

DRUGS, ALCOHOL AND FOOD

Anthropological research suggests that human beings in virtually every culture in history have ingested chemical substances to alter their consciousness. Certain spiritual traditions celebrate inebriation as a metaphor for conscious transformation. Sufi mystics have spoken of being ‘drunk with the wine of love.’ The Zen tradition has a history of poets and teaching masters who were spirited drinkers of sake. Other spiritual traditions have employed certain ‘power drugs’ and psychedelics in sacred rituals and ceremonies as an integral part of their teaching.

In a conversation in 1915 with P.D. Ouspensky, Gurdjieff explained the theoretical premises to support the use of psychoactive substances such as opium and hashish by students of esoteric schools to aid their inner development:

There are schools which make use of narcotics in the right way. People in these schools take them for self-study; in order to take a look ahead, to know the possibilities better, to see beforehand, ‘in advance,’ what can be attained later on as the result of prolonged work. When a man sees this and is convinced that what he has learned theoretically really exists, he then works consciously, he knows where he is going. Sometimes this is the easiest way of being convinced of the real existence of those possibilities which man often suspects in himself. (1)

Gurdjieff was very aware of the properties and effects of mind-altering substances and used them both personally and with many of his students. However, the use of drugs in a spiritual context is controversial and has been criticized even by some of Gurdjieff’s own pupils such as John Pentland. (2) Gurdjieff’s use of alcohol, both in his personal life and as a teaching method with his students, has also been a source of criticism. And, his elaborate and celebrated meals accompanied by ritual drinking, have been misunderstood by critics who failed to see their spiritual significance.

Gurdjieff’s Knowledge and Use of Drugs and Alcohol

Gurdjieff possessed an extensive and profound knowledge of psychoactive substances and their effects, much of it clearly based on personal experience. Rafael Lefort, who attempted to trace the sources of Gurdjieff’s knowledge, claims that Gurdjieff studied in Eastern esoteric schools where he was taught “the science of pharmacy and pharmacology, how to plant and use plants of importance, how to extract their essences and how to use these essences.” (3)

References to the use and properties of alcohol, cocaine, hashish and opium appear throughout *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson*. One of Gurdjieff’s companions in his semi-autobiographical *Meetings with Remarkable Men* is the character Soloviev, said to be “an authority on what is called eastern medicine in general, and on Tibetan medicine in particular,

and he was also the world's greatest specialist in the knowledge of the action of opium and hashish on the psyche and organism of man." (4)

James Webb, a biographer of Gurdjieff, speculates that Soloviev "probably never existed" and hints that his character may have been an oblique reference to Gurdjieff himself. Webb also notes that Gurdjieff was contemptuous of Western medicine and claimed that only three drugs from the whole Western pharmacopeia were useful – opium, castor oil and an unidentified substance extracted from a certain tree.

Gurdjieff's liberal use of caffeine, tobacco and alcohol throughout his long teaching career has been documented by biographers, journalists and students. Coffee and cigarettes were a daily fixture in Gurdjieff's life and were effectively employed to energize his writing pursuits during the 1920s and 1930s.

Gurdjieff's drinking was one of the most discussed and controversial aspects of his life. There is little mention of alcohol in the Russian phase of his teaching and certainly no suspicion of alcohol abuse. Ouspensky notes that at times Gurdjieff "liked to arrange big dinners, buying a quantity of wine and food of which however he often ate or drank practically nothing." (5) However, following his serious automobile accident in 1924 there seems to have been a dramatic change in his drinking habits. In a conversation with student Jean Toomer he revealed some of the reasons for his heavy use of drugs and alcohol in the years following 1924:

He then told me that following his motor accident he had been compelled to produce energy artificially. To this end, during the few following years, he had consumed enough drink to have killed ten men and, in addition, forty pounds of opium. To my question, "Did you know in advance what you were doing, or was it an experiment attended by grave risk?" he replied, "It was necessary to create energy artificially, my condition and my means and aims were such. I knew it, yet it was also an experiment and a risk." (6)

Gurdjieff's consumption of spirits clearly played an important role in the dissemination of his teachings and interactions with students. He reportedly could drink very large amounts of alcohol without showing obvious signs of inebriation. According to A.R. Orage: "Gurdjieff, who had an unusual capacity for drink, made a careful distinction between ordinary drinking and conscious drinking which could free the 'I' to think, feel, talk and act; that is, to expose 'essence'." (7)

That Gurdjieff was a heavy drinker for much of his life is indisputable. Whether or not he was an alcoholic, as esoteric teacher Oscar Ichazo and others suggest, is open to question. Although Gurdjieff did show some of the signs suggestive of alcoholism, such a daily drinking, drinking early in the day, and driving after drinking, he was clearly not impaired in any way that perceptibly prevented him from functioning at a very high level in all aspects of his life. The official medical cause of his death was cirrhosis of the liver and liver cancer.

Use of Drugs and Alcohol with Pupils

According to Gurdjieff, certain drugs are sometimes employed in esoteric schools to separate personality from essence as a method of self-study:

If personality and essence are for a time separated in a man . . . two beings, as it were, are formed in him, who speak in different voices, have completely different tastes, aims and interests, and one of these two beings often proves to be on the level of a small child . . . Certain narcotics have the property of putting personality to sleep without affecting essence. And for a certain time after taking this narcotic a man's personality disappears, as it were, and only his essence remains. (8)

There is evidence that Gurdjieff consciously administered drugs of this nature, possibly hashish, on certain occasions in specific circumstances to some of his pupils. John Bennett was given access to the private unpublished memoirs of a number of female students (sometimes called the 'Ladies of the Rope') who wrote of their experiences during the 1930s:

With these women, he carried through for two or three years a very intensive and extraordinary experiment, making use of methods that brought them into remarkable psychic states, and developed their powers far more rapidly than had been the case with the pupils who had been with him during earlier years . . . it throws a very vivid light upon Gurdjieff's methods as a teacher and upon his use, for example, of drugs as a method of developing not only psychic experiences, but also opening the hidden channels of the human psyche. (9)

Alcohol was Gurdjieff's primary agent of choice for producing effects on the consciousness of his students. He took advantage of the euphoric effects of alcohol to reveal sides of his pupils' personalities that were usually hidden. Gurdjieff believed that alcohol drew one's inner essence to the surface where it could be observed and studied: "Alcohol opens, it shows many aspects of your interior, it is very important for knowing one." (10) Dr. Kenneth Walker, a longtime student of Ouspensky, visited Gurdjieff in 1948 at his Paris apartment and was forewarned about the importance Gurdjieff gave to drinking alcohol at his dinner table:

A great many people are passing through Gurdjieff's hands at the flat, and if they've had a drink or two they are much more 'open,' and I mean by this that Gurdjieff is able to *see* them much more readily after they have had a drink or two. There is a great deal of truth in that old saying of the Arabs: 'Wine makes a man more so.' Alcohol uncovers a man so that he is much more readily perceived by those who are observing him. (11)

Gurdjieff's use of alcohol in teaching situations and his emphasis on conscious drinking parallels that of the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa (12) who regarded alcohol as a "weak poison" which could be transmuted into a medicine:

Whether alcohol is to be a poison or a medicine depends on one's awareness while drinking. Conscious drinking – remaining aware of one's state of mind –

transmutes the effects of alcohol . . . Thus alcohol can be a testing ground. It brings to the surface the latent style of the drinker's neuroses, the style that he is habitually hiding. (13)

One of Gurdjieff's most unusual methods of teaching was the 'Toasts to the Idiots' ritual. A number of Gurdjieff's pupils have related the form, sequence and presumed metaphysical meaning of these alcoholic toasts. Biographer James Moore provides a detailed description of the ceremonial process which was first introduced by Gurdjieff in 1922 at the Prieuré. (14) Gurdjieff sat at the head of the table while the person seated to his left, designated the master of ceremonies, was responsible for proposing a series of toasts (usually Armagnac or vodka) to successive categories of 'idiots.' Each pupil was required to select their own idiot from among at least twelve types (ordinary idiot, super idiot, zigzag idiot, and so on), reflecting progressive gradations of spiritual development. As the toasts were drunk, Gurdjieff closely observed each student as the alcohol, in Moore's words, "rendered their natures 'opaque' to scrutiny."

William Patterson, an American student of the Work, has described the challenges presented to the pupils during the course of the ritual:

The toasts were said to rarely go beyond the first nine Idiots and often ended earlier. Still, this is a lot of drinking, especially as Gurdjieff demanded that the Armagnac not be sipped but drunk "honestly." That is, in a single draught. No doubt it was difficult to stay present when the body had to absorb a series of alcoholic shocks to the system. It demanded a vigilant attention and discrimination. It was also a quick method of seeing people's mechanicality and inner animal. (15)

Of course, critics have been quick to denounce Gurdjieff's methods as contrary to traditional spiritual practices and designed to take advantage of his naive students. However, there is no evidence to suggest that anything untoward took place during or after the ritual toasts, and the most negative consequence to a pupil was likely no more than a severe hangover the following morning. (16)

Ritual Meals and Food as Sacraments

Gurdjieff taught that human beings take in three kinds of food: the ordinary food and liquids we eat and drink, the air we breathe and impressions. Each of these three foods, he explained, must be mixed in definite proportions and transformed within the body following an alchemical process in which coarse substances are transmuted into fine substances, leading to the development of 'higher being bodies.' How these foods are absorbed and assimilated, whether consciously or unconsciously, has profound implications for the growth of the higher bodies. (17)

Gurdjieff placed great importance on the health and well-being of the physical body, which he believed was the key to longevity. At his meals, he taught his students how to eat consciously and work with ordinary food and drink in order to influence the first octave of the development of the finer spiritual bodies. Pupils quoted him as saying "Man should eat, not as an animal but

consciously” and “If one knows how to eat properly, one knows how to pray.” (18) Gurdjieff’s students believed that the foods he prepared for them contained “active elements” which helped them assimilate his ideas and develop their spiritual being.

Unlike some religious and spiritual traditions, Gurdjieff taught that food should be enjoyed to the fullest and not restricted or arbitrarily rejected on cultural or moral grounds:

Mr. Gurdjieff always accorded food, its preparation and distribution the greatest respect. There was nothing hedonistic in this attitude. It came from his esteem for our marvelous human bodies and a belief that we are obligated to provide them with the best possible care and nourishment, including sense impressions. He only advocated fasting for special people under special circumstances, closely supervised. (19)

Gurdjieff’s students such as Thomas de Hartmann recounted how he tried to expose them to a wide range of foods, herbs, spices and exotic dishes:

To taste life fully was one of Mr. Gurdjieff’s principles. During our life with him we tried every sort of eastern dish, some very exotic. He told us that in the East they have always paid particular attention to the refinements of food elements. The aim is not to gorge oneself under the table, but rather to sample, in tiny portions, all kinds of variation of taste experience . . . I can still see him vividly, his muscles completely relaxed as always. Slowly he lifts to his mouth a very good pear, not peeled. Unhurried he takes a bite of it as if striving to absorb its entire aroma, its entire taste. (20)

Gurdjieff paid great attention to the preparation and creation of his meals, comparing himself to a “culinary doctor” who expressed the principles of harmony by “correctly blending elements as a composition of music or the colors of a painting.” (21) Students were struck by the skill, assurance and care with which he prepared his amazing dishes:

A large bowl having been placed in front of him he started to prepare a special treat for his guests. Into this bowl went chopped cucumber, pickles, red-pepper, onions, fragments of bread, contributions from a number of different bottles containing various kinds of preserve, pieces of dried fish and finally large spoonfuls of sour cream. This mixture he carefully stirred and occasionally tasted, in the manner of an old apothecary preparing a specially potent elixir of life. (22)

The meals themselves typically consisted of “tasty soups or hors d’oeuvres; and then meat and vegetables, usually cooked together for several hours, blending and caramelizing, intensifying the flavors enhanced with fresh herbs, spices, fruits, etc. and tenderizing ordinary cuts of meat or fowl into something of gourmet quality.” (23) On special occasions dinner guests would be offered exotic delicacies such as sheep’s head or a fully roasted lamb, reminiscent of a strange forgotten world of the mysterious past.

Gurdjieff presided over the meals and the accompanying ritual toasts of alcohol with a jovial and expansive generosity, playing the role of benevolent host. Meals with Gurdjieff were unforgettable experiences, described by his students as a dizzying combination of excitement, serious philosophical discussion, humour, nervous tension, alcohol and exotic unaccustomed food. But above all they were marvelously entertaining:

Most of our time was spent in howls of laughter. G.'s gift of mimicry and masterly comic timing infected everyone, old and young, of every nationality. He could point out situations and special characteristics in people with a wit that was sharp, but an attitude that was so warm and affectionate that although we all laughed in immediate recognition it was with the person, not at them. (24)

But the ceremonial meals and ritual toasts also served a more sober and serious spiritual purpose, that of exposing his student's inner being to objective scrutiny. Gurdjieff believed that he "could read the depth and breadth of personality from a person's eating habits and comportment at the table." (25) He used the meals as an opportunity for teaching his students in a way that impacted them both individually and collectively and could be understood on different levels and in various ways by all those present:

Throughout the meal he would prepare special small dishes from the array in front of him. "For Mother," he would say, and the dish would be passed to the one indicated, for "Blondie," for "Doctorina," for "Miss Chapeau" . . . and with each dish an exchange of eyes took place, or a word or two, often lost on the others but with special impact on the one who received the plate. Somehow Gurdjieff managed to touch each one in a deeply personal way, while remaining himself impersonal yet concerned, remote and curiously just. It seemed to correspond with each one's sense of aspiration and at the same time with the recognition of one's own nothingness on the scale of eternity. (26)

Commentary

It is clear that Gurdjieff used food, alcohol and drugs as teaching instruments and "skillful means" to advance his pupils' spiritual development. That his unconventional methods were misunderstood, misinterpreted and criticized is not surprising as the consumption of food, alcohol and drugs is not generally recognized as part of a viable spiritual path. Yet, food and eating plays an important ritualistic and symbolic role in many of the world's religions. Gurdjieff's ceremonial meals and sense of hospitality mirrors similar practices in Sufi, Jewish, indigenous and other spiritual traditions.

Gurdjieff's ritual meals appear to have been consciously designed to create multiple effects on many different levels. The time of day, the environment of the room, the seating arrangements, the type and order of food served, the alcoholic toasts, the interaction between Gurdjieff and his guests and their individual interactions, combined to produce a complex net or mesh in which spiritual energy or *baraka* could be produced, projected and shared. The meals were also

an opportunity for ‘self-observation’ and ‘self-remembering,’ cornerstones of Gurdjieff’s practical psychology.

Gurdjieff’s personal use of alcohol attracted criticism as it seemed contrary to the qualities of behavior usually expected of a spiritual teacher. In recent decades there have been numerous accounts of contemporary spiritual teachers with drug and alcohol problems which have seriously impacted their spiritual communities and relationships with individual students. (27) Some spiritual teachers have suggested that excessive alcohol use is a sign of “spiritual sickness” and a warning flag for potential seekers of wisdom:

Excessive drinking reveals a craving that would not be there if one were fully realized. Enlightenment is about freedom – not freedom to play out one’s cravings, but freedom from one’s cravings. If one would uproot the dualistic sense of self and other, he or she would not feel the compulsion to drink to excess. That person would feel complete without needing a substance that is potentially destructive. Excessive drinking is destructive. (28)

Gurdjieff’s use of drugs, and especially alcohol, with his students raises important questions concerning the nature of the teacher-student relationship and the methods employed on the path of spiritual transformation. Substances which transform ordinary states of consciousness have been used throughout human history in the quest for spiritual enlightenment. While some believe that they open doors to higher realms of experience and spiritual possibilities, others argue that they create illusory states of mind based on subjective imagination.

Gurdjieff may have employed alcohol and certain other drugs as “temporary means” to quicken his students’ spiritual growth. He clearly placed importance on this approach, as the Toasts to the Idiots ritual was a fixture in Gurdjieff’s experiential teachings for more than 25 years. However, critics argue that there was an unhealthy element of coercion in the application of this “spiritual exercise.” Gurdjieff insisted that all guests present at his table must drink his powerful alcoholic toasts and he brooked no exceptions. (29) Many pupils have revealed that they “cheated” at these toasts, using a variety of subterfuges to avoid drinking the full complement of toasts.

And who can honestly blame them? Force and compulsion in matters of the spirit is inherently unhealthy, contrary to the principles of personal responsibility and conscience, and ultimately counterproductive. Unquestioning obedience to authority, whether secular or spiritual, deprives human beings of freedom of choice and provides fertile ground for the development of a cult. And some of Gurdjieff’s most virulent critics have accused him of leading a cult that manipulated and brainwashed his gullible and malleable followers.

There is, of course, no real evidence to support this assertion. But certainly open to question is the way in which Gurdjieff forced his pupils to consume significant amounts of alcohol when it was clear that many of them objected to this practice for a variety of valid moral and personal reasons. Perhaps the ultimate lesson is that no human being, spiritual teacher or otherwise, is infallible in their knowledge, judgement or actions in the world.

NOTES

- (1) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), pp. 8-9.
- (2) John Pentland, who was appointed by Gurdjieff to head the Work in America following his death, warned of the dangers of using drugs as a method of spiritual development in William Patterson *Eating the "I"* (San Anselmo, California: Arete Communications, 1992, p. 77):

Lord Pentland had talked about how drugs weaken the will, burn up the fine energies of the body, create imagination in the higher emotional center, and keep one from doing the work. Sometime, though, he said, they could show what the next step would be. "But one has to pay for it."
- (3) Rafael Lefort *The Teachers of Gurdjieff* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1973), p. 78.
- (4) G.I. Gurdjieff *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 134
- (5) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 33.
- (6) William Patterson "Gurdjieff & Money" www.gurdjieff-legacy.org/40articles/money.htm
- (7) Paul Beekman Taylor *Gurdjieff and Orage: Brothers in Elysium* (York Beach, Maine: Weiser Books, 2001), p. 147.
- (8) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 162.
- (9) John Bennett *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 232.
- (10) William Patterson *Voices in the Dark* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2000), p. 71.
- (11) Kenneth Walker *The Making of Man* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 114.
- (12) Trungpa even makes an allusion to Gurdjieff in describing the nature of conscious drinking in *The Heart of the Buddha* (Boston: Shambhala, 1991, p. 188):

Mr. Gurdjieff, a spiritual teacher who taught in Europe, spoke of the virtues of 'conscious drinking' and insisted that his students do conscious drinking together.

Conscious drinking is a real and obvious demonstration of mind over matter. It allows us to relate to the various stages of intoxication: we experience our expectations, the almost devilish delight when the effect begins to be felt, and the final breakdown into frivolity in which habitual boundaries begin to dissolve.

- (13) Chögyam Trungpa *The Heart of the Buddha* (Boston: Shambhala, 1991), p. 189.
- (14) James Moore *Gurdjieff: The Anatomy of a Myth* (Rockport, Massachusetts: Element Books, 1991), pp. 353-355.
- (15) William Patterson *Ladies of the Rope* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 1999), pp. 259-260.
- (16) Kenneth Walker, who did not usually drink, provides a vivid portrait of his personal experience consuming alcohol during the Toast of the Idiots ritual in *The Making of Man* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963, pp. 121-122):

The vodka was terribly powerful and soon my inner life and the outer room were engaged in unpleasant movements. I was forced to remind myself from time to time of *where* I was, and of *what* I was doing . . . *here* I was not allowed to go to sleep, but had to stay awake and to cling on to the one remaining point of steadiness which remained within me . . . At long last the toasts came to an end and coffee cups and packets of cigarettes appeared on the table. I felt much as a shipwrecked sailor must feel when, after being buffeted about in a turbulent sea and all but drowned, he suddenly discovers that he is still alive and within sight of land.

- (17) P.D. Ouspensky describes in *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & world, 1949, pp. 181-198) the complex process whereby the three foods enter the human organism (called the ‘three-story factory’) and are transformed into finer substances through the law of octaves.
- (18) Jasmin and Dushka Howarth *It’s Up To Ourselves* (New York: Gurdjieff Heritage Society, 2008), pp. 245-246.
- (19) Jasmin and Dushka Howarth *It’s Up To Ourselves* (New York: Gurdjieff Heritage Society, 2008), p. 245.
- (20) Thomas and Olga de Hartmann *Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff* (London: Arkana, 1992), p. 46.
- (21) Jasmin and Dushka Howarth *It’s Up To Ourselves* (New York: Gurdjieff Heritage Society, 2008), p. 246.
- (22) Kenneth Walker *Venture with Ideas* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1972), pp. 145-146.

- (23) Jasmin and Dushka Howarth *It's Up To Ourselves* (New York: Gurdjieff Heritage Society, 2008), p. 252.
- (24) Jasmin and Dushka Howarth *It's Up To Ourselves* (New York: Gurdjieff Heritage Society, 2008), p. 450.
- (25) Paul Beekman Taylor *Gurdjieff's America* (Lighthouse Editions, 2004), pp. 202-203.
- (26) William Welch *What Happened in Between* (New York: George Braziller, 1972), p. 124.
- (27) In some spiritual communities substance abuse has led to public scandals, disgrace and disillusion. In some cases, where the teacher was alcoholic and encouraged drinking, many students followed suit. With some teachers, addiction to alcohol or drugs is hidden, with others it is public and open. Clandestine alcohol and drug addiction is frequently combined with abuses of sexuality and power. Certain Buddhist and Hindu spiritual communities have even felt the need to start AA groups to deal with their addiction problems. Alcoholic and addicted teachers have led to the downfall of whole communities and caused major suffering in the lives of students caught in the culture of addiction. For an insightful discussion of this problem see Jack Kornfield's "The Emperor's New Clothes: Problems with Teachers" in *A Path with Heart* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993, pp. 254-271) and "The Dirty Laundry" in *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry* (New York: Bantam Books, 2001, pp. 139-157).
- (28) Bodhin Kjolhede "What's in the Mix?" *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* Fall, 1998, p. 82.
- (29) In his later years Gurdjieff seems to have relaxed his strict admonition that everyone at his table drink. Writing in *What Happened in Between* (New York: George Braziller, 1972, p. 123), William Welch reports that in 1948 during the Toasts to the Idiots ritual "some did not drink at all, and stories to the contrary notwithstanding, when someone who knew his capacity or had a true disinclination to alcohol declined to drink, he was never, in my experience, treated with anything but consideration by Gurdjieff."