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GURDJIEFF'S SYSTEM OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT: "THE WORK"

(being a summary of "Basic Self-Knowledge" by

Harry Benjamin N.D. 1971. Weiser, N.Y. 167 pp.)

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"This work is beautiful when you see why it exists and what it means. It is about Liberation. It is as beautiful as if, Zonked for years in a prison, you see a stranger entering who offers you a key. But you may refuse it because you have acquired prison-habits and have forgotten your origin, which is from the stars."

Maurice Nicoll, 1952.

INTRODUCTION

This is an introduction to Esoteric Psychology based on the Gurdjieff System of human development with some reference to the writings of Krishnamurti.

To live in a truly creative and dynamic way, that is according to the basic laws of one's being, most of us would need to feel, and think in a completely new way.

MAN KNOW THYSELF

Only by knowing oneself can one come to understand the Universe.

Most people feel unfulfilled and don't understand why. Mass excitements, to solve their problems of inner boredom, frustration and futility. As most psychology deals only with mental and emotional phenomena, not with the whole human being, it too does not solve these problems. The solution is to engage in one's own conscious

evolution and, by realizing that each one of us is part of The ALL, tap into its vast store of inner peace, beauty and harmony.

THE WAY TO SELF-KNOWLEDGE

Eastern Psychology visualises humans as having seven interpenetrating bodies of increasing density, from spiritual, through mental, emotional to physical (Gurdjieff recognized only these four). If we focus on the lower three (which comprise our ordinary self) then we tend to emphasize personal satisfaction in terms of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, i.e., our life is sense-based, and we are victims of emotional swings between pleasure/expansion and pain/diminution-depression, and of a continuous search for fulfillment through money, power and ambition, or through immersing oneself in work, philosophical or artistic pursuits, or religion.

Real satisfaction and happiness are to be found by looking beyond the ordinary self to "something" not capable of being contacted by the senses, and by living according to our fundamental self ("S") rather than our ordinary self, i.e., our divine self, which is rooted in the same Creative Essence that created the External Universe.

IMAGINARY "I"

Our ordinary, illusionary or imaginary self is a collection of "I's", and when ruled by it our mood changes according to which "I" has been stimulated (we sometimes recognize this in others, but rarely in ourselves). In contrast, our fundamental self is consistent and is ruled from within by consciousness.

SELF OBSERVATION

The first step in THE WORK (or within Esoteric Psychology) is therefore to become aware of the imaginary and multi-faceted nature of our "I". Through self-observation, by setting aside a part of ourselves to observe what our false personality is doing, we will see that most of our activities are merely mechanical reactions rather than purposive actions. In a sense we are asleep, and one aim of THE WORK is to wake us up. Self-observation must always be uncritical to avoid identification and labelling. Krishnamurti calls this watching or passive self-awareness.

SELF REMEMBERING

Our older, fundamental, greater, nobler self has always been there, it has just been smothered by our newer, false personality. We can become aware of it by self-remembering, by recalling the existence of our fundamental self as often as possible each day, particularly when we are stressed, as this breaks the hold of our false personality on us, and wakes us up. In this way, we will find that our lives will be gradually transformed.

SELF JUSTIFYING

It is also important to stop self-justifying, or doing things to convince both ourselves and others that we are always in the "right" or at least, not to blame. These are things that the personality does to defend itself, but the price we pay is

that it keeps us mechanical and asleep. Admitting our mistakes openly to others, and to ourselves, takes courage and makes the personality passive, allowing the fundamental self, or REAL I, to take over.

PERSONALITY AND ESSENCE

Our personality is made up of a false personality, which is concerned with our ego (pride, vanity, self-conceit, imaginations and day-dreams about ourselves, etc.), and personality proper, which is developed through education, vocation, training and study of all kinds, and which enables us to earn our living.

The source of our fundamental self or REAL I, is our essence. In primitive peoples, and people who live close to Nature or who do creative work, it is often less smothered by the false personality, but its development is still usually limited. THE WORK seeks to weaken the false personality or make it passive, thereby enabling the essence to become active (feeding, as it were, on the weakened false personality). As one needs a well developed personality proper to support the growth of the essence, it is important that one is able to earn one's livelihood (support oneself) before entering THE WORK. In addition, this helps prevent THE WORK being an escape from everyday life.

It is not a matter of working to make ourselves perfect, the REAL I is already perfect, and its development is guided by its own laws; all we can do is make our false personality increasingly passive. The idea that we already have the key distinguishes THE WORK from Eastern religions, in which students must search for the key; and the idea that one is not engaging in a battle between "good" and "evil" distinguishes THE WORK from most orthodox religions in which one is visualized as engaging in a struggle for "salvation".

According to Gurdjieff, our mental (Man No. 3: thought), emotional (Man No. 2: feeling) and instinctive moving or physical (Man No. 1: body maintenance) Intros have eternal, middle and inner parts. The first two are also divided into higher and lower spheres. In the ordinary, unevolved human the higher spheres are hardly ever contacted, as the false personality prevents our receiving information from them. Most of us live chiefly in one centre, i.e., unbalanced. One of the aims of THE WORK is to make us balanced (Man No. 4), i.e., to have all centres developed and working in harmony. This is said to be The Fourth Way to development, the other three ways being The Way of the Fakir (1. Physical), The Way of the Monk (2. Emotional) and The Way of the Yogi (3. Mental). People attracted to THE WORK are also said to have a magnetic centre.

MAN AS A SELF-DEVELOPING ORGANISM

The Gurdjieff system also includes a belief in the existence of purpose and meaning in the Universe. Rather than being inert, matter is regarded as being a vehicle for a higher intelligence or "Greater Mind". The seen is always regarded as a product of the unseen. Although minerals, plants and animals work in harmony with the Universal or Cosmic Plan, only humans are free to consciously co-operate or not with the Plan. "The Kingdom of Heaven" is regarded as being a present rather than a future reality.

Those who operate fully from their fundamental selves or REAL I are considered to be part of "The Conscious Circle of Humanity" and are, as it were, "The Masters of

Wisdom", capable of helping others to become their REAL I. Such learning can come through: A - influences from life (environment, education, society, etc.), B - the communications of the prophets, sages, seers, esoteric schools, etc. (including all great works of art, literature, drama, etc.), and C - communications from "The Conscious Circle of Humanity" (such as the Gospels).

NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

Our emotional life is directed largely by our tower emotional centre, which is dominated by such negative emotions as fear, anger, jealousy, hatred, impatience, worry and self-pity. We are not born with these emotions but pick them up from our early environment. By becoming conscious of them and not identifying with them, but recognizing them only as aspects of our false personality, we create a space for the higher emotional Centre, which is characterized by awe, wonder, appreciation of beauty and the mystery of creation, compassion and real love, to develop and operate. As this happens, we develop a reverence for Nature and feel more at home in the Universe. Our feelings (higher emotions) begin to reach out in all directions and we feel that, rather than just existing, we are beginning to live at last.

Fear is the most established negative emotion, which is often recognizable as our false personality craving for security in a world that must be accepted as being insecure. Another is violence, which appears when the personality feels threatened. Eliminating this violence within ourselves is the pre-requisite for the achievement of world peace.

Ironically, we attract the problems that we worry about most.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL ACCOUNTS

Selfishness is the chief characteristic of the false personality. Our habit of making accounts (feeling slighted, not given our due, etc.) is one of its expressions. It is important to stop assuming that the world, or other people, owe us anything. What other people think about us often has little to do with what we are really like, which no one can take away from us. One of the best ways to stop making accounts is to indulge in external considering, that is thinking not what do they owe me, but what do I owe them. As we do this, we develop an inner taste, or true conscience, an intuitive sense of when we are acting from our fundamental self.

As we work on our selfishness we eventually come to recognize our own unique Chief Feature, or central issue, around which our total false personality revolves. Realizing this is usually a major, though transforming, shock. It is generally recognized as some aspect of fear, sex, lying, pride, greed or lust for power, wealth or dominance; and we recognize it as influencing our every act.

INNER TALKING: ATTITUDES: AND PICTURES

Another expression of selfishness is inner talking, e.g., about grievances, upsets, problems of other people, intentions, etc. By subjecting the various occurrences of the day (and of the past) to this continual going over, and by making excuses for ourselves, we are trying to show ourselves to ourselves in the best possible light. Stopping inner talking releases an enormous amount of energy that can be used for positive activities. In fact, the people who do most inner talking are those who continually complain how tired they are. By gradually reducing our requirements

we can reduce inner talking.

It is also important to become aware of (and divest ourselves of) our attitudes, or habitual modes of thought, as they are our armour, which we don and take off, according to circumstances.

We should also examine the way that we picture and label ourselves, as our labels prevent us from seeing what we are really like, what our potential is.

LEVELS OF BEING

Although there are many differences between people, the only important differences concern their level of being, or degree of inner development, and level of knowledge, as together these two determine our level of understanding and wisdom.

As we achieve wisdom we cease to become victims of the Yes/No type of questions and answers. We perceive another way of viewing problems that avoids these black and white responses and decisions.

A recognition of scale within the Universe is important. Thus, religion should not, and cannot, be examined by the same methods that are used to observe the material world. However, reflected in humans (Microcosm) are the same factors and qualities that characterize the Universe and God (Macrocosm).

Because our level of being attracts our life, we can only change our external situation by changing ourselves internally.

METANOIA

People who are attracted to THE WORK (those with a magnesia centre) are those who have begun to experience metanoia, or a change of mind, i.e., they have started to view themselves, and the Universe, in a different way. This is necessary because the mind that is still in the prison of the false personality cannot take in anything really new. Without this change the subconscious automatically sorts out incoming information and makes it fit with what the mind already possesses. Thus, we have to become conscious of the way in which we receive and register our impressions. This can be achieved by creating a pause between reception and any further mental developments, i.e., to prevent automatic responses.

Gurdjieff considers that there are four levels of thinking: 1. Alogical (based on superstition, suggestion, etc.); 2. Logical (based on what our senses tell us and on rational thought); 3. Psychological (where through metanoia one sees inner meaning and significance, not limited to that revealed by our senses and logical thought); and 4. Greater Mind (the Cosmic unseen, pure source).

THE FOUR STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Gurdjieff also recognizes four states of consciousness: 1. Asleep; 2. Awake; 3. Self Remembering (observing oneself); and 4. Objective Consciousness (the state of the REAL I, when one receives and understands the Cosmos as it really is). One's ordinary self is partially asleep) and the more fully we believe what life seems to tell us, the more completely are we living as slaves.

MAN AND THE COSMOS

Most people have no real philosophy of life. Political interests, for example, are merely expressions of external searching for something that can only be found within. Once we realize that we are related to the Creative Power that brought the Universe into existence we find meaning and purpose everywhere; we become aware that we and the Universe are, in fact, one. For example, Gurdjieff, in this state, perceived that life does not only exist on the Earth, but all over the Universe. Also, that man is an essential factor in the development of the Universe, working on a reciprocal basis with the Cosmos itself (but for this relationship to operate one must be aware). Awareness of this brings a sense of attunement with the Cosmos. Processes that bring one "up" towards this state may be regarded as good, and those that lead one "down" away from this as evil.

According to Esotericism the Universe was created to give expression to the creative urge of The Absolute. Thus, within oneself one bears the seed of one's own divinity, and one must become a willing co-operator with the Creative Power behind the Universe if one is to achieve one's real destiny.

We must exercise our will to become conscious. This is different from a desire within the context of the personality, as one desire is readily replaced by another as circumstances change. Rather, one is setting out on a path of inner unfoldment, knowing that the progress will not be even and that there may be much conflict and obstruction (which actually provide the opportunities for growth and for transcending our false personalities). It is important to realize that every path is unique, indeed the Universe itself is a symbol of unity in diversity.

THE LIMITATIONS OF LOGICAL THINKING

The personality operates largely through the Lower mind, which is concerned with the intellect and logical thinking. However, much of what we call logical is merely our response to pleasure and pain stimuli. In fact, it is our conditioned subconscious repressed urges that dictate most of our actions. Thus, the ability of our lower minds, which are bound up with our senses, to comprehend the Secrets of the Cosmos is strictly limited. The mind should be recognized as our servant, not our master, as it tends to be today. "The mind is the slayer of the real". This occurs partly because the lower mind cannot cope with anything that comes to it from anywhere other than the senses. The view of the world provided by science is thus limited in this respect. By acknowledging this limitation of the mind, we find that we can achieve a kind of inner peace, partly because we stop "trying" to understand The Secrets of the Universe.

In contrast to the lower mind, the higher mind can, through intuition, receive and comprehend directly (not via the senses) the realities of the Cosmos. With this understanding comes also a sense of deep Love and wonder. We do not have to develop these higher centres, they are already fully developed; we only have to learn how to access them, and this is achieved by progressively damping down the personality with its egocentricity and self-love.

Ideas are the food of thought, and they can transform us if we act on them.

To the lower mind everything is fragmentary and separate, for it habitually breaks things down. In contrast, the higher mind always sees the unity underlying the

diversity

THREE UNIVERSAL FORCES

All things of cosmic significance may be seen as being composed of three forces: native (positive), opposing (negative), and balancing (neutral). It is this third force, which is rarely recognized on our society, that enables us to really resolve problems and achieve inner development.

GAINING AND LOSING FORCE

Gurdjieff believes that we have only a certain Limited quantity of force or vitality at our disposal each day. Many things that occupy the personality make us lose force, e.g., inner talking, self-justifying, and all negative emotions. These tend to keep us swinging between extreme states of excitement and depression, and this uses much energy. It is also important to have adequate physical relaxation to conserve force. Being between (not connected with) our centres also causes us to lose force, e.g., as when we don't know what to do with ourselves, or cannot make up our minds, or when we feel bored. One way to deal with this is to quickly get into a centre (physical, emotional or mental, or a combination), whereupon we find that our force returns.

Gurdjieff envisaged four non-transmutable types of force or energy corresponding to four different levels: 1. Mechanical (as experienced in engines), 2. Vital (in organisms), 3. Psychic (mental and emotional), and 4. Conscious (spiritual).

TIME AND ETERNITY

Ouspensky regarded time as a dimension in which events take place and do not vanish but are always there, i.e., not just as duration. Thus, the past can be recalled and re-lived under certain stimuli or conditions. Similarly the future is already in existence. Eternity is not something distant, but simply another level of time that exists coincidentally with ordinary time; and it is the time in which the REAL I exists. Thus, to Christ, Buddha and Krishna, it was the eternal that was real and our time that was an illusion. Eternity is the home of reality. Note that this has nothing to do with Life after death because we can experience both forms of time right now.

Space and time are essential ingredients of the mental furniture of the ordinary mind. When we transcend the ordinary mind thinking can take place outside the confines of space and time. Thus, pre-cognition is quite understandable.

Gurdjieff considers that the life that we are living is just one of a series of lives that we live on Earth, and during which process we are learning certain lessons that the higher part of ourselves knows it is essential for us to learn. If we do not learn them in one life, then we have to learn them in the next, and so forth (i.e., through Rebirth), and this continues until we have learnt all that earth-life can teach us. Thus, everything that happens to us is always the result of our own actions, and not just chance. With this perception, we begin to feel responsible for our own future; and the more that we can work on ourselves in any one life, the more immortality shall we gain for ourselves.

A CHAPTER ON KRISHNAMURTI

Krishnamurti's salient points are as follows.

1. Individuals are faced with problems that have no permanent solutions.
2. The Ego is responsible, partly or wholly, for our problems.
3. To discover truth, the mind must first free itself of all conditioning.

Until the mind is aware of its own process, all search is in vain.

5. Without knowing oneself it is not possible to go beyond thinking.
6. To know oneself is to observe what one thinks, how one feels, to be deeply aware of what is, without condemnation or comparison.
7. The quest of self-knowledge can only take place in the field of relationship with things, people and ideas.
8. The first three realizations that we may experience may be that:
 - a) we never think - only recall;
 - b) we never make any conscious decision - some part of memory decides for us;
 - c) we are all automatic - obliged to meet the present with the past.

Self-awareness leads to self-knowledge and self-knowledge to right-thinking (passive awareness of what is). This is not really thinking, which is merely recollecting some fragments from memory when challenged by the environment; rather, for passive awareness, the mind must be un-occupied. Thus, the mind is completely inadequate for dealing with any problem or searching for Truth.

The difference between the systems of Krishnamurti and Gurdjieff is that the former concentrates on the individual without reference to The Cosmic Scheme of Things, whereas Gurdjieff sees man as an essential part of the Universe, not understandable separated from that relationship.

IS IT WORTH IT?

Those seeking to enter THE WORK should read Ouspensky's "In Search of the Miraculous" and Dr. Maurice Nicoll's five volumes of "Psychological Commentaries on the Teachings of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky".

One does not work on oneself merely for personal reasons - we must work with others who are working on themselves, and we must work to further THE WORK itself. Concentrating on ourselves can only strengthen our tendency to self-love, which is the chief antagonist that we have to deal with.

Harry Benjamin, the author, entered THE WORK after he realized that The Western Approach sought to change people from outside, whereas he perceived that real change can only come from within. He also concluded that Orthodox Religions had no answers to the basic problems of life; and that Science and Materialism had no answers either. In THE WORK he found an answer

Further Reading

as suggested by Speeth, Kathleen Riordan. 1976. *The Gurdjieff Work*. 176 pp. Pocket Books, N.Y.

A basic overview of Gurdjieff's ideas is given in:

Bennett, J.G., *Gurdjieff: leading a New World*. New York: Harper & Row, 1974

Ouspensky, P.D., *In Search of the Miraculous*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1949

Other accounts may be found in Kenneth Walker's books:

Walker, K., *Venture with Ideas*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1951

Walker, K., *A Study of Gurdjieff's Teaching*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1957

Gurdjieff's own works are:

All and Everything. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950

Meetings with Remarkable Men. New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1963

Herald of the Coming Good. Paris, 1933. Reprinted New York: Weiser, 1970

Views from the Real World: Early Talks of Gurdjieff as Recollected by His Pupils. New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1973

Life is Real Only Then When I Am. New York: Privately Printed by E.P. Dutton for Triangle Editions, 1975

Accounts of personal experience with Gurdjieff are many. Particularly vivid descriptions of his personality and teaching are given in:

de Hartmann, T., *Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff*. New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1964

Peters, F., *Boyhood with Gurdjieff*. New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1964

Bennett, J., *Fitness*. New York: Dharma Books, 1962

Nott, S.C., *Teachings of Gurdjieff The Journal of a Pupil*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964

Descriptions of Gurdjieff's teaching by his pupils, including actual teaching material, may be found in:

Ouspensky, P.D., *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1954

Ouspensky, P.D., *The Fourth Way*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1957

Nicoll, A., *Psychological Commentaries on the Teaching of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky*. London: Vincent Stuart, 1952

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