

A Fallen Yogi

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Recently I received an email with a link to a blog by a reasonably famous teacher, Andrew Cohen. He said he was stepping down so that he could work on himself and become a “better person.” It was a surprising event because arrogant people invariably live in an ironclad state of denial, the better to project their emotional problems on others. In any case, he is definitely a slow learner – evidently, the chorus of angry voices that has followed him for twenty-seven years swelled to such a din that it became too loud to ignore. His statement will undoubtedly be seen as a courageous act of contrition, the uplifting resolve of a reprobate, taking the first halting steps on the road to redemption. We wish him well and hope that he becomes the person he needs to be.

The real lesson here is not his personal story but what it says about his view of enlightenment, since it was behind this view that he perpetrated so much misery. Had he been taught by a proper teacher – he was one of the first Papaji Neos – he might have actually known what enlightenment is, and hundreds of people would have been spared so much heartache. Papaji, a *shaktipat guru*, propounded the experiential view of enlightenment.

Mr. Cohen was obviously not enlightened, by even the most liberal definition. What he called enlightenment was merely a “deep awakening,” an epiphany that had a profound effect on his ego. It convinced him that there was something “more” than his way of seeing. It convinced him, wrongly, that “he” was “enlightened.”

In fact enlightenment, as it is popularly conceived, is not enlightenment because enlightenment is not a special experience, an “awakening.” It is the hard and fast knowledge “I am awareness, the ‘light.’” It is not something that happens, because you, awareness, were never unenlightened. You are unborn and never die. Experiences are born and die. They do not change you, make you into something else. If you take yourself to be an ego, an experiencing entity, you will be apparently modified by what happens to you, spiritual or otherwise. We do not like the word “enlightenment” because of its experiential connotations but if you insist on using it, enlightenment is simply shedding ignorance of one’s nature as awareness. It is not the gain of a special state or status.

Any experience is only as good as the interpretation of it. If I am awareness there is no way to conclude that I am special or unique and that I have something that you don’t, because everyone and everything is awareness. The understanding “I am awareness” neutralizes the ego because the ego is just a notion of specialness and uniqueness. It does not mean that the ego disappears or is transcended. It means that it is known for what it is, an idea of separateness appearing in me, awareness.

We do not doubt the profundity of Mr. Cohen’s experience. We question his interpretation. Because anyone is free to define enlightenment in any way he or she chooses, he is free to call his epiphany enlightenment. However, it should be noted that most of the mischief in the spiritual world in the last thirty years, from Muktananda to Osho and Adi Da right up the present – the examples of fallen *gurus* are too numerous to mention – can be laid squarely at the feet of the experiential view of enlightenment.

What actually happened? Under the spell of apparent ignorance, the self – limitless awareness – mistook itself for an experiencing entity, an ego, had a particular type of experience known as an “awakening,” declared itself enlightened and imagined that it had transcended itself. It came to believe that it now inhabited a special experiential niche reserved only for the few and that said experience empowered it to enlighten others not so blessed. Evidently, in Mr. Cohen’s case his exalted status came with the companion belief that the end justifies the means, opening the door to abusive “teaching.”

This is the story: an ordinary ego had an extraordinary experience, one that changed its idea of itself, but little else. The impurities that were there before the epiphany survived – as they do – and immediately out-pictured when the experience ended – with predictable results. I recall hearing many stories of abuse at Mr. Cohen’s hands over the last twenty-plus years.

The enlightenment scenario he envisioned, which he obviously did not critically examine, is classic duality. It amounts to splitting the ego into a transcendental self and a self to be transcended. To make this idea work the ego needs to be in a state of complete denial. It must imagine that the non-transcendent part of itself doesn’t exist. It didn’t exist for him but, sadly, it existed for everyone else. To keep the myth of transcendence alive he was forced to lay the problem at the feet of those who hadn’t yet “transcended,” so his problem could easily be transferred elsewhere.

He finally admitted his folly. Without a trace of irony he said, “My ego is alive and well.” What an epiphany! It should be brought to his attention that ego death or ego transcendence, contrary to popular belief, is perhaps the number one enlightenment myth. Nobody is transcendent because reality is non-dual. It is not a duality. There is only one self. You are awareness and awareness is “other than” what it perceives, although what it perceives is only itself. During “awakening” moments you are actually experiencing yourself as you are but ignorance survives these moments and it projects the experience on the ego. Vedanta calls this phenomenon superimposition (*adhyaropa*). You think that what belongs to you, awareness, belongs to the ego. When the experience wears off you go back to experiencing yourself as the ego but now you believe you are something other than your ego. You declare yourself “enlightened” and imagine that you are qualified to teach others.

The name of the organization that Mr. Cohen founded tells the story: “Evolutionary Enlightenment.” It is an idea fit for doers who want to improve themselves. But enlightenment is not about becoming a better person. It is about discovering who you really are. Before you are a person you are non-dual, actionless, ever-present, ordinary, perfectly full awareness. The assumption underlying the evolutionary approach to suffering is incorrect – that reality is a duality, that you are in need of fixing, that you can do something to get what you already have, that you can “transcend.” Even in the unlikely event that he happens to become a “better” person he is in store for further disappointment, assuming he actually wants to be free. He will have to start his seeking over again from ground zero because his idea of enlightenment is incorrect.

Both people who imagine they are transcendent and those who accept the experiential view of enlightenment often fail to understand that life’s number one value is non-injury. Non-injury is the most valuable value because reality is non-dual. Non-duality means that you and I are non-separate. I will only injure something other than myself. Furthermore, this fact implies that I love everyone as I love myself – because they are myself. When Mr. Cohen finally wakes up this is a lesson

that he will do well to contemplate.

Here is his statement:

“I’m fifty-seven years old and currently find myself facing the biggest challenge of my life. I’ve been a teacher of spiritual enlightenment for twenty-seven years. Enlightenment has always been and always will be about transcending the ego. Over the last several years some of my closest students have tried to make it apparent to me that in spite of the depth of my awakening my ego is still alive and well.

“I’ve understood this simple truth, that we all have egos no matter how enlightened we may be, and even taught it to thousands of people all over the world throughout my career. But when I was being asked to face my own ego by those who were nearest and dearest to me I resisted. And I often made their lives difficult as a result.

“I’m aware that many of my students over the years have also been affected by my lack of awareness of this part of myself. And for those of you who are reading this, I apologize. As time passes I intend to reach out and engage in a process of dialogue with those of you who would like to.

“In light of all this, for the sake of my own integrity as a spiritual teacher and as a human being, I’ve decided that I need to take some time off so I can make the effort to develop in many of the ways that I’ve asked other people to. Starting this fall, once I’ve fulfilled some prior commitments, I’m going to embark upon a sabbatical for an extended period of time. During this hiatus I will be stepping down from the leadership of my organization, I won’t be publishing anything here on my blog and will not be doing any public teaching. My intention is to become a better teacher, and more importantly, a better man.

“One of the most beautiful fruits of my work over the years has been the international network of people who have studied, collaborated and trained with me for so long. They are all examples of Evolutionary Enlightenment in their own right, and I couldn’t imagine a greater community of people to carry forward this movement. I’m looking forward to working with them in a very different way in the future.”