

## TYPES OF SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

*'Prayer has a form, a sound and a physical reality.  
Everything which has a word, has a physical  
equivalent. And every thought has an action.'*  
Rumi

### **Meditation, Concentration and Contemplation**

- o Meditation is the first exercise of the triad: Meditation - Concentration - Contemplation. These three procedures are “inseparable from one another yet each forming one part of the triangle which leads to enlightenment.”

Meditation is but one dimension of Zen practice. The other two dimensions are “concentration” and “contemplation.” The word *meditate* comes from the Latin *meditari*, “to think about, consider, reflect.” A good way to meditate is to take a book written by someone spiritually mature and read a few lines, and then ponder on what is said – not so much to understand as to enter into the spirit of what is being said. To concentrate means “to direct or draw toward a common center; to focus.” Normally this requires considerable mental effort. The word *contemplate* is associated with the word *temple*, which originally was an “open space for observation.” Contemplation requires all the freedom that comes with meditation and all the tautness and firmness that is associated with concentration. Contemplation is the heart of practice. Concentration and meditation give support and aid. When we meditate, it is like rain on a parched land; when we concentrate, we generate great energy against which thoughts beat in vain. But contemplation is pure atonement, without goal, effort or fear of any kind. (1)

- o Analogies are often useful in distinguishing between meditation and concentration.

Concentration starts, so to say, from the periphery of the mind and goes to the center; that after all is what concentration originally meant: with (*con*) center. Meditation starts at the center and goes to the periphery. When we meditate on a theme, more and more is integrated around this theme. Concentration relies on the magnetic power of the center. Most of us have read of this power in books about the martial arts, where it is called *ki* or *chi*. Meditation, on the other hand, relies on the magnetic field, so to speak, that surrounds the center. It is like the field which surrounds a magnet, which becomes apparent when iron filings are sprinkled around it. It is this field that enables the mind to establish new patterns, order, and hierarchy, and experience vital ingredients in the creative process. (2)

- o Mind concentration is an essential prerequisite to higher spiritual development. “The disciple strives to remove certain thoughts from his mind and concentrate upon things which will make possible his illumination and lay a basis for his permanency.”

There are two ways of concentrating. The first is to try to eliminate from awareness all that is distracting, all that creates conflict. The second is to maintain a steady mind in the midst of distraction.

To concentrate calls for energy because we have to overcome the inertia of the mind. Inertia is another way of trying to rediscover unity. Repetition and habit of mind create inertia, and inertia in turn creates habit of mind. With inertia and habit, novelty, which would disturb the mind, is avoided. However, the unity of inertia is an island in the midst of a raging sea, and, moreover, it is a dead unity, although paid for at a very high price.

To rediscover original unity, which is alive, vital, and creative, this inertia has to be broken up, and to do this, habits of mind must be overcome. For many people, this calls for great concentration. (3)

- o Concentration exercises are employed in many spiritual systems to activate certain ‘centres of perception’ in the human being.

As in yoga, the Sufis believe there are internal “centers of perception” that can be utilized to help heighten the powers of the mind. There are five such “purity spots” that do not have a physical location in the sense of acupuncture points but that can be visualized for the purpose of transcending normal receptivity. Through a series of concentration exercises, a Sufi may be able to fix his attention on these spots as a means of enabling the mind to move to a higher plane. But these cannot be attempted by anybody. This is the method of which there is 1 percent operation, and 99 percent preparation. It is one of the most advanced of all techniques. It could take you 30 years to get to the point where you could do it and it might be over in 30 minutes. (4)

- o The essence of meditation is the directing of attention on a single, unchanging source of stimulation. The focus of awareness may be an object, a word or phrase, the breath, or even a specific part of the body. There are many forms and types of meditation, both culturally and historically.

The practices of meditation as developed in various cultures of the world and in various cultural eras are quite diverse. The practice may involve whirling, chanting, singing, or concentration on the movement of the breath, on specially posed questions, or on an internal sound. It may consist solely of ordinary activities, imbued with “mindfulness”, it may involve prayer in the church, in quiescence, or in unison. There may be an attempt to deliberately separate two coexistent streams of consciousness. Other, more advanced techniques may involve the control of various “centers” in the body, as in early Christian mysticism, and receptivity to communications beyond the norm. Meditation practices have many, many diverse functions, depending on the nature of the students and of the society. (5)

- o In traditional spiritual systems a wide range of meditation practices are employed, involving each of the five human senses.

Meditation involves putting something into the mind, wither an image or a sacred word that is visualized or a concept that is thought about or reflected on, or both. In some types of meditation the meditator envisions or contemplates or analyzes certain elementary shapes, holding them in his mind to the exclusion of everything else. He may ponder such abstract qualities as loving-kindness and compassion. In Tantric Buddhist systems of meditation, mandalas containing various seed syllables of the Sanskrit alphabet – such as *Om*, for example, are visualized and dwelt upon in a prescribed manner. Also employed for meditational purposes are mandalas consisting of special arrangements of Buddha, Bodhisattvas, and other figures. (6)

- o One of the most useful preliminary stages of meditation is the practice of following the breath, beginning by silently counting the inhalations and exhalations.

Zazen practice for the student begins with his counting the inhalations and exhalations of his breath while he is in the motionless zazen posture. This is the first step of stilling the bodily functions, quieting discursive thought, and strengthening concentration. It is given as the first step because in counting the in and out breaths, on natural rhythm and without strain, the mind has a scaffolding to support it, as it were. When concentration on the breathing becomes such that awareness of the counting is clear and the count is not lost, the next step, a slightly more difficult type of zazen, is assigned, namely, following the inhalations and exhalations of the breath with the mind's eye only, again in natural rhythm. (7)

- o The regular practice of meditation bestows numerous physical and psychological benefits to the practitioner. "Sitting after sitting, letting everything go, we become more aware of our personal center. This simple act of sitting, letting everything drop off, has far-reaching effects."

Although there are many kinds of meditation, meditation at its highest is a form of mental and spiritual training that aims at stilling and focusing the normally scattered mind, establishing a measure of physical and mental repose, and then becoming an instrument for Self-discovery. Meditation can also be a method of cleansing the mind of impurities and disturbances, such as lustful desires, ill will, indolence, restlessness, worry, and cynical doubt.

When the dusts of these hindrances are wiped from the mind mirror through disciplined meditation, we come to see things as they are in their True-nature, undistorted by our mental or emotional colourations. A lesser fruit of meditation is the strengthening and calming of the nervous system, and the tapping of physical, mental and psychic energies. This last is analogous to a generator-battery; a special kind of energy (called samadhi power) is generated and stored in the meditator's lower belly, enabling him or her to respond instantly to urgent situations without strain or wasted effort. In correctly practised meditation, the practitioner develops greater vitality, equanimity, mindfulness, and a responsiveness to the circumstances of his life. Meditation, then, is a healing practice in which the heart is calmed and the spirit strengthened. (8)

- o Meditation can be effective even when practised for very short periods of time.

Meditation, after all, can occupy twenty-five seconds as well as twenty-five years. If your system is so ineffective and inefficient that you have to meditate for twenty-five years, then something is very wrong with you or the system or perhaps both.

If you are enlightened enough to know upon what to meditate, then you can focus certain of your mind centres upon this and meditate for a matter of seconds to the total exclusion of everything else. (9)

- o Meditation should never become a repetitive task or compulsion, but rather a voluntary exploration of our mind and inner being.

When a musician wakes up in the morning, he goes spontaneously to his piano and plays. There is no inner intention in it. It is simply for the love of doing it. And a painter in his studio just begins to paint. There is no obligation. Likewise, you should only meditate in your laboratory when you feel drawn to do so. There must be nothing systematic in it. When there is systematic doing, you become stuck to it, and there is the danger that you will simply be repeating old patterns. When the mind knows that there is something beyond it, it will see that there is nothing more to do, and it will give up. This moment, when you are free from the reflex to be somebody, is the highest opportunity to be still. It is the death of a somebody, of an ego, when there is silence. So if there is anything to be aware of, it is these moments when the mind gives up striving. (10)

- o Meditation follows a natural progression in which effort and steady practice eventually develop into a spontaneous, natural and effortless state of 'meditation in life.'

This is the effortless meditation of Zen and Mahamudra. It is a meditation without any *thing* to meditate upon, the spontaneous and wondrous work of one's own mind, the pinnacle and essence of all Buddhist teachings. To those who have not entered into the "gate" this is the most difficult, but to those who have already entered this is the easiest of all meditations. All other exercises and practices are merely preparations for it. The critical point of this work is to recognize the nature of one's own mind, or at least to glimpse it. Once the Essence of Mind is recognized, the yogi will be able to absorb himself in it at any time or place without difficulty. In activity or quietness the illuminating-void consciousness will always shine brightly within him. Although after the recognition, or beholding, of the Mind Essence there is still a very long way to go, the first "glimpse" is regarded by all Buddhist sages as the most important thing. Once the "gateless-gate" is entered, meditation will no longer be a "practice" or effort. It now becomes a natural and spontaneous act of life. Sitting, walking, talking, or sleeping – all activities and conditions of life become marvelous meditations in themselves. (11)

- o More advanced meditation practices involve quietly observing thoughts as they arise until a state is reached when the mind is free from all thoughts.

*Q: What is meditation and what are its uses?*

A: As long as you are a beginner certain formalized meditations may be good for you. But for a seeker for reality there is only one meditation – the rigorous refusal to harbour thoughts. To be free from thoughts is itself meditation.

*Q: How is it done?*

A: You begin by letting thoughts flow and watching them. The very observation slows down the mind till it stops altogether. Once the mind is quiet, keep it quiet. Don't get bored with peace, be in it, go deeper into it.

*Q: I heard of holding on to one thought in order to keep other thoughts away. But how to keep all thoughts away? The very idea is also a thought.*

A: Experiment anew, don't go by past experience. Watch your thoughts and watch yourself watching the thoughts. The state of freedom from all thoughts will happen suddenly and by the bliss of it you shall recognize it. (12)

- o Some spiritual teachers speak of a level of silent awareness which is independent of the presence or absence of thoughts and transcends all forms of meditation.

*Q: Is the freedom from thought I experience in meditation close to my real nature? Is it the same stillness you talk about?*

A: In what is habitually called meditation, you strive to rid yourself of all intentions and concepts. Thus you find yourself before a screen free from thoughts, be they objective or subjective. Having rid yourself of these thoughts others, more rebellious, appear, invade you indiscriminately and you again eliminate them. It is true that after practising this for a certain length of time, mental activity lessens. However, if the seeker is not guided by an authentic teacher this empty screen will always remain a mystery. The silent awareness we are talking about is beyond the absence or presence of thoughts, words, activity or passivity. These arise from and are reabsorbed into stillness beyond the mind, stillness beyond freedom from thought. Nothing whatsoever can affect this tranquillity. Silent awareness does not require a means. (13)

- o At the highest level meditation and contemplation merge into a perception of the formless reality and unity underlying all existence.

*Q: Is contemplation the same as meditation?*

A: Deep inquiry leads to contemplation, or prayer. Through dedicated contemplation we can attune to consciousness, the light which constitutes all phenomena. This light is our intrinsic nature. Our being is always shining. Our real nature is openness, listening, release, surrender, without producing or will. Prayer or contemplation is welcoming free from projection and expectation. It is without demand or formulation. It invites the object to unfold in you and reveals your openness to you. Live with this opening, this vastness. Attune yourself to it. It

is love. Ardent contemplation brings you to living meditation. (14)

### **Attention and Mindfulness**

- o The practice of mindfulness or 'bare attention' is an essential component of many spiritual traditions and the heart of meditation. "Pure attention is absolutely empty of all direction. It is not focused on an object, it is free of any memory. It is simply expanded alertness."

Buddhist psychology or Abhidharma teaches that you are not your mind. You already know that you are not your body. But you do not yet know that you are not your mind, because normally you identify yourself with each thought, feeling, impulse, emotion or sensation that comes into your mind. Each takes you on a little trip. Through the practice of mindfulness, you come to observe the rise and fall, the appearance and disappearance of these various thoughts and feelings, and gradually develop a sense of distance and detachment from them. Then you will no longer become caught in your illusions. This leads to a deep inner peaceful calm. (15)

- o The study of attention is indispensable for inner work. Many spiritual teachings stress the importance of developing awareness or mindfulness and living with a sense of full presence from one moment to another.

Cultivating the capacity to be fully present – awake, attentive, and responsive – in all the different circumstances of life is the essence of spiritual practice and realization. Those with the greatest spiritual realization are those who are 'all here,' who relate to life with an expansive awareness that is not limited by any fixation on themselves or their own point of view. They don't shrink from any aspect of themselves or life as a whole. (16)

- o In esoteric schools of inner development students are taught to distinguish between conscious, directed attention and mechanical attention. In order to demonstrate our lack of conscious awareness, some teachings employ an exercise which involves following the moving hand of a watch:

Take your watch and fasten your eye on the second hand; watch it as it makes a revolution of a minute and do not let your eye wander. When you are quite sure that you can focus your attention for one revolution you will have begun to develop your power of thinking. Having accomplished this, while keeping the focus of attention on the small hand, count to yourself from 1 to 10 and then backwards. This requires a double attention; one part is on the movement of the hand, the other on the counting. You may find it easy at first, but keep on until it becomes difficult. Having got so far, continue to keep your eye on the moving hand and continue to count mentally, then, at the same time, repeat to yourself a verse of a rhyme. Do it for two or three minutes. (17)

- o The difficulty in maintaining attention and awareness for any length of time is made very clear in personal accounts of students attempting to perform the 'watch-hand exercise'.

I discover that hundreds of thoughts or shadows of thoughts assail me continually, hundreds of sensations, ideas and associations of ideas that have nothing to do with my aim and that distract me from my effort. Sometimes it is my watch-hand that attracts all my attention and in looking at it I lose sight of myself; sometimes it is my body, a cramp in the leg or a movement in the stomach, that distracts me from the hand and also from myself. Sometimes I believe I have succeeded in stopping my inner film show and in eliminating the outside world, but then I find that I have been plunged into a kind of torpor in which the hand, myself and everything else has disappeared. In this state the images, feelings and ideas continue to weave themselves together but as though behind a veil, or in a dream that goes on by itself while I sleep. Sometimes, at last, for a fraction of a second, *I am looking at the hand and I am myself*, totally and completely; but in the same fraction of a second I congratulate myself, my mind applauds its success and in so doing irreparably impairs it. In the end, upset and very exhausted, I tear myself away from the experiment and I feel that I have just been through the most difficult minutes of my life and endured the most gruelling test. How long it seemed! It was in fact not much more than two minutes, and in those two minutes I was only really conscious of myself for three or four almost imperceptible flashes. (18)

- o There are different levels and degrees of attention depending on a person's mind set, expectations and circumstances.

There are degrees of attentiveness. If on a crowded train you are watchful that your wallet is not stolen, that is one kind of mindfulness. But if you are in a situation in which you might be killed at any moment – during wartime let us say – the degree of your attentiveness is far greater. (19)

- o When thoughts and feelings arise in the mind they can be quietly observed and transformed through mindful awareness. Instead of identifying with these mental images we can notice them and then let them go.

*Q: When I sit quietly many thoughts and feelings come up. How shall I face these?*

A: What comes up are residues of the past accumulated through day-dreaming. Remain present to them, free of all motive to suppress them. If the upcomings are referred to a centre they will be pushed into the unconscious or referred to the already known. The residues are given life by association of ideas.

All that comes up is conflict, created by the reflex to take oneself as a fraction, a separate entity. When there is no longer a centre of reference these conflicts come up like bubbles from the bottom of the ocean, and, meeting no obstacle at the surface, they disappear for ever in the empty space of your being present.

Elimination can never occur through analysis. It can only happen in your full awareness without the obstruction of the mind. Transmutation can only take place in Presence. (20)

- o The everyday tasks of life provide a perfect opportunity to practice mindfulness and experience the beauty of living in the present.

If while washing dishes, we think only of the cup of tea that awaits us, thus hurrying to get the dishes out of the way as if they were a nuisance, then we are not “washing the dishes to wash the dishes.” What’s more, we are not alive during the time we are washing the dishes. In fact we are completely incapable of realizing the miracle of life while standing at the sink. If we can’t wash the dishes, the chances are we won’t be able to drink our tea either. While drinking the cup of tea, we will only be thinking of other things, barely aware of the cup in our hands. Thus we are sucked away into the future – and we are incapable of actually living one minute of life. (21)

### **Repetition of Sacred Sounds**

- o The invocation or repetition of words is widely practised in many different spiritual traditions throughout the world.

The use of invocations or *mantrams* has been known for thousands of years. It is practised by people of all religions and in all spiritual ways. It is well known in Eastern Christianity in the form of the ‘prayer of the heart’. It is well known in India in the *mantram* and in Buddhism by the various invocations and repetitions. The *zikr* is obligatory for all Sufi communities: it is part of the initiation process by which a seeker is received as pupil. The sheikh gives him the appropriate *zikr* at the time of his initiation, at the same time communicating the *baraka* or energy that enables the *zikr* to be fruitful.

The *mantram* is, substantially, the same thing as the *zikr*, consisting of an invocation of a few words that is repeated rhythmically or, in some cases, non-rhythmically, sometimes in time with the heartbeat, sometimes in time with the breathing, sometimes according to some externally imposed rhythm. (22)

- o The use of mantras as a means of spiritual development is a common feature in many world religions. “The mind is a channel, a swift current of thoughts and a mantra is a dam put up in the way of this current to divert the water to where it is needed.”

A mantra is a common device used in spiritual training. One repeats a word or phrase over and over. The etymology of the word mantra is *man*, which in Sanskrit means “mind,” and *tra* “to protect.” A mantra therefore protects the mind from the effects of the deep schism in the very heart of being by giving a stable centre.

A Christian mantra, made famous by an anonymous writer of *The Way of the Pilgrim*, is, “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me.” It was used by the Desert Fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries who retired to the desert for a life of solitude and prayer.

Hindus, Sufis and Taoists all have their own versions of mantras, and all use beads, or rosaries in the Catholic tradition, as an aid in mantric practice. (23)

- o The word *zikr* (or *dhikr* in Arabic) literally means repetition or recital. It involves repeating a word or phrase which embodies a concept as many times as directed by a spiritual teacher.



In one way *zikr* “means ‘remembrance’, and the sense is of remembering, commemorating, invocation.

- o In Sufism the 99 names of God (various attributes of the Creator taken from the Koran) are frequently used in a *zikr*. The very first line of the Koran is often used for verbal repetition.

*Q: How can we use the 99 names of God in the correct way and is it possible to do this?*

A: The 99 names are all attributes, they are all qualities. They can be used in a *zikr* or a recitation or a concentration, in a situation that relates to that quality.

You are making a connection or calling on that particular attribute. Use the attribute which is the nearest to what you want or hope to achieve or what you are doing, i.e. which more or less coincides with, or is a part of, the concept you are pursuing.

There is never a wrong choice, because since they are all what we call “strong” words, there isn’t any one which is stronger than the other. Nevertheless, there is always one which relates more closely to a particular situation or to a particular activity than another, so it is on this basis that you select. (24)

- o The phrases which are used in *zikrs* are usually in Arabic or Persian. They contain an important sound value which is lost when the phrase is translated into another language such as English. “The sound or cadentic value of these exercises are important, as are their associated breathing rhythms. For this reason they are performed in the original language.”
- o Certain sacred words have great spiritual potency and inherent power when recited properly and are a link to the primordial energy of the universe. Sacred words are forms or shapes through which spiritual energy can manifest.

*Q: When a mantra is chanted, what exactly happens?*

A: The sound of mantra creates the shape which will embody the Self. The Self can embody any shape – and operate through it. After all, the Self is expressing itself in action – and a mantra is primarily energy in action. It acts on you, it acts on your surroundings.

*Q: The mantra is traditional. Must it be so?*

A: Since times immemorial a link was created between certain words and corresponding energies and reinforced by numberless repetitions. It is just like a road to walk on. It is an easy way – only faith is needed. You trust the road to take you to your destination. (25)

- o The recitation of certain *zikrs* is believed to produce supernatural power which may be projected for the purpose of healing.

All recitations are performed in a state of ritual purity. *Zikrs* are generally said during the hours of darkness. When a supernatural result is desired, the *ziker* must dwell upon some facet of the Divine power allied to the effect to be accomplished. Thus, when a Sufi wishes to cure illness, he prepares himself by repeating a *ziker* consisting of the Name of God which denotes healing. By this means the Sufi intends to collect in his mind a tremendous potential of mental force associated with healing. This he projects towards the object of his attentions, at the same time concentrating upon the desired result. (26)

- o When a mantra is properly pronounced parts of the body which are out of harmony and dysfunctional are reorchestrated into a unified whole. “Our body is made up of many organs and each organ responds to the vibrations of certain sounds.”

A mantra in itself has no meaning. Its value lies in the pronunciation, the vibration. Our body is built of vibration. Each organ in the body has its special sound. Medical science will, in future, certainly come to healing through sound. When there is right pronunciation of the mantra, our body is affected by this vibration, and we come to a very deep, relaxed state where there is no directed attention and therefore no longer an observer and something observed; there is only being. (27)

- o The repetition of words or phrases may have different functions as the student progresses on the spiritual path. In the Sufi tradition, *zikrs* may be replaced with a more advanced exercise called the *sirr*.

The *ziker* is a word or a phrase which is given to somebody when they come into the Tradition. It is a word or a phrase which they repeat regularly and under certain circumstances to help themselves to obtain and use energy in a useful way. This is the simple explanation.

The *sirr* is given to a person after they have been some time in the Tradition. There is no fixed time for this, it happens after a certain time. It depends either on their degree of development or on the judgment of the master that they can now use it. The use of the *sirr* is more specific. Again, it is a word or phrase: it can be the same word or phrase as the *ziker* the person already has. It is used in a more specific fashion than the *ziker*. It is not used as frequently as the *ziker* because it requires certain particular circumstances. (28)

- o Three factors affect the efficacy of practising a mantra or *ziker*: (1) the intention of the practitioner; (2) faith that the mantra or *ziker* will work; (3) constant dedication and practice. “The mantra itself really doesn’t matter, but the direction and the question are of very great significance.”
- o The proper pronunciation of sacred syllables or sounds is the entrance through which spiritual influences can manifest. “Few know how to pronounce a sound correctly and without the correct pronunciation the sound cannot be effective.”

Pronouncing a mantra correctly is a high art rarely achieved. When correctly pronounced it has the power to quiet the mind. When all formulation of the mantra is dissolved through the sound vibration you are one with the perception, the vibration. The art of the mantra is magic and to learn it takes a very long time and a very talented teacher. Usually you die before you master it! (29)

- o The physical posture in which a repetition exercise is performed is important in optimizing the circulation of spiritual energy during the exercise.

There is an optimum physical position for doing the *zikr* that we call “joined together”, in the sense that in the classic position, the hands are placed on the knees, either in a sitting position or in a cross-legged position on the floor. This way there are no “loose ends” and the energy is circulating within the person and not flowing out. If a person is sitting in a position of doing the *zikr*, the energy is flowing and mixing within the person. (30)

- o Deep rhythmic breathing may be practised before a *zikr* to achieve a quiet, relaxed state. “Any physical or psychological energy spent on worry, or any degree of tension or anxiety, detracts from the *zikr*.”
- o Mantras and *zikrs* must be performed in a prescribed manner under the careful direction of a teacher. “The number of times of this repetition, and other matters, are stipulated by the teacher in accordance with his perception of the pupil’s needs. From time to time the master will assess the disciple’s progress and may prescribe other exercises.”
- o When a teacher imparts a mantra or *zikr* to a student, the teacher also projects a special spiritual energy or *baraka* which enables the pupil to make optimum use of the sacred sounds invested in the mantra or *zikr*.

### **Breathing Exercises**

- o Most people need to learn how to relax and breath naturally. “Grasping air with the lungs goes hand-in-hand with grasping at life.”

So-called “normal” breathing is fitful and anxious. The air is always being held and not fully released, for the individual seems incapable of “letting” it run its full course through the lungs. He breathes compulsively rather than freely. The technique therefore begins by encouraging a full release of the breath – easing it out as if the body were being emptied of air by a great leaden ball sinking through the chest and abdomen, and settling down into the ground. The returning in-breath is then allowed to follow as a simple reflex action. The air is not actively inhaled; it is just allowed to come – and then, when the lungs are comfortably filled, it is allowed to go out once more, the image of the leaden ball giving it the sense of “falling” out as distinct from being pushed out. (31)

- o Rhythmic breathing is an essential part of many spiritual exercises and has important physiological effects. “With deep and quiet breathing vitality will improve, which will influence the brain and help the mind to grow pure and stable and fit for meditation.”

You all know the emphasis I place on trying to get correct breathing in an exercise. Correct and rhythmic breathing has a distinctly physical, tranquilizing and calming effect. When one is doing an exercise, one is instructed and encouraged to settle down and get one’s breathing deep and rhythmic. There are perfectly good physical reasons for slow and deep breathing.

There are other reasons why the breathing is done in through the nose and out through the mouth. If you trace the path of the breath coming in, by the time it goes out, it passes over what we call three sensitive parts of the system. That breath or passage of air is a communication between centres in the sense that it carries and exchanges energy between one or other of the centres. (32)

- o Establishing a relaxed pattern of breathing has many beneficial consequences and is often a prelude to a subsequent exercise or activity.

Breathing is an important ingredient in exercises, either personal exercises or in a group. Breathing should settle down after a while to a certain rhythm. It settles down naturally, it should not be forced into being fast or slow. If you force the breathing you are using energy which can be used usefully in other ways. Allow the breathing to stabilize itself. Be aware of the breathing without being preoccupied with it.

Physiologically and psychologically speaking, deep breathing is more beneficial; one is taking in more oxygen. Psychologically, furthermore, deep breathing is symptomatic of calmness, quiet, tranquillity, lack of worry, lack of anxiety.

Having established a moment of calm around oneself and within oneself, one then aims to achieve the physical calm associated with deep breathing: a feeling of warmness, quiet and relaxation. (33)

- o Breathing exercises have been developed to a fine art in the Yoga practice of *pranayama* where the inhalation, retention and exhalation of breath are carefully controlled.

Pranayama is a conscious prolongation of inhalation, retention and exhalation. Inhalation is the act of receiving the primeval energy in the form of breath, and retention is when the breath is held in order to savour that energy. In exhalation all thoughts and emotions are emptied with breath: then, while the lungs are empty, one surrenders the individual energy, ‘I’, to the primeval energy, the Atma [Supreme Soul]. (34)

- o Controlling and regulating the breath is only one type of breathing exercise. A second form, ‘Watching the breath’ is a fundamental practice in Indian Yoga, Zen Buddhism and Chinese Taoism. Simply watching or observing the breath is simple, involves no risk and leads to the slowing of thought and control of the mind. “Neither control nor direct your breath; simply listen to it, be aware of it.”

- o The processes of breathing and thinking are intimately related. As breathing slows, mental activity also slows.

Thinking and breathing are in very close connection. When our breathing is tense and agitated, thought is as well. Pranayama serves to calm the breathing process which in turn calms the mind.

Usually inhalation is a volitional process, arousing tension in the brain and shoulder area. So pranayama should be performed in a relaxed position, without any effort or strain. Let inhalation happen, but don't inhale.

Even though this breathing technique may be a beautiful exercise, any attempt to quiet one's thought is purely artificial. Rather than trying to prevent thoughts from arising, we should take note of those times when thought naturally comes to a stop. (35)

- o Breathing exercises involving counting the breaths are very useful for calming the mind and relaxing the body.

A valuable exercise for calming the body-mind and inducing a feeling of deep relaxation, and even bliss, is concentration on the breath by counting the inhalations and exhalations, or simply the exhalations. Since ancient times, breath counting has been considered by spiritual masters the foundation of body-mind discipline. Breath is thus the force unifying body and mind and providing a link between the conscious and subconscious, the volitional and the non-volitional functions. In fact, breath can be said to be the most perfect expression of the nature of all life.

When you inhale quietly, count "One," and when you exhale, count "Two," and so on until you come to ten. Then return to one and repeat. If you lose the count or go beyond ten, as soon as you become aware of this, return again to one and continue again to ten, counting slowly. Another way to perform breath counting is to count only on the exhalation. As you exhale, feel your agitated mind state and negative thoughts evaporating. (36)

- o Breathing has great spiritual importance as it is the link between the body and spirit.

Breathing is the vehicle of spiritual experience, the mediator between body and mind. It is the first step towards the transformation of the body from the state of a more or less passively and unconsciously functioning physical organ into a vehicle or tool of a perfectly developed and enlightened mind. The most important result of the practice of 'mindfulness with regard to breathing' is the realization that the process of breathing is the connecting link between conscious and subconscious, gross-material and fine-material, volitional and non-volitional functions. (37)

- o Breathing exercises and breath control are merely one stage on the journey to self-realization and not an ultimate goal in themselves.

Breath-control is a help. It is one of the various methods that are intended to help us attain one-pointedness. Breath-control can also help to control the

wandering mind and attain this one-pointedness and therefore it can be used. But one should not stop there. After obtaining control of the mind through breathing exercises one should not rest content with any experience that may accrue therefrom, but should harness the controlled mind to the question ‘Who am I?’ till the mind merges in the Self. (38)

- o There are serious dangers in applying breathing exercises to oneself or others without the proper degree of knowledge and expertise. Certain breathing exercises may only be carried out for a specific and limited purpose, and always under the strict supervision of a teacher.

### **Physical Exercises**

- o Physical postures or *asanas* are an integral component of Yoga and have evolved and been practised for countless centuries.

The third limb of yoga is asana or posture. Asana brings steadiness, health and lightness of limb. A steady and pleasant posture produces mental equilibrium and prevents wandering of the mind. Asanas are not merely gymnastic exercises; they are postures. By practising them one develops agility, balance, endurance and great vitality. But their real importance lies in the way they train and discipline the mind. The yogi conquers the body by the practice of asanas and makes it a fit vehicle for the spirit. (39)

- o Ultimately, Yoga is a path of self-realization and not just a system of physical postures and exercises. “Yoga is right sitting, right doing, right behaviour in the moment itself. It is being appropriate to the situation in all your mental and physical action. Yoga is being united with the present.”
- o Yoga postures are archetypal forms or expressions which reflect the evolution of life. Many yoga *asanas* are named after various forms of natural life – the Fish, the Tree, the Swan. But in a larger sense every movement or pose is a posture. “The posture is an archetype. When you do it correctly, it acts not only on the physical plane, but also on the psychological plane. It brings about a reorchestration of energy.”

In the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali concerning the postures and the breathing, it is said that every pose is a posture, that sitting on a chair is a posture, lying down is a posture. But it must be a real lying down, it must be a real sitting on a chair; generally, there is much resistance when sitting on a chair or lying down, even in bed. It is necessary to explore in order to purify the posture, any posture. But generally when we put our body on the chair there is already resistance somewhere in the ribs, shoulders or stomach. (40)

- o Proper nutrition is important in maintaining the health and vitality of the body, freeing attention and energy for other aims. “With a well adjusted diet of healthy food our whole body begins to react differently and this unquestionably entails changes on the mental and psychological planes.

*Q: How important is good nutrition?*

A: Your body is what you think, feel and eat. Food is not only what you take in through your mouth. Your body is composed of the five elements – water, earth, air, fire, ether – and so your whole environment is food. How you handle the five elements constitutes good eating. Concerning what you absorb through the mouth, there is food which helps maintain the organism and there is so-called food to seduce the taste. What you eat is determined by your observation. Take note how it acts in you, how you feel before and after a meal, how the body goes to sleep and wakes up. The body itself will bring you to a choice. (41)

- o One of the purposes in working with the body is to remove blockages and impurities which prevent optimal functioning.

If we take a close look at our body we soon realize that it is overburdened by residues left over from inadequate feeding earlier in life. It creates an impression of density, and dulls our senses, preventing us from feeling our transparency. It is very interesting to observe that, if we give it the right conditions, the body eliminates these residues. Some forms of body movement can help us become conscious of and locate the parts of the body that are overburdened, solid, dense and congested. They help to free us from fixed ideas of what the body is and enable us to nourish our body with breath. All this is of great value, provided it is carried out with knowledge and great sensitivity. (42)

- o One of the most important purposes of physical exercises is to reduce the level of physical tension in the body. Unnecessary muscular tension eats up an enormous amount of energy.

He gave us many exercises for gradually relaxing the muscles *always beginning with the muscles of the face*, as well as exercises for “feeling” the hands, the feet, the fingers, and so on at will. The idea of the necessity of relaxing the muscles was not actually a new one, but G.’s explanation that relaxing the muscles of the body should begin with the muscles of the face was quite new to me.

Very interesting was the exercise with a “circular sensation”, as G. called it. A man lies on his back on the floor. Trying to relax all his muscles, he then concentrates his attention on trying to sense his nose. When he begins to sense his nose the man then transfers his attention and tries to sense his ear; when this is achieved he transfers his attention to the right foot. From the right foot to the left; then to the left hand; then to the left ear and back again to the nose, and so on. (43)

- o A relaxed body greatly enhances our receptivity to the spiritual dimensions of life. “The body has an organic memory of its natural, unconditioned state. Once you have experienced this relaxed, light body, it will solicit you often and remind you when it is not relaxed.”

In getting to know your body-mind, one can discover more clearly the nature of the identification, and so let it go. The relaxed body is a relaxed mind. In a relaxed body and mind you are open to receiving, availability, welcoming,

open to the openness. The relaxed, light, energetic, sattvic body-mind are a near expression of your real nature. It is almost impossible for a conditioned body-mind to be receptive to truth, open to grace. It can happen that truth pierces through all conditioning since the insight into our true nature ultimately has nothing to do with the body or the mind. But it is exceedingly rare. (44)

- o Some spiritual teachers emphasize the awakening of the more subtle energy body underlying the physical body in their body work exercises with students.

Our approach is to bring the energy body back to its full expression as it is in infancy. In being aware of it, it comes to complete functioning. Thus, the first thing we do in our body-work is to awaken the energy body, to make it an object of awareness. This energy is felt, it is a sensation. When the sensation of energy is fully alive it brings about a modification of the physical structure. Any other attempt to alter the body comes from will, the mind, and is violence. In any movement it is the energy body, the vital body, which moves and takes the physical body with it. The emphasis in our teaching on this level is therefore not on the posture or physical structure but on this body-feeling. When the vital body is awakened, all the muscle structure is relaxed and a reorchestration of energy takes place. Each sense is no longer limited to its physical organ but expands to the whole body. In this global sensation all the senses participate. Being in expansion automatically takes you beyond the idea of being a separate entity. The body-work is one way to bring you to oneness with all beings. (45)

- o Body work and physical exercises are vehicles of self-awareness and self-knowledge. When performed with a sense of openness and exploration they can lead to higher levels of understanding and consciousness.

*Q: What is the value in doing the exercises and postures?*

A: The approach to the body is to reorchestrate the dispersed energy, nothing else. It brings you to a state of fitness and clearness, transparency, where you are available for ultimate understanding. As the mind and body are interdependent, the readiness and lightness of the body play a role in understanding. In exploring the body you become more and more able to know the body. In exploring you are completely aware of the body, and it is only in this awareness that the body comes to this reorchestration of the dispersed energy.

*Q: But if the insight into our real nature has nothing to do with the mind or body, what difference does it make what our bodies do?*

A: Of course, what we are fundamentally has nothing to do with the body. One can never come to being the understanding through the body. But we are trapped in our mind and body and we must become free of this entrapment so that understanding can take place in us. It is commonly understood that the body is a hindrance to awakening, but to disregard the body because of this superficial observation is a mistake. One must discover what is the nature of this hindrance; we must understand it. Because truth can never be attained, only welcomed, we must bring our body-mind to the welcoming state. (46)



- o Physical exercises and movements can never be standardized and must take into account the individual characteristics and stage of development of the practitioners. “In authentic esoteric schools certain postures and body movements are changed every so often to prevent conditioning and training among the adherents.”

Mental and physical exercises are, of course, a well-known part of very many of the world’s religious and especially esoteric movements. With the real Sufi school, however, the movements are never carried out by all members: since each movement is held to correspond with a particular characteristic and a certain stage of the individual’s development. When the exercises become standardized, they lose their developmental effect, and instead serve either to automatize or else to provide a field for imagination. (47)

- o Although physical exercises play an important role in spiritual development they are a means and not an end in themselves.

Posture and breathing are a part of Yoga, for the body must be healthy and well under control, but too much concentration on the body defeats its own purpose, for it is the mind that is primary in the beginning. When the mind has been put to rest and disturbs no longer the inner space, the body acquires a new meaning and its transformation becomes both necessary and possible. (48)

### **Sacred Dance and Movements**

- o For countless centuries dance has played a significant role in the community life of cultures around the world. The yearly cycle of the seasons was celebrated in planting and harvest dances, and some dances even embodied recipes in their patterns and rhythms. Tasks such as weaving carpets, combing wool and spinning thread were often performed as rhythmic movement to the accompaniment of music.
- o In some cultures dance and movement are considered a form of ‘moving meditation’ and play an integral part in the life of the community.

The famous Chinese Taoist Movement of *Tai-chi* is an excellent way of practising meditation. This Primordial Movement is a very gentle exercise ingeniously devised to bring the negative and positive forces in the body into perfect harmony, thus automatically taming the mind, controlling the *Prana*, and even bringing one directly to the state of *Samadhi*. This Primordial Movement has now become one of the most popular gymnastic exercises, widely practised by Chinese people in all walks of life. Despite the marvelous therapeutic value of this exercise, its present application is considered by many Taoist sages to be a degeneration of the Movement, which was originally devised for a much higher purpose. (49)

- o Sacred dances and movements constitute a vital part of many esoteric teachings and are based on principles discovered in the course of inner spiritual experiences. “What we call ‘dance’ is

sometimes a developmental exercise, sometimes for communication of various kinds, sometimes for accumulating something and holding it, sometimes symbolic.”

Millennia ago Sacred Dance was essentially a mode of communication, a universal language with its own grammar, vocabulary and semantic usage. Each dance was a book, each sequence or rhythm a phrase, each gesture or posture a word. (50)

- o Sacred dances were developed and performed by esoteric schools as a non-verbal language which encoded and transmitted information about cosmic laws and human spiritual development.

This language is mathematical, according to exact measure. Every movement has its appointed place, duration and weight. The combinations and sequences are mathematically calculated. Postures and attitudes are arranged to produce definite, predetermined emotions. In these, he who is watching them may also participate – he may read them as a script, in which the highest emotions and higher mind can take part. (51)

- o In traditional spiritual teachings, sacred dances have other functions in addition to encoding and transmitting esoteric knowledge, including: (1) exercising the body, mind and emotions in unfamiliar ways, (2) developing the power of attention and concentration, (3) producing various psychological states corresponding to particular postures, (4) preparing students for heightened perception and higher states of consciousness, (5) accessing, assimilating and transmitting a more refined spiritual energy.
- o The ‘Whirling Dervishes’, historically associated with the Sufi master Jalalludin Rumi, can attain intuitive knowledge through a form of spinning, when correctly presided over by a teacher. “The body-mind movements of the Whirling Dervishes, coupled with the reed-pipe music to which they were performed, is the product of a special method designed to bring the Seeker into affinity with the mystical current, in order to be transformed by it.”

All dervishes, and not only the followers of Maulana Rumi (as most Orientalists erroneously believe) perform a dance. And a dance is defined as bodily movements linked to a thought and a sound or a series of sounds. The movements develop the body, the thought focuses the mind, and the sound fuses the two and orients them towards a consciousness of divine contact which is called ‘*hal*’ and means ‘state or condition’: the state or condition of being in ecstasy. (52)

- o The dances of the Sufi dervishes are performed in unison as a series of group exercises which are designed to produce a state of ritual ecstasy and spiritual union. “This method is chosen as a “means to an end, selected for given individuals in a given situation by their preceptor.”

The rhythmic (and arhythmic) movements called dance are used in many Orders, always in response to the needs of the individuals and the group. Sufi movements can thus never be stereotyped, and do not constitute what is elsewhere called dance, calisthenics or the like. The using of movements follows

a pattern based upon certain discoveries and knowledge which can only be applied by a teaching master of a dervish Order. (53)

- o The proper use of sacred dance and movements as a method of worship or interior development requires the correct people, time and place. “The simple dervish dance is an incredibly sophisticated instrument which can only happen at certain times and under certain circumstances.”

Rumi, for instance, organized his “dances” in accordance with what he considered to be the best way of developing in his disciples the Sufic experiences. This was done, as ancient records show, in accordance with the mentality and temperament of the people of Konia. Imitators have attempted to export the system outside of this cultural area, with the result that they are left with what amounts to a pantomime, and the original effect of the movement has disappeared. (54)

- o Descriptions of the Gurdjieff Movements by students reveal how complicated and difficult to master they actually were.

I myself have practised some of the movements and I know how much effort they require. Imagine making contradictory movements with all your limbs; this in itself is very difficult and assumes a certain mastery of the body. Imagine doing, at the same time, extremely complicated mental calculations with rules that *outrage* the rules of ordinary arithmetic (for instance, sums in which one plus one equals three, two plus two makes five, three plus three makes seven, with additions and subtractions all on this same basis). The slightest slip in these calculations, on which the timing of the movements depends, can throw out completely the *ensemble* of the choreography. Finally, imagine concentrating all your emotional powers on a given theme (say, for instance, “Lord, have mercy on me” and *feel* this from the bottom of your heart) and you will then have some idea of the “work” involved in these dances. Every note of the music that accompanied them could be interpreted, according to the highest religious traditions, as symbolic of one of the countless situations of the self in the cosmos. We came away from these sessions shattered, and curiously drained of our ordinary “me’s”, extremely receptive to “something else” and as though invested with a divine freedom. (55)

- o One of Gurdjieff’s aims in teaching the Movements was to help students achieve balance and integration between body, mind and feelings. Students have reported that after practising the Movements for many years they sometimes experience a transformative state where body, mind and feelings are unified and purified.

The Movements show us the profound effect that efforts can have when they are made under conditions created on the basis of precise knowledge. When seemingly insurmountable difficulties are overcome, the inner state of being changes. Fatigue and other obstacles vanish . . . Feeling becomes more confident, thought clearer, the body lighter. And when the experience is over, the body retains a trace of it. It is no longer quite the same. It has been baptized, initiated. It is in a state of balanced well-being. (56)

## Music

- o One important form of objective art is sacred music. This kind of music is based on mathematical laws governing the vibration of sound and its relationship to the human psyche: “Objective music affects all people in the same way. It not only touches the feelings but transforms them, bringing the listener to a unified or ‘harmonious’ state within himself and thus to a new relation with the universe which is itself a field of vibrations.”

- o Many traditional stories and legends illustrate the power of objective music:

Objective music is based on ‘inner octaves.’ And it can obtain not only definite psychological results but definite physical results. There can be such music as would freeze water. There can be such music that would kill a man instantaneously. The Biblical legend of the destruction of the walls of Jericho by music is precisely a legend of objective music. In the legend of Orpheus there are hints of objective music, for Orpheus used to impart knowledge by music. Snake charmers’ music in the East is an approach to objective music, of course very primitive. Very often it is simply one note which is long drawn out, rising and falling only very little; but in this single note ‘inner octaves’ are going on all the time and melodies of ‘inner octaves’ which are inaudible to the ears but felt by the emotional center . . . The same music, only a little more complicated, and men would obey it. (57)

- o Although objective music is believed to be relatively rare, some possible examples have been identified: the chants of Gregorian and Tibetan Buddhist monks, the recitations of Sufi zikrs, the songs of harmonic singers of Tuva and Mongolia, the music of Indian ragas and certain pieces of Bach and Mozart.
- o The metaphysical functions of performing and listening to music depend on factors such as the participants, their stage of spiritual development, the environment and characteristics of the music itself.
- o The creation of objective music requires certain conditions and precise knowledge of the human psyche to be effective. For instance, different spiritual effects are produced by stringed instruments and by wind instruments. The tuning of the musical instruments needs to take into account a number of factors, including local geographical conditions, atmospheric pressure, ambient temperature, the form and dimensions of the interior space where the music is performed and even the quality of energy, individually and collectively, of audience members.
- o Scientists now recognize the relationship between the properties of music and its psychological and physiological effects on the listener. Research suggest that music influences human beings in three ways: rhythm primarily affects the body, melody and harmony the feelings, and musical form and structure the mind.
- o At Gurdjieff’s school in France, his student Thomas de Hartmann would play Gurdjieff’s music

on piano or organ almost every afternoon and evening. The effects on the students were profound:

Some of them were so moving as to be almost unbearable, and the tears would stream involuntarily down our cheeks; one had to remember oneself with all one's might in order not to have to go out. Hartmann said that he himself found some of the pieces almost too difficult to play. One of the pieces consisted of slow and solemn chords of the most divine harmony, and in the overtones one could hear a sort of joyful singing as of the voice of a seraph. I have never heard anything like these hymns of Gurdjieff, except perhaps some of the very early church music such as can be heard in Notre Dame, and some of that of Bach, who at times touches the higher emotional centre. (58)

- o Gurdjieff may have played such music to heal or transmute the inner essential being of his pupils. His students have attested to the powerful effect of the simple recurring melodies Gurdjieff played on his hand-held harmonium, music which seemed to have pierced the depths of their being: "This was the music of prayer – haunting, disturbing, indescribably beautiful, a music calculated to arouse the deepest longings hidden in the heart of man."
- o Some believe that Gurdjieff's music is a form of objective art. Student Charles Nott recounts an incident where his emotional state was dramatically altered by listening to Gurdjieff's unusual music:

For a few minutes we just sat quietly, then he took up his hand-harmonium, and keeping his eyes fixed on me with a look of deep compassion and power, began to play a simple melody with strange harmonies, repeating and repeating yet all the time with different combinations of notes. Little by little I became aware that he was conveying something to me both through the music – the combination of notes – and by the telepathic means which he understood so well. A change began to take place in me; I began to understand something, and a feeling of conscious hope and conscious faith began to displace the dark hopeless depression. (59)

- o Music and sound have a special function in elevating human consciousness that goes very far beyond an emotional effect. However, participation in such 'higher' musical activities is limited to those who can actually benefit correctly from the experience, based on circumstances and need. "There are grave disadvantages, amounting to complete negation of the 'work,' inherent in the use of music and movement without an inner perception of what these are."
- o The contemporary understanding of music disregards several important considerations regarding composition, performance and appreciation.

*Q: I am very fond of music. I feel that the great composers and orchestras give us an additional dimension in life, something which is very precious to me. Can you tell me something about the place of music in teachings designed to awaken higher consciousness?*

A: Always remember two things. First, that people get out of something the nutrition which they are equipped and prepared to receive from it. Second, that music which is a product of a certain kind of mind, or a mind in a certain condition, will reflect that mind. I find that contemporary musicians and lovers of music take virtually no interest in these factors, if indeed they have ever heard of them.

Music can be used, and had been so used, to increase the milk-yield of cows. This is a factor which operates in the case of cows. In other instances, where human beings are concerned, there is merely the sensation that the music 'gives' something. In some of these cases, what the music is 'giving' is a vehicle or instrument whereby emotional tension can be released. In order for music to exercise a function in the formative or development area, it must be composed and performed, and experienced, on the basis of knowledge of its value for such a process. (60)

- o Without proper preparation and considerations of 'time, place and people' the employment of music in an esoteric sense can actually be harmful.

Take an example in musical assemblies. We do not attend them nor do we employ music. This is because for our time and in our position there is more harm than good in it. Music, heard in the right way, improves the approach to the Consciousness. But it will harm people who are not sufficiently prepared, or of the correct type, for hearing and playing it.

Those who do not know this have adopted music as something sacred in itself. The feelings which they experience while indulging in it they mistake for sublime ones. In fact they are using it for the lower purpose of arousing sentiment, emotion which is no basis for further progress. (61)

## **Prayer**

- o What are now known as religious prayers may have originated as special exercises of an inner developmental nature. The inner function of prayer is not generally understood. According to the Sufi al-Ghazali: "In prayer there is a secret significance. The exercises of prayer mark hidden elements."
- o The value and effect of prayer depends very much on the preparation and attunement of the participants. "Prayer depends upon knowing how to pray and what it is for. The usual idea of prayer is merely emotional, and performs a conditioning function."

When prayers are carried out among people with a certain preparation, and when due regard is taken for such things as correct attunement, there will be one effect of prayer. If people are encouraged to pray without these or other elements, their prayer may become a psychotherapeutic tool: immensely valuable, but nonetheless at a lower level than its optimum function. (62)

- o The act of praying focuses the mind and produces a change of consciousness and inner power that has a beneficial influence on the world.

Vowing, or praying, involves consciously directing attention and thought in a certain manner, fostering a particular frame of mind. In this sense Buddhism refers to faith as a faculty that can be developed into a power; it is a means of focusing the mind, whereby a certain type of power is concentrated, just as a magnetic power is concentrated by aligning the charges of the molecules in a mass of iron.

Note that the vow or prayer for enlightenment outlined by Zen master Dogen is made on behalf of all beings. This attitude is a necessary basis of the aspiration for enlightenment as understood in Mahayana Buddhism. Dogen makes it clear that he is not talking about ritual performance, but a “psychological technique” designed to affect consciousness in a specific manner. (63)

- o In order to be effective, prayer must be repeated with conscious presence and an awareness of the inner meaning of the words.

Your prayer should not be automatic. You must pray with your whole presence and with all three of your centres concentrated on the same thing. You must pray with your head, your feeling, your sensation. Do not pray to tranquillize yourself.

Man, in general, prays only with his thought. He was never told how to pray and it never occurs to him that the state of the feeling and of the presence should correspond to the movement of the prayer. (64)

- o Certain prayers of ancient origin encode knowledge of a higher order which can be revealed when recited with a sense of presence and reverence.

Most prayers have nothing in common with petitions. I speak of ancient prayers; many of them are much older than Christianity. These prayers are, so to speak, *recapitulations*; by repeating them aloud or to himself a man endeavours to experience what is in them, their whole content, with his mind and his feeling.

In Christian worship there are very many prayers exactly like this, where it is necessary to reflect upon each word. But they lose all sense and all meaning when they are repeated or sung mechanically. (65)

### **Ritual and Ceremony**

- o Ritual and ceremony have been an integral part of religious and spiritual worship since the beginning of recorded history.

Every ceremony or rite has a value if it is performed without alteration. A ceremony is a book in which a great deal is written. Anyone who understands can read it. One rite often contains more than a hundred books.

Indicating what had been preserved up to our time, G. at the same time pointed out what had been lost and forgotten. He spoke of sacred dances which accompanied the “services” in the “temples of repetition” and which were not included in the Christian form of worship. (66)

- o Many people misunderstand ritual and ceremony, believing that they are inevitably instruments of conditioning and remnants of outdated tradition.

*Q: I still do not understand the point of ritual and worship in Zen. Isn't that a kind of conditioning?*

A: This question cannot be answered satisfactorily in a few words. First of all, we must remember that there are different types of people, some of whom must be appealed to through the mind, others through the emotions, others through physical sensation, still others through symbols, and so on. Furthermore, ritual has nothing to do with conceptual thinking and cannot be explained conceptually. Some things, perhaps most things, we can only know by doing. Finally, implicit in your question is the modern fear of conditioning. We are all terrified of being *conditioned*. Yet the answer to conditioning is not to resist conditioning, but to be mindful. (67)

- o Ritual is not primarily symbolic but rather concerned with an interior spiritual activity. The atmosphere engendered by ritual activity produces a perception or 'trace' which is recognizable to those who are sensitive and perceptive.
- o When properly employed, rituals and ceremonies provide a form or structure through which spiritual truths may be expressed and understood.

At a time when many followers of traditional Western religions appear to have no significant understanding of or relationship to rites and ceremonies, it is well to remember that formality need not be an empty shell. For where gratitude, reverence and other genuine spiritual feelings are present they can be deepened and made more significant when expressed through a formal pattern, just as movement can be made more meaningful when turned into dance, or sound into music. (68)

- o The effect of ritual may be a dual one, as much an influence on the performers as on the audience.

All the excitement of a living tradition of art, theatre and music with its roots in the most ancient East was evidenced in the First Festival of Dervish Artistes.

The Festival was sponsored by the Nakshibendi Sufi Community, which was founded here over a thousand years ago. In Europe we regard 'Dancing Dervishes' as something of an oddity; but the rhythmic movements performed by the Balkhi Troupe showed that a rapport can be attained with an audience to such an extent that even strangers who have never seen this kind of display in their lives can harmonize with the music and callisthenics in such a way as to reproduce the fabled 'unity of performers and audience' which is even in the East only a vague rumour.

Dervish doctrine holds that theatre has a dual effect: that there is a polarity between actors and audience. According to the training of the artists and the motivation of the author or choreographer, so will a certain effect (called 'moment') be attained.

In the Central Asian tradition, where actors of this caliber are among the most



honoured of men and women, the players often choose their own audience. This is because, they say, the 'event' which they stage needs a perfect audience to be perfect in every way. Thus they will, at the best, vary their performance, even change the repertoire, in accordance with their assessment of the audience.

The strangely haunting music, the varied costumes, the immense vitality of the performers, quite apart from the perfection of the ancient buildings of Gazarga where the Festival took place, combined to form an impression second to none of my memories. There are affinities with Morris dancing, with the flamenco, with folk music of all kinds: and yet a faultless timing and a zest which I, for one, would give anything to borrow. (69)

- o People who are obsessed with ritual are incapable of using ritual in a spiritually developmental way.

Ritual can be important.

The last people to be encouraged to take part in ritual, if the intent is genuinely to help raise mankind, are the ritualistically-minded. Real ritual, you see, is functional, while ritualistic individuals, whatever they imagine, in reality live for the vehicle, not the content.

When you hear their eager and sometimes persuasive explanations – that they do not feel ritualistic at all – know that you are hearing automatic self-justifications seeking to protect an acquired taste.

It is a major task of real learning to understand the 'idolatrous' processes which, however hallowed by 'tradition' (repetition), are inimical to the true development of man. (70)

- o Ritual and symbolism are a meaningful reflection of a deeper spiritual truth even though they may have been diverted or adapted to lesser ends (display, entertainment and so forth).

*Q: We see people all over the world deriving satisfactions from ritual. How can we get beyond ritual?*

A: Initiation and celebratory rituals carried out by religions, societies and other groupings can have various – very different – origins, purposes and functions.

We might liken all these purposes, origins and functions to, say, the various processes which are known to and carried out in any given science. In chemistry, distillation is not the same as fermentation; the use of alkalis is not the same as the use of acids. There is both industrial and research chemistry.

In the case of the science of man, there are similar distinctions.

When the knowledge of these distinctions disappears, ritualism takes over, or else the limited use of such processes. When the use and possibility is limited, the effect is slight: it may even be harmful. (71)

- o One important instrument of ritual is the rosary or tasbeeh. It consists of 33 stones or beads separated after each 11<sup>th</sup> one), a number which is a multiple of the 99 Names or Attributes of God in Islam. According to tradition the rosary can accumulate a certain kind of spiritual energy or power.

One day Gurdjieff gave to each one of us in the group a chaplet made of large black beads of some curious substance, upon which we were to do a special sensing exercise as we passed the beads between thumb and index finger. He told us how in the old times such chaplets were known as the Inanimate Helper and that many kinds of inner-world work, far more difficult than our current exercises, were done with their aid. “You see men – Turk, Greek, Arab, Armenian – sitting all day in the coffee house with such chaplets. To you they make a picture of the lazy man, but what they do with these beads creates an inner force you cannot imagine. Even some special holy men, initiate, of course, could move mountains if they wished, just sitting still, working with their chaplets, seeming half asleep. (72)

- o One of the functions of the rosary or a crystal is to absorb, ground and discharge negative energy. It can be used by a person who is in a negative state or emotionally disturbed, as a means of removing negativity.
- o The chanting of sutras (precepts) and the words of realized masters are an integral component of many spiritual traditions. “Chanting forms the vocal ground on which every ritual, ceremony, and rite of passage is performed, setting a tone through which participants acquire heightened awareness and receptivity to what is being enacted.”

Chanting must be distinguished from reciting. The latter may be nothing more than repetition of an account or passage. Chanting, however, is generated deep in the belly, and when performed egolessly has the power to penetrate visible and invisible worlds. Mind is unlimited; energetic chanting done with a pure mind, with single-minded involvement, is another form of zazen, another mode of learning the buddha-truth in a direct, nonconceptual way. Performed in this manner, chanting is also a means of strengthening samadhi power and of helping to bring about awakening. (73)

- o A robe or cloak is often put on before commencing an exercise and then taken off immediately after, partly to help focus the activity. It is also believed to act as a protective item.

### **Psychological Exercises**

- o “Remembering” is a recollection exercise in which a person examines past situations and their personal reactions to people and events. The aim is to try to understand the influence of circumstances and people and how one might have reacted differently. It also means remembering situations of a positive developmental value and spiritual nature.
- o The exercise of ‘self-observation’ allows a person to objectively see his or her behaviour and reactions as they occur throughout the course of the day.

Self-observation is very difficult, but it can give you much material. If you remember how you manifest yourself, how you react, how you feel, what you want – you may learn many things. Sometimes you may distinguish at once

what is thought, what is feeling, what is body.

Each part is under different influences; and if we free ourselves of one we become slaves of another. For example, I can be free in my mind, but I cannot change the emanations of my body – my body responds differently. A man sitting next to me affects me by his emanations. I know that I should be polite but I feel antipathy. Each centre has its own spheres of emanations, and at times there is no escaping them. It is very good to combine this exercise of putting oneself in another's place with self-observation.

But we always forget. We remember only afterwards. At the necessary moment our attention is occupied, for example, with the fact that we don't like the man and cannot help feeling it. Things should be noted in the memory, otherwise you will forget. And what we want is not to forget. There are many things that are seldom repeated. Sitting in your room you will not see anything: you should observe in life. In your room you cannot develop the master. A man may be strong in a monastery, but weak in life, and we want strength for life. (74)

- o In the 'Reviewing of the Day' exercise a person uses memory to recall the events of the past day just before going to sleep.

He gave us two other exercises at this time. One was 'reviewing the events of the day', an exercise in memory, will and concentration. The idea was that before going to sleep one should begin slowly to count 2 . 4 . 6 . 8 . 10 – 10 . 8 . 6 . 4 . 2, and so on, up to a hundred. Having got this rhythm started, to try to picture oneself impartially – getting out of bed, dressing, having breakfast, going to the office in the bus, meeting people and so on, and so to bed – as if we were watching a not very interesting film, otherwise we might get identified with it. 'Don't think about it,' he said, 'thinking will falsify the picture. During the review, you will have periods of forgetting and you will stop counting. You must mend the film and start counting again. Also, you may want to go to sleep and a great effort will be needed to keep going. And often, when you get into bed, you will forget to do it. As with all real exercises, the organism is in a conspiracy to make you forget.' (75)

- o An inner exercise of great significance is to contemplate the quality and nature of relationships with significant others in one's life, with the intention of healing the past and enhancing the future.

I am going to give you an exercise. Choose someone close to you, for example a companion, a friend. For this exercise call to him without his knowing it. This is only for your inner life.

Think of him. This is a task; never forget him. Think about his relationship to you in the past and how you have behaved toward him. This is for the past. For the present, he has today the same relationship with you he had in the past. But today you want to change this relationship and you don't behave toward him in the same way you did yesterday. For example, you used to respond to his manifestations in a completely automatic, external way. Today, in the present, consciously, you have an inner relationship with him. He will continue to have the same relationship with you, but you will change yours consciously, within yourself. Today, with your whole presence, you will remember how you were yesterday and you will try to have a new relationship with him. You will say to yourself that

perhaps it is he who will give you the possibility of repairing your unfortunate past, who will automatically help you to repair what was bad.

Later, you will verify the results inside and you will observe that he too will have changed toward you. At the same time, he will have changed without working, without doing anything special. And when he remembers his past relations with you he will think of you with gratitude. You will be able to observe that with the present you have changed what was in the past, and, in the future, he will even wish to serve you because you have understood him. Choose someone for this exercise with whom you have a real relationship, but not someone in your family. (76)

- o An important, but very challenging and difficult exercise in esoteric schools of higher development is 'Relating the story of one's life'.

Let every one of you in the group tell about his life. Everything must be told in detail without embellishment, and without suppressing anything. Emphasize the principal and essential things without dwelling on trifles and details. You must be sincere and not be afraid that others will take anything in the wrong way, because everyone is in the same position; everyone must strip himself; everyone must show himself as he is. (77)

### **Other Exercises**

- o By performing certain mental exercises such as memorizing words during physical work the normal flow of automatic and mechanical associations of the mind can be broken.

During the summer and autumn of 1923 our work by day was physical labour in the open air, but something more was added. We were given long lists words to memorize. Mr. Gurdjieff insisted that we should not set aside special time for it, but to do it while working in the garden.

In the course of trying this I made one very important discovery. Usually when one observes oneself during physical labour, particularly work consisting of repetitive movements like digging and scything, one's thoughts wander freely in directions that have nothing to do with the labour. Associations flow, following one another in complete disorder, without goal and without results.

Now that Mr. Gurdjieff had added these memory exercises during just such work, there was no room for leaks of wandering associations. At times it was necessary to stir oneself and direct attention to the digging itself, which at other times became almost unconscious. But the characteristic feature in all this was complete collect- edness. Not a single bit of consciousness wandered away beyond the limits of the person. Everything was concentrated inside. This is one example of the many varieties of the Work, which always has as its ultimate goal the development of the person's being. (78)

- o Fasting is a useful exercise in the spiritual sense when applied under certain conditions and circumstances.

The short fast of which I spoke was also accompanied by special exercises. In the first place G. explained at the beginning of the fast that the difficulty in fasting consisted in not leaving unused the substances which are prepared in the organism for the digestion of food.

“These substances consist of very strong solutions,” he said. “And if they are left without attention they will poison the organism. They must be used up. But how can they be used up if the organism gets no food? Only by an increase of work, an increase of perspiration. People make a tremendous mistake when they try to ‘save their strength’, make fewer movements, and so on, when fasting. On the contrary it is necessary to expend as much energy as possible. Then fasting can be beneficial.

And when we began our fast we were not left in peace for a single second. G. made us run in the heat, doing a round of two miles, or stand with arms extended, or mark time at the double, or carry out a whole series of curious gymnastic exercises which he showed us. (79)

- o One very challenging but interesting exercise involves communicating for a certain period of time by means of specific gestures without using words.

In the meantime Mr. Gurdjieff gave us some new exercises, in one of which we were given special movements for arms and legs that stood for letters of the alphabet. We practised them for a week; then suddenly Mr. Gurdjieff announced that within the Institute we were to speak only by means of these movements. We were not to utter even a single word, no matter what happened, not even in our own rooms. We could speak outside the Institute, but we could not go out without permission. Life began to be very complicated. How difficult it was to remember not to speak, especially in private! During those days my wife and I had to go to Kislovodsk, which meant we had to dress appropriately for the outside world. In order to ask each other if we had forgotten something, we had to perform a long series of gestures, but it never occurred to us to speak in our room, even in a low voice so that nobody could hear. If we had done so, we would have felt that we had failed in our effort, that we had cheated ourselves.

It was wonderful to have this attitude in our work with Mr. Gurdjieff. Understanding that everything was done for our sake, we fulfilled the tasks. It was not blind obedience, for we saw the purpose. And how clearly we began to see our mechanicalness! We had to be aware of ourselves. Every moment we caught ourselves about to speak, but we remembered in time and stopped. It was very difficult. (80)

- o Many spiritual traditions employ visualization as a method of mental concentration and to achieve higher states of consciousness and perception.

Visualization is one of the best exercises for mastery of mind and *Prana*. Tantrism especially emphasizes its usefulness, and applies it in almost every form of meditation. Hundreds of different visualization practices are provided for different individual needs and for special applications. Visualizing a static object or a picture outside of the body is generally considered as a preliminary and preparatory exercise; visualizing a moving object circulating in a definite orbit within the body is regarded as more advanced practice. The attempted

visualization of a highly complicated picture with all its details is excellent for beginners who are learning to harness their errant minds; and visualizing a simpler picture or object is advisable for higher meditations. Certain specific effects may be achieved by the different colours, forms, shapes, positions and orbits of movement of the objects visualized. (81)

- o Visualization is also effective as a method of calming and healing the mind-body of the spiritual practitioner.

As a further aid in calming your mind, try visualizing the serene countenance of Christ or a saint or the Virgin Mary (if you are a Christian); Buddha or bodhisattva (if you are a Buddhist); Krishna (if you are a Hindu). Those who follow a religion that does not sanction visualization, or those who have no formal religious affiliation, might find that a certain object, picture or piece of music instills calmness. Or perhaps a certain prayer. Should feelings of anger or hatred toward any persons arise, mentally embrace that person and radiate thoughts of loving-kindness towards him or her. This may be easier said than done, but if you work at it conscientiously, what seems at first intolerable will gradually become easier. (82)

- o The Number-Halt (*Ukufi Adadi*) is an interior exercise carried out in Sufi schools with numbers in a rhythm corresponding to different parts of the body. "Different segments of the body can be put into operation at different times, under different circumstances."

The word *Abjad* means the numerological significance of letters in the Arabic language. Each letter has a value, and certain numbers make certain letters and vice-versa. The application of the numbers or letters also represents sounds and colours, and the whole thing interrelates in that way.

The body is basically divided up into different segments, and these segments are referred to in the *Abjad* or numerological code by certain numbers.

The idea is that, by dividing the body into certain segments that just as there is a harmony in music and colours, so there is a numerological harmony based on the human body.

This is not as complicated as it sounds. All I will say about it now is that it is the equivalent of a balancing scale using weights. As you put two kilos or two pounds on one side of the scale, so you should ideally have two kilos or two pounds on the other side. That is what is called a balance or an equilibration.

It is possible to give a long explanation of why it should be so, but the clearest way to see it is to look at the currents of energy normally present and passing through the body.

When one gets to know the corresponding parts of the body, one can see how and why the balancing or equilibration can be better used and better understood to be used. It is perfectly reasonable for one to explain and look at diagrams to try and understand the path or passage of energy within the human body, or even within a group, and it is a further bonus factor when one feels the activity of the passage of energy and knows that one feels it. (83)

- o The 'Divine Pause' is the traditional name given to the 'Halt' or "Stop' exercise associated with schools of the Fourth Way. This particular exercise can only be carried out under the strict direction and guidance of a teaching master. "The teacher, at a special time, calls for a complete freezing of movement by the students. During this "pause of time" he projects his *baraka* upon the people."
- o There are interesting descriptions in the literature of the actual use of the 'Halt' exercise in esoteric school situations.

Sometimes also Gurdjieff used his famous Stop- Exercise. At any moment of the day or night, he might shout: "Stop!" when everyone within hearing distance had to arrest all movement. First the eyes were to fix upon the object of their gaze. The body was to remain motionless in the exact posture of the moment the word 'stop' was heard, and the thought present in the mind was to be held. In short, every voluntary movement was to be arrested and held. The Stop might last a few seconds, or five, ten minutes or more. The posture might be painful or even dangerous; but, if we were sincere and conscientious, we would do nothing to ease it. We had to wait until Gurdjieff shouted "*Davay!*" or, "Continue!" and then resume what we had been doing before. (84)

- o One of the purposes of the 'Stop' exercise is to bring into awareness the automatic nature of most of our movements and postures. "When a person is at an intermediate stage between one action and another, he can free himself from the limitations of the ordinary thought-processes."
- o The 'Stop' exercise must be done with great care and only under the direction of a teacher who can see all the possible outcomes and ramifications.

The 'stop' exercise is considered sacred in schools. Nobody except the principal teacher or the person he commissions has the right to command a 'stop'. 'Stop' cannot be the subject of play or exercise among the pupils. You never know the position a man can find himself in. If you cannot *feel for him*, you do not know what muscles are tensed or how much. Meanwhile if a difficult tension is continued it can cause the rupture of some important vessel and in some cases it can even cause immediate death. Therefore only he who is quite certain in himself that he knows what he is doing can allow himself to command a 'stop'. (85)

- o One category of esoteric exercise involves studying and producing imitation psychic phenomena, partly for the purpose of developing attention and skills of observation.

Exercises on this occasion were much more difficult and varied than during the preceding summer. We began rhythmic exercises to music, dervish dances, different kinds of mental exercises, the study of different ways of breathing, and so on. Particularly intensive were the exercises for studying various imitations of psychic phenomena, thought-reading, clairvoyance, mediumistic displays, and so forth. Before these exercises began G. explained to us that the study of these "tricks", as he called them, was an obligatory subject in all Eastern schools, because without having studied all possible counterfeits and imitations it was not possible

to begin the study of phenomena of a supernormal character. A man is in a position to distinguish the real from the sham in this sphere only when he knows all the shams and is able to reproduce them himself. Besides this G. said that a practical study of these “psychic tricks” was in itself an exercise which could be replaced by nothing else, which was the best of all for developing certain special characteristics: keenness of observation, shrewdness, and more particularly for the enlargement of other characteristics for which there are no words in ordinary psychological language but which must certainly be developed. (86)

- o There are certain types of exercises which are very complicated as they involve very complex movements and the operation of persistent and sustained attention.

I will return to the physical exercises we carried out at that time. G. showed us the different methods that were used in schools. Very interesting but unbelievably difficult were exercises in which a whole series of consecutive movements were performed in connection with taking the attention from one part of the body to another.

For instance, a man sits on the ground with knees bent and holding his arms, with the palms of the hands close together, between his feet. Then he has to lift one leg and during this time count: *om, om, om, om, om, om, om, om, om, om*, up to the tenth *om* and then nine times *om*, eight times *om*, seven times *om*, and so on, down to one and then again twice *om*, three times *om*, and so on, and at the same time “sense” his right eye. Then separate the thumb and “sense” his left ear and so on and so on.

It was necessary first to remember the order of the movements and “sensing”, then not to go wrong in the counting, to remember the count of movements and sensing. This was very difficult but it did not end the affair. When a man had mastered this exercise and could do it, say, for about ten or fifteen minutes, he was given, in addition, a special form of breathing, namely, he must inhale while pronouncing *om* several times and exhale pronouncing *om* several times; moreover the count had to be made aloud. Beyond this there were still greater and greater complications of the exercise up to almost impossible things. And G. told us he had seen people who *for days* did exercises of this kind. (87)



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