

# Ether

**Ether** (also spelled **aether**, **æther**, **aither**; from Greek: Αἰθήρ *Aither* "the clear (blue) sky") was the original name given by the Greeks to the blue sky, illuminated by sunlight and starlight, in which they saw the transition to a higher, non-material **etheric world** or to the **world ether**. In the Orphic hymns, the Aither is the soul of the world and the primordial element of all life.<sup>[1]</sup> Until the Archaic period, the Greeks were convinced that the soul ascends into the Aither after death and that only the dead body sinks down into the womb of Gaia (the personified Earth).<sup>[2]</sup> For the nomadic Mongols and Turkic peoples of Central Asia, it is the supra-personal sky god Tengri who represents the "eternal blue sky" (Mongolian: *Mönkh khökh Tengeri*), the upper world, the heavenly world. In it, the same power is revealed that was already called Tao on ancient Atlantis. In the Whitsun lecture held in Dornach on 4 June 1924, Rudolf Steiner described in detail how the ether is directly revealed through the blue of the sky (Lit.:GA 236, p. 238ff).

Later, Aristotle added the ether as the 5th element (**quintessence**) to the four-element doctrine. It is not to be confused with the hypothetical ether of classical physics, which was finally discarded at the beginning of the 20th century and which had been postulated as a medium for the propagation of light from the late 17th century onwards.



The violet south window of the first Goetheanum, showing the initiation into the cosmic etheric world.

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## In the blue of the sky the ether becomes visible

The blue of the sky reveals one of the two primordial phenomena of colour formation: if you look at a dark background through a bright opacity, i.e. in this case through the sun-drenched Earth's atmosphere, the background is brightened to violet and blue hues depending on the intensity of the opacity. At the same time, this reveals the world ether.

„Adjacent to this earth which we inhabit, which has its physical substances and its physical powers, is the general world ether. This general ether of the world becomes visible to us through the fact that, if we simply look into the ether, our visual space is limited; it then appears to be blue. But to believe that there are physical substances in the cosmos, as one imagines in materialistic thinking, is a childish idea.“ (Lit.:GA 239, p. 144)

## Etheric forces

Rudolf Steiner also refers to the **etheric forces** as universal forces, which - unlike the physical forces - act without potential and therefore also without energy expenditure from the cosmic periphery, shaping the living world, which is why Steiner also calls them peripheral forces. In their essence they are space-emptying suction forces; they do not work through space, but through the negative counter-space that can only be grasped by turning it upside down. The physical central forces act in exactly the opposite way as space-filling pressure forces.

„The ether has actually been a strange thing for science over the last 40 to 50 years. If one were to recite all the ether theories that have been put forward about the nature of the ether, then we would not soon be finished - until it is already the case today that quite a number of people claim that the ether is basically only the mathematics and mechanics that exist in space, which are actually only there as lines. Yes, basically, for many people the ether consists of differential quotients flying around; that is, calculated things at any rate. Well, at least a lot of thought has been given to this ether. That is very laudable, but this way nothing comes out about the ether. One must know that the ether has the opposite property to that of pressure. It sucks, the ether is the sucker. Through its own being it always wants to destroy spatial matter out of space. That is the essence of the ether. Where physical matter presses, the ether sucks. Physical matter fills space; the ether creates matter out of space. It is negative matter, but qualitatively negative, not quantitatively negative.“ (Lit.:GA 306, p. 102f)

Matter filling space forms centres from which gravity acts. In contrast, the space-emptying etheric forces - the "negative" matter - work through lightness, which radiates in from the cosmic periphery and is particularly significant for plant growth. Plants are formed in the interplay of heaviness and lightness. The plant world is etherically stimulated from all sides by the world thoughts that weave in the world ether.

## The different types of ether

More precisely, the ether is differentiated into various coarser and finer types of ether, which have arisen in the course of the world evolution. Rudolf Steiner distinguishes the following etheric states:

- the life ether,
- the sound ether,
- the light ether,
- the warmth ether, which is of cosmic origin, but at the same time forms the transition to the earthly (telluric) fire element and thus to the physical world in general, the basis of which are the four elements fire, air, water and earth.

„We have the ether of light, we have the ether of heat, but it actually has two parts, two layers; one is the earthly layer of heat, the other is the cosmic layer of heat, and they continually play into each other. In fact, we have not one but two kinds of heat, the heat that is actually of earthly, telluric origin, and that which is of cosmic origin. They constantly play into each other. Then we have air adjacent to the heat ether. Then would come water and earth, and above would come chemical ether, life ether.“ (Lit.:GA 230, p. 81)

Warmth with its physical and etheric or earthly and cosmic side forms the gateway between the sensual and the super-sensual world. Every change of state in the physical world is connected with such a transition of heat from the physical to the etheric or vice versa. No matter whether it is a change in the state of aggregation of a physical substance, whether the human being tenses his muscles through an impulse of will, or whether he only grasps a thought inwardly in a concentrated way, or whether a chemical reaction or a nuclear reaction takes place, such a transfer of heat always takes place. The I of man, the spiritual core of his being, lives in the warmth of the blood and can thereby directly intervene in the physical organism.

„What the organism produces in the way of inner warmth in our blood, of warmth which it conveys to us through all the inner processes, shows that in the processes of warming we have something to see like a blossoming of all other processes in the organism. The inner warmth of the organism penetrates up into the spiritual-soul and can transform itself into the spiritual-soul. That is the highest, the most beautiful thing, that through the power of the human body the physical can be transformed into the spiritual-soul. When all that is predisposed in the human earthly organism has become warmth and the warmth is transformed by the human being in the right way, then compassion and interest for other beings arise from the inner warmth. If we ascend through all the processes of the human organism to the uppermost level, the processes of warming, we pass, as it were, through the gate of the human organism, which is formed by the processes of warmth, up to where the warmth of the blood is utilised by what the soul makes of it. Through living interest for all beings, through compassion for all that is around us, we, by our physical life leading us up to the warmth, extend our spiritual-soul over the whole of earthly existence, and we make ourselves one with the whole of existence. It is a wonderful fact that the World Being has made the diversions through our physical organism in order to give us in the end the inner warmth which we human beings are called upon to transform in the earth mission through our I into living compassion with all beings.

Warmth is transformed into compassion in the earth mission! We use the activity of the human organism as heat for the spirit, so to speak. That is the meaning of the Earth Mission, that the human being as a physical organism is so embedded in the Earth organism that all physical processes finally find their completion, their crown, in the heat of the blood, and that the human being as a microcosm, in fulfilment of his destiny, in turn transforms this inner warmth in order to pour it out as living compassion and love for all that surrounds us. Through everything that we take into our soul out of living interest, our soul life is expanded. And when we have gone through many incarnations in which we have utilised all the warmth that has been given to us, then the earth will have reached its goal, which was to be fulfilled within the earth mission, then it will sink down as an earthly pall and be consigned to decay. And the totality of all those human souls will ascend who have transformed physical warmth into warmth of the heart. Just as the individual soul, when the human being has passed through the gate of death, ascends to a spiritual world after the physical corpse has been handed over to the earthly forces, so the earthly corpse will one day be handed over to the worldly forces, and the individual human souls will progress to new levels of existence. Nothing in the world will be lost. What the human souls have gained as fruits on earth will be carried over through the human souls into eternity.“ (Lit.:GA 128, p. 177f)

The warmth ether already developed together with the fire element on the Old Saturn, the light ether on the Old Sun together with the air element and the sound ether and the water element on the Old Moon. Only in the course of the Earth's development did the life ether form as the finest etheric state, while the solid, crystallised earth element settled downwards (Lit.:GA 13, p. 137ff).

## The etheric world

In the Jewish Kabbalah, the etheric world is called Jetzirah, also Jetzirah or Yetzirah (Hebrew: עולם יצירה *Olam Yetsirah*, the *world of shaping*). Together with the physical world built up from the four elements, it forms the physical-etheric world.

### World ether

The **world ether** surrounds the Earth like a supersensible atmosphere. The deeds of higher spiritual beings, which weave as world thoughts in the world ether, appear in it in etheric images. When we take off our etheric body after death, the thoughts we have formed during our life on Earth are also woven into the world ether.

„Let us assume that man enters through the gate of death. His etheric body is then discarded. That which he still sees remains somehow in the earth's environment for a relatively long time. I have characterised such things to you in the course of time. But that which the Angeloi, Archangeloi and Archai have woven goes so far out by being woven into the general etheric world that it unfolds in a wide sphere whose centre is the earth. So like a spirit atmosphere, the world ether surrounds the earth. And into this world ether is woven what we have spun out of our thoughts. Don't be anxious about where there might be room for all these tissues: the spiritual interpenetrates, and in this sphere all these tissues are inside.“ (Lit.:GA 174b, p. 168f)

### Earth ether

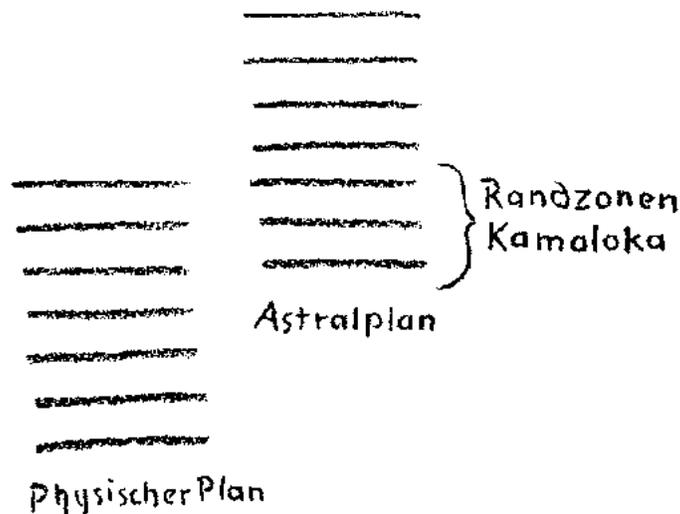
„And these forces of the earth ether, they are indeed etheric realisations of the spiritual which stands above them. If we look at the earth ether around us, we certainly find activity of spiritual entities in it, but in etheric images. The actual activity is above or within it. That which immediately surrounds us on earth is the activity which is projected down, which is actually first projected into the earth and is projected back from the earth into the earth ether. It is just as if the mirror images did not remain mere images, but as if they began to develop an activity of their own. Thus spiritual activity, which is actually radiated back from the earth into the ether, is present there. This spiritual activity is a real projection of spiritual activity.“ (Lit.:GA 227, p. 181f)

## The Kamaloka at the boundary of the physical-etheric and the astral world

→ *Main article: Kamaloka*

The Kamaloka is where the three uppermost regions of the physical-etheric world (light ether, sound ether and life ether) intersect with the three lowermost regions of the astral world (burning desire, mobile sensitivity and region of wishes); this is also the sublunary sphere:

„If we start from the physical plan, we have here (it is drawn) seven subdivisions of the physical plan; then would come seven subdivisions of the astral plan. Of these, the three lowest coincide with the three highest of the physical plan. We must regard the astral plan as being pushed together with the physical plan in such a way that the three uppermost sections of the physical plan are at the same time the three lowermost sections of the astral plan. We can speak of a marginal zone, that is, the one which our souls cannot leave after death, when they are still bound to the earth by desires. It is called kamaloka.“ (Lit.:GA 101, p. 223)



physical-etheric world	astral world	
	Region of soul life	
	Region of active soul force	
	Region of soul light	
	Region of liking and disliking	
Life ether	Region of wishes	
Sound ether	Region of mobile sensitivity	Kamaloka
Light ether	Region of burning desire	
Fire/Warmth ether		
Air		
Water		
Earth		

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