

The six basic exercises by Rudolf Steiner

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Introduction

Rudolf Steiner has given six simple exercises to develop and purify thinking, feeling and willing. They are called *basic exercises* or *additional exercises* ((German: Nebenübungen) because you can do them in addition to meditation. Even if you do not want to meditate, these exercises are good to do. You get to know yourself better and life becomes more interesting.

Thinking, feeling and willing are parts of the soul. By practising them - first separately (thinking, feeling, willing) and then in combinations - you develop your soul.

There are several reasons to do these exercises:

- In meditation thinking, feeling and willing become detached from each other and can go their own way.
- In ordinary life, too, one may observe disconnection between thinking, feeling and willing. You feel something and you think something that has no connection with that feeling. E.g. you may feel pity, but you think: 'that's not my problem'. Or you do something, which you did not think about and with which you are not satisfied. E.g. you watch television and see someone eating peanuts, you go to the kitchen and take some and eat them, and then you think: 'why am I eating peanuts, did I want to do that?'. With these exercises you will strengthen integration of the three.
- Sometimes you may find that thinking, feeling and willing happen automatically and that some thoughts, feelings and actions are not so pretty. By doing the basic exercises, you can purify them.

The six exercises

1. Control of thought aims to gain control over what you think.
2. Control of will aims to gain control over your actions.
3. Equanimity - the exercise of feeling - aims to be aware of your feelings, to weaken strong feelings and strengthen weak ones and to balance them.
4. Positivity aims to see the positive in addition to the bad and the ugly. In this exercise thinking and feeling are combined.
5. Open-mindedness aims to be always open to new experiences. In this exercise feeling and willing are combined.
6. Inner harmony: the sixth, in which the previous exercises need to be practised in order to create harmony between thinking, feeling and willing.

The goals of the exercises

- To be more aware of how you think, feel and act.
- To gain more control over thoughts, feelings and actions.
- To think, feel and act more clearly.
- To make a harmonious whole of thinking, feeling and willing.

You can practice alone or in a group. The latter enables you to exchange experiences, to stimulate each other and to maintain the exercises for a longer period. They may seem easy to do, but are not so easy to maintain for four weeks. It may seem that everyday life asks so much of you that there is no time to do the exercises. It may be helpful to write down your experiences every day: what exercise you have done and how it went.

Although Steiner made several statements about the duration of the exercises, it is generally recommended that all exercises are done consecutively and in the mentioned order for four weeks. After

having practised for four weeks, the acquired skills form a habit that will be included in your vital or etheric body.

When you start an exercise, the first week you are enthusiastic because of the novelty of the exercise. So first you are pulled forward by the exercise. Somewhere in the first or second week the novelty has gone and you have to do the exercise by yourself - you have to generate enthusiasm inside yourself. It becomes more difficult to do the exercise, you need to invest more, which also makes the effect of the exercise stronger.

It may be quite effective if you do each exercise one week and then take the next one - so you do exercises for a week alternately. How you do the exercises is ultimately up to you, your possibilities and your interest.

Take them seriously, but not too seriously; they should not be a duty. Humour gets you further!

Literature

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Steiner, Rudolf, 1910. An outline to esoteric science. Steiner books.

Flensburger Hefte 47, 1994. Übungen zur Selbsterziehung (German).

Control of thought

Use an ordinary object (a pencil, clothes pin, clip, book, etc.) and think about it for five minutes every day.

You take an object in front of you or in your mind and the first time you describe it to yourself aloud. You can also imagine yourself describing it to a blind person. Use all your senses and make as many observations as you can in five minutes. Repeat this the next day, you will probably notice new details. After a while you can ask questions about the object: "What can I do with it?", "What is it made of?", "Why this shape?", "What other shapes could it have?", "Where was it made?", "How did I get it?," "How are the raw materials mined?", etc. You will be able to answer some of these questions. If not, you can search for an answer in an encyclopaedia or on the internet. You should be able to determine whether your thoughts are correct, otherwise your thoughts will wander. which is not the intention. You can repeat what you did the day before and build on your previous thoughts. After some time you will have covered all possible questions, then do it one or two more times until you can really find no more issues to think about. Then follow the same procedure with another object.

When doing this exercise you may notice that your thinking gets clearer and sharper, and that your perception, concentration and objectivity increase. Also, your interest grows.

The difficulty of the exercise is that your mind wanders. The challenge is to be able to think about the object for five minutes, but you will find that your mind wanders to something else very easily, that your thoughts are associative and work automatically. E.g. you think of a pencil and suddenly you see in your mind your grandma with a pencil in her hand, grandma has a budgerigar and suddenly you are thinking about the whistling of this bird. Interrupt such thoughts: you wanted to think about the pencil. Another difficulty may be that you do not have the answers to the questions. However,

nowadays it is easy to find them on the internet.

The exercise is called *control of the mind*. The example just given shows that often there is no control over our thinking. We **are** thought, our thinking is associative and automatic. We believe that we think, but our thinking is often not focused.

Make sure that you do the exercise every day. You can choose a fixed time. Choose a time when you are awake and clear-headed, so not after dinner, but for example before or after breakfast or at 8 o'clock at night. You can also do it while waiting for the train, in a spare moment. Doing the exercise with two or three objects should be sufficient.

Control of will - acting on your own initiative

Do a simple act without purpose at a fixed time each day.

You decide to do a simple act daily at a fixed time during an period of four weeks. This act does not have a direct meaning and is only useful as an exercise. The act could be anything, e.g. pulling your left earlobe, taking out your handkerchief and putting it back into your pocket again, untying and tying your shoelaces, rolling back one sleeve of your sweater, or deflating and re-inflating the tire of your bike. The variations are endless, but make sure that you have the necessary attribute with you when you need it.

You can do the exercise at the same fixed time every day, or - and this is more difficult - you can decide on a time each day in the morning.

The difficulty of this exercise is not to think of a senseless act, but to do it every day at the time set by yourself. Often you think of doing the exercise an hour before the set time, again fifteen minutes before the set time, five minutes...., and then the phone rings or someone says something to you and the next time you think about the exercise it is an hour later. And you really wanted to do the exercise! Still, you were preoccupied with what others wanted from you or you were distracted by some thought that came along. If you are late for the exercise, it is still good to do it.

The meaning of the fixed time is that you must keep your aim and at the same time restrain yourself until the time has come. Your awareness of what you really want will grow by this.

The exercise is called *acting on your own initiative*. The goal is to take the initiative in your actions, to better direct your will and to your stand fastness.

Many, if not most actions in a day are done because they have to be done or they are done for other people. There are not many acts that we really do for ourselves. The exercise is a commitment to yourself to do something. Such a commitment is harder to keep than a commitment to someone else.

Some tips to make this exercise a success:

- It helps to choose a time that is easy. If you wake up every day at seven you can do it shortly thereafter. If you eat every day at six, at ten to six. Often you will see that when you are in a different rhythm, the exercise is more difficult to do. You will succeed during the week, for instance, but not so easily in the weekends. On those days you will have to make more of an effort.
- Imagine a picture in the morning of performing the act at the place and in the circumstances where you expect to be at the fixed time. Then you have a picture of an accomplished exercise. If you hold on to that image, it is more likely that your exercise will succeed.
- If you do the exercise lightly, using your sense of humour, it is easier to maintain and it will make you even happier when the exercise succeeds.
- If it is very difficult to do the exercise, then put a note on the wall to remind you.

Equanimity - the exercise of feeling

Observe your feelings, restrain strong responses and strengthen feeble ones.

This exercise is not done with an object or at a fixed time, but throughout the day. When something happens to you, look at your feelings, either at that moment or later.

If you start with this exercise, at first you might not experience many different feelings, but in the course of four weeks there appear to be more and more, both positive and negative, with fierce and feeble reactions. It may help to make a list or a map of your feelings and their intensity at the end of the day.

Feelings are like the weather. They are just there. We experience them, but unlike the weather we can adjust our reaction by our thoughts. An example: I say something to someone. He leaves the room and the door closes with a bang. I get scared and feel fear. Is this banging of the door a response to what I said? Did I hurt him? But is this thought justified? Perhaps the door was shut by a gust of wind. When the person comes back and smiles or says something like: the door fell out of my hand, then I am reassured and understand that my response was not correct and slowly I will be able to change my attitude to the slamming of a door. A next time I will be less scary and perhaps I am more neutral to such an event.

Another example: when I am pushed in my back while walking in the street, I feel anger, annoyance or fear. When I see that I was pushed by a blind person, I understand that he could not help it. Perhaps that thought leads to a modified feeling about the event. And I can take it a step further by cultivating the thought: "Others may be blind to how they affect others. It is their ignorance or failure to see, that leads others to act towards me in ways that may evoke my anger." Then, gradually, this thought permeates us and our feelings

and reactions become modified. Maybe they are not as intense, or they don't last so long anymore.

You cannot take a particular moment, but you need to restrain your strong responses at the moment that you experience them, and likewise cherish the subtle ones. When you look back at the end of the day, you will find that sometimes you could do that, and that you missed an opportunity at other times. The next day you go on with that awareness.

It's not always easy to name feelings. There are feelings that are close to each other and yet different, such as *happy* and *cheerful*, *anxious* and *afraid*, *angry* and *upset*. Negative feelings are often easier to tackle than positive ones. You need to distinguish feelings from quasi-feelings, which usually start with "I feel", e.g. taken, used, loved, attacked. Real feelings usually start with "I am", e.g. angry, happy, sad, surprised. It can help to make a list of feelings. **This list** is from the Centre for Nonviolent Communication.

Goals

- To become aware of the feelings you have and their intensity. So, you have to observe your feelings. Make an inventory of them and their intensity once or several times a day or at the end of the day. You use your feeling as an instrument of perception, because it tells you about your relationship with your surroundings and yourself. You will notice that there are feelings that you often have. You will also notice that some feelings are intense and that there are feelings that are less developed, hard to perceive and rarely or not expressed.
- To be aware how your thoughts influence your feelings. The closer you can stick to your observations, the less your feelings will overwhelm you.
- To create harmony and balance in your feelings. Control and weaken violent reactions and strengthen subtle and weak

emotions, so that an equilibrium arises. The aim is not to deny feelings, the aim is to diminish the violent reaction, so that other more subtle emotions can be felt. It is then that you take charge of your feelings and not vice versa. You should not suppress the anger, but the involuntary cursing. It is not the possible harm you fight, but the fruitless irrational fear.

Results

"You are not your feelings, you have them." You become more receptive to feelings and can experience them more evenly. Balance and equanimity arise. Awareness arises about your feelings. You are able to identify your feelings, they belong to you, are part of you. By observing them, you create a certain distance to your feelings. They can no longer sweep you away. You control yourself and your feelings better. You are able to keep your composure.

Positivity - observing the positive

Always try to see the positive aspects of something negative.

In many situations you encounter, you see the negative and ugly aspects quite clearly. In this exercise the aim is that you always see something positive, too, without denying the negative. When something is negative, you can emphasize the positive within or besides that. There is always something beautiful or good that lies concealed in everything. The exercise should not lead to an uncritical attitude and a vague "everything is good and beautiful" or to denying the negative.

The exercise is built on the previous exercises; it is a new step because of the combination of thinking and feeling. To see the positive or good in the negative, you have to overcome your reactions, opinions and prejudices. The circumstances become more interesting. Questions like "What does this tell me?", "What can I learn from this?", "Why is it that I did not hear?", may help in this exercise. A good opportunity to practice this are reviews, evaluations, etc.: you always mention one more positive point than negative ones. And if you criticize, then only as a starting point for improvement.

There are two aspects to this exercise:

- Strengthening the perception. You must not let the negative or the ugly distract you from looking for the positive. You strengthen your interest by searching for that.
- Becoming independent of your feelings by looking for the positive. You have to restrain your negative feelings, otherwise they keep you away from further observation.

During and after this exercise you still see the negative, but you try to find something positive in it. Sometimes this only succeeds when you look back, which may be days or even years later. As you observe more and see the situation from different angles, you will restrain your opinion at first and you become more open and will observe more comprehensively. Therefore the exercise leads to greater tolerance. Ultimately, there is almost nothing that does not have something positive in it.

Difficulties

- You are so overtaken by the negative or the negative is so overwhelming that you do not get around to the positive.
- You may be unable to withhold your criticism, because your judgements grew over the years and you accept them as established facts.
- You tend to forget to look for the positive at the moment itself. In that case: look back at a later moment.

Open-mindedness - be open to new experiences

Always keep open the possibility to experience something new and keep in mind that new experiences can counter old ones.

For the umpteenth time you stroll through the woods, for the umpteenth time you ride your bike to school or work. Everything is already known. Suddenly, you notice that the light falls through the leaves or the high grass of a meadow in a special way or that the colours are different and of a special intensity. You suddenly smell an unknown fragrance. The fact that you notice this makes you happy and relaxed and that happiness and relaxation are reflected in your body: you smile, there is a sense of freedom in your head, you breathe more freely, you walk or cycle more upright. You wonder what's so special and you realise that first you were less observant, that you were inside yourself. You notice your previous seclusion. There is wonder and amazement at what you perceived, you have opened your soul to the world outside you. You have been open-minded, but that needed a special observation.

The aim of this exercise is that you stimulate open-mindedness. The more knowledge and skills you have, the harder it is to be unbiased, the less you are open to new impressions. You have already made many judgements and many patterns have formed in your thinking and your actions. Imprisonment of your mind may be the result, i.e. something or someone is simply this or that and you think it will remain so forever. You're not alert to changes. Habit determines your reaction in certain situations and to certain people.

To practice open-mindedness, you must open your senses and hold your judgements back. You want to see the world with different eyes and become full of expectation about everything around you. You try to listen to new experiences. You discover things that you did not notice before. Your attention is greater and the result is that the world is expressed in your inner self. You must not deny your already

acquired knowledge, on the contrary, you should build on it, and enrich it.

Helpful when practising, is an attitude of inquiring interest and curiosity. The result is growing amazement and wonder: there are always new observations. Along with these, new questions arise.

This exercise is a combination of thinking and willing. The component of thinking consists of a great openness to new observations, keeping your judgements back, letting events speak for themselves. The component of willing is that you engage everything with confidence, assume that you can change every day and that there is always something new to be discovered.

Inner harmony - creating balance

Practice the five previous exercises, separately and in various combinations as needed, so that harmony between thinking, feeling and willing arises.

The previous exercises were aimed at the separate development of soul qualities: control of thought and willing, equanimity with respect to feelings of love and sorrow, positivity in assessing the world and open-mindedness towards life. This exercise is designed to ensure harmony between these qualities.

Some have a strong tendency to think, others have developed their feelings better, again others live strongly in action. Through practising the five exercises together and according to need, harmony will be created between the three faculties of the soul. You can practice combinations of exercises for a while, but you can also choose a specific exercise that you need in a certain phase in your life.

Perhaps it gets too much after a while. Then it may help to think that someone who practices, learns and grows, and someone who doesn't does not. The exercises get easier because you have practised them separately at first; you can do them to some extent. You have already gathered experience, acquired skills and built forces that will make it easier to continue. You've already become more attentive to your soul, you improved on your weaknesses and limitations and you already react more balanced than before. By going through this exercise you will improve this further.

After you've done all the exercises once, you can stop for a while and then start again or just do the exercises that did not go well. In this way the basic exercises can be a help to develop yourself continually.