

What Rudolf Steiner provided in 1924, beginning with the Christmas Conference and, from February 16 onward, with the karma lectures, was an esoteric training course on karma knowledge that was a direct continuation of his initiative of 1902 (“Practical Karma Exercises”). The actual number of “exercises” he gave was limited, but he spoke extensively of the destiny knowledge he had practiced for more than thirty years, and of the conditions, questions, and inner discipline required for it. “*You must have a profound interest in others if you wish to meet them anthroposophically,*” he pointed out,³⁴⁴ and he went on to explain what he meant by this in more than eighty lectures. In a lecture course five years earlier he had referred to real selflessness as the *conditio sine qua non* of true destiny knowledge, stating emphatically that this attitude was essential if the karma work (and karma research) was to be effective.

It is not just that the ideas of reincarnation and karma need to come into our time; the question is also *how* this is achieved. If they merely encourage egotism they will not elevate our culture but drag it down even more. . . . Our civilization has so few altruistic-religious impulses that it is unable to take ideas such as reincarnation and karma as motivations for altruistic rather than egotistical actions and feelings.³⁴⁵

“How” to practice and deal with karma knowledge was the question that was decisive for Rudolf Steiner and that informed all his lectures in 1924. He himself had—neither in his youth or later—been particularly interested in exploring his own spiritual origins, the history of his own “I.” His studies in this direction had rather been motivated by a profound interest in others, in their individuality, and this gave rise to further questions—questions regarding their past and future. In his autobiography, which he wrote in 1924, Rudolf Steiner described his later youth, his loneliness, and how he dealt with his inner experiences:

But I perceived the spiritual world as *immediate reality*; the spiritual individuality of each person was revealed to me with total

clarity. The bodily nature and activity in the physical world were merely an expression of the individuality that united itself with the physical germ from the parents. When people died, I followed them as they journeyed into the spiritual world. After the death of one former classmate, I wrote about this aspect of my inner experiences to a former...teacher, with whom I had retained a friendly relationship. His reply was unusually kind, but not a single word in that letter referred to what I had written about the dead schoolmate.³⁴⁶

When he said that the spiritual individuality of each person revealed itself to him Rudolf Steiner did not mean that the destiny of the other person was effortlessly visible to him; what he could experience spiritually was the particularity of the other's being, which he then strove to understand at a deeper level. Rudolf Steiner tentatively described his struggle with concrete reincarnation insights, which he only achieved around his twenty-eighth year and in a particular situation, in his autobiography. ("Many such visions arose in me due to my close relationship with people whose life habits and personal characteristics showed clear individual traits that could not be explained by heredity or by experiences since birth."³⁴⁷) Rudolf Steiner's questions and searching were guided by his interest in the "You," the other's true personality he sought to understand more deeply and on which he tried, in some cases, to cast a light to do justice to that individuality. In his karma lectures of 1924, he spoke of the necessary "intimate contemplation of life," or of "living oneself into" the other person as a precondition for any further knowledge, for any insight that could transcend and illuminate any initial observation.

On April 23, 1924, he said in Dornach:

What we first notice in others, what we perceive when meeting them or learn of them in history, all this they have largely acquired from their earthly environment. As human beings we are products of our earthly surroundings to a much greater extent than we think. Through our education we absorb what lives around us. Only the more subtle, more intimate traits of a person lead us back, through the life between death and a new birth, to former earthly

lives. For such investigations it can be more illuminating to look at a person's gestures, at the way they tend to hold something, rather than at what they have achieved as famous personalities.³⁴⁸

Elsewhere, he said:

How does destiny work? It works out of the whole human being. What people seek out in life, urged by their karma, and what then takes its course, has to do with the forces of destiny. These forces, as they pass from life to life, influence and condition the more subtle aspects of blood composition, they regulate neural activity, and they also stimulate the soul's instinctive susceptibility for this or that influence. You don't just find easy access to a person's destiny or karmic relations if you are not looking out (with the soul's eye, that is) for their habitual self-expression. It is true that for karmic observation it is as important to pay attention to a person's hand movement as to their ingenuity. It is equally important to observe—again, from a spiritual point of view, in astral body and “I”—how a person sits down, as it is to observe how they meet their moral obligations. Whether someone tends to scowl is as important as whether they are virtuous. Much of what is deemed inessential in ordinary life is very important indeed when one begins to study how destiny weaves its threads from one earthly life to the next; and much of what one thinks is particularly important in a person actually has little impact.³⁴⁹

Rudolf Steiner's deep interest in and awareness of others was striking. Friedrich Rittelmeyer related how Steiner, when meeting others, enabled people to reveal and unfold their being and participated in that process with selfless purpose, an attitude that penetrated the whole of his spiritual research. (“It was as if he let the being of the other person be built up before him in a subtle element of his own soul, while he himself remained still, in selfless surrender. It was not as if he were thinking about the other, but there seemed to be a process of inner, spiritual reflection whereby his whole existence could be revealed.”³⁵⁰). Rudolf Steiner made it clear in his karma lectures that nothing could be attained without such loving interest in others and the questions that arise as a result. In 1919, Steiner said that current

social understanding is a precondition for one's future understanding of destiny—not spiritual curiosity, but true interest in others' life and purpose are therefore essential, which is deeper study of their being, even at times that seem unimportant to the superficial eye.

Such insight cannot be gained by contemplating a person's immediately obvious expressions but arise through a study of the traits that seem to accompany such expressions but, in fact, deepen them endlessly through intuition. Nor is it useful to try to gain such insight while with the person. Once a strong impression reverberates and becomes as a vivid memory, what is ordinarily considered significant dissolves, and what seems "insignificant" begins to speak a clear language. Those who "observe" others merely to assess their previous earthly lives will never reach this goal. Indeed, we must experience this as an offense against the one being observed; only then can we hope to see the long-ago events of a person's previous life within the present, coming as it were from distant spiritual realms, as if by destiny.³⁵¹

In his karma lectures, Rudolf Steiner described numerous such observations and the visions they opened. Often they started with impressions of the physical body, of outer and inner movements and habits that, in the researcher's memory, needed to be reenlivened and artistically worked through in a long, active process that cannot, however, be forced. "One needs to *prepare* what one hopes will be revealed as a grace out of the spiritual world."³⁵² Insight into karma was thus for Rudolf Steiner neither an achievement nor a gift, but an experience on the path of inner seeking that was often granted only after years of hard work. Steiner explained in his karma lectures that this insight requires the will to examine the destiny of a particular person with "holy reverence" and to "penetrate to the very depths of world existence."³⁵³ He spoke of the needed "reverence for knowledge,"³⁵⁴ a quality his listeners fully experienced in him—his very real reverence, as well as the authentic way he was moved by his spiritual findings. ("Anyone who is not shaken by the karmic insights revealed here is

incapable of karma vision and will be unable to achieve insight into individual karmic relationships.”³⁵⁵)



Rudolf Steiner’s karma lectures were permeated by a mood of deep earnestness, leading his listeners into high cosmic regions. In the spring of 1924 he began to speak, in Prague, Paris, and Breslau about the planetary spheres that a human individuality passes through after death, and about the hierarchical powers that participate in preparing one’s next earthly life. In other words, he described in detail the cosmic journey of the individuality and the shaping of its destiny after death and before birth. “We must admit, in all modesty, that our human nature is connected with the spiritual wellspring of the cosmos and we will only understand our own nature by spiritually penetrating the cosmos.”³⁵⁶ “And this comprehension of the universe’s spiritual lawfulness is what Anthroposophy needs to achieve in our time.”³⁵⁷ In his esoteric class lessons of that time Rudolf Steiner spoke of the inner life of the great cosmic powers in relation to the human being with its destiny-bearing and destiny-shaping “I.” From April 1924, the Class Lessons and the karma lectures were attuned to each other, evolving step by step into a real cosmic anthropology:

When we look at human destiny, we see how it weaves, works, and lives through the hierarchical spheres. Human destiny is really something we need to observe with the greatest inner reverence, because in observing it we stand before the world of the gods.... Biographers should really know that they interfere in an invisible way with all the hierarchies when they describe a person’s life.³⁵⁸

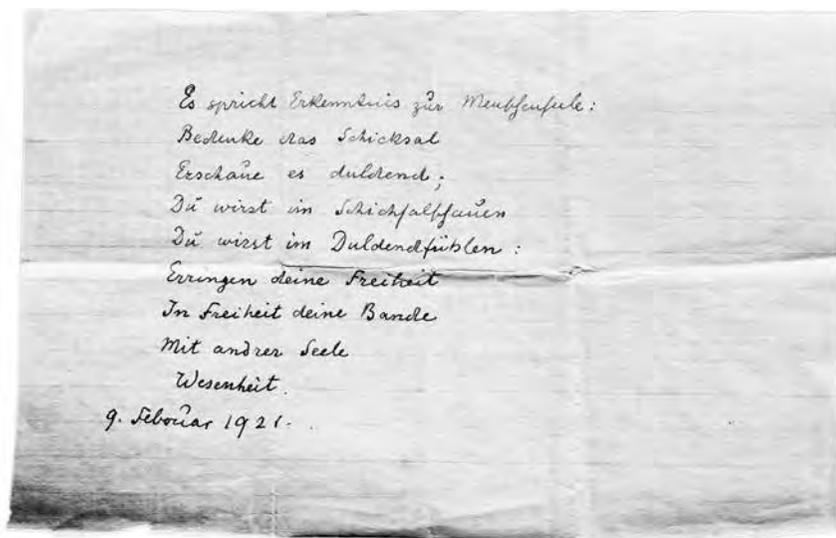
Beginning in mid-February 1924, Rudolf Steiner had tried to convey to his listeners how difficult—and yet how necessary—it is to gain insight into destiny. According to the first “Leading Thought,” Anthroposophy strives to guide the spirit in us to the spirit in the universe.³⁵⁹ Destiny research is consequently inseparable from

Anthroposophy, and it makes us humble when, by gaining karmic understanding, we become aware of our “universal existence.”³⁶⁰ Once we have acquired this understanding, our lives become “immensely deepened,”³⁶¹ our existence acquires meaning, and our biography gains dignity and value. “Enlightened karma,” Rudolf Steiner added, “anchors us” in our lives, in “the place where we live our earthly existence.”³⁶² Rudolf Steiner spoke of approaching one’s destiny with equanimity that emerges, or can be achieved, with growing knowledge. This unwavering certainty in pursuing one’s life’s work and the resolute acceptance even of very difficult biographical circumstances, outer hindrances, and unexpected changes are qualities that Rudolf Steiner’s friends and pupils had observed in him for many years, not just after the Goetheanum fire. In the 1924 karma lectures some listeners began to sense that Steiner’s steadfastness and positivity were linked to the access he’d gained to his true self, although he always spoke in general and very rarely in personal terms:

It will never occur that someone who gains true insight into karma will not agree with that karma...because we are our karma.... People who make no effort to gain a certain serenity—especially with regard to their destiny—who rail against their fate, who are discontent with their destiny and try to alter it in keeping with their own subjective judgment continuously disturb the gods’ weaving of destinies. We can live with our destiny only after we can accept it with equanimity. Learning to understand how destiny works is part of the aspects in life that are associated with severe trials of human nature. If we can bring ourselves to take our destiny seriously, we will receive great impulses for living in harmony with the spiritual world from the very experience of this destiny.³⁶³

Once we gain insight into destiny, Rudolf Steiner explained, we can fulfill our tasks “with greater freedom and awareness.” In our encounters with others we will feel a deepened respect for their being and intentions, their “alien will.” True knowledge of destiny promotes understanding and love between human beings.





Rudolf Steiner: Meditation for Edith Maryon. Dornach, February 9, 1921
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*Knowledge speaks to the human soul: Consider destiny,
look upon it with patience;
in looking upon destiny
you will, in patient feeling
wrest your freedom;
in freedom find what unites you
with the intrinsic being
of other souls.*

[tr. by M. Barton]

The karma lectures—which had taken years of preparation and in which, from July 1924 on, Rudolf Steiner also addressed the karma of the Anthroposophical Society itself—followed the conference that had, to a certain degree, joined his destiny to that of the Society. When he introduced his fourth and final mystery drama in 1913, Steiner pointed out that Benedictus now needed to be pictured as having “*interwoven his own soul’s destiny with his pupils’ soul experiences.*”³⁶⁴ Marie Steiner-von Sivers spoke later about Rudolf Steiner having made a “sacrifice” at the Christmas Conference.³⁶⁵ It was clear, however, that Steiner did not explain details of the Anthroposophical Society’s destiny until *after* he had united the anthroposophical movement with the Society. (“When I became president of the Society, the anthroposophical movement became one with the Anthroposophical Society.”³⁶⁶) The karma lectures were given “under the influence of the Christmas Conference.” The Christmas Conference (or rather the events underlying it) had made those lectures possible, but clearly also necessary. “I will go ahead with my contemplation of karma.”³⁶⁷

All of Rudolf Steiner’s lectures in Dornach to members in 1924 (with the exception of his specialized courses) were karma-related, including his “final address” on September 28. Whereas the diversity of themes he covered was immense and encompassed cultural history, Earth, and the cosmos, the lectures and motifs were largely informed by the idea of karma. While he explored perspectives and impulses for the School for Spiritual Science’s specialized sections with the various professional groups, he also spoke to the members of the Society about insights into destiny. Those lectures clearly meant to set the scene for the fundamental processes that would change the Society’s consciousness and lead to its and the individual members’ ultimate awakening—none of which happened in 1923, despite the destruction of the Goetheanum. Rudolf Steiner was prepared to “move ahead” with his contemplations on karma, because this was his task as a teacher, while the task of the members (or so he hoped) was to take these revelations seriously and apply them in practice. Nothing was further from his purpose in 1924 than to give “interesting” talks.

Everything he said—although he presented it in a calm and clearly structured way—was of the nature of an appeal or a wake-up call, if looked at more closely. The spiritual world, he said at the Christmas Conference, was expecting something of modern, spiritually minded people. As early as November 1923, he said in a lecture, “When we look into the spiritual world, into the world where divine-spiritual beings are working on our individual existence, we look into a sphere that is waiting for us. . . . A deeper spiritual understanding of human nature will lead us to make a decision: Will we reach the realm of the spirit, where we are expected, or will we—because we pass through births and deaths—come to the point where reproachful words will await us? ‘You were expected but you did not come.’”³⁶⁸

Rudolf Steiner’s pupil and friend Christian Morgenstern wrote in his poem “Responsibility”:

Here we stand idly about,
While above they wait for us!
Here we go idly about.

In our allegiance lives no gravity—
And up above they count on us;
In our allegiance no sense of gravity.

Neither above nor here can grow
Purpose and victory from such aid.
And so above and below there grow

From this half-heartedness shame and grief;
The gods above go hungry and
Here we wither away. Bleak grief
Corrupts the world’s love-created work.³⁶⁹

Rudolf Steiner’s karma courses did not dwell on the current situation, to which the Anthroposophical Society was destined to make a difference as a community with united powers. Equally, the professional courses of 1924 (on medicine, education, special needs education, and agriculture) referred only occasionally to the difficulties and challenges regarding the future of civilization about which Rudolf

Steiner was so concerned. His specialized lectures advocated constructiveness and new beginnings based on knowledge and avoided analyzing existing problems and divisiveness. The karma lectures, on the other hand, addressed ways toward deepened understanding of the meaning of “you” and “we” and the historical development and tasks of spiritual communities. Regarding society as a whole, it was clear in 1924 that capitalism, with its emphasis on egoistic needs and its excessive exploitation and factual devaluation of life—in conjunction with totalitarian and authoritarian power structures—was about to destroy humanity’s human and ecological foundations and to “eliminate” individual karma, if not the karma of entire groups of human beings, as Rudolf Steiner warned in his penultimate lecture to the “young doctors.”³⁷⁰

The “culture of selflessness” he had described ten years earlier was nowhere to be seen. On the contrary, in his karma lectures Rudolf Steiner did not discuss such topics as “permission to destroy life void of meaning” or “euthanasia,” anti-Semitism, or racism. Nonetheless, those who had an interest in Anthroposophy or were awake to historical developments would have understood in principle, from February 16 to September 28, 1924, how much depended on the success of the School for Spiritual Science and its mission as described by Rudolf Steiner. His lectures on medicine, education, and special needs education focused on the individuality—the right to life, incarnation, and the development of one’s potential on Earth—in child development; in health, sickness, and healing; and in the accomplishment of tasks and overcoming hindrances. Karmic relationships in education and life were rarely mentioned explicitly in these lectures. Nonetheless, that dimension was present even in those specialized presentations “as the real stream of substance of School for Spiritual Science” (Fritz Götte).³⁷¹ Indirectly, it became clear how much depended on whether it would be possible to firmly establish in the future the concept of human individuality and biography in the various sciences and spheres of life—as well as in opposition to the very different attitudes and aspirations of the time.



Rudolf Steiner continued to hope that the anthroposophical movement would take action unreservedly and courageously, working for humanity in life's various spheres. Until July 1924, members of the General Anthroposophical Society might have been forgiven for assuming that Rudolf Steiner's karma lectures were just another chapter in his systematic teachings on Anthroposophy or cosmology, or even on history and biography. From July 18, at the latest, it was clear that an entirely new and different purpose was behind those lectures. He spoke of matters that "*I would say, concern us most intimately.*" He had already mentioned them in early April.³⁷² The karma lectures were no mere add-on to his anthroposophical teachings; rather, they were a distinct means of support for the members and their future tasks. By focusing on the past, they provided them with the possibility of understanding, both individually and as a community, the present for the sake of the future.

In the history "read in the spirit,"³⁷³ about which Rudolf Steiner spoke in his eighty-plus karma lectures, the "more intimate questions of humanity's historical evolution"³⁷⁴ touched on the destinies of many individuals, including some he had followed with interest since his time in Vienna, such as Karl Julius Schröer, with whom he concluded his karmic presentations. In addition to the method and ethics of karma research, Rudolf Steiner also discussed crucial powers and forces in history, based on a selection of personalities who supported or hindered developments for the future. One such personality was the former American President, Woodrow Wilson, about whom he now said his karmic background (in a non-Christian, Islamist culture) had guided Steiner's early warnings. ("I said all this because I saw the whole picture."³⁷⁵) Rudolf Steiner described the details of those persons' destinies in precise and subtle terms, but never as an end in itself. His intention was instead to illustrate impulses "that stream powerfully from suprasensory worlds into the world of humanity today,"³⁷⁶ where they worked either for the good or to the detriment of humanity.

Human beings are not “mediums” but agents of historical and formative forces, including those associated with the Christ impulse (and its opposite). The motives by which individual human beings are inspired and united are part of their destiny. New beginnings are possible, but only against the background of previous historical and spiritual developments. These antecedents need to be recognized, including by those near to Anthroposophy. “In today’s materialistic times, people, regardless of education or circumstances, can come to something like Anthroposophy with honesty (otherwise they come to it dishonestly) only when they are guided toward the spiritual by karmic impulses. In this karmic impulse we find condensed what the individuality experienced as I have described it before descending into earthly life.”³⁷⁷

Rudolf Steiner hoped that, through his lectures, he could “*gradually awake a new understanding for the being of the Anthroposophical Society*.”³⁷⁸ He also hoped that the members who awake and see more clearly would then be able to address the “greater matters”³⁷⁹—the spiritual, cultural, and social tasks linked to the General Anthroposophical Society and its School for Spiritual Science. Gaining clarity about “the spiritual and cosmic foundations of a community like the Anthroposophical Society” was, Rudolf Steiner said in the first week of July, 1924, a central goal (if not *the* central goal) of his lecture course,³⁸⁰ even the premises and purpose of the anthroposophic association, could penetrate people’s consciousness only “very slowly and gradually.”³⁸¹

Rudolf Steiner made no secret of the fact that many members of the anthroposophical community, or many of those who were interested in Anthroposophy, showed little or no sign of this. This was a problem he addressed frequently in previous years. Now he implied that what he’d said then was corroborated by concrete insights. “It can be said of many people today—more people than one would think—that *their pre-earthly existence predestines them* for the Anthroposophical Society, but that certain events prevent them from finding their way there.”³⁸² Steiner did not elaborate further on those hindrances or distractions but focused instead on the connection between the

spiritual–anthroposophic movement and the Michael-being, the Christ event, and the destiny of “cosmic intelligence.” He described various groups of human souls who belonged to Anthroposophy in the twentieth century but had come to it by different paths and with different intentions. Each had a particular contribution to make to the future of the anthroposophical movement on Earth, he said, to what he saw primarily as the struggle for the future of human intelligence. If anthroposophists were able to “absorb Anthroposophy, from their very hearts, as the deepest life force over the next decades,”³⁸³ they would make a real, if not crucial, contribution to the humanization of intelligence by counteracting its ahrimanic–technological instrumentation and promoting a genuine, Sun-like and Michaelic heart thinking.

To instill greater awareness in the Anthroposophical Society of its own being and significance, Rudolf Steiner revealed its mystery background; the Anthroposophical Society was a true mystery community, in that, during the second millennium after Christ and under Michael’s guidance, the souls belonging to it had gone through profound experiences and rituals together in the spiritual world. In principle those experiences constituted a recapitulation of the ancient mysteries in Christian terms. What Steiner unfolded directly before the Christmas Conference was associated with these experiences shared in the past (as now became increasingly clear through the karma lectures), and it paved the way for the Christmas Conference and the new community it would initiate. Growing awareness of the mystery community they had joined as individuals was needed for enhanced cooperation imbued with awareness of one’s own karma *and* the destiny path of others as the real foundation of the “we” of joint tasks and responsibility. Souls that had been united by Michael before birth for future work in civilization were to find each other again in their mutually complementary activities in order to practice spirit recalling and move together toward the future.

