

# The Clear Impressions Exercise

Azize mini-commentaries by Cynthia Bourgeault

Joseph Azize  
Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation and Exercises  
New York: Oxford University Press, 2019  
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The Clear Impressions exercise is perhaps the most accessible of these five exercises for those of you starting from known reference points in Centering Prayer. It's a quieter, more "passive" (if you want to call it that) kind of Gurdjieffian exercise in which you are not making a strenuous effort with either the imagination or the will, but simply allowing yourself to "take in" what comes into sight (either outwardly or inwardly) without judgment or reactivity. The receptive attitude may feel vaguely familiar—and you even get to keep your eyes closed for five minutes!

But the exercise also catapults you straight to the core of what Gurdjieff means by "transformed contemplation:" the FULL, VIBRANT, SENSATION-BASED participation of the body in the exercise. Unlike Centering Prayer (and most other entry-level meditation practices on all paths, whether "concentrative," "awareness," or "receptive" methods), you are not trying to make the body neutral here; rather, you intentionally engage its sensation-based participation, both as a way of energizing your own presence and as a way of balancing and grounding your attention so that it is less likely to veer off into mental channels.

In Gurdjieffian teaching, the three "being foods" required for our participation in life are *food, air, and impressions*. To the extent that we ingest these in a state of *conscious presence*—i.e., balanced in all three centers—they not only sustain our physical body but begin to crystallize more subtle bodies within us that allow us to participate in more those more subtle realms (like the imaginal!) from which deeper wisdom and sustenance are always flowing. The main roadblock here is our over-reliance on thinking, which usurps three-centered awareness and lowers the level of our being without our even noticing. This exercise, if you stick with it, will expose that roadblock and help you cut through it.

As you work your way around the body rotation, simultaneously taking in the impressions that present themselves to you, you'll notice how often your attention defaults to thinking and how the head takes over as the unconscious command center of your being. Try not to wince. For you'll also taste a whole different quality of vibrancy and awareness when you manage to stay balanced and grounded in sensation. You'll begin to taste how thinking—no matter how "brilliant" or "inspired" is always one-dimensional, flat, stale.

Presence is something of an entirely different order.

This exercise is based on the basic body rotation but adds a new triad: sexual organs and spine; solar plexus; head. It's quite a wake-up call (for me, anyway) to experience my head THROUGH SENSATION—its weight, balance, buzziness as thoughts fly by—and not get lured back into thinking.

The "eyes closed" part of this exercise is bookended by "eyes open" parts in which you keep your head moving slightly (not fixed on a point) and allow yourself simply to notice what comes into sight. There's an almost irresistible temptation to name or inventory. Try not to. You may also notice when something you see hits one of your inner nerve points and starts to throw you into action...like the mug left on the coffee table hissing at you "UNTIDY," siren-calling you to get up at once and remove it to the sink. Try not to, but do notice the strength of the impulse.

The inner part is the same drill. Eyes closed, but now it is the thoughts that steal in on little cat's feet. Just let them be, like the mug on the coffee table.

For me, the great experiential learning in this exercise is exactly as Azize's teacher, George Adie, describes it in #19:

*"and from this we could understand that always we are caught and held, identified with what we see, and we project what we see. We project what we see, creating for ourselves an unreal, fantastic world of possessions, demands, hates, lusts, irritability, and endless appraisal and criticism."*

Not for the faint of heart. But in that seeing, a shackle snaps loose, and a different kind of energy rushes in. For a few minutes, the world is a distinctly different place.