Learning How to Think

The art in his job lay in knowing how to think. In Germany he had adapted his day to include an early morning period to study this question but in Caterham that time was filled by his new responsibilities as a householder and the demands of the garden. Fortunately another time was available: the forty minutes' train journey between Caterham and Victoria where Hobart House, the N.C.B. headquarters, was situated.

For Fritz this was a welcome gift of time when he could pursue his private studies. He knew the reserve of the English would guarantee his peace and in fact travelled uninterrupted in the same compartment with the same people for twenty years during which time he did a large proportion of his intensive studies! After a look at the papers - at that time the News Chronicle and The Times - he would take his book out of the brown leather N.C.B. briefcase. At first he read about South America - Prescott's Conquest of Peru and Conquest of Mexico - which took him back to his own family and their adventures in nineteenth-century Colombia, then his attention turned Eastwards to more ancient civilizations. He became caught up in the cradle of the Indus and then China and found that he could not study their civilizations without paying close attention to their religions and philosophy. It was an absorbing and challenging new study which was as disturbing as it was exciting. He was confronted with teaching which contradicted everything he had held valuable and had cultivated in himself. His whole life had been based on the assumption that his
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talent, powerful and penetrating, was the tool that would lead him to knowledge and understanding. His intellect had guided him through his life. His intellect had helped him to discern the real core of the problems the world was facing, and had enabled him to work out new and comprehensive solutions. His intellect had shown him why so many of his contemporaries, supposedly experts in their field, had failed to recognize not only the truths he put forward, but also a deeper level of truth which had been betrayed by Germany and the Nazis, namely the failure of the educational system to teach people how to think because of an obsession with facts and expertise. He believed he could think more clearly than most, that he knew how to concentrate on essentials and that the tools required for such thought were rationalism, logic and reason.

In his new reading he discovered that the Eastern mystics and philosophers not only had something to say about their own way of life, they also offered an answer to the questions that had preoccupied him increasingly after the war. What had caused men to fail as people despite their high level of expertise? Everywhere he read, the answer seemed to be the same.

The present crisis in human affairs is due to a profound crisis in human consciousness, a lapse from the organic wholeness of life. There is a tendency to overlook the spiritual and exalt the intellectual ... The business of the intellectual is to dispel the mystery, put an end to dreams, strip life of its illusions, and reduce the great play of human life to a dull show, comic on occasions but tragic more frequently. The primitive cults which helped their adherents to live healthily and happily on their own plane are dismissed as crude superstitions. Everything is stripped of soul, of inner life. This world is all and we must rest content with it.¹

Words such as these were a profound shock. The very values he had held up to be the way towards wisdom and truth were here dismissed. He had always held that ‘the business of the intellectual is to dispel the mystery, put an end to dreams, strip life of its illusions’ but regarded this as their strength and virtue, making progress possible, and this new teaching told him he was reducing life to a meaningless show. The challenge
was so fundamental that he either had to dismiss it out of hand or take it seriously, and study further. But honesty prevented him from abandoning the study for there were aspects that accorded with his own observations of life in the last few years such as the ‘wholeness’ or, as he put it, ‘rounded personalities’ of many simple unintellectual people. He wrote to his parents:

Through this contact with Indian and Chinese philosophy and religion, my whole way of thinking has come into motion. New possibilities of knowledge (and experience) have been opened to me of whose existence I had no inkling. I feel as men during the Renaissance must have felt. All the conclusions I had come to have to be thought through again. And it is not only thinking that is influenced. But it is not easy to describe all this. I have the feeling that I will look back to my forty-first year as a turning point for the rest of my life.

The admission that his whole way of thinking had perhaps been wrong had an immediate and dramatic effect. Once he admitted the possibility that there were forces in the world which defied rational analysis, which could not be explained scientifically, it opened the floodgates of a new kind of knowledge which he had previously refused to give any recognition whatsoever. In his efforts to correct the imbalance that his insistence on facts and rational thought had produced, the pendulum swung with increasing force in the opposite direction. He joined the Society of Psychical Research and examined every non-rational, non-factual belief he came across. From saying that no intelligent man should believe anything that could not be proved, he now took the opposite view that nothing should be dismissed because it could not be proved.

It was not only the possibility of higher spiritual forces that claimed his attention but all sorts of other unexplained phenomena. This change in his perception of the possible coincided with the publication of several books on flying saucers. Fritz not only took them seriously but was thrilled to meet several people who claimed to have seen them. His friends and acquaintances were incredulous at this transformation, Nicki
Kaldor among them. A weekend of Fritz enthusing about flying saucers could not convince him of Fritz’s sincerity. It was so out of character that Kaldor could only assume it was all a big joke.

The bombshell that had been dropped into Fritz’s life was not only that there was the possibility of a non-factual and non-rational side to life, a world which the writers he now studied called ‘the spiritual’, but also that they claimed that this could not be understood or reached by means of the intellect. This was the biggest leap of all. The intellect which Fritz had regarded as the most precious and powerful weapon he had, by which he had measured himself against other great men, was not only useless in this new teaching but actually regarded as a hindrance.

He was not left to ponder this paradox for long before a new discovery gave him the first clues to its meaning. Extraordinarily the contact came through the National Coal Board. The British Coal Utilization Research Association (BICURA) was run by a man named John G. Bennett who was also a disciple of the spiritual master named G.I. Gurdjieff. At weekends the BICURA laboratories at Coombe Springs were transformed into a centre for a band of spiritual seekers who met to explore the meanings and implications of Gurdjieff’s teachings. Gurdjieff’s teachings immediately appealed to Fritz. They explained the paradox of the uselessness of knowledge, including spiritual knowledge. Gurdjieff taught that such knowledge was just so much ‘intellectual baggage’ if the seeker had not ‘woken up’, ‘become conscious’. He taught that man was a clever machine which reacted to stimuli but that was not the true destiny of mankind. A truly complete person was one who had such awareness and control that he could learn to act rather than react to the stimuli of daily life. Bennett, who had known Gurdjieff, taught consciousness-developing exercises, types of meditation which the adherents of the Gurdjieff movement called ‘work’.

It was no mean task to let go of that part of him which he had always prized, to try and empty himself and begin to let his heart work. It was a totally new experience. In February 1952 he confided in his mother that, ‘I fear that it will be more difficult for me than for many others, because I have depended
on the intellect to such an extent that it now tries to push itself into the forefront at every opportunity.’

But he persisted, and as he practised the ‘work’ he believed that he felt his understanding increasing. He shared all his experience with his mother and after six months’ daily struggle and intense reading, wrote to her in April 1953: ‘The crux of the matter – and that of all other “schools of wisdom” is the method of allowing a deep inner stillness and calmness to enter, – a stillness not only of the body, but also of thoughts and feelings. Through this one gains an extraordinary strength and happiness.’

This made him want more than ever to share his new experience with Muschi. Time at Holcombe did not heal the unhappiness she felt about leaving her parents and Germany. Her frequent trips home only served to intensify her unhappiness and restlessness. Fritz’s own new discoveries convinced him that Muschi would only overcome her inner conflicts by treading the path he was now following. But he had spent fifteen years trying to do the very opposite. He had used all his intellectual power to demolish her religious faith because he said it was superstitious, irrational and could not stand up to intelligent scrutiny. Now he was suddenly talking about ‘intellectual baggage’ and flying saucers and Muschi felt very confused. Her unhappiness made her want to withdraw from his world and find comfort in her children and the visits to Reinbek.

Few other people were aware of the extent of the changes going on within Fritz besides Muschi and his mother, particularly not within the Coal Board circle. But there was one exception, a colleague, Sam Essame, who, like all Fritz’s early Coal Board associates, knew Fritz as ‘James’. He had met Fritz three days after Fritz had joined the N.C.B. Essame ran training courses for Coal Board employees, out of which the N.C.B. Staff College later developed. From the outset Fritz had been invited to lecture at the courses which were held at a hotel in Hastings. Generally he was scheduled to address the group in the morning and would arrive the night before for dinner at 6.30. After dinner he might give a talk or he and Essame would spend the evening discussing the next day’s talk over a drink. One evening in 1953 the relaxed evening developed in a differ-
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tent way. For some reason Fritz decided to tell Essame of his new line of inquiry. Essame was fascinated and the next thing the two men knew was that it was a quarter to five in the morning. The morning’s lecture had been forgotten. They had spent the whole night talking about Bennett and Gurdjieff. In the grey of dawn they walked along the sea-front hastily discussing Fritz’s lecture. It was delivered a few hours later with Fritz’s usual polish, giving no hint that he had prepared it in the hour before breakfast.

Their long conversation had an unexpected benefit. Sam Essame and his wife decided to accompany Fritz to a course of lectures on Gurdjieff given by Bennett. For the first time Muschi agreed to come too. It was a breakthrough. At this time Fritz had also begun to combine Gurdjieff’s ‘work’ with yoga and Muschi now joined him faithfully every morning. While it did not diminish her unhappiness, she began to see that her task in life was to accept her situation. In her letters to her mother she acknowledged the difficulties without complaining and marvelled at Fritz’s patience with her low spirits and lack of energy.

The difficulties with Muschi and the death of his father in 1952 drew Fritz closer than ever to his mother. He had been comforted when his father had suddenly opened his eyes on his death bed and, taking Fritz’s hand, had smiled and said, ‘Life is indeed rich’. It was a reassuring end to the years of hardship and obscurity into which the once eminent professor had had to sink, but more than that, it was a father’s last words to his son. Fritz was only beginning to realize that life held more riches than he had dreamt of, and partly because of his natural inclination to share his new discoveries with those close to him and partly because he saw how his mother’s life had collapsed without his father, confided in her some of his most inward feelings and experiences which he was sure would give her new strength and purpose.

In the summer of 1953 he had become very interested in another of Gurdjieff’s disciples, Maurice Nicoll, who had linked Gurdjieff’s teachings with Christianity. Nicoll impressed Fritz even more than Bennett and after reading one of his books, The New Man,² suggested to his mother that they should translate it together. It was exactly what she needed.
Her personality had been smothered by a lifetime of devoted service to her husband. She found it hard to come to terms with herself as an independent person after his death. The material in *The New Man*, with which she occupied herself, as well as the task itself, gave her new understanding and confidence. Her relationship with Fritz entered a new depth which enabled her to understand him more fully and also gave her a unique understanding of the other work he was doing ‘in the world’. This link with Fritz helped her too to perform a role not many mothers-in-law would succeed in accomplishing. She supported Muschi and gave her strength by her understanding, both of Muschi’s unhappiness (for she too would have preferred Fritz to return to Germany to be nearer to her) and by her joint work with Fritz on a book whose Christian links made Fritz’s new interests more acceptable to Muschi.

While the paths of Gurdjieff, yoga and in particular Maurice Nicoll, were ones Muschi was slowly prepared to tread with Fritz, his next phase was much more problematic for her. Despite his enthusiasms for Nicoll’s work, with its Christian basis, Fritz was really drawn to the East. In 1953 he met another of the men who were to influence his life: Edward Conze. Conze was an extraordinary character who had been a Buddhist for many years. He regarded himself as the reincarnation of a Tibetan Buddhist sent to enlighten the West in his new life as a sort of exile missionary. Fritz’s relationship with Conze was on the one hand that of pupil and on the other a modest benefactor. Conze often lived on the brink of poverty and it was not difficult to give him material help. In the autumn of 1953 Conze gave a course of lectures on comparative religion in Sanderstead, a small suburb of Croydon. The course lasted for four years and Fritz attended enthusiastically, taking Muschi with him. On the evening of the lectures Conze would often come to Holcombe for a meal. He hated children and at Holcombe the feeling was certainly reciprocated. We ridiculed his unsympathetic and shabby appearance. Conze was a passionate smoker and smoked throughout his lectures. Fritz frequently gave him cigarettes – it was a kindness he was glad to show. If he did not have a packet of cigarettes to give, he emptied the box of cigarettes kept for visitors into Conze’s own empty carton. One afternoon, unfortunately, Christian
and John had filled some of the ends of the cigarettes with small explosives. As usual that evening Conze lit up a cigarette soon after he had begun his lecture. As soon as it was finished he got out another. As he drew on it it exploded in his face. It was harmless enough but Fritz was frightfully embarrassed as he realized what had happened. The children were triumphant.

Muschi, too, had mixed feelings about Conze. His lectures on comparative religion were superb. He had profound understanding and was a gifted teacher. But his influence on Fritz worried her in some respects. Conze was a Buddhist and there was no doubt that Fritz was greatly drawn to Buddhist teachings. She could recognize that there was much to be learnt from the East but a wholehearted embrace of an alien religion was quite another matter. Then Conze introduced Fritz to astrology.

Fritz was immediately fascinated and impressed by Conze’s remarkable knowledge and intuitive gifts. He appeared able to pinpoint people’s sun-signs after only a cursory glance, as Fritz experienced on more than one occasion. Two struck him particularly. Conze appeared to avoid Fritz one lunch-time at the Vega. Later he came to Fritz saying, ‘Who was that disgusting Virgo you were with?’ On checking the birthday of his companion Fritz found out that he was indeed a Virgo. On another occasion when he introduced Conze to a friend, Conze said, ‘What, another Taurus?’ Again he was right. Fritz found his own case even more convincing. Shortly after meeting Conze he wrote to his mother asking the exact details of his birth. Born on August 16, 1911 Fritz knew he was under the sun sign of Leo and the moon at that time was in Taurus, but he needed to know the exact time of birth for Conze to plot the rest of his horoscope, particularly the planet in ascendant at his birth.

Unfortunately his mother no longer remembered the exact time of his birth and Fritz’s complete horoscope remained a mystery. Conze, however, had no doubts, knowing Fritz and his close ties to his family life, and was convinced that Fritz’s ascendant lay in Cancer. Many years later Fritz’s mother unearthed the record of his birth and all Conze’s convictions were confirmed. Fritz found his horoscope very interesting. He referred to himself as a ‘frustrated Lion’. Leos tend to be
outgoing, jovial, generous people who are eager to be in the limelight and in positions of leadership. This can certainly be said of Fritz, but in his horoscope lay a number of obstacles to his Leo nature represented in his astrological chart by planets which lay in what is called a square to his Sun sign. Most prominent was his moon in earthbound Taurus, but also significant were the positions of Mars and Saturn. These signs suggested that Fritz's life would not be plain sailing, that he would have to overcome a number of difficulties before he would find the right course. The strong concentration in Fritz's horoscope of earthbound signs were an indication of a stable and practical nature, but their position within the twelve houses of the heavens were concentrated in the air houses, signifying a strong empirical intellect.

Fritz found all this fascinating. He worked out all his children's horoscopes and those of other members of his family. He believed that astrology did work and that used correctly and wisely it could be a useful instrument in understanding one's fellow men and their apparent defects or difficulties. When one understood their horoscope, it was easier to exercise patience and compassion. He believed that learning from 'what is written in the stars' could in fact be a tremendous opportunity for growth and full living, helping people to discover their own weaknesses and how to overcome them.

How was it possible that Fritz could take these sorts of things seriously when not long before he had been adamantly against everything that was not scientific, not based on fact? What allowed the clarity of fact to be clouded by the voice in himself, like Hamlet to Horatio, that 'There are more things in heaven and earth Horatio than are dreamt of in your philosophy'? There is no doubt that the distressing years in Germany had something to do with it. The emotional shocks had begun to awaken the world of his heart and of feelings, and thereby introduce questions in his mind about the condition of man which fact, science and reason did not seem to be able to answer satisfactorily. Yet many people experience such uncomfortable niggling without paying them any attention. Why did Fritz?

Fritz himself had quite a simple answer to this question. He repeated it again and again. He said it was his work in the
garden, working with the soil. Yet, his days at the farm in Eydon had been spent outside doing intense physical work and had coincided with his most vehemently rational and anti-
spiritual stage, a stage which he was later to describe to his
sister Elisabeth as his ‘anti-Christian trauma’. The crucial fac-
tor he felt lay in the methods which he was now employing.
Occupation with organic husbandry had opened his mind to
the possibility of new vistas. His acceptance of the organic
approach rather than the conventional chemical approach was,
in a sense, an act of faith. It had opened the door to other acts
of faith. There was little scientific evidence at that stage to
convince the doubter of the ‘muck and mystery’ way of think-
ing. But to Fritz ‘it made sense’. ‘Of course, I don’t myself
understand anything about it all,’ he had written to his parents
right at the beginning of his gardening discoveries, ‘But I have
read a lot and it makes sense that nature is an unbelievably
complicated, self-balancing system in which the unconsidered
use of partial knowledge can do more harm than good. As far
as I can see, chemical agriculture has over-reached itself. It is
working against nature instead of with her.’

The Soil Association was, in a sense, a source both of sti-
mulation and of answers to these questions, and was the prac-
tical arm of Fritz’s new approach to life and his newly dis-
covered philosophy. As the Soil Association researched into
better methods of organic farming he avidly read their journal
Mother Earth, implemented their advice and conducted his
own experiments. He attended the Open Days at Haughley in
Suffolk with as much enthusiasm as he attended Bennett’s or
Conze’s lectures. A framework had developed in which his
own ‘wholeness’ could begin to grow. Week by week he baked
his bread, day by day he did yoga and his spiritual ‘work’, and
those parts of the day not filled by the garden or the office were
taken up by lectures and books. He was beginning to see that
there might be the possibility of a new understanding and a
new peace.

But it brought with it its own form of restlessness. The more
he immersed himself in Eastern teaching, the more he longed
to experience the East for himself, to find a teacher there to
initiate him into the deeper mysteries of Eastern forms of
meditation. To Muschi these deepening inner stirrings repre-
sented a growing threat. Her attempts to take an interest, such as participating in his yoga, did not reduce the tension between them. At the beginning of 1954, when she accompanied her parents on a cruise to Egypt, even their correspondence was marred by the gulf between them. She wrote sadly that she felt a lack of contact with Fritz in his letters and he admitted that his inner changes might well be responsible. ‘As you know, ever since 1950 a big change has been in progress inside me, — a reorientation in the entire attitude to life. This, of course, creates certain problems and a certain restlessness, and on many things one doesn’t know what to think or say. Perhaps that is the reason why you don’t “feel me in my letters”.’ He added that ‘the explanation may also be much simpler, namely, that these letters are written without any real knowledge where you are and what you are doing... can you imagine what it means to me that you have actually been there, that is: in the East, outside Western civilization, have actually seen it with your own eyes.’

In fact he was sharing a significant part of his life with his mother, whose work with him on The New Man had brought them very close. In the freedom without Muschi’s anxiety about his spiritual adventures, he had had an experience which confirmed to him that this new path was that of truth and enlightenment, and wrote to his mother:

On Monday, February 1st during my daily quarter of an hour, I came into contact with ‘X’. As one can read in all the books, this cannot be described in words. But suddenly all sorts of things that I had not understood became completely clear — and in the most simple manner. Not that anything dramatic happened — no light, sound, vision or experience; but merely an indescribable detachment from all that which usually tries to distract one during this quarter of an hour, and then, or with that, a new understanding. Sentences and scripture that had been a mystery to me up to now and which I have since re-read suddenly became completely unambiguous and true. It became clear what Buddhists and Taoists understand by ‘emptiness’, ‘nothingness’, ‘Nirvana’ or ‘Tao’, and how it is possible that ‘Plenum’, ‘abundance’, ‘All’ or ‘Life’ can be used just as well. Since the 1st February
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I have not had any more doubts about the ‘truth’ of ‘work’ – that is; that it really shows the right path.

Since then, not surprisingly, I have not been able to re-establish this contact. On the contrary, the ‘quarter of an hour’ has become more difficult than before. But an infinitely enlightened understanding has stayed and will, hopefully, remain. I write about this like one who seeks after gold, who shares with his fellow seekers that he has actually seen gold in the place where they are all looking. As I have in no way earned this rich strike, I can’t expect recurrence just like that. But that there is something to be discovered has now moved from the region of doubt (with good will) into certainty.

The tragedy was that he could not share this new insight with Muschi. In the summer of 1954 their relationship reached a new low. During his holidays, while Muschi was in Reinbek, he attended a course of talks on ‘Christianity and Yoga’ with his sister Edith in Germany. He confided in Edith at length about his difficulties, Muschi’s fears about the direction of his studies, her persistent homesickness and the apparent insolvency of these problems. The further his understanding and confidence in the path he was following progressed the more strain there seemed to be on their marriage. The way of enlightenment was a lonely business.