

Embodied Karma Research
From behind bars to the Last Supper

Mike Chase

I work in a democratic therapeutic community prison, HMP Grendon. Over the past nine years, I've been working with violent male offenders as a psychodrama psychotherapist and therapy manager, helping to reduce the rate of re-offending and support their integration back into society. As a psychotherapist, we are taught that it is the events of our childhood that affect our thoughts, feelings and behaviours; however, I have always questioned that idea without looking at the impact of our karma from past lives. I have always questioned the validity of that idea, which does not take into account the impact of our karma from past lives.

Throughout my life, my understanding of karma has been based on conceptual and theoretical understandings. However, having been immersed in rigorous research exercises inspired by Rudolf Steiner's indications for a number of years my felt experience for the truth of these ideas has begun to emerge. Developing this more living experience of what behaviours, thoughts and feelings may have arisen from childhood or from past incarnations, the question arose: how can I redeem my past actions, and learn their lessons for the future?

Answers began to arise in meditation, along with insights about my relationships with the prisoners and staff I was working with, about our karma, and the question of what some of us might have to do with each other. This led to the deeper question of how to create less chaos, pain and misunderstanding in the world and to take responsibility for our often complex lives?

Some years ago a colleague put in a grievance about the way I had managed her practice on the wing. While managing the therapy with a multi disciplinary team of sixteen staff on a wing with twenty men with learning disabilities, I had got into a tangle with this colleague whose practice was not up to scratch. In the process of managing her misdemeanours something seemed to get triggered for her, and she took out a grievance against me. We undertook mediation which, in all intense and purposes went well. However, when she asked me for a written apology I declined and told her I was not willing to do so as it had felt clear to me that we had co-created this conflict together.

Seeing her disappointment in my decision, I went home that evening and undertook Steiner's four-day karma exercise focusing on our conflict. Four days later I woke up with a shocking imagination: I had done her a terrible wrong, thousands of years ago, in a foreign land. Getting over the shock and shame, I decided to apologise, not only for the manner in which I had managed her but for something much deeper, further back in time, and much darker. I felt able to take another step in our relationship and wrote her a card apologising for the way I had made her feel, and gave it to her the next day. To my surprise she took it with a smile, the first genuine smile I had seen on her face; our relationship improved considerably over the next year.

In order to research karma it became evident that I had to find a place within myself which was gentle, open and un-expectant, in the hope that the beings of the spiritual world could come towards me and reveal – if I was ready – what it is that lies behind some of the complex relationships in my life. The process of moving beyond the desires and passions of my astral body and coming into an awakening of cognitive imaginations, inspirations and sometimes intuitions, was sometimes, to my surprise, like a flash of lightening; at other times, however, it was very slow and demanding patience which I often struggled to maintain.

The difficulty I was finding with doing karma research was that some of what was being revealed to me were aspects of my double, parts of myself which I would rather run away from rather than face the demons in my soul. The more I began to strengthen my Self to face these beasts arising in hideous animal forms, the less I needed to run away and hide from myself in shame. Going further into understanding and facing the darkness began to give me more courage to take on what this life was asking of me, and enabled me to move into more light-filled experiences.

As I started to get images of different incarnations spanning thousands of years, rich and challenging and insightful as they were, I became overwhelmed, struggling to keep track of what was arising. I decided to document my experiences by making masks of each of the personalities from different incarnations. The masks were quite primitive at first, different to any of the masks I had made in the past. Having made many hundreds of masks over many years for personal and professional use, these new masks were taking me to a very personal place within my karmic past, not for the stage, classroom or prison therapy room. As I began to explore these masks a friend, Jostein Saether, told me about a quote by Rudolf Steiner which helped contextualise what was arising in my research.

Rudolf Steiner describes how in pre-Christian antiquity there were those initiated into the spiritual world, in whom Christ was already fervently awakened. This was Christ in an etheric form, not yet incarnated into the physical. One of the pictures that arose for the initiates of those times was that, while lying asleep for three and a half days, they became surrounded by twelve human figures with whom they sat around a table. These twelve figures were the bodies of personalities which the initiate had lived through during different epochs of human development. In the cosmic ether twelve personalities from different incarnations sat around the initiate, the 'host', the 13th, and they broke bread together. This was a preview of Christ as the 13th in the middle surrounded by six disciples on either side, archetypal constellation of the spiritual development of each of us as we strive towards awakening the Consciousness-Soul and eventually the Spirit-Self.

Far from being an initiate, this image has given me courage to situate my karma masks in a growing image of my past. In this article, as I prepare for my retirement from the prison service, I wanted to share a fragment of this research, to invite a conversation with those who might be interested in sharing their karma research in light of the spirit. It is now one hundred years after Rudolf Steiner brought his lecture series *Karmic Relationships*, and it feels to me that we need to be able to have a more open discourse about our personal heartfelt experiences.