

The Lectures of Rudolf Steiner

What is Self Knowledge?

GA 108

The blockquotes below have been added for special emphasis of the content.

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Translated by Hanna von Maltitz

The day before yesterday we considered one the most important occult themes namely getting a glimpse into the Higher Worlds. Yesterday we had an open lecture in which we occupied ourselves with which method and tasks are needed to reach the stage when the slumbering soul's capabilities and powers can be awakened in order to make knowledge of the Higher Worlds possible. The theme to which we will apply ourselves today relates in a particular way to both of these, and stand in a certain relationship to all anthroposophical striving. What is so often expressed theoretically is that anthroposophic occult science can be nothing other than an all-encompassing, universal self-knowledge of mankind, a self-knowledge which leads to the deepest origins, the deepest existence of the individual "I" and how it is enclosed in World Knowledge. Not only, I can say, do you find this expressed often in theosophical literature and elsewhere, but is adhered to; genuine self-knowledge is an accompanying phenomenon which needs to run parallel with all real research into the areas of the Higher Worlds, running parallel with development of all our inner soul forces. The "Know Thyself" ancient human expression means a great deal, even much more so for the Anthroposophist. Today we want to explore that which we call in the occult scientific sense self-knowledge in relation to the most varied stages of human development. We will commence with the most ordinary, everyday self-knowledge and rise up to this self-knowledge which can be called World Knowledge in the anthroposophic sense; and to above all, relate each single element we discuss to what could be called "occult scientific" with constant consideration to the occult side.

Self-knowledge is considered so much more important within the anthroposophic world view because it, when understood correctly, can include the most High within anthroposophic striving, but falsely understood, can become extremely dangerous. Incorrectly understood self-knowledge tends to appear particularly at the beginning of the path of spiritual scientific striving which is pointed out in Anthroposophy, earlier rather than leading towards it. Goethe, with many references to this familiar field, once said that he has a particular distrust in the expression "self-knowledge," as it means something which the human being represents basically as some kind of false melancholy, self-anaesthesia, caught up in an incorrect channel. This is correct throughout. We always have an opportunity in the occult scientific field to gaze at the complexity of human nature when we remember what we all know: with anthroposophic insight we have human members in the physical body, which comprises the ether and astral body, and what we call the actual Ego- or "I"-carrier (*Ich-Träger*). When we look at that which we basically call the Self, with all these members linked to human nature, we easily come to the conclusion that self-knowledge is something extraordinarily complex.

To anticipate the simplest, humblest type of self-knowledge, we must remember to differentiate between these four members of human nature — according to the present relationships between these members — the wakeful and dreamless sleeping human being of which we can now say: the sleeping human being's physical and ether bodies are loosened from the astral and I-bearer and the latter two are outside the body. We know at the same time that it is normal in the present human cycle, that the human "I" can only become self aware when using physical organs, and make observations on the physical plane. Thus we speak as it were in a spiritual scientific sense if an I-bearer existing through those conditions called unconscious sleep. We have to say that this I-bearer only develops consciousness and self-consciousness while entering directly into the field of observation and use physical organs, thus taken up into the physical and ether bodies. There we have today's normal human self consciousness before us and need ask: what is the being of this self-consciousness at the lowest level? Better even is to describe the question thus: How does the human being, how do we, come to understand that which lives in the physical body from morning to night, using physical organs — how do we arrive at knowledge of this being, or even of the self? We can easily believe that we need to look within and thus investigate ourselves. Here we discover all possible kinds of self-knowledge which could be cultivated and recommended. For example a person is advised to observe what he or she does, what their characteristics and faults are, they should brood within and search for their worth, how efficient they appear in one or the other activity — that kind of thing. **Here already dangers arise in false understanding of self-knowledge and for this reason we must speak about these dangers. We always have it in mind that we should strive to rise towards the Higher Worlds. We also know that this rising up is something which makes a person quite different from what he or she was before, and therefore it is natural that various hindrances are encountered on the way. Through false self-knowledge the ascent becomes just as dangerous as it becomes firstly possible through genuine self-knowledge. This kind of self-knowledge which could rather be called the brooding of the everyday "I," an awareness of faults, is false and a danger which works backward in fact, because a comprehensive measure for judgement is missing.**

When a person, through ordinary consideration of his merits and faults says: "This you have done well, that you have not done well, you must improve," it appears that he has developed a measure with which to orientate himself. This measure becomes so to speak the yard stick for all which the person will portray in future. In this way a person will never rise above himself and this is exactly what **the Anthroposophist always recites to himself: "Don't remain stuck, on the contrary, again and again, step by step, move out of this fixed point" — a saying which should be taken to heart: Everything undertaken with reference to soul development as an advancement on your life path, is good; everything which holds you back at this point is basically a loss for the soul. — No self-knowledge which draws you into being overcome with remorse or drives one to self satisfaction, brings you forward.** Only if we want to reach the possibility to have insight into what really matters, must we ask the following question: On what does the human being usually depend? — You can easily consider the following: How would it have been in my imagination, my experiences and feelings if this individuality which has gone from one incarnation to the next and which will repeat future incarnations, how would it have been if this individuality had not, for instance, been born at such and such a date in Vienna, but rather about fifty years earlier in Moscow? What kind of experiences, feelings, imaginations, thoughts and ideas would this individuality develop to create the characteristic keynote of his life? Something quite different! **You easily realise with precise imagination when you reflect about it, how you, from morning to evening, going through your ideas and experiences, how much of this depends upon when and where you are situated in the world. Make an attempt to formulate a precise reckoning, drawing from your inner soul everything which is caused from the when-and-where of your birth.**

Now throw out all these images from your soul life. Try to ponder what is left over and try to meditate primarily on how many of these images, which from morning to night permeate the soul, have validity and value other than being linked to the place and time in your life between birth and death. As a result you will see how important it is for the "I" to carefully consider the extent of the influences of the where-and-when. This is not realised in what broods within, but realised through proper consideration of the poetic saying: If you want to examine yourself, learn to know about yourself through others — through your surroundings. Thus we are oddly enough directed away from the brooding soul to say: we should, in order to get to know our "I," encourage a watchful eye, an open sense for the unusual in the world content of the when-and-where into which we were born. The more we endeavour to develop this open perceptive sense towards the outer world surrounding us, so much more closely do we approach, in the spiritually scientific sense, that which at this basic level could be called self-knowledge.

Through taking a clear view and getting to know the entire tenor of our own time, let's try to clarify what, in the most manifold ways at our disposal, is the most unusual in our epoch and in the location in which we live. Highly individualistic is this self-knowledge, which directs us from ourselves towards our surroundings. Learning to know this outer world, we try to enter into the spirit of it and researching what has crystallized in ourselves as a result, we will recognise a mirror image of our Ego or "I." This is an objective way. Looking into oneself is a danger. The causes why one is like this, or like that, need to be recognised. This can be found in the surroundings, through this we are deflected from ourselves. As a result we acquire the capability to recognise ourselves, as far as we are an "I," through use of the physical organs and living amongst contemporaries.

The "I" is served by the organs of the ether-body, the life-body — the composition of this fine organism with which the anthroposophic occult scientist is familiar — penetrate the physical body and continuously fight against the physical body's disintegration. Similarly, when it dives down into the physical and etheric bodies in the morning, it works in the present human cycle in both bodies, including the etheric body. Nothing is added into our examination according to place and time, to when-and-where, but something else is added to the consideration. The ether body links to something quite different, which in a certain sense is tied even deeper to our self, something which surpasses birth and death. Here we discover a certain relationship the self brings along, something which had originated earlier and reaches into the future, something it already had, before it had been incorporated into a physical body. Seen from outside in a superficial manner, the ether body presents something extraordinary which we call talents, aptitudes, particular abilities and here we come to a certain connection which is an even more difficult area of self-knowledge. Although this which on a elevated level of higher development is called self-knowledge, even though still at a relatively low level, the human being here also doesn't come far when he or she broods in order to reach clarity: which are my talents and abilities?

Today it would go too far, to take as a basis the being of the human, regarding what I would like to say now. In self-knowledge lurk the worst enemies when we begin to search for clarity regarding talents and abilities through self-centred brooding. Right here we must shift our examination of the

environment from the personal to the impersonal. Next we need to link the examination, with reference to the area of the ether body, to our common bond with this or that race. We need ask ourselves to which member of mankind we actually belong. We will occupy ourselves with researching particularities of this group to which we belong through family, race and folk, in comparison with the universal qualities of the whole human race. **We get to know what continues through the hereditary stream, what develops from great-grandfather to grandfather and so on, and even what the self has as colouring in this hereditary line, which does not link directly with the when-and-where, but links to deeper basic laws of human existence. We learn to recognise these particularities within the laws and through this we find the right basis to which we can see how we rose from this background. However, everything brooded upon in examining this background is bad (Ubel). Anthroposophy demands an uncomfortable kind of self-knowledge from us compared with cliché filled alternatives, but in any other way we don't reach genuine self-knowledge, because a comparative measure is missing, because brooding on a single aspect fails to provide a measure with which to make a comparison.**

Now I want to immediately link up to occult facts. We all know that our human body is surrounded by an aura, embedded in this astral aura, which is visible to the clairvoyant like an oval cloud. As a result of being born at a certain time and a particular place, makes the mass of our aura distinctly particular. Should we have a very limited outlook and actually only experience and will only judge and be led by our own will impulses not visible from our surroundings, being a product of where-and-when, then the clairvoyant will see our aura appearing as if squeezed, pressed together. The aura in this case is not large and not wide around the physical body. The moment we widen our outlook, the very moment we develop our receptive sense, an "open eye" for the observation of our environment, others can actually see how our aura enlarges all around us, how it becomes inclusive in relation to the physical body. We become spiritually larger within, through spreading our horizons in relation to our world of understanding and feelings. For the clairvoyant awareness it becomes gradually more obvious how people, as an echo of their environment, have a small aura. When we start to refine our judgement, making it independent, in order to reach that which distinguishes us from the mere common, then clairvoyant consciousness is able to see the aura spreading, enlarging, as we become refined and more extensive.

Grotesque as it may sound — knowledge of the environment is the first step towards self-knowledge. Knowledge of the family and race is the second step. With someone who tries to become liberated in their feeling and will impulses from aspects instilled by folk, race, family and so on, the clairvoyant will see not only an expanding aura but the aura becoming mobile, displaying vibration in contrast to its earlier immobility. It was mentioned already — not directly but in a certain sense — that what we call these particular colourings and talents inter-relate with the hereditary line.

How can we lift ourselves beyond all that which stems from the defining base, the causes of inner structures of the self? Mankind has not accomplished much by getting to know itself this way. With reference to our talents and abilities as a rule, not much can be done when we build an imagination upon descent and inheritance, we will not get any further. Here only spiritual scientific experience is valid. It involves the following: out of spiritual scientific experience mankind can become independent from his talents and abilities. This healing remedy hardly seems applicable, not at all similar, yet still it is a healing remedy: when we try to develop a warm, heartfelt feeling for something which hardly interests us, for

something too bothersome to attempt involving our interested and especially if we make this interest many-sided, then we will lift our individuality out of our inherited abilities.

The first step, knowledge of the environment, will relatively soon be accomplished; the second — this self-education — only slowly transforms talents. Yes, attention must be drawn to the fact that now and then this incarnation must be renounced in order for the transformation of talents to be carried out, yet the way is introduced and it is extraordinarily important that we really try to do this. Clairvoyant vision will soon perceive how the aura becomes agile and vibrates. We will at least see the beginnings of transformation in our own nature. In this gradual resulting self-education there arises quite by itself what can be called impersonal self-knowledge.

Now we come to the third important area. We reach, through self-contemplation, what we express in our astral body — the bearer of desire and pain, of suffering and so on. The astral body is lifted during dreamless sleep out of the physical and etheric bodies. Ordinarily we are not aware of the astral body being separated from the physical and ether bodies. Clairvoyant consciousness can, but not common consciousness. What kind of rule in human nature will now express its characteristics in the astral body? Something is expressed from the self which we call karma, that which is particular to the self or the individuality, not only developed out of the hereditary stream but which continues from one incarnation to another, connected to individual deeds, with personal experiences of the soul, through incarnations. Our experiences through our bodies, and thus results from the law of cause and effect experienced in a purely spiritual way, bring us to the third step in examining self-knowledge.

We can ask: can a person do something in order to attain self-knowledge in this sphere? I could respond by explaining how difficult it is in the present human cycle to actually understand the working of karma. Take an example of how karma pre-determined an individual to undertake a journey, say in 14 days" time. He may take a decision that he has to do something three weeks later, ignoring karma because he knows nothing about his karma. Planning for the three weeks ahead, he organises everything, until he gets news that he needs to take the journey. **Now the two directional lines collide. His planning comes in direct opposition with the direction of his karma. We see through this, how karma always attaches something new. This way karma's aim is strengthened and interlinked. It has to be added that a person in his normal development can only with difficulty measure the way to his Self, his "I," while taking into consideration the karmic links; because he lacks clairvoyant consciousness through higher development and is unable to know what lies within his karma.**

Now the question arises: can we reach this point of self-knowledge in a normal life? I must straight away indicate the means which spiritual scientific experience gives us, which makes it possible for us not to overlook what is karmically correct and at a precise moment perform the right thing. **It is a totally false conception which one meets from time to time, namely that we are un-free due to karma. Karma does not make us un-free. Exactly by dint of our freedom can we do what karma gives rise to within us, at any given moment. Karma excludes nothing which allows the karmic line to weave and form links this way and that.** Can we do something in order to orientate ourselves towards our karma in such a way that our karma isn't counter-acted and as a result create more karmic causes, thus instead of bringing us forwards, only pushes us

backwards? There is one thing which helps us align ourselves ever more in the direction of our karmic stream, and this is something we nurture through our world view within anthroposophical circles, something often practiced and discussed. It is actually a mood of soul under the influence of the anthroposophic world view. It is that which we bring ever more into our karma. We must really orientate ourselves within the anthroposophic way: compliant individuals who only talk about it, that a person should become more profound, seek God within, will hardly direct a person any further on his or her path, rather it could bring them further by directing them away from themselves and offering a world view which makes the super-sensible world view possible. Everything that is offered in anthroposophy allows us to see into supersensible events. First of all if we aren't clairvoyant we need to absorb what is presented by clairvoyant research. It is frankly not necessary to be a clairvoyant just as little as if one takes a telescope or microscope in hand. That which the researcher shares in these fields is always understood through unquestionable logic. **The human being, we, must so to say make an instrument of ourselves, if we want to research the supersensible regions ourselves; however, *insight* can become everything without having to make ourselves into an instrument.**

When an anthroposophist builds an image for himself of what the Higher Worlds look like, how it approaches behind the sense perceptible realities, it influences his or her entire mood and life of feeling. **Once and for all we must speak right into the soul and not allow a comfortable reasoning: it doesn't depend on learning a great deal but rather that one has this or that moral principal. It is actually like this, with anthroposophic spiritual science learning can't be spared and whoever is on the wrong track, say: why bother with theory of Higher Worlds and so on?** Decidedly it depends on the anthroposophic way of thinking, a self-evident requirement: just like an oven warms a room when tinder is lit — so it is with people. If you stand and preach to the stove and say: "Lovely stove, your duty is to warm the room" — the room won't become warm. Merely preaching to people regarding their duty to love one another and so on, will come to nothing much. Setting ourselves up as moral preachers has little worth because moral preaching leaves human beings just as they are. When you heat the oven, the room warms up. Giving it heating offers the chance to heat the room. Giving the human being a world view which offers him or her Anthroposophy regarding supersensible facts, what follows is the first ground rule of the Theosophical Society — a general avowal of friendship and brotherhood — which is utterly necessary. The fundamental anthroposophic attitude must be there, but to merely repeat it doesn't help. Your step is sure when you enter into that *expression* which works for you in the world by including knowledge of the higher worlds and supersensible-world knowledge. Like plants tap into the sun, just so everyone strives for world knowledge, towards a central sun, and all other consequences capitulate by themselves. Thus it is with the anthroposophic way of thinking, revealed out of the spiritual scientific knowledge.

This is what makes it possible for us, in relation to our karma, to live out of ourselves. It deals more with the fact that we arrive at a moment when anthroposophic teaching can transform facts. It is necessary, that if karma is not to remain an abstract concept, that we attempt to bring in these karmic ideas on a trial basis at least, because we can't remain continuously in a state of self-contemplation in our everyday life of complexity and restlessness. It is necessary to consider the question: **what is karmic thinking?**

Take a radical example: someone has given another — me for instance — a slap in the face. What can be called in this case, "karmic thinking?" I was here in a previous life, and so was he. I had, perhaps in that previous life, given him a reason to justify his present actions; forced him to do it, simultaneously directed him towards it. I don't wish to theorize, I wish to make a hypothesis which

should become a life-hypothesis. Will he give me a slap if I think about it? No, he will not do it. I, myself, delivered this slap because I have put him in this place, I have lifted the very hand myself which was raised against me.

Further to this experience the following can be added: when you earnestly focus on examining this karmic idea, pose such a question now and then, in full earnestness and full honesty and you will really see the results. This no other person can prove for you. You must prove it for yourself by doing it. **As a result you will notice your inner-life becoming quite different. You experience quite different feelings, will-impulses regarding life and a totally different life shows its consequences: life will reveal itself in quite a transformed way. Whereas you had experienced great pain and disappointment before, now you accept this calmly, having been equilibrated as a result of how you acted and thought about it. Now the following happens, your soul life is flooded by a remarkable peace, a kind of legitimate comprehension of events which is in no way fatalistic.**

This is also the direction in which to focus, by gradually exploring the karma-idea and its inherent truth, if you want to bring it to a certain stage of development. The Karma-idea is open to argument. Whoever wants to present reasons may do so. Theoretically nothing can be proven except through a test and here experience needs to be added. Experience provides, when applied intensively, the tool with which to understand karma. As a result you notice a grouping of things — that indeed it is inherent in things — just like you notice, when you have a fantasy image, whether it actually has the reality of a steel bow when grasped. **Experience itself must create each combination of life's facts, through which we gradually, according to our own will forces, include these inner will-impulses into our lives. This complex work of our lives is one of the best remedies to achieve the third step which belongs to genuine self-knowledge. Through this you gradually learn to feel how present setbacks originate from an earlier life.**

This experience is not as easy as brooding within, because it has to originate and approach from the surroundings. Most importantly we need to move beyond ourselves, even in the highest self-knowledge, which is world-knowledge. Fichte said: "Most people will rather be a piece of lava in the moon than be their 'I.'" — Thus we learn to know the "I," in its selective existence, as more than just a point. This "I" we recognise as a selective copy of the whole world. In this sense self-knowledge is, if you will, God-knowledge, not in the pantheistic sense but like a drop of similar substance and wisdom is to an entire sea. How you as a result search for knowledge regarding the essential similarity between the Being and the nature of the entire sea, you are equal in being to the Godhead, who is recognised; yet it will not occur to anyone to explain the drop as the sea. We could recognise substance and the ocean's godly Being from the drop, but no one will be presumptuous and say knowledge of the drop is sufficient; surely everyone will say, for me relevance is in knowledge of the sea and what happens if I sail on it. You particularly learn to recognise the godly when you allow the drop of godliness to enter within, understand it within, but you comprehend that within you is only a drop or spark, nothing more, then you deepen yourself selflessly in the greater supersensible worlds in the highest way possible. Should we want to learn to know ourselves we must totally go out of ourselves and need to research the supersensible worlds in the most profound way.

For the third step, what's been said suffices, regarding reincarnation and karma. For the highest self-knowledge we must reach knowledge of the great cosmic relationships of our earth; because we are part of our earth like a finger is part of the whole organism. The finger doesn't create the illusion that it has an independent existence; cut it off and it is no longer a finger. If it could walk around our organism then it could give, like us, the illusion that it is an independent organism. The human being doesn't think that when he lifts himself for a couple of kilometres above the earth, he is no longer a human being. The human being is a member of the earth organism, the earth is again a member of the cosmos. This we can only see when we understand the basis of cosmic relationships. All thinking about the self without all-embracing world-knowledge, without grasping how the "I" need all aforementioned events, is in vain, without glancing over it we can't reach knowledge, also none of the "I"-Self. We reach knowledge about the daily-"I," when we search in the area of the when-and-where.

Knowledge, as expressed in the ether body, we find when we consider the inheritance line. Knowledge of the "I" living through the astral body, we find when we experience karma, and the last kind of knowledge, when we acquire world-knowledge; because there it is spread out but is condensed in a few points of the human "I." World-knowledge is self-knowledge.

When you present to your soul exactly what is described in the essays "out of the Akashic Records," how the development of the earth is described, which can appear quite strange to the soul, how it finally leads to the present configuration out of necessity, then you have self-knowledge through world-knowledge! Thus self-knowledge goes ever further and further out of us, always towards the impersonal. As with the application of karma in life resulting in the aura turning ever lighter, so through actual knowledge of cosmic relationships the aura becomes stronger and capable of shaping itself out of the original free impulses. Here you discover the answer to the question about freedom and bondage. Because freedom is the product of development, people are able to obtain this increasingly, the more they attain self-knowledge. Then you arrive, through such a practice of self-knowledge as described, at various things in the spiritual scientific fields and through genuine understanding, you can feel yourself enter the anthroposophic spiritual stream. Various things haunt like children's disease in the anthroposophic movement, which needs to fall away once such things are grasped, as they were given as directions to self-knowledge. The impersonal kind of anthroposophic knowledge will become ever more known. It is indeed achieved through that which has been gained from those researchers who not only transformed their souls into instruments of self-knowledge, but have also developed themselves — as had been related even today — and have come to impersonally reveal what the Higher Worlds offer. One of the first basic sayings which has to be conquered is the old, beautiful saying of the wise Greeks: "Whoever wants to attain wisdom dare not take notice of his own opinion." You will find that whoever has really experienced the spiritual scientific route, will say: Yes, my opinion doesn't provide much; I can give descriptions of experiences, but not regularization principles, not claims of action, and these descriptions should be taken as instructions flowing into the theory of occult science. **Opinions and points of view need be given up by the spiritual researcher. He has no point of view because all observations are like images originating from different points of view, which are as varied as people looking at the world from the most diverse angles. On the one side is the image of the materialistic standpoint, then from the other side that of a spiritual or a mechanistic or the easy-life observation. These are all observation angles. To not only recognise them theoretically but to live with every world view in order to create images as to how each observation creates a different side, that is the inner tolerance which is important here. One opinion shouldn't fight another. As a result an inner and from this an outer tolerance develops which we need if we, mankind, want to meet our healing in future.**

Particular value must be awarded to insight, that resulting ideas flowing through the anthroposophic world stream come as products of the impersonal. As a result we will arrive at eliminating from the anthroposophic movement that which was there in earlier times and is still there today: authority in the worst sense. Do we call the microscope an authority? It is a necessity, a gateway. So we too, should become gateways, but we must lift ourselves to the impersonal, because only through people can there come into the world, what must come. Belief in authority must be struck from the anthroposophic dictionary and for this very reason mankind attain, while living into this knowledge, an attitude of impartiality, so that they, through the personal can enter into the impersonal way of the world.

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