

# THE TEACHERS OF GURDJIEFF

*by*  
**Rafael Lefort**



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# Foreword

*by Spencer Richardson*

## Foreword

There have been many metaphors that describe the spiritual expedition. Think of it this way: if you've got cataracts in your eyes, obscuring your sight, what you need is some way to get them removed. What you don't need is hearing about others' descriptions of what they have seen, in some other place, at some other time. Or, worse, their ideas about what they were seeing.

*The Teachers of Gurdjieff*, a tale of an expedition, was published 47 years ago, and when it was first issued, the book made a very considerable stir. George Gurdjieff was one of the most famous mystics before the war (he died in the late '40s saying, as is usually reported, "I leave you all in a fine mess," but those who were there reliably inform me that he used the word "merde" in his departing remarks) and a teaching master who had many fashionable and influential pupils. He had a striking appearance and manner of teaching; one that was to prove influential. The meaning of his teaching, and the sources of it, were a puzzle. How did he come by his knowledge? What was to become of it? These were questions that engaged many seekers.

Yet, with the rapidly-changing focus of our era in all things, least not spiritual, this is, in some real part, a book of another time. From the time of Gurdjieff's operations to the early '70s, many in the West were discovering, for the first time, the older religious and spiritual traditions of the East. After his death, Gurdjieff's followers were running groups in "the fourth way"; travelers set out to India,

Tibet, Japan, Turkey and other parts East to find their “perfect masters.”

Some did, Indian yogis had their adherents, Zen Buddhists, Tibetan Buddhists, sonoran shamen, and the rest. Schools began, seekers sought and found, sought again, found again.

But that “lost and found” era is gone, and for many it is a sign of maturity; for others, it will always be a nostalgic, adventurous era.

Now, every technique is available, and exposed on the table, and anybody can connect with anything at any time. Want Tibet or yoga, go to the net. Want to find a diet for enlightenment, just go there or the gigantic self-help section of a bookstore or a health food or alternative therapy association. The bounds are broken, no longer do we have to reject conventional religion or therapy, we can just add on.

The Multicult era is here.

For lack of a coherent framework, with the wholesale exodus from the traditional sources, new combinations spring up—a bit of yoga, perhaps some Zen meditation, a look at the doctrines, freshly translated of Zoroaster, the millennial revival of interest, of course, in Jesus. I’ve spoken to groups who are looking for a new amalgamating of spirituality in a combination of Taoism, the early works of Castaneda, and Plato’s dialogue, “The Meno.”

On a more intellectual level, many groups today are interested in putting together the “best” of the translations of different traditions, with an eye to selecting the parts thought most relevant, or, even, the craze a few years ago for “late works” esoteric interpretations of Shakespeare’s

“Cymbeline,” Cezanne’s penetration into vision, and perhaps John Coltrane’s music. And in this multicult market, the possibilities are endless, highly intellectual, highly emotional, highly sensual. How many different forms of yoga, Zen, philosophy are there, and how many philosophies, spiritual exercises and techniques, and is a lifetime, your lifetime, enough to find a right combination?

Or is the answer closer at home? What does this book offer now? I’ll give a few examples here.

Here’s a quote, which could describe the contemporary multi-seeker going from technique to technique, tradition to tradition, teacher to teacher, experience to experience:

“You are scrabbling about in the sand, attracted by pieces of mica to knit together and make a window, not realising that the sand itself is capable of being transformed into the purest glass.”

This book is laden with ideas, sparks, some stories that may serve as parables, but one that is fun as an adventure, as well as containing insights for anybody interested in contemporary spirituality. Lefort is asked:

‘Are you prepared to leave the world as you know it and live in a mountain retreat on a very basic diet?’

I signified that I was.

‘You see,’ he nodded his head regretfully, ‘you still feel that to find knowledge you must seek a solitary life away from impure things. This is a primitive attitude and one satisfactory for savages. Do you not realise that a sophisticated path of development keeps pace with the requirements of the present day? Can you comprehend the uselessness of abandoning the world for the sake of your selfish development? ... There is nothing ‘impure’

about reasonable worldly activity provided you do not allow it, nay invite it, to corrupt you. If you have enough skill you can actually harness the negative forces to serve you ... but you must have enough skill.'

Another confusion regards the use of spiritual literature. Over time, texts that have use in "removing cataracts" become blunted, made more "regular" and acceptable, and often degenerate into some kind of renegade cosmology or schematics. But many teaching texts need a different way of reading from the way one reads, say, *The New York Times*, or *Fundamentals of Hydraulic Engineering*:

'How were the texts studied?'

'By constant reading so that the different levels of meaning should be absorbed gradually. They were not read to be "understood" as you understand the term but to be absorbed into the very texture of your conscious being and your inner self. In the West the intellectual teaches that you must understand a thing to profit from it. Sufi lore places no reliance upon such a clumsy thing as your superficial ability. The *baraka* seeps in, often despite you, rather than being forced to wait upon the doorstep until your "intellect" permits it to filter through in an attenuated form.'

And, as we circle the millennium, there is some striking reference to Christ, and the Christianity that took over much of the world:

Pauline Christianity, transplanted from its nursery and based upon mutilated and edited doctrine, left behind its stark realism, its esoteric teaching, and became codified

rather than experimental, moulded for the new world of tottering paganism rather than being the template for a basic, direct belief by which man could find God—perhaps in spite of himself, but find Him none the less.

Moslem mystical writers call Jesus a Prophet, a Teacher, a Messenger, and give him the rank of *Insan Kamil* or Complete Man. Many of their historians deal with his life and teachings and dwell on the esoteric side to the exclusion of much that appears in later Gospels collected a generation after his death.

This book sparks awareness, and does not always instruct in a conventional manner. Returning to the process of attaining “sight,” a story from Idries Shah’s *The Dermis Probe* (referenced, with others of Shah’s books, at the end of this work) puts it well:

### **Eyes and Light**

The Cleric Khatib Ahmed said to Salih of Merv:

‘Illuminate your abstruse subject for me, for Sufi presentations invariably remain dark when I try to approach.’

Salih of Merv observed:

‘If the blind need eyes and not light, how can a brilliant presentation seem other than dark to them?’

## Introduction

Immediately before the beginning of the First World War a man of Armenian Greek ancestry, with a background of travel, mysticism and esoterism, arrived back in Russia bringing a mystic teaching.

The man was George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff. His teaching was designed to permit, encourage or force man to develop even in spite of himself.

Passing from the 'Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man' in Tiflis, centres of study in Constantinople, Berlin and London and occasional theatrical performances of mystic dancing, he established himself, in 1922, in the Chateau du Prieuré, at Avon near Fontainebleau.

In this chateau lived, and in the case of Katherine Mansfield died, the pupils and disciples of this man variously described as the 'twentieth century Cagliostro' and 'Master'. His methods attracted wide attention and publicity, but no matter what attacks were made upon him the 'forest philosophers', as they were called, continued to attract more and more adherents.

There was no set 'ritual' or 'course'. Pupils were expected to follow instructions to the letter, read deeply of Gurdjieff's own writings and learn the complex dance and posture 'exercises'. Gurdjieff numbered among his adherents Dr. Maurice Nicoll, who had studied under Jung, P. D. Ouspensky, Kenneth Walker, Orage, editor of the in-

fluent *New Age*, Frank Lloyd Wright and a whole host of others who lived to bless, curse or forget him.

As the teaching progressed it became more and more clear that much of Gurdjieff's philosophy was based on Eastern ritual, and he himself made frequent reference to dervish practice and the names of characters familiar to students of Sufi thought. One of the most sacred pieces of music to which the 'movements' were performed was named after the Syeds or descendants of Muhammed.

In 1924 Ouspensky, who had set up groups to study what he had learned from Gurdjieff, broke with him. This break has been the cause of puzzlement and many bad guesses. However, from the sources described in this book it has been possible to obtain the true reasons for it. Gurdjieff wanted to teach Ouspensky to 'pick up' the teaching by establishing a bond between them by virtue of which the teacher could transmit to the pupil; but Ouspensky, always the correct and classic intellectual, wanted to be given the 'principles' from which to work out the most 'efficient' method. Since the system and the method of its transmission are one and the same, this intellectual process had no chance of success.

Ouspensky revolted against the 'enigmatic' character of Gurdjieff's teaching. He failed to understand that Gurdjieff could only transmit his message to those who could 'decode' the enigmas. This is standard teaching practice, but Ouspensky wanted to arrive at the basis of the teaching by 'reasoning it out' and not by the traditional and most tried, most efficient, method.

Up to Gurdjieff's death in 1949, the teaching saw all manner of ups and downs; it spread to North and South

America, but all the time seemed to lack something. After his death it marked time and became less positive with the mainspring gone. Was it the contact with the Source that it lacked? Be that as it may, from the 1950s onwards it carried on only because of the momentum Gurdjieff had given it. Movements, readings and lectures continued, and from time to time expeditions sought for contact with the Masters. They sought the Takamour and the Hudakar Monasteries, Yangi Hissar in Kashmir eluded them, and so did Kizil Jan in Turkestan. Perhaps if they had had the knowledge to understand that the transmission of the message is not a right but a privilege granted to those who merit it, need it and stand in the correct relation to the time element, they would have saved themselves much heart-burning. Perhaps, too, if they had had the knowledge to decode some of the names that Gurdjieff had given them they would have come up with Ashuk ul Haq, Hakim Beg, Bedar Karabeg, Bahauddin Evlia, Ahl Saz and others.

Years turned to decades, and the pupils of Gurdjieff and his successors found themselves no nearer their goal. Recognition had been withheld from those who claimed to have inherited Gurdjieff's mandate to teach. His pupils were restless, afraid of trusting their fate to those in whom they could repose little confidence. 'How can one,' they reasoned, 'trust in those who declare "When I am answering questions, I feel I should be the one asking the questions" and "To make one perfect man takes one hundred thousand years"?'

This, then, is the background against which my search began. It has ended so far as finding the Source of the

teaching is concerned, yet the search to find myself has just begun, but begun with confidence, direction and discipline.

R.L.

**Hakim Abdul Qader** drew reflectively on his water pipe, exhaled a long plume of acrid smoke and squinted at me through heavy lidded eyes before answering my question. ‘Yes,’ he said at length, ‘yes, I knew Jurjizada, or George Gurdjieff, as you call him. He was my pupil. But why do you seek this knowledge?’

The why and wherefore were easy enough to answer. I had studied Ouspensky, Nicoll and finally Gurdjieff; I had tried to follow the meaningless pattern of repetitive activity kept up by the inheritors of Gurdjieff’s mantle in Paris, and at length, disillusioned, had decided to seek the source or sources, school or teachers who had given him a glimpse of what man’s destiny really is, really can be.

From crank to crank, book to book, group to group I had travelled, finding always people frozen in a pattern of thought and in a way of ‘understanding’ that I found to be unproductive.

Did Gurdjieff, I asked myself, falsify the message, or invent it himself, or was it that the fragments of truth had not survived his death? Were his successors just trying to

re-create the past and live in a sterile way because that was how they interpreted what Gurdjieff had tried to tell them? I did not believe that Gurdjieff had made up all he taught. I believed that somewhere there were people who had taught him, and it was they whom I sought. My aim was to find the true source of a developmental, organically harmonious activity. It was easy to be sidetracked from this by the very monolithic nature of the 'activities' in Paris and the USA, to be blinded by their claims and brainwashed by their 'movements'. True, they spoke in the name of Gurdjieff and the 'hidden masters', but could something so unproductive be valid? I thought not.

*All and Everything* and *Meetings with Remarkable Men* had given me distinct clues that the teaching lay in the East. I had a smattering of Persian and Turkish, and it was obvious that the continent 'As Sharq' referred to by Gurdjieff was from the Arabic As Sharq or 'The East'. Coupled with his known travels in the Near East it was obvious that this was the place to start the search. I sold up my business and left for Turkey with little idea of where to start.

Frustration! 'Do you know the name Gurdjieff or Jurjizada?\*' Do you know anyone who knew him? Does anyone remember having heard about a man of such and such a description? No!

Always no! Until Adana!

\* 'Son of George' in Persian.

## CHAPTER I

# Hakim Abdul Qader

Adana, in South East Turkey, was and still is an important trade centre for goods from Syria, Lebanon, Irak and Persia. I had been referred there from Konia, centre of the Mevlavi dervishes whose patron, Jalaluddin Rumi, is buried there. The connection between Gurdjieff and the dervishes is apparent throughout his writings. Some of the movements of his dances are dervish ritual movements, while others are movements from the Moslem prayer. Konia I found to be a beautiful city, but there existed a manifest bloc between the people and myself. Although the monastic orders were suppressed in the twenties, there is a very strong 'underground' Sufi activity, and a foreigner cannot penetrate this veil.

I sought high and low, until a carpet merchant near the Tomb of Rumi advised me to go to Adana. He did not suggest any person there or any address, and may have only been trying to get rid of me, but I went nevertheless.

For several days I patrolled Adana. At long last I tackled an old weaver in the carpet serai and asked him if I could sit and watch him to learn the rudiments of his art. He demurred; Haji Abdul Qader was the master, not he. Although retired, the Haji sometimes took students.

I sought the Haji out, and after innumerable cups of coffee broached the subject of my call and added that I was

looking for traces of those men who had taught Gurdjieff. Did he know of any?

His reply made my heart skip a beat, and I hurriedly explained the reasons for my search.

‘My friend,’ he replied, ‘I am not a Sufi in the sense in which you in the West understand the word. I am what you would call a Lay Brother, and from time to time I am sent people to teach weaving. They are sent by the head of an Order to amass a certain knowledge or technique which does not appear to have a direct relationship to esoteric study. It is not my business to enquire who my pupils are or what degree of enlightenment they have. I teach them to weave carpets and they go on their way. Gurdjieff was one of such. He stayed with me one year and a day and, though not having fully mastered the art, was sent elsewhere. He was an attentive pupil, paying more attention to the colours and patterns of the carpets than to the actual weaving, but a good pupil.’

‘What did you teach him other than weaving?’ I pressed.

The Haji spread his hands. ‘Nothing more. I cannot teach that which I do not know. The lore of carpet weaving, the techniques and the marketing he learned from me. His inner life was not in my care but in the care of others. They said “Teach Jurjizada”, and this I did.’

‘Who are the “they” that sent him?’ I asked, prying further.

‘It is no secret,’ he replied. ‘The Lodge near Cape Karatas to the south. They were the disciples of Bahaddin known as the Nakshbend or Painters. They are no longer there, but in any case he must have been sent there from some-

where else because I used to go there frequently and never saw him.'

'Where would he have been sent from?'

He laughed. 'From the North or the South or the East or the West, from any of a thousand places. From another place of teaching, from another teacher. Who knows what he studied before he came to me? Perhaps falconry, music, dancing, carpentry. There is no set "course" by which you can plot a man's "career".'

'Where could the lodge have moved. . . ?' I began, and he interrupted me.

'Lodges do not move. If they have performed their function in a specific place they are dissolved, their chief being re-assigned, if you like, and the disciples scattered to other centres. If you really want to find out who the Sheikh was I can help you. It was Mulla Ali Jamal of Kerbala in Irak. Where he is now I do not know, perhaps dead, perhaps anywhere in the world.'

I took my leave of this good man regretfully, for I would have chosen to study under him if my search had been otherwise, but now the dead trail had become alive and I must follow.

As I left my hotel en route for Diyarbekir and the Irak frontier I was handed a cryptic note by the doorman.

'Remember Abdul Qadir,' it read. Mystified, I went on my way.

Certainly I would remember him, but why the note? It could mean that he wanted a reward for his information. Perhaps it meant that I should pray for him or mention his name to further contacts or. . . ?

Baghdad is not the gem of the desert as it was described in the book of Muqadassi the Arabian geographer that I had read. Admittedly he wrote in the thirteenth century, before the advent of Genghis Khan, who paid the city a visit from which it never recovered. It has had plenty of time to recover, but seemingly lacks the energy.

The main hub is Raschid Street. Walking from the former Feisal Bridge I found, at the other end, a huge building with domes, grills and cupolas. The guide book described it as the tomb of the Sufi Saint Abdul Qadir Gilani. Abdul Qadir!—was this the Abdul Qadir I was to remember? Hastening to the Semiramis Hotel, I booked a room and engaged a guide to tour the Tomb.

No non-Moslem is allowed through the massive portals of the sanctuary, which houses tomb, mosque, school and library. According to my guide, Gilani, the founder of the Qadiri Order, is venerated by all Sufis as a Great Master, and his degree of enlightenment made him a teacher of all Sufis no matter what their Order. I prowled around but could glean little. I marked down a calligrapher's shop nearby which I intended to visit the next day to buy some of the illuminated texts displayed in his window.

In the morning the shop was empty save for an urchin busy mixing inks, who spoke only Arabic. His master, he said, by dint of much pointing and waving, was in the Mosque but would be back shortly. I waited and thus found Hashim Mohamed Khattat, another teacher of Gurdjieff.

## CHAPTER 2

# Hashim Mohamed Khattat

Khattat was a mild-mannered Iraki Arab whose steely gaze and erect carriage belied his four score and nine years. He greeted me with old-world courtesy and, in broken Persian, explained that the samples of Kufic calligraphy were not for sale. He would make me others and send them to me if I had not the time to wait for their completion. Talk turned to the Shrine at Kerbala where the grandson of the Prophet Muhammed is buried, and another piece clicked into place. Hussein was the name of the grandson of the Prophet and the name of the grandson in *All and Everything*. Kerbala, home of the Sheikh of the tekia or Sufi hospice at Karatas, another name!

These thoughts, one after another, left me reeling.

I asked, 'Do you know Sheikh Ali Jamal, formerly of Karatas?'

'I knew him; he is long dead. Were you his friend?'

'No, but I seek to know of one of his pupils, Gurdjieff.'

'Why do you seek this knowledge?' The familiar question.

I explained and—pause—

'I taught Jurjizada.'

'You did! Please tell me what you taught him and how and . . .'

Hashim held up his hand. 'Stay! I taught him nothing more than my poor craft. He was under the instruction of

Sheikh Muslihuddin of Oudh, then settled in Baghdad. He spent his Thursday nights with the Seekers.'

'The Seekers?'

'The Seekers of the Truth, our group within the Qadiri order. Thursday nights we spend in meditation and exercise under the direction of Sheikh Qalamuddin of the Surkhani Brotherhood.'

'What more can you tell me of Gurdjieff? Where did he live and who were his companions?'

'He lodged with the widow Bint Ahmad near the small mosque. He came to me daily at the time of the dawn prayer and we would spend the day writing, cutting reed pens and mixing ink. We would, from time to time, walk in the gardens and the bazaars and listen to the storytellers. Gurdjieff had no Arabic and little Persian. We talked little together. Sometimes we would try to discuss the Nasreddin story that our teacher had taken as his lesson the last Thursday, or perhaps the words of the zikr or repetition. He stayed a year less one week and was gone. To Turkey, it appears.' Khattat continued, 'Little more I know. I taught Gurdjieff penmanship and know little of his life here. I could have hoped for a better pupil, but he was eager and worked hard.'

'How did he come to you?'

'He was sent to me by Sheikh Muslihuddin, whom some called Saad after his great predecessor of Shiraz. He had been in Baghdad some months before he was sent to me. I used to see him visiting the libraries and listening to the public discourses on the Koran and Hadith (traditions). He would often sketch the layout of the city, which is, of course, based on the hexagon, and more than once asked

me why the tomb of Gilani is positioned as it is in relation to the whole. It was not my place or duty to enlighten him.'

'Could you have done so?' I asked.

'For what purpose, save to hear the sound of my own voice? If he needed to know the reason he would be told or given enough information to be able to work it out. It was not up to me to arrogate to myself the duty of his master. I could have told him that Baghdad is built in the form of the enneagon with the Shrine as the ninth point, but apart from its informative value he could have not profited from this. It is not hidden knowledge but useless knowledge unless you have the capacity to use it. A donkey with a load of Rumi's books is worse off than an uneducated man with a will to learn and one leaf from the *Mathnavi*.'

'What did you think of Gurdjieff's developmental state?'

'Divining this was not my business. As I have tried to explain, I was given the task of teaching him one thing. How or if he was reacting to it more deeply was not within my competence to chart. He was following a certain definite path of instruction on which I was a mere signpost. He was eager to learn and eager to steep himself in the traditions of my art and those of the Order but how deep it went I know not. Only his teacher in the realm of interior polishing would be able to say. Do not forget, my friend, that in the realm of Sufi action there are the outer and inner activities. They may be different, but each one is important. Gurdjieff, on instructions from the Order, spent many months writing the phrase "God have Mercy". This obviously was a blend of the two, but some others are not.'

I took my leave of Khattat and wandered the streets. It was obvious that Gurdjieff had been passed from teacher

to teacher, each of whom had imparted to him some of their knowledge. I was sure that his training had been to fit him for life in the world and also in the realm of man's development. But how to knit together the tangled skeins if I could only find the artisans and not the teachers? Was there anything metaphysical to be learned from these men? Should I in turn study under them? This thought I dismissed, for it was clear that without the underlying direction that a pupil received from his spiritual master there was no good in slavishly following a pattern of mundane activity.

Disconsolate, I went over in my mind all the conversations I had had, but there was no indication. Baghdad was a centre of dervish lore, even to its layout, but it seemed that I could make no breakthrough here.

Day after day I hunted for contacts, but to no avail.

Could I be admitted to a Sufi meeting? No!

How could I be admitted? By being sent by a teacher. How could I find one? By searching.

'Where?'

'Within yourself'

'For what?'

'For direction.'

'Could I meet a master and ask him to accept me?'

'You have already met one, Hashim Mohamed.'

'But he said he was a calligrapher.'

'Sufi masters are not necessarily mysterious figures. They do not all teach "Sufism" as you know it, and through the channels that you expect. They may live in a place and work as carpenters, motor mechanics or fishermen. They go where they are sent, and perhaps wait years before a

pupil is sent to them. You have no rights on them, you cannot claim their teaching. They may not be able or permitted to teach a person of your level.'

I went back to Hashim Khattat and asked him.

'Yes,' he replied, 'I have a task here. It does not include taking on random pupils. I cannot accept you. If you want to follow the path that Gurdjieff followed out of pure curiosity or hero worship, then abandon your search, for it will profit you naught and bring you sorrow. Neither, for that matter, will following his teaching benefit you, for the Sheikh ul Mashaikh has declared that what residual *baraka*\* there was in Gurdjieff's teaching left with the beginning of the last year of the first half of your twentieth century.'

'Who is the Sheikh ul Mashaikh and where . . .' I began.

Hashim held up his hand. 'None of these questions has an answer for you. Just because you ask means nothing! Search, but let your motive be development and attunement with the Infinite, not the aping of a teaching in a rundown and sterile form as it is expressed at present. See Ali Jamal's disciple in Kerbala, Sheikh Daud Yusuf, and now please allow me to return to my work.'

I stammered my thanks and left. I could not say that things were falling into place, but only that they were a little less obscure. I must go to Kerbala.

\* Impalpable force held to be possessed only by the great Sufi masters and imparted to people, situations, places and objects for a specific reason.