

POWERFUL AND MAGNETIC PERSONALITY¹

Almost everyone who met Gurdjieff was struck by his powerful personality and commanding presence. Together his physical attributes, personal magnetism and immense knowledge created an impression of great strength and mastery.

Gurdjieff possessed an enigmatic quality and a mystique that set him apart from other men. The widely-held belief that he possessed hypnotic and psychic powers only deepened his aura of mystery. His alleged use of these abilities as part of his teaching, condemned in some traditional spiritual circles, has always been a source of controversy.

That Gurdjieff's powerful personality made a strong impact on his students is without question. However, whether this impact was always positive is open to debate. Student Fritz Peters believed that Gurdjieff's personal power did both harm and good to those around him. Writer Claude Bragdon made a similar assessment of Gurdjieff: "He impressed one as a man of power, but at the same time I was a little repelled; I did not want to be drawn into that particular net." (1)

Some observers have wondered whether Gurdjieff controlled or was controlled by his powerful personality. Author Gary Lachman claims that Gurdjieff possessed a psychological need to dominate others, evidenced by his belief that most people were incapable of appreciating their own genuine worth. Other critics have argued that his personal magnetism diverted attention away from his teaching and was actually a detriment to his students, preventing them from developing their highest spiritual potential. However, many of his students felt that his powerful presence and remarkable level of being were important elements in the direct transmission of his teachings.

Personal Power and Presence

Gurdjieff possessed an undeniable personal power and magnetism. The sheer force of his presence made a lasting impact on others. Student Henriette Lannes describes the impression Gurdjieff made at their first meeting:

I was struck by the impact of his force, very quiet, calm and controlled, yet almost frightening, but more than anything by the degree of his total presence, a presence which I felt extended to the tips of his fingers. It gave meaning to all his movements, which seemed so much more alive than ours. As alive as those of a cat or a tiger. I also felt very strongly his vast generosity – a generosity which I would call superhuman. (2)

P.D. Ouspensky was impressed by Gurdjieff's inner simplicity and naturalness. Ouspensky considered him versatile and inventive in his practical dealings, indifferent to his own personal comfort, and willing to tackle whatever work was required in any

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situation. Student René Zuber, on first meeting Gurdjieff in 1943, noted that he possessed both an impressive calm and “the agility of a fencer capable of delivering a lightning thrust.” (3) Some, such as Robert de Ropp, even went so far as to attach archetypal significance to Gurdjieff’s personal attributes:

In him were combined no less than four sacred archetypes, all of them rare and all of them powerful . . . The odds are high against a human being having even one of these archetypes strongly developed in his essence. The odds are astronomical against anyone having all four. (4)

Gurdjieff’s physical qualities contributed to his impact on others. Although of only average height, he appeared physically powerful with a broad and sturdy build. When he moved he did so with extraordinary coordination, which students have described as feline in nature. Ouspensky noticed the remarkable assurance and precision in all of Gurdjieff’s movements, and Zuber observed that “his gait and his gestures were never hurried, but followed in unison with the rhythm of his breathing like those of a peasant or a mountaineer.” (5) Even in his later years, Gurdjieff maintained an impressive physique. Students who saw him in the baths noted that his muscle tone remained firm despite the additional weight he carried.

Perhaps the most compelling physical feature of Gurdjieff was the power of his eyes. Students have described them as ‘piercing’ and of unusual depth and penetration. John Bennett said that Gurdjieff had the strangest eyes that he had ever seen, with each being very different in expression from the other.

Gurdjieff’s undeniable force of character acted as a magnet in attracting students, many of whom were soon in awe of their teacher’s extraordinary power. René Zuber was among them: “He seemed to be filled with an experience – almost incommunicable – which set him at an unbearable distance from the common run of mortals.” (6)

John G. Bennett speculates that Gurdjieff derived much of his personal power from his belief that he had a special mission to accomplish in the West. (7) This guiding principle gave Gurdjieff a powerful sense of purpose and direction. Psychiatrist Anthony Storr supports Bennett’s assessment, believing that “it was his own conviction that he had discovered *the answer* which made him charismatic and persuasive.” (8)

Perhaps Gurdjieff’s power resulted from an interplay between his own personality and the training he received during his esoteric study. When combined with the driving purpose to enhance the spiritual well-being of humanity, the ultimate effect was a personality of immense power and influence.

Even in death, Gurdjieff’s personal power was clearly evident to some. At his funeral service, as his body lay in state, one of his pupils remembered:

I was overwhelmed by the force that came from him. One could not be near his body without feeling unmistakably his power. He looked magnificent; composed, content, *intentional*, for want of a better word. Not

simply a body placed by someone else. He was undisguised, nothing was concealed from us. Everything belonging to him, his inner and outer life and all the circumstances and results of it, were there to be seen, if one could see. What force there was in him then! I have never seen anything in any way like it. This, I think, was what I had dreaded: I could not bear to see him with the force gone from him. Yet in fact I saw his power for the first time unobscured. (9)

Power of Attention and Awareness

Many spiritual traditions stress the importance of developing awareness or mindfulness and living with a sense of being fully present in every moment. In his teachings Gurdjieff placed great emphasis on the importance of properly focusing one's attention:

When you do one thing, do it with the whole self. *One thing at a time.* Now I sit here and I eat. For me nothing exists in the world except this food, this table. I eat with the whole attention. So *you* must do – in everything. When you write a letter, do not at the same time think what will be the cost of laundering that shirt; when you compute laundering costs, do not think about the letter you must write. Everything has its time. To be able to do *one* thing at a time . . . this is a property of Man, not man in quotation marks. (10)

One of Gurdjieff's most striking characteristics was his ability to direct his awareness to the reality of the present moment. Fritz Peters, who lived at the Prieuré in France during the 1920s, experienced Gurdjieff's power of attention in their interactions: "He was fully aware of me, completely concentrated on whatever words he said to me; his attention never wandered when I spoke to him." (11) French pupil Solange Claustres made a similar observation:

What left the deepest impression upon me was that profound look when he was listening to someone, silently listening with his whole being. Answering with words only the question put in words and, through a particular attitude in the tone of his voice, by a smile, a look, he conveyed to one's feelings something which the ordinary mind could neither hear nor understand . . . I sensed and saw in him a quality of attention that nothing escaped. He looked heedless, like a dozing tiger of Turkestan, but he was always ready to pounce, to act, attentive to everything, even at rest. (12)

Gurdjieff's ability to be fully present in his encounters with pupils contributed to his aura of magnetism and power. This extended even to apparently mundane situations. A.R. Orage and his wife were dining with Gurdjieff and a number of other students at the Prieuré when Gurdjieff suddenly snatched a locket belonging to Jessie Orage. After waiting patiently for an opportune moment to recover the locket, A.R. suddenly leaped at Gurdjieff. But Gurdjieff, even though he had been drinking heavily, was fully present and quickly whisked the necklace away from Orage's grasp, to the amazement of the pupils in attendance.

Many students were struck by Gurdjieff's uncanny perceptivity in dealing with people. Katherine Mansfield: "He always acts at precisely the moment one needs it. That is what is so strange . . ." Fritz Peters also commented on his acute awareness and practical understanding of the human psyche:

There is no question that Gurdjieff had an unbelievable (unless you've seen it) *awareness* of other people. It was nothing so limited as mind-reading or thought transference. He seemed to know so much about the human processes, about the underlying logic in man, that he was conscious of everything that took place within any human being that he happened to observe. It is the same kind of faculty that a highly trained psychiatrist seems to have to a limited degree. Gurdjieff had it to an enormous degree, and I have never known him to be wrong – in my own case or in the case of other people I knew. It was difficult to resist such obvious learning or "power" and, in fact, there was no reason to resist it. (13)

Some critics of Gurdjieff have argued that he used his formidable capacity for attention to ensnare and manipulate his followers. They claim that many pupils became enamored of Gurdjieff, which allowed them to be highly suggestible or vulnerable to manipulation. However, the evidence to support this contention is sketchy. Gurdjieff was famous for making things difficult for his students, even driving them away when he felt they were becoming too attached to him.

Psychic and Hypnotic Powers

There is no doubt that Gurdjieff possessed unusual abilities of a psychic nature. They reportedly ranged from autosuggestion and hypnosis to more advanced powers like telepathy and clairvoyance.

Gurdjieff admitted that he possessed hypnotic abilities which he employed primarily in healing others. In *Herald of Coming Good* he revealed that he had previously practised as a professional hypnotist, a fact that caused consternation among many of his followers who were fearful that he was attempting to hypnotize *them*. While Gurdjieff admitted that he possessed hypnotic abilities, he claimed that he used hypnosis only to awaken subjects from their 'sleep' of conditioned everyday life.

Gurdjieff claimed that in 1912 he took a personal oath to renounce the use of hypnotism to further his aims. He admitted that he found it very difficult to control his hypnotic power, which he called an "automatic influence over people." As he told his student Jean Toomer in 1933: "Twenty-one years ago I vowed never to use hypnosis to effect my aims. Recent circumstances have made me struggle with myself to keep my vow . . . I do not want to break it." (14)

It is impossible to know the extent to which Gurdjieff employed hypnosis in the course of his work with students. None of Gurdjieff's primary pupils have reported a

first-hand experience of being hypnotized by their teacher. Although some pupils expressed concern that Gurdjieff used hypnotic abilities to manipulate others, most offered only indirect evidence or appeared to be reporting mere suspicions. However, Boris Mouravieff claimed that Gurdjieff hypnotically induced excessive suggestibility in his followers: “The effects of Gurdjieff’s [hypnotic] influence upon his immediate surroundings were quite visible. He could have proposed any absurdity to his disciples . . . and be sure in advance that it would be accepted with the same enthusiasm as if it were a revelation.” (15) And, Dr. James Young, who was a student at the Prieuré in the 1920s, believed that Gurdjieff used hypnosis with him as well as with many other students, citing his own heightened suggestibility as evidence.

It is evident that Gurdjieff possessed psychic powers beyond the realm of hypnosis which he used in certain situations when working with his students. The memoirs of Gurdjieff’s students contain a number of accounts of paranormal phenomena associated with him.

In the summer of 1916, Gurdjieff worked closely with a small group of students in a country house in Finland. P.D. Ouspensky, one of the students at the time, describes an incident of telepathy in which he was able to hear Gurdjieff’s thoughts:

Suddenly I noticed that among the words which he was saying to us all there were “thoughts” which were intended for me. I caught one of these thoughts and replied to it, speaking aloud in the ordinary way. G. nodded to me and stopped speaking. There was a fairly long pause. He sat still saying nothing. After a while I heard his voice inside me as if it were in the chest near the heart. He put a definite question to me. I looked at him; he was sitting and smiling. (16)

A number of other students (Thomas de Hartmann, Leonid Stjoernval, Jeanne de Salzmann, John Bennett, C.S. Nott, Rina Hinds, Tcheslaw Tchekhovitch, A.R. Orage) also attested to telepathic experiences with Gurdjieff.

In his autobiography *Witness*, John G. Bennett reported that when he was a student at the Château du Prieuré in 1923 he attempted to perform demanding dance exercises while suffering from chronic dysentery. Just at the point where he was reaching exhaustion, he perceived Gurdjieff concentrating on him, and felt a sudden infusion of an immense power which completely rejuvenated him physically.

Margaret Anderson relates an incident in 1936 in which Gurdjieff exhibited his extraordinary psychic power. After instructing her to relax her body and allow her head or other body parts to move freely at will, he initiated an “experiment” in which he transmitted an energy force across a short distance: “In a few seconds, my head began to move from side to side and up and down, slowly. Then a wide hot ray or wave struck my neck with force and moved down, then up my spine . . . A minute later he said, ‘Now enough.’ He left the room with no explanation and never referred to this again.” (17)

In a further example in 1945, Fritz Peters, in a state of acute nervous exhaustion following his difficult military service, experienced a powerful transference of energy from Gurdjieff to himself which Peters experienced as “a violet, electric blue light.”

Gurdjieff's extraordinary abilities were often viewed with great suspicion. In some metaphysical circles he was regarded as a ‘black magician’ (18) who used supernatural powers to manipulate his followers. Gurdjieff claimed that he employed a substance related to animal magnetism that he called ‘hanbledzoin’ which he then transmitted to others through the force of his concentration. He may have overstated his mastery of this subtle ‘enabling’ substance (or was merely jesting or testing his students’ gullibility) when he boldly boasted to Margaret Anderson and others that “the kind of power I have does not need [any] exercise. Thirty years ago, I had it so much that I could split that table in two from a distance, if so wished, or kill a large animal like a yak.” (19)

Most esoteric traditions acknowledge that spiritual teachers often possess extrasensory powers which are developed as by-products of their training. However, for a teacher who has not fully transcended ego identification, such powers can be easily abused when the motive is to manipulate, intimidate and control. Critics have argued that Gurdjieff's use of hypnotic and psychic powers was not based on respect for his students' spiritual integrity, but rather the desire to manipulate them. However, it seems more likely that Gurdjieff's intention in deploying such powers was to benefit the inner development of certain spiritual aspirants. The accounts of Gurdjieff's pupils suggest that he used his psychic abilities only in selected cases to heal, reveal pupils' developmental possibilities or prepare students to absorb further teachings.

Personality Worship

Gurdjieff's leadership abilities and powerful personality inspired widespread respect and admiration from his students. However, beyond a healthy attachment, many followers' behaviour bordered on idolization and hero worship. For these devotees, any criticism of their master provoked disbelief and outrage or condescending dismissal. They attributed almost divine powers to Gurdjieff, even in the most mundane situations. For instance, some believed that Gurdjieff could learn to drive a car through sheer inspiration, or that he could instantly affect the health and physical functioning of visitors to the Prieuré. Even the most outrageous behaviour by Gurdjieff was rationalized by some students as having hidden meaning and significance beyond its surface. Even more seasoned students like Paul Beekman Taylor were captivated by Gurdjieff's powerful personality: “The sheer power of the man fascinated me. Increasingly as I saw and heard more of him . . . I could never, nor did I wish to, shake myself loose from the impact of his person upon me. From the moment I first met him, I wondered at his force of person. (20)

Some critics have argued that the force of Gurdjieff's personality so overwhelmed his students that they lost all objectivity and discernment. Whithall Perry observed that Gurdjieff provoked strong reactions in everyone who met him. While some felt repulsed, others were drawn irresistibly to Gurdjieff and were totally enraptured.

Students' own accounts suggest that while many felt abject devotion, others were clearly intimidated by Gurdjieff. Paul Beekman Taylor noticed that many pupils were stone-faced and tense in Gurdjieff's presence, appearing ill at ease or afraid. Fritz Peters observed that few of Gurdjieff's students at the Château du Prieuré dared to oppose Gurdjieff, even in the face of insult and ridicule: "The rebellious did not stay at the Prieuré to exchange banter, and they were not permitted to stay to challenge or oppose him; the 'philosophical dictatorship' brooked no opposition." (21)

It is evident that Gurdjieff was aware of the effect of his powerful personality on his students and the dangers of personality worship. Fourth Way author William Patterson notes that Gurdjieff considered projection and transference to be natural developments in the student-teacher relationship, which the teacher is responsible to interrupt at the appropriate juncture: "The projection onto the teacher, the unconscious miming of the teacher, the taking of his every manifestation as law, is simply a step on the path of the student which the teacher will break at the necessary moment. And Gurdjieff did." (22)

Paul Beekman Taylor believes that Gurdjieff deliberately shocked, destabilized and discouraged his pupils to prevent them from focusing on their teacher to the exclusion of the teaching:

By his speech, dress, and postures, Gurdjieff seemed to do his utmost to maintain distance, as if he would encourage others to hear the teaching instead of seeing and sensing the man . . . He would turn pupils back into themselves as a first and necessary step towards positioning themselves for his teaching. (23)

The results of Gurdjieff's attempts to disengage from his students and to redirect their focus to his teachings were mixed. Although many were unable to shake their attachment to Gurdjieff the man, others felt that Gurdjieff's shocking behaviour forced them out of their pattern of hero worship.

Commentary

Gurdjieff is widely regarded as one of the most powerful and charismatic spiritual teachers of the 20th century. Almost everyone who came in contact with him felt that he possessed extraordinary presence and knowledge.

Gurdjieff was clearly aware of his great personal power but was under no illusions about his human weaknesses or level of spiritual development. Speaking to a group of Paris students in the 1930s, he admitted: "Thousands more complete than me on earth. I have far to go." (24) But many of Gurdjieff's students were blinded by his personal power and magnetism and became ensnared in the trap of personality worship. His hypnotic and psychic abilities further contributed to his mystique. Unable to separate the teacher from the teaching, many students failed to grasp the significance and value of his teachings.

When a spiritual teacher possesses a commanding presence and immense personal power he or she must exercise great care when interacting with pupils. The temptation to dominate or control the lives of students is always a very real possibility which, if manifested, is clearly detrimental to students' spiritual progress.

Gurdjieff must be given credit for recognizing how the powerful influence of his personality could affect his students. Much of his role-playing and unconventional behaviour was designed to force his students to penetrate beyond his personality to the heart of the Fourth Way teaching he was trying to transmit.

In *Boyhood with Gurdjieff*, Fritz Peters relates how Gurdjieff's spontaneity and unpredictability often baffled his pupils, many of whom were under the illusion that a spiritual master should always exhibit an aura of tranquility, quietude and sobriety: "Gurdjieff at no time manifested calmness or serenity as if it were an aim in itself. He was far more likely to fly into a rage or to enjoy himself in an apparently uncontrolled fit of animal spirits. On many occasions I heard him mock the seriousness of people, and remind them that it was essential for any well-rounded human being to 'play' . . . No one could accuse Gurdjieff of not playing." (25)

Charismatic spiritual teachers like Gurdjieff raise many serious questions for their followers. When the teacher's personality is so strong, how does a student distinguish between behaviour which is consciously directed for teaching purposes and that which is ego-based? When working with a powerful teacher, is the onus on the teacher or the pupil to establish a balanced and effective learning relationship?

There are no simple answers to these questions. Each seeker must make an independent assessment of the teacher and the teaching situation. Students who worked with Gurdjieff often had serious doubts about their powerful teacher and were sometimes shocked by his unconventional behaviour. Yet, those who persevered in their work with Gurdjieff ultimately believed they had obtained something of inestimable value which changed their lives forever.

NOTES

- (1) James Webb *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Works of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), p. 269.
- (2) Henriette Lannes "To Recognize a Master" in Jacob Needleman and George Baker, eds. *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teaching* (New York: Continuum, 1996), p. 363.
- (3) René Zuber *Who Are You, Mr. Gurdjieff?* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 2.

- (4) Robert de Ropp *Warrior's Way* (Nevada City, California: Gateways, 2002), pp. 180-181.
- (5) René Zuber *Who Are You, Mr. Gurdjieff?* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 3.
- (6) René Zuber *Who Are You, Mr. Gurdjieff?* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 4.
- (7) John G. Bennett, after carefully researching Gurdjieff's life, concluded that Gurdjieff had contacted a higher source of wisdom and was engaged in an enterprise to transmit ancient esoteric teachings to the West. In *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973, p. 132) he discusses Gurdjieff's mission:
- We can see that Gurdjieff was pursuing a clear and consistent plan. To others, his actions may have appeared eccentric and inconsequential, but he was evidently driven by the conviction that his mission was important for mankind, and that the Higher Powers would provide the means to fulfill it . . . He gave me the impression of a man who had a well-defined programme. He said that he was able to call on help from people who knew the importance of his task.
- (8) Anthony Storr *Feet of Clay* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 43.
- (9) William Patrick Patterson *Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014), p. 460.
- (10) Kathryn Hulme *Undiscovered Country: In Search of Gurdjieff* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1966), p. 91.
- (11) Fritz Peters *Boyhood with Gurdjieff* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 32.
- (12) Solange Claustres "The Dessert" in Jacob Needleman and George Baker, eds. *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teaching* (New York: Continuum, 1996), p. 400.
- (13) Fritz Peters *Gurdjieff Remembered* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1971), p. 127.
- (14) James Webb *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Works of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), p. 91.
- (15) Boris Mouravieff *Gurdjieff, Ouspensky and Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (Chicago: Praxis Institute Press, 1997), p. 16.
- (16) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 262.

- (17) William Patrick Patterson *Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014), p. 315.
- (18) Gurdjieff made frequent reference to the figure of a black magician in his teachings. A black magician was one of the central characters of Gurdjieff's ballet *Struggle of the Magicians*, and he taught his students an Eastern tale of a magician who hypnotized his flock of sheep. In P.D. Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949, p. 227) Gurdjieff warned of the dangers of black magic:
- Black magic is based on infatuation and on playing upon human weaknesses . . . Black magic has always one definite characteristic. This characteristic is the tendency to use people for some, even the best of aims, *without their knowledge and understanding*, either by producing in them faith and infatuation or by acting upon them through fear.
- (19) Solita Solano and Kathryn Hulme *Gurdjieff and the Women of the Rope* (London: Book Studio, 2012), p. 28.
- (20) Paul Beekman Taylor *Gurdjieff's America* (Lighthouse Editions, 2004), p. 6.
- (21) Fritz Peters *Boyhood with Gurdjieff* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 119.
- (22) William Patterson *Taking With the Left Hand* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 1998), pp. 70-71.
- (23) Paul Beekman Taylor *Shadows of Heaven: Gurdjieff and Toomer* (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1998), p. 182.
- (24) Paul Beekman Taylor *Gurdjieff's America* (Lighthouse Editions, 2004), p. 1.
- (25) Fritz Peters *Boyhood with Gurdjieff* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 137.