

Endurant Being

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The author has been a “seeker” for over 50 years. During most of this time I have had a connection with the Gurdjieff Foundation of San Francisco. I have also explored other traditions, largely by extensive reading, and also by short experiential encounters. Some of these traditions are called “esoteric.” “Esoteric” usually is taken to mean that there is something secret, too sacred to be openly revealed. The word itself—“esoteric”—comes from the Greek and means “behind the curtain”. This refers to the layout of ancient temples and cult sites, which were often divided into an outer court, to which all have access, and an inner court only accessible to authorized initiates of a certain level. I have been able to look behind some of the curtains.

In all these traditions, much is hidden, sometimes intentionally but more often owing to the simple fact that practitioners’ views crystallize around an established set of ideas and words. Almost always the signature words of a tradition are understood only superficially and accepted to be understood simply because they are familiar, and are surrounded by familiar clusters of associations. This is true even for the “great books” of traditions, and the talks of their highest representatives.

In my “search” much has been revealed by a comparative approach. This is usually disparaged within each tradition, perhaps because what it reveals casts a shadow of doubt on the usual way words are understood. And also because it may tend to peek behind the esoteric curtain.

Even though the Gurdjieff tradition does not intentionally hide its aim and means—it is, as is said, “an open secret”—few practitioners feel able to articulate their personal understanding. When they try to do so, what they say differs very much among them. In this essay I mine several traditions that have been important to me, and finally throw some light on the aim of the Gurdjieff tradition, and its means of achieving this aim. Your mileage may vary.

Tibetan tantric Buddhism has an idea expressed by the term *Mahamudra*¹ which means (among other connotations) “The Great Seal”: a stamp, a Royal Seal, impressed indelibly on the mind by a long rightly conducted practice. The practice is to inquire within, to investigate the true nature of the mind. This nature is described as *emptiness*, *sunyata*. Everything that appears within the mind, every concept, perception, thought, feeling, sensation; are all mental constructs that arise mechanically from impressions, and are taken by the ordinary person as real, though they have no more reality or permanence than “moonlight reflected in water.” This is not difficult to

¹ *Mahamudra: The Moonlight—Quintessence of Mind and Meditation*, a classic 16th century Tantric text by Dakpo Tashi Namgyal, translated by Lobsang Lhalungpa, who also translated *The Life of Milarepa*, working with members of the Gurdjieff Foundation.

understand intellectually, but only through long practice can it become authentic permanent understanding that arises simultaneously with the arising of each impression.

It is worth noting that the Dalai Lama speaking to Westerners of *emptiness* once said “you might call it *consciousness*.” It is the empty inner space in which *seeing* takes place, prior to any thing being seen, the space of *mentation* prior to any actual thought.

The image of a stamp is echoed by Carlos Castaneda’s idea “the mold of man”. He writes²:

...the old seers as well as the mystics have one thing in common - they have been able to *see* the mold of man, but not understand what it is. Mystics have given us moving accounts of their experiences. But these accounts, however beautiful, are flawed by the gross and despairing mistake of believing the mold of man to be an omnipotent, omniscient creator.

The mold is our God because we are what it stamps us with and not because it has created us from nothing and made us in its image and likeness. [Belief in God] is a secondhand conviction that does not amount to anything; [it is] based on hearsay and not on the act of *seeing*..

[The new seers] have *seen* that what we call God is a static prototype of humanness without any power. For the mold of man cannot under any circumstances help us by intervening in our behalf, or punish our wrongdoings, or reward us in any way. We are simply the product of its stamp; we are its impression. The mold of man is exactly what its name tells us it is, a pattern, a form, a cast that groups together a particular bunch of elements, which we call man.

Again, a long practice is required for such *seeing* of reality.

It is necessary first to “destroy all the opinions and views by centuries rooted,”³ which cover the naked emptiness. Each of these opinions and views is the root of what Gurdjieff called a “little ‘I.’” It is not difficult to observe in others, and in oneself, the parade of little I’s that occupy the mind, each one knowing little of the others, and knowing nothing of the whole, of the “mold.” Gurdjieff speaks of the aim of his work as *crystallization* of an enduring “real I.” It is only to be attained by a long process of “rightly conducted self-observation,”⁴ based on the study of one’s mechanicalness.

The biblical “fruit of the tree of knowledge”⁵ is indeed the recognition of the deep nakedness of being. The shame of it is that one has never been able to consciously acknowledge this nakedness, having been constantly absorbed in the play of good and evil, pleasure and pain, gain and loss, desire and repression of desire.

² From *The Fire from Within*, Carlos Castaneda p. 125 (slightly edited here)

³ *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson*, G. Gurdjieff, p. 1

⁴ *Fragments of an Unknown Teaching*, P. D. Ouspensky

⁵ *Genesis 2, Holy Bible*

To attain true knowledge is to go *down* the tree to the root, deep into the rabbit hole⁶ of imagination, the hidden underworld of the unconscious, and then return *remembering* what has been seen.

This was what that took place in the “mystery cults” of the ancient world, in which the initiate went into a cave, was given sacred food and drink (often a psychedelic, usually the mushroom *Amanita Muscaria*) and received a vision of the infinite and eternal.⁷ The Christian Eucharist is derived from these practices. Castaneda’s path was initiated by similar psychedelic experiences using Peyote cactus and other psychoactive plants.

Julian Jaynes⁸ throws some light on the nature and origin of consciousness, and its locus in oneself. The mind, he says, is double, “bicameral”: one chamber is the animal mind, which in human beings includes the power of speaking and responding to words. The other chamber, roughly corresponding to Castaneda’s “mold of man,” is behind a curtain, hidden from the animal mind. In ancient times the second chamber was the locus of god, gods, angels, ancestors (who sometimes evolve into gods) and other mythical beings, who sent emanations to the animal mind which gave rise to hallucinatory words and images. These were sent as prophecies, suggestions, and commandments. The commandments were often obeyed—if not, the gods would send down punishment.

Around 1200 BC, a moment in history called “the Great Catastrophe” in which all the great urban centers of bronze age civilization were destroyed⁹, by causes that remain controversial (earthquakes, volcanos, famine, plague, drought, and a new kind of warfare have all been suggested) a change in organization of the mind took place: the second chamber became the locus of “I,” of a sense of personal identity, which is not found in texts surviving from earlier periods. It became possible, even normal, to doubt the existence of the ancient gods, even to

⁶ *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. See also *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland Decoded: The Full Text of Lewis Carroll’s Novel with its Many Hidden Meanings Revealed* by David Day—this book shows that among other things Carroll was a very serious Masonic practitioner, and that *Wonderland* is full of representations of Masonic and Rosicrucian ideas.

⁷ See *Mushrooms, Myth and Mithras--The Drug Cult that Civilized Europe* by Carl Ruck. Gurdjieff writes knowingly in *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson* on the use of opium and hashish and other drugs in ancient schools. There is also his published talk *Narcotics and Hormones*. Gurdjieff exponent P. D. Ouspensky reports in *Experimental Mysticism* on his experiences with hashish. Gurdjieff student René Daumal’s little book *Fundamental Experiment* is one of the most powerful accounts ever written about a mystical experience induced by a drug. In William James seminal book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* the most compelling account is of his own experiences with nitrous oxide. In *Wonderland* Alice has unusual experiences after eating pieces of a mushroom.

⁸ *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, Julian Jaynes (1976). Long resisted by establishment psychology and philosophy, Jaynes’ ideas have recently enjoyed a resurgence based on new data; see *Gods, Voices, and the Bicameral Mind* and other works by Marcel Kuijsten.

⁹ *The End of the Bronze Age*, Robert Drews (1993)

deny it¹⁰. The activity of this “I” is what is known as “consciousness.” But much of the activity in both chambers remains unobserved by consciousness. An important part is deliberately hidden from view: this is the “repressed unconscious” of Freud¹¹, though he did not penetrate all of what is hidden.

Prior to the Catastrophe, theological doubt was nearly impossible, and was never recorded in texts whether mythological or historical. After a warlike dark age of several hundred years following the Catastrophe, the Axial¹² enlightenment blossomed almost simultaneously in many places in Europe and Asia: in Greece, philosophical schools (Parmenides, Heraclitus, Plato, Diogenes), Homer and the playwrights and Archimedes, in Iran Zarathustra (Zarathustra’s date is contested and may have been several centuries before the classical Axial era), in India Buddhism, Confucius, in China Lao-Tzu and Chuang Tzu, in Palestine the prophets Elijah and Isaiah and Jeremiah. In many of these teachings doubt is either expressed, or implied by the vehemence with which theological ideas are propounded.

The power of doubt is central to “I”: Descartes, who practiced his “method of doubt” [i.e. doubting everything one “knows,” including one’s own existence, and that of God] summed it up memorably: “I think (i.e. I doubt), therefore I am”. Descartes observed that the fact that he could think was directly present, indubitable, and concluded that it was proof of his existence.¹³ He was, perhaps, inspired by Augustine, that foundational figure for Christian thought, who said “I err, therefore I am.”¹⁴

Ever since the beginning of the “post-bicameral” mind, doubt concerning the literalness of ideas such as “God” has gradually been whittled away. Buddhism, which first appeared in the 6th century BCE, generally eschewed belief in Gods, marking a decisive turn from the Hindu

¹⁰ Socrates was sentenced to death for destroying faith in the gods among the youth of Athens. See *The Death of Socrates* by Plato.

¹¹ *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899, published in English in 1913) and *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Sigmund Freud

¹² *The Origin and Goal of History*, Karl Jaspers (1949)

¹³ *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason, and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, Descartes, Rene (1637) pp. 19–20.

¹⁴ *Confessions*, St. Augustine, around 400 CE.

traditions from which it emerged. In Buddhist Tantric writings¹⁵ Gods are spoken of—but it is made clear that this is a visualization exercise for inner practice.

In the West literal faith in God and in the biblical account of the creation and fate of the human being was contested for centuries. Finally, since the work of Darwin¹⁶ and Nietzsche,¹⁷ Christian faith became intellectually suspect in the mainstream of “modern” Western thought—its staunch defenders only add to the impression of its impending demise.

Lately however a more nuanced view of faith has been entertained by “post-modern” thinkers such as Derrida, as witnessed by the following extraordinary paragraph:

That’s what my readers won’t have known about me, the commas of my breathing henceforward, without continuity but without a break, the changed time of my writing, graphic writing, through having lost its interrupted verticality, almost with every letter, to be bound better and better but be read less and less well over almost twenty years, like my religion about which nobody understands anything, any more than does my mother who asked other people a while ago, not daring to talk to me about it, if I still believed in God, *nutrierat filios totiens eos parturiends, quotiens abs te deuiare cernebat* [‘She had brought up her children, being in labor with them each time she saw them wandering away from thee’], but she must have known that the constancy of God in my life is called by other names, so that I quite rightly pass for an atheist, the omnipresence to me of what I call God in my absolved, absolutely private language being neither that of an eyewitness nor that of voice doing anything other than talking to me without saying anything, nor a transcendent law or an immanent *schechina*, that feminine figure of Yawheh who remains so strange and familiar to me, but the secret I am excluded from.¹⁸

This is a strikingly post-bicameral passage, presaging an ability to recognize and see much more fully the contents of the second chamber, including its revenant (virtual?) gods and theological considerations. Derrida’s method recommends itself as a new kind of path: not to destroy, but to

¹⁵ A prime example is *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, traditionally said to have been composed in the 8th century CE by Padma Sambhava, then “buried” to preserve and protect it, then “dug up” by Karma Lingpa in the late 14th century. It was one of the first Tibetan texts to be translated into English, by Evans-Wentz in 1927. It has proven remarkably influential. The text, whose Tibetan name *Bardo Thodol* means “liberation by hearing” is traditionally read aloud to the hovering spirit of the recently deceased to help him recognize the illusory nature of the peaceful and wrathful divinities he is experiencing in the “bardo,” the intermediate state between death and re-birth. This hopefully will lead him to freedom from the compulsion to re-incarnate. The similarity of the after-death experiences described in *Bardo Thodol* to the LSD experience was recognized by Timothy Leary, who modelled his *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual* (1964) on it.

¹⁶ *Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin (1859)

¹⁷ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Friedrich Nietzsche (1885)

¹⁸ *Circumfession*, Jacques Derrida (1993) p. 125. The title *Circumfession* is an homage to Augustine’s *Confessions*, and like *Confessions* it is composed as if to the author’s mother. The quoted Latin passage is from Augustine.

deconstruct all words, opinions, and views. To look underneath them, to conduct an archeology, a digging-up of the ideas and associations that they are made up of, normally hidden from view by the habit of taking them literally.

Though the deconstructive, post-modern, “I” is more complete, more I-like, than the “modern” “I,” which lives in a tense situation between belief and doubt¹⁹, it is still a transient tenant in the second chamber. This “I,” like other contents of mind, comes and goes, disappears and reappears. Like all thoughts it has a certain measure of eternal existence: a thought can be transmitted to and re-incarnate in another person, and this can go on for many generations—it is the normal uniquely human process of persistence of the commonwealth of culture. Gurdjieff raised the idea of an *endurant* I—a Being that does not disappear, and which is proposed to have a continuing kind of consciousness even after the death of the person it inhabits.

By what means is this to be achieved? Gurdjieff gives a fundamental exercise: to anchor “I” in a sensation, a “reverberation,” in the solar plexus²⁰. More precisely, the anchor is a sustained attention coming from the head directed upon the solar plexus. Similar exercises are given orally to students in the Gurdjieff tradition. Initially this attention is directed by an intellectual effort, but eventually the natural overseer function of the “second chamber” takes over and the relationship proceeds without any special effort. An “I” anchored in the head alone, as is often misunderstandingly done when students attempt “self observation,” would pretend to know itself in the head, a narcissistic oxymoron since the contents of the head are mental ephemera. But from a place incarnate in the solar plexus, the contents of the head are no longer a distraction to “I.”

¹⁹ *Critique of Modernity*, Alain Touraine (1992)

²⁰ In the chapter “Fifth Talk” of *Life is Real, Only Then When ‘I Am’*. This is nearly the last thing Gurdjieff wrote and though the book was never finished and ends incompletely in its posthumously assembled form (Gurdjieff suddenly stopped writing in 1935; this book was assembled from his drafts and published by his heirs in 1981), this “Fifth Talk” is believed by some to be his promised full revelation of his method.