

# Philosophy as a Way of Life

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*Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*

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## Spiritual Exercises

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To take flight every day! At least for a moment, which may be brief, as long as it is intense. A “spiritual exercise” every day – either alone, or in the company of someone who also wishes to better himself. Spiritual exercises. Step out of duration . . . try to get rid of your own passions, vanities, and the itch for talk about your own name, which sometimes burns you like a chronic disease. Avoid backbiting. Get rid of pity and hatred. Love all free human beings. Become eternal by transcending yourself.

This work on yourself is necessary; this ambition justified. Lots of people let themselves be wholly absorbed by militant politics and the preparation for social revolution. Rare, much more rare, are they who, in order to prepare for the revolution, are willing to make themselves worthy of it.

With the exception of the last few lines, doesn’t this text look like a pastiche of Marcus Aurelius? It is by Georges Friedmann,<sup>1</sup> and it is quite possible that, when he wrote it, the author was not aware of the resemblance. Moreover, in the rest of his book, in which he seeks a place “to re-source himself”,<sup>2</sup> he comes to the conclusion that there is no tradition – be it Jewish, Christian, or Oriental – compatible with contemporary spiritual demands. Curiously, however, he does not ask himself about the value of the philosophical tradition of Greco-Roman antiquity, although the lines we have just quoted show to just what extent ancient tradition continues – albeit unconsciously – to live within him, as it does within each of us.

“Spiritual exercises.” The expression is a bit disconcerting for the contemporary reader. In the first place, it is no longer quite fashionable these days to use the word “spiritual.” It is nevertheless necessary to use this term, I believe, because none of the other adjectives we could use – “psychic,” “moral,” “ethical,” “intellectual,” “of thought,” “of the soul” – covers all the aspects of the reality we want to describe. Since, in these exercises, it is thought which, as it were, takes itself as its own subject-matter,<sup>3</sup> and seeks to

modify itself, it would be possible for us to speak in terms of “thought exercises.” Yet the word “thought” does not indicate clearly enough that imagination and sensibility play a very important role in these exercises. For the same reason, we cannot be satisfied with “intellectual exercises,” although such intellectual factors as definition, division, ratiocination, reading, investigation, and rhetorical amplification play a large role in them. “Ethical exercises” is a rather tempting expression, since, as we shall see, the exercises in question contribute in a powerful way to the therapeutics of the passions, and have to do with the conduct of life. Yet, here again, this would be too limited a view of things. As we can glimpse through Friedmann’s text, these exercises in fact correspond to a transformation of our vision of the world, and to a metamorphosis of our personality. The word “spiritual” is quite apt to make us understand that these exercises are the result, not merely of thought, but of the individual’s entire psychism. Above all, the word “spiritual” reveals the true dimensions of these exercises. By means of them, the individual raises himself up to the life of the objective Spirit; that is to say, he re-places himself within the perspective of the Whole (“Become eternal by transcending yourself”).

Here our reader may say, “All right, we’ll accept the expression ‘spiritual exercises’. But are we talking about Ignatius of Loyola’s *Exercitia spiritualia*? What relationship is there between Ignatian meditations and Friedmann’s program of “stepping out of duration . . . becoming eternal by transcending oneself?” Our reply, quite simply, is that Ignatius’ *Exercitia spiritualia* are nothing but a Christian version of a Greco-Roman tradition, the extent of which we hope to demonstrate in what follows. In the first place, both the idea and the terminology of *exercitium spirituale* are attested in early Latin Christianity, well before Ignatius of Loyola, and they correspond to the Greek Christian term *askesis*.<sup>5</sup> In turn, *askesis* – which must be understood not as asceticism, but as the practice of spiritual exercises – already existed within the philosophical tradition of antiquity.<sup>6</sup> In the final analysis, it is to antiquity that we must return in order to explain the origin and significance of this idea of spiritual exercises, which, as Friedmann’s example shows, is still alive in contemporary consciousness.

The goal of the present chapter is not merely to draw attention to the existence of spiritual exercises in Greco-Latin antiquity, but above all to delimit the scope and importance of the phenomenon, and to show the consequences which it entails for the understanding not only of ancient thought, but of philosophy itself.<sup>7</sup>

## 1 Learning to Live

Spiritual exercises can be best observed in the context of Hellenistic and Roman schools of philosophy. The Stoics, for instance, declared explicitly

that philosophy, for them, was an “exercise.”<sup>8</sup> In their view, philosophy did not consist in teaching an abstract theory<sup>9</sup> – much less in the exegesis of texts<sup>10</sup> – but rather in the art of living.<sup>11</sup> It is a concrete attitude and determinate life-style, which engages the whole of existence. The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being. It is a progress which causes us to *be* more fully, and makes us better.<sup>12</sup> It is a conversion<sup>13</sup> which turns our entire life upside down, changing the life of the person who goes through it.<sup>14</sup> It raises the individual from an inauthentic condition of life, darkened by unconsciousness and harassed by worry, to an authentic state of life, in which he attains self-consciousness, an exact vision of the world, inner peace, and freedom.

In the view of all philosophical schools, mankind’s principal cause of suffering, disorder, and unconsciousness were the passions: that is, unregulated desires and exaggerated fears. People are prevented from truly living, it was taught, because they are dominated by worries. Philosophy thus appears, in the first place, as a therapeutic of the passions<sup>15</sup> (in the words of Friedmann: “Try to get rid of your own passions”). Each school had its own therapeutic method,<sup>16</sup> but all of them linked their therapeutics to a profound transformation of the individual’s mode of seeing and being. The object of spiritual exercises is precisely to bring about this transformation.

To begin with, let us consider the example of the Stoics. For them, all mankind’s woes derive from the fact that he seeks to acquire or to keep possessions that he may either lose or fail to obtain, and from the fact that he tries to avoid misfortunes which are often inevitable. The task of philosophy, then, is to educate people, so that they seek only the goods they are able to obtain, and try to avoid only those evils which it is possible to avoid. In order for something good to be always obtainable, or an evil always avoidable, they must depend exclusively on man’s freedom; but the only things which fulfill these conditions are *moral* good and evil. They alone depend on us; everything else does *not* depend on us. Here, “everything else,” which does not depend on us, refers to the necessary linkage of cause and effect, which is not subject to our freedom. It must be indifferent to us: that is, we must not introduce any differences into it, but accept it in its entirety, as willed by fate. This is the domain of nature.

We have here a complete reversal of our usual way of looking at things. We are to switch from our “human” vision of reality, in which our values depend on our passions, to a “natural” vision of things, which replaces each event within the perspective of universal nature.<sup>17</sup>

Such a transformation of vision is not easy, and it is precisely here that spiritual exercises come in. Little by little, they make possible the indispensable metamorphosis of our inner self.

No systematic treatise codifying the instructions and techniques for spiritual exercises has come down to us.<sup>18</sup> However, allusions to one or the

other of such inner activities are very frequent in the writings of the Roman and Hellenistic periods. It thus appears that these exercises were well known, and that it was enough to allude to them, since they were a part of daily life in the philosophical schools. They took their place within a traditional course of oral instruction.

Thanks to Philo of Alexandria, however, we do possess two lists of spiritual exercises. They do not completely overlap, but they do have the merit of giving us a fairly complete panorama of Stoico-Platonic inspired philosophical therapeutics. One of these lists<sup>19</sup> enumerates the following elements: research (*zetesis*), thorough investigation (*skepsis*), reading (*anagnosis*), listening (*akroasis*), attention (*prosoche*), self-mastery (*enkratēia*), and indifference to indifferent things. The other<sup>20</sup> names successively: reading, meditations (*meletai*), therapies<sup>21</sup> of the passions, remembrance of good things,<sup>22</sup> self-mastery (*enkratēia*), and the accomplishment of duties. With the help of these lists, we shall be able to give a brief description of Stoic spiritual exercises. We shall study the following groups in succession: first attention, then meditations and "remembrances of good things," then the more intellectual exercises: reading, listening, research, and investigation, and finally the more active exercises: self-mastery, accomplishment of duties, and indifference to indifferent things.

Attention (*prosoche*) is the fundamental Stoic spiritual attitude.<sup>23</sup> It is a continuous vigilance and presence of mind, self consciousness which never sleeps, and a constant tension of the spirit.<sup>24</sup> Thanks to this attitude, the philosopher is fully aware of what he does at each instant, and he *wills* his actions fully. Thanks to his spiritual vigilance, the Stoic always has "at hand" (*procheiron*) the fundamental rule of life: that is, the distinction between what depends on us and what does not. As in Epicureanism, so for Stoicism: it is essential that the adepts be supplied with a fundamental principle which is formulable in a few words, and extremely clear and simple, precisely so that it may remain easily accessible to the mind, and be applicable with the sureness and constancy of a reflex. "You must not separate yourself from these general principles; don't sleep, eat, drink, or converse with other men without them."<sup>25</sup> It is this vigilance of the spirit which lets us apply the fundamental rule to each of life's particular situations, and always to do what we do "appropriately."<sup>26</sup> We could also define this attitude as "concentration on the present moment":<sup>27</sup>

Everywhere and at all times, it is up to you to rejoice piously at what is occurring *at the present moment*, to conduct yourself with justice towards the people who are *present here and now*, and to apply rules of discernment to your *present representations*, so that nothing slips in that is not objective.<sup>28</sup>

Attention to the present moment is, in a sense, the key to spiritual exercises. It frees us from the passions, which are always caused by the past or the

future<sup>29</sup> – two areas which do *not* depend on us. By encouraging concentration on the minuscule present moment, which, in its exiguity, is always bearable and controllable,<sup>30</sup> attention increases our vigilance. Finally, attention to the present moment allows us to accede to cosmic consciousness, by making us attentive to the infinite value of each instant,<sup>31</sup> and causing us to accept each moment of existence from the viewpoint of the universal law of the *cosmos*.

Attention (*prosoche*) allows us to respond immediately to events, as if they were questions asked of us all of a sudden.<sup>32</sup> In order for this to be possible, we must always have the fundamental principles “at hand” (*procheiron*).<sup>33</sup> We are to steep ourselves in the rule of life (*kanon*),<sup>34</sup> by mentally applying it to all life’s possible different situations, just as we assimilate a grammatical or mathematical rule through practice, by applying it to individual cases. In this case, however, we are not dealing with mere knowledge, but with the transformation of our personality.

We must also associate our imagination and affectivity with the training of our thought. Here, we must bring into play all the psychagogic techniques and rhetorical methods of amplification.<sup>35</sup> We must formulate the rule of life to ourselves in the most striking and concrete way. We must keep life’s events “before our eyes,”<sup>36</sup> and see them in the light of the fundamental rule. This is known as the exercise of memorization (*mneme*)<sup>37</sup> and meditation (*melete*)<sup>38</sup> on the rule of life.

The exercise of meditation<sup>39</sup> allows us to be ready at the moment when an unexpected – and perhaps dramatic – circumstance occurs. In the exercise called *praemeditatio malorum*,<sup>40</sup> we are to represent to ourselves poverty, suffering, and death. We must confront life’s difficulties face to face, remembering that they are not evils, since they do not depend on us. This is why we must engrave striking maxims in our memory,<sup>41</sup> so that, when the time comes, they can help us accept such events, which are, after all, part of the course of nature; we will thus have these maxims and sentences “at hand.”<sup>42</sup> What we need are persuasive formulae or arguments (*epilogismoi*),<sup>43</sup> which we can repeat to ourselves in difficult circumstances, so as to check movements of fear, anger, or sadness.

First thing in the morning, we should go over in advance what we have to do during the course of the day, and decide on the principles which will guide and inspire our actions.<sup>44</sup> In the evening, we should examine ourselves again, so as to be aware of the faults we have committed or the progress we have made.<sup>45</sup> We should also examine our dreams.<sup>46</sup>

As we can see, the exercise of meditation is an attempt to control inner discourse, in an effort to render it coherent. The goal is to arrange it around a simple, universal principle: the distinction between what does and does not depend on us, or between freedom and nature. Whoever wishes to make progress strives, by means of dialogue with himself<sup>47</sup> or with others,<sup>48</sup> as well as by writing,<sup>49</sup> to “carry on his reflections in due order”<sup>50</sup> and finally to arrive

at a complete transformation of his representation of the world, his inner climate, and his outer behavior. These methods testify to a deep knowledge of the therapeutic powers of the world.<sup>51</sup>

The exercise of meditation and memorization requires nourishment. This is where the more specifically intellectual exercises, as enumerated by Philo, come in: reading, listening, research, and investigation. It is a relatively simple matter to provide food for meditation: one could read the sayings of the poets and philosophers, for instance, or the *apophthegmata*.<sup>52</sup> "Reading," however, could also include the explanation of specifically philosophical texts, works written by teachers in philosophical schools. Such texts could be read or heard within the framework of the philosophical instruction given by a professor.<sup>53</sup> Fortified by such instruction, the disciple would be able to study with precision the entire speculative edifice which sustained and justified the fundamental rule, as well as all the physical and logical research of which this rule was the summary.<sup>54</sup> "Research" and "investigation" were the result of putting instruction into practice. For example, we are to get used to defining objects and events from a physical point of view, that is, we must picture them as they are when situated within the cosmic Whole.<sup>55</sup> Alternatively, we can divide or dissect events in order to recognize the elements into which they can be reduced.<sup>56</sup>

Finally, we come to the practical exercises, intended to create habits. Some of these are very much "interior," and very close to the thought exercises we have just discussed. "Indifference to indifferent things," for example, was nothing other than the application of the fundamental rule.<sup>57</sup> Other exercises, such as self-mastery and fulfilling the duties of social life, entailed practical forms of behavior. Here again, we encounter Friedmann's themes: "Try to get rid of your own passions, vanities, and the itch for talk about your own name . . . Avoid backbiting. Get rid of pity and hatred. Love all free human beings."

There are a large number of treatises relating to these exercises in Plutarch: *On Restraining Anger*, *On Peace of Mind*, *On Brotherly Love*, *On the Love of Children*, *On Garrulity*, *On the Love of Wealth*, *On False Shame*, *On Envy and Hatred*. Seneca also composed works of the same genre: *On Anger*, *On Benefits*, *On Peace of Mind*, *On Leisure*. In this kind of exercise, one very simple principle is always recommended: begin practicing on easier things, so as gradually to acquire a stable, solid habit.<sup>58</sup>

For the Stoic, then, doing philosophy meant practicing how to "live": that is, how to live freely and consciously. Consciously, in that we pass beyond the limits of individuality, to recognize ourselves as a part of the reason-animated *cosmos*. Freely, in that we give up desiring that which does not depend on us and is beyond our control, so as to attach ourselves only to what depends on us: actions which are just and in conformity with reason.

It is easy to understand that a philosophy like Stoicism, which requires vigilance, energy, and psychic tension, should consist essentially in spiritual

exercises. But it will perhaps come as a surprise to learn than Epicureanism, usually considered the philosophy of pleasure, gives just as prominent a place as Stoicism to precise practices which are nothing other than spiritual exercises. The reason for this is that, for Epicurus just as much as for the Stoics, philosophy is a therapeutics: "We must concern ourselves with the healing of our own lives."<sup>59</sup> In this context, healing consists in bringing one's soul back from the worries of life to the simple joy of existing. People's unhappiness, for the Epicureans, comes from the fact that they are afraid of things which are not to be feared, and desire things which it is not necessary to desire, and which are beyond their control. Consequently, their life is consumed in worries over unjustified fears and unsatisfied desires. As a result, they are deprived of the only genuine pleasure there is: the pleasure of existing. This is why Epicurean physics can liberate us from fear: it can show us that the gods have no effect on the progress of the world and that death, being complete dissolution, is not a part of life.<sup>60</sup> Epicurean ethics: Epicurean, as deliverance from desires can deliver us from our insatiable desires, by distinguishing between desires which are both natural and necessary, desires which are natural but not necessary, and desires which are neither natural nor necessary. It is enough to satisfy the first category of desires, and give up the last – and eventually the second as well – in order to ensure the absence of worries,<sup>61</sup> and to reveal the sheer joy of existing: "The cries of the flesh are: 'Not to be hungry', 'not to be thirsty', 'not to be cold'. For if one enjoys the possession of this, and the hope of continuing to possess it, he might rival even Zeus in happiness."<sup>62</sup> This is the source of the feeling of gratitude, which one would hardly have expected, which illuminates what one might call Epicurean piety towards all things: "Thanks be to blessed Nature, that she has made what is necessary easy to obtain, and what is not easy unnecessary."<sup>63</sup>

Spiritual exercises are required for the healing of the soul. Like the Stoics, the Epicureans advise us to meditate upon and assimilate, "day and night," brief aphorisms or summaries which will allow us to keep the fundamental dogmas "at hand."<sup>64</sup> For instance, there is the well-known *tetrapharmakos*, or four-fold healing formula: "God presents no fears, death no worries. And while good is readily attainable, evil is readily endurable."<sup>65</sup> The abundance of collections of Epicurean aphorisms is a response to the demands of the spiritual exercise of meditation.<sup>66</sup> As with the Stoics, however, the study of the dogmatic treatises of the school's great founders was also an exercise intended to provide material for meditation,<sup>67</sup> so as more thoroughly to impregnate the soul with the fundamental intuitions of Epicureanism.

The study of physics is a particularly important spiritual exercise: "we should not think that any other end is served by knowledge of celestial phenomena . . . than freedom from disturbance and firm confidence, just as in the other fields of study."<sup>68</sup> Contemplation of the physical world and

imagination of the infinite are important elements of Epicurean physics. Both can bring about a complete change in our way of looking at things. The closed universe is infinitely dilated, and we derive from this spectacle a unique spiritual pleasure:

the walls of the world open out, I see action going on throughout the whole void, . . . Thereupon from all these things a sort of divine delight gets hold upon me and a shuddering, because nature thus by your power (i.e. Epicurus') has been so manifestly laid open and unveiled in every part.<sup>69</sup>

Meditation, however, be it simple or erudite, is not the only Epicurean spiritual exercise. To cure the soul, it is not necessary, as the Stoics would have it, to train it to stretch itself tight, but rather to train it to relax. Instead of picturing misfortunes in advance, so as to be prepared to bear them, we must rather, say the Epicureans, detach our thought from the vision of painful things, and fix our eyes on pleasurable ones. We are to relive memories of past pleasures, and enjoy the pleasures of the present, recognizing how intense and agreeable these present pleasures are.<sup>70</sup> We have here a quite distinctive spiritual exercise, different from the constant vigilance of the Stoic, with his constant readiness to safeguard his moral liberty at each instant. Instead, Epicureanism preaches the deliberate, continually renewed choice of relaxation and serenity, combined with a profound gratitude<sup>71</sup> toward nature and life,<sup>72</sup> which constantly offer us joy and pleasure, if only we know how to find them.

By the same token, the spiritual exercise of trying to live in the present moment is very different for Stoics and Epicureans. For the former, it means mental tension and constant wakefulness of the moral conscience; for the latter, it is, as we have seen, an invitation to relaxation and serenity. Worry, which tears us in the direction of the future, hides from us the incomparable value of the simple fact of existing: "We are born once, and cannot be born twice, but for all time must be no more. But you, who are not master of tomorrow, postpone your happiness: life is wasted in procrastination and each one of us dies overwhelmed with cares."<sup>73</sup> This is the doctrine contained in Horace's famous saying: *carpe diem*.

Life ebbs as I speak:  
so seize each day, and grant the next no credit.<sup>74</sup>

For the Epicureans, in the last analysis, pleasure is a spiritual exercise. Not pleasure in the form of mere sensual gratification, but the intellectual pleasure derived from contemplating nature, the thought of pleasures past and present, and lastly the pleasure of friendship. In Epicurean communities, friendship<sup>75</sup>

also had its spiritual exercises, carried out in a joyous, relaxed atmosphere. These include the public confession of one's faults;<sup>76</sup> mutual correction, carried out in a fraternal spirit; and examining one's conscience.<sup>77</sup> Above all, friendship itself was, as it were, the spiritual exercise *par excellence*: "Each person was to tend towards creating the atmosphere in which hearts could flourish. The main goal was to be happy, and mutual affection and the confidence with which they relied upon each other contributed more than anything else to this happiness."<sup>78</sup>

## 2 Learning to Dialogue

The practice of spiritual exercises is likely to be rooted in traditions going back to immemorial times.<sup>79</sup> It is, however, the figure of Socrates that causes them to emerge into Western consciousness, for this figure was, and has remained, the living call to awaken our moral consciousness.<sup>80</sup> We ought not to forget that this call sounded forth within a specific form: that of dialogue.

In the "Socratic"<sup>81</sup> dialogue, the question truly at stake is not *what* is being talked about, but *who* is doing the talking.

anyone who is close to Socrates and enters into conversation with him is liable to be drawn into an argument, and whatever subject he may start, he will be continually carried round and round by him, until at last he finds that he has to give an account both of his present and past life, and when he is once entangled, Socrates will not let him go until he has completely and thoroughly sifted him . . . And I think there is no harm in being reminded of any wrong thing which we are, or have been, doing; he who does not run away from criticism will be sure to take more heed of his afterlife.<sup>82</sup>

In a "Socratic" dialogue, Socrates' interlocutor does not learn anything, and Socrates has no intention of teaching him anything. He repeats, moreover, to all who are willing to listen, that the only thing he knows is that he does not know anything.<sup>83</sup> Yet, like an indefatigable horsefly,<sup>84</sup> Socrates harassed his interlocutors with questions which put *themselves* into question, forcing them to pay attention to and take care of themselves.<sup>85</sup>

My very good friend, you are an Athenian, and belong to a city which is the greatest and most famous in the world for its wisdom and strength. Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honour, and give no attention or thought to truth [*aletheia*] or thought [*phronesis*] or the perfection of your soul [*psyche*]?<sup>86</sup>