

The Separation Exercise

An Unpublished Gurdjieff Group Meeting dated Saturday 16 October 1943

On 20 July 2008, I was sorting through some papers in a folder Kenneth Adie, Mr George Adie's youngest son, had passed onto me from among his father's unsorted documents. Amongst them was a French language transcript of a meeting with Gurdjieff on Saturday 16 October 1943. I have not checked that 16 October 1943 was a Saturday, I am reading from the transcript itself.

Present were Mme de Salzman and people identified as André Abadi, G. Franc, Louise Leprudhomme, Miss (Elizabeth) Gordon, Yette, Simone, and Nano. The transcript then has a return, apparently, to distinguish those above from those below, being Rene Daumal, Philippe, Méchin, (Henri?) Tracol, Aboulker, Kahn, Luc (Dietrich?), Lebeau, J. and A(lfred?) Etiévant, and J. Crochereau.

The meeting took place in two parts. The first section is said to occur after the reading of 'Pogossian', which we know from Meetings With Remarkable Men. Evidently, this was the first meeting after holidays. Gurdjieff asked if anyone had made any observations concerning what I have translated as "the separation exercise". The exact French is "l'exercice du dédoublement", literally "the exercise of making into two." 'Separation' and 'division' are attested translations of 'dédoublement', and this meaning is supported by the context. Later in the transcript the French word 'separation' appears as an equivalent. But, unless otherwise stated, you can take it that the speakers always use the word 'dédoublement' when I refer to 'separation'.

The first to speak was Dr Aboulker. He said that he had continued with the exercise, and although he had "succeeded a little" during the holidays, he now had "much less than I did back then". He stated that he had not been able to reach "a point of coming out of myself". He requested Gurdjieff to now give him the exercise he had promised to at the beginning of September, "to help me regain the taste of division (dédoublement)."

Gurdjieff did then give him an exercise.

Then Luc observed that he can "separate out from myself very strongly (fortement)" when he makes a very brief effort, but that it disappears when he tries to keep it.

Gurdjieff replied that it was not necessary to do it 'fortement', what is necessary is to do it gradually. Indeed, he said, one should never force oneself: that could lead to fixed ideas.

Luc said that he had expressed himself badly. It wasn't the efforts which are strong (forts), but rather that the impression which he receives is strong, provided the effort is brief.

Gurdjieff replied, it seems to me, not only to the question, but also to the state of the questioner, and to what he intuited was behind the question. He did not seem to be buying Luc's 'clarification'. His first sentence is lapidary: "It's in the effort." He continued that to act a little more consciously will always be an effort, a point Mrs Adie used to make very often. However, Gurdjieff added, it isn't necessary to do anything vehemently (violenter).

Luc's next statement vindicated Gurdjieff's scepticism as to his 'clarification'. He stated that he would focus all of his 'forces' for a very short period, "as if trying to overcome some obstacle". He also spoke about how he wrenched himself

Gurdjieff reiterated that that was not necessary. "Do your exercise just as a service, and little by little, you will arrive there. I did say, on one occasion, that it was better to work intensely and for short moments. But the intensity is in the attention, the intensity of concentration, and not in any shock (choc). ... Your effort must be to concentrate, not to wrench." Luc replied that his 'nature' refused to "separate itself out" (a se séparer).

De Salzmann gave the advice that if he concentrated in himself more, it would "happen by itself".

Gurdjieff added that he should tense himself 'organically', or else he would also tense his feeling. To show him how to tense organically, Gurdjieff gave him an exercise to try before the main exercise, and invited him to report back in a week "what result you've obtained", a salutary reminder for those who take so literally the idea of not working for results as to think that results are unimportant.

The Louise spoke. She said that she was no longer doing the separation exercise, but concentrating in such a way that she could "sense myself ... see myself, and that it is not my head. I have the impression that I see myself as more than my head, more than my body." Gurdjieff replied that 'separation' is exactly that. When Louise added that she could not, however, "feel myself as double" (the French word is 'double'), Gurdjieff said: "But you can't feel yourself at all. Your double is incorporeal, you are not able to feel it. It is something which is beyond bodily."

The last question before lunch was from Lebeau, who spoke of the separation exercise, and how he sensed vibrations which reacted a certain way with his body, bringing a sense of "two separated (séparées) things". Gurdjieff was pleased, and advised Lebeau too, to try the first exercise because: "Without that you could work for a thousand years, and all you would receive is fixed ideas, and end up a candidate to enter into a madhouse. ... do the exercise solely as a service."

After lunch, Philippe said that Gurdjieff had told him not to continue the exercises, but he would now like to begin them again. Gurdjieff wanted to know, first, how he had been spending his time. Philippe initially said he'd been resting a little, but Gurdjieff soon established that he hadn't been resting enough, he had had to work to earn his living, and said: "Perhaps you need a special physical respite. How do you work on yourself when you wish to rest yourself?"

What Philippe said was that he had slept a bit better while he was away. Gurdjieff was pleased with that, saying: "If you cannot sleep here, but you have slept there, we have a sign of work. You have arranged your life a little less mechanically. If it wasn't automatic, then you were working." This is, to my mind, is an interesting example of how encouraging Gurdjieff could be. The idea that even sleeping better is a sign of work shows that work is closer, more in such details, than we might think.

Philippe said that he felt: "the need for an inflexible rule. I would like to introduce into my life a very firm rule. I sense that I would be able to maintain it. I have never sensed my slavery so much as now. I have, without doubt, had that knowledge, but never have I sensed it to this degree."

The 'rule' Gurdjieff gave him was to "Do this exercise as your work", and then gave him a relaxation exercise. Make a program, Gurdjieff advised, decide how much time you will spend on it: 15 minutes, half an hour, one hour; and arrange to do it three times each day "as a service". The first time, he said, the experience will perhaps be mediocre, and he won't receive anything. But the second time it would be better, and by the tenth time, perhaps, he would be able to compare the taste of mediocre relaxation with that of good relaxation.

Interestingly, Gurdjieff said that if certain muscles did not relax, he should smack that spot. Presumably, the sharp sensation would make relaxation possible.

Then, Gurdjieff asked Philippe to give the exercise to Doctor Aboulker, who had been doing the washing up. Philippe immediately substituted the word 'decontract' for 'relax' in describing the exercise.

In a significant reference to the importance of directing thought, Gurdjieff said: "What you need is to relax and to occupy your thought with this exercise." The word he used was 'relâcher', not 'decontracter'. Aboulker then spoke of difficulties in his attempts to 'decontract' himself.

Even a donkey can decontract its large muscles, said Gurdjieff, but to decontract the small muscles is a job for a human cow (literally, "a man of the genre cow").

To Philippe, Gurdjieff added that the relaxation exercise would be the first exercise of his fresh start, and expressed the hope that it would produce in him faith in his possibilities of becoming. Again, encouragement.

Philippe wanted to return to the separation exercise, but Gurdjieff said to return to that one later. In answer to a reference by Aboulker to his difficulties, Gurdjieff gave the same advice, to leave the separation exercise until after he had progressed with the relaxation exercise.

Aboulker resisted, but Gurdjieff ignored him. Turning to Philippe, he said: "Among other things, you changed one word. In place of the word 'relax', you've substituted the word 'decontract'. Relaxation is without end. While there is a limit to decontraction, you can go very far with relaxation. It was you who changed the word. At the same time, if you could understand how you did that, you would understand yet better many of your subjectivities. But this way, you close the door to understanding. This, this is you. ... I wish for you that you could understand the difference, for then you could understand many things in your life which are similar to that manifestation. Do not forget this: decontraction – even a donkey can do that. But relaxation – only the intellect can do that. May God help you with your intellect (Que Dieu vous aide avec votre intellect)."

To me at the moment, perhaps the most important sentence is this very final one. I think that too often the intellect is either adored or abused, with little appreciation of what it could be, let alone impartiality. The negative or critical side of intellect, so necessary for any discrimination, is often treated as if it were a negative emotion. As Ouspensky remarked, the reason we have negative emotions is because our attitude to them is insufficiently intellectually critical. It is a piquant human trait that when we ourselves are generally in negative emotion when we condemn others for either using the critical parts of the intellect or for negative emotion, alike.

But the transcript has also significantly helped me in clarifying what Gurdjieff was doing in his final years. Many 'transcripts' which are circulated, even published as authentic transcripts, have been substantially edited, and even portions from different meetings have been stitched together to form a 'genuine' Gurdjieff meeting. And I think one is entitled to be prima facie cautious of English translations of French language meetings. I say this because I have copies of so many originals from Mr Adie. The same editing and Frankensteining occurred in the production of Views from the Real World. Once more, I have copies of the original drafts. Mrs Staveley, who also knew that this was occurring, referred to it, more kindly, as 'disinfecting'. To her, there was something earthy about Gurdjieff which she felt might have embarrassed some of the keepers of the flame. We see the same process in the Tchekhovitch book, where the references to the post-death apparition of Katherine Mansfield (vouched for, let me say, by Mme de Salzman) was

omitted from the English translation, together with many other interesting and even valuable excerpts. Obviously, I don't approve of the process.

To my mind, what we need is impartiality in respect to Gurdjieff, not air-brushing away idiosyncracies we find untidy in our image of him. To do otherwise, to pretend that he was perfect or saintly, is to do him a deep disservice, because it is as if he never had to struggle. But he had denying factors, and as I heard that one lady who knew him said: "Mr Gurdjieff never tried to hide his faults". Further, if our attitude to him is not critical, if it is anything less than impartial, we are giving ourselves over to suggestibility.

This transcript, I repeat, has not been through any editing process, although there are some handwritten corrections. Obviously, however, I have no right to make the entire text freely available. I have sent the original French copy to two people who knew him. I have retained for myself a photocopy.

Together with what I have published of Gurdjieff's teaching to the Adies in 1948 and 1949, it seems to me that the centre of his inner work in the 1940s was in the exercises as much as it was in the movements, although these have garnered almost all of the attention. The movements can be considered as exercises for the movements floor, but they are less clear, less potent, less concentrated, to my mind; and to a very great extent they depend upon the quality of the group and the movements demonstrator. To me, the movements are something like what Gurdjieff said the Christian liturgies were, school demonstrations of which their true nature was now forgotten. But I don't think that this has happened with the exercises, for the simple reason that Mme de Salzmann ignored them after a certain point, probably in the 1960s, and they were left to a very few people who, for whatever reason, were not affected by her "new work" and passed them on unchanged. The Adies were among these, perhaps because they came to Australia before she introduced the new work to London. So, too, Mrs Staveley, who had the good luck to return to the USA from London before the great forgetting.

To speak directly of the exercises, which are after all the chief thing, the chief exercise is (I think) what the Adies, like Madame Lannes, called "the preparation". Secondary, although still vital, are three other types of exercise: (a) tasks to be attempted during the day's practical activities (particularly well passed on by one person I knew), (b) exercises to relate the energies to the centres and to the whole person (my chief sources here are the Adies, Mrs Staveley and Dr Lester), and (c) preparatory exercises to help in both the preparation and the energies exercises (all the above, but also the Paris transcripts). Bennett admitted that he made changes to the exercises. I think that if one does this, and there may be reason to, one should then give the amended version in addition to the original.

Personally, I think that without these exercises just as Gurdjieff brought them, the "Gurdjieff work" is seriously crippled. People know what to do, but bit by bit, they are bound to forget how to do it. Hence the doubt and uncertainty in so many Gurdjieff groups. Hence the firm belief in the rightness of their "group leaders" and their approach: the belief is a way of coping with their unbelief. But with the exercises, one can find the way.

Joseph Azize has published in ancient history, law and Gurdjieff studies. His first book "The Phoenician Solar Theology" treated ancient Phoenician religion as possessing a spiritual depth comparative with Neoplatonism, to which it contributed through Iamblichos. The third book, "George Mountford Adie" represents his attempt to present his teacher (a direct pupil of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky) to an international audience.