

From Rudolf Steiner, Guidance in Esoteric Training

Part 5: GENERAL DEMANDS...

GENERAL DEMANDS WHICH EVERY ASPIRANT FOR OCCULT DEVELOPMENT MUST PUT TO HIMSELF (Subsidiary Exercises)

In what follows, the conditions which must be the basis of any occult development are set forth. Let no one imagine that he can make progress by any measures applied to the outer or the inner life unless he fulfils these conditions. All exercises in meditation, concentration, or exercises of other kinds, are valueless, indeed in a certain respect actually harmful, if life is not regulated in accordance with these conditions. No forces can actually be imparted to a human being; all that can be done is to bring to development the forces already within him. They do not develop of their own accord because outer and inner hindrances obstruct them. The outer hindrances are lessened by means of the following rules of life; the inner hindrances by the special instructions concerning meditation, concentration, and the like.

The first condition is the cultivation of absolutely clear thinking. For this purpose a man must rid himself of the will-o'-the-wisps of thought, even if only for a very short time during the day—about five minutes (the longer, the better). He must become the ruler in his world of thought. He is not the ruler if external circumstances, occupation, some tradition or other, social relationships, even membership of a particular race, the daily round of life, certain activities and so forth, determine a thought and how he works it out. Therefore during this brief time, acting entirely out of his own free will, he must empty the soul of the ordinary, everyday course of thoughts and by his own initiative place one single thought at the centre of his soul. The thought need not be a particularly striking or interesting one. Indeed it will be all the better for what has to be attained in an occult respect if a thoroughly uninteresting and insignificant thought is chosen. Thinking is then impelled to act out of its own energy the essential thing here, whereas an interesting thought carries the thinking along with it. It is better if this exercise in

thought-control is undertaken with a pin rather than with Napoleon. The pupil says to himself: Now I start from this thought, and through my own inner initiative I associate with it everything that is pertinent to it. At the end of the period the thought should be just as colourful and living as it was at the beginning. This exercise is repeated day by day for at least a month; a new thought may be taken every day, or the same thought may be adhered to for several days. At the end of the exercise an endeavour is made to become fully conscious of that inner feeling of firmness and security which will soon be noticed by paying subtler attention to one's own soul; the exercise is then brought to a conclusion by focusing the thinking upon the head and the middle of the spine (brain and spinal cord), as if the feeling of security were being poured into this part of the body.

When this exercise has been practised for, say, one month, a second requirement should be added. We try to think of some action which in the ordinary course of life we should certainly not have performed. Then we make it a duty to perform this action every day. It will therefore be good to choose an action which can be performed every day and will occupy as long a period of time as possible. Again it is better to begin with some insignificant action which we have to force ourselves to perform; for example, to water at a fixed time every day a flower we have bought. After a certain time a second, similar act should be added to the first; later, a third, and so on . . . as many as are compatible with the carrying out of all other duties. This exercise, also, should last for one month. But as far as possible during this second month, too, the first exercise should continue, although it is a less paramount duty than in the first month. Nevertheless it must not be left unheeded, for otherwise it will quickly be noticed that the fruits of the first month are lost and the slovenliness of uncontrolled thinking begins again. Care must be taken that once these fruits have been won, they are never again lost. If, through the second exercise, this initiative of action has been achieved, then, with subtle attentiveness, we become conscious of the feeling of an inner impulse of activity in the soul; we pour this feeling into the body, letting it stream down from the head to a point just above the heart.

In the third month, life should be centered on a new exercise—the development of a certain equanimity towards the fluctuations of joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain; ‘heights of jubilation’ and ‘depths of despair’ should quite consciously be replaced by an equable mood. Care is taken that no pleasure shall carry us away, no sorrow plunge us into the depths, no experience lead to immoderate anger or vexation no expectation give rise to anxiety or fear, no situation disconcert us, and so on. There need be no fear that such an exercise will make life arid and unproductive; far rather will it quickly be noticed that the experiences to which this exercise is applied are replaced by purer qualities of soul. Above all, if subtle attentiveness is maintained, an inner tranquillity in the body will one day become noticeable; as in the two cases above, we pour this feeling into the body, letting it stream from the heart, towards the hands, the feet and, finally, the head. This naturally cannot be done after each exercise, for here it is not a matter of one single exercise but of sustained attentiveness to the inner life of the soul. Once every day, at least, this inner tranquillity should be called up before the soul and then the exercise of pouring it out from the heart should proceed. A connection with the exercises of the first and second months is maintained, as in the second month with the exercise of the first month.

In the fourth month, as a new exercise, what is sometimes called a ‘positive attitude’ to life should be cultivated. It consists in seeking always for the good, the praiseworthy the beautiful and the like, in all beings, all experiences, all things. This quality of soul is best characterized by a Persian legend concerning Christ Jesus. One day, as He was walking with His disciples, they saw a dead dog lying by the roadside in a state of advanced decomposition. All the disciples turned away from the disgusting sight; Christ Jesus alone did not move but looked thoughtfully at the corpse and said: ‘What beautiful teeth the animal has!’ Where the others had seen only the repulsive, the unpleasant, He looked for the beautiful. So must the esoteric pupil strive to seek for the positive in every phenomenon and in every being. He will soon notice that under the veil of something repugnant there is a hidden beauty, that even

under the outer guise of a criminal there is a hidden good, that under the mask of a lunatic the divine soul is somehow concealed.

In a certain respect this exercise is connected with what is called 'abstention from criticism'. This is not to be understood in the sense of calling black white and white black. There is, however, a difference between a judgment which, proceeding merely from one's own personality, is coloured with the element of personal sympathy or antipathy, and an attitude which enters lovingly into the alien phenomenon or being, always asking: How has it come to be like this or to act like this? Such an attitude will by its very nature be more set upon helping what is imperfect than upon simply finding fault and criticizing.

The objection that the very circumstances of their lives oblige many people to find fault and condemn is not valid here. For in such cases the circumstances are such that the person in question cannot go through a genuine occult training. There are indeed many circumstances in life which make occult schooling impossible, beyond a certain point. In such a case the person should not impatiently desire, in spite of everything, to make progress which is possible only under some conditions.

He who consciously turns his mind, for one month, to the positive aspect of all his experiences will gradually notice a feeling creeping into him as if his skin were becoming porous on all sides, and as if his soul were opening wide to all kinds of secret and delicate processes in his environment which hitherto entirely escaped his notice. The important point is to combat a very prevalent lack of attentiveness to these subtle things. If it has once been noticed that the feeling described expresses itself in the soul as a kind of bliss, endeavours should be made in thought to guide this feeling to the heart and from there to let it stream into the eyes, and thence out into the space in front of and around oneself. It will be noticed that an intimate relationship to this surrounding space is thereby acquired. A man grows out of and beyond himself, as it were. He learns to regard a part of his environment as something that belongs to him. A great deal of concentration is necessary for this exercise, and, above all, recognition of the fact that all tumultuous feelings, all passions, all over-

exuberant emotions have an absolutely destructive effect upon the mood indicated. The exercises of the first months are repeated, as with the earlier months.

In the fifth month, efforts should be made to develop the feeling of confronting every new experience with complete open-mindedness. The esoteric pupil must break entirely with the attitude which, in the face of something just heard or seen, exclaims: 'I never heard that, or I never saw that, before; I don't believe it—it's an illusion.' At every moment he must be ready to encounter and accept absolutely new experiences. What he has hitherto recognized as being in accordance with natural law, or what he has regarded as possible, should present no obstacle to the acceptance of a new truth. Although radically expressed, it is absolutely correct that if anyone were to come to the esoteric pupil and say, 'Since last night the steeple of such and such a church has been tilted right over', the esotericist should leave a loophole open for the contingency of his becoming convinced that his previous knowledge of natural law could somehow be augmented by such an apparently unprecedented fact.

If he turns his attention, in the fifth month, to developing this attitude of mind, he will notice creeping into his soul a feeling as if something were becoming alive, astir, in the space referred to in connection with the exercise for the fourth month. This feeling is exceedingly delicate and subtle. Efforts must be made to be attentive to this delicate vibration in the environment and to let it stream, as it were, through all the five senses, especially through the eyes, the ears and through the skin, in so far as the latter contains the sense of warmth. At this stage of esoteric development, less attention is paid to the impressions made by these stimuli on the other senses of taste, smell and touch. At this stage it is still not possible to distinguish the numerous bad influences which intermingle with the good influences in this sphere; the pupil therefore leaves this for a later stage.

In the sixth month, endeavours should be made to repeat all the five exercises again, systematically and in regular alternation. In this way a beautiful

equilibrium of soul will gradually develop. It will be noticed, especially, that previous dissatisfactions with certain phenomena and beings in the world completely disappear. 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. The very movements and gestures of a person change under the influence of such exercises, and if, one day, he can actually observe that the character of his handwriting has altered, then he may say to himself that he is just about to reach a first rung on the upward path.

Once again, two things must be stressed: First, the six exercises described paralyse 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. The esotericist must not rest content with fulfilling, however conscientiously, the demands of conventional morality, for that kind of morality can be extremely egotistical, if a man says: I will be good in order that I may be thought good. The esotericist does not do what is good because he wants to be thought good, but because little by little he recognizes that the good alone brings evolution forward, and that evil, stupidity and ugliness place hindrances along its path.

*Translation revised by Charles Davy and Owen Barfield.*