

Gurdjieff's sources

Nikos Kazanas (6/6/2026)

0. Recently I chanced on an old article by Victoria Lepage on “*Gurdjieff & Sufis*” in the magazine *New Dawn*, 107, March–April 2008. Why some people with very little knowledge embark on such a subject is strange. Others too have produced publications on this very subject but without adducing any evidence for their claims. Gurdjieff and Ouspensky did warn about people dreaming and having all sorts of fantasies. I wrote to the *New Dawn* that the article was unreliable, but they showed no interest. So, I decided to put on show once again my own research which reveals a very different story.

1. I find it difficult to understand G’s “*mission*” about which so much fuss has been created by successors and students. It is equally difficult to understand why G was, at least as some published accounts indicate, always short of time and in a hurry to fulfil this mission.

One of John Bennett’s last books while in life was *Gurdjieff - The Making of a New World* (1973, Turnstone, London). There were many other publications with his name after his death, edited by loyal students or members of his family. Most of these refer to periods and activities of JB before that year.

In this book JB gives various definitions of G’s mission. One is “*to awaken mankind to the ‘Terror of the Situation’ [i.e. automatism, identification, materialism, negativeness, sleep, population explosion, resource exhaustion, pollution, revolt of the deprived, etc.] and...[prepare] helpers who can join with him in spreading the message*” (108). Elsewhere, according to G, our “*salvation*”, the welfare of mankind and “*the evolution of the earth and the solar system, are intimately linked together in the universal transformation upon which the maintenance of the World depends*” (271).

2. Before delving deeper into this “*mission*” one should examine the sources of G’s teachings. On this JB devotes 57 pages.

In an earlier paper I showed that one source must have been the Vedic Tradition of India since bodily postures and breath exercises come from the Yoga system. Self-remembering, again, was a basic and central practice of G’s teaching; he in fact removed A.R. Orage from leading the students in America because Orage had neglected to press upon the students this practice. This too is an integral part of the Vedic Tradition. (I shall return to this later.)

However, JB focuses on the Khwajagān Masters of Wisdom, Sufis of Central Asia (= Turkey, Persia, Turkestan, Afghanistan, Tibet, N-W China), and the Naq’shband orders (= “*symbolist*”, p42) of the same Sufi communities. This may well be very true. I know very little about Sufism and am now too old to study the subject as seriously as it deserves.

3. However, it should be noted that G remained reticent about his sources: his rather playful and hardly serious narrations in the *Tales of Beelzebub to his Grandson* (1st Series of *All and Everything*) and in the *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (2nd Series) cannot be taken at face value for the simple reason that G jokes endlessly, while the *Tales of Beelzebub* is (science-) fiction full of myths. Also, for the reason that there is no independent testimony (nobody else confirms any of this).

It is well known now that in 1972 JB hosted the Sufi sage Hasan Lutfi Shushud (1901-1988) who was one of the Masters of Sufism and followed the Path of self-annihilation (Itlak) with its principal practices of deliberate suffering, fasting and *zikr* (= breathing exercises and prayer). He objected to JB’s contention that G had contacted that tradition, established in the 12th century CE (= AD). And for this reason, broke his cooperation with JB on the production of that book.

4. In the early 1960’s JB had come under the spell of Idries Shah, another “*Master of Sufism*” who actually produced a document that G had been with the Sufis of Central Asia.

This of course is highly suspect. Anybody could produce a “*document*” proving anything

provided no independent testimony is demanded. Then, why take this to JB who was known in the Gurdjieff world to be erratic and unreliable? Why not present the document to the acknowledged authority who was Madam Jeanne de Salzmann?

Moreover, Idries Shah and his brother influenced Robert Graves, the famous Oxford scholar, and published a new translation of the *Rubayat* of Omar Khayyam as though it was a Sufi work, according to an ancient manuscript that was in Shah's family for many centuries.

Expert orientalist decided, after a heated controversy, in the early 1970's that this was a hoax - and the manuscript was never produced by the Shah brothers to prove their claim. (Graves reputation suffered abominably and he died in shame.)

5. G mentions in his own writings the community of Sarmoun (Sarmān or Sarmoung) which is projected back to the time of Zoroaster and even Babylon at the time of Hammurabi (1800-1750 BCE) and later with Pythagoras (500 BCE: J Bennett: 1975 *Gurdjieff - Making a New Word* ch.3). The only problem is that nothing at all is known about the Sarmoun Brotherhood in those ancient times. The documents mentioned by G in *Beelzebub's Tales* and *Meetings with Remarkable Men* are sheer fiction not reality. However, it is very probable that G borrowed dances, music and much else from Sufi, Zoroastrian and other traditions in the Near East and Central Asia. These have not been identified as yet and probably cannot be identified now.

6. JB connects the idea of the Inner Circle with a permanent tradition or "brotherhood" of Wise Masters (= Sarmoun, Naq'shbandis, Khwajagan etc.) which he finds also in Buddhism with the Arhants and Bodhisattvas and the Tibetan Lamas (p25).

Unfortunately, his scholarship is abysmally sloppy. Despite his statement about Buddhism, on p26 he writes "*Strangely enough the tradition of the Masters is almost unknown in India*". He does not explain the force of the adverb "almost" nor of the "Masters". For, apart from the fact that Buddhism is an Indic product, this tradition is preeminently known in India from the earliest times of the *Rgveda* hymns and the subsequent lists of teachers and divine Incarnations in many texts.

On p29 he refers to Zoroaster as being of the 6th cent. BCE whereas he is much-much earlier. Then, he states that earliest hymns of the Aryan people contain evidence that they were composed "*in the far north ten thousand years ago*".

These hymns of the Aryan people are either the Rigvedic sūktas (Indic) or the Avestan gathas (Iranian/Persian) and neither contain "*convincing evidence of having been composed in the far north*". There are references to the North and the Pole, but that is all. The Rigvedic hymns were composed in the larger area of what is today N-W India and Pakistan including the Indus and the lost Sarasvati and Seven Rivers: hence the many references to saptasindhu (= seven-rivers) with some names that are still in use! The Avestan gathas were composed in S-E Persia moving North-westward in what is today Iran!

7. On p67, to change the subject, Bennett tells us that "*The science of numbers, in the widest sense, originated in Mesopotamia...*" He obviously ignores the work of American mathematician and historian of science A. Seidenberg (1962, 1978 *The Origin of Mathematics in Archive for History of Exact Sciences* vols 1,18 and others) who postulates that the Maths in the Indian *Śulba-sūtras* is much earlier than Mesopotamian and Greek.

Then Bennett gives the Pythagoreans as source. On p59 he tells us that according to Iamblichus (ch4) Pythagoras, whose style of living G followed, spent 12 years in Babylon evidently not being aware that Iamblichus lived 700 years after Pythagoras and is as fond of myth-making as Gurdjieff and Bennett himself. And how could G's Institute and general mode of living be like that of Pythagoras (same page) when the Pythagoreans were vegetarians whereas G loved lamb, fish and like delicacies!

Moreover, nowhere does he mention the Orphics who were older and more secretive than the Pythagoreans, nor the Eleatics who, like the Orphics, spread as far north as the eastern shore of Bulgaria.

When JB calls the Sumerians “*the older Indo-European race*”, I wonder if he had the slightest correct idea about the Indo-Europeans. Indo-European is a family of languages - Greek, Italic, Germanic, Celtic, Iranian, Sanskrit, Slavonic etc. but certainly not Sumerian!

8. If JB had delved only a little deeper into his subject and asked expert orientalists, he would have found out that A Von Kremer refers in his study of Islamic Civilisation (1873) to a version of the Indic *Kāmarūpa Seed-syllables* or *Forms of desire*, mentioned for its breathing and other yogic practices in a 14th century Persian Encyclopedia.

In fact, with luck, he would have also found out that the Indic *Amṛta Kunda* ‘*Pool of Nectar*’ (with yogic breathing, meditative and other practices) was translated into Persian in 1210 (first in Bengali and afterwards into Arabic & Turkish), and then became a “best-seller” among Muslim spiritual circles.

Apart from all this, the Naths or Kanpathas, followers of Guru Goraknath, were known among Muslims early on (from the 13th cent) and during the Delhi Sultanate, then rose in political power in the 16th century.

So, Sufism has spiritual practices derived from the rich Indic Vedic culture as well as aspects of Buddhism.

9. Let me repeat again that we have no means of ascertaining the immediate sources of G’s teaching and that it is very probable that he had direct contacts and tuition from Sufi spiritual communities of one form or another. There is also evidence that G went to Tibet where he received Buddhist influences. Buddhism is an unorthodox offshoot of the Vedic Tradition in philosophy and religion. But since Buddhism seemed in some formulations to dismiss the element of “*Self*” (Atman) it is difficult to see what G could have had from it since his central practice was ‘*self-remembering*’ – which is an important practice in the Indic system Vedānta.

10. As many have observed, one definite source of G’s teaching was the Eastern Orthodox (Greek, Russian, Armenian) Christianity. G’s book *All & Everything* begins in the clearly Christian prayer “*In the name of our Father and of the Son and in the name of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*”

G was brought up in the Christian faith and remained a Christian to his last breath. His earliest teachers, apart from his parents and grandmother (all Christian), were the dean of Kars Cathedral in Armenia and a priest who later became the abbot of an Essene monastery. His funeral and burial were performed according to the Russian Orthodox Church.

The programme at the Institute in Prieuré, its power and aim, were in G’s few words to “*help one to be able to be a Christian*”!

11. JB provides, if it is to be believed, solid and official evidence that G had been in Delhi: in 1920 he received as a British Intelligence Officer in Constantinople a dispatch from Delhi warning of the dangerous Russian agent, George Gurdjieff. But Bennett does not give us a date for G’s presence in Delhi.

However, we can follow a different and more profitable procedure. This is to examine various “*fragments*” of G’s teaching - which fragments obviously derive from an unknown Whole System.

Earlier I mentioned the practice of “*self-remembering*”, which is found in the tradition of the Śankarācāryas in India - and certainly that of the North. This may be found in Muslim or Sufi practices but I don’t know them and since nobody (e.g., Bennett) mentions it, I take it that it is not to be found there.

12. The Enneagram also has an important place in G’s teaching. It is a very significant “*fragment*”. Bennett speculates that it goes back to Sumer and G places it in the Sarmoun Brotherhood but neither of them gives any evidence for this assertion. Nothing like it has been found in Sumer or the Sarmouns.

On the other hand, in India we find the Circle of Nine Points with *Brahman* ‘Absolute’ at 1; *Parā* (or *Avyaktā*) *Prakṛti* ‘Unmanifest Nature’ at 2; *Aparā* (or *Vyaktā*) *Prakṛti* ‘Manifest Nature’ at 3; *Mahat-tattva* ‘Great being/essence’ at 4; *Ākāśa* ‘Ether/space’ at 5; *Vāyu* ‘Air’ at 6; *Agni* (or *Tejas*) ‘Fire’ at 7; *Āpas* (or *Jala*) ‘Water(s)’ at 8; *Bhūmi* (or *Pr̥thivī*) ‘Earth’ at 9. The sequence can be reversed with Earth at 1, Water(s) at 2 and so on.

One finds other schemes in the Purāṇas, the *lokās* ‘cosmoses’: *bhūr-loka* ‘earth’; *bhuvar* ‘space above earth’; *svar* ‘sky-light’ (Indra’s Kingdom); *mahar* ‘world beyond polar star’; *janar* ‘world of rebirth’ (of Sanatkumar and other sons of Brahmā ‘creator-god’); *tapar* ‘world of pure being(s)’; *satya/brahma-loka* ‘abode of Truth’, ‘unchanging and no-rebirth’. There are others.

13. Various exercises are mentioned in Ouspensky’s *In Search of the Miraculous* and other books. Breathing exercises are paralleled in India with *prāṇāyama* the ‘breath-aspect’ of Yoga; exercises of sense control with *pratyāhāra*; exercises of attention and concentration with *dhāraṇā*; meditative practices with *dhyāna* ‘meditation’. All these are parts of the *aṣṭāṅga* “eightfold” yoga, found also in Vedānta.

Ouspensky mentions another interesting exercise (p351, *In Search...*) calling it “circular sensation”: a man lies down on his back and senses first his nose, then his right ear, right hand, right foot, left foot, left hand, left ear and back to his nose. This is found in a much more complex and effective form in yoga and other Vedic systems: the man lies down on his back but in the *śava-āsana* “corpse position” and directs his attention again circularly right to left sensing many more spots (60 at least!) which are, in fact, centres of energy.

14. Let me examine some more affinities between G’s teaching and the Vedic Tradition in India. The Vedic Tradition starts with the *sūktas* ‘hymns’ of the Ṛgveda and passes through many phases and many forms of expression (the poetic and prose Upanishds; the texts in *sūtra* ‘brief, pregnant formulations’; epic like the vast *Mahābhārata* etc.).

In G’s *Beelzebub’s Tales to his Grandson*, we meet repeatedly the principle *Trogoautoegocrat* – a term made up for the occasion by G from Modern Greek meaning ‘I eat myself and so maintain myself’. (JB got this right on p191 and p 275 but the verb is **cratō** not *cratizo*, as he puts it).

This is the simple fact that every level of being in the Ray of Creation, at every level of Cosmos, is food for another. The elements air, fire, water etc. feed on one another; plants feed on them; animals feed on plants and higher on lower ones; man feeds on organic life; gods (celestial bodies) feed on man; and so on.

15. In the Indic *Bṛhadāranyaka* Upanishad we read (1.3.17-18) that *prāṇa* ‘the vital power breath’ gathers food and the other powers (*devās* ‘gods’) say ‘The whole world is nothing but food’. And in 1.4.6 – “Food and eater; such is the extent of this entire world”. In 6.2.12: “*In that fire [i.e., man’s organism] gods offer food and from that offering arises semen*” – which becomes man in a woman. However, 3.8.8 declares that the Absolute “does not eat anything and nobody eats It”.

Man transforms energy, fine or gross, by eating and being eaten. Common man produces semen (*retas*). Superior man produces higher energy (*ojas*).

16. Another important idea (and reality) in G’s teaching is that of the three bodies which the Self has in his embodiment in this world. This could come from Paul’s Epistle to the Corinthians (15.42-49): the carnal (of earth), the soul (= mind), the spirit. But G expounds the idea using the image of the carriage – all given beautifully in Ouspensky’s *In Search of the Miraculous* p41 ff. There is the Divine body which is the Master, the supreme Self or “I” and “*Will*” (which he terms “*causal*”). This has the carnal body (= carriage), the astral or natural (= horses), and the spiritual or mental (= driver). All this is imprecise and confused drawing terms from different traditions.

This image is missing in Christianity and Islamic sources. But it is found in a somewhat different form in Plato’s *Phaidros* 246AC.

The *Kaṭha* Upanishad of the Vedic Tradition gives a more precise and elegant picture (3.1-9): The Self is the master, the passenger; the *buddhi* ‘higher intellect’ is the driver; *manas* ‘ordinary intellect’ is the reins; the desiring senses are the horses; the carnal body is the carriage; the roads are the objects of the senses. “When a man has real understanding with *buddhi* as driver and *manas* as reins and the senses obey the driver, then he reaches that high state from which there is no rebirth”.

17. Generally, in the Indian philosophical schools the bodies are given as follows: ātman, the Self, the Master; kāraṇa śarīra ‘causal/spiritual body of one’s nature’; sūkṣma ‘subtle mental body, soul’; sthūla śarīra ‘the gross carnal body’.

Perhaps even more telling is the term “*Fourth Way*” as distinct from the ways of the fakir, monk and yogi of Gurdjieff (p44-6, *In Search...*). These reflect rather clumsily the three ancient ways in the Indian culture of Karma ‘action’ (which you can follow without being a fakir), of bhakti ‘devotion’ (which you can follow without being a monk) and of *jñāna* (or *buddhi*), the way of ‘knowledge’ (which you can follow without being a yogi).

However, it is said generally (in Vedānta especially) that if a householder (one in common life) **follows one or all three without personal desire**, he obtains all the puṇya ‘merit’ of any celibate monk or yogi. This is the 4th way where the aspirant does not have to change his condition or mode of living (provided it is not criminal) in the world.

18. Consequently, it seems that the whole integral system is present in the Vedic Tradition of India. One may claim that the Cristian tradition was the main source. Another, that the Sufi tradition was. But any claim must be substantiated by affinities – many and strong affinities, and documentation. Referring generally to ancient or modern or secret texts, that are unavailable, is not satisfactory or acceptable.

I am not saying that G stayed and studied very long in any school in India. If he had, his teaching would have been different and cast in a very different terminology. But the different strands and elements (the fragments of an unknown teaching) that make it up must have come perhaps in part from India and from traditions and systems that probably originated in large part or wholly in the Vedic Tradition of India.