

## GURDJIEFF AND "THE TERROR OF THE SITUATION"

*'Life: a pain factory run by madmen'*  
G.I. Gurdjieff

The subtitle of G.I. Gurdjieff's magnum opus, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* is "An Objectively Impartial Criticism of the Life of Man." In the book and through his teachings and his life, he endeavored to transmit an honest, truly impartial description and appraisal of both humanity's failings and its spiritual possibilities. He taught that human beings have a lower nature ('animal'), but also a higher aspect ('angelic'). A fully developed individual is able to harmonize the natural energies and functions of both natures, thereby fulfilling his or her spiritual potential and purpose on earth.

But in order for this to happen, there must be a transmutation of the lower nature through inner work and development. The first stage in any authentic spiritual path is to 'know thyself,' whereby objective knowledge of the conditioned patterns of our mind, emotions, perceptions and body is gained through impartial self-observation.

The majority of people on our planet, Gurdjieff asserts, are living a life of 'waking sleep' and are "automatons" rather than authentic, conscious human beings. Our thoughts, feelings and actions are heavily conditioned through the influence of family, education and culture. This is true both individually and collectively, and is reflected in the sordid state of affairs rampant in the world: senseless wars, violence, persecution, poverty, social injustice, racial prejudice and ecological disaster, to name a few obvious human-induced "horrors." The relentless power of conditioning, identification and imagination prevents humanity from seeing and honestly acknowledging what Gurdjieff calls "the terror of the situation."

Although firmly rooted in a very ancient, lost tradition, Gurdjieff's teaching is biting contemporary. It analyzes the human predicament with devastating precision. It shows how men and women are conditioned from earliest childhood, how they operate according to deep-rooted programs, living from cause to effect in an unbroken chain of reactions. These in turn produce a stream of sensations and images, which are never the reality they pretend to be; they are mere interpretations of a reality which they are doomed to mask by their constant flow. Every phenomenon arises from a field of energies: every thought, every feeling, every movement of the body is a manifestation of a specific energy, and in the lopsided human being one energy is constantly swelling up to swamp the others. This endless pitching and tossing between mind, feeling, and body produces a fluctuating series of impulses, each of which deceptively asserts itself as "me": as one desire replaces another, there can be no continuity of intention, no true wish, only the chaotic pattern of contradiction in which we all live, in which the ego has the illusion of willpower and independence. Gurdjieff calls this "the terror of the situation." (1)

## The Affliction of 'Waking Sleep'

The central feature of the majority of humanity, Gurdjieff asserts, is the lack of conscious awareness. In fact, most people are *asleep* – thinking, feeling, sensing and acting mechanically at the mercy of external influences and habitual conditioned responses. In *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution*, P.D. Ouspensky succinctly describes the reality of everyday life: "All the absurdities and all the contradictions of people, and of human life in general, become explained when we realize that people *live in sleep*, do everything in sleep, and do not know that they *are asleep*."

Some of the features of 'sleep' include lying, unnecessary talking, expression of negative emotions, imagination, identification, unexamined assumptions, habitual behaviours, and so forth. "Everyone has these features. No one is free from them and it is essential to know them. If anyone thinks otherwise it simply means they have not observed them."

The state of so-called 'waking sleep' is pervasive throughout the societies and cultures of the world: "This state of affairs takes the form of a continuous self-deception and a continuous process of egoistic emotions, such as anger, self-pity, sentimentality, and fear which are of such a pervasively painful nature that man is constantly driven to ameliorate this condition through the endless pursuit of social recognition, sensory pleasure, or the vague and unrealizable goal of 'happiness'." In *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, professor of philosophy Jacob Needleman speaks to this reality:

Man, Gurdjieff taught, is an undeveloped creation. He is not really 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 we encounter him is an automaton. His thoughts, feelings, and deeds are little more than mechanical reactions to external and internal stimuli. He cannot *do* anything. In and around him, everything *happens* without the participation of his own authentic consciousness. But human beings are ignorant of this state of affairs because of the pervasive influence of culture and education, which engrave in them the illusion of autonomous conscious selves. In short, man is asleep. There is no authentic *I am* in his presence, but only an egoism which masquerades as the authentic self, and whose machinations poorly imitate the normal human functions of thought, feeling, and will. (2)

According to Gurdjieff, humanity is at the mercy of the power of suggestion, collective myths and illusions, and outright delusions – a situation which he compared to a deranged state of "mass psychosis." The implications for the life of humanity are enormous:

This horrifying suggestibility has been compared to a near-universal mass hypnosis – a kind of waking sleep. What we call education, in its central import, is being made susceptible to these mass suggestions. Addictions, dependencies and co-dependencies, identifications, inner "keeping of accounts," negative

emotions, mechanical associative thinking, determines everything we do, think, and feel, while all along we are under the impression that we act, think, and feel for ourselves. The “enthrallment” of the attention practiced by advertisers, entertainers, politicians, and public relations persons is only a second-level manipulation, since these people themselves are, just as much as anybody else, under the spell of the general suggestibilities. The mass hypnosis or waking sleep is so pervasive that it lies beyond the power of individual responsibility to recognize or deal with. In this respect it resembles the Christian conception of original sin or the Buddhist idea of the wheel of samsara. Without awakened being, we have lived asleep. (3)

For most individuals, their normal waking state of consciousness is usually subjective and centered around themselves. We are constantly reacting to people and events from an ego-centered perspective – what pleases or upsets *us*, what *we* like or reject. The ego defines itself by words and images, but neither words nor their accompanying feelings are perceptions of reality, of the actual facts of life. The ego is essentially selfish, consumed with taking rather than giving. Gurdjieff: “Your life is the mirror of what you are. You are passive, blind, demanding. You take all, accept all, without feeling any obligation. You live exclusively according to ‘I like’ or ‘I don’t like.’ You have no appreciation except for yourself.”

When I wake up, in what state do I wake up? Waking consciousness. I *think* I am aware of myself in that moment, but that is almost immediately overwritten by an impulse, feeling or thought. Usually, it’s not thinking at all in the genuine meaning of the word but associative thought. It’s all internal. It’s not on display. Yet the mind is filled with random associations, daydreams, fears, desires, future hopes, cutting and pasting the past . . . And when with others – what happens? Doesn’t the self-talking still go on? Yes, my attention initially might be focused on how you look, what you’re feeling, how you’re speaking – all, of course, with regards to how it affects me. Waking state consciousness is almost totally self-referential. It’s already disposed, conditioned to see what it sees. Memory, interpreted and believed, dictates seeing. What I am conditioned to believe is what I see. What I remember is circumscribed in terms of my interests, desires and fears. (4)

It is difficult for most people to accept that we lack genuine free will. Yet, when we closely observe ourselves, we see that we are at the mercy of external influences and suggestions, habits and conditioning, the environment, the behaviour of others, and much more. For instance, physical illness can affect our emotional and mental state, and our emotions can affect our body and mind. We react to people, events and situations rather than consciously act:

We are creatures of habit, of tradition, of education; we may wish to act differently, but our wills are not free. We behave according to the conditioning our environment has subjected us to, we are mechanisms, very perfect ones in many ways, but without the ability to perform in any way but the prescribed form, we

act or react always as it has been suggested we should act, either by example, tradition or education. It would be difficult to name one act of free will, to locate one instance of unsuggested behavior. We have the potentiality, but at present free will has no part in the thing we call will, which is really only strengthened by tradition created or suggested by the impressions we have been receiving even before birth. We are unable to act apart from conditioning. Man as we know him is a mechanism, the realization of this is the first step in the direction of freedom from it. (5)

The power of conditioning determines much of our behaviour and interactions with others. "All my thoughts, my words, all my feelings, my body's learned ways of behaving – all the contents as well as most of the dynamics of what is called my psychological life – have been programmed into me. The way all this has been put together has merely happened. It came about through contingency – through accidental events – and developed quite unconsciously. My psychic life is given to me and is basically conditioned or motivated by the cultural world I was born into."

We are conditioned by our heredity, our parents, peers, society. We are also conditioned by the world-time in which we live. The conditioning involves our memory, which is based on our experiences, real and imagined, some of which we remember and much of which we don't. The most fundamental conditioning happens between our birth and about the age of nine years. Our parents, for example, are the very first representations of the archetypal images of male and female. (6)

Most of our responses to the demands of life are acquired through learning, which subsequently establishes fixed habits: "Repetition of the same behavior in analogous circumstances creates in an individual a similar association in all the different functions of thinking, feeling and sensing. As a result, a network of special relationships is set up as a 'way of manifesting' which is automatically reproduced every time certain analogous outer circumstances reappear." Thus, the apparent activity of our waking state is really only automatic, conditioned *reaction*, driven by associations and identification. The consequences are either a passivity to passing events, opposition to people and events, or fallacious imagination about oneself:

The quality of daily life, activities and behavior thus remains entirely reactive, and the three great fundamental faculties which might provide meaning only exist there as yet in a reflected form: a fragmentary consciousness changing from moment to moment; a dispersed attention moving from one thing to another or on the contrary caught by some 'fascinating' aspect; a "will" that is constantly weakening or taking the form of sporadic whims. Finally, a variety of personages occupy the stage, all made up of the same familiar collection of qualities and functions, but differing in each case in their number and proportion: now in constant change, now held captive by some idea or some fixed

emotion, they are always without any direct relation to what could be a stable and permanent I. In this state a person has none of those properties that they so readily attribute to themselves: unity in themselves, clear consciousness, will, freedom, the ability to do. (7)

## Human Beings as Automatons

According to Gurdjieff, most people's thoughts, feelings, physical manifestations and actions are unconscious and involuntary. None of our functions are under conscious, voluntary control and each function, rather than acting freely and intelligently, is constantly influenced by other functions. "It is an illusion to say our movements are voluntary. All our movements are automatic and under the sway of conditioning. Our thoughts and feelings are just as mechanical. The automatism of thought and feeling is definitely connected with the automatism of movement. One cannot be changed without the other."

Gurdjieff coined the term "man-machine" to describe the mechanical functioning of most human beings. John G. Bennett, a student of Gurdjieff, offers a sober assessment of the human condition from Gurdjieff's perspective: "The starting point of Gurdjieff's teaching is that man as we know him is a machine, controlled by external influences. He has no power of effective action; nothing in his life is determined by his own will and choice. There is nothing in man as we know him which is capable of independent, self-determined action. It can be established by each one of us beyond doubt, if we are prepared to observe impartially our own behavior."

It is no easy task to convince oneself or to convince others that men are machines, and yet this simple truth provides the only possible explanation of human behavior as we observe it, whether individually or in the mass. As we survey the life of man, we must see that it cannot be accounted for in terms of intentional, voluntary action. People do what they never intended, and, what they intend, they do not do. When man first sees the reality of this situation face to face, he can scarcely escape from a feeling of terror as he looks forward into his own future. He sees that his life must of necessity be determined by the combination of external circumstances which chance or fate will bring. He is bound to drift helplessly through the stream of events in which he is immersed. If the stream threatens to bear him to destruction, he has no power to escape from it. Then and then only can the idea of self-creation begin to have power over him. He dare not remain such as he is. (8)

Gurdjieff stressed to his students that the automatic or mechanical behaviour of most people is manifested through unconscious, involuntary thoughts, feelings, perceptions and actions as a result of outer influences and stimuli. We are at the mercy of our physical health, diet, social and cultural pressure, the media, weather and climate, solar, lunar and planetary influences. There is effectively no conscious effort or action, only conditioned repetition and reaction. Gurdjieff: "To establish this fact for oneself, to understand it, to be convinced of its

truth, means getting rid of a thousand illusions about people. Everything happens – popular movements, wars, revolutions, changes of government, all this happens. And it happens in exactly the same way as everything happens in the life of individuals. But it is one thing to understand this with the mind and another thing to feel it with one's 'whole mass,' to be really convinced that it is so and never forget it." P.D. Ouspensky expands on this notion:

What does it mean that man is a machine? It means that he has no *independent movements*, inside or outside of himself. He is a machine that is brought into motion by *external influences and external impacts*. All his movements, actions, words, ideas, emotions, moods, and thoughts are produced by external influences. By himself, he is just an automaton with a certain store of memories of previous experiences, and a certain amount of reserve energy. *We must understand that man can do nothing*. But he does not realize this and ascribes to himself the *capacity to do*. This is the first wrong thing that man ascribes to himself. That must be understood very clearly. *Man cannot do*. Everything that man thinks he does, really *happens*. It happens exactly as "it rains" or "it thaws." Man cannot move, think, or speak of his own accord. He is a marionette pulled here and there by invisible strings. If he understands this, he can learn more about himself, and possibly then things may begin to change for him . . . He is a machine which, in right circumstances, and with right help, *can know that he is a machine*, and having fully realized this, he may find the ways to cease to be a machine. (9)

There are a number of significant consequences that issue from mechanical thinking, feeling and behaving. The notion that everyone has free will at all times is an illusion. The meaning of life events and our responses to them are a blending of the impressions of the moment with the memory and associations of the past. How can there possibly be free will under such circumstances? "As far as free will is concerned, Gurdjieff says that things *happen* to us, just as it rains or it snows. We don't normally *do* anything ourselves. He means that a great deal more of our response to life is of the nature of conditioned reaction than we normally imagine."

Gurdjieff challenged our notion that we have inner freedom and the ability to control our thoughts and emotions regardless of the situation or circumstances: "We are machines, entirely governed by external circumstances. When a certain level of being is reached, we can control each part of ourselves; but such as we are today, we are not able to do what we decide to do."

All our actions follow the line of least resistance. Try for yourself: can you govern your emotions? No. You can try to suppress them, or drive away an emotion with the aid of another emotion. But you cannot control it. It controls you. Or you can decide to do something – your mental "I" takes the decision. But when the time comes to act, you will surprise yourself by finding that you are doing exactly the opposite. If the circumstances are favorable to your decision, you can accomplish it, but if they are unfavorable you will do exactly what they dictate. You cannot control your acts. You are a machine and outside circumstances direct all your acts without considering

your wishes. I did not say that *no one* can control his actions. I said that *you* could not, because you are divided. In you there is a strong part and a weak part. If your strength grows on one side, on the other side your weakness will grow in the same way, and will become a negative force, unless you learn how to stop it. If we could learn how to control our actions, everything would be different. (10)

In our normal state of consciousness, we are governed by *duality*, by pairs of opposites. Thought opposes feelings, action is opposed by inertia. And this duality can also alternate from moment to moment and day to day: "What is victor today is the vanquished tomorrow; what guides us today becomes secondary and subordinate tomorrow. And everything is equally mechanical, equally independent of will, and leads equally to no aim of any kind." But it is possible to transform conditioned thoughts, feelings, perceptions and actions into more conscious ones. Gurdjieff:

The understanding of duality in oneself begins with the realization of one's mechanicalness and the realization of the difference between what is mechanical and what is conscious. This understanding must be preceded by the destruction of the self-deceit in which a man lives who considers even his most mechanical actions to be volitional and conscious and himself to be single and whole. When self-deceit is destroyed and a man begins to see the difference between the mechanical and the conscious in himself, there begins a struggle for the realization of consciousness in life and for the subordination of the mechanical to the conscious. For this purpose, a man begins with endeavours to set a definite *decision*, coming from conscious motives, against mechanical processes proceeding according to the laws of duality. The creation of such a permanent third principle is for man the *transformation of the duality into the trinity*. (11)

### Some Features of the Conditioned Self

The conditioned self or 'false personality' forms a "shell" around the authentic inner being or essence of a person. This forms the basis of the 'waking sleep' that permeates our lives and prevents the development of higher spiritual possibilities and a conscious engagement with everyday life. Our outer behaviour reflects our inner being. John Pentland, a direct student of Gurdjieff, highlights this reality in a pithy observation: "If you want to see the measure of a human being, see how he or she deals with money, sex and time."

Most people are oblivious to the workings of their own psychological self; lacking honest self-awareness they hold an unrealistic picture of who they really are. Gurdjieff's pupil Annie Lou Staveley: "If we could see ourselves as we truly are, we would die of horror."

There are a number of 'psychological fixations' that characterize the conditioned self:

### Imagination and Daydreaming

The two qualities of *imagination* and *daydreaming* are prominent fixtures of the ego-based personality. Although many people regard them as being creative and even praiseworthy faculties, in reality they are uncontrolled, random and involuntary. They lead to self-forgetting and a lack of awareness and presence. Imagination and the associations connected with it have been metaphorically compared to a passing cloud, buzzing insects, or a balloon that has lost its string. In *This Fundamental Quest* Henriette Lannes captures this wayward activity:

Imaginative associations are troublesome insofar as they take on too much importance and occupy the place of true thought – thought belonging to our essence. One of our difficulties is that we actually love our mill of associations. We love our worries – in a sense we cultivate them. We love to dream about past actions and imagine what we are going to do in the future. The imaginary lays hold of us. During this time, our organic sensation of ourselves and our authentic feeling lose contact with our lives. (12)

Daydreaming is the cousin of imagination. It operates unconsciously and falsely fulfills dreams and desires through fantasy and misplaced hope: "Daydreaming is absolutely the opposite of useful mental activity. 'Useful' in this case means activity directed towards a definite aim and undertaken for the sake of obtaining a definite result. Daydreaming does not pursue any aim, does not strive after any result."

### Identification

*Identification* is a technical term for the state in which a person is completely absorbed in an idea, an emotion, a perception or a sensation. Identification is similar to the Buddhist conception of 'attachment' and deprives us of a free attention. When we are identified with something, we cannot separate ourselves from the object of identification in which we are absorbed. At this point, the identification is so powerful that we actually lose any awareness of our actual existence in the present moment: "In the moment of identification with a particular desire, a person or an event, the knowledge and feeling of 'I am here' is somehow subtly drawn out of us and becomes imperceptibly replaced by whatever is the focus of our attention."

Identification permeates virtually every aspect of our lives as we pass from one hypnotic identification to another, limiting our field of awareness and our ability to make free, conscious choices and actions. As a consequence, our attention is no longer free and open – it is either scattered and shifting or captive and restricted to a narrow focus. Everything absorbs us, and we cannot separate ourselves from the idea, the feeling, or the object that absorbs us. We are unable to be impartial and objective – we are lost in an inner world of subjectivity and fantasy.

One of the fundamental characteristics of man's attitude towards himself and to all his surroundings is his constant "identification" with what at a given moment has attracted his attention, his thoughts or his desires, and his imagination. Identification is so common a quality that that for purposes of observation it is difficult to separate it from everything else. Man is always in a state of identification, only the object of identification changes. It is necessary to see and to study identifying to its very roots in oneself. The difficulty of struggling with identifying is still further increased by the fact that when people observe it in themselves they consider it a very good trait and call it 'enthusiasm,' 'zeal,' 'passion,' 'spontaneity,' 'inspiration.' In reality of course this is illusion. Man cannot do anything sensible when he is in a state of identifying . . . Look at people in shops, in theaters, in restaurants, or see how they identify with words when they argue about something, particularly something they do not know themselves. So long as a man identifies, he is the slave of everything that can happen to him. Freedom is first of all freedom from identification. (13)

### Internal and External Considering

*Considering* is a term employed by Gurdjieff to describe our relationships with other people. Internal and external considering are polar opposites, the former focused on ourselves and the latter on those with whom we relate, directly or indirectly. 'Inner considering' is a special form of identification in which there is an overemphasis on one's own needs and desires. This creates dependence and inner slavery. Ouspensky provides an apt example: "It is a state in which people constantly worry about what people think of them. It plays an important part in everyone's life, but in some people, it becomes an obsession. All their lives are filled with inner considering – worry, doubt, suspicion – and there remains no place for anything else."

Much of our behaviour is influenced, and sometimes even controlled, by the opinions of others about us, or what we *imagine* those opinions to be: "Inner considering makes you do certain things that you wouldn't otherwise do, in order to put across some image of yourself to other people or to hide something that is felt to be incongruous to the image you wish to project." Gurdjieff's insight on inner considering is reported in Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous*:

Man is identified with what others think of him, how they treat him, what attitude they show towards him. He always thinks that people do not value him enough, are not sufficiently polite and courteous. All this torments him, makes him think and suspect and lose an immense amount of energy on guesswork, on suppositions, develops in him a distrustful and hostile attitude towards people. How somebody looked at him, what somebody said of him – all this acquires for him an immense significance . . . There are people who are able to consider not only injustice or the failure of others to value them enough but who are able to consider, for example, the weather. This seems ridiculous but it *is* a fact. They can be irritated by the weather, be indignant and angry

with it. A man can take everything in such a personal way as though everything in the world had been specially arranged in order to cause him inconvenience or unpleasantness. (14)

'External considering' is the opposite of internal considering and, in fact, can ameliorate and help overcome the negative effect of self-centered behaviour. It places the wellbeing of others before one's own needs and wishes:

External considering is based upon an entirely different relationship towards people than internal considering. It is adaptation toward people, to their understanding, to their requirements. By considering externally a man does that which makes life easy for other people and for himself. It requires a knowledge of others, an understanding of their tastes, habits and prejudices. At the same time external considering requires a great power or control over oneself . . . If a man really remembers himself he understands that another person is a machine just like himself. And then he will *enter into their position*, he will put himself in their place, and he will be really able to understand and feel what another person thinks and feels. (15)

## Lying

Gurdjieff regarded all forms of self-deception and self-justification as *lying*. It is a path of least resistance and, for many, an automatic and lifelong habit. Most people are completely unaware that they habitually and unconsciously lie nearly all the time. In *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, Gurdjieff decries the fact that people constantly lie without knowing it, placing them in "an upside-down world where their minds have been turned into mills for grinding out nonsense."

Lying is one of the major manifestations of the ego. It occurs when we pretend to know the truth when in fact we do not. Most people rarely tell a deliberate lie; they honestly believe that what they think and say is the truth. Ouspensky highlights this distortion of reality: "People pretend that they know all sorts of things: about God, about the future life, about the universe, about evolution, about everything; but, in fact, they do not know anything, even about themselves. And every time they speak about something they do not know, *as though they knew it, they lie.*"

Only through careful self-study and self-observation can we perceive the fact that we cannot control lying – it controls us, with all its harmful consequences. Because it is rarely recognized when it occurs, it is a formidable barrier to self-transformation. "Wake up to the lie in the moment-of-the-lie. Get the *taste* of it. Lying has a very specific quality. First, we have to verify for ourselves how much of our life is lived in lying. Look for it in everything. And don't judge, just observe." Jeanne de Salzmann stresses the importance of impartial self-observation in recognizing and overcoming our propensity for lying:

You must stop inwardly and observe. Observe without preconceptions, accepting for a time this idea of lying. And if you observe in this way, without self-pity, giving up all your supposed riches for a moment of reality, perhaps you will suddenly see something you have never seen in yourself until this day. You will see that you are different from what you think you are. You will see that you are two. Learn to look until you have seen the difference between your two natures, until you have seen the lies, the deception in yourself. When you have seen your two natures, that day, in yourself, the truth will be born. (16)

## Negative Emotions

In the ordinary state of affairs, our emotions and moods are constantly changing, vulnerable to the exigencies of the moment. In *Toward Awakening*, Jean Vaysse contrasts the expression of positive and negative emotions: "All our pleasant emotions such as joy, sympathy and confidence, may degenerate at any moment into sadness, aversion, jealousy, doubt, and so on. The expression of these disagreeable emotions, which we cannot usually keep to ourselves, only serves to reinforce them needlessly and spread their negativity."

The forms of negative emotions are almost endless: fear, anger, self-pity, depression, envy, resentment, despair, anxiety, hatred, jealousy, cruelty, irritability, gossip, and many others. "Almost all forms of negative emotion are infantile, and in their manifestations bear a close relationship to a child throwing a temper tantrum." One of the major consequences of these emotions is that we infect others with their poisonous energy. Their expression also drains the organism of vitality and wastes energy; they may even lead to physical or mental illness.

Negative emotions usually originate in the early years of life when children observe and imitate their parent or other adults or other children:

What is the origin of negative emotions if they are artificial, unnatural and useless? We can speak about them and their origin only in relation to ourselves and our lives. For instance, in watching children we can see how they are *taught negative emotions* and how they learn them themselves through imitation of grownups and other children. If, from the earliest days of their life, a child could be put among people who have no negative emotions, they would probably have none, or so very few that they could be easily conquered by right education. But in actual life things happen quite differently, and with the help of all the examples they can see and hear, with the help of reading, the cinema, and so on, a child of about ten already knows the whole scale of negative emotions and can image them, reproduce them, and identify with them as well as any grownup. In adults, negative emotions are supported by the constant justification and glorification of them in literature, the arts and the media, and by personal self-justification and self-indulgence. (17)

Dealing with negative emotions is challenging, and most people are essentially powerless to resist their power and entrapment. One strategy is to let them burn out over time, but this avoids addressing the root of the problem. Ouspensky offers a more hopeful perspective: "In reality, we have much more power over negative emotions than we think, particularly when we already know how dangerous they are and how urgent is the struggle with them. But we find too many excuses for them, and swim in the sea of self-pity or selfishness, finding fault in everything except ourselves."

Ultimately, the powers of self-observation and conscious attention offer the best alternative for dealing with and transforming negative emotions. Kenneth Walker, an English student of Gurdjieff, concurs: "The best hope of learning how to avoid falling such an easy prey to negative emotions lies in becoming more and more sensitive to the early signs of their advent, and having detected their close proximity to us, to step aside in time." This agrees with Gurdjieff's own admonishment to carefully observe and study negative emotions and the impact they have on everyday life. The light of impartial awareness is the most effective medicine to transform the "dross into the fine."

## Self-Knowledge and Transformation

The egoistic self protects itself through various unconscious "defence mechanisms." Michel de Salzman: "Obstacles are raised by the power of suggestion, the tendencies inherent in our upbringing, random habits, the mechanisms of projection and identification. A great inner tranquility is needed to evaluate, understand, taste in a direct, experiential way the instability of the ego." However, the personal ego has a definite role to play in human life, enabling us to function in the everyday world and meet many of our basic physical and social needs. But we must realize that even a healthy ego is subservient to our higher aspirations: "We need to feel, know, taste directly the actual reality of the fundamental Self within us."

One of the goals of the inner work of transformation is to attain a degree of freedom from ego-driven behaviour which keeps us enslaved and at the mercy of external influences. Each of us has the potential to change our attitude and control our attention so that we do not automatically react to external influences. Instead, we can live more consciously and in harmony with the world around us:

We don't always have to react in the same way. We can learn to react differently. In this way we can learn to escape a great deal of the suffering we feel obliged to undergo today. If our suffering were imposed upon us from outside as the result of some kind of law of nature, we would indeed be in a very bad way. Fortunately, this is not so. Since we can change the way we take things, we can see that a great deal of our suffering is self-caused. Consequently, it can be laid down quite quietly, because there is no actual obligation to suffer in a lot of the ways that we find ourself suffering. (18)

The ego acts as a barrier preventing contact with our higher Self. Through the forces of passivity and resistance it deprives us of a deeper quality of being – a stable presence and panoramic vision that is open to all the currents of life. Jeanne de Salzmann: “In the ordinary state one is cut off from the Real, from the energy that will give clarity, meaning and sense to one’s life. Out of vanity, desire, laziness and fear one lives isolated from the great reservoir of Being, in a very small fragment of being called myself.”

Within every human being there is the possibility of a connection with a higher level of reality, the source of All. “An authentic human sense of self-worth can never come from the ego alone, but only as an awareness of something deeply within ourselves that is completely independent of the ego and the body.” This openness to Being begins with a force of conscious attention that transcends the biosocial impulses which make up our usual sense of self. Jacob Needleman:

There is a wish that is not invented by the ego. It is an energy, a movement that exists outside of linear time. Only when you are ready to experience the complete breakdown of the ego without the slightest impulse to re-establish it again, only then will you experience the wish of the evolving self . . . The ego has to become gradually convinced that what it wants – safety, happiness, existence – cannot be obtained through mechanical thinking, personal emotion, or instinctive action. The mind has to become convinced that the only source of its wellbeing is consciousness. The work of studying oneself introduces a motivation that is free of personal gain, egoistic gain. Study, without the impulse to change anything, motiveless study, choiceless awareness . . . There is an action, an allowing, a surrender within, that has always been the birthright of every man or woman. It is a special quality of silence. In that moment, you *know* why you are on earth and you know that as you are you cannot serve. You know that you must change your life and that this can only happen by searching for conditions that will support the appearance of this moment of opening. (19)

The opposite of the states of ‘waking sleep’ or ‘identification’ is to dwell in pure moment-to-moment awareness in which we experience the sense of ‘I Am.’ This is the difference between a conscious life and an unconscious one, between freedom and slavery. One of the practical ways of escaping, or at least relieving, the pull of the ego is to consciously remember that in life everything changes and no psychological state persists indefinitely:

Nothing lasts forever, nothing is permanent, we are in a state in which things fluctuate the whole time. They fluctuate for a thousand different reasons, but this much is certain – they *will* fluctuate. When things are going well inside or outside, one must try to remember that this will not last forever. And that is why we need to try to stretch the boundaries of the world in which we live, opening to the greater reality in which we live. (20)

The inner work of transformation begins with recognizing the importance of impartially observing and studying the personal defects and hindrances that impede our self-development. Through self-observation it is possible to verify for ourselves that we are not conscious and present to the moment in the way that we commonly suppose. Close observation reveals that we are enslaved by habits and conditioning formed in the past; that we are unable to act with conscious intent; and that we are unduly influenced by external forces and events. However, there is a quality of mind that can mobilize a *conscious attention* which is free from conditioned thoughts, feelings and reactions:

We know from experience that there are moments in life – moments of great crisis, perhaps, or sorrow, or wonder, or even terror, or shock, or tenderness – in which a conscious attention appears within ourselves that is independent of our emotions, thoughts and sensations. It is an attention that is pure presence. It sees what is, what is taking place within ourselves. It sees what thoughts are proceeding, what emotional reactions are being activated, what physical sensations and impulses are being triggered. The appearance of this conscious attention brings with it a new sense of *I am*, I exist, I exist here, I exist *now*. It is not itself a thought or emotion or sensation – it is all of these together, but related together in such a way as to conduct an entirely new capacity of conscious presence . . . Such experiences are glimpses of the Self. Or, should we say, glimpses *by* the Self, that is, moments when the person we ordinarily are feels himself or herself as seen and known by another conscious presence which is, paradoxically, also one's own real self, one's own intimate identity. An identity that we have all but forgotten existed within us, waiting for us, calling to us. (21)

According to Gurdjieff, the chief purpose of human life is to be a conscious instrument of "divine love and impartial justice" in the world. This requires a transmutation of the ego-based consciousness that characterizes our inner and outer life on earth: "It is necessary to open oneself to the conscious force that can genuinely direct the impulses of desire and instinct – to work towards opening ourselves to the inner consciousness which can make of us an instrument of moral action, love and justice. As we are, we are not open to this higher level of consciousness – or conscience, in its proper meaning. Thus, our first duty is to my Self."

In order to carry out this inner duty toward *myself* a specific attitude or orientation toward one's own impulses and functions is necessary. These ordinary functions, these desires, impulses, powers of thought, forces of attraction and repulsion, constellations of ambition, creativity, loyalty, even anger, doubt, fear – in short all that in their ungoverned condition make up what we call the ego, rooted as it is in the "inclination toward evil" in man, must be brought to come into direct relationship with the movement toward the higher Self in man . . . But in order to be capable of morality – in order to be entirely capable of moral action towards one's

fellow man – it is necessary that these functions of the body, heart and mind obey the impulse of love that originates in the Self. Ultimately, genuine morality, genuine ethics, originates in the establishment of an overflowing relationship of mutual love and assent between the inner Self and the forces of desire, thought, and instinct, a state of affairs that expresses itself in right action, right feeling, right speech (and thought) through these self-same instruments or functions of body, heart and mind. In this light we can permit ourselves an inner reading of the beautiful and mysterious words of the Twenty-third psalm:

*Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:  
Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. (22)*

Human beings live in two worlds or levels at once – an outer world of sense-based material realities and limitations, and an inner world of spiritual energies and possibilities. In the Stoic teachings of Marcus Aurelius, there is an injunction to accept the desires and sufferings inherent in living in a mortal body on earth while concurrently obeying the spiritual laws of a higher order. In *The American Soul*, Jacob Needleman echoes this perspective: “Both worlds call to us, and as long as we live, we are obliged to give each its due. Our task, our place in the scheme of creation, is to become conscious instruments of action on earth under the aegis of divine law and love.” The teachings Gurdjieff imparted to the world are congruent with this higher-order endeavour:

In order to fulfill this role, we must work to transcend the sense of self-identity that society thrusts upon us and thus prevents us from recognizing our own inner self and its power to serve the good. In this ancient teaching, freedom is understood not as the licence to obey one’s desires but as obedient submission to a deep inner law; independence is understood as the discovery of one’s own authentic self which – although it may seem paradoxical – is also a mirror of the common cosmic Selfhood; equality is understood as every human being’s right to seek the truth and to be allowed to give his or her light to the common welfare . . . In this teaching, a human being is viewed as a being whose individual mind is meant to reflect and manifest the same all-universal and all-beneficent consciousness that creates and maintains the cosmos. At the same time, we are made to live for a finite time in a mortal body and are obliged by the pure power of reason (which includes cosmic love) to care for our neighbor and to answer the moral requirements of family, society and culture – all of which are also part of the universal scheme. Although our inner nature is cosmic, our finite life is on earth; our duties are to both the immortal presence within and, while we live on earth, to our temporary role in the social order. Our task is simultaneous inner freedom and full outer engagement. (23)

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