

WORLD GOODWILL

Interviews

ANDREW COHEN

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Andrew Cohen shares some of the experiences that led him to his current work. He discusses such central concepts as humility and service, and stresses the importance of wanting to be free "more than anything else". He explains his idea that enlightenment is an evolving process and that human beings are called to participate in the evolution of consciousness.

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Evolutionary Enlightenment An Interview with Andrew Cohen by World Goodwill

WG: Welcome Andrew. We really appreciate your making time in your busy schedule to do this interview. For those of you who don't know him, Andrew Cohen is a spiritual teacher and author, as well as founder and editor of the groundbreaking magazine, *What is Enlightenment?* I'd like to begin by asking you how long you've been a spiritual seeker and how you ended up doing what you're doing today?

AC: Well, I've been a seeker since I was about twenty-two years old, and I began teaching when I was thirty and I'm forty-seven now.

WG: How did you end up doing what you're doing today; how did your life evolve to the point where it is now?

AC: Well, the first thing that happened was that when I was sixteen years old, I had a spontaneous experience of what's called "cosmic consciousness." It was quite unexpected—I wasn't really looking for it.

WG: I read that you were an atheist up until that point?

AC: Well, I'd been brought up as an atheist—I didn't have any religious training. But this experience was so powerful that it shocked and stunned me into the understanding that there was something else.

WG: This was a spontaneous experience? You weren't in a meditative state or doing any spiritual practice?

AC: I was just staying up late one night, having a talk with my mother. I don't know what the catalyst was, I don't think it was anything we were talking about, but suddenly the doors of perception opened and, in a very mysterious and hard-to-understand way, I became aware of the whole universe as one conscious being—a being that was aware of itself as one whole, and I realized that I was not in any way separate from that One Being. The nature of this being was an impersonal, ecstatic love that was almost physically unbearable, and it was intelligent, it was self-aware. I was overcome with awe—tears were streaming down my cheeks, but I wasn't really crying. It was a strange kind of joy that I hadn't experienced before. It was bigger than anything I had ever known. I realized that there was no such thing as death, that all points in space were the same—that no matter where we were, we were always in the same place. There only was one place that we could ever be. And at the end of this episode I somehow understood that if I gave myself to this presence, this consciousness that had revealed itself to me, I'd have nothing to fear, but that if I didn't, I was really going to be in trouble.

Soon the experience began to fade and I was kind of confused as to whether it had really happened to me. And I spoke to many people about it, but nobody really understood. I never completely forgot about it, but I went on to pursue my desire to be a musician. And then, six years later, when I was twenty-two and I was struggling in my life, I found myself being haunted by this event and, at a certain point, I decided that I had to dedicate myself to the rediscovery of what it was that happened. So I started to meditate, and I became a spiritual seeker—I started reading books, and I had various adventures with different types of teachers. I was very curious and hungry to understand.

When I was thirty I went to India. I ended up staying for a few years and right before I was finally going to leave, I went to meet a teacher, H.W.L. Poonja, who, at that time, was little known. He'd been a disciple of the sage Ramana Maharshi. When I met him, two things happened. First, I asked him if one had to make effort in order to be free, and he said, "*You don't have to make any effort to be free.*" And when he said that, in the deepest part of myself there was a recognition that actually I'd never been unfree. It was like a flash: all my life I had believed I was in bondage, or in an unenlightened state, and at that moment I realized that actually it had never been true. Then a couple of days later I had told him about the experience I'd had as a teenager, which I had thought might not be true. He was the only one who understood me, and he said, "You knew everything then." After that, a confidence in what had already happened started to re-emerge in my experience, and that was the beginning of the end of my seeking.

I then had a very powerful experience that went on for about three weeks. There was a burning throughout the body, and a kind of unbearable ecstasy, and a lot of fear. I thought I was dying—I knew I was dying—and I remember being aware of this presence that seemed to be following me everywhere,

that seemed to be literally consuming me, and I realized that if this thing doesn't stop, there'll be nothing left of me. And during this period, when I would meet my friends, I would spontaneously start telling them about what was happening to me and as I was telling them, they were drawn into it themselves, and they started to experience the same expansion of consciousness, and the same burning that I was. And that was the beginning of the teaching. That was in 1986.

WG: I was told that your group is called the "Fellowship for the Realization of Impersonal Enlightenment." I was wondering if you would expand upon the meaning of the word "impersonal".

AC: Well, the word "impersonal" points to the discovery or the experience of what I call the "authentic self," which is who we are beyond ego. You see, there's the ego self, which is deeply conditioned and in a state of bondage to the history of the human personality, and is suffering and struggling with what has already happened in the past—all the pain and drama of one's experience. And there's a deeper part of oneself, which I call the "authentic self", which has never been hurt, wounded, or traumatized by anyone, and is already full and complete as it is. That part of yourself and myself, that part of The Self, is a self that isn't personal. An individual's personal history has no bearing on the emergence of that self, because that self is free from history. And it's the discovery of that part of the self that liberates the human from his or her painful attachment to, and a sense of being in bondage to, a historical past.

When one discovers this authentic self that is free from personal history, one consciously experiences a profound sense of liberation from all the fears and concerns of the separate ego and discovers what it means to be a liberated human being. So that authentic self is not personal or unique in any sense. Impersonal Enlightenment refers to a potential for *all* human beings who are seeking. When two or more human beings discover this authentic self and endeavor to relate to one another from the perspective or vantage point of one human self, not from the separate ego, then we have enlightenment beyond the personal sphere, which is a completely different potential for human beings.

WG: Are you saying then that it's your understanding and experience that people can transcend the personality problems without having to go through any type of healing process to reach this state? That they can just skip over the wounded personality and go on?

AC: That's the whole idea. You see, the point is that this authentic self is not wounded. The authentic self doesn't have any problems to overcome. So if we discover that self and identify with that self, and no longer with the ego-based personal self, then we're home.

WG: But don't you find difficulties in the people you're working with, difficulties that they experience in that process of dealing with the personal self?

AC: Well, the only real difficulty people have, and it's a big one, is that they are unwilling to drop their infatuation with their neurotic self.

WG: Are there any steps that you advocate in order to do that?

AC: Yes: to want to be free from the neurotic self, *to want to be free more than anything else*. And I really mean more than anything else. So in this case, the individual would have to want to be free more than they want to work out their problems.

WG: So, working out their problems is the slow route to spiritual experience?

AC: It's not a slow route; it's a dead end. You see, the whole point is that if the spiritual experience is deep enough, you realize that that part of yourself isn't real.

WG: But don't you think that even though most people understand that theoretically, they still succumb to it?

AC: Many people understand it, and if they do still succumb to it, which a lot of people do, it's because they're not yet willing to leave the neurotic self-obsession alone. In order to find the courage and integrity and interest in liberation to leave the neurotic self-obsession alone, we have to have a very passionate desire to be free. Because it takes tremendous courage, it takes a big heart, just to let it be as it is, and not to try to do anything particular.

WG: Why would we need courage to want to leave something that is so inherently destructive behind? Why do you think so many human beings need courage to do that? Why are we so attached?

AC: Well, we need courage because it takes a leap of faith. Most people think, "If I don't do something about this, I'll never be free of it." Even though you can tell them that if they want to be free of it then they have to stop needing to believe that they have to do something about it. Just let it be. Just *let it be*. That does take a lot of courage, because there's a lot of fear.

WG: Fear of going into the unknown?

AC: That's precisely it—there's a big fear of going into the unknown and a tremendous sense of insecurity. And then there is the desire for a strategy.

WG: It's said by some that you take a rather hard-line, controversial approach to your teaching of your students. Could you describe what methods you use and what it is you're trying to accomplish?

AC: Well, I would say I'm not really hard-line, just very straightforward. It's just that I'm uncompromising

WG: Demanding a lot from your students?

AC: I'm only asking people to follow through on their own stated desire to change. You know, a lot of people who seek the company of spiritual teachers are not really looking for a profound radical transformation, but actually looking for a sense of security and an affirmation of who they already are. Often around spiritual teachers it's kind of a cozy little mutual admiration society—where the students adore the teacher and the teacher affirms the students and everybody kind of remains the same.

WG: And so to try to cut through that, what do you do?

AC: Well, I insist that people actually follow through on their stated intention to actually change in this life, which means *now*.

WG: So, what does that mean? What do you ask of them, how do you demand that they change, that they follow their stated intention?

AC: Well, for example, if someone has experienced a profound spiritual insight and has seen very deeply into the nature of things, and recognized that the way things actually are is very different than the way they had imagined them to be, and that person then wants to change, the expectation is that, as a result of their own experience of insight, they would reorient their relationship to their own experience and to life itself according to what it is that they had seen. So what I would do is that I would insist they do exactly that. If someone sees and experiences a deeper reality or truth, and acknowledges it, and yet is unwilling to live or change accordingly, then he or she could be encouraged to actually do so. Because you see, it's much easier for someone to have a spiritual experience and to see into the nature of things than it is to actually be willing to change.

I find that the big challenge for most people is ego, or inertia, it's this intense psychological and emotional resistance to change *now*. When I started teaching, people had very powerful experiences. But I noticed that usually those powerful experiences didn't lead to a permanent transformation. They resulted in a kind of temporary epiphany that, more often than not, the individual's ego would claim. So after a few years I realized that the whole business of human transformation was a lot more complicated and a lot more challenging than I had originally thought. And this is why, in my teaching, the fundamental tenet is to cultivate what I call "Clarity of Intention" which is the desire to be free more than anything else. This really is the foundation of everything, because without that, even if an individual has a powerful experience, a radical transformation is unlikely to be the result.

If you want to be free more than anything else, you're always going to be in a position of interest in that which is new, so you're not going to be holding on to the way things have been. And that's a very radical and unusual position to take in relationship to the human experience. People don't realize that even teachers, who really have experienced something, still often get stuck, and assume very rigid and fixed positions. They're not willing to examine certain conclusions they have come to, which may have been true at one point but, because things do change in time, may not be the case now. But if you want to be free, you always have to be interested in what's true right now.

The manifest world could change at any time. There has to be a tremendous degree of renunciation, an unusual degree of letting go all the time, in order to be in a position where we're actually able to see what the relationship between things actually is. And that's the big challenge, because the ego's tendencies toward inertia and a false sense of security make it difficult for people to have that experience, that kind of insight, on a permanent basis. But if one wants to be free, it would need to be a constant state, not just one experience that happened one time in the past and has become a memory, something that we hope will happen again in the future. One has to access this kind of depth of insight all the time.

WG: Can you speak about why humility is such an important quality to be developed by spiritual seekers?

AC: Well, from the perspective of enlightenment, humility would be the willingness to *not already know*. The position that the ego takes in relationship to most experience is that "I already know." That's the subtle and not-so-subtle arrogance of ego. And if we already know, we don't have to allow ourselves to experience any real vulnerability. So the position of the ego is one of no innocence. This already-knowing is a wall of self-protection; it's a self-defense mechanism. The position "I already know" means you don't have to question anything too deeply. So the opposite of that kind of arrogance would be the position of not already knowing. If we don't already know, and yet we want to know, then there's innocence, and there's awakened interest. And when I say innocence, I don't mean naïve faith, I mean the sincere interest in life, in what this is all about. We become cynical so easily. But I believe that if one is truly free, and one is truly awake, this sense of innocence would be a permanent attribute and expression of the human personality. In the presence of someone like that, one experiences this genuine sense of innocence. Such a person can be self-assured, and very confident, but still be free from those ego defenses that don't permit that which is new to invade the psychological space.

So I think humility is really the ground for the experience of enlightenment to become a permanent state—because, as I was just describing to you, even people who have become enlightened can become fixed and rigid. So humility is the ground for enlightenment to grow.

WG: Do you practice meditation?

AC: Do I personally practice meditation as a discipline? No. After this transformation happened to me, the need to practice meditation or anything else in order to be free just fell away. Before that, I was meditating every day, religiously. Once this transformation happened, the need to formally meditate fell away. But, for example, when I teach, I meditate with people and I encourage people to meditate.

WG: Yes, I was wondering, because if meditation started your path, I was wondering if you advocate its practice.

AC: Well, meditation can help the individual to begin to see and understand the deeply mechanical nature of bondage and ignorance. If you pay attention, you can see that this experience of unenlightenment is created through a compulsive, unconscious, and deeply mechanical identification and relationship with thought and also with feeling. And through the practice of meditation, and really paying attention, one can choose to no longer compulsively identify with thought and feeling and, as a result, experience the enlightened state. So in terms of understanding the mechanics of our potential for liberation and how bondage is created, the practice of meditation is very, very important.

WG: What do you see as a connection between serving, helping others, and the attainment of enlightenment?

AC: Well, if the enlightenment is profound, the inevitable result is that from that moment on the individual is going to dedicate the rest of his or her life and energy to the upliftment and liberation of others—without any doubt. Because if enlightenment is profound, one ceases to live in order to have and to get and become for oneself. From that moment on, the point of life is to bring light into this world and to liberate as many people as possible—to live for the sake of others, no longer just for oneself.

WG: One of the basic premises of your work is that the face of enlightenment has changed throughout time, that it has moved from a transcendence of the world to a deeper engagement with it. Would you comment on that? And, also, from your observation, has the spiritual community in the West begun to grasp this shift?

AC: I think that it hasn't really been grasped very much. Generally speaking, the word enlightenment usually refers merely to an experience of transcendence of the world of time and becoming, transcendence of the manifest universe, in order to experience the primordial self that has never been born and that has never become. Prior to the experience of enlightenment, one has believed oneself to be only the human personality which has been born in time, and then as a result of enlightenment or a deep spiritual revelation, one sees the Unmanifest realm that has not yet become, that which is unborn, and one instantaneously experiences freedom from the world of becoming, the world of time. And traditionally speaking, in the East, the idea was to experience the unmanifest realm and then, once we experience it, to rest there, to remain as uninvolved with the world of time and becoming as possible.

But you see, when those traditional teachings came into being, it wasn't known that we're part of an evolving universe. People thought that time was cyclical, and that the life process was just going around and around like a wheel. But what we've discovered now is that that's not actually true, that we're all part of an evolutionary process, a process of becoming more and more and, in the case of human beings, becoming *more conscious*. So when we begin to understand the experience of enlightenment in the context of evolution, we begin to see that as human beings who are incarnated in this world, we are actually here to participate.

This body wasn't built for silent absorption in the unmanifest; it was built to actively participate in the manifest universe, because that's what it's a part of. We're all part of an evolutionary process. So when we begin to understand the experience of enlightenment in the context of evolution, what we want to do is to free the vehicle, the human personality, from its compulsive identification with the fears and desires of the ego, or the separate self, so that it will be able to wholeheartedly and unselfconsciously participate in the life process for the greatest cause there is. It's only then, you see, that we cease to live in slavery to the fears and desires of the separate ego, and live our life in the full knowledge of who and what we really are. In the cause of evolution itself, the human experience begins to make *sense*. Only then does it really make sense to be who we are—to be a human being who's living in this world who knows who he or she actually is. Most of us go through life in an unconscious way, lost in the fears and desires of the ego. But when we see through the ego, we discover a much deeper meaning in the life process, and then there's a tremendous passion for actually being able to participate, as ourselves, in the life process. And suddenly being alive and being who we are becomes a thrilling, very meaningful adventure.

Then we're living in a different dimension, because we have discovered a different *motive*. And as we surrender more and more to that motive, we constantly experience this affirmation of purpose, and this sense of being at the right place at the right time doing the right thing for the right reasons, and of being deeply, deeply connected with life. And there's the sense that there's *so much to do*, but there's not enough time to do it, and it's all so important. And we're just so lucky to be here and to have the opportunity to participate. So you see, evolutionary enlightenment is very different from the Eastern ideal of transcendence or removal, because the idea is to enter *into* the life process in ways that most people don't ever even realize.

WG: Can you please expand upon the idea contained in your writings of the need for spiritual seekers to consciously participate in the vast evolutionary process, and that we can actively guide evolutionary growth?

AC: The next leap of evolution, for human beings, is not physical, it's noetic—it's the evolution of consciousness itself. And the way this leap is going to occur is through the individual realizing that the purpose of being here is actually to consciously give oneself over to that process. So, when one actually does such a thing, one pretty soon finds oneself at the outer limits of where the human race has actually gone. One finds oneself actually pushing the limits of the possible, pushing the barriers of oneself, and trying to encourage other people to also push those same barriers. And it's through pushing those limits and those barriers that one becomes aware of the fact that, because one has given oneself over to this process so wholeheartedly, one *is*, in a sense, guiding it. But it's not ego that's guiding it. The degree of surrender and of passion for that which has not yet occurred puts one's own mind and one's psychological, emotional, and spiritual capacities into the conscious service of what I call the evolutionary impulse.

This evolutionary impulse is already there within us; it's not something that the mind creates. And when we give ourselves over to it that much, at times we can feel this sense of being absolutely at one with the first cause, the greater principle, the energy behind the Big Bang, the intelligence that created and is still creating this universe. One's own mind becomes one with that process, and one begins to

express that same creative aspiration *consciously*. And when it gets to that point, we can say that we're literally guiding, or pushing those energies ourselves. We're way out there on the edge.

WG: In some spiritual traditions, the idea of a spiritual hierarchy of Masters of the Wisdom, a group of enlightened beings, is posited—a group of beings who have gone through the rounds of ordinary existence and transcended the limitations of human form. I was just wondering if you believed in this concept, that there are enlightened beings?

AC: Do you mean “Ascended Masters,” that kind of thing? No. Because the point is, you see, if this next evolutionary step is going to happen, *we*—you and I—have to be the ones who are going to do it.

WG: Does that preclude the existence of a greater group?

AC: What I'm saying is that if we believe that these “Ascended Masters” are already looking after us, and are guiding the way, then it lets us off the hook. We think we don't really have to do it because they're actually taking care of it already. But what if they didn't actually exist, and what if it *is* up to us? Then we would have to rise to a much higher level in order to take on that burden, because we knew that it literally was up to us. And I personally believe that it is.

WG: I do, too, I believe that it is up to us, but I also believe in the existence of a Hierarchy. Their purpose is not to usurp human free will, but rather we have to work together with them to evolve as a whole, as a planet, to this higher state of consciousness. That's why I am truly optimistic about the future, for I believe that in concert with these higher minds working with human beings, together we can bring the masses of humanity into a higher state of consciousness.

AC: But I think that what those beings, those Ascended Masters, represent, is *already in us*. And the whole idea is to access that deeper, more evolved part of ourself, and then we're going to be one with what those beings represent, and we will become that same energy that they are.

WG: Right. We've already touched on this, but in a recent issue of *What is Enlightenment?*, there was a dialogue between you and Ken Wilber in which you referred to the fact that some of the groups you are associated with are going through a process of what you referred to as “group enlightenment”. Do you see this as a new evolutionary unfoldment? And do you think it will affect the way in which groups serve in the world?

AC: Well I do think, I do think it's a new form of group unfoldment, because it's taking the experience of enlightenment out of the hands of one individual, and it is beginning to emerge in and through a collective mind, which I personally think is the next step in the emergence of this higher consciousness. It's a very delicate business, so it's on very shaky ground. It's very new and it's very fragile. But I could say that my life's work is dedicated to insuring that this, what I call “evolutionary enlightenment”, emerges as a stable event. But I haven't achieved that yet, that's for sure.

WG: It's a good goal.

AC: Yes. And it's demanding.

WG: In *Living Enlightenment*, which I should mention is your 12th book, you wrote, “The freedom I'm speaking about, the freedom of enlightenment, is always only about the celebration of no difference whatsoever.” Could you talk a little bit about what that means, the experience of “no difference whatsoever”.

AC: Well, that refers to something I was saying earlier, and that is the discovery of and the sharing and mutual recognition of this authentic self.

WG: The experience you had when you were 16? That sounds to me like “no difference whatsoever”.

AC: Well, no. That's true, but that was more an experience of Cosmic Consciousness. What I was referring to was the discovery of the authentic self, and that is, as I said earlier, that part of myself and yourself which literally is identical. In other words, it's the same self. So when I experience my authentic self, and you experience your authentic self, you and I are literally One. Because the self you experience and the self I experience is the same self. That self is the already enlightened part of us.

WG: The undying part? We speak of the soul as the undying aspect.

AC: Well, when I say the *authentic* self, it's slightly different than what we might call the unmanifest, unborn, primordial self. There's the unmanifest self, and then there is this authentic self, which is very much part of the manifest self, but it is not the conditioned human personality. It's very aware of the world, and it cares about virtue and evolution. It desperately wants all the right things to occur. It's the best part of who and what we are. So when I become aware of this authentic self in myself, and you become aware of the authentic self in yourself, the self we're becoming aware of is literally the same. And in that, we will experience absolutely no boundary whatsoever between us, we will experience perfect oneness, ecstatic communion and intimacy. Because the self that we're both experiencing is really the same. And so you may be a woman, I may be a man, and you may have a different personal history and background than I do, but if you're resting in that authentic self and I'm resting in that authentic self, none of that will interfere in any way with the experience of profound union and spiritual communion. So that experience is when we delight in the experience of *no difference whatsoever*. Because that's really where freedom lies, that's where the greatest happiness lies—in the discovery and celebration of that part of ourselves where there literally isn't any difference—not metaphorically but actually. If one thinks about the implications of that, it's very profound.

WG: In some teachings I've read there is a concept mentioned that I think is related to this, they talk about the "blotting out of all form"—that when you reach a certain state of consciousness, you're in the form but you've blotted it out.

AC: Yes. Because something deeper is emerging, and you're becoming more aware of that than you are of the external things here.

WG: In *Living Enlightenment* you write that "surrender and surrender alone is the key to the kingdom" and that it takes "guts, love and devotion," more that most of us would be willing to give, to attain it. Would you be willing to explain how this process of surrender works out within consciousness and the daily life?

AC: Well, in light of what we have been speaking about so far, surrender means that we actually do want to be free more than anything else, and that we would never compromise that, for any reason, at any time. So that uncompromising position would be an expression of the surrender that we're speaking about.

WG: OK, this is my final question. I just found a quote in your book that I thought was really beautiful. I wondered if you had anything else to say about it. You wrote: "Consciousness cannot evolve beyond a certain point without our wholehearted and fully conscious participation in the process. And for this to happen, we have to make ourselves available. That's why it's so, so important to want to be free more than anything else, not for ourselves but for the evolution of life itself."

AC: Well, the point is that we need to want to be free more than anything else so that we're going to be in a position to be available to actually carry things forward—not for our own benefit, but for everyone else's sake. Unless you want to be free more than anything else, you're not going to be in a position to be a vehicle for the evolution of consciousness itself.