

The Challenge of Enlightenment

A Voyage into the
Multidimensional Integrity
of Nonduality

A Talk by Andrew Cohen

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of Non-duality

Edited by Andrew Cohen

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MOKSHA PRESS 1996

BOOKS BY ANDREW COHEN

An Unconditional Relationship to Life
Enlightenment Is a Secret
Autobiography of an Awakening
My Master Is My Self

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ISBN 1-883929-14-8

Printed in the United States of America

Printed on recycled paper





Foreword

I was fortunate enough to be present during the retreat where Andrew Cohen delivered the talk from which this book has been created. As he came in, sat down and began to speak, it seemed that he had come before us that day without a plan, without any particular preparation, without even a notion of what should or shouldn't take place. I listened with awe, fascination and rapture as he plunged fearlessly into an unimaginable mystery. It seemed he was reaching deeply, deeply into the unknown, and with calm precision and passion proceeded to slowly and delicately draw forth the threads and the pieces of a serene, overwhelming and absolute dharma. A light so bright shone forth that I

cannot describe it. A light so healing in its totality and embrace that it streamed out to touch the living heart of anyone who dared to truly let it in. This was no unassuming spiritual talk, nor the simple opinion of one man speaking his mind. Seated among the throng that day, we were all given the chance to peer farther than we could have imagined into the exact nature of what and who we are. We were offered on outstretched hand the key to the riddle of how to be whole—and therefore free—in this challenging human life.

Reading for the first time the written version of the talk, as I leaned far forward, breathlessly in my chair I found myself overwhelmed by the sensations I experienced that day in Bodhgaya. It is my heartfelt wish that you, the reader, having deeply considered the contents

of these pages, will find yourself also disarmed and uplifted by the profound innocence which they evoke, even as you may be startled by their absolute challenge and unyielding perfect logic. In its few pages, it speaks volumes. Within its close covers, is contained a universe. No matter where on the path any of us may be, the sheer magnitude and timeless relevance of what lies beyond this introductory page is an unwavering beacon to guide us on the Way. It shines with the strength of a love that has no limit in its embrace of all humanity and for the potential Liberation which lies at the center of this, our shared existence.

Richard Klein

This talk was given by Andrew Cohen to a gathering of over 300 people on January 13, 1996 during a two-week retreat. The retreat took place in Bodhgaya, a small town in northern India which is the site of the Buddha's awakening.

PART ONE

If one wants to be free, if one wants to realize a perspective on one's experience that is vast and potentially limitless, then one has to look into what it means to have an absolute relationship to life. Most people, of course, do not have an absolute relationship to life. Indeed, their relationship to all of their experience and to life as a whole is a very relative matter. There is a very simple way of understanding the difference between a relative relationship to life and one that is absolute. The first is very narrow and very limited, and the second is vast and unlimited. If one wants to be free, then one has to look into this question of what an absolute relationship to life and to all of one's experience could be.

This is a very, very demanding endeavor, because we are not in the habit of viewing our experience or looking at

life itself from a perspective that is absolute. This is not something that we're taught, and this is not something that we're in the habit of doing. In order to discover and experience for ourselves what a truly absolute relationship to life is, it is imperative that the individual is not in the picture at all. As long as we see ourselves as being apart in any way, looking out on our experience from some kind of separate island called the self, that perspective on one's experience and on all of life that is truly absolute will be impossible to realize. Absolute implies all. Absolute implies everything. Absolute implies that there is nothing separate. It implies a perspective that is all-inclusive.

Let Everything Be as It Is

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In order to find out for ourselves what an absolute relationship to life is all about, we have to be willing to *let everything be as it is*. If we really want to get to the crux of the matter, if we want to get to the very core of what it means to be alive, to know what it means to be, then all we have to do is let everything be as it is. In this way, through simply letting everything be as it is, slowly we will sink, naturally and effortlessly, to the very core of who and what we are. It will all happen by itself if we simply allow everything to be as it is. Allowing everything to be as it is means *letting go of*

everything. If you let go of everything, naturally you will sink to the bottom, to the very center, to the very core of who and what you really are.

What I'm trying to point to is the ground of being itself, to where we end up when there is no motion, no doing, no action, no movement. When there is no notion of any sense of a self as being separate, when there is no notion of another, no notion of the world, when there is no time, there is only that—and what it is we really don't know. Nobody really knows what it is. I don't know what it is. But we don't have to know what it is in the sense of being able to describe it as an object. All we have to do is to be able to recognize it for what it is—where everything came from and where

everything goes back to, the very ground of being, the very ground of everything, the ground of who and what each and every one of us is. It's through the discovery of this ground of being, this ultimate source of who we are, that an absolute relationship to life, which is Liberation, is found.

Letting everything be as it is means that one is assuming no position in relationship to anything that occurs. This is often difficult to understand—what it truly means to assume *no relationship* to our experience. If we want to realize a perspective that is absolute, a perspective that is always new and without limits, we have to be willing to allow everything to be as it is. To discover what it means to take no position for a moment, for a few moments, for a few hours, or for a few days is a very good thing and it's very important, because obviously if one doesn't experience it at all, one won't have any idea what it's all about. But if this experience is truly to become the foundation of Liberation, it cannot merely

be a momentary episode, but must eventually become the very place where we rest always, no matter what.

If we genuinely seek Liberation, the place where we always are and the place we never move from is that place where everything *is as it is* and where we are certainly therefore allowing everything to be as it is. But in the end we are not even allowing because there is just resting. There is only resting, and there is nothing more than that. When at rest, when any of us are truly at rest, deeply at rest, there is no effort at all being made to allow anything to be as it is—because we are simply resting, deeply, deeply at rest, and so there is no effort. There is no struggle of any kind to maintain, sustain or control anything whatsoever. When deeply at rest, we have let go of everything, we have let everything be as

it is. Because of that and only because of that do we experience peace.

Once again, allowing everything to be as it is means to assume no relationship to our experience. This is to *neither accept nor reject anything that occurs*. Now when allowing everything to be as it is, when assuming no relationship to our experience, it means that *we are ceasing to make distinctions*—even if the mind seems to continue to mechanically make distinctions, make choices and make preferences, *we* no longer are. So if we are truly allowing everything to be as it is, if we are assuming no relationship to our experience, it means that we are no longer making distinctions, even if distinctions are being made by the mind.

When we go very deeply into letting everything be

as it is, we dare ourselves to go beyond the familiar, beyond this or that, to where everything becomes equal to us, where there is no positive or negative, where one thing is not any better than another. The value of everything then becomes utterly the same.

Because we are allowing everything to be as it is and because we are not making distinctions anymore, the whole world of opposites, of differences, begins to fall away from us. The only thing that we are aware of is rest. Rest and more rest. If we go very deeply into it, that's what happens. It is not that we have ceased to respond to the fact of difference merely because of a conscious choice, but now we find that we are so deeply absorbed in the stillness of being itself that we can no longer see any differences. Indeed, even making

the effort to discriminate becomes impossible. At this depth there is no sense of differentiation, no distinctions of any kind being made—even between absolute opposites like positive or negative. It's too still for that.

Only a true seeker is going to have the kind of courage that is necessary to really do this—to let everything be as it is—in just the way that we have been speaking about. Why? Because in letting everything be as it is there is no consolation. Usually we attempt to acquire more and more information with the idea that this will lead us to some kind of salvation. We are always in search of that special something that we are going to add to who and what we already are, in the hope that this new addition will change everything. In allowing everything to be as it is, we are doing the very opposite! The opposite for most people requires the willingness to take a big risk. For the individual who is

fundamentally insecure already, this kind of risk poses quite a challenge. But in the end there is no other way, if we want to be free.

The individual who is successful in truly allowing everything to be as it is, the one who is willing to take that risk, will experience enormous relief. From what? From the burden of knowledge, from the burden of accumulated knowledge. In that knowledge are all of the ideas we have about who we are. In that knowledge are all of the ideas we have about the world. Suddenly it all falls away. Then there is no idea about who we are. There is no idea about how the world is. *There is no idea about how anything is.* Not only is this a great relief, but more importantly we begin to discover that almost always the more we think we know, the less we're able to

recognize the truth. When someone begins to see this for themselves, it is something very profound indeed.

When we discover the place of absolute peace and perfect stillness, when we discover that place where we no longer make distinctions, where we no longer know who we are or how things are, if successful, we die and are reborn. You see, it's possible to experience this kind of depth and come back and still be intact. But it is something else altogether when one experiences this kind of depth and lets go of everything and is reborn anew. Anew means with no history. Reborn means, in a very deep sense, having no notion of being that person who one was before this event occurred.

Wholeness

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But there is more to it. The discovery of the place of absolute peace and perfect stillness is only half of the picture. Because Life, you see, which is what we are, is made up of two parts. One is *inactive* and the other is *active*. They are both part of and an expression of the very same thing. We cannot have one without the other when we are speaking about Life, which is once again, what we all are. So the wholeness of Life is made up of two parts, one inactive and the other active, one fullness and volition, and the other stillness which is nothingness. That means on the surface there is endless

activity and differentiation. And at the center there is perfect stillness, there is nothing. Do you understand what I am saying? This is constant, this is always.

We can understand then that a condition of ignorance, of fundamental ignorance, is a condition where the individual is only aware of one half of the picture. So looking at it in this very absolute way, to be ignorant means that we are only aware of movement, we are only aware of volition. To be ignorant means that we are unaware of literally half of who and what we are. And we can see that if we are only aware of half of who and what we actually are, there cannot be any experience of wholeness. Therefore there cannot be any real integrity. In an ignorant condition we are

almost continuously lost in volition, in activity, in action, and because of that we are not going to be rooted anywhere. There will be nothing that is holding us down in a very positive sense. Due to this fundamental ignorance, we find ourselves almost continuously tormented by this gnawing sense that something is terribly wrong. You see, we are out of touch with a half of the whole, which is stillness and inactivity. That is why we suffer. That's also why we are so confused. It is impossible to have any perspective, any real perspective that expresses true depth, without both halves of who and what we really are being recognized, being realized, being known. Is that clear?

So through the discovery of the other half of who we are, through the discovery of stillness and inactivity,

there is the experience of finding oneself, of coming home. This is when we recognize who we have always been. This is when the individual says, "I've always known this, but somehow I forgot." And in this experience there is always joy and great happiness, but most importantly the discovery of wholeness. It is through the discovery of wholeness that we find ourselves. This is when the individual proclaims, "I've found myself. I've found my true self. I've come home."

It is important to remember that the profound implications of what it means to be a fully human being must be embraced by the individual who has discovered or rediscovered who and what they really are. Resting in stillness will solve a lot of problems for the individual because in profound stillness no problems exist. But stillness alone doesn't address the whole picture because what we are speaking about here is life, human life, which means being a *human being*. A human being who acts and reacts, who is incarnated in a body that moves in the world of time and space. As long as one is a human being, then the active and volitional part of life needs to be embraced *fully*. That's the whole point.

You see, simply remaining absorbed in the stillness of being does not, in and of itself, solve the problem of what it means to be a human being. Indeed, the task at hand is to become a fully human being. A human being *who knows who they are*. A human being who is able to embrace and manifest fully the wholeness of what it means to be alive. That means *both volition and stillness*.

Through *letting things be as they are*, we have moved from a condition of confusion and difference to no confusion and no difference. That has been the return. But that's only half of the picture. To become whole once again, we now have to embrace the other half of who we are, which is action and volition, which is the world of time, multiplicity, self and other, mind and body.

So the question is, in the discovery of this nothingness that has no beginning and no end, where it is impossible to distinguish between self and other, subject and object, where there is no time, where there is no space, and where nothing ever existed, how is it that

we can move into the world of time and space, self and other, and in no way lose touch with who and what we really are? How to move from the unbroken knowing of stillness, where there is no form and there is no movement, no thought and no time, to the world of time, thought and movement, without in any way losing touch with the truly absolute nature of what we have discovered, which is no limitation. That is what absolute means. How to return once again to the world of time and thought, the world of the body, the world of distinctions, without in any way losing touch with this absolute dimension of life. How to not in any way lose touch with the knowledge of no limitation.

PART TWO

For or Against

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When speaking about an absolute relationship to life, I am speaking about a perspective that embraces all of our experience. Absolute relationship means a perspective that embraces everything. Everything includes *everything*. And when we enter into the world of distinctions, the world of light and darkness, heat and cold, pleasant and unpleasant, and all the rest of it, what is our absolute relationship to all of that? Therefore, *what is our bottom line?*

What our bottom line means is this: from a per-

spective that is *absolute*, is our relationship to life fundamentally *positive*, or is our relationship to life fundamentally *negative*? What is the bottom line from which we relate to life and to all of our experience? Now that we have re-entered the world of time and space, mind and body, the world of distinctions, on a deep and fundamental level we have to know what our relationship to life *as a whole* is. That means is our fundamental relationship to life positive or negative?

You see on one hand, we can deeply be convinced that the whole business of being alive is basically rotten, and yet still enjoy certain aspects of it—still try to get the most out of it that we can. On the other hand, we can also be deeply convinced that the whole business of being alive is a profoundly positive event,

in spite of the fact that much of what occurs as part of that event is horrifying. So therefore, absolutely speaking, are we *for* it or are we *against* it?

When we are only aware of one half of who and what we are, the half which is activity, which is volition, and we are out of touch with the other half, which is stillness, which is nothingness, we experience ourselves as not being whole, not being complete. For a human being, being out of touch in this way causes suffering. At times this suffering can be unbearable. Like a brain disconnected from the heart, it's a kind of tyranny that can seem to have almost no beginning and no end. Sometimes intense, sometimes mild, at other times it can disappear. But it always seems to come

back again. For most people this tyranny seems to be the fundamental substratum of all of their experience. And as long as this is the case, it will be the very foundation of everything that we know. Therefore it is not difficult to see how it would be impossible to be able to embrace life in a way that is truly whole as long as the core or fundamental substratum of our experience is one of almost unending suffering. What I am speaking about is not always obvious, it can often be very subtle indeed. What I am speaking about is something very deep. I'm not talking about appearances here. I'm talking about the core of the matter—our fundamental relationship to life.

So because there was something deeply wrong we began to search for ourselves. We did that through letting everything be as it is. Through letting everything be as it is, we discovered that nothing at all was wrong because we discovered a place where nothing at all had ever happened. And if nothing at all had ever happened, *how could anything be wrong? That's what Liberation is. In perfect death there is nothing wrong.* That's the glory of it! So we go from there's something wrong to there's nothing wrong. That's what the inner journey is all about.

Only the person who really goes very deeply into this and truly is able to let go of the way everything was before will become a liberated individual, a radically

transformed human being. Only the courageous individual will go that far. Most people don't have the mettle for it. It's simply too far, too fast, too much.

In the discovery of that which makes us whole, if we die in that discovery, if we surrender unconditionally, then that means that *all of the ideas we had about the way things are have to go*. Why? Because all of the ideas and conclusions we had about the way things are, were based only on a partial experience of life. So when our experience becomes whole, based on the rediscovery of the other half of who we are, all of the ideas that we had about the way things are obviously have to be relinquished. They have to be relinquished because they represent what has now been recognized to be

only a partial view, a partial perspective, which is by definition what ignorance is. So if we surrender, if we truly allow ourselves to die unconditionally, then everything changes. Then our relationship to life changes in a way that is absolute.

Knowing versus Not Knowing

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If consciously or unconsciously we are convinced that life is fundamentally negative, then that breeds cynicism. It is a cynicism that is deep, at the core of our being. Cynicism means hardness. It is the opposite of vulnerability. You see, someone who is cynical *knows*. Someone who is cynical *already knows*. Indeed, most people are cynical without even knowing it. Someone who is fundamentally cynical already knows in a way that is very hard. They already know what? They already know that *it's not possible*. They already know what is not possible? *Everything*. You see? EVERYTHING!

Why is this important? Because when we speak about Enlightenment, when we speak about a Liberation that is profound, we are pointing to the discovery of no limitation. No limitation means *everything*. It's indescribable. It's absolute. It's unthinkable. It's so big, it's so glorious and it means so much that you can say it means *everything*. And the point is, in order to allow the glorious and liberating fact of *no limitation* in fully, to allow THAT MUCH in, then all of the cynicism has to go. It *has* to go.

So this cynicism then breeds a negative relationship to life, a negative relationship to life that is *absolute*. It is hard, invulnerable and very, very cold. Once again, this cynicism is based on the belief that one knows *better*, that one *already knows* better. This

knowing is cast in iron. Almost nothing can penetrate it. This is the shell, the prison that most human beings are caged in. This is an absolute relationship to life, *because one already knows*. Knows what? *That it's not possible*—that everything, which means Liberation, is not possible. Do you understand?

However, in a relationship to life that is fundamentally *positive*, the picture is very different. Once again, in the experiential discovery of the fact that nothing ever happened, we realized that *nothing was ever wrong*. When we move that state of consciousness, that *nothing was ever wrong*, into the world of time and space, mind and body, self and other, *nothing was ever wrong* translates into a relationship to life that is fundamentally POSITIVE. Again, positive means nothing is wrong—*because nothing ever happened*. If nothing ever happened, how could anything be wrong? That's why we're smiling. This is the source of the absolute relationship to life that is positive.

The human expression of an absolute relationship to life that is positive is *humility*, and genuine humility is the result of abiding in a condition of *not knowing*. This is the very opposite of an absolute relationship to life that is fundamentally negative—which is arrogance, which is when one *already knows*. If you *already know*, there is limitation, there is a fundamental limitation. If you *don't know*, everything is possible because there is no fundamental limitation. There is infinite space if you *don't know*. So resting in and abiding in *not knowing* is the conscious experience of the individual who has died unconditionally to the past through the direct experience of nothingness, of neverwasness, of never-happenedness.

Again, *the conscious experience of the true self, of*

wholeness, springs from resting in not knowing. Not knowing is the source of this absolute relationship to life that is fundamentally positive. This is the very opposite of an absolute relationship to life that is negative, that is based on this fundamental conviction that one already knows. So in this "I know" there is a fundamental limitation. When there is not knowing, there is no fundamental limitation.

The Unknown

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As I said, when we *already know*, there is no room for the unknown. The unknown is *everything*. The unknown is not just what lies beyond the farthest star. The unknown is every single moment. And everything that occurs between one moment and the next is the unknown. But it is the unknown only if there is no limitation in our consciousness, in our fundamental relationship to life, then every moment is not separate from the unknown itself. Included in the unknown is the known. The unknown is the seen and the unseen. It is thought and what lies beyond thought. It is time

and what lies beyond time, and everything in between. *All becomes the unknown. The unknown is a metaphor for no limitation. It's a metaphor for no limitation only if our fundamental position is that we don't know. Do you understand?*

So if we know, if we *already know*, our fundamental position is limitation. If we don't know, our fundamental position is no limitation. That means if we already know, everything that we think and feel, everything that occurs that can be measured, inner and outer, gross and subtle, all will occur within this very narrow or very small view. If our absolute relationship to life is negative, then that is the filter through which we are going to perceive all of our experience. Then no matter what occurs, the first thing we will always be aware of

is that we *already know*. And because of this, it will be impossible to experience anything directly. It will be impossible to perceive our experience with any real depth. What that means is that we are always only going to perceive a part of the whole picture. Therefore our experience of life will always be partial, and all of the conclusions that we will draw from our own experience are going to reflect that limitation, that partial view. That's what ignorance is.

But if our absolute relationship to life is one that is positive, which means that our fundamental position is that deeply we *don't know*, then there will be infinite room, there will be infinite space. And therefore everything that occurs to us, gross and subtle, inner and outer, now all will occur within a perspective that is

unlimited because we don't know, so there will always be room for the unknown. And everything that does occur, will occur within this vast and unlimited perspective where there is always depth. Therefore the conclusions that we will draw about that which occurs are going to reflect that depth. That is what wisdom is. That is what makes a wise person wise—because depth is there, and everything that occurs within their experience occurs within the field of that depth. That is why they appear to be able to see so much more than other people do. They are aware of the very same objects in consciousness as everybody else. But because of the enormous depth that is already present within them, they are able to see so much more of what is there all of the time.

We began our journey by allowing everything to be as it is. We ceased to make distinctions in order to find our true self. Upon finding our true self, we returned once again to the world of differences, the world of distinctions. But everything is very different because now we know who we are, and the fact that we know who we are is what makes it possible for us to make distinctions without in any way losing touch with the absolute nature of life. And that's the whole point, you see. That's the whole point. That's the whole picture. And that is the great challenge. It's the great challenge of Enlightenment—how to make distinctions without in any way losing touch with the absolute nature of life.

Andrew Cohen began teaching in 1986 after a spiritual realization transformed his life beyond recognition. Since that time the fire of his awakening has sparked a revolution in the hearts and minds of many people throughout the world.

Those who have been touched by his teachings have found themselves immersed in a deep recognition of their own true nature and propelled into a profound discovery of what it means to reach beyond all limitations. For many, this has been the catalyst for coming together in a way that transcends barriers of conflict and separation. In the past few years, communities dedicated to living these teachings have formed throughout the world, with a network of centers in North America, Europe and Israel. Andrew Cohen now

travels extensively around the world every year, giving public talks and intensive retreats.

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and his teaching please contact:

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“When we speak about Enlightenment, when we speak about a Liberation that is profound, we are pointing to the discovery of no limitation. No limitation means *everything*. It’s indescribable. It’s absolute. It’s unthinkable. It’s so big, it’s so glorious and it means so much that you can say it means *everything*. And the point is, in order to allow the glorious and liberating fact of *no limitation* in fully, to allow THAT MUCH in, then all of the cynicism has to go. It *has* to go.”

ISBN 1-883929-14-8



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