

Taking the Thinking Exercise in Earnest

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The thinking exercise, as some readers probably know, is the first of the six exercises which were presented by Rudolf Steiner for the development of the higher organ of the heart. These exercises can be found in *Knowledge of Higher Worlds and Its Attainment (KHW)* and *Occult Science: An Outline*, Chapter 5. And significant versions of them are also contained in *Esoteric Development: Selected Lectures and Writings From the Works of Rudolf Steiner*.¹

This higher, twelve-petalled organ in the region of the heart is the central member of the set of seven higher organs within the astral body² which await our work to bring them to complete development and functioning. Their purpose? – to enable our perceptions and cognition of the spiritual world. But a healthy outcome of our efforts is not assured. Depending upon how this higher heart center is developed, it could happen that although it begins to function, its form and activity could be abnormal and the spiritual sight gained through it unreliable. Deliberate, conscientious attention to these six basic exercises gives assurance to the student that full and proper development is possible. Rudolf Steiner made clear that such exercises need no great amounts of time. (Note: I am making no claims concerning my own success or progress.)

In the event that higher perceptions begin to dawn in the student, before seeking to investigate anything super-sensible concerning another person – i.e., going beyond the contemplation of a seed or of a plant in growth and decay – Rudolf Steiner strongly counseled the following:

it is imperative for the student to strive for the absolute purity of his moral character. They must banish all thought of ever using knowledge gained in this way for their own personal benefit. They must be convinced that they would never, under any circumstances, avail themselves in an evil sense of any power they may gain over their fellow-creatures. For this reason, all who seek to discover through personal vision the secrets in human nature must follow the golden rule of true spiritual science. This golden rule is as follows: *For every one step that you take in the pursuit of higher knowledge, take three steps in the perfection of your own character*.³

So, what means do we have of perfecting our “moral character”? We have the six basic exercises. These work on the whole of our actions, giving focus to our effort to bring the soul forces of thinking, feeling and willing into

orderly functioning, rather than running their courses out of their own impulses freely. Rudolf Steiner wrote a summary concerning these exercises:

A mood reconciling all experiences takes possession of the soul, a mood that is by no means one of indifference but, on the contrary, enables one for the first time to work in the world for its genuine progress and improvement. One comes to a tranquil understanding of things which were formerly quite closed to the soul. ... Once again, two things must be stressed: First, the six exercises described paralyze the harmful influence other occult exercises can have, so that only what is beneficial remains. Secondly, these exercises alone ensure that efforts in meditation and concentration will have a positive result.⁴

Certainly, these results appear to be highly moral in nature.

Before considering the thinking exercise more particularly, I want to mention that of the six, if the will exercise were done to the exclusion of the others, with the intent to govern one's will forces for one's own purposes, it would be contrary to the intent of the exercises as a whole; and this was nothing Rudolf Steiner ever recommended. In the case of the other five exercises, my sense is that they reveal themselves as being not at all merely strengthening exercises that could therefore serve ill as easily as good; for in the process of doing them one can realize that deeper, higher perceptions awaken that will lead the student onward, toward a good and healthy path, an upward, moral path.

To and through the higher, twelve-petalled heart center that is developed by these exercises will also flow etheric currents flow from the six other higher centers. Hence, “the very greatest care must be devoted to the development of the twelve-petalled lotus; for an imperfection in [it] would result in the irregular formation of the whole structure.”⁵ And a proper preparation of the currents must also be undertaken. Rudolf Steiner wrote that for this:

... a preliminary center is formed for the currents of the etheric body.⁶ This center is not yet in the region of the heart but in the head, and it appears to the clairvoyant as the point of departure for movements and currents. No esoteric training can be successful which does not first create this center. If the latter were first formed in the region of the heart the aspiring clairvoyant would doubtless obtain glimpses of the higher worlds, but would lack all true insight into the connection between these higher worlds and the world of our senses. This, however, is an unconditional necessity for the human being at the present stage of evolution. The clairvoyant must not become a visionary, [but] must retain a firm footing upon the earth.⁷

Once this preliminary center is established in the region of the head, through further exercises it is brought to descend to the region of the larynx and then further to the region of the heart. It is at this point that the heart center becomes the actual center for the movements of the etheric currents. And at this time:

... the student becomes gifted with the inner Word. All things now acquire a new significance for [the student]. [All things] become as it were spiritually audible in their innermost self, and speak to [the student] of their essential being. ... [The student] acquires a new understanding for all that the great teachers of humanity have uttered. ... For the tone of their words follow the movements and rhythms which they themselves have formed within themselves.⁸

By this it seems quite clear, that it is through the accomplished descent of this preliminary center that was first formed in the head, that “hearts begin to have thoughts.”⁹ In other words, hearts do not begin to have ‘thoughts’ out of themselves, on their own and without the assistance of this other center. It would seem that the higher heart center is indeed an organ of higher perception and that this other center – evidently in concert with it – provides the necessary clarity of cognition concerning what is perceived: as Rudolf Steiner led us to realize in *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*,* merely having perceptions – and feelings are also just perceptions – does not give us knowledge.¹⁰ It is only when the concept is sought and joined to the percept, that the percept and the connections between it and other percepts become clear. Thus, it is precisely through laying hold of the relevant concepts that the act of cognition is completed and knowledge is gained. And here, now in the realm of clairvoyance, these two halves come together: perception and cognition.

*(This is the English title which he himself gave for his book, *Die Philosophie der Freiheit*.)

In his book, *A Theory of Knowledge*, he described this new, properly-functioning heart center as a new “mystical organ” established within us, which from then onward supplies us with “true mysticism” – not “the mysticism of muddled heads.”¹¹ He stated:

... one must carry full clarity of concepts into one’s experience through the mystical organ if knowledge is to come about. There are persons, however, who wish to take refuge in the ‘inward’ for the purpose of escaping from clarity of concepts. These [persons] apply the term ‘mystical’ to that which would lead knowledge away from the light of ideas into the darkness of the world of feeling – the world of feeling, not illuminated by ideas. Against this mysticism* I have expressed myself throughout my writings. On behalf of that [true] mysticism which holds fast to the clarity of ideas, and makes of the mystic sense

a perceptual organ of the soul which functions in the same region of the human being where otherwise obscure feeling is dominant, every page of my books has been written.¹²

*(This murky mysticism is also known as the ‘philosophy of feeling.’¹³)

But the etheric currents themselves also need to function properly; and for this “[the student] introduces into their etheric body currents and movements which are in harmony with the laws and the evolution of the world to which [the student] belongs.” How? – through the exercises, meditation and concentration tasks already presented to that point in *KHW* and by at times becoming “inwardly entirely filled” with their content. And Rudolf Steiner added: “A simple start is made with a view to the deepening of the logical activity of the mind and the producing of an inward intensification of thought.”¹⁴

I truly hope we can begin to see why aiming ‘to open the heart center’ directly, and imagining that we can access ‘heart-thinking’ through focussing on the heart itself, is dangerous. That kind of talk is frequently heard – and perhaps especially in such places as eurythmy trainings. This was the case when I was in attendance. Without the proper development of the preliminary center in the region of the head and its conscientiously-regulated descent to the region of the heart, and without the proper preparation of the etheric currents, all such effort to awaken this heart center and ‘heart thinking’ is bound to lead to aberrant results. Perhaps it is no wonder that I felt so confused when I was a student; but I was unable form the questions that would elucidate what was going on in that teaching.

But now coming around to the thinking exercise, I would like to share some of the things in it that I find beautiful. From my orientation as a eurythmist and through my interest in the formation of words, I have discovered that not just sense-perceptible nouns can be taken as the focus, but also verbs, adjectives, conjunctions, etc. The most obvious connections with the concept, ‘heavy,’ might be physical objects having weight; but in the soul-spiritual sense there is more to explore. ‘Running’ comes in various forms, including in stockings. With ‘carry’ vs. ‘bear’ vs. ‘hold,’ it is possible to discover amazing things when the lawful differentiations of meaning are brought to light. And then as a eurythmist, I also explore the connections between the conceptual meaning-image and the sounding of the word.

It is very real to me that through this exercise, I am honing my ability to respect the innate lawfulness of the entire interconnected thought-world, which is spiritual in nature. I am bringing myself in harmony with this thought-world, and seek to do no offense to its harmony. In this way, what I attempt is moral. I also strengthen the logical connect-

edness of my thinking; and this no doubt contributes to the preparation of the above-mentioned etheric currents.

I have added a further strengthening through requiring that if I have strayed, I will not rudely yank myself back to my chosen focus (as is often done in inner practices). If I do that, it feels to me like a tear in the ‘fabric’ that leaves a hole. Instead, I patiently seek to remember and retrace my steps, to discover where and how I got off track! Often, what threw me off track is a physical perception that spurred the thought of something else. Or a properly-connected thought prompted another thought which was associative for me and not a true connection. It turns out that these efforts to retrace are not for naught: in the development of the ten-petalled center in the region of the pit of the stomach, the ability to regulate one’s reactions to all sensory impressions is necessary – so that thoughts, images or feelings shall not arise in us automatically at the bidding of a sense-perception we’ve in fact had of which we were unaware.¹⁵ Therefore healing the ‘unawarenesses’ that crop up within the thinking exercise will have value in the development of this other center, too.

If we study Rudolf Steiner’s lecture on “Pre-Earthly Deeds of Christ,”¹⁶ we can find the mystery of the significance of thinking explained. The third pre-earthly deed of Christ is completely bound up with our gift of speech “inasmuch as words are signs which represent thing in the outer world” and inasmuch as we do not merely think in pictures as animals do, but have gradually come to think in ideas, thoughts. And the fourth Christ event adds enormously to this ability:

If our thinking is gradually to be brought more and more into order, to develop on the right lines so that our thoughts shall no longer be chaotic and confused, but filled and permeated with inner feeling, if there is to be an increasing development of healthy thinking based upon truth – it will be because thinking has acquired, through the Mystery of Golgatha, the fourth Christ-Event, the impulse which it could only acquire as a result of the Christ-Impulse having poured itself out into the spiritual atmosphere of the Earth.

I believe that our understanding of what we are doing when we engage in the thinking exercise can be wonderfully deepened by knowing this. May our gratitude for the powerful help we are given by Christ Himself also be awakened and magnified by this understanding.

With all of these thoughts shared, I hope that I have engendered a sense of joy and welcome toward the work of thinking.

¹ *Knowledge of Higher Words, KHW*, is GA10. *Occult Science* is GA12. *Esoteric Development*: my copy is from the Anthroposophic Press, 1982. Note: GA in German means the same as CW in English: Rudolf Steiner’s Comprehensive Works (catalog).

² About the supersensible ‘astral body,’ see Rudolf Steiner’s book, *Theosophy*.

³ *KHW*, Ch. 2, section on “The Control of Thoughts and Feelings,” a bit more than ½ in.

⁴ *Esoteric Development*, near the end of Ch. V, “General Demands Which Every Aspirant for Occult Development Must Put to Himself (Subsidiary Exercises),” the six exercises.

⁵ *KHW*, Chapter on “Some Results [Effects] of Initiation, a bit less than ⅔ in.

⁶ About the supersensible ‘etheric body,’ see Rudolf Steiner’s book, *Theosophy*.

⁷ *KHW*, *ibid.*

⁸ *KHW*, *ibid.*

⁹ *Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts*, GA 26, First Michael Letter, August 17, 1924, last paragraph.

¹⁰ *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*, PSA GA 4, Ch. 2, 2nd page, Ch. 4, 5-6 pages in.

¹¹ See his 1923 Preface to *Mysticism at the Dawn of the Modern Age*.

¹² *A Theory of Knowledge*, GA 2, 6th Note at the back, which is in reference to a passage 6 pages from the end of Ch. 16.

¹³ *PSA*, Ch. 8, 3rd page especially

¹⁴ *KHW*, Ch. on “Some Results,” a bit less than ⅔ in.

¹⁵ *KHW*, Chapter on “Some Results [Effects] of Initiation, a bit less than ½ in.

¹⁶ Pforzheim, March 7, 1914. See especially ⅘ in for the fourth Christ-Event.

Because the Consciousness or Spiritual Soul can appear cold at the start, we might shun these tasks that depend upon thinking. But Steiner wrote that “in its essential nature the Spiritual Soul is not cold. It seems to be so only at the commencement of its unfolding, because at that stage it can only reveal the light-element in its nature, and not as yet the cosmic warmth in which it has indeed its origin.” Let us trust in the coming of the cosmic warmth!

“A Christmas Study: The Mystery of the Logos,” *Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts*,
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