

The Path through Life

by

Karl Brodersen

Translated by Anniken Mitchell

We are all on a path, every day all through our lives. All of humanity is on a path, from the beginning of time to the present and then further towards an unknown future. We each walk on our own road, yet we all walk the same road, and that is the road of humankind.

The road is an ancient metaphor for the life conditions within which we move. The image indicates a dynamic element, an intentional force in our existence, which leads us from one experience to the next. Sometimes we might have the experience of coming to a standstill, of feeling stuck. However, if we look at the totality of our life, we have certain proof that movement has taken place. This dynamic form is most obvious and energetic in the first phase of life. Later, as adults, we can look for this dynamic element in our own inner being.

Something happens to us every day, the numerous small and the few large events shape us and reshape us, and our insights, feelings, and deeds are slowly transformed. We can search in our memories for the geological layers of our personality. We have left behind faces, changed perspectives and outlooks, moods we now can laugh about, deeds about which we might feel ashamed. It would be too simplistic to say that on this journey we are steadily changing into more perfect beings. We lose the innocence of childhood, the light-heartedness of youth, and we are in danger of becoming a rigid caricature of ourselves, disappointed and bitter with life, living in a state of soul poverty.

When we stop to really examine the movements of our lives, the results may seem bleak. There is a natural growth and expansion of strength and opportunities up to the mid-point in life. Then out of a natural necessity stagnation and decline follow. With more careful observation, however, we can see that, from the first moment, growth and decline go hand-in-hand. Every day something is lost in the life of the child, just as in the old person. We move in the polarity between life and death; the life forces and death forces strike the notes for the existential transitions in our lives.

However, something in us stands “above” this polarity of forces, something eternal, that which we refer to as “I.” This “I” is the same indefinable constant in the perpetual transformational process of life. This “I” is not conditioned to the moment, it lives also in the past and with awareness of the future. The “I” encompasses—consciously, half-consciously and unconsciously—all of life from cradle to grave.

The “I,” which should not be confused with our socially conditioned persona, is our being’s innermost kernel, the most personal in us. Curiously enough, it is this most deeply personal element which is at the same time the transpersonal, commonly human aspect in our being. This “I” can never settle down to some final expression of itself, it is always pushing onward, forcing us further along. Everything we attain in the realms of earthly perfection, happiness or fame, becomes, in the words of Thomas Aquinas, like straw in the eyes of the “I”. The dynamic element in our lives is the obvious, and the experience of the reality and activity of the “I” is possible for everyone. The contemplation of these two realities is the foundation for all religions, for every conscious effort to place oneself in life in a realistic way. The “I” is working in us from the beginning, it raises us from the horizontal to the vertical, and leads our first steps. It is with us in all of life’s situations, but we only slowly become aware of its constant presence. We have to reach a certain maturity to become fully aware of the dramatic mission of our existence.

The “norm” is that at around our twenty-first year, we have some inkling of the activity of the “I” in our life. We start to see more connections, sense the shapes in our life patterns, and distance ourselves from wishes and hopes which lie outside of this pattern. For many this constitutes a period of crisis, to find one’s place within the limitations of the final circumstances, a process which starts at puberty and culminates with a life decision during our twenties. With a better-developed sense of reality and a budding self-knowledge, one can ask the question: What can take place in the course of my life? The processes of metamorphosis go on relentlessly, noticeable for ourselves and others from year to year. But it is now accompanied by an observing awareness, and this awareness is not only as a passive onlooker. We learn to accept more events as they unfold, to work with the limitations of our outer circumstances, and to connect an inner soulful reality with many possibilities. Life might bring us to this point without much effort on our part. Then we may become interested in the dynamic aspect of our inner life, aware that something is growing on a developmental course for which we ourselves are responsible, just like a parent towards a child. Behind the mask of convention and in the midst of the gradual decline of the physical (and also perhaps the soul forces), a being is developing,

a personality kernel in us, who is searching for ever more independence from the outer conditions in which life between birth and death places us.

What we are discussing here has nothing to do with mysticism or clairvoyance. It is about a common human experience everyone can have, but perhaps described differently. We become aware of the kernel of truth in all religions and in all the thought constructs of the great philosophers, in the sum total of striving, which reaches way beyond the limitations of time and space. We can experience a need for this just like for food and drink; it gives strength and direction for our budding spiritual life. Let us now look at Rudolf Steiner during his work as a teacher and how he answered the questions each human being will encounter on this path.

In his philosophical writings, and first and foremost in the *Philosophy of Freedom* (1894), Steiner gave the reasons for and the strong impulse towards the kind of knowledge we are trying to characterize. His entire philosophical authorship at the end of the nineteenth century was geared towards the contemporary public and is built on the European and German cultural and spiritual traditions and what they had to offer.

The next phase in Steiner's activity has a very different character. People with specific pre-conditions and questions wanted guidance within the area that, for them, had great relevance: the world of religions and esoteric traditions. This transition is clearly visible in the title of the last book in the philosophical series *Goethe's Worldview* from 1897, and then the *Die Mystik im Aufgang des Neuzeitliche Geisteslebens und ihr Verhältniss zur Modernen Weltanschauung* in 1901. Then follows the book *Christianity as Mystical Fact and the Ancient Mysteries* (1902), *Theosophy* (1904), and finally *Knowledge of Higher Worlds and Its Attainment* (published first as articles during 1904–1905, then later published in a book in German in 1909).

The questions and needs which can awaken through real self-knowledge, through the experience of an inner space and its growth processes, is addressed in different ways in this series of Steiner's writings. He offers nurturing for needs and an orientation for a state of consciousness which now sees itself in relationship to a whole new set of facts, but initially more like an inkling. It was decisive of Steiner to establish the continuity of our development of consciousness, to show this fact and also help us care for it. The task for our time is to move with a wakeful sense of judgment and a clear light of intelligence into the areas that up to now have been shown only in the twilight of mere hints.

The paths towards such an expanded sense of insight can be varied. Steiner has with great clarity explained his road, from a biographical perspective in his book *The Course of My Life*, from a methodical perspective in many of his

writings, but first and foremost in the book *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and Its Attainment*. A fruitful engagement with this book pre-supposes a certain inner readiness, a certain elementary experience of the dynamic force in our inner lives. Further, this road towards insights demands the will and capacity for a strong inner activity in concentration and meditation.

It was Steiner's perception that people in our time, through the strict schooling of natural science, have attained the possibilities for an inner discipline and an active thinking, which made it possible to develop a true spiritual science, an exact clairvoyance. In this connection it might be necessary to point out two sides of the modern scientific attitude.

The one side includes the results, the sum of achieved insights, results which have their validity within its not always clearly stated premises. With different premises, very different insights are possible. Apart from the personal and historical imitations which dictate these premises, there is a will towards objectivity, towards selfless observation, which has to permeate the one who wants to pursue the path of spiritual science.

When we try some of the seemingly simple meditation exercises that Steiner indicates, we become quickly aware of the challenges they pose. We experience how filled we are with inner restlessness, random thoughts and moods, rigid perspectives and prejudices, much-loved habits and instinctual, emotional reactions. This level of self-knowledge is valuable in itself and could awaken the will to become master in one's own house. If we persist with some simple exercises, we will soon become aware of certain effects. We achieve a more inner calm and better perspectives, and also a heightened self-awareness in many of the delicate process that we tend to ignore in the haste and bustle of everyday life.

At a certain point we might experience a tendency towards hubris; self-satisfaction spreads like a cloud in the soul and creates new difficulties, especially socially. In this cloud many a good beginning can come to an end. Steiner pointed out this danger, and gave the explicit advice that one step on the road towards spiritual insights needs to be accompanied by three steps in moral development. What does this mean?

Our starting point was a contemplation of the journey through life. We are placed in certain life conditions, we "owe" something both right and left, we have responsibilities to take care of. A spiritual training does not exempt us from these responsibilities; we have to learn to love them and we have to discover the larger responsibilities that follow greater insights. This is far from easy for us, we are by nature "escapists" and prefer "the strong wine of the spirit above the sour bread of everyday life."

When we have achieved a certain inner calm and strength, we may, with renewed interest, turn towards nature, towards our surroundings. Among the fundamental exercises Steiner indicates is contemplation of the fundamental gestures expressed in nature: the living element in the plant kingdom, the death forces in the mineral kingdom, and the ensouled qualities in the animal kingdom. On this path of discovery we can create a concrete picture of the forces that also work in our own inner nature. We find them all there, and, in the pendulum swing between inner and outer contemplation, can let the one throw light on the other. To get a sense for what this is about we can remember the intense quality of experiences in our early encounters with the world, before the gray shadow of the world of concepts obscured them.

It is a very long road to travel from these humble first attempts at “higher insights” to the exact clairvoyance which deserves the distinction of spiritual science. This road is at least as long as the road from multiplication tables to higher mathematics, and significantly more dangerous. We must perceive Steiner as a pioneer, way ahead of his time and unrecognized. However, it is just in this way that things happen in the life of mankind: everything which needs to come forth grows first in secret.

What filled Steiner’s later years as a teacher? In his lectures he concentrated his attention with increasing intensity on the social tasks which were weighing on the modern human being, and which he felt could only be solved with a real acknowledgement of the world of spirit. We must return to our starting point, the path through life.

If we have come so far that we can see the boundaries of our lives drawn, and we have learned to accept existence, then we can easily become stuck in a place of resignation versus the ideals and dreams of our youth. If we look a little more closely, we will discover that this life which now can be perceived as growing inwardly, in a strange way stands in relationship to our outer existence. What emerges is that it is not without consequence how we handle it. Thoughts and feelings are not just byproducts, a powerless reflection of the world of actions that surrounds us. The brutal reality of the world of action is in an inner correspondence with our soul’s spiritual processing and what meets us in life. Thoughts and feelings have the power for both good and evil in the world, which might surprise us when we first think about this.

To remind us of some common situations: what we dread often turns out to be quite manageable and simple; what we regret often will right itself even if we do not intervene on the physical plane; tasks that seem insoluble get solved. These examples belong to everyday psychology. However we can increase our attention in this arena and come to see that what we usually divide into inner and outer experiences actually belong to the same whole.

If we want to pursue these perspectives and the advice Steiner has given for the practical areas of life, we ought to keep this in mind. Steiner does not give any recipe for solutions to problems (for example, there is no systematic teaching manual for Waldorf education). It is about a methodical attitude, to learn to see the well-known phenomena with new eyes and in a broader context.

A contemplative consciousness is a prerequisite for all social practices in the spirit of Steiner's teachings. Only from a deeper self-knowledge will we human beings be able to solve our social problems.

If we try to take a hold of some of the tasks Steiner has indicated, we will also experience our human limitations. The extensive activities in many areas which happen today in the name of Rudolf Steiner will all have to be viewed as humble attempts. It cannot be other than at this moment in time. Steiner's efforts can be judged fairly only in a larger time perspective. We ought to look forward to seeing the journey of humankind into a future which starts with ourselves. We do not have permission to hope for a miracle, but we have been given a certain freedom to shape our lives, to connect ourselves with this or that. If we have discovered the sprouting inner life in ourselves, and in all human being's inner life who has good will, we can then know that this inner life is also growing in humankind. Only to this life can we attach hope and good deeds for the future.