

The Lectures of Rudolf Steiner

The Practical Development of Thinking

GA 57

Berlin, 11th February, 1909

The anthroposophic spiritual science that is represented here — of course, always only piecemeal — is regarded by a lot of people who do not know or do not want to know it as a field of daydreamers and of such human beings who, as one says so easily, are not in the real, in the practical life. Indeed, someone who wants to inform himself cursorily with this or that brochure or with a single talk about the contents and the goal of spiritual science can easily get to such a judgment. That applies, in particular if he — like many others — is less willing on penetrating into the real spiritual fields or if he has all prejudices and suggestions which arise from our civilisation so numerous against such a field of research. Moreover, it is not so seldom today that the bad will is added, no matter whether consciously or unconsciously, then the judgement is ready: oh, this spiritual science deals with matters which the practical human being who wants to stand firmly with both feet on the ground of life should not care about!

However, spiritual science feels intimately related with the most practical fields of life, and where it is appropriately pursued, it places the greatest value on the fact that thinking, the most certain guide, experiences a practical development with the real practical life. Because firstly spiritual science should not be anything that hovers unworldly and otherworldly anywhere in the cloud-cuckoo-land and wants to deduct the human being from the usual everyday life. However, it should be something that can serve our life with all that we think, act, and feel at every moment. Secondly, spiritual science is in a certain sense a preparation of our soul for those levels of knowledge, by which the human being himself penetrates into the higher worlds. One often stresses that spiritual science has a value not only for the human being who already has open eyes to penetrate in the spiritual world, but that the healthy human mind, the unclouded reason and power of judgement are able to understand what the spiritual researcher knows about the higher worlds. For the acceptance of his communications has an infinite value for the human being, long before he himself can penetrate into the spiritual fields. One can say, spiritual science is for everybody a preparation to develop the higher organs of knowledge bit by bit slumbering in the soul by which the spiritual worlds become discernible to us.

We have already spoken partly; we will have still to speak partly about the different methods and performances, which the human being has to carry out in order to penetrate into the spiritual worlds. However, there is always an unconditional requirement: who wants to penetrate into the spiritual world, who wants to apply the methods exactly given by spiritual research, so that the spiritual senses are opened to him, that should never ever venture this way to the higher fields of life without standing on the ground of a healthy, a practically qualified thinking. This healthy thinking is the guide, the true leitmotif, in order to reach the spiritual worlds. Someone reaches them best of all using the methods of spiritual science who does not disdain to educate himself strictly to a thinking bound to reality and its principles. Indeed, if one speaks about the real practical thinking, one easily is contrary to practice, and probably practice of thinking in our world. One has only to remind of something that I have already often suggested here in order to characterise this. Many a person attributes practice to himself in our world. What is, however, practice about which today the so-called practical human beings talk? There is somebody apprenticed to a master. There he learns all those

performances and measures which were carried out for decades, maybe since centuries and which are strictly compulsory. He appropriates that all, and the less he thinks, the less he forms an independent, free judgement, the more he goes beaten tracks, the more the world considers him as practical, in particular those consider him who are active in this field. One calls this often impractical what differs only in the least sense from anything that one practises since long time. Maintaining such a practice is mostly not bound to reason, but only to force. Someone who has any position in life and has to carry out things in a way, which appears to be correct for him, insists that every other who is active in this field must do this just as he does it. If he has the power, he pushes everybody out who wants to go forward differently.

Life praxis consists of such conditions in many cases. Then the right also results, as for example in the case where a big progress should be implemented: The first German railway should be built from Fürth to Nuremberg. One consulted an eminently practical board, the Bavarian Medical Council, whether generally this railway should be built. One can read this judgement, even today. It reads, one should build no railway because the driving would ruin the nerves. However, if one wanted to build railways, one should fence them on the left and on the right with high wooden walls, so that passing persons would not get concussions. This is a judgement of practitioners. Whether one would consider these practitioners as practitioners even today, this is the question. Probably not.

Another example, which can show us whether progress originates from those who call themselves practitioners or from other people: you find it certainly very practical that one has no longer to go to the post office with any letter where the postage has then to be determined according to distance and weight. Only during the forties of the nineteenth century, the uniform letter postage was introduced in England. However, not a practitioner of the postal system invented it, but such a practitioner said when the matter should be decided in the parliament, firstly he did not believe that such an advantage arose, as Hill (Sir Rowland Hill, 1795–1879) calculated, and secondly the post-office building had to be extended. He could not imagine that the post-office building has to comply with the postal traffic and not vice versa the traffic with the post-office building. When the first railway should be built from Berlin to Potsdam, a practitioner said, namely that who let two stagecoaches go to Potsdam for many years: if people wanted to throw their money out of the window, one could build the railway. Because this practice of the so-called practitioners is so impractical, if the big issues of life are considered, one can become contrary to these practitioners if one speaks about the practical development of thinking. Something presents to the impartial observer in all fields of life that can show how it is with the real life praxis.

Once I experienced a quite vivid example, what practical thinking can prevent. A friend of my study time came once excitedly with red head to me. He said, he must immediately go to the professor and inform him that he has made a great invention. Then he came back and said, he could speak the expert only in one hour, and then he explained his invention to me. It was a device, which set a machine in motion expending a very small quantity of steam power only once supplied, and then this machine perpetually performed an immense work. My friend himself was surprised that he was so clever to make such an invention, which exceeded everything and made good economic sense. I said to him, he should trace back the matter to a simple thought. I said, "Imagine, you stand in a railroad carriage and you try to push against the walls of the carriage in order to move it. If you succeed in moving the carriage standing and pushing in it, your engine is good, because it is based on the same principle."

At that time, I realised that a main obstacle of all practical thinking can be called with a technical term: one is a "carriage pusher from within!" This fits the thinking of many people; they are "carriage pushers from within." What does that mean? That one is only able to survey a certain narrow field

and to apply to this field what one has learned to this field. However, one is also forced to stop within this field and cannot see at all that everything changes substantially, as soon as one exits from the "carriage."

This is one of the principles, which one has to follow above all with a practical development of thinking: that every human being who is active in any field must try to connect it with adjacent fields regardless of his own activity. Otherwise, it is impossible that he gets to a practical thinking. For this is a peculiarity which is connected with a certain internal sluggishness that the human thinking likes to be encapsulated and forgets what is outdoors, even if it is palpable.

I have recently stated in other connections that one wants to prove the Kant-Laplace theory: Once the universal nebula was there. This started rotating by any cause; the single planets of the solar system separated bit by bit and received the movement, which they have still today. One makes this very clear in a school experiment, the so-called Plateau (Joseph P., 1801–1883, Belgian physicist) experiment: one gives an oil drop in a vessel with water. Then one cuts out a disc of cardboard as the equator. One lays this under the oil globule. Then one pierces it with a needle, rotates the needle — and small oil globules separate in the equator area like planets, and they move around the big globule. One has committed something very impractical in intellectual respect: the experimenter has forgotten himself what is sometimes rather good; he has forgotten that he himself has turned the thing. For one is not allowed to forget the most important of the matter. If one wants to explain an experiment, one has to invoke all things in the field to which it comes down; these are the essentials.

The first that must exist with that who wants to experience a practical development of thinking is that he confides in reality, in the reality of thoughts. What does this mean? You cannot scoop water from a glass without water. You cannot take out thoughts from a world without thoughts. It is absurd if one believes that the whole sum of our thoughts and mental pictures exists only in us. If anybody disassembles a clock and reflects the principles of its construction, then he must suppose that the watchmaker has joined the parts of the clock first according to these principles. Nobody should believe that one could find any thought from a world, which is not created and formed according to thoughts. All that we learn about nature and its events is nothing else than what must be put first into this nature and its events. It is no thought in our soul, which has not been outdoors in the world first. Aristotle said more correctly than some modern people did: what the human being finds in his thinking last exists in the world outdoors first.

However, if anybody has this confidence in the thoughts, which are contained in the world, then he sees very easily that he has to educate himself at first to a thinking full of interest in the world. He has to educate himself to that great, beautiful ideal of thinking as it distinguished Goethe: the concrete thinking, that thinking which isolates itself as little as possible from the things, that sticks to the things as intensely as possible. Heinroth (Johann Christian August H., 1773–1843, physician, formed the term "psychosomatics"), the psychologist, used a sentence concerning Goethe that his thinking is a concrete one, where the thoughts express nothing else than what is included in the things themselves and that in the things nothing else is searched than the real creative thought. If anyone has this confidence, this faith in the reality of thoughts, he easily realises that he can educate himself in harmony with the environment, in harmony with reality to a practical, healthy thinking not receding from the things.

One has to take into consideration three ways if the human being really wants to take on an education to practical thinking: firstly, the human being must and should develop an interest in the surrounding reality, interest concerning facts and objects. Interest in the environment, this is the magic word for the education of thought. Secondly, desire and love of that which we do. Thirdly, the satisfaction of that which we reflect. Who understands these three things: interest in the

environment, desire, and love in the activities and the satisfaction of contemplation soon finds that these are the main demands of a practical development of thinking. Indeed, the interest in our environment depends on matters that we discuss with the next talks when we speak about the invisible members of the human nature and about the temperaments.

The biggest enemy of thinking is often thinking itself. If anybody thinks that only he himself can think and the things would not have any thought in themselves, he is hostile, actually, to the practice of thinking. Imagine that a person would have formed some narrow mental pictures of the human being, would have made a few stereotyped schematic concepts of the human being. Now any human being faces him who has roughly the qualities, which fit his pattern. Then he is ready with his judgement and does not believe that this human being can tell him anything particular. If we approach anything that surrounds us with the feeling that any fact can tell us something particular, that we are not entitled at all to let judge something else about the things than the things themselves, then we soon notice which fruits such concrete sense bears. The confidence that the things can tell us much more than we are able to say about the things is again such a magic ideal of the practice of thinking. The things themselves should be the educators of our thinking, the facts themselves.

Imagine once that a person brings himself to use the following two important means of education for his practical development of thinking: he opposes himself with any fact, for example, that somebody has done a walk to this or that place just today. He experiences that at first. Now the person concerned wants to educate his thinking. There it is good if he says to himself, I have experienced this and that, now I want to contemplate how the today's event was caused yesterday, the day before yesterday and so on. I go back and try to form a view from that which goes forward to that which could have been. If I have selected such an event and the cause of it after my intellectual imagination, then I can investigate whether the real cause complies with my thoughts. I have something very important from such compliance or non-compliance. If my thoughts comply with that which I can know as the cause, then it is good. In most cases, this will not be the case. Then one investigates in what one was deceived and tries to compare the wrong thoughts with the right course of the events. If one does this repeatedly, one notices that one no longer makes mistakes after a shorter or longer time, but that one can liberate such a thought from a fact, which corresponds, to the objective course of the events.

Alternatively, one does the following: again, someone takes an event and tries to construct in thoughts what can result tomorrow or in some hours from this event. Now he waits quietly whether that happens which he has thought himself. In the beginning, he experiences that this is not right which he has thought. However, if he continues this, he sees thinking immersing itself in the facts that it does not form any mental pictures for itself, but that the thoughts proceed as the things proceed. This is the development of the factual sense. If he even forbids to himself to form abstractions, then he experiences that he grows gradually together with the things and that he obtains a sure judgement.

There are people who are directed by a certain sure instinct to such a thinking. This is because they are already born with special dispositions to develop such a thinking. Such a person was Goethe. He had grown together with the things so that his thinking did not proceed in the head, but in the things inside. Goethe, who was once a lawyer, had a healthy power of judgement and a sure instinct to tackle the things. There was no long referring to documents and reviewing of documents if a case had to be undertaken. Goethe did not allow that. It was a practitioner.

If once all documents of the Weimar minister Goethe are published — I have seen big parts of them — then the world will recognise Goethe as an eminently practical nature, not as a quixotic human being. One knows that he accompanied his Grand Duke with the training of recruits to Apolda (small town near Weimar). He observed everything that took action — and, besides, he wrote his *Iphigenia*. Compare to it what disturbs a modern poet at work. Moreover, Goethe was a much greater poet than anyone was who is not allowed to be disturbed today. Because of the eminently practical thinking, he could also say, for example, if he looked through the window: today we cannot go out, because it will be raining in three hours. — He had done cloud studies, but had put up no theory. It was in such a way that from his thinking developed what developed in nature outdoors. One calls this concrete thinking. One obtains such concrete thinking if one does such exercises in particular as I have just stated them. However, this is connected with a certain unselfishness, as strange as this sounds. However, there are principles also in the soul, and someone will not attain very much who thinks only of himself if he does such experiments. If he looks, for example, at a fact and says then immediately, ah, have I not said it? Therefore, this is the most certain obstacle of practical thinking. Thus, we could state many things to show how one can systematically develop the sympathetic adherence of the thoughts to the things, so that one learns to think in the things.

The second is desire and love of all we do. They really only exist if we can renounce success. Where it depends only on success desire and love are not undimmed. Hence, not anyone who is dependent on success can develop that rest in trying which is necessary, so that desire and love of activity can inspire us bit by bit. By nothing, we learn more than by lending a hand to everything possible and renouncing the so-called success. I knew somebody who had the habit to bind his schoolbooks himself (*Steiner himself*). It looked bad, but he thereby learnt enormously. If he had looked at the success, he would have maybe refrained from it. However, just in the activities we develop the qualities, the talents that enable us to become dexterous up to the movements. We never become dexterous if we look at the success of our activities in particular. If we are not able to say to ourselves, the failures in our activities are as dear to us as our results, we never reach the second level, which is necessary if one trains thinking.

Thirdly, we have to find satisfaction in thinking itself. This is something that appears so unambitious and is mostly combated today. How often does one hear saying, why have our children to learn this and that? They cannot need this in the practical life. — This principle to think only what one can need is the most impractical principle. There must be areas for a human being if he wants to think practically where the mere activity of thinking grants satisfaction to him.

If a human being does not find time, may it be only short, to do something that he does purely intellectually and that satisfies him intellectually, he can remain always only on beaten paths. If he finds, however, such a thing that he does only because of his inner interest, then he has something that has a big, strong effect on him, on his finer organisation, on the finer structure of his organism. Never work the things on us creatively, which captivate us to life, which enslave us; they wear out our talents, they take vitality from us. The things, however, which we do intellectually only to our satisfaction create vitality, new talents and they go into the subtlest organisation of our being and increase the subtle structures of our organism. Not by working for the benefit of the outside world, but by working to our satisfaction we create something by which we advance a developmental step. If we approach practice with this finer organisation again, this affects the practice, and everybody can see that it is right.

Take a painting, for example, the Sistine Madonna by Raphael, and put a human being and a dog before it. The painting makes a different impression on the human being and the dog. The same applies to the life praxis. If one remains captivated in life, the things always make the same impression on us, and one is not able to intervene creatively. If anyone develops a level higher in his

activity of thinking, he faces the impressions as the same being in two different forms. He faces it once with that on which he has not yet worked, the other time with that on which he has worked. He becomes more and more practical because the impressions, which make the things on us, are raised more and more. Hence, there is loss of time, indeed, if one does such a thing that does not belong to life praxis directly, however, it promotes life praxis extraordinarily indirectly.

These are the three levels of any practical development of thinking: interest in the environment, desire, and love of all trying and working, and perpetually controlling oneself. You see, for example, such an astute man like Leonardo da Vinci already describing the way in which one can advance just while trying. He does not despise to say how one can appropriate the art of drawing bit by bit. He says, draw on tracing paper, put what you have drawn on the template, and look at that in which the drawn differs. Then make it once again and try — doing so — to do the right thing at the wrong places. — Thus, he shows how it depends on working with desire and love. The third is the satisfaction within contemplation that refrains from the external world and can quietly rest in itself. These are such things that can show us first that we grow into a real practice of thinking by the trust in the thoughts in nature, in the world building of thoughts. However, if we also believe that thinking itself is a creative force, we advance. Someone does much for the practical development of his thinking who does the following systematically: he thinks about something, for example, about what he has to do or about a question of the worldview, it may be anything usual or anything of the highest. If he is out now to find a solution quickly, then he develops no practical thinking as a rule. This rather means saying to himself: you are as little as possible allowed to interfere, actually, in your own thoughts. — Besides, most human beings can imagine nothing at all if one says this. This is a main requirement: that we open ourselves to the thoughts in ourselves that we get used to becoming the scene of the work of our thoughts. We could think, there would be only one single way to accomplish a certain thing, or only one single answer to a question. Nevertheless, we are no dogmatists to whom only one single answer is right.

If we want to learn practical thinking, we have to try to give ourselves also another answer, maybe also a third one, or a fourth. There are things to which one can think ten sorts of answers. One has to imagine them all carefully, of course, only such things where this is possible, not with such ones, which must be made quickly; one often makes them rather badly than too slowly. If one has ten possible solutions, one carries out each in thoughts with love. Then one says, I want to think no longer about it, I wait until tomorrow and open myself to the thoughts. These thoughts are forces that work in my soul, even if I am not at all involved with my consciousness. I wait until tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, and then I cause this thought again in myself. — Maybe I do this still a second or a third time, and each time I survey the single things much clearer and can then decide better than before. This is an incredible schooling of practical thinking presenting different possible solutions of a thing in thoughts to oneself, to allow them to rest and to take up them later again.

Who does this for a while notices that his thinking becomes versatile, that he develops presence of mind and repartee by a certain practice. Then he grows together with life until the most usual things and recognises what is clever and clumsy, what is wise, and what is foolish. It does not come into his mind to behave in such a way as often so-called practical persons behave. I already had to know many practical persons who can use the beaten paths of their occupation very well; if you see such persons in other situations, for instance, at travelling, their practice is often rather odd. The proof that the practical development of thinking can lead to real life praxis is founded in experience. This works up to the hands, up to the way to seize something. Much less, you drop plates and pots than other persons if you work in such way on your inside. Practical thinking works up to the limbs. If it is carried out actively and not in the abstract, it makes pliable and flexible.

However, impractical thinking is most obvious where the practice of thinking should work, for example, in science. I have stated the hypothetical astronomic experiment as an example. One often experiences, how frightfully impractical just the scientists of today are. I do not attack the real methodical work, the excellent activity of our science in the slightest. Nevertheless, the thoughts, which the modern human beings form, are often almost dreadful. Our microscopes and the photograph are very well developed. One can observe all possible mysterious facts in the various little beings. One observes plants and sees certain strange things in these plants, possibly faceted organs like the eyes of a fly, and one even sees a sort of lenses in some plants at this or that place.

One observes with other plants that certain insects are attracted, and then the plants close their leaves and catch the insects. One has excellently observed that all. How does the present impractical thinking explain these phenomena? One confuses the human soul, which reflects the outer processes internally, with that which one observes purely externally in the plants. One talks about the ensoulment of the plant, and one throws plant soul, animal soul and human soul in a mess. One throws this in a mess. Indeed, I object nothing to the marvellous observations of nature, which are popularised in the world. However, the thinking of our contemporaries is confused if anybody says, certain plants have their stomachs at the surface with which they draw in the food and devour it. This thought is approximate in such a way, as if anybody says: I know a being, this is organised artfully and has an organ in itself by which something like a magnetic force is exercised on little living beings, so that they are drawn in and are devoured; this being, which I have in mind, is the mousetrap! This thought is completely the same as that which assumes the ensoulment of the plant. You could speak in the same sense of an ensoulment of the mousetrap as you talk about the ensoulment of the plant if you really thought in this peculiar way.

The matter is that one is able to penetrate into the very own nature of thinking, and that one becomes no "carriage pusher from within" in such fields. Something else is important for the practical development of thinking and this is that one has confidence in the inner spiritual organ of thinking. With most human beings, the benevolent nature provides that this spiritual organ of thinking is not ruined too very much because the human being must sleep.

Because the spiritual does not stop then, because it is there always, this organ of thinking works for itself and the human being cannot ruin it perpetually. However, it is quite another matter if the human being allows nature to take care of thinking with important and serious facts of life only, or if he himself takes this in hand. It is a very important principle to let the organ of thinking work in yourselves. You are practicing this best of all if you try not to think for a while, howsoever short. A big, immense decision belongs to it to sit or to lie somewhere without letting thoughts go through the head. It is much easier to let your thoughts surge up and down in yourselves, until you are released from them by a good sleep than to tell yourselves: now you are awake and, nevertheless, you do not think, but you think nothing at all. If you are able to sit or to lie quietly and to think nothing with full consciousness, then the organ of thinking works in such a way that it gains strength in itself, accumulates strength. Who puts himself in the situation over and over again not to think with full consciousness notices that the clearness of his thinking increases, that in particular repartee grows because he does not only leave his apparatus of thinking to itself by sleep, but that he lets this apparatus of thinking itself work under his guidance.

Only somebody who has taken leave of his spiritual senses can believe that then it is not thought at all. Here the word applies that Goethe says about nature: "She has thought and thinks continuously."

In addition, the innermost nature of the human being has thoughts, even if the human being is not present with his conscious thoughts. Nevertheless, in the case where he is not at all with his thinking, something thinks in him of which he is not aware. At these moments, if he lies there without his own personal thoughts, something higher really thinks in him, and this higher works tremendously educating on him. This is essential and important that the human being also lets the superconscious, the divine work in himself, which does not announce itself directly but in its effects. You become a clear and glib thinker gradually if you have dedicated yourselves to such exercises of thinking. A certain energy belongs to it to carry out such exercises of thinking.

You realise at the single examples, which I have given today, how one can develop this thinking with own strength. I could only give some examples of self-education of thinking, but these examples have shown that one is able to point to real remedies of thinking whose fruits life and experience can give only.

Who exercises his thinking that way experiences that — on the one side — he can go up to the highest fields of spiritual life, that he can use this thinking — on the other side — also in the everyday life. What one gains with the overview of the big spiritual facts one should apply to practical life. All fields of the everyday life, education in particular, could experience a tremendous fertilisation because of this, and another view of life praxis would make itself noticeable all around us. In addition, someone who wants to develop the qualities slumbering in him in order to penetrate to the spiritual fields would have a sure base and stand firmly in life. This is something that one has to demand absolutely, before anybody penetrates to the higher spiritual fields. In addition, the usual science would be able to attain tremendous knowledge if it is fertilised by spiritual science.

The carriage pushers of thinking who fancy themselves often as great practitioners do not have this practical thinking; they lack it. They are not able to lead back something to a simple, comprising thought. Spiritual science gives us this: it enables us to survey what is usually small and detailed in life, with big, comprising viewpoints. The human being thereby gets the survey because he is able to think from great viewpoints into the details; then he is led to real life praxis.

We can take Leonardo da Vinci as an example, who was a practitioner in many fields. He said, theory is the captain, and practice is the soldiers. — Who wants to be a practitioner without controlling the viewpoints of practical thinking is like someone who goes on board a ship without compass, he does not have the possibility to steer the ship correctly. Goethe showed repeatedly from his practical way of thinking how just scholarship gets by impractical thinking to infertile fantasising. There are people, who lead the outside world back to atoms, and others who lead them back to movements; others deny any movement. On the other hand, the most practical thinkers point to the fact that simplicity comes from the greatness of the worldview. Goethe's dictum is suitable, and we can put it before our eyes:

*Some hostile may occur,
Keep quiet, remain silent;
And if they say
There is no movement,
Walk around right
Under their noses.*

Source: <https://rsarchive.org/Lectures/GA057/English/eLib2014/19090211p01.html>



Read & Write @ kennethmdouglass.com