

# The Four Ideals Exercise

Azize mini-commentaries by Cynthia Bourgeault

Joseph Azize, *Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation and Exercises*; New York: OUP, 2019.  
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## Preliminary to the Four Ideals Exercise

The Four Ideals Exercise is complex and demanding. It will draw on all the practices you've been working with in the exercises to date, then up the ante still another notch. Of all the Gurdjieff exercises, it is the most cosmic in scope and the most unabashedly mystical in tone. In the Bennett line of the Work students were not allowed to embark on it before spending a year in specifically designed preparatory exercises. While the Bennett version of this exercise is somewhat more technical than the original Gurdjieffian version we'll be considering here, one is nonetheless well advised to approach this exercise in a state of inner preparedness and with all due respect. The terrain we will be traversing here is numinous and powerful.

My purpose in what may have seemed to you all like a lengthy set of commentaries on the Web exercise last week was really to open up for you some sense of the vastness of this terrain, both in the enormity of its scale and in the profundity of its demand. The Four Ideals exercise really unfolds against the backdrop of the entire Megalocosmos, as Gurdjieff calls it —i.e., embracing the full wingspan of The Ray of Creation in the dance of reciprocal giving-and-receiving that maintains the entire created order in dynamic equilibrium. Both horizontal and vertical exchange are fully in play here, and if your heart is strong enough to take it, and your presence deep enough to hold it, you can indeed begin to sense yourself as a living particle of this infinite cosmic dance. You begin to taste the true scale of things—and to grasp, in those immortal words of St Paul, “how wide and long and deep and high” is the Mercy flowing through these ancient cosmic ley lines.

This exercise will call specifically on four skills you've learned in our earlier exercises:

1. The four-limb body rotation (“Clear Impressions,” “Lord have Mercy”), together with spinal extension (“Clear Impressions”)
2. The “I AM,” placed on the breath (“Make Strong”)
3. The retention during the outbreath of some finer particulate of “being food” carried in the air (“Make Strong”)
4. The capacity to “represent” a notion to yourself (“Make Strong,” “Atmosphere,” “Web”)

In addition, you will find it helpful to call upon the following more general capacities, all of them hopefully now fairly well imprinted through your work with the

previous exercises:

1. The sensation of full, three-centered participation: i.e., “With all three centers, do!”
2. Some feeling for the complementarity (i.e., symbiotic unity) of “I AM” and “Lord have Mercy.”
3. A visceral sense of what it means to remain within your atmosphere.
4. Some feeling for how individual atmospheres can be joined “at the apex,” to form a web, through which energy and assistance flows.
5. A direct sensation of what it means to “free my head. Free it from words” ; to make it remain in the body.

Before plunging into the Four Ideals Exercise, my recommendation would be that you take some time revisiting each of the earlier exercises, reviewing these individual components with the awareness that they are about to be synthesized in a whole new way. Practice the skills that come hard; luxuriate in the ones that come easily. Prepare yourself both inwardly and outwardly for the task you are about to take on.

And remember, TAKE YOUR TIME!!! There is no rush to get through these exercises; any impression that this is some sort of e-course with a curriculum and timeline is simply a trick of the presentational format. In the original circumstances—*still* the normative circumstances within properly constituted Fourth Way groups—students would regularly work for months on a single exercise, each pass-through taking them deeper and deeper into the hidden treasures to be revealed there. A new exercise would be introduced *only as the students were ready*, and according to no pre-determined order or timeline other than the readiness itself. Many of these exercises were not even originally intended for group use at all; they were “subjective,” in Gurdjieff's words—individually created or customized for a specific recipient to meet a specific developmental need. Just as in *lectio divina*, if you rush through it, you've missed the whole point.

Over the next week or so (my own timeline still to be determined) I will post a few more comments on The Four Ideals exercise—intended, as always, only to get you launched. The rest is up to you, your fellow travelers on this journey, and hopefully some assistance flowing to us from those “Four Ideals” themselves. In any case, the commentaries will be still be there for you on this page there when you are ready, and there is no race course or time clock. Like the Mad Hatter, “how you get there is where you'll arrive.”

## 1. Four Persons, Not Four Principles

The four Ideals Exercise consists of two parts linked together by a short, crucial bridge. Each of these three segments poses its own challenges, but the first section is literally “the biggest stretch.”

In this section you will be doing the familiar limb rotation (though in a slightly unfamiliar order.) But now, in addition to the direct sensing of the limb itself, you will also be attempting to establish a contact between that limb and one of “the four ideals,” as Gurdjieff calls them—four sacred individuals who stand at the headwaters of their respective religious lineages and have served this planet with the highest degree of purity and devotion. These are Muhammed (right arm), Buddha (right leg), Christ (left arm), and Lama (left leg.)

To be more accurate, you will be trying to establish the contact between your limb and the prayer-rich atmosphere hovering just above the place where each prophet lived: for Muhammed, above Mecca and Medina; for Buddha, above India; for Christ, above Jerusalem; for Lama, above Tibet. In the Adie version of the exercise (which here as usual forms the basis for Azize’s commentary) this atmosphere is depicted as “foyer of substances” where the cumulative energy of the prayers, aspiration, and devotion of the faithful are concentrated. The invitation here is to establish a connection—a “thread” — between each of these “foyers” and the corresponding body part, and through that thread begin to “assimilate these substances and accumulate them in yourself” (p.231)—presumably for the building up of your own higher being-bodies.

If you feel your head starting to spin here, it’s understandable. There is enough audaciousness, challenge, and plain old HUH??? packed into just those two sentences to keep me going on these commentaries if I wanted to until well into the summer. But if we take it in small bites and limit ourselves only to the most important points, I hope you will be able to stay onboard with this exercise long enough to at least get a glimpse of where it’s heading.

So starting at the top....

First of all, these “four ideals” are not ideals in the sense that we now typically understand this word. They are not values, virtues, or noble ideas you want to emulate in your life. They are actual embodied individuals, who physically walked on this planet and carried us all on their backs. In the Bennett version of this exercise, they are known as “The Four Prophets,” but to my (Christian) theologically trained ears, “prophets” sets the bar a little too low. Prophets come from below; sacred individuals come from above. Whether you call them avatars, “Messengers from Above,” or “the Highest and Most Sainly Common Cosmic Sacred Individuals” (Beelzebub’s Tales, p. 317, in reference to the Very saintly Ashiata Shiemash), the

point is that these “four ideals” are human beings of the highest order of spiritual magnitude. They emanate from realms far higher than our own along the Ray of Creation, and bear the luminous substantiality of those realms even as they walk about in human flesh.

So I had to chuckle when Azize listed as one of the “secondary theoretical elements” on his list: “The ‘ideal’ himself actually exists.” Of course he exists!!! First-order beings are immortal within the cosmos. They never go away. They make themselves eternally, graciously available to our beleaguered planet. And that is the fundamental reason, in my estimation, why this exercise actually works. But let me hold my comments on that point until a bit later in this series.

“Where prayer has proven valid...”

Remember, however, that you are not trying to directly connect with the ideal himself, but rather to “represent” to yourself the “reservoir”—“foyer”—“atmosphere” of energy generated around the place where that prophet had his chief sphere of operations. While this apparent reluctance to aim higher may or may not finally prove to be a failure of mystical nerve (that’s the issue I want to circle back to a bit later), there are nonetheless two excellent practical reasons for placing our attention here. First of all, the experience of a highly-energized atmosphere around a holy place is something that I daresay most of us have actually tasted. Whether it’s an ancient church or monastery, the tomb of a saint, The Upper Room in Jerusalem, the sacred river Ganges, or the Kaaba in Mecca, where millions of Muslim faithful make Hajj, you know that something gathers in these places, and this “something” remains available there in an unusually concentrated dose. It hangs in the air as thick as incense in those places “where prayer has been proven valid” (as T. S. Eliot put it), and through it you find your own prayer mysteriously intensified.

So you will probably recognize exactly what Azize is talking about in his first two bullet points on this exercise: “Higher substances” form certain “reservoirs” above the earth...[formed] from emanations and vibrations that arise when people pray to the “Ideal” who live on the spot of earth immediately below.” And at least this gives you a concrete starting point as those other, more “out there” premises on which this exercise is built still go swirling around in your head.

The other thing that’s useful about this focus is that it is so geographically expansive. As you allow right arm, right leg, left arm, left leg to connect with Mecca, India, Jerusalem, and Tibet, you are essentially inviting your body, as it comes into sensation, to become co-extensive, symbolically with the entire world—“the four corners of the round earth,” in that marvelous image from the poet Christopher Smart. And in our broken and aching world, that is a powerful self-extension, itself a mysterious form of embrace in a world where embracing has suddenly

become too scary to even imagine. As you do the familiar body rotation, but now sensing each of your limbs as somehow connected to a geographical place on the earth and, through the atmosphere just above it, to its corresponding Ideal in worlds beyond, you may well feel yourself expanded both horizontally and vertically, becoming momentarily co-extensive not only with the whole world, but with the whole ray of creation. Do not think you have done nothing here. It is a sensation from which you never emerge unchanged.

## 2. Representing Mecca

The next important thing to consider as we approach this exercise is what it means to “*represent something to yourself*,” as you will shortly be asked to do, sequentially, for Mecca, India, Jerusalem, and Tibet. What, specifically, does this entail?

I mentioned in my first pass through this topic (in the Atmosphere exercise commentary) that representing something to yourself is not quite the same as visualizing it. It takes a bit of practice, however, to get the hang of the difference between them. Visualization is more mental, imagistic, sharp-edged, and—inasmuch as it remains oriented toward the surface of things—superficial. *Representing* dives below the surface, is less concerned with the appearance and more with the overall energetic impression, and is in fact carried more by sensation than by cognition. A student in the Bennett line of the Work helpfully clarifies: “The images (Kaaba in Mecca, etc.) are seen in one’s eye at first, but *during contact no mental picture is present*... We don’t contact the mental image but the reservoir of energy.”

You may find it helpful to begin by establishing a strong sensation in the limb itself before introducing any image, or even the place name. As you do introduce your image, do so in the spirit of Thomas Keating’s celebrated mantra: “*ever-so-gently, like a feather placed on a ball of cotton*.” Straining or forcing toward a desired effect is not the best way to concentrate. Remember that the real trick is to concentrate your attention not at the objective pole but at the *subjective* one—i.e., at the core of yourself. Then it can flow out effortlessly and brush the object lightly without getting stuck there (we practiced some of this in the Clear Impressions exercise.)

So instead of frantically trying to conjure up mental images of Mecca or the Taj Mahal, instead, get settled and stable inside yourself, establish sensation in the appointed arm or leg, and when you’re ready, gently bring the intended location to mind. Invite it to come “online.” You will be surprised how the pieces start to fill in of their own accord. Mecca, Jerusalem, India, Tibet: each come gently to you, even if you have never physically been there or studied a tourist brochure; even if you don’t know exactly who Lama is or how Mohammed got to Mecca in the first place. Remember, this is an energy exchange, not an information exchange. Something deeper than your mind is at work here.

Those of you who have spent time praying with icons may well have some inkling of what this “something deeper” might be—or at least, of the direction in which it lies. The subtle dance that goes on in this practice as you fall into entrainment with an icon is a fairly good analogue to the entrainment that actually undergirds the process of “representing.” At first, you think you’re the one gazing at the icon. But as you allow yourself to be drawn in through its eyes, you begin to get the distinct feeling that the icon is also gazing back at you! Then as the entrainment grows still deeper, both “you” and “icon” gradually disappear, and you step through the portal it has now become, directly into the cave of the heart.

The key that really unlocked this exercise for me, however, came totally out of left field about twenty years ago, with no direct connection to the exercise at all. It was less than a year after Rafe’s death, toward the end of a late fall teaching gig at the Vancouver School of Theology. Still raw in my grief and clinging for dear life to the slim tether I still sensed between our souls, I was doing my best to keep his image continually before my mind, fearing that to lose concentration would be to lose the connection. One afternoon as I was walking along the shoreline absorbed in my usual doleful efforting, a sudden catspaw came hurtling across the water, and a voice distinctly Rafe’s whispered in my inner ear, “Shhhhhh!!!! You do not have to come all the way to me because I am also coming toward you...”

Talk about having your head instantly rearranged.

In the end it’s so simple, so very, very simple. Why, after all, should we imagine that it is only from *our* side that the work is being done, that the water we are endeavoring to draw from those reservoirs is impersonal and mechanical, obedient only to the Newtonian laws that govern the physics of this earth realm? No, we are talking here about a meeting ground, where the highest aspirations of human hearts throughout the ages have met and been graciously received by these higher cosmic servants on the other side *who are also coming toward us* because they love us and are invested in our ultimate flourishing. Mecca does not appear because we conjure it up through our own powers of concentration; it arrives because the Megalocosmos is imbued with intelligence, compassion, and a deep responsiveness to our sincere desire for connection. It is the tenderness that evokes it, not the skillfulness.

Even if you don’t have a clue how to take this first step into “representing Mecca,” take it anyway. Trust. Somehow Mecca will appear.

## 3. Stepping onto the Bridge

You have now filled your limbs with the energy of those four sacred places: Mecca, India, Jerusalem, Tibet. You should be able at this point to sense your two arms and two legs as fully “online,” vibrant with sensation.

They have become, to use one of Gurdjieff's pet words, *accumulators*. And these accumulators are now fully charged and ready to go.

While the term "accumulator" often gets explained as a kind of reservoir, I think the term "battery" actually comes closer to Gurdjieff's intention. Out here on Eagle Island, my two solar panels collect the energy of the sun and store it in four marine batteries, from which it can be drawn (unless there's a prolonged rainy spell) to light my house, run my computer and send you this post. Exactly the same type of collection and redistribution of energy will be at work as we move into Part Two of this exercise. Remember that the goal here is not "fade out" sensation in one limb as you shift your attention to another, but to quietly expand attention so that you can feel the cumulative resonance of all four limbs: your whole body as a single vibratory field. As noted in *The Clear Impressions Exercise*, "*As always, the sensation of the body is cumulative, so that I finally finish up with a total sensation.*" (#6, p. 266)

Lean deeply into this total sensation now. As I mentioned in my earlier commentary, your body has now become symbolically co-extensive with "the four corners of the round earth," and each of your limbs pulses with the subtly different energies of the four great sacred traditions: Islamic, Judaeo-Christian, Indian, and Tibetan. If your sensing has become very keen, you may actually be able to pick up these subtly different flavors, but don't push it with your head; it's enough simply to know that these great rivers of human longing are like colors of the rainbow, each one of them bearing a unique vibratory expression of the invisible white light of God.

Savor this moment deeply. Then, when you're ready, step out onto the bridge.

"Now follows the second part of this exercise...

*Breathe in air consciously while drawing into yourself the substances accumulated in the limbs so that it can flow to meet the air which you are breathing in. It mixes with the air by itself, at the level of the breast. Then pour it into the sex organs."*

In this relatively brief transition into Part Two, you will be asked to perform three critical operations:

1. to *inhale*, consciously drawing in the substances accumulated in the limbs.
2. during the inhale, to *allow these substances to mix* on their own with the finer substances in the air.
3. to *pour* this mixed substance into your genitals.

We have already practiced all three of these operations separately. Drawing (or "sucking") a substance from the periphery of ourselves into the center was a skill we practiced in *The Atmosphere Exercise*. Consciously inhaling the finer substances available to us in the air

and retaining them for our own inner development is at the heart of the "Make Strong" exercise. And the genital placement of your attention has already been introduced in *The Clear Impressions Exercise*, though in a somewhat more diffuse form ("the area of the sex organs and spine.")

How long does this bridge last? The answer, basically, is that "it lasts as long as it lasts." Gurdjieff's intention, clearly, is that this is fundamentally *a single unified gesture*: a drawing in and a pouring out. Symbolically, it is a single "breath" of timeless time, and the emphasis is so much on the unity of the action that Gurdjieff does not even explicitly state that the "pouring out" occurs on the exhale. This is not an action pasted onto a breathing rhythm; it is a breathing rhythm profoundly in service to an action, an action itself mysteriously suffused with the resonance of a sacred consecration.

Practically speaking, however, you can't afford to float through this moment on autopilot. You need to be *consciously present* to the sensation in your body (particularly to the sensation in your chest, where the mixing of substances is occurring)—which means it may take a few breaths to get your sensation actually up and running in this region of your body. Joseph Azize reports to me that in George Adie's teaching, five breaths was the general rule of thumb in lieu of more specific instructions, but he emphasized that *this is not about counting breath*, but simply a general indication of the "average" duration required to bring yourself fully present. Adie also frequently commented that as proficiency in sensing increases, duration tends to decrease.

So if you wind up crossing this bridge over the course of several breaths, *do you deposit a bit of the substance in your sex organs on each outbreath, or do you make a single final deposit?* This exercise in particular allows for a certain amount of personal experimentation, and I would encourage you to explore a few different combinations and see what inner feedback you get. My own experience is that it wants to remain a single donation: a single moment in which you consciously choose to complete this action and do so. Till then, let your attention remain nested in the sensation of your inbreath as you draw in these extraordinary substances and ready yourself to become even more consciously a crucible of cosmic transformation.

In my next post I will have more to say about the genital placement of this exercise.

#### 4. The Cosmic Mixer

As the second part of this exercise officially gets underway, you are instructed to take the cumulative vibration of those substances now concentrated in your limbs, draw it deeply into your inner core through one

or more conscious breaths, then “pour it into the sex organs.”

The genital placement of this highly charged subtle energy is admittedly a strong, perhaps even dicey move. Operationally it may present some initial discomfort. In the Bennett version of the exercise, the outpouring is in fact directed to the breast rather than to the genitals. This is certainly a more familiar and no doubt more comfortable placement (the Sufis and Hesychasts among you will recognize it well), although it winds up imparting a distinctly different flavor to the final result. Azize argues persuasively that the genital placement is in fact correct, building his case not only on fidelity to the Gurdjieffian original, but on his own detailed research into Gurdjieff’s Food Diagram (see *In Search of the Miraculous*, Chapter 9), from which he can stipulate clearly what alchemical contribution to the transformation of higher substances is specifically played by these organs. The subject is highly technical and neither necessary nor appropriate to our immediate concern here. But if you are a Gurdjieff “chemical factory” adept and want to see the general direction in which Azize is headed, I would point you toward his note 11 on pages 163-4 of his book.

Meanwhile, your mind is no doubt already picking up the symbolic resonances: “*creativity*,” “*fertility*,” “*primordial sexuality*.” Yes, but try to hold a lid on all this symbolic chatter. It keeps the mind overinvolved and overstimulated, which will get in the way of your work. Instead, stay quietly gathered in sensation, and allow yourself to gently led into this mysterious new terrain. You will be touching on secrets that monastic anchorites and sannyasi have come to know throughout the ages.

Having deposited this energy deposited in your genitals, the next step is to move it to seven specific regions of your own body, working from bottom to top using the familiar “I AM” pattern. On the “I”—always on the inhale—you connect with your genital “accumulator.” On the “AM”—the exhale—you distribute this energy, sequentially, to right leg, left leg, lower abdomen, entire abdomen, torso, both arms and shoulders, and head. The means by which this “connection” and “distribution” occurs, is of course, through your capacity to *move sensation by means of your attention*. It is the fundamental skill underlying all these Gurdjieff exercises, which we have been practicing from the very start.

Encore “I AM”

It may be helpful to review some of the earlier comments I have made about the “I AM” in the “Lord Have Mercy” and “Make Strong” exercises. There is an instruction commonly given in Gurdjieffian practice to “*feel the I*” and “*sense the AM*”—or in other words, to approach the “I” through the feeling (or emotional) center and the “AM” through sensation. This placement flows seamlessly into feeling the “I” as your most primordial sense of your own finite particularity and the “AM” as the

undifferentiated simple, infinite PRESENCE. And *voilà*, there we are back again on the cusp of “the innermost mystery of the onto-poetic (self-manifesting) process,” to return again to Olga Louchakova’s extraordinary insight (see my commentary on the Lord Have Mercy Exercise, part C). Or as Thomas Keating put it more simply at the very end of his life:

*When there is no more “me, myself, or mine.”  
Only “I AM” remains  
Then the “I may fall away,  
Leaving just the AM.*

—The Secret Embrace, VI

It is that rhythmic intercirculation—that “secret embrace” between the finite and infinite—which ultimately comprises “The Mercy of God” and links the two expressions, “Lord have mercy” and “I AM” inextricably together. In this exercise you have leaned deeply into that Mystery and breathed in some of its boundless fecundity..

Shake it up, share it around...

Notice how this exercise is a total energetic mix-up! In at least three ways you have ingested and recombined separate elements:

1. You have taken four separate sacred traditions (Islamic, Juadeo-Christian, Hindu-Buddhist, and Tibetan Buddhist) and allowed their energies to flow together in your own being
2. You have further mixed these energies (technically, these subtle “substances”) with the air itself, “at the level of the breast,” mindful that this air itself contains fine substances coming from other planetary realms along the ray of creation.
3. You have drawn this recombined mix into your genitals, then redistributed it through the various regions of your own body. Limbs that formerly served as “accumulators” for specific sacred traditions are now flooded with the combined and fortified vibrancy of the whole.
4. And you have used this to strengthen and accelerate your own transformation, in order to better equip you to offer yourself back into that whole in order to “lighten the sorrow of our Common Father.”

If you feel like you’ve just become a conscious fractal of that great “*Trogoautoegocrat*”—that intercosmic dance of reciprocal feeding that maintains the entire Ray of Creation in its dynamic equilibrium—guess what? YOU HAVE!!! No wonder your whole being is reverberating.

A final operational note. Gurdjieff emphasizes that when you have completed the exercise, “*rest ten or fifteen minutes in a collected state, not [allowing] thought or feeling or organic instinct to pass outside the limits of the atmosphere of the body.*” In such a way, what you

have so precious collected here will not be simply dissipated, but can be offered back, through that web of atmospheres, directly back to the planet, and in fact, to the entire Ray of Creation.

## 5. Stealing?

Gurdjieff did in fact sometimes refer to The Four Ideals Exercise as “The Stealing Exercise.” I wish I could say he was just being playful, but I don’t think he was. The conviction that “the Ideal himself is too far [beyond] for an unprepared man to be able to enter into contact with him” (Azize, 231) remains an obdurate and troubling aspect of Gurdjieff’s teaching. To his way of picturing the situation, it would seem that the best we “mere mortals” can do is to offer up our prayers and devotion. But even these are able to rise only so far toward their intended recipient and remain trapped within the planetary atmosphere, where they form concentrated pockets above the immediate geographical regions from which they originate. These constitute the “foyers” or “reservoirs” we have been working with in this exercise—Mecca, Jerusalem, India, Tibet—to which we are invited to put out an imaginal umbilical cord and siphon off some the spiritual energy concentrated here for our own personal development.

Not only is this questionable theology from a Christian standpoint, but I believe it also betrays Gurdjieff’s own highest understanding, implicit in his majestic and heart-expanding vision of the Great *Trogoautoegocrat*, the intricate web of reciprocal nurturance that holds the entire Ray of Creation in dynamic equilibrium.

I do not need to climb onto my Christian soapbox and start citing reconciliation theology (“in Christ heaven and earth have been brought together, God and man have been reconciled, all things hold together, etc.”) in order to state the obvious. It is known universally, in every religion: that these great cosmic servants do not simply vanish into the stratosphere, but are distinguishable *by their intimate proximity*: their willingness, even their seeming delight, to move toward us and meet us where we are. The testimony of countless numbers of Christians of personal encounter with Jesus is matched by the experience of devout Sufis and Hindus at the tombs of their respective saints. I have visited some of these Sufi tombs and can attest that these saints do indeed show up, each bearing his or her own distinctive fragrance. And in fact, in the Indian tradition the name for the tomb of a Hindu saint—*samadhi*—is identical to the term used to describe the experience of bliss. All along the Ray of Creation *we are met*, and the sense of intimacy and inter-accessibility suffuses the entire cosmos. There is nothing that cannot be penetrated by love: no realm too high, no heart too darkened. And love moves in all directions along the ray: not simply rung-by-rung on an inter-realmic monkey bar, but leapfrogging across worlds to wherever it is beckoned. Gurdjieff’s insistence that the

direct vibrational presence of “The Holy Sun Absolute” grows increasingly attenuated as we move down the Ray of Creation (becoming, by the time it reaches our own realm essentially imperceptible) seems to me a curiously Newtonian holdover from classic “great chain of being” redshift metaphysics. The Einstein in him, I am convinced, knew better.

So these four holy places we have been working with in this exercise cannot be construed simply as glorified cosmic locker rooms where the faithful breathe in the sweat of their own spiritual exertions. They are in fact *imaginal transfer stations* where exchange between the realms is going on at an extremely high order of intensity and potency. Something is indeed being bestowed here “from above”: blessing, miracle, samadhi, revelation, fortification for the road ahead. But something is being bestowed here *from below* as well. The fruits of our “conscious labor and intentional suffering” are not merely the crystallization within ourselves of those “subtle being bodies” that confer immortality and agency within higher realms. They are also—as St. Paul precisely realized—“*love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*” These alchemized fruits of the awakened heart, ground in the crucible of our human marrow and our human longing, are then offered back up into the Ray, where they indeed become “food for the Gods.” And for our own starving earth as well.

As William Segal, a first-generation Gurdjieff student, points out in his essay “The Force of Attention:

*“Just as man’s structure needs to be vivified by the infusion of finer vibrations, those very same vibrations require the mixing of coarse material for their maintenance. Without the upward transmission of energies through the intermediary of conscious attention, the universe would give in to entropy.”*

It is a two-way street. There is giving, and there is receiving going on in these imaginal transfer stations. There is *exchange*.

The Mercy of God...

To my mind, *this* is Gurdjieff’s own highest theology, against which the innuendo of “stealing” must finally be laid to rest. One cannot steal what is freely given. One cannot steal what is sacrificially offered, perhaps imperfectly, but with sincerity and mystical courage. And that, for me, is also the key to unlocking the mysterious power and “cosmic tenderness” coiled within this Four Ideals Exercise. I will have more to say on it in my final post.

## 6: Agios Ô Theos

“Man is a microcosm,” the ancient philosophers

continually reminded us. In the vernacular of our own times, we would more likely say we are *fractal* of the whole, a *hologram*. We are tiny slice—a single pixel of consciousness—that recapitulates in perfect proportion the pattern of the entire whole.

We can beam this holographic capacity in either of two directions. We can zoom our consciousness vastly outwards until we become coextensive with the entire created order. We can experience ourselves as a single drop in a vast ocean of cosmic aliveness. Or we can zoom it daringly inward and experience the whole ocean in the conscious drop that we are.

What I find so exhilarating about the Four Ideals Exercise is that it invites (actually *requires*) us to do both: to become both the drop-in-the-ocean and the-ocean-in-a-drop in a single, flowing motion that is powerful and mysteriously sacramental. We play ourselves like an accordion, whose keyboard is the Ray of Creation.

#### Zoom out

The first part of the exercise catapults you into that vast expansion. As you connect with Mecca, Jerusalem, India, Tibet, you can literally feel your body becoming co-extensive with “the four corners of the round earth.” And the expansion is not only lateral but vertical as well, as successive realms along the Ray of Creation begin to open up within you. Those four “atmospheres” hovering over their respective holy places are in fact *those places themselves as they are actually embodied in the imaginal realm*, and the work in this first part of the exercise is situated powerfully at the point of exchange between imaginal and earthly reality. That is why it is so important not to simply “push through” the imaginal ranks of the faithful and attempt to connect directly with the Ideal himself. That connection is always there and instantly accessible, but *the real sacramental and collective work in this exercise is in fact powerfully concentrated at that imaginal junction point*. This is the epicenter of what Gurdjieff called “the conscious circle of humanity.” It is here that earth-healing is concentrated. Here that the mystical body—“the world soul”—is built up. Don’t push through this realm too quickly. It is in solidarity with our brothers and sisters throughout the ages that our world will be pulled through its present crisis.

Once you give yourself permission to regard these imaginal “foyers” not as checkpoints but as *meeting points*, you do indeed feel the nurturance flowing to you from realms still more subtle, The “finer elements emanating from the sun” pour into your lungs as you breathe them in consciously. The adamant presence of the Ideals themselves leans and harkens toward you from realms still higher... till at last you can even pick up the distant reverberations of that primordial “secret embrace” between the Manifest and Unmanifest from which the entire created order emerges. If you are quiet enough and steady enough you can become co-extensive

with the entire Ray of Creation. Like a vast concert organ, octaves upon octaves of celestial harmony pulsate through your being as you do indeed come to grasp “how wide and long and high and deep” is this ocean of Mercy, and—as St. Paul so boldly promises in his celebrated teaching in Ephesians 3:19—“to be filled with the very nature of God.”

#### Zoom in

Then just as quickly, in the second part of the exercise you rein this vastness in, draw it into your own tiny pixel of being, and breathe it into the microcosm of your body for the deep nurturance of your own conscious pixelhood. The ocean pours into the drop. You are being fed from worlds beyond worlds: angels, archangels, “the communion of saints,” the conscious circle of humanity, the vast stream of living souls past, present and yet to come. And curling beneath your feet, awaiting the time when the life force coiled within you will be returned to them (either by your physical death or your conscious rebirth): earth, plants, the biosphere, the geosphere... the entire great *Megalocosmos*, tumbling and turning in this grand dance of reciprocal feeding,

The *coinherence*, British mystic Charles Williams called it. The profound, mutual indwelling of the entire created order. In the Four Ideals Exercise, you get to taste a fractal of that coinherence. The fractal that you imperishably are.

#### “Agios Ô Theos”

Touching on elements of both Tonglen and Eucharist, this exercise is implicitly sacramental in resonance. In the Tibetan practices of Tonglen, conscious breathing is combined with substituted love as you intentionally breathe in the pain or suffering of another and offer your own body as a place of cleansing. In Eucharist, this same substituted love (a.k.a. *exchange!*) continues to glow brightly, and you experience the same accordion-like dance between the micro and the macro as you take Christ’s body into our own only to find yourself simultaneously ingested into his own mystical body. The resonances are strong enough to alert us that we are on holy ground here. In its own way, the Four Ideals Exercise is equally a “Mass on the World,” even out-Teilharding Teilhard in its grandeur and scale. Our own finite pixel becomes the “body and blood,” consciously offered up on the altar of the *Great Trogoautoegocrat*, then returned to us sanctified, overflowing with a strength and tenderness not our own, but ours to offer back, “for the life of the world...”

The ocean of Mercy flowing into the drop.  
The drop flowing into the ocean of Mercy.  
The Great Trogoautoegocrat.  
The Four Ideals.  
*Lord, have Mercy.*