

Rudolf Steiner's Intermediate Path—Another Road Less Travelled

Corrected update of September, 2015 SEPA Branch Newsletter version with postscript added.

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Over the years, I have been repeatedly surprised at the number of Anthroposophists who did not know what the Intermediate Path is. In the fifth chapter of *Occult Science, An Outline*,¹ which is entitled *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*, we find Rudolf Steiner's description of the Intermediate Path. Approximately in the middle of seventy some odd pages describing a variety of exercises and meditation instructions as well as the emphasis on the necessity of moral self-development, we find just one page describing this path.

*The path that leads to sense free thinking by the way of the communications of Spiritual Science is thoroughly reliable and safe. There is however another [path] that is even more sure and above all more exact; [and] at the same time, it is for many people also more difficult.*¹ (please note that the sentence after the semicolon is omitted in the Creeger translation)

Steiner then goes on to tell us¹ that “the path in question is set forth in my [two] books, [*Fundamentals of a Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe's World-Conception*]² and [*The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*]³.” (both appear under different titles)^{2,3} Now it may strike one as odd that these two epistemological, philosophical works can provide a path to higher knowledge and especially so since Steiner tells us that in them “you will find nothing at all that is derived from the communications of spiritual science.”¹

So what is it that these two books provide that can lead us to higher knowledge?

*These books tell of what man's thinking can achieve when directed, not to sense impressions that come from the outer world of the physical senses, but solely upon itself. When this is so, we have within us no longer the kind of thinking that concerns itself merely with memories of things of senses; we have instead **pure thinking** which is like a being that has life within itself. [These books show us how] pure thinking, working within itself alone can throw light on the great questions of life—questions concerning the universe and man.*¹

Although this was written in 1909, we find the same thoughts implied in the two subtitles to *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* (1894)—the first subtitle, *Fundamentals of a Modern View of the World* (the great questions of life), and the

second, *Results of Introspective Observations According to the Method of Natural Science* (finding the life within pure sense free thinking).

Steiner goes on to make it clear why the study of these two books is an intermediate path:

*[These] books thus occupy a significant intermediate position between knowledge of the sense world and knowledge of the spiritual world. What they offer is what thinking can attain when it rises above sense-observation, yet still holds back from entering upon spiritual, supersensible research. One who wholeheartedly pursues the train of thought indicated in these books is already in the spiritual world; only it makes itself known to him as a thought-world.*¹

At this point one might ask why anybody would choose a path that is more difficult and slower to yield results than the meditative path Steiner describes in the fifth chapter of *Occult Science*. It can't be timidity since both paths are safe, but what is different about the two paths is that when the Intermediate Path yields results, they are "even more sure and above all more exact."¹ So in a certain sense one might view the Intermediate Path as one of prudent sacrifice because clairvoyance may be deferred to a future life for the sake of a higher level of clairvoyance, but not just in a single future life:

*Whoever feels ready to enter upon this intermediate path of development will be taking a safe and sure road, and it will leave with him a feeling in regard to the higher world that will bear rich fruit for all time to come.*¹

"For all time to come," is an awesome statement and considering the challenges that we will face in human evolution, those of the highest clairvoyance will be needed to assist mankind. The fact that Steiner says, "Whoever feels ready to enter upon this intermediate path," indicates that this path is asking for a conscious decision to make a special commitment requiring patience, perseverance, and an extraordinary willingness to wait in the higher sense of the word. But such a path is not necessarily an exclusive restriction to the study indicated because one might also think of it as an invitation to a small number who would take this up along with and in addition to the exercises given in the fifth chapter of *Occult Science* or at least a study of the results of anthroposophical research.

We know that Steiner refers over and over again to one of the two books, *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*, but not explicitly as part of a particular path, and I think the reason for this has to do with a reaching out to the world or one might say

providing a rescue function, a lifesaver, for those striving or struggling or even tormented by certain questions. Some of these may be caught in a materialistic or atheist world conception, and would outright reject a work on the results of spiritual research or instructions on how to meditate. To such as these, Steiner is showing a way out from what otherwise might remain a hardened position :

*In this book [The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity] the attempt is made to justify knowledge of the realm of spirit **before** entering upon spiritual experience. And this justification is undertaken in such a way that for anyone able and willing to enter into this discussion there is no need to cast furtive glances at the experiences which my later writings have shown to be relevant.* ⁴

Ironically, it's even conceivable that that someone who initially rejects spiritual science but who earnestly seeks clarity about the nature of human knowledge, thinking, and freedom, might be making more progress in taking on this book than someone only practicing the exercises Steiner gives for spiritual development. What is required is "an open-minded consideration of just the two problems ... indicated [can insight into human nature serve as the foundation for all knowledge? and have we any right to ascribe freedom to our will? (p.29, ref.4)], problems which are fundamental to all knowledge," because such open-minded consideration "leads to the recognition of the fact that man is living within the reality of a spiritual world." Although Steiner addresses the scientist and the philosopher who of course have special expertise, he reassures us that no special knowledge is needed to grapple with this book and encourages potential readers with the following assurances:

This [Philosophy of Spiritual Activity] does not contain any special results [of spiritual science] any more than it contains special results of the natural sciences, but what [the book] does contain cannot in my view be dispensed with by anyone who strives for certainty in such knowledge. ⁴

Thus we see that Steiner is clearing the way for all to enter in—the non-specialist who may be intimidated, the specialists who reject spiritual science or who think a scientist must reject it, and the Anthroposophists who are already drawn to spiritual science. But especially those who are already drawn to spiritual science "will recognize as important what is attempted here." ⁴ The latter group, seekers after spiritual knowledge and "strivers after certainty in such knowledge," should also consider these poignant comments by Steiner on his *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*:

*Though I have always said that ordinary thinking can if it is unprejudiced grasp the findings of Anthroposophical research, I have also emphasized that everybody can attain to a state of consciousness whereby he is able to develop a new kind of thinking and willing, which give him entry to the world whereof anthroposophy speaks. The essential thing would be to change the habit of reading books like my *Philosophy of [Spiritual Activity]* with the mental attitude one has to other philosophical treatises. The way it should be read is with attention to the fact that it brings one to a wholly different way of thinking and willing and looking at things... Those who read *The Philosophy of [Spiritual Activity]* as it should be read speak with inner conviction and assurance about the findings of researchers who have gone beyond the state one has oneself reached as a beginner.⁵*

But Steiner makes it clear that it's not just the personal element that is concerned, but Anthroposophy itself and the Anthroposophical Society, for if *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* is not read in the right way then the Society will fall behind Anthroposophy and the consequence will be that "Anthroposophy's conveyance through the Anthroposophical Society will result in it being completely misunderstood, and its only fruit will be endless conflict."⁵ In light of these comments, we see how understated Steiner was five years earlier in his Preface to the 1918 edition of *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* when he said the following:

Thus it seems to me that, on the one hand, this book occupies a position completely independent of my writings on actual spiritual scientific matters, and yet, on the other hand, it is also most intimately connected with them.⁴

Another indication of the intimate connection between spiritual science and *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* is given in the prefaces to *Theosophy*, a foundational starting text for Anthroposophy:

*Those who feel more drawn to another method of searching after the truths here set forth [in *Theosophy*] will find a method in my "*Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*." The lines of thought taken in these two books, though different, lead to the same goal. For the understanding of one, the other is by no means necessary, although undoubtedly helpful to some persons.⁶*

I conjecture that the "some persons" Steiner refers to would include those drawn to the Intermediate Path. We see more indication of this intimate connection in that it's not only *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* that needs to be read in a special way but *Theosophy* too:

This book [Theosophy] cannot be read in the customary manner of the present day. In certain respects every page, and even many sentences, will have to be worked out by the reader. This has been aimed at intentionally because only in this way can the book become to the reader what it ought to be. The one who merely reads it through will not have read it at all. Its truths must be experienced, lived. Only in this sense has spiritual science any value.⁶

This intimate connection is even further illustrated by Steiner's comments on his *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* in the last lecture of his cycle on the gospel of St. John wherein different pathways to higher knowledge are described; the Christian one and the one more adapted to modern life, the Rosicrucian path:

*A person can go very far in this matter of katharsis [cleansing or purification of the astral body], if for example, he has gone through and inwardly experienced all that is in my book, *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*, and feels that this book was for him a stimulation and that now he has reached the point where he can himself actually reproduce the thoughts just as they are there presented. If a person holds the same relation to this book that a virtuoso, in playing a selection on the piano holds to the composer of that piece, that is, he reproduces the whole within himself—naturally according to his ability to do so—then through the strictly built up sequence of thought of this book—for it is written in this manner—katharsis will be developed to a high degree...[but if] a person has not been successful...he should not think what has been said is untrue, but rather that he has not studied it properly or with sufficient energy [and] thoroughness.⁷*

And in respect to the esoteric aspect of study, which is the first of the seven stages of the Rosicrucian path,⁸ we find Steiner commenting in *Theosophy of the Rosicrucian*:

Study in the Rosicrucian sense is the ability to immerse oneself in a content of thought not taken from physical reality but from the higher worlds. This is called the life in pure thought...One who will press forward into the higher worlds must accustom himself to the kind of thinking in which one thought proceeds from another. A thinking of this nature is developed in my "Philosophy of Spiritual Activity" and "Truth and Science". These books are not written in such a way that one can take a thought and put it in another place; much more are they written as an organism arises, one thought grows out of another. These books have nothing at all to do with the one who wrote them; he gave himself up to the what the thoughts themselves worked out in him, how they linked themselves one to another.⁸

But Steiner then goes on to indicate two levels of study:

*Study, then, for one desiring to make a somewhat elementary approach means acquiring a certain knowledge of the elementary facts of spiritual science itself, whereas for one who wishes to go further it means an inner meditation in a thought-structure which lets one thought grow out of another, out of itself.*⁸

In other places too, Steiner places the importance of his doctoral dissertation turned into a book, *Truth and Science*⁹ on the same level as *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*, which comes as no surprise since its subtitle states that it is a prelude to the latter:

*The whole range of elementary spiritual science as it is taught today is the best preparation for the ordinary person. But those who want to enter more deeply into a training of their soul faculties are advised to study such books as “Truth and Science” and “The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity,” for they were written with the express purpose of disciplining thinking, without any mention of theosophy. Anyone who wishes to apply a strenuous and logical training of thought to further pursuit of occult development does well to subject his mind to the soul-spiritual gymnastics which these books call for. This provides him with the foundation on which Rosicrucian schooling builds.*¹⁰

The book, *Truth and Science*,⁹ was included in one volume with *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* in the 1963 edition by Rudolf Steiner Publications,³ but since then has unfortunately been separated.

But there may be an even deeper and more profound connection of the Intermediate Path with great spiritual truths. One studying the books of this path may not fully sense that he or she is making a great advance. And I suspect that in this lack of awareness there may be a connection to the awakening of the young man of Nain (Luke VII:11-17) described by Steiner in the tenth lecture of his cycle on the Luke Gospel:

The healing of the [young man of Nain] was an awakening, an initiation. The individuality in the body of the young man of Nain was to undergo an initiation of a very special kind. There are various kinds of initiation. In one kind, immediately after the process has been completed, knowledge of the higher worlds flashes up and the laws and happenings of the spiritual world are revealed to him. In another kind of initiation it is only a seed that is implanted into the soul, and the individual

has to wait until the next incarnation for the seed to bear fruit; only then does he become an Initiate. The initiation of the young man of Nain was of this kind.

Steiner then goes on to say that this individuality was able to bring wonderful things to the world in his later lives.

Yet, in spite of all of these esoteric aspects, Steiner demonstrates the truly intermediate nature of *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* when he maintains that “What I have said in this book can also be acceptable to [those] who, for reasons of their own, will have nothing to do with the results of my spiritual scientific research.”⁴ We as Anthroposophists should be fully aware that there could be many who at present eschew spiritual science but might be started on a pathway to it through these two books. The Intermediate Path should certainly be part of any discussion of Anthroposophy reaching out to the world. The least we could do is be aware of the relevance of the Intermediate Path even if it’s something we don’t individually choose. On a personal note, I should like to point out that I could not enter into Anthroposophy until I started working with Steiner’s epistemological writings, and I have often wondered how many others coming from a similar materialistic or atheistic position might be similarly affected by being exposed to them.

If we turn now to the other main book of the Intermediate Path, [*Fundamentals of A Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe’s World-Conception*],² we have fewer comments by Steiner to draw on. However, this was Steiner’s first stand-alone book (1886) laying a sound and healthy foundation for epistemology in general and also describing the particulars of the right method for the different branches of knowledge. In his preface to the 1923 edition of this work, he describes the character of his writing back then when he was 25 years old:

Were I writing the book now, I should express many things differently. But the essential nature of knowledge I could not set forth in any different light. Moreover, what I might write now could not convey so truly within itself the germ of the spiritual world-conception for which I stand. In such germinal fashion one can write only at the beginning of one’s intellectual life. For this reason, it may be well that this youthful production should appear again in unaltered form. (p.xviii, ref.2)

The germinal nature of this work suits it well for inclusion as one of the two books on the Intermediate Path — a path that promises to bear “rich fruit for all time to come.” The fact that Steiner wanted it republished in its original form even though

he had built on the argument in his later writings, indicates that it is this particular book through which the reader can activate germinal forces in himself—the forces enabling the reader to encounter new challenges as they arise.

It is interesting to note that Steiner opened this first part of the Intermediate Path long before he started publically speaking of his spiritual researches in 1900. The book's elucidation of the correct view of thinking and knowing was essential in order to avoid the danger “in the philosophical conceptions prevalent at the time regarding the essential nature of knowledge...[because with] these conceptions, knowledge threatened to become sealed up within the being of man himself.” (p.xiii, ref.2) Furthermore, “There was everywhere manifest the confession that human knowledge arrives at certain barriers beyond which it cannot pass into the realm of genuine reality.”(p.xiv, ref.2) It seems obvious that such a danger is no less immanent today when the conviction that we are merely products of our brain activity is so widespread.

The germinal nature of the work is also evident in the full title which tells us we are being given fundamentals—something to build on or to support us. The first part of the book clarifies the fundamentals of epistemology by taking us on an ascending pathway from experience through thought to knowledge. This part of the book supports what is given in the first seven chapters of *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*. Then, Steiner turns to a characterization of the branches of knowledge and what each calls for in our approach to it. He starts with the science of nature by distinguishing the inorganic from the organic, something which has been totally denied by modern science which wishes to reduce life to chemical and physical processes. Then he ascends to the spiritual or cultural sciences which include psychology, the science of peoples, the science of history, and a short four page characterization of human freedom. The latter obviously expands into *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* and those who study the latter can experience it in germinal form in this little section. The one and a half page penultimate chapter, *Optimism and Pessimism*, tersely explains why neither view is tenable, and again permits us a wonderful opportunity to see the expansion from a germ into something full blown in the thirteenth chapter (29 pages) of *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* entitled *The Value of Life —Pessimism and Optimism*.

In the historical growth progression, we see that the first book of the Intermediate Path (*Fundamentals*) became publically available in 1886, the introduction to the *Philosophy, Truth and Science*, in 1892, the second book of the path (*The Philosophy*) in 1894, the public announcement of the Intermediate Path as such in 1909 (*Occult Science*); the re-publication of the second book in 1918, and the republication of the first book in 1923. However, in 1997, the Intermediate Path

received a set-back when the Anthroposophic Press published a new translation of *Occult Science* with the title , *An Outline of Esoteric Science*, because it erroneously lists *Goethe's World View* (formerly *Goethe's Conception of the World*)¹¹ in place of [*Fundamentals of*] *A Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe's World Conception*. Of course, anyone taking up Steiner's philosophical or epistemological works will soon see that *The Theory of Knowledge* and *The Philosophy* supplement each other and belong together even if they aren't told that they constitute a pair on an intermediate path, but to find out that they do, greatly lifts one's motivation to study them together and might even provide a significant insight into one's karma, but anyone trying to figure out the connection between the wrong pair will be perplexedly scratching his or her head for a long time. Listing the wrong pair of books is not helpful. So maybe the time is at hand to correct this erroneous signpost to the Intermediate Path. It's been wrong since 1997, and correcting it and making the signpost a little bit bigger and easier to see just might encourage a few more travelers. I don't see what harm this could do.

Postscript

To avoid a possible misleading of the reader, I have included the following point made by Joel Kobran in his essential article, "An Introduction to *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*:"¹²

It is of course, a significant misunderstanding for one to fail to distinguish between not taking up "The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity" as a path and not taking it up at all! In the end, all Anthroposophists are in need of an epistemological foundation for higher knowledge [for as Steiner says], "What it contains cannot in my view, be dispensed with by anyone who strives for certainty in such knowledge."

Endnotes

1. *Occult Science, An Outline*, pp.255-256; translated by George and Mary Adams, Rudolf Steiner Press, London, 1962/1963; reprinted 1969. It should be noted that Anthroposophic Press (Spring Valley, New York) published a translation of this work in 1972 by Maud and Henry Monges which was revised by Lisa D. Monges entitled, *An Outline of Occult Science* (see p.296). Subsequently in 1997 Anthroposophic Press, then in Hudson, New York issued a new translation by Catherine E. Creeger entitled, *An Outline of Esoteric Science* (see p. 324) as part of its Classics in Anthroposophy series.

2. [*Fundamentals of*] *A Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe's World-Conception*, translated by Olin D. Wannamaker, Anthroposophic Press (Spring Valley, New York), Copyright, 1968; Third Edition, 1978. This work was also translated by William Lindeman with the title: *The Science of Knowing, Outline of an Epistemology Implicit in the Goethean World View* and published in 1988 by Mercury Press, 241 Hungry Hollow Road, Spring Valley, New York. A third translation was made by Peter Clemm entitled *Goethe's Theory of Knowledge, An Outline of the Epistemology of His Worldview*; Steinerbooks, 2008. An explanation of why I have added "*Fundamentals of*" in brackets to Wannamaker's title, *A Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe's World-Conception*, is given in the following. The full German title is *Grundlinien einer Erkenntnistheorie der Goetheschen Weltanschauung* which I have translated as *Fundamentals of a Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe's World Conception*. Wannamaker's truncation to *A Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe's World Conception* causes two problems. First, using the article "A" might be taken to mean that there are other theories of knowledge in Goethe's world conception. This would render Goethe self-contradictory which he is not. Secondly, omitting the phrase, *Fundamentals of*, in the formal title de-emphasizes the fact that this is not a fully developed theory as presented and might lead a critic to say that this work is too sketchy. Rather, it provides the basic foundation for future growth and this should be part of what the world first sees, and what Steiner wanted the world to see first. However, in the German original of *Occult Science*, Steiner does use shortened titles or omits subtitles for the two books of the Intermediate Path—'*Erkenntnistheorie der Goetheschen Weltanschauung*' und '*Philosophie der Freiheit*,' ostensibly because he just wanted to identify the books without being pedantic, but again, this does not justify translators truncating the title that goes on the book's cover.

3. *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* has appeared under this main title in Poppelbaum's revision of Hoernle's translation, in Rita Stebbing's three different translations, and also in William Lindeman's translation. The same work has appeared as *The Philosophy of Freedom* in the first English translation by Professor Hoernle and also by Michael Wilson. The most recent translation by Michael Lipson goes under the title, *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path*.

4. *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*, p. 31 (from the Preface to the 1918 Revised Edition); Rita Stebbing's first translation of this work, Rudolf Steiner Publications, West Nyack, New York, 1963. This edition also included Rudolf Steiner's *Truth and Science* but with the title, *Truth and Knowledge*. (see ref. 9)

5. *Awakening to Community*, pp.44-45; Ten lectures in Dornach, Jan. 23 to Mar. 4, 1923; Anthroposophic Press, Spring Valley, New York, 1974.

6. *Theosophy, An Introduction to the Supersensible Knowledge of the World and the Destination of Man*, p.vii, *From the Prefaces to the First, Second, and Third Editions*; Anthroposophic Press Inc., 1971.

7. *The Gospel of St. John*, pp. 174-175; Twelve lectures in Hamburg, May 18-31, 1908; Anthroposophic Press, Spring Valley, New York, 2nd printing 1973.

8. *Theosophy of the Rosicrucian*, pp.159 & 161, lecture 4 of fourteen lectures by Rudolf Steiner in Munich, May 22 – June 6, 1907; Rudolf Steiner Press, London, 1st ed. 1954, reprinted 1981.

9. *Truth and Science, Prelude to a “Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*, translated by William Lindeman; Mercury Press, Spring Valley, New York, 1993; also translated by Rita Stebbing for Rudolf Steiner Publications, 1963 with the title, *Truth and Knowledge, Introduction to “Philosophy of Spiritual Activity”* in a volume combined with *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*. (see reference 4)

10. *Rudolf Steiner on his book The Philosophy of Freedom, Selections arranged and annotated by Otto Palmer*; pp.85-86; Anthroposophic Press, Spring Valley, New York, 1975; This work makes an incredibly valuable contribution to understanding the significance of Steiner’s chief work as Steiner’s autobiography also does.

11. *Goethe’s World View*, translated by William Lindeman, Mercury Press, Spring Valley, New York, 1993. Also translated previously as *Goethe’s Conception of the World*, edited by H. Collison; Haskell House Publishers LTD, New York, N.Y. 1973. Its German title is *Goethes Weltanschauung* and was written in 1897, eleven years after [*Fundamentals of*] *a Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe’s World Conception*, which was published in 1886. (see endnote 2)

12. *The Threefold Review*, Issue No. 20, Fall 2002; available on line at [mathscience help.com](http://mathsciencehelp.com) or by mail from ronmilito@comcast.net.