

THE INSTITUTE FOR THE COMPARATIVE STUDY
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GURDJIEFF

Six Introductory Lectures
by
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HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Retyped February 2004 from the original¹ shorthand transcript.

¹ This is a 'gender-neutral' version of the lecture; words or phrases indicating the male gender exclusively have been replaced. Mr. Bennett's sense and meaning has not been altered in any way. Jeff Chaplin, Toronto, March 2004.

We can start this evening with the idea of a human being as a seed. A seed can be looked upon as a storehouse of possibilities. That which is important in a seed is not so much its temporal existence as its eternal pattern. It can die as a seed without actualising its possibilities, or it can germinate and develop to produce a new being. This is the situation with us men and women. We have the possibility of Being. In this lies the significance of our existence, and therefore nothing is more important for us than to study what is involved in becoming a being. We can look upon ourselves as receptacles that hold certain possibilities. If these possibilities develop, a new being will come into existence. This development is not automatic, but depends at least in part upon something that we ourselves have to bring to it. This contribution is what Gurdjieff calls work on oneself.

You may have noticed in reading “In Search of the Miraculous” (p. 10) how, when Ouspensky first met Gurdjieff’s pupils and asked them what was meant by ‘work on oneself,’ they failed to explain what this work consisted in. It is really very difficult to explain, and I am not going to find it very easy tonight. You will see why.

It may help us if we first ask what ‘work’ means in the ordinary sense, that is, as it is understood in physical science. Work is the transformation of energy. Whenever energy is transformed, work is done. But not all work in this sense is useful. For example, an avalanche rolling down the side of a mountain – perhaps destroying villages – does work. The potential energy that was in the mass of the snow on the high level is transformed into energy of movement, and in the end into energy of destruction. Therefore we have to distinguish what is constructive work, and what is work that is no more than an aimless exchange of energy, or even harmful or destructive.

Whenever work is done, there must be a diminution in the quality of energy. But, under certain circumstances, there can also be a conversion of a part of the energy into forms that correspond to higher levels than that from which we started. This well known principle of dynamics applies also to our own inner experience. We humans are so made that there can develop in us a tension that endows us with the possibility of doing work. Through this work, energy of such quality can be produced that from it a new being can come into existence. This is human development or self-creation. We have as our starting point the datum that this transformation depends upon the use that we make of the energy that is already present in us. It is not sufficient that this energy should be converted into work. It must be conscious work, that is conscious labour. This means to separate the fine from the coarse, and it makes possible the appearance of the new and finer Being.

The transformation depends on three principal groups of factors. In the first lecture, I distinguished between three aspects of Reality including our human nature. The first is Function, the second is Being, and the third is Will. Our development involves a transformation of each of the three aspects. There is no one exclusive way by which this transformation can be brought about. I emphasized in my first lecture the need to accustom ourselves to thinking in relative terms. Among other things, this involves discarding the idea of any one, absolute, and sole way to self-perfecting. We must also put away the idea that there is one single goal, the same for all. We see how different seeds give birth to different species of plants, how different conditions of growth result in greater or lesser degrees of perfection. This is an imperfect analogy, for that which we see refers to Function only, whereas our transformation is most significant in the dimensions of Being and Will which we cannot see. Because of these invisible factors, the work of self-perfecting is not always the same. In different aspects and in different stages it can be so different that it needs much experience to see a common thread running through the whole proc-

ess. There is, nevertheless, such a thread. It consists in the separation of fine and coarse. Whenever there is transformation, one result is achieved at the expense of another. This is inherent in the very nature of Time, for it is the separation of that which becomes actual from that which was possible. It is therefore inevitable that whatever comes into existence in Time does so at the expense of something else that fails to come into existence. This can be expressed in another way by saying that whatever is to be established and maintained in Time must somehow or other be paid for. The form of payment can vary greatly from one individual to another. Moreover, each of the several ways of self-perfecting has its own characteristic order in which the payments have to be made. It is by these differences that the various ways open to us are distinguished from one another.

I hope that you will remember this, because I shall speak this evening about one way, that is, one form of work, and I cannot constantly be reminding you that I am speaking of one only, of many possible ways. I do not want you to think that when I assert that it is necessary to work in a certain form, and in a certain order, I mean that this is the only right method, and that every other method is wrong. Such an assertion would be as far as possible from the truth. It is indeed typical of the error that I have called the 'absolutism' of the past Epoch. Every way is right, providing it is honestly followed according to the indications of those who understand it. This does not mean that every way is equally suitable to all people. Some ways that appear easy are really quite impossible except for very few. Other ways that appear difficult are suitable for many more than perhaps realise it. I mention this here only to remove from the start any suggestion that work on oneself must follow for all people a single invariable plan.

Let us try to see what, in general, work on oneself means. I have already referred to the difficulty that arises from our inability to see ourselves for what we are. That which matters most to us is

invisible to us, because we only discern what we do, and not what we are, nor the form of our will. Even in relation to ourselves, all that we can observe and study is what we do, that is, our own functions. This is equally true, whether we are taking note of our outward behaviour or our inner activity of thought, feeling, and so on. The same applies to our knowledge of others. All that we can observe is what they do, that is, their functions. But Function is only one dimension of our nature. There are two other dimensions, one of Being and one of Will. Work on oneself certainly means work on Function, but is also means work for the growth of Being, and for the liberation of Will. It is almost impossible to avoid confusion unless we distinguish between the kinds of work and the stages of work that are involved in this triple process.

You may understand better what I mean if I we examine together what could be called the characteristic scheme of work according to Gurdjieff's Teaching. This starts with the arising of a certain force, a certain state of energy, that gives rise to an impulse towards self-perfecting. With modern people generally, brought up under modern conditions of education, this impulse – if it appears at all – arises in the head. That is to say, we start to think in a certain way. Certain ideas begin to appeal to us, and we come to attach greater importance to them than to others. This is called by Gurdjieff the formation of the 'magnetic centre.' (c.f. "In Search of the Miraculous" pp 200-4). All this builds up a certain predisposition in the functions. It is a new valuation that brings about a fresh arrangement of memories and habits of thought, of feeling and attitude. All this can be expressed by saying that we begin to be concerned with the problem of Reality. When this concern is given shape, through some form of knowledge of what is possible for us, it leads to the formulation of an aim.

The formulation of an aim is the starting point for work. I do not mean that there must of necessity be present a clear understanding of what has occurred. We may not see that we have be-

gun to look in a new direction. We may only feel in ourself an impulse to look for a different way of life. The more clearly we see the direction we wish to go, that is, the more definitely we can formulate our aim, the more productive is our work. Gurdjieff always insisted on this point. He said that the starting point of being human is to have an aim. I spoke about this at the end of the last lecture. The aim itself is not final. It also must undergo transformation. At first we cannot see either what we really want or what is possible for us. Nevertheless, until we do see something, and wish for something, there is no potential energy, and therefore no possibility of productive work.

This leads to the question that we must inevitably ask when we set before ourselves an aim which is really significant for us. We wish to achieve something that at present is lacking in us, and sooner or later we are bound to ask ourselves what is involved in achieving this, and whether we have the means of providing it. At first we must inevitably interpret such questions in functional terms. We ask whether we know what it is necessary to know, in order that the conflict of impulses can be resolved in favour of a definite decision. I ask myself whether or not I have the physical strength to endure what it may be necessary to go through, whether or not my feelings are able to bear what I may have to suffer. All this is an assessment in functional terms. The step that must be made is to relate 'what' and 'how.' What I wish to achieve is my aim, how to achieve it is a question of knowledge.

One part of work on oneself, and at the beginning the only possible part, is connected with Function. For this I must know my own functions, and what is involved in their transformation. This is self-knowledge. Until I have at least some degree of authentic self-knowledge, I have no means of knowing what work is useful and what work is useless or even harmful. Nevertheless, self-knowledge is not everything. As I said in the first lecture, knowledge refers to Function only. Sooner or later, therefore, if the

transformation of Being and Will is to take place, we shall need more than knowledge. Although knowledge is only one factor, it is indispensable. In order to work there must be a separation between active and passive, that is, between the higher and the lower level of energy. The first step towards this separation can only be made through knowledge. If there is present in me a desire to change, I can do nothing until I can recognise what in me favours my aim and what in me resists it. When I set the one against the other, it is the beginning of work on myself. It is through this that there arises in me a choice of 'yes' and 'no' that can result in real change.

So far I have only spoken theoretically. Now we have to enquire in a more practical way what it is that favours and what it is that hinders our development. The favourable or positive factor is my wish to change. This is the force which arises insofar as I really feel that my aim is important for me. It determines the extent to which I am prepared to resist other impulses in order to attain it. Insofar as the resulting force is conscious, it is the positive factor in my work. Against it is set a negative or denying factor. I have referred several times in the course of these lectures to the negative or denying influences in human life. We have to acknowledge the presence in ourselves of denials, and we have to take them into account.

We not only to watch over the growth of the seed, to feed it and take care of it. We have also to remove the weeds that may choke it, and ward off the enemies that may destroy it. These weeds and other enemies exist in us. It is easy to see that they include the impulses of our own egoism, our vanity, our self-love, our suspicions, our fears, our laziness, and so on. Taken together, these are a negative or denying force that opposes the transformation of our Being. It is the force that holds us to what we are. It is not, however, the only enemy of our transformation. There are others that are equally dangerous. There is a second group of fac-

tors connected with illusion, with self-deception, with inability to distinguish the real from the false either inside or outside of us. We do not see things as they are. We cannot, even if we wish to. There is in us an inherent defect that prevents us. We see what is important as unimportant, and what is unimportant can look like a mountain. This is what Gurdjieff calls “the reflecting of Reality in one’s attention upside down.” (“All and Everything” p 1233). What is difficult appears to us to be easy. It is more accurate to say that we take for granted that we can do what is actually impossible for us, whereas what really can be done we imagine to be very hard, if not impossible. Illusions of this kind play a very great part in our life. For example, we think that we can ‘do.’ We imagine that we can direct and arrange the course of our lives – perhaps with difficulty – but at any rate we take for granted that we can, more or less, do what we decide. We quite fail to see that this impossible, and that things never happen as we decide them. All this is part of the illusion in which we live. Closely connected with illusion is the perpetual waste of force by which we pour out our energies into unconscious activities of our functions which give us nothing real or permanent. The waste of energy and opportunities is the chief cause of the sense of frustration into which we fall as soon as the illusion of our ability to ‘do’ is shaken. Illusions, pleasant and unpleasant, imagination and frustration and waste, are a group of negative factors that stand in the way of our possible development. They are different from our egoism and our self-love, but they are no less dangerous.

There is a third group of factors which is less understood than either of these, although it includes perhaps the greatest obstacle to self-perfecting. This is what Gurdjieff calls ‘identification.’ In its simplest form, identification is the tendency that we all have to lose ourselves in everything that we think of feel or do. Another factor in this group is the inner slavery which makes a false relationship with other people, and which Gurdjieff calls ‘inner considering.’ I think it is true to say that no one can hope to

understand what is meant by identification until he or she has seriously grappled with the problem of free will. Theoretical discussions about free will and determinism lead nowhere, because they miss the essential point, which is that we have no freedom of will, not because of deterministic laws, but because we lose ourselves in everything we try to do, and do not realise it. Identification is a very strange form of slavery, because it acts precisely through disguising from us the truth that we are not free. We have the impression that we think what we intend to think, do what we intend to do, and in general that we are stronger than the influences of our environment. In reality, we are much weaker and we are always controlled by something other than our own intention. All this and much besides belongs to the group of factors that constitute the subjectivism of ordinary people, that is, their inability to experience anything objectively, even their own inner states. The strange thing about identification is that it is an act of freedom which produces a state of slavery. It is 'giving up,' surrendering oneself to every accidental influence, and so losing contact with one's own reality. Identification has been recognised and described by the wise of all Epochs, as the chief enemy of prayer and contemplation, the chief obstacle to all intentional doing.

The more clearly we see the nature of the negative influences that act in our lives, the better we can understand the problem that lies before us. All our functions are permeated with these negative factors. To get to know them is no small matter. It requires a struggle to be sincere. It is not sufficient to know theoretically, we must verify and establish the facts. This can only be done by self-study. Whether their nature is clearly recognised or not, every Way for our self-development must take these negative forces into account, and provide means for struggling against them. Sometimes the emphasis is placed on one group, sometimes on another. If too much emphasis is placed on one factor to the exclusion of others, this can result in a one-sided, unbalanced development, leaving behind problems which at a later stage can be more diffi-

cult to solve than if they are looked for and taken into account from the very beginning.

I have spoken about the transformation of energy. It is through surrendering to negative influences that we use destructively the energy that we need for the creation of our own Being. I have spoken, for example, about illusion and self-deception, and all that goes under the name of imagination taken in the negative sense. Self-deception does not stop with the subjective illusion that makes me picture myself other than I really am. There is also the illusion of 'doing.' A great part of our energy goes into useless activity. We do not notice how great a part of our time we spend in activities that produce no positive results, either inward or outward. This refers especially to our thinking activity, by which I mean not only obviously useless day-dreaming, but all the time that we spend in worrying about problems that are either imaginary or insoluble. Most of the energy of our sensation leads nowhere. We are not connected with what we look at, with what we hear, with what we feel, and so the energy which flows into these things produces nothing but waste. We have to see and acknowledge the truth of this. It is part of our work. In some form this issue arises in every way of self-perfecting. Sometimes it can be seen directly, sometimes it is only the consequences that disturb us. It is a great advantage to be able to look below the consequences and see the roots of our negative condition.

Knowledge of negative influences is only one part of self-knowledge. We have also to discover for ourselves and verify the characteristic working of our functions. As you know, Gurdjieff describes the human as a 'three-brained Being.' Modern people, especially modern 'civilized' people, have to a great extent lost the power of co-ordinating the work of their three brains. We tend to identify ourselves with our thinking brain, that is, we regard the awareness of our mental associations as 'self' or 'I.' Analytical psychology has realised that there is much that is deeply significant

for us, of which we are not and cannot be aware with our thinking brain. Nevertheless, in spite of the recognition that unconscious processes have a powerful influence on our lives, we still continue to identify ourselves with our ordinary awareness, to call it 'I,' and say 'I think,' 'I like,' and so on. All the time we refer only to the associations in our heard brain. These go on automatically. They constitute what Sir Grafton Elliot Smith has called the 'thalamo-cortical circulation.' ("The Neural Basis of Thought", Chapter V). They are as mechanical as any other of our bodily processes. By identifying ourselves with them, we lose touch with a higher, more powerful thinking process that is possible for us, and through which we could have contact with Reality.

The mechanicalness of our thinking process is matched by that of our emotional life. Our emotional states are governed by the ever-changing condition of our sympathetic nervous system, over which in our ordinary state of consciousness we have no control at all. Our feelings should be the force in our functional life, but unfortunately we have no power to feel what we choose. We constantly surrender ourselves to the automatism of like and dislike, of attraction and repulsion. Consequently, instead of having feelings which could be a force, we have only emotions, which are a weakness. Finally, there are the energies of our physical organism, arising in our inner instinctive processes and in the mechanism that controls our external movements. We know very little about the uses and the possibilities of these energies. If you continue these studies you will soon see how great a part they can play in our development.

There is much more to be said about human functions. I have only tried to show you that we know very little, and we do not give a practical interpretation even to the little we know. Much has to be done in order to acquire a practical working knowledge of what our functional life is, and what it can become. As it stands it is very unbalanced. In consequence of this, the automatic processes

of thought and emotion which should be instruments of our consciousness, like our hands and feet, become instead the controlling factors in our experience. Our unconscious bodily impulses determine, without our knowing it, the direction our thoughts and emotions will take. You may have read the last chapter of Gurdjieff's "All and Everything" in which he compares a human to an equipage with carriage, horse, and driver. The study of this comparison will help you to understand what I have been saying. In the ordinary human state, we are dragged along by our automatic likes and dislikes, by our hopes and by our fears. These leave us, so far as our thoughts are concerned, in a perpetual daydream, a perpetual round of automatic experiencing, seldom having any contact with Reality.

This then is the first stage of work on oneself. By doing it, we are brought to the recognition that no real aim can ever be achieved so long as our inner life remains without coherence. With the help of this recognition, we can begin to struggle with our own automatism, with the negative processes that absorb our energy. By this work we can bring some order into our functions, but we soon find that even though we may see what has to be done and have a real desire to do it, it is very hard for us to undertake the struggle alone, that is, without the help of others. One reason for this is that we are entangled in that which we are trying to put right. We are machines seeking to remedy the difficulties in their own working. We have inevitably to begin the work in one part of the machine, for example, the thinking brain, and from this to readjust the balance between the different brains or different functions, as these react back on the thinking brain itself. Because we are hindered all the time by the negative influences of which I have been speaking, there is a danger of making mistakes, and losing our way. Therefore we should be wise to seek the guidance of someone who has already passed through the process and knows from his or her own experience what it involves.