

**GEORGE IVANOVITCH
GURDJIEFF:**

**MAN'S AWAKENING
AND
THE PRACTICE
OF
REMEMBERING ONESELF.**

by Henri Tracol

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GEORGES IVANOVITCH GURDJIEFF. Yes, I did indeed know this man. I was among those who, during the German occupation of France, frequented his modest apartment off the Avenue des Ternes in Paris. Others have described the sumptuous 'feasts of friends' to which we were bidden several times a week and which, to say the least, were incongruous in those sparse times.

To see him in the early morning busying himself in getting the rarest and most exotic provisions the market could produce and preparing with such care, on an old charcoal stove, his felicitous and audacious banquets, was to realise what importance he attached to the patriarchal custom of welcoming guests. It was his way of enabling us to experience, amid the turmoil, of contradictory reactions that such hospitality inevitably aroused in us at such a period, the exceptional character of those hours—so remote from our ordinary lives—that we spent with him. And the subtle flavour of his dishes and the vodka in which the famous 'toasts to the idiots' were drunk, presaged, on another level, that special nourishment which we could receive only from him.

'Potlatch'¹ some people called it, and not without reason. There is no doubt at all that in this generous display of hospitality there was an element of provocation. And later we shall have occasion to return to this question. But what was the challenge implicit in this largesse? What summons lay within it, as it were disguised? All this was difficult to understand. There we were, time after time, back at his side, returning as

¹ 'Potlach': a tribal feast given by a chieftain for the express purpose of challenging his guests. This custom, originally found among the Kwakiutl Indians of British Columbia, is considered by many anthropologists to be one of the main features of what they are pleased to call 'primitive mentality'.

prodigal children to a father until then unknown – astonished to be there, yet feeling that it was the most natural thing in the world and, at the same time – it must be admitted – a little uneasy at our inability to grasp the reason why. For if he accepted us as his children what was he likely to expect from us in return? Nothing, it seemed, except, as a first step, to open our eyes and recognise him as indeed our father.

At this point, I am tempted to recall his massive presence, the serene power, at once formidable and reassuring, which emanated from his whole being – his bearing, his gestures, his manner. I can still hear his voice resounding in me, arousing echoes that are ever fresh and new. Above all, I find myself standing before him, his eyes in mine, confronting the exacting benevolence of his gaze. Exactng, yes, and kindling with fire and often merciless. He seemed to divine the best as well as the worst in us and, being an expert in such matters, he smiled. That smile was ironic and compassionate but quite without indulgence. Nothing escaped him. We felt that he would not hesitate to show himself as pitiless to 'mine own executioner' which, without yet knowing it, we ourselves were. Here, indeed, was the real meaning of love.

He listened and invited us to declare ourselves. But sentimentality and maudlin beneficence had no part in him. On this point he was utterly unequivocal. To be indulgent was not his role. His language was rough, his tone sometimes violent, his comments could be brutal, his mimicry and gestures all too eloquent. And his sudden resumption of affability could be even more wounding. In short, he did not spare us.

There is no lack of material to illustrate this uncompromising side of his nature. But all this belongs to the past.

I knew this man, I said just now. But was I not, more or less wittingly, lying? Who can say of any man that he has really known him?

Charity, as the proverb reminds us, should begin at home and, properly speaking, one's knowledge of man begins with oneself. It is only in the measure that I know myself that I can find again the mark of Gurdjieff's passing footprint in me – the trace of the impressions that, according to where I was in myself during the nine years I was near him, he left in me – and realise what has become of these impressions in relation to what I myself have become.

The image of the same man is inevitably different for everyone who comes into contact with him, and since the image is necessarily created by the beholder, it is subject to change and fluctuates according to the beholder's idiosyncracies. It would be fruitless, therefore, from various personal reminiscences, subjective and fragmentary as they are, to attempt to reconstruct what could only be the robot-portrait of a ghost.

If we are seeking Gurdjieff it is not in this direction that we shall find him. There are other indications that can better orientate us in our search, and questions that need to be asked. Is it not a fact, for instance, that for a number of our contemporaries the encounter with this man was the major event in their lives? Even when some of them later drifted away, were they not secretly still intrigued, still asking themselves if all they had experienced had truly happened and whether they had really lived through this period in their lives? And was it not common to us all, that sense of having let slip through our fingers everything that was offered us? What we came looking for in Gurdjieff was not, after all, the man. It was the Master.

Or, to put it more clearly (for nothing could be

worse at this juncture than to create artificial distinctions) it was the man in his quality of Master. At the risk of overstating my case let me tell you of an experience which accurately bears on this ambiguity, an experience that was shared by someone who is present tonight.

Monsieur Gurdjieff had invited the two of us to lunch in the Rue des Colonels-Renard, and we found ourselves alone with him – a rare enough event and one not to be missed. I arrived, full of burning questions, and found him so benevolent, so manifestly disposed to listen that I watched eagerly for the first opportunity to put them to him. But the opportunity never came.

Apparently, he realised my impatience and proceeded to play with me as a cat plays with a mouse. He was disarmingly gentle and benign but the moment he sensed that I was ready to return to the charge, he ingeniously side-tracked me, either with some malicious comment or a pithy anecdote, or by challenging me to detect a specific flavour or to guess the exact quantity of spices used in a certain dish he had devised for our special benefit.

I was at a loss to understand where all these manoeuvres were leading. My questions suddenly lost all their weight. Never shall I forget his look of amusement as he watched the skirmishes of the battle surging in me, nor my feelings of frustration and distress that were nevertheless permeated by a strange gratitude for this lesson. When at length I found myself once more out in the street, I felt like Parsifal in the desert waste after the Fisher King's castle had vanished.

Who among us did not suffer from this 'Parsifal complex' – as I was pleased to call it from then on –

during those wonderfully rich years when so much was given and so little really received?

There is certainly nothing new in this. Even so, it is a serious matter – all the more serious when the voice we knew not how to listen to is now silenced.

After the death of a Master, what becomes of his disciples and the teaching he has transmitted to them? It depends. What kind of a Master do we speak of here and what kind of disciple? If, when the bell tolls, a man's disciples inaugurate a cult, become sectarian or fanatical, freeze his thought and codify his slightest utterance – can such a situation relate to a real Master?

But when he who has gone has taken care, during his lifetime, to warn his followers of the danger of any kind of crystallisation and the necessity of putting everything in question, even at the risk of leaving them in a continuing dilemma – this is a very different matter.

The writer, Margaret Anderson, quotes the sombre reflection of a former 'Gurdjieffian'.

'It was Gurdjieff's failure,' it says, 'that he never trained a single disciple who was capable of understanding what was expected of him.'

Margaret Anderson hastens to put this in doubt when she asserts that she knew 'at least three people fully trained to transmit the essence of Gurdjieff's system, one among whom had worked with him for more than thirty years and had been charged by him to continue his teaching after his death'.

But we must go further. If it is true that the tree is known by its fruit (and who will deny that this is so?), it is too often forgotten that only a true gardener understands trees and fruit. Who will pretend to be an expert here? And where can such a one be found? There will be no lack of candidates for this role, prom-

ising or unpromising, as the case may be. But their knowledge, for the most part, will be hearsay.

A true gardener's first care is to make sure that the tree is still alive and capable of bearing fruit. He will not be disconcerted when one bough fails and another matures, for he knows that he is not here dealing with a diagram or a botanical chart but with life itself. The gardener of men, if we may so put it, knows well that he himself has created nothing, he has merely dug the ground, planted the tree, hoed, watered and pruned – all this after taking into account the nature of the soil, the atmospheric conditions, the climate and the prevailing wind. And if he has taken the precaution of training certain assistants, they will know, when one day he has to leave them, how to watch over the tree that is now in their keeping.

Is it, moreover, so difficult for us to realise that there must inevitably be long years of struggle between 'seeing what is expected of us' and being able in some measure to put it into practice? This fact – that the way is long – accounts for many defections.

Furthermore, is it, in the last analysis, so difficult to accept the obvious – that Gurdjieff would have failed in his most essential task had he, in fact, 'trained a disciple' capable of understanding *once and for all* what life itself, and his own deepest being, would unceasingly exact from him to the very end?

These questions show us without any doubt how far we are today from understanding the concept of Master.

In this connection, let me say how sorry I was not to be able to come back from the United States in time

for the report, given in this series *l'Homme et la Connaissance*, of the fruitful and serious study undertaken by the review *Hermes* on this crucial subject. The fourth issue of this review – which I cannot too much praise – makes the point that once the nature of a Master is recognised according to traditional indications – that is, as 'an incarnation of consciousness' – the emphasis is laid on his *function* and not on his personality.

This, without question, is the only true perspective. One could speak, in vague terms, of his 'message' or, in a sense more dogmatic than spiritual, of his mission. But to underline the fact that he is there for a purpose, that he has something to do, an exacting task to accomplish, immediately gives us the possibility of a different understanding. One step further, and the Master will appear to us not only as having a precise role to play in a particular context but, in the long run, as the embodiment of the role itself.

Indeed, the Master is one with his function. It can even be said that he *is* the function, the function made man.

But what is the essence of this many-faceted function that forever eludes our grasp?

You know, or at least can surmise, the answer. It is suggested in the title given to the subject we are studying this evening. The master-function is that of Bodhidharma whose role was to waken the sleeper. The Master is the Awakener.

Yes. The Master embodies awakening.

But who is awakened? From what, and to what?

The Master awakens those who themselves wish to wake up. He rouses them from their sleep, awakes them to Being, to Reality, to Life.

Everything has to start with an encounter. But who is it that desires this encounter? An event of this kind

cannot be entirely due to chance. It implies at least that one is ready for it in one way or another. Otherwise, even if the encounter takes place, the necessary contact cannot be made.

We cannot speak of a Master without disciples any more than of disciples without a Master. What makes a Master is not only his power to transmit the truth he himself has received; it is also the fact that there are those that await him.

René Daumal, Luc Dietrich and their fellowsearchers were properly qualified to be disciples for they were hungry and athirst. Their search for the truth was based on an essential dissatisfaction, a profound unease and a particular suffering brought about by not really being what they were, nor what they felt themselves called to be. The sleepers were tossing in their beds, fumbling for the light.

Unless there is someone at hand to shake them, only those sleepers who really wish to wake will be woken. As for the others – well, there is no sounder sleeper than the man who does not want to wake up.

And from where does this wish to awake arise? Something must glimmer under the cinders, some embers still be glowing. Awakening must smoulder under the ashes of the dreams of him who seeks to awake.

This is the prime mystery, the fundamental enigma. For it is as if awakening were already there, watching for the propitious moment to shake the sleeper.

But there are few who know how to recognise the nature of this waking dream which is our substitute for life.

The old Taoist Master, Chang Tzu, well understood this when he asked – 'Is life not a dream?

'There are some who, when awakened from a happy

dream, are desolate. Others, delivered from an uneasy dream, rejoice. In either case, so long as the dream lasted they believed in its reality.

'So it is with the great awakening, death, after which we say of life that it was nothing but a long dream. But, among the living, there are few who understand this. Almost everyone believes himself to be awake. Some are convinced that they are kings, others that they are paupers. You and I, all of us dream. I who tell you that you dream, I, too, dream my dream.'

For the moment let us be content with this brief reference to Chang Tzu, lest some Taoist in exile should come along claiming to be the begetter of Gurdjieff's teaching, as indeed happened recently when, almost simultaneously, a theologian of the Eastern Christian Church and a 'Sufi' under mandate from a secret brotherhood in the Middle East, made the same assertion.

Be that as it may, the sleep which Gurdjieff speaks of as the permanent condition of the man who believes himself to be awake, is a kind of hypnotic trance in which he is imprisoned by the power of the imagination – that power which to the end of life opposes his awakening and the possibility of seeing himself for what he is.

As to the final aim of Awakening, what can I say that any serious searcher does not know already? Although it has many diverse aspects, the mountain has only one summit.

In alluding to Being, Reality, Life, let me not go babbling on, like one drunk with words. Their inner resonance is not the same for all of us and each can get intoxicated in his own way. This is not our object.

It is, rather, to confront a concept on which we may, I hope, find ourselves at one – the idea of *return*.

Awakening is not the conquest of a state of higher consciousness. It is a movement, repeatedly attempted and repeatedly frustrated, of a return to the consciousness of *what is*.

Even the most fleeting glimmer of consciousness carries the promise of a participation in All that Exists, 'out of which, by division and differentiation', as Gurdjieff says, 'springs the diversity of all observable phenomena'.

But let us not dally with words that lend themselves all too easily to pseudo-metaphysical speculations. Seen in its true spiritual perspective, Gurdjieff's teaching is essentially *practical*.

And since we seek to comprehend the function of Awakening as it appears in a Master we should now try to understand how it proceeds.

Is it not his first concern to assemble or create the best possible conditions for awakening? Nor should we forget that he himself is part of these conditions, he is integral to them, or rather, he deliberately puts himself under their sway. He is, in fact, the central condition towards which others gravitate.

If we understand this we may be less astonished by the freedom with which Gurdjieff juggled with these conditions. For to him, it seems, all means were good. The simplest and most evident was his own presence—the silent influence he exercised on all who came to him, which sometimes assumed a very direct form, as a sort of osmosis.

But he had many other means up his sleeve, indirect and, to outward appearances, negative.

For example, he never hesitated to arouse doubts about himself by the kind of language he used, by his calculated contradictions and by his behaviour — to such a point that people around him, particularly those

who had a tendency to worship him blindly, were finally obliged to open their eyes to the chaos of their reactions.

Awakening implies a rupture in the thread of continuity, a change of levels, an interval between two completely different states. A shock is necessary to ensure the passage from one state to the other.

This shock could be brought about by Gurdjieff in all sorts of ways — by an abrupt change of attitude, by direct provocation or an unexpected smile, by a redoubling of exacting requirements or a sudden mollifying gesture.

Naturally, all these methods presuppose the existence of a science, of a gifted hand and a consummate artistry on the part of the manipulator. We should be wary of Sorcerer's Apprentices, who imagine they can follow on and imitate their masters! Sooner or later they have to give up or else learn to adapt. Such capacities cannot be transmitted, even to those who may be qualified to receive them. They have to be found for oneself, adjusted to one's own capacities and made to accommodate to our constantly changing circumstances.

In any case, Gurdjieff's teaching was as far away as it is possible to get from all didactic formalism. With him, in him, doctrine and method formed a close, indissoluble union. His refusal to meet our expectations of a 'teaching' couched in orderly terms and following a 'rational' sequence, was in itself a lesson. He had the art of eluding questions and equally of illuminating a subject, as with a flash of lightning, when we had given up all hope of an answer.

He spoke of his 'system' and opposed all systematization.

He would put all his strength of emphasis upon a certain aspect and a moment later sweep it away in

favour of its opposite.

When he heard anyone piously repeating his own words he would angrily deny having uttered such stupidities.

Here we come to a point that has to be very clearly understood. It is no part of the Master's role to take over the disciple's effort of understanding; the latter, and he alone, must make it for himself. The shocks, suggestions and situations calculated to provoke the disciple's awakening are there solely to prepare and train him to do without his master, to go forth under his own steam as soon as he shows himself capable of doing so.

By its very nature, the inner search is inevitably an individual matter. The suggestion is put, the call is made. The rest is up to each one of us.

On the one hand – sleep, absence, forgetfulness; on the other, awakening, presence and remembering oneself. These are the basic elements of the problem. Each must make of them what he can.

But what does it mean to remember oneself?

Without launching into a lengthy dissertation let me, nevertheless, at this point, try to dispel some possible misconceptions.

If we have chosen this theme above all others to elaborate upon, it is because the Practice of Remembering Oneself is the master key to Gurdjieff's teaching. It is the Alpha and Omega, the threshold that must be passed at the outset and crossed and recrossed time and again. It is also the 'ground', as it were, of complete realisation; any man capable of reaching this point would comprehend in their entirety all the inner

and outer aspects of his own make-up. He would be completely himself and able eventually to take his true place in the universe.

It must also be said that remembering oneself admits of an infinite number of approaches. It can be looked at from many and varied angles, it has certain definite degrees and stages and there is always more in it than we can ever grasp.

Yet, beneath all its multiple forms we can savour again and again the unique taste of this fundamental experience. Nothing else matters and it is because this fact is not sufficiently realised that so many discordant notes are heard.

There is a time for everything – for meditation with doors and eyelids closed, and for plunging with eyes wide open into the vortex of life. Crystallisation, the making of arbitrary oppositions, the tendency towards dissociation, wrong timing – all these are obstacles; so, too, are over-activity when calm is called for and retreat into silence when it is time to speak.

I would add that although the ability to remember oneself is our birthright, it needs first to be discovered and thereafter cultivated.

Lacking such special work, it will wither away. It is necessary, therefore – without exhausting oneself in fruitless efforts, but at the same time never giving up – quietly to try to develop this capacity by the frequency, duration and intensity of our attempts and by increasing their breadth and depth.

What does it mean to remember oneself?

Here have I been working at this practice for more than a quarter of a century and I have to admit that I feel as incapable now as I was at the beginning of describing it to my own complete satisfaction.

I will even go so far as to say that I am even *less* cap-

able than I was at first. For at the outset it seemed to me that I could clearly understand what it was all about. But I had quickly to disabuse myself of this idea. The tentative attempts to remember myself soon swept away my cherished assumption that I understood, and I plunged each time into an even deeper abyss of incomprehension.

I was not alone in this predicament. Indeed the abyss was very densely populated! We clung to each other as drowning men are said to cling to straws. But our good Master, taking a malicious pleasure in our plight, even to the extent of making it even more difficult, never failed, at the propitious moment, to ask – with what perfidious wisdom! – the most innocent question in the world.

‘When you remember yourself, what exactly is it that you remember?’ We were stupified at such a bolt from the blue. Our heads were awlirl with conflicting thoughts.

How could I, or anyone else, know ‘exactly’ if it was only by fleeting moments that I could snatch myself away from my perpetual dream of myself; only by intuition that I could guess at my latent possibilities and experience my lack of unity, coherence and any permanent or effective being? And if all this was experienced simply by default, as it were, was not this reducing the whole thing to absurdity?

But these are mere empty words. In this effort, all that can be known for certain is that I remember *nothing*. There is nothing that, without any possible doubt, I can call myself. Am I, then, nothing?

And yet, there is further evidence that cannot be denied. It is this – that whether or not it be active in me, the possibility is given me to become aware, at certain moments, of my own presence: I, here, now.

This, when I experience it, is accompanied by a strangely familiar taste, a particular sensation that might be called ‘genuinely’ subjective. It is, quite simply, I. I recognise myself. I remember myself. I.

Inevitably, this inner presence disappears. I lose it and I forget it. Then I find it again. I remember it – or, to be more accurate, it remembers me.

‘To awake. To die. To be born.’

Caught on the horns of my dilemma – on one side the recognition of my impotence and nothingness and on the other the certainty of this constantly renewed power of being – I am reminded of this saying, so dear to Gurdjieff.

‘To awake. To die. To be born.’

Faced with such a stumbling-block, such an enigma, I am tempted, as so many others have been, to abandon the game rather than argue endlessly with myself or else fall back on compromises.

But if I persevere – deliberately – by accepting to face it again and again; if I oblige myself to deepen my insight into the paradoxes of my inner situation, there may await me, at the end of this long tunnel, a very different prospect; a vision, and a new question – or the old question transformed.

I remember myself.

Who is this ‘I’? Who is ‘Myself’?

Who?

Let us envisage a rider on his horse, cantering along the side of the mountain. ‘I’ is the rider, ‘Myself’ the horse; ‘I’ this individual essence, this potential being, ‘Myself’ this power of functional manifestation.

But the vision fades all too quickly.

My horse, because of his faulty education and the mass of influences to which he has been subjected—and both of these aggravated by neglect — has become a monster of egoism. He has been badly broken in, obviously — for, lo and behold, if he is not at this very moment perching on the shoulders of his rider and crushing him under his weight! Indeed, deprived of my mount, 'I' am no longer a rider—not even a pedestrian, for 'I', of myself, have no means of locomotion.

Once again, I remember myself. Order is again established and the vision reappears. Now the 'I' no longer dreams, for the rider is once more in the saddle. With his hand securely on the rein, his mount will have no chance of straying down the path that leads to the precipice. Wide awake, the rider keeps an eye on 'Myself', the horse, and guides him unflinching along the ridge. The one keeping watch, the other carrying the watcher, they make a complete whole. Thus related, they will go far.

And yet, the question remains. 'I', 'Myself', a single being — but 'Who' is this being? Who am I?

The urge to know and to experience what I am so that I may become it more truly — that is the question which, all unknown to me, has never ceased to resound in the secret depths of my being.

To be able to grapple with the evidence one needs to be very simple. To the question 'Who?' there can only ever be an echo — 'Me'. But this 'Me' is unfathomable. To us, who are always so ready to reduce to a common denominator that which belongs to infinity — this is precisely what is so difficult to accept.

It is true, nevertheless, that this question of 'Me'

passes understanding and it is fair to say that my head, quite legitimately, finds itself unable immediately to grasp this fact. It wants to go on searching. Its role, after all, is to deal with ideas, to elaborate the picture I have of myself which needs to be sufficiently stable and self-affirming to stand up to the host of impressions that constantly assail it.

Does this mean, then, that nothing of a better quality is available to the mind? If it surrenders to something that it realises is beyond its scope and therefore begins to lose hope, is there no other course open to it than to deny and suppress itself?

No. The mind is not the enemy, but rather the victim of the use I make of it. A reversal of this situation — a possibility that is always open — would enable the mind, in close relation with the other supports of human experience, to become the indispensable auxiliary in a general liberation from which the mind itself would benefit.

This reversal of the situation is the fuse that ignites the process we call 'remembering oneself'.

Such an experience can be more or less fugitive and superficial. Even so, I can glimpse in it the possibility of a radical transformation which, if it develops, will affect not only the world of my thought but my whole being.

That, in fact, is what is at stake — an entirely different way of being. My attention is no longer the same, its power, subtlety and mobility increase and at the same time it becomes more comprehensive and alive and mobilises in me latent forces that have hitherto been inert. Again, this attention brings about a change in the capacity and rhythm of certain functions, thus releasing a series of processes by which the global perception I have of myself is intensified, a perception

that is far beyond my ordinary level of sensation and the taste of which is quite unmistakable.

This general upheaval coincides with the emergence of a very intense feeling of renewal, a sense of opening towards and belonging to the world without as well as to the world within, as though, in me, the two were one.

I am now brimming with certitude. What I have just experienced breaks through the narrow confines of my automatism and I am brought under the influence of a certain category of laws which, at my ordinary level of existence, cannot make themselves felt. From now on, supported by this experience, I cease to thrust aside as suspect the desire to study seriously those processes of transformation of energy which the great traditions have set before us as nothing less than cosmic laws.

Henceforward, I am activated, not by mere idle curiosity, but by a legitimate foreshadowing, ampler and more accurate than before, of the possibilities open to me; and a wider understanding of the principles of relativity and analogy in the universe on which rests my hope of inner growth and liberation.

Thus we may say that at each level of existence the manifold components of our being are subjected to implacable laws. For the sleep-walker who spends his life as a 'zombie', as well as for the impenitent dreamer who surrenders himself to the mirages created by an unbridled imagination, the action of these laws spells perpetual enslavement. But he who awakens to himself can recapture, by dint of study and practice, the sense of an inner order and divine the secret by means of which his own energy is redistributed and regulated. So sustained, he may hope to manifest himself increasingly in accordance with his true nature.

And so, what does it mean – to remember myself?

It is up to each one of us to harken to the question without any thought of finding an answer, to carry it within himself – yes, and to live it.