

Pilgrimage to the Gobi Desert

by [R. Hodges](#) April © 2021

Jeanne de Salzman has said that our most important need, our principal lack, is a connection with “higher energies.” How in fact do we connect with “the higher”? It is one of the reasons for which Traditions exist. We “modern” people largely lack a religious tradition, but some of us find such a connection in meditation, “sitting,” some in nature. I seek it and sometimes find it in music, and in contemplation of certain ideas, often with the help of books. Just recently as I was re-reading a very interesting book *Tibetan Tale of Love and Magic* by Alexandra David-Neel, which I discovered long ago in the library of the Gurdjieff Foundation and read it through in one sitting, I encountered the following passage (p. 61) that throws light on how the Tibetan Tantric Buddhist tradition helps people in this regard (here edited a bit):

Many Tibetans undertake arduous pilgrimages to a certain holy mountain to make obeisance there. They believe that a great god holds court on the summit. They may have been initiated to conceive of this court as an image of the world, an illusory projection of this god who is sitting alone in meditation. Others who have penetrated deeper visualize the light of their own consciousness on top of the radiant summit, endlessly creating, destroying, and recreating the universe. They murmur endlessly the creed of the great mystics: “*Shiva aham!*”—“I am, I am Shiva, I am god beyond god”.

How does the Gurdjieff tradition help? The pilgrimage to the higher is not based on such an image. It is a path left up to the individual. Perhaps it is only possible after a person has been stripped naked, his “habit,” his clumsy thick garments of beliefs and feeling and images, having been taken off. This seems to be the aim of *Beelzebub’s Tales* (BT). Gurdjieff says that his purpose in this book is “To destroy...in the mentation and feelings of the reader, the beliefs and views, by centuries rooted....” in people (BT page v.). But how are we to take the images, the tales, in this book? Are we to “believe in” them? Perhaps the point is to put us in question about what we *do* believe, what we want to believe.

Gurdjieff’s last book *Life Is Real Only Then When “I Am”* shows in telling the story of his own struggles how he incarnated such a path. J. G. Bennett writes in his long-unpublished Introduction to this book that this path, called “intentional suffering,” consists of undertaking to benefit all mankind, with the knowledge that the undertaking will result in the highest degree of personal suffering, including the suffering of the failure of the undertaking.

In 2015 I made a pilgrimage to the Mogao caves in the Gobi desert near Dunhuang, Xinjiang province, China. Located at the junction of the northern and southern branches of the silk road, Mogao became the site of perhaps the world's largest collection of ancient Buddhist art works and scriptures in many languages—it consists of more than a hundred temples and monasteries built inside caves that lie under the eaves of a limestone escarpment. Built up starting in the late 4th century, it fell out of use in the 10th century around the end of the Tang dynasty but was rediscovered by European explorers in the early 20th century (the first such was Sir Aurel Stein, see his book *On Ancient Central Asian Tracks*). They proceeded to buy and steal and haul away whatever they could. But much remained, and some was later restored. In 1987 it was designated a UNESCO world heritage site. It is now the site of tourism on an industrial scale. Most visitors are Chinese, Korean, and Japanese, not many westerners go there. I saw many beautiful and interesting things and learned much.

I learned something about modern China. Xinjiang is the homeland of the Uighur people, Muslims from Central Asia. I found them friendly, industrious, non-dogmatic. But shortly after my visit they

found themselves bearing the brunt of massive ethnic repression, well-documented in media reports but studiously denied by official sources. Another impression bears on this: my assigned guide for the Mogao caves was a charming intelligent young woman who spoke excellent English. She was very knowledgeable: I asked many probing questions about what I was seeing and she infallibly had an answer. At the end of the tour, I said to her “You know a great deal about this tradition—are you personally interested in Buddhism?” Her answer: “The government does not approve of that.” Hmm. This was a foretaste of what is now becoming more clear, a relentless campaign by the Chinese government to exercise draconian control over every aspect of its people’s lives, including their inner lives.

After I returned, I discovered an old Tibetan Buddhist Tantric scripture, long lost but now famous, which had been found at Mogao. Its title is *The Cuckoo of Awareness* (Tibetan: རིག་པའི་སྤྱུ་བྱུག). Here is my summary translation (for the original text, with transliteration and literal English translation, see http://www.zangthal.co.uk/files/The_Cuckoo_of_Awareness.pdf):

The way things are is non-conceptual
but the way of action is conditioned by forms.
Having abandoned the disease of striving,
since one already has it all,
through being spontaneously present
one leaves it as it is.

As you may know, the cuckoo is a very handsome bird. Its beautiful song is a harbinger of Spring, of the renewal of life. Its way of life is that it lays its eggs in the nests of other birds, who feed it better than their own chicks because it is larger and chirps louder than they do (see *Cuckoo: Cheating by Nature*, Nick Davies). Is this text saying that unstriving awareness is a cuckoo chick in the nest of the all-too human spirit, so full of striving, and it can grow up to a resplendent great bird, the true Self?

There is a story about why this text interested me. Once in the mid 70’s, at a meeting where our Teacher presided, I remember asking for an exercise. His answer was: “Every day, say ‘cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo’ with as much seriousness as possible.” Was he saying it was a stupid question? Was he saying I was “cuckoo”? Was he saying that in the Work I was a cuckoo chick, who made a lot of noise and got a lot of food and could grow up to a large commanding presence? Was he, perhaps, giving me permission? Or is this perhaps vanity, self-justification on my part?

I am reminded of perhaps the most memorable and poetic passage in the published writings of Gurdjieff, the “self-reasoning” that took place in him in 1904, as told in his book of “the third series”, *Life is Real Only then when ‘I Am’* (p. 16 *et seq*). It took place “...on the southwestern edge of the Gobi desert and represents to my mind the most fertile of all the parts of the surface of our earth.” “...under the influence, from one side, of a distant hollow din formed from sounds of milliards of lives of all possible outer forms and, from the other side, of an awesome silence,...”

The phrase “distant hollow din” invites philological speculation. The word “din” may be a sly reference to the Arabic word “din” which means “religion,” especially Islam. It is, for example, part of the name of Mullah Nasr Eddin which translates roughly as “Teacher (*Mullah*) of the Victory (*Nasr*) of Religion (*Al-din*, which becomes, according to the rules of Arabic, *Eddin*, a common appellative surname).” Surely Gurdjieff was aware of this word. If “din” points to religion, then why “hollow,” why “distant”? But isn’t it true that most of the roar of words about religion is hollow, and distant from real human concerns?

The setting, between “paradise and...hell”, between his “ordinary waking state” and “inner emptiness” seems to invite comparison with a crucial duality in inner work: between, on the one hand the “way of action”; and on the other the way of pure contemplation, of having “abandoned the disease of striving.” Some have argued that what Gurdjieff taught in the early days was a way of action, as reflected in the intensive work done in Russia (in Ouspensky’s account for example) and at the Prieuré and in the exhausting journeys between the two places; and that later, as early as 1957, a contemplative approach was introduced by Jeanne de Salzmann. This may have been influenced by William Segal’s connection to the Zen teacher D. T. Suzuki. A practice was instituted that came to be called “sitting,” regarded now by many in Gurdjieff’s legacy community as an obligatory daily practice, sometimes called “preparation” in the sense that it prepares one to “work” during the day. It is clear however that Gurdjieff’s work always included inner contemplation, for example Beelzebub’s instructions to his grandson (*BT* p. 78): “...every day, at sunrise, while watching the reflection of its splendor, you [should] bring about a contact between your consciousness and the various unconscious parts of your general presence”; and a number of other passages in *Beelzebub*.

In practice, as sitting is taught and practiced, it is not always clear what the relationship between “sitting” and “work” truly is or could be. In “sitting” people do a number of different inner exercises, even sometimes, though not often, the practice of doing nothing, which turns out to be the hardest exercise of all. Doing nothing may be the most important practice. Is it the same as the “being spontaneously present” of the *Cuckoo* text? Is it possible to enter into a condition similar to that described by Gurdjieff that took place at the edge of the Gobi, in which both sides are equally present, the passive and the active?

Is this the third world of man, “...his own world, depending neither upon his ‘outer world’ nor upon his ‘inner world’; that is to say, it is independent of the caprices of the processes that flow in him...” (*Life is Real Only Then When ‘I Am’* p. 173)? Is this the way in which life ought to be lived? It is experienced at moments, but often soon dissolves in the turmoil of life. Is sitting a preparation for making these moments more frequent and longer lasting? Is this what Gurdjieff calls to “remember oneself,” which seems to imply two selves, one which remembers and one which is remembered, and even a third self which is the remembering? He enjoins that this self-remembering should be practiced “always and everywhere” (aphorism in special script in Gurdjieff’s Study House at the Prieuré).

People talk about stopping, quieting the mind. While a quiet mind is deeply important for inner realization, and it has been given as a work instruction to stop thought, for a long time this proves difficult or impossible in practice. Work is first of all for oneself, but perhaps more importantly must always be for the other; in a group, for others in the group. To think of quieting one’s mind can be egoistic unless it is also in service of others. As Gurdjieff writes in *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, at the end of the chapter “My Father”, the inscription for a stone to be set up at his father’s grave (p. 49): “...MAY ALL BE FOR OUR NEIGHBOUR.” There is a passage (*BT* p. 567, Hypnotism) where Beelzebub speaks of certain “...general cosmic lawful phenomena, to sense which by Reason is proper to every three-brained being, and by means of which there is established that connection between all the three-brained beings of all our Great Universe for the collective fulfillment of the common universal functioning, for which purpose everything existing in the Universe just exists.”

When Madame de Salzmann spoke of the “earth going down” if we do not work, what earth did she mean? It’s not about stopping climate change, or feeding the hungry, or reforming the political system. Admirable goals, but they often seem to be people’s substitute for working to save the real earth—the earth that consists of the fellowship of those who work. The point of work is to be a member of the fellowship, to be in vibrational communion with it, be it a small fellowship like a Group or the

worldwide fellowship. This is what group leaders, and group members, are meant to do. This is the only reason for groups. It is the only reason for a work community.

A Group is a miniature cosmos of others to work with. To be fed, one must feed others. The creation of the Megalocosmos was because of the need of “our ENDLESSNESS” for such reciprocal feeding (p. 749 *et seq.*, Purgatory). The “Megalocosmos” is, in my reading, the community or fellowship of all those who work for and with each other. The cuckoo fellowship which is the third brain of the unconscious human race.

Being responsible for a group is a challenging condition. Not easy, not without hazards. More than one person has been destroyed by it. But a far more common hazard is that “leaders” get puffed up and think they know far more than they do.

In an exchange May 25 1944 (private communication), Gurdjieff says that it is necessary to “poison” others to make them go toward higher aspirations. He uses the French word “poison,” which means what it means in English but also carries the notion of potion, medicine.

The German noun “Gift” means “poison.” “Gift”: literally “that which is given.” Derrida makes magic with this interlingualism in *The Gift of Death*. That stunning book introduced me to Derrida; it was recommended by Carl Lehman-Haupt. A gift, including a book recommendation, always contains poison. One idea is that Christ's crucifixion was his (i.e. God's) gift to mankind. It was meant to kill the old man so the new man could be born. *Beelzebub's Tales* is Gurdjieff's gift to us. So is his Work.

As I write this, it is Easter week. I reflect: “Easter” is a resurrection of the worship of Ishtar, one of the most important ancient god(esse)s. The word “Easter” is directly cognate. At least as early as 3000 BCE she was worshipped (under her earlier Sumerian name Inanna—see *History begins at Sumer* by Samuel Kramer). Many Christian myths and rituals derive directly from Ishtar, who gave herself out of love, descended into the underworld (our world?), followed by her death and resurrection. With many attributes, she was specially associated with associated with love, beauty, sex, war, justice, and politics. She plays an important role in the epic of Gilgamesh, whom she tried unsuccessfully to seduce.

Easter is a symbol. It is important to understand the difference between “symbol” and “metaphor”. It has been expressed like this: A metaphor is an explanation of one thing or idea in terms of another, an analogy, but it could just as well be a different analogy and does not introduce any actual new idea. A symbol on the other hand is a thing itself, an *idea* in the Platonic sense, and is an inexhaustible source of meaning.

God is a symbol. Gurdjieff calls “God” a “universal analogy” (*Life is Real* p. 22) but in terms of the present discussion his usage there of “God” is as an inexhaustible symbol. In *Beelzebub's Tales* he says that God *is* the Megalocosmos (*BT* p. 775, Purgatory); other traditions make God something more than that, for example in Islam God (Allah) is totally transcendent, completely separate from Cosmos; yet also totally immanent, identical with the cosmos and present in every aspect of it. But there are passages in *BT* in which God clearly has an immanent aspect, for example in *BT* p. 372, Organization by Ashiata Shiemash, under one of Beelzebub's ever-changing appellations “OMNI-LOVING AND LONG-SUFFERING-ENDLESS-CREATOR;”.

In one Hadith, a traditional report of the word of Muhammad, it is said that Allah created the world out of loneliness, out of his longing to be known as a “hidden treasure,” in and through his creature Man. Henry Corbin's important book *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi* reminds us of this. As Corbin informs us, the word “Al-lah” (Arabic: الله) is from an old Semitic root meaning “alone,” “lonely.” “Al-” is the definite article, like English “The,” which intensifies the sense of uniqueness, the aloneness, of Allah. Corbin explains a subtle Sufi doctrine in which, though Allah is too remote from man for a direct encounter to be possible, they can meet each other in an intermediate realm, the “imaginal realm” (Arabic *Alam al-mithal*, the world of images), in which realm they co-create

images that enact such an encounter—not “imaginary” images but real beings, like Platonic ideas. This idea is very popular with Sufis, who regard their work as submission to the law of this gnosis, this love. Creation by reciprocal feeding (*BT* p. 749, Purgatory) lends itself to being read in a similar vein.

The prototypical being of the imaginal realm is the Angel. The word “angel” means “messenger,” i.e. of God. Our most spiritual poet Rilke often uses the image of the Angel, see for example his greatest work the ten Duino Elegies. He explicitly credits a Sufi influence.

In another Hadith, Allah says “I am not contained in the entire universe, but I fit easily within the heart of my faithful servant.” God is always saying “I”: “I am Who Am” (Hebrew: אֲנִי אֶשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה, Exodus 3:14); “Let be, and know ‘I Am’” (אֵין וְיָדָעוּ, Psalms 46:11). We could listen better.

In Gurdjieff we sometimes use the mantram “Lord Have Mercy.” It is chanted aloud in certain movements, and uttered silently within in sitting exercises. It is a contraction of the Jesus prayer, which in esoteric Russian Orthodox practice is meant to be prayed continuously, always and everywhere. In a well-known story a Russian *starets* (teacher) tells his pupil to place the prayer *on* his heart; the pupil asks why not *in* the heart—the answer is “one day the heart will break, and the prayer will fall in.”

“Lord have mercy” bids the Higher to recognize the aspirant’s love of It, to look upon the one praying. As Madame de Salzmänn says in “The Look from Above”

(<https://www.gurdjieff.org/salzmänn4.htm>): “Without this look upon me, I cannot know that I exist.”

The heart, presently surrounded with impermeable buffers, must break with love for this to happen, for the fulfillment of the reason for Creation

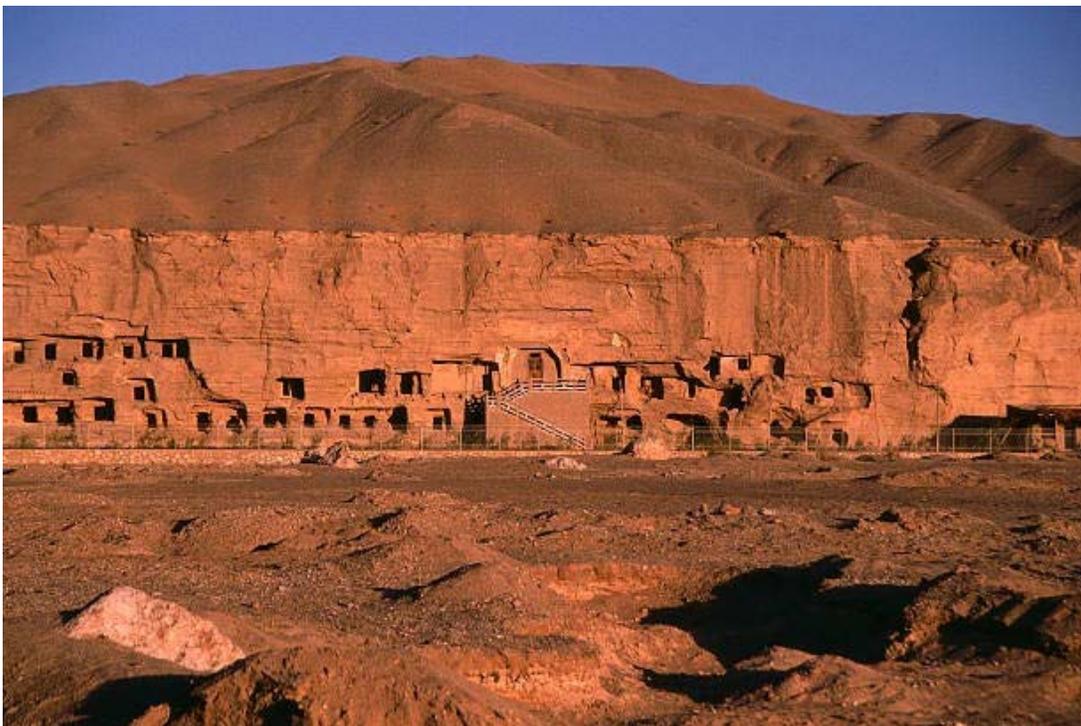
In the Gobi passage in the third series (pp. 20-22) the young Gurdjieff is faced with the heartbreak of an anguished realization that after years of merciless efforts he still cannot succeed in “... ‘remembering myself’ in the process of my general common life with others...sufficiently to hinder the associations flowing in me automatically from certain undesirable hereditary factors of my nature.” In an interesting soliloquy (*Life is Real only then, when “I Am”* pp. 22-25) he compares his “I,” his inner god, with the God of the outer world and arrives at a radical solution: to take an oath to himself intentionally to give up his highly developed “power of telepathy and hypnotism,” by the use of which he had become “depraved to the core,” so that the absence of this power for the rest of his life would constantly remind him to remember himself.

The *Cuckoo* scripture does not tell how to achieve a two-sided presence, even if it illuminates it. But in truth the Gurdjieff teaching does not directly tell how either. Gurdjieff talks about a lost Christianity (*Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* Chapter XV) which taught this *how*, and he seems to promise to tell us how; but is it possible to tell anybody how to do anything? People are always telling and asking *how*. But the only way to really find out *how* is by a pilgrimage passing through longing, trying, suffering, heartbreak, and finally letting be, then finding oneself in the place one set out to go to, which is of course the Self, the very home from which one was exiled long ago.

Images



Mogao Caves, near Dunhuang, Xinjiang, China
Entrance façade



The Mogao caves in context



Buddhist mural art and statues inside two of the Mogao caves



“Three Hares” image on ceiling of Mogao Cave 139
Each hare shares its ears with the other two

Possible meanings:

- Creation of the universe by spinning movement of three forces
- the Buddhist idea of “Interdependent Origination,” that things (and people) have no independent self-existence but subsist only in their relationships with others



Green Man and Three Hares, Wiessembourg Cathedral, 7th Century



THE
GOSPEL ACCORDING
TO S. MATTHEW.

Green man image from a 1619 edition of the King James Bible
The Green Man as Beelzebub, in the form of a horned goat.

Alongside its obvious meaning of Nature's Bounty, the Green Man has a darker side: Nature the destroyer. The Green Man was also known as Beelzebub, and sometime called "Three-headed Beelzebub". In the traditional Beltane (May Day) Mummers' plays of old Celtic Europe, Beelzebub as the Green Man fights with his club against St. George, who wounds him with his sword. This reflects the age-old struggle between the autochthonous human essence (Beelzebub) and the spirit of civilization (the dragon-tamer, St. George); or perhaps the struggle between pagan religion and Christianity.

In the Mummers' play, a mysterious Doctor appears who heals the wound of Beelzebub. Is Gurdjieff this Doctor?

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

PARTICIPANT: Thank you. Richard, I wanted to ask you, I did the work for many years and studied under Lord Pentland and other teachers. I'm wondering what you think is the most important thing you've learned on your journey toward spiritual progress.

RH: Become yourself, abandon all hope of achieving anything by any means. External means including exercises. Not that I don't do exercises—I do; but as is said it's not for results. It's for the fun of it, and the suffering of it. There is very little difference between suffering and fun, actually.

PARTICIPANT: If I could just ask a follow-up question: what do you see as the role of grace in the transformation process?

RH: It depends on what you understand by grace. If by that you mean the unexpected and unearned descent of higher energies into oneself, it's like Mme. de Salzman said, that's our only hope. We can't ask for it. We can't earn it. We can just accept it.

PARTICIPANT: Do you feel that Buddhism and ancient myths of the area of the caves still thrive there: underground or embedded practice and knowledge in that area similarly to the Yezidis in Afghanistan, and Sufis?

RH: Maybe not in Dunhuang but in China certainly there is a living Buddhism which has to be somewhat underground and until recently there was a living Sufism in Xinjiang. I'm not sure whether that still exists because the present repression has been severe there, but certainly in all of East Asia. Buddhism is taken very seriously and has many different levels, ranging from something resembling Baptist Sunday school up to the highest most esoteric and refined teachings. In Tibet I believe this still exists, and also in the Tibetan diaspora. It's been given to the world, Tibet's gift to the world through the Tibetan diaspora.

SAME PARTICIPANT: The three hares that were on that ceiling—like the three forces—do they have a physical practice that you noticed in any of your researches in that area?

RH I really have not encountered a 'practice' relating to the three hares. All I know is that the image has been respected for at least a millennium and a half; it's one of the most frequent images that you find throughout world religion. Not just Buddhist but also Christian and even occasionally in a mosque, so there's something about the mystery of the three hares that is truly of esoteric significance.

SAME PARTICIPANT: That's the first time I've noticed that the ears were connected

RH: Somehow it has to do with listening, even with the third ear, the one that's not connected.

PARTICIPANT: The talk was very interesting. There is something that caught my attention very much when you talked about the cuckoo and the fact that there is no 'I', the 'I' does not exist. At the same time, you said that Gurdjieff said the same thing. So, I was wondering since Gurdjieff says that, if we balance our three centers, we can become our own manifestation of the law of Triamazikamno. So how

do you reconcile this—this is for me making a decision that if you develop your own identity in yourself in being able to do something, isn't it individuality?

RH: The 'I' that doesn't exist is the imaginary I, the I of ego. The I that I identify myself with, how important I am and how friendly and amazing and rich, and so forth and so on. That doesn't exist, it's an illusion which all of us have so embedded in ourselves that it's very, very hard to get rid of it even for a moment, although it does, through grace, fall away at moments. The real I—and it's difficult even to use the word because one confuses the word I with the imaginary I—the real I is something else. It's more like the look from above, from another level, which doesn't really belong to me. It descends upon me. And again, I can't earn it or ask for it. I can pray maybe, but it comes when it comes. I need to be very alert; I need to be watchful and see that something special is happening, and not take credit for it, but receive it, and try to receive it in the whole of myself: mind, feelings, and body.

PARTICIPANT: I would like to focus on the discussion about grace and the disease of striving, and a shift from effort to receptivity. There is an article "Moveable Feasts" by James Moore which starts a kind of discussion about work and the new work, and what you presented is confirming some aspects that he highlighted. I wanted to ask where does the cosmology fit into the picture you draw here, if it has a place? The ray of creation, or the hydrogen table, or in Bennett's interpretation energies.

RH: Well, here is one approach. What are the cosmological ideas for? Paul Reynard used to say that the movements are not for the body. People imagine they are for the body, but he says they're not for the body, they are for the mind. So, what are the cosmological ideas for? We imagine that they are for the mind. The mind has to work in order to engage with them, but they're really for the feelings. To engage with the idea of the cosmos means to sense something of immense scale, to have this sensation of immensity, and modern science does that for many people, me included. But also the various cosmological ideas of different traditions, not just the Gurdjieff tradition, but specifically the Gurdjieff tradition, have the power to create a different level of feeling that is totally higher, one would say, than the ordinary emotions that occupy us almost all the time. It's kind of a "poison," a gift, to take us to a higher level of feeling, of feeling a sense of the cosmos, to quote the title of Dr. Needleman's book by that name. And studying the ideas—I remember so well from early days I would go home with an idea like the ray of creation or the table of hydrogens which I couldn't make sense out of. I would try and struggle with it and argue with myself and make diagrams and occasionally there were these moments when I realized that something really immense was being spoken about, which can actually not be spoken about in words and it had to be spoken about in symbols, in incomprehensible symbols. So that is the function: to destroy the ordinary mind and to destroy the ordinary feeling so that one can become open to a higher feeling.

PARTICIPANT: Thanks so much Richard, that was really a very rich presentation. Just want to ask if you managed to see any dervish or Sufi shrines or places of worship, and if so who they were, and did you see any evidence of the movements in the places there?

RH: I have been in Sufi lodges in Turkey and also in San Francisco and had extremely memorable experiences there. I remember once there was a group that came through here called the Mevlevi Dervishes. They were not actually Mevlevi, they told me they were a group that had been authorized to present the whirling. But they were practicing Sufis and they, without knowing who I was, invited me into their circle. We did a Zhikr with men in a circle holding hands, chanting "*la ilaha il'allah...*" with a

flute playing, and a drummer, and a Sheikh going around looking at each man intently. This took place for two hours, and by the end of that we were going very fast and getting quite dizzy. And then everything stopped and there was a moment of silence, but more than just silence, there was a sense of brotherhood of having shared something with people whom, even though one didn't know them in any personal way, one was very close to. I never experienced anything like that before.

PARTICIPANT: just in relation to the Gobi experience: did you find anything there like that?

RH: Yes, the art. Some of the art made a profound impression on me, of how much work, and how much inner work and contemplation, as well as art, and craftsmanship, and money,...and hauling of rocks and dirt and so forth, had gone into this. We have Work weeks where we work hard for a week, but these people had worked hard for centuries, really hard, and they produced something utterly transcendent and beautiful. One of the great places of our planet.

PARTICIPANT: Yes, I also wanted to thank you Richard for really lovely impressions. The question is with the quotation about how Mr. Gurdjieff spoke about “poison,” do you think there is any relationship to the image of Zilnotrago?

RH: Very interesting question! I hadn't thought of that before, but that's actually an entertaining idea—Zilnotrago, as you know, was hydrogen cyanide, which is a deadly toxin, a poisonous gas. Yes I think there's probably something there.

PARTICIPANT: The definition he gives, besides the cyanic acid, is “disorganizing most of its functions.” That's a little suspicious, don't you think?

RH: Well cyanide poisons the oxygen metabolism in the body and makes it impossible for the cells to receive oxygen because the cyanide CN molecule replaces the oxygen and prevents the real oxygen from getting to the nerve cells, and so you pass out, and soon you die. But the question is what dies, what part is being killed? I like your question. It's an interesting one.

PARTICIPANT: You were talking about the “disease of striving.” Gurdjieff wrote that striving was central to his work. The aspect “active, active, active,” “try, try, try.” And then the aspect of being receptive, being open to what is. Which you also address. But there's gotta be a reconciling. Where do you see that?

RH: Every stick has two ends, and every word which is about something good is also about something bad. In the case of striving, we all know that feeling of clammed up heart because you want something so bad and you keep trying to get it and you don't get it, or maybe you do. But, as we all have experienced, after an intense striving, there comes a moment of relaxation when the striving simply stops and then there is an opening and something truly new often appears in that opening. I would say lawfully always appears if one is capable of opening to it, of being aware of what's taken place. For example, I play music and I'm always striving to play the music better, to play it all really. It's hard work: very frustrating and annoying and painful sometimes physically, and you hate the sound you're making. But then there's a moment when suddenly there's a breakthrough and all of a sudden the music is just playing and you're listening and it's happening through you.

SAME PARTICIPANT: Same in the movements! There's a moment when the movement just does itself.

RH: It's like this Zhikr I was describing--it's hard work. But at the end there is this something waiting.

PARTICIPANT asked a question in the chat about whether the word "lonely" was used in the traditional hadith you cited.

RH: It's true that the usual translations of the hadith do not use the word lonely. That was a word that Corbin brought based on his understanding of the etymology of the word "Allah." But Allah did say that he needed something, he implies a certain loneliness that He was not known by his creation, and something had to be created within the creation which could know this hidden treasure and that and that task was given to man. But man was created not ready to know God, so he had to work on himself, suffer a little, or a lot, in order to become able.

PARTICIPANT: Richard, thank you for that very interesting talk. You caught my attention when you mentioned that your Gobi guide had really good answers to your questions. Can you say a little bit more about her and the types of answer she gave, and what was her level of understanding?

RH: It is hard to tell about level of understanding, but certainly she knew the art very well and when I would ask about what certain personages were, because in Buddhist iconography every personage is represented, also in Christian icons, they carry certain implements and they have a certain attitude and those mean something. I was curious and still I'm curious because I'm not really that educated in Buddhist iconography. I would ask her what does it mean that he's carrying a Dorje, a ritual thunderbolt, or a disc, and she would have an answer, which usually sounded pretty good and authoritative to me. That's the level of the questions and answers. I don't know that it really went that deep, but I did have the feeling that her heart was in it. No matter what she said, she actually did take an interest in the Buddhist religion. In fact, that was what she said--by saying the government does not approve of this, she was saying "I'm interested but I can't really admit it."

PARTICIPANT: It seems it's implicit in Sufism, Buddhism, etc. the concept of annihilation, which you mentioned in a certain way. And when you juxtapose that to the concept of acceptance, being oneself, impartiality. Is there a way to reconcile those two ends of the stick?

RH: Obviously there's something in oneself that needs to--shall we speak about being destroyed?--or become less fierce, less strong in order that something more real can appear. It's sometimes said that the third force appears in the *result* of an interaction or a conflict or something like that. These various forces in oneself are in conflict. The desire for knowledge and for truth, and the resistance of one's ego. The result is much harder to define in words but it's very palpable when it occurs and that, I think, is pointed to by the idea of the reconciling force. It's a lawful result that only appears when there is a real struggle, a real battle between yes and no, between good and bad, between higher and lower in oneself that one is totally identified with—one has to be identified with the struggle for a certain period, before coming to this reconcile.

PARTICIPANT: A wonderful presentation and your paper is amazing. My question is: in what context Mme. de Salzmann said that the earth was going down.

RH: In some of her recorded questions and answers. I can't cite chapter and verse at the moment, but it appears in some of the sections in *Reality of Being* and also in some of the other privately translated talks. She often said that the Earth would go down unless people worked. And many people have interpreted that to mean that the Earth's climate change would happen, life would become miserable, people would not survive, which could be true. But as I said in the paper, my feeling is that she meant a different Earth--she meant the Earth of those who work. Without our work this whole fellowship, this brotherhood, would not exist and could cease to exist, as it constantly threatens to do.

PARTICIPANT: My daughter Kendra is an Asian medicine physician, and she took a trip across Xinjiang in 2005 on horseback with a group of Asian-American ancient medicine students. They were at a Bon festival with dancing, they met a Tibetan Buddhist. They seemed to be basically at liberty. Where did that kind of freedom and interchange end? It was one of the high points of her experience in China.

RH: It seems to have ended quite recently—I was in in Xinjiang in 2015 and found the Uighurs full of joy and love and industriousness and willing to talk and not that dogmatic at all. I remember carrying a beer, not realizing what I was doing, into a restaurant. The owner of the restaurant came and waved his finger at me. I said “Oh I'm sorry I'll throw it away.” He said “No just drink it, but don't talk, don't show anybody.” You know that they don't drink in Islam...

[laughter] Wow, that's tolerance.

RH: This was all conducted in sign language because we didn't speak each other's language. But I'm pretty sure that's what that's what he was saying.

PARTICIPANT: I would like your thoughts on “Nirioonossian world sound.” When I first discovered this word, and learned about sittings, it was something I wanted to experience what that might be...and now I've got ringing in my ears.

RH: It's a very interesting idea—the Nirioonossian world—sort of a vibration that underlies the cosmos. One can perhaps imagine that one hears it, or maybe more than imagine. You've heard of listening to the sound of silence underneath sound, which is something that is definitely possible as a meditation practice. And it's also possible to sense some deep sound behind everything. Maybe what they used to call “the music of the spheres.”

PARTICIPANT: I was wondering when you visited these temples in these places on your pilgrimage to the Gobi were there some special sensations you had from the area. Were you picking up some of the vibrations of the area, and did it feel special to you in any way?

RH: Yes, although maybe not as much as some other places in the world that I've been. These Buddhist realities have long since ceased to be actively practiced in these places. Perhaps the most definite inner sensation was being around the Uighurs in some of these oasis towns of Xinjiang, including Dunhuang, which is a very thriving lively town and Turpan, and Urumqi. Obviously these people have an inner life, and they also have an outer life, in a very industrious Western influenced culture. But something underlying that is real, I did sense that. Perhaps the repression of the Chinese government is not total.

PARTICIPANT: Just as a follow-up what places have you been that you did feel something special?

RH: Angkor Wat is one of the most special places of the planet and one does feel something from long ago there. Angkor has both Buddhist and Hindu temples. Hundreds of temples over a many square mile area. Again, there's a feeling of how much work went into this, both outer work and inner work, and one feels something from that. The Cambodian people, in spite of the horror of war they experienced, have deep reverence for this place. You can feel it when you climb to the top of Angkor Wat itself, the main temple, or any of the other temples: and you sense that it is the culmination of a pilgrimage. It's very difficult to climb them, they are very steep and if you slipped backwards you would fall a long way before you hit the ground. People made this so, for a reason.

PARTICIPANT: My wife and I have been fortunate enough to visit that area and the temples and had a rich experience similar to what you said. We met a Buddhist in one of the temples and we will never forget it—just a quick look in the eye of a person who doesn't speak English.

RH: One little observation I made: there are Shivaite temples and Vishnavite temples and the experience of going to those temples is very different. The Vishnavite temples, like Angkor Wat itself, you circumambulate around a large area hundreds of feet around. You are always going up and down. You have to step up 3 feet and then down 4 feet and back up 5 feet. It's a lot of work. The image that it conveys is the physical work *and* the spiritual work involved in worshipping Vishnu, the maintainer. But in a Shiva temple, and remember Shiva is the destroyer, symbolized by a phallus, usually a very large phallic-shaped stone hidden in a central dark recess deep in the temple, the closer you get to it lower the ceiling gets, and you have to bend down, bow down, until you're practically crawling by the time you get to the Holy of Holies. It's an image of self negation, of submission. Like in Islamic prayer, physically making the head lower than the heart. Bowing before Shiva, god beyond God. If he opened his third eye and looked at you, it would burn away your whole illusory dream of existence.