

SEXUAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

By all reports Gurdjieff was a vigorous, charismatic man with a robust sexual nature, described by biographer James Webb as “a sensual man who enjoyed the pleasures of the bed as much as those of the table.” (1) Gurdjieff’s sexual conduct shocked many people in the 1920s and 1930s, especially in conservative America. There were rumours that he had a highly varied sex life and was involved in unusual sexual practices. Some claimed he was a master of exotic Tantric sexual teachings learned in the East. While many of the stories surrounding Gurdjieff and sex were clearly fictitious or based on hearsay, there is a body of information on this subject gleaned from the written accounts of his pupils and research by biographers, scholars and academics that can be considered reasonably reliable.

Gurdjieff held many traditional conservative beliefs and attitudes about sexuality, probably based on his upbringing and cultural conditioning. He strongly condemned masturbation, contraception and homosexuality as affronts to the proper order of nature. At the same time he clearly possessed a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the role of sexuality in the process of spiritual transformation, and enunciated a complex model of the transmutation of sexual energy to a higher developmental level. Sometimes Gurdjieff created teaching situations which revealed to his students and others the hypnotic power of their conditioned attitudes and unconscious expression of sexuality.

Gurdjieff’s personal sex life appears from all accounts to be complex and sometimes contradictory, with varied expressions throughout his life. At times he was celibate, at other periods highly sexually charged. He fathered numerous children out of wedlock, including many with his own female disciples.

Critics have roundly condemned Gurdjieff’s sexual behaviour as irresponsible and contrary to the actions of an authentic spiritual teacher. But teachers in many other spiritual traditions have engaged in exactly the same kind of sexual behaviour. (2) The notion that spiritual masters must always be celibate and beyond the “base desires of earthly sexuality” is clearly an idealized myth and not congruent with reality.

However, the issue of a sexual relationship between a spiritual teacher and his or her student(s) raises a number of important ethical questions: Is a sexual relationship between a teacher and student harmful or beneficial from a spiritual perspective? Is there an imbalance of power between teacher and student that compromises the authentic expression of a loving relationship between two equal partners? Is it possible to separate an intimate sexual relationship from an objective impersonal transmission of spiritual knowledge?

Gurdjieff's Beliefs About Sexuality

Gurdjieff discussed sex with his pupils both in his lectures and in their private conversations. He believed that the function of sex was twofold: to ensure the continuation of the human species, and to produce a 'finer energy' to nourish higher spiritual development. He regarded sexual energy as sacred and wrote in *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* that sex "constitutes and is considered everywhere in our Great Universe for beings of all kinds of natures, as the most sacred of all sacred Divine sacraments." (3)

Gurdjieff was of the opinion that sexual energy in the modern Western world was misused in the pursuit of personal pleasure and gratification. (4) He claimed that, in general, the only two proper ways of expending sexual energy were through a conventional sex life or through spiritual transmutation. In 1916 Gurdjieff spoke to his Russian pupils about the misdirection of sexual energy in the pursuits of everyday life and the self-deception it can entail:

Sex plays a tremendous role in maintaining the mechanicalness of life. Everything that people do is connected with 'sex': politics, religion, art, the theater, music, is all 'sex.' . . . What do you think brings people to cafés, to restaurants, to various fetes? One thing only. *Sex*: it is the principal motive force for all mechanicalness . . . Sex which exists by itself and is not dependent on anything else is already a great achievement. But the evil lies in the constant self-deception. (5).

Gurdjieff took a distinctly pragmatic approach to sex and its role in human life, insisting that sex should be separated from the intellect and the emotions: sex was sex. Gurdjieff linked sex to personal development and, as such, considered it to have a different function for each individual:

His teaching about the transformation of the sexual energy is very personal and he was emphatic that there are no general rules that can be given. In some cases he regarded abstinence as desirable, in others encouraged strong sexual activity; in some cases self-control, in others the devotion of one man and one woman to the creation of one single soul between them. In some cases, he demanded at least for a time a completely promiscuous sexual life in order to rid a man with obsession with sex . . . Gurdjieff did not wish to give any rules that people would take to be universally valid and that could lead not only to misunderstanding but even to disaster. (6)

Many of Gurdjieff's sexual beliefs run counter to contemporary thought and have been ridiculed by modern critics. For instance, he described masturbation as a harmful affliction and an evil, and even claimed in *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* that people were transformed into "psychopaths" by the practice. Further, he endorsed male and female circumcision as a means to prevent masturbation in youth: "This terrible children's disease of onanism is scarcely ever found among those children upon whom this rite has been performed, whereas the children of those parents who fail to observe this custom are almost all subject to it." (7)

Gurdjieff also insisted that achieving an orgasm before reaching adulthood had serious consequences on an adolescent's mental development: "If even once the sensation of the climax of what is called the 'Ooomonvanosi process' occurs in what is called the "nervous system" of their children before they reach majority, they will already never have the full possibility of normal mentation when they become adults." (8)

Gurdjieff's conservative ideas also manifested in a strong homophobia. Pupil Fritz Peters relates that "he was puritanical, even a fanatic about homosexuality, and condemned it vigorously . . . he felt that homosexuality - as a career - was a dead-end street." (9) Ironically, many of Gurdjieff's female students, including his group 'The Rope,' were lesbian. It seems unlikely that Gurdjieff subscribed, in a practical way, to the belief that spiritual development was possible only with a "normal" sex life and orientation.

Gurdjieff's Sexual Behaviour

Gurdjieff was keenly interested in people's sexuality and how it manifested in different personality types. Students report how he was able to describe in accurate detail, and often in vulgar and amusing terms, the sex lives and sexual history of some of his followers or the people who came to him for advice.

Gurdjieff often took advantage of the sexual preoccupations of people to provide a teaching lesson. In 1933, Gurdjieff invited a number of influential New York writers and journalists to a party. Fritz Peters was able to observe first-hand Gurdjieff's striking demonstration of the role of sex in human behaviour.

During the dinner party Gurdjieff subtly switched roles from that of the perfect host to that of satyr . . . The result was the beginning of an orgy. Gurdjieff eventually stopped proceedings by ridiculing his guests and directing them to see from their conduct what they really were. He told them that, as this was an important lesson, he deserved to be paid; and according to Peters collected several thousand dollars. (10)

Gurdjieff's use of the power of sex as a teaching tool also had a light-hearted side, as some of his female students discovered. He would sometimes encourage young women to visit him late at night, implying that a "special kind of experience" awaited them. When they arrived, their expectations were usually exposed and dashed:

Sometimes young women would come to Paris to visit him. He would flirt outrageously with them, and invite them to come back to the flat late at night when everyone had gone. Often thinking that this was some kind of mysterious test, or just frankly curious, they would go. In all cases that I heard of, Gurdjieff would open the door, look astonished and say: "Why you come now?" give them a handful of sweets and send them away. (11)

But not all female followers were treated to a gentle rebuke. Nicholas de Val, a natural son of Gurdjieff and for many years his personal assistant, reported that in 1937,

even though approaching 70 years of age, Gurdjieff's sex life was so robust that it disturbed his sleep to such an extent that he was forced to move to a nearby hotel!

The most reliable information about Gurdjieff's sexuality is provided by student John Bennett who conducted extensive research on almost all aspects of his life:

His sexual life was strange in its unpredictability. At certain times he led a strict, almost ascetic life, having no relation with women at all. At other times, his sex life seemed to go wild and it must be said that his unbridled periods were more frequent than the ascetic. At times, he had sexual relationships not only with almost any woman who happened to come within the sphere of his influence, but also with his own pupils. Quite a number of his women pupils bore him children and some of them remained closely connected with him all their lives. Others were just as close to him, as far as one could tell, without a sexual relationship. (12)

A great many stories and gossip about Gurdjieff's reputed sexual activities surfaced over the years. While many of the claims were exaggerated, there is no doubt that Gurdjieff fathered a number of children. Gurdjieff did not believe in contraceptives and one result of his sexual behaviour was the birth of more than a half dozen children by various women, many of them his own students. (13) A member of a New York group wrote in the 1930s that: "His women followers obviously adored him, and some of those who had found favor in his sight had visible mementos: swarthy and liquid-eyed children." (14)

John Bennett comments on the effect that Gurdjieff's sexual liaisons with some of his female pupils had on their teacher-student relationship: "There was a tendency on the part of some of the women to convey the impression that only women could really understand him and only those women who had slept with him were really initiated into his work." (15) Although for some women the Work and sexual relationship were inseparable, for most female followers this was not the case. In the words of John Bennett, Gurdjieff could be "all things to all women."

The fact that Gurdjieff was sexually involved with pupils raises ethical issues and challenges our notions of the teacher-student relationship. James Webb examines some of the implications of Gurdjieff's behaviour in terms of his use and misuse of power:

There is no doubt at all that Gurdjieff had sexual relations with many of his pupils. The important questions are: under what conditions did these relationships take place and what was the effect of Gurdjieff's promiscuity on the women who became his sexual partners?

If Gurdjieff merely used the power of his position to persuade girls to sleep with him, is this a serious offense? . . . but failure to comply with Gurdjieff's plans often led to exclusion from the Work altogether. (16)

In ethical terms, many commentators argue that sex between a spiritual teacher and student is clearly inappropriate and cannot be justified under any circumstances. Others feel that a sexual relationship is permissible, but only if it is helpful to the pupil's spiritual development. Regardless of which view is adopted, there remains the more troubling issue of whether Gurdjieff, with his tremendous power and authority over his female students, was engaging in sexual relations with them consensually or with some subtle or overt element of coercion.

In his writings, especially the second and third series of *All and Everything*, Gurdjieff hints at a powerful inner conflict revolving around his sexual desires. On the one hand there were the interiorized prohibitions inculcated during his upbringing and education recommending abstinence and sublimation of his sexual urges and, on the other hand, his natural sexual desires. Some have speculated that this early cultural conditioning created a sharply dualistic attitude and behaviour toward women and sexuality that manifested throughout his adult life.

Commentary

Gurdjieff's sexual beliefs and personal sex life were certainly controversial and widely discussed both during and after his lifetime. His numerous liaisons with female pupils and resulting offspring were easy fodder for his critics and fuel for speculative rumour by his followers. But Gurdjieff's sexual behaviour raises deeper questions of power, authority, ethics, judgement and the nature of the teacher-student relationship.

Jack Kornfield's survey of the sexual behavior of a broad sample of contemporary spiritual teachers (see Note 2) provides a more universal perspective and is highly instructive: "In fact, teachers are likely to have active and complex sex lives. We have to re-examine the myth that enlightenment implies celibacy, and that sexuality is somehow abnormal or contrary to the awakened mind." (17) Spiritual teachers are human after all and sexuality is a powerful natural force and integral part of life.

Sexual relationships between teachers and students can take a number of different forms. Some of the relationships are loving, conscious and freely chosen. Others, although lacking in emotional depth and commitment, are openly and harmlessly sexual. Instances of true tantric sex or the transmission of spiritual energy may also occur. But many have involved the exploitation of students, secrecy and deception, and clearly contradict the moral and ethical precepts of most spiritual traditions.

Sexual exploitation can take the form of secret affairs, sex in exchange for access to the teacher, or serving a teacher with sexual favours in the name of a "special teaching" or "initiation into tantra." In extreme cases, sexual misconduct has led to secret harems, abuse of underage boys and girls, and even the transmission of AIDS to male and female students by a teacher who told his unsuspecting partners that his special powers would serve as protection. (18)

It is now recognized in the secular world that a sexual relationship between a person in a position of power (doctor, therapist, teacher) and a person who is dependent on them (patient, client, student) almost always involves an element of coercion and betrayal of trust. The standard code of ethics of universities and professional associations warn against “inappropriate sexual contact,” which can range from verbal sexual innuendo to a long-term sexual liaison with a student, patient or client.

Jack Kornfield spoke with a sample of largely female students who were involved in a sexual relationship with their teacher. (19) Half the students reported that the relationship had harmed their spiritual practice and their relationship with their teacher. It also undermined their feelings of self-worth and caused a great deal of pain and confusion. Many of the teachers also suffered greatly as a result of the relationship.

Female students from many spiritual traditions have admitted that they believed a sexual relationship with their teacher was part of their spiritual training and they felt privileged at having been chosen to service a teacher’s sexual needs. But many of them were also ambivalent about unresolved issues of power, authority and male hierarchy. Some students concluded that relationships between teachers and students were more about power than about sex. (20)

Gurdjieff’s sexual beliefs and behaviour are illustrative of both the complexity of human sexuality and the dynamics of a teacher-student relationship. Is it appropriate for a spiritual teacher to have a sexual relationship with a student? What are the implications on a personal and spiritual level of such a relationship? Are there consequences that cannot be foreseen and may carry long-term spiritual ramifications? These are serious, challenging questions and there are no easy answers.

NOTES

- (1) James Webb *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Works of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), p. 332.
- (2) In a study reported in *Yoga Journal* (July/August 1985, pp. 26-28), Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield interviewed a sample of spiritual teachers from a variety of traditions about their sexuality. Almost three-quarters reported that they were sexually active while the rest were celibate. Of the teachers who were sexually active, 87% said that they had had at least one sexual relationship with one or more students. One of the most striking findings of the survey was that many spiritual teachers were no more enlightened or conscious about their sexuality than the average person. There were heterosexuals, homosexuals, bisexuals, exhibitionists, fetishists, monogamists and polygamists. There were teachers who were celibate and happy and those who were celibate and miserable. There were teachers who were married and monogamous and those who had had many clandestine affairs. Some teachers were promiscuous and hid it; others were promiscuous and open about it.

- (3) G.I. Gurdjieff *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson: An Objectively Impartial Criticism of the Life of Man* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950), pp. 794-795.
- (4) Gurdjieff discusses the misuse of sexual energy in extended conversations with his students recorded by P.D. Ouspensky in *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), pp. 257-259.
- (5) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), pp. 254-255.
- (6) John G. Bennett *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 223-224.
- (7) G.I. Gurdjieff *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson: An Objectively Impartial Criticism of the Life of Man* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1959), p. 1008.
- (8) G.I. Gurdjieff *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson: An Objectively Impartial Criticism of the Life of Man* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950), p. 1008.
- (9) Fritz Peters *Balanced Man: A Look at Gurdjieff Fifty Years Later* (London: Wildwood House, 1979), p. 43.
- (10) James Webb *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Works of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), p. 419.
- (11) John G. Bennett *Witness: The Autobiography of John G. Bennett* (Tucson: Omen Press, 1974), p. 258.
- (12) John G. Bennett *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 231-232.
- (13) Paul Beekman Taylor, whose mother Edith Taylor had a relationship with Gurdjieff that produced a child, attempted to constitute Gurdjieff's family tree through available records and personal communications. In *Gurdjieff's America* (Lighthouse Editions, 2004, pp. xiv-xv), he identified at least seven of Gurdjieff's children, six of whom could be conclusively confirmed: Svetlana (Olga Ivanovna Milalova), Nikolai (Elizaveta de Stjernval), Michel (Jeanne de Salzmann), Sophia or "Dushka" (Jessmin Howarth), Sergei (Lily Galumnian) and Eve (Edith Taylor). Interestingly, each of the mothers were pupils of Gurdjieff and some were married at the time.
- (14) James Webb *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Works of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), p. 332.

- (15) John G. Bennett *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 232.
- (16) James Webb *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Works of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), pp. 331-332.
- (17) Jack Kornfield “Sex Lives of the Gurus” *Yoga Journal* July/August, 1985, p. 28.
- (18) Many high profile spiritual teachers were revealed to have hidden sex lives and exploitive relationships with some of their students in published reports which surfaced in the last 30 years:
- Swami Muktananda: William Radamar “The Secret Life of Swami Muktananda” *The CoEvolution Quarterly* Winter, 1983
 - Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh: James Gordon *The Golden Guru: The Strange Journey of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh* Stephen Greene Press, 1987
 - Swami Rama: Katharine Webster “The Case Against Swami Rama of the Himalayas” *Yoga Journal* November/December, 1990
 - Jiddu Krishnamurti: Radha Sloss *Lives in the Shadow with J. Krishnamurti* Bloomsbury, 1991
 - Kalu Rinpoche: June Campbell *Traveller in Space: In Search of Female Identity in Tibetan Buddhism* George Braziller, 1996
 - Richard Baker: Michael Downing *Shoes Outside the Door: Desire, Devotion and Excess at the San Francisco Zen Center* Counterpoint, 2001
 - Maezumi Roshi: Anne Cushman “Under the Lens: An American Zen Community in Crisis” *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, Fall, 2003
 - Chögyam Trungpa and Özel Tendzin: Jeremy Hayward *Warrior-King of Shambhala: Remembering Chögyam Trungpa* Wisdom Publications, 2008
 - Da Free John: William Patterson “Franklin Jones to Adi Da Samraj” *The Gurdjieff Journal*, No. 49, 2009
 - Sri Chinmoy: Jayanti Tamm *Cartwheels in a Sari: A Memoir of Growing Up Cult* Harmony Books, 2009
- (19) Jack Kornfield “Sex Lives of the Gurus” *Yoga Journal* July/August, 1985, p. 28.
- (20) Longtime Zen student Perle Besserman writes in *A New Zen for Women* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007, p. 2) that:

In the name of our spiritual quest . . . we surrendered to archaic patriarchal traditions (initially without complaint) by knuckling under and becoming handmaidens, caretakers, and/or concubines to our male teachers. Throwing away all our intellectual questioning and hard-won independence, impelled by the mistaken notion that we were “killing the ego,” we bowed our heads and submitted our better judgement to the enlightened minds of our masters.