

Gurdjieff's Fourth Way

From earliest times, certain people have had the longing to touch another level in themselves - to look behind the stage machinery of their lives and contact what great traditions tell us is a unifying reality behind everything. Or, as the Zen master puts it, 'Your face before your parents were born'.

Depending on the attitude, such an attempt will seem either significant or pointless.

It will seem pointless to people who are primarily interested in the desires and achievements of ordinary life. In fact, most people are not attracted to intensive study of such questions. Such people can be worth-while and decent. But their focus is on getting and spending, on self-promotion, esteem, accomplishment on the practical level, on physical pleasures and the attempt to attain security, political action or charitable pursuits—perhaps on fixing things or changing things to make the world 'a better place'.

Western civilisation reflects this attitude well. In order to succeed, we spend years in education, specialisation or apprenticeship - and are judged on outer results. Our culture is almost entirely outward oriented - centred on efficiency, usefulness, productivity.

Two Natures

But if we question ourselves seriously, we may discover a second aspect of our nature. The first is the personal or egocentric self we have been speaking about - what we generally call 'myself'. The second, much less easy to perceive and almost impossible to define, connects with a deeper level. The need, one could say, for something higher.

People who find this second nature significant are faced with a choice between two streams of life.

The second stream is concerned, not with achievement or self-development, but a return to levels of awareness of which outer life has no suspicion. This stream, still new to the West, has developed among certain Eastern centres of learning. It demands even more time, more research and methodical care than is needed by the life we know. In this second stream, there is nothing to be acquired but much to be discarded.

Great teachings and traditions tell us that we are two-natured beings. We have our feet on the earth and our heads in the heavens. We are 'born of clay and the spirit - fearfully and wonderfully made'. These teachings also assert that humanity is a bridge between these two levels - and our ability not to become lost in either is the measure of our growth.

Balance

Such teachings assert that, if we want to be fully ourselves, we need to re-establish the lost balance between these two natures. Gurdjieff described this undertaking as more difficult than becoming a multi-millionaire through honest work. And whichever traditional discipline is followed - Hinduism, Islam, Taoism, Buddhism, Vedanta, Christianity... none suggests the path is easy.

Christianity, for instance, talks about the 'strait gate' or narrow way. The 'eye of the needle'.

Consider the Buddhist position...

Noble truth number one: Life is suffering.

Noble truth number two: Suffering is caused by desire or selfish craving.

Noble truth number three: Suffering can be eliminated by eliminating craving.
In other words, the secret is to accept everything but to be very careful not to be attached to anything whatsoever.

Here is Gurdjieff on this subject:

"The first thing that is necessary is to separate inner things from outer.

"A mark of the perfected man is his ability to play to perfection any desired role in his external life while inwardly remaining free and not allowing himself to 'blend' with anything proceeding outside of him.

"You must understand and establish it as a strict rule that you must not pay attention to other people's opinions. You must be free of the people surrounding you. When you are free inside, you will be free of them."

Inner Freedom

Simple to state. But, in practice, astonishingly difficult. Because everything we have been taught from our earliest days reinforces the possessiveness of the ego.

All true spiritual or source teachings are like different doors to the same room. To use another analogy, they are like the spokes of a wheel. They draw closer to each other the more we understand them and finally converge at the hub. And whichever path we chose demands commitment and personal struggle. All authentic ways call for courage and great resolve - because they expose our personal contradictions. This is payment indeed.

Many books suggest approaches toward living an inner life which can bring a gradual transformation culminating in a realisation called different names by different traditions. Everything could be found in books if we were only able to decipher them. But we are not at the level of inner understanding that permits this. For us, the words are theoretical. The road-map is not the road.

The way is also long and the nearness of the promised goal deceptive. And it has no place for imbecilic bliss or masochistic heaviness, for vain posturing or the equally egotistical self-depreciation. There are many pitfalls in this study - most in our habitual reactions.

If we deeply feel the need to live in two worlds instead of just the outer one we know - one might even say, borrowing the Christian symbol of the cross, to live vertically as well as horizontally - or more accurately in the middle where those two directions meet - then how do we begin?

Self-knowledge

The methods of true esoteric schools can be summarised by the Socratic edict "Know Thyself".

But how? Are there any practical methods? Or is it again more vague hope and flim-flam? Despite all we've read and been told, there still seems no practical way to proceed.

If we start out alone, we will almost certainly delude ourselves, become exhausted or fail. And even to start is problematical, because outer life absorbs our attention so completely that we soon forget the flavour of our decision to begin and deviate while certain we are still on track. Worse still, this adventure has to be undertaken at the expense of our outer life.

Perhaps all we have to work with at the start is the intuition that another way of living somewhere exists.

The best known ways of accelerated growth fall into three broad categories - imitation, revelation or understanding. Traditionally, these are:

- 1 The mastery of the body - the way of the Fakir.
- 2 The mastery of the emotions - the Monk's way.
- 3 The mastery of the mind - the way of the Yogi.

These ways are difficult for westerners as they require initial renunciation - a severance from daily life. Contemporary circumstances make this almost impossible.

Fortunately, there is a Fourth Way which is followed in life itself. A way that doesn't concentrate on just one aspect of man - body, feelings or mind - but on all. The significance of Gurdjieff was that he taught such a way.

The Fourth Way

This Fourth Way is a synthesis of the great traditional teachings - stripped of dogma, ritual, and belief - until only the core remains. Gurdjieff presented it in a form that appeals to the western intellect and his approach was distinguished by a series of practical steps. No faith was required. The Fourth Way aspirant needs to be disappointed in life and to have the scepticism to verify everything he is taught. Nothing must be taken on trust.

On the Fourth Way, definitions are precise because the same word can mean different things to different people. One of the first steps in this self-study is called 'Self Observation'. But it is not what we normally consider self observation to be as analysis and introspection are impediments. It is the bare recording of impressions. By taking, so to say, a 'snapshot' of ourselves in various situations but changing nothing, we begin to see our position and dilemma. Without this, there is no hope of later balancing our functions.

A very ancient knowledge which Gurdjieff makes use of considers that our everyday life is governed by five functions - each with its own centre or 'brain'. These are the intellectual function, the emotional, the moving (connected with the moving functions of the organism), and the instinctive (which controls functions such as our heartbeat and breathing). The fifth function is the sexual.

As well as these, there are two higher functions - the higher emotional and higher thinking centres to which belong objective feeling and thought - properties unknown to ordinary man.

Different religions or teachings assert that we have, or can have, a soul or an astral body - a spirit or 'double' and so on. Gurdjieff states that the two higher functions are in us, fully formed but not connected. And that they can only be connected by balancing the lower centres. The whole difficulty lies in bringing the dispersed parts of ourselves into an integrated relationship. In other words, our mirror is not cracked but simply covered with grime.

Coming from a different perspective, the same ancient knowledge declares that our lives are spent in three degrees of presence or, if you prefer, three levels of awareness. These are sleep, dreaming and a kind of waking sleep. As well as these states a fourth is possible. Self consciousness. We believe we possess this state but, in fact, are very far from it.

Sometimes, in moments of crisis or deep sadness, we touch it for a moment. But our inner speed is so slow that we are incapable of understanding flashes of self-knowledge given by the shocks of life. We also think our ordinary state is the fullest available to us. Gurdjieff

compares us to someone who lives in the basement of his house, unaware there are rooms above full of wonders.

You might remember when this exposition began that it talked about the two natures in our psyche.

Essence and Personality

The Gurdjieff theory tells us that we consist of two parts - our essential being or essence and our so-called 'personality'. Essence is our birthright - our physical form, tendencies, and fundamental characteristics and our only true growth is growth in this part.

Personality is the facade - all we have learned... education... moral upbringing... social environment... everything imposed from outside. Also the conditioned response called habits.

Before long, our habits become dictators. It is as if each of them says 'I' and believes itself, for a moment, to represent the whole. One such 'I' can make a decision in certain conditions that the rest later have to pay for and this state of many 'I's' can cause great trouble for us. We think we are consistent because we retain the same body and same name. But it's as if many different people live in us with each thought or emotion saying 'I'. We are not unified, not one. We are the committee of the damned. As the Bible puts it, 'Man's name is Legion'.

Gurdjieff says that, in fact, we are a series of reactions - totally conditioned, like a complex machine - but we do not see it and will not believe it if told. We are simply a play of associations which produce a series of false personas or masks which, incidentally, those around us see far more clearly than we do. It's as if we carry in front of us a huge pie full of hot-air which we present to the world as ourselves.

And, while we are imprisoned in these personalities and habits, we remain simply a mechanical process, with no possibility of change.

In a very real sense, we are asleep. As Gurdjieff says, we do not 'remember ourselves'. But the famous 'Self Remembering', which forms the basis of the Fourth Way, is not as simple as it sounds.

So, if we wish to contact something more real, we cannot manage it by ourselves. Our conditioning is so pervasive, that is, we are such slaves, that one man can do nothing. We need to find other people who also wish to escape. Then, even if most are asleep, one may be still be awake to rouse the others.

If we could be more aware of ourselves, very much would be possible. The expansion of the embrace of our attention would soon show us a way out. But 'attention' is not our thoughts and the endlessly chattering mind is unable to produce it. Attention needs a certain energy and special techniques to develop. These can't be explained in books. The only way to learn them is by oral transmission - directly from one who knows.

Influences

There is one more idea in Gurdjieff's system that might be worth mentioning. The idea of influences. He claims there are three kinds...

A - ordinary life influences.

B - the influences of religions and teachings which began from a conscious source but which now act mechanically yet are still able to make man ponder and look for

something more.

C - a third influence - in touch with a conscious source. The way to development only begins when we contact an influence of this kind.

Do such influences still exist? Gurdjieff certainly found one. Gurdjieff certainly was one as thousands of his students can confirm.

So to restate...

Gurdjieff explained that we live in a kind of waking sleep. That we are nothing but conditioned reactions - automatons controlled by everything inside and outside us. By every thought, feeling and physical irritation - by every event, shock and outside influence. That we are the behaviourist's nightmare. Putting it more artistically, he said that we are "never at home". By this he meant that we are never present to ourselves, never autonomous - never see ourselves in our identification and live entirely in our reactive animal nature. Like the dog that barks at the moon but does not know itself as it barks.

He explained that all our "doing", including our wish to be spiritual or charitable or to improve the world, all our fine words are on the same mundane horizontal level - no more than reactions stemming from the ancient self-defence-mechanism we call ego.

He explained that the way of inner transformation has nothing to do with "doing" at all. Because permanent change requires an increase in the level of "being". This is a difficult term because, without direct experience, what is meant by it is obscure.

Every legitimate tradition from Buddhism to Sufism says that to discover that our "I" is a mirage is the first thing we can do. "The seeing is the doing," as Krishnamurti pointed out. Only when we can see our faults clearly do possibilities begin because it is impossible to do anything in our present mechanical state of waking sleep. Lau Tzu similarly stated that the way to do is to be.

In fact the direction is not accumulation but relinquishment - and learning to "be" proceeds in parallel with learning that, objectively, we don't exist. So vertical life is reached not through the horizontal - through our reactive so-called "doing" - but by "being".

Being

Being is vertical to time. But, without special training we can't know what 'being' means. And so the "I AM that I AM" - the name of God in the Old Testament - still puzzles us.

The key to 'being' is attention. But what scant attention we have is mostly lost in the inattentiveness called associative thinking. "Life begins when thought ends," said Krishnamurti, who also said, "thought is an agitation of the mind." But we are always identified with something or someone. We always think - rather than experience.

Gurdjieff stated that "I AM where my attention is," and that, "the experience we need is the experience of ourselves". This experience has various names in different traditions. 'Mindfulness', 'existence in the now', 'presence' and so forth. Strangely, even the slightest application of attention changes many processes in us, just like switching on the light in a dark room. It begins to free us from all kinds of stupidities we have lived with all our lives. And this eventually makes room for a certain energy coming from a higher level that, in itself, brings understanding —a feeling completely impartial that has nothing to do with words or conventional knowledge at all.

As Krishnamurti said, "Emptiness has tremendous energy. It IS energy!" Unlike the slavery of emotion, this energy is impartial, impersonal, always available and does not change. It is like a supreme feeling that connects us with intrinsic being. All religions strive to bring us to this energy. And, once its value is recognised, the aim becomes not to be distracted but to stay as much as possible in that stream.

At this level, paradox applies. The less you know the more you know. As the great Sufi poet Attar said, "When you learn to lose yourself, you will find the Beloved. More than this is not known to me."

"Abide always in yourself," wrote Shankara. His words are an invocation to wholeness - to being. And this being requires attention in every part of ourselves if we are ever to wake from the sleep of the ego. The process begins with a certain special inner contact with the body, the one part of us which, unlike the emotionality or the thought, doesn't take sides.

Anchoring the attention

We first learn how to anchor our attention to the bodily sensation and, eventually, to something more inclusive - its energy flow. No sentimentality is required here. All pleasant self-calming is stamped on. This is a rigorous, life and death study. One has to be longing and desperate, to succeed with it. And one has to pay in advance.

But, ultimately, with the separation of attention established - we begin to attract an energy that is stronger than the shocks received from life - an energy that is also intelligence, and vastly greater than we are. And, as we cease from our identification - or become adroit enough to bear it or stand behind it - we begin to live in two worlds at once.

We begin to double our time.

Humanity is a transitional form. It is the organ of perception of the planet, a transmitter of cosmic energies. And its rightful place is between heaven and earth - between the spiritual and material. Without this balance a person becomes nothing but a stupid ineffectual saint or a crass opportunistic grubber after sex, status and security.

But if we are able to stand between and reconcile these opposites - slowly, we discover that our real nature is liberation.

However, there are no restful plateaus on this quest. The vertical is threatened at every moment. As we are, we only have so much attention. And, as soon as the energy for that inner attention goes, we are ordinary again.

Another difficulty. There is no continuity in reality. The first step is also the last step. So a continual beginning is required.

We are asked to serve something. And, ultimately, incarnation is the only way to serve the higher. The word must be made flesh. It requires an actual chemical or alchemical change.

Self-remembering

So what does it mean to 'Remember Oneself'?

This famous injunction of Gurdjieff's has many aspects and levels. Initially it means to be here now - attentive in the midst of our lives. We then exist at the meeting point of forces - material and spiritual - and have a chance to reconcile those opposites and assist the Cosmic Plan. To take our poison, one might say, like the blue-tongued Shiva and not die. To suffer intentionally and, in so doing, benefit ourselves as well as others. Because suffering, not faith, is the price of immortality. But not stupid suffering. We need to suffer cleverly. Gurdjieff's method requires conscious labour and intentional suffering. Every creature suffers. But few understand the benefit of doing so voluntarily for a higher aim.

The suffering required is the shedding of so called individuality. A terrifying prospect for those enmeshed in the ego's hope, fears and desires. Some call this process, "the eating of

the I". Gurdjieff further stated, "Either you eat life or it eats you."

Our potential metamorphosis parallels the butterfly. But in our case, is psychological.

So again - What does it mean, to remember ourselves?

Ultimately 'to remember oneself' means to remember the greater Self of which we are a spark and incarnate it so that no separation exists. The moth becomes one with the flame. And, at that moment we discover, as did the birds in Ansari's *Conference of the Birds* that the two were never other than one.

As Ramana Maharshi put it, "Nothing exists to be attained other than oneself."