

THE RHYTHM OF THE YEAR: IN-BREATHING AND OUT-BREATHING

In an Advent Address (47) König indicates, “The Calendar of the Soul is written out of the sphere of the spiritual course of time itself, where dwell those beings whom Rudolf Steiner calls the Spirits of the Cycles of Time.”¹ This echoes what Steiner said of “the spirits working in the onward flow of time” in his lecture of May 7, 1912. This theme will occupy the present study, and we will peel its layers progressively. First we will explore what we could call a spiritual geography, an understanding of the deeper being of Gaia/Earth.

The Yearly Rhythms of the Earth and Their Relation to the Ethers

Immediately beyond the physical earth stands the etheric body of the Earth in which we find its elementals, and enveloping it further the Earth’s astral body, where we find the Spirits of the Cycles of Time, the beings of the First Hierarchy—Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones.

To better follow the Earth in relation to the working of the Spirits of the Cycles of Time, we will look at how the formative forces work through the so-called ethers and to the yearly breathing cycle of the Earth. The four ethers are the link between spiritual beings and phenomenal manifestation; they link what stands beyond space to what manifests in space.

To each ether corresponds closer to the realm of manifestation one of the four elements. Ethers and elements complement each other; the elements are the terrestrial counterpart of the ethers.

In the evolution of Earth through its previous embodiments the ethers and elements have differentiated thus:

- In Old Saturn: birth of warmth ether and warmth (fire): in practice warmth and fire are one and the same.
- At the Old Sun stage, the light ether separated from the element of air.
- In Old Moon the chemical or tone ether separated from the element of water.
- During the present Earth stage, the life ether separated from the element of earth.

¹ See footnote 3 in the Introduction.

The ethers originate from the periphery of the cosmos and penetrate the human being in the formation of her etheric body. Ernst Marti, who has studied the question of the ethers in depth, concludes: "When the astral forces stream in by way of the portal of the stars (or streamed in during creation), they stimulate the ethers and create from them the formative forces. The spiritual forces penetrate more deeply into the elements and create in them the substances."²

Warmth is nonspatial and is the only element that dies away; it brings things into existence, helps them transform, and dies away. Fire and warmth exist as time, which originated in Old Saturn. They are not separated since there was no space as yet in Old Saturn; it only began in the successive Earth incarnation of Old Sun.

Light is essential for the appearance of space. It is through it that appear borders and distances. When we see the sun at dawn, things become visible and the space widens. As light separates in space, an inside from an outside, so air connects and fills the space. Air has no direction and structure, whereas light propagates in a linear fashion. The air can be compressed, and it exerts pressure over the earth, whereas light has a suctional effect, carrying the gaze toward the periphery. The light ether is active as a centripetal force that pulls away from earth.

The tone or chemical ether finds its earthly reflection in the form of tones and music. Music is only possible through what divides and separates: intervals, distances, what appears simultaneously or in sequence. By contrast water always reconstitutes a whole; in a body of water the droplets merge. Water joins together and surrenders. In nature the action of the tone ether is visible in the division of trunk, branches, and twigs; in the nodes of the stem, standing in numerical relationship to each other. In water things grow together; through the tone ether they separate while still relating to each other.

The audible music becomes inner music in chemical relationships. We know that regular intervals interrelate chemical elements in the Mendeleev periodical table. Substances relate to and combine with each other according to laws of measure and number. The tone ether was known in the Mysteries of old as the "harmony of the spheres," and *harmonia* is that which arranges, creates order.

Whereas dense water has heaviness, the tone ether overcomes gravity. Thus

² Ernst Marti, *The Four Ethers: Contributions to Rudolf Steiner's Science of the Ethers; Elements, Ethers, Formative Forces*.

the primary polarity of weight and levity is reflected in water/tone ether.

Earth and the life ether form the last polarity. On Earth we find for the first time in evolution the solid state, which brings fixity and immobility. The life ether animates what is solid and fixed; it gives it inner mobility. The earth element rejects since it separates at its surface; the life ether absorbs, it creates a skin that relates the inner to the outer and creates a whole. It gives form to space and differentiates the whole in the directions of space. An inanimate object, a rock is non-distinct: it has arbitrary boundaries that can be endlessly altered. The life ether creates living bodies and orients them through space. It enlivens and individualizes, organizes as a unity.

In Old Saturn space did not exist; it was not possible to speak of dimensions of space. Thus fire and warmth are not separated and are practically the same.

Air and light express themselves in one dimension: light in the linearity of its rays, air in its tension and elasticity. The plant lives within this dimension, in the polarity of earth and sun. It manifests in radial symmetry, except when astrality penetrates more deeply and expresses an animal element in the flower; this introduces bilateral symmetry, rather than radial symmetry, as in the example of leguminous flowers.

Water forms planes everywhere; it flows in laminar planes moving over each other. The plane dimension is mirrored in the element of symmetry that forms pairs of tones or nodes in the plants. It is through water and tone that arises the development of the embryo, which on one hand grows two elements together and on the other separates and differentiates. Tone and water allow for the development of two dimensions that we see in animal life; only two since the animal knows right and left, front and back, but does not yet have the erect position and therefore no up and down. Here, as already mentioned, appears bilateral symmetry.

Through earth and the life ether the three dimensions appear. An inanimate object has no true center; this appears in the living through the nucleus or the heart. The three dimensionality appears in the human being thanks to the upright position, which gives us individuality.

The Breathing of the Ethers

Something else appears in the ethers when we go from the oldest (warmth ether) through the most recent (life ether). The later ethers, more evolved, contain the attributes of the older ones. The light ether includes the warmth ether; the life ether encompasses all the ethers. Another important

differentiation occurs between the two older and the two younger ethers:

- Warmth and light ethers act centrifugally, toward the cosmos; they are radiating, expansive, and act in the gaseous atmosphere of the earth.
- Chemical and life ethers act centripetally toward the earth; they have concentrating, suctional forces and act on the liquid, solid masses of earth.

The Earth organism tends to bring about a situation of static equilibrium of four concentric circles. In this situation no life nor evolution would be possible. The forces of the cosmos disturb this equilibrium and the order of the layers, causing weather phenomena, the seasons, and the possibility of life on Earth with all its variations.

In the daily rhythm of the Earth the centripetal forces, more particularly the chemical ether, is exhaled in the morning into the light ether; it is inhaled and brought back toward the earth in the evening. Around sunrise and sunset we have maximum barometric pressure in the lower atmosphere and maximum humidity in the soil (Figure 3).

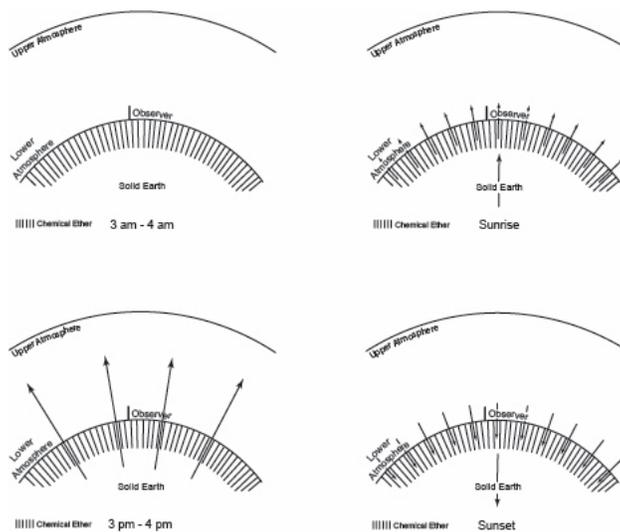


Figure 3: Daily Breathing of the Ethers

To the maximums at sunrise and sunset correspond minimums toward 3–4 a.m. and 3–4 p.m., which are reflected in the barometric pressure and humidity. At 3–4 p.m. we have minimum barometric pressure and much higher humidity in the whole atmosphere in relation to the earth. At 3–4 a.m. we have minimum barometric pressure and much lower humidity in the whole

atmosphere.

In the seasonal rhythm occurs a larger exhaling and inhaling of the chemical ether into the light and warmth ethers. Exhalation occurs at the beginning of the spring, and water starts to rise in plants and trees. It reaches its apex at the height of summer with the culmination of plant growth. The chemical ether is then gradually inhaled back in the fall and reaches its highest contraction at the time of winter. Water starts to descend in the plants and the formative forces penetrate the body of the earth (Figure 4).

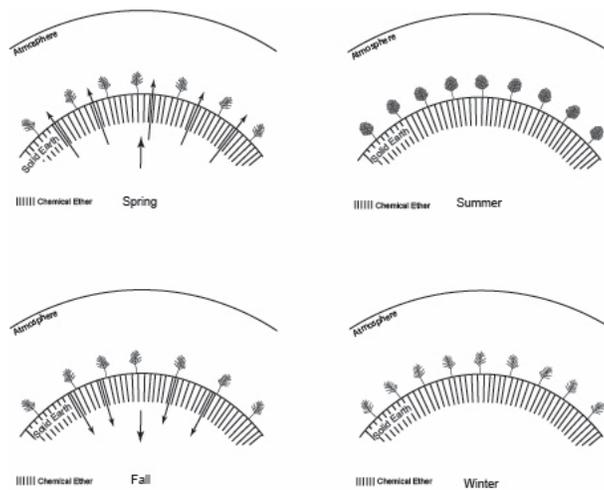


Figure 4: Yearly Breathing of the Ethers

The understanding of the above, external cycle of the year, is deepened when we look at the beings that accompany it.

The In-Breathing and Out-Breathing of the Earth

Guenther Wachsmuth has led us through the in-breathing and out-breathing of the Earth during the year from the perspective of nature. The picture can be enlarged if we include the work of spiritual beings in the whole picture. We will turn mostly to what Steiner has offered us in *The Cycle of the Year as Breathing Process of the Earth*.³ This view will be enlarged in the chapters that treat of solstices and equinoxes.

At Winter Solstice the Earth is holding her forces, her soul element, within; it can be compared to the human being holding his breath within. In a sense

³ Rudolf Steiner, *The Cycle of the Year as Breathing Process of the Earth*, lectures of March 31 and April 4, 1923.

we could say it is not speaking to the heavens. This is the time in which the birth of Jesus happened.

At the Spring Equinox the earth breathes out and the soul is still half within the Earth. The Earth-soul, permeated with the Christ element, pours out into the spiritually permeated cosmic space. The Christ forces coming from the Earth start to work with Sun forces around Easter. Christ rises into the cosmos accompanied by Michael, who seeks to renew the forces he uses up in fall and winter.

At St. John the Earth has completely exhaled, pouring out its soul-element into the cosmos and taking into itself the forces of Sun and stars. These forces are reflected on the surface of the Earth, for example in the forms of the flowers. We are moved to living with the cosmos rather than just with the Earth. "What appears in world space springing and sprouting from the Earth in thousandfold colors—this is of the same nature. Only it is a reflection, a raying-back force, whereas we bear in our human souls the original force itself."⁴ The earth becomes a mirror of the cosmos in the summer. Since the Christ impulse is taken into the Earth's exhaled breath, foregoing the Earth, this one is overtaken by Ahrimanic forces, which the human being will find upon its return in the fall.

At Michaelmas the Earth starts to inhale. We take back within ourselves everything we have received from the cosmos through the Christ impulse. Michael comes to meet humanity and has to overcome the Ahrimanic dragon. In uniting himself with the Earth's in-breathing, Michael prepares the way for Christ Jesus.

At Christmas time, because Michael has purified the Earth, the Christ impulse lives in the earth itself. In the cycle of the year we see Michael preparing the way for the Christ, at different points in time contending with powers at work on Earth and in the cosmos.

The yearly breathing cycle of the Earth leads to the distinction between the spring/summer time of the year and the fall/winter time. During the warm part of the year we could say that human being experiences an expanded nature consciousness and during the cold part of the year a contracted self-consciousness.⁵

⁴ *The Cycle of the Year as Breathing Process of the Earth*, lecture of March 31, 1923.

⁵ These are the terms used by Steiner in the lecture *The Michael Imagination* of October 5, 1923.