

Gurdjieff's Aphorisms

With Commentary by Kenneth Walker M.D.

Gurdjieff had the capacity to convey so much in some forceful saying that his words echoed for a long time in the hearers' minds. His maxims did not usually take the form of polished aphorisms for, although he was acquainted with many different tongues, he was a master of none of them, and was inclined to poke fun at what he called the 'bon ton literary language.' Indeed, some of his phrases were memorable chiefly because of their colloquial character, such as that saying of his which Ouspensky so often quoted: 'To know everything it is necessary to know only a very little but to know that very little is to know pretty much.' A great deal of the force in G's maxims was imparted by the man who uttered them, and this force is absent from the written word. Yet despite the weakening which his sayings will undergo in print, I have felt it worth while recording some of them. . .

If it were possible for me to introduce them with a short and telling description of the man who uttered them and whose presence made such a strong impact—not necessarily favourable—on everybody who came into contact with him, I would do so, but I have never read any successful description of him. I shall not attempt, therefore, to make a thumbnail drawing of a man so difficult to portray as George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff. His maxims must stand by themselves.

It is better to be temporarily selfish than never to be just.

Only *conscious* suffering is of value.

Man is given a limited quantity of experiences; being economical with them lengthens his life.

Know that this house is of value only to those who have recognized their nothingness and believe it is possible to alter.

Here we can only direct and create conditions, but not help.

Remember that here work is not done for work's sake, but as a means.

Like what *it* does not like.

Conscious love evokes the same in response.
Emotional love evokes the opposite.
Physical love depends on type and polarity.

Faith of consciousness is freedom.
Faith of feeling is slavery.
Faith of body is stupidity.

Hope of consciousness is strength.
Hope of feeling is cowardice.
Hope of body is disease.

Only he can be impartial who is able to put himself into the position of others.

We can only strive to be able to be Christians.

I love him who loves work.

Judge others according to yourself and you will seldom be mistaken.

Consider what others think of you, not what they say.

If you are not critical by nature, it is useless for you to remain here.

He who has got rid of the disease 'Tomorrow' has the possibility to attain what he is here for.

If you already know what is wrong and do it, you commit a sin that is difficult to redress.

The chief means of happiness in this life is the ability to consider outwardly always, inwardly never.

One of the strongest motives for the wish to work on yourself is the realization that you may die at any moment – only you must first realize this.

Man is refreshed not by the quantity but by the quality of sleep – sleep little without regret.

The highest that a man can attain is to be able to *do*.

Here there are neither English nor Russians, Jews nor Christians, but only those following one aim, to be able to be.

Take the understanding of the East and the knowledge of the West and then seek.

Only he who can take care of the property of others can have his own.

Remember yourself always and everywhere.

A good man loves his father and mother.

Help him only who strives not to be an idler.
Love not art with your feelings.
Respect all religions.
Judge no one according to the tales of others.
Blessed is he who hath a soul,
Blessed is he who hath none,
Woe and sorrow to him who hath it in conception.

The worse the conditions of life, the greater the possibility for productive work,
provided you work consciously.

The energy expended in active inner work is immediately transformed into new
energy; that expended in passive work is lost forever.

Practice love on animals first; they react better and more sensitively.

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I add some additional sayings of Gurdjieff's, most of which have been abstracted from accounts of meetings taken by him in London and America during the years 1921-24:

- There is only one kind of magic and this is 'doing.'
All energy spent on conscious work is an investment; that spent mechanically is lost forever.
We must destroy our buffers. Children have none; therefore we must become like little children.
- We attract forces according to our being.
Humanity is the earth's nerve-endings through which planetary vibrations are received for transmission.
- Everything in the universe has a place in a scale.
- No energy is ever lost in the cosmic scheme.

One twentieth of all our energy goes to emotional and instinctive centres. Self-remembering is a lamp which must be kept alight by energy from these two centres. Our thinking centre is not really a centre, but an apparatus for collecting impressions.

Formatory apparatus resembles a hired typist who works for a firm and has a large number of stereotyped replies for external impressions. She sends printed replies to other centres who are the 'directors' of the firm and who are strangers to each other. Wrong replies are often sent, as the typist is asleep or lazy.

In deep sleep all communication between centres is closed. Our sleep is bad because we do not cut off lines of communication.

We have good and bad angels. The good angels work by way of our voluntary, active nature and the bad through our passive nature.

Mr. Self-love and Madame Vanity are the two chief agents of the devil.

Do not be affected by externals. In themselves they are harmless; it is we who allow ourselves to be hurt by them.

We never reach the limits of our strength.

If we do what we like doing, we are immediately rewarded by the pleasure of doing it. If we do what we don't like doing the reward must come later. It is a mathematical law and all life is mathematics.

Man is a symbol of the laws of creation; in him there is evolution, involution, struggle, progress and retrogression, struggle between positive and negative, active and passive, yes and no, good and evil.

Men have their minds and women their feelings more highly developed. Either alone can give nothing. Think what you feel and feel what you think. Fusion of the two produces another force.

For some people religion is useful but for others it is only a policeman.

We are sheep kept to provide wool for our masters who feed us and keep us as slaves of illusion. But we have a chance of escape and our masters are anxious to help us, but we like being sheep. It is comfortable.

He who can love can *be*; he who can *be* can *do*; he who can *do* is.

Sincerity is the key to self-knowledge and to be sincere with oneself brings great suffering.

Sleep is very comfortable, but waking is very bitter.

Free will is the function of the Master within us. Our 'will' is the supremacy of one desire over another.

Eastern art has a mathematical basis. It is a script with an inner and an outer content. In Persia there is a room in a monastery which makes one weep

owing to mathematical combinations of different parts of its architecture. Real art is knowledge and not talent.

An ordinary man has no 'Master.' He is ruled now by the mind, now by the feelings and now by the body. Often the order comes from the automatic apparatus and still more often he is ordered about by the sex centre. Real will can only be when one 'I' rules, when there is a 'master' in the house.

Morality is a stick with two ends; it can be turned this way and that.

From the time when man began to live on the Earth, from the time of Adam onwards, there started to be formed within him, with the help of God, of Nature, and of all his surroundings, an organ whose function is conscience. Every man has this organ, and whoever is guided by it automatically lives according to God's commandments. If our consciences were clear, and not buried, there would be no need to speak about morality, for consciously or unconsciously everyone would behave according to God's commandments. Unfortunately conscience is covered up with a kind of crust which can be pierced only by intense suffering; then conscience speaks. But after a while a man calms down and once more the organ becomes covered over and buried.

You should forget about morality. Conversations about morality are simply empty talk. Your aim is *inner morality*.

External morality is different everywhere.

You should understand, and establish it as a firm rule, not to pay attention to other people's opinions. You must be free of people surrounding you, and when you are free inside you will be free of them.

To be just at the moment of action is a hundred times more valuable than to be just afterwards.

To gain anything real, long practice is necessary. Try to accomplish very small things first.

There are two kinds of doing—automatic and doing what you 'wish.' Take a small thing which you 'wish' to do and cannot do and make this your God. Let nothing interfere. If you 'wish,' you can. Without wishing you never 'can.' 'Wish' is the most powerful thing in the world.

To bear the manifestation of others is a big thing. The last thing for a man.

In the river of life suffering is not intentional. In conscious life suffering is intentional and of great value.

To love one must first forget all about love. Make it your aim and look for direction. As we are we cannot possibly love.

Until a man uncovers himself he cannot see.

Excerpted from Kenneth Walker's *A Study of Gurdjieff's Teaching* © 1957