

## **NEGATIVE EFFECTS ON STUDENTS<sup>1</sup>**

The methods and techniques employed by Gurdjieff in his teaching, especially the difficult physical and emotional demands he made on his students, adversely affected some of them. There are accounts of students experiencing psychological breakdown or the dissolution of their marriage. Gurdjieff was even accused of contributing to the suicide of certain students, although a causal connection was never ultimately proven.

Gurdjieff's methods and behaviour throughout the course of his career often aroused doubt even in his most dedicated students. Early in their relationship P.D. Ouspensky expressed reservations about Gurdjieff as a teacher. His doubts grew over the years until finally, in 1924, Ouspensky formally broke off all relations with Gurdjieff. Many other students left the Work, some voluntarily and others at Gurdjieff's instigation. In the years following his serious automobile accident in 1924, Gurdjieff deliberately applied pressure to his most trusted and skilled students, driving many of them away, including Thomas and Olga de Hartmann, Alexander de Salzman and A.R. Orage.

Gurdjieff's motives for alienating his followers have been food for speculation in Work circles for many decades. The accounts of his closest students and research by independent scholars suggest several possible explanations for Gurdjieff's puzzling conduct: it was a means to force pupils to shed their dependence on him; he was creating conditions to assist his own spiritual development; it assisted his mission to transmit esoteric wisdom to the West. Although no clear answers are forthcoming, there is evidence to suggest that much of his behaviour, though difficult for many to understand in the moment, was consciously calculated to facilitate his task to bring an ancient Fourth Way teaching to the contemporary world.

### **Adverse Consequences of Gurdjieff's Methods**

In the early 1950s, French writer Louis Pauwels published an article and book which criticized Gurdjieff's teaching methods and exposed their adverse effects on many of his pupils. Pauwels' publications were roundly condemned by the Gurdjieff establishment and many of his most serious accusations were subsequently refuted. However, a number of other reports exist documenting the negative effects of Gurdjieff's methods which do appear credible.

In his biography of Gurdjieff, James Webb raises serious concerns about Gurdjieff's unconventional methods of working with students:

In administering his "shocks," he could often be brutally harsh – and sometimes he overstepped his limits. Even if we admit the validity of his objectives, it must also be admitted that in a number of cases

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<sup>1</sup> Updated 2017/04/21

Gurdjieff's methods ended in tragedy. Either he made a false assessment of a particular pupil, or he was guilty of criminal negligence toward him. He was playing with fire and the game in which he invited his pupils to take part was a dangerous one. (1)

As early as 1922, reports circulated in the press that Gurdjieff was a "black magician" who hypnotized his students and caused them irreparable harm. The most sensational stories were more imagination than fact, but there is evidence from more credible sources that some of Gurdjieff's followers experienced serious psychological damage. John Bennett was a student at Gurdjieff's Institute at the Prieuré in Fontainebleau in 1923, and at the time witnessed an extraordinary state of tension there: "Some people went mad. There were even suicides. Many gave up in despair." (2) In 1948, Bennett returned to work with Gurdjieff in Paris after an absence of more than twenty years. Again, the atmosphere surrounding Gurdjieff was charged and intense, with the effect being too powerful for many students. Bennett reports that several pupils were so shattered by their experiences with Gurdjieff that they required treatment in mental institutions.

Central to Gurdjieff's teaching approach was his belief that the path of spiritual transformation was more important than any human relationship. He often put intense pressure on couples and forced them to make choices that placed them in conflict with each other. Breakups of partnerships and marriages among his students became commonplace.

In *Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff*, Thomas and Olga de Hartmann write poignantly of their deep love for each other and the stress created by Gurdjieff on their marriage. They reveal that despite emotional demands made by Gurdjieff that were so intense they felt like leaving, they remained with him because of the great value of his spiritual work with them. John Bennett has also written of the tremendous pressure he felt from Gurdjieff's interference in Bennett's relationship with his future wife.

Perhaps most extreme was Gurdjieff's negative influence on the relationship between Jessie and A.R. Orage. A.R. Orage conducted groups for Gurdjieff in New York and was a frequent visitor to the Prieuré. Gurdjieff never approved of A.R.'s wife Jessie and resented her influence over A.R., whom Gurdjieff called his "super-idiot." Gurdjieff's interference resulted in numerous quarrels between the two and tested their commitment both to their marriage and to Gurdjieff's teaching. By the late 1920s, the relationship between the Orages and their teacher had deteriorated irreparably:

Gurdjieff grew increasingly impossible, and the final straw was a terrifying experience when the couple were leaving Paris for New York in February 1929. Gurdjieff transfixed Jessie Orage with his gaze. He seemed to immobilize her, and she could not breathe; for a moment she was convinced that he was going to make her lose consciousness altogether. Then he spoke: "If you keep my super-idiot from coming back to me, you burn in boiling oil." (3)

This incident marked a turning point for the Orages. They left France and never returned to the Prieuré. A few years later, A.R. Orage broke off his relationship with Gurdjieff and did not see him again for the rest of his life.

By far the most serious allegation against Gurdjieff is that he directly contributed to the suicide of certain followers. Biographer James Webb investigated this accusation thoroughly. The first case of suicide involved a British diplomat who studied at the Prieuré in 1924. The accounts of his fellow students from this time period indicate that he was clearly distraught and in the midst of a psychological or spiritual crisis. Shortly after his last visit to the Prieuré in 1925 he was posted to the Middle East. He shot himself two days after his arrival. In his analysis of this case, Webb posits that this individual had a pre-existing psychological imbalance, which cast doubt on the claim that Gurdjieff “caused” his death: “Gurdjieff’s teaching cannot be shown to have played any specific part in this suicide; and Gurdjieff might merely have been one ingredient in a personal crisis whose main constituents were quite different.” (4)

A second suicide linked to Gurdjieff occurred in 1927. A former dancer with the Paris Opéra who was interested in Gurdjieff’s movements stayed at the Prieuré in 1923. She was involved in an incident with Gurdjieff that biographer James Webb describes as a “near rape,” which caused a scandal in the Gurdjieff community. Others strongly refute this accusation. Nevertheless, Webb suggests that the experience, compounded by Gurdjieff’s subsequent rejection of her, left the woman mentally unstable. After unsuccessfully attempting to return to the Prieuré in 1927, she committed suicide while she was, in the words of the coroner, “of unsound mind.”

Fritz Peters relates another case of suicide involving a young American woman who was infatuated with Gurdjieff. During the 1930s, she followed Gurdjieff to New York from Chicago against the wishes of her family. When family members arrived in New York they accused Gurdjieff of having “immoral sexual relations” with the woman and they proceeded to confine her in a mental institution. A week later the despondent woman took her own life. According to Peters, Gurdjieff was taken into custody by the authorities for questioning but was subsequently released.

James Webb brings some perspective on these suicides, by placing them within a broader context and stressing a teacher’s responsibility when working with students who may be psychologically fragile:

The cases of suicide which are from time to time linked with the Work do not prove a great deal. The unstable people attracted to “occult” theories include numerous potential suicides. On the other hand, the teacher must be considered responsible for any pupil whom he accepts and he must be aware that he will attract people in dangerous psychological states. The teacher should be able to monitor his pupils with the skill of a psychological technician; he has to know

precisely what pressure to apply and when; he must be an exceptionally sensitive person, and he should certainly have undergone lengthy training in the skills needed by a manipulator of the Fourth Way. (5)

Attempting to determine causality with something as complex as an act of suicide is speculative at best. It is impossible to isolate one potential cause from another or to assess the relative contribution of factors like hereditary predisposition or underlying depression. Those students of Gurdjieff who resorted to suicide were clearly strongly influenced by him. However, each appeared to have reached a particularly difficult stage in their life when they came to Gurdjieff. To determine what responsibility to assign to Gurdjieff and his treatment of these individuals would be impossible, as would be an attempt to assess the likelihood that these individuals would have chosen to end their lives in any event, with or without the influence of Gurdjieff.

### **Questions and Doubts**

The force of Gurdjieff's personality and his unconventional methods raised many serious questions. To some, Gurdjieff's powerful influence over his followers was nothing short of sinister. Doubt and distrust grew among a large number of Gurdjieff's students, whose rejection of his teachings led to their expulsion by Gurdjieff or to their voluntary departure.

Early in their relationship P.D. Ouspensky expressed misgivings about Gurdjieff, but he believed in the authenticity of Gurdjieff's vision and esoteric teachings. As the years went on, his respect for Gurdjieff's ideas remained strong, but he found Gurdjieff himself less and less tolerable.

Observers like journalist Carl Bechhofer-Roberts, who first met Gurdjieff in 1919, also mistrusted certain aspects of Gurdjieff's enterprise. In 1924, Bechhofer-Roberts published an article which questioned Gurdjieff's excessive self-promotion, exaggerated claims for his Institute and practice of collecting fees for his teaching. By the time he visited the Priuré a few years later, his doubts about Gurdjieff's legitimacy as a spiritual teacher had escalated:

In my own mind lies no longer any faintest doubt about Gurdjieff and his Institute. Signs of hoofs and horns are all over the place, and my deep and instant distrust, which increased with every day I spent there, find confirmation now wherever I turn. Much, of course, remains inexplicable, and will always remain so. Gurdjieff, with reason, is aloof and inaccessible, and the full truth of his motive we shall never know. That it is wholly selfish motive, I am convinced . . . The note of fear, rather than love, is too conspicuous to miss. (6)

During this same period one of Gurdjieff's English pupils, psychiatrist James Young, became increasingly skeptical of Gurdjieff and his management of the Institute. Young's disillusionment eventually led to his decision to leave the Prieuré, but the catalyst was a disagreement between Dr. Young and Gurdjieff over an ill student. When a student one day began to vomit blood, Young diagnosed her with an intestinal ulcer. Gurdjieff disagreed and even denied that the woman had vomited blood. A subsequent operation in a London hospital confirmed Young's diagnosis. When Young challenged Gurdjieff he was criticized for lacking trust. Some of Gurdjieff's followers in their unquestioning support claimed the entire incident had been a test for Young. Even James Webb supports this view and appears to place the onus on Young for the safe resolution of the medical emergency:

It could well have been that the lesson Gurdjieff was trying to teach was that you should assert yourself more – rely on his professional competence when he knew himself to be right. There remains an element of doubt; but the evidence is weighted on Gurdjieff's side. It was not necessarily Young's diagnosis with which he took issue, but with the doctor's own psychology. The fact is that, whatever Gurdjieff said, the sick woman was operated upon, and his pronouncement did not prevent her from having medical treatment. It may have delayed treatment; in which case Gurdjieff is certainly to be blamed – but, as he told his pupils, they were supposed to take no account of his expressed opinions except as a stimulus to their psychological work. The trouble was, as he himself recognized, that he was naturally a figure who inspired uncritical obedience and attracted to himself people in search of a pair of shoulders broad enough to carry their burdens. (7)

Fritz Peters, who was a child at the Prieuré in the 1920s and maintained a relationship with Gurdjieff until his death in 1949, provides an inside perspective on Gurdjieff. As Peters observed Gurdjieff over the years, a number of troubling questions emerged, and his respect for Gurdjieff was gradually supplanted by doubt and cynicism. Peters acknowledged Gurdjieff's power over him and even admitted to a genuine fear of Gurdjieff. Yet, he maintained a great affection for Gurdjieff, much as a child feels for a loving parent. Gurdjieff acknowledged the profound effect he had had on Peters:

You not learn my work from talk and book – you learn in skin, and you cannot escape . . . If you never go to meeting, never read book, you still cannot forget what I put inside you when you child . . . I already in your blood – make your life miserable forever – but such misery can be good thing for your soul, so even when miserable you must thank your God for suffering I give you. (8)

Peters' ambivalent feelings towards Gurdjieff are echoed in the accounts of many other students who, despite serious doubts and reservations about their teacher, are nevertheless deeply thankful for the spiritual knowledge and wisdom he transmitted to them.

## Separation From Gurdjieff

During the course of Gurdjieff's lengthy teaching mission in the West, many pupils voluntarily left the Work. Others were forced to leave by Gurdjieff, often under unpleasant circumstances. In the early phase of his teaching in Russia, Gurdjieff frequently created conditions which made it impossible for certain students to stay with him. The long journey with his students from Russia to France, where in 1922 Gurdjieff ultimately established his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man at the Prieuré, was a natural sorting process. Many students left Gurdjieff at this time, but a loyal retinue of followers stayed with him and later became his most important assistants. Among them were composer Thomas de Hartmann and his wife Olga, and stage designer Alexander de Salzmann and his wife, dancer Jeanne de Salzmann.

At the Prieuré, Gurdjieff attracted an influx of new students, mainly from Britain and North America. Those prospects whom Gurdjieff deemed unsuitable for the Work were quickly rejected. In August 1923, he challenged his pupils to "remember why you came" and asked those who were not making use of the conditions he created for inner work to leave at once and stop "wasting his time."

Following his serious automobile accident in 1924, Gurdjieff appears to have deliberately alienated many students at the Prieuré. In *Life is Real Only Then, When "I Am,"* Gurdjieff relates that in 1928 he took a sacred oath: "to remove from my eyesight all those who by this or that make my life too comfortable." (9) In keeping with his resolution, Gurdjieff deliberately tested his students and their commitment to his teaching by placing insurmountable obstacles in their path which caused many to leave:

The teacher's role is to present certain barriers that the student has to surmount. At first they are small, but as he progresses more is required of him. Finally he gets to a point where he can no longer return to life, to sleep, and yet he is not yet awake. He is presented with a difficult barrier, and he cannot get over it. He may then "turn against the work, against the teacher, and against other members of the group." . . . Sometimes he may be made to leave it intentionally; he may be put in such a position that he is *obliged* to leave, and for good reason. He is then watched to see how he will react. Generally, in such cases, the one who leaves turns against the work. When a student asked Gurdjieff what happens to such people, he replied, "Nothing." There is no need for anything to happen. They are their own punishment. (10)

John Bennett considers this process to have been essential to the ultimate fulfilment of Gurdjieff's teaching mission, that Gurdjieff needed to separate from many of his closest students and friends. What appeared to them to be practical and immediate actions to impose the suffering that would aid in their development were actually calculated steps on a deliberate course charted by Gurdjieff to send them on their way permanently.

Within the span of a few years, Gurdjieff lost one of his oldest pupils, Dr. Leonid Stjoernval, as well as Alexander de Salzmann and Thomas and Olga de Hartmann. The departure of the de Hartmanns was particularly telling. According to John Bennett, when Gurdjieff recognized that the de Hartmanns had developed a dependency on him, he began to make life very difficult and unpleasant for them. Their relationship with him became very strained. Finally, in October 1929, Gurdjieff made an impossible demand which forced the de Hartmanns to leave the Prieuré. The couple was devastated and Olga was so emotionally overcome that she could not get up from her bed for four days.

Gurdjieff also engineered a situation which led to A.R. Orage's ultimate split from Gurdjieff in 1931. Gurdjieff visited Orage's groups in New York and perceived that the groups had become stuck and needed a shock to recover their spiritual momentum. He decided to ask the group members to sign a letter repudiating Orage as their leader. Ironically, Orage also signed the letter, sensing some hidden intent to Gurdjieff's actions. Eventually, Orage's relationship with Gurdjieff deteriorated and he saw Gurdjieff for the last time in May 1931. Despite a number of attempts by Gurdjieff to resume their relationship, they never spoke to each other again. In a conversation with fellow student Stanley Nott, Orage revealed his feelings about breaking with his teacher, saying that "he felt that his work with groups in America had come to an end, and another phase was beginning; that to every pupil the time comes when he must leave his teacher and go into life and work out, digest, what he has acquired." (11)

The gratitude Orage felt for his teacher overshadowed his pain at their separation. Nott observes that the host of other students from his inner circle who were pushed to separate from Gurdjieff – de Hartmann, Stjoernval, de Salzmann and others – remained influenced by Gurdjieff and his teachings for the rest of their lives.

John Bennett believes that Gurdjieff's separation from his students served a much broader purpose than their own individual development. Bennett posits that Gurdjieff drove students away as part of his own spiritual development and to further his aim of transmitting esoteric teachings to the West:

It was not until much later that he revealed his own personal reasons for these traumatic actions. They were necessary to enable him to gain the bodily and mental energy for completing his task. It is a very remarkable fact that no one who has written about Gurdjieff – even from the most intimate acquaintance like the Hartmanns – seems to have understood what he himself had to suffer at that time. They saw him always as their teacher, concerned with the spiritual progress of his pupils, whereas, he was concerned with the fulfillment of his mission, which he saw upon a very much larger scale than those around him. He was not concerned with the immediate present but with the impact which his work and his ideas could have on the world over a long period of years. (12)

Bennett's assessment appears essentially correct. Most likely the real motivation behind Gurdjieff's decision to force students to leave him involved a combination of factors: the pupils' need for independence to further their own spiritual development, the creation of favorable conditions for Gurdjieff's teaching mission in the West, and the generation of obstacles for the benefit of Gurdjieff's own inner development.

### **Ouspensky's Break with Gurdjieff**

P.D. Ouspensky's break with Gurdjieff is one of the most significant and controversial events in the history of the Work. (13) Ouspensky's disillusionment with and eventual separation from Gurdjieff led to a splitting of the Work into two major streams, one led by Ouspensky and the other by Gurdjieff. For many decades the two lines of teaching existed independently of one another with virtually no communication between their respective proponents.

Ouspensky met Gurdjieff in Russia in 1915 and shortly thereafter began working with him intensively. Gurdjieff recognized Ouspensky's intellectual gifts and spiritual potential, seeing in his student a possible co-creator of a Fourth Way school in the West. (14) Almost from the beginning of his work with Gurdjieff, Ouspensky acknowledged the importance of what he was learning from his teacher: "I began to realize what an immense value these ideas had for me. I became almost terrified at the thought of how easily I could have passed them by, how easily I could have known nothing whatever of Gurdjieff's existence, or how easily I could have again lost sight of him." (15)

A turning point in their relationship occurred in the summer of 1917 at Essentuki, when Gurdjieff suddenly announced he was disbanding his group and ending all work. Ouspensky would later write that at this juncture his confidence in Gurdjieff began to waver and that for the first time he had begun to separate Gurdjieff the man from Gurdjieff's ideas. Ouspensky was struck by a "queer duality" in Gurdjieff's behaviour: "He was both a very astute man and a very naïve. He understood and saw right through many things and at the same time, many things he judged like a child." (16)

In him was much of the strange: side by side with traits which attracted people to him and disposed them favorably, were other traits which I refrain from calling vulgar only by a great effort of will. Many of us noticed these traits but when we spoke of them we explained to each other that this was done *for us*, that he wished to show himself worse than he was, in order that we should value the *ideas* better. That it was "acting" and so on. And it was remarkable that in certain cases this was true and in other cases another thing was true. (17)

By 1918, Ouspensky's doubts had grown to the point where he found it impossible to continue working with Gurdjieff:



I had no doubt about the ideas. On the contrary, the more I thought of them, the deeper I entered into them, the more I began to value them and realize their significance. But I began very strongly to doubt that it was possible for me, or even for the majority of our company, to continue to work under G.'s leadership . . . I saw clearly at that time that I had been mistaken about many things that I had ascribed to G. and that by staying with him now I should not be going in the same direction I went at the beginning . . . I had nothing to say against G.'s methods except that they did not suit me. (18)

Although Ouspensky continued to support Gurdjieff's ideas and maintained cordial relations with him, he felt he had no choice but to leave Gurdjieff's community. In 1921, Ouspensky emigrated to London and gave a series of public lectures based on Gurdjieff's ideas. He quickly gathered a nucleus of students including many prominent members of the intelligentsia, like literary critic A.R. Orage.

Gurdjieff made two visits to London in early 1922, where he publicly criticized Ouspensky and asserted his own authority in the transmission of Fourth Way teachings. (19) Many of Ouspensky's students reacted by aligning themselves with Gurdjieff and providing financial support for the purchase of the Prieuré in France. Despite this, Ouspensky maintained a surprising degree of loyalty to Gurdjieff in public, sending pupils to the Prieuré and collecting money for his Institute. Ouspensky would later state that the efforts he made on behalf of Gurdjieff at this time constituted one final test to see if Gurdjieff's attempt to establish his Institute in France would bear fruit.

Ouspensky's concern with Gurdjieff's conduct and the direction of the Work intensified throughout 1923, at which time Gurdjieff was implicated in a sexual scandal involving a female follower. Ouspensky objected to the way new students were selected and integrated into the Institute's program (20) and felt that Gurdjieff, by his own behaviour, was contradicting the most fundamental tenets of his own teaching. Where formerly Gurdjieff had required his students to act only with full understanding and after verification through their own experience, he now appeared to be demanding their obedience and their blind faith in his word: "Gurdjieff began by demanding consciousness in work, and passed to the demand of submission. He lowered the standards of his demands, became satisfied with mechanical submission." (21) To Ouspensky, this was a clear abuse by Gurdjieff of his authority as a teacher. (22)

January 1924 marked a critical turning point in the relationship between Gurdjieff and Ouspensky. At a meeting in London with some of his senior students, Ouspensky announced that he had decided to end completely his association with Gurdjieff. His students would have to choose between him and Gurdjieff as their teacher. Students who decided to remain with Ouspensky were ordered to avoid communicating in any way with Gurdjieff and his pupils. Ouspensky's break with Gurdjieff had many serious consequences for the future of the Work: "The octave broken, the die now cast, there will be not one work, but two – Gurdjieff's Fourth Way and Ouspensky's 'System.' And so, less

than a year and a half after Gurdjieff founded his Institute at the Prieuré to establish the Fourth Way in the West, the octave is deflected, the force of the teaching halved.” (23)

There is considerable evidence that after the official break in 1924, Ouspensky remained in contact with Gurdjieff for many years. Biographer James Webb describes a number of visits by Ouspensky to the Prieuré from 1924 to 1926 which were witnessed by some of Gurdjieff’s pupils. Webb notes that Gurdjieff was careful to conceal Ouspensky’s visits from the other students. The final meeting between the two occurred in 1931 on the terrace of the Café Henri IV in Fontainebleau. The nature of the meeting and the content of their conversation is unknown, but some have speculated that it ended in a deadlock. Later that year, Ouspensky told his students that he broke with Gurdjieff because he felt that Gurdjieff had changed in a significant way and was no longer a teacher with whom he could effectively work. Later, in 1935, he revealed in greater detail some of the specific reasons for breaking with Gurdjieff:

When Gurdjieff started his Institute in Paris I did everything I could for him. I raised money for him and sent him pupils, many of them influential people. When he bought the Prieuré I went there myself and Madame stayed for some time. But I found that he had changed from when I knew him in Russia. He was difficult in Essentuki and Constantinople but more so in Fontainebleau. His behavior had changed. He did many things that I did not like, but it wasn’t what he did that upset me, it was the stupid way he did them. He came to London to my group and made things very unpleasant for me. After that I saw that I must break with him, and I told my pupils that they would have to choose between going to Fontainebleau or working with me. (24)

Even after their official break, Ouspensky appeared to remain fascinated with and conflicted about Gurdjieff. Robert de Ropp met Ouspensky in 1936 and during an exchange commented that Gurdjieff must have been a very strange man. Ouspensky replied: “Strange! He was extraordinary! You cannot possibly imagine how extraordinary Gurdjieff was.” (25) De Ropp was struck by Ouspensky’s tone and many years later commented:

So many emotional elements entered into that simple statement: wonder, admiration, regret, bewilderment. I had the feeling that in his relationship with Gurdjieff, Ouspensky had confronted a problem that was absolutely beyond his power to solve. He had played the great game with a master and had been checkmated, but he still could not figure out quite how it had happened. (26)

Although Ouspensky clearly understood the importance of obedience to and trust of one’s teacher, he also recognized the student’s need to take ultimate responsibility for his or her own spiritual development. (27) In *In Search of the Miraculous* he describes the conflict that was inherent in his relationship with Gurdjieff:

All work consists in doing what the leader indicates, understanding in conformance with his opinions even those things that he does not say plainly, helping him in *everything* that he does. There can be no other attitude towards the work. And G. himself said several times that a most important thing in the work was *to remember that one came to learn* and to take no other role upon oneself. At the same time this does not at all mean that a man has no choice or that he is obliged to follow something which does not respond to what he is seeking. (28)

One of the primary reasons given by Ouspensky for leaving Gurdjieff was that he began to separate the teaching from Gurdjieff the teacher. The former he supported, the latter he could not. William Patterson questions whether one can in fact separate the teacher from the teaching, since the teacher embodies the teaching. And Rafael Lefort believes that Ouspensky's intellectual approach to the teaching blocked his understanding of what his teacher was attempting to transmit: "Gurdjieff wanted to teach Ouspensky to 'pick up' the teaching by establishing a bond between them by virtue of which the teacher could transmit to the pupil; but Ouspensky, always the correct and classic intellectual, wanted to be given the 'principles' from which to work out the most 'efficient' method." (29)

Patterson believes that it was intellectual arrogance on Ouspensky's part that led him to separate himself from Gurdjieff. (30) Much of Gurdjieff's behaviour as a teacher could only be understood in relation to his larger aim of transmitting wisdom to future generations, a goal that transcended any individual teaching situation. It is clear that Gurdjieff valued Ouspensky's intellectual abilities and potential as a "helper-instructor" and tried to confine him to that role. In the end, Gurdjieff's efforts were ineffective in the face of Ouspensky's resistance and ambitions.

Other observers present an alternate perspective. Gary Lachman argues that Gurdjieff contributed to the breakdown of the relationship by undermining and humiliating Ouspensky, behaviour which he suggests was motivated by Gurdjieff's need to dominate his colleagues:

Either Gurdjieff was unable to see Ouspensky's own powers and abilities, or his need to dominate was too great. It is true, Ouspensky could have left whenever he wanted to. Some need, some weakness prevented him from cutting the ties earlier or, indeed, ever: although physically separated from Gurdjieff, it's clear that Ouspensky was never very far from him in his mind or heart . . . And if the object was to get Ouspensky to stand on his own two feet, then why did Gurdjieff undermine all of Ouspensky's efforts to do that, why did he go out of his way to humiliate him? Gurdjieff, too, perhaps had a weakness, a need to dominate and master the people around him. Like some sadly dysfunctional relationships, in many ways the two were made for each other. (31)

## Commentary

Gurdjieff's stated purpose in working with his students was to reveal, without compromise, each pupil's fundamental weakness or 'chief feature' in an effort to 'awaken' them to a higher level of being. Gurdjieff's confrontational methods, when not properly employed, carried the risk of serious consequences. Students who could not handle Gurdjieff's physical and emotional demands often suffered psychological trauma. Some were forced to leave their teacher when his psychological pressure became too much to bear. Others experienced the breakdown of their closest relationships.

Gurdjieff's manipulation of his students and the impact of his powerful personality raise serious ethical questions. While in some spiritual circles casualties are considered unavoidable in the course of serious inner work, most condemn the misuse of powerful spiritual techniques. Sufi teacher Omar Ali-Shah writes: "The amount of confusion and damage which was caused and still is being caused by Gurdjieff and his followers can be measured only in terms of human suffering and pain." (32)

Ali-Shah argues that Gurdjieff had an incomplete knowledge of many of the potent psychological and spiritual methods he employed with students and ignored the injunction of proper 'time, place and people' in their application:

If you follow and analyze some of the techniques and tactics employed by Gurdjieff, you can see how they were half-learned. There is a great difference between learning a technique and knowing when to use it. You can learn the best technique in the world, but if you apply it at the wrong time and under the wrong circumstances, it will fall to the ground. (33)

On the other hand, there is evidence that Gurdjieff, well aware of the potential pitfalls of his powerful methods, monitored the physical and emotional states of his students (34) and took care not to push them past their breaking point:

Though Gurdjieff often pushed his students past what they had supposed was their limits of endurance . . . he always knew when they had reached their actual limits, and he then rewarded their organism with food and sleep. He followed the same course in his assaults on his students' psychological mechanicality: he would role-play seamlessly, appearing to be enraged; he would shout at people, "press their corns," going right for their psychological weakness, pushing them to their apparent limits and just beyond, but he always, later, gave them ease and support, and they understood that what they'd endured had been an exercise, not some dictatorial cruelty. (35)

Biographer James Webb argues that the essential element in any evaluation of Gurdjieff's methods is his motives. Webb believed that Gurdjieff had begun to identify with his students' view that he was omniscient and incapable of misjudgment, and thus lost perspective and any sense of caution. His conviction grew stronger that his unorthodox

and risky methods were necessary to help his students, and he disregarded the possibility that his actions would cause serious harm.

The acrimonious split between Gurdjieff and P.D. Ouspensky is a case in point. There is no doubt that Ouspensky was profoundly impacted by his decision to leave Gurdjieff and remained bitter for the remainder of his life. Gary Lachman argues that Gurdjieff must share some of the responsibility for the break with Ouspensky and that Ouspensky has not received sufficient credit for his own independent spiritual knowledge and development:

Ouspensky was no stranger to the realms of higher consciousness, and to the readers of his early books, it's clear he already knew a great deal before his fateful meeting with Gurdjieff. His introduction to Gurdjieff was without doubt the central experience of Ouspensky's life. Yet some, like myself, may wonder if his meeting with his master wasn't perhaps the worst thing that ever happened to him. (36)

Gurdjieff was one of the most unusual and powerful spiritual teachers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. More than sixty years after his death many of his ideas and methods have percolated into the mainstream of contemporary spiritual teachings. Yet, no one has been able to duplicate the profound effect he had on his students and followers. His case is both an example and a warning of the inherent power of esoteric teaching methods. In the hands of enlightened teachers they can lead students to new levels of self-knowledge and inner development. Used incorrectly they can cause irreparable damage and unnecessary suffering.

## NOTES

- (1) James Webb *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Works of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), pp. 332-333.
- (2) John Bennett *Witness: The Autobiography of John G. Bennett* (Tucson: Omen Press, 1974), p. 113.
- (3) James Webb *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Works of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), p. 363.
- (4) James Webb *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Works of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), p. 334.
- (5) James Webb *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Works of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), p. 567.
- (6) Louis Pauwels *Gurdjieff* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1972), p. 212.
- (7) James Webb *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Works of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), p. 259.

- (8) Fritz Peters *Gurdjieff Remembered* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1971), pp. 25-26.
- (9) G.I. Gurdjieff *Life is Real Only Then, When "I Am"* (New York: Triangle, 1975), p. 45.
- (10) Gary Lachman *In Search of P.D. Ouspensky* (Wheaton, Illinois: Quest Books, 2004), p. 131.
- (11) C.S. Nott *Journey Through This World* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1969), p.28.
- (12) John Bennett *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 172-173.
- (13) The reason behind the split between Ouspensky and Gurdjieff has been a source of speculation for many decades. Students and historians of the Fourth Way have raised many questions and explored many possibilities, but provide few satisfactory answers: Did Ouspensky misunderstand the nature and importance of Gurdjieff's mission in the West? Did Ouspensky's independence and egoism prevent him from working effectively on Gurdjieff's behalf? Did an opportunistic Ouspensky appropriate Gurdjieff's ideas in order to establish himself as a rival teacher? Or did Ouspensky attempt to save the teaching from a man he perceived as increasingly erratic and misguided?
- (14) Boris Mouravieff, who knew both men, argues in *Ouspensky, Gurdjieff and Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (Chicago: Praxis Institute Press, 1997, p. 12) that Gurdjieff exerted a powerful dominating influence on Ouspensky and used Ouspensky for his own advantage: "Without Ouspensky, Gurdjieff's career in the West would probably not have gone beyond the stage of endless conversations in cafés."
- (15) William Patrick Patterson *Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014), p. 34.
- (16) William Patrick Patterson *Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014), p. 34.
- (17) William Patrick Patterson *Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014), p. 35.
- (18) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 374.
- (19) Biographer William Patrick Patterson speculates that in 1922 in London Gurdjieff confronted Ouspensky and criticized him for his lack of qualifications to teach (*Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014, p. 113):

Speaking in private with Uspenskii, Gurdjieff finally delivers an all-out assault. He is working on the wrong lines. He is too intellectual. He lacks an understanding of the real purpose of the Work and of the purpose of himself. All his vast knowledge would be useless unless he works on himself so as to understand basic principles. If Uspenskii truly wishes to understand, he must stop teaching and begin again – work again with Gurdjieff. It is a scorching appraisal. How could Uspenskii not hear it? Not understand his identification? How could he believe he was a spiritual equal, or near equal, to Gurdjieff? But Uspenskii didn't hear the appraisal – he heard the assault. Although a man of rare intellect, honest and uncompromising in his search for real knowledge, Uspenskii's blindness here and elsewhere shows the strength of buffers.

(20) In the early Russian phase of his teaching (1915-1916), Gurdjieff gave Ouspensky the responsibility for screening potential pupils in St. Petersburg while Gurdjieff was in Moscow. But in subsequent years many students were admitted to the Work from St. Petersburg without Ouspensky's prior approval. Gurdjieff later blamed Ouspensky for the unsuitability of many of these pupils, a charge Ouspensky felt was unfair and unjustified.

(21) William Patrick Patterson *Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014), p. 504.

(22) Although at first Ouspensky accepted the demands that Gurdjieff made on him, he eventually refused to accept new demands which he deemed unacceptable. In his essay "Why I Left Gurdjieff," written in 1926, and published in William Patrick Patterson *Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014, pp. 497-498.) he elaborated:

The first of these demands was the fact that I had to work in a group with people who seemed to me quite unprepared for work; then, the fact that I had to accept theories which seemed absurd at first; the next was the fact that I had to introduce people to G. and to take upon myself the responsibility for doing so without the slightest idea of what he intended to do with them. Further, my work with G. actually demanded that I should abandon my own work, that I should remain in Russia after the revolution, in spite of my thinking it absurd, and so on. Besides this, at a certain definite moment in 1916 I had to accept a series of demands of a very difficult personal character. All this was not at all easy, but I realized perfectly that everything I received from G. was only due to my submitting to his demands. Yet, in spite of this I decided to leave him, because later his demands acquired a character to which I could not agree . . . Apart from these demands which I refused to accept there were two kinds of demands which I also resisted although for different reasons. The first category included all demands which were insignificant in themselves, but which forced me to do things that went very much against my nature. At times my resistance to these demands may perhaps have seemed ridiculous to anybody not concerned, but on several

instances these demands touched upon those sides of my nature which I was unable to overcome . . . Then there were other demands about which I can say candidly that I never understood them and do not understand them even to this day.

- (23) William Patrick Patterson *Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014), p. 151.
- (24) C.S. Nott *Journey Through This World* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1974), p. 97.
- (25) Robert de Ropp *Warrior's Way* (Nevada City, California: Gateways, 2002), p. 91.
- (26) Robert de Ropp *Warrior's Way* (Nevada City, California: Gateways, 2002), p. 92.
- (27) In the essay "Why I Left Gurdjieff," in William Patrick Patterson *Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014, p. 497), Ouspensky writes: "To leave even a perfectly organized school may sometimes be quite right and legitimate. A man always approaches a school with his eyes closed. At school his eyes open and he may see that this school is not for him."
- (28) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 374.
- (29) Rafael Lefort *The Teachers of Gurdjieff* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1973), pp. 6-7.
- (30) In a telling admission, Ouspensky would later admit that he chafed at the demands Gurdjieff imposed on him: "If I submitted to him in any particular thing he very soon demanded something more of me, if I accepted this, immediately a new and still more greater demand appeared. When I refused anything, it was always taken as extraordinarily tragical. In fact, I always resisted everything. I could never overcome my obstinacy. I never made any effort." (William Patrick Patterson *Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014, p. 72).
- (31) Gary Lachman *In Search of P.D. Ouspensky* (Wheaton, Illinois: Quest Books, 2004), pp. 279-280.
- (32) Omar Ali-Shah *The Sufi Tradition in the West* (New York: Alif, 1994), p. 226.
- (33) Omar Ali-Shah *The Sufi Tradition in the West* (New York: Alif, 1994), p. 225.
- (34) In one instance, related in Frank Sinclair's *Without Benefit of Clergy* (U.S.A.: Xlibris, 2005, p. 126), a pupil watched Gurdjieff verbally assault and reprimand another student for their mechanical unconscious behavior. Seeing the observing pupil's obvious distress, Gurdjieff offered a gentle reassurance: "Not to worry . . . She like duck; shed water from feathers."



- (35) John Shirley *Gurdjieff: An Introduction to His Life and Ideas* (New York: Jeremy Tarcher, 2004), p. 180.
- (36) Gary Lachman *In Search of P.D. Ouspensky* (Wheaton, Illinois: Quest Books, 2004), p. 3.