

CHALLENGES AND DIFFICULTIES FOR STUDENTS¹

The methods Gurdjieff used to teach his students have attracted both admiration and condemnation. Critics have accused Gurdjieff of using his pupils as mere guinea pigs for his own experimentation, exposing them in the process to unreasonable and even dangerous conditions.

Gurdjieff played roles and devised situations that stirred negative emotions in his students and created friction between them. Gurdjieff's manipulation of people and situations was designed to challenge his students' conditioned beliefs and behaviour patterns, to allow them opportunities for obtaining self-knowledge. In a conversation with pupil Thomas de Hartmann, Gurdjieff described his methodology:

When working with pupils, I am like a coachman. If the horse follows the road, I give him free rein. If he goes to the right towards the ditch, I pull the left rein. If he goes to the left towards the hillside, I pull on the right one. (1)

Gurdjieff's methods were sometimes harsh and unpleasant, as he was adroit at discovering students' sensitive points and then 'stepping on their corns.' In doing so, Gurdjieff created conditions in which his students could observe their own automatic reactions and negative emotions. Gurdjieff once explained that his actions were intended to produce in his students a sensation of their own nothingness: "I wish you do not be like *merde*, so I first make you feel like *merde*, only from there can one begin." (2)

Gurdjieff's intense demands and challenges in his work with students has been criticized as inappropriate for a spiritual teacher. He has been accused of misusing techniques that require great care and sensitivity in their application, to the detriment of his students. However, many of Gurdjieff's pupils have argued that his unorthodox methods helped them access their real authentic self and essential inner being. In their view, Gurdjieff's challenges to them were actually a healing balm born of genuine love and compassion. Jacob Needleman describes the intention behind Gurdjieff's controversial methods:

Gurdjieff always gave his ideas to his pupils under conditions designed to break through the crust of emotional and intellectual associations which, he taught, shut out the small voice of conscience in man. The often awesome precision with which he was able to break through that crust – ways of behaving with his pupils that were, in turn, shocking, mysterious, frightening, magical, delicately gentle, and clairvoyant – remains one of the principal factors around which both the Gurdjieff legend and the misunderstandings about him have arisen, as well as being the element most written about by those who came in touch with him. (3)

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Experimentation with Students and Others

One of the areas for which Gurdjieff was most frequently criticized was his experimentation with both pupils and lay persons. In *Herald of Coming Good*, Gurdjieff disclosed that in the period before he began teaching in Russia he sought out a variety of people as subjects for his investigations into human psychological types: "I began to observe and study various manifestations in the waking state of the psyche of these trained and freely moving 'Guinea-Pigs', allotted to me by Destiny for my experiments." (4) When questioned by C.S. Nott about his work with students, Gurdjieff declared, rather baldly, that he needed rats for his experiments.

Around 1908, Gurdjieff established himself in Tashkent, Turkestan as a healer, hypnotist and wonderworker. At the occult organizations that he frequented at the time, he found ready-made subjects for psychological study, but quickly realized that these groups did not provide a broad enough cross-section of human types for his observations.

Student John Bennett believes that during this period Gurdjieff conducted experiments to ascertain which ideas and teaching methods would be effective in the West. Bennett argues that, in order for Gurdjieff to introduce Eastern esoteric teachings to Western society with any measure of sensitivity, he needed to familiarize himself with the differences in culture and psychology between East and West. (5)

In light of the need to adapt Eastern teachings to a Western milieu, Gurdjieff conducted a number of experiments which may not have been recognized as such at the time. In the summer of 1917 he gathered a small group of students at Essentuki near the Black Sea, where he worked with them intensely for six weeks. One of those students, P.D. Ouspensky, relates that Gurdjieff revealed the whole plan of his work to them, but then abruptly dismissed the group. The following year at nearby Tuapse, he collected a group of ten senior pupils and engaged them in activities of a completely different nature. Strict rules were imposed and for the first time Gurdjieff introduced the group to movements and dances of dervish origin.

Later, in 1922, when Gurdjieff established his Institute at the Château du Prieuré in Fontainebleau, many of the techniques and exercises tested at Essentuki and Tuapse formed the core of his programme. However, following his serious automobile accident in 1924, Gurdjieff again changed course. He greatly reduced the activities at the Prieuré and concentrated on writing. In the mid-1930s he re-established his teaching in Paris and began a new phase of work which continued until his death in 1949. During this final period of his teaching, Gurdjieff's methods departed significantly from those during the years at Fontainebleau. Gurdjieff assumed the more humble role of a 'servant' to his pupils, using as his teaching tools the ordinary situations of everyday living – preparing food, eating, drinking, playing music and travelling with his students.

The many different phases of Gurdjieff's teaching suggest that he was continually experimenting with the most effective methods and techniques for awakening higher levels of consciousness in his students. Methods which were ineffective were discarded, and others introduced, in a succession of trial-and-error experiments. And, when one successful method or phase of work had served its purpose, it was abandoned in favour of something new. His constant aim was to awaken his students to the reality of their being:

Gurdjieff knew how to make use of every life circumstance to have people feel the truth. I saw him at work, attentive to the possibilities of understanding in his different groups and also to the subjective difficulties of each pupil. I saw him deliberately putting the accent on a particular aspect of knowing, then on another aspect, according to a very definite plan. He worked at times with a thought that stimulated the intellect and opened up an entirely new vision, at times with a feeling that required giving up all artifice in favour of an immediate and complete sincerity, at times with the awakening and putting in motion of a body that responded freely to whatever it was asked to serve. (6)

Much of Gurdjieff's seemingly erratic and inconsistent behaviour as a teacher can be explained by his experimentation with different approaches to spiritual development. He was constantly improvising as individuals and conditions changed, starting projects, dissolving them or suddenly changing direction:

A striking characteristic of Gurdjieff's teaching and methods is that he never stood still. To the very end of his life he was experimenting and there was no stationary period . . . Experimentation can lead to misunderstanding because people acquainted with one particular period of his life may take it as being representative of the whole; and find themselves in complete contradiction with people who know a different period of his life. This also concerns statements which he made at one time, which might be thrown aside and contradicted thirty years or even thirty days later. (7)

Physical and Emotional Demands

For Gurdjieff's students, uncertainty and ceaseless change to their physical routine and scheduled activities were the order of the day. Many critics have accused Gurdjieff of being a dictator who enjoyed the exercise of power and demanded unquestioning obedience to his commands. One of his favorite maxims was "The greater the efforts that are made, the greater the new demands."

P.D. Ouspensky describes some of the deliberate challenges that Gurdjieff created for his students during the period in Russia. He would suddenly convene a meeting at short notice. Sometimes he would quickly change plans, announce he was returning to Moscow and then reverse his decision. Gurdjieff's moods were also subject to sudden change;

sometimes he would talk of abandoning his work altogether. His behaviour alternately confused, discouraged and exasperated his followers. Ouspensky was initially baffled by Gurdjieff's behaviour but later concluded that any student, once faced with and having successfully met these challenges, would value his ideas and teachings.

At the Château du Prieuré Gurdjieff would sometimes rouse his students in the early hours of the morning to practise an exercise or perform a new task. Projects such as landscaping a kitchen garden would begin with a flurry of activity, only to be abandoned shortly afterward. Gurdjieff claimed that the aim of these activities was never the attainment of outer results but rather to develop students' inner resources.

Gurdjieff's behaviour to newcomers could be especially cruel if he was trying to discourage a would-be student whom he deemed unsuitable. To increase their level of frustration no one, least of all Gurdjieff, would answer their questions or explain the purpose of their work. And, in one instance he suggested to an adoring female follower that she eat ice cream with mustard. When she dutifully obeyed, Gurdjieff thundered: "You see what is round idiot. She all the time idiot. Why you here?" (8) At this, the pupil burst into tears, packed her bags and left the Prieuré.

When new pupils arrived at the Prieuré they were inevitably assigned tasks involving hard physical labour. Gurdjieff placed great importance on awakening the body through physical work and practical activities:

The prospective pupils no doubt have come expecting to be initiated into the esoteric world, but, says Gurdjieff, "Everything is body." Though none realize it, no one consciously inhabits their body. The body is taken for granted, only noticed in fear, desire or disease, and quickly dismissed once these pass. The head and heart's relationship to the body is practically nil. Hard physical work helps to center and reconnect the pupils with their bodies, allowing their bodies to begin to breathe and eat normally. The pupils then learn what it is to actually inhabit a living, breathing body. Such work also allows pupils to struggle with reactions and attitudes of self-pity, sloth, superiority. The pupils are put to work scrubbing latrines, felling trees, digging ditches, doing farm work, gardening, housework, laundry and the like. (9)

Gurdjieff frequently required his pupils to make extended physical efforts which often led to their exhaustion. He believed that by driving his students to the limit of their physical capacity, he could get them to understand that they possessed greater powers of endurance than they realized. One example was an incident in 1918, when Gurdjieff led Thomas and Olga de Hartmann and other students on a perilous journey through mountainous terrain near the Black Sea. Despite the students' unsuitable clothing, injuries and exhaustion, Gurdjieff ordered them to continue, which they obeyed without question and without regard for their own safety and well-being.

Later, at the Prieuré in France, Gurdjieff established daily work routines that tested his pupils' physical capacities to their limit. (10) Physical work was employed by Gurdjieff as fodder for self-observation and as a means of inner development and transformation. Student Jean Toomer:

Manual work is usually done for the sake of outward results, for the products, that is, a farmer works to grow crops, a carpenter to build a house. Here at the Prieuré we were to work chiefly for the sake of purification, growth, increased ability and consciousness. Each job, to be sure, was to be done as well as we could do it. Work standards were anything but lax. Each of us was to improve as a workman, acquiring confidence and skill. Tools and materials were to be cared for as real craftsmen care for them. But we were not to be attached to the fruits of our labor. The aim was the same as that expressed in the Bhagavad Gita, "Be free from attachment to results." People who became overly egotistical about their accomplishments were likely to find their pet projects mysteriously interrupted. (11)

Intellectuals unaccustomed to physical labour were often given work tasks when they arrived at the Prieuré. The well-known English editor and literary critic A.R. Orage describes the challenges and eventual benefits of such treatment:

My first weeks at the Prieuré were weeks of real suffering. I was told to dig, and as I had had no real exercise for years I suffered so much physically that I would go back to my room, a sort of cell, and literally cry with fatigue . . . When I was in the very depths of despair, feeling that I could go on no longer, I vowed to make extra effort, and just then something changed in me. Soon, I began to enjoy the hard labour, and a week later Gurdjieff came to me and said, "Now, Orage, I think you dig enough. Let us go to café and drink coffee." . . . This was my first initiation. The former things had passed away. (12)

The challenging conditions that Gurdjieff created for his students were based on the principles of 'conscious labour' and 'intentional or voluntary suffering.' (13) Student Fritz Peters:

I had a fairly good idea of how Gurdjieff induced "conscious effort" and "intentional suffering" in his pupils – or perhaps I should say how they were exposed to it. For the average person, it consisted largely in a preliminary period of joining in reasonably hard manual labour in a group. It could be anything from building a house to working in a garden and, at the beginning, it was simply hard work that was supposed to be done conscientiously. After a while, one became conscious of being thrust into somewhat frustrating circumstances having to do with the work – such as being forced to work with someone whose temperament clashed with yours; being taken off a job as soon as you became too interested in it, etc. Most of the novice students seemed to be put through a period of purposeful frustration. Inevitably, they began to wonder just exactly

what was being accomplished by doing physical labour, and nothing else. The frustration would usually increase because no one, including Gurdjieff, would answer their questions – they were simply told that for the time being they were to do as they were told. When they reached some kind of breaking point, they would suddenly be given an exercise – usually being told that they should observe themselves consciously while they worked and learn more about themselves. (14)

Some critics argue that the physical demands required of pupils was just a convenient way for Gurdjieff to obtain free labour and, further, that keeping his students in a state of physical exhaustion made them more susceptible to his hypnotic power. But the de Hartmanns claimed that these extreme demands taught them to transcend their physical and emotional and limitations: “We suffered and would have been only too happy to rest; but there was no protest in us, because the one thing we really wished to do was to follow Mr. Gurdjieff.” (15)

Gurdjieff believed that unpleasant emotions and unhappy life experiences could move people forward spiritually. To this end, he deliberately created pressure on his pupils in order to produce a range of emotional reactions: “He constantly manipulated people and situations so as to provoke friction, to create negative emotions between people and give them an opportunity of seeing something in themselves.” (16)

Acting as a provocateur, Gurdjieff intentionally created friction and strong emotional reactions among his students by alternately praising and insulting them. Some students were moved to anger and outrage, others to overweening pride and ambition. Gurdjieff told them that they should not be resentful when he aroused in them these negative emotions, but rather should consider it “healing medicine.” He believed that this technique gave his students the opportunity to reflect on their own emotions, reactions and motivations, which ultimately allowed them to become more conscious, authentic and responsible human beings.

Another means of emotionally manipulating his students was through angry outbursts, for which Gurdjieff was infamous. Pupils have described his verbal onslaughts as frequent and terrifying:

Those who have witnessed Gurdjieff’s rages can understand what it means to be exposed week after week to them. His entire body would shake, his face grow purple and a stream of vituperation would pour out. It cannot be said that the anger was uncontrollable, for Gurdjieff could turn it off in a moment – but it was unquestionably real. (17)

Gurdjieff’s students must have felt that they were on an emotional rollercoaster. One of them, Dr. Michel Conge, captures the experience of being manipulated by Gurdjieff:

With a minimum of means, he flipped you over like a pancake, led you left or right, and then left you stuck. And you realized you were no

longer on the same track and tried to learn the lesson. It always produced a strange feeling: one would show up at his place in a certain mood and a quarter of an hour later one would find oneself in another mood. It was rather weird, and one always wondered how it could have happened. Each time one swore never to get caught like that again, and yet . . . (18)

Gurdjieff believed that the dynamics of group work provided exceptional opportunities for self-observation. He created situations in which students with very different temperaments were forced to interact and work together, and the inevitable clash of personalities that resulted was rich food for their self-study. At the Prieuré one of Gurdjieff's favoured followers was a former lawyer, a Russian named Rachmilievitch, who constantly created friction when interacting with other pupils. Gurdjieff claimed that he actually paid Rachmilievitch to stay at the Prieuré for the express purpose of annoying everyone else, as this individual was unparalleled in his ability to produce friction in others without any apparent effort.

In communal living situations, Gurdjieff would deliberately make things difficult by constantly changing the students' living arrangements and routines. Frequently he separated the men from the women. Sometimes Gurdjieff imposed fasting for periods up to a week or a complete ban on all verbal communication. All the time he kept a watchful eye on the proceedings, observing how his pupils reacted to his announcements of the often unpleasant daily activities he devised.

Thomas de Hartmann ultimately understood that the physical and emotional difficulties were set up by Gurdjieff to force his students to face and overcome a 'ladder of obstacles' so that they might achieve a higher level of spiritual development. This required that they undergo a fundamental shift in attitude, to develop a deeper and more conscious understanding of themselves.

De Hartmann also realized that some of Gurdjieff's more unreasonable demands were a test of the students' ability to make rational choices and to resist mechanical obedience to their teacher. (19) Years later, John Bennett reached the same conclusion when reflecting on his eight months of intense study with Gurdjieff in 1949, which he described as the most difficult and painful of his life. Gurdjieff exposed one of Bennett's personal weaknesses – an inability to say “no” – through pushing him to his breaking point by thrusting unexpected tasks upon him, making constant demands and interfering with his closest relationships. Bennett learned through these challenges how to stand up for himself and to set better personal boundaries.

Financial Demands

Gurdjieff's reputation for coaxing money from people was notorious. He often described obtaining money from his followers as “shearing sheep,” which contributed to a reputation for unbridled greed and lack of conscience. John Bennett admits that Gurdjieff

was expert at wheedling money out of people, and even described him as a “shark.” Biographer James Webb did not entirely disagree: “Sometimes he may have been teaching the penny-pinching or gullible lessons in the use of money; sometimes, no doubt, the sheer pleasure of the game impelled him to see how far he could push his luck.” (20)

Early in the Russian phase of his teaching Gurdjieff made very clear his attitude towards money. Gurdjieff believed that people do not value something, including knowledge, unless they pay for it. He explained to P.D. Ouspensky why he charged money to teach his students:

Nothing shows up people so much as their attitude towards money. They are ready to waste as much as you like on their own personal fantasies but they have no valuation whatever of another person’s labor. I must work for them and give them gratis everything that they vouchsafe to take from me. ‘How is it possible to *trade in knowledge*? *This* ought to be free.’ It is precisely for this reason that the demand for this payment is necessary. Some people will never pass this barrier. And if they do not pass this one, it means that they will never pass another. (21)

At the same time, Gurdjieff is reported to have taken students who could not afford his fees and even to have financially supported many of his pupils, as well as Russian refugees who followed him to the Prieuré in the early 1920s. And, during the Second World War in Paris, he fed the neighbourhood poor, elderly and infirm, and even paid the rent and medical expenses of some of the most needy. Almost all of this was done in secret and only surfaced after Gurdjieff’s death. (22)

Gurdjieff frequently used money and material possessions as teaching tools. On one occasion he asked Olga de Hartmann, who was very attached to her family jewellery, to turn them over to him. After a night of great inner struggle she finally complied. As soon as she handed over the jewels to Gurdjieff he promptly returned them to her. A woman who later heard the story from Olga decided to turn over her valuables to Gurdjieff, but she never saw hers again.

Sometimes Gurdjieff would ask followers for large sums of money and then spend it on seemingly trivial items. Once he bought bicycles for everyone at the Prieuré. On another occasion he purchased opera glasses for them. Occasionally he would spend donated money on extravagant meals or trips throughout the countryside.

A well-to-do pupil from New York once gave Gurdjieff a cheque valued at fifty American dollars but written in francs to make the sum appear larger. After cashing the cheque, Gurdjieff invited her to dinner. After dinner he brought a number of children into the dining room and proceeded to distribute all of the woman’s donated money to the children. C.S. Nott relates another incident involving a rich donor who gave Gurdjieff a gift of one hundred dollars toward his “great work” with an air that he was conferring a great favour. Gurdjieff responded by inviting the benefactor to dinner at a restaurant

the next day, where he used the money to pay the waiter for a bill that came to exactly one hundred dollars.

Gurdjieff's incessant demands for money from his followers reached their peak in the late 1920s and early 1930s. A.R. Orage, in charge of Gurdjieff's New York groups, was subject to persistent and ongoing requests by him for large sums of money. These demands severely tested Orage's allegiance to Gurdjieff; on one occasion, after his teacher had sailed back to France, he reportedly exclaimed, "Thank God I'm free again." By 1933 Gurdjieff had exhausted the patience and goodwill of many of his American followers, who were convinced that their teacher was using his power to extract money from them again and again.

Critics of Gurdjieff have expressed outrage that a spiritual guide would use his influence with followers to obtain money. Gurdjieff defended his practice by asserting that his benefactors gave willingly and freely, and always received value in exchange:

I not make money like others make money, and when I have too much money, I spend. But I never need money for self . . . I *ask* for money and people always give, and for this I give them opportunity to study my teaching. (23)

Gurdjieff's students agree that, except for the occasional purchase of clothes, he never spent money he obtained from others on himself. Rather, money was fuel to further the aim of his teaching mission. Gurdjieff also contributed significant amounts to initially establish his Institute in Russia. (24)

Purpose of Testing Students

Gurdjieff told his pupils at the Prieuré that the aim and purpose of the difficult circumstances he created was to develop their own inner essence, which was hidden beneath a conditioned false personality. By attacking and revealing his students' false personalities he forced them to see what was authentic and real in themselves: "I cannot change your being, but I can create conditions, thanks to which you can change yourselves." (25)

When a man arrives at the Institute, difficult conditions are created and all sorts of traps laid for him intentionally, so that he himself can find out whether he came because of his own interest or only because he heard about the interest of others. Can he, disregarding the outside difficulties that are made for him, continue to work for the main aim? And does this aim exist within him? When the need for those artificial difficulties is over, then they are no longer created for him. (26)

The experiences that Gurdjieff created for his students were very different from their ordinary lives. (27) Pupils spoke of touching a higher dimension of existence and seeing another possibility of 'being.' As a result of her experiences, one pupil wrote:

“Mr. Gurdjieff unveiled for me, to the extent to which I was capable of receiving it, the mystery of true love.” (28) Fourth Way author William Patterson suggests that Gurdjieff was offering an “active manifestation of Divine Love” cloaked in the garment of outrageous or offensive behaviour: “The *real food* Gurdjieff served at his daily luncheons and dinners was prepared in Being. The role he might play, his words, his actions – these were its mere surface reflections.” (29)

Gurdjieff taught that most things in life could not be learned merely with the mind, but only through the direct participation of all aspects of one’s being, including feelings and sensations. Many students felt that when they were with Gurdjieff they entered a state much closer to their true essence. Thomas de Hartmann contrasted the experiences Gurdjieff created at the Prieuré with those in a more traditional monastic setting:

At the Prieuré all these constantly changing works engulfed the whole person. Life outside somehow ceased to exist. Reclusiveness of life in the Prieuré was totally unlike that of a monastery, where external life is rejected and there is concentration on prayer, abstinence and elevation of thought. In the Prieuré the life of a person, like a ball, was thrown from one situation into another. Our prayer was the Work, which concentrated together all spiritual and physical forces. The variety and constant change of tasks continually reawakened us. We were given minimal hours of sleep, just enough to give strength for the following day. Instead of abstinence, there was spending of forces to the utmost, attentive work renewing energies as they were spent, in the manner of a rhythmic fly-wheel. There was no rejection of life within the Prieuré. On the contrary, life was expanded to the utmost intensity and spirituality. (30)

Although some students found Gurdjieff to be gentle and kind (31), he was unsparing with those aspects of behaviour connected with the ‘chief feature’ or primary defect of an individual’s personality. Gurdjieff challenged his pupils to more deeply examine their own weaknesses and develop their authentic selves through release from their conditioned personalities. In some cases this involved creating unpleasant or challenging conditions that exposed the worst sides of people so that they could honestly see their defects and then work to correct them:

There was *meaning* in everything, particularly in one’s own reaction to unusual situations, hard work, and extraordinarily complicated exercises. From the moment of entrance into the community, conditions were arranged so as to grate against a pupil’s “mechanism.” Maurice Nicoll was forbidden to read, another pupil who could not bear the sight of blood was given the task of slaughtering animals for food. And the most hum-drum situation – which in ordinary life would have been ignored or accepted – could provide material out of which to build new meanings. Dislikes to be overcome, pettiness borne in silence, one’s own worst impulses encountered face to face; every event of the day provided material for “work on oneself.” (32)

Gurdjieff encouraged his pupils to become aware of their identifications and negative emotions, to see themselves as they really were, then to transform the sides of themselves that inhibited their spiritual growth. By creating situations in which his students could observe the reactions and behaviour of themselves and others, he accelerated their process of inner development: “The teacher trying to trap his students into identification, the students working not to identify, to remain free of their reactions – that was part of the taxing, frustrating, maddening and ingenious conditions Gurdjieff created.” (33)

Gurdjieff’s goal was to help his students confront their weaknesses, overcome them and ultimately stand on their own two feet as independent, mature adults:

When he was there, truth was carved out as with a knife. The least cowardice, the slightest deviation, the smallest lie – albeit by omission and however insignificant – was detected with incredible firmness, merely through his presence. He encouraged sincerity and confronted you with your own weakness, your inability to be sincere even towards yourself. “Become an adult” was a phrase I often heard. It was one of the essential ideas of his work: to become an adult by one's own efforts. (34)

Much of Gurdjieff’s unusual behaviour, including role-playing, insults, shocks, bursts of temper and intentional deception, can be understood as forms of indirect teaching. In this teaching method, the teacher does not instruct the pupil directly but is able to create situations and provide experiences from which students come to their own understanding, and ultimately self-knowledge. (35)

Gurdjieff taught not only a system of ideas but also an attitude towards life and a set of values based on higher knowledge and understanding. Students have reported that the knowledge Gurdjieff transmitted to them was their most precious possession. It often took students many years, even decades, to finally understand the value of his teaching. Michel Conge concludes:

The behavior of a man like Gurdjieff . . . is incomprehensible for most people; it took several years of striving, of contact, and of, at last, untrammelled experience to begin to understand the goodness of behavior that was sometimes, apparently, insensitive, harsh, cruel, and which, in the last analysis, was nothing of the sort! (36)

The testimony of Gurdjieff’s students is compelling evidence that they received great value from his teachings. Kathryn Hulme: “The discipline under which we put ourselves voluntarily and gratefully was the most intense kind of inner struggle we had ever experienced – simply to discover *what we were*. In shortcuts, sometimes merciless, sometimes compassionate, Gurdjieff showed us our *nonentity-ness*, thus helping us to die to the artificial selves which our worldly past, our materialistic heritage, from a spiritually stagnant West, had made us.” (37)

In many cases their lives were greatly transformed by their encounter with Gurdjieff and his ideas. Despite Gurdjieff's unorthodox methods, many of his pupils confirm that they were profoundly impacted by the man and his teaching.

Commentary

Gurdjieff's practical methods of teaching his students were carefully developed and refined over the course of many years after deliberate experimentation and testing. They were specifically designed for the Western psyche and culture, and embody a wide range of specific techniques and approaches to further the development of higher human potential.

Some of Gurdjieff's methods and behaviours were clearly meant to challenge and confront his pupils by creating situations which revealed their identifications, automatic reactions and negative emotions. Similar techniques have been employed with success in other spiritual traditions like Advaita Vedanta and Zen Buddhism:

There are certain definite cases where the use of force, of compulsion, even violence, is imperative. In such cases the egoless man will make use of such force and may apparently act with violence. But it goes without saying that this will be mere appearance since his action is completely devoid of desire or fear. (38)

However, scholars like Whithall Perry warn that the sometimes outrageous behaviour of Zen *roshis* functions within the framework of traditional Buddhism and should not be applied outside this particular context. Gurdjieff was clearly not operating under any such umbrella of protection and his pupils could not be sure whether the treatment they were receiving was based on tried-and-true traditional methods, or merely on the whims of their teacher.

Gurdjieff's confrontational approach to helping his students overcome their self-imposed limitations required extreme care and sensitivity in its application. Psychologist Charles Tart sounds a cautionary note about the dangers of applying psychological pressure to push through a pupil's resistances: "There is always a risk that the teacher's understanding is faulty or that the push won't be effective and may even backfire and increase resistance, or that the pain involved in pushing through may be too much for the student, so he will quit the work rather than see it through." (39)

The Sufi teacher Omar Ali-Shah is especially critical of Gurdjieff's unconventional methods. He argues that many of the shock techniques used by Gurdjieff were not properly learned and were applied at random or in circumstances that were inappropriate: "You have to be conscious of time, need, place and people; if any of these factors are absent, the result . . . is confusion, and at its maximum, it is damage." (40)

The concerns raised by Tart and Ali-Shah are important and certainly relevant in assessing Gurdjieff's use of confrontational and challenging techniques in his work with students. Many pupils strongly believed in Gurdjieff's infallibility and were reluctant to criticize his methods even when, in some cases, they appeared to be ineffective or counterproductive. Techniques which involve challenge and psychological pressure may be open to abuse and misapplication even by the most careful and sensitive teacher. Although Gurdjieff's motivation for using these methods was arguably well-intentioned and his results frequently successful, there may have been instances where they did psychological harm to pupils who were unprepared for his dynamic teaching methods.

According to Jeanne de Salzmann, Gurdjieff worked with his students in two directions simultaneously. These two approaches operated functionally as a 'carrot' and a 'stick.' On the one hand he tried to awaken "the possibility of approaching a higher level of being . . . [while] at the same time he made us suffer terribly by making us see our actual state, the way we really were." (41) This strange duality created a friction in each student which compelled them to choose between remaining as they were, as a slave to their conditioning, or rise to a higher level:

Most of the misunderstandings and disagreements about Gurdjieff's methods and behavior come from the fact that he worked at the same time on our two natures. On the one hand Gurdjieff worked on our essence. He listened to our inner need with tireless patience and kindness . . . He took an interest in our difficulties. He gave practical help to take the next step. With unbelievable exactness he indicated the definite inner act that each had to carry out at the given moment to free himself further from his automatism. On the other hand, Gurdjieff worked on our functions in a relentless way – continual pressure, greater and greater demands, putting us in horrible situations, shocks of all kinds. Not only did he not attract us but, in pushing us to extreme limits, he forced us to resist him, to react against him. And he did this without mercy. By his Presence he obliged us to come to a decision, to know what we wanted. One could always refuse and go away. (42)

The demands and challenges Gurdjieff imposed on his students raise a number of very important questions: Under what conditions are 'shock' methods justified in an esoteric teaching? What safeguards need to be in place to prevent damage or confusion? Are pupils capable of evaluating the appropriateness of their teacher's actions and methods? Is a teacher always in full control of the consequences of their behavioural techniques?

Many of Gurdjieff's students were convinced that he transformed their lives and that his unusual teaching methods were integral to this process. Critics wonder if he caused more harm than good. Although many students who embraced Gurdjieff's challenges as learning opportunities were able to greatly advance their own process of spiritual development, it remains an open question whether the unorthodox means always justified the ends.

NOTES

- (1) Thomas and Olga de Hartmann *Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff* (London: Arkana, 1992), p. 27.
- (2) William Patterson *Ladies of the Rope* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 1999), p. 249.
- (3) Jacob Needleman “Introduction” in Jacob Needleman, ed. *The Inner Journey: Views from the Gurdjieff Work* (Sandpoint, Idaho: Morning Light Press, 2008), p. xxiv.
- (4) G.I. Gurdjieff *Herald of Coming Good* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1974), p. 22.
- (5) John Bennett explains in *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973, pp. 81-82) why the task of transferring Eastern wisdom to a Western environment requires great care and sensitivity:

There have been various premature attempts at bringing to the West notions and methods that have come from India, from China, from Japan, from the Middle East – from Buddhist, Hindu, Tantric, Zen, Sufi and other sources. Really serious difficulties have arisen, because those who have made the attempt to bring this wisdom to the West have either been Europeans who had imperfectly assimilated what the East had to give, or Asiatics who did not understand the European and American environment. In nearly every case they made serious mistakes, either in attempting to transfer exactly what worked extremely well under certain Asiatic conditions into quite different conditions, or in adapting it to the West without really understanding the new environment.

- (6) Jeanne de Salzmann *The Reality of Being* (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), pp. 2-3.
- (7) John Bennett *Gurdjieff: A Very Great Enigma* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1973), p. 70.
- (8) John Bennett *Witness: The Autobiography of John G. Bennett* (Tucson: Omen Press, 1974), p. 111.
- (9) William Patrick Patterson *Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014), p. 121.
- (10) Student John Bennett describes the regime in *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973, p. 154.):

We woke up at five or six in the morning and worked for two hours before breakfast. Afterwards there was more work: building, felling trees, sawing timber, caring for the animals of almost every domestic

species, cooking, cleaning, and every kind of domestic duty. After a quick light lunch and a period of rest, one or two hours were devoted to 'exercises' and 'rhythms' accompanied by music usually played by Thomas de Hartmann on the piano. Sometimes there would be fasts lasting one, two, three or even up to seven days during which all the work continued as usual. In the evenings, there would be classes in rhythms and ritual dances which might go on for three, four or five hours until everyone was totally exhausted.

- (11) William Patrick Patterson *Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014), p. 179.
- (12) C.S. Nott *Teachings of Gurdjieff: The Journal of a Pupil* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1962), pp. 27-28.
- (13) In a talk to his Paris pupils in 1941, Gurdjieff stressed the importance of the concept of 'intentional suffering' in the process of spiritual transformation (William Patrick Patterson *Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014, p. 405):

One needs fire. Without fire, there will never be anything. This fire is suffering, intentional suffering, without which it is impossible to create anything. One must prepare, must know what will make one suffer and when it is there, make use of it. Only you can prepare, only you know what makes you suffer, makes the fire which cooks, cements, crystallizes. Suffer by your defects, in your pride, in your egoism. Remind yourself of the aim. Without prepared suffering there is nothing, for by as much as one is conscious, there is no more suffering. No further process, nothing. That is why with your conscience you must prepare what is necessary. You owe to nature. The food you eat which nourishes your life. You must pay for these cosmic substances. You have a duty, an obligation, to repay by conscious work.

- (14) Fritz Peters *Gurdjieff Remembered* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1971). p. 126.
- (15) Thomas and Olga de Hartmann *Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff* (London: Arkana, 1992), p. 26.
- (16) William Patrick Patterson *Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014), p. 122.
- (17) John Bennett *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 217.
- (18) Michel Conge "Facing Mr. Gurdjieff" in Jacob Needleman & George Baker, eds. *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teaching* (New York: Continuum, 1996), p. 356.

- (19) Other pupils have reported that in certain situations they did not automatically acquiesce to Gurdjieff's demands. Ethel Merston makes this point in Jessmin and Dushka Howarth's *It's Up to Ourselves: A Mother, A Daughter, and Gurdjieff* (New York: Gurdjieff Heritage Society, 2010, p. 184):

Several of the old students did not worship blindly, but stood up to him, including myself, using our own judgment . . . Gurdjieff as he himself said, was no God, but was himself learning – we were often his guinea pigs. But that he knew more than we did is unquestionable, he was a marvelous instrument, even with occasional mistakes, for making us more awake, a necessary preliminary stage before real work. That he did fail sometimes for himself and others is for me equally undoubted.

- (20) James Webb *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Works of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), p. 331.
- (21) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), pp. 165-166.
- (22) Tcheslaw Tchekhovitch was a pupil of Gurdjieff from 1920 until his death in 1949. In *Gurdjieff: A Master in Life* (Toronto: Dolmen Meadow Editions, 2006, pp. 198-200), he shares an account of Gurdjieff's "impersonal kindness" during the war years in Paris:

Mr. Gurdjieff often did his own shopping when he took his morning stroll. As soon as he returned, he started working in the kitchen. During this time, he would not receive any of his pupils, and the door opening onto the main staircase remained closed. It was quite another story, however, at the back stairs. One had to see it to believe it: from the bottom of the stairs to the top, there was a long procession of beggars. One had his bowl, another his tin plate, still another an old pot, all coming solemnly to receive a full ration of soup accompanied by some kind words. Mr. Gurdjieff himself served from enormous cooking pots while asking after the health of everyone, not forgetting those who could not come because of illness . . . Here was an old woman who came for herself and also for her husband, who could no longer walk; there, an undernourished and sick man who said he was unable to work; then children from a large poverty-stricken family; and the concierge from a neighbouring building, who had looked after a bedridden tenant on the seventh floor for a long time . . . After Mr. Gurdjieff's death, I witnessed many touching scenes. For example, an old woman came to the apartment about three weeks later. Overcome by the news that he was no longer there, she could only say, "And now, how shall I pay my rent?" Someone else came and said, "I would so much like to have thanked him. He paid for my daughter's treatment, and she has just come out of the sanatorium, cured."

- (23) Fritz Peters *Gurdjieff Remembered* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1971), pp. 89-90.
- (24) The remarkable efforts he expended to finance and develop his enterprises are detailed in “The Material Question” (G.I. Gurdjieff *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 247-303).
- (25) William Patrick Patterson *Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014), p. 124.
- (26) William Patrick Patterson *Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014), p. 126.
- (27) Gurdjieff transmitted his teachings in a manner which required his pupils to make deliberate efforts to understand and complete the material he presented: “Gurdjieff teaches using declarations without examples, apparent contradictions, hints, and nuances of all kinds, all of which keep the group on edge and create friction. Teaching in this way makes a demand on the group to become active, to inquire, explore, to think and act independently, to take nothing and no one for granted.” (William Patrick Patterson *Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014, p. 33).
- (28) Genevieve Lief “How I Learned Who He Was” in Jacob Needleman and George Baker, eds. *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teaching* (New York: Continuum, 1996), p. 406.
- (29) William Patterson *Ladies of the Rope* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 1999), p. 248.
- (30) Thomas and Olga de Hartmann *Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff* (London: Arkana, 1992), pp. 191-192.
- (31) Many students have recorded that the time they spent with Gurdjieff were generally warm and filled with gratitude. Solange Claustres writes in “The Dessert” in Jacob Needleman and George Baker, eds. *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teaching* (New York: Continuum, 1996, p. 399):
- He was gentle but firm, putting my possibilities to the test in order to make me understand them, and all the while giving me confidence. That was what I most needed. He was, simply, a human being full of wisdom and common sense towards everyday reality, the reality of life with no trimmings; he was a good and strict teacher, never weak, never unjust, but never letting anything slip by unnoticed, his attention always alert. I never sensed any sort of manipulation or the application of a ‘system’; his behavior was instantaneous, flawless and faultless – and above all devoid of any judging. He was always inwardly serious, with a smile and a gentle expression.

- (32) James Webb *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Works of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), pp. 241-242.
- (33) William Patterson *Ladies of the Rope* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 1999), p. 248.
- (34) Solange Claustres “The Dessert” in Jacob Needleman and George Baker, eds. *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teaching* (New York: Continuum, 1996), p. 401.
- (35) Many spiritual teachings have employed the method of ‘indirect teaching.’ Idries Shah describes its use within the Sufi tradition in *Caravan of Dreams* (London: Octagon Press, 1983, pp. 193-194):
- Many aspects of higher human development can only take the form of communicating knowledge and experience in a disguised manner: rather as we teach our children by involving them in activities which they consider to be amusements rather than lessons in (say) counting, or co-ordination, or manners. One method of accustoming people to a ‘higher pattern’ is to involve them in activities and enterprises which are equivalents of higher things.
- (36) Michel Conge “Facing Mr. Gurdjieff” in Jacob Needleman and George Baker, eds. *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teaching* (New York: Continuum, 1996), pp. 357-358.
- (37) William Patrick Patterson *Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014), p. 315.
- (38) Jean Klein *Be Who You Are* (London: Watkins, 1978), p. 66.
- (39) Charles Tart *Waking Up: Overcoming the Obstacles to Human Potential* (Boston: Shambhala, 1986), p. 248.
- (40) Omar Ali-Shah *The Sufi Tradition in the West* (New York: Alif, 1994), p. 225.
- (41) Jeanne de Salzmann *The Reality of Being* (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), p. 3.
- (42) Jeanne de Salzmann *The Reality of Being* (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), pp. 3-4.