

## SELF-REMEMBERING

*'You do not remember yourselves. You do not feel yourselves, you are not conscious of yourselves. You do not feel: I observe, I feel, I see.'*

*G.I Gurdjieff*

### Nature of Self-Remembering

The term “self-remembering” is sometimes referred to as “self-presence” or “self-consciousness.” The practice of self-remembering has been called the master key to Gurdjieff’s teaching. In the words of his student Henri Tracol: “It is the Alpha and Omega, the threshold that must be passed at the outset and crossed and re-crossed time and again.”

Gurdjieff once provided a succinct description of self-remembering: “To know you are angry when you are angry.” Self-remembering is a state of consciousness in which a person is aware of their own presence and being: *I, here, now*. In the words of Henri Thomasson: “To remember myself is to submit myself to the effort which brings me to the concrete sensation of existing in the present moment: ‘I, wholly here, where I am, present’.” Self-remembering is an experience of coming back to ourselves by opening to the reality of the present moment:

Only when we succeed in gathering our attention and relaxing does our body become capable of opening. If these inner conditions are brought together and maintained for a certain time, a true feeling – without words, without images – can appear for a few moments within ourselves. At the moment of this experience, which is like no other, we sense a new vibration that transmits the taste of a more secret, more subtle life. We realize, then, that the capacity to *be there* has been given us. Habitually, we are everywhere but there, in ourselves. In our ordinary state, we are sometimes in the past, sometimes in the future, but rarely in the present and at home. (1)

According to Gurdjieff self-remembering is a state of consciousness in which human beings are simultaneously aware of both themselves and their actions:

Self-consciousness is the moment when a man is aware both of himself and of his machine. We have it in flashes, but only in flashes. There are moments when you become aware not only of what you are doing but also of yourself doing it. You see both ‘I’ and the ‘here’ of ‘I am here’ – both the anger and the ‘I’ that is angry. Call this self-remembering, if you like. Now when you are fully and always aware of the ‘I’ and what it is doing, you become conscious of yourself. (2)

The possibility of remembering ourselves, being attentive to ourselves, is always present. Self-remembering seeks to create a correspondence between the inner and outer worlds of

each human being: "Self-remembering is the *expansion* of the field of consciousness so that both the outside and the inside worlds are perceived together in the unity of experience." P.D. Ouspensky spoke of the division of attention which is the characteristic feature of self-remembering:

When I observe something, my attention is directed towards what I observe – a line with one arrowhead. When at the same time, I try to remember myself, my attention is directed both towards the object observed and towards myself. A second arrowhead appears on the line. 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 else" could as well be within one as outside me. (3)

Self-remembering is an inner process of conscious attention which "allows us to take in impressions directly, unfiltered . . . we consciously receive and digest impressions, rather than simply react to them."

Self-remembering is simply a relocation and redistribution of one's attention. Thus, one becomes embodied. In doing so, the attention is freed and elaborated and a new quality emerges. That quality separates one from their state. From this separateness, the state and its manifestations are observed. If there is identification with the observation, then the separateness is lost. One becomes their state again or a successive state. That is, they are absorbed back into the program. But whatever has been observed has been truly seen without buffers or filters. One's intelligence has been awakened to itself. (4)

Vivid experiences of self-remembering occur naturally at certain times in the lives of many people, especially in childhood. "Certain memories of childhood, full of color and flavor, are moments of self-remembering – unforgettable because they connect our deeper inner world with what is happening to us and around us. Such impressions are as alive now as they were then, no matter how long ago they took place."

I realized that moments of self-remembering do occur in life, though rarely. Only the deliberate production of these moments created the sensation of novelty. Actually I had been familiar with them from early childhood. They came in either new or unexpected surroundings, in a new place, among new people while traveling, for instance, when suddenly one looks about one and says: *How strange! I and in this place*; or in very emotional moments, in moments of danger, in moments when it is necessary to keep one's head, when one hears one's own voice and sees and observes oneself from the outside. I saw quite clearly that my first recollections of life, in my own case very early ones, were moments of *self-remembering*. This last realization revealed much else to me. That is, I saw that I really only remember those moments of the past in which *I remembered myself*. Of the others *I knew only that they took place*. I am not able wholly to revive

them, to experience them again. But the moments when I had remembered myself were alive and were in no way different from the present. (5)

The consequences of the lack of self-remembering and conscious awareness in our lives are immense:

Self-observation brings a man to the realization of the fact that he does not remember himself. Man's inability to remember himself is one of the chief and most characteristic features of his being and the cause of everything else in him. The inability to remember oneself finds expression in many ways. A man does not remember his decisions, he does not remember the promises he has made to himself, does not remember what he said or felt a month, a week, a day, or even an hour ago. He begins work of some kind and after a certain lapse of time he does not remember *why* he began it. It is especially in connection with work on oneself that this happens particularly often . . . Speaking in general one can say truthfully that if a man remembers one thing he forgets ten other things which are much more important for him to remember. (6)

### **Difficulties and Challenges**

Many of Gurdjieff's students, such as P.D. Ouspensky, reported how difficult it was "to remember myself, or to be conscious of myself, to say to myself *I am walking, I am doing, and continually to feel this I.*"

The very first attempts showed me how difficult it was. Attempts at self-remembering failed to give any results except to show me that in actual fact we never remember ourselves. "What else do you want?" said G. "This is a very important realization. People who *know this* (he emphasized these words) already know a great deal. The whole trouble is that nobody knows it. If you ask a man whether he can remember himself, he will of course answer that he can. If you tell him that he cannot remember himself, he will either be angry with you, or he will think you an utter fool. The whole of life is based on this, the whole of human existence, the whole of human blindness. If a man really knows that he cannot remember himself, he is already near to the understanding of his being." (7)

In actual fact, it is very difficult to remember oneself. In a memorable passage from *In Search of the Miraculous*, Ouspensky describes how hard it is to maintain a continuous state of self-remembering for more than a brief period of time:

I was once walking along the Liteiny towards the Nevsky, and in spite of all my efforts I was unable to keep my attention on self-remembering. The noise, movement, everything distracted me. Every minute I lost the thread of attention,

found it again, and then lost it again. At last I felt a kind of ridiculous irritation with myself and I turned into the street on the left having firmly decided to keep my attention on the fact that *I would remember myself* at least for some time, at any rate until I reached the following street. I reached the Nadejdinskaya without losing the thread of attention except, perhaps, for short moments. Then I again turned towards the Nevsky realizing that, in quiet streets, it was easier for me not to lose the line of thought and wishing therefore to test myself in more noisy streets. I reached the Nevsky still remembering myself, and was already beginning to experience the strange emotional state of inner peace and confidence which comes after great efforts of this kind. Just around the corner on the Nevsky was a tobacconist's shop where they made my cigarettes. Still remembering myself I thought I would call there and order some cigarettes.

Two hours later I *woke up* in the Tavrisheskaya, that is, far away. I was going by *izvostchik* to the printers. The sensation of awakening was extraordinarily vivid. I can almost say that I *came to*. I remembered everything at once. How I had been walking along the Nadejdinskaya, how I had been remembering myself, how I had thought about cigarettes, and how at this thought I seemed to fall and disappear into a deep sleep. At the same time, while immersed in this sleep, I had continued to perform consistent and expedient actions. I left the tobacconist, called at my flat in the Liteiny, telephoned to the printers. I wrote two letters. Then again I went out of the house . . . And on the way while driving along the Tavrisheskaya I began to feel a strange uneasiness, as though I had forgotten something. *And I suddenly remembered that I had forgotten to remember myself.* (8)

In his teachings, Gurdjieff constantly stressed the difficulty of remembering oneself for more than a short period of time and the consequences of this fact for the ability to observe oneself objectively:

Not one of you has noticed that *you do not remember yourselves*. You do not feel *yourselves*; you are not conscious of *yourselves*. With you, 'it observes' just as 'it speaks,' 'it thinks,' 'it laughs.' You do not feel: *I observe, I notice, I see* . . . In order to really observe oneself one must first of all *remember oneself*. (He emphasized these words). Try to *remember yourselves* when you observe yourselves and later on tell me the results. Only those results will have any value that are accompanied by self-remembering. Otherwise you yourself do not exist in your observations. In which case what are all your observations worth? (9)

Self-remembering requires a sustained effort in order to overcome the draw of external events, forces and circumstances. "We are the slave of the outer world. It is difficult for us to listen to our essential, more intelligent wish, and difficult to return to it. The confrontation of these two movements produces the spark of self-remembering."

Despite a good theoretical understanding of what is at stake, our remembering is weak and almost instantly disappears as soon as there is contact with external

facts and events. To live a more persistent remembering is possible only if we accept to see the ease with which we try to escape this return to ourselves. We must ceaselessly remember this state of affairs and recover the meaning and direction of the search. Self-remembering is immense. It has many degrees. We are never fully capable of appreciating a moment of remembering. We still do not have enough vigilance of thought, openness of feeling. Yet even in our habitual life circumstances, which seem unfavorable to remembering, it is possible to recover the confidence that helps us experience an inner vibration of an entirely different nature. After a certain period of sincere work, we are led to recognize that the vibrations of the external world can serve as reminding factors. We need to exercise, to try each day to remember ourselves when we are in contact with something or someone. If we truly try, the work in us will remain alive. (10)

In order to remember ourselves we need to overcome the passivity and weakness of our attention and create a finer level of attention. Self-remembering counters the force of identification with our thoughts, feelings and perceptions. "If my force of attention is entirely taken, I am lost in life, identified, asleep. All my capacity to be present is lost."

Our effort must always be clear – to be present, that is, to begin to remember myself. With the attention divided, I am present in two directions, as present as I can be. My attention is engaged in two opposite directions, and I am at the center. This is the act of self-remembering. I wish to keep part of my attention on the awareness of belonging to a higher level and, under this influence, try to open to the outer world. I must make an effort to remain related, an effort of attention. I try to know truly what I am. I struggle to stay present, at the same time with a feeling of "I" turned toward a better quality and with an ordinary feeling tied to my self, my person. I wish to see and not forget that I belong to these two levels. (11)

### **Engagement of Intellect, Emotions and Body**

The process of self-remembering, although intellectually quite understandable, is in actual practice very difficult due to the complexity of the organization of the human 'machine.' "When we say 'remember yourself,' we mean yourself. But we ourselves are – my feelings, my body, my sensations, my mind. Our mind is not us – it is merely a small part of us."

I wish to remember myself as long as possible. But I have proved to myself that I very quickly forget the task I set myself, because my mind has very few associations connected with it. I have noticed that other associations engulf the associations connected with self-remembering . . . If the thinking center produces associations of self-remembering, incoming associations of another character, which come from other parts and have nothing to do with self-remembering, absorb these desirable associations, since they come from many different places and so

are more numerous. And so I sit here. My problem is to bring my other parts to a point where my thinking center would be able to prolong the state of self-remembering as much as possible, without exhausting the energy immediately. (12)

Self-remembering requires the simultaneous attention of all aspects of the human being to be truly effective. Gurdjieff taught that proper self-remembering is a conscious effort involving all our functions -- body, mind and feelings. "A moment of self-remembering is a moment of consciousness, that is, of self-consciousness – not in the ordinary sense, but a consciousness of the real Self, which is "I," together with an awareness of the organism – the body, the feeling and thought."

A man cannot remember himself because he tries to do so with his mind – at least in the beginning. Self-remembering begins with self-sensing. It must be done through the instinctive-moving center and the emotional center. Mind alone does not constitute a human being. The center of gravity of change is in the moving and emotional centers, but these are concerned only with the present; the mind looks ahead. The wish to change, to be what one ought to be, must be in our emotional center, and the ability to *do* in our body. The feelings may be strong, but the body is lazy, sunk in inertia. Mind must learn the language of the body and feelings, and this is done by correct observation of self. One of the benefits of self-remembering is that one has the possibility of making fewer mistakes in life. But for complete self-remembering all the centers must work simultaneously. (13)

Self-remembering requires a global attention that is simultaneously aware of body, mind and feelings. "Only when there is self-awareness do we experience the world and ourselves in the world. Then, we viscerally sense, feel and know – *simultaneously*."

To have consciousness of self is not only to be aware of oneself mentally (in which case it would be only the mind looking at the mind), but also physically and emotionally; that is a global awareness . . . this demands a certain quality and strength of attention, of a direct recognition of the *immediate*, of what-is, of having an awareness that is global in reference to oneself. Consciousness of self is a state predicated on self-remembering – a conscious awareness of the body, of being embodied, of being connected with what is happening internally, as well as what is happening externally. (14)

## **Levels and Degrees of Self-Remembering**

Self-remembering has different levels or degrees and develops with practice. "There are two types of self-remembering. The first is mental, the thought arises to remember oneself. After a long time of repeated practice of obeying this reminder to redirect the attention into the body,

the second may emerge, an organic and spontaneous experiencing, one in which 'I am remembered'."

It should be pointed out that self-remembering, however full and whole, can be of two kinds, conscious and mechanical – remembering oneself consciously and remembering oneself by associations. Mechanical, that is, associative self-remembering can bring no essential profit, yet such associative self-remembering is of tremendous value at the beginning. Later it should not be used, for such a self-remembering, however complete, does not result in any real, concrete doing. But in the beginning it too is necessary. There exists another, a conscious self-remembering which is not mechanical. (15)

Self-consciousness or awareness of oneself is not a constant state, but varies in quality and potentiality. There are definite levels and stages of self-remembering. Although the ability to remember oneself is our birthright, it needs first to be discovered and then carefully cultivated. "Self-remembering itself is a journey with many stages. Every step along our way is marked by a new experience of the feeling of 'I.' It isn't until we arrive at the experience which answers for us in a direct experiential fashion the question, *Who am I?*, that we plumb the depths of this self-remembering."

By observing in yourself the appearance and disappearance of consciousness you will inevitably see one fact which you neither see nor acknowledge now, and that is that moments of consciousness are very short and are separated by long intervals of completely unconscious, mechanical working of the machine. You will then see that you can think, feel, act, speak, work, *without being conscious of it*. And if you learn to see in yourselves the moments of consciousness and the long periods of mechanicalness, you will as infallibly see in other people when they are conscious of what they are doing and when they are not. Your principal mistake consists in thinking that you *always have consciousness*, and in general, either that consciousness is *always present* or that it is *never present*. In reality consciousness is a property which is continually changing. Now it is present, now it is not present. And there are different degrees and different levels of consciousness. Both consciousness and the different degrees of consciousness must be understood in oneself by sensation, by taste. It is necessary to distinguish *consciousness* from the *possibility of consciousness*. We have only the possibility of consciousness and rare flashes of it. (16)

Self-observation and a degree of self-knowledge depend on the creation of a stable state of self-remembering. "As long as a man cannot remember himself, things happen to him or because of him but they are not done in his presence or by himself. Only the machine functions; he himself is not present – even simple self-observation is not possible without a certain degree of self-remembering."

Self-observation by itself is not sufficient for awakening. It is only a preliminary step requiring a certain degree of awakening, but the awakening remains in a certain sense passive – man has hardly emerged from sleep before he falls back into it. It is only in beginning to “remember himself” that a man really begins to awaken. This effort brings an “impression of oneself” with a special “taste” which cannot be mistaken – when a man experiences it, he begins to be less imposed upon by his personality . . . In beginning “to remember himself” a man can truly awaken. It is only with a real and long enough awakening that a man can become present to himself. And it is only with “presence to himself” that a man begins to live like a man. (17)

One of the qualities of self-remembering is an open global attention. “The most important step before any real Work can begin, is to acquire the power of free attention. And only free attention leads to self-remembering.”

The ability to control and point our attention in a definite direction prepares the ground for the act of self-remembering. “There must be something present that attends – an attention that is stable, free and related to another level. I wish to be present to what is taking place, to remain conscious of myself and not lose myself.”

The practice of being present is self-remembering. Instead of being taken outward, the attention of the functions is turned toward the inside for a moment of consciousness. I need to recognize that I can understand nothing if I cannot remember myself. This means remembering my highest possibilities, that is, remembering what I open to when I come back to myself alone. To remember myself also means to be present to my situation – to the place, the conditions, the way I am taken by life. There is no room for dreaming. (18)

## **Gateway to Higher States of Consciousness**

Self-remembering or self-consciousness prefigures the realization of higher states of consciousness. “These glimpses of consciousness come in exceptional moments, in highly emotional states, in moments of danger, in very new and unexpected circumstances and situations; or sometimes in quite ordinary moments when nothing in particular happens. But in his ordinary or “normal” state, man has no control over them whatever.”

The state of “self-consciousness” man ascribes to himself; that is, he believes that he possesses it, although actually he can be conscious of himself only in very rare flashes and even then he probably does not recognize it because he does not know what it would imply if he actually possessed it . . . We can say that man has occasional moments of self-consciousness leaving vivid memories of the circumstances accompanying them, but he has no command over them.

They come and go by themselves, being controlled by external circumstances and occasional associations or memories of emotions. (19)

Self-remembering opens the possibility to fully awaken to life: “Every day, every hour, every minute life begins anew. If I could be aware of this I would have new impressions every minute. Through a sensation of myself I can open more to life.”

What is demanded of me is that I wake to life. Life is creation, and the only thing I can do if I wish to awaken as a creative being, is to share in this continuous process of creation. I do not have to create anything. But I may feel myself part of this process. I may make the same gesture, I may try to speak in the same way, utter the same words, but if I am present, if I am awake to myself then I will be in the same gesture, but I will be completely different . . . I have to make room for a new set of impressions, a new kind of relationship with the world and myself in this world. And this is perhaps the only way for me to revive my relationship to the world and to share in this universal process of creation. (20)

Human beings exist in both the physical and spiritual dimensions of reality. Self-remembering creates a simultaneous connection between both worlds:

At a certain moment we come to see two aspects, two natures, in ourselves – a higher nature related to one world and a lower nature related to another, a different world. What are we? We are neither one nor the other – neither God nor animal. We participate in life with both a divine nature and an animal nature. Man is double; he is not one. And as such, he is only a promise of man until he can live with both natures present in himself and not withdraw into one or the other. If he withdraws into the higher part, he is distant from his manifestations and can no longer evaluate them; he no longer knows or experiences his animal nature. If he slides into the other nature, he forgets everything that is not animal, and there is nothing to resist it; he is animal . . . not man. The animal always refuses the angel. The angel turns away from the animal. A conscious man is one who is always vigilant, always watchful, who remembers himself in both directions and has his two natures always confronted. (21)

The process of self-remembering is the gateway or portal to deeper levels of consciousness and awareness:

As my inner receptive space becomes, from time to time, less occupied by involuntary thoughts, impressions and so forth, more subtle impressions can be received and are received in a state of Self-remembering. And as time goes on, one feels in this state one’s own living connection with the silence which lies behind sound – the same silence in which, whether we are aware of it or not, we pass our lives. This silence and the corresponding, more subtle feelings of the emptiness – the living void behind appearances, behind forms – connect us in a very vivifying

way to the very ground of being, about which we cannot say more than that it is a wordless, naked experience of being . . . That something else that comes into being in us when we experience this inner state which we call Self-remembering is something that grows in us over time. (22)

Self-remembering is a prerequisite to the possibility of accessing higher energies and states of consciousness. "Self-remembering enables the 'Real Self' to enter and flow through human beings and form a connection with Truths that are of Divine origin."

Gurdjieff gave the name of "self-remembering" to the central state of conscious attention in which the higher force that is available within the human structure makes contact with the functions of thought, feeling and body. The individual "remembers," as it were, who and what he really is and is meant to be, over and above his ordinary sense of identity. This conscious attention is not a function of the mind but is the active conscious force which all our functions of thought, feeling and movement can begin to obey as the "inner master." Consistent with the knowledge behind many contemplative traditions of the world, the practice of the Gurdjieff Work places its chief emphasis on preparing our inner world to receive this higher attention, which can open us to an inconceivably finer energy of love and understanding. (23)

Self-remembering allows us to touch the state of pure being or timeless presence. When we remember ourselves we become present to the moment, to the ceaseless creation and flow of life. This is sometimes called "being in the Being," a voyage of discovery in which we go deeper and deeper into the world of Being:

The attention that leads to the moment of consciousness is the fire which brings about a blending of forces, a transformation. To become conscious simultaneously of both these movements requires a greater activity of my attention. The effort *awakens* it, awakens a force that was asleep. My attention is entirely mobilized, including at the same time the higher centers and the lower centers, the functioning of my whole Presence. This depends on a new feeling that appears, the feeling of *being*. Remembering oneself is above all remembering this other possibility, the search for a force in myself that is more active. I wish to know, I wish to *be*. (24)

In a sense, self-remembering is a death knell for the ego or conditioned self, leading to an opening to higher consciousness and universal understanding:

In so seeing, I liberate myself. For a moment I am no longer the same. My freed attention, my consciousness, then knows what I am essentially. This is the death of my ordinary "I." To remember oneself means to die to oneself, to the lie of one's imagination. I have the taste of understanding through awareness of the lack of understanding. In remembering oneself, it is the letting go of the ego that allows a new consciousness to penetrate. Then I see that the ordinary "I" is a phantom,

a projection of myself. In fact, everything I take as manifestation is not something separate, but a projection of the essential. Returning to the source, I become conscious of that which is not born and does not die – the eternal Self. (25)

## References

- (1) Henriette Lannes *This Fundamental Quest* (San Francisco: Far West Institute, 2003), p. 60.
- (2) G.I. Gurdjieff *Views From the Real World: Early Talks of Gurdjieff* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1973), pp. 79-80.
- (3) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), p. 119.
- (4) William Patterson *Spiritual Survival in a Radically Changing World-Time* (Fairfax, California, 2009), p. 182.
- (5) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), p. 119.
- (6) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), pp. 149-150.
- (7) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), p. 118.
- (8) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), pp. 120-121.
- (9) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), pp. 117-118.
- (10) Henriette Lannes *This Fundamental Quest* (San Francisco: Far West Institute, 2003), pp. 61-62.
- (11) Jeanne de Salzmänn *The Reality of Being* (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), p. 16.
- (12) G.I. Gurdjieff *Views From the Real World: Early Talks of Gurdjieff* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1973), pp. 234-235.
- (13) C.S. Nott *Teachings of Gurdjieff: The Journal of a Pupil* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1974), p. 37.
- (14) William Patterson *Spiritual Survival in a Radically Changing World-Time* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2009), p. 13.
- (15) G.I. Gurdjieff *Views From the Real World: Early Talks of Gurdjieff* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1973), p. 235.
- (16) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), pp. 116-117.
- (17) Jean Vaysse *Toward Awakening* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), pp. 155-156.
- (18) Jeanne de Salzmänn *The Reality of Being* (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), p. 19.
- (19) P.D. Ouspensky *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), pp. 20-22.
- (20) Henri Tracol *The Real Question Remains* (Sandpoint, Idaho: Morning Light Press, 2009), p. 177.
- (21) Jeanne de Salzmänn *The Reality of Being* (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), p. 21.
- (22) Hugh Ripman *Questions and Answers Along the Way* (Washington, D.C.: Forthway Center Press, 2009), pp. 120-121.
- (23) Jacob Needleman "Introduction" in Jacob Needleman (ed.) *The Inner Journey: Views From the Gurdjieff Work* (Sandpoint, Idaho; Morning Light Press, 2008), p. xviii.
- (24) Jeanne de Salzmänn *The Reality of Being* (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), p. 74.
- (25) Jeanne de Salzmänn *The Reality of Being* (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), p. 264.