

Running Head: Contemporary Esotericism: Anthroposophy

Contemporary Life and the Esoteric Path of Anthroposophy

By Seth Miller

“Though it is easy, the easy is hard.” – Goethe

Introduction

It seems to be a simple fact that regardless of the historical time period in which a given culture develops, there will always exist unique individuals for whom the exoteric answers maintained by the outer culture (with its various institutions, including religion) are insufficient. Often this feeling arises when an individual has personal experiences which lead him or her to ask what at first may seem obvious or even innocuously simple questions, such as: “Who am I?”, “Where do I come from?”, and “Where am I going?”. When the individual reflects upon the answers given by the surrounding culture, he or she is left with the feeling that something is missing. This feeling can only come to consciousness when the individual has the capacity for a truly inward experience of his or her soul in its universal nature, apart from its cultural background – for everyone else, the given cultural disposition is sufficient to carry one through all the problems and joys of everyday life. If the individual decides to pursue the line of questioning without simply relying upon the ‘given’ cultural milieu for direction, he or she may be called an *esotericist*, in the de facto sense that the individual’s development from this point onward takes on a character that with respect to the outer culture, is hidden (Steiner 1994a).

The ‘esoteric drive’ of inner curiosity has produced such individuals in every culture and time period in which we care to look, and sometimes small societies are formed by like-minded individuals to provide a soil in which this esoteric drive may be tended so that it may flower and bear fruit. It is often because of records left by members of such societies, whether official or de facto, that we now can speak of different esoteric ‘paths’ around which the groups formed. The term ‘path’ is appropriate because, in accordance with their origin in a certain kind of inner curiosity, the method by which such questions were addressed was often more important than the

particular answers received by an individual along the way; i.e. it is a path because it is something which traces out the willfully directed movement and activity of the individual.

Now, it is a fact that life as it exists today for “Western”¹ individuals is of a very different nature than at various times in the past or other places even in the present. In addition to having marked differences arise by virtue of our technological saturation (from watches to computers to genetic engineering), we are faced with a culture in which media is ever-present, social plurality and dissociation are inescapable, and in which scientific materialism with its associated capitalistic economics dominate the forces that touch our lives. What of a contemporary “Western” individual whose inner curiosity leads them to the esoteric in today’s environment? To what extent can the esoteric drive find a lawful expression in an individual with this cultural background? Is contemporary Western life incompatible with esoteric paths in general, in the sense that they contain too many mutually exclusive requirements which an individual cannot possibly satisfy? If not, then what might a truly contemporary esoteric path look like, and how might it be constructed so as to appropriately meet the needs of individuals today in both their esoteric and exoteric lives? No single answer to this question can lay exclusive claim to the truth. However, by examining how one successful contemporary esoteric path, that of anthroposophy, addresses this question, we may be able to gain some general wisdom. It will not be possible to present in this paper an overview of the actual insights gained from following this path, as they are contained in over 6000 lectures and some 30 books constituting the written works of its founder, along with countless other works published by anthroposophists over the last century. It will be possible only to indicate something about the general method utilized in

¹ In this paper, the term “Western” will refer in no way to race or even strictly to any geographical area, but instead is meant to convey something of the *mood* of a culture with respect to certain aspects of its manifestation, viz. mechanism, media saturation, capitalism, materialism, individualism, etc.

anthroposophy, and its applicability to the constitution of contemporary Western individuals who find themselves to be esotericists in the de facto sense mentioned above.

The Anthroposophical, or Rosicrucian Path

Anthroposophy, or spiritual science, is an esoteric movement which was established at the beginning of the last century by Dr. Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) in Western Europe. Presently centered in Dornach, Switzerland, anthroposophy has active branches on every continent. Although drawing upon esoteric traditions from around the world, anthroposophy is not simply a representation of old knowledge in a new form (as the bulk of Theosophy is), but is rather based on original spiritual research by Steiner and others. Even though this path is an esoteric path, Steiner is very clear that “anyone can set out on the esoteric path; it is closed to no one. The mysteries are present in the breast of each human being. All that is required is serious inner work and the possibility to free ourselves of all the fetters obstructing this subtle inner life.” (1999) In fact, the “esoteric” is regarded as such primarily by virtue of the fact that in order to gain insights into the domain in question, certain preconditions must first be met. “Just as higher mathematics would be incomprehensible to the simple peasant who had never before encountered it, so is occultism incomprehensible to many people today. Occultism ceases to be ‘occult,’ however, when one has mastered it.” (Steiner 1995) These insights, along with the recognition that “no one tells you to become an esotericist; people come to esotericism of their own volition,” (Steiner, 1999) provide a practical framework for entrance into esotericism within which the individualism prominent in Western peoples can maintain itself.

Steiner was uniquely aware of the development of humanity throughout the ages, and was able to bring a spiritual perspective to that development. Within this larger context, Steiner

discovered a means by which Western individuals could consciously place themselves in the stream of evolution if they so chose. Steiner identified three² basic esoteric paths by which this could occur (1995): the Eastern or yogic path, the Christian-Gnostic path, and the Rosicrucian path. According to Steiner, “among Europeans, the Christian way is best suited to those whose feelings are most strongly developed. Those who have more or less broken away from the Church and rely rather on science, but have been led by science into a doubting frame of mind, will do best with the Rosicrucian way.” (1995)

The Eastern path is generally not suitable for Western individuals, because the yogic method works best when “the pupil eliminates his own self entirely and hands it over to his guru, who must advise him on every action he may take. This absolute surrender of one’s own self suits the Indian character, but there is no place for it in European culture.” (Steiner, 1995)

Since Steiner’s time, Western culture has increasingly been shaped by precisely the frame of mind to which the Rosicrucian path addresses itself: that of the doubting, scientific, critical, and individualistic character. People today find themselves in a position of really *feeling* like individuals, trying to navigate their way through the myriad forces buffeting them from all quarters of life. Each person, seemingly alone, must find a way to balance work-life, home-life, social-life, and inner-life, all in the context of the dominant materialistic expressions of our times, best seen through a critical examination of any one of the various media forms which blanket our streets, airwaves, and computer screens. Whereas in the past, individuals had to actually travel to spiritual centers or temples and spend much time away from normal life in esoteric training, today, “the new mysteries are no longer tied to a certain time or a certain place.” (Lievegoed, 1985)

² Steiner spoke of more than three esoteric paths, for example the path of the Northern mysteries, or the path of the Egyptian mysteries, but these are generally spoken of in their historical manifestations, while the three paths here mentioned are paths that are currently available for individuals today.

For those who choose an esoteric path today, all of these demands which come from outer life must also be balanced with what is required by the particular esoteric path. Steiner was adamant that

it cannot be emphasized enough that nobody devoting himself to inner spiritual development needs to change his everyday occupation in any respect whatever, nor neglect his daily duties in any sense, nor take time away from them. On the contrary, he who is of the opinion that a special amount of time must be spent on his inner training and consequently neglects his ordinary duties and, by his attempts at insight into spiritual worlds, becomes an anti-social, inferior member of human society, will soon discover that by these means least is achieved. (1904)

The ideals of the anthroposophical path, which *is* the contemporary form of the Rosicrucian path (Steiner, 2000), are meant to be entirely compatible with the demands placed on an individual by Western society. Whereas the yogic path often encourages dissociation from the ‘mundane’ concerns of everyday practical life through various forms of asceticism, the path of anthroposophy is designed to explicitly situate the esotericist *within* practical life. Anthroposophical schooling does not require the observance of external formalities or rituals, but is instead “a completely intimate development of the human soul, [wherein] all the significant degrees of development one must undergo take place in the innermost depth of being. Precisely here a transformation takes place in a person, but nobody, not even his closest friend, need notice anything different.” (Steiner, 1904)

A practical example of how the anthroposophical path fulfils this prescription can be seen in the way in which an esotericist is encouraged to undergo a series of preparations in the form of rhythmic exercises. These exercises are designed to provide the individual with the training required to meet the preconditions by which the previously 'occult' knowledge becomes simply knowledge, experienced from the inside. Additionally, these exercises are seen as essential aids on the path of inner development because Anthroposophy recognizes that, although one's *outer* duties should continue to be embraced, in fact should be *deepened*, one's *inner* character must undergo a radical but well-delineated transformation. The exercises can be mentioned briefly in the sequence by which they would be practiced by an individual: control of thoughts, control of actions, equanimity (control of feelings), positivity or inner tolerance, open mindedness, inner harmony, as well as the feeling for freedom. (Steiner 1999)

The practicing of these exercises is not meant to explicitly change one's external behaviors, although this will be a natural consequence if they are followed, but is rather meant to change the habits and patterns which commonly exist in contemporary human beings which act to prevent spiritual development. Practiced rhythmically, for example at certain times every day, these exercises can act as a sort of homeopathic tincture in the soul life of the individual. The undertaking of these exercises need not take away from the occurrences of exoteric life, for example when developing one's inner harmony:

In pondering the demands everyday life makes it becomes clear that it is an impossibility to completely free one's mind from outside impressions. To do so, it becomes necessary, therefore, to set aside a short period of time every day. This short time, which is needed and which must not conflict with one's obligations, is

sufficient. Even five minutes or, indeed, even less is enough. For this brief period, a person must be able to tear himself away from all sense impressions, from what flows into him through his eyes, ears and his sense of touch. For this brief duration of time he must become blind and deaf to his outer surroundings. Everything that crowds into us from the outside world unites us with sensuality and the ordinary everyday world. All this must be silenced and total inner calm must take its place. (Steiner, 1904)

By following such practices, obstacles to inner development are, over time, mitigated by the growing capacity of the individual to direct his or her inner life. This paves the way for the development of organs of perception which are active in the spiritual world. Just as we perceive the physical world by means of physical sensory organs, in order to perceive in the realms of the spirit, spiritual organs must be developed (Steiner, 1904).

The goal of the development of spiritual sight, and the goal of anthroposophy in general, is to provide a context by which individuals may place themselves consciously in the progressive stream of human development, while leaving them in freedom. In this respect there is no place for dogma in anthroposophy. Although certain preconditions must be met (such as the preparation intended by the undertaking of the above basic exercises) in order for an individual to move safely along the esoteric path of anthroposophy, “no one is required to fulfill these demands” (Steiner, 1999) unless one chooses to.

Gurus and Teachers

In the Eastern esoteric traditions, an opposite approach was taken, whereby all claims to freedom must be given up by the pupil, who puts him or herself wholly in the hands of a guru. This is simply impractical for most Westerners. But “it must initially be noted that most people require the aid of a personal teacher in this field [of esoteric training]. Some might be of the opinion that a person can develop in himself inner abilities, soul forces and spiritual perception by his own attempts, and it might seem unfortunate that in this vital area of life personal guidance is supposedly necessary.” (Steiner 1904) If submission to a guru is impractical, but one generally needs a teacher in order to progress, what can be done to meet the esoteric drive as it occurs in Western individuals?

The modern Rosicrucian path of anthroposophy takes a slightly different approach to the communication of esoteric wisdom. First, to the extent that an instructor is required, such an instructor

never gives anything but advice. Indeed, the greatest teachers in this field never did more than advise and suggest. It is left entirely to the judgment of the individual to what extent, if at all, he intends to follow such advice. It is left up to the individual what task he sets before his soul and spirit; the consideration of human freedom is too pronounced on the part of the teacher to do more than advise and guide. (Steiner, 1904)

Thus one is left free to follow through with all the normal activities of daily life. Following Native American mythical tradition, we can say that the Eastern teacher is often (although not always) a Coyote, while the Rosicrucian teacher is a Raccoon. The Coyote teacher manipulates

the pupil into enlightenment, while the Raccoon teacher simply brings the pupil to the door of enlightenment and waits for the pupil to freely enter (or not). Thus the teachings of anthroposophy, inasmuch as they relate specifically to the following of the esoteric path (and not of the actual results of spiritual research), take the form of advice, as between compassionate friends. But from where does such advice come?

In the case of anthroposophy,

the statement that the student needs personal instruction should be understood in the sense that this book [*Knowledge of Higher Worlds and Its Attainment*, Steiner 1918], itself, is personal instruction. In earlier times, there were reasons for reserving such personal instruction for oral teaching; today we have reached a stage in evolution of humanity in which spiritual scientific knowledge must become far more widely disseminated than formerly. Hence, this book replaces the former oral instruction. (Steiner, 1999)

An individual is thus not necessarily dependent upon another physically present human for advice, but can utilize the direct communications of a teacher in the form of writings that have been set down for that explicit purpose. Additionally, the Rosicrucian path of anthroposophy itself is designed to minimize the generation of obstacles whereby such advice would be sought. In a sense anthroposophy is a contemporary esoteric path in that it has built-in error correction: by following the prescribed exercises, the pupil will be able to continue progressing on the path in a hygienic way, because

What is found in *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and Its Attainment* is apart from other books of instruction in that it is harmless. Only those guidelines are disclosed that cannot do damage to a person, even if they are not followed with patience and perseverance. They can do no harm even if a person practices them improperly. This had to be mentioned because the question has arisen as to why and by what authority a set of esoteric rules was published. (Steiner, 1904)

Anthroposophy as Spiritual Science

The area in which anthroposophy is most suited to the contemporary Western individual can be seen in its appellation “spiritual science.” The widespread adoption of the secular “scientific method” in the West since the 16th century has had a profound impact on the development of both Western culture as well as the context in which the individual consciousness of particular human beings finds itself embedded. Particularly for the esotericist, it is not enough to take esoteric truths simply on faith; they must also *make sense*. The way in which this ‘sense’ is judged lies in the method provided by scientific inquiry³. In the truest sense, anyone who is already a scientist by trade could feel comfortable with navigating the esoteric path of anthroposophy while keeping a healthy scientific sensibility intact. In fact, the acquiring and refining of a healthy scientific sensibility is very much a part of the anthroposophical path.

The ability to think clearly is of prime importance to the esoteric student, as it lays the foundation for discernment both in daily life and when the student begins to bring spiritual perceptions into awareness. Normally our thinking is guided in large part by the contents given

³ The distinction between science, scientific realism, scientific materialism, and scientism should be noted by the reader in order avoid misunderstandings when speaking in this way. Here, all references are to science *qua* science, wherein the fewest number of ontological assumptions possible are made. For more information see Wallace’s excellent book *The Taboo of Subjectivity* (2000)

to our consciousness by virtue of our physical senses – if we have an incorrect idea about something in the world, our physical senses will act to correct the error. But as the esoteric student slowly develops organs which perceive in the spiritual realm, the physical world is less and less able to offer assistance in this manner, and the student needs something to rely upon in order to be able to navigate among these new percepts without falling into error. It is the training in thinking (ultimately a spiritual activity itself) which provides this capacity. The esoteric student must take responsibility for his or her own thinking, both as a process and with respect to the actual thoughts produced. A scientific mind is a flexible mind, which recognizes that all judgments are subject to revision pending new information, which is actively sought. This applies even more so to a spiritual scientist, who is in a process of continual revision, discovery, and refinement, with respect to one's relationship to both the outer world *and* the inner world.

Spiritual science also aims at being *scientific* in its method. Science is a form of inquiry, and as such in no way presupposes that only certain realms are valid for gathering data or performing experiments. To the spiritual scientist, the spiritual world and the material world are equally valid realms for inquiry. Just as the physical scientist must follow certain procedures in order to claim that any discoveries made are valid, so too must the spiritual scientist, but whereas the procedures required for a physical scientist are primarily physical in nature, the procedures required for a spiritual scientist relate in addition to processes which occur within the inner life of the spiritual researcher. When followed correctly, the results of spiritual scientific research can be made available to those who have not themselves done the actual research, just as it is in the case of physical science. To a great extent, it is not required that one be a spiritual researcher oneself in order to be able to understand results of spiritual scientific inquiry. But if one wishes to validate the results for oneself, then one must undertake the training necessary to do so

correctly by becoming a competent researcher, in exactly the same way that this is true for results gained by physical science⁴. In Steiner's words,

We do need certain faculties in order to *discover* the kinds of things we are talking about, but if these ideas, once discovered, are shared and made known to others, they can be understood by anyone willing to apply impartial logic and a healthy feeling for the truth. (1994b)

In this respect, the discoveries made by spiritual researchers have the quality of scientific knowledge, and it is knowledge that is well-founded in reason and logic that is essential if it is to meet the developmental process of the Western esotericist.

The esoteric path of anthroposophy is not for everyone – *no* esoteric path can be for everyone. But for contemporary Western individuals who feel the esoteric drive, anthroposophy provides a framework within which one can meet the need for true inner development in a way that appropriately fits the exoteric situation encountered today. With its respect for individual freedom, compatibility with the demands of already existing external life, lack of need for an individual teacher, encouragement of clear thinking, and reliance upon the essential method of science, anthroposophy is geared towards the cultural context of the West. Anyone who sets themselves upon this esoteric path with persistence can see for themselves its effects, both in the individual, and ultimately, in the wider world as well.

⁴ Charles Tart has made a valuable contribution to this understanding in his appeal for state-specific sciences. (Tart 1998)

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