

Pilgrimage to the Gobi Desert

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In 2015 I made a pilgrimage to the Mogao caves in the Gobi desert near Dunhuang, Xinjiang province, China. Located on the northern branch of the silk road, Mogao became the site of perhaps the world's largest collection of ancient Buddhist art works and scriptures--it had almost a hundred temples and monasteries built inside caves that lie in a row under the eaves of a great limestone cliff. It fell out of use after the Tang dynasty but was rediscovered by European explorers in the late 19th century, who proceeded to buy and steal and haul away whatever they could. But much remained, and some was later restored. It is since 1987 a UNESCO world heritage site. It is the site of Chinese tourism on an industrial scale. Some westerners go there. I saw many beautiful and interesting things and learned much.

I learned something about modern China. Xinjiang is the homeland of the Uighur people, Muslims from Central Asia. I found them friendly, industrious, non-dogmatic. But shortly after my visit they found themselves bearing the brunt of massive ethnic repression from the central government, well-documented in media reports but studiously denied by the government. Another impression bears on this: my guide for the Mogao caves was a charming intelligent young woman who spoke excellent English. She was very knowledgeable: I asked many probing questions about what I was seeing and she infallibly had an answer. At the end of the tour, I said to her “You know a great deal about this tradition—are you personally interested in Buddhism?” Her answer: “The government does not approve of that.” Hmm. This was a foretaste of what is now becoming more clear, a dedicated campaign by the Chinese government to exercise draconian control over every aspect of its people’s lives, including their inner lives.

After I returned, I discovered an old Tantric scripture, long lost but now famous, which had been found at Mogao. Its title is *The Cuckoo of Awareness*. Here is my summary translation of this text:

The way things are is non-conceptual
but the way of action is conditioned by forms.
Having abandoned the disease of striving,
since one already has it all,
through being spontaneously present
one leaves it as it is.

As you may know the cuckoo is a very handsome bird, whose beautiful song is a harbinger of Spring, of the renewal of life. Its way is that it lays its eggs in the nests of other birds, who feed it better than their own chicks because it is larger and chirps louder than they do. Is this text saying that this unstriving awareness is a Cuckoo chick in the nest of the all-too human spirit, which can grow up to a resplendent great bird, the true Self?

There is a story about why this text interested me. Once in the mid 70’s I asked a question at a meeting where our Teacher presided. I remember asking for an exercise. His answer was: “Every day, say ‘cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo’ with as much seriousness as possible.” Was he saying I was “cuckoo”, in this sense, or in the more conventional sense of being crazy? Or both? Was he saying that in the Work I was such a cuckoo chick, who made a lot of noise and got a lot of food and could grow up to a large commanding presence? Was he, perhaps, giving me permission?

I was reminded of perhaps the most memorable and poetic passage in the published writings of Gurdjieff, the “self-reasoning” that took place in him in 1904, according to the chronology he gives in his book of “the third series”, *Life is Real Only then when 'I Am'*. It took place “on the southwestern edge of the Gobi desert and represents to my mind the most fertile of all the parts of the surface of our earth.” “under the influence, from one side, of a distant hollow din formed from sounds of millions of lives of all possible outer forms and, from the other side, of an awesome silence”.

The phrase “distant hollow din” invites philological speculation. The word “din,” an uncommon usage, may be a sly reference to the Arabic word “din” which means “religion”, i.e. Islam. It is, for example, part of the name of Mullah Nasr Eddin which translates roughly as “Teacher (Mullah) of the Victory (Nasr) of religion (al-din, which becomes Eddin according to the usual rules of Arabic).” Surely Gurdjieff was aware of this word, and probably Orage and others of the translators. If “din” points to religion, then why “hollow,” why “distant”? But isn't it true that most of the roar of words about religion is hollow, and distant from real human concerns?

The setting, between “paradise and...hell”, between his “ordinary waking state” and “inner emptiness” seems to invite comparison with a crucial duality in inner work: between, on the one hand the “way of action”; and on the other the way of pure contemplation, of having “abandoned the disease of striving.” Some people have argued that what Gurdjieff taught in the early days was a way of action, as reflected in the intensive work done in Russia (in Ouspensky's account for example) and at the Prieuré and in the exhausting journeys between the two places; and that later a contemplative approach was introduced by Jeanne de Salzmann, perhaps under the influence of William Segal's connection to the Zen teacher Suzuki. A practice was instituted that came to be called “sitting,” regarded by many in Gurdjieff's legacy community as an obligatory daily practice, sometimes called “preparation” in the sense that it prepares one to “work” during the day.

In practice, as sitting is taught and practiced, it is perhaps not clear what the relationship between “sitting” and “work” truly is, or could be. In “sitting” people do a number of different inner exercises, or sometimes, though not often, the practice of doing nothing, which turns out to be the hardest exercise of all. Doing nothing may be the most important practice. Is it the same as the “being spontaneously present” of the *Cuckoo* text? Is it possible to enter into a condition similar to that described by Gurdjieff that took place at the edge of the Gobi, in which both sides are equally present, the passive and the active? Is this actually the way in which life ought to be lived, which happens perhaps for brief moments, but always quickly dissolves in the inner turmoil engendered by life; and is sitting then a preparation for making these moments more frequent and longer lasting? Is this what Gurdjieff calls to “remember oneself”, which he enjoins should be practiced “always and everywhere”?

In the passage from the third series the young Gurdjieff¹ is faced with an anguishing realization that after years of merciless efforts he still cannot succeed in “remembering myself in the process of my general common life with others...sufficiently to hinder the associations flowing in me automatically from certain undesirable hereditary factors of my nature.” After an interesting soliloquy comparing himself with God, he discovers a radical solution: to take an oath to himself intentionally to give up his highly developed “power of telepathy and hypnotism,” so that the absence of this power for the rest of his life would constantly remind him to remember himself.

¹ He could have been either 26 or 38 years old, depending on what birth year one accepts. See *Gurdjieff: A New Life* by Paul Beekman Taylor.

The *Cuckoo* scripture does not tell how to achieve a two-sided presence, even if it illuminates it, largely from the side of passivity. But in truth the Gurdjieff teaching does not really tell how either, even if it illuminates it from the side of activity. True, G talks about a lost Christianity which taught *how*, and he seems to promise to tell us how; but is it really possible to tell anybody how to do anything? The only way to find out *how* is by going through longing, trying, suffering, and finally giving up, then finding oneself in the very place one set out to go to, which is of course the very home from which one was exiled long ago.