

The Twelve Constitutional Exercises – Working from the Soul

Lecture by Theodor Hundhammer in Moscow on August 9, 2026 (automatic translation)

The twelve exercises form a kind of culmination in the Eurythmy Therapy Course. In the first lectures, Rudolf Steiner develops general perspectives and foundations of Eurythmy Therapy. The vowels are then treated intensively, followed by the consonants and the therapeutic effects connected with them.

Steiner introduces the fifth lecture by pointing out that something special is now to follow: exercises that work from the soul, by way of a detour through the etheric body, right into the innermost being of the organs. He also says that essentially everyone should practise these exercises regularly and in moderation.

This is what we would like to explore today: What does this detour consist of? What is the innermost being of the organs? Why should these particular exercises be important for everyone? How can we help them actually find their way to many people, or perhaps even to everyone? Could these twelve exercises in particular play a special role in the place that eurythmy may find in our time?

Where Is the “Detour”?

In the literature, the effect of these exercises is often described approximately like this: I want to do something for my health, so I practise one of the twelve exercises in which a particular soul-spiritual content is brought into movement. This works upon the etheric body, and the etheric body, as the bearer of the life processes, has a healing effect upon the organs of the physical body.

I → soul → etheric body → physical body

Presented in this way, the path seems fairly direct, and we asked ourselves: Where, in this picture, is the detour? For Steiner’s formulation says that the exercises work by way of a detour through the etheric.

For this question, an image Rudolf Steiner develops in his late writings, in the so-called Michael Letters, is helpful to me (Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts 165–174, GA 26). There he describes two very different realms: the soul-spiritual world and the physical-etheric world. In what follows, I connect this description with some thoughts of my own.

In the Innermost Being of the Organs

At birth, we gradually come from a spiritual-soul world into earthly life, and after death we return step by step to this world.

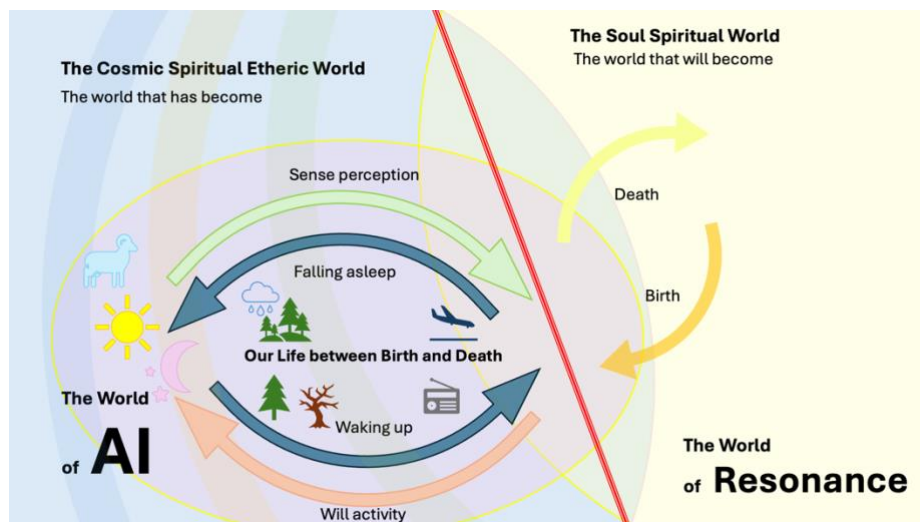
Something different happens in sleep. We let go and, dreaming or sleeping, release ourselves from our ordinary daytime consciousness. This raises the question: Where do we go, in our soul-spiritual being, while we sleep?

Do I separate from my body as I do at death and return to the spiritual world? When falling asleep, do we enter the path we go through after death, and on waking retrace the path we travelled at birth? Hardly, because that could not be accomplished in a single night.

According to Steiner, at night we enter with our soul-spiritual being into the physical-etheric cosmos surrounding us, which has developed over aeons in the course of evolution. We incarnate into this cosmos at birth, live within it between birth and death, and leave it again at the moment of death.

When we are awake, the physical-etheric cosmos surrounds us as the outer world: as the trees and nature around us and as the stars above us. We perceive its physical-sensory part in sections through our sense organs, depending on where and how we look. The non-sensory etheric part, the being of the world-thoughts that carry and move the physical-sensory world, we experience in our feeling and thinking.

Steiner says that at night we immerse ourselves with our soul-spiritual being in the physical-etheric cosmos in such a way that we undertake a kind of journey there and have different experiences from stage to stage: a stillness that we may hardly be able to bear, a mobility that may become too much for us, and finally a clarity that nourishes us. Depending on the mood in which we have lived through the day, we may be able to penetrate more deeply and come into contact with strengthening encounters with spiritual beings, bringing their forces back into the day as forces of health and morality.



But where is this physical-etheric cosmos that at night we can enter no longer outwardly, but inwardly with our soul-spiritual being? Do we go out in sleep, as we do during the day, into the trees and nature around us or to the stars above us?

Here something becomes essential that Rudolf Steiner repeatedly emphasises: the world that surrounds us and that we perceive with our senses also lives and weaves within us. The substances and processes of the world around us are likewise active in our organism as the life processes that sustain and enliven our body.

Within us, however, it is not only the physical-material processes that are active, as medicine can observe them, but equally the forces and thoughts that carry them, which move and enliven outer nature and at the same time move and enliven the inner nature of our organism. When we are awake, we enter the outer world through the senses that generate consciousness; when we sleep, we enter our inner world without consciousness, into the interior of our organs. The etheric-spiritual world within our organs is the same world that lies behind the sense-perceptible world.

The difference is that during the day, with the help of sensory perception, I immerse myself in the outer side of the surrounding physical-etheric world and come to an experience of my soul-spiritual being as separate from the divine-spiritual in nature. At night I withdraw from the sense organs, inwardly experience within my organs the forces that form and enliven the cosmos, and unconsciously come to an experience of unity between my soul-spiritual being and the divine-spiritual of the world. As Rudolf Steiner describes it, the depth and character of this experience depend on our condition and on what he calls the religious mood, that is, on our sense of coherence during the day.

We encounter the outer world through language, forms and the things with which we engage. How does the world speak to us, and what does it want from us? In the innermost being of the organs, we encounter this world differently, in an experience that is more musical, carried by rhythm, harmony and melody. In this experience, our own infinite, immortal soul-spiritual being becomes perceptible to us, and we open ourselves to what sounds towards us from the soul-spiritual world – our true home and our future. From this experience we draw our moral impulses, our will to live and our forces of health. When this succeeds, we sleep “properly”.

Compared with the physical-etheric cosmos surrounding us, the sense-perceptible world, the soul-spiritual world is eternal. We can sense this in music:

♩ = 140

1. Him - mel und Er - de müs - sen ver - gehn,
a - ber die Mu - si - ci, a - ber die Mu - si - ci,
a - ber die Mu - si - ci blei - ben be - stehn.

*Heaven and earth must pass away,
but the music, but the music shall remain.*

Against this background, the statement that the special quality of these twelve exercises lies in the fact that they work “by way of a detour through the etheric body” takes on a new meaning.

The Detour through the Etheric

At the beginning of an exercise stands the I: the human being who wants to develop, or perhaps a therapist who has convinced my I that this exercise is right and important for me. Within the I there already lives an inner relationship to the soul-spiritual, and I want to work from this soul-spiritual realm for my health. But I cannot do this directly, because since my birth I no longer have the soul-spiritual available to me in the same purity as before. Therefore I choose a detour and practise an exercise that supports and makes this possible.

The Polar Principle in the Physical-Etheric

If we ask fundamentally what the difference is between the soul-spiritual and the physical-etheric, we discover the principle of polarity. In the soul-spiritual, the human being lives in a unity that permeates everything.

In the physical-etheric, we live in a polar world. The archetype of this is heaven and earth, above and below. From this, in principle, all transformations of form and horizons of experience that we encounter in life metamorphose: sleeping and waking, working and pausing, loud and quiet. Rhythm arises between them. We try to find a harmony and dynamic within these rhythms that allow us to be present in our soul, to benefit from them and to grow through them.

Rudolf Steiner builds on this and uses an artistic device. He constructs the exercises in such a way that a soul content is carried out in a polar movement and experienced in polarity. The soul initially experiences itself in the world within these polarities.

The challenge is now to shape the movement in such a way that it acquires an etheric quality: so finely, vividly and self-sustainingly that it can mirror the soul-spiritual. The etheric then acts like a mirror back upon the soul-spiritual and can give it a new quality of consciousness. This is what matters in these exercises.

The further effect into our own organism then takes place unconsciously, below the threshold of consciousness. What is shaped in movement on the conscious side can have an effect on the unconscious side right into the interior of the organs.

Etheric Movement

There are a whole range of criteria for etheric movement to unfold its potential. At Eurythmy4you these criteria are described in many different contexts. How does a living stream of movement arise? What role does thinking play, and what role does sensory perception play? How does movement arise out of an inner coherence? When does it flow, and what allows it to carry itself?

Behind the etheric lies what one might call bodily intelligence. For this reason, in principle every movement is etheric. Yet depending on how I relate to my own movement, this intelligence can unfold more strongly or be pushed back by the habitual patterns I bring into it.

Slowness is one of the keys that open this space. In some of the exercises Rudolf Steiner explicitly draws attention to this and even speaks of “entering into slowness” (O with form). Yet even with a fast movement, the question remains important: Do I impose the movement out of my own mental image, or does it arise from the thought, lightly and almost by itself?

From the Etheric into the Soul

Let us look once more at the path we take in an exercise. We know why we want to practise the exercise and choose a content that we consciously take up in the soul. This content lives in a polar quality of movement, which we realise both in time and in space through our bodily consciousness as an etheric movement.

This is the conscious path into the etheric. Then an inner return path begins, which I can perceive only as a subtle feeling. Out of the etherically sustained movement, a particular soul-form corresponding to the exercise now arises in the opposite direction. It arises as a kind of inner perception in a much purer form than the thought or mental image I had formed before the exercise out of my everyday consciousness.

Only in this way does it reach my actual soul-spiritual being, which remains untouched by the imprints of everyday life, hidden within me in a pure form, living and weaving there, and still carrying the original impulses of the human being, the prenatal moral-musical element.

From the Soul into the Innermost Being of the Organs

The soul-spiritual is ultimately what enlivens my body from within, brings it into lightness and keeps it healthy. It brings imbalances back into their context and balances them. This is addressed in a very particular way by the twelve constitutional exercises.

Here we are not concerned with the immediate functions of the organs, but with the place where I am at night – the interior of the organs, the soul-spiritual layer in which the human being’s will to live resides. In its interconnectedness it forms the basis of the rhythmic system: the feeling for myself, the feeling for what it means to be human, and the feeling for the larger contexts in which I am embedded.

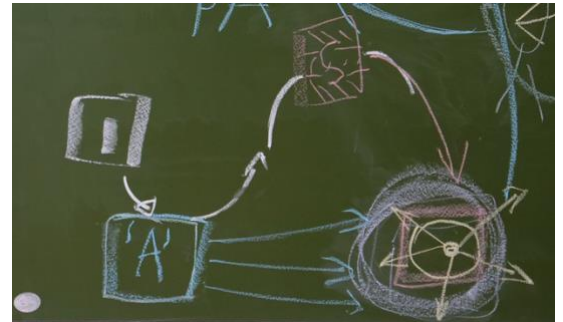
It is precisely this inner, by its nature subtle, moral-musical layer of the organism that is to be addressed by the twelve exercises. Therefore it matters that an exercise, initially described clearly and externally and living in polarities, is carried out in such a way that it stimulates the soul-spiritual so that it comes, in a subtle and appropriate way, into resonance with its place at night – the innermost being of the organs. From there this resonance can work back upon the organs, strengthening and healing them from within.

On this path, therefore, the etheric body is not simply an intermediate station passing on an already completed soul effect. Rather, it becomes the actual detour and mirror-space through which – then unconsciously – a new soul quality can arise, allowing the organs to be addressed from within in a strengthening and healing way.

I → soul image → etheric → soul-spiritual form
→ innermost being of the organs → organ functions

We can hardly follow this process directly with our ordinary consciousness. In actual practice, therefore, we may let go of all these thoughts again. They do not need to be consciously thought during the exercise. We concern ourselves only with the etheric quality of the movement while carrying out an exercise that addresses the soul.

Knowing this, however, can certainly awaken in us a certain reverence for these seemingly simple exercises.



Working on the Organs from Outside and from Within

In Eurythmy Therapy, two paths can be distinguished.

The exercises in the first four chapters of the Eurythmy Therapy Course describe eurythmic sound movements and principles that work in a healing way upon the organism and its functions. If, for example, I make a B, I am working on a particular quality of the kidney and its function. These exercises work from the physical-etheric upon the organs, that is, upon their functional life layer, their life body – from the etheric, from outside.

With the twelve exercises described here, Rudolf Steiner points instead to the inner layer of the organs, which is connected with our moral-musical being. They work upon the organs from within, from where the moral and soul-spiritual being of the human being is at home. They work from the innermost being of the organs upon their life layer from within – so to speak, from the beyond.

Why Were They Called “Hygienic Exercises”?

Steiner gives concrete indications and effects for each of the twelve exercises, for example shortness of breath, headaches or cramps. Nevertheless, they work differently from other exercises in Eurythmy Therapy that are likewise applied in a very targeted way.

Because Rudolf Steiner, when presenting these exercises, said that essentially everyone should practise them regularly and in moderation, the twelve exercises were for a long time called “hygienic exercises”. They work more strongly out of the whole, less correctively and more regulatively and generally.

A certain consensus therefore developed: Eurythmy Therapy is practised only by trained eurythmy therapists. These twelve exercises, however, can also be used by eurythmists in their courses because they have a generally hygienic effect and are less directly specific to illness.

At Eurythmy4you, we would like to take one further step and encourage everyone to become acquainted with these exercises, to practise them together and to tell one another about them.

The Twelve Constitutional Exercises

Our constitution is shaped by how the nerve-sense system and the metabolic-limb system work together. In each of us these two poles are developed differently: in one person the nervous system, thinking and wakefulness are stronger; in another, the metabolic-limb system, the will and the element of taking up space.

How these two poles interact is essentially a function of the rhythmic system. It influences how these two poles, despite their differences, can work together and complement one another instead of working against each other.

The rhythmic system is not simply a third system alongside the other two. Through its mediating and ordering character, it stands in a certain sense above them. It is subtler than the clearly experienced opposites and more difficult to grasp.

I remember a scene in the underground that I witnessed many years ago. Two people were fighting fiercely on the platform. Then a third person came along who knew neither of them. He turned calmly first to one, then to the other, responded moderately to their aggressive reactions, stayed with the situation, repeatedly helped it relax, and through his manner the entire situation changed.

This image remained with me and helps me today to understand the rhythmic system. It enters, as it were, as a third element, allowing something harmonious, healthy or even something entirely new to arise through the opposition of the polarities. Out of this calmed, finer interaction, something third can light up – like a small spark: a feeling of presence, a feeling of myself.

In the scene described above, the mediating person and his qualities came from outside. In the organism it is precisely the other way round: the higher soul-spiritual does not hover somewhere around us but lives within us. One could therefore say that the rhythmic, balancing system enters from within, ordering, mediating and healing.

This mediating and balancing activity of the rhythmic system is to be strengthened through the particular mode of action of the twelve exercises. This is why we call them constitutional exercises.

Why Exactly Twelve?

It is an interesting question what inspired Rudolf Steiner to give these exercises in precisely this sequence.

When we encounter a twelvefoldness, it is easy to think of a circle. Within a circle, relationships and laws emerge. We can look at sequences, compare opposite points and ask what other orders connect the individual members with one another.

The zodiac – likewise a twelvefoldness – describes an archetypal articulation of principles that are fundamentally different from one another. This naturally raises the question of whether the twelve exercises can be considered together with the twelve qualities of the zodiac.

If we begin with the usual sequence, we look for an Aries quality in affirmation and negation, a Taurus quality in sympathy and antipathy, and so on. We will discover various correspondences. When working with archetypal images, one will find that somehow something always fits. This lies in the nature of such archetypal orders, for every correspondence can deepen the experience by raising new questions.

Precisely for this reason we can ask: Where does this sequence begin most meaningfully? Which correspondence can best deepen the experience of these exercises and help them unfold more fully?

One morning the unexpected thought came to me: the sequence of the twelve constitutional exercises begins with Sagittarius. When I then went through the sequence in my mind starting from Sagittarius, it became exciting, because much of it proved astonishingly coherent.

A Sequence from Sagittarius to Scorpio

In eurythmy, each zodiac gesture is connected with a particular thought-character. With Sagittarius, it is decision. The relationship to the first exercise is obvious: Yes or no? I decide.

With Capricorn, the eurythmic thought is the thought's engagement with the world: sympathy and antipathy.

Aquarius is connected in eurythmy with the thought of the human being in equilibrium: love and E, devotion and boundary-setting.

With Pisces, the thought is: The event has become destiny. I have been born into this world and am dependent on what happens: hope and U.

The Complete Sequence from Sagittarius to Scorpio

Affirmation and Negation

Sagittarius – Decision

Sympathy and Antipathy

Capricorn – The thought's engagement with the world

Love and E

Aquarius – The human being in equilibrium

Hope and U

Pisces – The event has become destiny

Knee Bend and B

Aries – The event

Rhythmic R

Taurus – The deed

Head Inclination and M

Gemini – Capacity for action

Dexterity with E

Cancer – Impulse to act

E with Form in Pairs

Leo – Blazing enthusiasm

O with Form in Pairs

Virgo – Sensible sobering

H and A – Laughter

Libra – Weighing the premise of the thought

A and H – Reverence

Scorpio – The thought

With many of the exercises, a correspondence can be felt relatively easily. With others, it eludes immediate perception. Precisely then it becomes especially interesting, while carrying out and experiencing the zodiac gesture and the exercise, to open oneself to this possible relationship and see what may emerge from it.

I place two motifs beside one another and let them enter into conversation: yes and no on the one side, Sagittarius and decision on the other. I listen in on their conversation. What do they whisper to one another? What comes alive between them? How does awareness of the thigh, which belongs to Sagittarius, enrich the experience of the movement sequence?

We should not work with these images by saying: this exercise is Sagittarius, that exercise is Capricorn. This approach is not a defining correspondence. It allows us to bring in further perspectives and relationships that we might not have arrived at by ourselves and to listen for where they may lead us. It gives beauty and richness to daily practice and awakens curiosity to continue researching.

In this way the overall experience of the exercise deepens: on the one hand into the subtlety of the execution of the movement, on the other into soul experience.

Why Do We End with Scorpio?

If we begin with the exercise of affirmation and negation at Sagittarius, the circle closes at Scorpio with A and H – Reverence.

But do we really want to end with a quality connected with difficult images of experience? At first this can seem strange. Scorpio appears stinging and wounding.

If we look more deeply at the Scorpio motif, the image changes. Scorpio says: I encounter a surface, but I do not remain at the surface. I press through it. I go into the depths. I seek the mystery.

Scorpio wants to penetrate and not remain at the surface, in the external – even at the risk of hurting the other person. But that is not the goal. The goal is the essence.

In this way, the image of Scorpio gives us a new perspective on something that is already present in the exercise A and H – Reverence, but which had not previously become conscious and experienceable for us in this dimension.

A Surprising Parallel

An interesting parallel to this zodiac sequence can be found in Rudolf Steiner's so-called Kultuskurs, or Course on Ritual, of 1921, in which he developed foundations for the later establishment of The Christian Community. (Rudolf Steiner, Kultuskurs, GA 343a, 26th and 27th lectures, October 9, 1921.)

There Rudolf Steiner describes a meditative accompaniment of the life of Christ through the course of the year, which likewise begins with Sagittarius and ends with Scorpio. Sagittarius corresponds to Advent, Capricorn to Christmas, and so forth.

For each period Steiner describes seven stages of inner experience of the Christ path. The Scorpio period stands under the motif of descent and leads to the central sentence: "In darkness, in death, I must seek the Sun."

Even if one does not wish to hold this directly in consciousness while practising A and H – Reverence, it can be carried as an atmosphere in the background: not remaining at the surface, being prepared to give oneself up and even to seek the essential through darkness. Perhaps the gestures of A, H and reverence can then be experienced even more deeply – as a movement that opens itself to the essential.

Here this has been shown only through the example of the final exercise. The conversation between the twelve constitutional exercises and this meditative accompaniment of the Christ path would certainly be a field of research in its own right.

The Twelve Virtues

Another discovery, particularly important from my point of view, arose during a nine-month online course on the twelve constitutional exercises. We went through the sequence of exercises again and again from new perspectives, looking at their order, at exercises in pairs or groups of four, at exercises opposite one another in the circle, and at the different ways in which they work upon the rhythmic system.

Towards the end of the course I once again found myself asking: What shall we do at the next meeting? By chance, at that time there was a flip chart standing beside me on which I had been working with the twelve senses and their relationship to the twelve monthly virtues.

These monthly virtues, together with their correspondence to the signs of the zodiac, come from the Theosophical tradition. According to a recollection by Ilona Schubert, Rudolf Steiner explained that this correspondence went back to H. P. Blavatsky, and he added to each virtue a second virtue as its direction of development. He then said: "If these virtues are practised conscientiously, new forces and capacities arise from them." Thus, for example, devotion becomes the power of sacrifice, balance becomes progress, control of thought becomes perception of truth, and courage becomes redemptive power. (Recollection by Ilona Schubert, GA 267.)

Rudolf Steiner did not, of course, develop the twelve constitutional exercises out of the monthly virtues. He turned the virtues into a path of development: one virtue is practised and through this

transforms into a second virtue. But I became curious: What happens if we place this sequence beside the twelve constitutional exercises and the zodiac, beginning with the virtue belonging to Sagittarius?

So I placed Sagittarius with affirmation and negation beside “Control of thought becomes perception of truth” in December, and I was astonished. Is not the theme of affirmation and negation, of yes and no, of deciding for or against something, precisely about a perception of truth arising behind it? Does this quality live in the movement of the exercise as well?

Does something similar apply to the other exercises?

Zodiac	Constitutional Exercise	Monthly Virtue
Sagittarius	Affirmation and Negation	Control of thought becomes perception of truth
Capricorn	Sympathy and Antipathy	Courage becomes redemptive power
Aquarius	Love and E	Discretion becomes the power of meditation
Pisces	Hope and U	Magnanimity becomes love
Aries	Knee Bend and B	Reverence (Devotion) becomes the power of sacrifice
Taurus	Rhythmic R	Inner balance becomes progress
Gemini	Head Inclination and M	Perseverance becomes fidelity
Cancer	Dexterity with E	Selflessness becomes catharsis
Leo	E with Form in Pairs	Compassion becomes freedom
Virgo	O with Form in Pairs	Courtesy becomes tact of the heart
Libra	H and A – Laughter	Contentment becomes serenity
Scorpio	A and H – Reverence	Patience becomes insight

The parallel with the twelve constitutional exercises is nevertheless astonishing and suggests a common source of inspiration, on whatever level that may lie. Both sequences live in a duality: in the constitutional exercises it is polarity; in the monthly virtues it is a process of development.

For this reason, it is extraordinarily interesting to take up the thought of the corresponding monthly virtue while actually performing the exercise. Again, the point is not to find both in one another as a fixed correspondence, but to attend to the conversation between them.

Remarkably, it is precisely the experience of the movement that changes. It becomes finer and deeper. If we remember that the exercises are said to work by way of the detour through the etheric body, we can observe, or at least assume, that this may deepen the effect back upon the soul-spiritual and from there upon the innermost being of the organs.

In practice, one can proceed by performing the twelve exercises one after another, from affirmation and negation through to A and H – Reverence, practising each one once, twice or three times. With each exercise, one takes up the corresponding virtue and looks for it within the movement: If I think it in this way, or if I carry out the movement in this way – where and how do I find it again?

The whole sequence can be completed surprisingly quickly and is very satisfying. One not only has the feeling of having done something for one's health, but at the same time something for the soul. The virtues, which previously were not so easy to remember, suddenly become plausible and much easier to recall.

The Twelve Exercises as a Whole in Everyday Life – A Path for the Future

Connecting the twelve constitutional exercises with the twelve virtues makes it attractive to practise them regularly. The exercises become unexpectedly rich in content and can be experienced differently again and again. The soul responds with surprise and joy, and the movement can be experienced more inwardly.

I then no longer have the impression that I am doing the exercises because they are good for my health, but because they give me soul strength for everyday life without requiring any great effort. I also experience the twelve virtues in movement in a very different way from merely imagining them meditatively.

Something threefold happens: the movement becomes light and full of content, the soul rejoices in the etheric support, and the I is grateful for the impulses of growth it receives.

For some time now, we at Eurythmy4you have been concerned with the question of how we might practically follow Rudolf Steiner's indication that essentially everyone should regularly practise these twelve exercises in moderation. By connecting them with the monthly virtues, we believe that people may be reached who want to experience directly how what they are doing is good for them, enriches them inwardly and brings joy.

Perhaps this discovery offers a possibility for these twelve very simple exercises not only to be cultivated symptom-specifically by a small professional circle of therapists with their clients, but – in the way developed here – to find a place in the lives of many people, simply and moderately, in the comprehensive wholeness of all twelve.

Continuing the Work

What has been presented here is a collection of observations and experiences arising from many years of shared work with many people on different continents.

We invite others to continue examining, experiencing and deepening the understanding presented here of how the twelve exercises work and of their relationships to the zodiac and the monthly virtues.

We would be very glad to hear about your experiences and, with your permission, to include them in our continuing work.