

The Fourth Way

Ouspensky's Fourth Way addresses one of the two fundamental and inter-related challenges of the spiritual path, namely waking up. The other challenge is purification or refinement, which is dealt with in many teachings and in many ways. The challenge of waking up builds upon the progress in refinement, for without refinement there is really no chance of waking up because the person is simply too mired in the physical world and personality life.

The three traditional methods of waking up considered by Ouspensky have worked well for many people, but most methods run the risk of complacency, which is to say, going back to sleep. Thus Ouspensky's Fourth Way, in the broadest sense, is a fourth method, and one that challenges the student to overcome his or her conditioning.

Therein lays the inertia of the spiritual path, namely conditioning. The human being in incarnation is immersed in matter. He or she naturally identifies with the physical body, the emotions, maybe even the mind, yet all of these things are of the lower world, not the higher. The human being in incarnation is immersed in matter, in so many ways and to such a great extent, that it is almost, but not quite, impossible, for most people to rise above this conditioning. Worse, everything in the outer world seems to contrive to further condition us, to prevent us from waking up. And yet this lower, outer world is the place where we need to be, in order to learn and grow, and eventually to rise above our conditioning in spiritual awakening.

For most people waking up is not an issue. Most people don't need to be awake. Most people cannot even comprehend the fact that they are asleep. Most people are where they need to be, to learn the more basic lessons of life, to meet and fulfill their karma, to develop in all the ways that human beings need to develop, as prerequisites to waking up. This takes place over the course of many lifetimes. But eventually the human consciousness begins the process of refinement and gradually begins the process of waking up, of overcoming all of the conditional rampant in the material world, the inertia of the physical plane, the allure and glamour of the astral plane, and the illusion of the mental plane.

Eventually there is the beginning of the realization that a person is not really what he or she seems to be, not the physical body or emotions or mind or even the entire personality, but something higher, deeper, much more profound. But this growing realization is necessarily on emotional or intellectual levels, and the very mechanism of realization, either the deeper feelings or the intellect, is necessarily very highly conditioned, by the inertia of matter itself, by the entanglement of the senses, by the separative nature of the mind.

Thus Ouspensky's Fourth Way, or some other comparable method of undoing the conditioning. One of the things that he naturally addresses is the nature of reality. We necessarily suffer the illusion that what we see and hear and feel and "know" is real. Ouspensky encourages us to think differently, to consider other "realities" or ways of looking at things, that help us loosen the grips of "ordinary" awareness, enabling us to see things more broadly, more deeply, thus his focus or emphasis on multi-dimensional reality, higher dimensions, and ordering. He does this based on reasoning, and stretching the mind, where theosophy simply presents the panorama of higher dimensions that are realized rather than reasoned.

We tend to perceive and to think in accordance with our temporal and spatial, i.e., experiential, conditioning. But the truth is that what we see and hear and feel in this lower world is a very small fragment of reality, and distorted. When we begin to realize other dimensions and a broader, deeper sense of time, we are thereby less conditioned by the ordinary perspective. We still must struggle to maintain this higher awareness, for the lower consciousness, the pull of the ordinary senses and "life" in the lower worlds is ever there to deceive us. And yet this "awareness" is still within the realm of being asleep. Any intellectual realization is necessarily part of being asleep. Anything that relies on the abilities of the personality, that is biased by the personality (body, emotions, mind) is part of being asleep. So this awakening to higher dimensions, whether a matter of intellectual appreciation or actually experiential and a matter of perception, is merely a prelude.

It is the soul that is not asleep. Therefore the personality (mind) will remain asleep, to some considerable extent, until it is wholly subordinated to and aligned with the soul. Therein lays another great challenge, namely the illusion that the mind is the soul, that one is awake when one is really still asleep.

Which leads to Ouspensky's concept of self-remembering. We are only self-conscious in some very primitive sense. The objective is to become self-conscious, to embrace the self-realization and higher senses of the soul, which cannot be done unless the personality is truly qualified, meaning purified and very highly refined, and unless the personality is truly self-less, i.e., being truly humble and with no sense or tendency to "be" separate. An intellectual understanding of inclusiveness is nice. Embracing that understanding is even better. But neither is sufficient, for it is still the personality or mind that has this understanding. One must rise above the mind, one must learn to not think at all. And that is what self-remembering ultimately leads to.

One must truly overcome all of the conditioning of mechanical life, and even thinking is part of this mechanicalness. One must truly embrace the truth that one is asleep if there is to be any hope of waking up. One must continually, if not continuously, remind oneself of this. One must become truly honest, which is very, very difficult. One must become truly humble, which is almost impossible. One must not know anything. One must be open to the truth, without becoming attached to whatever is apprehended, meaning that one cannot think about what is apprehended without going back to sleep.

While Ouspensky's Fourth Way is a very powerful tool, is it actually the next step that is key, namely achieving the mystical state of communion with the soul. In this sense, all four "ways" lead to the same place, by some same means (purification and refinement leading to integration and alignment) and some different means (focus and specific methodology). This higher state is a place where the whole (refined, integrated) personality is absorbed by the soul, in communion with the God-Christ-Self within. And this is not a matter of the personality "doing" something, but a matter of the personality preparing itself, and losing itself, and giving itself to the higher. Ultimately, it is the soul that "does" something, in absorbing the lower self. Only at that level, of the soul, is there is any real awareness, any real awakening.

And of course the biggest impediment besides the inertia of the entirety of worldly existence, is the deep and abiding need of the mind (personality) to remain separate. The mind will necessarily participate in this process of preparation for awareness. And continually sows seeds of further deception, to undermine the process, to ensure its own existence. But as the student actually

achieves some measure of refinement, the hold and strength of this need is lessened, which is another way of saying that the illusions created and sustained by the mind become more and more subtle. And yet, eventually even these hurdles are overcome, through further refinement, through further detachment from worldly ways (those who have truly mastered this “seem” to be in the world, but are truly not) (there are strong indications and evidence of this, that the more aware student will recognize), through truly embracing honesty, through not knowing anything, through truly not-thinking, through truly being humble.

Whether one approaches this place of being through one or another of the more traditional paths, or through Ouspensky’s Fourth Way, does not really matter. What matters is truly embracing the process, and everything that that means.

