

Quarterly Transitions in Astrology

by Bill Herbst

*Version 1.3 (posted on 18 October 2022)
© 2022 by the author, all rights reserved*

This commentary is about the four primary transitions that occur in every astrological cycle. All transitions within cycles are determined by dividing the whole cycle by various fractions, the most common of which are $1/2$, $1/3$, $1/4$, $1/6$, $1/8$ (or $3/8$), and $1/12$. Other fractions are also used, but less commonly. $1/5$, $1/7$, and $1/9$ are divisions of the circle that are considered “esoteric,” since they’re more occult and perhaps less practical in their symbolic implications.

Translated from fractions into degree arcs, we get various points within every cycle that are considered particularly potent or “active” energetically. Those points are at 0° (conjunction), every 30° (as in the zodiac), 60° (sextile), 90° (square), 120° (trine), 180° (opposition). In a cycle moving through time, these points are called “transits. In a natal chart, they are called “aspects.”

The reason for the difference in jargon is that astrology works in two dimensions — out of time and in time. The “out of time” dimension is used to describe the overall meaning of anything. Everything has a chart for its emergence into the material world, the time-space moment of autonomy in existence. For people, these maps are called “natal” or “birth” charts. They are “out of time” in that they apply generally to the entire life as whole. The “in time” dimension involves watching heavenly movement over the passage of time, mainly through cycles. With people and their lives, astrologers track the moving cycles and derive their custom-tailored individual meanings through the natal chart to get a sense of the unfolding life journey. Permanence and change are intertwined, as are generic, more universal meanings and unique, custom-tailored individuality.

Of all these divisions of the circle (or cycle), the ones I pay the most attention to are the quarterly transitions that occur within a given cycle at the conjunction or beginning (at 0°), the $1/4$ mark (at 90°), the halfway point (at 180°), and the $3/4$ mark (at 270°). These four points define quarterly phases of a cycle: New phase, First Quarter (actually second, but the jargon is First), Full phase, and Last Quarter.

Most people become familiar with these phases through the Moon’s monthly cycle with Sun, from the dark of the Moon through full and back again. In that cycle, each of the four quarterly phases take about seven days. What many people don’t know, however, is that this same scheme of four quarters applies to every interplanetary cycle.

Of all the different cycles that astrologers use in personal astrology, my favorites are Saturn cycles. Why? Because I live in a culture (America) that is obsessed with "freedom," yet there can be no freedom without responsibility, and that's what Saturn cycles are all about — accepting responsibility for our lives. Another reason I like Saturn cycles is that they form the structure — the skeleton or backbone — for the human psyche and our individual lives. They are about the necessities of physical life in bodies on the earth, as part of a species or kinship herd. In other words, they are both individually psychological (having to do with our character and personal maturity) and socially relevant (having to do with our position in the world through duty, achievement, and status).

Saturn cycles are roughly analogous to monthly lunar cycles. In numerical terms, all Moon cycles are 29 days long, with four quarters of seven days each. The most archetypal Moon cycle is the soli-lunar cycle, with its dark of the Moon beginning in each month, followed seven days later by the first-quarter waxing half Moon, then the full Moon, and finally the last-quarter waning reversed half Moon. This plays out visually in the heavens. We can literally see each phase. Saturn cycles do the same thing, but are measured in years rather than days, and without the stunning visuals. Every Saturn cycle is 29 years long, with four quarters of seven years each.

If you ask people who know a little more than mere Sun sign astrology about Saturn cycles, they will almost always refer to the Saturn Return at age 29. That's a very significant event in what's technically called the "Saturn-Saturn" cycle. What those same people often don't know, however, are two other important factors. The first is that there are also Saturn Returns at age 58 and again at age 87, and the second is that the one Saturn cycle they've heard of is only one of many different Saturn cycles in everyone's personal astrology.

See, Saturn has a cycle with every fixed point in the natal chart — planets, angles, nodes, etc. And each of the many Saturn cycles has its own specific meaning based on that fixed point. What all Saturn cycles are about is dealing with some symbolic element that's a factor in real life. Each Saturn cycle reveals the complexities and schedules of our accepting responsibility for the many parts of our lives by recognizing our limitations, learning patience, bearing weight, and coming to understand how we need to alter our strategies and tactics at certain points in time to achieve our goals and fulfill our intentions.

For instance, the Saturn-Sun cycle is arguably the most important cycle in the entire lexicon of personal astrology. That's what I call the "life-purpose cycle," where we gradually give form and substance to whatever is most meaningful to us. Then there's the Saturn-Moon cycle, which is about taking care of our emotional needs for security, safety, and social comfort. Basically, Saturn has a cycle with every planetary symbol in the chart — Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, and so on, as well as with certain other points (angles, nodes, asteroids, whatever). Each of these Saturn cycles is about working with some part of ourselves in the physical world of real life, with all its obstacles, difficulties, disappointments, setbacks, and (we hope) gradual achievements and eventual

successes. But even if we don't always succeed, Saturn is still the great teacher about real life and our time in bodies on the earth. It's about learning to live within our limits.

The Saturn-Saturn cycle begins at birth for everyone and changes quarterly phases at the same chronological age— birth, age 7, 14-15, 21-22, 29, 36, 43-44, 51, etc. This means that when you have your first Saturn Return at age 29, everyone in your high school graduating class is going through theirs as well. While each Saturn-Saturn cycle has a generic meaning that applies to all the people who are the same age as you — whether in childhood, adulthood, or old age — it also has a custom-tailored meaning derived from your particular chart. One person's Saturn-Saturn cycle may be about learning how to effectively give love or fulfill the ambition to lead, while another person's may be about learning to effectively communicate or gain personal value (self-worth, money, property, etc.). That said, if you were born the same year as another person, you will go through each of the phase changes in the Saturn-Saturn cycle at roughly the same time.

By contrast, all the other many Saturn cycles do not activate at birth, but at some point later, somewhere between birth and age 29. This means that most Saturn cycles are not chronological. For instance, your personal Saturn-Sun cycle doesn't change phase at the same age as most other people's. Two individuals who are both 44 years old are unlikely to be in the same phase of that cycle.

So, when I look at a natal chart seeking to understand how that person's journey through life is shaped, I try to get some sense of how the different Saturn schedules are naturally programmed. Which cycles started earlier, which ones later, and where are they at any given time?

OK. All that is background. The rest of this commentary describes what each phase of a cycle means (especially a Saturn cycle) and how the transits that mark the quarterly phase changes (every seven years in the case of Saturn cycles) feel to us.

New Phase

This is the initial quarter of the cycle, akin to birth, infancy, and early childhood. Something new has begun to take shape, emerging out of our psyches and our circumstances. Our responsibility is to slowly realize what that is, to become aware of it and to embrace it. We need to own and work with whatever is happening (rather disowning or denying and working against it). That's sometimes easier said than done, but it's critical to the eventual fulfillment or success of the cycle.

The transit (the alignment in time where Saturn as a moving body passes over a given natal symbol) is a 10-month period where time stands still. We may or may not be aware of what's beginning, but we will feel the heaviness, intensity, and sense of importance of whatever occurs. In a sense, we experience the whole 29-year cycle that will unfold over the next three decades in very compressed

form during the transit, although we may not realize that this is happening or what that means. What happens during the six years that follows the transit is that we further define our intentions, gradually commit to a goal, and work to remove the inner doubts and fears that hold us back.

The New Phase is the seven-year period of overcoming inertia and getting the ball rolling. It's equivalent to spring, where seeds — either planted by us or pre-existing in the ground of our beings — germinate and begin to grow. It's a vital and vibrant time, even though it may seem slow, halting, or uncertain to us.

First-Quarter Phase

Although it's called "first-quarter," this phase is actually the second quarter of the cycle. (I know, that's weird, but it's just a naming convention.) What began to manifest in our lives during the New Phase has now reached the point where it needs to assertively establish itself into the external world, the outer world of people, society, and real life events that are visible and tangible. To do this, we must move forward to manifest whatever the cycle means. This is most aggressive of the four phases. It's like conquering territory — planting a flag and claiming the ground for oneself. In that process, external resistance must be overcome. Don't take no for an answer.

Paradoxically, the first-quarter transit (where Saturn is 90° ahead of the cycle's natal symbol) is a period of near-total blockage. We get stopped in our tracks by external obstacles that arise, seemingly out of nowhere. We may feel major frustration at this point and believe that we're being overwhelmed and defeated, but that's not true. We're being tested. It's like trial by fire, where metal is tempered to become strong. Even if you think you won't survive, keep fighting.

Time accelerates during the second quarter. Everything that pertains to the meaning of the cycle becomes more urgent and very physical. The pragmatism of real life becomes paramount — doing what is necessary to survive and move forward. This is the seasonal equivalent of summer, where the crops are growing rapidly and need to be tended if we hope for a bountiful harvest later.

Full Phase

The third phase of the cycle marks the end of building something in the world, and the beginning of figuring out how to use what we've built. Up until now, the cycle has been like a project we're creating or working on, something that's almost separate from us. Now we have to stop thinking of the cycle as a project and begin to consider it as both our vehicle and our new identity. Enough going to school as a student or internship as a trainee. Now we have to stand in the world as a true authority and become what we've been studying and learning about. And we have to do that with other people, in a way that shows them our competence, skill, and effectiveness.

The full-phase transit is where Saturn is exactly opposite the cycle's natal planet or other symbolic indicator. It's the halfway point in the cycle. And again, we are

stopped in our tracks. Something is likely to happen that will flummox us, and it will probably involve relationships — either one-to-one with another individual or our social position with many people.

During the seven years of the Full Phase in a Saturn cycle, time gradually slows again. We learn to pace ourselves by using less effort and more negotiating. This is the season equivalent of autumn — the harvest. Time to get the crops in and taken to market. If we planted and tended well, and if circumstances were favorable, we get to enjoy the full reward of a good harvest. If not, then we will suffer the disappointment of what might have been but, for one reason or another, didn't pan out. In other words, we live with the results or consequences of the first half of the cycle. During the latter three years of this phase, we get the chance to fully share our successes or turn our failures to advantage by converting them into helpful teachings to benefit others.

Last-Quarter Phase

The fourth and last phase of the cycle is the time of detachment from what came before. This is the equivalent of winter. We are done with that year's farming. We planted in spring, tended in summer, and harvested in autumn. The results were whatever they were — good, neutral, or lousy. In any case, it's time to let go of our judgments and involvements about who we were through all that. This seven-year period is when we transition out of the existing cycle and gradually clear the decks for the new cycle that will begin the following spring.

It's a time of independence, reflection, and relative freedom (or at least reduced responsibilities). This is the most philosophical of the four phases. Time becomes less urgent, and even less relevant. Achieving or getting things done doesn't matter so much. It's not like a vacation, but more akin to a sabbatical where we can focus on understanding rather than maintaining all our dutiful day-to-day responsibilities. This period is the most natural time for the distillation of experience (whether it was joyful or painful) into wisdom. It is my personal favorite of the four phases within any Saturn cycle, where we get to cut loose of past responsibilities and try more experimental ways of being without taking on burdensome commitments.

Like all the major Saturn transits, the ten-month arc of the last-quarter waning square represents yet another stop sign. This time, however, the stopping is an internal pressure to let go of something that isn't quite over yet, but is no longer vibrant. We may not be able to let go during the transit, but we'll be doing that more and more fully over the six years that follow.

What I've witnessed over my 50 years as a working astrologer in private practice is that almost no one ever truly succeeds with any phase of any Saturn cycle. We are never ready for the next phase when it initially arrives, and everyone is constantly getting whammied by their own lives. Oddly enough, though, that's OK, because life pulls us forward in spite of ourselves.