

THE BODY AND ITS USES

The Gurdjieff System

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WE CAN BE AWARE OF BEING PRESENT “here and now”. This awareness may be experienced indirectly as a thought “about” presence and it can also be experienced directly “as” presence. The second mode is irreducible to any simpler or more immediate mode of experiencing. Thus a tooth-ache is “here and now” and does not refer to anything but itself. We should, therefore, regard bodily self-awareness as a primary element of experience that is prior to knowledge of anything at all. In this light, Dr. Johnson’s “refutation” of Berkeley is not to be sneezed at, for it demonstrates that there are modes of apprehending reality that have nothing to do with ideas.

“Presence” or awareness of bodily “here and now” is important, not only for philosophy but even more so for the practical understanding of how man works. From awareness of presence we can arrive, still without mental concepts, at awareness of posture, of movements and of instrumental acts. We can, for example, “know how” without “knowing what.”

Another starting point which dispenses with “knowing what” and hence with mental concepts or images, is awareness of “willing”. We observe that our attention is directed to a physical sensation and that we may respond to this automatically, and perhaps “unwillingly”, or we may respond to it consciously by a volitional act. We can do this without either knowing how or knowing what. In such a case, we also observe that it is the bodily organism that acts and not the “mind.”

A third example of the direct and immediate significance of the body is its role as our sole instrument of expression and communication. We tend to identify communication with verbal language; but it is the vocal apparatus of the body that produces sounds and the hand that writes. The spoken and the written word are only a small part of communication. The entire body communicates through gestures and postures and also less obviously by hidden tensions and relaxations which influence the bodies of others in the vicinity. Sights and smells communicate and both are emitted and received by the body. Only a very small part of the total act of communication is determined—even indirectly—by thoughts and mental images.

From such considerations, it should be obvious that the body is an element of decisive importance for understanding human behaviour, for regulating it and increasing its efficiency. Three earlier papers in this journal have discussed the significance of posture for the right functioning of the human entity. Feldenkrais¹ in particular, has emphasized the intimate link between bodily postures and gestures and the pattern of emotional reactions. All agree that modern men fail to make the best and fullest use of the bodily powers.

In the present paper, I shall attempt to describe the theories and methods of G. I. Gurdjieff² in the domain of the human body and its most effective use.

The starting point we shall adopt is that the body is to be regarded as an instrument to be used for a great variety of purposes and in nearly all circumstances, and not merely as a set of specialized organs of affection and effection. This total instrument can be used to that advantage only if its operations are understood by the user himself and if he knows how to develop its powers to their highest efficiency and maintain them in good order. To illustrate the total significance of the body, Gurdjieff proposes various experiments capable of being performed and verified by anyone interested. The postures and gestures of the body are linked

to the states of the nervous system including the cerebral cortex. Our thoughts affect our postures and conversely our postures influence our thoughts. We think differently if we sit, stand walk, or recline. Set yourself four problems requiring equal mental concentration and measure the time taken to solve them under the four conditions: the four times will disclose a pattern of psycho-somatic correspondence that is characteristic of the individual. The experiment must, of course, be repeated many times to give reproducible mean values; but even a few trials are sufficient to demonstrate the dependence of thought processes on bodily posture.

Other experiments familiar since the work of Darwin³ Mantegazza⁴, C. Lange⁵ and William James⁶, demonstrate the intimate connection between bodily gestures and expressions and the states of feeling. Feldenkrais⁷ describes the pattern of innervation by which the mind, emotions and body interact. Gurdjieff⁸ has stated that postures and movements invariably correspond to patterns of “Mutually-balanced tension”, “lines of movement” and “Points of dynamic concentration” and that these three elements combine to make all bodily gestures significant and therefore a means of communication. These notions lead to the conclusion that efficiency in all departments of human activity must be linked to right working of the body not only in its physiological but also in its motor and expressive functions. Gurdjieff did much pioneering work in this field and even regarded himself primarily as a “teacher of dancing”.⁹

The body is concerned in several groups of functions:

1. Instinctive. Postures and gestures influence the tone of the nervous system and the distribution of blood flow. The methods of Hatha Yoga are based upon observations made over the centuries regarding the effect of various postures (asanas) in regulating the activity of the physiological processes. The same results can be obtained with greater ease by appropriately devised rhythmic exercises. These require specialized knowledge. Some athletic and gymnastic exercises (Swedish gymnastics for example), which develop the voluntary muscles, can be very harmful to the inner organs. Premature senility observed in some athletes is attributable to malfunctioning of this kind. (*cf. Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, p. 447. “Owing to that maleficent sport of theirs, these unfortunates diminish the duration of their own existence”.) The overall tone and vitality of the organism is associated with the right distribution of the vital energies¹⁰ When this is normal, the individual not only feels healthy, but is aware of his or her own “presence” as an overall proprioceptive sensation. Gurdjieff taught a series of exercises designed to develop and stabilize this right distribution of energies and the accompanying sense of being “present” in one’s own body. These exercises are obligatory for all students following his system of self-development. At a more advanced stage, movements are introduced that produce rhythmic contractions and relaxations to stimulate the activity of the liver, spleen, and digestive organs. The beneficial effect of these movements when executed under the direction of an experienced teacher is quickly apparent.

2. Motor. The primary need here is the co-ordination of afferent and efferent nerve impulses. This cannot be achieved by static postures and requires suitably designed exercises. These make demands upon the attention of the student who has to stretch to the utmost his hearing, seeing, proprioceptive sensation and the power of independent movement of the arms, legs, head and torso. The purpose of movements of this character is to develop overall skill in the use of the body and to achieve independence of mind and body. The motor functions of man can be developed for specific skills. This development can reach extraordinary degrees in athletes, musicians, surgeons and other specialists; but

very little is known and still less is done about the overall development of the motor function. Gurdjieff attached great importance to this and particularly to the transfer of skills. For this a high degree of independent control of the body and limbs must be worked for. Complicated movements are introduced to achieve a progressive liberation of the voluntary muscles from the habitual interlinkings that prevent independent voluntary control. Such exercises are combined with training in manual skills e.g. in carpentry, metal-working, cooking, etc., and the fine arts. The objective in all these exercises is to increase the “power of embrace” of the attention and thereby increase the scope of consciously coordinated bodily actions. Some of the exercises are very complicated requiring independent movements of the four limbs and the torso, often very difficult to execute because calling for muscular adjustments to which the students are quite unaccustomed.

3. Intellectual. The uses of the mind by means of verbal signs and other symbols are usually well developed in modern education. The use of mental images, though widely advocated, is seldom successfully taught in schools and colleges. According to our reading of the problem, the failures are due to neglect of the role of the body in image formation. The process of learning new and complicated movements is greatly accelerated if the students make use of the power to form a mental image of the structure of the movement as a whole. Usually, such visualization is deceptive because its accuracy cannot be verified; but where the image has to be converted directly into bodily gestures and postures, errors are immediately apparent. Mental images here include not only use of visual imagery, but also postural or structural imagination. These exercises have proved beneficial for scientists in strengthening the power to represent complex situations without the use of diagrams and symbols. By eliminating such aids to representation the mental activity becomes both more direct and more flexible. Different intellectual activities—probably associated with different regions of the brain—tend to be confused, with resulting loss of efficiency. Thus, association of ideas commonly interferes with image formation, and both with creative insight. By occupying the centres responsible for association and imagery with appropriate exercises, the creative regions of the mind are liberated. This is done by extending and complexifying the type of exercise above cited to include problem solving under different conditions of bodily activity. Students report a remarkable increase in the flow of insight and creative ideas after a course of training in movements of this type.

4. Feelings and Emotions. The intimate link between emotional states and bodily postures, gestures and movements has been mentioned earlier. Gurdjieff goes beyond James-Lange and Feldenkrais, and suggests that every gesture has a double significance, expressing some universal character and also the personal state of the man who makes it. (*cf.* J.G. Bennett. *The Crisis In Human Affairs*. Hodder & Stoughton, 1948. pp. 118-120 and 185-7 for a discussion of “gesture languages.”) Since people in general are not aware of the significance of their gestures and bodily postures they produce the equivalent to noise, that is unrelated vibrations which carry no meaning. According to this view, one true function of dance and mime is to express by gesture and to communicate without the use of conceptual speech. Schools have arisen in many parts of the world that claim to put into operation the principle of significant gesture: but, according to Gurdjieff, this was achieved in South-West and Central Asia in the remote past and much has been preserved up to our time in monasteries and temples—particularly those of various Sufi orders. He claimed to have been admitted to many of these centres and to have built up from personal

experiences a system of training by means of gesture, movement, music and dance that develops all the human powers in a harmonious and progressive sequence. The required action upon the centres of feeling and emotion is not to be achieved directly. This is explained by the character of the autonomic nervous system. (Formerly the autonomic or involuntary nervous system was supposed to have little connection with the cerebral cortex. There is now seen to be a potential for integration that can be realized by appropriate exercise.) This is balanced between the sympathetic and parasympathetic or vagus ganglia, which are the physiological basis of the typical polar—like-dislike, pleasure-pain, expansion-contraction—mechanism of the emotions. In order to be free and wholly effective men and women, we must learn how to bring this mechanism under conscious control. This cannot be done by a direct mental effort, because the autonomic system does not respond to cortical stimulation. It is, therefore, necessary to bring the motor system into action and this is precisely what is done by gestural training and development. When dance and mime are taught for amusement or for show, they do not develop the power to control and direct the feelings and can even increase emotional instability. This is one reason why Gurdjieff insisted upon the need to avoid confusing the different uses that can be made of gesture training. We are primarily concerned here with its use in achieving a balanced development of the mental and physical powers of man. This is a field that has been little explored in the West; although according to tradition, it has been known for thousands of years not only in Asia, but also in Africa and Oceania.

5. *The Will.* By “will” we mean the ability to choose between alternative possibilities that are presented to the consciousness. Choice is not an activity, and will has rightly been rejected as a faculty or power of the mind. It is not to be included among the functions of the body. Will, according to our view, is a reality, but it is not of the same nature as thought, feeling and sensation. It is not a process but an act that initiates or triggers off a process. This act may be strong or weak, and can be developed by exercise. Since it is the condition of all voluntary control of the human mechanism, its effectiveness is a measure of the ability of the human being to cope with his problem. Hence, training of the will must always be a necessary part of any system of education and development. The simplest exercise of the will is in the use of the body through the voluntary muscles. Everyone knows that some reflex actions can be resisted and that some actions can also be initiated without sensory stimulation. Starting from here it is possible to build up a series of exercises that develop the will, through overcoming distaste, habit, fatigue and other inhibitions or stimulations. With this also, comes work on “attention.” We regard attention as a property of will and not of thought, feeling or sensation. There can thus be strong attention and weak attention. The development and control of attention increases efficiency, by strengthening the will. Movements can be devised that make graduated demands upon the attention. They consist in the use of independent gestures, postures and rhythms executed by the arms, feet and head and torso; i.e., all limbs of the body controlled by voluntary muscles. The value of this technique goes beyond the development of the power to control and co-ordinate bodily movement. It develops self-confidence and a sense of inner freedom and balance. Students find that their ability to resist negative impulses and to direct their actions positively increases.

6. *Spontaneity and Creativity.* Creativity in man depends upon a non-volitional element of our experience: the spontaneous and unexpected arising of thought, images and insights that cannot be ascribed to any preceding causal process. Without creativity man would be a

machine, or at best, an animal. We must ask, therefore, if the use of bodily exercises can in any way promote creativity. (For a discussion of creativity in terms of energies see the author's book, *Energies: Material, Vital and Cosmic*, Coombe Springs Press, 1964. pp. 87 et seq.)

There are two ways in which beneficial results have been obtained. One is the practice of deep relaxation leading to the state of mental stillness. The other is the practice of discovering for oneself the significance of gestures. When a student learns to make a sequence of significant gestures very precisely without having been told what they are intended to convey, he begins to discover this meaning for himself.

This meaning "awareness" arises spontaneously in the mind and it has the same character as recognition of creative impulses. When the two techniques are combined, it is found that a marked increase in the ability to notice, recognize and interpret creative impulses can be achieved. This is interesting, because it probably shows that creativity is much more common in man than is usually supposed: but fails often to be recognized and used. These exercises must not be practiced in a competitive or exhibitionist spirit, otherwise success in one direction is counter-balanced by deterioration in another. The desire for notice and praise is a weakness that readily creeps into this kind of work and must be watched by the teacher, who must be able to recognize the symptoms in himself or herself. The kind of exercise that is beneficial for one purpose may, if not compensated, do harm in another direction. The work affects all the powers of man and also his will. It is beneficial to the health both physiologically and psychologically as it helps to break down and eliminate bad habits and it develops the higher powers of attention, judgment, and creativity. Nevertheless, it must also be admitted that it is very dependent for success upon highly trained and skilled teachers and this is bound to be a limitation upon its general usefulness. The human mechanism is so complex and so highly integrated that it is seldom safe to interfere with one part without knowing the consequential effects upon several others. This applies even more to dynamic exercise such as outlined in this note, than to more static methods such as described in earlier papers. (This short note is intended only to indicate the scope and complexity of the problem of making the fullest use of the bodily, as distinct from the mental, powers.)

1. (a) Rolf, Ida P., *Systematics*, Vol 1, No. 1, June, 1963.—Structural Integration. (b) Carrington, W. H. M., Vol I, No. 3, December, 1963.—The F. Mathias Alexander Technique. (c) Feldenkrais, M., Vol. 2, No. 1, June, 1964.—Mind and Body.
2. *cf.* an earlier article by Professor Roy Finch, *Systematics*, Vol 1, No. 4.—Gurdjieff and the Modern Spirit
3. Darwin, Charles (1881), *The Expression of Emotions In Animals and Man*. pp. 290-2.
4. Mantegezza, Paris, 1885, *La Physiognomie et L'expression des Sentiments*
5. Lange, C., Leipzig, 1887, *Uber Gemutsbewegungen*
6. James, William, 19???. *Principles of Psychology*. Vol 2, Chapter 25. pp. 442-485
7. Feldenkrais, M., 1949, *Body and Mature Behaviour*. pp. 83-95.
8. Gurdjieff, G. I. 1950. *All and Everything*, Chapter 30. Art. pp. 475-6
9. Gurdjieff, G. I., *loc cit* p. 50.
10. Bennett, J. G., 1964, *Energies—Material, Vital, and Cosmic*, pp 15 and 66. [133]