

## **Conscious Labor and Intentional Suffering**

From Cynthia Bourgeault's 2019 Wisdom School at Claymont:  
Mr. Gurdjieff Meet Mr. Teilhard: Teilhard and Gurdjieff in Conversation  
Thursday Afternoon Teaching, December 5, 2019

The two real pillars of the Gurdjieffian program for conscious transformation and for conscious participation in the great Trogoautoegocrat\* are conscious labor and voluntary suffering, or intentional suffering.

And we looked a bit this morning at conscious labor and saw that it tends to niche within the cluster of practices worldwide in spiritual practice that cluster around mindfulness. It's the capacity to deliberately place and keep one's three-brained attention on what one has intended and to be fully present in the present moment, three-brained against, taking in what's going on, really widening, really widening, so that in any minute you're aware.

And you see how easy it is to get tunnel vision? Mindfulness is a learned skill of being able to expand attention in the present from an absolutely fixed point deep in the viscera of the being, somewhere around the solar plexus, so that you can hold a wide circle of everything that's going on.

And the common terminology with this in the work was and continues to be divided attention, which I've always hated, because attention is indivisible. It's seamless, and it's whole. And what happens is you don't break it up into little bits and take 25% for this and 25%. You simply stabilize your being at center and take in the whole thing with an expanding capacity to do that.

That's how it works in movements. Well, I'm going to spend a little bit of me concentrating on the hands and a little bit more on the feet, and then there's this counting, and then-- you drive yourself crazy. But there's a place in you when you're settled and attending and grounded in your being to sense the now, you can be mindful of what's in there and then begin to work creatively around that.

Conscious labor is anything that really sets a task for yourself and then moves forward to do it. It's practice. My teacher Rafe, very often, conscious labor will be taking on something that's not easy, that's a challenge. And it often works better when there, because when you can do stuff easily, you go on automatic pilot. But to actually be present, to take on something unfamiliar, out of your comfort zone, and work to remain awake, to expand attention, to move beyond like and dislike, all of these are components in conscious labor.

Intentional suffering, I would say, belongs to the spectrum of practices worldwide, spiritually, that cluster around the topic of letting be, letting go, deferring, releasing, bearing. Bearing in that wonderfully always double sense of when you bear something, when you have a bearing wall that holds something up. And when you have a bearing womb, it gives birth. And both of these capacities of bearing something are operative in intentional suffering.

So the first and most important thing to know about it is intentional suffering is not the same as stupid suffering. And there is a very, very strong line of demarcation. Stupid suffering is the kind of suffering inflicted by the frustration of our emotional programs for happiness, as we nowadays familiarly call them. There's a friend of mine who's a good Buddhist, calls it squeezing the cactus. If you set yourself up with an agenda which is patently neurotic, defensive, hostile, undigested, you're going to suffer. Because the world doesn't put up with that kind of crap. It dishes it right back. And then you're going to be miserable.

And that's not what we mean by intentional suffering. That's what Gurdjieff called stupid suffering. And it has no cosmic redemptive value whatsoever. Sorry.

Intentional suffering begins from a part of you that is non-identified and uncoopted. You don't have a dog in the fight. And out of that interior freedom, you choose to bear part of what we could think of, for lack of better terms, the pain body of sentience. Always on behalf of something larger than yourself, always as a part of the collective-- Gurdjieff's language that always still breaks my heart is to lighten the sorrow of our common father. In traditional Christian piety, this is sometimes known as sharing in the suffering of Christ. And if you get that with the intentional drift in it, you can do so.

It's to realize that there's a dread cost for anything arising at all. There's a pain. And as we've talked about before, the pain body of the planet is deep. And it's a willingness to use, to allow, sufferings that come our way, either through conditions in life or of our own choosing, to be voluntarily offered to relieve the suffering of the greater whole.

And I think in that sense, it's a very high act. I think intentional suffering actually has its origin in World 12, which is what gives it its deep heart when you touch it just right.

So it can start very simple. Gurdjieff said that the most available and easily at hand form of intentional suffering is to bear the unpleasant manifestations of another. Your roommate snoring, the nasty tick or the rasp in the voice or the way this person always presents themselves, the things that make you go, eh, to consciously, rather than reacting, correcting, scolding, negating, to bear. And from there, it just goes on.

And on the deeper manifestations, it's actually become some variation on the practices of Tonglen. These wonderful practices that we know from the Buddhist tradition, where you all intentionally breathe in and ingest into yourself part of that pain and breathe out from the goodness that flows through your own being, not of your own making, but from that vital Askokin\* that you didn't create, but is somehow temporarily residing in you, from your will, from your own charitable heart, you breathe out. Blessing, acceptance, whatever. These are all practices that fit within that spectrum.

And it should be said, too, that the circumstances for intentional suffering can grow out of circumstances not of your choosing. I mean, you can take a bad deal, a broken leg, a departed

beloved. The death of a beloved. All of these tragic losses and reversals in your life. And you can choose to use them as intentional suffering.

So you don't have to elect the circumstances. You can take something that's been thrown onto your plate and make of that intentional suffering by your attitude towards it, by your responses to it. So you don't have to start by saying, well, now how am I going to go out and find something to intentionally suffer about?

One of the people I know who is one of my spiritual heroes is a woman who was in our Minnesota group, while the Minnesota group was still viable. And she drew one of the ultimate bad luck cards. She had two aging parents who simultaneously showed symptoms of rapidly escalating dementia. So one of them she could have put, perhaps, in a nursing facility. But two, it was out of the question. And she was just starting with our group. And she decided, I'm going to take this on. I'm going to make this my work. And she did.

And there were times when she was gnashing her teeth, when all her little friends went tripping off with their meditation cushions and their matching mats and all their meditation blankets to go to these beautiful meditation retreats and get enlightened. And there she was dealing with these parents. Well, they're still trooping off to their meditation with their meditation cushions to retreats. And boy, the fusion in her being.

The things that you're able to take on with clarity and freedom are not likely to destroy you. I'm not going to make that just a blanket stupid statement. But sometimes we think that if we don't want to be a victim of toxicity or poison, that we have to remove ourselves from damaging or dysfunctional situations. And that's the general and prevailing wisdom. And in 90% of the cases, it's probably true.

But the case can also be made that when you really decide to take something on out of your deepest will and deepest freedom, the circumstances lose much, if not all, of their power to harm you. And they lose all of their power to take you down. So don't be afraid in that.

One of the ways that intentional suffering becomes so hard for people today is that we're really taught that our welfare, our psychic well-being, depends on things outside ourselves. That we have to control our psychological environments outside. Because if we get too much toxicity, too much fear, too much this, too much that, we're going to be hurt. Pretty weak consciousness, if it is dependent on that coming from the outside to be well.

And so what the intentional suffering's practices begin to say is that you can find something in yourself of such freedom and such force that when you decide to take on a bit of carrying this pain value, you are carried as if on angel wings in some ways. And amazing things happen.

So don't forget it. Don't be reckless. But also take some confidence that if you're stuck in a bad situation and your choices are between bailing and running and taking it on, realize that the

freedom when you say, I will do this, and when you do this from a free and clean heart, some protection comes along with that. That's clear? So those are just in a nutshell the practices.

And remember that how we're situating this is that this is the way in for human beings to this whole great chain that we looked at in such depth this morning. That around here, we're situated cosmically. It's like we're straddling in the cosmic worlds that first cautious cosmic shock point. And it seems like we human beings are set up brilliantly to navigate in two worlds at once.

We're bilingual in that a lot of the work that we're doing is very intensely translating between the finite and the infinite, between the constricted and the more spacious. And we don't do well when we try and collapse the tension. It's like we're straddled here at the intersection of the timeless and time, as T.S. Eliot called it, because that's where the work is done.

And if we choose to take the conditions of our life and make of them a laboratory for the generation of the energies that emerge from this kind of work, the fruits of the spirit that emerge from this alchemical work, we offer something back into the planet of an imperishably fine nature.

You could say, by the way, that the teaching is that we also coat our own interior being bodies. But we qualitatively put into the world goodness, those fruits of the spirit that Andrew was mentioning this morning, strength, endurance, forbearance, peacefulness, joy, these substances that are absolutely essential nutrients to the health and life of the cosmic system, particularly our own Earth atmosphere.

\* Trogoautoegocrat: A term coined by Gurdjieff from Greek roots meaning “I eat myself, I maintain myself.” It refers to the great cosmic law of reciprocal maintenance: the entire universe is sustained through an unbroken exchange in which every being both receives from and gives to the whole. From the smallest cell to the largest star, each participates in the feeding and transformation of energies. For human beings, conscious participation in this process — especially through the practices of conscious labor and intentional suffering — offers back finer, life-sustaining energies that nourish the greater system.

\* Askokin: In Gurdjieff's cosmology, Askokin is described as a very fine, highly concentrated energy substance produced in living beings, particularly at moments of intense shock, suffering, or strong emotional experience. In the normal, mechanical course of life, Askokin is released at death or under stress to serve the needs of the planetary or cosmic body, often without the individual's conscious participation. However, through the Work — and especially through intentional suffering and conscious labor — this substance can be transformed and offered voluntarily, becoming a conscious contribution to the maintenance and evolution of the whole. It is one of the “higher hydrogens” in Gurdjieff's symbolic language of energies.