

Introduction to  
**THE GURDJIEFF WORK**



*Jacob Needleman*

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## THE GURDJIEFF WORK

It has been nearly a hundred years since G. I. Gurdjieff first appeared in Moscow in 1912, bringing with him a teaching unlike anything known or heard of in the modern world. And although his ideas have since then been explored in hundreds of books and articles, and now exert a significant influence throughout the Western world, both the teaching and the man himself remain essentially as new and unknown, and as astonishing, as when they first appeared.

Gurdjieff's fundamental aim was to help human beings awaken to the meaning of our existence and to the efforts we must make to realize that meaning in the midst of the life we have been given. As with every messenger of the spirit, Gurdjieff's

fundamental intention was ultimately for the sake of others, never only for himself. But when we first encounter the figure of Gurdjieff, this central aspect of his life is often missed. Faced with the depth of his ideas and the inner demands he placed upon himself and upon those who were drawn to him, and becoming aware of the uniquely effective forms of inner work he created, we may initially be struck mainly by the vastness of his knowledge and the strength of his being. But sooner or later what may begin to touch us is the unique quality of selflessness in his actions, the sacrifices he made both for those who came to him, and for all of humanity. We begin to understand that his life was a work of love; and at the same time that word, “love,” begins to take on entirely new dimensions of meaning, inconceivable in the state of what Gurdjieff called *waking sleep*.

In most major cities of the Western world, men and women are now trying to live his teaching. It is not too soon, therefore, to consider what this teaching has

brought or can bring to the world. As human life in our era spirals downward toward dissolution in violence and illusion, one central question rises up before us in the shadow of which all teachings, including the Gurdjieff Work, must now be measured: How can humanity reverse the process leading to its seemingly inevitable self-destruction?

In the face of this question, the heart is restless, but the mind soon falls silent. It is as though the unprecedented crisis of our modern world confounds and all but refutes thousands of years of religious doctrine and centuries of scientific progress. Who now dreams of turning to religion for the answer when it is religion itself that lies so close to the root of war and barbarism? Who dares turn to science for the answer when it is advancing technology, the very fruit of scientific progress, that has so amplified the destructive powers of human egoism? And who imagines that new theories of society, new social programs, new ideologies can do anything more than wrap the falling earth in dreams of flying?

The mind falls silent.

But in that silence something within can awaken. In that moment an entirely new kind of hope can appear. The Gurdjieff Work may in part be understood as the practical, painstaking cultivation of that silence and that hope, that state of embodied awakening to the truth of the human condition in the world and in oneself. The unanswerable question about the fate of humanity and the world is transformed into the question, also unanswerable: What is a human being? Who am I? But it is now a question asked with more of oneself, not only with the mind alone—the mind which, with all its explanations, has so little power to resist the forces of violence and brutality; nor with emotion alone, which, with all its fervor, often ends by making the most sacred of doctrines into instruments of agitation and death. Nor, so the Gurdjieff teaching also shows us, can the question of who and what we are be answered by giving way again and again to the endlessly recurring

obsessions rooted in the physical body. That is to say, the great question of who and what we are cannot be answered by only one part of the whole of ourselves pretending to be the master. This self-deceptive state of the human being is precisely what Gurdjieff meant by mankind's state of waking sleep. In this sleep, he tells us, we are born, live and die, write books, invent religions, build monuments, commit murders, and destroy all that is good.

One thing, and one thing only, is therefore necessary. It is necessary for individual men and women to awaken, to remember Who they are, and then to become Who they really are, to live it in the service of Truth. Without this awakening and this becoming, nothing else can help us.

But it is very difficult. An extraordinary quality of help is needed. To this end, Gurdjieff created what has come to be called the Work.

## The Gurdjieff Work Today

### *The Gurdjieff Foundation*

Before his death in 1949, Gurdjieff entrusted the task of transmitting the teaching to his chief pupil, Jeanne de Salzmann, and a small circle of other pupils in France, England, and America who acknowledged her leadership. Under her guidance, the first centers of the Work were established in Paris, London, New York, and Caracas. Over the past half-century other centers have radiated from them to major cities of the Western world. Most of the groups maintain close correspondence with the principal centers and most have developed under the personal guidance of one or two of the first-generation pupils of Gurdjieff. The general articulation of all these groups is a cooperative one, rather than one based on strictly sanctioned jurisdictional control. There are also groups that no longer maintain close

correspondence with the main body of pupils and operate independently. And there are numerous other organizations led by individuals who claim no historical lineage with either Gurdjieff or his direct pupils. In what follows, we limit ourselves to the teaching as it has been studied and transmitted by groups that may be historically designated as representing the direct Gurdjieff lineage. These groups now exist in each specific location under the name of “The Gurdjieff Foundation,” or, in the United Kingdom, “The Gurdjieff Society.”



A central focus of the Gurdjieff teaching is the awakening to consciousness and the creation of proper communal and psychological conditions that can support this multi-leveled process. For this, a preparatory work is necessary, as stated by Jeanne de Salzmann:

According to Gurdjieff, the truth can be approached only if all the parts which make the human being, the thought, the feeling, and the body, are touched with the same force in a particular way appropriate to each of them—failing which, development will inevitably be one-sided and sooner or later come to a stop. In the absence of an effective understanding of this principle, all work on oneself is certain to deviate from the aim. The essential conditions will be wrongly understood and one will see a mechanical repetition of the forms of effort which never surpass a quite ordinary level.<sup>1</sup>

Gurdjieff gave the name of “self-remembering” to the central state of conscious attention in which the higher force that is available within the human structure makes contact with the functions of thought, feeling, and body. The individual “remembers,” as it were, who and what he really is and is

meant to be, over and above his ordinary sense of identity. This conscious attention is not a function of the mind but is the active conscious force which all our functions of thought, feeling, and movement can begin to obey as the “inner master.”

Consistent with the knowledge behind many contemplative traditions of the world, the practice of the Gurdjieff work places chief emphasis on preparing our inner world to receive this higher attention, which can open us to an inconceivably finer energy of love and understanding.



The Gurdjieff work remains above all essentially an oral tradition, transmitted under specially created conditions from person to person, continually unfolding, without fixed doctrinal beliefs or external rites, as a way toward freeing humanity from the waking sleep that holds us in a kind of hypnotic illusion. The moving life of the tradition thus supports

the individual search and helps to overcome the seemingly universal impulse of resistance or inertia: the tendency toward attachment, and the gradual fixing on partial aspects, institutionalized forms, dogmatic doctrines and a habitual reliance on the known rather than facing and entering the unknown. According to the Gurdjieff teaching, the forms exist only to help discover, incarnate, and elaborate a formless energy of awakening, and without this understanding, the forms of the teaching become an end in themselves and lose their meaning.

At present, the general forms of practice in the Gurdjieff tradition may be characterized as follows:

*Group meetings:* Gurdjieff taught that alone, an individual can do nothing. In group meetings, students regularly come together to participate in a collective atmosphere that is meant to function as a principal means for the transformation of the individual state of consciousness. Although, with the help of more advanced pupils, questions are shared and responded

to in words, the fundamental support of the group is directed to the individual work of facing oneself and consciously recognizing one's own inner lack, until the appearance of a new quality of energy is possible. The more experienced pupils, helping the group as part of their own search, strive to be sensitive not so much to the content of the exchange, but to the process of the developing energy and the mutual teaching that can take place under its influence. In their turn, more advanced pupils just as urgently need to work in groups, and in this way a redefinition of the conventional image of the "leader" is inevitable. At each level of inner work, what has been understood needs to be individually and collectively re-examined and verified in the movement of a dynamic living esoteric school.

The *sacred dances and movements* which Gurdjieff taught were partially a result of his research in the monasteries and schools of Asia, and are of a nature that seems unique in the modern Western world.

In certain respects, they are comparable to sacred dances in traditional religious systems (for example, the 'Cham dances of Tibetan Buddhism or the derwish dances of the Sufis). Like them, the Gurdjieff Movements are based on the view that a series of specific postures, gestures, and movements, supported by an intentional use of melody and rhythm and an essential element of right individual effort, can help to evoke an inner condition that is closer to a more conscious existence, or a state of unity, which can allow an opening to the conscious energy of the Self. The Gurdjieff Movements are now regularly given at major centers of the work by carefully prepared pupils who emphasize the need for exactitude and a special quality of feeling, without which the movements cannot provide the help for which they were brought.

The practice of *sitting* is difficult to characterize apart from observing that, in accordance with the overall aim of the work, it is not a "form" in and of itself, but

is fundamentally a preparation for the inner search within the midst of life. With or without spoken guidance, the aim is ultimately to help individuals search for an embodied presence that sustains the attempt to enter more deeply into an awareness of all the opposing forces constantly moving within the body. Madame de Salzmann gave this special work to her older pupils in the way Gurdjieff had given it at the Prieuré.<sup>2</sup> Later, in the 1960s, when groups had become more advanced, she gradually introduced it more broadly.

*Work in life:* To be able to work in life in the full sense would be considered a very high achievement. The struggle to be “present” in everyday life constitutes a major aspect of Gurdjieff’s teaching, a struggle which leads to a full engagement in the duties and rewards of human life, now and here. In this context, Gurdjieff created conditions to help his pupils experience the fundamental practice of self-observation. Through such experience, a man or woman can begin

to come into contact with an ever-deepening sense of inner need which allows an opening to a powerful conscious influence within oneself. According to Gurdjieff, without a relationship to this more central aspect of oneself, everyday life is bound to be an existential prison, in which the individual is held captive, not so much by the so-called forces of modernity, as by the parts of the self that cannot help but react automatically to the influences of the world. The help offered by the special conditions of the work is therefore understood not as replacing our life in the world, but as enabling us, in the course of time, to live life with authentic understanding and full participation.

Briefly, the movement toward awakening, which is meant to be supported by the ideas and these forms of practice, becomes in fact an organic process in life and movement, and for that reason, dogmatic approaches will inevitably fail. The process of awakening requires not only an understanding of the constituent forces and laws governing man's psyche and

actions, but also a deep sensitivity and appreciation of individual subjective needs and conditions. In other words, for an effective guidance, the principle of relativity must be recognized in the transmission of the teaching: individuals must be approached according to their respective levels of development and experience. Gurdjieff might have stressed one view to a student at a certain level of understanding and quite another view when that student had reached another level. This might give the appearance of contradiction, but in fact it was consistent in applying only those aspects of the whole teaching truly necessary at a given moment. The same principle applies to the ideas, some of which seemed more accessible at one period while others still remained to be revealed in the unfolding life of the teaching.<sup>3</sup>

For example, the work of “self-observation” acquires a completely new meaning as the developing attention lets go of its effort, joining and willingly submitting to a higher conscious seeing. The action that might take place in this condition—in the quiet

of meditation or even in outer action—reflects the simultaneous dual nature of both an impersonal consciousness and a personal attention that has a new capacity to manifest and act in the world. The qualities of both these aspects of consciousness and attention are quite unknown to the ordinary mind. In this new relationship of individual attention and a higher impersonal consciousness, a man or woman can become a vessel, serving another energy which can act through the individual, an energy which at the same time transforms the materiality of the body at the cellular level. This understanding of inner work introduced by Jeanne de Salzmann can be found today in many of the Gurdjieff Foundation groups worldwide.

## The Life of Gurdjieff and the Principal Ideas

### *The Early Years*

What we know of Gurdjieff's early life is based mainly on what he has revealed in the autobiographical portions of his own writings, especially *Meetings with Remarkable Men*. Although there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of his account, the fact remains that the principal aim of Gurdjieff's writings was not to provide historical information, but to serve as a call to awakening and as a continuing source of guidance for the inner search that is the *raison d'être* of his teaching. His writings are cast in forms that are directed not only to the intellectual function but also to the emotional and even subconscious sensitivities that, all together, make up the whole of the human psyche. His writings therefore demand and support the search for

a finer quality of self-attention on the part of the reader, failing which the thought contained in them is unverifiable at its deeper levels.

Gurdjieff was born, probably in 1866, to a Greek father and an Armenian mother in Alexandropol (now Gumri), Armenia, a region where Eastern and Western cultures mixed and often clashed. The environment of his childhood and early adolescence, while suggesting a near-biblical patriarchal culture, is also marked by elements not usually associated with these cultural traditions. The portrait Gurdjieff draws of his father, a well-known *ashokh*, or bard, suggests some form of participation in an oral tradition stretching back to humanity's distant past. At the same time, Gurdjieff speaks of having been exposed to all the forms of modern knowledge, especially experimental science, which he explored with an impassioned diligence. The influence of his father and certain of his early teachers contrasts very sharply with the forces of modernity that he experienced as a child. This contrast, however, is not easily describable. The

difference is not simply that of ancient versus modern worldviews or patterns of behavior, though it certainly includes that. The impression, rather, is that these “remarkable men” of his early years manifested a certain quality of personal presence or being. That the vital difference between human beings is a matter of their level of being became one of the fundamental elements in Gurdjieff’s teaching and is not reducible to conventional psychological, behavioral, or cultural typologies.

*Meetings with Remarkable Men* shows us the youthful Gurdjieff journeying to monasteries and schools of awakening in remote parts of Central Asia and the Middle East, searching for a knowledge that neither traditional religion nor modern science by itself could offer him. The clues to what Gurdjieff actually found, inwardly and outwardly, on these journeys are subtly distributed throughout the narrative, rather than laid out in doctrinal form. Discursive statements of ideas are relatively rare in the book, and where they are given it is with a deceptive

simplicity that serves to turn the reader back to the teachings woven in the narrative portions of the text. Repeated readings of *Meetings with Remarkable Men* yield the realization that Gurdjieff meant to draw our attention to the search itself, and that what he intended to bring to the West was not only a new statement of what has been called “the primordial tradition,” but the knowledge of how to conduct a search within the conditions of contemporary life. For Gurdjieff, as we shall see, the search itself, when rightly conducted, emerges as the principal spiritualizing force in human life, what one observer has termed “a transforming search,” rather than “a search for transformation.”

As has been noted, Gurdjieff began his work as a teacher in Russia around 1912, on the eve of the civil war that led to the Russian Revolution. In 1914, he was joined by the philosopher P. D. Ouspensky and soon after by the well-known Russian composer Thomas de Hartmann. Ouspensky was later to produce *In Search of the Miraculous*, by far the best

account of Gurdjieff's teaching written by a pupil or anyone other than Gurdjieff, while de Hartmann, working in a unique collaboration with Gurdjieff, would produce what has come to be called the "Gurdjieff/de Hartmann music." Soon after, as the Revolution drew near and the coming breakdown of civil order began to announce itself, Gurdjieff and a small band of dedicated pupils, including Thomas and Olga de Hartmann, made perilous journeys to the Crimea and Tiflis (now Tbilisi). There they were joined by Alexandre and Jeanne de Salzmann, the former a well-known artist and theatrical designer and the latter a teacher of the Dalcroze system of rhythmic dance who was later to emerge as Gurdjieff's greatest pupil and the principal guide under whom his teaching continued to be passed on after his death in 1949. It was in Tiflis, in 1919, that Gurdjieff organized the first version of his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man.

The account by Ouspensky and notes by other pupils published in 1973 under the title *Views from*

*the Real World* show that in the Moscow period, before the journey out of Russia, Gurdjieff tirelessly articulated a vast body of ideas about man and the cosmos. It is appropriate here to interrupt the historical narrative in order to summarize some of these formulations, which played an important role in the subsequent development of his teaching, even as Gurdjieff changed the outer forms and certain inner emphases in his direct work with pupils. Also, to a limited extent, these ideas throw light on developments that came later, some of which have given rise to unnecessary confusion in the minds of outside observers. One caveat, however, is necessary. If in his writings Gurdjieff never sought merely to lay out a philosophical system, all the more in his direct work with pupils did he mercilessly resist the role of guru, preacher, or schoolteacher. *In Search of the Miraculous* shows, with considerable force, that Gurdjieff always gave his ideas to his pupils under conditions designed to break through the crust of emotional and intellectual associations which, he

taught, shut out the voice of conscience in man. The often awesome precision with which he was able to break through that crust—ways of behaving with his pupils that were, in turn, shocking, mysterious, frightening, magical, delicately gentle, and clairvoyant—remains one of the principal factors around which both the Gurdjieff legend and the misunderstandings about him have arisen, as well as being the element most written about by those who came in touch with him, and the most imitated in the current age of “new religions.”

### *The Gurdjieff Ideas*

It is true enough to say that Gurdjieff’s system of ideas is complex and all-encompassing, but one must immediately add that their formulation is designed to point us toward a central and simple power of apprehension that Gurdjieff taught is merely latent within the human mind and that is the only power

by which we can actually understand ourselves in relation to the universe. In this sense, the distinction between doctrine and method does not entirely obtain in Gurdjieff's teaching. The formulations of the ideas are themselves meant to have a special action on the sense of self and may therefore be regarded as part of the practical method. This characteristic of Gurdjieff's teaching reflects what Gurdjieff perceived as the center of gravity of the contemporary subjectivity—the fact that modern civilization is lopsidedly oriented around the thinking function. Modern man's illusory feeling of "I" is to a great extent built up around his thoughts and therefore, in accordance with the level of the pupil, the ideas themselves are meant to affect this false sense of self. For Gurdjieff, the deeply penetrating influence of scientific thought in modern life was not something merely to be deplored, but to be understood as the channel through which the eternal Truth must first find its way toward the human heart.

Man, Gurdjieff taught, is an unfinished creation. He is not fully Man, considered as a cosmically unique being whose intelligence and power of action mirror the energies of the source of life itself. On the contrary, man, as he is, is an automaton. Our thoughts, feelings, and deeds are little more than mechanical reactions to external and internal stimuli. In Gurdjieff's terms, we cannot *do* anything. In and around us, everything "happens" without the participation of an authentic consciousness. But human beings are ignorant of this state of affairs because of the pervasive and deeply internalized influence of culture and education, which engrave in us the illusion of autonomous conscious selves. In short, man is asleep. There is no authentic *I am* in his presence, but only a fractured egoism which masquerades as the authentic self, and whose machinations poorly imitate the normal human functions of thought, feeling, and will.

Many factors reinforce this sleep. Each of the reactions that proceed in one's presence is

accompanied by a deceptive sense of I—one of many I's, each imagining itself to be the whole, and each buffered off from awareness of the others. Each of these many I's represents a process whereby the subtle energy of consciousness is absorbed and degraded, a process that Gurdjieff termed "identification." Man identifies—that is, squanders his conscious energy—with every passing thought, impulse, and sensation. This state of affairs takes the form of a continuous self-deception and a continuous procession of egoistic emotions, such as anger, self-pity, sentimentality, and fear, which are of such a pervasively painful nature that we are constantly driven to ameliorate this condition through the endless pursuit of social recognition, sensory pleasure, or the vague and unrealizable goal of "happiness."

According to Gurdjieff, the human condition cannot be understood apart from considering humanity within the function of organic life on earth. The human being is constructed to transform energies of a specific nature, and neither

our potential inner development nor our present actual predicament is understandable apart from this function. Thus, in the teaching of Gurdjieff, psychology is inextricably connected with cosmology and metaphysics and, in a certain sense, biology. The diagram known as “the Ray of Creation” provides one of the conceptual keys to approaching this interconnection between humanity and the universal order, and as such invites repeated study from a variety of angles and stages of understanding.

The reader is referred to chapters 5, 7, and 9 of *In Search of the Miraculous* for a discussion of this diagram, but the point to be emphasized here is that, at the deepest level, the human mind and heart are enmeshed in a concatenation of causal influences of enormous scale and design. A study of the Ray of Creation makes it clear that the aspects of human nature through which one typically attempts to improve one’s lot are without any force whatever within the network of universal influences that act upon man on earth. In this consists our fundamental

illusion, an illusion only intensified by the technological achievements of modern science. We are simply unable to draw upon the conscious energies passing through us which, in the cosmic scheme, are those possessing the actual power of causal efficacy. We do not and cannot participate consciously in the great universal order, but instead are tossed about en masse for purposes limited to the functions of organic life on earth as a whole. Even in this relatively limited sphere—limited, that is, when compared to man's latent destiny—humanity has become progressively incapable of fulfilling its function, a point that Gurdjieff strongly emphasized in his own writings. This aspect of the Ray of Creation—namely, that the “fate of the earth” is somehow bound up with the possibility of the inner evolution of individual men and women—resonates with the contemporary sense of impending planetary disaster.

How are human beings to change this state of affairs and begin drawing on the universal conscious energies which we are built to absorb but which now

pass through us untransformed? How is humanity to assume its proper place in the great chain of being? Gurdjieff's answer to these questions actually circumscribes the central purpose of his teaching—namely, that human life on earth may now stand at a major transitional point, comparable perhaps to the fall of the great civilizations of the past, and that development of the whole *being* (rather than one or another of the separate human functions) is the only thing that can permit us to pass through this transition in a manner worthy of human destiny.

But whereas the descent of humanity takes place en masse, ascent or evolution is possible only within the individual. *In Search of the Miraculous* presents a series of diagrams dealing with the same energies and laws as the Ray of Creation, not only as a cosmic ladder of descent but also in their evolutionary aspect within the individual. In these diagrams, known collectively as the Food Diagram, Ouspensky explains in some detail how Gurdjieff regarded the energy transactions within the individual human organism.

Again, the reader is referred to Ouspensky's book. The point of these energy transactions is that humanity can begin to occupy its proper place within the chain of being only through an inner work which within the individual human being may be subsumed under the general term *attention*. The many levels of attention possible for man, up to and including an attention that in traditional teachings has been termed Spirit, are here ranged along a dynamic, vertical continuum that reaches from the level of biological sustenance, which humans require for their physical bodies, up to the incomparably finer sustenance that we require for the inner growth of the soul. This finer substance is termed "the food of impressions," a deceptively matter-of-fact phrase that eventually defines the uniquely human cosmic obligation and potentiality of constantly and in everything working for an objective understanding of the Real.



The Ray of Creation and the Food Diagram, extraordinary though they are, are only a small part of the body of ideas contained in *In Search of the Miraculous*. They are cited here as examples of how Gurdjieff not only restated the ancient, perennial teachings in a language adapted to the modern mind, but also brought to these ancient principles something of such colossal originality that those who followed him detected in his teaching the signs of what in Western terminology may be designated a new revelation.

However, as was indicated above, the organic interconnection of the ideas in *In Search of the Miraculous* is communicated not principally through conceptual argument but as a gradual unfolding, which Ouspensky experienced to the extent that there arose within him that agency of inner unity which Gurdjieff called “the real I”—the activation of which required of Ouspensky an ego-shattering

inner work under the guidance of Gurdjieff and within the general group conditions he created for his pupils. Each of the great ideas in the book leads to the others. The Ray of Creation and the Food Diagram are inseparable from Gurdjieff's teaching about the fundamental law of three forces and the law of the sevenfold development of energy (the Law of Octaves), and the interrelation of these laws as expressed in the symbol of the enneagram. These ideas are in turn inseparable from Gurdjieff's teaching about the tripartite division of human nature, the three "centers" of mind, feeling, and body. Likewise, the astonishing account of how Gurdjieff structured the conditions of group work is inseparable from the idea of his work as a manifestation of the Fourth Way, the Way of Consciousness, distinct from the traditionally familiar paths termed "the way of the fakir," "the way of the monk," and "the way of the yogi."

The notion of the Fourth Way is one of Gurdjieff's ideas that have captured the imagination of

contemporary people and have brought quite a new meaning to the idea of esotericism. The meaning of this idea is perhaps best approached by resuming the narrative of Gurdjieff's life, with special attention given to the conditions of work which he created for his pupils.

*The Institute for the Harmonious  
Development of Man*

After a brief period in Constantinople, Gurdjieff and his group of pupils made their way through Europe and finally settled in France where, in 1922, he established his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man at the Château du Prieuré at Fontainebleau-Avon, just outside Paris. The brief intense period of activity at the Prieuré has been described in numerous books, but even for those familiar with these accounts, the establishment and day-to-day activities of the Prieuré still evoke

astonishment. It was during this period that Gurdjieff developed many of the methods and practices of group work that have retained a central place in the work throughout the world today, including many of the Movements or sacred dances. All serious accounts of the conditions Gurdjieff created at the Prieuré give the impression of a community life pulsating with the uncompromising search for truth engaging all sides of human nature—demanding physical work, intensive emotional interactions, and the study of a vast range of ideas about humanity and the universal world. These accounts invariably speak of the encounter with oneself that these conditions made possible and the experience of the self which accompanied this encounter.

The most active period of the Prieuré lasted less than two years, ending with Gurdjieff's nearly fatal motor accident on July 6, 1924. In order to situate this period properly, it is necessary to look back once again to the year 1909, when Gurdjieff had finished his twenty-one years of traveling throughout Asia,

the Middle East, Africa, and Europe meeting individuals and visiting communities who possessed knowledge unsuspected by most people. By 1909 Gurdjieff had learned secrets of the human psyche and of the universe that he knew to be necessary for the future welfare of humanity, and he set himself the task of transmitting them to those who could use them rightly. After trying to cooperate with existing societies, he decided to create an organization of his own. He started in 1911 in Tashkent, where he had established a reputation as a wonder-worker and an authority on “questions of the Beyond.” He moved to Moscow in 1912 and after the revolution of February 1917 he began his remarkable journeys through the war-torn Caucasus region, leading a band of his pupils to Constantinople and finally to France, where he reopened his institute at the Château de Prieuré at Fontainebleau-Avon. His avowed aim during this period was to set up a worldwide organization for the dissemination of his ideas and

the training of helpers. The motor accident of July 1924 occurred at this critical juncture.

When he began to recover from his injuries, Gurdjieff was faced with the sheer impossibility of realizing his plans for the institute. He was a stranger in Europe; his health was shattered; he had no money; and many of his friends and pupils had abandoned him. At that point he made the decision to find a new way of transmitting to posterity what he had learned about human nature and human destiny. This he would do by writing. His period as an author began in December of 1924 and continued until May 1935. It was during this period that he produced the monumental expression of his thought, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*; the subtle, crystal-line call to inner work, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*; and the profoundly encoded, unfinished *Life is Real Only Then, When "I Am."* It was also during this period that he culminated his collaboration with the composer Thomas de Hartmann, rounding off

the unique corpus of music that now bears both their names.

In fact, although the period of the Prieuré had ended, and although struck by numerous personal blows and tragedies, Gurdjieff by no means limited himself to writing. Quite the contrary. His travels to America, and his seeding of the work there, accelerated and intensified. The creation and development of the Movements continued. And, perhaps above all, assisted by Jeanne de Salzmann, his work with groups and individuals in Paris not only attracted from Europe and America the men and women who would later carry the work to the cities of the Western world, but at the same time allowed him, within the silence and energy of his Paris apartment, to transmit a portion of his understanding of inner work to many other men and women from many parts of the world.

After his death in Paris in 1949, the work continued under the guidance of Jeanne de Salzmann

and now rests largely in the hands of the second generation of his circle of direct pupils.



In conclusion, and returning to the idea of the three centers, a succinct statement of this fundamental aspect of what Gurdjieff brought to the modern world as “the Fourth Way” may be cited from the descriptive brochure published at the Prieuré in 1922:

The civilization of our time, with its unlimited means for extending its influence, has wrenched man from the normal conditions in which he should be living. It is true that civilization has opened up for man new paths in the domain of knowledge, science and economic life, and thereby enlarged his world perception. But, instead of raising him to a higher all-round level of development, civilization has developed only certain sides

of his nature to the detriment of other faculties, some of which it has destroyed altogether . . .

Modern man's world perception and his mode of living are not the conscious expression of his being taken as a complete whole. Quite the contrary, they are only the unconscious manifestation of one or another part of him.

From this point of view our psychic life, both as regards our world perception and our expression of it, fail to present a unique and indivisible whole, that is to say a whole acting both as common repository of all our perceptions and as the source of all our expressions.

On the contrary, it is divided into three separate entities, which have nothing to do with one another, but are distinct both as regards their functions and their constituent substances.

These three entirely separate sources of the intellectual, emotional or moving life of man, each taken in the sense of the whole set of functions proper to them, are called by the system under notice the thinking, the emotional and the moving centers.<sup>4</sup>

It is difficult conceptually, and in a few words, to communicate the meaning of this idea of the three centers, which is one of the central aspects of Gurdjieff's teaching. The modern person simply has no conception of how self-deceptive a life can be that is lived in only one part of oneself. The head, the emotions, and the body each have their own perceptions and actions, and each in itself can live a simulacrum of human life. In the modern era this has gone to an extreme point, and most of the technical and material progress of our culture serves to push the individual further into only one of the centers—one third, as it were, of our real self-nature. The growth of vast areas of scientific

knowledge is, according to Gurdjieff, outweighed by the diminution of the conscious space and time within which we live and experience ourselves. With an ever-diminishing “I,” we gather an ever-expanding corpus of information about the universe. But to be human—to be a whole self possessed of moral power, will, and intelligence—requires all the centers, and more. This more is communicated above all in Gurdjieff’s own writings, in which the levels of spiritual development possible for human beings are connected with a breathtaking vision of the levels of possible service that the developing individual is called on to render to mankind and to the universal source of creation itself.

Thus, the proper relationship of the three centers of cognition in the human being is a necessary precondition for the reception and realization of what in the religions of the world has been variously termed the Holy Spirit, Atman, or the Buddha nature. The conditions Gurdjieff created for his pupils cannot be understood apart from this fact. “I wished to create

around myself,” Gurdjieff wrote, “conditions in which a man would be continuously reminded of the sense and aim of his existence by an unavoidable friction between his conscience and the automatic manifestations of his nature.”<sup>5</sup> Deeply buried though it is, the awakened conscience is the *something more* that, according to Gurdjieff, is the only force in modern man’s nearly completely degenerate psyche that can actually bring the parts of his nature together and open him to that energy and unnamable awareness of which all the religions have always spoken as the gift that descends from above, but which in the conditions of modern life is almost impossible to receive without an extraordinary quality of help.

Notes:

- 1 From the Introduction to *Life is Real, Only Then, When “I Am,”* p xii.
- 2 In 1922, Gurdjieff acquired the Prieuré d’Avon, a large estate and former priory located about 40 miles

from Paris where he established intense communal conditions for inner work, especially from 1922 until his automobile accident in 1924.

- 3 In this light, it is interesting to note that groups that break away at different moments, to work by themselves and on their own, run the risk of clinging dogmatically to certain specific forms and practices.
- 4 G. Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man: *Prospectus No. 1*, p 3 (privately printed, ca. 1922).
- 5 *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, p 270.

## For Further Study

### *The Gurdjieff Foundation*

The most comprehensive directory of websites and contact information for the Gurdjieff Foundations throughout the world may, at present, be accessed on the website of *The Gurdjieff International Review*, at [www.gurdjieff.org/foundation.htm](http://www.gurdjieff.org/foundation.htm).

### *Books, Music and Film*

Note: first publication of all books is cited, followed, in parentheses, by most recent or more readily available editions.

### *Books by Gurdjieff*

Gurdjieff, G. I. *All and Everything: Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1950 (New York: Penguin Arkana, 1999); and New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin (revised), 2006 Tarcher/Penguin (second revision), 2008.

Long read and respected, and perennially

in print, the 1950 edition was edited by A. R. Orage on the basis of a literal English text prepared from Gurdjieff's original Russian and Armenian by pupils at the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man. This version may become the reader's preference. However, the revised translation, initially published in 1992 and republished with corrections in 2006, should also be read. This edition reflects, to some extent, the greater ease of expression of the French edition of 1956 and also benefited from direct access to the original Russian text, published in 2000 by Traditional Studies Press (Toronto). Both versions of the book can be trusted.

———. *Meetings with Remarkable Men*. New York: Dutton, 1963 (New York: Penguin Arkana, 1985).

Gurdjieff's account of his youth and early search for hidden knowledge was written as an autobiographical narrative. It possesses an uncommon inner calm and presence which offers a taste of the path that he brought to the modern world.

———. *Life is Real Only Then, When "I Am."* New York: Dutton, 1982 (New York: Penguin Arkana, 1991).

Here Gurdjieff speaks on many levels and with great precision and candor of the discoveries and difficulties in his personal struggle to bring the Work to birth.

———. *Views from the Real World.* New York: Dutton, 1973 (New York: Penguin Compass, 1984).

A collection of Gurdjieff's lectures from the years 1917 to 1933. "That any record of these lectures exists at all is due to a few pupils who, with astonishing powers of memory . . . managed to write down what they heard afterwards" during the turbulence of revolutionary Russia, at the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man, and during Gurdjieff's visits to American pupils in New York and elsewhere. The book offers a rare opening to the vast scale of the Gurdjieff ideas expressed in the human resonance of his own "voice."

### *Accounts by Direct Pupils*

Ouspensky, P. D. *In Search of the Miraculous*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949 (New York: Harcourt, 2001).

This book may be given a special significance in this list of reliable recommended works. Since its first publication in 1949, Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous* has served as the most artful, electrifying and profound account written by a pupil. Ouspensky's book retains a remarkable strength and freshness to this day and continues to help readers at all levels of their preparation and acquaintance with the Gurdjieff teaching. For many, it remains the book of choice for those approaching the teaching for the first time.

de Hartmann, Thomas and Olga. *Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff*. New York: Cooper Square, 1962. Several revised and enlarged editions have been published over the years. The most recent and definitive: Sandpoint: Sandpoint Press, 2008.

This book describes the dangerous flight by Gurdjieff and a handful of pupils out of war-torn revolutionary Russia, ending with the establishment of the Prieuré community in France. One of the most faithful portraits of Gurdjieff the man.

Lannes, Henriette. *This Fundamental Quest*. San Francisco: Far West Institute, 2007.

A direct pupil of Gurdjieff, Henriette Lannes was responsible in later years for the practical study of the Gurdjieff teaching in Lyon (France) and in London. Many of the brief chapters in this record of her work in Lyon are deceptively simple, recording a kind of higher common sense based on few but fundamental assumptions: the need for self-knowledge, the necessity of challenging ourselves, the revelatory power of attention, the imperative of honesty with oneself and of clarified relations with others.

Pentland, John. *Exchanges Within*. New York: Continuum, 1997 (New York: Tarcher Penguin, 2004).

John Pentland was immensely influential in the transmission of the Gurdjieff teaching in America. A faithful and dynamic record of both the energy and the thought exchanged in a Gurdjieff group as led by one of its most powerful and creative leaders.

de Salzmann, Michel. "Man's Ever New and Eternal Challenge." In *On the Way to Self Knowledge*, pp 54-83, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976. Also "Seeing: The Endless Source of Inner Freedom" in *Material for Thought*, #14, 12-30.

Michel de Salzmann was both a trained psychiatrist and one of the most respected leaders of the Work throughout the world. These two magisterial essays show the place of psychotherapy in the process of inner development while at the same time offering a far-reaching vision of the several levels of the Gurdjieff work.

Segal, William. *A Voice at the Borders of Silence*. New York: The Overlook Press, 2003.

A highly successful businessman, an important American artist and a devoted practitioner of Zen, William Segal was for many years a leading figure in the development of the Gurdjieff Work in America. This book generously offers a window into all sides of this remarkable “Gurdjieff man.”

———. *Opening*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1998.

Tracol, Henri. *The Taste For Things That Are True*. Longmead, Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element Books, Ltd., 1994. (Expanded and revised edition forthcoming, entitled *The Real Question Remains* by Sandpoint Press, Sandpoint).

Henri Tracol was a pupil of Gurdjieff for over ten years and worked as a leader of the Work closely alongside Jeanne de Salzmann in the years following Gurdjieff’s death. The essays, talks and interviews in this book reveal an approach to the Gurdjieff teaching unsurpassed in its subtlety, depth and purity.

*The following books seem to me to be among the most honest attempts by pupils of Gurdjieff to depict the personal impact of the man and his way of teaching:*

Anderson, Margaret. *The Unknowable Gurdjieff*. New York: Weiser, 1962 (London and New York: Penguin Arkana, 1991).

Hulme, Kathryn. *Undiscovered Country*. Boston: Little Brown, 1966.

Hands, Rina. *Diary of Madame Egout Pour Sweet*. Aurora, Oregon: Two Rivers Press, 1991.

Nott, C. S. *Teachings of Gurdjieff: The Journal of a Pupil*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961 (London and New York: Penguin Arkana, 1991).

Tchekhovitch, Tcheslaw. *Gurdjieff: A Master in Life*. Toronto: Dolmen Meadow Editions, 2006.

Zuber, René. *Who Are You, Monsieur Gurdjieff?* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980.

*Accounts by Other Pupils of the Gurdjieff Work*

Ravindra, Ravi. *Heart Without Measure*. Halifax: Shaila Press, 1999. (Sandpoint: Morning Light Press, 1999).

The first published account of the teaching of Jeanne de Salzmann, Gurdjieff's greatest pupil, who was responsible for the Work after his death.

Vaysse, Jean. *Toward Awakening: An Approach to the Teaching Left by Gurdjieff*. San Francisco: Far West Undertakings, 1978. (London and New York: Penguin Arkana, 1988); (Sandpoint: Morning Light Press, 2009).

Written by a long-time pupil of Jeanne de Salzmann, this concise exposition clarifies much that has seemed obscure in the Gurdjieff teaching.

*Also recommended:*

*Material for Thought*, a journal published occasionally in San Francisco by the Gurdjieff Foundation of California under the imprint of Far West Editions. See: <http://www.farwesteditions.com>

*Gurdjieff International Review*: see <http://www.gurdjieff.org>

*Guide and Index to Beelzebub's Tales*. Toronto: Traditional Studies Press, 2003. Second edition, referencing all editions of *Beelzebub's Tales*.

Needleman, Jacob and George Baker, eds., *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teaching*. New York: Continuum, 2004.

Needleman, Jacob, ed., *The Inner Journey: Views from the Gurdjieff Work*. Sandpoint: Morning Light Press, 2008.

The first major collection of essays and interviews by the first and second generation of Gurdjieff

pupils. The present essay has been drawn, with minor changes, from the Introduction to this book.

### *Music*

*The Music of Gurdjieff/de Hartmann.* Thomas de Hartmann, piano. 3-disc set. Triangle Records, a division of Triangle Editions.

In these essential recordings one feels immediately the authority of the composer's interpretation of his own music, although de Hartmann was not always aware that his performances were being recorded. Thus certain pieces contain spontaneous departures from the printed text.

The original recordings were made largely on an early, somewhat primitive, wire recorder. Many years later the transfer to LP, and eventually to CD, included an electronic process designed to clarify the sound and eliminate extraneous noises and background hiss. Nevertheless, the spiritual authenticity of these recordings make this a definitive rendition of one of the central forms of the teaching.

*Gurdjieff/de Hartmann: Music for the Piano*, Volumes 1-4. Linda Daniel-Spitz, Charles Ketcham, Laurence Rosenthal, pianists. Wergo (Schott Wergo Music Media, Mainz, Germany).

These performances were recorded by the three editors of the published complete works. This edition was produced under the guidance of Jeanne de Salzman. A major feature of these four sets of CDs is that they comprise a complete recording of the four volumes of the published music, presented in the same order. Thus it is possible for the listener to follow in sequence the printed scores.

*Gurdjieff/de Hartmann*, Volumes 1-10 (Various titles: Meditations, Music of the Sanyids and Dervishes, Hymn for Christmas Day, First Dervish Prayer, Circles, etc.). Alain Kremski, piano. Fano, Italy: Naïve Recording Studio.

Alain Kremski's interpretations are often imaginative and unusual, and always there is great authority in his playing and technique. Although the

music for the Gurdjieff Movements is generally not designed to be heard separately from the sacred dances themselves, Kremiski has elected to include many of de Hartmann's compositions for the Movements in these collections.

*Gurdjieff/de Hartmann*, Volumes 1 and 2. Laurence Rosenthal, piano. Windemere.

These recent recordings, part of a series still in progress, were made by a composer and pianist with a long association with the Gurdjieff/de Hartmann music. Rosenthal arranged and orchestrated many of these pieces for inclusion in the musical score of Peter Brook's film *Meetings with Remarkable Men*. The CD of the score for the film is available on Citadel records.

### *Film*

*Meetings with Remarkable Men*, directed by Peter Brook, produced by Remar Production, Inc., 1978, distributed by Morning Light Press, Sandpoint.

    Filmed on location in Afghanistan, and based

on the book by Gurdjieff, this deeply evocative film includes what is currently the only publicly available performance of the Gurdjieff Movements.







It has been nearly a hundred years since G. I. Gurdjieff first appeared in Moscow, bringing with him a teaching unlike anything known or heard of in the modern world. His fundamental aim was to help human beings awaken to the meaning of our existence and to the efforts we must make to realize that meaning within the life we have been given. We can now begin to understand that Gurdjieff's life was a work of love; and at the same time that word, "love," begins to take on entirely new dimensions of meaning.

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