

“Try Not to Express Negativity”

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Of all Gurdjieff's directions and suggestions for the practical implementation of his ideas, the one which seems most persistently misunderstood is his recommendation to “Try not to express negativity”. Regardless of how often students may be reminded that the Work may be about psychological evolution, it is *not* psychotherapy. It is *not* about suppressing or repressing feelings, behaviors and reactions. It is *not* about learning how to pretend one is beyond experiencing reactivity. It is *not* about improving one's persona to look like a nicer or more spiritual person. I have seen people discouraged and frustrated with themselves for years, wondering if they are failing, are not “working hard enough” when reporting that, despite whatever efforts they have tried to implement, they still, periodically experience inner states of anger, anxiety, resentment, irritation, judgmental attitudes, depression, anxiety, the kinds of emotional qualities that are collectively understood to reflect “negative” reactions.

In my experience, both as a Fourth Way practitioner and a psychotherapist, the primary problem with negative conditioned patterns is not the fact that they exist in us, but that we become *identified* with them. The potency of their energy, their near instantaneous appearance which always takes us by surprise, their durability reinforced by countless repetitions of their patterns over many-years, the degree to which our image of ourselves has become entangled with these phenomena, creates a huge gravitational field in our psychological world that continually attracts our attention like an powerful magnet. Throughout our ordinary life and its “first education”, we have learned to judge and be judged by others according to both our natural preferences as well as by the subjective morality trained into us by family, religion, social groups and the general society.

It is said that to be drawn to a spiritual path, a path which we hope will transform us into something better, something more than we are at present, requires a degree of disappointment with outer life. As long as life, itself, seems to hold all the possibilities I hope for, it is unlikely I will turn inward to seek meaning and value. As we humans are social mammals, the opinion of others is a potent variable in directing my life's course and definition of myself. Being liked, being accepted, being a representative of what others judge to be the kind of person they want to be in relationship with, does demonstrably increase chances for “success” in life. Many social psychology studies prove the obvious: personable, attractive, friendly people have more doors opened to them than do people with less socially agreeable manifestations. Who one knows and what they think about you is a strong determinator of the degree to which one will overtly achieve an appearance and status which others will commend.

Dissatisfaction with life can come in different varieties. I may achieve the status and accomplishments of my dreams and/or the dreams of others for me, and yet, somehow, it is not enough. Something feels to be missing despite my having achieved the milestones I assumed would leave me feeling fulfilled. Or, I may have continually not achieved my goals, or those expected of me, and am disappointed either in myself and/or in outside factors that blocked my path. Or, I have not “bought into the system” and not made the societally expected run for the

brass ring, but not discovered a satisfactory substitute. Where is my place? How do I find a sense of meaning if not in the organized society in which I live?

If I cannot find a sense of meaning for my life that will satisfy the longing of my heart and mind in the outside world, the only location left to turn my gaze is into my interior psychological/emotional world. After all, the wish for meaning, and the emotional experience of its absence, are experienced inside myself. Perhaps what I am looking for cannot be found as a place in the outside world, but rather what I am looking for may be a different place, a different relationship, within myself.

Gurdjieff's approach to inner exploration provides many practical suggestions for how and where to direct attention in order to be able to make this search. The first stage in the journey is *preparatory* for truly reaching the doorway to the mystery of oneself. It may last many years before the student realizes a new depth has been reached. Gurdjieff called this first stage for its aim; "Self-Remembering" and "Self-Observation" and its practice depends on a shift in mental/emotional attitude which he called the "First Conscious Shock". Interfering with and obstructing these efforts, is the phenomena he called "Identification".

One way to think about identification is as a collapse of attention into the emotion, the thought, the reaction ... into a fascination with the object of interest, such that all sense and experience of oneself, in one's body, as the witness of the situation in that moment, vanishes. One's subjective experience of personal existence disappears, as the entirety of available attention is swallowed by whatever has "captured" it. If awareness of myself in existence is not in my field of awareness, then I no longer exist for myself. I have left my own awareness. I disappear for myself. In that instant, I become *identified* with what has grabbed my attention. As whatever fills the sphere of my attention in a given moment is all I am aware of at that moment, then whatever my attention has become identified with becomes my entire world ... for as long as the spell of identification continues.

Identification depends on an emotional reaction, liking or disliking, attraction or repulsion, comfortable or painful, agreement or disagreement, joy or fear. The intensity of the emotional energy powers the 'magnet' which pulls and holds the attention. One of the primary contributors to this emotional energy is my "image" of myself. As a result of the labels given to us by others, the roles we choose and are assigned, qualities I wish to possess as a person, the qualities I assume I have already developed and much more of a related nature, all combine to build a mental-emotional picture of who I believe I am and who I believe I am not. As this is only an image, I am not seeing my actual "self", but only a projection of what the self may be through the filter of how life has suggested I think about myself. How do I know the image is accurate? Which parts of it are valid and which parts not? Until I am capable of looking at this image objectively with a desire for truth and accuracy, rather than the balm of confirmation, I cannot separate the wheat from the chaff. This sorting out is a long, slow, surprising and sometimes painful process.

In order to begin, I must clarify, through repeated observation, the difference between objective and subjective viewpoints. To develop objectivity, I must find a way to separate myself from what I am viewing, feeling, noticing in myself. *I must learn to separate my attention from what I*

am attending to. Without experiencing the practice, this sounds like an oxymoron. Nevertheless, it is possible. Spiritual traditions have many variations on approaches to this state. Gurdjieff recommended the practice of “dividing” attention by placing some of it into the sensation of the body while leaving the remainder to focus on the object or subject of interest. Although this division is difficult to maintain for more than brief moments, these moments, and their accumulation of observations, add up. With part of attention grounded in the sensation of the imagination and what types of thoughts, feelings and reactions are actually occurring inside me. Are they consistent with my image? What is valid and what is not valid about my concept of myself? As the inaccurate parts of the image are peeled away by discovery, and accepted as incomplete or false, an increasingly accurate picture and sense of the underlying Self begins to emerge.

Most of us believe we are “nice” people. In most circumstances, those parts that are either, by natural essence and/or by cultural training, socially acceptable, will be the parts of me to overtly manifest ... but not always. Every once in a while, most of us will have a momentary reaction that we will characterize as, “I’m not usually like this. I don’t know what came over me. That is not who I am”. Often, we do not notice the manifestation of reactions from us that do not fit our self-image. We rationalize them or simply ignore them as in, “I would never have said something like that! No, you remember it wrong. You are the one who is impolite, not me. I never judge others.”

Most of the time, we curtail the outward expression of our internal negative reaction so as to maintain the image of a nice person, or a fair person, or a superior person ... whatever our fantasy about ourself which we enjoy holding on to ... or we hide from the other person our actual reaction. In such manipulative moments, our attention is typically focused on the playing of the “appropriate” role in the moment and little to none is available, to watch inside, to study the actual reaction occurring. Often, maintaining this role while my interior is inconsistent with it, takes considerable energy. Over time it may become exhausting, draining the reserves of limited energy that could be used to observe myself during the manifestation. This makes it difficult to impossible to notice the contradictions between what is actually occurring inside me and my outer performance. I may truthfully deny that I felt angry, when it is obvious in my tone of voice, because I am focused on the role. I may be identified with, believe in, my judgmental attitude at the same time I continue to believe in my self-image as a non-judgmental person.

One of many shocking assertions made by Gurdjieff about us humans, is that, in a literal sense, we are, most of the time, actually functioning like machines. I am a machines in the sense that, unless I am aware of myself as a conscious witness inside a body that produces feelings and thoughts which have been involuntarily programmed into its internal computer by life experiences, all the inner and outer manifestations that come from me are programmed. It may seem as if I am choosing my reactions, but the capacity to learn to watch them objectively eventually belies that assumption.

Why is the suggestion to “try not to express negativity” one of the first practices introduced to students just beginning the study of Gurdjieff’s system? Firstly, the intensity of negative reactions is one of the greatest wastes of our energy; mental, emotional and physical. Secondly, most of us vastly underestimate the amount of time and energy we waste on negative reactions.

If we are one of those people who believe we are always ‘nice’, always “fair”, never “judgmental”, this will especially be a shock.

Since negative reactions are such powerful attractors, to study them requires the development of the capacity to divide attention so that some of it is kept free from the gravitational pull of the negative energy. How is one to learn to do this? On the one hand, there is the powerful attractor and, on the other hand, there is the intermittent and difficult attempt to keep dividing and re-dividing attention so as to be able to take a peek at the negative force field in one’s emotional center without immediately falling into the black hole.

Like Jason confronting Medusa, looking directly at the negativity without protection, will result in one’s attention becoming frozen as stone. Jason had to look at Medusa’s reflection in his shield before swinging his sword.

What could be used as a ‘shield’ when learning how to observe subjective negativity without becoming frozen in identification? Suppose, when I become aware of negativity within myself, I make the effort to “try not to express” it?

Exact Wording

Let’s examine the wording of this practice. When I was first given this suggestion, it was stressed to me that the wording was *exact*! To change the words or sequence would destroy the effort of its possibilities. The error I hear repeated by students struggling with this practice, is the distortion of the original into a version of, “*Don’t* express negativity”.

Try

Are “try” and “don’t” the same effort with the same aim? To “try” is to *attempt* to make an effort. “Try, try again”, recognizes the appropriate attitude with which to approach something of difficulty but great value. It carries a tone of flexibility, an encouragement to not be discouraged. It recognizes that the effort is difficult, that the attempt will inevitably run into strong resistance, hence try, try and try again. It recognizes and confirms a *process*, perhaps of long duration. It stresses that the *attempt*, the *effort* is more of a focus at this stage of working than the “success” of the sought for achievement. Trying is an act of will, a builder of character and Being. Trying represents an acceptance of resistance as an inevitable and normal part of life, not a personal failure. If degrees of resistance to initiation were not built into the fabric of existence, everything would be available at all times without effort. To persevere in the face of headwinds builds a type of internal strength, strength of will and attention. To persevere develops patience, understanding of the flow of relationships between things, how to accept and navigate the push and pull of life. To persevere teaches us a more realistic sense of our place in the universe. It tempers and reshapes our “image” of ourselves.

“Don’t” is an imperative, not a suggestion. It implies that the demand should be immediately achievable. It assumes one already has the capacity demanded. If assumed that one can immediately control one’s emotions without extensive training, the “Don’t” is based on fallacious assumption and therefore impossible. If this is the interpretation of Gurdjieff’s

suggestion, it will inevitably lead to frustration and sense of failure ... in other words, misconstruing the first word of this injunction leads to more negativity, not less.

Express

How does one understand the word “express”? As a verb, it is defined as, “to put (thought) into words; utter or state: to express an idea clearly. to show, manifest, or reveal: to convey one's anger, to set forth the opinions, feelings, etc., of (oneself), as in speaking, writing, or painting” As an adjective it conveys: “clearly indicated; distinctly stated; definite; explicit; plain. From late Middle English it means to “press out, obtain by squeezing.” To express is to make an outer manifestation of one's inner state.

Used in Gurdjieff's injunction to “try not to express ...” it asks for the effort to hold in, to not let out in manifestation, indications of one's inner reaction. What would be the point of such an effort? What is required for the ability to make such an effort?

First, one would have to be open to the possibility that one does periodically experience negative impulses, that there are aspects of them that are unbecoming to one's image of oneself. This alone begins to move assessment of self-image a bit closer to reality.

Second, one would have to become aware of negative reactions *prior* to their breaking into outward display. As this period is often a fraction of a second, this requires an inner awareness to be available prior to, or at the precise moment, of the arising of the negative energy.

Third, this rapidly available attention results from the practice of dividing attention, so that capacity is strengthened with each effort. Thus, attention can begin to become sensitive to the moment of the arising of negativity.

Fourth, the application of holding back the external manifestation strengthens the power of Will.

Fifth, the recognition that I can be negative in the same ways that I criticize others for, begins to bring humility and compassion for them ... but only if I can develop compassion for myself. Struggling to be present at the moment negativity arises and struggling to short-circuit one's conditioned response pattern, is very, very difficult. Hopefully, the question arises after a time, that if it is this difficult for me to control my manifestations, and I have method to practice, how much more impossible is it for others to understand and control themselves when they have no method or system to follow?

Negativity

The dictionary definition of this word focus on resistance, refusal, saying no. When applied to emotional states or attitudes, it can also include uncomfortable moods such as fear, anger, disgust, sadness, rage, loneliness, melancholy, annoyance, depression, anxiety. There are many circumstances where it is appropriate to say no, to state disagreement, to state one's emotional

feelings. Are we being instructed to say yes when we mean no, to say we are pleased when we are not, to agree when we disagree?

My experience suggests that we also examine the *quality* and *form* of the manifestations we are being advised to check. I am recalling now an evening long ago in my first group. There was a lively discussion ongoing with strong opinions on different aspects of a question. Our group leader listened patiently and quietly. When everyone had expressed their opinion, some with considerable emotion, he simply, calmly, without emotional agitation said, "Well ... I see it differently" and then went on to outline his perspective. That moment has stayed with me always. I can see it now in the reflection of memory. A disagreement, a judgement, can be offered without a negative tone or implication that other opinions are inferior, or the holder of them is deficient. One can express negation without a judgmental posture ... if one has not identified one's opinion with one's self-image. In that case, disagreement is not experienced as an attack upon oneself, but only a different viewpoint.

If I have interpreted the suggestion, "Try not to express negativity" to literally mean that I should hide and lie about my reasoning or feelings or ideas to keep the peace, how am I helping myself or the situation? This would be the posture I would take if I were protecting my image or trying to conform to what would please the other. This is the defensive protection of personality, itself a collection of opinions about my-self derived from life. These are the phenomena psychologists refer to as *suppression* or repression. *Suppression* is a deliberate hiding from others for self-protection. *Repression* is hiding from oneself so one does not know or remember data in one's psychological world that is too uncomfortable to consciously face.

On the other hand, it is an invaluable exercise in self-discipline to choose to *not impose oneself* or one's opinion. Opinion can be stated, but then circumstances can be allowed to unfold without manipulative attempts to direct a conclusion. This quality of effort is done with the aim of tempering and exploring the patterns of my personality, not to maintain or improve my self-image ... either for myself or others. To temper and explore the patterns of my personality intentionally, with an aim to get closer to the truth of myself, requires an ability to separate attention from the magnetic pull of a strong resistance or attraction.

The injunction to "Try not to express negativity" provides the opportunity, that split-second between arousal and recognition, to evaluate the reason and quality of the "negativity". Is it a conditioned, programmed response that always appears in certain situations? What is the underlying sensitivity in my psychological history that responds in this way? Is either the content, or the intensity, of this response relevant to the outside situation or is it a mechanical reaction in me from an old psychological wound ... or perhaps an insult to my self-image? Or, perhaps, I just have a different perspective or value on the question. Can this be divulged, "expressed" out of me, as information, rather than a judgmental attack or angry defense? This moment, either at the instant of the event or perhaps on later reflection, provides the laboratory for me to begin to see deeper into myself, to confront my prejudices, my emotional wounds, my haughty superiority, my hypocrisies, my judgments of others while overlooking my own weaknesses.

Gurdjieff defined “conscience” as “consciousness in our feeling part”. To be conscious of our feelings, to be *aware inside our feelings, without identification* with them, begins the awakening of a real conscience. A real conscience sees and feels, directly, the contradictions in the emotional world. Its assessments are based on direct perception rather than the subjective morality and societal rules given to us in childhood. So, in the attempt to “try not to express negativity”, we develop greater objectivity towards what we have called “ourselves”, and thus we begin to form a real conscience.

“Try not to express negativity” is a challenge, a dare, an encouragement. When we try, we discover how difficult it is to separate ourselves from our reactions, how easily we are hijacked by strong emotions, how often we are guilty of the same or similar qualities and behaviors that we tend only to see in others. *It is difficult.* It is difficult because these patterns have built up over our lifetime, in the darkness, out of sight of our inner-eye. Now, later in life, when we begin to learn how to intentionally shine the light of attention into our interior subjective world, we find a dense matrix of reactions firmly in place. There is immediately experienced a clash between my wish to be honest and sincere with myself, and others, and the more complicated reality forced on me by years of the programming of my nervous system.

This clash inevitably, lawfully, brings a quality of suffering. It is as if I am standing on one side of the river and longing to be on the other. But there is no bridge and the river is wide, deep and turbulent. There is the recognition that this journey will be neither short nor easy. And all the while I am trying and trying and trying to find a way, the other side lies in sight but out of immediate reach.

To maintain this struggle, and not become identified with it, to allow myself to *feel* the suffering, but only as an empathic observer not identified with the discomfort, is perhaps the defining aspect of *trying not to express negativity to myself, about myself*, because I cannot just wish this difficulty away. The determination, the patience, the maintenance of hope for an eventual solution grow, in of me, a quality that can truly learn how to live a life inside that is free from identification with my incapacity, free from the illusion of self-image and free from identifying this “freer self” with what is being seen.

By “trying not to express negativity”, with this attitude and understanding, we can gradually free ourselves from the slavery of identification with our suffering. Suffering comes with life. How I interpret its meaning, my attitude towards it, and whether I see it as an opportunity to work on the development of this more objective quality ...or ... I, once again, allow my whole attention and sense of myself to fall into the unpleasant reaction, is a choice I can learn to exercise ... but it takes a long time and much patience. It is an ongoing practice, not a one-time achievement.

Gurdjieff recommends that since we must labor and suffer, we might as well use inevitable labor and suffering as a source of energy by laboring and suffering consciously, struggling not to identify with my reactions to the labor and suffering.

The most useful attitude I have found to confront this challenge is to think of myself ... when I remember ... as an explorer. I am entering a new terrain never traversed in this way before. This place is filled with things both familiar and things of which I will have no awareness until I encounter them. There are pleasant animals in the forests here as well as dangerous, carnivorous creatures that I will have to confront. All the while, my attention is flickering on and off, on and off ... mostly off. I can only catch brief glimpses at first. If I will remember that I am exploring, not trying to change what I am encountering, I will take notes, mental or actual, of what I noticed in those intermittent glimpses.

If one of my strategies in this exploration is to “try not to express negativity”, this will place my attention on the lookout for negativity. If someone told me, “try not to let the lions out”, I would be continually watching for lions. To make certain the lions did not get out while I wasn’t looking, I’d have to keep my eye on them. As I watched over time, I would begin to see them as individuals, with different aspects, qualities, motivations. I would learn to be interested in them, not afraid of them or personally ashamed of their presence.

When I fall into identification, and I am *only aware of my feelings and reactions, but not myself* as distinct from them, then I will believe I am a lion ... or the anger or the jealousy or the judgmental-ness, or whatever unbecoming quality I notice in my emotional world. When I can avoid becoming identified, I know I am an observer looking at lions, not a lion myself.

This seemingly simple, straightforward suggestion to “try not to express negativity” is not an injunction to control certain manifestations to improve personality or to appear spiritual or evolved. It is an invitation to explore the more difficult areas of our psyche in a way that can stimulate the beginning of a transformation of consciousness. Held correctly, it becomes our shield so that we may look directly and still remain free.

