

Three Lines of Spiritual Work: Perennialism, Orthodox Christianity, the Fourth Way

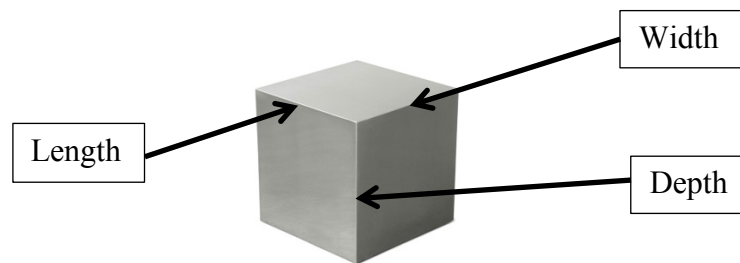
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Session 1: Theory

Picture, if you will, three lines, each marking the edge of a cube:



We can think of each line in three different ways, though in each case the lines, taken together, may be said to constitute a “solid”—that is, a complete—spiritual life. The lines may be labeled:

<i>Length</i>	Philosophy
<i>Width</i>	Religion
<i>Depth</i>	Science

More precisely, in view of our common philosophical commitments and respective traditions, we may give them these names:

<i>Length</i>	<i>Philosophia Perennis</i>
<i>Width</i>	Christianity \approx Islam
<i>Depth</i>	Hesychasm \approx <i>Tasawuff</i> ¹

Or yet again, using now the terms of my subtitle, let us refer to the lines as:

<i>Length</i>	Perennialism
<i>Width</i>	Orthodox Christianity
<i>Depth</i>	The Fourth Way

¹ Considered, in this case, as “sciences of the soul”.

Philosophically speaking, along the length of my solid, we are all perennialists, so I do not think it is necessary for me to say very much about this line of spirituality, either today in theory or tomorrow in practice.

I can, and no doubt should, talk in more detail about the line describing the religious width of the solid, in my case, Orthodox Christianity, as well as about the ways in which it is “scientifically” deepened by the Eastern Christian practice of Hesychasm—though, if you attended this retreat two years ago, you will have already heard me discuss this dimension in the talks I submitted, along with some PowerPoint slides, under the title “Orthodox Christianity and the Interior Life”.

That of course leaves the final line of work in my title, namely, The Fourth Way, which, as you see, I am also relating to the dimension of depth, connecting it, not with philosophy or religion, or not at least primarily so, but with science. More as to why momentarily.

Now obviously, the question becomes: What might The Fourth Way—taken as a theoretical science and as supplying a practical deepening—what might this Way offer us that is *not* already supplied by my own Christian Hesychastic tradition or your Islamic Sufi tradition? I propose to spend most of my time, both today and tomorrow, trying to address this question.

I do so, let me add, in full knowledge of the fact that this line of spiritual work, known among its students in fact as “*The Work*”, was regarded by Guénon and Schuon as a deviant and perhaps even dangerous path, while the man who brought this teaching to the West, George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866-1949), they believed to be, at best, a clever charlatan. Guénon is reported as saying that one should “flee Gurdjieff like the plague”. And in a letter written in 1978, Schuon refers to “Gurdjieffism” as a “Satanic heresy”.

No doubt many, if not most, of you are already aware of these facts, and you may well be wondering why in the world I would wish to play the apologist in apparent defiance of these great traditionalist authorities.

Allow me to say at once, therefore, that I have no interest in defending The Fourth Way as an integral system, as if it might suffice unto itself, taking the place of an orthodox, revealed religion. *Quod absit*, as the Scholastics would say. My aim is simply to share with you some of the things I have gleaned from Gurdjieff’s teaching, a teaching I first encountered as a junior in high school, and why it has continued to interest me these many decades later. I realize even this

muted praise could scandalize some. If so, good! As you will see, “friction”, according to Gurdjieff, is essential to the spiritual life.

In any case, before turning to *The Fourth Way*, some relatively brief thoughts about the length and width of my solid. First:

Perennialism

As already noted, what unites everyone in this room is, I assume, our common conviction concerning the truth of the *philosophia perennis*; and what this conviction betokens in turn, of course, is our fundamental agreement that each of the orthodox, revealed traditions—including not only our own Abrahamic traditions, but the principal religions of Asia, as well as certain primal religions—offers its followers salvific truth. I do not feel the need to name them all here; I think we know what I am talking about.

In trying to explain to people what this first line of our inquiry entails, I often find myself coming back to a passage in the preface to Schuon’s book *From the Divine to the Human*:

Our position is well known: it is fundamentally that of metaphysics, which is by definition *universalist*, ‘*dogmatist*’ in the philosophical sense of that term, and *traditionalist*: universalist because free from all denominational formalism; ‘dogmatist’ because far from all subjectivist relativism . . . and traditionalist because the traditions are there to express, in diverse ways but unanimously, this quintessential position—at once intellectual and spiritual—which, in the final analysis, is the reason for the existence of the human spirit.²

I trust this *précis* of perennialism and the perennial philosophy should be sufficient for now, and so I turn to my second line, the dimension of width, namely:

Orthodox Christianity

I shall say a few things about Hesychasm tomorrow when I talk about practice. Today, keeping to the level of “theory”, allow me to point to some of the features which distinguish Orthodoxy from Western forms of the Christian tradition, on the one hand, and from Islam on the other.

² Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Press, p. 1.

Perhaps the most useful point I can make in our present context, given our similar intellectual trajectories and formations, is to note that Orthodoxy comes the closest, compared to other Christian forms, to what Schuon meant when he said that “Christianity is not *a priori* a religion, but a mystical brotherhood that has become a religion.”³ When I hear the word “mystical” in this observation, I cannot help but think of the classic work by Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*; and when I hear the word “brotherhood”, I am reminded that the Orthodox Church regards the monastic calling, not as something exceptional, but as representing the ideal Christian life, whether one happens to be living as a celibate or not. I am sure you remember Schuon’s description of Islam as “‘a democratic theocracy’ of married monks”.⁴ These words could easily be applied to Orthodox Christianity—except, of course, that some of its monks (and nuns) *aren’t* married!

A good argument could be made that Orthodoxy is also the form of Christian tradition which best supports Schuon’s claim that Christianity is an eso-exoteric tradition—in other words, that at the level of dogma, belief in which is indispensable for every Christian, this religion includes certain teachings which can be understood only esoterically and which were, and are, meant to serve an initiatic purpose. These would include the doctrine of the Trinity, the dogma that God has a Mother, and the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Needless to say, not every Orthodox Christian approaches such dogmas in the way they were intended; for most—and of course this is true for the majority of the adherents of any religion—the teachings are accepted for the sake of consolation not transformation, since most people prefer comfort to effort. Still, in my experience, even at the parish level, Orthodoxy has managed to retain a sense of the mystical, if not the esoteric, in a way that is not true for either Roman Catholicism (certainly in its degenerate current form) or Protestantism. This no doubt is why Schuon once told me during a private audience, “The Orthodox are right about everything ... except [he added, with a characteristic gesture for emphasis] for their interminable liturgies!”

I used the term “transformation” just now. Let me round out this part of my talk by reminding you, or telling you if you did not already know, what precisely this transformation entails, as we Orthodox see it. And I can do that best, and with the most provocative punch, by

³ *Christianity/Islam: Perspectives on Esoteric Ecumenism*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2008), pp. 59-60.

⁴ *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2007), p. 69.

quoting two famously potent lines from two of the most important of the early Church fathers, St Athanasius of Alexandria and St Basil of Caesarea. According to Athanasius, “God became man that man might become God”, while St Basil puts it this way: “Man is a creature under orders to become God.”

As I once wrote in an article,⁵ what Islam *proscribes*, namely, *shirk*, “association”, we Orthodox *prescribe*, using such terms as *koinonia* or “communion” with God; *synergeia* or “synergy”, that is, “co-working” with God; and, most daringly, *theosis* or “deification”, that is, participation in God. This is the agreed-upon, if seldom fully understood or intensively pursued, goal of religion for all Orthodox Christians, and not simply the *bona fide* mystics among them. If I were to put it in Schuonian terms, I might refer you to the chapter entitled “The Servant and Union” in *Logic and Transcendence*, and I would say that *theosis* is to be found at the intersection of the two axes of relationship discussed in that chapter: the axis between the servant and Lord, on the one hand, and the axis between the Intellect and the Self, on the other.⁶ In Orthodox terms, this is tantamount to saying that man is called to participate in the *energies*, though not in the *essence*, of God.

I trust I am throwing off enough sparks to generate a little fruitful discussion! But now I need to move on to the third line noted in my title, which of course is:

The Fourth Way

The first thing to understand is the meaning of “fourth”. And to do that, we need to know that, according to Gurdjieff, each of us has three centers or functions: We think, we feel, and we move; we each have a head, a heart, and a hand; an intellectual, an emotional, and a bodily aspect; or yet again, to use his anatomical language, three brains: one in the forehead, one in the solar plexus, and one at the base of the spine. But in most of us these functions or centers are not balanced. The majority of men and women are dominated by their bodies, by instincts and physical habits. These are what Gurdjieff calls Men No. 1. The next largest group are those for whom feelings are dominant. These are Men No. 2. Finally, Men No. 3 are those in whom thinking predominates.

⁵ “Disagreeing to Agree: A Christian Response to *A Common Word*” (Barnes Symposium, University of South Carolina, 27 March 2009). See “Articles” at www.cutsinger.net.

⁶ Ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2009), p. 181.

This division, I should add, is not as clear cut as it might seem at first glance. A given person may be very intelligent and keenly interested in ideas, but when his behavior is carefully observed, he may turn out to be dominated by material and physical considerations, being insensitive to the emotional side of his own nature as well as to the feelings of others and drawing conclusions of a strictly planimetric kind, based upon premises supplied by empirical and tangible data alone.

Corresponding to these three functions and three types of people, Gurdjieff goes on to claim that there are, traditionally, three common forms of spiritual work, three time-tested ways leading to transformation: the way of the *faqir* for Men No. 1, whose development depends on capitalizing on the powers of the body; the way of the *monk* for Men No. 2, whose most productive effort is with their emotions; and the way of the *yogi* for men No. 3, who can make the most progress by exploiting their minds. I realize that, as *fuqara* and *faqirat*, you may balk at this classification, and as *Maryami* in particular you may well assume that your strength is intellectual and that you are actually, in Gurdjieffian terms, yogis and yoginis. All I can say is that we need to allow Gurdjieff his own special use of these terms, keeping in mind as well what I have already noted, namely, that these divisions among types of people are subtler than they may at first seem.

You can probably see where this is going even if you have never heard of The Fourth Way before. According to Gurdjieff, the problem with these first *three* ways is that they work on only one side of a person, or at least on only one side at a time, and for this reason they fail to promote what he called “the harmonious development of man”.

What distinguishes The Fourth Way is the claim that a fully attentive or conscious deployment of any one of our functions requires a simultaneous work on the other two functions: I cannot think as I ought unless I feel and sense *what* I think *as I think it*; I cannot feel as I ought unless I think and sense *what* I feel *as I feel it*; I cannot sense and move with my body as I ought unless I think and feel *what* I sense and in the way I move *as I sense and move*. Only when these functions are balanced do I become a Man No. 4, and only then am I able to begin assimilating certain “higher energies”⁷—energies which alone can transform, not only myself, but, through me,

⁷ These energies come to us, according to Gurdjieff, from two higher “centers”: the higher intellectual and the higher emotional, these centers corresponding more or less, in Christian terms, with divine knowledge and love. Every man has both of these higher centers, but Man No. 1, Man No. 2, and Man No. 3 have no awareness of them. Consider this Orthodox parallel: “Unless we co-operate with God’s grace—unless, through the exercise of our free will, we struggle to perform the commandments—it is likely that the Spirit’s presence within us will remain hidden and unconscious”

the world around me. Otherwise I remain, according to Gurdjieff's disconcerting diagnosis of our present condition: a mere machine, a collection of habits, a panoply of inadvertent thoughts, emotions, and postures, plunged in a state of mild hypnotic coma, sleep-walking my way through life, and destined—you will find this, I am sure, one of his more bracing and no doubt controversial claims—destined for annihilation. Man is *not ipso facto* or intrinsically immortal, but must *work* to become such.⁸

I have connected The Fourth Way with the line of science, and in discussing the types of human beings, I have already hinted as to the psychology it brings to the table. Its scientific character in a broader sense can be understood perhaps best if one considers the fundamental question which informed Gurdjieff's own spiritual search as a young man, as well as the teaching he later passed on to others. Beginning in his early teens, his *idée fixe*, as he called it, was to discover an answer to this question:

“What is the sense and significance in general of life on Earth and of human life in particular?”

And the answer he came to was that organic life, both plant and animal, is a kind of filter covering the planet—what I suppose we might today call the biosphere—a filter which is intended to serve

(Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* [Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995], p. 100.

⁸ A bracing claim indeed, but not without solid precedent in Patristic tradition. “Plato's theory of the immortality of the soul has often been so enthusiastically received by Christians of different ages that they have sometimes forgotten that the Church has never taught or sanctioned such a pagan idea. The human being, as Athanasios knew, is conditionally immortal, but naturally corruptible. To connote such a novel concept, he added to the vocabulary of the Hellenist ontologists a third, middling category, calling it *meontic*. The adjectival suffix ‘ontic’ derives from the Greek word for being. The prefix ‘me-’ is the Greek conditional negative ... connoting a state or condition which is fundamentally tentative. Something that is meontic, therefore, is poised between polarities. Human nature is thus depicted as a reactive force, an energy, rather than a fixed substantive category. Athanasios regarded human life as becoming, not being ... called towards ‘making a response’ in order to define and claim its hold on reality. Aristotle had introduced ... the notion of teleotic development within set forms, but had not gone as far as the Christian Fathers in seeing the very nature of human beings as itself an energy (*energeia*) that had been sent out by God for the purpose of lifting mankind into a transcendence of itself in communion with the deity.... Reflecting also on the startling concept of the creation of man from nothing (*ex nihilo*, or *ek ouk on*), Athanasios considered human nature as made up out of the very stuff or fabric of nothingness, and with an innate ontological tendency to revert to nothingness. This tendency he called *ptharsia*, corruption or corruptibility.... When a human being followed this natural tendency to dissolution, it was occupied with wholly material concerns. The end of material life, however, is the corruption of both body and mind, which is fixed within the material entity as an inescapable law of death. When a human being responded, on the other hand, to the deeper instinct planted within it by the direct gift of God, it found a different form of life, a form rooted in material humanity, but rising out of it in a grace-filled existence that brought it into direct communion with God and the angelic beings. When a man lives such a life ... the material boundaries of human nature, which are otherwise inflexible (death being a prime example of our limits), prove to be permeable to a new *energeia* of being” (John Anthony McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture* [Oxford: Blackwell, 2008], pp. 187-88).

as a transforming apparatus, taking in those higher “energies” of which I have spoken and lowering their “voltage” in a way appropriate to the Earth’s current state, “empowering” the planet itself to move toward a higher level of spiritual development. It is unclear to me, I confess, how literally to take this electrical and biochemical language. What *is* clear, however, is that Gurdjieff was some sort of panpsychist, teaching that at least a rudimentary potential for consciousness is present, not only in animate, but in what we (mistakenly) suppose are merely inanimate parts of creation. According to his best-known student, P. D. Ouspensky, Gurdjieff taught that “everything in its own way is alive, everything in its own way is intelligent and conscious.”⁹

In any case, according to Gurdjieff, the human being, as part of the Earth’s filter or biosphere, is also meant to serve as a transformer and conduit through which the planet is brought to higher and higher energy states. But unlike the lower animals—the “one-brained” invertebrates and the “two-brained” vertebrates, which perform their functions unconsciously, no more aware of what they are doing than an electrical generator—we have a *choice*.

We “three-brained” beings, too, can remain unconscious, just machines—or, alternatively, mere “pieces of meat”, to use Gurdjieff’s colorfully challenging imagery—in which case we shall serve the Earth only when our energetic potential for consciousness, having been squandered in life, is released at death, while the souls we might have otherwise developed are lost forever. On the other hand, we can actualize our greater potential so as to become conscious co-workers with God in the salvation of the Earth, and indeed by extension of the cosmos itself, while at the same time freeing ourselves from the limitations of earthly existence, moving through the level of Man No. 4, or balanced Man, to higher and higher states of being—Man No. 5 or unified Man, Man No. 6 or objectively conscious Man, and finally Man No. 7 or perfected Man—and guaranteeing for ourselves a continuing life after death.

These provocative ideas are all rooted in a complex, multi-dimensional Gurdjieffian metaphysical cosmology and philosophy of nature, the details of which I cannot even begin to go into. The best I can do is to put before you as examples, in no particular order, five of Gurdjieff’s more tantalizing claims.

1. God—or what Gurdjieff variously calls Our Almighty Omni-Loving Common Father, His Endlessness, the Actualizer-of-Everything Existing, and our Creator All-

⁹ *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, 1977), p. 317.

Maintainer—was obliged to create the universe in order to forestall the corrosive, entropic effect of Time on the Most Holy Sun Absolute, which is where God lives, His place of residence. I grant you, this is a very strange claim. But consider this possible parallel, no less strange in its way: according to Schuon, All-Possibility includes even the possibility of Its own negation, which, since this cannot be realized inside the Divine Principle Itself, is brought to realization extrinsically in Manifestation, a Manifestation the increasing remoteness of which in the direction of nothingness results in what we call evil. For neither Gurdjieff nor Schuon can God do just whatever He wants; He Himself operates as it were within certain limits or boundaries. Evil and its consequent suffering remain inevitable corollaries of creation, and thus—as Gurdjieff sees it, at least—opportunities for increasing consciousness for those whose wish is strong enough to underwrite the necessary effort, what he calls “conscious labor and intentional suffering”. More on this last point tomorrow.

2. Everything that exists is material. And that means *everything*. Even God is material, as material—as weighable and measurable—as a rock, or a man. Again, a startling claim, the shock of which is somewhat softened, perhaps, by the correlative teaching that there are different degrees of materiality, corresponding to differing frequencies of vibration, ranging from His Endlessness, in whom matter is the most rarified and vibrations the fastest or “densest”, to the moon, which lies at the bottom end of what Gurdjieff calls The Ray of Creation, where vibrations are the slowest and matter is densest.
3. Everything that exists exists in a relationship of reciprocity or mutuality with everything else that exists. And this—once again an unexpected idea—this includes God. Gurdjieff names this The Law of Reciprocal Maintenance, or the Trogoautoegocratic Process. (“Trogoautoegocratic” is his neologism derived from the Greek, and literally meaning: “I maintain myself by eating”, or even: “I maintain myself by eating myself.”) At the level of organic life, we are accustomed to the idea of symbiosis. As the aboriginal Source of *all* life, His Endlessness is Himself in a symbiotic relationship with His creatures. This can be mapped with relative ease, I propose, onto the Orthodox Christian understanding of *synergeia* or synergy between God and His human creation, where it may truly be said that the realization of God’s will for creation depends upon man, even as man’s salvation—in Gurdjieffian terms, man’s becoming a Man No. 7—depends upon God. Consider this formulation, for example, from *The Homilies of Saint Macarius*, one of the Desert Fathers, “The will of man is an essential condition, for without it, God does nothing.”¹⁰ Admittedly, we would not ordinarily think of equating synergy in this sense with symbiosis in a biological sense. But that is because we tend to compartmentalize, dividing the

¹⁰ As quoted by Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p. 112. Ware adds, “We are to hold in balance two complementary truths: without God’s grace, we *can* do nothing, but without our voluntary co-operation, God *will* do nothing.”

“spiritual” from the “organic”. For Gurdjieff, this dualism only serves to blind us to the integrity, the wholistic nature, of Reality. On the other hand, an underlying integrity notwithstanding, there are nonetheless ...

4. ... certain discontinuities in the Ray of Creation. Gurdjieff likens the Ray to the musical octave, and the discontinuities to the half-step intervals, as one ascends the octave, between *Mi* and *Fa*, and *Si* and *Do* in the C-major scale. Basarab Nicolescu—a theoretical physicist at the National Center for Scientific Research in Paris and a specialist in particle physics with numerous scientific articles to his credit, as well as a senior figure in the Work and a fellow Orthodox Christian—has used the concept of quantum discontinuity to interpret the Gurdjieffian intervals. According to Gurdjieff, special “shocks” are needed in order to “leap” over the discontinuities in the Ray of Creation. Nicolescu comments, “To try to grasp the full strangeness of [this idea], let us imagine a bird jumping from one branch to another without passing through any intermediary point: it would be as if the bird were to suddenly materialize on one branch, then on another. Evidently, confronting such a possibility, our habitual imagination is blocked.”¹¹ Take note of that phrase “habitual imagination”. As we shall see in discussing practice: Habit, of whatever kind, is always an obstacle to spiritual development for the Gurdjieffian.
5. We human beings have within us all the many levels or degrees of materiality, all the frequencies of vibration, just as they exist at every level of our Ray of Creation, whether in God Himself (whom Gurdjieff connects with *Do* at the top of the octave), in All Worlds (that is, the created Universe) (*Si*), in All Suns (that is, our galaxy, the Milky Way) (*La*), in our own Sun (*Sol*), in All Planets (that is, all those of our Solar System) (*Fa*), in the Earth (*Mi*), and in the Moon (*Re*). Man is thus microcosmic, or rather: He has the *potential* to become a microcosm, a miniature universe, but only insofar as he actualizes all his God-given capacities as a three-brained being. You may have noticed that I spoke of “our” Ray of Creation. According to Gurdjieff, there is an infinitude of such rays or radii emanating from the center of God. Of these and their universes, we have as yet no knowledge.

We can glean at least a preliminary sense of why these unusual teachings are so important to The Fourth Way in light of what Gurdjieff called the five “Being-Obligonian Strivings”, each of which is essential for those who are really serious about transformation. They are as follows:

¹¹ “Gurdjieff’s Philosophy of Nature”, *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teaching*, ed. Jacob Needleman and George Baker (New York: Continuum, 1996), p. 40.

First: “To have in their ordinary being-existence everything satisfying and really necessary for their planetary body.”

Second: “To have a constant and unflagging instinctive need for self-perfection in the sense of being.”

Third: “The conscious striving to know ever more and more concerning the laws of World-creation and World-maintenance.”

Fourth: “The striving from the beginning of their existence to pay for their arising and their individuality as quickly possible, in order afterwards to be free to lighten as much as possible the Sorrow of our COMMON FATHER.”

Fifth: “The striving always to assist the most rapid perfecting of other beings, both those similar to oneself and those of other forms, up to the degree of self-individuality.”¹²

The practical, personal import of the Third Striving—to “know ever more and more concerning the laws of World-creation and World-maintenance”—comes through very clearly in the following words of Gurdjieff, as quoted by Ouspensky:

“It is impossible to study man without studying the universe. Man is an image of the world. He was created by the same laws which created the whole world.... By studying the world and the laws that govern the world he will learn and understand the laws that govern him.... The study of the world and the study of man must therefore run parallel, one helping the other.”¹³

I think it best if I reserve further details concerning Gurdjieffian science and the “technology”, if you will, of The Fourth Way until tomorrow when I talk more precisely about what I myself have endeavored to adapt from the Work as a complement to my Hesychastic practice as an Orthodox Christian.

I did want to add just a coda today, however, concerning Gurdjieff and his possible sources. There seem to be two opinions among those involved in the Work: first, that Gurdjieff was essentially an isolated phenomenon, unique and self-sufficient; someone who had traveled widely, engaging with

¹² Gurdjieff, *All and Everything: An Objectively Impartial Criticism of the Life or Man, or Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* (Aurora, Oregon: Two Rivers Press, 1993), p. 386.

¹³ *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 75.

many different cultures and traditions, and who as a syncretist connected bits and pieces of various spiritual teachings, molding them into a system of his own, and then expressing it in a vocabulary that would be intelligible and accessible to the more or less scientifically minded but religiously agnostic—say rather, religiously hostile—European and American intelligentsia, his primary audience.

A second group of Gurdjieffians claim, on the contrary, that his theory and practice were deeply informed by his continuing contact throughout his long life with spiritual masters belonging to an extremely ancient tradition, antedating the historical religions, but most fully revealed and embodied in our day—and now here is where things get interesting for all of us in this room—most fully revealed and embodied in (1) the Orthodox Christianity in which he had been raised (his father was Greek and his mother Armenian) and with which he continued to identify throughout his life; and in (2) the Sufism of the *Naqshbandi*, whom he frequented during his many travels in Central Asia. If that is true, if what we are dealing with here is an Orthodox Christian who borrowed from Sufi sources—well, you can see, I am sure, why *I* at least have a hard time being too dismissive of the Work! nor of the man who said that his teaching was tantamount to “*esoteric Christianity*”.¹⁴

One of Gurdjieff’s most intelligent, multifaceted, and provocative interpreters, J. G. Bennett, connects the teachings of the *Naqshbandi* in turn to the *Khwājagān*, a term he translates as “the Masters of Wisdom”.¹⁵ I have no doubt that many of you will know a good deal more about these matters than I do.

In any case, I enter these suggestions into the record as a possible response to the criticisms leveled by Guénon and Schuon, for both of whom the chief problem with *The Fourth Way* was the absence of a traditional lineage. I do not mean to suggest that they would have been any more sanguine about Gurdjieff himself and some of his more startling teaching methods, nor would they have been exactly pleased, I suppose, by his having a double spiritual parentage, or all the more by the fact that he was so coy about saying what this parentage was. No one in the Work has a *silsila* they can hang on the wall! And yet, if you think about it, this is entirely in keeping with an important feature of Gurdjieff’s teaching, namely, that none of his students were to *believe*

¹⁴ *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 102.

¹⁵ “The Masters of Wisdom”, Ch. 2 in *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973). See also *Beads of Dew from the Source of Life: Histories of the Khwājagān, The Masters of Wisdom* (Al-Baz Publications, 2001), pp. 16-25.

anything. Nothing was to be taken for granted, he insisted; ideas were to be accepted only when first verified in one's own experience.

Still, I think it is worthwhile at least to entertain the second hypothesis. Bennett recalls Gurdjieff having more than once said, "Every man must have a teacher. I too have my teacher."

It is also worth noting that Gurdjieff was very much a perennialist, respecting all the great religions and having no more use than do we for the likes of theosophy, anthroposophy, or the various New Age phenomena. He was also a devolutionist, as are we. Ouspensky quotes him as saying, "*There is no progress whatever.... Modern civilization is based on violence and slavery and fine words. All these fine words about 'progress' and 'civilization' are merely words.*"¹⁶

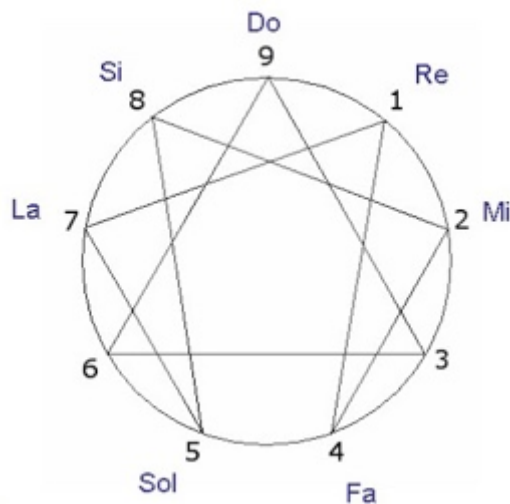
It is also of interest that Gurdjieff's leading student, the woman tasked by him with continuing the Work after his death, Madame Jeanne de Salzmann, set off for Cairo immediately after Gurdjieff died, in 1949, to consult with (of all people) René Guénon, though there are conflicting reports as to what transpired in their conversation. According to Whitall Perry, this is when Guénon uttered his admonition about fleeing Gurdjieff like the plague. On the Fourth Way side of the record, however, one hears instead that Madame de Salzmann was able to situate things for Guénon and help him to see the traditional legitimacy of what Gurdjieff had taught, despite his admittedly strange formulations and apparently erratic behavior. Either way, Madame de Salzmann herself reportedly said that, were it not for Gurdjieff, she and others in the Work would have very willingly turned to the traditionalists for guidance.¹⁷

¹⁶ *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 51.

¹⁷ James Moore, one of Gurdjieff's biographers, notes: "Ironically Guénon's and Schuon's books (and those by associated figures like Titus Burckhardt, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Martin Lings, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Marco Pallis, Whitall Perry, and so on) receive more sympathetic attention in certain Gurdjieffian circles than anywhere else" ("The Enneagram: A Developmental Study" [*Religion Today*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 1988], note 8. For an explanation and further discussion of the enneagram, an image of which I have placed on the following page, see *In Search of the Miraculous*, pp. 294-95, 376-78; the "movement of the enneagram", mentioned by Ouspensky on pp. 294-95, can be seen at the end of the film *Meetings with Remarkable Men* [see below, p. 28]). Moore writes elsewhere [in reference to Whitall N. Perry's book *Gurdjieff in the Light of Tradition* (London: Perennial Books, 1978)]: "It was not that the eminent French Sufi and 'perennialist' Guénon himself constituted a present bother, having died in 1951, but his fellow-traveler Frithjof Schuon was very much alive, and constellated about him was a mutual admiration society of spiritual apologists (notably Titus Burckhardt, Gai Eaton, Martin Lings, Marco Pallis, the editor F. Clive-Ross, and the culprit Perry himself). Prior to Perry's ambush, we Gurdjieffians, especially our erudite Nicoll wing, had viewed this traditionalist coterie as so-to-say first cousins: estimable allies in the dialectical struggle against nihilism, humanism, modernism, positivism, scientism, secularism, etc. Henri Tracol [a senior figure in the Work in France] himself was a big fan of Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, while Dr Jacob Needleman—a young and rising Gurdjieffian protégé of Lord Pentland, and editor of *The Penguin Metaphysical Library*—was even then promoting a traditionalist anthology, *The Sword of Gnosis* [1974] (*Gurdjieffian Confessions: A Self Remembered* [London: Gurdjieff Studies Limited, 2005], pp. 186-87).

In the final analysis, Gurdjieff's sources are a matter of speculation. In closing, let me leave you with something that is *not* speculative, in anticipation of my talk tomorrow. I quote from a lecture of Gurdjieff's. No matter how the other points I have made today may have struck you, I think you will agree that the following is undeniable:

Freedom leads to freedom. Those are the first words of Truth. You do not know what is truth because you do not know what freedom is. All the truth that you know today is only 'truth' in quotation marks. There is another truth, but it is not theoretical: it cannot be expressed in words. Only those who have realized it in themselves can understand it.... The freedom I speak about is the freedom that is the goal of all schools, of all religions, of all times.... But it can never be attained without a first kind of freedom, which I will call the Lesser Freedom. The Greater Freedom is the liberation of ourselves from all influences acting outside ourselves. The Lesser Freedom is the liberation of ourselves from all influences acting within ourselves. For a start—for you who are beginners—the Lesser Freedom is a very big thing indeed.... You must understand that you do not begin with freedom [whether Greater or Lesser]—freedom is the goal, the aim. People say that God created man free. That is a great misunderstanding. Freedom cannot be given to anyone—even by our all-loving Creator Himself. But God *has* given man the biggest thing He can—the possibility to become free.”¹⁸



¹⁸ Quoted by Bennett, *Gurdjieff: Making a New World*, 148-49, 151.

Session 2: Practice

We turn today in this second session from theory to practice. What are the practical implications of the three lines of spiritual work in my title? How does one *practice* the perennial philosophy? How does one *practice* Orthodox Christianity, or more precisely Hesychasm? How does one *practice* the Fourth Way?

Perennialism

I can be very brief in addressing the practice of Line No. 1. How does one practice perennialism? It seems to me we are doing that right now, even as I speak and you listen. The practice of perennialism, or so I would say, is nothing other than esoteric ecumenicism: the sort of dialogue or discussion which comes about between people who follow different religious traditions, who acknowledge and honor the providential disparities and apparent contradictions between their exoteric doctrines and frameworks, but who seek nonetheless to discover the inner, principial commonalities that unite those traditions. In other words, one is practicing perennialism when, in Schuon's formulation, one insists on "holy separation at the base" in order to realize "holy union at the summit";¹⁹ or again, when one seeks spiritual unity—once more in Schuonian terms—not in "the human atmosphere", but in "the divine stratosphere".

Orthodox Christianity / Hesychasm

As for the second line of spiritual work, what I called yesterday the width of my solid, the dimension representing the religion one practices—in my case, Orthodox Christianity and, more particularly, its Hesychast stream—I shall be somewhat less brief, though here too I do not think I need to say very much since, as I reminded you yesterday, three lectures of mine on "Orthodox Christianity and the Interior Life" should already be available to you from your 2017 retreat.

Orthodox Hesychasm, which I myself have been endeavoring to practice in my own feeble way for a little over 30 years, consists in an effort to find and enter *hesychia*, a Greek word meaning "stillness" or "silence". The silence in question is more than an absence of audible sound. More

¹⁹ "The Nature and Function of the Spiritual Master", *Logic and Transcendence*, p. 195.

deeply understood, it is a state (a *ḥāl*, in your terms)—and eventually a station (a *maqām*)—of stillness in which not just outer but inner conversation either comes to a halt or—and this is actually the higher attainment: It is a stillness untouched and undistracted even by continuing thoughts or their outward expression, whether one’s own or another’s. In this sense, the stillness of *hesychia* is to be understood less in terms of sound and more in terms of movement. *Hesychia* is motionlessness or immovability in the midst of motion.

The stopping of movement is, as we know, a common device in the animal world to escape being notice; the object is to become as it were invisible. Practicing *hesychia* is like making yourself invisible inside your own inner space. You seek to escape notice, yes, but the notice of what? In your mind you are surrounded by thoughts, which may be regarded as predators, to extend my analogy from the animal kingdom. Each wants to consume your attention. But suddenly, for a few precious seconds, they are unable to find where you are. They look for you everywhere. Odd as this way of putting things may sound, it is possible to experience your own thoughts searching for you and not finding you.

The key to entering this silence is—again a Greek term—*nēpsis*. *Nēpsis* can be variously translated as alertness, watchfulness, sobriety, or attention. The Hesychast masters, many of whose writings have been preserved in *The Philokalia*—a classic collection of Orthodox spiritual materials dating from the 4th to the 15th centuries—are sometimes called the Neptic Fathers, precisely because of their having found and made use of this key.²⁰

As an aid to a deepened attention, Hesychasm prescribes the use of invocation, and this of course, like your *dhikr*, consists in the rhythmic repetition of a short formula containing a Name of God, with the understanding that the Name is the Named—that the Name of God *is* God. The most common such formula for an Orthodox Christian, as I am sure you know, is the Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” The invocation can be, and often is, linked to the breath and even, among those further advanced in the practice, to the beat of the heart.

²⁰ Interestingly enough, the very first translations of these Philokalic texts into English were made at Ouspensky’s request for use with his Fourth Way groups in London. Working from the Russian translation by St Theophan the Recluse, Ouspensky’s secretary, Evgenia Kadloubovsky, collaborated with one of Ouspensky’s students at the time, G. E. H. Palmer, in providing these groups with typescript translations and commentary during the early 1940s. Their work was later published by Faber and Faber as *Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart* (1951) and *Early Fathers from the Philokalia* (1954). Palmer, who later worked with Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware in translating *The Philokalia: The Complete Text* from the original Greek (Vols. I-IV are in print [1979-95]; a fifth and final volume has yet to appear), was also the first to translate Schuon’s *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom* into English (Perennial Books, 1959).

A circular movement is sometimes recommended, in which with an intake of breath the Name is drawn upward along the spine to the head and then permitted to descend from the head toward the heart as one gently exhales. But regardless of specific technique or stratagem, one of the goals is to overcome the apparent dichotomy between mind and body or spirit and matter, triangulating as it were to their identity—or rather, more precisely, their advaitic relation, their non-duality—*in* and *as* God in Christ. There is in all the Hesychast writings a strong sense that the body and its rhythms are not to be neglected, that they can become a precious ally in one's efforts to move along a path through *nēpsis* to *hesychia* and thence, finally, to *theosis* or deification. In the words of one of the greatest masters of the Hesychast life, St Symeon the New Theologian:

Christ is my hand and my lowly foot, and I am His own foot and hand. I move my hand, and Christ is all my hand, for God is indivisible in His Divinity. I move my foot, and behold it shines like Him. A true marriage takes place, ineffable and divine: God unites Himself with each bodily member, and each becomes one with the Master. If in your body you have put on the total Christ, you will understand all that I am saying. He became totally man, He who is totally God—He the Unique One, without division, perfect man without doubt, and the same One completely God in the totality of all my members.²¹

Alright, now for the final line of work, namely, *the* Work, which is to say:

The Fourth Way

Before sharing with you a few of the practices one finds in the Work, I feel I need to return to the question I posed yesterday. Putting it in personal terms: Why have I, as an Orthodox Christian perennialist—someone, all the more, who has had for many years full access to Schuon's unpublished Texts—why have I felt the need for something else, something more than is offered by Hesychasm, something I seem to have found among the Gurdjieffians? I think I can address that question best by pointing you back to Gurdjieff's own question, also mentioned yesterday:

“What is the sense and significance in general of life on Earth and of human life in particular?”

²¹ *Hymns of Divine Love*, No. 15.

As I see it, neither of our religions as such—neither Islam nor Christianity—fully addresses this question, nor do their respective “sciences of the soul”, whether *Tasawuff* or Hesychasm; nor do our convictions concerning the perennial philosophy prove of any obvious use. You may object, of course, and point me to the *Hadīth Qudsi*: “I was a hidden treasure, and I desired to be known.” And a fellow Orthodox Christian might likewise quote the words of St Maximos the Confessor, who makes much the same point: “The Divine moves and is moved,” the saint says, “since it thirsts to be thirsted for, desires to be desired, and loves to be loved.”²² Are these teachings not enough to account for the significance of human life on planet Earth? We are here to satisfy God’s desire to be known and His desire to be loved. Full stop.

For me, however, two aspects of Gurdjieff’s question remain unanswered: first, what about “life on Earth” *in general*? Why are there all those billions of one- and two-brained beings, and what are *they* here for? And what is my proper relation to them? Our religions will answer: Man is called to be vicegerent in relation to these lower creatures, to have “dominion” over them, to be toward the Earth and its other inhabitants what God Himself is in relation to us. But this on its own remains rather generic and abstract. Do our religions, even their esotericisms, explain in precisely what my dominion consists, or how its proper execution assists me in knowing, loving, and serving God? Do they empower me to be a god for a tree or a squirrel, let us say, or help me to understand my distinctive relation to each?

But there’s also a second unanswered, or at least not fully answered, question or set of questions implicit in Gurdjieff’s guiding query, and it is this second cluster of questions that interests me even more, because I suspect that if I knew the answer to these I would be better able to address the first. Here is the second set: What is the “sense and significance” of my having a *body*? My body allows me to share, not only in the life and relative consciousness of the one- and two-brained beings, but in the life of the plants, as well as in the life-giving properties of minerals drawn from the soil of this Earth. Why should this be so? Granted my own higher calling as a three-brained being, the possibility of developing a soul, my potential immortality: why have I nonetheless been made in such a way as to participate in the full range of this planet’s other forms of being? What is the purpose of that?

Needless to say, it is no accident that, as a Christian, the significance and role of my body should be of particular interest. Christianity teaches that the embodiment of God Himself on this

²² *Ambigua to John*, 23.

Earth is essential and central to the meaning and life of the entire cosmos. It is therefore impossible for a Christian to suppose that his body is a mere excrescence, a temporary house for something strictly immaterial. I do realize, of course, that there are many efficacious *upāyas* and that certain schools among the Asian traditions prefer to exploit saving stratagems which involve detachment from everything physical, and which recommend, for example, the contemplation of my body in various stages and states of decomposition and dismemberment as I seek to liberate myself from the illusion that I have a body so as to know my true Self. For a Christian, however—and, for reasons I have already hinted at, all the more for a Hesychast—this does not seem the most effective or productive approach to transformation and salvation.

Speaking just for myself, I have felt as though something is missing, even in Hesychasm. Or perhaps better put: I have felt as though there might be ways of taking what one finds in the writings of the Neptic Fathers concerning the spiritual use of the body and going even further and deeper, ways of understanding the relationship between my body and the other parts of myself that would help me to move toward becoming more fully integrated, toward—to repeat myself from yesterday—toward *feeling* and *sensing* what I think *as I think it*; toward *thinking* and *sensing* what I feel *as I feel it*; toward *thinking* and *feeling* what I sense and in the way I move *as I sense and move*.

Well, that is my *apologia* for what I have been up to and why. Now, in the remainder of my time, just a few practical insights as to what I have learned from the Work. I should note that these insights have come in part from extensive reading and study of the literature of The Fourth Way, but also, more importantly, from my having had the opportunity to meet several times in person, and to talk on a more or less every-other-weekly basis by phone for a number of years, with one of the most senior people in the Work. This teacher has been at pains to insist more than once that the real effectiveness of Gurdjieff's teaching requires an oral transmission, that there is only so much one can gather from books, and that it takes someone more experienced to see what I need at any given moment, to correct my misunderstandings, to catch me out, and to show me what lurks behind my questions and mistakes.

Above all, I for one needed something, *still* need something, that can help bring me down out of my head. God gave me a pretty good mind, as He did, I dare say, everyone in this room. The problem is that it is very easy for this pretty good mind of mine to remember ideas, to chart

their relations—even to write articles and books about them!—but without those ideas bearing a truly transformative fruit within the deeper regions of my organism. You may be thinking, and I would not blame you if you were, that Schuon’s alchemical Texts could, and should, have provided me with this missing element. All I can say is that, rich as they are, these Texts have always seemed to me largely phenomenological descriptions of Schuon’s own experiences as an embodied spiritual being, but—and again I am speaking just for myself, without wishing to discountenance your own use of these materials—they have not provided the sort of practical, operative instruction I needed in order to experience the same dynamics within my own body. And as a result, my assimilation of even these Texts, with all their numerous and engaging diagrams, has been more or less strictly cerebral, a mastering of concepts.

It was therefore incredibly useful to be admonished by this teacher in the Work, in one of our very first conversations, that esotericism is *not* a matter of concepts but of “energetic events”, and to be gradually guided by him toward a few, admittedly fleeting, moments of eventful experience.

I do not wish to be any more autobiographical than that. As you know, it is easy to empty a real experience of its value by talking too much about it. Nor do I wish to violate the trust and confidentiality between me and this teacher by speaking in overly specific terms about our relationship or conversations. I *would* like to share with you, however, just a brief sample of the practical exercises that are recommended in general terms by and for those following The Fourth Way, notably exercises and tasks involving the body.

I can best begin by reminding you of the Gurdjieffian diagnosis of our present condition. What is the problem, or what are the problems, to which the exercises and tasks, bodily and otherwise, are an intended solution? In putting the problem before you in my talk yesterday, I told you that Gurdjieff regarded undeveloped, unharmonized man as a mere machine, no more truly alive than a toaster or a washing machine. Or again, in Work language, man is said to be asleep: What we are only too pleased to call our “waking” consciousness, while perhaps marginally more aware than the sleep we sleep in our beds at night, is nonetheless almost entirely lacking in focus, and almost entirely occupied by day-dreams.

But perhaps the best known, and in many ways the most telling and frighteningly accurate, approach in the Work is to describe our present condition by saying that we have no permanent

“I”, but are instead enslaved by the passing whims of multiple “I’s”. James Moore makes this point in especially poignant terms:

All men and women, [Gurdjieff] warns, play host to scores if not hundreds of different parasitic identities, each with its blinkered repertoire of behavior. A snub, a flattering letter, a no smoking sign, a slow queue, a come-hither look—and we are strangely altered. We have one personality with subordinates, another with superiors, one with our mother, another with the tax man—each is Caliph for an hour. One scatters promissory notes which others must redeem: “Certainly. See you in the morning. Only too delighted.” One despairing, humorless personality may even take an overdose or jump off a cliff—crazily destroying the habitat of all the others.... Very few [of us] are strong enough to confront this impression emotionally and to work within the compass of its appalling implications.... Chiefly to blame, in Gurdjieff’s eyes, is man’s irresponsibility towards his godlike faculty of attention: He does not reverence it, he does not mobilize it, he does not govern it; and what little he finds access to, he casts to the dogs. Unsurprisingly man’s enfeebled attention has no autonomy, but is always attached, glued, surrendered to this or that “identification”: Here for example it hardens into sharp configurations of self-pity, irritability, anxiety, resentment, envy, vanity, hatred, and every sort of “negative emotion”; there it softens into treacherous interior fantasies, “imagination”, daydreams, and delusional systems; here it supports a complacent judgement on other poor devils, and here, paradoxically, a squirming fear of their verdict on us; here it embellishes ignorance to seem like knowledge ... and invariably it provides voltage for our inner and outer chattering, for the despotic associations, which flutter ceaselessly through our weary brain.²³

So, what is to be done, practically speaking? The first thing, according to Gurdjieff, is to acknowledge the accuracy of the diagnosis, confirming its truth—assuming it is not immediately obvious—by practicing what the Work calls “self-observation”. If I am honest and persistent in this endeavor, I shall very quickly be brought up short by my inattentiveness, my sleep, my machine-like behavior, my interior fragmentation. But then, having admitted that I have no permanent or unified self, I shall have to admit in turn that there is really nothing I *can* “do” about it. If Cutsinger has no I, there is no one—no *one*—who can *do* anything.

²³ Gurdjieff: *The Anatomy of a Myth: A Biography* (Rockport, Massachusetts: Element Books, 1991) pp. 53, 54.

On the other hand, if I have begun to develop what Gurdjieff calls a “magnetic center”,²⁴ there may be a small, semi-serious cluster of “I’s” inside of me which, when confronted by this diagnosis, find themselves frightened enough—frightened by what he called “the terror of the situation”—that they are willing to place themselves in the hands of someone who *does* have an “I”²⁵ and who is willing and able to provide these little “I’s” with appropriate means for gradually becoming more and more unified, allowing Cutsinger—over time—to overcome the “discontinuities” or “intervals” I mentioned in my talk yesterday, and to become increasingly able to will and to do: in the first place for himself, but then by extension for other people, other creatures, the Earth itself, and finally God. Meanwhile, anything amounting to a direct assault on my sleep is impossible, for it presupposes a will and powers I do not yet have as a disunited being; the solutions must therefore be indirect or oblique.

Perhaps this will help. I would like to quote a few lines from an unpublished text by one of my teacher’s own teachers:

In the face of this teaching, I am silenced. The real war has not yet broken out. The parts of myself that have lived without a conscious control over them are not yet engaged and therefore do not yet resist. So, at the beginning, my struggle is limited to informing my mind about these ideas that have shaken me and to verifying for myself those central ideas that specifically concern my own immediate human condition. Through self-observation, trying not to analyze or judge what I see, I begin the actual work.

Is it true that man, that I myself, am only a machine, a complex automatism that lives entirely in reaction to external stimuli and under the sway of impulses, thoughts, and emotions haphazardly programmed into me from the time of my earliest childhood? Is it true that there is no permanent I in myself, but only a never-ending succession of I’s having little or no relation to each other? Am I constantly lying to myself, or living in fantastic dreams about my personal powers or worth?

²⁴ Gurdjieff taught that certain “influences” come from “outside this life ... esoteric influences.” He continues, “If a man in receiving these influences [which come to him initially by way of “religious systems and teachings, philosophical doctrines, works of art, and so on”] begins to ... put on one side those [influences which come from ordinary life] ... the results of the influences whose source lies outside life collect within him, he *remembers* them, *feels* them together ... and after a time they form within him a kind of magnetic center, which begins to attract to itself kindred influences, and in this manner it grows.... When the magnetic center attains sufficient force and development, a man already understands the idea of the way, and he begins to look for the way” (*In Search of the Miraculous*, pp. 199, 200).

²⁵ “One man can do nothing, can attain nothing. A group with a real leader can do more.... You do not realize your own situation. You are in prison. All you can wish for, if you are a sensible man, is to escape. But how escape? It is necessary to tunnel under a wall. One man can do nothing. But let us suppose there are ten or twenty men—if they work in turn and if one covers another, they can complete the tunnel and escape” (*In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 30).

Is it true that I am unable to love, to create, to will? Am I really in some strange and terrible prison, whose bars and walls are illusions that I cling to with a passion to which I stupidly give such high-sounding names as commitment, morality, sincerity? Is all my suffering really only the play of energies wrongly operating within me? Is what I treasure as my deepest feelings actually a screen between myself and the real operation of a mind that can feel the truth of existence? In short, am I really living in a waking sleep, immeasurably far below the state of consciousness which is possible for man and in which alone he is able to live meaningfully?

Yes, it is all true. But I discover that there is another truth as well. Although my attempts to observe myself are puny and separated by astonishingly long intervals in which I forget what I started out to do on this path, I discover that in the very attempt to observe my inner slavery, a certain taste of freedom is experienced. I begin to understand that self-observation is far more than an instrument of mental verification, but rather—when practiced under precise guidance and in carefully arranged conditions—it is itself a means of deep inner change. At this point, I have entered the world of energies, and I can grasp, a little, that correctly conducted self-observation opens me to a force, an actual movement of psychic energy, which is palpable and material and the bearer of power. But this power is not mine in the usual way I experience myself. Yet it *is* mine in a deeper sense.

But now, let me give you just a few examples of some of the tasks you might be asked to engage in as a student of the Fourth Way, some of the practical exercises. I begin with the relatively easy and move on to the more difficult, focusing—as already mentioned above—on tasks intended to mobilize unconscious parts of the body:

- Try to keep half your attention on the sensation of the soles of your feet on the floor while you are taking a shower. At first you will not be able to do this for more than a few seconds at a time before some stray thought or emotion undercuts even that half-attention. But the point in any case is not to “succeed”. Or rather, success consists in the little “shocks” which should come from seeing, more and more clearly, that you cannot *do* even something as simple as this. If and when you begin finding yourself more and more “able” to perform this task, try the same thing while sitting at a table and eating a meal, at first alone and then with others.
- As you sit in a chair, consider your right arm as if it were an empty tube, and try to fill it, beginning at the shoulder and ending with the fingers, with a little sensation or, if you will, with some vibration or energy. Then proceed to your right leg and try the same, beginning

at the hip and moving down to the toes. Then the same with the left leg, and then the left arm. At this point, pause for two or three minutes, and try to find some sensation of your body as a whole, taking in your whole mass, together with the thought, “I—am—here.” Then repeat the whole cycle, two or three more times.

- You have been observing yourself for a while now. Have you noticed with which hand you open a door? Which way you tend to cross your knees? Make it your aim for a week to open doors with your other hand, and to cross your legs with the other leg on top. This exercise can be elaborated in a variety of ways, to the point of deliberately choosing an unaccustomed, even uncomfortable, position when you sit, or even to placing a small pebble in your shoe and walking around on it as you proceed with your day. This last practice in particular would come under the heading of what Gurdjieff called “conscious labor and intentional suffering”. The suffering is by no means intended as an end in itself; it is meant to be a reminder, a reminder of how “programmed” we are, how much a slave of our habits, how attached to comfort. (Just a parenthesis here: In a way, habits, by which I mean all forms of routinized behavior which one performs unconsciously, are high on the list, if in fact they do not top the list, of the problems we face. And this includes the repetitive, routinized behaviors involved in our ritual and spiritual practices. The tasks or exercises I am describing are seldom practiced for very long in the Work.²⁶ For, as my teacher once told me, “Today’s solutions are tomorrow’s problems.” I encourage you to ponder that aphorism.)
- Suffering of the sort in question, according to Gurdjieff, results from an inner struggle, a struggle between “yes” and “no”. The “yes” he called First Force, or Holy Affirming; the “no”, Second Force, or Holy Denying. In the set of exercises just described, the “yes” comes from the mind, which has been given a task; the “no” from the body, which does not wish to be disturbed or discomfited. This and other such struggles, says Gurdjieff, can produce a sort of friction within us, leading to heat, thence to fusion, thence to crystallization, thence—finally—to inner unity. In this light, allow me to read from the transcript of an exchange between Gurdjieff and his students in Paris, dated 7 December 1941.

G. There is a series of exercises for the successive development of the three centers.... The only one which is necessary [for you at this point] is the spinal cord, the one which you must first develop and strengthen. This exercise will strengthen it. Hold out both arms horizontally at an exact angle, at the same time looking fixedly at a point in front of you. Divide your attention exactly between

²⁶ “Since we are different at different moments, Self-Remembering [see below, pp. 26-27] is different at different times. The ‘Sly Man’ [see *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 50] knows this. He does not always practice the same method. To do so is to make it mechanical. What is mechanical is useless for the Work” (Maurice Nicoll, *Psychological Commentaries on the Teaching of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky*, Vol. Two (Eureka Editions, 2008), p. 375.

point and arms. You will find that there are no associations, no place for them, so occupied you will be with point and position of arms. Do this sitting down, standing, then on knees ... several times a day.

Q. When I wish to make such efforts for work, a hard barrier forms in my chest, impossible to overcome. What should I do?

G. It is nothing. You are not in the habit of using this center. It is a muscle—just muscular. Continue, continue.

Q. I have done this exercise till I had aching shoulders. But while doing it, I did have the sensation of ‘I’. I felt myself apart, really ‘I’.

G. You cannot have ‘I’. ‘I’ is a very expensive thing. You are cheap. Do not philosophize. It does not interest me, and do not speak of ‘I’. Do the exercise as service, as an obligation, not for results. Results will come later....

[G. continues in a more general way, speaking now to the group as a whole]: One needs fire. Without fire, there will never be anything. This fire is suffering, voluntary suffering, without which it is impossible to create anything. One must prepare, must know what will make one suffer, and when it is there make use of it. Only you can prepare, only you know what makes you suffer, makes the fire which cooks, cements, crystallizes, DOES. Suffer by your defeats, in your pride, in your egoism. Remind yourself of this aim. Without prepared suffering, there is nothing.... No further process, nothing. That is why with your conscience you must prepare what is necessary. You owe it to nature—the food you eat which nourishes your life. You must pay for these cosmic substances. You have a debt, an obligation, to repay by conscious work. Do not eat like an animal, but render back to nature for what she has given you—nature, your mother. Work—a drop, a drop, a drop—accumulated during days, months, years ... this will give results.

- I spoke of First and Second Force. One of Gurdjieff’s key ideas is the Law of Three. Much could be said about this Law, but here I thought only to mention one of its practical applications. According to Gurdjieff, whenever I find myself engaged in a struggle between “yes” and “no”, merely saying “yes” more loudly or more often will not help. I need to adopt a new standpoint, neither on the side of the “yes” nor on the side of the “no”, but between or (better) above them, where I can make use of what he calls Third Force, or Holy Reconciling. [As an aside, Gurdjieff aligns these three forces with the *Trisagion* of the Orthodox Liturgy: “Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us.”] But finding and then making use of Third Force requires that I learn to draw upon a different source and quality of energy. And this means in turn that I not squander what energy I have, but learn to “economize”, and even accumulate, energy. There are, we are told, three methods of doing that, which you could also think of as tasks, I suppose, though in this case what I am talking about is more in the way of general practical advice. First, I need to

learn how to spot even the smallest, unnecessary tensions in my body and to relax all my muscles, beginning with the muscles in my face. Second, I must try not to express my negative emotions, at first outwardly, whether with words or even the expression on my face, but ideally inwardly, even inside myself. And third—this may surprise you, given what I just said about relaxing my muscles—I must try *not* to relax my mental function, for it will simply fall into dreaming, which actually saps me of energy; on the contrary, I should give my mind a task, even something as comparatively simple as mentally counting a sequence like this: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 4, 3, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 5, 4, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, *etc.*

- Here is some more general instruction. Gurdjieff describes Man as a three-storied chemical factory; the stories correspond to the anatomical positions of my three brains: one in my head, one in my solar plexus, and one at the base of my spine. The science of the Work becomes very complex at this point, and I cannot even begin to provide you with an adequate *précis*. Suffice it to say that the work of the factory consists in transforming coarser forms of matter into finer forms. This in turn is related to our ingestion of three kinds of food. There is, first of all, the food we normally think of as food, the proper digestion and transformation of which entails mindfulness in eating. Second is the finer food of air, the energy of which can be properly assimilated by means of certain breathing exercises. Finally, third, is the finest food of all and the most important, namely, impressions; these can range from ordinary empirical data (what I see, hear, taste, touch, and smell of the world around me), to inward data (including my emotional state and proprioceptive movements inside my body). These I am to digest and transform by standing as it were in the middle: neither becoming identified with them, on the one hand, nor turning away from them, on the other, but being in conscious relationship to them. Here too is an example of what is meant by Third Force. Ouspensky images this as a double-headed arrow between me and the observed phenomenon, adding that “the problem consists in directing attention on oneself without weakening or obliterating the attention directed on something else”.²⁷

One final word about practice. The Work, we are told, is a “work in life”, in and amidst the difficulties, challenges, annoyances, and dangers of daily life in the world. Unlike the ways of the *faqir*, the *monk*, and the *yogi*, which traditionally required a life lived apart, either as a solitary or in a community at some remove from the world, the Fourth Way endeavors to make very deliberate use of the shocks to which one is subjected all the time in the world, each and every one of which shocks can and should serve as an opportunity for self-observation, leading to states, and eventually the station, which Gurdjieff called “Self-remembering”, a state of consciousness

²⁷ *In Search of the Miraculous*, p. 119.

beyond the usual “sleep” of my life in which *I* truly come awake and am alive. One thinks here of the title of Gurdjieff’s final book: *Life is Real Only Then, When “I Am”*.²⁸

I cannot resist sharing with you one of my favorite anecdotes. A visitor—not yet a student, and not yet apprised of what he was in for!—told Gurdjieff that he had just come into some money, had bought a beautiful house on some secluded, forested property overlooking a lake, and planned to spend his time doing nothing but reading and praying. Didn’t this sound like a good life? Gurdjieff’s response? “Good life for *dog!*”

In this brief discussion of practice, I have yet to mention what those in the Work regard as the most important of practices, the practice they most carefully guard as the esoteric heart of their Way, a practice which works at once against the many sides of my sleep, helping me to see how intimately and disastrously linked are my habitual thoughts, my habitual feelings, and my habitual postures. I am speaking of what the Work calls the Movements, which are always accompanied by the music that Gurdjieff composed in collaboration with one of his students, a Russian composer, Thomas de Hartmann.

Words are virtually useless here. What I *can* say is that there are 39 of these Movements in the Gurdjieffian repertoire, including six “obligatories”, which teach as it were the ABC’s of the Movements. There are very strong, vigorous Movements for men, sometimes called “dervish dances”, as well as subtle and quite beautiful Movements intended mainly for women. In his book *Meetings with Remarkable Men*,²⁹ Gurdjieff talks about how struck he had been as a young man during his searches throughout the Near East, central Asia, North Africa, and as far away as Tibet, by the importance, and intrinsic meaning, of the various folk and sacred dances he witnessed, which he likened to books, in which one could read various esoteric truths. It seems clear he was influenced, at least to a certain extent, by what he found—as, for example, by the well-known “whirling” movements of the Mevlevi. In the final analysis, however, the Movements of the Work appear to have been Gurdjieff’s own creation, coming from something inside himself.

²⁸ *All and Everything: Third Series* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1981). A friend in the Work once told me of visiting a Sufi community in Morocco many years ago. He was treated most cordially and even allowed to observe their practices. All went well until, just as he was about to leave, one of the *fuqara* scolded him, saying, “You Gurdjieffians are trying to *remember* yourselves. We are trying to *forget* ourselves!” Nearly out the door at this point, and not wishing to get into a debate, all my friend said was: “It’s the same thing!” The self—or rather selves—which one is asked to observe in “self-observation”, whose *fanā* this Sufi was presumably seeking, is not the Self remembered in “Self-remembering”. I trust this is obvious.

²⁹ London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963.

As I say, it is impossible for me to describe the Movements in words. So, for those who are interested, and who may be unfamiliar with this aspect of The Fourth Way, I have come prepared to show clips from two films that will give you at least a glimpse of what Gurdjieff's "dances" involve, as well as a sample of his music.

Gurdjieff de Hartmann Music: The Sandpoint Concert & Talks

2009 Public Concert by Laurence Rosenthal (Morning Light Press)

Meetings with Remarkable Men: Gurdjieff's Search for Hidden Knowledge

1979 Film directed by Peter Brook (Morning Light Press)