evolution as themselves, form and structure are an inevitable necessity. I came to this conclusion only after much reservation. Then I realized that as long as the structure that is the manifestation and expression of collective evolution is constantly being informed by the living realization of the Truth itself by those involved, then the structure would itself become the expression of evolution in action. And more than that, it had become obvious that the truly impersonal implications of evolution for the race as a whole could never become manifest without the creation of structure, because whenever more than one individual is involved, structure of some kind is unavoidable. This was significant because it was then that I began to understand how the birth of true religion had come about. It seemed possible that true religion had always been an expression of the purest, most impersonal manifestation of the evolutionary impulse, but had over time, when the light of living realization faded out, left behind only corpses that had originally been the living expression of evolution itself. Indeed, without the living light to animate them, religious structures degenerate and their effect then actually stifles that most profound evolutionary impulse that originally created them.

Andrew Cohen
from his forthcoming book,
In Pursuit of Sanity

AG: And since we are movements of consciousness I think consciousness is moving that way. How can it not?

AC: Towards?

AG: Towards this kind of a global realization which will enable us to continue and evolve. That is the whole evolutionary impulse of consciousness itself at work.

AC: I feel that you have, for example, the substratum of pure consciousness and that simply is itself. And then we have the evolution of self-discovery that is taking place within the human race in the way we've been speaking about. But I don't think that the evolution of consciousness itself in the way that we've been speaking about it is in any way separate from, for example, this conversation that we're having here today. My excitement, your excitement, my sense of urgency, your sense of urgency, is the evolution of consciousness itself manifesting itself right now. This is it.

AG: This is it. And this is where the power of this movement lies because you and I can clearly participate in this movement at this moment. We are participating, and therefore to the extent that we are participating with that purity of heart and that innocence, change will come. And therefore I'm very optimistic.

THE ROLE OF SCIENCE

AG: My feeling is that science is a very strong language because of mathematics, because of the use of experiment. For the first time, perhaps this objectivity of the Absolute that you were talking about before might make sense in the language of science. When that combines with spirituality, with spiritual people such as yourself, and spiritual disciplines, traditions and philosophies that have been developed from the past—

AC: It can have greater weight.

AG: Yes, perhaps it will be such a greater weight that it could produce transformation at a fairly large scale which hasn't happened before. I'm very optimistic...One of my visions actually is that maybe the time has come—and I know that you are already doing it—where we will have unprecedented communication among teachers. Previously, it's very interesting, teachers have always worked individually, somehow independently of others, and even a little scornfully of others. Perhaps the time has come when we all can start really presenting a very solid agreement; partially because of the improvement of science, because of objective experiments that are being done, and because of the tendency of logic, etc. to also improve, to the extent that you and I can communicate readily and agree that "Okay, this is obvious." If we can do that, then perhaps—it's a big perhaps—a substantial number of people, people who have—

A MATTER OF CURIOSITY

I think that people generally overestimate me. I realize of course, the value of my contributions to science, but I don't consider myself superior or different from any other men...I am not more gifted than anybody else. I am just more curious than the average person and I will not give up on a problem until I have found the proper solution. This is one of my greatest satisfactions in life—solving problems—and the harder they are, the more satisfaction do I get out of them. Maybe you could consider me a bit more patient in continuing with my problems than is the average human being. Now, if you understand what I have just told you, you see that it is not a matter of being more gifted but a matter of being more curious and maybe more patient until you solve a problem.

Albert Einstein

AC: Some open-mindedness.

AG: That's right, open-mindedness and people who intuit that things have got to be more liberating than taking a very fixed position. Otherwise what is the purpose?

AC: Yes, I agree. I don't know anything about science, but I'm sure that there must be as much disagreement in the scientific community as there probably is among spiritual teachers. But at least in science there is this emphasis on objectivity and proof.

AG: And the facts.

AC: In the spiritual world though, as I travel around the world a lot, I'm always trying to meet teachers who I've heard about, who I have respect for, to really try and come together and meet, come to an agreement about what the Truth is and what it has to do with being a human being, which is what all religious life is all about. But it's amazingly difficult to often just be able to meet on what the Truth is and what its relationship is to being a human being.

AG: I know it, and this is precisely part of the reason at this time that I'm speaking to a lot of teachers. It's because of that. Because if we can overcome this, then we can start a scientific investigation and then slowly the process becomes open and then it's not so scary anymore. Right now it is very scary because it's very secret.

AC: One of the things that I'm interested in is to get five or ten of the biggest teachers in the world all in a room together, close the door and then go for it together to try and collectively come to some agreement about what is objectively true, and also to begin to see where everybody is really at. No pretense.

AG: But we will do that. This is precisely what I'm getting at. This is what needs to happen. We must have peer groups among people who are teachers, people who are scientists of consciousness.

AC: I completely agree. There has to be though a sincere willingness in the individual. Those individuals also have to be more interested in what's true than they are in their own position.

AG: But if we make the demand, how could they not? I mean I have an advantage here. I can come and say, "Well, I'm the scientist, I'm studying this phenomenon." People actually do a little more talking with me. I guess from that point they don't feel as threatened. They would feel more threatened if you were coming and telling them because you are a teacher.

AC: Exactly.

AG: I don't present such a threat, but nevertheless we can collectively present this very simple idea that the reason that idealism does not make very much inroad (in the olden days and today) is that we have never been able to present it as people studying it as a science. I mean we're not studying physics, but we are definitely studying something very objective. This idea does not enter people. Look how much objectivity there is in this endeavor.

AC: Not much. There isn't.

AG: The way we do it, it's just total mush. But it doesn't have to be.

AC: I completely agree with you. This is music to my ears because I feel—at least in the world that I travel in—very alone in terms of trying to emphasize the necessity of approaching the Truth as an objective fact, and then once it's discovered, forcing oneself to come to terms with that. That's the only way it can have real purity.

AG: But really that's the only way.

AC: I'm preaching this everywhere I go. Some people recognize it, they say it's perfect, it makes total sense. They feel it, they recognize it and they say, "Ah, but there's nothing for me in that. Nothing for me."

AG: Right, that's precisely the point. There is nothing for you and that's why it works. And subjectivity doesn't have to go away at all because subjectivity is, of course, the basis of all this. It is the objectivity of subjective experience—that's what

we're talking about. But it is because it is ultimately completely objective that it can be completely studied and it can be completely talked about, yet not sacrificing an iota of the individual's subjective experience.

AC: I completely agree. This is music to my ears.

AG: So, you see what's already happening because we are talking about this.

AC: You know in ancient times, so I've heard, what would happen is that the teachers would publicly debate each other about what the nature of Truth was, the structure of reality based on their own experience and realization. And if it was revealed that one individual actually had a higher understanding than the other, that individual would humbly—

AG: Become the disciple of the other.

AC: And also all the followers. You're talking about rare integrity. We're speaking about human beings that really care more about the Truth than they do about themselves. We do not live in a time where people feel this way.

AG: That's true, but also notice that the reason those people were able to do that was because the peer group was very

strong in those days...What you have now is that there is no peer group even within this same community. Two people live in the same town and teach, and they'll not talk to each other. We have deviated that much from wisdom.

AC: Right, I completely agree with you. But the reason is, I think, this fact of what we're speaking about—the Truth being an objective fact and needing to come to terms with that. If spiritual insights are to have any meaning, a lot of people have a lot to lose.

AG: That's right. They lose the weight of their word and this will only make them more afraid.

AC: Absolutely.

AG: They have to understand that and they will as soon as we start systematically developing this peer group.

AC: I'd love to be a part of that or to help in any possible way I can.

AG: It will happen with conversations like this.

AC: This is all that I do. This is my whole life.

AG: Great. ■

Cynicism

The Modern Spiritual Predicament

continued from cover page

the unconditional revelation of the absolute Truth is so awesome in its magnitude and so profound in its implications for the individual who recognizes it, that most simply prefer (although usually without realizing it) to remain at a very safe distance. And what keeps this kind of revelation and the overwhelming intimacy with all of life that it brings at a safe distance is simply the insistence that it is not possible.

It is cynicism that protects the individual from having to even begin to seriously face into the actuality of life. *That is the secret.* It is cynical views and conclusions about that which is absolute, perfect and always overwhelming that protect the individual from having to come to terms with that which is absolute, perfect and always overwhelming.

Cynicism is where the ego always finds refuge. Behind cynical views and conclusions is where the individual hides out, protecting themselves from what seems like quite an intimidating and burdensome task: leaping beyond all

boundaries into the unknown forever. In fact, many unknowingly allow themselves to hide behind a wall of cynicism that rarely allows anyone or anything to penetrate its perimeters. For when that wall falls away, the individual no longer has any protection.

The subtlety involved in the role that cynicism plays in protecting the individual from the whole is often difficult to recognize. Even many who seem to be well on their way along the spiritual path more often than not deeply remain terrified at the thought of going all the way. In this time when so many seem to have embarked on the spiritual journey, how many have truly ventured beyond the superficial layers of spiritual insight and experience?

It is only when the individual sincerely endeavors to venture beyond the superficial and intends only to succeed absolutely that every vestige of hiding place for the ego that cynicism always presents can be abolished forever. ■

Through the Looking Glass

by Hal Blacker

Reflections on a Spiritual Controversy

Looking around at the spiritual world today, I often have the disconcerting feeling that I am peering through a mirror into another dimension where things seem familiar yet strange, like backward images of themselves, that will not right themselves no matter how hard one squints or blinks. The frequency of this sensation is both fascinating and unnerving, to say the least, but what is even more striking is that this experience appears to be felt mutually and with equal intensity by the inhabitants of either side of the looking glass when they become aware of each other, sometimes giving rise to very unexpected responses. I wrote this article because this peculiar yet common phenomenon and the perspectives that it reveals are so compelling that I could not help but explore, describe and share my discoveries with others.

MY FIRST MEETING WITH ANDREW COHEN was born out of controversy, and now over three-and-a-half years later the same controversy that brought me to Andrew has not weakened but only continues to grow. But now I find myself firmly on the other side. Contemplating the paradigm shift involved in this change can make you dizzy. It is as if due to a defect in vision everything appeared like a photographic negative until the shift occurred. This kind of change in perspective from black to white, from insanity to sanity is simultaneously so simple and so radical that it is difficult for me now to relate to the perspective that saw Andrew Cohen's very existence and his teaching as an affront. Now, affront and outrage at his teaching seem to be completely incomprehensible responses. But I am constantly reminded of those

responses because he, and now myself as a student of his, frequently meet them wherever we go. What are the seeds and what is the significance of this reaction of outrage that I once expressed myself and that I now so often recognize in others?

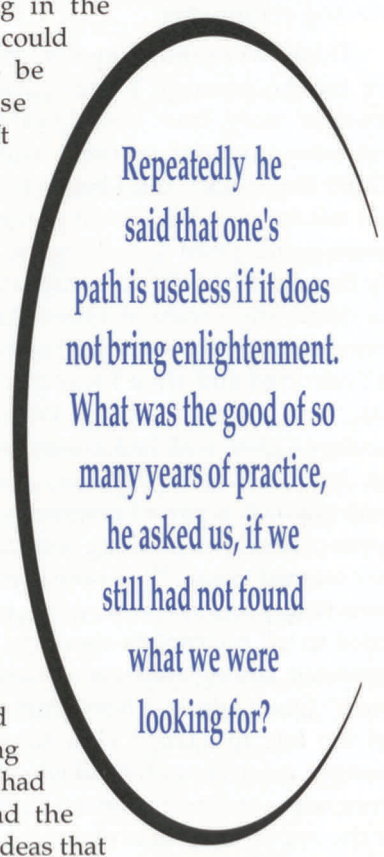
I had been a student of the renowned and also controversial Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche for over sixteen years when I first heard that a young American man, a student of a disciple of the great Indian sage Ramana Maharshi, had become enlightened and was going to be teaching in Boulder, Colorado. It was merely curiosity that made me make a mental note of his visit and decide I might go see him, for I thought I had found my path in Tibetan Buddhism a long time ago. But after Andrew Cohen

had been in Boulder for less than a week, I heard that he had made critical remarks about the usefulness of meditation and its lack of results in Trungpa's students. I knew then that I had to go to defend my teacher and fellow students and try to prevent him from leading anyone astray.

When I went to see him, he almost immediately began challenging the audience, many of whom like myself were long-term students of Chögyam Trungpa, to take a hard look at where they had come to after so many years of study and meditation. Repeatedly he said that one's path is useless if it does not bring enlightenment. What was the good of so many years of practice, he asked us, if we still had not found what we were looking for? I was shocked and I was angry, yet I could not help but listen closely to what he was saying. It reflected my own unstated feelings of frustration at what I knew was the lack of fundamental change in myself and my fellow Buddhist students despite numerous retreats, experiences and meetings with famous and learned teachers. Andrew stirred in me the intimation that somewhere along the road I had given up the sweet and fragile passion for liberation in this birth. Still, what I mainly felt was outrage. How dare he, a young American, question the teachings of my master, the eleventh in a line of reborn enlightened sages and the holder of the wisdom of 2500 years of Buddhist tradition?

I argued with him endlessly. "Why," I asked, "do you stress enlightenment all the time? I think this goal orientation denigrates the present moment." "You are wrong, dead wrong," he told me. "It is exactly the opposite." I was disturbed by the degree of seriousness I saw in him. "Is it possible to be too serious about spiritual matters?" I asked. "No," he replied simply. Day after day I came back to argue and debate this man. He constantly stressed the importance of one's intention to be free, over and above any practices or techniques. I was affected by his clarity, simplicity and sincerity, but I could not easily bring myself to question the many beliefs that I had invested in for so long. How dare he question the effectiveness of meditation practice? Did not all the great masters teach meditation? And yet in his presence I felt the reality of a spontaneous meditation deeper than any I had ever known. It was clear that despite his assertion of the inability of meditation techniques to bring liberation, meditation itself was his greatest love, as he said. But even in the face of my direct experience, the inertia that had resulted from many years of seeking without finding would not let go. I doubted the reality of the bliss and insight that was beginning to explode within me. My mind tenaciously asked: how could such bliss and insight have as its source a young American outside the Buddhist tradition that I held in the highest esteem? After a short time, however, all my fundamental questions had been answered and I was experiencing a profundity of conviction in the reality of enlightenment in this life as I had never dared to experience before. I finally had to surrender to what by then I knew was the truth within my own heart speaking through him.

I realized then that a circle had been completed. Many years ago as a member of the crazy wisdom lineage of Tibetan Buddhism I had, like Lewis Carroll's storybook Alice, entered a looking glass world where different rules (or even no rules at all) applied. Entering this world, I was thrilled at first by the shock that it presented to all my previous conceptions. Anything seemed possible, and almost everything was permitted. Guided by the example of my crazy wisdom guru, I thought that the spontaneous fulfillment of almost any desire could be a path to liberation, as long as it was done with mindfulness, and that alcoholic intoxication, if indulged in with the same frame of mind, could lead one to the coveted state of non-discrimination. The attempt to live a life of purity was viewed as unrealistic and the inordinate desire for liberation was viewed as an unsophisticated distraction from Buddhist practice. There was really nothing to attain and one could be liberated just as one is, we were taught, and my fellow students and I took that to mean we did not have to make the effort to really change in any practical way. Someday, when liberation came (perhaps many lifetimes from now) everything that confused us would automatically be clarified. In the meantime, experiences of dissatisfaction with myself or others on the one hand, or even bliss and insight on the other, should be viewed as just passing states of mind. Since there was no real basis for discriminating in the relative world, nothing could definitively be said to be either better or worse than anything else. Left with no means to discriminate between what was appropriate or inappropriate, we simply submitted to everything our teacher said and did. Though filled with excitement at first, over the years I gradually, without being aware of it, lost my fire, lowered my sights and settled into confusion and compromise. But now I had emerged and it all looked completely different. The black and whitesquares of the looking glass world chessboard had reversed their hues, and the pieces, my accumulated ideas that



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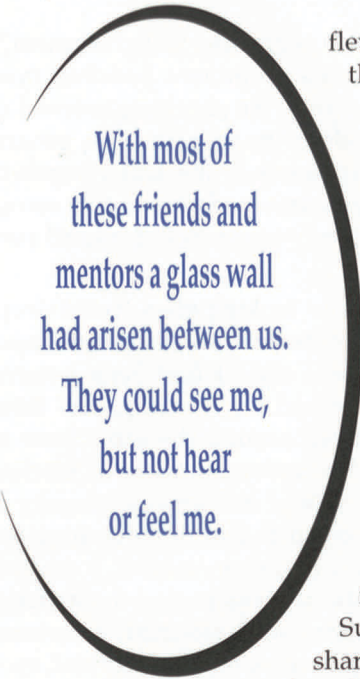
had seemed so alive and real, were now seen for what they were: inanimate constructs. I still had tremendous respect for my deceased teacher Trungpa Rinpoche (I could not deny the power of his realization which I had experienced) and great affection for the many Buddhist friends with whom I had spent so many years practicing and studying. But many of the assumptions we had shared about the nature of spirituality I had now left behind. I saw that giving the highest priority to my desire to be free was itself the basis for discrimination between that which liberates and that which binds, and this insight gave me a previously unknown sense of independence and clarity of perspective. I recognized that I had been living my life in a divided state in which I had often betrayed my stated intention to be free because of my confused priorities. I realized that my passion for liberation was the most precious thing I had and I knew that I had to make radical changes in my life in order to express this passion without compromise. Like a snake shedding his dead skin, I emerged from so many ideas that I had previously thought were inseparable from me, and I felt a deep connection with the intensity of life, an excitement and confidence about throwing myself into the unknown, and a sense of joy and freedom like I had never imagined. My love for the teachings that had revealed this perspective to me was immense, my gratitude to Andrew immeasurable, and my joy in the company of others whose eyes were open was uncontainable. I knew that while anything was possible, there was nothing else for me but to move to California and join Andrew's growing community.

Things were unfolding at a terrifying speed and I tried to live by the message I had garnered from mythology in Orpheus' story, from the biblical story of Lot and his wife, and from my contemporary childhood hero Bob Dylan: "Don't look back!" But I began to see that not looking back was not so easy. The gestalt of the looking glass, the world where nothing had to make sense, continued to pursue me. My Buddhist friends' responses to the changes in me made me doubt my sanity at times. After talking for over two hours, telling my meditation instructor of many years what had occurred and what I was going to do, all she could say was, "You'll like California." With most of these friends and mentors a glass wall had arisen between us. They could see me, but not hear or feel me. Some viewed me with the knowing look a parent reserves for their adolescent in the throes of first love. Looking both nostalgic and worldly-wise they seemed to say, "I've been there and it is very sweet, but when reality sets in you are going to be disappointed." When I tried to tell my friends about the purity and passion I had witnessed among Andrew's students they said, "Wait ten years." One night in a restaurant a friend warned me, "It's not too late to change your mind." Others reacted more strongly. A former girlfriend who had been one of Trungpa's seven wives invited me over for dinner one night. I was glad for the opportunity to explain what I feared they all thought

was a betrayal, and to tie up some personal loose ends in the process. But when I arrived she sat me down and began to unleash a tirade against me. "Have you gone insane?" she practically shouted. "How could you leave the greatest crazy wisdom teacher that ever lived?" "But I still have great love and respect for him," I stated. "Besides, he is not alive now. If he was I would speak to him and get his blessing. I know he would give it to me because all that I am doing is giving myself completely to the desire to be free. I am sure he would agree that this is what he really wanted from all of us." She exploded. "How can you be so inconsiderate as to rub it in my face, his wife, that my husband is dead!" she cried. She grabbed my coat from a chair and threw it at me with surprising force yelling, "Get out!" As my coat catapulted towards my face I instinctively batted it away. With horror we both looked as it flew to a nearby table and knocked over a picture of Trungpa. Now she was really mad and accused me of the ultimate disrespect. I got out of there glad the incident was over, but several weeks later an old Buddhist friend from Halifax called me. "What's going on?" he said. "I heard you went insane and threw something at a picture of Trungpa." I tried to explain that it was not like that but I never heard from him again.

The clash of two worlds continued to haunt me as I wrapped up my law business and prepared to move to be with Andrew and his students. At times I woke with a start in the middle of the night, gasping for breath, chills moving up my spine. What if they were all right and I had gone crazy? Images from the 1950s science fiction movie *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* emerged from the corners of my dark room. Had I been hypnotized and unsuspectingly had my soul stolen by malevolent forces, becoming one of the "pod-people" while I was enjoying the bliss, as my friends seemed to think? But no, things came back into focus and I knew that what I was doing by leaving behind my life of unfulfillment and compromise was right. I still had doubts, however. During this period my father, a psychologist for over thirty years, hearing about my plans,

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flew out to see me. We spent three days together with me at the wheel driving through the mountains of Colorado, talking and talking. I was consoled that even though he admitted he did not understand from his personal experience most of what I said, it made sense to him and he pronounced me sane.

O

How my heart sang when I finally arrived in California! Surrounded by others who shared my newfound seriousness about liberation and the determina-

tion to live it in every aspect of our lives, the night-creeps and battles with the topsy-turvy world of the looking glass began to fade from my memory. I was challenged, inspired and lifted by the fire of joy and investigation that was burning around me. Being with the community of Andrew's students, I felt like I had finally come home to where I always belonged, and at the same time had entered into a previously unimagined condition of trust and communion with others. I had no way of knowing that an even stranger trip through the looking glass was about to begin, courtesy of my teacher's own guru H.W.L. Poonja. The fairy-tale relationship Poonja and Andrew shared was about to fall apart. Although Andrew was still receiving letters of love, praise and affirmation from him, like those he had always received since soon after their meeting, many reports began to emerge that Poonja was secretly criticizing Andrew, especially disagreeing with Andrew's emphasis on the relationship between enlightenment and purity of conduct. It later became clear that Poonja had apparently always held strong views to the contrary, feeling that any stress on ethical conduct in relationship to spiritual realization was an expression of profound ignorance and unenlightenment. In fact, some of those who had found Andrew's call to rise up out of compromise too challenging were, ironically, finding complete relief from that challenge in the company of Andrew's teacher. Many even returned from visits with his teacher having been declared "enlightened" and angrily began to dismiss Andrew's emphasis on the need for closing the gap between one's spiritual realization and one's behavior. When Andrew approached his teacher directly and asked him if there was anything about his teaching that he was unhappy with, his teacher said, "No, I am completely satisfied," and reaffirmed his full support. But immediately more reports ar-

rived that his teacher was continuing to make critical remarks. As I became increasingly aware of the emerging conflict, my brain, unable to comprehend it, began to oscillate again between black and white. I began to doubt everything, sometimes his teacher, sometimes Andrew, sometimes my own sanity. It was the Boulder night-creeps all over, but this time during the waking day.

By then the recognition that I had had of Andrew in Boulder had been tried and tested and found to be true by my close observation of him in a multiplicity of situations in California. He had never betrayed the insight, integrity and sincerity that had caused me to become his student. But hadn't he become transformed into this awakened condition by his teacher Poonja? If now, as it appeared, Poonja who was the source of Andrew's awakening was lying and demonstrating hypocrisy and obvious misunderstanding what might that say about Andrew? On the other hand if Poonja's awakening was powerful, as I knew it must be, then was not Andrew violating the most fundamental dictum not to contradict or doubt one's own teacher even in the face of inconsistent behavior? As a crazy wisdom Buddhist for so many years, I had been schooled in the importance of lineage, and taught that everything the teacher does is pure, even if it appears otherwise. I had approached Trungpa's womanizing and drunkenness in this way, believing that its purpose was to propel me above the preconceptions of conventional morality. Perhaps this was the way to explain Poonja's obviously erratic behavior, I thought. After all, how could someone be enlightened yet still be caught in delusion? Were not these two states mutually contradictory? Suddenly I remembered a long-forgotten lecture I had heard at Naropa Institute in 1974. Aghananda Bharati, a western Hindu monk and scholar who, clad in his yellow renunciate robes, had wandered throughout the length and breadth of India for over twenty years, had warned the audience that enlightenment and moral character did not necessarily have anything to do with one another. He told of meeting many sages who could drop off into profound samadhis at the drop of a hat and whose demeanor and emanation showed their extraordinary attainment. Still, he said, while some were everything you would expect from a saint, others were as boorish as the most unwanted dinner guest you might ever have the misfortune to encounter. Some were worse still, exhibiting extreme pride, aggression or cupidity. I could not accept this at the time, dismissed it and relegated it to the hidden recesses of my memory. But now it reemerged and lent a new perspective to my experience with Poonja and my own previous teacher and the revelations over the past years about corruption in so many other recent spiritual leaders. My mind began to reel. The reality of the possibility of the coexistence of realization and impurity struck me with its undeniable truth and application to the current situation. I realized that even a profoundly awakened person's condition could still be tainted with delusion. Such a person might

express awakening in many respects yet still be capable of behaving with hypocrisy, compromise and egotism. This helped to explain many of the contradictions and the often destructive behavior that I had seen in so many spiritual leaders over the last twenty years and that I was now witnessing in my own teacher's guru.

Meanwhile the situation between Andrew and his teacher escalated and the looking glass world once again appeared to be pursuing me, the myriad reflections that it cast becoming stranger than ever. Poonja was so unhappy with Andrew's emphasis on the relationship between realization and one's behavior that he instructed Ganga, one of his students who had begun to teach, to travel to places where Andrew had taught in order to counter his influence. Strangely, many saw neither the strength of Poonja's rejection of such a holistic teaching nor the duplicity with which he behaved as a problem. His students generally regarded his duplicity as a

"leela," a traditional term used to indicate both play and teaching. Later,

when asked how she understood her guru's deception,

Ganga replied, "Teachers have lied to their students throughout history." For

Poonja's students, as well as for a surprising number of others, such behavior, like play, did not have to make sense and could even be a teaching because it supposedly expressed the ultimate senselessness of manifest reality itself. This kind of view gives license to the individual to justify almost any behavior in the name of Truth.

But hardly anyone seemed shocked by the nihilism of this and similar views. Recently, asked whether an enlightened teacher is responsible for his behavior, Poonja replied, "Behavior is a part of ignorance," and also emphatically declared, "He [the guru] is a free man. No one can command him. Not even God can command him. God listens to his commands." I found it bewildering that so many people seemed oblivious to what seemed to me pride and an outright rejection of reason in this statement and others like it. "Buddha spent forty-nine years speaking, speaking, speaking. And I don't think he touched the point.

As I became increasingly aware of the emerging conflict, my brain, unable to comprehend it, began to oscillate again between black and white...It was the Boulder night-creeps all over, but this time during the waking day.

Why should he speak for fifty years after enlightenment?" Poonja said in an interview in a prominent Buddhist (yes, Buddhist) publication. Over time, the shocking reversal of reality evident in these kinds of images and the general response to them became apparent to me and I began to recognize them for what they were: madness. In that recognition I was able to breathe freely again. Still it was all very disturbing.

As my objectivity about the looking glass world deepened, I began to look around at the entirety of the contemporary spiritual world. For some time I had been hearing various criticisms of Andrew and his teaching, and these were continuing. Most centered around the same bone of contention that had caused his separation with his teacher: his teaching that realization should manifest as integrity in this world. Many people seemed to find this teaching too much. Others, like me when I first met Andrew, found his seriousness about the immediacy of realization threatening. The responses to these teachings were fascinating because, despite my familiarity with such responses at this point, each time I encountered them I began to flash back to the same disconcerting oscillation between black and white that occurred when I first met Andrew. But by now, though disconcerting, the looking glass world had no hold on me.

Why is it that so many find Andrew's teaching about the immediate possibility of enlightenment here and now, and his emphasis on integrity so hard to bear? When I heard these teachings I was also hard-pressed by them. The immediacy of enlightenment leaves no room to delay, no protection against urgency and no excuse for going anything less than all the way. It reveals the myriad ways one might be giving oneself time and room to not be serious. The emphasis on integrity, on the other hand, presses one to conform one's life to one's realization without compromise and vividly reveals all the inconsistencies and contradictions that one would rather not see, or would rather excuse. When I met Andrew I had been squeezed between these two teachings as if between the two plates of a tightening vice and had begun to squirm. This was the root of all my arguments and affront. But now, having emerged through this test to the other side, I am inspired by both the simplicity and the all-encompassing nature of these teachings, which directly address all conceivable responses in relation to the highest possibility.

The backward images in the looking glass world that have emerged in the controversy around Andrew still proliferate, sometimes seeming endless. Recently I heard that a former meditation teacher of Andrew's, hearing that he had become powerfully awakened and had begun to teach, remarked in a statement that illustrates the clash of two paradigms, "Andrew was only interested in enlightenment. He could never settle into the practice." A Zen teacher, hearing that Andrew stresses the living of one's understanding, warned his students, "Stay away from Andrew. He teaches morality." Even the complete integrity of Andrew's

behavior calls forth unexpected responses. An editor of a prominent Buddhist magazine, in discussing the possibility of an interview with Andrew, seemed doubtful but remarked that if there was a scandal around him "that would make a very interesting article."

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Still the controversy continues. It is early 1992 and I am seated with a friend in the large audience hall which doubles as the abbot's sitting room in the most palatial monastery in Boudha, Nepal. Boudha, near Kathmandu, is one of two leading centers of Tibetan Buddhism in exile. The hall is decorated with ancient Tibetan religious statues, paintings, ritual objects and brightly colored silk brocade. I am waiting to speak with the presiding lama there, the renowned Chökyi Nyima. I had met him some days before in a hallway of the monastery while waiting to get permission to attend a highly acclaimed teaching event given by his father, the universally respected Buddhist elder, Tulku Urgyen. I am no longer afraid of "looking back" towards my Buddhist past in this way, but now find what it reveals most fascinating. While standing in the hallway during my earlier visit to the monastery, a monk had approached me. He asked me in English if I had a teacher, to which I replied, "Yes, his name is Andrew Cohen. Have you heard of him?" He nodded and immediately asked me if Andrew is enlightened. I told him that in my opinion, yes he is. Then he surprised me by asking, "Are you enlightened?" I said that while I had had a glimpse, I could not claim full enlightenment. To my astonishment he then proceeded to press his index finger on the middle of my forehead, and made wooshing sounds while waving his hands upwards towards my head, telling me that now I was enlightened and that I should go and teach my teacher. I was not sure what he was talking about but having spent a fair amount of time in Tibetan Buddhist circles I knew that anything was possible. Was this some kind of esoteric teaching, merely fun and games or an intentional insult? I respectfully told him that I could not presume to teach my teacher, that my teacher teaches me. Around that time Tulku Urgyen entered the hallway and the monk left me to approach him. Only later did I find out that this monk was Chökyi Nyima himself, the head of the monastery and one of the most popular teachers of the Tibetan Dzogchen school. Later that same day, a western Tibetan Buddhist acquaintance that I saw in a restaurant winked knowingly at me and said, "I heard that Chökyi Nyima is playing with you. You are in for it now," then smiled. Her attitude indicated that I should regard this fact as a rare opportunity for which I should be grateful.

So today I was patiently waiting my turn to speak to the revered lama I had met earlier in the hallway to ask him what exactly he meant by his remarks, and why he made them. But

when my turn finally came, try as I might, I could not get a straight answer. My polite and formal statement that I was glad to meet him was hardly out of my mouth when he asked me why I was glad since he had insulted me (and implicitly, my teacher). I told him that was why I was here, in order to find out if it was meant to be an insult or something else. Frankly, I was prepared for him to claim that it was a crazy wisdom teaching, or perhaps a homily about us all having something to teach—explanations I would have had no recourse but to accept. But since he had said it was an insult, I asked him, being careful to preserve the tone of respect given a man of his position, why he would do such a thing, and if he knew anything at all about my teacher. He then replied that it was just a joke. Not sure now which it was, I said, "Then it was just a joke?" But now he sidestepped the issue saying, "If you want me to say it was a joke, I say it was a joke. Whatever you want me to say, I tell you." I responded that I only wanted him to tell me the truth. About this time we were interrupted, however. A visiting western student who obviously had great respect for the lama arrived bearing gifts. In front of myself, my friend and a retinue of about six other westerners, the lama asked the man if he remembered the new name he had given him. It was common practice, I knew, for a lama to give his disciple a religious name, usually one meant to be inspiring and thought to reflect the enlightened potential that the lama could see in the person with his unusual insight. The man, looking sheepish, replied, "Yes." "Say it," the lama said. "Chicken-heart," the man replied and the lama and the others in his entourage laughed. My discomfort with the situation raised a significant notch higher.

After this interlude I tried to resume our discussion but with little success. Messengers came from other monasteries. Other western students arrived bearing gifts, all as diffident as "Chicken-heart." A fax arrived, a phone call came, the lama was brought his cordless phone. I began to realize that except for the modern electronic appurtenances I could have been in the court of a medieval lord, amongst the customary retainers and sycophants. When there was a pause in the flurry of activity I gently tried to bring the conversation back to the purpose of my visit. "Why you want to know the truth? Why you care?" the lama asked me. I found myself in the awkward position of trying to explain why a person is accountable for their statements, why one should be prepared to stand behind what one says, something the lama did not seem to understand or be interested in doing. My friend and I were finally dismissed when the lama said, "You wait. You will find out. You will find out."

We left the monastery, walking past the lama's Mercedes Benz parked in the courtyard, into the streets of Boudha filled with beggars and devout Tibetan refugees, towards the all-knowing Buddha eyes painted on the Great Stupa in the center of the village. Another trip through the looking glass, I thought, and it is not over yet. ○



TRUE

WAKING

***T**HESE DAYS MANY PEOPLE are attached to strong notions of independence, often without having any clear idea of what it actually means to be independent. Indeed, one has to be willing to pay a very high price to be truly independent in a world where so few actually are.*

If we are sincerely interested in becoming independent human beings, then it is first imperative that we look deeply enough within ourselves to recognize that as human beings we are all dependent upon conclusions that we have reached about the nature of reality and our own identity, in order to know how to respond to life in a meaningful way. What becomes important therefore is that we question whether the conclusions we have come to are in fact accurate.

When we dare to look beyond the superficial we are usually surprised to discover how terrified we have been of losing control. Seeing for the first time how deeply threatened we are of being overwhelmed by love and how intimidated we have been by vulnerability and intimacy, we begin to recognize how for so long we have been unknowingly protecting ourselves by hiding behind false and wrong conclusions about the nature of reality and our own identity, including notions of independence. In this way, we begin to see how false and wrong conclusions about the nature of reality and of our own identity, including those of independence, serve to create a sense of security, where none actually exists.

Identification with false and wrong notions of self always keeps us separate from the ecstasy of true spiritual union. It is ironic to discover how through blindly adhering to unexamined notions of independence we often end up creating the very prison we are convinced that we want to escape from.

A.C.

A dialogue with Andrew Cohen

INDEPENDENCE

UP FROM THE DREAM OF INDIVIDUALITY

Question:

How could notions of independence keep us separate from spiritual union?

Andrew: Many people are more concerned with independence than they are in taking risks spiritually. In fact, a blind adherence to the presumed need to be independent all too often becomes a justification for the individual to allow themselves to remain separate. The need to be independent, which in a mundane sense really means remaining separate, usually takes precedence over the longing to realize for oneself the fact of no separation whatsoever between self and other (which is one definition of spiritual union). Indeed, the experiential recognition of no separation ultimately challenges every concept that the individual could cling to for personal identity, including *all* notions of independence.

Interestingly enough, when one calls up the whole notion of independence, it automatically brings with it a feeling of being separate; and related to that feeling of being separate is a sense of power. The notion of independence usually relates to a sense of personal power, because theoretically as long as you're independent then nobody can touch you and nobody can hurt you. That is why the notion of independence so often serves to make one feel secure. If one intends to finally destroy the painful illusion of separation and isolation, then the attachment to the notion of independence from which one has derived so much security and safety eventually has to be given up.

When someone sincerely intends to liberate themselves from the sense of isolation and separation to realize perfect freedom and absolute relatedness, then every notion of self, including all notions of independence, has to be questioned.

The pursuit of genuine spiritual freedom is not safe, and allowing oneself to continue to assume a safe relationship to that which is absolute, when deeply scrutinized, will always be found to be an expression of fear, doubt and ignorance. The pursuit of spiritual freedom is unsafe for any part of us that still clings, consciously or unconsciously, to any need to be special, unique, secure or independent.

If one is serious about liberation, one has to come to that point where one is finally willing to dive unconditionally into the living fact of perfect insecurity. It is the eventual willingness to accept the living fact of total insecurity that means one is ready to truly let go. It is only then that the individual no longer needs a place to exist where they feel special, unique, secure or independent in order to feel safe.

Are you saying then that the need to be independent is always motivated by the need to protect and ultimately separate oneself?

Andrew: No. But the fact of the matter is, most people are terrified of being *truly* connected. One reason why it is so important for people to believe they are independent human beings is because they are so terrified of real intimacy. You see, the ability to be profoundly intimate consistently and without fear is a big part of what spiritual attainment is all about. Indeed, the individual who has succeeded in liberating themselves from the emotional and psychological need to be special, unique, separate and even independent in order to feel safe finds it difficult to be other than intimate.

What then does it mean to be intimate?

Andrew: Intimate means free from pretense. That means free from the need to be false or unreal in any way. In fact, if you're serious you want to come to that point when there is no

longer any distance created between you and reality as it is. That means the experience of fear or desire will no longer be able to create a gap between you and the rest of life. That means you're deeply in touch—in touch with yourself, in touch with life as a whole and finally free from the separation that fear and desire create. Deeply undistracted by everything that has ever happened and everything that could ever

oneself and another, between oneself and the rest of life. The emotional and psychological need to be separate is an expression of the terror of the discovery that no separation actually exists. Separation is actually volitionally created by an individual who is deeply terrified of getting too close to the absolute Truth of non-duality, and is therefore clinging to false and wrong views about the nature of their own identity

so that the illusion of difference and experience of isolation will survive. And as long

The emotional and psychological need to be separate is an expression of the terror of the discovery that no separation actually exists.

happen, you will have no choice but to be extraordinarily present, unusually available and profoundly receptive.

If you want to experience this kind of profound intimacy, you have to be willing to consistently take big risks without needing to hide behind *any* notions of self, including those of independence. If you want to discover that profound intimacy that is the expression of true spiritual freedom, you have to be willing to be excruciatingly vulnerable. It's too much for most people—too raw and too real. Most keep a shell around them and want God to sweep them off their feet without having to remove that shell. You *have* to be willing to remove that shell and stand without it forevermore—no matter what happens.

But most people do not want to allow themselves to become that vulnerable because they are afraid of being hurt or taken advantage of.

Andrew: People have very good reasons for feeling that way. But the individual who wants to be free, the individual who wants to discover *true* independence, can no longer use those reasons as excuses for remaining separate. That individual *has* to be willing to take the risk of allowing themselves to be consistently vulnerable and in touch, even when it may be difficult or threatening.

But when one is frightened it's very difficult to remain that vulnerable.

Andrew: The individual in whom the mere presence of fear automatically inhibits their ability to remain vulnerable is still clinging knowingly or unknowingly to false or wrong notions about the nature of their own identity. Only the individual who is entertaining false notions of self will feel the need to be separate in the face of fear and confusion.

As long as there is a psychological or emotional need to see oneself as being separate in any way in order to feel safe, then distance is literally created in time and space—between

as any notion of separation continues to survive, the individual will experience a deluded sense of security in the infinite and often chaotic ocean of life where no security actually exists. It's similar to being in the middle of the ocean without a raft while at the same time convincing oneself that one is very securely resting on a lounge chair on the upper deck of a large oceanliner. As long as notions of individuality or independence stem from the need to feel secure in any way, they must be false.

So how then does one discover what you call true independence?

Andrew: The way to find true independence is through the cultivation of a very unusual interest in the discovery of what is true. That means one has to dare to question every assumption and conclusion one has come to about what is true, and in this way, to slowly but surely make the effort to come to terms with reality as *it* is. It is a very delicate process for an individual to genuinely inquire into the nature of the Real in such a way that they are not afraid of discovering *any* possible answer. The sole motivating factor in this investigation must be the pursuit of the Real and the Real alone.

That individual who is *independently* interested in wanting to know what is true, who is attached to the pursuit of the Truth alone, because they have realized that nothing less will reveal the Truth as it is, will find a way to do it.

Those individuals who have some interest, but who are not independently committed to looking beyond the superficial, will never become truly independent. They will be followers forever. The individual who has realized true independence is not a follower anymore. He or she is finally able to stand alone and think and know for themselves. The truly independent individual has utterly, perfectly and finally liberated themselves from their own mind, and therefore, from everyone else's mind. That individual has awakened fully from the dream of individuality and from the fear-motivated need to be an independent individual in order to feel different, be separate or seem unique in any way. ■

"If You Meet the Buddha on the Road... Follow Him!"

WE ARE TOLD THAT THE GREATEST SPIRITUAL FIGURES of the last several thousand years burned with an exalted devotion for Truth and a rare and remarkable intensity for life. Their influence on the world's cultures, histories and ways of life can hardly be exaggerated, such was the impact of these few individuals. Whether we are followers and believers of these pioneers of human evolution or not, we are unable to escape their influence, so indelibly have their legacies been imprinted upon our collective psyches. And while no doubt in many cases the philosophies of these spiritual giants have been used to justify unfathomable hatred and strife between those of different creeds, their human example of what is possible has held out a hand of hope to those immersed in the swamp of human struggle, showing that indeed there is a way out of the ignorance and the madness of conflict that human life so often is.

It seems that most of us have a paradoxical relationship to these great historical figures, feeling close to them while also feeling them to be very far away. On the one hand, we have love, reverence and devotion for the virtues they displayed, the wisdom, passion and courage they embodied. In contemplating their characters we may feel that we are in communion with the deepest, most valued parts of ourselves. In them, we may recognize simultaneously both our highest potential and the truth of our own self-nature.

On the other hand, in regarding these Masters of the human spirit as spiritual icons, we have given many of them an almost mythical status. As a result, instead of relating to these individuals as catalysts for an equally profound realization and sense of responsibility in ourselves, the general tendency is to separate ourselves away from them and their attainment, by seeing them as "special cases." It is as if these individuals were almost "freaks of nature," aberrations of a sort, like an exceedingly rare shell found on the beach, or a four-leaf clover.

Indeed, no doubt the rarity of their attainment is even far more profound than the examples just described. It seems natural, then, to consider them with wonder, awe and great respect. But in relating to them less as human beings than as cosmic anomalies, most of us unconsciously erect a buffer of safety between these individuals and ourselves, thereby protecting ourselves from having to fully face into and rise up to the potentially revolutionary implications of their condition and the lives that they led.



*A
two-part
article
by
Brad Roth*

And so while deriving great faith and solace from the fact that these individuals were victorious in their spiritual journeys, the relevance of these individuals to our lives usually remains limited to their being sources of inspiration, ultimately having only a relatively superficial impact on the reality of our own personal predicament. We may look to them in times of crisis, or even pattern our spiritual search on their teachings, but most seekers deeply feel ambivalent and skeptical about (and even have aversion towards) the possibility of personally taking the radical leap these role models pointed to. Most lack the extraordinary sense of urgency and conviction these trailblazers displayed, and so in the face of the fire of these powerfully awakened human examples, for almost all, the possibility of permanent and radical success seems very far away.



Are not most of us drawn to and smitten by the greatness of these pioneers into dimensions of higher consciousness and deepest wisdom? At the same time, are not most of us deeply terrified by the prospect of standing out and above the spiritual status quo in the way that these Masters did; of taking full responsibility for ourselves and for the Truth itself? Like children to our spiritual forefathers, we love and look up to them, emulate them (and even rebel against them); at the same time, just as small children are dependent upon and cling desperately to their parents in the seemingly overwhelming and incomprehensible world of adulthood, so are most seekers deeply shaken and daunted at the prospect of truly standing alone in the midst of the raw and naked chaos that is Life.

The call to Liberation beckons and soothes a serious seeker like a roaring campfire in the midst of a cold winter night. Seeing a light in the darkness, we draw closer. Feeling the heat, we come closer still. But even as we sigh with relief at the comforting warmth of Truth, deeply most of us keep a wary eye to make sure the flames do not come too close. Wishing to bask in the glory and glow of revelation without diving in and becoming one with it, most try to keep a healthy distance between themselves and that which ultimately spells their own extinction. A rare few unhesitatingly throw themselves in, emerging to passionately engage with others, but they are likely to be met with less than a welcoming response. Some may even try to put out the flame in that individual, or run away screaming, because they don't want to catch on fire themselves.

One who has realized and is focused

on that which is unlimited, presents an immediate threat to those still attached to "the false sense of self" and the notions of reality this idea helps give rise to. He or she represents, manifests and points towards the highest potential of human evolution, and makes clear, simply in being themselves, the possibility and challenge of radical and permanent transformation here and now. When confronted with such an individual the seeker is thrown back on themselves, and all excuses and rationalizations for not having taken the same leap become ever more apparent. Perhaps this is why some of the truly revolutionary teachers who are now universally esteemed faced such tremendous opposition while alive. Distanced by time and location, it may be easier to appreciate their courage and passionate conviction for the Truth than it would be if we were approached by these individuals ourselves and had to decide then and there, "Do I want to be Free, and am I willing to give up my life as I've known it for that end?"



Recently while thinking about the Buddha and other great teachers, I began to reflect on what they might have been like as individual human beings, rather than spiritual icons. I found myself leaving aside romantic ideals and scenarios and letting in the possibility that these individuals were in many ways just like most other human beings—experiencing the same thoughts and feelings, enticed by similar temptations. In this contemplation, the Buddha, for example, suddenly looks less like a God, a distant and idealized archetype, inaccessible and so far high up on a pedestal that he cannot be recognized by many as a human being. In my mind's eye, he begins to look more like a man. I found that taken deeply, such contemplation presents an immediate and outrageous challenge, which shouts out to the one who is thinking such thoughts, "What about you?!"

The essential message shared by the Buddha and other great teachers, if we look beyond the particular differences in their philosophies, was to give all of one's heart, breath, body and soul to the realization of and abidance in that which is beyond the mind; to a revelation, realization and understanding infinitely more vast than the limited perspective of reality that is the norm. They gave all of themselves to and for that one possibility and they ceaselessly urged others to realize what they had realized and to become as they were: not followers of romantic and idealized images, but fully committed to and eventually identical with Perfect Liberation.

Yet in many spiritual circles these days, seekers inspired by the living

They gave all of themselves to and for that one possibility and they ceaselessly urged others to realize what they had realized and to become as they were: not followers of romantic and idealized images, but fully committed to and eventually identical with Perfect Liberation.

An enthusiastic display of interest in the end of the search is frequently seen as an expression of misunderstanding, rather than the pure and sincere longing for the heart's release; a manifestation of the wanting mind rather than an inspired heart.

possibility of Enlightenment are often dissuaded from being too passionate in their desire to awaken; their vigor and innocence subtly if not overtly regarded as naïveté or youthful idealism. An enthusiastic display of interest in the end of the search is frequently seen as an expression of misunderstanding, rather than the pure and sincere longing for the heart's release; a manifestation of the wanting mind rather than an inspired heart. "There is no end to the spiritual journey," adherents of this view may proclaim. "The very idea of there being an end which one could reach makes the entire process of spiritual unfoldment into just another object to be pursued, possessed and displayed like a badge of honor upon the spiritual ego's chest."

Like any other form of self-affirming pursuit, they maintain, that which is sacred and unknowable is then reduced to just another "thing" to be had and to feel proud of, a common form of "spiritual materialism."

Rather than look for goals "somewhere else," many instead suggest allowing ourselves to cultivate and maintain a more healthy acceptance and appreciation of "what is," and finding our freedom in that. In doing so, they believe, we become more "mature" in our spiritual endeavor, no longer divided by the duality of forever seeking to possess the projected objects of our romanticized wishes and desires. "We began with high ideals and lofty aspirations," proponents of this view may aver. "But as we grew older we came to realize that the spiritual search has more to do with accepting what is and who we already are, without judgment. In letting things be, we come upon a harmony with all of life instead of incessantly struggling for things to be different from what they are." Change, they attest, happens naturally, effortlessly, appropriately; in time and with patience. "Like a fruit on a branch, you ripen naturally in due season, without will or effort," is how one well-regarded meditation teacher recently described his view of the ideal approach to spiritual evolution. "Que sera, sera—whatever will be, will be," a Zen Master repeatedly exclaimed when speaking about how the aspirant should relate to the possibility of Enlightenment.

Such teachings of acceptance also frequently emphasize "integrating" the search for Freedom into the life one is already leading, as opposed to the view of transforming one's life in the light of the highest perspective to the degree that deeply, one's own life has been left behind completely. Spiritual practices which help one to "bring the Truth" into one's "daily life" abound, and an increasing number of teachings continually emphasize that we are all already perfect, needing only to realize that. The attraction of this

approach also helps to explain the popularity of soothing spiritual figures whose general message affirms people as they are, rather than urges the seeker to realize the aspiration and change necessary for true spiritual transformation. (Interestingly enough, many of the most challenging and revolutionary spiritual teachers of history are often seen in the eye of the seeker's mind as comforting and all-approving figures.)



No doubt, there is much truth and wisdom to be found in the injunction to accept things as they are, to surrender with equanimity and patience to the flow of all things. However, the practical effect of accepting such a philosophy is more often than

not compromise, complacency, relief and avoidance in light of the challenge offered by the greatest of teachers to rise up with urgency to one's greatest potential here and now.

The lives of such sages are played out upon a world stage in which the stakes are always high, for their existence represents the nexus or meeting point between the Absolute and the relative. Indeed, fully embracing the essential message of the most revolutionary teachers of Liberation points beyond an inner realization of our unity and interconnectedness with all of life, and towards the active pursuit and certain destruction of the "personal world" of the individual. The greatest of teachers did not have an insulated, "personal" life separate from their teaching, but were bold examples of what is possible to rise up to in every aspect of their lives. A sense of urgency and a perspective on what was truly most important in life caused them to take nothing for granted. Most people's "personal" lives and characters are defined and limited by that which they take for granted. But because the lives these teachers lived were universal in their scope, their "personal" lives only existed as the outer garments to an essence and core of humanity that evinced a message equally applicable to all.

Accordingly, the person seeking that realization which is not limited by the particulars of their own predicament will necessarily be compelled to break through and destroy the illusory separation between themselves and the rest of the universe, and thereafter live in accordance with that which they have discovered. In order to meet in ourselves the attainments of the great Masters, in order to take the applicability of this message seriously in relation to ourselves, it will be necessary to propel ourselves far beyond the confines of a perspective which in any way is limited by notions of time, security or personal history.

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Sid Arthur of Sausalito

Imagine how a young seeker on fire to seek and know Truth might be regarded by a contemporary spiritual teacher espousing a view that encourages "letting things be" rather than the dedicated striving for Liberation. On the eve of his departure from his palatial Marin County, California estate, the young seeker, Sid Arthur of Sausalito, over hot cappuccino with his teacher, Lloyd Hirshfeld, expresses his desire to go forth into the unknown in his search for Enlightenment.

Sid Arthur begins: "Lloyd, I feel compelled to share with you my growing dis-ease and discontent with the life I am presently living. When I traveled into the city the other day, I felt as if I saw for the first time the extent of the suffering inherent to human existence. I noticed an appalling degree of physical and social degradation. I was shocked and dismayed in seeing how death, disease and so many other plights we humans are subject to, make a mockery of the worldly pursuits of myself and my peers. I saw at once the foolishness and futility of striving for things impermanent, and in the light of this revelation, I began to reevaluate my priorities. There is a growing conviction in me that I must find a radical alternative to the life I am presently living. I now know that I must break through the dream and drama that I and so many seem to be caught up in and are subject to. I feel consumed by a passion to know that which is true, that which is changeless, and to attain the peace of deepest understanding!"

"This sounds very good. How do you propose to do this?" asks his teacher, Lloyd Hirshfeld.

"This evening I will leave my family, my palatial Marin estate, and all that I possess, and will devote every cell of my being to waking up, to penetrating the layers of confusion and ignorance that all sentient beings are suffocated by."

"Excuse me, Sid, but did you say you were going to leave your parents, your home, wife and child?! Why on earth would you feel it is necessary to do something like that?"

"Despite the anguish I know this will cause to my family, my decision to go forth on the path to final Liberation is utterly a choiceless choice. I must be free as the open sky to pursue this highest and most noble pursuit of the good and the wholesome. The household life is a crowded and dust-ridden enterprise, filled with the pursuit of other concerns, inevitably containing much misery. It holds no interest for me, I find it distasteful, and it is certainly not a suitable environment for the kind of search I have in mind."

"You certainly are very inspired! But Sidney, leaving

your wife and child and all that you own sounds very extreme! What about your responsibilities as a householder, as a citizen of the world, for that matter? You mustn't forget the world. Pursuing your own liberation without regard to these concerns can make the whole enterprise quite a self-centered occupation—and self-centeredness is the very antithesis of Freedom. Why don't you try to do both: work on yourself, seek Freedom, and at the same time serve in the world and help to alleviate the suffering you see all around you?!"

"So much of the suffering I see around me is due to ignorance, which I feel compelled to break through. If I seek to alleviate the symptoms of ignorance without having fully addressed and conquered the causes of ignorance in myself, I will never cut the cords that bind me! I must devote myself wholeheartedly and without distraction to the pursuit of Nirvana."

"Well, I also felt this kind of passionate idealism when I was younger. But you know, Sid, I found that by retreating from the world in the way you are suggesting, I actually wound up avoiding many of the issues I needed to face."

"But I must keep both arms unshackled by the chains of the world so that I can be free to cut through all that binds me to it, with the razor-edged sword of my commitment to know the Truth and by the keenness of discrimination!"

"Well, the results might be unbalanced, because pursuing Liberation in the context of one's daily life ensures that one will be faced with all that life has to offer in all of its forms. Issues such as relationships to others, sexuality, money and power sooner or later make themselves known. In my own case, after years as a monk, I found that my emphasis on spiritual practice was imbalanced, leading me to repress these other parts of myself that weren't being addressed. Rather than looking honestly at myself and these concerns, I placed myself in a context where I didn't have to face any of these things in the name of being spiritual. I knew many other monks who also were cloistered away from dealing with so

many important parts of themselves. Pursuing Liberation in the world enables one to not hide or avoid anything in any way."

"But why pursue Liberation 'in the world,' when the world in the way that you are speaking of it is an expression of the very ignorance I so desperately want to free myself from? I seek not that which is of the world, not that which is subject to 'birth, aging, ailment, death, sorrow and defilement,' but rather I seek 'the unborn, unaging, unailing, deathless, sorrowless, undefiled supreme surcease of bondage, of Nirvana!'"

"Very well, but you know, Freedom isn't about realizing something that is somehow separate from the world and all of life, nor is it about discovering a state or condition which is other than who we already are. Rather, it is about coming to a state of maturity and ripening naturally. You can try to run away from the actualities of life, Sid, as I've seen in so many cases, but when you return to everyday life, you are bound to find that the multiple demands of day-to-day living are likely to push the old buttons just as they did before. You will have to deal with all of these parts of yourself when you eventually return to the world."

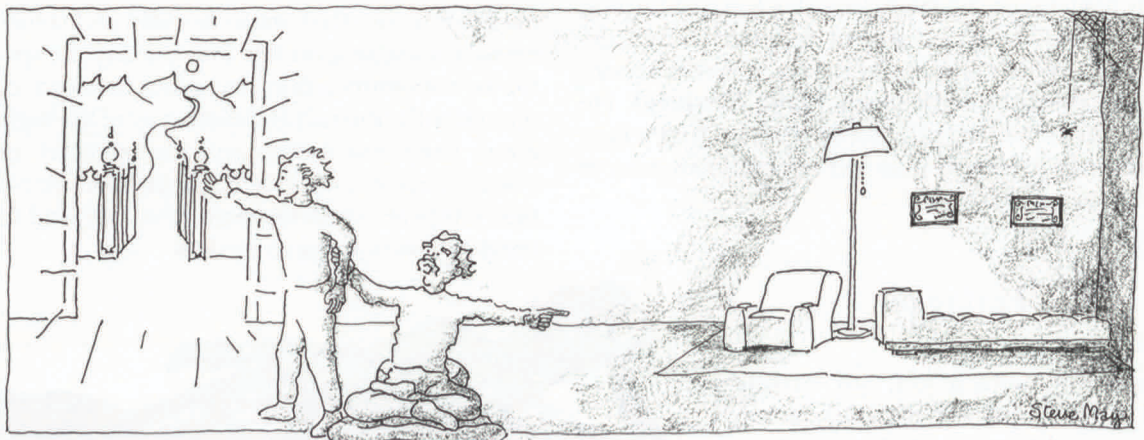
"You say 'when I return to the world,' but why would I return to a burning house? I am not leaving on a vacation, but with the desire to give all of myself to the realization of the unborn, unmanifest Reality! I have no interest in things of the world, in pleasures of the world, in enticements of the world. They bring no rest, no higher knowledge, no everlasting peace or contentment. In a world of ceaseless craving and striving after illusions, I have only a burning desire to live a life of renunciation and to discover that which is Real!"

"Now, now, Sidney, you do not want to be too flurried in your passion! The aversion with which you are speaking about being in the world really does make me wonder if perhaps there isn't something you're trying to avoid or escape from. Freedom doesn't have anything to do with escaping

anything, but rather with embracing all of life as it is, accepting it and welcoming it and treating it like a friend rather than an enemy! Only in allowing room for all the dualities in life to manifest free from judgment are we able to be truly at peace with all of life and with ourselves! You are obviously finding it difficult to accept all of the stress and disappointment that we so often find in life. I was once speaking in the same way as yourself, but eventually, after doing years of psychotherapy, I was able to address many issues in a way I never would have been able to otherwise. I learned to deal with my hurt, my anger, my fears and my secret desires. Believe me, Sid, I learned through hard experience that you can reach for the stars and become fascinated with all kinds of spiritual experiences and insights, but when you take an honest look at where you are, your feet are still always on the earth, no matter how much we would like to wish otherwise. We so want to be happy, and it is so easy to forget that we are human beings, subject to all the frailties of being human. We all have pain, anger, misunderstanding, hurt feelings and deep wounds from our childhood and society that we have to deal with in some form or another, sooner or later. And it is vital that we deal with all of this pain and anger, with forgiveness and compassion for ourselves and for all of those with whom we crossed paths along our way. So please, don't use the spiritual search and all of the excitement you are now discovering to avoid what sounds to me like very strong and painful feelings! They'll just come back to haunt you if you do not deal with them now."

"But Lloyd, there is no time to waste! All human life is subject to death and decay, to sickness and old age, to ceaseless change. You suggest psychotherapy, but how can I preoccupy myself with examining the dream when I have seen that this dream of a separate existence is a nightmare, causing endless suffering, that I must wake up from!"

"Sid, you sound awfully upset, and judgmental as well!"



Now forgive me for asking, but is everything going well in your relationship with your wife? I know that since you had your child things have been difficult. Perhaps some couple counseling would help..."



Coming to his senses, Sid Arthur takes his teacher's advice and returns that night to his palatial Marin County estate and family. The next morning, he takes a good hard look at himself and his life, reexamining his motives for wanting to run away from his home and responsibilities. He thinks much about the pressure from his father to inherit his business empire, his recent difficulties with sexuality and his resistance to accepting his own mortality. Concluding that the torment he had been experiencing was extreme, he supplements his meditation practice with psychotherapy, in an attempt to understand his need to stand against and even run away from the lifestyles of his friends, family and neighbors. He delves deeply into his past, learning much about himself and his persistent desire to separate himself away from the world in the pursuit of an ideal and romantic notion of spiritual Liberation. His attraction to psychology eventually inspires him to become a transpersonal psychotherapist, and upon graduating from university he opens up "The Center of Sacred Wholeness," which offers counseling, relaxation techniques and meditation practices to help spiritual aspirants address all aspects of themselves in their spiritual search. Devoting himself ceaselessly to raising his three children, working as CEO of his father's multinational corporation, fulfilling his activist and board member duties for several charitable organizations, and writing books which help share his understanding about the value of pursuing the spiritual journey in the context of everyday life, his name and fame grows, inspiring many others to follow his example of "bringing the Truth into daily life." He occasionally looks back at that turning point in his life, when he sipped cappuccino and exclaimed his idealistic urgings to the teacher with whom he now occasionally helps teach, Lloyd Hirshfeld. He shakes his head and smiles to himself, wondering where on earth he would be now if he had run off on impulse in his search for Liberation...

Epilogue

Awakening with a jolt, Sid Arthur of Sausalito, upon opening his eyes, immediately became aware of the full moon shining

brightly down on him and his hundreds of disciples sleeping around him in the redwood forest in the wee hours of the morning. Sitting up on his right side and placing his head onto the palm of his right hand, he chuckles to himself while remembering the contents of the dream he just awoke from.

Musing, he thankfully recalls how he did not take the advice of his teacher, Lloyd Hirshfeld. He had bid him farewell and departed from his family and home, abandoning all vestiges of his former life. Venturing forth into the unknown in his search for Liberation, he had traveled far and wide, undertaking various spiritual practices in his endeavor to discover an understanding and condition beyond impermanence; a knowledge which revealed the futility of searching for security in that which is ultimately empty.

Sitting under a tree one day, in the fields of a village in a far-flung land, he had undergone an explosive transformation, liberating him from the endless cycles of death and rebirth. In his realization of Truth, he was freed from all ignorance, all clinging and craving to that which is transitory; from all doubt, fear and from the interminable wheel of becoming. He had achieved the complete contentment, the supreme Victory, and had come upon a knowing of that which is beyond all knowledge.

His Awakening sent shock waves throughout the spiritual world, and news of his transformation spread far and wide. He began to teach, reawakening in many the belief in the possibility of final emancipation in this life. Soon thousands of students had gathered around him, many catching the same passion for Freedom that motivated their teacher to leave all in search of that most precious jewel.

After the morning meal, Sid Arthur begins to instruct those who had gathered around him. He tells them about his dream of the night before, and of the time when his former teacher tried to convince him to combine his quest for Truth with other, more worldly endeavors and concerns. Continuing on late into the day, he speaks about the joys of renunciation, and about the need to give all of oneself to the pursuit and discovery of the highest attainment. Later, Sid Arthur and his followers sit for their evening meditation. When it is finished, he rises, smiles then winks at a student, once his teacher, and walks off as the day slowly turns to dusk. ■





From Russia, With Love

by Steve Brett

THE CAPTAIN HAS JUST ANNOUNCED that we are about to land, but we are still immersed in dense cloud, then suddenly only a few hundred feet below us, the ground appears...Russia! I scan the view. Vast, colorless, dismal looking fields stretch out into the mist, derelict unfamiliar buildings sunken into the ground. It all feels utterly alien. The initial impression? Desolation...forsaken, unloved country, bleak and cold.

A wave of fear, oh my God...we are going to be here for six days...maybe they will never let us out! I look across at Chris sitting next to me, my old dharma friend since the 1970s. We have been on many adventures together over the years. By the look in his eyes I guess he is having the same impression as I.

We seem to spend an interminable time taxiing down runways on what appears to be an abandoned airstrip. We pass an old plane with propellers lying like a beached whale on the side of the runway, rusting to death. Everything is broken down, uncared for or abandoned. Eventually we spot the main terminal; there are only about four planes in the entire St. Petersburg airport. This is the second largest city in Russia.

As we step out into the brisk air, at the bottom of the aluminum steps standing on the tarmac is a soldier in military uniform and a slim blond woman dressed in a long black leather coat, hair blown out in the wind. As we enter the terminal building they are still there, as if waiting for someone who didn't arrive. What are they doing there? For a moment I feel as if I'm in a Russian spy film.

Entering the terminal the feeling of desolation subsides,

but I am still bewildered, swept away by the absolute unfamiliarity of everything. We spend what seems to be like an endless amount of time going through passport control and customs, even though the terminal is almost empty. We have an enormous amount of luggage as we have brought two large suitcases of clothes for a friend's family in St. Petersburg. (This is common practice in Russia as most people are very poor and clothes are expensive.) There are no trolleys in the airport. Fortunately, Michael is there to meet us, and our adventure begins.

It all started almost a year ago when Michael Momot, a Russian man from St. Petersburg came to see a video of Andrew Cohen teaching in London. He was very fascinated by the video and on his return to Russia took with him some of Andrew's books and journals. A few months later we received a letter from Michael saying how inspired he was by Andrew's writings and that, in fact, a number of people had become very interested in Andrew's teaching in Russia. Later he invited Chris and me to St. Petersburg to give a series of talks and meet the people interested in Andrew's teaching. Michael would translate for us as his English was almost perfect. We were very excited to go.

We are driven from the airport by Sergei, the president of the Vedic Society in St. Petersburg, where we are due to give several talks. Michael sits in the front of the car telling us about how he has planned out our trip. He apologizes that he's been unable to obtain a VCR for us to show a video of Andrew. "Russia is a difficult country," he says. Sergei's car is virtually a write-off. It has a Hare Krishna sticker on the back windshield. In contrast, and there are many in Russia,

Sergei is dressed in a suit with a stylish long coat and Italian-style shoes.

On our way into St. Petersburg, we see for the first time many of the faceless, dour buildings that are a metaphor for Soviet Communism. They make no attempt to please the eye or the heart. Utterly functional, they seem designed to freeze the soul. At the entrance to the city we pass the last remaining statue of Lenin in Russia. It is huge, striking, created to inspire the people. One wonders how Russians respond to it now.

Our first port of call is the apartment of the family whose suitcases we have brought. We stop outside an apartment block. Like so many buildings in Russia, it looks dilapidated. It is pitch dark inside. Up to a high floor in a dark lift, and then amazingly—a home. The apartment is a shock. It is terribly poor. An elderly couple and their daughter greet us. Surprisingly the rooms are very well heated (a pro for Communism—heating for everybody piped through huge apartment blocks at minimal charge), but they're almost bare. A table stands in the middle of the room. Four chairs for the four of us are the only ones in the room, and dinner is already laid out. It consists of a thin vegetable soup, Russian bread, cheese, hard-boiled eggs, tomatoes and Russian tea, black, without milk. We are served by the elderly couple with extraordinary sweetness. Meanwhile Michael and Sergei are completely at home in what is obviously a very familiar situation for them. The poverty of these people is shocking to me. Sergei meanwhile keeps checking the window to see if his car and our luggage that is in the back are still there. Car theft is epidemic in St.

Petersburg. It is only after we leave that I realize that the meal our hosts have given us was probably a feast for them, especially produced for us.

It is late when Chris and I finally arrive at our apartment. Sergei's car ran out of gas on the way. A normal occurrence since Russians run on empty—a spare can of gas in the trunk to save money. As Michael is fond of saying, "Russia is a difficult country." We are staying in an apartment that belongs to a friend of Michael's in one of the massive Communist apartment blocks that surround the city and house most of the population. They are utterly depressing. The apartments are very small but surprisingly warm and have constant hot running water. It's all so surreal! Chris and I feel as if we are on another planet.

At eleven the following morning Michael arrives to pick us up for our talk at the Vedic Society. We travel by metro

into the city, no small event since the metro in St. Petersburg is spectacular. Spacious, elegant, huge and marbled, even lit in some places with chandeliers! It is packed with people. Everyone in St. Petersburg travels by metro; few can afford cars. It is efficient, unlike most things in Russia. It costs virtually nothing and will take you anywhere in the city.

St. Petersburg itself, we discover, is a truly beautiful city. Built at the beginning of the eighteenth century by the emperor Peter the Great, it is like Paris, Venice and Amsterdam rolled into one. It is built on a grand European scale, with countless waterways and bridges, wonderfully colorful buildings and breathtaking cathedrals. And yet it is a crumbling masterpiece. The economy is so bad that there is no money to keep its beauty intact. On its huge generous streets, cracked and muddy, there are few cars. Old trams rumble through the city, full to capacity.


The Vedic Society stands in one of the countless St. Petersburg courtyards behind a classic curving face of buildings on a sweeping canal in the center of the city. We give our talk incongruously in front of a massive poster of Sai Baba (a popular figure in the Russian spiritual scene) in an attractive meeting hall. There are about twenty-five people in the room. A lot of people arrive late and seem to wander in and out. Michael explains that this is the Russian way.

There is no such thing that I can see as a spiritual "type" in Russia. Young and old, all classes and backgrounds, the group is completely mixed. I give a talk on why clarity of intention is a necessity for anyone who truly wants to be free. Then Chris and I both take questions. No one speaks any

English, but Michael does an impeccable job translating. The group is very attentive, respectful and curious, but is obviously struggling to adjust to our approach. We learn later that most people attending the groups at the Vedic Society are used to visiting teachers giving some kind of simple practice or technique to them. To be asked to think for themselves about such a big question as "Do I really want to be

free?" was completely unfamiliar. A number of the questions revolved around "Yes, it sounds good, but...do you have a practice?" Several people were smiling and nodding to everything we said. The session lasted about two hours. We immediately found the Russians to be direct, passionate and urgent, determined to find out the value of what we were saying.

It's 3:00 p.m. the same day and we are heading across town in Sergei's car on our way to have lunch at Michael's



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or the heart. Utterly functional, they
seem designed to freeze the soul.*

parents' house. Chris and I are now really starting to get in the groove of being in Russia. We enter an apartment in which everything has the appearance and feel of Europe circa 1940, certainly before my childhood. Michael's parents are Russian Jews. They are utterly sweet and define the word hospitable. I am aware that a home just like this is the roots of so many Jewish friends in America, just right here, over lunch of borscht and Russian bread and cottage cheese patties with sour cream and sugar. Many things are starting to come into focus about life in post-Soviet Russia. These are chaotic times. The political situation is very unstable and the possibility of a democratic future completely uncertain. Life is hard. Michael shares their only bedroom with his mother. His parents are both retired and get a minimum pension from the State. They are very poor like most families in Russia. Inflation is twenty percent a month.

Only basic foodstuffs are affordable and are sometimes hard to get. Rents are exorbitant in St. Petersburg, so almost everyone is forced to live in their family home.

Our second talk at the Vedic Society was the following day. Chris spoke about the mind and the need to cultivate what Andrew calls radical objectivity in relationship to it. It was necessary to explain the teaching very simply and thoroughly, with no assumptions that concepts that we took for granted would be understood. Many of the same people returned and this time they really started to tune in to us and respond to what we were saying. No more questions about practices but fierce questioning about the meaning of objectivity. No one in the room was casual; because they really wanted to know, they were beginning to respond to the power and immediacy of the teaching itself. It was very satisfying. After the talk, Michael took us to the Ramakrishna Center where we were expected for lunch and would meet with a group later in the evening.

The Ramakrishna Center was a larger apartment than most we had seen. The meeting room with its shrine of Ramakrishna and the Mother had a very peaceful atmosphere. Ludmilla was looking after the center and cooked us lunch. She had the same quality of innocence, the same natural and sincere curiosity which seemed to be the norm in the Russian spiritual seekers we had met. She was relieved to find that we weren't "nutty" like so many spiritual people she had met passing through St. Petersburg from the West. She told Michael she liked what we were saying and wanted to come to the meeting in the evening.

That evening a small group of us gathered in the meeting room at the Ramakrishna Center: Maria, her husband Victor, Natasha, Ludmilla, Alexander and Anatole. Most of these people didn't know each other and had been brought together by Maria, a young woman who had been so affected by Andrew's book, *Enlightenment is a Secret*, that she had translated the whole book into Russian. Not having a computer or access to a photocopier, she had typed out six copies of her translation and given them to friends. As a result many Russians had been able to read it. Maria spoke of the extraordinary effect the book had had on her, and Alexander said that it was one of the most powerful spiritual books he had ever read. Chris and I suggested that rather than us giving a talk, since they had already read the book they might like to ask us questions. And this they did. For about two-and-a-half hours they grilled us, asking us in-depth questions about

Interestingly, their questions seldom revolved around their own personal lives; they seemed to naturally be looking at life from a larger perspective. The main priority seemed to be "How is this teaching going to help us?" rather than "How is this teaching going to help me?"

many different aspects of Andrew's teaching: about the mind and objectivity, about evolution, about different levels of enlightenment, about absolute and relative truth, and about our own experience in Andrew's community in California and what was involved in living the teaching together. Interestingly, their questions seldom revolved around their own personal lives; they seemed to naturally be looking at life from a larger perspective. The main priority seemed to be "How is this teaching going to help us?" rather than "How is this teaching going to help me?"


We illustrated many answers by reading passages from *Enlightenment is a Secret*, which stimulated more questions. We were moved by the intensity of their passion, by their innocence and sincerity. They were seizing the moment and taking nothing for granted. Above all they were hungry to know and to talk about what was most important for all of them. We then suggested we meditate together. It was pouring with rain outside. The atmosphere in the room was powerful, full to the brim, electric. Time disappeared. After the sitting we thought everyone would want to go home, but they continued to ask questions for another hour. My throat was getting sore. The last comment at the end of the evening was, "When can we meet again?" We arranged to meet at Natasha's the next afternoon. Everyone wanted to come.

We all walked together to the metro. Michael also was delighted with the evening. In between translations he had asked questions himself, the teaching becoming more and more alive in his own recognition, as it was in the group as a whole. We asked Maria how she had found it. She said she

had loved it but she wanted "more." While Maria went off to catch a late train back to the country where she lived with her family, Michael took us back to our apartment block.

Monday, our second-to-last day in Russia. We met with the small group again at Natasha's apartment at midday. It had been discovered that Natasha had a VCR, so following tea and cake we were able to watch part of a video of Andrew teaching, with Michael translating using the pause button, a difficult task. They appreciated actually seeing Andrew speak about the teachings, but wanted to meet again to ask us more questions. They were determined to make complete use of their time with us.

That afternoon, after lunch at Michael's parents' we had our final meeting at the Vedic Society. On the stairs we met



To a Russian spiritual seeker the freedom to think, to question, to discriminate is precious. It is experienced as a kind of freedom because it is simply not being taken for granted. Russians have lived for so long being told what to think, and not to question.

a man who had come to both previous talks. He looked like an old railway worker. He had always been very quiet, sitting at the back, paying very close attention. He told us that the Vedic group had met the previous evening to talk about us. We were evidently quite a phenomenon, since we had a very different approach to what they were used to. The group consensus was that what we were saying was very valuable. He himself expressed great appreciation for the teaching and was very grateful to us. He said he liked the teaching because it was "tough." He said that they were used to being given some technique to do, which he found quite superficial. He engaged with us in a very real and direct way. About fifteen or twenty people came to the meeting. We didn't give a talk this time, but asked for responses from the group. It was a very lively meeting, the group really coming to life. After two hours, when the intensity and concentration in the room was at its height, we were forced to finish as another meeting was due to begin. Sergei suggested we continue in his office, so everyone piled into Sergei's office and we continued for another hour. We arranged for everyone who wanted one to be given a copy of Maria's translation of *Enlightenment is a Secret*. Sergei was very happy and told us that Andrew's teaching spoke to the Russian heart. He

told us he was very keen to invite Andrew to St. Petersburg and wanted to publish the book. We exchanged warm good-byes.

On our last day, we did some sight-seeing in the city and visited the Hermitage, a magnificent palace housing one of the world's greatest collections of art. Michael showed us the monolithic KGB headquarters where in the late 1930s thousands of people were murdered for being suspected of being against the State. A tunnel was constructed from the building to the river Neva to wash down all the bodies and blood.

In the evening we had a final meeting with the small group at Natasha's. This time a couple of the men stayed at home to baby-sit so their wives, who had also read Andrew's book, could come instead. It was a very intimate and beautiful time. The evening sparkled with excitement. We were there for about five-and-a-half hours, which began with a feast created by Natasha and some of the other women. We watched a small part of a video and otherwise continued to discuss the teachings all evening. It was wonderful to be with them, and they never seemed to get tired. They were all so excited that a group had spontaneously formed that could continue to meet in the future.

The next day we left Russia. We said good-bye to Michael at the airport. From the moment we got up in the morning until the moment we went to bed at night, he had been with us, translating, guiding us around St. Petersburg, telling us the history of the city and of Russia and its people. Without him the trip would simply have been an impossibility. But entirely because of him we were able to have an unusual access to the Russian heart. We were now returning to such different worlds.

Shortly after our plane had taken off I remembered what Natasha had said to us the day before: "What do you mean by freedom? Isn't that something you already have in the West?" From the Russian perspective, the kind of freedom we have available to us in the West is paradise. To a Russian spiritual seeker the freedom to think, to question, to discriminate is precious. It is experienced as a kind of freedom because it is simply not being taken for granted. Russians have lived for so long being told what to think, and not to question. It was this quality of innocence and urgency that we found in so many of the spiritual seekers in Russia that made our visit so rewarding. Their humanity and unself-conscious passion had illuminated so clearly what is always truly significant in life, East or West. It made me more aware of the precarious predicament of the human condition, and the preciousness of the opportunity we all have in being alive, to be truly awake. ▲

Steve Brett and Chris Parish have been students of Andrew Cohen since 1986. In 1992 they helped to establish FACE (Friends of Andrew Cohen in Europe) with centers in London and Amsterdam. They travel throughout Europe to coordinate FACE activities and to speak publicly about Andrew's teaching.

INTERNATIONAL TEACHING SCHEDULE FOR ANDREW COHEN

| | |
|-----------------------|------------------------|
| INDIA RETREAT* | JANUARY 4 - 18, 1994 |
| KATHMANDU, NEPAL | FEBRUARY 1 - 6 |
| BALI, INDONESIA | FEBRUARY 12 - 20 |
| AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND | FEBRUARY 24 - MARCH 13 |
| CORTE MADERA, CA | MARCH 19 - APRIL 9 |
| PORTLAND, OR | APRIL 13 - 14 |
| TORONTO, CANADA | APRIL 17 - 18 |
| AMHERST, MA | APRIL 20 - 21 |
| NEW YORK, NY | APRIL 24 - 26 |
| CORTE MADERA, CA | MAY 1 - 13 |
| VIENNA, AUSTRIA | MAY 21 - 22 |
| GERMANY | MAY 26 - 29 |
| PARIS, FRANCE | JUNE 7 |
| LONDON, ENGLAND | JUNE 13 - JULY 3 |
| AMSTERDAM, HOLLAND | JULY 7 - 14 |
| TEL AVIV, ISRAEL | JULY 18 - 26 |
| SWITZERLAND RETREAT** | AUGUST 1 - 8 |
| CORTE MADERA, CA | AUGUST 19 |

*A fourteen-day retreat in Bodhgaya, India

**A seven-day retreat in the Swiss Alps

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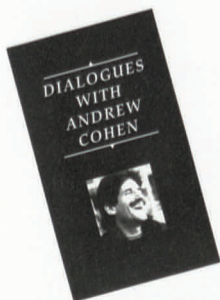
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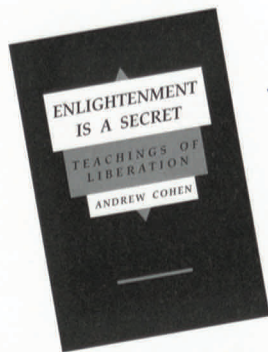
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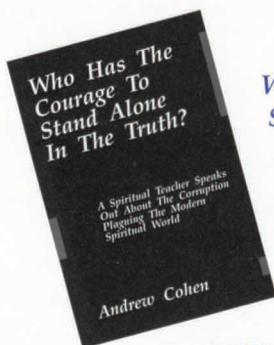
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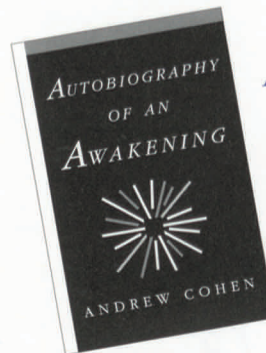


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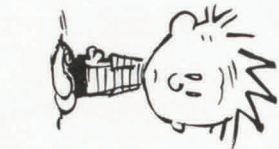
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