

# HPB, Gurdjieff, & the Secret Doctrine

---

Seymour B. Ginsburg

IT IS  
HERE  
PROPOSED  
THAT  
GURDJIEFF  
WAS THE  
DISCIPLE  
TO BRING  
THE  
PRACTICAL  
TEACHING  
PROMISED  
BY HPB

**T**HE SECRET DOCTRINE," says Mme. H. P. Blavatsky, "is not a treatise, or a series of vague theories, but contains all that can be given out to the world in this century"<sup>1</sup> (the nineteenth). As we turn our attention to its study, we do so usually through an examination of the written document that HPB left to us. This document—*The Secret Doctrine*—consists of two volumes which she called *Cosmogenesis*, and *Anthropogenesis*.

In our study we need to bear in mind that the Secret Doctrine is a teaching and not merely a book. It is selected, as HPB says, "from oral as much as from written teachings."<sup>2</sup> It is, in fact, the ancient wisdom that is the truth behind all religions, and the document itself must be seen as the shell of this wisdom, the understanding of which requires our bringing to it a practical as well as a theoretical comprehension.

But the practical teaching was not given out by HPB in *The Secret Doctrine*. She tells us this and explains why. In the very last paragraph of Volume II HPB leaves us with the following injunction:

A commencement has been made to fell and uproot the deadly Upas trees of superstition, prejudice and conceited ignorance, so that these two volumes should form for the student a fitting prelude for Volumes III and IV. Until the rubbish of the ages is cleared away from the minds of the Theosophists to whom these volumes are dedicated, it is impossible that the more practical teaching contained in the Third Volume should be understood. Consequently, it entirely depends upon the reception with which Volumes I and II will meet at the hands of Theosophists and Mystics, whether these last two volumes will ever be published, though they are almost completed.<sup>3</sup>

---

**Seymour B. Ginsburg**, a long-time student of Gurdjieff's work, is past president of the Miami Branch of the Theosophical Society in America. A previous article by Ginsburg, "Gurdjieff's Contribution to Theosophy," appeared in *The American Theosophist* for December 1987. In this issue, Ginsburg carries his line of argument further, asserting a strong "Yes" to the question he posed in December.



In a previous article in *The American Theosophist*,<sup>4</sup> I suggested that the more practical teaching anticipated by HPB has, indeed, been given out in this century by another Russian-born mystic who appeared on the Western scene some forty years after her, George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (1870?-1949). Like HPB, Gurdjieff disappeared for almost twenty years into the hidden recesses of the Hindukush/Himalayan ranges. Like her, he claimed to have been instructed there by people of a higher type, people who some have called the Masters of Wisdom. When he finally appeared in Moscow, he began to teach the practical aspects of the ancient wisdom as HPB portended.

It is proposed here that Gurdjieff is actually the very disciple whom HPB predicted would come forward in the twentieth century to give final and irrefutable proofs that the ancient wisdom exists, and who would bring forward the needed practical teaching. In *The Secret Doctrine* she says:

In Century the Twentieth some disciple more informed, and far better fitted, may be sent by the Masters of Wisdom to give final and irrefutable proofs that there exists a science called *Gupta-Vidya*; and that, like the once-mysterious sources of the Nile, the source of all religions and philosophies now known to the world has been for many ages forgotten and lost to men, but is at last found.<sup>5</sup>

The proposition that Gurdjieff, a name not even known to many Theosophists, might be the predicted disciple will no doubt be met with incredulity by some. He was neither anointed by any of the leaders of the Theosophical movement to assume such a role nor did he himself pay more than lip service to the portion of the *Secret Doctrine* that HPB exposed to the world. He is reported to have said that it had cost him an immense amount of labor to track down the erroneous statements in Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine*, and he delighted to tell a completely fictional story about how its author had fallen in love with him.<sup>6</sup>

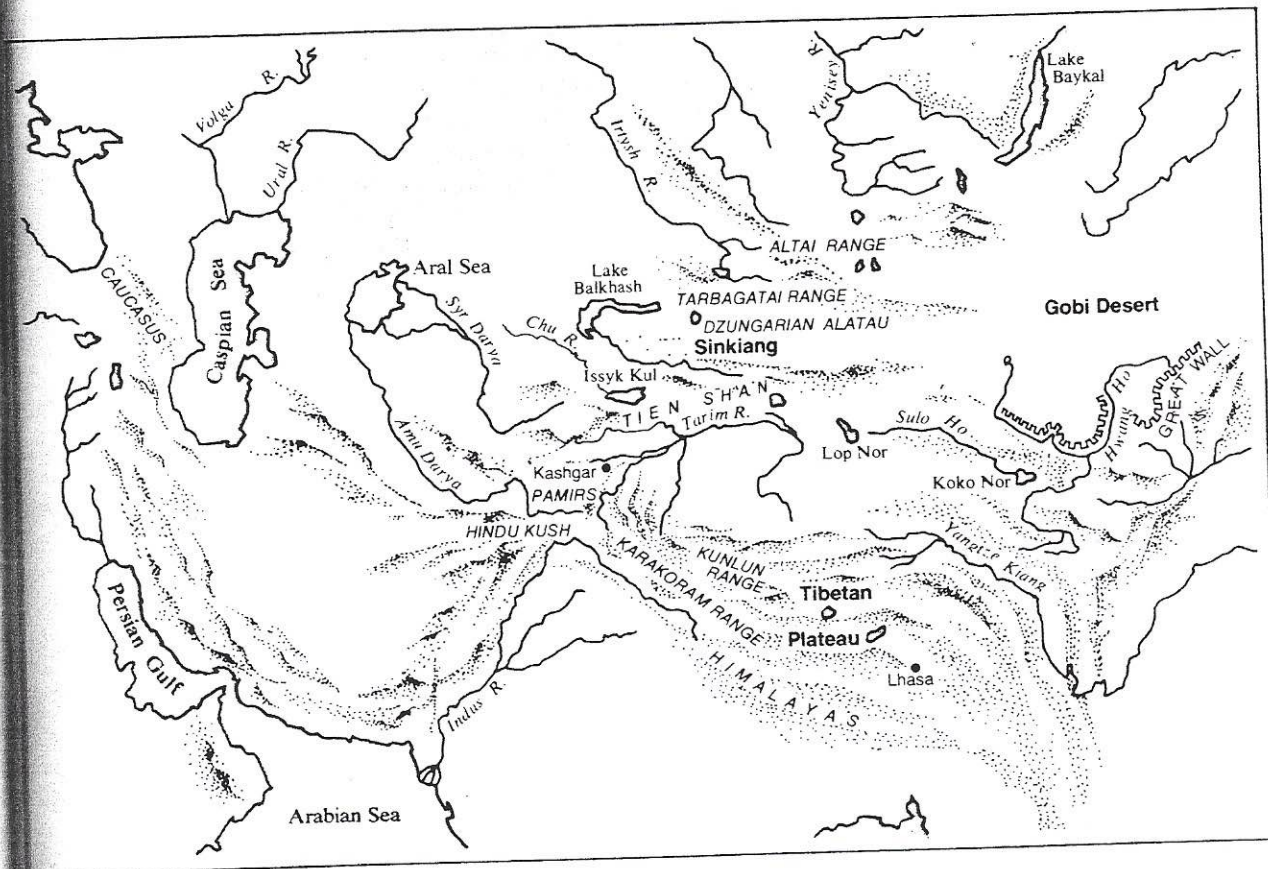
Statements like this were not atypical of Gurdjieff, who would frequently say and do outrageous things, always with the purpose of waking people from their normal "waking sleep" and jarring them loose from adherence to dogmas and shibboleths. In this respect he was not unlike HPB, both of them making many enemies among the hidebound of their respective generations.

However, if we impartially examine the teaching that Gurdjieff brought and the written documents that he left, we may plausibly conclude that he was the anticipated disciple. Not only are we likely to discover that Gurdjieff did indeed bring the promised practical teaching, but that he also left for us its written shell under the title *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*.<sup>7</sup> We shall further discover that *Beelzebub's Tales* is presented in exactly the form predicted by HPB, though written in an entirely different style.

Since many will not be at all familiar with Gurdjieff, it may be useful to know that like HPB, he was born near the Black Sea in that part of the world that had for centuries been a crossroads of ancient traditions and civilizations. Just as she came forth in the West after many years of mysterious travel, so too did Gurdjieff, appearing in Moscow in 1913. If it was his mission to expose the practical teachings which were to constitute Volumes III and IV of *The Secret Doctrine*, he dutifully began his work by attempting to establish an institute in that city for this purpose.

The ensuing World War and the subsequent Bolshevik revolution disrupted these plans and Gurdjieff was forced to flee with a small band of followers across the Caucasus to Constantinople, Berlin, and ultimately to Paris. Included in this group was P. D. Ouspensky, mathematician and philosopher, who was well known in the theosophical circles of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Ouspensky was later to write the definitive popular exposition of Gurdjieff's ideas under the title *Fragments of an Un-*





known Teaching, later changed to *In Search of the Miraculous*.<sup>8</sup> This book on the teaching was based on Ouspensky's notes and verbatim recollections of talks given by Gurdjieff to his early pupils during the eight years that Ouspensky remained under Gurdjieff's tutelage. Its text was approved by Gurdjieff, who was known to have said, "these are my words," and it provides a concise written outline of the practical teaching in a form more accessible than the abstruse *Beelzebub's Tales*.

Gurdjieff was finally able to establish his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man, just outside Paris at a house he acquired, the *Chateau de Priere*, in 1922. It was here that he began to train those

who came to him in the practical work that he saw as obligatory for men and women who wished to bring about a change in the level of their being and the state of their consciousness. It was Gurdjieff's intention that those whom he trained and who arrived at a sufficient degree of understanding would go forth to bring the practical teaching to a wider public.

Once again his plans were interrupted, this time by a terrible automobile accident in 1924. The accident and its aftermath led ultimately to the closing of the institute, after which Gurdjieff retired to an apartment in Paris where he continued to receive and to instruct a small number of pupils.



With the reduction in his activities, Gurdjieff turned to setting down the practical teaching in written form. This document, which with minor exceptions constitutes all that he wrote, was a trilogy titled *All and Everything*. The first series of the trilogy, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* or *An Objectively Impartial Criticism of the Life of Man*, is considered his *magnum opus*, and is (I am suggesting) the likely Volume III of *The Secret Doctrine*.

To understand that this is the case we need to turn again to the previously published volumes of *The Secret Doctrine* and see what it is that HPB tells us about the anticipated Volume III. In Volume II she says:

In Volume III of this work (the said volume and the IVth being almost ready) a brief history of all the great adepts known to the ancients and the moderns in chronological order will be given, as also a bird's eye view of the Mysteries, their birth, growth, decay, and final death—in Europe.<sup>9</sup>

*Beelzebub's Tales* is exactly this, a brief history of all the great adepts known to the ancients and the moderns in chronological order along with what is literally a bird's-eye view of the events and the Mysteries.

*Beelzebub's Tales* is a vast allegory describing observations of the planet Earth over several thousand years as recounted by Beelzebub, an old and wise space traveler. In the story, Beelzebub is exploring the universe for perhaps his last time in the spaceship *Karnak*, accompanied by his near attendants and his kinsmen, including his beloved young grandson, Hassein. During this lengthy cosmic journey there is much time for conversation, and Hassein has many questions about the strange "three-brained beings" (human beings) who inhabit the planet Earth.

Beelzebub had for a long time been exiled from the center of the universe to our remote solar system, where he had taken up residence on the planet Mars.

From there he had made six sojourns to Earth covering various epochs, the first during the days of Atlantis and the last in the early twentieth century. Between visits Beelzebub continually monitored activities on Earth from his base on Mars with the aid of an unusual telescope-like device invented by Gornahoor Harkarkh, a feathered creature who was his close friend. (Beelzebub himself had a scaly skin, horns and a tail.)

---

### Beelzebub gave "bird's eye view of the Mysteries."

---

To answer Hassein's many questions, Beelzebub recounts his experiences during these six visits along with the results of his telescopic observations—which afforded him a "bird's-eye" view of Earth's mysteries. In chronological sequence he introduces, as HPB predicted, the adepts known to the ancients of prehistory, including Belcultassi and Ashiata Shiemash, about whom recorded history knows nothing and who lived in the days of Babylon and before. He then proceeds to relate the activities and purposes of those adepts who are known to the moderns, such as Moses, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad.

Through the device of his allegorical Beelzebub, Gurdjieff reveals, to the extent possible in a written document, the secret science of the Mysteries.

The central Mystery that Gurdjieff discloses is the occult mechanics of energy transformation that is possible within the human body. HPB brought the teaching of the septenary nature of man. She presented the idea that man consists of seven interpenetrating bodies, each of an increasingly rarified matter and carrying in turn an increasingly conscious nature. The first or



lowest of these is the physical body and the seventh or highest principle is the one ultimate reality of which each man and woman is a spark. The first through the fourth bodies are considered to be the lower part of man's nature and relate to his physical, emotional, and ordinary mental makeup, characteristics which are merely temporal. The three higher bodies are seen as the higher nature of man: permanent, essential, and thus reincarnating.

Gurdjieff explains that while man contains within himself the finer matter of the higher interpenetrating bodies, they are not crystallized and consequently man is unable to reside in his higher nature with any degree of permanence. The required crystallization of the inner bodies must be brought about by the occult transformation of energy that the human body receives from the three categories of nourishment that it takes in: (1) food and water, (2) air, and most important (3) incoming impressions. The reception of this nourishment in the ordinary way can lead us nowhere. It is through the Mystery of the special techniques of ingestion here revealed that a person may become a different being.

In *Beelzebub's Tales* the occult processing of these three forms of nourishment is explained and the refinement of energies that can take place in the various organs of the human body is described and traced through those organs. Key to the practical teaching is the proper processing of the nourishment of incoming impressions by the effort to be self-aware or self-conscious in each moment that an impression is received. Gurdjieff sometimes called this technique self-remembering. It is this effort over a long period of time that provides the specially refined energy needed for the crystallization of and accessibility to the higher triad in each human being. The oral teaching transmitted by Gurdjieff is described in outline in Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous*, and in more detail in *Beelzebub's Tales*. Those mystics who throughout history have attempted to ex-

plain their experience of the state of illumination and who have been able to reside in the state of enlightenment have of necessity entered into the occult transformation of energies through the very techniques that Gurdjieff taught.

The rebirth spoken of in *The New Testament* in its so badly distorted form is exactly this. It is the birth or crystallization within the human organism of inner bodies composed of finer matter brought about by the occult transformation of energy processed through the same bodily organs that in everyday life transform the energy needed for the ordinary and mundane purposes of life.

---

### G. disclosed mechanics of energy transformation.

---

The alchemists of the Middle Ages similarly worked on themselves for the inner transformation of energy. Their writings describing the turning of base metals into gold were veiled descriptions of the Mystery teachings, intended to communicate what they had discovered while avoiding persecution by exoteric religious authority.

Throughout the allegorical chronology of *Beelzebub's Tales* runs the theme of its subtitle—*An Objectively Impartial Criticism of the Life of Man*. Gurdjieff uses the document to show how human consciousness has been kept at an artificially low level by improper education and conditioning passed down from one generation to the next, which has created almost insuperable obstacles to the development of the higher consciousness that is the right of every human being.

In his criticism of the life of man Gurdjieff explains the decay and final death of knowledge of the Mysteries, especially in the



Europe and America of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Those who attempt to approach *Beelzebub's Tales* will find the going rough, as rough perhaps as the effort required to understand *The Secret Doctrine*. Its length

---

He would rewrite passages  
"to bury the bone deeper."

---

alone of more than 1200 pages will discourage all but the most tenacious student. Gurdjieff intentionally made its access difficult, choosing to develop a lexicon of unfamiliar words, the meaning of which must be discerned from the context in which they are used. In writing and revising the document over many years, he would have chapters of it read aloud to various groups of pupils. If the deeper meanings of what he wished to convey were too apparent, he would rewrite those passages, observing that it is necessary to "bury the bone deeper."

One who attempts to read *Beelzebub's Tales* on his own should be warned that the first chapter is intentionally designed to frustrate the prospective inquirer. One sentence, for example, runs to well over four hundred words. But the text then becomes interesting and significant, with a thread of humor throughout. The determined student will be well repaid for the effort required to grasp the meaning of *Beelzebub's Tales*, just as the effort to approach *The Secret Doctrine* is rewarded by an ever growing understanding. While one need not be an expert scholar of either of these documents, a familiarity with both is necessary to comprehend the relationship of one to the other.

Those of a scholarly bent may find numerous examples from Gurdjieff's teaching

of matters on which he elaborated, that appear earlier in *The Secret Doctrine*. For instance, his explanation of the relativity of energies between different elements as expressed in the Periodic Table of the elements, and his description of the use of the terms hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, and nitrogen can be seen as clarification of matters appearing in *The Secret Doctrine*. Conversely, Gurdjieff's explanation of the development of the moon is at odds with what HPB wrote. A detailed study of the correspondences as well as the conflicts between the two documents will enhance the student's knowledge of them.

If Gurdjieff is seen as the disciple predicted by HPB to appear in the twentieth century, two questions are immediately raised. Why did he not announce this, and why did he not draw more closely the correlation between *The Secret Doctrine* and *Beelzebub's Tales*?

To the first it may be replied that his acceptance by the theosophical community would have been unlikely. He had no official sponsorship and any such declaration would have been seen as presumptuous and self-serving.

The answer to the second question is not as obvious because we do not know if the scenario within which Gurdjieff placed *Beelzebub's Tales* was created intentionally to meet the criteria that HPB set for the third volume. We may assume that he was familiar with *The Secret Doctrine*, but just as he demanded intense effort to understand *Beelzebub's Tales*, so too he may have wanted people to find for themselves the correspondences between these two documents. In addition, HPB's well known psychic abilities could as easily account for her ability to describe the setting of the forthcoming third volume.

Moreover, it was Gurdjieff's mission to awaken people, by bringing the practical teaching, not to assume the mantle of any mundane authority. He was ever the practical teacher, urging mankind to awaken—and showing the way.



In the second series of the *All and Everything* trilogy, published as *Meetings With Remarkable Men*,<sup>10</sup> Gurdjieff in a more forthright style takes us through the mountains and deserts of Africa and Asia, tracing his own search as a young man for the abodes of the Masters of Wisdom. As was the case with HPB, nothing definite is given to disclose any meaningful geographic location of the center of the teaching. The student is, nevertheless, left with the impression that there are such centers and that there are, indeed, such Masters.

The final portion of the trilogy, the third series, was never completed. Gurdjieff began it by stating:

My last book, through which I wish to share with other creatures of our Common Father similar to myself, almost all the previously unknown mysteries of the inner world of man which I have accidentally learned.<sup>11</sup>

After writing 177 pages, he put down his pen and left the work undone. Various reasons have been put forward for this, but the truth about it will likely never be known. The volume was eventually published in its unfinished form under the title *Life Is Real Only Then, When "I Am."* In reading the unfinished book one becomes convinced of its great promise, and there is a sadness in knowing that it has in a sense been withdrawn. Whether it might have been the said Volume IV of *The Secret Doctrine*, which as HPB tells us is "almost entirely devoted to Occult teachings,"<sup>12</sup> cannot be known. Gurdjieff made a start in this third series with a further disclosure of the Mysteries. We may hope that it will eventually be given out in its entirety.

Notwithstanding the incompleteness of his third series, if we are able to understand that Gurdjieff brought us Volume III of the *Secret Doctrine*, then we shall recognize that a sufficient disclosure has been made in this twentieth century of the practical work that it is incumbent on man and woman to do.

Although she knew and predicted in the introduction to *The Secret Doctrine* that mankind would have to wait until the twentieth century for the practical teaching, HPB began an effort in this direction during the last three years of her life. During that time she founded the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society, and in the last months of her life she organized an inner group that collected around her in London. During this period five sets of written instructions were issued (the last two posthumously),<sup>13</sup> and to the inner group HPB orally discoursed on these materials.<sup>14</sup>

---

---

The mission: to awaken  
people from "waking" sleep.

---

---

After her death some additional materials that she left were published by her students under the title of Volume III of *The Secret Doctrine*. This is not to be confused with Gurdjieff's teaching which chronicled the adepts, and divulged the Mysteries.

If one examines the teachings of HPB during the three years following publication of *The Secret Doctrine*, it can be seen that, although largely theoretical, they are a commencement in the disclosing of the Mysteries that Gurdjieff more fully elaborated. They are mainly a discussion of the nature and relativity of the vibrations of energy which are the matrix of the universe with reference to bodily organs and states of consciousness. Gurdjieff explained the relativity of energy more fully in terms of man's need to be more conscious, and the required transformation of energy necessary for this purpose. He brought the "how to" along with the theory.

Gurdjieff taught that man resides only in the two lowest states of consciousness—



sleep (characterized by sleep at night) and his ordinary "waking state" in which he lives and functions in the world (but which is another kind of "sleep"). But there are two higher states available to him—the state of enlightenment which he cannot approach such as he is, and the intermediate state of self-consciousness which man erroneously thinks he has, but has not. Only when he is shown and experiences the state of self-consciousness can he begin to appreciate its qualitative difference from the minimal consciousness of which ordinary life consists.

---

### Fourth Way does not require retreat from life.

---

To experience and reside in the state of self-consciousness, we must make special efforts. These efforts bring about the occult transformation of energy through the organs of the body as documented in *Beelzebub's Tales*, and cause the crystallization of the inner bodies. The state of self-consciousness may be briefly described as the condition of including the experience of oneself in one's attention along with whatever else can be included in the attention in each moment of time. It is from one's position in this state that one may eventually experience the fourth state of consciousness: that of enlightenment or illumination. One who is fully crystallized resides permanently in the upper triad, having completed the course of human evolution, and stands in the unity of being that HPB has called the Absolute.

Gurdjieff spoke about the three traditional ways in which the practical work of residing in these higher states of consciousness is accomplished in the monasteries of the East. He called these the way of the *yogi* with its emphasis on study, the way of

the monk with its emphasis on devotion, and the way of the *fakir* with its emphasis on special physical practices. But these ways without exception have required retreat from the outer world and an entering into the monastic life. The Secret Doctrine as brought to the West by HPB and then elaborated by Gurdjieff, is a way that is available to humanity in the midst of life. For this reason Gurdjieff called the teaching the Fourth Way, a way in life. It is often simply called The Work.

The Fourth Way does not require a retreat from life, but uses the conditions of life as the field of experience in which men and women may work on themselves in the direction of residing in the higher states of consciousness. In the Fourth Way practical efforts are made to balance one's intellectual, emotional, and physical make-up so that the state of self-consciousness or self-awareness can be attained. These efforts require detachment from identification, which is the enemy of self-awareness—and especially detachment from identification with the negative emotions that absorb most of our life and energy.

To the extent that we are not free from identification, it is impossible for us to reside in the higher states of consciousness. Gurdjieff taught special physical techniques to help one work toward non-identification. Indications of some of these techniques are given in his writings and in the written recollections of Ouspensky, but proper instruction in them requires an oral transmission from teacher to student. To the extent that these techniques have not been distorted by Gurdjieff's pupils in their further transmission to others, this information is still available.

Central to the practical teaching of the Fourth Way is work in a group. Because of the improper education and conditioning that all human beings have received and have in turn passed down from one generation to the next, the identifications with things in life are so strong as to be unbreakable by one person working alone. No



sooner does one begin to make efforts to be more self-aware than he or she forgets all about it and is swallowed back up in identification. When people engage collectively in the practical work, they can, as Gurdjieff says, serve as alarm clocks to continually wake each other up.

Among HPB's missions was the founding of the Theosophical Society as a nucleus organization to help reacquaint humanity with the ancient wisdom. She was eminently successful in this task and the Theosophical Society today stands as evidence of that success. Had Gurdjieff's plans not gone awry his institute might similarly have spawned adjuncts for the dissemination of the practical teaching. This was not to be, and at his death in 1949 there remained but a small group of students still around him, although many hundreds had been instructed during his life.

These students undertook to preserve his writings, which were published posthumously. They have also endeavored to preserve, with as little of the inevitable distortion as possible, the oral side of the practical teaching.

On this 100th anniversary of the publication of *The Secret Doctrine*, it is appropriate to note the contribution made by George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff in disclosing the more practical teaching promised by HPB for the third volume. HPB not only predicted that this information would be forthcoming in the twentieth century but indicated that this last quarter, like the last quarter of all centuries, is especially auspicious for new occult work to begin.

Many Theosophists have recognized and regretted the incompleteness of the Secret Doctrine, but when Gurdjieff's teaching is added to it, a comprehensive picture of the ancient wisdom begins to emerge. Therefore, members of the Theosophical Society and theosophists in general may wish to examine and to consider very seriously the practical teaching that Gurdjieff brought

and the effort that its implementation requires. They may want to put into practice in this final quarter of the twentieth century the techniques that he prescribed for men and women who desire to work on themselves for a change in the level of their being and the state of their consciousness.

The efforts required and the techniques employed are neither easy nor quick, but diligent work engaged in sincerely and with proper guidance will inevitably bring results. It is a work that is well described in an aphorism by which Gurdjieff enjoined those whom he instructed: "Remember yourself always and everywhere." □

#### References

1. H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* (Los Angeles: The Theosophy Company, 1974), introduction, p. xxxviii.
2. *Ibid.*, p. xxxvii.
3. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, pp. 797-798.
4. Seymour B. Ginsburg, "Gurdjieff's Contribution to Theosophy," *The American Theosophist* 75, No. 11 (December 1987), 406-410.
5. *The Secret Doctrine*, p. xxxviii.
6. James Webb, *The Harmonious Circle* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1980), p. 36.
7. G. I. Gurdjieff, *All and Everything, First Series: Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950).
8. P. D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950).
9. *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. III, p. 437.
10. G. I. Gurdjieff, *Meetings With Remarkable Men* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1969).
11. G. I. Gurdjieff, *Life Is Real Only Then, When "I Am"* (New York: Triangle Editions, 1978), Foreword, p. xi.
12. *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. II, p. 437.
13. H. P. Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, ed. Boris de Zirkoff, Volume XII (Wheaton: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1980), pp. 477-713.
14. H. J. Spierenburg, *The Inner Group Teachings of H. P. Blavatsky* (San Diego: Point Loma Publications, 1985).