

Gurdjieff - a great enigma

The first thinker in the West who not only promoted the need of the development of man's consciousness, but who also provided practical guidelines as to how to do it was George I. Gurdjieff. He is a little-known and still less understood figure because of the inaccessibility of his philosophy and his unusual teaching methods.

Biography

Gurdjieff was born in 1866 in Alexandropol in Russian Armenia, from a Greek father and Armenian mother. His father, by vocation, was a bardic poet and loved telling old local myths and legends. In 1877, when Tsar Alexander II won the war over the Turks, the entire family moved to Kars (at present in Turkey) where they lived in very modest conditions. The exceptional abilities of the young Gurdjieff were noticed by the dean of the Russian Orthodox Church and thanks to that he had private tuition provided by the church deacons. In 1883 he moved to Tbilisi, where he probably attended a seminary. There is a lack of independently confirmed information about his life from early youth until his arrival in Moscow in 1912. He probably traveled widely all over Asia, where he searched for esoteric knowledge about man. It has been suggested that for some time he stayed in Tibet and had close contact with the Dalai Lama, but no documents confirming these stories exist. After his arrival in Moscow as a rich man, he married a Polish girl, Julia Ostrowska. During this time he started teaching his ideas, attracting many followers. The most prominent was Peter Ouspensky, a well-known writer and publicist who joined his group in 1914.

At the beginning of the revolution, in 1917, Gurdjieff went with his pupils to the region of the Caucasus Mountains, and then to Georgia, where he founded the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man. Escaping from the Red Army with his pupils, he reached Constantinople in 1920, and then moved through Germany to France, where he arrived in July 1922. He settled in Fontainebleau, near Paris where the works of the Institute continued. In 1924 he went to the United States, where he was able to recruit many new pupils and to obtain financial support for his Institute. In August 1924, after a serious car accident, he reduced his works at the Institute and

began writing his most important work *Beelzebub's Tales*. During the following years he continued his work with chosen students, as well as visited the United States several times. In 1932, after the bankruptcy of the Institute, he moved to Paris, where he lived for the rest of his life. In this city he survived through the war period without any significant problems. After the war many new students from England and America started coming to see him in Paris, where interest in his teachings grew. Gurdjieff died on 29 October 1949 just before *Beelzebub's Tales* was published.

Objectives of Gurdjieff teachings

What makes Gurdjieff different from all other reformers of all epochs is the fact that his aim was to help man to achieve the highest possible freedom - freedom from beliefs, freedom from superstitions, from internal and external pressures, freedom from himself. Gurdjieff explicitly stated that he did not want to start a new religion, sect or a new school with a new set of "truths" influencing people, forcing them to obey new gurus or masters. According to Gurdjieff true freedom can only be achieved by developing a higher level of consciousness through individual effort and will-power. The level of man's consciousness is not only responsible for wars and other kinds of suffering, but it is responsible for the totality of his life. The entire life of man, including his beliefs, activities and work, everything he has built up for himself, our whole civilization depends on his level of consciousness.

According to Gurdjieff, man possesses mental abilities well above the level needed for his biological life and he is completely unaware of his incredible potential. These possibilities are lying dormant in man and without proper effort and understanding cannot be released and utilized. Modern man is developing his intellect, is gaining scientific and technical knowledge, is improving his standard of living - and this means that he is concentrating on his external development. But what is most vital for him - his morality, attitude to other people and to himself, depends on his own consciousness, and this however remains at a very low level.

Gurdjieff frequently stated that he had not invented anything new, but that his teachings were based on the esoteric knowledge that has been in existence for thousands of years. This knowledge is invisible to the average man and is completely misunderstood and disregarded by the contemporary religious and

scientific world.

It is not certain from which sources Gurdjieff obtained his information, but it is known that he held Christian teaching in the very highest esteem. He believed that the teaching of Christ contained a great deal of esoteric information, but that information was not understood by his followers. Gurdjieff considered that the commandment "Love your neighbor" was the most important, but unfortunately the least practiced Christian commandment.

Main elements of the Gurdjieff philosophy

States of man's consciousness

It is generally believed that, with the exception of such conditions as addiction and mental illnesses, man functions in two states of consciousness: sleep and awakening. Gurdjieff maintained that there are more states of consciousness than is widely recognized, and distinguished four states of man's consciousness: sleep, awakening, self consciousness, objective consciousness.

Western psychology, contrary to Eastern psychology, states that man in the awakening state is fully conscious and that there are no other states of consciousness. Psychologists consider that in this state we can control our attention and direct it where we want - outside or inside; that we have free will and do what we wish. However Gurdjieff claimed that what we call awareness was not the only consciousness man could attain. In the awakening state man can be aware of his emotions, thoughts or physical movements, but the awareness of these functions is very faint and changeable. Most of man's functions are carried out automatically and he is often not aware and does not understand why he is saying or acting in a particular manner.

Gurdjieff maintained that most people are living as if suspended in a light hypnotic "sleep" and spend their life in a state of minimum attention. If a man's consciousness is not awakened, Gurdjieff describes this man as being asleep. To prove this condition he uses a very convincing argument: how could it have been possible for fully conscious people to kill each other during the both World Wars to achieve some trivial and illusive aims. Only sleeping people would have been able to do it.

The concept of the state of self-consciousness was introduced for the first time in the West by Gurdjieff. This state has not been studied by academic psychology yet because it manifests itself in man very rarely and only in exceptional situations. It might appear when we are in great danger, in completely new and difficult circumstances, during challenging experiences and in a state of great stress. During such moments we start to realize that we truly exist, that life is precious, that material things do not matter. These flashes last only a very short time, but they put us in a state of euphoria and deep satisfaction.

In practice only a few, specially predisposed individuals can spontaneously achieve the state self-consciousness. However, for most people this access is not completely closed. Gurdjieff maintained that through continuous self-development we could attain moments of self-consciousness, but this would require a great level of concentration and a great deal of effort. Achieving this state should be the first and most important step in man's development.

The fourth level of consciousness is the highest level man could ever reach. This level is comparable to divine consciousness. Man who attains it has one undividing and unchanging "I" that governs his life. He possesses free will and knows what he is supposed to do. In this state he is able to see reality as it truly is, he can ascertain the objective truth about everything, and his perception of the world around him is not influenced by any subjective elements.

Centers of man

According to Gurdjieff, several independent centers exist in man and each of them is responsible for a specific activity and has a unique way of working. They can work completely independently of each other, or can communicate with each other. The centers could be analogous to independent computers that are fully responsible for man's psychological states and the control of all his functions. These centers act on three levels; on the highest there is the intellectual center, in the middle there is the emotional center and on the lower level there are the moving, instinctive and sexual centers. These centers perform the following functions:

The intellectual center is responsible for creative, analytical and logical thinking, scientific discovery and inventions.

The emotional center is responsible for feelings, for artistic reception and creation,

aesthetics, moral and religious emotions.

The moving center is responsible for the control of body movements, e.g. sporting activities, dance and physical work.

The instinctive center controls the functioning of man's internal organs, is a source of intuition and drives instinctual behavior.

The sexual center is responsible for sexual behavior, attraction, desire and gratification.

Typology of man

Depending on the relative importance and dominance of each center as regards the behavior of man, Gurdjieff distinguishes three types of man:

The first type of man is controlled mainly by his moving and instinctive centers, which determine his behavior and conduct. On the intellectual level he will memorize information and use other people's opinions and judgments. In daily life he will quickly make up his mind using his intuition rather than intellect. Professionally he could be successful in sports, business or the army.

The second type of man is directed by his emotional center. On the intellectual level he tends to separate knowledge and information into two groups: what he believes in and what he does not believe in, without analyzing the facts. He has very strong religious, political and racial convictions that might lead to intolerance. He tends, in his everyday life, to make decisions based on feelings and emotions. Professionally he could achieve success in arts, politics or the church.

The third type of man is mainly under the influence of his intellectual center. He has the ability to think logically and analytically, and prefers the literal interpretation of facts. He excels in abstract and theoretical work. He will make decisions following long analysis of all information. Professionally he could succeed in the sciences, engineering, medicine and law.

These three types present a very simplistic picture of man. In real life man uses all three centers to different degrees. Moreover the level of activity of each part of a center is changeable. The true model of the functioning of man is much more complex than presented in the above typology.

Apart from these three basic types, four more advanced types of man exist, each having a higher consciousness:

The fourth type of man has balanced centers of functioning which start cooperating with each other. He begins to absorb real knowledge and commences to free himself from subjective elements. He is able to look critically at himself, to recognize the different parts of his personality and his internal contradictions. He understands a lot about his life, and this helps him to understand others and not to judge them too severely. People belonging to this group are able to understand each other, and try to avoid the use of force and violence in human relations.

The fifth type of man has attained internal unity by developing one, permanent and unchanging “I”. Man on this level is completely different from ordinary people because he possesses profound knowledge and his functioning is based on true understanding. People on this and higher levels understand each other and never use force.

The six and the seventh types of man have attained the highest possible level of development for man and have acquired all the special qualities that man could ever possess such as free will, full consciousness, permanent “I” and distinctive individuality. They have achieved the highest Objective Reason on a divine-like level. Men of these types are at the apex of the pyramid of the development of humanity. Attainment of these levels should be the ultimate aim of man. The sixth type of man possesses the same attributes as the seventh type of man, but some of his qualities are not yet permanent.

Ways of man’s development

Gurdjieff presented a new way of the development of consciousness and called it “the Fourth Way”. It differs from three traditional methods of the development practiced by all sorts of religious schools, such as the way of the fakir, of the monk and of the yogi. Gurdjieff rejects these methods, because they lead to unbalanced development, involve huge personal sacrifice and cause great suffering, and above all they require isolation from society. The main drawback of “the Fourth Way” lies in that, it is not explicitly defined or described and everyone must discover it individually. It does not require renunciation of the world and it should be practiced

under normal living conditions, however this does not mean that it is an easier method. On “the Fourth Way” everybody works individually on what he needs, and using his own assessment he rejects or applies the elements of tradition of other schools.

Novices must practice self-observation, which in the initial phases is limited to the observation of one’s own moods, feelings and activities, without any attempts to analyze them, such as why do we think or act this or that way. They must stop identifying with themselves and with their own problems, and also they have to try to control their imagination and to work on their own “I”. Among the most important tasks, which must be worked on from the beginning, is a fight against negative emotions, which dominate the everyday life of man. Gradually a student starts experiencing gleams of the higher state of consciousness, which Gurdjieff calls “remembering oneself”.

During the next phase of the work, students start putting in to practice what they have learned at the earlier stage in relation to other people. The most important objective is not expressing negative emotions in our relationships with others, but this does not mean that we have to suppress spontaneous feelings in ourselves. It is very important to understand the importance of enduring suffering in man’s development, especially intentional suffering. The subsequent phase includes further work on oneself in combination with work for others. In order that this work is beneficial to our development, we must not expect to receive any benefits and rewards, or even any personal satisfaction.

Who was Gurdjieff?

The life of Gurdjieff is shrouded in mystery, because he did not usually talk about himself, but even if he ever mentioned something about his life, it was done in a hinted fashion, leaving a lot of unanswered questions. Even his book , *Meeting with remarkable men*, which describes the early period of his life, cannot be treated as an autobiography, because it was written for teaching purposes. His early life story reminds us in many details of the exploits of, a well known in Russia and Tibet

adventurer and traveler of Buryat Mongol origins, Agwan Dordjjeff¹. It is most likely that Gurdjjeff knew Dordjjeff and supposedly met with him for the last time in Russia in 1935. The fact remains that there are no independent proofs available confirming Gurdjjeff activities from his childhood until his arrival in Moscow in 1912. Frequently he spread implausible information about his early life, trying to hide his past. This triggered many rumors and preposterous stories about his life, which he never denied. He tried to disguise his origins, because he did not want to or could not reveal the truth.

Once, Gurdjjeff, in encrypted language, told Bennett who was one of his close aides: "I can write a check with seven zeros, something even your king cannot do". What message did he want to pass to him? Certainly not that he was a millionaire, but a man of the seventh type, having objective knowledge and reason.

Gurdjjeff possessed a huge accumulation of knowledge and information which were not widely available in his times. What is even more interesting is that his helpers and pupils do not recall that he read any books or scientific magazines. In spite of the lack of academic education he drew to himself many outstanding, unusually intelligent and well educated people. So what was the source of his knowledge? This will remain a secret.

From the analysis of known events from Gurdjjeff life, from his teachings, as well as from the information which he spread about himself, we could assume that he was also a messenger, similar to Buddha or Christ, who appeared on earth in order to show man how to develop his consciousness.

¹ Some writers identify Gurdjjeff with Dordjjeff because of the similarities of their names and certain events in their life stories. However analysis of their photographs does not support this theory.