

DRUGS, ALCOHOL AND FOOD¹

Anthropological research suggests that human beings in virtually every culture in history have ingested chemical substances to alter their consciousness. Certain spiritual traditions celebrate inebriation as a metaphor for conscious transformation. Sufis have spoken of being “drunk with the wine of love,” and have used wine, hashish and coffee to facilitate the attainment of mystical states of consciousness. The Zen tradition has a history of poets and teaching masters who were spirited drinkers of saké. In Hinduism, *bhang* (cannabis) is often a central element of religious rites and practices. Other spiritual traditions have employed certain psychedelics or ‘power drugs’ such as peyote and ayahuasca in their sacred rituals and ceremonies as an integral part of their teaching. In *Gurdjieff’s Early Talks*, he speaks of the ancient and widespread use of drugs in many cultures throughout history:

The use of narcotics in psychological schools is very ancient. In all popular beliefs, legends and tales there are stories about miraculous potions, ointments and incense, which changed the outer aspect of a man . . . There are Indian legends about the sacred potion, *soma*, which gave miraculous powers. In the Eleusinian Mysteries the Epoptes, before initiation, were given a sacred drink. Ancient historians looked upon this drink as a ritual, a ceremonial, but in fact it had a much deeper meaning. The idea of the philosopher’s stone, of the elixir of life, permeating all medieval alchemy is connected with the same thing. (1)

In a conversation in 1915 with P.D. Ouspensky, Gurdjieff explained the theoretical premises to support the use of psychoactive substances such as opium and hashish by students of esoteric schools to aid their inner development:

There are schools which make use of narcotics in the right way. People in these schools take them for self-study; in order to take a look ahead, to know the possibilities better, to see beforehand, ‘in advance,’ what can be attained later on as the result of prolonged work. When a man sees this and is convinced that what he has learned theoretically really exists, he then works consciously, he knows where he is going. Sometimes this is the easiest way of being convinced of the real existence of those possibilities which man often suspects in himself. (2)

Gurdjieff was very aware of the properties and effects of mind-altering substances and used them both personally and with certain of his students. However, the use of drugs in a spiritual context is controversial and has been criticized even by some of Gurdjieff’s own pupils, such as John Pentland. Alcohol also played a significant role in Gurdjieff’s life. His use of alcohol, both in his personal life and as a teaching method with his students, is controversial and has been a source of criticism by journalists, academics and some of his own pupils. And, his elaborate and celebrated meals accompanied by ritual drinking, have been misunderstood by critics who saw only excess and flamboyance. They failed to see their spiritual significance as opportunities for

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self-study and as a means for Gurdjieff to assess his pupils under unusual circumstances, following, perhaps, the ancient Latin saying *In vina veritas* (“In wine is truth”).

Gurdjieff’s Knowledge and Use of Drugs and Alcohol

Gurdjieff possessed an extensive and profound knowledge of psychoactive substances and their effects, much of it clearly based on personal experience. Rafael Lefort, who attempted to trace the sources of Gurdjieff’s knowledge, claims that Gurdjieff studied in Eastern esoteric schools, where he was taught “the science of pharmacy and pharmacology, how to plant and use plants of importance, how to extract their essences and how to use these essences.” (3)

References to the use and properties of alcohol, cocaine, hashish and opium appear throughout *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson*. Alcohol use by Gurdjieff and others is also mentioned in his semi-autobiographical *Meetings with Remarkable Men*. One of Gurdjieff’s companions in the book is the character Soloviev, said to be “an authority on what is called eastern medicine in general, and on Tibetan medicine in particular, and he was also the world’s greatest specialist in the knowledge of the action of opium and hashish on the psyche and organism of man.” (4)

James Webb, a biographer of Gurdjieff, speculates that Soloviev “probably never existed” and hints that his character may have been an oblique reference to Gurdjieff himself. Webb also notes that Gurdjieff was contemptuous of Western medicine and claimed that only three drugs from the whole Western pharmacopeia were useful – opium, castor oil and an unidentified substance extracted from a certain tree.

Gurdjieff’s liberal use of caffeine, tobacco and alcohol throughout his long teaching career has been documented by biographers, journalists and students. Coffee and cigarettes were a daily fixture in Gurdjieff’s life and were effectively employed to energize his writing pursuits during the 1920s and 1930s.

Gurdjieff’s drinking was one of the most discussed and controversial aspects of his life. There is little mention of alcohol in the Russian phase of his teaching and certainly no suspicion of alcohol abuse. Ouspensky notes that at times Gurdjieff “liked to arrange big dinners, buying a quantity of wine and food of which however he often ate or drank practically nothing.” (5) However, following his serious automobile accident in 1924 there seems to have been a dramatic change in his drinking habits. In a conversation with student Jean Toomer, he revealed some of the reasons for his heavy use of drugs and alcohol in the years following 1924:

He then told me that following his motor accident he had been compelled to produce energy artificially. To this end, during the few following years, he had consumed enough drink to have killed ten men and, in addition, forty pounds of opium. To my question, “Did you know in advance what you were doing, or was it an experiment attended by grave risk?” he replied, “It was necessary to create energy artificially, my condition and my means and aims were such. I knew it, yet it was also an experiment and a risk.” (6)

Gurdjieff’s consumption of spirits clearly played an important role in the dissemination of his teachings and interactions with students. He reportedly could drink very large amounts of

alcohol without showing obvious signs of inebriation. According to A.R. Orage: “Gurdjieff, who had an unusual capacity for drink, made a careful distinction between ordinary drinking and conscious drinking which could free the ‘I’ to think, feel, talk and act; that is, to expose

‘essence’.” (7) This is consistent with his claim that with mastery of the body and mind, an adept may be freed from certain ‘laws’ and use substances for ‘conscious work.’ Gurdjieff: “No matter what he have in surroundings – people, noise, alcohol – he must always mathematically understand; never lose self even when drunk. *He* can be drunk, but never his ‘I’ be drunk.” (8)

Alcohol played a significant role in Gurdjieff’s life, especially in the 1930s and 1940s. In *Gurdjieff Reconsidered*, Biographer Roger Lipsey captures the flavour of these years:

There was always alcohol at Gurdjieff’s table from earliest days to last, typically Armagnac, sometime flavored vodka. Judging wine best suited to what the French delicately call *lavement*, he had no interest in it. The ritual toasts to the idiots were a daily reminder of the general human tragicomedy and of one’s own. Each person who returned regularly to Gurdjieff’s table was asked to choose his or her idiot and was thereafter saluted as such during the round of toasts. In Russia, at the Prieuré, and in the 1940s there seems to have been nothing more than good-natured chat among his pupils about the purpose and quantity of alcohol: the consensus held that it allowed Gurdjieff to see more quickly behind the façades of those who sought him out, and participants had the right – though he might reproach them – to drink modestly or not at all. That was somehow settled, and if it was a game with risks, people knew how to play it. Legend maintains that no one got drunk at his table. (9)

It is evident from the testimonials of pupils that even respected spiritual teachers with valuable teachings to impart may have a “shadow” side and be prone to personal weaknesses, such as substance abuse. In fact, some of Gurdjieff’s followers were shocked by certain aspects of his life, particularly the “Rabelaisian contradictory, provocative side of him.” (10) French artist François Stahly: “Here was this character, deliberately drinking until he was nearly drunk, under control perhaps, but still . . . There was something obsessive there, obviously very much under control – even exaggerated. But all the same, it wasn’t entirely under control. So it didn’t always go as planned; his nature also played tricks on him.” (11)

Gurdjieff’s students were well aware of his drinking since he made no effort to hide or downplay his consumption of spirits. (12) Sometimes he would apologize for his rants, saying that he had drunk too much. At a group meeting he once claimed, “I do not often pray to God, I do not wish to disturb His Endlessness. But when I am drunk, I pray to Judas.” A pause. “And I am nearly always drunk.” (13) The 1930s witnessed some of his most legendary drinking bouts, which at times bewildered his pupils:

At times Gurdjieff was drinking quite heavily, sometimes to excess even for him. At least once in Solita Solano’s hearing he made clear that he had his reasons: “Now because each day I will drink Armagnac. In mornings with such troubles as now, I make nervous, make elephant from fly. But with this Armagnac fly is not elephant. Fly is – fly.” . . . [Solano] reflected in autumn 1935: “Wondering why an aware being knocks over same bottle put is same place by his elbow three times in succession, thus spilling favorite drink, Armagnac. Why after glass is

filled he tilts it while talking (this always happens) so that favorite liquid spills over his coat and trousers. Is this a lesson for us in not what to do. We don't need it." . . . Solita's puzzlement is easily explained: the master was drunk. (14)

That Gurdjieff was a heavy drinker for much of his life is indisputable. Whether or not he was an alcoholic, as esoteric teacher Oscar Ichazo and others suggest, is open to question. Although Gurdjieff did show some of the signs suggestive of alcoholism, such as daily drinking, drinking early in the day, and driving after drinking, he was clearly not impaired in any way that perceptibly prevented him from functioning at a very high level in all aspects of his life. The official medical cause of his death, though, was cirrhosis of the liver and liver cancer.

Gurdjieff told Jean Toomer that his main reason for drinking was to relax the body. William Patrick Patterson speculates that his frequent drinking was to alleviate the pain from the many "local delicacies" he picked up on his many travels and adventures when younger. In his biography of Gurdjieff, Patterson makes some thought-provoking observations regarding the cause of Gurdjieff's death and its possible association with excessive drinking:

His followers did not admit the real cause of Gurdjieff's death in that he himself had said that cancer and heart disease "were almost always the inevitable results of living in an unharmonious atmosphere under constant strain and pressure." But this was Gurdjieff's great sacrifice: his own life. It must be remembered that he took a vow on 14 September 1911, "to live an *artificial* life in order to establish the ancient, esoteric teaching of the Fourth Way in the West." [emphasis added.] Given the abnormal conditions and customs and deviations of our contemporary world, a constant and unflagging super-effort would be demanded that must, of course, be paid for in terms of constant strain and pressure. What was taken as a negative was really quite otherwise when truly seen. (15)

Use of Drugs and Alcohol with Pupils

Authentic schools of inner development have traditionally used psychoactive substances for purposes of self-study (16) or the temporary creation of higher states of consciousness to enable students to preview their future possible development: "The use of narcotics to change the state of consciousness and alter the conditions of psychic functions affords a tremendous scope for experimental psychology. Strictly speaking, experimental psychology begins with the moment when the knowledge of using substances to affect human functions in one or another direction is reached." (17) Gurdjieff:

A temporary opening up of higher centers by means of one or another narcotic may sometimes be useful to a man, for it may show him what the future has in store for him. A man looks over the fence, as it were, into his future. In other cases narcotics are used to show a man his present, that is to say, the form and level of his being. There are more than fifty formulas of complicated substances capable of producing a definite effect on one or another center, function or property of the human organism. The use of these substances may considerably help in the work of self-observation and self-study. But this is possible only under the guidance of a man who has full knowledge

of the organization and the functions of the human machine and of all the sides of the action of the narcotics. Independent attempts in this direction almost invariably produce negative results because a man who tries to experiment with narcotics does not know the state of his organism or the effect that one or another narcotic may produce on it . . . All this requires a thorough knowledge of the human machine and cannot give exact results without such knowledge. (18)

The correct use of psychoactive drugs in genuine esoteric schools is guided by a ‘technical science’ of the knowledge of their affect on the human functions of thinking, feeling and sensing. They are not to be used indiscriminately or experimentally, or with those who are unprepared or characterologically unable to benefit from their effects. (19) P.D. Ouspensky records a talk by Gurdjieff along these lines in *In Search of the Miraculous*:

There are schools which make use of narcotics in the right way. People in these schools take them for self-study; in order to take a look ahead, to know their possibilities better, to see beforehand, ‘in advance,’ what can be attained later on as the result of prolonged work. When a man sees this and is convinced that what he has learned theoretically really exists, he then works consciously, he knows where he is going. Sometimes this is the easiest way of being convinced of the real existence of those possibilities which man often suspects in himself. There is a special chemistry relating to this. There are particular substances for each function. Each function can either be strengthened or weakened, awakened or put to sleep. But to do this a great knowledge of the human machine and of this special chemistry is necessary. In all those schools which make use of this method experiments are carried out only when they are really necessary and only under the direction of experienced and competent men who can foresee all results and adopt measures against possible undesirable consequences. (20)

There is evidence that Gurdjieff consciously administered drugs of this nature, possibly hashish or opium, on certain occasions in specific circumstances to some of his pupils. “Occasionally Mr. Gurdjieff used special substances, ‘drugs,’ for the purpose of some specific demonstration, but always under his own strict personal control, direction, and supervision. He warned repeatedly against the private and indiscriminate use of drugs, whether singly or in groups.” (21) In January 1936, he spoke to members of ‘the Rope’ about the theoretical premises of the use of drugs in certain circumstances:

Man has wish or desire but not possibility of doing what he wishes or desires. After a certain age, this effort is very difficult and often impossible. But there is an artificial aid by means of psycho-chemical substances. For example, a substance can be injected which will furnish artificial help for effort, for prayer. For everyone a different quantity is necessary which must correspond with the amount of effort made by the individual. If the effort and the amount of this chemical are not balanced, it becomes a dangerous poison for the organism. (22)

John G. Bennett was given access to the private unpublished memoirs of a number of female students in ‘the Rope’ who wrote of their experiences during the 1930s:

With these women, he carried through for two or three years a very intensive and extraordinary experiment, making use of methods that brought them into

remarkable psychic states, and developed their powers far more rapidly than had been the case with the pupils who had been with him during earlier years. It throws a very vivid light upon Gurdjieff's methods as a teacher and upon his use, for example, of drugs as a method of developing not only psychic experiences, but also opening the hidden channels of the human psyche. (23)

Alcohol was Gurdjieff's primary agent of choice for producing effects on the consciousness of his students. He took advantage of the euphoric effects of alcohol to reveal sides of his pupils' personalities that were usually hidden. Gurdjieff believed that alcohol drew one's inner essence to the surface where it could be observed and studied: "Alcohol opens, it shows many aspects of your interior, it is very important for knowing one." (24)

Sometimes Gurdjieff prescribed an alcohol regime for certain students depending on their personality and circumstances. One such pupil was Fritz Peters, who was in psychological turmoil following his war experiences during World War II. (25) In *Gurdjieff Remembered*, he describes Gurdjieff's prescription of alcohol in order to observe its effects on Peters: "I was to drink, privately, a certain amount of hard liquor everyday – depending on my particular 'state' of the moment, which I would have to learn to judge accurately, and he said that he had insisted on my drinking a great deal while in Paris in order that he would have the opportunity to observe me and determine my chemical reaction to hard liquor." (26)

It was during Gurdjieff's unforgettable group meals that alcohol achieved its premier role in opening his pupil's essence and providing opportunities for him to observe each person's reactions to alcohol as their "personality armor" was dissolved. Jeanne de Salzmann captures the atmosphere of these truly unique feasts: "In Mr. Gurdjieff's presence one felt an extraordinary freedom to be what and how one wanted to be. He would give them food and drink – even oblige them to drink too much – to add to this freedom. But one could not behave just anyhow. One was always aware of a higher level in him." (27)

Dr. Kenneth Walker, a longtime student of Ouspensky, visited Gurdjieff in 1948 at his Paris apartment and was forewarned about the importance Gurdjieff gave to drinking alcohol at his dinner table. He was told that:

A great many people are passing through Gurdjieff's hands at the flat, and if they've had a drink or two they are much more 'open,' and I mean by this that Gurdjieff is able to *see* them much more readily after they have had a drink or two. There is a great deal of truth in that old saying of the Arabs: 'Wine makes a man more so.' Alcohol uncovers a man so that he is much more readily perceived by those who are observing him. (28)

Gurdjieff's use of alcohol in teaching situations and his emphasis on conscious drinking parallels that of the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa (29) who regarded alcohol as a "weak poison" which could be transmuted into a medicine:

Whether alcohol is to be a poison or a medicine depends on one's awareness while drinking. Conscious drinking – remaining aware of one's state of mind – transmutes the effects of alcohol . . . Thus alcohol can be a testing ground. It

brings to the surface the latent style of the drinker's neuroses, the style that he is habitually hiding. (30)

One of Gurdjieff's most unusual methods of teaching was the 'Toasts to the Idiots' ritual. A number of Gurdjieff's pupils have related the form, sequence and presumed metaphysical meaning of these alcoholic toasts. Biographers James Moore and William Patrick Patterson provide a detailed description of the ceremonial process which was first introduced by Gurdjieff in 1922 at the Prieuré. (31) Gurdjieff sat at the head of the table while the person seated to his left, designated the master of ceremonies, was responsible for proposing a series of toasts (usually Armagnac or vodka) to successive categories of 'idiots.' Each pupil was required to select their own idiot from among at least twelve types (ordinary idiot, super idiot, zigzag idiot, and so on), reflecting progressive gradations of spiritual development. As the toasts were drunk, Gurdjieff closely observed each student as the alcohol, in Moore's words, "rendered their natures 'opaque' to scrutiny." William Patrick Patterson has described the challenges presented to the pupils during the course of the ritual:

The toasts were said to rarely go beyond the first nine Idiots and often ended earlier. Still, this is a lot of drinking, especially as Gurdjieff demanded that the Armagnac not be sipped but drunk "honestly." That is, in a single draught. No doubt it was difficult to stay present when the body had to absorb a series of alcoholic shocks to the system. It demanded a vigilant attention and discrimination. It was also a quick method of seeing people's mechanicality and inner animal. (32)

Although Gurdjieff exerted pressure on pupils to drink the toasts there was no overt compulsion. Dr. William Welch noted that some at the table did not drink at all, while others knew their capacity or declined for health reasons. A.L Staveley reports that Gurdjieff would insist that everyone follow his instructions to drink each glass of alcohol fully and not cheat. When she did not drink her proper measure, Gurdjieff admonished her, "You not drink honorably. Now, must finish all at once." But Jeanne de Salzmann intervened, saying "If you feel you should not drink this, there is no need." (33)

Of course, critics have been quick to denounce Gurdjieff's methods as contrary to traditional spiritual practices and designed to take advantage of his naive students. However, there is no evidence to suggest that anything untoward took place during or after the ritual toasts, and the most negative consequence for a pupil was likely no more than a severe hangover the following morning. (34)

Ritual Meals and Food as Sacraments

Gurdjieff taught that human beings take in three kinds of food: the ordinary foods and beverages we eat and drink, the air we breathe, and impressions. Each of these three foods, he explained, must be mixed in definite proportions and transformed within the body following an alchemical process in which coarse substances are transmuted into fine substances, leading to the development of 'higher being bodies.' How these foods are absorbed and assimilated, whether consciously or unconsciously, has profound implications for the growth of the higher bodies. (35)

Gurdjieff placed great importance on the health and well-being of the physical body, which he believed was the key to longevity. The importance of respecting the body and its organic needs was highlighted in *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* in his injunction to strive “to have in one’s ordinary being-existence everything satisfying and really necessary for one’s planetary body.” (36) At his meals, he taught his students how to eat consciously and work with ordinary food and drink in order to influence the first octave of the development of the finer spiritual bodies. Pupils quoted him as saying “Man should eat, not as an animal but consciously” and “If one knows how to eat properly, one knows how to pray.” (37)

Many religions have specific dietary restrictions – clear rules about what, when and how much to eat. Gurdjieff noted that to be useful, such rules are always linked with other indications and practices. Henri Tracol: “It is a whole, and if something is missing in the other rules, then it is pointless. At certain times it may be necessary to refrain from certain foods, and at other times not . . . We have to adapt ourselves to conditions – to outer conditions of course – but to inner conditions as well.” (38) Gurdjieff’s perspective on food was very inclusive (39):

Mr. Gurdjieff trained us to eat all sorts of things that were not particularly recommended! He would insist that you at times had to eat all sorts of greasy, fatty foods, all sorts of extremely spicy ingredients which, from an ordinary medical point of view were totally unacceptable. Of course, there were those who needed to be on a special diet, and he was resilient enough to exempt them. But otherwise, you *had* to eat what was served. He would go to the market and choose the ingredients and prepare the food early in the morning for the evening. He would allow very few people to help him. He had his own ways of doing things. And when you were eating with him, he was very attentive to how we ate our food. It was very important for him. When he saw someone who was preoccupied with a question he perhaps wanted to ask, and was eating without realizing he was eating, he would frown and sometimes scold the person. So there was respect for food, no matter *what* it was! (40)

Gurdjieff’s students believed that the foods he prepared for them according to “the science of dietary law” contained “active elements” which helped them assimilate his ideas and develop their spiritual being. He once told Kathryn Hulme that one of the reasons he cooked for his pupils was to give them the proper first food that could be transformed into the finer energy required to digest his “idea foods.” He once compared his cooking to the creative work of an artist or musician: “It is important to compose a dish in its correctly-blended elements as a composition of music or the colors in painting. Harmony in scale. Must have much knowledge to be a good cook. A culinary doctor.” (41)

Gurdjieff always did the preparation and cooking himself, although occasionally he was aided by pupils when there were many guests at his table. He created his original recipes in the spur of the moment, combining dexterity, refinement of taste, and extraordinary knowledge of dishes from many cultures of the world. Yet he never made any dish in exactly the same way. He once confided to A.L. Staveley, “I never cook exact same dish twice. Always different.” Staveley confirmed: “And it was so.” (42)

Perhaps his most important ingredient was his state of presence and being. Solange Claustres: “He himself always cooked for the groups, for guests, or just for one person, with great care, with a deep feeling of reverential hospitality, close, I felt, to a communion, without the guests being fully aware of it.” (43) Kathryn Hulme describes how Gurdjieff carefully prepared his meals so that they would have maximum spiritual effect:

What a labor it was to produce the wonderful foods he created, rich with ‘active elements’ that fueled the body for thought. I saw him ‘composing.’ Once he was holding his long spice tray while he pitched no less than twelve different herbs into a ‘phenomenon soup,’ stirring it with a big wooden spoon from which at intervals he tasted, nodding and smacking, ‘I compose like symphony’ he told me; the spice tray was his keyboard. He waved his long-handled spoon like a baton. ‘Three hours after you eat this soup, you will experience I AM – will have sensing of how it is to have I AM.’ (44)

Gurdjieff’s students, such as Thomas de Hartmann, recounted how he tried to expose them to a wide range of foods, herbs, spices and exotic dishes (45):

To taste life fully was one of Mr. Gurdjieff’s principles. During our life with him we tried every sort of eastern dish, some very exotic. He told us that in the East they have always paid particular attention to the refinements of food elements. The aim is not to gorge oneself under the table, but rather to sample, in tiny portions, all kinds of variation of taste experience . . . I can still see him vividly, his muscles completely relaxed as always. Slowly he lifts to his mouth a very good pear, not peeled. Unhurried he takes a bite of it as if striving to absorb its entire aroma, its entire taste. (46)

Gurdjieff paid great attention to the preparation and creation of his meals. Students were struck by the skill, assurance and care with which he prepared his amazing dishes. Louise Welch recounts her impressions as she watched him prepare an exotic meal: “He was a superb cook, with knowledge of exotic herbs and spices that transformed freshly killed lamb and ordinary eggplant to *haute cuisine*. One of the appetizers he often had was a salad containing all the usual ingredients – greens, tomatoes, red peppers, sweet basil tarragon – into which he had tumbled bottles of chutney and a species of dill pickle.” (47) Kenneth Walker and his wife were struck by the conscious preparation of the dishes when they visited Gurdjieff’s apartment in the late 1940s:

A large bowl having been placed in front of him he started to prepare a special treat for his guests. Into this bowl went chopped cucumber, pickles, red-pepper, onions, fragments of bread, contributions from a number of different bottles containing various kinds of preserve, pieces of dried fish and finally large spoonfuls of sour cream. This mixture he carefully stirred and occasionally tasted, in the manner of an old apothecary preparing a specially potent elixir of life. (48)

The meals themselves typically consisted of “tasty soups or hors d’oeuvres; and then meat and vegetables, usually cooked together for several hours, blending and caramelizing, intensifying the flavors enhanced with fresh herbs, spices, fruits, etc. and tenderizing ordinary cuts of meat or fowl into something of gourmet quality.” (49) On special occasions dinner guests would be offered exotic delicacies such as sheep’s head or a fully roasted lamb, reminiscent of a strange

forgotten world of the mysterious past. In *Teachings of Gurdjieff*, C.S. Nott captures the flavour and flair of a typical meal at Gurdjieff's table:

In all my travels I think I have never eaten food so delicious as at these dinners. There was food from every quarter of the world – soup, meat with spices, poultry, fish; vegetables of all kinds, most wonderful salads whose juice we drank in glasses; pudding and pies, fruit of all sorts, dishes or oriental tit-bits, fragrant herbs, raw onions, and celery. Calvados and slivovitz for the elders to drink, and wine for the young and the children. A specialty was sheep's head after the meat course, done in Caucasian style, delicious and very rich . . . All the food supplies and the cooking was supervised by Gurdjieff, and there seemed no end to his recipes. He himself was a wonderful cook, and knew how to prepare hundreds of oriental dishes, though he himself never ate a great deal. This, I used to think, is just how dinners should be; to be able to savour the food and enjoy it, without being identified with it on the one hand, or being unconscious of it on the other. (50)

Gurdjieff presided over the meals and the accompanying ritual toasts of alcohol with a jovial and expansive generosity, playing the role of benevolent host. Meals with Gurdjieff were unforgettable experiences, described by his students as a dizzying combination of excitement, serious philosophical discussion, humour, nervous tension, alcohol and exotic unaccustomed foods. But above all they were marvelously entertaining:

Most of our time was spent in howls of laughter. G.'s gift of mimicry and masterly comic timing infected everyone, old and young, of every nationality. He could point out situations and special characteristics in people with a wit that was sharp, but an attitude that was so warm and affectionate that although we all laughed in immediate recognition it was with the person, not at them. (51)

But the ceremonial meals and ritual toasts also served a more sober and serious spiritual purpose, that of exposing his students' inner being to objective scrutiny. Gurdjieff believed that he "could read the depth and breadth of personality from a person's eating habits and comportment at the table." (52) He used the meals as an opportunity for teaching his students in a way that impacted them both individually and collectively, and could be understood on different levels and in various ways by all those present:

Throughout the meal he would prepare special small dishes from the array in front of him. "For Mother," he would say, and the dish would be passed to the one indicated, for "Blondie," for "Doctorina," for "Miss Chapeau" . . . and with each dish an exchange of eyes took place, or a word or two, often lost on the others but with special impact on the one who received the plate. Somehow Gurdjieff managed to touch each one in a deeply personal way, while remaining himself impersonal yet concerned, remote and curiously just. It seemed to correspond with each one's sense of aspiration and at the same time with the recognition of one's own nothingness on the scale of eternity. (53)

Gurdjieff insisted that those at his table eat with 'conscious presence.' When he saw that someone was distracted, he would rail at them: "Sometimes he would say to someone, 'Eat, eat! English people pick at their food. They never know what they are eating.'" (54) Gurdjieff

himself was composed and attentive: “When I eat, I self-remember.” He chided those people who insisted on talking during the meal: “Idiot God made only one mouth. Should have made two.” (55)

Commentary

It is clear that Gurdjieff used food, alcohol and drugs as teaching instruments and ‘skillful means’ to advance his pupils’ spiritual development. That his unconventional methods were misunderstood, misinterpreted and criticized is not surprising, as the consumption of food, alcohol and drugs is not generally recognized as part of a viable spiritual path. Yet, food and eating play an important ritualistic and symbolic role in many of the world’s religions. Gurdjieff’s ceremonial meals and sense of hospitality mirrors similar practices in Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, Indigenous and other spiritual traditions.

Gurdjieff’s ritual meals appear to have been consciously designed to create multiple effects on many different levels. The time of day, the environment of the room, the seating arrangements, the type and order of food served, the alcoholic toasts, the interaction between Gurdjieff and his guests and their individual interactions, combined to produce a complex net or mesh in which spiritual energy or *baraka* could be produced, projected and shared. The meals were also an opportunity for ‘self-observation’ and ‘self-remembering,’ cornerstones of Gurdjieff’s practical psychology.

Gurdjieff’s personal use of alcohol attracted criticism as it seemed contrary to the qualities of behaviour usually expected of a spiritual teacher. He is not the only one accused of misconduct along these lines. There have been numerous accounts of contemporary spiritual teachers with drug and alcohol problems, including Chögyam Trungpa, Maezumi Roshi, Shlomo Carlebach, Reshad Feild and Bubba Free John. Such addictive behaviours have seriously impacted their spiritual communities and relationships with individual students. (56) Some have suggested that excessive alcohol or drug use is a sign of “spiritual sickness” and a warning flag for potential seekers of wisdom:

Excessive drinking reveals a craving that would not be there if one were fully realized. Enlightenment is about freedom – not freedom to play out one’s cravings, but freedom from one’s cravings. If one would uproot the dualistic sense of self and other, he or she would not feel the compulsion to drink to excess. That person would feel complete without needing a substance that is potentially destructive. Excessive drinking is destructive. (57)

Gurdjieff’s use of drugs, and especially alcohol, with his students raises important questions concerning the nature of the teacher-student relationship and the methods employed on the path of spiritual transformation. Substances which transform ordinary states of consciousness have been used throughout human history in the quest for spiritual enlightenment. While some believe that they open doors to higher realms of experience and spiritual possibilities, others argue that they create illusory states of mind based on subjective imagination. When treated as temporary ‘guides’ to awaken evolutionary possibilities, they may be helpful, for some, on the spiritual path.

John Pentland, who was appointed by Gurdjieff to head the Work in America following his death, warned of the dangers of using drugs as a method of spiritual development: “Lord Pentland had talked about how drugs weaken the will, burn up the fine energies of the body, create imagination in the higher emotional center, and keep one from doing the work. Sometimes, though, he said, they could show what the next step would be. ‘But one has to pay for it’.” (58) His student William Patrick Patterson echoes this position when he speaks of the dangers of drug use from a Work perspective:

Drugs create imagination in high emotional center. Besides the intellectual, emotional and instinctive centers, there are two higher centers, the higher emotional and higher intellectual. Drugs change the chemistry, one’s vibration, allowing a possible contact with the higher emotional center. But if you have not sufficiently worked on yourself, haven’t integrated all those strange fish swimming in the subconscious, they are going to be projected onto the higher emotional center. What happens will be taken as “real” because of the power the drug has opened you to . . . Some people go “up” but never come “down.” They get stuck between states of consciousness, trapped in the dramatic universe. But let’s say that you could take that little Matrix pill and become conscious, even to the degree of consciousness-without-an-object. You’d miss out on the entire adventure of learning about yourself, the “I’s, false personality, internal considering, daydreaming, imagination, essence, being, centers and how they work, their dysfunctions, and so on. What would you be? At best, a stupid saint or another of our “acid-head messiahs.” Why are we here? What is the sense and significance of life on Earth, human and otherwise? (59)

Gurdjieff may have employed alcohol and certain other drugs as “temporary means” to advance his students’ spiritual growth. He clearly placed importance on this approach, as the ‘Toasts to the Idiots’ ritual was a fixture in Gurdjieff’s experiential teachings for more than 25 years. However, critics argue that there was an unhealthy element of coercion in the application of this “spiritual exercise.” Gurdjieff insisted that all guests present at his table must drink his powerful alcoholic toasts and he reportedly brooked no exceptions. (60)

However, in his later years, Gurdjieff seems to have relaxed his strict admonition that everyone at his table drink. William Welch reports that in 1948 during the ‘Toasts to the Idiots’ ritual “Some did not drink at all, and stories to the contrary notwithstanding, when someone who knew his capacity or had a true disinclination to alcohol declined to drink, he was never, in my experience, treated with anything but consideration by Gurdjieff.” (61)

Perhaps we will never understand Gurdjieff’s motives for employing intoxicants and food as integral parts of his Fourth Way teachings. In some strange fashion, they be seen as unorthodox ‘skillful means’ to awaken the consciousness of his pupils to the true reality of being – ‘I Am.’

NOTES

- (1) G.I. Gurdjieff *Gurdjieff's Early Talks 1914-1931* (London: Book Studio, 2014), pp. 43-44.
- (2) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), pp. 8-9.
- (3) Rafael Lefort *The Teachers of Gurdjieff* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1973), p. 78.
- (4) G.I. Gurdjieff *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 134.
- (5) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), p. 33.
- (6) William Patterson "Gurdjieff & Money" www.gurdjieff-legacy.org/40articles/money.htm
- (7) Paul Beekman Taylor *Gurdjieff and Orage: Brothers in Elysium* (York Beach, Maine: Weiser Books, 2001), p. 147.
- (8) Roger Lipsey *Gurdjieff Reconsidered: The Life, the Teachings, the Legacy* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2019), p. 171.
- (9) Roger Lipsey *Gurdjieff Reconsidered: The Life, the Teachings, the Legacy* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2019), pp. 169-170.
- (10) François Stahly "An Exacting Way" in Jacob Needleman and George Baker (eds.) *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teaching* (New York: Continuum, 1996), p. 407.
- (11) François Stahly "An Exacting Way" in Jacob Needleman and George Baker (eds.) *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teaching* (New York: Continuum, 1996), p. 407.
- (12) The private notes of members of 'the Rope' reveal some of the trials and tribulations they witnessed of Gurdjieff's daily drinking during a period in the 1930s:

Kathryn Hulme - October 1935: "At 8:30 p.m. the four of us arrive for crayfish. He tells us he has already drunk four large Vieux Armagnac at Café de la Paix. He doesn't seem affected . . . We have among us, drunk two whole bottles of Armagnac . . . He tells Miss Gordon she must drink brandy because we are all drunk and her vibrations are cacophonous with ours – 'For harmony, you drink' and she does." (*Gurdjieff and the Women of the Rope* London: Book Studio, 2012, pp. 4-5)

Kathryn Hulme - November 1935: He said that he has just finished his book and that he wished to celebrate tonight. 'After tonight I drink no more' . . .

He stopped drinking three days ago – says he cut off everything – Armagnac, Calvados, Vodka.” (*Gurdjieff and the Women of the Rope* London: Book Studio, 2012, pp. 15-17)

Solita Solano – January 1936: “Yes he’s drinking again,” she wrote to Kathryn in January, “but I’m glad because he talks much more.” She knew, as well, that the situation could abruptly change. “He stopped drinking three days ago. From one to four bottles of brandy a day he cut off everything. Had several crises and fell down twice in the street.” (Roger Lipsey *Gurdjieff Reconsidered: The Life, the Teachings, the Legacy* Boulder: Shambhala, 2019, p. 171)

(13) J.G. Bennett and Elizabeth Bennett *Idiots in Paris* (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1991), p. 60.

(14) Roger Lipsey *Gurdjieff Reconsidered: The Life, the Teachings, the Legacy* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2019), pp. 170-171.

(15) William Patrick Patterson *Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014), pp. 459-460.

(16) According to Gurdjieff, certain drugs are sometimes employed in esoteric schools to separate personality from essence as a method of self-study (P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* New York: Harcourt, 2001, p. 162):

If personality and essence are for a time separated in a man . . . two beings, as it were, are formed in him, who speak in different voices, have completely different tastes, aims and interests, and one of these two beings often proves to be on the level of a small child . . . Certain narcotics have the property of putting personality to sleep without affecting essence. And for a certain time after taking this narcotic a man’s personality disappears, as it were, and only his essence remains.

(17) G.I. Gurdjieff *Gurdjieff’s Early Talks 1914-1931* (London: Book Studio, 2014), p. 43.

(18) G.I. Gurdjieff *Gurdjieff’s Early Talks 1914-1931* (London: Book Studio, 2014), p. 43.

(19) Pseudo esoteric schools often employ drugs indiscriminately without the knowledge of how to use them properly and safely. “There are other schools which use [opium, hashish] or similar substances, not for experiment or study but to attain definite desired results, if only for a short time. Through a skillful use of such substances a man can be made very clever or very strong, for a certain time. Afterwards, of course, he dies or goes mad, but this is not taken into consideration.” (P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* New York: Harcourt, 2001, pp. 8-9). In a talk to his students recorded in *Gurdjieff’s Early Talks 1914-1931* (London: Book Studio, 2014), pp. 42-43, he expands:

A certain substance, introduced into the organism, can give a man certain powers and capacities which he ordinarily does not possess. In that case narcotics may be used for creating these states and for using them for definite purposes. For example, under the influence of certain narcotics a man may

become clairvoyant, may read other people's thoughts, foretell the future, see events which take place at great distances and so on. Or he may get great hypnotic power enabling him to suggest to other people or to a whole crowd one or another idea, or make them see pictures and images which do not really exist. Naturally such a temporary increase of man's powers and capacities has nothing to do with growth and evolution . . . The effects obtained from the use of narcotics in schools of this kind may be very varied and exciting, but they invariably contain a certain dose of uncertainty and risk. It is never possible to foretell exactly what results will be obtained; it is never possible to tell what the consequences of these results will be. As a rule these schools are possessing only incomplete knowledge, sometimes conducted by men who had come into contact with true esoteric schools, but who had not finished their training there and who wish to act at their own risk and peril, with no relation whatever to esoteric work.

- (20) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), p. 8.
- (21) Nicolas Tereshchenko *Mister Gurdjieff and the Fourth Way* (Austin, Texas: Kesdjan Publishing, 2003), p. 44.
- (22) Kathryn Hulme and Solita Solano *Gurdjieff and the Women of the Rope* (London: Book Studio, 2012), pp. 22-23.
- (23) J.G. Bennett *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 232.
- (24) William Patterson *Voices in the Dark* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2000), p. 71.
- (25) Later, Peters was hospitalized in Paris and Gurdjieff continued their conversation regarding his drinking. (*Gurdjieff Remembered* New York: Samuel Weiser, 1971), p. 109:

Gurdjieff dwelt on my condition at more length than he had before. He said that my non-reaction to the medicine he had given me only proved one thing to him – that I had an enormous, natural resistance to drugs, and should, therefore, avoid taking them whenever possible. As to drinking, he recommended that I continue to drink, but “consciously” – in the sense that I should learn to gauge accurately the needs of my system for alcohol. He insisted that I had such a need, but that it was periodic, and predicted if I gauged the need properly I would go through periods where I would drink – or would need to drink – a good deal, and also sometimes through long periods when I would not need to drink at all; in fact, at such times, I would find that liquor might even be harmful for me. “As you grow,” he added, “must remember that body can, without your awareness, make many changes in chemistry; may come time when you should never drink at all. Must try to live in tune with physical self and be conscious of all changes in own chemistry.

- (26) Fritz Peters *Gurdjieff Remembered* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1971), p. 99.

- (27) Ravi Ravindra *Heart without Measure: Work with Madame de Salzmann* (Halifax: Shaila Press, 1999), p.p. 30-31.
- (28) Kenneth Walker *The Making of Man* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 114.
- (29) Trungpa even makes an allusion to Gurdjieff in describing the nature of conscious drinking in *The Heart of the Buddha* (Boston: Shambhala, 1991, p. 188):
- Mr. Gurdjieff, a spiritual teacher who taught in Europe, spoke of the virtues of ‘conscious drinking’ and insisted that his students do conscious drinking together. Conscious drinking is a real and obvious demonstration of mind over matter. It allows us to relate to the various stages of intoxication: we experience our expectations, the almost devilish delight when the effect begins to be felt, and the final breakdown into frivolity in which habitual boundaries begin to dissolve.
- (30) Chögyam Trungpa *The Heart of the Buddha* (Boston: Shambhala, 1991), p. 189.
- (31) See James Moore “Toasts to the Idiots” (*Gurdjieff: The Anatomy of a Myth* Rockport, Massachusetts: Element Books, 1991, pp. 353-355) and William Patrick Patterson “The Science of Idiotism” (*Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014, pp. 542-546)
- (32) William Patterson *Ladies of the Rope* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 1999), pp. 259-260.
- (33) A.L. Staveley *Memories of Gurdjieff* (Aurora, Oregon: Two Rivers Press, 1978), pp. 52-53.
- (34) Kenneth Walker, who did not usually drink, provides a vivid portrait of his personal experience consuming alcohol during the Toast of the Idiots ritual in *The Making of Man* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 121-122:
- The vodka was terribly powerful and soon my inner life and the outer room were engaged in unpleasant movements. I was forced to remind myself from time to time of *where* I was, and of *what* I was doing . . . *here* I was not allowed to go to sleep, but had to stay awake and to cling on to the one remaining point of steadiness which remained within me . . . At long last the toasts came to an end and coffee cups and packets of cigarettes appeared on the table. I felt much as a shipwrecked sailor must feel when, after being buffeted about in a turbulent sea and all but drowned, he suddenly discovers that he is still alive and within sight of land.
- (35) P.D. Ouspensky describes (in *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* New York: Harcourt, 2001, pp. 181-198) the complex process whereby the three foods enter the human organism (called the ‘three-story factory’) and are transformed into finer substances through the law of octaves.
- (36) G.I. Gurdjieff *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1973), p. 386.

- (37) Jessmin and Dushka Howarth *It's Up To Ourselves: A Mother, a Daughter, and Gurdjieff* (New York: Gurdjieff Heritage Society, 2008), pp. 245-246.
- (38) Henri Tracol *The Taste of Things That Are True* (Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element Books, 1994), p. 98.
- (39) Unlike some religious and spiritual traditions, Gurdjieff taught that food should be enjoyed to the fullest and not restricted or arbitrarily rejected on cultural or moral grounds (Jessmin and Dushka Howarth *It's Up To Ourselves: A Mother, a Daughter, and Gurdjieff* (New York: Gurdjieff Heritage Society, 2008), p. 245:
- Mr. Gurdjieff always accorded food, its preparation and distribution the greatest respect. There was nothing hedonistic in this attitude. It came from his esteem for our marvelous human bodies and a belief that we are obligated to provide them with the best possible care and nourishment, including sense impressions. He only advocated fasting for special people under special circumstances, closely supervised.
- (40) Henri Tracol *The Taste of Things That Are True* (Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element Books, 1994), pp. 98-99.
- (41) William Patterson *Ladies of the Rope* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 1999), p. 122.
- (42) A.L. Staveley *Memories of Gurdjieff* (Aurora, Oregon: Two Rivers Press, 1978), p. 63.
- (43) Solange Claustres *Becoming Conscious with G.I. Gurdjieff* (Utrecht, the Netherlands: Eureka Editions, 2009), p. 21.
- (44) William Patrick Patterson *Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014), pp. 322-323.
- (45) William Welch describes some of the more unusual offerings that sometimes appeared at Gurdjieff's table, as he "expected us to try what we didn't know or what we didn't like." In some cases the fare was shocking and rather unappetizing – pig knuckle soup strongly flavoured with garlic or "a half-denuded roasted calf's head, with the brains still bubbling under the sawed-off apex of the calvarium . . . Mercifully, the eyes, by the time I received the delicacy, had usually been proffered and popped into the mouth of special guests." (William Welch *What Happened in Between* New York: Braziller, 1972, p. 123).
- (46) Thomas and Olga de Hartmann *Our Life with Mr. Gurdjieff* (London: Arkana, 1992), p. 46.
- (47) Louise Welch *Orage With Gurdjieff In America* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 92.
- (48) Kenneth Walker *Venture with Ideas* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1972), pp. 145-146.

- (49) Jessmin and Dushka Howarth *It's Up To Ourselves: A Mother, a Daughter, and Gurdjieff* (New York: Gurdjieff Heritage Society, 2008), p. 252.
- (50) C.S. Nott *Teachings of Gurdjieff* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1974), pp. 56-57.
- (51) Jessmin and Dushka Howarth *It's Up To Ourselves: A Mother, a Daughter, and Gurdjieff* (New York: Gurdjieff Heritage Society, 2008), p. 450.
- (52) Paul Beekman Taylor *Gurdjieff's America* (Lighthouse Editions, 2004), pp. 202-203.
- (53) William Welch *What Happened in Between* (New York: George Braziller, 1972), p. 124.
- (54) C.S. Nott *Teachings of Gurdjieff* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1974), p. 57.
- (55) Annabeth McCorkle *The Gurdjieff Years 1929-1949: Recollections of Louise Goepfert March* (Utrecht, the Netherlands: Eureka Editions, 2012), p. 52.
- (56) In some spiritual communities, substance abuse has led to public scandals, disgrace and disillusion. In some cases, where the teacher was alcoholic and encouraged drinking, many students followed suit. With some teachers, addiction to alcohol or drugs is hidden; with others, it is public and open. Clandestine alcohol and drug addiction is frequently combined with abuses of sexuality and power. Certain Buddhist and Hindu spiritual communities have even felt the need to start AA groups to deal with their addiction problems. Alcoholic and addicted teachers have led to the downfall of whole communities and caused major suffering in the lives of students caught in the culture of addiction. For an insightful discussion of this problem see Jack Kornfield's "The Emperor's New Clothes: Problems with Teachers" in *A Path with Heart* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993, pp. 254-271) and "The Dirty Laundry" in *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry* (New York: Bantam Books, 2001, pp. 139-157).
- (57) Bodhin Kjolhede "What's in the Mix?" *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* Fall 1998, p. 82.
- (58) Wm. Patrick Patterson *Eating the "I"* (San Anselmo, California: Arete Communications, 1992), p. 77.
- (59) William Patrick Patterson *Spiritual Survival in a Radically Changing World-Time* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2009), pp. 118-119.
- (60) Many pupils have revealed that they "cheated" at these toasts, using a variety of subterfuges to avoid drinking the full complement of toasts. Can we blame them? Force and compulsion in matters of the spirit is inherently unhealthy, contrary to the principles of personal responsibility and conscience, and ultimately counterproductive. Unquestioning obedience to authority, whether secular or spiritual, deprives human beings of freedom of choice and provides fertile ground for the development of a cult. This command to drink on the part of Gurdjieff has provided ample ammunition for some of his most virulent critics, who

have accused him of leading a cult that manipulated and brainwashed his gullible and malleable followers. There is, of course, no real evidence to support this exaggerated assertion. But, certainly open to question is the way in which Gurdjieff sometimes tried to force his pupils to consume significant amounts of alcohol when it was clear that many of them objected to this practice for a variety of valid moral and personal reasons. Perhaps the important lesson is that no human being, spiritual teacher or otherwise, is infallible in their knowledge, judgement or actions in the world.

(61) William Welch *What Happened in Between* (New York: George Braziller, 1972, p. 123).