

Intentional Suffering and Conscious Labor

One of the things we emphasize most strongly is to regularly attend retreats, where we have the opportunity to really settle into all aspects of practice more deeply. One crucial element of retreats is that they create an artificial environment—minimizing external distractions—so that we can look more deeply inward. Since we may feel both the physical discomfort from long days of sitting, as well as the emotional discomfort that comes when difficult emotions arise, retreats can be, in part, an act of “intentional suffering.”

Intentional suffering, a term from the Gurdjieff teachings, is where we consciously place ourselves in circumstances where we are forced to deal with difficulty—both physical and emotional. In other words, the retreat environment can help push us in ways that we would never push ourselves on our own.

For example, one of the great benefits of retreats is sitting in silence. We intentionally place ourselves in this environment where there is no talking. It’s true that at times we might relish it—but usually not for too long. The feeling of restlessness might kick in. Or the desire for a little drama, a little entertainment. And often we follow the urge—even if we’re just talking to ourselves. Yet, sitting in silence allows us to see through how we continually try to distract ourselves. In other words, it forces us to look more deeply at ourselves.

There are two very different types of suffering—*intentional* or *conscious* suffering, and, as Gurdjieff calls it, *stupid suffering*. The second kind of suffering is our everyday suffering, which is self-imposed by our own mechanicalness and neurotic conditioning. For example, our angry or anxious reactions, our self-judgments, and our addictive behaviors that bring us no real or lasting satisfaction.

Hopefully, we have all found out that this kind of suffering is completely useless, and often avoidable; or, at the very least, workable. In fact, one of the primary purposes of our practice is to gradually liberate us from this pointless, self-inflicted misery. Every time we make an effort to intentionally stay with our



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experience, especially when it's difficult, it's food for our Being, nourishing qualities like perseverance and equanimity. This is one of the prime ways our learning can go deeper.

In many ways, we're afraid to look at—to really see—our many layers of self. It takes some courage to face not only our beliefs and assumptions, but also our identification with them. We're afraid that the story that we've been telling ourselves all along—about who we are, what our life has been, why things are the way they are—will be jarred and shaken. If we are not this story, this fabrication of a life, who are we? And until we have a deeper sense of Being, the story of ourselves is all we know.

So it's good to look precisely at our many layers, particularly where we're afraid. These are our hidden corners—our edge. This is where we must go most deeply. It is one of the paradoxes of spiritual practice that the more deeply we look into self, with conscious efforts, the more we become free of self.

In this way, retreats offer us the opportunity to take our learning to deeper levels, always grounded in our willingness to intentionally suffer, that is, to stay present with our own difficult experience. When we talk about learning, we're not talking about acquiring conceptual knowledge or intellectual insights. In practice, the real learning process has to be *experiential*. Without the experiential component, especially without our inner struggles, our understanding remains merely conceptual. In other words, to be transformative we must move from growth in mere knowledge to growth in what we call Being, or Being-Awareness. This does not mean, however, that there is a bigger or better "me"—what it means is that we are connecting more fully with who we really are and with what life is.

As an example of the learning process in retreats, a very common meditation instruction is to bring attention to the breath. At first, we usually understand this to mean we should focus on the breath in a very concentrated way. So when we go to retreats we will follow this practice, often with the idea that if we stay really focused on the breath, we will become more calm. This notion is what many people believe meditation is about in the Me-phase of practice.

After we've worked with this practice for a while, our understanding may begin to change. As we sit and struggle through the long hours of retreats—and this is what is meant by intentional suffering—there is often a shift from simply trying to become calm, toward viewing the breath as part of a wider container of awareness. The breath becomes the space within which we experience our thoughts and emotions. At this point we are moving from the Me-phase of practice into Being-Awareness, cultivating a larger sense of life.

But over time, the awareness of the breath can take us even

deeper. As we practice awareness of the breath through many retreats—intentionally undergoing difficult conditions—the breath can become a touchpoint or portal into reality. The breath touches lightly on the center of the chest, and puts us in touch with the warmth of our natural kindness. Eventually, a very light, almost effortless awareness replaces the former disciplined focus on the breath. And perhaps, at some point, we become aware of the breath breathing itself, like a breeze that goes right through us, without real effort. Paradoxically, this is both wonderful and also nothing special.

The key element is the quality of our efforts. The term Gurdjieff used was *conscious labor*. Conscious labor is basically any intentional effort that moves to override our pervasive mode of waking sleep—where we act mechanically on autopilot. A conscious labor can be as simple as noticing something about ourselves that we don't want to see, such as when we are impatient or judgmental.

Or it could be as pleasant as appreciating our surroundings as we walk around outside, rather than being caught in our daydreams. Or it can be as courageous as when we struggle to not succumb to one of our many addictions—for food, or distractions, or whatever your own addictions are.

Conscious labor is not about the external fruits of our labors, but about inner growth. The conscious struggle is between the Yes and the No—the Yes, I want to be awake, and the No, I want to resist—which leads to a kind of inner friction. Out of this friction can come an inner seeing, where our very solid sense of Me can be seen through.

In other words, as we bring awareness to our tightly woven sense of self, there are moments where our Me becomes less solid, less substantial. This is where we are no longer held captive by our thoughts or moods or emotions. Once our attachment to Me is seen through—and this almost always comes about as a result of our conscious efforts—a more spacious sense of reality is available to us.

Ezra Bayda

