

The Teachings & Methods of Gurdjieff

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"Do you think that anything is given in a complete form in schools? You look at this very naively. You must be cunning, you must pretend, lead up to things in conversation. Sometimes, things are learned from jokes, from stories. And you want everything to be very simple. This never happens. You must know how to take when it is not given, to steal if necessary, but not to wait for somebody to come and give it to you."

Gurdjieff

We saw previously how Gurdjieff, after a period of much travel, tried on a number of occasions to set up an institute so he could spread his teachings and methods. We shall consider some of these ideas, concentrating chiefly on what he has to say about people and their development.

Gurdjieff says again and again that ordinary man, even when awake, is asleep. He suffers a form of mass hypnosis. He is (according to Gurdjieff) wholly controlled and mechanical. The necessity therefore is for him to wake up, to become fully conscious of all he does, to gain control and overcome mechanicalness.

Why is man like this? According to Gurdjieff, there are 3 centres in man (he later changed this to 4, 5 and then 7). These 3 are the moving, emotional, and mental centres. Ordinarily man is controlled by one or other of them - usually one dominates - when he ought to be in control of all three.

How is he to gain control? There are seemingly many methods of "waking" or expanding the awareness of a person. Gurdjieff spoke of many of them maintaining that the use of groups was best of all. (We must remember that he was greatly influenced by the sufis and other mystical groups of the Middle East). The problem with groups was to find and enter one. But this was not so simple. Because each man was asleep, even those who wanted to "wake Up" had little idea of how to do it. So most people would inevitably try one way and then another to gain knowledge. The difficulties they went through were necessary to toughen them. Hence, said Gurdjieff, all the schools were difficult to find, difficult to join, and difficult to extract knowledge from. However, this hardship caused those who did find knowledge to value it.

Why the group? In a group there would be both a teacher and special living conditions aimed at promoting results. Not only could an individual observe himself, but others too would observe him so he comes to know of his peculiar problems and attitudes more quickly. Where normally problems were avoided and pleasures sought, in a group deliberate tensions could be set up, so causing each person to confront inner weaknesses and limits. The aim of the group was to provide specific intensive conditions which brought about a change.

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Why did Gurdjieff consider groups to be superior to other ways? Look again at the 3 centres. Gurdjieff said the 3 paths were adapted to them. The way of the fakir for the moving centre. The way of the monk for the emotional centre. The way of the yogi for the mental centre.

The way of the fakir was intended to give control over the moving (or physical) centre. It worked by self-imposed restraints such as holding the arms out by the sides sometimes even for years 'til they became stiff or withered. This way required and built up enormous will power but it was blind. Even if the fakir dominated the physical body he had yet to work on the emotional and mental centres.

The way of the monk used faith and "religious emotion". It sought to dominate the emotional body. It required work in a group and focused on complete obedience to the teacher. It tried to express only the feeling of intense faith while subduing all other feelings but it left the physical and mental centres untrained.

The way of the yogi was the way of the mind for which there had to be a teacher. But again even if the yogi gained complete control over the mind he had still to train the emotional and moving centres.

Gurdjieff talks of a fourth way, which had none of the disadvantages of the other 3, whose results were much quicker, and which enabled the follower to carry on an ordinary lifestyle - or so Gurdjieff maintained. The method of the 4th way was to use groups and individual exercises that affected all the centres at once. Gurdjieff called it the "way of the sly man".

How did the process start? According to Gurdjieff the seeker had to learn how the various centres acted, how they brought about their effects, and what went wrong when one centre interfered with another. At the beginning, this involved careful self-observation under many different circumstances.

Gurdjieff said there are 2 aspects to man: his being and his knowing. His being or ability to be meant what he could actually do and what hardships he would undergo to bring about what he wanted to do. So, for example, he might see a need to decorate his house but never do so - Gurdjieff would call this weak being.

Knowing was used in the normal intellectual sense. Gurdjieff observed how knowing in the West was praised far above being. And he saw too that this led to the idea of the absent-minded professor who knew much but was often hopeless in practical affairs. So, an excess of being led to an ability to do much but no knowledge as to what should be done. An excess of knowledge gave insight as to what needed doing but not the means to do it. The task was to develop knowing and being harmoniously and Gurdjieff claimed the 4th way did this.

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Gurdjieff had no time for religions. He saw that a message transmitted, by word of mouth from one person to another could become hopelessly garbled even by the 2nd person - so what of the 10,000th? This meant the teaching had to proceed in living groups with living teachers.

From careful observation the idea was that each person came to see how one centre could interfere with another. For example where the moving centre interrupts the thinking centre then reading and listening would just become mechanical. Gurdjieff said that by proper self-awareness the centres would be made to work without mutual interference.

But what after self-observation? Gurdjieff made use of many exercises taken from the dervishes that were aimed to bring the 3 centres under greater control. One was the "stop" exercise. For this members of the group could be made to stop at any moment, staying "frozen" in the position they were then in. They then had to stay like this until told to relax. Gurdjieff explained that when stationary each person tends to take up instinctive positions that they seldom if ever changed. But in moving between one position and another our bodies adopted new, if temporary, positions - by "freezing" in one of these they learned more about their muscles, feelings and so on than would normally be the case.

Other exercises included rhythmic dance movements where certain specific movements were accompanied by breathing exercises and mental repetition of sounds such as om. The combinations became ever more complex, requiring the utmost concentration to perform them without mistakes. This too was supposed to lead to an increased awareness and training of the centres.

Then again Gurdjieff would use short, sharp fasts accompanied by extreme workloads so that results would be brought about by great pressure. He would, at these times, keep sleep to a minimum.

Gurdjieff's teachings were put out always in a slightly veiled form using group discussions and periods of "super effort" aimed at waking people up. He claimed that the end point of the 4th way was the liberated man, among whose qualities were included immortality and complete conscious self-control. This for Gurdjieff, was the fullest expression of what an individual could achieve.

In ISHVARA'S Grace my love and devotion

Sant Vairagyanand Ji