

Steiner's Karma Exercises

To help us be more conscious in our encounters, Steiner formulated many practices and exercises designed for awakening interest, acquiring objectivity, and increasing our understanding of people and events in our lives. In the last twenty-three years of his life, Steiner struggled to bring a living understanding of the ideas of karma and reincarnation. In line with his intention, and central to this attempt, were the exercises that can awaken a sense for individual recognition of the forces of destiny in our biography, and ultimately the reawakening of memories of previous lives. Steiner's effort never received the consecration or ultimate form that the path of thinking finds in *Philosophy of Freedom* or *Knowledge of Higher Worlds*. The reason for this could be that Steiner barely managed to complete laying out important blocks of this edifice in the last year of his life. Nevertheless, a whole, coherent direction emerges once we look at some of these exercises, arranging them from the most immediate to the most demanding. This review is in no way exhaustive; it is merely indicative of the breadth of Steiner's work in the matter. Some of the names chosen for nine of these exercises are the author's choice.

Karma Exercise I: Gratitude Recollection

A first exercise that forms a prelude to the series that we will examine is designed to awaken gratitude and a sense of perspective concerning our personal achievements.¹ In it, Steiner asks us to turn back to an overview of our life and see what part other people have played in it, by detecting how much we owe to our parents, relatives, friends, teachers, colleagues, and so forth. The exercise should lead to the realization of how much in our life we owe to others. Repeated over time, it allows us to develop an imagination for those people who play an important part in our life, an imagination that points to their deeper being. A variation on this exercise is offered in the lecture "Social and Anti-Social Forces in the Human Being," and goes a step further.² We are asked to bring before our mind's eye images of those who have played a role in our lives, either directly and positively, or indirectly through hindrance and opposition, and see them as vividly as possible. We should be able to develop an objective sense of our indebtedness. Steiner has this gripping comment to offer: "It is extremely important, for the ability to inwardly picture another individual without love or hate, to give space to another individual within our souls, as it were; this is a faculty which is diminishing week by week in the evolution of humanity. It is a capacity which we are losing completely, by degrees; we pass one another by without arousing the slightest mutual interest." By invigorating this ability, we develop a truer picture of the people in our lives, in effect, an imagination of them. This will develop further in the ability to "relate ourselves imaginatively to those we meet in the present."

Karma Exercise II: Phase of Life Recollection

¹ Steiner, *Inner Aspect of the Social Question*, February 4, 1919 lecture.

² Steiner, "Social and Anti-social Forces in the Human Being," December 6, 1918 lecture.

An exercise that anticipates the so-called Lesser Karma Exercise is the one Steiner described in the same lecture quoted above as a complement to the first. Whereas in the exercise above, we are seeking to develop an objective and imaginative perception of others, here the same is true about ourselves. In this instance, we will refer to a particular stage of our lives, and immerse ourselves objectively into that time, as if we were spectators of ourselves. In so doing, we are freeing the perception of ourselves in the present from the images that bind us to the past, and that lead us to identify our ego with our life experiences, rather than with the intimations of our higher self. We thus develop an imaginative picture of ourselves, and lessen the effects of the egoism that naturally develops in our age of the consciousness soul. None of this can be achieved without repeated effort. “According to true occult science, nothing can be done by remaining in place, for one forgets things and must always be cultivating them afresh. This is just as it should be, for fresh efforts need to be continually made.”

Karma Exercise III: Basic Lesser Karma Exercise

A next simple exercise, the “Lesser Karma Exercise,” consists of looking back to one single event in our life, one that is seemingly due to chance, or to something that we did not wish to happen. Steiner spoke of this exercise in more than one place.³

The example that Steiner offers is that of a shingle falling from a roof onto our head. He asks us to imagine the deed of the “second person in us” who loosens the shingle from the roof just in time for it to fall on our heads when we pass under it. In other words, he wants us to picture that we have planned our lives before our birth in such a way as to come to certain critical turning points on earth. When we enter the exercise for the first few times, this second man is clearly seen as an invention, something artificially conjured up. However, he grows and evolves in us to the point that we cannot escape the feeling that he really is within us, accompanied with the growing realization that we have really wanted these events to come to pass. The memory of the fact that we have wanted these events has been all but erased from our consciousness; and the exercise, repeated over many life events, serves to awaken it. We can thus deepen an inner conviction and feeling for our karmic biography. Cultivating this feeling bestows deep inner strength, and modifies our attitude toward events we may have previously confronted with fear. We acquire a certain peacefulness and acceptance, together with the feeling that everything in our life has a purpose. This can even go further, as Steiner points to in a lecture of 1912.⁴ “Through such mental pictures—that we ourselves have willed the chance events in our life—we arouse, in the life of feeling, memory of our earlier incarnations. In this way we understand that we are rooted in the spiritual world, we begin to understand our destiny.” Whether or not we attain more than a simple feeling for the tenor of our past lives, something else becomes apparent: we start taking responsibility for our destiny, and stop blaming parents, friends, enemies, or random events for those things that cause us unhappiness.

Karma Exercise IV: Attitude Toward Joy and Happiness

³ Steiner, *Karma and Reincarnation*, January 30, 1912 lecture. See also: January 29, 1912 and February 8, 1912 lectures in *Esoteric Christianity and the Mission of Christian Rosenkruz*.

⁴ Steiner, *Esoteric Christianity*, January 29, 1912 lecture.

When the previous exercise has become an ingrained practice or changed our inner disposition, our attitude towards joy and happiness will change, although this step may not be easy. One will come through joy and happiness to feelings of thorough shame. And the only way to rid oneself of these feelings is to realize that we have not earned this happiness. “This is the only cure, for otherwise the shame may be so intense that it almost shatters the soul. The only salvation is not to attribute our joys to the wiser being within us.” And doing this will allow the feeling of shame to pass. In its place comes a new feeling of peaceful security in the spirit, and thankfulness towards the guiding powers of humanity. “If [the human being] ascribes joy and happiness to his karma he is succumbing to a fallacy which weakens and paralyses the spiritual within him.”⁵

Karma Exercise V: “Contrary Being” Exercise

The Lesser Karma Exercise is developed to the extreme in the exercise that Steiner offered in the lecture of January 23, 1912.⁶ In this exercise, we are asked to have a retrospective look at our life, and see our propensities, both for what comes naturally and what does not. We are asked to focus mostly on what we could not develop; on what became of us in spite of our desires to the contrary; on everything that we wanted to flee from, and have not managed to escape. When that image of this “contrary” being has been carefully built up, we are asked to immerse ourselves in this being, and completely identify with it. From this exercise, we will derive some level of understanding for something that does not come from this life but from previous incarnations. In this instance, we are no longer looking at a separate undesired event in our life, but at the sum total of all undesired events, as a whole gesture within our being.

Karma Exercise VI: Grace Events Recollection

An exercise that is somehow the reverse of the Lesser Karma Exercise consists in consciously looking back at what did not happen, at what we were spared. The graphic example consists of looking at what held us back, pausing to look at a flower or at the landscape; seconds later, a boulder detached from the cliff above and fell, passing a few yards ahead of us, thereby avoiding us. In a less dramatic manner, there are countless encounters that would not have happened in our lives were it not for delays, changes of plans, or last-minute decisions. Observing these events leads us to break away from a strictly mechanistic cause-and-effect mentality, and to develop an ability to perceive the chain of events that constantly unfolds in front of our eyes by virtue of the forces of karma.

Karma Exercise VII: Extended Lesser Karma Exercise

An enhancement of the Lesser Karma Exercise appears in *Secrets of the Threshold*.⁷ There Steiner asks us to go back over our last three or four weeks; or better, the last three to four months. We look at everything that has taken place in this period of time. In doing this, we lay aside the idea that any undesired event was the result of an injustice caused to us. Likewise we lay aside any self-justifications we could invoke for our shortcomings. In brief, we place all responsibility for our life at our own feet. This exercise awakens us to

⁵ Steiner, *Esoteric Christianity*, February 8, 1912 lecture.

⁶ Steiner, *Karma and Reincarnation*.

⁷ Steiner, *Secrets of the Threshold*, August 31, 1913 lecture.

a new relationship with the spiritual world; that is, a relationship with the “second person in us” who arranges the events in our lives. We will continue this series with two exercises specifically designed for the perception of previous lives; both of them were given to us by Steiner in 1924.

Karma Exercise VIII: Moon/ Saturn/ Sun Exercise

The first could be called the “Moon/ Saturn/ Sun Exercise.”⁸ This can be applied to another person or to oneself. Here it is a matter of peeling layers of the personality; of seeing more and more deeply into the real human nature, rather than what our senses present us of the human being, by looking at the threefoldness of willing, feeling, and thinking. In meditation we first look at the person by disregarding everything that he achieves in life by virtue of what he can accomplish through his arms and legs, disregarding where he goes, where he lived, what he does professionally, how he moves. One focuses instead on temperament, mood, way of thinking, and so forth. It is a way to render the man transparent to everything that works in his will. Behind the picture of the individual thus elaborated starts to shine the spiritual Moon; that is, everything that works from the Moon sphere upon the person.

In the next stage, we further disregard what comes from his life of emotions, from the temperament, everything of a soul nature; and further, also disregard what the man receives through his senses. All that is left is the way the person thinks. At this point, the whole of the rhythmic system has been rendered transparent, and behind shines what comes through the spiritual Sun.

In the final stage, we also disregard what comes from the person’s thinking, in order to behold what shines behind the man; he is thus made wholly “transparent,” and one beholds the impulses shining from Saturn. At that moment, one can start seeing the individual as a spiritual being, and start perceiving his karma.

Karma Exercise IX: Greater Karma Exercise

A final exercise is the so-called four days/ three nights exercise or the “Greater Karma Exercise.”⁹ Here it is a matter of bringing back to memory an event from daily life that may or may not involve another person. It is a matter of depicting it inwardly, or “painting it spiritually,” as Steiner puts it, by recreating in greatest detail all the impressions received by our senses. If the memory includes a person, one re-creates inwardly the way in which she moved; the quality, pitch, and tone of her voice; words used, gestures, smells, and so forth. This experience is taken into the night and repeated the following two days. The image is first given shape by the astral body in the external ether. From there, the next morning the image is impressed into the etheric body. One awakens with definite feelings and the impression that the image wants something from us. It grows real in us. The etheric body continues to work on the image. On the third day, the image is impressed into the physical body. There the image is spiritualized. Steiner describes the experience of the day as a cloud in which the person moves. It gives rise to the feeling of being part of the picture itself. At first we feel part of the picture, but with our will paralyzed, frozen, so to speak. This experience then evolves and becomes sight, an objective image. This will be the image of the event of the previous life that was the

⁸ Steiner, *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 2 (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1997) May 4, 1924 lecture.

⁹ Steiner, *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 2, May 9, 1924 lecture.

root cause of the event in the present incarnation. An experience of this kind will most likely not arise until the exercise is carried out a great number of times.

Before moving further, we can look at the contrast between Lesser and Greater Karma Exercises. The distinction is significant. The first stage is one of “taking responsibility for our lives”; the second leads to precise knowledge. The first stage is emblematically reached by the character of Strader in *The Souls’ Awakening* with the words “And yet will come what has to come about” [“And yet ... what must be *will* be.”] (Scene 1, Ruth and Hans Pusch translation). Strader has acquired an unshakeable faith in the wise guidance of karma, one that leads him to accept bitter opposition, and even complete paralysis in his life pursuits, with the knowledge that other doors will open to him after death. Quite differently from him, Thomasius encounters tremendous challenges with an aspect of his double, called “the spirit of Johannes’ Youth,” and only manages to dispel this being through knowledge of his previous incarnation as an Egyptian woman (*Souls’ Awakening*, Scene 10). This second instance illustrates a stage that can be attained through the Greater Karma Exercise.

Exercises I-II	Exercises III to VII	Exercises VIII and IX
Seeing Ourselves as a Stranger	Lesser karma exercise	Greater karma exercise
Developing imaginative pictures of self and others	Taking responsibility for our lives.	Perceiving the causes in previous life events.

Table 4: Exercises of Spirit Recollection

We can graphically present the evolution of Steiner’s exercises of Spirit Recollection in Table 4. All of these imply a strengthening of our powers of observation, and of our memory. The quintessential exercise that forms the foundation and prelude for all of them is the *rückschau*. The activity of the *rückschau* is one of pure review, deprived of evaluation. As we move towards the other exercises, review is mixed with as objective as possible an evaluation element. Only the *rückschau* is pure observation and memory.