

AFTERWORD

The first decades of the twentieth century brought with them momentous accomplishments in science, art, and spiritual life. During these same years, Rudolf Steiner sought to address the need for a modern spiritual practice—one standing fully within the flow of contemporary life that might produce the insights needed by individuals and communities to meet the practical and personal demands of the age. In proposing a path of self-development, a teacher can only speak of what he knows and is master of. Such was certainly the case with Rudolf Steiner.

Parallel with his university training in the natural sciences and philosophy in Austria, and his outer life as a scholar and editor, Rudolf Steiner cultivated a contemplative life of extraordinary depth and clarity. From childhood on he had had personal experiences of the supersensible, but it was only after many years of disciplined inner work that he felt that the secure foundations had been created for what he called Anthroposophy, or a “science of the spirit.” Only then did his own spiritual maturity reach the point where he could share publicly the results of his spiritual researches.

Beginning in 1901, when he was forty years of age, and continuing until his death in 1925, Rudolf Steiner presented the fruits of his inner work in lectures, articles, and books. *How To Know Higher Worlds* dates from this early period, first appearing in book form in 1909. Although complete in itself, Rudolf Steiner viewed this work from the outset as part of a larger whole that was to include not only a second volume on meditation, but also many other aids in support of the meditative life. While the planned second volume never appeared in the form originally intended, innumerable lectures, essays, and meditative verses did appear. In addition, personal consultations were given and an Esoteric School was established. In other words, Rudolf Steiner made sure that, at every stage of an aspirant's development, both personal and communal supports were available, yet always in a way that left the student entirely free.

This motif of freedom is central to the structure and content of *How To Know Higher Worlds*. In the first chapters, Rudolf Steiner leads the reader carefully through a series of exercises that steady the soul, while leaving it free and opening it to new experiences.

He then goes on to relate the exact nature of the changes that take place within the meditator as a consequence of this self-development, and also to describe the inner experiences a student can expect to have along the path. Having completed the book, the reader understands not only the exercises and moral injunctions associated with the meditative path, but also their consequences. The end as well as the means are presented together.

Fully informed from the beginning concerning the effects of meditation, we can therefore choose freely whether or not we wish to embark upon a spiritual practice. Rudolf Steiner viewed this as a requirement for modern spirituality: namely, that individual freedom and judgment be respected at every point.

In earlier times, students of spiritual knowledge worked intimately with those who had already trodden the path of initiation. The sacred traditions of the past often required the student to give over his or her being to the directives of a master or guru. Today, such subservience is inappropriate. Teachers still exist, but our relation to them should now be based on mutual respect and freedom. The teacher can offer counsel, but the student must, in the end, judge for himself or herself whether to accept the advice and how to implement it. Still, the question justifiably arises, how can I best determine my own particular meditative path?

Rudolf Steiner gives important suggestions in this regard in the prefaces to *How To Know Higher Worlds*. A student, having worked for a time with particular exercises, can detect the effects these have on the soul. From the very beginning, therefore, it is important to develop a sense for one's own soul health, for the benefit or detriment arising from each exercise. Choosing from the many suggestions for meditation offered by Rudolf Steiner, each student can then shape his or her meditative practice according to whatever need is felt, working with those exercises that strengthen the weaknesses that are apparent, and harmonize those areas of soul life that are in turmoil.

Although Rudolf Steiner did give personal advice concerning self-development, he emphasized that “a totally *direct* relationship with the objective spiritual world is more important than a relationship to the personality of a teacher” (Preface, p. 9). In addition, he reassured the seeker that help was always available when truly needed. It may come in the form of written material or oral teaching, and also through persons who are our companions in spiritual striving. Today we learn from each other, as well as from masters. Through shared study and struggle, we begin to think and feel anew.

This process of transformation can lead to one’s becoming a member of a community of meditants. From his earliest years, Rudolf Steiner worked not only publicly, but also more quietly with a circle of serious students. In 1923, with the refounding of the Anthroposophical Society, this intimate work took on a new form: the First Class of the School of Spiritual Science. Those already familiar with Steiner’s anthroposophical teachings and ready to enter into a more serious meditative life within the community of Anthroposophy could apply to the First Class. To them, Rudolf Steiner gave special teachings in the form of imaginations leading toward the threshold of the spiritual world and beyond. Thus he provided not only a text, but a human community, in support of the meditative life.

How To Know Higher Worlds offers an introduction to the inner life and to an inner discipline that can heal and transform us profoundly.

I will turn now to a more detailed consideration of the book’s contents.

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There are many reasons that can lead one to begin a meditative practice, but at the outset every true aspirant must pass through the “portal of humility.” We may be drawn to the inner life because of suffering, loss, or grief, in the hope of finding solace. Certainly nothing is wrong, and much is right, with this, and techniques exist that can help with every kind of personal trial. Yet every step inward should be joined to a gesture outward. We are safeguarded from becoming self-absorbed in our own concerns by mindfulness of the suffering of others. Our mastery of personal hardships is achieved not by withdrawal from the world. Rather we retreat so that we can better serve. This is part of the practice of humility.

The same steadfast commitment to selflessness should be present at every stage along the path, from the first attempt at meditation to the experience of enlightenment. This commitment to selflessness forms the moral foundation for all spiritual self-development—whether concerned with stilling our rage or opening the eyes of the soul that reveal the spiritual dimensions of all creation. Always, whatever is done is done in service. If anything, Rudolf Steiner states the point even more forcefully:

Let nobody imagine that he or she gains any advantage over fellow human beings by developing clairvoyance, for that is simply not so. One makes no progress that can be justified on any ground of self-interest. One achieves progress only

insofar as one can be more useful to others. The immorality of egoism can find no place in the spiritual world. A person can gain nothing for him or herself through spiritual illumination. What one does gain is gained only as a servant of the world in general, and one gains it for oneself only by gaining it for others.

(Background to the Gospel of St. Mark, p. 18)

The “portal of humility” stamps our striving with the seal of reverence for all of life and with a devotion to truth and service. These form the fundamental mood of soul for one’s meditative life. If we cultivate this mood, we have already taken a significant step on the path of meditative life.

Every sound spiritual practice begins with moral development. This is as true of Buddhism and the mystical traditions of Christianity as it is of Anthroposophy. In keeping with this, the opening pages of *How To Know Higher Worlds* strive to engender in us the tenor of soul that should underlie meditation. It is an attitude of selfless love. Esoteric schooling never has as its goal the accumulation of spiritual treasures for personal gain. If one seeks for oneself, one actually achieves nothing. Every striving, every accomplishment is properly placed only when it is placed at the service of others. Once the context of selfless love is established, meditative practice can unfold within it.

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The first chapter of *How To Know Higher Worlds* stands like a microcosm, reflecting in its few pages the entire path of spiritual development. Having begun with the creation of a moral foundation for meditative practice, we pass on to the care of the soul, to harmonizing and healing. The peace thus achieved permits the unfolding of a higher self, which can turn away from personal matters to the universal spiritual realities surrounding us. In what follows, as well as in other writings, Rudolf Steiner offers us a wealth of additional details concerning each stage of the path from Preparation through Illumination to Initiation. Nevertheless, if we wish to penetrate fully the path Steiner suggests, we can do no better than to ponder more and more closely the first chapter of *How To Know Higher Worlds* where we find the several stages of the path reflected in miniature.

Once we have established the inner axis of veneration for all that is noble, as well as the attitude of service, we are ready to begin our work with the soul. Special times are set aside for regular practice. During these we undertake exercises that can work deeply into our essential nature, unraveling the knots of destiny and quieting the turmoil of life.

Turning inward in meditation, we often feel beset, if not overwhelmed, by the troubles and crises of daily life. The first task, therefore, is what I call “soul hygiene.” At this point, we are not concerned with the attainment of higher knowledge, but simply strive for the tranquility and self-control required for subsequent stages of self-development. These exercises can begin with reflection

on a past, perhaps difficult personal experience. Through such quiet reflection we gradually come to distinguish the important from the unimportant in what we have experienced, and to view the problem or issue from a higher, calmer vantage point. What before might have thrown us into turmoil is now beheld with equanimity.

As a consequence of these exercises, one's inner life no longer swings from one extreme to another and, in the resultant calm, one can begin to sense the dawning of a "higher self." The experience of this moment is one which can center a student's entire life—inner and outer. With the first modest success in bringing the buffeting forces of life under control, one can already sense a firm inner ground on which to stand. Time and again, one needs to step out of the work-a-day tempo and create one's own private time for contemplation. As with all such exercises, repetition is the key. Even after an initial success, one needs to return repeatedly to that higher ground which is open to the calm, clear air of the spirit.

We need not fear that we will be estranged from life as a consequence of this accomplishment, far from it. We are able to consider life all the more deeply because personal passions have been set aside, and we begin to learn what only compassion can teach.

Essential though they are, the path of reverence and the exercises concerned with "soul hygiene," just described, form only the preliminary stages of meditative life to which others can now be added. In particular, while these foundational exercises are intended to foster a mood of reverence, bring tranquility to the soul, and give birth to a

higher self, subsequent exercises foster other soul capacities that lead us from our own concerns to an ever deepening understanding of what is universally human.

The exercises concerned with this second stage of the meditative path allow everything of a personal nature to fall away. In contemplating an appropriate verse, mantram, or image, the meditator moves from personal issues to eternal ones. The specific choice for the focus of meditation may be recommended by a teacher, or selected from the treasures available from past masters of the inner path. Working with such material is like lifting our gaze from the ground on which we stand to the infinite horizon. We come to sense a “living world of silent thought activity” around us. This vibrant, luminous, circling stream carries us into its creative glories. The world’s wisdom lights up as a stream of thinking. This is a dawning experience of the spirit, an experience of the Logos. We feel the touch of the divine, although at first only gently and without understanding. Before insight can be joined to experience we will need to pass through many experiences and confront numerous trials. Like a child newly born into a strange and beautiful world, we must mature. Impressions must unite with understanding for meaning to arise. Both impressions and thinking must be raised from the earthly to the divine.

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Whether we are occupied with its opening or final pages, Rudolf Steiner’s other writings and lectures extend

and develop in innumerable ways the themes introduced in *How To Know Higher Worlds*. For example, in a lecture given on December 27, 1911, Rudolf Steiner elaborates on the path of reverence, the foundation for everything that comes afterward, described in chapter one. But where before only a single mood of soul was described, Steiner now identifies four stages along the way. Elsewhere, he speaks of the “mission of reverence,” and so on. One can pause at any place in Steiner’s works and uncover a wealth of material suitable for a lifetime of practice. This is as it should be, for no single spiritual exercise can ever be exhausted. Rather, each exercise leads us deeper and deeper, offering us not only a fount of personal renewal, but also a basis for right work in the world. By faithfully embracing the meditative life, we move daily through domains of inner experience that transform the soul into a beautiful, selfless organ for collaboration in the redemptive work taught by the Buddha and exemplified by the Christ.

The teaching of humility and compassion, in fact, frames the whole of *How To Know Higher Worlds*. We are enjoined at the beginning to start our meditative life under the sign of humility, and likewise at the end of the book, when we stand before the Great Guardian, we are asked to take a vow of compassion.

Up to now, you have striven as an individual. Now you must join yourself to the whole, so that you may bring with you into the supersensible realm not only yourself but also all else that exists in the sensible world (p. 203).

Thus, our work is not done even when we have achieved full enlightenment. Rather must we continue to care for the needs of others, for all our companions on the Earth. The deeply Christian-Bodhisattvic character of the entire book is as much a part of the teaching as the specific indications for the exercises. It is an integral part of the practice.

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In *How To Know Higher Worlds* and elsewhere, Rudolf Steiner gives many exercises whose purpose is to prepare the soul for challenges quite different from those that arise during the course of our sense life. Perhaps the most important are those aimed at developing the six soul qualities essential for a healthy and balanced life within the supersensible.

These qualities are important because many of the supports provided by the sense world vanish when the aspirant crosses the threshold into the spiritual world. It is, therefore, especially important to strengthen one's own inner resources and soul stability early on, and to maintain those resources. Steiner gives six "accessory exercises" which can be practiced by the student regardless of what other meditative work has been undertaken. These establish the requisite inner balance. Neglecting the accessory exercises is dangerous. Therefore Steiner warns us that, "All meditation, concentration, or other exercises are worthless, indeed, in a certain respect actually harmful, if life is not regulated in accordance with these conditions" (*Esoteric Development*, p. 102).

The six conditions are the development of: 1) clarity of thought, 2) mastery of the will, 3) equanimity of feeling, 4) positivity, 5) openness, and 6) the establishment of harmony among these five. The student begins in each case in the simplest possible way. For example, clarity of thought can best be strengthened by taking a common object (a tack, pencil, or whatever) and holding it before the mind's eye unswervingly for five or ten minutes. No thought should enter that is not connected directly with the object under consideration. Time and again, the mind will wander, and time and again we will need to return our attention to the task. Gradually the experience arises that we can control our attention. Our attention, which before flitted without notice from one subject to the next, has been steadied and brought under our control. The remaining five exercises can likewise be pursued for a month each, always using the simplest means. Then one can begin again.

As we faithfully execute these and similar preparatory exercises, soul capacities are cultivated which lead to the first experiences of a supersensible kind. What is the character of these initial experiences? Although the path for every individual is unique, certain characterizations can be helpful, especially as false expectations often allow the real promptings of the spirit to pass by unnoticed.

Frequently, one expects the spiritual to appear in the form of visions or hallucinations, but these are not the stuff of authentic spiritual experience. Such experiences may indeed arise, but they are more a manifestation of our own selves than of higher worlds, and it is essential to

find one's proper relationship to them. In many passages, Rudolf Steiner turns us away from visionary or mediumistic experience toward more subtle but reliable intimations of the spirit. He writes, for example, that "one of the gravest deceptions occurs when the entire realm of soul experiences spoken of in spiritual science is misclassified so that it appears placed in the same category with superstition, visionary dreams, mediumism, and other aberrations of the natural human striving for the spirit" (Epilogue, p.207).

Rather than visions, Steiner points to the deep importance of a responsive yet disciplined life of feelings. Instead of trying to "see" into the spiritual world, we should attend to the inner feelings that accompany our meditation. Concerning spiritual imaginations, Steiner writes,

One must let the pictures weaving in the soul become, as it were, spiritually transparent in oneself by continuous activity. They will gradually become so through their own development. In fact, they will become such that one no longer "beholds" them, but only feels them living in the soul and perceives the substance of supersensible reality through them.

(The Threshold of the Spiritual World, p. 170)

Even when writing about auric colors, Steiner is careful to point out that, by such colors, the genuine spiritual seer means something quite specific: namely, "that he or she encounters something experienced in soul *that is like* the

perception of that particular color in sense experience.” By contrast with this, those who hold that what they experience is “the same as the color in the sense world are not spiritual students, but visionaries or people with hallucinations.” The spiritual world is not an ethereal, hazy double of the physical sense world, but reveals itself to our heightened sensibilities in quite other forms.

Steiner often elucidates the difference between sense experience and the supersensible by reference to memory. To the eye, the objects of the sense world appear in a certain way. But our memory of the same experience is not the same as the initial sense experience. A memory of childhood may be vivid, but it differs from the actual experience in significant ways. Supersensible experience is much like memory, except that it refers to no past sense impression, but rather to present soul and spiritual aspects of our world.

For example, as we continue our practice, a tranquil openness of soul can be established in which a specific mood arises. Perhaps one is working with budding plants on the one hand and dying ones on the other, as described in Chapter Two. The experience of new life brings with it a definite feeling, one that is delicate but objective; the same is true of the experience of the dying plant. Each produces a “quite definite form of feeling.” That is, a feeling arises with a very specific shape or form. It is these clear feelings that we should hold to. Thereby our feeling life gradually becomes schooled, and an entire universe of soul experience of the world around and within us dawns in us. In some individuals these feelings provoke actual

color images, in others not. In either case, however, what is important is not the image itself (usually simply borrowed from the sense world) but what shines through as a “form of feeling.” Only through the latter can we be led on to the spiritual beings who stand beyond.

In this way, *How To Know Higher Worlds* provides the student with a systematic path for the cultivation of the feeling life so that it can become truly cognitive, the basis for genuine knowledge. To further this end Rudolf Steiner recommends exercises that move the student inwardly through the mineral, plant and animal kingdoms to the experience of the human being. At each stage a new range of soul experience is added, and a rich and trustworthy inner language is forged in the process.

To begin with, the supersensible often appears in brief encounters: it is gone as soon as it has arrived. Ordinary memory is insufficient to hold it. Yet, as we continue to meditate, we notice many changes in our inner life and come to acknowledge the potent reality of the spirit, now known through firsthand experience. Our dream life, for example, previously chaotic or determined by the day’s events, gradually takes on a more ordered form. When awakening, we sense a different character and relation to sleep—for the development of the spiritual bodies, as these are affected by meditation, naturally leads to a transformation of dream life. In sleep, when the prodings of the sense world are silenced, the first clear intimations of the spirit show themselves. It is essential to treat these experiences as provisional, and not to attempt to interpret them prematurely. Many further stages must

be passed through before reliable spiritual insights can be had by the meditator. Still, with each step along the way the link between the spiritual in us and the world grows stronger and stronger.

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The path set forth in *How To Know Higher Worlds* is not a linear one, uniformly applied and graded step-by-step. Everyone will find their own unique way and pace of development, meet trials specific to themselves, and make discoveries that only they can make. Rudolf Steiner's own advice varied depending on the audience to whom he spoke. When lecturing to a group of scientists and scholars he recommended they begin their practice with thought exercises. To a group in Scandinavia he elaborated a path leading through color and tone to inner moods and from there to an experience of the etheric world. He gave special mantric material to doctors, to teachers, to priests and so on. Entering a cathedral we all stand first in the nave, but then we may well find our way to a small side chapel dedicated to a particular saint. Likewise when we set out upon the meditative path we may quickly find our way to a practice appropriate to our needs.

Yet over and above the variety of spiritual practices is an architecture whose form is dictated by the requirements of our age. Every culture and every age has a means of connecting with the divine. We are well aware that the range used today extends from shamanic drumming to yoga, from sweat lodge to prayer, from psychedelics to

asceticism. What is appropriate for our present age and for me? At the time Rudolf Steiner was writing the explosion of practices had just begun, and was especially centered on those discovered by Europeans in Asia. How can we understand the relationship between the way described in *How To Know Higher Worlds* and these others, for example to those that employ breathing exercises? Concerning this Rudolf Steiner wrote:

All the exercises described in the book [*How To Know Higher Worlds*] are the spiritual correlate suited to the West, of that for which the Orient longs: to bring the rhythm of the process of breathing into the process of cognition. If our thinking had the same tempo as our breathing many secrets of the universe would be disclosed to us.

(The Karma of Materialism, p. 36)

In other words, Rudolf Steiner lifts to the level of cognition, to our seeing and reflecting, all that which is enacted with the breath in ancient breathing exercises. In cognition, too, there is a process of exchange between the inner world and the outer. In order to know our universe we both take in and move out—we breathe light, as Steiner called it. Cognitive practice, therefore, is a yoga not of breathing in the element of air, but of breathing through all our senses in the element of light.

This is one approach to the question of the relationship of Rudolf Steiner's description of the spiritual path to that given in other traditions. Another centers around the

Christ event, the Mystery of Golgotha and its significance for our meditative life. Indeed, Rudolf Steiner's entire effort can only be understood within the context of that event. He sought, often in unspoken ways, always to work out of the forces that flowed into world evolution through the deed of the Christ. *How To Know Higher Worlds* is no exception.

Finally, Rudolf Steiner felt it his task to create a way to the spirit that met the specific demands of Western culture in the twentieth century. Ours is a time deeply shaped by developments in science and technology, and Rudolf Steiner himself was trained as a scientist and engineer, before he turned to philosophy and literature. His path to the spirit reflects this striving to meet the expectations of the modern soul, to respect its demand for freedom and its need for a clear, articulate knowledge of the spiritual—one which could be put to good use whether in medicine, education or farming. While deeply respectful of Eastern spiritual paths, and of the variety possible within individual spiritual practice, Rudolf Steiner sought to delineate a safe, sure way to the spirit that was at the same time both deeply Christian and completely contemporary, a path committed to loving service and to uncovering the deepest truths to which we are granted access. At one point Rudolf Steiner described Anthroposophy as a path from the spiritual in us to the spiritual in the universe. *How To Know Higher Worlds* can be our first guide along that path. We will discover other guides as the need arises.