

Gurdjieff's 'Dirty Dog'

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An exploration of 'conscious' sleep

. . . the best word would be awareness, that is, a consciousness which is not linked to language, to the functioning of the computer, but to presence. Certainly, one could also say that awareness is linked to the mind, but in such a case, surely, this refers to another mind. In it, there is a meeting with the heart, with the domain of the soul, of the emotions, but in this case distinct from the soup of projections, repulsions, and attachments. It is of the same domain, but much higher and, at this point, there no longer exists a perceptible difference between the higher “psyche” and this higher “mind”. The two aspects are very linked and perhaps identical.

Jerzy Grotowski: ^[1]_{SEPP}A Kind of Volcano¹

Jerzy Grotowski's radical explorations of the meaning of theatre are widely known in theatrical circles, his Stanislavski-influenced conclusions often identical to those advanced by the Armenian philosopher G.I. Gurdjieff. Before exploring some of these conclusions, Grotowski's view of what conscious awareness is in itself should be considered, for in suggesting (as he does in the above quote) that awareness is not linked to language, but to the body's mind (heart, soul, presence, etc) Grotowski breaks with the tradition in which language is our only means of knowing that we know something. In his interpretation of consciousness and its workings, language itself is identified as the mind's computer, not the unconscious mind as presumed by Poincare and many a neuroscientist. Poincare's conception of the unconscious as a “mixing machine in the basement” is replaced by language functioning like a computer program, a program that sifts the essence of thought within the confining rules of grammar and syntax, so automatically limiting it. Attended by awareness, language can then be described as manufacturing language out of itself by way of an associative juggling. That is its functional limit, however; it is not in itself the root cause of our ability to think. Reduce or extinguish the influence of language in consciousness through meditation or contemplation (self-talking in particular), and another dimension of the self begins

to form, an experience of self quite different from the one we are accustomed to.

What we generally do is conceive of something *then* clarify its meaning through the words we choose. We in other words test bits of language against other bits until some level of clarity is achieved – particularly in writing. It is this stumbling and sometimes incoherent process that leaves the impression that everything belongs to language, when in fact what we started with belongs to a much deeper level of coherence, a deeply subtle level where psyche works alongside language and informs language of its next optimum move. But we can of course get caught up in the act of manufacturing language out of language and ignore the promptings of psyche. We can get distracted (seduced?) by the logic of language, and end up with meanings estranged from their psychophysical base. This need not lead to an immediate debacle of thought, but if it becomes a habit then that will almost certainly be the case. Why? Because language-dependent concepts endlessly pursued lead us into a linguistic desert, a dry, lifeless place of the mind where inspiration and insight give way to feats of linguistic gymnastics. This is the tormenting of language Don Cupitt unfairly attributes to mystical expression, and the same reasoning can be applied to mathematics and philosophy when the somatic element is all but missing.

The aware conscious mind does not think in language, or math, it expresses its realizations *through* language or math. In this sense the unconscious mind takes on a significance not generally attributed to it, namely, that within which there is a meeting with the heart, with the domain of the soul, of the emotions. This is in contrast to the conscious mind's tendency to indulge in raw logic, in addition-like knowings that breed situations of conflict linked to the "soup of projections, repulsions, and attachments" belonging to the personality. The unconscious mind is our "other" mind, the one within which we *move and have our being* but tend to denigrate as "un" because it functions contrary to how everything known is conceived to have become known. For Don Cupitt, this is a non-argument; there is only one way to know anything, and that is through language representations, the rest is by definition psychic mush. To my way of thinking that is to overlook the role of evaluative feeling in thought and ignore its pretty obvious role as that which backgrounds comprehension. There is no doubting how powerful language is, but the belief that only language can carry meaning is a false conclusion. We "think" *in a marrow bone*, to borrow W.B. Yeats' lovely phrase. To think otherwise is to ignore the psychophysical nature of thought; the fact that thought in its primary stage grows into language, not out of language. In its primary, undifferentiated state, thoughts haunt and tantalize us with the weight of their

presence, a psychic weightiness that drives us to express in language what we sense and feel forming in psyche. In speech we blurt our thoughts out into the world *through* grammar and syntax without awareness as to how they arose, and when writing spend most of our time struggling to express what we sense ourselves to already know. And if by chance we get stuck and attempt to wrestle meanings out of psyche by sheer force of will, then we invariably end up with a big fat nothing for our efforts. Forced by the nature of psyche to wait on the good auspices of psyche as it realigns awareness with psychophysical reality, we have little option but to submit to the sheer magic of interior processes.

I will be accused of subjectivism by some for daring to say what I've just said about language and meaning, never mind many of the other things said about psyche and body throughout this group of essays. So be it. The barriers put up to thinking like this are beginning to come down, and philosophers like Jacob Needleman, R.K. Forman, Bruce Mangan, Jordan Zlatev and the psychologist's Benny Shanon and James Hillman (to name but a few) are leading the charge towards a more experientially based appreciation of psyche. Self-reflectivity is now part of the push towards an informed scientific investigation of consciousness, and you can't get anything more basic than a re-evaluation of how meaning arises in the mind. Get that right and just about everything to do with consciousness falls into place. Get it wrong and we end up with a skewed comprehension of what it means to be a human being. Meaning stranded in language leaves us with a meaningless subjectivity and a truncated understanding of self. If all we can know is what's known in language, then we are governed by the very obvious limitations of language and incapable of ever venturing beyond linguistic constructions.²

But this is not the case. Language itself gives way to intimations that stretch beyond the horizon of language; we are forever straining at the linguistic leash, and do sometimes break free. Great poetry is a breaking free. Great literature carries us into the depths of the human psyche as it battles with life and death. Great mathematics opens before us vertiginous vistas of space and time. In sleep we cast aside the restraints of logic and experience psyche in the raw, and in meditation or contemplation we probe to the very heart of what it means to be human and emerge transformed in attitude if nothing else. But it is in our relationships that the most insightful moments occur, for it is there in the daily tussle between minds that we see ourselves reflected in our entirety. Mystical experience may afford us glimpses of another dimension, but it is our experience of each other that affords us, moment by moment, the chance to see ourselves as

others see us. The question is, what do we see when we look at ourselves in this way?

Sleepwalkers Awake!

If George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff gave the world anything of value, it was a system of ideas whereby human beings could intentionally witness their own state of mind in the behavior of others, and in how they themselves behaved in relation to others. Throughout these essays I have explored the tendency we have to disappear into consciously engaged thought, and through the writings of Jacob Needleman, Father Sylvan and others have moved towards the realization that this is a serious matter. So serious, in fact, that to not be aware of it is to be without proper bearing in terms of how to behave, think, or feel. Usurped by thought and deed, we surface only occasionally during any given hour, and may remain submerged for hours, indeed days at a time. Moving impulsively from one thought to another, from one deed to another, we resemble sleepwalkers in our actions and reactions. We are awake and aware to the extent that we are not asleep and in bed, but we are not intrinsically awake and aware (real to ourselves) as we sometimes find ourselves to be. In moments of real awareness we exchange our usurped conscious state for a sense of self that is immediate, a *thereness* of the self that can leave us feeling vulnerable and uncertain. Or elated. It depends greatly on what triggers the experience, on how we are *way down deep* in ourselves. Conversely, we can experience ourselves as being so near to the surface of what we are that nothing seems to be of the slightest importance. In such moments we are empty of self in a manner that is existentially dangerous, possibly suicidal. So it can be said that loss of self as an experience lies at both ends of the awareness spectrum, and that depending on the end experienced this loss can lead either to insight or despair.

Gurdjieff plays an important role in Jerzy Grotowski's scheme of things because this man of the theatre discovered for himself important aspects of Gurdjieff's thinking through theatre and what it takes to be an actor of substance. This is not surprising, for Gurdjieff, too, was a man of the theatre; he saw all human beings as involved in role-playing, and used actual stage performances (sacred dances and movement configurations) to get his ideas across *as* experiences. He was also recognized as an actor in his own right because of intentionally wrought behavior designed to impart aspects of his system beyond the confines of language. Aware

of how predictable human beings are in their reactions, he set out to destroy the automatic thinking responses of those around him through situations that embarrassed and sometimes alarmed those attempting to work with him. This earned for Gurdjieff the reputation of being a bit of a madman, and caused not a few to regard him as mentally unstable. As it is the chief desire of most of us to appear sane and sensible, Gurdjieff's willingness to suffer the bad opinion of others for a greater purpose speaks of someone within whom the usual requirements of ego had perhaps been brought under conscious control. But more than that even, for he was also pushing *apatheia* (an intermediate state of awareness in relation to 'conscience') to new heights in the sense of creating that subtle form of suffering in the psyches of those around him. So powerful was this form of instruction that even those who knew what he was up to could not escape the pain of such situations. In relation to the originality of Gurdjieff's approach, Grotowski's own words are revealing:

There, all at once, appeared a person who brought a rigorous practice and a rigorous research. I mean it when I say research. For me, there is a very strong element of research. It is not like implanting a branch of the ancient tradition; it is also, on the same level, contemporary. After all, the traditions are only founded in this way.³

What Gurdjieff was up to went far beyond the instilling of some ancient system into those who worked with him; it was also an attempt to extend and refine what was already known about that system through ongoing experience and an examination of first principles. The temptation to engineer that knowledge into a system that could be learned, like a foreign language, was anathema to Gurdjieff; it had to be conveyed through hands-on work on oneself, a confronting of what we were at the deepest levels of being. In *The Heart of Buddhism*, Guy Claxton sums up this situation rather well:

The function of much teaching and instruction is to try to speed things up by giving you hints and clues as to where to look and what it is you are looking for. But the danger with this, of course, is that, if you are prompted too much, you may get too fixed an idea of what it is you are supposed to be seeing, and see your idea, rather than what is really there.⁴

For this reason Grotowski says that P.D. Ouspensky's great work on the Gurdjieff system, *In Search of the Miraculous*, is both useful and potentially destructive

because it is too clear by half. Clarity is all very well, but too much clarity leads to a false security, the security of thinking that believing something is the same as experiencing something. Caught up in the dream of believing that we are awake because involved with ideas about being awake, we fail to notice the difference between belief and experience and die, to put it in Gurdjieff's confronting language, *like a dirty dog*. Or, in Meister Eckhart's equally brutal words, *rot with the body* because we do not have the power *to do*. There has to be a substantial accumulation of the energy (*tonos*) of attention for real change to be possible, and because of our natures and the mechanics of perception we are deficient in our ability to accrue this energy. This, too, was the core of Father Sylvan's thinking: without an accruing of the energies that accompanied sustained acts of awareness no new entity can form within us. To accept that this entity continues after death is neither here nor there; what matters is our awareness of the huge difference sustained acts of attention make to the quality of our responses. Gurdjieff avoided questions at the theoretical level; he asked them at the practical level of everyday experience and interaction. It is in the rough and tumble of everyday life that work on oneself begins, not just in the organizing of one's ideas into a coherent and satisfying form, or system.

We are, it seems, a problem waiting to be solved, a problem Christianity thought it had solved a long time ago, only to discover that its answers were not as clear-cut as it had assumed. We are, on one level, more than we seem, and on another less than we hoped we were. Gifted in that we can know what the animal kingdom seems incapable of knowing, we are at the same time blind to the fact that our engagement with knowing robs us of the next level of knowing, that of mind freed from its engagement with knowing through signs and ciphers alone. There's nothing wrong with knowing, or with attempting to know, but there is something deeply problematical when that engagement usurps the whole mental landscape.

When that happens our humanity progressively leaks away and the result is a blind automaton who gets around by radar. We do awaken to ourselves every so often, but it is the equivalent of someone awakening from a sedative-induced coma – no sooner are we awake than we are comatose again. We may do the right thing, say the right thing, even think the right thing, but it's all hit and miss and done inside a dream-like state of awareness that only a shock can awaken us from. And that's the rub. As we're all in the same boat there's little chance of anything other than grief, pain, psychological suffering or the threat of death acting as the shock we require. Anything less leaves us blissfully unaware of our predicament. Hence the power of Christianity's crucified Christ; he is a rude, crude awakener for many

within whom the Question of existence has arisen. Such individuals sense that this man was properly awake and aware, and that makes them question the quality of their own awareness in terms of moral behavior. But as we saw earlier, moral issues in terms of our being good are not what this puzzle is about, and neither is it about using Christ as a shield against a God angry with us over moral issues; it is about our inability to embrace real change in our lives because our awareness level is calibrated to only one focal level. There are numerous awareness levels available to us, but we are far too involved in thought and action to try them out. Religion, as we know it, is undoubtedly helpful to those for whom questions of being or not being are meaningless, but that does not excuse our religious institutions from not facing up to their own meager grasp of spiritual reality.

Jacob Needleman cuts to the heart of this matter when he asked if we can hear the voice of conscience speaking within us. This was Gurdjieff's question, and it had nothing to do with moral injunctions. And neither had it anything to do with the voice of our social conditioning. Conscience was not the voice of parent, teacher, clergyman or policeman whispering in our ear, nor was it the voice of Christianity's tripartite God instructing us personally from some unknown dimension. It was, rather, "the feeling of the whole truth in any situation" surfacing within us as a friction between our deep-seated sense of truth and our automated natures – we were awake, and the gift of being awake was the gaining of real conscience. It was conscience alone that had to be awakened. Discover real conscience and morality and ethics took care of themselves. So also with the attempt to teach "love", "hope" and "faith". Such attributes were impossible possibilities until the intermediate state was established. We had to open up to the intermediate state of being (*apatheia*), and that meant opening up to the force of conscience as it arose in our awakening minds.⁵ To consciously awaken was to undergo intrinsic change at the center of being, it was to wake up into a new mind and perceive things in an entirely new way. And in waking up what did we see? We saw that Christ had been turned into a monster because of our emotions and conditioning and had to be chased out of our minds.⁶ Only with the arising of real conscience could he be allowed re-entry, and real conscience was the psychological friction experienced by mind as it glimpsed itself slipping constantly into unaware responses. With reference to Jacob Needleman's book *Lost Christianity*, Archbishop Rowan Williams picks up on this theme when he says, "Authentic religious . . . practice begins in the attempt to attend to the moment of self-questioning – to refuse to cover over, evade or explain the pain and shock of whatever brings the self into question, to hold on to the difficulty

before the almost inevitable descent into pathos and the personal drama begins.”⁷

Three Centers of Perception

To help us with the problem of conscience, Gurdjieff postulated three centers of perception: (1) the thinking center; (2) the emotional center; and (3) the moving-instinctive center. It is through these centers that we perceive, think or move in any given moment of time. In our consciously engaged state of mind we are unaware of the functioning of these centers, and equally unaware of our perceptions being organized and filtered through what Gurdjieff called the “formatory apparatus”, the mechanical functioning of the mind that organizes all physical and mental experiences as they occur. Place this alongside Grotowski’s idea of language functioning as a computer program in its own right, and “formatory apparatus” begins to make sense – it aptly describes our perceptions of self, other and world as being under the control of automatic processes difficult to detect, and equally difficult to bring under conscious control. As each center is said to perceive only one aspect of reality, and we perceive reality through only one center at a time (thinking, feeling or organic sensation), we end up with a truncated comprehension of reality that can be righted only through an *intentional spreading of attention into those other centers*. Needleman puts it like this:

. . . the body needs to be penetrated by a quality of attention that is quite distinct from the mainly intellectual function which we usually designate by ‘mind’.⁸

If, however, this penetration of the body by attention does not take place, then we are at the mercy of the center that happens to be in control. We are, therefore, not just half the person we ought to be, we are only one-third the person we ought to be in terms of the center we happen to be functioning through. We’re either *all* mind (“intellect”) or *all* feeling (“emotion”) or *all* sensation (“body”), but hardly ever a conscious mixture of all three. That is perhaps the deadly fascination drug addiction has for us; it allows us a glimpse of reality not generally experienced, and it is such a revelation some of us are willing to slowly die to repeat it. At the most basic of levels a single cigarette can change the consciousness of an addict, and alcohol and sex can become addictive for the same reason. Even intellectual matters can become addictive in the sense of an over-dependence on verbal schemes.

So what to do? How can we escape the dictates of our own natures as they have

evolved? And what does this say about Christianity's spiritual premise? If the penetration of attention into the body can bring about a radical transformation of what we are and what we perceive, and this was well understood and practiced by Christians in the early days of the faith, then how are we to evaluate that faith's evolution when dependence on vicarious sacrifice has turned its original contemplative genius into a theological excuse for us to stay exactly as we are? For that, in essence, is what Christianity offers the world: the ability to legitimately ignore the deep-seated knowing that moments of real awareness afford. Don't you dare question the Christian plan of salvation, or cast doubt on whether Jesus walked on water or fed five thousand with the contents of someone's lunch box. Salvation comes to those who believe, then believe some more. It is the experience of *believing without question in what you've been taught to believe* that saves you from the wrath of God, not some philosophically obscure notion about truth being allied to the experience of being. But hang on a minute. The wrath of what? God? Does this mean that God too is emotionally unstable, that he is liable to react in unpredictable ways? Is that why we need Jesus? Would God destroy us all if left to his own devices?

In terms of conscience, what we're talking about here is not some kind of mental struggle in the sense of trying to be good and avoiding bad behavior. That's not it at all. That's bootstrap conscience, and it belongs to anyone within whom attention has not, to some degree, been developed. Yes, there is a struggle involved, but it has nothing to do with sin, guilt or fear; it has to do with *impulses recognized for what they are as they arise*. It is a state of attention within which we sense (because we are momentarily awake) an impulse toward behavior that could be problematical and manage to deal with it before it takes hold. If we don't, then like everyone else we have to ride it through until the energy of the impulse dissipates. *That* is conscience at work, and it is altogether different from what an engaged mind does when confronted with the same impulse. When we are engaged in (mesmerized by?) mental or physical activity, habit tends to rule the roost – we are at the mercy of ingrained patterns of behavior. When not so engaged the slide into habitualized responses is less likely. So what we're doing battle with is the impulse to go along with behaviors triggered into existence by a host of subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, urges of a well-established nature. Such urges can, on occasions, be conquered through mental stubbornness reinforced by prayer or New Age affirmations, but few individuals are capable of sustaining that kind of control, and when their steely resolve fails the result is generally catastrophic. Father Sylvan puts it like this:

The most dangerous people . . . are those who have achieved inner being without the corresponding development of soul.⁹

And again:

Man must reverse the . . . dispersal of the soul by drawing unto himself the attention which he unnecessarily gives to his thoughts, emotional reactions and sensations, and which results in the deformation and distortion of the entire human organism, to the extent that he has fallen to the level of a sick animal. This work is the basis of religious asceticism and is the authentic meaning of religious morality.¹⁰

The dispersal of the soul refers to the losing of soul through an inability to accumulate the energy of attention. We in other words fail to withdraw attention from mental and emotional experience and suffer the consequences of being continually overpowered by such experiences – we have the habit of feeding them and don't know how to stop. For those who achieve a sense of inner being through moral uprightness alone, their morality is by definition bigger than their soul in the sense that they have invested all their energies in the idea of moral uprightness at the expense of the energies they ought to have accumulated. They will achieve much in pursuing this path (moral uprightness seems to confirm the claims of faith), but as these powerful energies are still attached to submerged and engaged conscious minds, and to emotionally governed natures, the result is religious leaders or charismatic personalities who at the flick of an eye can exhibit unexpected tendencies. Hence Father Sylvan's observation that these "men of salvation walk the earth like explosive devices ready to be set off at random." This is "mysticism without a soul," he tells us,¹¹ and according to Needleman it can lead to religious fervor (the "caricature of love") and to fear, hatred and violence. Orthodoxy has a role to play in society, but on its own it offers a system of moral idealism and belief that in itself is not enough in terms of personal transformation. Christ may be held up as the example we ought to follow, but the meaning of Christ's life and death have been trumped by a theology of dependence that leaves the individual existentially bankrupt.

For Jerzy Grotowski, P.D. Ouspensky suffered from the problem of being too clear in his breakdown of Gurdjieff's ideas, but as we shall see, a certain degree of clarity is necessary when dealing with the challenges that system of thought represents. Misunderstand attention and everything falls in a heap. Whatever one

thinks of our having three centers of perception, it is the idea of attention being ultra-important that makes Gurdjieff's ideas unique – unique to the extent that Father Sylvan relies on them to explain the relevance of contemplative practice for the modern world. So also the philosopher Jacob Needleman who, as co-editor of *Gurdjieff, Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teachings*, tells us in the introduction that Gurdjieff's diagnosis of the human condition “integrates psychological, social, cultural, and ontological approaches to life.”¹² The surgeon Kenneth Walker was no less certain as to Gurdjieff's importance, for on meeting with P.D. Ouspensky in 1923 he spoke of stumbling into Gurdjieff's ideas and described them as capable of “taking possession of us and of propelling us in a direction in which, at the beginning, we had no desire to go.”¹³ Likewise Jerzy Grotowski whose radical explorations of the meaning of theatre splice almost seamlessly into the Gurdjieffian perspective of what makes a human being human. And as I discovered when reading the book of essays on Gurdjieff edited by Needleman and George Baker, many others were of the same opinion. Peter Brook, director of the International Centre of Theatre Research in Paris, had, like Grotowski, come under the sway of Gurdjieffian thought, as had Henry Leroy Finch, philosopher and Wittgenstein authority. Also Roger Lipsey, historian of art and classical literature; Basarab Nicolescu, theoretical physicist and specialist in the theory of elementary particles; Ravi Ravindra, professor of physics and comparative religion; Robin Skynner, psychiatrist and pioneer in the development of family and group therapy in England; and last but not least Charles Tart, professor of transpersonal psychology. This varied collection of individuals had given the Gurdjieffian scheme a firm nod of approval, and their reason for doing so rested mainly on one thing: the discipline of *self-remembering* as taught by Gurdjieff to Ouspensky, and through Ouspensky's seminal book *In Search of the Miraculous* to a host of others across the planet since 1949. So maybe Bernadette Roberts wasn't far off the mark when she suggested that there were millions of people out there who had, like herself, experienced the depths of being, and that eventually all human beings would experience what she had experienced. In an evolutionary sense we were perhaps on the cusp of another huge change in perception of self, other and world, a change already well established, although not yet self-evident.¹⁴

The Skill of Self-Remembering

Those familiar with Gurdjieff's ideas may think the word “skill” in this context inappropriate, but I think it has its place, particularly as Ouspensky himself refers

to self-remembering as a “deliberate” act.¹⁵ If something is deliberate, it is intentional, and if it is intentional it is brought about by an act of will. We may not have a developed will, but we are not exactly will-less. As self-remembering is, in its early stages, an extremely difficult thing for many people to grasp, it takes an active will to set it in motion *as an experience*, that is, it takes conscious effort to start the wheel of awareness turning. Once that wheel is set in motion, however, everything changes, for self-awareness then becomes part of a loop in the conscious mind that can spring into action when least expected. But there’s a problem here, and it has to do with how we interpret “self-awareness”, for becoming self-aware is something we all experience from time to time, and that, strictly speaking, is not self-remembering in the sense that Gurdjieff taught. Self-awareness and self-remembering are different experiences; there is without doubt self-awareness *in* self-remembering, but there need not be, and seldom is, any level of self-remembering in a moment of self-awareness. Why? Because self-awareness as an experience is by definition mono-directional, that is, it is reflective of the self alone, whereas self-remembering incorporates the context within which self-awareness takes place *alongside the experience of self-awareness*. In this sense self-remembering is duo-directional, not mono-directional, and it is this fundamental factor that makes it into the problem many people experience when experimenting with it. Self-remembering requires *a division of attention between self and object*; it is not just you becoming aware of yourself, it is you becoming aware of yourself *and* what you are looking at or interacting with in the same moment of time. It is a form of double-attention in which two objects of attention are paradoxically attended to simultaneously. Ouspensky’s own words confirm this point:

Having defined this I saw that the problem consisted in directing attention on oneself without weakening or obliterating the attention directed on something else. Moreover, this “something” could as well be within me as outside me.

Hence my interest when I came across Robert Forman’s definition of a “pure consciousness event” as a “dualistic mystical state” (DMS) that gives way to a “unitive mystical state” (UMS). And then more directly still as *an awareness of one’s own awareness while simultaneously remaining conscious of thoughts, sensations and actions*.¹⁶ I did a double-take when I read those words, for Forman was articulating something not generally understood in meditational circles. I was also intrigued by his two-tier approach: that a dualistic mystical experience subsequently *gives way to* a unitive mystical experience. The reason for my

interest was that a form of awareness capable of going in two directions simultaneously defied Kant's assertion that two objects of attention could exist in the same conscious space in any given moment of time. That seemed to put the mockers on the whole business, except that Forman had come to the same realization I had come to: it was a two-tier process that *resulted* in an experience of mystical unity. First came the intentionally aroused state of two-way attention (the attempt to scan self and object simultaneously), followed by the unity experience in which self and object *appeared* to fuse into one experience. But how did one explain what had happened given that the first tier of this experience had been declared philosophically impossible to attain? Accept that that was the case and one had to admit that it was simply not possible to scan two objects of attention at the same time. And what's more, it could be proved to be so by anyone in two seconds flat. So what was going on?

For myself, the answer to this problem came from experimentation followed by the realization that there was an "as if" in the experience of dualistic scanning *as it is initially experienced*. Choose two external objects of attention, say a book and a flower, or two objects of thought, and the process of double scanning could not be initiated – it was truly impossible except in the most defused sense of looking at a room in which both objects happened to exist. In relation to "self" and "other", however, things were quite different; there were two distinct levels to the experience, and it was only when the first level had been perfected that the second level could emerge. There was, in relation to self and other as objects of attention, a slow ricochet between the two that became progressively faster with practice, and this resulted in a motion that was so incredibly fast that it seemed *as if* a simultaneous scanning of each had taken place. The first level was that of experiencing the physical self and the other as alternative objects of awareness at growing speed, the second level what appeared to be a momentary fusion of those levels.

The question that arose at this point was this: Why does this fusion result from a mind that loops presence of the physical self into its internal or external perceptions? Is the experience had a mystical experience, is it a reward of some kind gifted by a beneficent universe? Or is there a more mundane explanation? Could it be that the experience of unity had has more to do with the tension set up in psyche than with anything overtly spiritual? The experience would then be the result of a mind that had blown a psychic fuse, not a mind in contact with some transcendental source. Such an explanation tends to take the gloss off such experiences, but it need not be viewed as such, for we have no way of telling how

or when the phenomenon of self-consciousness arose, and how those who first experienced consciousness of self reacted to that development. The self-conscious loop would have given a huge advantage to those within whom it first developed.

But what kind of unity experience are we talking about here? Robert Forman's description of a "dualistic mystical experience" suggests a moment in the meditative process when self and other come together as a result of successfully holding in place awareness of one's own awareness alongside whatever one happens to be looking at or dealing with. But that should be understood as a moment prefaced by many such moments that can hypothetically result in a full-blown fusion experience – this is not something that happens once and that's it; it is an ongoing series of experiences that progressively strengthen. There are degrees (qualities or intensities) of the self-other fusion experience to be had, and the *via negativa* experience (contentless seeing) is the beginning of a whole new way of knowing oneself. This is quite different from identification with (being hooked by) internally projected events leading to ecstatic experiences aligned with religious beliefs or experiences of at-oneness with nature; it is an altogether different experience in that it has no emotional content and no doctrinal hook. If the eyes are closed, there may be visual content, but it is content witnessed rather than identified with. The meditator/contemplator is not at the mercy of religious bias or imagination; they are instead open to the mythic level of being where symbols dominate. Having said that, it is possible for someone of a definite religious persuasion to find themselves experiencing something that carries them beyond their religious orientation – in fact if they persist it is almost inevitable. It is at this point that after-the-event interpretations can be placed on the experience to bring it into line with theological expectations. Conformity to religious norms can even bedevil someone who has experienced the depths of psyche.^[1] To suggest that the fusion experience may be the result of the psyche blowing a fuse should not be seen as in any way diminishing the importance of such an experience. Why? Because we don't actually know what blowing a psychic fuse means in this context. The tendency to romanticize such experiences and make them part of some grand spiritual scheme governed by something outside of ourselves is not uncommon, but we may have to lower our sights and accept that most fusion experiences belong to fairly rudimentary, but nevertheless important, levels of meditative experience. There are, in other words, numerous levels of fusion, the final levels being described by people like Meister Eckhart and Bernadette Roberts as unitive on two levels. At the more mundane levels fusion experiences can be described as instances where the mind manages to cast off its constant busyness, and through the conscious attempt to hold self and other in the same perceptual

frame of reference, experience the tiny jolt of becoming momentarily real to itself in the sense that consciousness of the self is an act of cognitive-mentation, not meta-mentation. Cognitive-mentation requires us to relate to our own cognitive activities; *it does not involve mentations that take other mentations as objects of observation*. In this sense we are fundamentally free of the philosophical objection cited above: awareness of self is *not awareness of an object in consciousness*, it is an experience, it is not a *thing*. Or, as J.L. Mehta puts it in *Heidegger and Vedanta*,

Being and thinking belong together in a deeper unity (inaccessible to any form of dialectic), from which they both derive their nature and which exhibits itself, while yet concealing itself, as the proper manner of thinking that is no more a grasping, no longer a striving to form a system of concepts for what is beyond conceptualizing.”¹⁷_[SEP]

The discipline of being aware of being aware in conjunction with either internal or external reality is the key to a wholly other kind of mental life, and it can be initiated with a blink of the eye. But it is the sustaining of the condition that arises that is important. Without effort nothing is reciprocated. Reciprocated? I use this loaded term in the sense of a higher system of awareness being switched on. No, sorry, not “switched on”, that is a mechanistic way of talking that has no place here. This is not the experience of a switch being thrown; it is the experience of Being registering at ever deeper levels.

There is, however, little reason to call these initial experiences “mystical”; they are the result of little more than a subtle mental game, albeit a game with serious consequences. Ouspensky uses the term “novelty” to describe the deliberate production of such moments,¹⁸ and that just about sums them up. But not quite. For to scan self and other simultaneously is to inadvertently scan the still point of being, and when one consciously accomplishes that there is always the chance one might thread the ontological needle of existence and pop through. When that happens the as-if factor in fusion experiences gives way to a new experience of self and other, an experience that changes sense of self into something altogether different.

References and Notes:

- 1) Grotowski, Jerzy, “A Kind of Volcano”, an essay in *Gurdjieff*, edited by Jacob Needleman and George Baker, Continuum, New York, 1996, p 90.

- 2) Cupitt, Don, *Mysticism after Modernity*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1998. pp 35, 61. Cupitt rejects the idea of subjective self-reflectivity as being in any way valuable in terms of meaning; that was a hope sandwiched between the early seventeenth and the early twentieth centuries that bore no useful fruit. Arguments from religious experience were of no consequences then, and equally of no consequence now. True as this observation is on many levels (trying to prove the existence of God or some implicit moral order cannot be done by way of subjective experience), Cupitt’s argument weakens when he automatically equates mystical experience with religious beliefs and pronounces mystical experience subjectively invalid because of that supposed relationship. At the *via positiva* level of mystical experience, emotional intoxication can seem to verify religious beliefs for the experiencer, but at the *via negativa* levels the very opposite is true. When *via negativa* mysticism begins to gain ground in the full-blown sense it unravels rather than confirms religious beliefs. This is perhaps why Cupitt is later forced to interpret the tendency of experienced mystics to question belief forms as a species of political subversion.

- 3) Ibid, p 93.^[1]_[SEP]

- 4) Claxton, Guy, *The Heart of Buddhism*, Aquarian/Thorsons, London, 1990, p 127.^[1]_[SEP]

- 5) Needleman, Jacob, “Gurdjieff, or the Metaphysics of Energy”, an essay in *Gurdjieff*, edited by Jacob Needleman and George Baker, Continuum, New York, 1996., pp 83-84. The question of conscience is a difficult one for Christians, indeed for anyone. The modern, democratic idea of conscience is that we each, ultimately, have the right to decide what is right and what is wrong for ourselves. This is a “rights of the individual” argument that has taken hold in our time, but it may be mistaken in its basic premise. Not in the Catholic sense of a willful ignoring of established doctrine for selfish purposes (the use of contraceptive devices is, for the Catholic hierarchy, a major sin), but in the sense of our becoming aware of how we overlook our own habituated foibles. We are adept at side-stepping our own weaknesses, yet do manage to glimpse them from time to time. It’s a matter of awareness levels. Caught mostly in submerged and engaged thought as we are, our capacity for self-reflection is impaired. In this sense, and in this sense alone, is our ability to view and correct our own behavior through conscience not as robust as we might think.

- 6) Needleman, Jacob, *Lost Christianity*, (as above), p 212.
- 7) Williams, Archbishop Rowan, *Lost Icons*, T & T Clark. A Continuum Imprint, London 2003, pp 183-4. 364
- 8) Needleman, Jacob, Gurdjieff, or the Metaphysics of Energy, an essay in *Gurdjieff*, edited by Jacob Needleman and George Baker, (as above) p 80.
- 9) Sylvan, Father, as cited in *Lost Christianity* by Jacob Needleman, p 194.
- 10) Ibid.
- 11) Ibid, p 193.
- 12) Needleman, Jacob, Gurdjieff, or the Metaphysics of Energy, an essay in *Gurdjieff*, edited by Jacob Needleman and George Baker, Intro, p ix. (as above)
- 13) Walker, Kenneth, *Venture with Ideas*, Intro, Luzac Oriental, London, 1995, p 10.
- 14) Roberts, Bernadette, *What is Self? A Study of the Spiritual Journey in Terms of Consciousness*, Sentient Publications, LLC edition, 2005, pp 165-6. Roberts makes an extraordinary statement in this section of her book. She accuses God of overstepping himself and pushing her human limits at age nine too far. She then caps this statement with the following observation: The result... left me with the decided intuition that God's work in this human form [herself] was actually a piece of research, or that God was testing to see just how far he could stretch the human limits – possibly with the idea of refashioning them." One makes of this what one will.
- 15) Ouspensky, P.D., *In Search of the Miraculous*, Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1949, p 119.
- 16) Forman, Robert K., "What Does Mysticism Have to Teach us?", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol 5, No. 2, 1998, p 186.
- 17) Mehta, J.L., "Heidegger and Vedanta", p 32. As found in *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, ed. Graham Parkes, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1990.
- 18) Ouspensky, P.D., *In Search of the Miraculous*, (as above) p 119.