

The Lectures of Rudolf Steiner

The Nature of the Thinking Soul and of Meditation

GA 17

A Road to Self-Knowledge, Chapter 1, 1918

In waking consciousness human thought is like an island in the midst of the stream of the soul's life, which flows by in impressions, sensations, feelings, and so forth. We have to a certain degree finished with an impression or a sensation when we have formed an idea concerning it, that is, when we have framed a thought which throws light on the impression or sensation. Even in a storm of passion and emotion, a certain degree of calm may set in, if the ship of the soul has worked its way to the island of thought.

The soul has a natural confidence in thinking. It feels that if it could not have this confidence, all stability in life would be lost. The healthy life of the soul comes to an end when it begins to doubt about thinking. For even if we cannot arrive at a clear understanding of something through thought, we may yet have the consolation that clearness would result if we could only rouse ourselves to think with sufficient force and acuteness. We can reassure ourselves with regard to our own incapacity to clear up a point by thinking; but the thought is intolerable that thinking itself would not be able to bring satisfaction, even if we were to penetrate as far into its domain as was necessary for gaining full light on some definite situation in life.

This attitude of the soul with regard to thinking underlies all human efforts after knowledge. It may be dulled in certain moods of the soul, but it is always to be found in the soul's dim feelings. The thinker who doubts the validity and power of thought itself is deceived about the fundamental state of his soul. For it is often really his acuteness of thought which, being overstrained, constructs doubts and perplexities. If he did not really rely on thinking, he would not be tormented with these doubts, which after all are only the result of thinking.

One who develops in himself the feeling here indicated with regard to thought, feels that the latter is not merely something which he is cultivating in himself as a human force of the soul, but also something which quite independently of him and his soul bears within itself some Being of a cosmic nature, a Being to whom he must work his way, if he intends to live in something which belongs at the same time to him and to the world that is independent of him.

There is something deeply tranquillising in being able to surrender oneself to the life of thought. The soul feels that in that life it can escape from itself. This feeling is as necessary to the soul as the opposite one of being able to be wholly within itself.

In the necessary change between these two conditions lies the healthy rhythm of the soul's life. Waking and sleeping are really only the extremes of these conditions. When awake the soul is in itself, living its own life; in sleep it loses itself in the universal life of the world, and is therefore to a certain extent freed from itself. The conditions in either direction correspond to the various inner experiences. And the life of thought is a release of the soul from itself, just as feeling, sensation, emotional life, and so forth are the expression of the soul remaining within itself.

Looked at in this way, thought offers to the soul the consolation which it needs when face to face with the feeling of utter loneliness in the world. It is possible to arrive in quite a legitimate way at the feeling, "What am I in the current of universal cosmic events, flowing from one infinity to another — I with my feelings, desires, and will which surely can be of importance to me only?" Directly the life of thought has been rightly realised, this feeling is confronted by another. "The thought which is concerned with these cosmic events draws into itself me and my soul; I am living in those events when I, through thinking, let their being flow into me." It is then possible to feel oneself taken into the universe and secure therein. From this condition of the soul, a strength ensues, which feels as though it had come from the cosmic powers themselves, in accordance with wise laws.

It is but another step from this feeling to that in which the soul says, "It is not only I who think, but something thinks in me; the cosmic life expresses itself in me; my soul is only the stage upon which the universe manifests itself as thought."

This feeling may be repudiated by this or that philosophy. It may, with various reasons, be made apparently quite obvious that the thought which has just been expressed, of the world thinking itself in the human soul, is entirely erroneous. In answer to this it must be realised that this thought is one which can be worked out through inner experience. Only one who has thus worked it out fully understands its validity, and knows that no refutations can shake that validity. One who has thus mastered it sees from this very thought, quite clearly, what so many refutations and proofs are really worth. They may appear infallible when you still erroneously believe in the convincing power of their content. In that case it is difficult to come to an understanding with people who consider such proofs as conclusive. They are bound to think another person mistaken, because they have not yet accomplished the inner work within themselves which has brought him to a recognition of what seems to them erroneous, or perhaps even absurd.

For one who wishes to find his way into spiritual science, meditations such as the foregoing on thinking are of benefit. For such a person it is a question of bringing his soul into a condition which gives it access to the spiritual world. Access may be denied to the clearest thinking or to the most perfect scientific method, if the soul does not bring anything to meet the spiritual facts, or the information about them ready to press in upon it. It may be a good preparation for the apprehension of spiritual knowledge to have felt frequently what invigorating force there is in the attitude of soul which says, "I feel myself to be one in thought with the stream of cosmic events." In this case it is less a question of the abstract value of this thought as knowledge, than of having often felt in our souls the powerful effect which is experienced when such a thought flows with force through the inner life and circulates like a breath of spiritual oxygen through the soul. It is not only a question of recognising what there is in a thought of this kind, but of experiencing it. The thought is recognised when once it has been present in the soul with sufficient power of conviction; but if it is to ripen and bear fruit which shall promote understanding of the spiritual world, its beings and facts, it must, after having been understood, be made to live in the soul again and again. The soul must again and again be filled with the thought, allowing nothing else to be present in it, and shutting out all other thoughts, feelings, memories, and so forth. Repeated concentration of this kind on such a thoroughly grasped thought draws together forces in the soul which in ordinary life are to some extent dissipated. The soul concentrates and strengthens these forces within itself, and they become the organs for the perception of the spiritual world and its truths.

The right way in which to meditate may be learned from what has just been pointed out. We first work our way through to a thought which may be realised with the means that lie ready to hand in ordinary life and knowledge. Then we plunge into that thought again and again, and make ourselves completely one with it. The strengthening of the soul is the result of living with a thought which has thus been recognised. In this case the above thought was chosen as an example which was derived

from the very nature of thinking. It was chosen as an example because it is very specially fruitful for meditation. But what has been said here holds good, with regard to meditation, for every thought which is acquired in the way that has been described. It is especially fruitful for meditation when we know the state of soul which results from the above-mentioned rhythmic swing in the life of the soul. By that means we arrive in the surest way at the feeling of having been in direct touch with the spiritual world during our meditation.

And this feeling is a sound result of meditation. The force of it should give strength to the rest of our daily life, and not in such a way that an ever-present impression of the meditative state is present the whole time, but so that one feels that from the meditative experience strength is flowing into our whole life.

If the state brought about by meditation extends through daily life as an ever-present impression, it diffuses something which disturbs the mental ease of that life. And the state of meditation itself will not then be sufficiently pure and strong. Meditation gives the best results when through its own character it is kept apart from ordinary life. It influences life in the best way when it is felt to be something distinct from and raised above ordinary life.

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