

Freedom in the Third Age? – Biographical Considerations for over 50

How do the life phases after 63 correlate to the entire biography?
What possibilities and tasks could arise for the 'years of freedom'?

The Third and Fourth Age

It was Dr Gudrun Burkhard who, with her book 'Freedom of the Third Age', introduced the term 'third age' into Biography Work. With this she followed up the research results of the English sociologist Peter Laslett. He describes four life-ages:

' ...

1st age: age of socialisation

2nd age: age of family and professional duties

3rd age: age of personal achievement and fulfilment

4th age: age of dependency and infirmity. ...'

More precisely, Peter Laslett describes the third and fourth ages as follows:

"The phase of life, referred to as the third age, is a time in which the 'young elderly' ... after their time of active family and professional life, are commonly in possession of plenty of time, health and ... sufficient ... resources to live their life according to their preferences. ...

The fourth age, in contrast, marks the life phase in which strength and health dwindle and demand a completion of the life's journey; the largest part of resources are being depleted for coping with everyday life, and the old men and women are dependent on the solidarity of others. ..."

(*Interpreting the Demographic Changes*, Peter Laslett, Oxford 1997)

(<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1692128/pdf/9460064.pdf>)

In contrast to this modern sociological interpretation, let us consider the Hindu tradition which also outlines four life phases:

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|--|---------------------------------|--------------|
| 1 st Up to 20/25 years of age | Scholar phase | Brahmacharya |
| The scholar learns about worldly and spiritual knowledge. Acquisition of knowledge and life management skills. | | |
| 2 nd 20-60 years of age | Householder phase | Garhasthya |
| Engaged in the service of family and society. Work, starting a family, having children. | | |
| 3 rd 50-75 years of age | Retirement | Vanaprasthya |
| Literally: Living in the forest. The person steadily retreats from professional and family life. | | |
| 4 th After 70 years of age | Turning away from external life | Sannyasa |
| Surrendering of all connections to the world. To live a meditative life in an ashram. To become a wise teacher. | | |
| (See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashrama_(stage)) | | |

While one can see similarities in the first three phases, the fourth phase is worlds apart in the Western and Eastern interpretations. The Western focusses on the withering whilst the Eastern emphasises letting go as a step towards spiritualization.

Self-realisation during 'restless-retirement'

Often when talking with a 'young elderly', one experiences the sense of freedom Gudrun Burkhard speaks of, a sense of independence and an urge for self-realisation. Retirement almost becomes non-retirement or restless-retirement. There is so much to be accomplished. The days and weeks are filled with activities. Courses are undertaken and hobbies are nurtured, trips are planned and completed. Children, parents and friends are visited. When one wants to make a time to see one of the 'young elderly', their calendar is often as full as that of a person in full employment. Finally, they have the time to do what they always wanted to do and so the calendar is filled up. One wants to live a self-determined life, no one may meddle and one would prefer this state to last forever. We know the tune ... 'forever young' ...

Freedom to create

If one asks people between the ages of 60-70 about their future plans, one often receives the following answers: 'We'll keep going as we are for now'. 'We'll solve problems as they arise'. Even if things aren't going quite as well anymore, I often experience the tendency to 'keep going' and to not give up on the acquired lifestyle, during my conversations and consultations with them. If then, problems which can't be ignored any longer, occur they often don't have the strength left to implement necessary change. We may derive from this, that the sense of freedom experienced during the third age, apart from being a time of self-realisation, could also be a time where active non pressured preparation for a life one wants to live when strength fails can be undertaken. If such plans are not made and worked upon pro-actively, then it follows that it will be either circumstances or relatives who take over this design and planning. If one wants to make plans for adapting to this change oneself, then one needs to spend time, strength and creativity. Sayings such as: 'there is lots of time', 'we'll think about that when the time comes', 'we'll just keep on going for now', I experience increasingly as 'head in the sand' phrases. From the mid-fifties onwards, the following questions belong to biography work: 'How do I want to live during my old age?' 'Which steps do I need to take to make this happen?' 'How do I realise this?' 'What is shelved tagged with: I will do this ...when...'

Freedom to look back on our life

Apart from this view of the future, the free years also offer an opportunity to look back on one's biography. This provides an overview of one's life and you find meaning even in things which initially, if left unconsidered, were felt to be merely a chain of events. Meaning is found and connections are seen if we pause for a moment as we look back. The methods used in biography work and working in small groups provide support for the individual review, helping one to gain a better understanding of one's own life.

It is interesting to note that the review, looking back on one's life, also has an aspect that relates to the future. We know from re-reported near-death experiences that these frequently include the development of a panorama, an overview of life. Spiritual schools say that on transition to after-death consciousness we see our own life in images and how it is evaluated. The seeds for a future incarnation arise from this review.

Within this context, a conscious review pre-empts something that has previously in human development been part of the unconscious spiritualisation process which we call death. I will prospectively dare to make the following comparison: As Psychology or in more general terms self-reflective-work over the past 100 years, has widened our consciousness into the areas of sleep and dreams, active life review may widen our consciousness in the area of life after death and before birth. This would be a step towards the continuity of consciousness predicted to arise in human kind by schools of spiritual development.

Even if a person finds this esoteric view quite unfamiliar, a conscious life review makes sense from the perspective of health, as meaningful experiencing and processing of one's own biography builds resilience and therefore contributes to health ('Salutogenesis', Aaron Antonovsky, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salutogenesis>).

Some people who come for biographical consultations know of difficult situations in their life and prefer not to look back. Biography work does not have to mean recalling everything in detail or stirring up the mud at the bottom. It is perfectly possible to reflect on life from specific points of view. What were the golden moments in my life? What has helped me to develop the positive aspects of myself further? Biographies may be considered from different angles. I can produce a work, relationships, reading, holiday or ill-health biography, letting only one aspect of my biography hologram come to awareness.

Life Phases and 'Mirrorings'

Observations on the life phases from the 57th year onwards

According to Lievegoed (*Phases – Crisis and Development in the Individual*, Rudolf Steiner Press, London, 1979), biography work applies a model of developmental phases, which always connects seven sequential years into one developmental phase (see diagram). Phenomenological observations and spir-

itual science theories lead us to find interconnections and 'mirrorings' between specific phases. Lievegoed's model contains nine life phases, each made up of seven years, and therefore relates to the life time from birth to 63 years of age. Each phase is influenced by the qualities of a particular planet. Today, this **Nine Life Phases Model** is proving less and less satisfactory as life does not end at 63. If we speak of the 3rd age as this article proposes, then this time supersedes that age of 63. Gudrun Burkhard proposed an expansion into three further phases and has assigned them the following trans-Saturnian Planets: Uranus, Neptune and Pluto (Gudrun Burkhard: *The Freedom of the Third Age*, Freies Geistesleben, 1999).

In this context, we must clarify how the corresponding 'mirrorings' might be assigned. Following observations from my biographical consultation practice, I have begun to create the following three categories for the biographies of the third age:

1. Biographies which don't seem to have a continuous extension past the 8th, 9th or 10th phase. A new element is introduced and this life phase may be viewed as almost a 'second biography'.
2. Biographies which experienced such a deep life changing event (turning-point) during the 6th or 7th phase, that the only meaningful connections can be made by mirroring around this turning point.
3. Biographies which display strong connections between the 9th and 10th life phase. For these biographies I have begun to work on the extended **Twelve Life Phases Model** as the following diagram demonstrates. This also corresponds with Gudrun Burkhard's depiction.

Nine and Twelve Phases Overview or 'Panorama'

1 st Life phase 1.-7. Years of age Defiance Phase Awakening to the world	Moon	6 th Life phase 36.-42. Years of age Crisis of meaning Routine and/or new beginnings	Sun	9 th Life phase 57.-63. Years of age Mission ... in progress ... fulfilled? Accepting the change	Saturn	10 th Life phase 64.-70. Years of age Fire trials Discard baggage ... clear clutter	Uranus
2 nd Life phase 8.-14. Years of age Learning together Rubicon: End of childhood	Mercury	5 th Life phase 29.-35. Years of age Finding my centre Karmic encounters	Sun	8 th Life phase 50.-56. Years of age Ordering life I can...but I don't have to	Jupiter	11 th Life phase 71.-77. Years of age Water trials Ongoing renewed involvement	Neptune
3 rd Life phase 15.-21. Years of age Outgrowing the family of origin Puberty and Rebellion	Venus	4 th Life phase 22.-28. Years of age Crisis of the talents Exploring new horizons	Sun	7 th Life phase 43.-49. Years of age Midlife crisis 'Leading' my life	Mars	12 th Life phase 78.-84. Years of age Air trials Living the unpredictable	Pluto

Phase Models Nine phases according to B. Lievegoed: Green, orange, blue/ 10th-12th phase purple.

Mirrorings Nine phases: 1-6-9 and 2-5-8 and 3-4-7 Twelve phases: 1-6-9+10 and 2-5-8+11 and 3-4-7+12

Trials as the guiding principle after the mid-fifties

One of the modules I deliver, as part of my 'Biographical training course', has the title 'Trials and Thresholds'. During our seminar work we gained the impression that there are correlations between particular trials and typical life challenges and life-phases or ages. In particular this seemed to be the case for the life phases after the mid-fifties. Aging can be viewed, as the above mentioned Hindu tradition shows, as a time of letting go and spiritualisation, rather than as a withering. On the path to spiritualisation, or **Initiation through Life**, trials may arise which esoteric schools would describe as parts of initiation paths. The following paragraphs will present the connection between the 'Initiation through Life' and the 'Initiation through Ageing'.

In 'The Magic Flute' Mozart depicts the fire, water and air trials as consciousness expanding steps. For Papageno, it is more an expansion of his earthly horizons, whereas for Tamino, it is a process that seeks to transcend what is earthly.

In his book *Knowledge of Higher worlds*, Rudolf Steiner presents the concept of **Initiation through Life**, i.e.: ...' *Those, on the other hand, who already have certain experiences behind them and have in many respects been initiated by life itself, ...*' (GA 010 p.4 EN). In his depictions of these trials he describes different aspects of initiations through life. For instance: *'The trial will thus be easier for those who*

have acquired self-control in their lives before initiation. Those who can follow high principles and ideals, regardless of personal feelings and desires ... **are already and without knowing it initiates in ordinary life.**' (GA 010 p.76 EN).

Fire Trials

Fire trials are about 'burning away' illusions and mirages and replacing them with truthful pictures or imaginations. They are about fare welling dependencies, securities and fond habits. They are about confronting disappointment and loss. Fire trials are experienced as a painful process, but they also contain the possibility to develop self-reliance, courage, steadfastness and the right perspective for the surrounding reality. They are a biographical process and confrontation belonging to the process aging and maturation. They are, for instance, moments when there is a pending move or a change of profession. It is about shedding ballast, about separation from people and objects, about detaching from the past, in order to step into something new.

There are houses where the children's bedrooms are still arranged as such, although the children left home twenty or more years ago and now have children themselves. In the attic are their old toys and in the shed are their scooters and bikes. One day, the ever aging inhabitants will not have the strength to separate themselves from these items. And once they have left or died a radical clean out takes place. This is an instance where the fire trial, the shedding of ballast and the separation of fond memorabilia has been missed.

Fire Trials and the Planet Uranus (♅) – Light, new Insights – Imagination – Mission

In ideal circumstances, Uranus mediates 'spiritual vision'. Imagination, seldom controlled, rather, imaginary pictures appearing arbitrarily yet consciously, as if cognitively recognising. Uranus leads to spiritual heights and is related to light and air. It has a differentiating effect. – If the mediated imaginations are not recognised, the effect becomes physical. Then, Uranus brings abruptness, unpredictability, radicalism and upheaval. These have an external clearing effect and test our flexibility and decision making ability. Relocation, and wanting or needing to burn the bridges behind us are typical Uranus themes. ... (Characterisations following Gisela Gorrissen: Astrology from an Anthroposophical Perspective, p. 65 DE).

In regards to fire trials the following becomes apparent: Imaginations, in other words pictures of truth, can appear when illusions have been burnt and therefore clear sensory and supernatural perception become possible.

Water Trials

Water trials are moments when one loses the ground under one's feet, when usual stability has been lost, and when that what was taken for granted does not apply anymore. When walking, it would be the moment when we have one foot on the ground, another in the air, our bodyweight is forward and a backwards step is no longer possible. In order to keep moving forwards, we need to trust that the foot that is in the air will land on the ground.

When external surroundings don't hold or orientate us any longer, we have to find self-orientation inwardly. When we are in the water and lose the ground under our feet, it is helpful not to panic, rather we need to gain self-control and to trust that the water will carry us and that it is possible to swim to new shores.

The same applies for biographical situations which ask us to engage with uncharted territory without panic and prejudice. Panic may arise because such situations are often experienced as a loss of control. As we age, the strength to control and create our outer circumstances diminishes. The result may be, that we lose our orientation as we lose control.

From a biographical point of view, the relocation from the 'familiar four walls' to another home might be seen as a water trial. As we move, the support the familiar surrounding offered, is lost. Re-orientation and adjusting to the new circumstances, a certain going with the flow are now asked for. However, it is also possible that we give up and let go totally – or that we rebel and do not face the situation and

as a result experience the loss of orientation.

When travelling, one sometimes, on awakening, experiences moments of disorientation. Imagine your reaction when on awakening in unfamiliar surroundings you also didn't know who you were? Have you tried, while on holidays, to get out of bed on the wrong side, or you went to the bathroom in your usual direction and it wasn't there.

For good, and often financial reasons, the step to leave our familiar walls is often delayed. 'We'll do that when there are no other options.' From a biographical point of view, it is important to take this step consciously, when there is still an overflow of strength and the water trial is overcome in a self-directed way.

Water Trials and the Planet (Ψ) Neptune – Water, Constant Change – Inspiration

Neptune leads into spiritual breadth, and is related to water (ether, rhythm, patterns) and behaves in a collectivising manner. Neptune seeks spiritual connectedness amongst humans. Neptune works with strength of inspiration into the central part of the human, into the sensitivity and feelings. Imagination is like 'spiritual listening'. Physically, Neptune has a softening and dispersing effect. He brings escape, disintegration of relationships; illusions, daydreams and fallacies are dissolved. It asks of us to dare to enter the flow with trust and to mistrust and question the clinging to security and objects. ... (Characterisations following Gisela Gorrissen: Astrology from an Anthroposophical Perspective, p. 66 DE).

Air Trials

Air trials happen out of the blue. They cannot be foreseen and they prompt us to act with presence of mind, according to our abilities and in tune with the situation.

As we age, there are times when it is no longer possible to plan for the next day. Older people begin to live from day to day, which does not mean that they live for the moment or without a plan. However, whether one is able to manage a shopping expedition the next day, can only be decided the next morning, when it is apparent whether enough physical and mental strength are present.

Life becomes an air trial, decisions on what is – or is not – possible, are made moment by moment. This is a challenging situation for the social surroundings, which rely on planning, and often leads to tension and resignation on both sides.

Example: *An older couple had joyfully planned a trip to visit relatives, but in the moment when the train pulled into the station, it became clear that they could not manage this trip. A few days later, they attempted the visit again and managed. If either side had given up, the second attempt would never have taken place.*

Air Trials and the Planet Pluto (♃) – Dissolution of Matter, Nuclear Fission –

Intuition

Pluto leads to spiritual depths and brings the power of intuition. This power seems to be not in our control, one either has it or one does not; it cannot be called up and often appears in the most surprising moments. An intuition is like 'spiritual smelling' – it is the nose for acting with presence of mind; it creates a direct connection between recognition and action. Pluto allows, that what is bubbling in the soul's depths, to arise, with the aim to come to fruition. Pluto seeks complexity and demands flexibility. If we don't fathom ourselves and our environment in all depth, Pluto corrects us externally and lets us experience situations which are as if turned upside down, so that we are forced into new actions and thinking. Pluto can catch us unawares from behind. ... (Characterisations following Gisela Gorrissen: Astrology from an Anthroposophical Point of View, p.67 DE).

Spiritualisation – Becoming and Passing

In the above mentioned book *Knowledge of Higher Worlds*, Rudolf Steiner introduces self-developmental exercise, which is about observing the processes of becoming and passing, which are always

present simultaneously. One of the possible outcomes doing the exercise is that we don't experience passing as negative, as withering and dying, but instead as transformation and spiritualisation. This reconnects with the conclusion of the contrasting interpretations, concerning the fourth age from both Eastern and Western points of view, as the Western interpretation is one of 'withering', whereas the Eastern interpretation sees it more as a releasing and as a step towards spiritualisation.

Following the growing and withering of plants we may compare four developmental stages:

1. Phase: Growth, Germination, and Leaf Formation

Germination, joining with the earth, creating leaves. Connecting with the forces of the environment, growing with and through the forces of nature.

2. Phase: Budding and Flowering

Forming buds and when flowering, displaying the most intense expression of self. Becoming an individual, emanating individual forces into the outer world. Giving to the world, experiencing the world and gathering world experience.

3. Phase: Fruiting, Fertilisation and Ripening

Maturation, resulting from self and world experience. Processing experiences and passing fruits on to the world.

4. Phase: Withering, Consolidating, Seeding and Creating towards the Future

The entire potential of the plant, including the fruit formation, concentrates in the seed formation. The seed contains the essence, the future potential, to create a new plant of the same kind, when the conditions are appropriate.

Following this depiction, there might be a further freedom of the third age, not only the one gained as already depicted through conscious review and evaluation of life, but namely to **bring more consciousness into the life after death** and life before birth. Following this train of thought one could try, through activities engaged in during the third and fourth age, to co-create the spiritual-preparation for the next incarnation. One could decide not to leave this preparation to the destiny forming forces alone, but to contribute with self-awareness to form one's own destiny.

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