

THE INNER CIRCLE OF HUMANITY¹

The source of Gurdjieff's teachings has never been conclusively established by either scholars or students of Gurdjieff. However, some have speculated that he contacted and learned from esoteric schools that were custodians of ancient spiritual teachings on the evolution of humanity. The term 'esoteric' is widely misunderstood, reflecting the Sufi aphorism: *'The secret protects itself.'* Author Max Gorman provides a useful definition of this elusive concept:

'Esoteric' means 'inner.' It comes from the Greek word 'esoterós.' From the developmental point of view, 'inner' means guidance, work, and growth related to inner perception. Inner also means hidden, not necessarily deliberately, but because of its very nature – being accessible only to the inner faculties, and, by virtue of such nature, out of sight of and thus inaccessible to, outer or exoteric perception. 'Exoteric' is derived from the Greek 'exoterós' meaning 'outer' and 'exos,' 'out.' Something esoteric is thus beyond the perception of the outer, veiled to its view, and in this sense, 'secret.' (1)

Gurdjieff spoke in general terms about esoteric schools directed by a circle of evolved human beings who have guided the spiritual development of humanity throughout history:

The supposition that such people have existed in the past, and that they decisively influenced human life in ways that ordinary people cannot understand, is the hypothesis that an 'Inner Circle' of humanity existed in the past . . . This tradition is common to most Sufi teachings and it was affirmed by Gurdjieff himself. He associates it with the idea of esoteric schools. He defined 'schools' as organizations that exist for the purpose of transmitting to the 'Outer Circle' – that is, ordinary people – the knowledge and powers that originate in the 'Inner Circle.' (2)

Gurdjieff's only explicit reference to an Inner Circle is his description of the 'Sarmoung Brotherhood' in *Meetings with Remarkable Men*. (3) Ostensibly located in Central Asia, the actual existence of the Sarmoung has been questioned by students and biographers of Gurdjieff and many regard his account as allegorical. (4) Nevertheless, it is a widely held belief among his students that Gurdjieff did make contact with and learned from *some* sort of esoteric school connected with the Inner Circle of Humanity.

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Esoteric Knowledge and Schools

According to esoteric tradition, a body of ancient knowledge of human spiritual development has existed since time immemorial, and has been transmitted through a chain of succession from initiate to initiate. (5)

The guardians and custodians of these ancient secret teachings hold that there are eternal universal truths which are the foundation of all religious and spiritual traditions. This trans-dimensional knowledge has been described as the “inner kernel or essence of spirituality,” “the science of human evolution and transformation” and the “river of knowledge from beyond the stars.” The source of this timeless esoteric tradition of mystical knowledge is mysterious and unknown. It is said to have ancient prehistoric roots originating from the most remote antiquity. Some of the historical manifestations of this ancient stream of transcendental wisdom have been provisionally identified by scholars and esotericists:

- Egyptian and Chaldean masters (Hermes and Zoroaster)
- Hindu Vedas and Upanishads
- Indigenous shamanic traditions
- Old Testament prophets (Abraham, Moses, Solomon, Noah, Elias and John the Baptist)
- Jewish mysticism and the Kabbalah
- Greek philosophers (Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, Hippocrates, Aristotle)
- Taoism (Lao-Tzu, Chuang-Tzu)
- Gautama Buddha and his School
- Jesus Christ, Essenes, Gnostics
- Mohammed the Prophet, Sufi saints (Rumi, ibn el-Arabi, El-Ghazali)
- Medieval alchemists (Avicenna, Roger Bacon, Raymond Lully)
- Christian mystics (St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, St. John of the Cross, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Teresa of Avila)
- Masonic and Rosicrucian teachings

Although the outer form or external shape of each historical manifestation of the perennial teaching is different, the inner essence is the same: “All authentic expressions of human spiritual aspiration may be seen as having a single source, and that the differences are in appearances only, imposed by cultural and local conditions.” (6) From this viewpoint the three great monotheistic traditions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, are all manifestations of the same primal religious impulse and the Torah, New Testament and Koran expressions of the same universal spiritual truths.

Gurdjieff taught his students that this body of wisdom or ‘Great Knowledge’ has been continuous and present throughout history, but has been frequently reformulated so as to be suitable for each time, each place and each community:

Great Knowledge, which has existed from the most ancient times, has never been lost, and knowledge is always the same. Only the form in which this knowledge was expressed and transmitted changed, depending on the place and the epoch . . . The form in which the Great Knowledge is expressed is barely comprehensible to subsequent generations and is mostly taken literally. In this way, the inner content becomes lost for most people. In the history of mankind, we see two parallel and independent lines of civilization: the esoteric and the exoteric. Invariably one of them overpowers the other and develops while the other fades. A period of esoteric civilization comes when there are favorable external conditions, political and otherwise. Then Knowledge, clothed in the form of a Teaching corresponding to the conditions of time and place, becomes widely spread. (7)

A number of important features of the Great Knowledge have been identified by scholars and researchers:

- It is a science or body of esoteric knowledge based on a number of immutable spiritual laws.
- It has been preserved and transmitted throughout history by a continuous stream of altruistic guardians chosen for their capacity, spiritual development and purity of intention.
- It is an organic whole with its own postulates, procedures and schemata. It is organized and prescribed to ensure the most positive spiritual influence on those receptive to the teaching.
- Its correct application to the needs of humanity is based on conscious design, which provides the methods and instruments that are effective in a given circumstance, following the dictum 'knowledge of the end creates the means.'
- Its manner of transmission must ensure its proper reception and comprehension with a minimum of distortion and corruption.
- It is transmitted by teachers who have completed the journey of spiritual self-realization and who are able to guide others along a similar path.
- It may be formulated in a manner devoid of any apparent spiritual content or appearance, effectively concealing its true nature from the uninitiated.

When asked why the Great Knowledge was not disseminated to as many people as possible, Gurdjieff replied that it is a misconception that higher knowledge is deliberately hidden or made inaccessible to those capable of assimilating it:

No one is concealing anything; there is no mystery whatever. But the acquisition or transmission of true knowledge demands great labor and great effort both of him who receives and of him who gives. And those who possess this knowledge are doing everything they can to transmit and communicate it to the greatest possible number of people, to facilitate people's approach to it and enable them to prepare themselves to receive the truth. But knowledge cannot be given by force to anyone. (8)

One of Gurdjieff's most controversial ideas was that knowledge has properties similar to a material substance. Knowledge, he claimed, can exist in different strengths and solutions, from the very weak to the very strong. It can be collected, preserved and shared. At certain times it may be plentiful, and at other times scarce. Gurdjieff believed that although efforts are made to disseminate esoteric knowledge as broadly as possible, it is more desirable to limit rather than expand the number of people having access to it.

Although this approach would seemingly deny knowledge to some so that others can receive a greater share, Gurdjieff was steadfast in his defense of this principle: "There is nothing unjust in this, because those who receive knowledge take nothing that belongs to others, deprive others of nothing; they take only what others have rejected as useless, and what would in any case be lost if they did not take it." (9)

Gurdjieff believed that higher knowledge cannot become common property because the vast majority of people either ignore it, reject it or are unable to receive it properly. Therefore, knowledge of humanity's developmental possibilities is entrusted to initiates who have the wisdom to collect, preserve and transmit the knowledge at appropriate times in human history.

The means by which higher knowledge is transmitted are complex and multi-faceted. Historical examples include the Mysteries of ancient Egypt and Greece, the philosophical schools of Plato and Socrates, and traditional religious teachings. Other means include myths, legends, teaching stories, literature, rituals and ceremonies. Various forms of sacred art have also been employed, among them dance, music, poetry, sculpture, drama and architecture.

In most cases, the vehicles that transmit higher knowledge are consciously designed products of esoteric schools. These schools transmit spiritual knowledge according to a precise plan "to a very limited number of people simultaneously [through] the observance of a whole series of definite conditions, without which knowledge cannot be transmitted *correctly*." (10)

According to Jeanne de Salzmann, a senior student of Gurdjieff, esoteric schools create the conditions for the development of consciousness and being. The knowledge embedded in these schools is "a science that shows what we are and our potential capacity, what needs to be developed. It is a real understanding of the energies in us, of their relation in ourselves and with everything around us." (11):

Esoteric knowledge is the science of man's relation with God and the universe. Its transmission requires an engagement with others – so-called “schools” – because a certain energy can only be produced in conditions where people work together. Schools may differ in their knowledge and their approach – their way – but they have the same aim in common: to see reality. The knowledge is passed on theoretically and through direct experience, that is, by living a drama which follows the particular way of the school. This creates a relation, the link without which it would not be possible to live in two worlds of different levels at the same time. (12)

The knowledge taught in esoteric schools is transformative in nature and derived from contact with higher levels of spiritual reality. P.D. Ouspensky believed that an esoteric school could exist on a level beyond the physical dimension: “Sometimes it seemed to me that true schools could only exist on another plane and that we could approach them only when in special states of consciousness.” (13) Max Gorman writes:

Esoteric knowledge can be regarded as of two kinds. Firstly, there is the higher or inner cosmic knowledge possessed by those beings who have reached the deepest levels of consciousness possible to mankind. These people are the inner or esoteric Circle of Humanity. They will obviously possess knowledge of the inner nature and destiny of the Universe related to, and necessary for, their special role in it, and which is an attribute of their level of being. It will be knowledge of the Design and the Direction of the universe, its Purpose and the path to that Purpose . . . Clearly knowledge of such a kind, of the means of raising man's very being beyond its normal level, can only itself originate from a higher level, from which it is sent down like a ladder for ordinary humanity to recognize, grasp and mount. It should be obvious that such help from a higher level of intelligence and surveillance is essential to the inner evolution of mankind. It is expressed in the creation, maintenance and direction of esoteric or evolutionary schools. And this kind of direction can only be given by those who are conscious of the wide and deep cosmic content of the activity. There must be an organic connection and continuum between inner cosmic knowledge and the work of schools. For the Universe is One. (14)

Rodney Collin, a student of P.D. Ouspensky, studied the history of esoteric schools and identified some of their salient characteristics:

- The primary purpose of these schools is the regeneration of individual human beings through increased consciousness and purification of being. The secondary purpose is to spread objective understanding of cosmological laws and human spiritual possibilities throughout humanity.
- Esoteric schools may be hidden or openly visible according to the conditions of ‘time, place and people’: “At most favourable times . . . though the inner school will still be hidden and concentrated, its preparatory schools and its external work

or effect may reach large proportions and even fundamentally affect the course of visible history.” (15)

- The inner workings of these schools are largely invisible to ordinary humanity and cannot be readily ascertained by ordinary means of investigation: “What true schools are like, how they are organized, what are their rules and methods, how suitable pupils or raw material are drawn out of the general run of life, we do not know. Evidently one of their chief requirements is secrecy and anonymity.” (16)
- Schools may engage in some external expression of their work such as the construction of temples or churches, the writing of spiritual literature or poetry, the composition of sacred music and even scientific research. (17)
- Schools may transmit their knowledge in encoded ways through enciphered language or the symbolism of special sculptures or buildings.
- The activities of schools follow a pattern in harmony with cosmic planetary cycles. When these influences are favourable the work of inner regeneration and outer expression in the world proceed more productively.
- Often esoteric schools disseminate their knowledge to the outside world through individuals who are sympathetic to and influenced by a school’s inner circle, but who are outsiders to the school, like some professional scientists or writers.
- When the work of an esoteric school is finished traces of its existence may remain. An imitation or counterfeit school may then form around the vestiges of a formerly vibrant school. (18)

The Inner Circle of Humanity

According to tradition, the responsibility for the evolution of human consciousness lies with an ‘inner circle of humanity’ who provide developmental influences to the ‘outer circle’ of ordinary, undeveloped humanity. In the words of Gurdjieff: “the life of humanity to which we belong is governed more than we know by influences proceeding from the inner circle of humanity whose existence and significance the vast majority of people do not suspect.” (19)

The belief that a body of ancient esoteric wisdom is secretly being guarded and transmitted by an Inner Circle of highly evolved human beings can be traced throughout the course of human history:

Tradition asserts that for thousands of years there has been an “Inner Circle of Humanity” capable of thinking in terms of millennia and possessing knowledge and powers of a high order. Its members intervene

from time to time in human affairs. They do this, not as leaders or teachers of mankind, but unobtrusively by introducing certain ideas and techniques . . . This inner circle, it is claimed, concentrates its activities in those areas and at those times when the situation is critical for mankind. (20)

Some scholars have speculated that the founders of many of the world's major religions, such as Zoroaster, Moses, Jesus and Mohammed, made contact with esoteric schools and teachers connected with the inner circle of humanity. In a similar vein, Gurdjieff spoke of 'messengers from above' who were sent to perform specific spiritual tasks for a given community at a given time:

Gurdjieff's *Beelzebub's Tales* gives a special place to a number of holy figures, saints, prophets and messengers – all of whom have been sent with a particular teaching for their own specific context. Similar to an Islamic view, the prophets of Judaism and Christianity are recognized as authentic messengers or prophets sent with revelations from the same divine source, each to their own communities. Moreover, the Qur'an recognizes the books of Judaism, the Torah and Psalms, the books of Christianity and the Gospels, at least in their initial creation, as authentic teachings brought by genuine messengers. (21)

John G. Bennett has proposed a "strong" and "weak" version of the hypothesis of an Inner Circle of Humanity possessing knowledge and powers far beyond the level of ordinary humans. While the "strong" view posits a hierarchy of all-powerful super-humans guiding the evolutionary development of humanity, the "weak" view is much more modest, "ranging from simple confidence that there are good and wise people who are working in some kind of concert for the welfare of mankind, to belief in a traditional teaching transmitted by people who have attained a higher level of being by their own effort, and who use their knowledge and powers to the extent that world conditions permit." (22)

Gurdjieff hinted at the power of this influence in a talk to his Russian students: "*Two hundred conscious people*, if they existed and if they found it necessary and legitimate, could change the whole of life on the earth." (23)

In discussing the structure of the Inner Circle, Gurdjieff divided humanity into groups of progressively more spiritually developed human beings, which have been represented graphically as concentric circles emanating from a core. The outer circle represents ordinary humans, described as the region of the 'confusion of tongues' or lack of understanding. The inner three (exoteric, mesoteric, esoteric) constitute three levels of spiritually developed human beings. There are four gates on the circumference of the exoteric circle through which those from the outer, undeveloped circle could pass to enter the inner circles. The four gates correspond to the traditional ways of the *fakir* (body), *monk* (emotions), *yogi* (mind) and the *fourth way* (balanced development).

Gurdjieff provided a very precise description of the innermost or esoteric circle:

This circle consists of people who have attained the highest development possible for man, each one of whom possesses individuality in the fullest degree, that is to say, an indivisible 'I,' all forms of consciousness possible for man, full control over these states of consciousness, the whole of knowledge possible for man, and a free and independent will. They cannot perform actions opposed to their understanding or have an understanding which is not expressed by their actions. At the same time there can be no discord among them, no differences of understanding. Therefore, their activity is entirely coordinated and leads to one common aim without any kind of compulsion because it is based upon a common and identical understanding. (24)

The two adjacent circles represent successively lower levels of spiritual development relative to the esoteric circle. Members of the mesoteric, or middle, circle possess qualities and understanding similar to members of the esoteric circle, but their spiritual knowledge is of a more theoretical nature, and is not completely expressed in their actions. Those belonging to the exoteric or outer circle have spiritual knowledge which is still more abstract and philosophical than the previous circle.

The three circles of developed humanity are responsible for the creation of esoteric schools and the transmission of higher influences into the world. Gurdjieff described how these higher influences are distinct from ordinary influences on human life:

The first kind are influences created *in life itself* or by life itself. Influences of race, nation, country, climate, family, education, society, profession, manners and customs, wealth, poverty, current ideas, and so on. The second kind are influences created *outside this life*, influences of the inner circle, or esoteric influences – influences, that is, created under different laws, although also on the earth. These influences differ from the former, first of all in being *conscious* in their origin. This means that they have been created consciously by conscious men for a definite purpose. Influences of this kind are usually embodied in the form of religious systems and teachings, philosophical doctrines, works of art, and so on. (25)

Although influences emanating from the inner circle are conscious in origin, many begin to act mechanically and randomly when they enter the realm of everyday life. However, certain conscious influences retain the power to lead receptive individuals to the realization of the existence of a guiding spiritual element. The ability to discriminate these conscious influences from mundane ones leads to the formation in a human being of what Gurdjieff called a 'magnetic center.' Allowed to develop sufficiently, a person's magnetic center will influence them to change their spiritual path or orientation and seek out further esoteric knowledge.

The search begins with finding a spiritual teacher who is in direct contact with the Inner Circle of Humanity. Gurdjieff described this critical step as the ‘first threshold’ and the beginning of the ‘stairway.’ As the seeker ascends the stairway with the help of a guide, he or she eventually reaches the ‘way’ or path of higher development.

Gurdjieff stressed that a teacher is necessary to guide the aspirant during the initial preparatory stages of spiritual development. Once the seeker has completely ascended the ‘stairway,’ he or she is capable of completing the spiritual journey alone and of entering the ranks of the Inner Circle. But, there are many challenges and obstacles that must be overcome in climbing the stairway and the aid of a teacher is essential.

Gurdjieff precisely delineated the stages of spiritual development: ‘life’ – ‘conscious influences’ – ‘magnetic center’ – ‘stairway and teacher’ – ‘way’ – ‘inner circle of humanity’ – ‘Spirit.’ These seven stages constitute a map describing the sequence of development and the work that is required at each stage. Some have speculated that this model was passed on to Gurdjieff, in part or in whole, by his teachers or contacts in the Inner Circle.

The Fourth Way

Gurdjieff called the esoteric teaching that he brought to the West ‘the Fourth Way.’ He distinguished the Fourth Way from the three traditional paths of spiritual development, which he termed the ways of the *fakir*, the *monk* and the *yogi*. The *fakir* is concerned with mastery of the body, the *monk* mastery of the emotions and the *yogi* mastery of the mind. Each way has its own theories, techniques and approaches to spiritual development: “In the Way of the Fakir by conquering physical suffering, in the way of the Monk by creating religious emotion, and in the way of the Yogi by acquiring knowledge and working on consciousness.” (26) The Fourth Way, however, is qualitatively different, in its comprehensive approach and its rejection of superfluous elements that are based on tradition and imitation. (27) Gurdjieff sometimes referred to the Fourth Way as the ‘Way of the Sly Man.’ The sly or cunning spiritual seeker has obtained a certain knowledge or learned a secret which speeds up work on the way.

The Fourth way is said to have ancient roots:

In fact, the Fourth Way emerged from the mists of pre-history in the ancient civilizations of Egypt and India and has been known in the East by many other names, such as the ‘Way of Understanding’ and the ‘Way of the Householder.’ It has no single founder nor any traditional date nor place of origin. For millennia, in one form or another, it has provided the path to a spiritual enlightenment without the need to renounce the world – quite the contrary, for it insists that a normal life in the world, entailing the whole gamut of experience and challenge, is for many people the best and most fertile ground from which such an enlightenment, or ‘Self-realization,’ can spring most naturally and easily. (28)

The Fourth Way differs qualitatively from traditional spiritual paths, as it calls for conscious work rather than blind obedience. “The Fourth Way is to be lived, experienced, not simply thought or believed. The ideas brought by Gurdjieff contain knowledge from a higher level that we must live in order to understand.” (29) Jeanne de Salzmann:

The Fourth Way is a way of understanding. The magnetic center which leads one to a group following the Fourth Way is different from that which leads toward a monastery, a school of yoga or an ashram. This way demands another kind of initiative. It demands a broad mind and discernment, that is, the ability to distinguish the mechanical from the conscious in oneself. It requires the awakening of another intelligence. What can be attained does not depend on obedience. The knowledge that results is proportional to the state of awakening, of understanding. The Fourth Way begins from the idea of different levels of being. But what is being? The level of being is determined by what enters into one’s Presence at a given moment, that is, the number of centers which participate and the conscious relation between them. The level of being determines everything in our lives, including our understanding. My being today is not unified. It is dispersed, and therefore without consciousness. Can being change? Can my being become different from what it is today? This is where the idea of evolution, of work, begins. The first step is to recognize that through a certain effort I can live a moment of more complete Presence. Then I will see that the slightest difference in the level of being opens new possibilities to know and to act . . . The demand to live the teaching implies respect for forms that have been given, but without being afraid to modify them when the need is indicated by sound understanding. It also calls for a certain attitude toward traditional teachings. We should not allow false complacency to close our minds to other ways. Indeed, we can find many principles and practices in common. But comparison can be useful, only after we have understood the way that has been transmitted to us. We have to guard against judging with our mind before we have allowed our intuition, which is at the heart of the experience, to bring us knowledge. Studying general themes is one thing, but following steps on another way is very different, especially experimenting with practices of other teachings. (30)

The Fourth Way is based on a number of important principles (31):

- The Fourth Way seeks a balanced and harmonious development of the body, emotions and intellect. Unlike the traditional ways which focus on the mastery of one function at a time, the Fourth Way aims at acquiring parallel control of the bodily, emotional and intellectual functions.
- Each of the three traditional ways makes an artificial division between spiritual life and secular life, whereas the Fourth Way integrates the two in the process of spiritual development. The seeker does not avoid or withdraw from life, but strives instead to ‘be in the world but not of it’: “On the fourth way it is possible to

work and to follow this way while remaining in the usual conditions of life, continuing to do the usual work, preserving former relations with people, and without renouncing or giving up anything.” (32)

- The Fourth Way has the fundamental requirement that all spiritual work must be grounded in understanding rather than pure faith:

A man must do nothing that he does not understand, except as an experiment under the supervision and direction of his teacher. The more a man understands what he is doing, the greater will be the results of his efforts. The results of work are in proportion to the consciousness of the work. No ‘faith’ is required on the fourth way; on the contrary a man must satisfy himself of the truth of what he is told. (33)

- The methods of work in the Fourth Way are individualized and tailored to the specific needs, abilities and potential of each student. The Fourth Way concentrates on what is essential for each individual student’s spiritual development and eliminates anything that lacks meaning or relevance for the student.
- An essential condition of the Fourth Way is that students, in order to progress or ‘ascend the stairway,’ are required to help others reach the same level of development as themselves:

On the fourth way there is not *one* teacher. Whoever is the elder, he is the teacher. And as the teacher is indispensable to the pupil, so also is the pupil indispensable to the teacher . . . *No one can ascend onto a higher step until he places another man in his own place.* What a man has received he must immediately give back; only then can he receive more. (34)

- The purpose of a Fourth Way school is “the transmission to *prepared people* of knowledge emanating from higher mind. Such a school requires work along three lines – work on oneself, work with and for other people in the group, and work for the school as a whole in its relations with the people of the world around.” (35)
- The three traditional paths are tied to permanent and recognizable forms which have existed almost without change for countless centuries. The Fourth Way is never permanent and has no fixed forms, institutions or practices. It appears and disappears, changes and evolves as is suitable and necessary for the needs and conditions of the time.
- A Fourth Way school exists to achieve conscious work directed towards a specific aim or undertaking. Once the aim has been achieved the school “disappears from the given place, disappears in its given form, continuing perhaps in another place in another form . . . [These schools] never exist by themselves as schools for the purpose of education and instruction.” (36) When the task of a Fourth Way school

is completed the inner dynamic is withdrawn and only the outer shell remains. Yet, the outer form may continue to exist for decades, even centuries.

Gurdjieff adapted his Fourth Way teachings specifically for a Western audience in the twentieth century. One of the ways the Inner Circle of Humanity is said to operate is through the transmission of Fourth Way teachings suitable for the requirements of ‘time, place and people.’ With the goal of guiding seekers from the outer circle of undeveloped humanity to the Inner Circle of conscious humanity, the Fourth Way uses language, form and alternating levels of activity and quiescence, always responding to the needs of a population at a given place and time in history. (37)

In her seminal book *The Reality of Being*, Jeanne de Salzmann enunciates the fundamental developmental principles of the Fourth Way:

The science underlying the Fourth Way is ancient, although it has been forgotten. It is a science that studies man not just as he is but as he can become. It regards man as having a possibility of evolving, and studies the facts, the principles and the laws of this evolution. This is an evolution of certain qualities that cannot develop by themselves. It cannot be mechanical. This evolution calls for conscious effort and for seeing. Knowledge is knowledge of the whole. Yet we can only receive it in fragments. Afterward we must connect them ourselves in order to find their place in an understanding of the whole. The Fourth Way is to be lived. In the work to be present I need first to find each day a certain quality of coming back to myself. Then I must become able to observe my identification with the life force and find a place in myself in which at certain moments my attention can hold itself between the two. For this, it is necessary to work with others. (38)

Commentary

In 1923, scholar Denis Saurat was interviewing Gurdjieff and asked why he came to Europe to teach:

I want to add the mystical spirit of the East to the scientific spirit of the West. The Oriental spirit is right but only in its trends and general ideas. The Western spirit is right in its methods and techniques . . . I want to create a type of sage who will unite the spirit of the East with Western techniques. (39)

Gurdjieff fulfilled his mission by introducing the Fourth Way to the West with an undeniable influence and impact. His System has been called extraordinary by students and scholars alike. P.D. Ouspensky believed that Gurdjieff’s esoteric ideas originated from a source on a qualitatively different level of spiritual development from ordinary humanity. And Denis Saurat wrote that Gurdjieff’s teaching “could not be of terrestrial

origin. Either Gurdjieff had revelations vouchsafed only to prophets or he had access to a school on a supernatural level.” (40)

While some assume that Gurdjieff created his own original teaching by transforming material from traditional sources, Gurdjieff never claimed to have originated his System. (41) He admitted to his students that he had teachers and implied that he had been sent by them to the West to fulfill a teaching mission. According to John Bennett, Gurdjieff spoke of esoteric schools in the East whom he consulted, from whom he sought help, and to whom he sent specially prepared pupils. Sufi sources also believe that Gurdjieff was trained and sent to the West by the ‘Guardians of the Tradition’ to perform a specific task. (42)

John G. Bennett, after thorough study of Gurdjieff’s mission in the West, concluded that he contacted and maintained communication with representatives of the Inner Circle of Humanity:

I have distinguished between those who look at Gurdjieff the man and treat his “system” as no more than the expression of his genius, and those who look at the “system” and treat Gurdjieff as no more than a link in the chain of transmission. These latter are also inclined to suspect that the link broke at some point and left us with no contact with the source. I have rejected both these interpretations in favour of the hypothesis that Gurdjieff was in contact with a source that . . . was a brotherhood of people with the capacity to survey the world on a great time scale. (43)

Many of Gurdjieff’s students believe that during the course of his travels in the East he made contact with the Inner Circle of Humanity, or Masters of Wisdom, and derived his teachings from the ancient primordial current of esoteric knowledge that is the root or source of all known spiritual traditions: “He must have gone beyond the surface forms to the very core of these teachings and made them authentically his own.” (44)

On the other hand, P.D. Ouspensky, although convinced that Gurdjieff’s teaching originated from a “Great Source,” believed that Gurdjieff’s contact with this source was limited. The degree to which Gurdjieff was a representative of the Inner Circle of Humanity is an issue that continues to be debated:

Some people say that he was never admitted to the innermost groups and was obliged to put together, as best he could, fragments collected from a variety of sources. Others believe that he was accepted as a missionary or messenger to prepare the way for a more decisive entry of the guardians of the tradition into the life of the West. (45)

Gurdjieff acknowledged that he had teachers and had studied in Eastern esoteric schools, although never directly identifying either by name or tradition. Although some of Gurdjieff’s students and independent scholars believe that he contacted an esoteric school guided by initiates of the Inner Circle of Humanity who inspired and directed his teaching

enterprise, the identity of these guardians of esoteric knowledge has never been ascertained, and their nature and mission remains a mystery.

NOTES

- (1) Max Gorman *Stairway to the Stars: Sufism, Gurdjieff and the Inner Tradition of Mankind* (London: Aeon Books, 2010), p. 19.
- (2) John G. Bennett *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 51.
- (3) The nature and practices of the Sarmoun Brotherhood are described by Dr. Yannis Toussulis in *Sufism and the Way of Blame* (Wheaton, Illinois: Quest Books, 2010, pp. 45-46):

In Egypt and Armenia, Gurdjieff had found maps that pointed to the survival of the “Sarmoung Brotherhood,” a group comprised of elite members of the world’s religions. As a long-standing tradition, the school was founded at the beginnings of recorded history in Babylonia. According to Gurdjieff, the Sarmoung had preserved a “scientific method” of spiritual transformation that transcends all religious differences. The “method” of the Sarmoung was not haphazard. Like other sciences, this sacred technology was rigorous and precise, and it could be tested and verified through direct experience . . . In their monastery the Sarmoung had employed movements that transformed the subtle “centers” of each individual. These centers were coordinated, then integrated, then aligned with a “Higher Reality.” Some (not all) of these movements were drawn from a variety of exercises performed by various dervish orders . . . Unlike the world’s religions, which have been divisive, the Brotherhood offered a method that unified humanity in a common cause: the transformation of human beings into self-responsible agents who could actually *perceive* reality or truth more directly.

- (4) Anthony Storr in *Feet of Clay* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996, p. 24) writes:

Gurdjieff claimed to have learned much from a three-months stay in ‘the chief Sarmoung monastery,’ belonging to a brotherhood which he said taught him secret wisdom derived from traditions dating back to 2500 B.C., including physical techniques for self-transformation, and sacred dances. Gurdjieff was careful never to be specific about the exact location of these teachers of secret knowledge, although he later stated that he had a teacher from whom he was never separated, and with whom he constantly communicated, presumably telepathically. The Sarmoung monastery cannot be identified and even disciples of Gurdjieff regard his account of it as an allegory rather than literal truth.

- (5) P.D. Ouspensky, even before meeting Gurdjieff, was convinced of the existence of these esoteric schools which form the bridge connecting ordinary humanity to a higher order of being (Kenneth Walker *A Study of Gurdjieff's Teaching* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), p. 190):

According to tradition, the following historical personages came from esoteric schools: Moses, Gautama Buddha, John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, Pythagoras, Socrates and Plato, as well as the more mythical Orpheus, Hermes Trismegistus, Krishna and Rama. Ouspensky also includes in his list of school products the builders of the Pyramids and Sphinx, a few of the old alchemists, the priests of the Egyptian and Greek Mysteries, the architects of the Gothic Cathedrals built in the Middle Ages, and the founders of certain Orders of Sufis and Dervishes.

- (6) Idries Shah, *A Perfumed Scorpion* (London: Octagon Press, 1984), p. 160.
- (7) G.I. Gurdjieff *Views from the Real World: Early Talks of Gurdjieff* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1973), pp. 210-211.
- (8) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 39.
- (9) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 38.
- (10) P.D. Ouspensky *The Fourth Way* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), p. 9.
- (11) Jeanne de Salzmann *The Reality of Being* (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), p. 2.
- (12) Jeanne de Salzmann *The Reality of Being* (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), p. 2.
- (13) Gerald de Symons Beckwith *Ouspensky's Fourth Way* (Oxford: Starnine Media & Publishing, 2015), pp. 15-16.
- (14) Max Gorman *Stairway to the Stars: Sufism, Gurdjieff and the Inner Tradition of Mankind* (London: Aeon Books, 2010), pp. 20-21.
- (15) Rodney Collin *The Theory of Celestial Influence* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1973), p. 314.
- (16) Rodney Collin *The Theory of Celestial Influence* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1973), p. 315.
- (17) The influence on European civilization of the esoteric school responsible for the building of the Gothic Cathedrals is described by Rodney Collin in *The Theory of Celestial Influence* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1973, p. 317):

About the effects of those schools which at the beginning of the 12th century designed the Gothic Cathedrals and remodeled mediaeval society and custom from top to bottom, we have perhaps most material of all. Everywhere we see their influence: in architecture, music, art, in the ritual of the church, in the spread of political peace, in the right organization of castes and guilds, even in a popular wisdom of legends and proverbs. Upon the stability so created, Europe continued to exist into living memory. Hardly any other esoteric current in history created such profound and lasting effect.

- (18) Idries Shah describes the deviation of esoteric schools in *Learning How to Learn* (London: Octagon Press, 1983, p. 71.):

Many religious, mystical and other formulations are, up to a point, shrines for the relics of a completely or partially successful attempt to present and make available to various individuals and communities means for acquiring [higher] knowledge. Like almost everything on earth, they are subject to deterioration or fossilization. They become both museums and exhibits, at one and the same time . . . What appears to some people as the sum total of the human heritage of philosophy, metaphysics or even magical thinking can also be viewed as heavily burdened with the wreckage or misinterpretation (through selective choice) of formulations previously operated by coherent Schools.

- (19) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 310.
- (20) Ernest Scott *The People of the Secret* (London: Octagon Press, 1983), p. 260.
- (21) Michael Pittman *Classical Spirituality in Contemporary America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 95.
- (22) John G. Bennett *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 53.
- (23) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 310.
- (24) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 310.
- (25) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 199.
- (26) P.D. Ouspensky *The Fourth Way* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), p. 99.

- (27) William Patterson develops this idea in *Struggle of the Magicians* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communication, 1996, pp. 26-27):

The fourth way differs from the other ways in many important and substantial respects, not all of which lend themselves to words. The fourth way does not separate work, for example, on body, emotions and mind, but works on them simultaneously. Furthermore, the pupil is not required to give up anything. He must not withdraw from life but, on the contrary, stay in life and learn to use it for his own development . . . The conditions of his life, the uncertainties, the shocks and suffering . . . are used to come to real life. The principal demand of the fourth way is for understanding. For, the greater a man's understanding of what he does, the greater the results. It is practical, immediate, and works with and through ordinary life. Therefore, in contrast to the traditional three ways, the work of the fourth way can be more effective, more efficient.

- (28) Gerald de Symons Beckwith *Ouspensky's Fourth Way* (Oxford: Starnine Media & Publishing, 2015), p. 1.
- (29) Jeanne de Salzmann *The Reality of Being* (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), p. 180.
- (30) Jeanne de Salzmann *The Reality of Being* (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), pp. 179-181.
- (31) In *Ouspensky's Fourth Way* (Oxford: Starnine Media Publishing, 2015, pp. 3-4) Gerald de Symons Beckwith provides a succinct description of how the fundamental principles of the Fourth Way distinguish it from other, more traditional, spiritual paths:

The Fourth Way is a 'whole person' approach, providing wisdom and enlightenment for 'householders,' ordinary people fully engaged in the hurly-burly of modern life. For many, life inevitably presents vital questions that can seem unanswerable and for such people the Way has always been available, its discovery dictated only by the depth of the need for answers. On this Way, the faculties of 'head, heart and hand' are regarded equally and are addressed simultaneously. All the practices and disciplines are progressively and voluntarily self-imposed and only undertaken after it has been understood why they are necessary and what can be expected to result from them. Understanding comes first and then gives rise to action – this is the first principle of the Way. We must never simply believe what we are told without first proving the truth of it to ourselves in our own experience . . . The hallmark of this Way is that it conveys a self-transcendent knowledge. It shows that we ourselves are self-transcendent beings, and, most importantly, it leads to the understanding that Self-realization is not a liberation *of* the person but a liberation *from* the person. Ultimately, this knowledge arises from the source of Consciousness itself and presents a complete and unified cosmology

and psychology that orients us to find our true place in the universe, demonstrating that the whole of Creation is produced and sustained by one single Consciousness – that which we intrinsically and eternally are ourselves.

- (32) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), pp. 48-49.
- (33) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 49.
- (34) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), pp. 203-204.
- (35) Gerald de Symons Beckwith *Ouspensky's Fourth Way* (Oxford: Starnine Media & Publishing, 2015), p. 61.
- (36) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 312.
- (37) This view is articulated by Frank Sinclair in *Of the Life Aligned* (U.S.A.: Xlibris, 2009, pp. 97-98):

When Gurdjieff came to the West, most if not all traditional understandings had been forgotten . . . The sense of multidimensional reality and of the sacred and the spiritual were lost. Gurdjieff brought back to the West the lost sense of the sacred. He used a new language because he felt that the so-called traditional ways had been so debased. He brought his teaching to the West to challenge the automatic and habitual thought of modern man. Again, his is an esoteric understanding and not for everybody. It is for those who really want to know.

- (38) Jeanne de Salzmann *The Reality of Being* (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), p. 23.
- (39) Louis Pauwels *Gurdjieff* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1975), p. 177.
- (40) John G. Bennett *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 82.
- (41) Some students of Gurdjieff have wondered whether he merely combined elements from the many spiritual traditions he encountered during his years of travel in the East to forge a new synthesis which he termed the 'Fourth Way.' John G. Bennett speculates along these lines in *Gurdjieff: A Very Great Enigma* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1963, p. 2):

If Gurdjieff was no more than a syncretist, a reformer who put together fragments from various well-known traditions or even secret traditions that he managed to unearth in the course of his search, then he would occupy one place. If, on the other hand, there is something wholly original, which cannot be referred back to any earlier known or secret tradition, then he occupies quite a different place. Herein lies the second enigma of Gurdjieff; which of these two places does he occupy? Was he just a clever man who was able to travel and search widely, to discover many things, to read a great deal, having access to sources in many different languages, and out of all the material so collected, to construct something?

(42) Rafael Lefort *The Teachers of Gurdjieff* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1973), p. 56.

(43) John G. Bennett *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 262-263.

(44) Frank Sinclair *Of the Life Aligned* (U.S.A.: Xlibris, 2009), p. 96.

(45) John G. Bennett *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 56.