

Stas Mavrides responds to Yonatan Levy's questions re: Andrew Cohen & EnlightenNext

Could you respond to EnlightenNext's denial of soliciting financial contributions under duress?

While obviously, over the years, contributions were made by students who were genuinely inclined to make them without any “encouragement” or pressure, these are NOT the “donations” described on the *What Enlightenment??!* blog. In these instances, the gifts referred to were of large sums of money given to Andrew Cohen under conditions of pressure and emotional duress to demonstrate one’s good intentions after having made some mistake or displeased him in some way. I have written in detail on the WE??! blog about Cohen’s expectations—and, in fact, demands—for these so-called donations, and about my own situation when I offered him a check for \$3000 only to be told directly by him that it was not sufficient payment for my “mistake.” In this case, I ended up giving him \$20,000.

And for the record, Bill Yenner was definitely under a five-year “gag order,” drawn up by an attorney for Andrew’s organization (then called “Impersonal Enlightenment Fellowship”), which he signed in exchange for the return of his \$80,000 inheritance. (A copy of this document can be found [here](#).)

Could you respond to EnlightenNext's account of Vimala Thakar's letter, and about Cohen's general attitude toward women?

Andrew Cohen’s attitude toward women has always been that they are somehow inherently less equipped to embrace the so-called “emptiness” of enlightenment, and he would typically treat his female students harshly and condescendingly. The result was that many of them felt discouraged and depressed by their guru’s attitude toward them and his treatment of them. Some years ago in India, when a number of his female students accompanied Andrew on a visit to Vimala Thakar’s home in Mt. Abu (at which I also was present), these women expressed a defeated and self-critical attitude toward the possibility of their own awakening. Vimala listened empathetically and tried to be helpful, offering them insight and encouragement. Andrew subsequently berated these students in private for “whining” to Vimala, and for not expressing the confidence that he demanded of them; yet despite their inability to express it directly, it was apparent that in Vimala’s wise and loving presence they had been unable to hide their anguish, confusion and self-doubt—all results of having been beaten down by Andrew for such a long time.

It is entirely possible that Vimala saw in these students’ behavior signs of their having been suppressed and emotionally traumatized by their own teacher. In the succeeding months, after having pressed her for a response to his recent alleged successes with his female students, Andrew received several letters from Vimala. One of these letters in particular was critical of Andrew’s approach, essentially expressing the idea that his manner of “teaching” them was probably causing the women harm on a soul level. As far as I know, this letter was never publicly posted anywhere in Foxhollow. I did see it, however, with my own eyes, and when I wrote about it on the *What Enlightenment??!* blog I discovered that it was a total surprise to many people. It is possible that another of Vimala’s more positive letters to Andrew was posted, but never, to my knowledge, the one I am describing here.

Did Cohen used to compare his spiritual attainment to those of other masters, e.g., Ramana Maharshi?

He did by implication, especially and often regarding the Buddha; but my feeling is, who cares what Andrew Cohen thinks about his own attainment? Can anyone imagine Ramana treating

people the way Andrew does? Did Ramana ever slap his students? On two occasions I saw Andrew slap some of his male students and I can recall numerous others when he ordered students to do this as a “message” from him. I personally carried out some of these ridiculous and awful missions. Although I’ve heard that he has stopped this practice since the *What Enlightenment??!* blog exposed it, even up to the time I left him in 2003 he was ordering slaps to formal or committed students that he was displeased with. I was present when Andrew slapped Calvin Phipps, Arjan Kindermans (the current leader of Amsterdam EnlightenNext Center) and Mike Dudka.

Can you confirm the story about the celibate student who gave up his inheritance after admitting to Andrew that he had masturbated? Can you also confirm the incident in which a student was forced to visit prostitutes? Both of these stories are completely denied by EnlightenNext.

Regarding the first, I personally knew the man in question, who, like me, was a celibate living at the Foxhollow center in 2002/03. He was a friend of mine, and a close student of Andrew’s. As he is presently still involved in the EnlightenNext organization, I will withhold his name so as not to cause him embarrassment. He “broke his vow” of celibacy, meaning in this case that he masturbated. Subsequently, he broke down and confessed this to Andrew, who was very upset and angry with him. My friend felt so guilty over this that he offered to give Andrew his inheritance to show how sorry he was. This offer was accepted, but the inheritance was not yet available. The last thing my friend told me at the time was that he was meeting with his family to request to borrow a sum of money as an advance on his inheritance. Can such a “donation” possibly be construed as “given freely”? Or was it encouraged and exploited as a sad and fearful gesture of forgiveness? To me, the answer is obvious.

Regarding the student who was forced to visit prostitutes:

I will first recount what I know of this incident based on my own direct experience as one who was present during conversations with Andrew in which he discussed a) his instructions to this student and b) his impressions and responses during the period when this enforced “spiritual practice” was being carried out. Then I will give an account of the circumstances leading up to these events as told to me by the student himself.

The student in question was a close personal friend of mine at the time and has remained so since our respective departures from Andrew’s community. As students we shared leadership responsibilities at the London center in 1999 and 2000. Prior to that, he had been leading the EnlightenNext center in Amsterdam while I was running the center in Stockholm. As he remains hurt and embarrassed by what he was put through, I am withholding his identity as well, and for purposes of this account will refer to him as “John.” ***[Editor’s note: As part of my research, I met in person with the man described here, who confirmed to me that he was the student sent by Andrew Cohen to visit prostitutes.—Y.L.]***

While he was still living in Amsterdam, John was ordered by Andrew come to London to visit brothels and have sex with prostitutes. These English brothels were illegal establishments, unlike in Holland where prostitution is at least legal. According to Andrew’s instructions, John was to have sex three times a day and to have an orgasm each time; Andrew felt that this would wear him down to a point where he would “feel drained and horrible” and finally be “cured” of his “sex addiction.” John was ordered to check in each day with Steve Brett (another student director of the London community), and to fax the details of his sexual encounters to Andrew wherever he happened to be. I was present when Andrew received at least two of these faxes during a visit to Stockholm. In my presence, Andrew read aloud John’s sordid accounts of sex with hookers under the most degrading circumstances, laughing derisively as he did so. John’s daily check-in meetings

were considered unsatisfactory by Andrew and Steve, and though John begged to be able to terminate his daily “practice,” he was ordered to continue it until he had completed fifty sex acts. Andrew laughed when he told me of these instructions, saying he wanted John to complete a “nifty fifty bangs.” How he can now, in apparently good conscience, deny that any of this happened is beyond me, as he himself created literally all of it.

An account of the events that led to the “prostitution practice” as told to me by John:

In recalling these events from their inception, John described having shared a sauna with Andrew and Steve in Amsterdam, where John was hosting Andrew during a teaching engagement there. During the sauna, Andrew in his usual fashion started complaining about his female students and how they were making his life so difficult. At that time, he had prevailed on all the men in his community who were in relationships to withhold sex from their partners and to treat them with strict formality in order to convey the message that things were very wrong with them. John recalls Andrew suggesting during the sauna that everyone present forget about their women and “visit some hookers.” At that time, John’s partner was living at the Foxhollow center in Massachusetts and, according to Andrew, was “doing extremely badly.” Andrew said to John something to the effect that she “wasn’t going to make it,” that he should “forget her,” and that he would find someone for him who was “better.” Andrew then repeated his idea that they all go out together the next evening and pick up some prostitutes. John recalls experiencing disbelief that Andrew would even suggest such a thing. As it turned out, the following day Andrew came down with a bad case of the flu and the plan to visit prostitutes never materialized.

Still, because his teacher had introduced this idea as something that would be worth doing in order to help him to get over a relationship that was about to be terminated, the idea started to work in him. Though John was still very much in love with his girlfriend, he received a call from Andrew soon after Andrew’s return to Massachusetts, in the course of which he was ordered to end the relationship. John was devastated by this, and in this depressed emotional state decided to follow through with the idea proposed earlier by Andrew of trying to forget his woman by visiting a prostitute in Amsterdam. He did this several times, and at some point afterward decided to tell his teacher about it. Outraged and furious, Andrew then decided to “punish” John by setting in motion the events described above.

In his very aggressive response to this and other allegations on the *What Enlightenment??!* blog, Craig Hamilton **admitted** that an anonymous student had been told by Andrew to visit prostitutes, but (lying presumably on Andrew’s behalf) suggested that this had “only happened once, just for the record,” and represented the incident as a lesson prescribed in response to the student having cheated on his girlfriend with a prostitute. In fact, John had been forced to end the relationship before any such “cheating” took place.

Do you know if Cohen approved, encouraged or explicitly instructed students to prostrate to his picture? How and when did this practice evolve among the students, and was it common?

Andrew explicitly instructed many students to do this practice. He approved the use of his picture for this purpose starting in the 1990s, while the community was still in Marin County, California. It continued and became more formalized after the move to Foxhollow. Prostrations were always done with Andrew’s picture at the head of the prostration board. Along with many others, I did this practice for months at a time, sometimes as many as 1000 prostrations each morning. At one point, both in Massachusetts and in London, students did a bowing practice together, each person bowing to their own photo of Andrew. I have no idea why Andrew, Amy Edelstein and their lawyer are trying to deny this; it’s actually a traditional practice in Tibetan

Buddhism, and such things are common in the *guru bakhti*, or devotional, traditions, and also in Orthodox Christianity. It is merely a demonstration of the truth, i.e., that for longtime students in EnlightenNext, the relationship to the guru is in fact the central practice.

Would you comment on EnlightenNext’s “technical” denial of responsibility in the case of Andrew Cohen’s involvement in your relationship with your daughter?

Although it was ill-conceived and highly inappropriate, Andrew strongly advised me (for reasons described by Hal Blacker on the *What Enlightenment??!* blog) to inform my daughter, who was then sixteen years old, of events during my marriage to her mother that occurred before my daughter had even been born. Andrew did not tell her himself; instead, he instructed *me* to do it. In Andrew’s organization, it was presupposed that any instruction from one’s teacher was to be obeyed, and although it did not seem like a good idea to me, I did somehow trust that Andrew knew what was best for my daughter; certainly, without his insistence that this was the right thing, I would never have considered doing it. What was additionally shocking about this event was that when it became apparent that his “advice” had completely backfired—both my daughter and her mother were extremely hurt and upset—Andrew had his wife Alka call me with the following message (and I quote): “*Andrew says to leave him out of this.*” In short, Andrew wanted and instructed me to lie about his involvement, and when my ex-wife asked me if he had had anything to do with it—which she had every reason to suspect—I obeyed his order to misrepresent the truth.

Was head shaving a volitional act or a punitive one?

Many of us who shaved our heads were ordered by Andrew to do so and to be celibate for a year, which usually turned into three to five years or more, depending on how Andrew felt about it. In many cases, if Andrew prescribed head shaving and celibacy, it was a signal that you had a problem or had done something very wrong.

Were confessions of sins an essential part of a student’s life?

Although the word “confession” wasn’t used, people were expected to “come clean” about any wrongdoing, any way they were not “living the teachings,” or any breach of trust they might have committed. If Andrew felt that one was holding back in some way, tremendous pressure was exerted by peers in meetings, or by Andrew himself, until the individual “broke.”

Did Cohen emphasize the importance of complete surrender to him?

Yes, to students involved with him for many years, this is explicitly stated. I include below an account of a fellow student and leader in Andrew’s EnlightenNext community that illustrates graphically what we were willing to do—or put up with—in order to demonstrate our “surrender” to him. It’s important to understand that according to Andrew’s “black or white” thinking, as a close student you were either surrendering to him or betraying him; there was no in-between. Although it’s an extreme one, the following is only one of many such stories:

Steve B. has been with Andrew since the early days of his teaching career in the UK and close to Cohen as a leader in the EnlightenNext international community. Recently, I’ve heard, he has been in Rishikesh, India, conducting projects out of the EnlightenNext center there. (Personal experience tells me that when a senior student and longtime associate of Andrew’s is sent to live at the Indian center, it’s an indication that s/he has failed in some way and is not well regarded or respected by him.) I was living at the Foxhollow center in 2001 when Steve, at that time a leader at the London Center, was suddenly ordered to come to Foxhollow. Andrew told some of us that Steve

had been “doing things his own way” for a while, and now had directly disobeyed him. Andrew was furious, and we all knew from past experience that Steve would be in for it when he got to Foxhollow. When he arrived, he was an emotional mess, expressing apologies to Andrew and feeling very guilty. The “horrible thing” that he had done was to give some advice to one of the formal students in London despite Andrew’s instructions not to.

First, Andrew had me and another student speak with Steve in an intensely confrontational way. As usual, we were then to report to Andrew on whether he was “coming through,” i.e., responding appropriately. Of course Steve, who was frightened and cut off from his own emotions, was as unresponsive as any normal human being would be under such circumstances; for Andrew and ourselves, however, habituated as we were to confrontational strategies for “meeting with someone,” Steve’s failure to own up to his “competition” with Andrew meant that he was not “taking responsibility.” Then Andrew himself met with Steve, treating him coldly and condescendingly (even though Steve was literally bowing to him when he entered his room) because his profuse apologies struck Andrew as “unreal.”

Next, we were instructed to call Steve back to Andrew’s residence, where his wife Alka had been told not to “hold back” and to “really go for it with Steve.” I was just outside the house, and I could hear her screaming at Steve and punching him. It was a chilling experience to listen to him crying and moaning his apologies as Alka beat him while screaming loudly, “How dare you betray Andrew? How dare you?” Afterward, Andrew told me proudly, “Alka really went for it with Steve!”

Subjected to such harsh discipline, people who were strong leaders in Andrew’s community often became beaten down, weakened and humiliated. (This was the condition I ultimately left in as well.) As for Steve, shortly after the beating by Alka, Cohen demoted him and then kicked him out of the community. Steve stayed around for more than a year, living a strange existence on the fringes of Foxhollow and working as an orderly at a local hospital, occasionally sending flowers and apologies to Andrew—who during this period had me and others call Steve on the phone to “mess with his mind.” Listening to Steve on his speaker phone, Andrew would coach us on what to say or laugh silently, giving thumbs-up signs as all this was going on. I am sickened that I went along with these tormenting tactics, but we all did such things to each other under Andrew’s direction. During this time, Andrew would say how much he hated Steve, calling him “the devil,” “Judas” and other such names. One night, he had me and fellow student Bob Voss go to Steve’s residence and let the air out of all of his tires so that he couldn’t get to work. He represented himself as trying to break down Steve’s ego, but in retrospect it is obvious to me that Andrew was simply acting out his own vengeful anger at a perceived “betrayal.”

This went on and on. At one point, Steve wrote to Andrew, saying that he would do anything to be allowed to come back. (At times I wondered why he didn’t just return to England and get a life, but of course I myself wouldn’t at that time have taken the same advice; Andrew’s hooks were in me—and all of us—too deeply for that). In response to Steve’s desperate letter, Andrew had him come to a remote part of Foxhollow with instructions to start digging a deep 6 x 8-foot trench in the woods using only a shovel. At that time Andrew was into making videos of students who weren’t “doing well” in an effort to capture what he called “the smile of the ego.” (This is a whole story in itself; Andrew was convinced that when someone is under pressure to speak about what they’re doing wrong, a “smile” emerges like that of “the “devil himself.”) Andrew had me drive a golf cart carrying him, his dog and one of the EnlightenNext videographers, Rosalind Bennett, to the site of the huge trench where we found Steve, standing about five feet below us, hunched over his shovel and drenched in sweat. He seemed startled to actually see his teacher after such a long

period of excommunication. As he paused from his digging, Steve looked up at Andrew with an expression of reverence and said hello—but he looked like a broken man, not at all the person I knew.

It was a sad picture, the more horrifying because Andrew just stood there looking down at him, holding his little dog in his arms and telling us coldly, “There’s the devil smiling at me,” and instructing Ros Bennett to get the camera rolling. I remember him saying, “Look how cut off he is, happy to be down there digging. There’s no love in his eyes.” Yet it was Andrew who seemed bereft of any love, compassion or humanity. In my mind—though now I see it differently—I still actually believed he was trying to help Steve.

Some time later, Andrew had a “meeting” with Steve and I at the same time, as I too was now back in Andrew’s disfavor. He had me look at Steve, saying in effect that what I saw should frighten me: “Look at him! He is Lucifer himself sitting there, and this is where you’re headed if you don’t get it together.” Sometime later, Andrew confided to me that he would allow Steve to return with a condition—he could rejoin the community if he agreed to “donate” whatever inheritance money he had left, so that he would “have no back-door out.” “Then,” Andrew said, “I’ll know he’s mine.” I myself left fairly soon after that, and Steve returned; though I can’t confirm it, I have every reason to believe that he “paid the price.”

Does Cohen control the marital or sexual lives of his students?

Yes. At least when I was there, no one in the formal community would ever get into a sexual relationship without running it by Andrew, who often had his own ideas about who one’s partner should be. There was one fellow who complained about Andrew’s choice of a mate for him, and that man was put through hell until he eventually agreed to follow Andrew’s wishes. Andrew would also dissolve a relationship if he felt that it was distracting either partner from their commitments to him and EnlightenNext, or if either partner was “doing badly” in relation to “the teaching.” Everyone who has been there for a while knows that this has happened many times over the years.

How do you feel about Andrew and his teaching after all these years?

From what I’ve written, you can probably tell that I am grateful to have gotten myself out of what I believe to be the *cult* of Andrew Cohen, and to have begun to live an autonomous life for real. For me, leaving was the beginning of a new self-discovery, based on a kind of individuation process that was long overdue, and for which there was no room while under Andrew’s tight control. Part of that process, for me, has been unraveling and trying to understand why I made the choices I did, and stayed for so long, participating in such a corrupt situation.

I do have to say that in meeting Andrew my mind and heart were opened in a deep and very powerful way that had a profound effect on my whole life. Yet staying with this man as his narcissistic demands and actions interacted with his ability to transmit deep experiences of the non-dual created an even deeper confusion and inner wounding that only the act of leaving him has helped to clarify and heal.

Andrew’s “teaching,” I feel, cannot be separated from who he is—which is a mixed picture. Therefore, put mildly, my current view of Andrew’s teaching is one that sees a fervor for universal, “impersonal” truths and ideals mixed with a peculiar lack of humanity, compassion and respect for individuals. In coming to clarity myself, it is my hope is that the truth of the *whole picture* will be revealed for others, and hopefully even for Andrew himself.

I am in communication with a few EnlightenNext students who have recently managed to leave Andrew’s group. One of these ex-students left Foxhollow within the last year, having

thankfully managed to do so without her exit being detected; I am told (and know from personal experience) that it would not otherwise have been an easy departure. This student informs me that many of Andrew's abusive and damaging attitudes and behaviors still continue to this day. And another of these ex-students was shocked to learn that the events described on WE??! blog had actually happened—since, according to her, Andrew has been telling EnlightenNext students that most of the information presented on the blog was fabricated by a few ex-students who had been unable to “face the truth about themselves” and so were now trying to “bring him down.” This, in turn, was shocking news to me, and I am deeply concerned that this *official* denial by Andrew Cohen—of his own acts—represents yet another step down the slippery slope of dishonesty.

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