

SPIRITUAL GROUPS AND COMMUNITIES

'A group is the beginning of everything. One man can do nothing, can attain nothing. A group with a real leader can do more. A group of people can do what one man can never do.

You do not realize your own situation. You are in prison. All you can wish for, if you are a sensible man, is to escape. But how escape? It is necessary to tunnel under a wall. One man can do nothing. But let us suppose there are ten or twenty men – if they work in turn and if one covers another they can complete the tunnel and escape.

Furthermore, no one can escape from prison without the help of those who have escaped before. Only they can say in what way escape is possible or can send tools, files, or whatever may be necessary. But one prisoner alone cannot find these people or get in touch with them.

An organization is necessary. Nothing can be achieved without an organization.'

G. I. Gurdjieff

Significance, Purpose and Intention

The correct development and expression of spirituality at a given time and place may require the organization of people into viable groups and communities. Many spiritual traditions believe that the group or circle is the heart or "kernel" of the spiritual path -- the basic human unit whose members associate and meet together to carry on studies prescribed for them by a living teacher:

One startling point of spiritual writings is that the individual is *not the 'unit' of enlightenment, or higher understanding*. It is the group, correctly organized, that has this possibility, not a person alone. Our history records the achievements of certain famous individuals, like the Buddha, Jesus and others. What may well be left out, it is tempting to speculate, is that these individuals were the public face of a larger group. (1)

Although it is possible to progress on the spiritual path alone, it is more difficult as individual endeavour cannot, by its very nature, draw from the energy, support and feedback of a group. The purpose of a spiritual group is multiple:

- To create and maintain the appropriate conditions in which a spiritual teaching, under the guidance of a teacher, can operate effectively

- To enable as many members of the group as possible to achieve a real understanding of spiritual work and provide the maximum developmental help
- To keep the group operating “as a channel for the successively refined impulses from the Source of the Teaching, and to attune the members to be able to perceive these impulses”

The aim and purpose of a group is known by the teacher, but is only gradually revealed to the members of the group as their experience and understanding matures. Gurdjieff talked with his students in Russia about this important idea:

The next important feature of group work is that groups may be connected with some *aim* of which those who are beginning work in them have no idea whatever and which cannot even be explained to them until they understand the essence and the principles of the work and ideas connected with it. But this aim towards which without knowing it they are going, and which they are serving, is the necessary balancing principle in their own work. Their first task is to understand this aim, that is, the aim of the teacher. When they have understood this aim, although at first not fully, their own work becomes more conscious and consequently can give better results. (2)

One of the functions of a group is to provide a setting and format in which certain experiences can occur so as to develop and awaken specific capacities, inner faculties and levels of awareness. These experiences arise, in part, from the interplay between individual members of a group (the group dynamic) and the impact of activities and exercises provided by the teacher:

Several times, on arriving from Moscow, G. arranged excursions into the country for large parties and picnics where we had *shashlik*, which were somehow totally out of keeping with St. Petersburg. There remains in my memory a trip to Ostrovki up the river Neva, more particularly because I suddenly realized on this trip why G. arranged these seemingly quite aimless amusements. I realized that he was all the time observing and that many of us on these occasions showed entirely new aspects of ourselves which had remained well hidden at the formal meetings in St. Petersburg . . . I saw the development of a very definite plan. We were not only learning from G. but we had also to learn one from another. I was beginning to see G.'s groups as a 'school' of some medieval painter whose pupils lived with him and, while learning from him, taught one another. (3)

The ultimate goal of the group is to attain the “special knowledge of humanity” which includes both self-knowledge and an understanding of the inner significance of life and the evolution of humanity. The group provides a framework for contact or access to a higher realm

of being based on the development of more refined states of consciousness. In this sense the group acts as an instrument of reception and transmission which resonates to the higher impulses (divine grace).

Selection, Composition and Harmonization of a Group

There is a cosmic need for a certain arrangement of factors to enable the individual to properly benefit from the efforts and activities of a group. A viable community must include the right people, at the right time, in the right place. One of the characteristics of a living "organic" group is that the members are chosen so that they can align, attune and harmonize so as to develop the maximum learning advantage from the group. An analogy of the unity of purpose and harmonization successfully achieved in a group format is that of an orchestra composed of different musicians playing different instruments but all playing in harmony and unison together. To achieve harmonization, the individual members of a group need to be carefully chosen:

The majority of any group of people can be conditioned, if the group is in effect a random one: non-conditioning-prone groups can only be developed by selecting people who harmonize in such a manner as to help defeat this tendency. The primary object is to associate people together who can avoid conditioning, so that a development can take place among these people which in turn can be passed on to larger numbers. It can never be applied to large numbers of people directly. (4)

Typically, people are grouped in a special way in order to complement each other, reinforce one another's abilities and learn from each other. By including individuals of different "types" and personalities, the progress and the potential of the group can be maximized. A current or circulation is produced in the group by the interchange of ideas and sharing of experiences as members profit from one another's qualities and capacities.

The organization and assignment of people to a group is done by a teacher with the requisite knowledge, by "someone who has completed the learning, who is the end-product, not a learner in any sense." People are selected and arranged according to a pattern known by the teacher but invisible to the students or outsiders. Members of a group may be at different levels of spiritual development. Certain individuals who make for disharmony may be excluded from the group as even one unsuitable member can harm the effort of the whole. There is an Eastern saying: *'One dog will pollute a whole pool of rosewater.'*

Members of a group are instruments with functions to perform as part of an overall unity:

Each member should discharge the functions for the time being allotted to him or her, if any, as a communicator of material, as an organizer, or

whatever it might be. The community has to develop a sense of unity of purpose – learning and development – in which each member is to be regarded as important for the success of the whole. Members of the group meet as if there were a special current passing through them. They have been chosen for the group in order to be able to function in this manner, and people leaving or joining the group altering its composition must maintain the same capacity of the group to be an instrument. (5)

One of the most important functions of a group is to have a positive influence and effect on other people who come in contact with the group and its members. The proper development of a group may require lines of contact with the general population:

Tradition avers, and experience verifies, one of the least known and strangest facts about group studies. Learning groups collect around an individual or a doctrine, or both. The level of greed and fear, because these emotions disturb the learning and 'digesting' processes, must be reduced to tolerable proportions. It is always hard, and sometimes impossible, to do this without introducing new people who have lower than average levels of these two characteristics. Such people are almost always found in the general population, not mainly interested in the 'spiritual' purposes of the group which their presence can help. The only method of attracting them to the group in order for them to fulfil this function is if they are contacted and interested on an ordinary 'human,' not greed- or fear-based footing. This is the paradox. This, too, is the real reason for people who are 'magnetized' into an esoteric or spiritual grouping to establish lines into the general population which are in areas and subjects free from the bias of the group. The extent to which this can be done will determine the future of the group and the interaction of the committed 'groupists' and the members of the general population. Each provides something which the other lacks. Through their interaction a healthy community may form. (6)

Preparatory Groups

Collections of interested people and would-be learners are often grouped together, forming "preliminary" or "preparatory" groups with the intention of accumulating potential capacity:

The would-be student may join 'associated studies,' a preparatory course of living or working in some stable form which might help them to prepare for the next stage. This is the stage of the study group or congregation. Certain people are required to meet regularly, to read or interchange ideas. Very often they are grouped in enterprises which bear no resemblance to spiritual activities as known elsewhere. (7)

A student usually begins study in a small group which is connected to a series of similar groups on different levels and "occupied in different work, according to the state of their preparation and their powers." Gurdjieff stressed in talks with his students that a preparatory group is only the initial stage of spiritual work:

Do not think that we can begin straight away by forming a group. A group is a big thing. A group is begun for definite *concerted* work, for a definite aim. I should have to trust you in this work and you would have to trust me and one another. Then it would be a group. Until there is general work it will only be a preparatory group. We shall prepare ourselves so as in the course of time to become a group. And it is only possible to prepare ourselves to become a group by trying to imitate a group such as it ought to be, imitating it inwardly of course, not outwardly. (8)

Preparatory groups often begin with the intensive study of written materials through a process of familiarization: "the student is asked to 'soak' themselves in them, as rain soaks into the earth." A learning or study group may or may not be under the direct guidance of a teacher or deputy. The best qualification for running a study group is common sense: "If one has this, and works carefully with the materials, a sensitivity is developed which becomes the permanent qualification or capacity."

Preparatory groups are unsuccessful if they deteriorate into a hierarchical power system or if the group is dominated by the search for lesser personal satisfactions. Members of such groups seldom realize how easily subjective demands and needs can take over under the guise of higher aims. When the membership of a group is largely composed of people who use it for lower psychological purposes, the group as a whole will tend to lose the capacity and desire for recognizing higher levels of material:

Once such a group is invaded by personality or power or other considerations from 'the World,' it cannot be called one of our groups at all. This is not to say that a group may not be formed with the hope of becoming a learning one. But the dangers are great, since unless the determination to learn and to qualify as an authentic teaching group is stronger than subjective desires to shine in company, to share secrets, to feel important, and so on, the group will go sour, often without anyone realizing that it has. Or, even if it is realized that it has, few people generally suspect *why*. It is a test of a study group and for its members if social strains develop, if people leave because there is insufficient emotional stimulus, if a demand for action, information, activities, objectives and so on build up. Truly effective, real developmental organizations are rare or not well known simply because of the great wastage and metamorphoses through which they go because of these very human-subjective-demands. (9)

Progress in a preparatory group may not be visible or readily apparent as the initial work of the group is on removing the barriers of psychological and social conditioning that prevent learning and growth:

Q: Why does a group go on, sometimes for years, reading books, meeting and apparently not getting anything done, without any measurement of its progress, and without a sense of how things are going?

A: Such a group has to 'wear out' emotional expectations. It also has to provide circumstances in which the irrelevant and customary associations, characteristics brought in from other systems may be displayed and observed, so that everyone can see what is central and what is not. If the members of the group are not seeing these things, it is not a real group at all. Much of its visible work is that of a 'preparatory group.' This does not mean that it might not be extremely important: for where else are you going to obtain this opportunity of living through and observing your reactions and those of others. The main characteristic displayed by the questioner is that of a person who wants something ('progress,' or 'a sense of how things are going') without carrying on an active observation and digesting of experience happening in and to the group. Finally, individual and group progress is not always visible to all participants on demand. (10)

Group Activities and Studies

A wide range and variety of activities are possible in a group setting. These include:

- Meetings, assemblies
- Question and answer sessions
- Theoretical and practical study
- Spiritual exercises and practices
- Music, audition
- Work enterprises and tasks
- Performances, events, dances and movements
- Physical tasks, organization of the environment

There is a different movement of energy, harmony and result of an exercise or activity when it is carried out by a group rather than by an individual. Activities are structured to harmonize with each other – the quality, nature, energy and outcome of the activities complement each other. There needs to be a balance between theory and practice.

The format and formulation of activities and exercises must be suitable for the group and consistent with the nature of the culture in which it is operating. Typically, the group is

exposed, under correct circumstances, to suitable materials or given a task or an assignment which can profit the group. The materials and tasks may be experienced by the group and its individual members in a variety of different ways.

The materials and matters discussed at a meeting have many levels of action: "Something which is expressed in philosophical form also has another side, which can operate when one is not following what appears to be the main thread of thought." Members of the group also learn from the daily teachings and transactions of the teacher or guide. In fact, the means of study "may constitute only the action of being present, without intense reactions, at an assembly of the Wise."

There is a progressive process through which the group learns and develops when certain activities, tasks or exercises are introduced to the group by a teacher:

An introduction can be carried out by inviting interested people to read certain books, etc., and then to formulate their own questions and observations. The next stage is to hold a meeting at which the materials are considered, after which the questions and observations are looked at. Following this, it is decided which questions and observations are answered or have been sufficiently looked at: the knowledge resident in this group has been shared so far as it is possible at this juncture. An appropriate group of individuals may then carry on to either: further study and consideration, or, taking part in exercises. The group is demonstrated the exercises and then performs them, without expectations, acceptance or rejection. When the exercises have been carried out by everyone in such a way that they all know how to do them, the session is ended. Members of the group may choose whether they wish to carry out these exercises by themselves for a period of two weeks daily. Each day after the first three days (when no notes are taken) each individual checks in the evening whether he or she feels that there has been any effect of the exercise, and what it seems to be. This feedback is reported at the next meeting of the members of the group. According to the reactions, further studies, or none, are prescribed for the group. If further studies are prescribed, people are asked to register the pitfalls of auto- or self-indoctrination, to help prevent the enterprise developing, as most human groups will, into a conditioning system. The programme continues from there. (11)

Guidance and Supervision by a Teacher

The Way or Path requires a teacher who has completed the spiritual journey. The teacher guides and supervises a group following a clearly defined path. To organize group work requires special knowledge by those who knows its aims, methods and pitfalls and have per-

sonally passed through such organized work themselves. Groups are initially established and organized under the guidance of such a teacher. Groups comprised of individuals belonging to study or preparatory groups may also be accepted by a teacher:

The first and most important feature of groups is the fact that groups are not constituted according to the wish and choice of their members. Groups are constituted by the teacher, who selects types which, from the point of view of his aims, can be useful to one another. No work of groups is possible without a teacher. The work of groups with a wrong teacher can produce only negative results. (12)

A teacher may have to avoid or prevent fixation upon his or her personality by would-be students. The nature of contact with the students may vary depending on the presence and strength of this disabling factor:

If you have any experience of spiritual groups, you will know that too many people focus their attention on the teacher and not on the teaching. Indeed, this is such a frequent abuse that some people become completely fixated on a teacher, whether true or false. Knowing this, many teachers do not teach directly at all; much will depend on the condition of their followers. It is not uncommon for teachers to write out or dictate teachings, which are then read or read out. When, however, individuals or groups of learners are able to concentrate on the essence and not on the appearance or presence of the teacher, meetings do take place. (13)

The teacher must balance and harmonize the needs of the individuals within a group, the group itself, and the larger teaching situation: "A person who is teaching will relate to each individual in a group as an individual; also as a member of the group; and also in terms of the teacher's overall function within the Tradition in relation to that individual as a person in the Tradition."

One of the functions of a teacher is to monitor the progress of groups and to intervene when necessary in order to enhance the group's functioning and performance. Different groups react in different ways to particular teachings, exercises or impacts:

Some of the teaching done by a teacher in the Tradition must sustain the various groups that he teaches by 'illuminating' certain aspects of the Tradition and feeding them fragments, pieces or phrases, according to a certain tempo which the teacher has to establish. He has to maintain that tempo, and once he has got the momentum going, it has to be kept moving by the momentum of the group itself, plus a little bit of push from him. (14)

Groups may sometimes be guided by a “deputy” who is in contact with the teacher or source of the teaching. He or she administers and coordinates activities on behalf of the teacher in a given region or geographical area and acts as a liaison between the students and the teacher. Senior members of a group are also encouraged to provide guidance and help to newer members, serving as a link between the novice student and the Teaching itself. Everyone who approaches a comprehensive spiritual teaching will have questions and sometimes confusions which experienced group members can answer or clarify:

In every group we have people who are more experienced. They are usually people who have been longer in the group and have more knowledge and information about the Tradition. Part of their functions, as far as their knowledge goes, is to explain certain aspects of the Tradition to newer members; to make themselves available, possibly to establish and sit in on small discussion groups, to generally explain and help the correct functioning of the group, and to explain certain exercises and technical terms which we use in the Tradition. (15)

Levels of Learning in Spiritual Groups

A group is not necessarily a permanent entity: “It may be dissolved, recombined, suspended for months or even years, so that the unwelcome characteristics of a group are avoided.” There is a cyclical process of learning in a group that varies with time:

Remember, too, that the advantages which you gain from the study circle and its materials vary from time to time. That is to say, we cannot, and should not imagine we can, extract all the nutrition from any piece of study material at one time. What we have to do is familiarize ourselves with certain information, techniques and so on, so that our attention is not focused upon them when the time comes to use them. Then, as and when we can do so, we extract the use of the materials on successive occasions. (16)

Rates of progress and understanding will, of course, differ among individual members of a group. In some cases, slow learners or “laggards” may be told by more advanced members of a group that they, too, are not yet learning or “never seem to get anywhere” in order to prevent comparison and anxiety, which disturb the learning process. Others, misunderstanding the nature of group work, resent the fact that they have to wait for others to make a certain kind of progress before they can benefit from it. “They have failed to note that others, too, are waiting for *them* to progress.”

The goal of group work is to progress from the stage of “weak in understanding” to an alignment with the essence and heart of the Teaching and eventually to the activation of higher

perception and consciousness. Members of groups are partly preparing themselves to be allowed, when "ripe," to carry out more advanced studies. By maintaining contact with and profiting from the Teaching, students are placing themselves in a position to be selected for "special activities and higher understanding at the proper time."

The personal work of individual members of a group takes different forms and is specific to each person. In Gurdjieff's teaching, this meant the effort to observe, understand and ultimately transcend one's "chief feature":

Every man has a certain feature in his character which is central. It is like an axle around which all his 'false personality' revolves. Every man's personal work must consist in struggling against this chief fault. This explains why there can be no general rules of work and why all systems that attempt to evolve such rules either lead to nothing or cause harm. How can there be general rules? What is useful for one is harmful for another. One man talks too much; he must learn to keep silent. Another man is silent when he ought to talk and he must learn to talk; and so it is always and in everything. General rules for the work of groups refers to everyone. Personal directions can only be individual. In this connection again a man cannot find his own chief feature, his chief fault, by himself. This is practically a law. The teacher has to point out this feature to him and show him how to fight against it. No one else but the teacher can do this. The study of the chief fault and the struggle against it constitute, as it were, each man's individual path, but the aim must be the same for all. (17)

The activities and tasks given each member of a group by the teacher are graduated in terms of difficulty and complexity:

As a rule only very easy tasks are given at the beginning which the teacher does not even call tasks, and he does not say much about them but gives them in the form of hints. If he sees that he is understood and that the tasks are carried out he passes on to more and more difficult ones. More difficult tasks, although they are only subjectively difficult, are called 'barriers.' The peculiarity of barriers is the fact that, having surmounted a serious barrier, a man can no longer return to ordinary sleep, to ordinary life. And if, having passed the first barrier, he feels afraid of those that follow and does not go on, he stops so to speak between two barriers and is unable to move either backwards or forwards. This is the worst that can happen to a man. Therefore the teacher is usually very careful in the choice of tasks and barriers; in other words, he takes the risk of giving definite tasks requiring the conquest of inner barriers only to those people who have already shown themselves sufficiently strong on small barriers. (18)

Not all individuals in a group will learn in the same manner and at the same rate, and there may be a separating-out process based on capacity and potential. A useful analogy is sometimes employed to describe this process:

Accidental collections of people centering around a teaching will always endure a separating-out, like the separating of butter from milk, in the presence of the agitating factor, which is manifest or concealed but none the less present, whenever a renewal of teaching starts to work. This is the shaking of the vessel containing the milk. People imagine that, like buttermilk, when there is a movement, they will all be affected in the same way. But both butter and skimmed milk have their function, although these may be in different fields. (19)

The separating-out process in a group, when some members leave or are asked to leave, reveals aspects of their personality that may have been hidden or dormant. Gurdjieff explained this process in talks to his students:

There is nothing that shows up a man better than his attitude towards the work and the teacher *after he has left it*. Sometimes such tests are arranged intentionally. A man is placed in such a position that he is *obliged* to leave and he is fully justified in having a grievance either against the teacher or against some other person. And then he is watched to see how he will behave. A decent man will behave decently even if he thinks that he has been treated unjustly or wrongly. But many people in such circumstances show a side of their nature which otherwise they would never show. And at times it is a necessary means for exposing a man's nature. (20)

Right Attitude and Orientation

A correct orientation is needed to make effective use of the materials provided to a group for study. The right kind of effort is necessary to accomplish the goals and aims of the group and to achieve something beyond the normal range. Some of the qualities required by a group and its individual members include trust, patience, responsibility, attunement, focus and effort. On the other hand, there are a number of obstacles to the unity, harmony and communication in a group, including:

- rationalizations, making excuses
- tension, disturbance, negativity
- pride, superiority, self-importance
- rivalry, jealousy, competition between group members

Discipline and focus are also central to the correct functioning of a group. Discipline is not a rigid structure of behaviour, but rather a conscious purposeful attempt to follow the instructions and indications of the teaching and the teacher:

These techniques will require two forms of discipline. One is the discipline I ask from you, and the other is the discipline you impose on yourself. From your point of view, the second discipline is the most difficult. Don't forget that the activities and techniques of the Tradition help you to develop this discipline. You are not alone in disciplining yourself; nor is it a battle in which you are tearing yourself apart. If you like, you are using functionally useful tools. Knowing how to use these tools gives you the ability to use them. (21)

One of the functions of a group is to provide the opportunity for members to observe their own reactions to group meetings and their interactions with others as a field of self-study: "Human beings often try to hide aspects of reality from themselves – people make excuses and explain to themselves why they thought of something or why they did something . . . if they hide things from themselves or deny the existence of certain things within themselves, they are not approaching an understanding of their own being." For Gurdjieff, the group was an important vehicle for self-study and self-knowledge:

The first aim of a man beginning work in a group should be *self-study*. The work of self-study can proceed only in properly organized groups. One man alone cannot see himself. But when a certain number of people unite together for this purpose they will even involuntarily help one another. It is a common characteristic of human nature that a man sees the faults of others more easily than he sees his own. At the same time on the path of self-study he learns that he himself possesses all the faults that he finds in others. But there are many things that he does not see in himself, whereas in other people he begins to see them. But, as I have just said, in this case he knows that these features are his own. Thus other members of the group serve him as mirrors in which he sees himself. But, of course, in order to see himself in other people's faults and not merely to see the faults of others, a man must be very much on his guard and be very sincere with himself. Furthermore, in the work of self-study one man begins to accumulate material resulting from self-observation. Twenty people will have twenty times as much material. And every one of them will be able to use the whole of this material because the exchange of observations is one of the processes of the group's existence. (22)

Members of groups must be honest and sincere and tell the teacher the whole truth. "Telling the teacher a deliberate lie, or being insincere with him, or suppressing something, makes their presence in the group completely useless." Group members must remember that they are in a group to learn and must follow the instructions of the teacher. Gurdjieff strongly emphasized this point:

If, therefore, once they are in the group, they begin to feel or express mistrust towards the teacher, to criticize his actions, to find that they understand better how the group should be conducted and especially if they show lack of external considering in relation to the teacher, lack of respect for him, asperity, impatience, tendency to argument, this at once puts an end to any possibility of work, for work is possible only as long as people remember that they have come to learn and not to teach. (23)

Group Energy and Communication

A group generates an energy that is circulated and shared among the members of the group. Each person produces and receives this current of energy, passing on a proportion to others: "There is a pool of energy which is produced in the form of 'group energy.' The group benefits from the transmission, exchange and interchange of this energy, and an individual within the group can benefit according to his or her need."

Spiritual groups and individual members produce and receive four different types of energy, in terms of use, assimilation and absorption: "They have the energy they produce themselves, the energy which comes from working in a group, the energy which comes from the natural surroundings, as well as the energy which comes from the teacher and the source of the Tradition." One of the functions of a group is to enable each member to use all four energies simultaneously. This creates a circle of energy in which each individual is a link in a "chain."

The energy created by a group may benefit another group in some other place or at some other time: "Energy produced in a group activity can be shared with and drawn upon by another group without detriment to the group that produced it." The spiritual force of a group can also be conveyed to members of the group who are absent by drawing on an accumulated group-pool of energy. A group can also assist other members of the group who may be ill or physically weak, by generating and sending energy to help such an individual.

Communication and sharing of energy occurs between individual members of a group, between the teacher and students, and between the Teaching and each individual person. This process includes not only verbal communication but also a form of communication "beyond words." It is through the correct inner development of the group that the stage of "direct communication" may be achieved: "When the group is operating correctly and in the proper balance without too much emotion, and without too much intellectuality, there is a direct communication among all the people connected with this work, and that communication is telepathic." The relationships and energy developed in a group produces a "special flavor" or atmosphere that can be recognized and experienced. But in talking about this energy field it is important "not to become excited or emotionally involved, because this will interrupt it."

Relationship Between a Group and the Greater Teaching

An “organic” group is developed and comes into being in response to the potentialities of a situation. A group carrying on real work must fulfil the requirements of proper time, place and people:

Certain physical conditions are necessary even before such a situation (a teaching situation) can exist. The human community is involved in an evolutionary movement. The existence of the teacher and the community in a given place is connected, by cosmic laws, with a necessity of the community. There is, in fact, an organic situation of which the individual psychological position is merely a part. (24)

The interrelationship between correctly grouped people and a real, living spiritual teaching has a holistic nature in which all operate as one whole: “The learning group and the total organization to which it belongs is so important that it is worth regarding as sacrosanct in itself as far as its integrity and maintenance are concerned.” The structure of the Teaching is dependent upon the interplay of the materials of study, rules, energy and purpose of the School and the human factor:

As soon as you join a study circle, you come into a certain special relationship with its members, with its teacher, and with the whole of the studies. That is why it is important to maintain a special sort of relationship between the members, and a special sort of attention in the student. The study materials themselves, the membership of the group, the activity as a whole of the school, the proceedings which are carried out – these are the means whereby the special harmony and receptivity, as well as the inter-relation between students and the study, take place. (25)

Teaching is generally carried out in both large and small groups. Sub-groups may also be formed to further refine the system: “When a group of people becomes too large, it must be sub-divided in order to maintain the organic nature of the group, of the movement of people.” Groups complement each other, and the collected experience of different groups becomes part of the accumulated knowledge of the whole. An analogy is sometimes given of individual members in a group being a link in a chain, and each group being a link in a still larger chain. The links of the chain work together simultaneously, sharing energy and enhancing each other’s spiritual work.

Contact and communication between groups takes many forms, from the conventional and ordinary to more refined and higher level experiences. This sharing of a range of experiences enhances the feeling of fellowship and communication. However, it is important that individuals belonging to different groups should not compare or share exercises and activities

without the permission of the teacher, as these are specific for a given group and may not apply to another group.

When groups achieve a certain harmony, an energy wave is produced that can link with the corresponding energy wave from another group, allowing energy to flow in both directions. Geographical, climatic and other factors can sometimes influence the transmission of energy between groups and produce "a difference in the rhythm or momentum a group builds up and sustains." Ideally there is a balance and harmony within and between groups:

People functioning together in a group support, compensate and balance each other's function. There may be moments when, for one reason or another, one member of a group is functioning below normal. The function of the group is to try and restore the correct functioning of this person by contact and relationship. Equally, it is the function of a group, relating to another group, to try and establish this balancing function. One group may produce an excess amount of energy which they can store for their own future use, or pass it on to another group which needs an extra boost of energy at that moment. It is therefore necessary to have as close a rapport as possible between members of a group, and between groups. (26)

Some Characteristics of Deteriorated Groups

There is an almost inevitable tendency for groups of all types to become ossified or mechanical. All kinds of social, religious, psychological and philosophical schools, lacking an organic nature, have been turned into a rigid system or "quasi-religion."

Among the tests are whether the group will deteriorate into a power-system or a hierarchical set-up; whether the activities of the group will degenerate into a mere search for personal satisfactions (since social satisfactions can, of course, be obtained anywhere else), or whether some other kind of immature demand will develop. Very many such groups are not successful, since their members, by a sort of unsensed conspiracy, seldom recognize how easily subjective demands can take over and under how deep a disguise they may operate. Many of the collections of spiritual people which one sees in the West, and not a few in the East, are really this kind of group. Stabilized they may be; spiritual activities they are not. (27)

Random collections of "like-minded people" or irregular arrangements of students who gather together for group-mentality reasons cannot, for all practical purposes, form a real learning group. There is saying: *'Every gathering of people has its own potential – those collected arbitrarily have only physical, mental or emotional potential.'*

Authentic groups are not recruitment groups. They are not collections of people who have all answered a newspaper advertisement, or formed a group after reading a book or hearing a lecture, or because they are related to someone, or have been made interested in the Way; or people who simply seek a group. Such groups may be recognized, even by complete outsiders, by the personality conflicts which arise within them. (28)

Individuals who lack friends and normal social relationships often try to use a group as a social organization for companionship and mutual comfort. But if group members “already have a sound social equilibrium, they will not need to convert their study atmosphere into a source of stability and reassurance.”

In such cases, the natural development of a social sense in the grouping stunts aspiration. Only the introduction of different types of people into the group, in order at least to restore it to a normal cross-section of people, would be likely to revive this group’s possibilities. But a social group of this kind is almost by definition hostile to such introductions; people who seem to think in a different manner are regarded as hostile or ineligible. (29)

Groups can easily develop into a clan or “in-group,” becoming narrow sociological communities of the elite when refusing to accept those outside their ranks. Many such groups have a strange or abnormal atmosphere, making newcomers feel uncomfortable or unwelcome. A good test is to see whether friends, relatives or even complete strangers feel at ease in the group. Another pitfall of the group process occurs when members are magnetized around certain ideas, readings, exercises and so on. There may be an overly intellectual approach to studies and a tendency to take things in a literal sense. Individuals who seek to acquire and extract intellectual satisfactions from the group are so filled with thoughts and ideas that they are unable to concentrate on subtle concepts.

Many people in study groups, rather than wanting to learn, are actually craving emotional stimulation or are looking to attract attention to themselves. Such people are characterized by over-enthusiasm, strong subjective feeling and excitement. Another indication of a cult-like or deteriorated group is a community produced and maintained by the process of indoctrination and conditioning:

Because virtually all human actions are motivated by greed or fear (the ‘carrot’ or the ‘whip’), these are the mainsprings of virtually all study groups. But these negative characteristics, although they alone caused the individuals to find, enter and persist in the group, are a distinct barrier to learning. (30)

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