

Joseph Azize. *Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation, and Exercises*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. xvii + 326 pp. ISBN: 9780190064075. \$99.00

In this trailblazing book about philosopher and spiritual teacher G.I. Gurdjieff (c.1866–1949), religious studies scholar and Gurdjieff practitioner Joseph Azize argues that the central insight of Gurdjieff’s approach is that we as human beings “do not perceive reality, but we can change our being, and with that change, we will be able to perceive our own reality, at least to some degree” (52). In other words, human beings are not fully conscious and live their lives in a shallow “waking sleep.” As Gurdjieff associate P.D. Ouspensky summarized the situation: “Compared to what we are capable of, our normal waking state is more like sleep-walking” (12).

Standard summaries of Gurdjieff’s methods of self-development identify three central components: his *writings*, facilitating students’ intellectual development; his *music*, facilitating students’ emotional development; and his *sacred dances*, or “Movements,” facilitating students’ bodily development, especially a deeper mode of corporeal awareness, engagement, and presence. Azize’s book is an innovative addition to the Gurdjieff literature because he offers convincing evidence for a fourth key component that Gurdjieff introduced to his teaching around 1930—what he called “transformed-contemplation” exercises; i.e., precisely directed inner exercises strengthening students’ attention, intention, will, and self-awareness. Azize explains that these exercises were provided by Gurdjieff “so that the outer life (life in the social domain) and the inner life should be harmonized by the development of one’s individual reality, with consciousness, conscience, and will” (304).

Drawing on published works, unpublished archival sources, and firsthand accounts from students who worked directly with Gurdjieff, Azize aims to “introduce Gurdjieff’s inner exercises . . . to a wider world” (80). He attempts to “expound the nature and basis of Gurdjieff’s contemplative methods and

to explore his sources, to the degree that is possible” (5). Azize contends that, from one perspective, Gurdjieff can be understood as “a ‘mystic’ who, in his earliest efforts, tried to fashion a workable system [of spiritual development] without contemplative methods, but later found them necessary supplements to his practical methods” (5). Azize proposes that Gurdjieff derived at least some of these inner exercises from Hesychasm, a contemplative practice in the Orthodox tradition associated with the monastery of Mount Athos in Greece. Specifically, Azize argues that some of the exercises were adapted from the hesychast “Prayer of the Heart” and its simpler version, the “Jesus Prayer,” both laid out in the writings of Nicephorus the Solitary, a thirteenth-century Mt. Athos monk and spiritual writer. Azize also links Gurdjieff to the mystical tradition of Neoplatonism, claiming that “there are affinities and some literary dependence” (83). Azize points out that both the Athonite and Neoplatonist mystical traditions are Greek and that this linkage is “not accidental,” since “Gurdjieff identified as a Greek and considered Greek to be his mother tongue” (83).

In presenting Gurdjieff’s transformed-contemplation exercises, Azize divides the book into three parts, the first of which reviews Gurdjieff’s biography and philosophy and justifies associating his efforts with a mystical tradition: “Gurdjieff’s system can be interpreted as a method to achieve the mystic experience in such a way that it can, as needed, be remembered and productively influence ordinary life” (83). In the book’s second part, Azize provides, in tentative chronological order, descriptions of the transformed-contemplation exercises as mostly presented in unpublished archival materials as well as in published writings by associates and students. This second section of the book is the longest and includes chapters on Gurdjieff’s time in Russia; his two books, *Beelzebub’s Tales to his Grandson* and *Life Is Real Only Then, When “I Am”*; and descriptions of exercises mentioned in transcripts from Paris group meetings with Gurdjieff and his students in the 1930s and 1940s.

In the book’s third part, Azize covers exercises described by Gurdjieff associates George and Helen Adie (mostly through unpublished transcripts) and Jeanne de Salzmann (as described in *The Reality of Being*, published posthumously

in 2010). Since there are overlaps in several of the exercises as Azize presents them, one cannot provide a precise count of the transformed-contemplation exercises described in the book, though there are at least twenty, including “Preparation,” “Relaxation,” “Sensing,” “I Am,” “The Four Ideals,” “Lord Have Mercy,” and “Clear Impressions.” These exercises vary greatly in their complexity and difficulty. One of the first exercises to which students are introduced is the “Relaxation exercise,” in which one begins by bringing attention to the eyes and head, directing any bodily tensions to loosen and relax. One moves from the head to the neck, shoulders and shoulder joints, to the upper arms, elbows, lower arms, hands, hip joints, and so forth. Gurdjieff emphasized that “It is only when you relax consciously . . . that the relaxation has value” (190).

Azize explains that this effort to relax one’s body consciously is “the first step in all of Gurdjieff’s exercises” (173), which are said to facilitate modes of attention and inner awareness not usually noticed or worked with in everyday life experience. In the “I Am exercise,” for example, one works to feel in the breast a sense of self-presence via feeling “I” emotionally on the inbreath and feeling “am-ness” emotionally on the outbreath; this “am-ness” should be simultaneously “sensed” through actual physical awareness of the right arm, thus setting up an inner effort whereby emotion and body are integrated experientially through a process that Gurdjieff called “blending.” One then moves to the right leg, left leg, and left arm, carrying out this same “I-am” sequence via the four limbs for three more cycles. One then completes the exercise by feeling the whole body in the inbreath of “I” and feeling and “sensing” the whole body in the outbreath “am.” Particularly in the later 1930s and 1940s, Gurdjieff gave progressively more emphasis to these inner exercises. Azize conjectures that this shift happened because Gurdjieff realized that his other methods were not fully facilitating the self-transformation he hoped for his students. “Exercises, exercises, thousands and thousands of times,” Gurdjieff exhorted members of a Paris group meeting in the early 1940s. “Only this will bring results” (17).

Azize's book will have value for two contrasting readerships. On one hand, researchers of Western esotericism should find the study insightful because it is the first to discuss comprehensively Gurdjieff's inner exercises and to probe their possible provenances and developmental trajectories. Azize's account is also noteworthy because it provides a preliminary picture of how these exercises are actually conducted and what their potential value is for personal transformation. On the other hand, the book should also appeal to Gurdjieff practitioners; though for this readership, Azize's book may face criticism. As someone involved in Gurdjieff groups for some fifty years, I am ambivalent toward Azize's study, since Gurdjieffians are strongly advised never to discuss or demonstrate exercises to non-group members. The assumption is that these exercises (like the Movements) can only be passed on by direct transmission from teacher to student; even if one is qualified to instruct students in the exercises, they are said to be "sacred" and only potent in their workings through face-to-face, teacher-to-student contact.

Since Azize is a practicing Gurdjieffian himself, he is well aware of this concern, but justifies publication because "what is not recorded is lost" (273). In this sense, I sympathize with Azize's public presentation of the exercises; in my own experience, I have encountered personally how exercises not carefully recorded can become distorted or forgotten entirely. In this sense, Azize's book is an invaluable contribution for keeping one crucial component of the Gurdjieff tradition alive, accurate, and usable.

One other concern I have about Azize's presentation is he does not define or explain certain "tools" that are integral to doing the inner exercises properly. For example, several of the exercises he describes invoke *sensing*, which requires a specific kind of effort to activate a unique experiential "taste"—i.e., direct physical awareness and contact with a particular bodily part or one's whole body (note the "I Am" exercise above). Nowhere in the book does Azize clarify the importance of sensing or explicate its experiential qualities, which include a sense of tingling and thickening in the bodily part. One notes a similar lack of explanation for other important efforts like relaxing and blending.

One last point I feel it important to mention is that Azize's catalogue of transformed-contemplation exercises is incomplete and only a starting point. In the early 1970s, I studied at J.G. Bennett's International Academy for Continuous Education, a ten-month program in which Bennett introduced some one hundred students to the Gurdjieffian system. Each day would begin with a "morning exercise," a good number of which parallel the exercises that Azize presents. At the same time, however, a majority of these morning exercises are not included in Azize's book—e.g., "60-point," "6-point," "9-point," "Expanded Present Moment," and "Eye of the Needle." Bennett emphasized that these exercises were indebted to Gurdjieff, so it is significant that few are included in Azize's inventory.

In spite of these concerns, Azize made the right decision to publish this book, which is a worthy addition to the Gurdjieff literature. I emphasize, however, that Azize's effort is only a beginning and that there is much more to be said about Gurdjieff's transformed-contemplation exercises.

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