

THE WHAT, WHY AND HOW OF THIS BOOK

Nearly seven years after I broke off my twenty-one-year relationship with spiritual teacher Andrew Cohen—by far the most significant, intense, challenging and rewarding relationship of my adult life—I decided to create this book. It has since taken me hundreds of hours of interviews with teachers and students, who helped me cast light on the spiritual teacher-student relationship; that was followed by perhaps thousands of hours of reading, editing, contemplation and writing. I'm pleased to present you with my findings, humble though they may be, regarding the paradoxical nature of that relationship. I write in the hope that we, students and teachers alike, can begin to come to better grips with the meaning of our relationship with each other.

The interviews and stories you are about to read are deeply personal in nature. Such is the subject matter itself. The questions I have sought to elucidate in this book are the very ones that I myself have struggled with all these years.

JULY 1987
JERUSALEM

In the summer of 1987, I was twenty-nine years old, finishing up my fifth year of medical studies at the Hadassah Medical School and my fourth year of Chinese medicine studies at a private school. And I was in total turmoil about my life. The turmoil had to do with Andrew Cohen.

He was an ordinary-looking Jewish-American kid from New York, which is how I fondly thought of him, even though he was only three years my elder. My experience of sitting every evening with Andrew and a small group of people in a friend's living room in Jerusalem—listening to him answer people's questions about enlightenment, liberation, timelessness and the absolute reality with utter simplicity and directness, as well as having my own personal revelatory conversations with him—was catalyzing a tectonic shift in me.

I had caught the bug of seeking spiritual liberation when I was sixteen, but I had always been suspicious and even hostile toward the idea of becoming the student of any spiritual teacher. That seemed to me a sure recipe for spiritual slavery—the very opposite of what I was looking for. Although I had lived for two years with a delightfully free-spirited Zen master in Japan, who I spoke of as my teacher, and I intended to go back to meditate with him after I completed my studies, I never considered him as my *Teacher*. But there I was, contemplating the possibility that in Andrew I had met my *Teacher*, and it was driving me crazy. How could I know if he was my true *Teacher*? How could anyone know? What did *Teacher* even mean?

On a warm July morning, the upheaval I was experiencing grew so intense that once I arrived at the hospital, I couldn't imagine joining my team at the surgery department. We were to study anesthesia that day. But I needed to figure out my relationship with Andrew first, I told myself, and without further delay. My life depended on it. But how could I know? My mind seemed completely useless in the face of my questions. I walked back and forth on the hospital lawn in an agitated state for what felt like hours. Then, in despair I thought: I should try to have a nap; maybe the answer would come to me in my sleep. I lay down under a tree, but the heat, the flies and my agitation made it a hopeless attempt. "I give up," I thought. "I might as well join my team and use the rest of the day for studying." I started to get up, but just as I was halfway to standing I was catapulted into a state of unitive consciousness.

I have no idea how long I was in that state, for I had no perception of "I" nor of time. It seems to me that if somebody had been standing

next to me with a stopwatch, they would have measured only a few seconds, but I was in a “dimension” or an “existential state” in which a fraction of a second and eternity are one and the same. I cannot use the words “experience” or “knowing” for it, because “experience” and “knowing” require a split between the knower (the subject, “I”) and the known (the object of experience or knowing), and in the state I experienced that day outside the hospital in Jerusalem, there was no such split.

In that fraction of a second, the very foundation of my being seemed to shift. When I found myself back in the world of self and time, I knew that Andrew had always been and would always be my Teacher, and that somehow I had always known that.

I stumbled to the phone booth at the hospital entrance and called the house where Andrew was staying.

“Hello,” he answered in his now familiar voice.

“Andrew?” I said, “This is Andrew. I mean, hi, Andrew, this is Amir.” I couldn’t think straight.

“I’m yours,” I said.

I could feel Andrew smiling on the other end.

“I knew that since we first met,” he replied. “Why don’t you come over and tell me what happened?”

SEPTEMBER 15, 1987
TOTNES, UNITED KINGDOM

A few days after completing my end-of-year exams in medical school I flew over to the U.K., and was warmly welcomed into one of the *sangha* (Sanskrit for community) houses of Andrew’s students in Totnes, a town in England’s picturesque South Devon region, where Andrew was staying.

A few weeks after arriving in Totnes, I spent one evening after *satsang* (Sanskrit for being in the company of a guru) with Andrew and the people who were living with him. The next day I received a message from him that he wanted to talk with me, so I went over to his house. As we sat together in the living room, Andrew laid out for

me the full picture of my psycho-spiritual makeup. He said that on the one hand, he found me an exceptionally warm, trusting, serious and committed man, and felt a deep connection with me; but on the other hand, he felt a heavy presence of ego in me, and he and the other people with him had been very aware of it during our meeting the night before. He said it was rare to have these two extremes co-existing in the same person. Then he said: "You want to become as light as a feather, and this may take a few years. I suggest that you forget any plans you may have other than being with me. Think of yourself as a wandering monk. This means you should completely forget about your medical career."

That was a lot to let in, and Andrew saw that and got up to make coffee for both of us. During the few minutes that he was in the kitchen, I decided I was going to follow his advice. Instantly, I experienced a change in my attitude. When he came back, holding two cups of cappuccino, I told him: "Andrew, something completely unexpected has just happened to me. Only a few minutes ago I was dreading the possibility that you would suggest that I completely discard my medical career, and now I feel like I've just dropped a few sandbags, to help my takeoff."

And so it happened that I ultimately and irrevocably discarded my plans to become a medical doctor, and never looked back.

But my meeting with Andrew that day also marked another significant turning point in my life. Until that day I had never liked coffee, and under any other circumstances I would have refused it, but when your guru makes you a cup of cappuccino, you drink it. I drank it—and to my utter surprise, I loved it. That day I became a coffee lover.

NOVEMBER 1990
SANTA CRUZ AND MILL VALLEY, CALIFORNIA

In mid-1988 I moved, together with Andrew and over one-hundred of his European students, to live in the United States. We lived for about a year in Boston and then moved to Marin County, California.

At about the middle of 1990 the pressure on me by Andrew and my friends in the community, to face my “Israeli macho” conditioning, was becoming unbearable for me. I could see some of what they were pointing out to me, but I also felt that there wasn’t much I could do about it. I fell into despair and considered giving up my spiritual aspirations and returning to “life in the world.” At some point I left the community and moved to Santa Cruz, a few hours away from where the community was living. I rented a room in a house there and spent a few months working and thinking about what I wanted to do with my life. The crisis ended surprisingly with a dream.

In my dream I was sitting face to face with Andrew, close to him, telling him in great detail all I was seeing and understanding about my psychological and spiritual condition, all the obstacles I saw in my way, which of them I had already faced, which of them I felt I could overcome and which of them I had no confidence that I could overcome. Andrew listened to me very attentively without responding, and when I finished speaking (in the dream it was after a long time), he said to me very simply: “It all depends on what you want.”

I woke up immediately. It was still completely dark outside. The dream was so lucid, so tangible, that it could have been real. I knew that in the dream I was clearer and more accurate than I could ever be when I was awake, and I decided to write down all I had told Andrew in the dream while it was still fresh in my memory. I opened my diary and began writing feverishly. I wrote about the obstacles in my way, but as I read what I wrote I *knew* these particular obstacles could not stop me. At the end of the process I had all the obstacles clearly laid out on the pages of my diary, and none of them was a real obstacle. I knew what I wanted.

At 9:00 a.m. I called the office of the community and asked to give Andrew the message that I wanted to come back. Minutes later I received a call from Andrew. I told him what had happened, and asked him to let me come back to the community. “Why don’t you come

over and meet with me and a few of your friends,” he suggested. A few days later I moved back to the community.

JANUARY 1991
BODHGAYA, INDIA
(DURING A MONTH-LONG RETREAT)

“Andrew, what happens when we die?” The question came from a Bhutanese monk at our month-long retreat; he wore saffron robes, and had been coming regularly to satsang with Andrew.

“I don’t know,” Andrew said, “I don’t have any memory of it. But when I get there, I’ll send you a postcard.”

We all laughed, and I started thinking: Do I know anything about this question? Is there anything in my experience that could indicate to me what happens after we die? What if I died right now—would everything stop or would something of me continue?

I sat there, imagining that I had died, suddenly, without anything leading to it, and I *knew* that my death would have absolutely no effect on my relationship with Andrew. It wouldn’t even register on that level—it would be completely insignificant. I didn’t know how I knew that, but I had no doubt that it was true, and as I contemplated it I was flooded with intense ecstasy. I was thinking about death and I was totally ecstatic, because I knew my death would mean nothing for my relationship with Andrew.

JANUARY 1998
RISHIKESH, INDIA
(DURING A MONTH-LONG RETREAT)

“I’ve just inherited a lot of money and I don’t have to work anymore,” said the man sitting in front of Andrew in satsang. “On the one hand, I am attracted to do social work and help the needy, and on the other, I am pulled to dedicate my life to the spiritual quest. What should I do?”

“You should find what it is that pulls you like a black hole, that if you immerse yourself in it you will disappear into it, and then you should give yourself wholeheartedly to that,” Andrew replied.

I contemplated for a minute what that black hole was for me, and quickly came to the answer: It was the purity and absolute nature of the enlightenment teachings that I felt drawn to and wanted to immerse myself completely in.

I sat there, feeling happy with that answer, until it suddenly hit me that it was my relationship with Andrew himself, much more than his teachings, that I was pulled to. *What? How could that be?* The answer made no sense to me. How could my relationship with Andrew, who is just a human being, be more powerful and all-consuming than spiritual teachings? To my mind, the answer made no sense, but at the same time my heart was exploding with it, and tears were streaming down my face.

I knew I had to ask Andrew what this meant, so after satsang ended, I went and asked to talk with him. “I have a spiritual question I want to ask you,” I said, and told him what had happened and my bewilderment about the insight I had had.

“You’re right!” Andrew exclaimed when I finished. “Do you know why? First of all, because *I am* the teachings! Secondly, it’s also a perfect answer because a smart guy like you can find a way to remain separate and intact in your relationship with the teachings, but you sense and know that you will lose yourself completely in your relationship with me.”

JUNE 2006
FOXHOLLOW, MASSACHUSETTS

Foxhollow was the world center of EnlightenNext, the international organization and spiritual community that grew around Andrew, with a dozen centers in Europe, the United States, Israel and India. Andrew and sixty to seventy of his students lived at Foxhollow, and the place also functioned as an ashram or monastery where people practiced meditation and various physical practices a few

hours each day, as well as engaged in intensive individual and collective enquiry.

One weekend at Foxhollow, the tension became almost palpable. It was a moment of truth for the men among Andrew's oldest students, and I was one of them. After months of intensive practice and countless meetings among us, Andrew felt that the time was ripe for a significant change in our relationship with him and our ability to take more responsibility for the development of the community. A meeting with him was scheduled for the morning of the following day, Saturday. In a message that Andrew sent to all of us, he emphasized that it was important that we be ready for the next step, both all together and individually.

It had become clear to everyone that I was the weak link in the group. My friends were concerned about the effect that my weaknesses—self-doubt, lack of confidence and emotional instability—would have on this important meeting. I promised them that I would do all I could not to disappoint them, but in my heart I was not confident at all that I would keep my promise.

That evening, Andrew played with his jazz band at a club in one of the nearby towns. I drove with a few friends to the gig. As soon as I entered the club, Andrew noticed me, even as he was busy setting up his drum kit, and signaled for me to come over to him. As I leaned toward him, he whispered forcefully: "Amir, tomorrow we are going to have a very important meeting, and its success depends very much on you. But rather than do everything to face your weakness and come prepared to the meeting, you chose to come here, drink beer and enjoy the music. It seems that you don't really care. But I do. A lot. Would you please leave the club for me?"

Shaken and on the verge of tears, I left the club and drove back to Foxhollow. I didn't know what to do. I went to the meditation hall, sat down in the middle of the large, empty space, and meditated through the night. In those hours of meditation, I rediscovered immovable stability, which was not dependent in any way upon me.

In the morning, when we met with Andrew, it was clear to everyone—without exchanging a word—that something had settled

down and completely relaxed in me. I shared with everyone what happened.

“Andrew, I don’t understand,” I said. “I’ve been meditating for thirty years, but nothing like this has ever happened to me; I’ve never had such a meditation. What happened?”

“It’s very simple,” Andrew replied. “You’re a narcissist, so even your meditation is for yourself. Last night you meditated for me. That’s what made all the difference.”

DECEMBER 26, 2008
FOXHOLLOW, MASSACHUSETTS

“We’ve been putting so much energy, time and money into the Israeli center, but it’s never taken off,” Andrew said. “So, as disappointing as it is for me and for everybody, we’ve decided to close it down. I want you to move back to Foxhollow and be part of the core group here.”

I sank into my chair, feeling as if all the energy were draining out of my body. The room suddenly turned darker. A horrible feeling of total and final failure came over me. But the failure wasn’t just of our Israeli center and of me as its co-leader. At that moment I sensed that, for me, the failure really lay in my relationship with Andrew and the promise it had carried.

In a way, that moment was the culmination of a half-year process, during which my mistrust in Andrew’s motivation had grown. I mistrusted his willingness to support me in the independence, strength, creativity and responsibility I was discovering. The stronger and more independent I became, both as a leader and as a cultural activist, the more tension I felt growing between us. Being sent back to Foxhollow also meant that I would be again in Andrew’s sphere of tight control, which would be a major setback to my growing autonomy.

From the bottom of my sinkhole, I heard myself mumbling, “I cannot do that. I cannot leave Israel and all the projects I’m involved in. That would be completely wrong.”

“Why don’t you think about it, and let’s talk again tomorrow,” Andrew said. “I think it would be good for you to be here, with your brothers and close to me. You’ve become a leader, and here you’d be part of the worldwide revolution, rather than wasting your time in Israel.”

“I cannot leave Israel,” I repeated, now with a little more determination. “That would be a total letdown of my friends and colleagues there, and of my own integrity. I’m not going to do that.”

As I stepped out of Andrew’s office into the freezing wind and began walking back to the house where I was staying during my visit, I already knew that this conversation marked the end of my relationship with Andrew as my Teacher. It was the first time in nearly twenty-two years that I had told him directly that he was wrong and that I wasn’t going to obey his instructions. That meant that I trusted myself more than I trusted him. That meant the termination of our teacher-student “contract.” But at that moment, for me it also meant failure, disappointment and heartache.



The breakdown of my relationship with Andrew left me with one big, wide open question: “*What was it all about?*” Five years later, when Andrew’s worldwide organization of EnlightenNext collapsed, I decided to engage even more fully with that question, and take its exploration as far as I could—at least for myself, at this point in my spiritual process. I didn’t know where this would lead or what discoveries I would make in the process, but just the idea of diving into the mystery of the teacher-student relationship made my nerves tingle with excitement.

I started off by reading every book and article on the subject that I could find, and taking my first steps in interviewing teachers and students in Israel. My very first interview was with Peter (Hakim) Young, a British Sufi teacher who was visiting Israel with his Israeli-born wife. On a sunny morning in Tel Aviv, we met in a café on Sheinkin Street, and I vividly remember our first exchange. I asked Hakim to

tell me about his relationship with his teacher, Bulent Rauf, and he replied that the man had never regarded himself as a teacher but rather as “a fellow student.”

“Gosh,” I thought, “this project is going to be trickier than I thought.”

My second interviewee was with Aikido teacher Miles Kessler, in another café in Tel Aviv. At the end of the interview, I asked him if he was willing to refer me to a couple of his students to interview, and his response seriously impressed me: “Since you heard from me only good things about myself,” he said, “I think you should get a more balanced picture, so I’ll introduce you to two former students of mine with whom the relationship did not end well. If they agree to be interviewed, I think you’ll get quite a different perspective from them.” Indeed, the picture I got from those former students was much more complex and dilemmatic than I got from him.

Israel is a mecca for spiritual teachers, and I went on to interview about a dozen visiting teachers, from Zen masters to Jewish rabbis, as well as a few of their students, including British Vipassanā teacher Christopher Titmuss, American teacher Gabriel Cousens and two Tibetan Rinpoches. During that initial process, I built a list of ten questions, which I used as the basis of each interview and from which I happily diverted into whatever interesting subject came up during the talk. I soon discovered that teachers were generally clearer and had more to say than students about what it meant to be a student, based on their previous experience with their own teachers, so I devoted a good part of many of the interviews to the teachers’ experiences as students.

After completing that first round of interviews in Israel, and with the generous help of *Buddha at the Gas Pump* interviewer Rick Archer, interfaith dialogue advocate Kurt Johnson and some of my friends in Europe and the United States, I began contacting teachers from other parts of the world and asking them for interviews about their relationships with their own teachers as well as with their students.

I was surprised by the high ratio of positive responses I received. Within a few months I had conducted about thirty more interviews,

most of them via Skype and a few in face-to-face meetings during trips I made to the U.K. and the U.S. About half of the interviews were with teachers; the other half were follow-up conversations with their students. Reading through the interviews and considering the excerpts, I found that the most potent parts of each interview were those during which I sensed a paradox or an unresolved question or dilemma—all of which were suggested by an interviewee's hesitation, inconsistency, vagueness or confusion. One night over dinner, I excitedly told my wife that I came upon what would be the heart of my book: the paradoxes and dilemmas in the spiritual teacher-student relationship.

I became most interested in the types of relationships in which paradoxes and dilemmas were most prominent, including spiritual mentorships and root guru-disciple relationships, which are described in the next chapter. These relationships are characterized by a high level of commitment, involvement on many levels and a certain intensity of intimacy or love between teacher and student.

After conducting nearly one-hundred interviews, of which about one-third were with teachers and two-thirds were with students, and forming a list of about a dozen types of paradoxes and dilemmas, I decided to dedicate each chapter in this book to a specific problem and demonstrate it through one or two interviews in which it is most clearly evident. This meant that most of the interviews I conducted were not included in this book, but excerpts from many of them—as well as additional paradoxes and dilemmas that were not included—are posted on my website *The Freedom to Question* (free2quest.com).