

*From the Gurdjieff Society of Massachusetts*

## **To Grow Horns: Conscious Labors and Intentional Sufferings**

By Anne White: January 1, 2025

Early in Gurdjieff's *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, Beelzebub tells his grandson the reason for his banishment: his youthful rebelliousness against His Endlessness due to his unformed reason and limited understanding. As punishment, he is cast out. In his fall from grace, he is deprived of his horns. Late in the book when Beelzebub is old and wise, his horns are restored to him in a ceremony orchestrated by archangels. *Tales* -- the allegorical story of Beelzebub's re-birth, the development of his being, and his unique service to humankind -- unfolds in symbolic language.

I have questions about the horns.

What do these horns symbolize? Do we lose our "horns" when we, as children, compromise and adjust to the world, abandoning our essential nature, our essence? And as corollary, what can we -- aged and young alike -- infer about growing older in the Gurdjieff teaching, a life-long work on oneself, a work toward real being?



Celtic God Cernunnos, the Gundestrup Caldron, 150 BC - 1 BC, National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen

In ancient cultures, the horn was a metaphor for physical strength or spiritual power. The 20,000-year old painting in the cave of the Trois Frères in the French Pyrenees depicts a figure, most likely a shaman, standing on human feet, whose body is an animal and whose head is crowned by a massive set of antlers. The chief gods and goddesses of Egypt -- Re, Osiris, Isis, Hathor -- were portrayed with crowns of horns. In Buddhist tradition, Yamāntaka, the Conqueror of Death, is shown with horns. Moses, believed by many to have been a semi-divine being, is shown both in painting and sculpture with concrete proof of *being* -- the horns in which divine power is concentrated. In the Old Testament, Yahweh ordered the Hebrews to construct a

sacrificial altar to be built with horns at its four corners, where the blood of atonement was to be sprinkled.[1]

While some ancient sources speak of the presence of horns earned, others justify cutting them off. In the words of the psalmist, *“All the horns of the wicked also will I cut off, but the horns of the righteous shall be exalted.”*[2]

In the ceremony at which Beelzebub’s horns were restored to him, the archangel says,

*“...(A)lthough he first transgressed on account of his youth, yet afterwards was able by his conscious labors and intentional sufferings to become worthy with his essence to be one of the very rare Sacred individuals of the whole of our Great Universe.”*[3]

Is some degree of wisdom, understanding, and objective reason possible for us lesser creatures, to each according to his gifts, to each according to her individual work? Can we enjoy the gifts of a lifetime of work on self when we are old? Can earned *being* crown our heads with our own symbolic horns?

First, an essential, if heady, look at terms:

Conscious labors: An effort that requires us to summon a finer attention and to work consciously against habit, mechanicalness, and sleep; to do something that needs to be done for its own sake.

This is not ordinary *doing*. That is, the ordinary labors we take on in order to live, essential but not necessarily conscious, or the daily workout on the bike, or the push to meet a publication deadline, or labor for result or recognition. Conscious labors are closely associated with service.

Intentional sufferings: To suffer, from the Latin *ferre* (to bear) and *sub* (under). To *bear up under the weight of*, to carry -- not the same as being worn down by the weight of guilt, shame, and worry.[4] There is a *feeling* element in intentional sufferings -- a deep wish, a courageous heart, perseverance, a self-confidence at the level of essence. This is heart-grit.

In a meeting in Gurdjieff’s Paris apartment in 1941, evidently Mme. de Salzmann had reported to Mr. Gurdjieff that no one in the group understood his explanation of intentional sufferings. He kicked it up a notch:

*“One needs fire. Without fire, there will never be anything. This fire is suffering, voluntary suffering, without which it is impossible to create anything. One must prepare, must know what will make one suffer and when it is there, make use of it. Only you can prepare, only you know what makes you suffer. ... Without prepared suffering, there is nothing.”*[5]



Bronze/Early Iron Age Crucible, 500-300 BC.  
National Museum of Mongolia.

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Fire arises out of curiosity and deep wish. This steadfastness leads directly to the crucible.

Rather than face at once *all* those less-than-helpful facets of ourselves that need our attention (which could be quite overwhelming), we choose one, as suggested to us by a teacher in the Work in a recent gathering. We choose a specific habit, addiction, buffer, belief, or behavior. And we prepare.

I rise from my daily thirty-minute sitting during which I have been presented with one troublesome behavior that needs to be seen and addressed. Daily sittings can do that; they're the true connector between the higher and the lower. Like prayer, sittings are for seeing, for listening. Rather than avoid, get up, and get on with my day, I stay to see it all; I stay to see myself; I stay and suffer. Or else I am working to my satisfaction.

Sitting helps us to prepare. This particularly troublesome behavior is one that nags at me and has for years. Perhaps my conscience lights the way, not with the heavy hand of self-judgment; rather, with embodied clarity grounded in sensation, in feeling. A call to do what needs to be done. A new intention arises.

How to prepare to face this troublesome behavior? With the fire of wish? With conscious intention? With a deep and attentive sitting that opens us to role of worthy vessel? With opened eyes? With the curiosity of a scientist and the heart of a poet? All of these. When next I see this behavior -- for it will cycle back as surely as the tides -- I try to stay there and suffer, intentionally. And because I have prepared, I can approach with both intelligence and feeling. I work to watch without judgment or analysis, without guilt and shame. **I bear who I am, in the face of who I could be.** I see the difference between mere regret – that voice of self-serving ego, the Old Scold – and true remorse of conscience, the path to innocence, to true repentance, and to the possibility of transformation that is opened to me from the Higher.

To our ordinary ears, intentional suffering has the sound of stern admonishment. It is not. It is the surer, lighter, redemptive path to change, to compassion, and to forgiveness – of others and of self. I allow myself to be worked. If I can get out of my own way -- a work in itself -- perhaps the same archangels who followed Beelzebub's efforts, who returned to him his horns, will come to my aid. I, too, can be helped on my way to *being*.

But there's a trap: that ever-present, ever-accompanying force of resistance. Conscious labors and intentional sufferings are difficult work. The self-serving ego will oppose change; it will go to any measures to deny, to justify, to avoid acknowledging and suffering a specific lack, or to

taking up a burden that will serve the commonweal -- but not ourselves. Blind pride often will out. The self-satisfied ego will even choose to continue to sleep and to suffer its old habits, a condition that eats away at our very souls. This attachment to involuntary, mechanical suffering, Gurdjieff tells us, must also be sacrificed.

But where the force and fire of wish is stronger than the opposing force of resistance, where the heart is stronger than self-serving ego, we can place our work in that small, liminal space that opens. We see that it is along the vertical from whence cometh our help.

Over time, I have learned to be grateful for the *No* of resistance and the *Yes* of perseverance and duty. This friction is essential. Without the energies of both these ineffable and inseparable forces of the Universe, I would have little to work with; true change is not cheaply earned. I begin to understand that God is a verb.

We struggle with a small, isolated sense of self. When we begin to *see*, we choose to suffer, which requires dismantling this small self, this ego, before it can be reassembled in a new form, the Self. According to Gurdjieff 's teaching, when this new conscious individual joins with other conscious souls, this force from all maintains the integrity of the Whole, the Universe. Individually and together, we are responsible for this maintenance; this transformation from self to Self requires intentional suffering.

It is those moments of stillness in the early morning when I sit alone in the silence that provide the touchstone, the resetting of the compass, the invitation to the vertical. The return home. Surrendering to attention, to the present, and to intentional suffering bring innocence every time. I should perhaps be on my knees.

In answer to his pupil's question, "Why do we sit?" Thich Nhat Hahn, responded, "So that you can have a happy old age."

[1] Exodus 29:12

[2] Psalms 75:10

[3] G. I. Gurdjieff, *Gurdjieff's Tales to His Grandson* (New York: Penguin Group, 1992), 1078.

[4] Helen M. Luke, *Old Age: Journey Into Simplicity* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books, 2010), 103.

[5] *Transcripts of Gurdjieff's Meetings: 1941 – 1946* (London: Book Studio, 2009), 4.