The Way of Thinking

“To lay hold of thinking in oneself is to lay hold on the Divine.”
—Rudolf Steiner, Mystery Knowledge and Mystery Centers

“Thinking” is the heart and blood of what distinguishes Steiner’s approach to spiritual work. The thinking that he is talking about, however, is not our ordinary thinking by which we rearrange existing (past, dead) thoughts. By thinking Steiner means “living” thinking, the dynamic process-state before thinking becomes thoughts. It is, as it were, “thinking without an object,” which, in some sense, could also be a definition of attention.

Trust in thinking

Trust allows us to live in the stream of thinking, which is the first stage of meditation. According to Steiner, “The soul naturally trusts in thinking.” We must cultivate this trust. When we do so and we live in the stream of thinking, it is as if cosmic existence were flowing through us. We realize that “the world thinks itself in the human soul.” As he puts it in A Way of Self-Knowledge:

For everyday, awake consciousness, human thinking is an island in the river of soul life that flows by in impressions, sensations, feelings, and so on. Once we have understood a feeling or impression—that is, once we have created a thought to illuminate it—we are more or
less finished with it. Even amid a storm of passions and emotions, a certain calm arises when the barque of the soul reaches the island of thought.

_The soul trusts naturally in thinking._ Were it to lose this trust in thinking, the soul would lose all certainty in life. Once we begin to doubt thinking, healthy soul life stops. Even if thinking cannot always bring us clarity about something, at least we need the comfort of knowing that we _could_ attain that clarity if only we were able to summon sufficient mental strength and sharpness. A person can come to terms with being unable to bring clarity to something through thinking, but the idea that thinking itself could not bring satisfaction—even if one were to push as deeply into it as should be necessary to attain the complete clarity required by a particular situation—that idea is unbearable.

This attitude of the soul toward thinking lies at the heart of all human striving for knowledge. Certain states of mind can dampen it. Nevertheless, in its own dark depths, the soul always feels it can think. Thinkers who doubt the validity and power of thinking deceive themselves about the basic tone of their souls. Often it is the very sharpness of their thought that, by a kind of excess, creates their doubts and perplexities. If they really did not trust thinking, they would not torture themselves so much with doubts and riddles, which are themselves only the results of thinking.

If you develop this feeling of trust in relation to thinking, you will find that thinking contains not only something that you form inwardly as the power of the human soul, but also a power that is independent of both you and your soul and that bears within it a cosmic being—toward whom you must work if you wish to inhabit a place that belongs simultaneously both to you and to the world that is independent of you.

There is something deeply calming in being able to surrender oneself to the life of thought. In it, the soul feels it can get away from itself. The soul needs this feeling just as much as it needs
The opposite feeling—that of being able to be totally within itself. Oscillation between these two is necessary for a healthy soul life. Wakefulness and sleep are only the extreme manifestations of this oscillation. In wakefulness, the soul is in itself; it lives its own life. In sleep, the soul loses itself in universal cosmic experience and is, in a sense, free of itself. We can also see these two extremes of the pendulum-like movement of the soul in other states of inner experience. Living in one's thoughts, for example, is an instance of the soul's getting away from itself, whereas living in feeling, sensation, emotion, and so forth, are all instances of the soul's dwelling in itself.

From this perspective, thinking gives the soul the consolation it needs in the face of feeling abandoned by the world. You are certainly justified in wondering, What am I in the general stream of world events that runs from infinity to infinity? What am I with my feelings, wishes, and deeds, which have meaning only for me? As soon as you have truly felt what it is to live in thought, you will be able to counter this feeling of abandonment with another perspective: The thinking involved in this stream of world events raises me up, and my soul with me, and I live in those events when I allow their essence to flow into me through my thinking. Thus, you can feel yourself taken up into the world and feel legitimate within it. This attitude of the soul results in a kind of strengthening, which the soul experiences as deriving according to wise laws from cosmic powers.

It is not a great leap from this perspective to one that says, It is not merely I who think, for it thinks in me—world-becoming expresses itself in me and my soul provides only the stage upon which the world lives as thought.

Philosophies can, of course, reject this attitude. There are many grounds on which the idea that “the world thinks itself in the human soul” can be made to seem obviously false. We must recognize, however, that this is an idea that can be acquired only through inner experience. Only those who have acquired it in this way can fully understand its validity. They know that so-called refutations cannot shake that validity. Anyone who has thought
his or her way through this thought can see quite clearly the real value of most so-called refutations and proofs which, as long as one remains falsely convinced of their content, often appear quite infallible. Thus, it is difficult to communicate with those who find such counterproofs convincing. They have no choice but to believe in them, for they have not done the inner work required to understand the inner experience that brought the other person to the recognition they think is false or, perhaps, simply foolish.

Anyone wishing to become familiar with the practice of spiritual science will find such meditations on thinking useful. The work of this kind of meditation is to bring the soul to a state that opens a doorway into the spiritual world. That doorway will remain closed, no matter how ingenious the thinking or how fully scientific the approach, unless the soul prepares to advance to meet the approaching spiritual experiences (or, indeed, even the account of them).

A good preparation for understanding spiritual insights is to feel frequently what strength lies in the mood or attitude of soul when one meditates the thought: *In thinking, I experience myself united with the stream of cosmic existence.*

The value of meditating this thought lies much less in the abstract understanding of it than in what is to be gained by repeatedly experiencing the strengthening effect it has on the soul if it flows powerfully through one’s inner life. It expands in the soul like a deep spiritual breath of life. Far more than cognizing the content of such a thought, it is experiencing it that is important. Let the thought be present only once in your soul with sufficient conviction, and you can understand it. But if it is to bear fruit in the understanding of the beings and facts of the spiritual world, then, when you have understood it, you must repeatedly bring it to life again in your soul. Again and again, you must fill your soul with the same thought. Only that thought must fill your soul, excluding all other thoughts, feelings, and memories.
Repeatedly concentrating on a thought that one has completely penetrated gathers the forces of the soul—forces that in normal life are scattered. The soul strengthens itself—in itself—and the powers that have been gathered together become organs of perception for the spiritual world and its truths.

This brief description indicates the right way to proceed in meditation. First, you work your way through to grasping a thought that you can fully understand with the means provided by everyday life and ordinary thinking. Then you sink yourself repeatedly into that thought, become absorbed in it, and make yourself wholly one with it. By living with a thought known in this way, your soul gains strength.

Above, a thought about the nature of thinking itself was chosen as an example, because it is particularly fruitful for meditation. But what was said about meditation applies to every thought that we thoroughly penetrate.

It is especially fruitful for a meditator to know the mood of soul that results from the pendulum-like movement of soul life as described above. It is the surest way to come to the feeling in your meditation that the spiritual world has touched you directly.

This feeling is a healthy consequence of meditation. It should radiate its strength into everything you do during the rest of your waking day. But it should not be a continuous, ever-present prolongation of the meditative state. Rather, you should feel, Strength flows into my life from my meditation experience.

If you carry your meditative state into daily life like an ever-present imprint, something will spread from it that will disturb the natural simplicity of your daily life. Then, during the meditation itself, your meditative state will no longer be either strong or pure enough. The true fruits of meditation are brought to maturity only when we raise our meditation and meditative state above the rest of our life. Meditation will have the best effect upon our lives when we experience it to be something special, something uplifting.
Intuitive thinking and the path to freedom

Steiner was thirty-three when *The Philosophy of Freedom* appeared in 1894. It had germinated in him for fourteen years. When it came to fruition, it was not so much the content that was important to him but its independent, existential value. As he wrote to his friend Rosa Mayreder with whom he had conversed at length as the book developed, Steiner mourned the fact that Nietzsche would never read his book, for he would have seen it for what it was: “personal experience in every sentence.” Steiner goes on to say that his reasons for writing it were purely “subjective.” He was not setting forth a doctrine, but simply recording inner experiences. He reported them as he experienced them. In other words, his purpose was “to write a biographical account of how one human soul made the difficult ascent to freedom.” Obviously, to walk the path that Steiner walked, it is important to read and reread meditatively every word and sentence as he wrote it. To do so, as he himself states on many occasions, is a transformative experience and the basis for a real understanding of Anthroposophy. Precisely because of its fundamental importance, I have (perhaps to the chagrin and outrage of some) extracted certain key sentences and sets of sentences for meditation.

Steiner begins with the fundamental split that places us outside and against the world. Elsewhere, he writes, “The root of human imperfection lies in the division of primal unity into subject and object. In the realm of action, this imperfection takes the form of unfreedom. We are unfree in actions in which the interpenetration of subject and object has not taken place, and we are under the power of the object.” Before we can overcome the split, however, we must first become aware of it.

THE SPLIT

What we seek in things, beyond what is immediately given to us, splits our entire being into two. We immediately become aware of standing in opposition to the world as independent beings. The universe appears to us as two opposites: I and the world.

We set up this barrier between ourselves and the world as soon as consciousness lights up within us. But we never lose the feeling that we belong to the world, that a link exists that connects us to it, and that we are creatures not outside but within the universe.
This feeling engenders an effort to bridge the opposition. And in the final analysis the whole spiritual striving of humanity consists in bridging this opposition. The history of spiritual life is a continual searching for the unity between I and the World.

**The Way to Heal the Split**

Only when we have made the world content into our thought content do we rediscover the connection from which we have sundered ourselves.

**The Cause of the Split**

It is we who separate ourselves from the native ground of nature and place ourselves as “I” in opposition to the world. Goethe gives this its classical expression: “We live in Nature’s midst and are strangers to her.”

**Ariadne’s Thread**

To be sure, we have torn ourselves away from nature, but we must still have taken something of her with us into our own being.

**The First Step**

We can find nature outside us only if we first know her within us. What is akin to her within us will be our guide. We must seek out this natural being within ourselves; then we will also discover the reconnection to her.

**The Two Points of Departure**

Insofar as we are conscious of it, observation and thinking are the two points of departure for all human spiritual striving.... Philosophers have proceeded from various primal oppositions—such as idea and reality, subject and object, appearance and thing-in-itself, I and not I, idea and will, concept and matter, force and substance, conscious and unconscious—but it can easily be shown
that observation and thinking precede all of these as the most important antithesis of human beings.

**Observing Thinking**

Thinking differs essentially, as an object of observation, from all other things.... While observation of objects and processes, and thinking about them, are both everyday situations that fill my ongoing life, the observation of thinking is a kind of exceptional state....

When we observe thinking, we are applying to thinking a procedure—observation—that is normal when we consider all the rest of our world content, but that is not normally applied to thinking itself.

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This is the characteristic nature of thinking. The thinker forgets thinking while doing it.... It is the unobserved element in our normal spiritual life.

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It is because thinking is based on my own activity that I do not observe it in everyday life.

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When I think, I do not look at my thinking, which I myself am producing, but at the object of thinking, which I am not thinking.

I am in the same situation even if I allow the exceptional state of affairs to occur and think about my thinking. I can never observe my present thinking....

These two are therefore incompatible: active production and its objective confrontation.

**A Corner of the World**

In thinking we hold a corner of world process where we must be present if anything is to occur.
THE ESSENCE OF THINKING

We must not confuse having “thought pictures” with working out one’s thoughts by means of thinking. Thought pictures emerge dreamily in the soul, like vague suggestions. But this is not thinking.... The essence of thinking always requires that it be willed.

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Unprejudiced observation shows that nothing can be attributed to the essence of thinking that is not found within thinking itself. One cannot arrive at anything that causes thinking if one leaves the realm of thinking behind.

WHERE CONCEPT AND OBSERVATION MEET

It is through the thinker that thinking is linked to observation. Human consciousness is the stage where concept and observation meet and are connected with each other. This is, in fact, what characterizes human consciousness. It is the mediator between thinking and observation.

SUBJECT AND OBJECT

We must not overlook the fact that it is only with the help of thinking that we can define ourselves as subjects, and contrast ourselves to objects. Therefore, thinking must never be regarded as a merely subjective activity. Thinking is beyond subject and object. It forms both of these concepts, as it does all others. Thus, when we, as thinking subjects, relate a concept to an object, we must not regard this relationship as merely subjective. It is not the subject that introduces the relationship but thinking. The subject does not think because it is a subject; rather, it appears to itself as a subject because it can think. The activity that human beings exercise as thinking beings is therefore not merely subjective, but it is a kind of activity that is neither subjective nor objective: it goes beyond
both. I should never say that my individual subject thinks; rather, it lives by the grace of thinking.

**The Move to the Center**

In thinking, we are given the element that unites our own particular individuality with the whole of the cosmos. When we sense, feel, and perceive, we are separate. When we think, we are the one being that penetrates all. This is the deeper basis of our dual nature. Within us, we see an absolute force come into existence that is universal. Yet we do not know it as it streams forth from the center of the world, but only at a point on the periphery. If we came to know it as it streamed forth from the center, then we would know the whole mystery of the world at the moment we became conscious. But we stand on the periphery, and find our existence enclosed within certain limits. Therefore, we must find out about the realm situated outside our own being with the help of thinking that extends into us from universal world existence.

**Concept and Percept Together Make the Whole**

For thinking beings, a concept arises from the encounter with an external thing. The concept is that part of the thing that we do not receive from without, but from within. Knowledge means to accomplish the union of the two elements, inner and outer.

A percept, then, is not something finished or closed off. It is one side of the total reality. The other side is the concept. The act of knowing (or cognition) is the synthesis of percept and concept. Only percept and concept make up the whole thing.

[Percept ... should not be confused with that of external sensory perception, which is only a particular case of it. Readers will see from what has been said, but still more so from what will be said later, that everything both sensory and spiritual that meets a human being is to be taken as percept until it is grasped by an actively elaborated concept.]
Consider the world of percepts by itself. It appears as a mere juxtaposition in space, a mere succession in time, and an aggregate of unconnected details. None of the things that enter or exit the perceptual stage seem to have anything to do with one another. In the world of percepts, the world is a multiplicity of uniform objects. None plays a greater role than any other.... If we are to have the insight that this or that has greater significance than another, we must consult our thinking.

In contrast to perceptual content, which is given to us from without, thought content appears from within. We shall call the form in which thought content arises “intuition.” Intuition is to thinking as observation is to perceiving. Intuition and observation are our two sources of knowledge. We remain alienated from an object in the observed world as long as we do not have within us the corresponding intuition, which supplies the piece of reality missing from the percept. Full reality remains closed off to anyone without the ability to find intuitions corresponding to things. Just as a color-blind person sees only shades of brilliance without hues, a person without intuition observes only unconnected perceptual fragments.

Thinking and feeling correspond to the dual nature of our being.... Thinking is the element through which we participate in the universal process of the cosmos; feeling is the element through which we can withdraw into the confines of our own being.

Our thinking unites us with the world; our feeling leads us back into ourselves and makes us individuals. If we were only thinking and perceiving beings, then our whole life would flow past in monotonous indifference. If we could only know ourselves as selves, then we would be completely indifferent to ourselves. It is only because we have self-feeling along with self-cognition, and
pleasure and pain along with the perception of things, that we live as individual beings whose existence is not limited to our conceptual relationship to the rest of the world, but who also have special value for ourselves. Some might be tempted to see in the life of feeling an element more richly imbued with reality than thinking contemplation of the world. The reply to this is that the life of feeling has this richer meaning only for my individuality. For the world as a whole, my feeling life can attain value only if the feeling, as a percept of my self, combines with a concept and so integrates itself indirectly into the cosmos.

REAL KNOWLEDGE

Any increase or alteration in the human senses would result in a different perceptual picture—an enrichment or alteration of human experience. But real knowledge must be achieved, even in regard to this experience, by the interaction of percept and concept. The deepening of cognition depends on the forces of intuition that live in thinking. In the experience of thinking, such intuition can immerse itself either more or less deeply in reality.

EVERYTHING GIVEN IS A PERCEPT

The idea of the percept ... must not be confused with that of external sense perception, which is only a special case of it.... Everything, both sensory and spiritual, that meets a human being is here taken to be a “percept” until it is grasped by the actively elaborated concept.

THINKING, FEELING, WILLING

The difficulty of grasping thinking in its essence by observing it consists in this: When the soul wants to bring it into the focus of attention, this essence has all too easily already slipped away from the observing soul. All that is left for the soul is the dead abstraction, the
corpse of living thinking. If we look only at this abstraction, we can easily feel drawn to the mysticism of feeling or the metaphysics of will, which seem so “full of life.” We find it strange if anyone seeks to grasp the essence of reality in “mere thoughts.” But whoever truly manages experience life in thinking sees that dwelling in mere feeling or contemplating the element of will cannot even be compared (let alone ranked above) the inner richness and the experience, the inner calmness and mobility, in the life of thinking.

It is precisely the richness, the inner fullness of the experience of thinking that makes its reflection in normal consciousness seem dead and abstract. No other activity of the human soul is so easily misunderstood as thinking....

Thinking all too easily leaves us cold. It seems to dry out the life of the soul. But this is only the sharply contoured shadow of the reality of thinking—a reality interwoven with light, dipping down warmly into the phenomena of the world. This dipping down occurs with a power that flows forth in the activity of thinking itself—the power of love in spiritual form.

One should not object that to speak of love in active thinking is to displace a feeling—love—into thinking.... Whoever turns toward essential thinking finds within it both will and feeling, and both of these in the depths of their reality. Whoever turns aside from thinking toward “pure” feeling and willing loses the true reality of feeling and willing. If we experience thinking intuitively, we also do justice to the experience of feeling and willing.

A SELF-SUPPORTING SPIRITUAL ENTITY

To observe thinking is to live, during the observation, immediately within the weaving of a self-supporting spiritual entity. We could even say that those who want to grasp the essence of the spirit as it first presents itself to human beings can do so in the self-sustaining activity of thinking.

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If we see what is really present in thinking, we will recognize that only one part of reality is present in the percept and that we experience the other part—which belongs to it and is necessary for it to appear as full reality—in the permeation of the percept by thinking. We shall see, then, in what appears in consciousness, not a shadowy copy of reality, but a spiritual essence that sustains itself. Of this spiritual essence we can say that it becomes present to our consciousness through intuition. Intuition is the conscious experience, within what is purely spiritual, of a purely spiritual content. The essence of thinking can be grasped only through intuition.

**THINKING'S DOUBLE FUNCTION**

The effective essence of thinking has a double function. First, it represses the human organization's own activity. Second, it replaces that activity with itself.

**“I” AND I-CONSCIOUSNESS**

What happens in the human organization as a result of thinking has nothing to do with the essence of thinking, but it does have something to do with the origin of I-consciousness out of thinking. The real “I” certainly lies within the essence of one’s thinking, but I-consciousness does not. Anyone who observes thinking without prejudice sees this is the case. The “I” is to be found in thinking; but I-consciousness appears because the traces of thinking activity are engraved in general consciousness.... I-consciousness therefore arises through the bodily organization.... Once it arises, it is taken up into thinking, and thereafter shares in the spiritual being of thinking.

**THINKING WITHOUT CONTENT (OR OBJECT)**

The highest stage of individual life is conceptual thinking without reference to a specific perceptual content. We determine the content of a concept out of the conceptual sphere through pure intuition.
**ETHICAL INDIVIDUALISM**

The sum of ideas active within us, the real content of our intuitions, constitutes what is individual in us, not withstanding the universality of the world of ideas. To the extent that the intuitive content turns into action, it is the ethical content of the individual. Allowing this intuitive content to live itself out fully is the driving force of morality.

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Only an act of will arising from an intuition can be individual.

**WHAT IS INDIVIDUAL IN ME?**

What is individual in me is not my organism, with its drives and feelings, but my world of ideas that lights up within this organism.

**FREEDOM**

Insofar as an action proceeds from the conceptual part of my individual being, it is felt to be free. Every other portion of an action ... is felt to be unfree.

**CODA**

Eternal becoming in thinking,
Each step, at the same time a deepening
Overcoming the surface,
Penetrating the depths.

—Inscription in *The Philosophy of Freedom*, 1894