

East Meets West

The stories of the remarkable men and women from
the East and the West who built a bridge across
a cultural divide and introduced Meditation
and Eastern Philosophy to the West

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Introduction



EAST MEETS WEST is a phrase often heard and a story seldom told. This is the history of the introduction of meditation and Eastern philosophy to Western Civilization. Today meditation is practiced by millions of people throughout the West, and has become a household word. Virtually every religion has revived a form of the practice; it is taught in schools, business seminars and has been the subject of scientific research. Fifty years ago it was little known, it was considered an obscure practice, 'contemplating one's navel', or something a hermit did in a cave that had little relevance to Europeans and Americans engaged in worldly pursuits. This practice, little known in the West, became widespread in less than fifty years through the work of 'The Teachers', the men and women who built a bridge across a cultural divide and transmitted the knowledge of an ancient tradition to the West. These remarkable men and women devoted their lives to the search for truth and higher knowledge, and to making it available to others. They lived by the principle of 'Learn and teach'. This work became the aim and purpose of their life. Their lives are a source of inspiration and provide an example of the perseverance, devotion, and commitment needed if one is to 'Work on Oneself' with the aim of reaching one's highest potential. They lived their lives on a world stage, and they played their parts well. It would not be possible to include every member of the cast; the intent here is to tell the story of some of the major players.

For students of Eastern philosophy, those who meditate, and those who engage in 'The Work', this history is their heritage.

East Meets West

Many of the facts and quotes have been gathered from the author's conversations with Joy Dillingham, Leon MacLaren, Nicolai Rabeneck, William Hager, Sitaram Jaiswal, Willem Nyland, Swami Muktananda, and from transcripts of conversations with Gurdjieff, Ouspensky, Willem Nyland, Gurudeva, Dr Roles, Leon MacLaren, and Shantananda Saraswati. Additional sources have been foot-noted and listed in the bibliography.



The science and technology that shaped Western Civilization began with the classical scientists. In the middle of the second millennium there was an awakening in Europe. It started as an inquiry into the nature of the world in which we live. Copernicus, Kepler, and Newton observed the planets and began investigating the laws that governed their movements. The men of knowledge in Europe sought to understand matter and energy. Darwin expounded a theory of the origin of species, as engineers, digging canals in Europe, discovered a recorded history of the planet in the layers of the earth. These inquiries led to a mastery of metallurgy, thermodynamics, electrical, and nuclear power. During our lifetime worldwide communication has become instantaneous, and distances between continents are traversed in hours.

In the East, the inquiry was governed by ancient tradition. Although the first experiments in printing, gunpowder, and metallurgy were begun in the East, they did not evolve as they did in Europe. Scientific research and exploration were of more interest to the West than to the East. The interest of the Brahmins was of a different nature from that of the learned men of Europe. The exploration in the East was in the Spiritual Sciences. The West sought mastery over matter; the East sought Self-mastery. The West strove for freedom from want and poverty; the East sought freedom from desire and suffering. While scientists in the West investigated the principles and laws that govern nature, the learned men of the East sought to lift the veil of illusion that kept men from reaching their highest potential.

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Seekers of Truth



WITH THE OPENING of the trade routes and the beginning of commerce, there began a transmission of knowledge and technology from the West to the East. The transmission of the spiritual philosophy from East to West is a more recent story – a story largely untold. It began in Armenia at the crossroads of the trade routes. In the first years of the twentieth century a small group came together who called themselves, ‘Seekers of Truth’. This group of fifteen men, and one woman, had among them scientists, explorers, an anthropologist, a medical doctor, a linguist, a priest, a wealthy prince, who funded many of their expeditions, and one man with an indomitable will, George I. Gurdjieff.

Gurdjieff was born in Alexandropol, a city in Armenia, now called Gyumri, in 1876. His mother was Armenian. His father, Ivan, of Greek stock, was widely known as one of the last of the bards with a remarkable memory who recited epic poems, legends, and myths. Through this oral tradition, history, legend, and folklore were passed down from one generation to another. Gurdjieff once read an article that described the discovery of tablets in ancient Babylon that were four thousand years old. The article printed the inscription and the translation of an ancient legend he had often heard his father recite. To his astonishment the words he read matched in word and form the poem his father recited; it had been passed down unchanged for four thousand years!¹

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His father, seeking to prepare him for the priesthood, arranged for his son to receive an exceptional education. Gurdjieff's mentor, Father Borsh, was the dean of Kars Military Cathedral. He was a physician and the spiritual authority for the region. As Gurdjieff's tutor, he guided him in his studies of theology and medicine. It was his belief that in order to attend to the needs of the body or the spirit one needed knowledge of both.²

The group of seekers shared a belief that there existed ancient knowledge that had been forgotten by all but a few. They investigated the traditional sources of science, religion, and philosophy, and what they found convinced them that there was a profound and complete body of knowledge, known to a few, that could guide men and women to fulfill what they believed was the highest purpose of human life.

They began to make expeditions, 'journeys to inaccessible places', to remote regions of Egypt, Persia, Tibet, and India, in search of a teacher, a monastery, a brotherhood - repositories where ancient knowledge had been passed down from generation to generation by way of teacher to disciple.

By this tradition, an aspirant seeks out a master teacher to whom he makes a commitment. The student studies and works under the guidance and discipline of the teacher who prepares him not simply to hear knowledge, but to strengthen his ability to reason and cleanse his heart so that true understanding can be achieved. After years of preparation the student begins to realize the knowledge of the master within himself. Eventually the student becomes the master and takes on the next generation of students.

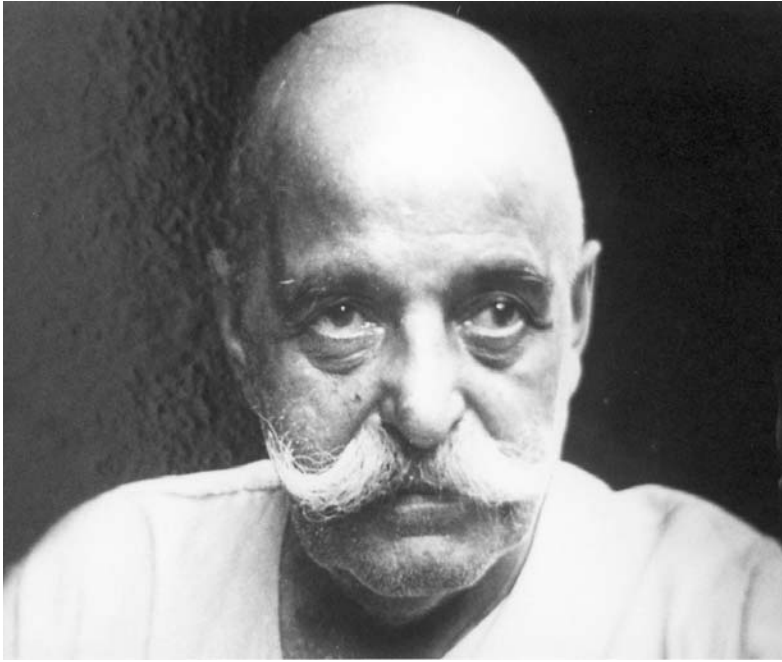
The group undertook difficult journeys to remote regions lasting months, sometimes more than a year. They traveled vast distances on foot with pack animals, overcoming difficult terrain, hostile local people, and diseases. Not all survived, not all returned, yet some found the knowledge for which they were searching. Prince Yuri Lubovedsky, who had been one of the seekers from the beginning, stayed at a brotherhood that was one of their destinations for the remainder of his life.³

Seekers of Truth

Gurdjieff said little about his sources of knowledge: secrecy may well have been a condition of gaining access to these inner circles. He mentions a monastery on Mount Athos with a lineage reaching back to 500 BC, a brotherhood with a lineage to the early Christians, and a school in Chinese Turkistan. Many of the areas that he traveled through were soon after devastated by war. The knowledge he brought to the West may have been all that survived from these esoteric groups. In *All and Everything*, he wrote that one of the great tragedies of war was the destruction of institutions, records, and traditions that preserved knowledge.

He encountered master teachers of several traditions, and he was influenced by the Sufis and the Dervishes. In India he met teachers on the way of knowledge, the way of devotion, and the way of the fakir (physical discipline). These were traditions known only to a few, and these disciplines were referred to as the three Paths or Ways to Spiritual Development.

He returned to the West with a profound understanding of the nature of Man, his place in the cosmos, and the laws that governed him. He also brought back knowledge of the methods by which men and women could work toward an inner transformation and expanded awareness. He called his method 'The Fourth Way', for it incorporated elements of the three ways of knowledge, devotion, and physical discipline. This was practiced not in the seclusion of a monastery or hermitage but while carrying on the life of a householder, fulfilling the responsibilities of family, profession, and citizen.



GEORGE IVANOVITCH GURDJIEFF
(1876-1949)

To possess the right to the name Man, one must be one. He must with an indefatigable persistence and an unquenchable desire, issuing from one's entirety, that is to say, from thought, feeling and organic instinct, work on all-round knowledge of oneself – at the same time: struggling unceasingly with one's subjective weaknesses, striving for their eradication without mercy towards oneself.*

He must strive:

- 1 To have everything necessary for his physical well being.
- 2 For self-perfection.
- 3 To know ever more about the laws of world creation and world maintenance.
- 4 To pay for the cause of his arising as quickly as possible, so as to be free to lighten the Sorrow of Our Common Father.
- 5 To assist others in their work toward self-perfection.†

Adapted from *All and Everything*: *p.1209, † p.386.

Photo taken by Dushka Howarth, France, 1949 – the year of his death.