

INNER READING  
AND  
INNER HEARING

& How to Achieve Existence in the World of Ideas

Two Lectures Cycles, Followed by Two Christmas Lectures  
Dornach, October 3–7 and December 12–20, 1914  
Dornach, December 26 and Basel, December 27, 1914

TRANSLATED BY MICHAEL MILLER  
INTRODUCTION BY CHRISTOPHER BAMFORD

RUDOLF STEINER

SteinerBooks

CW 156

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SteinerBooks

Anthroposophic Press

610 Main Street

Great Barrington, Massachusetts 01230

www.steinerbooks.org

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This book is volume 156 in the Collected Works (CW) of Rudolf Steiner, published by SteinerBooks, 2008. It is a translation of *Okkultes Lesen und okkultes Hören* published by Rudolf Steiner Verlag, Dornach, Switzerland, 2003.

The drawings in the text were done by Hedwig Frey and Lenore Uhlig, based on the stenographer's sketches of Rudolf Steiner's blackboard drawings.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Steiner, Rudolf, 1861-1925.

[Okkultes Lesen und okkultes Hören. English]

Inner reading and inner hearing ; and, How to achieve existence in the world of ideas : two lecture cycles, followed by two Christmas lectures, Dornach, October 3-7 and December 12-26, 1914 and Basel, December 27, 1914 / Rudolf Steiner ; translated by Michael Miller ; introduction by Christopher Bamford.

p. cm. – (The collected works of Rudolf Steiner ; v. 156)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-88010-619-1

1. Anthroposophy. I. Steiner, Rudolf, 1861-1925. How to achieve existence in the world of ideas. II. Title. III. Title: How to achieve existence in the world of ideas.

BP595.S8656513 2008

299'.935—dc22

2008038737

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Printed in the United States

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# INTRODUCTION

CHRISTOPHER BAMFORD

If one reads them carefully, despite their vast quantity—the figure usually given is around 6,000—Rudolf Steiner’s lectures rarely fail to astonish and surprise; and always for unique reasons. No matter how many lectures one has read, one always finds new insights, either because the research is new or because Steiner’s mood or disposition in relation to his audience shades his remarks in a way that brings out previously hidden nuances or perspectives not available elsewhere. Such is the case with the three short lecture cycles printed here. The year is 1914; the months October and December: a fate-filled moment both for Anthroposophy and Western civilization.

The year before (1913) had seen the expulsion of the German Section from the Theosophical Society and the establishment of the Anthroposophical Society. This finally gave Rudolf Steiner the untrammled freedom to form his own spiritual movement without the constraints that working within the Adyar-based Theosophical Movement had inevitably imposed. On February 3, the first constitutive General Meeting of the new Society took place and by the middle of the year, it numbered over 3,000 members, active in 85 working groups. That same month, a second, equally epoch-making event occurred when it was finally decided that the “Building,” which in 1918 would be renamed the Goetheanum, but was then still known as the “Johannesbau” or “John Building” after John the Evangelist, would be located in Dornach, Switzerland, rather than in Munich, Germany, as had been previously considered. This decision, long in coming, was made on May 18, and on September 20 the Foundation Stone was laid. By November construction was underway. Clearly, the spiritual world was seeking to found something, as may also be seen from the deeply esoteric lectures Steiner gave during this period—such as those on *The Fifth Gospel*, *The Secrets of the Threshold*,

*The Esoteric Foundations of the Bhagavad-Gita, and Christ and the Spiritual World: The Search for the Holy Grail.*

By the following year, 1914, as if prophetically preparing for the wartime years, the center of Anthroposophical work had shifted to Dornach, where construction was in full swing and Steiner oversaw all aspects of the work. As a consequence, he was forced to reduce his lecturing activity, though he continued to research and speak on the Fifth Gospel, as well as on life between death and a new birth. It had been his hope to open the Johannesbau by December. However, with the inception of hostilities, following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on June 28, that of course did not happen. Events moved very fast, as the world caught fire. By the end of July, Austria-Hungary had declared war on Serbia, and Russia had ordered the mobilization of troops. On August 1, Germany declared war on Russia; on August 3 on France; on August 4, Germany invaded Belgium and Britain declared war on Germany. The die was cast.

Rudolf Steiner had long recognized what was coming. He understood that humanity was entering a great test. Since the deed of 1879, when the Archangel Michael—according to both Steiner’s research and esoteric lore—overcame the Dragon, throwing him to Earth, and assumed the regency of the age, offering himself to human beings as their mediator and helper, the spiritual world had sought fiercely to manifest itself on Earth. Human beings meanwhile, for their part, sunk deeper into materialism and into the dragon’s clutches. Evil had entered the world in a new way. Yet the call was to rise upward—to work one’s way in freedom toward the spirit, thereby dissipating the evil, which in so many ways and in so much in human life now drew humanity evermore downward. From this point of view, the war came—or ought to have come—as a form of “hitting bottom.” If ever an event should bring human beings to change their way of thinking and being, this was it. During the first six months of the year, therefore, Steiner, while continuing to focus on the building that would be the living manifestation of the anthroposophical spirit, sought above all to strengthen his students’ spiritual resolve.

The reality of war had indeed changed everything. Suffering and death began to fill the air. Spiritual research, of the kind that Rudolf

Steiner had been doing, became difficult, if not impossible. In response to people's very heartfelt needs and the great confusion in the spiritual world, his focus narrowed. Thus, over the next few years, we find a greater emphasis on the vital connections between the living and the so-called dead, as well as on the esoteric historical currents underlying the ongoing carnage. On a more mundane level, travel, too, became more difficult. Steiner had to curtail his lecturing activity. Steiner's orbit would gradually become limited largely to Dornach and Berlin. Personal changes also ensued. His wife Anna (Schultz) Eunike (Steiner) had died in 1911. This left him free to marry his longtime co-worker and spiritual collaborator, Marie von Sivers, who was still a Russian citizen. With the War, the long-planned event became a necessity. Rudolf Steiner and Marie von Sivers were married on December 24, which meant that Marie Steiner, now with an Austrian passport, could travel freely to Berlin with her husband, Rudolf Steiner.

At the same time, Providence, establishing the new center outside the war zone, in Dornach, obviously provided a haven. While witnessing the horrific events going on in the rest of Europe, those in Switzerland were protected from them. This made it all the more important, as Steiner repeatedly stressed, for those whose fortunate karma had granted them this asylum to uphold with all their strength their spiritual ideals, manifesting them in their lives in the full existential resolution that the "Spirit will triumph."

The time for theory was over. The path to spiritual knowledge must be lived and practiced. Such is the context of the lectures collected here.

"Inner Reading and Inner Hearing," the first cycle, was originally intended to contain fourteen lectures. They were to be given during the rehearsal of Steiner's new Mystery Drama, which would have carried the previous four plays to a new level. This fifth play was to have been written during rehearsals in Munich, but the War made rehearsals impossible. It was never written. Nevertheless, in response to requests that he give the lectures anyway, Steiner gave what he had previously conceived of as a major and extended cycle of fourteen lectures in the shortened form of four lectures. Though, as he says,

the War now made it impossible to say what he would have said in Munich—“it is just not possible to speak the highest truths into the storm”—what he did say, perhaps precisely because he was forced to speak at a “lower” level, is unusually clear, astonishing, and enormously instructive.

The tone is intimate. Steiner is speaking here not just as teacher, but also as friend and colleague, a coworker in a shared enterprise at a time of common—indeed, from a European point of view, near universal—grief and foreboding. But the War and its desolation are present only between the lines. Steiner’s explicit theme is essentially meditation: the path to the spirit, to entering into relationship with spiritual beings—in the first place with the dead, but also with the angelic beings. Rather than instruction, he gives advice in the most remarkable, forthright, touching way, speaking not theoretically but directly from his experiences—which are often the most valuable teachings.

He begins with the in-itself-astonishing statement that “the essentials of spiritual science have been won basically through inner reading and inner hearing.” That is to say, inner reading and inner hearing constitute the primary method of spiritual research. They are the way we come to and experience spiritual reality.

Such an “inner” phenomenology and hermeneutics, however, is very different to what we habitually practice in relation to the “outer” world. Steiner gives the example of someone who suggested that “seers” be gathered together to observe a group of people, each of whom was instructed to think and feel certain things. If then, based on seeing their auras, all the seers agreed and were correct in perceiving what the members of the group were experiencing inwardly, the validity of the seers’ inner perceptions would be proved. In other words, this person has proposed a typical scientific experiment. But inner perception does not work like that. The spiritual world is not at the behest of our desires and intentions. Quite the contrary: it is always a gift: not a generic gift, but a gift given by a specific giver, a spiritual being. For the spiritual world is a world of beings—from the highest angelic hierarchies to the so-called dead. Spiritual knowing is not something we can take. It must be received. Therefore,

to approach such knowing-receiving, we must silence our desires, purposes, and intentions and present ourselves in devoted, expectant, attentive, empty waiting. Whatever comes originates in the spiritual world, not in us. And that world is nowhere else but here, where we are. But we are unaware of it; we do not see it.

Where are the beings of the elemental world; where are the beings of the spiritual world; where are the beings of the upper hierarchies? They are right where we are. They are all around us—where the table and the chairs are, where you yourselves are. They are everywhere all around us, but they are so thin and evanescent compared to the relationships and processes of the things of the external world that they escape our attention. We continually go straight through the spiritual world and do not see it; we are inattentive to the spiritual world because our disposition is not prepared for it.

The same, in fact, is also true for a right perception of the so-called physical or outer world. When we think, feel, and will in relation to the outer world, we usually think of ourselves as over “here” and the world as over “there.” But, though we can certainly develop valuable capacities in approaching it in that way, reality is not like that. With regard to our soul and spirit, we are not skin-bound. When we see a rose, our astral body and our “I” are *in* the rose; and this experience is *reflected* back to us by our organism or body. We do not produce what we experience inwardly; we only reflect it. “With our soul-spiritual nature we are truly within the part of the world we observe, and we see it because our organism reflects it.” But in ordinary daily life what we see is more or less ourselves reflected back to us. It is *maya* (or illusion) because we do not realize we are within what we see.

Perception of the spiritual world is even more complex, because (as stated in the above quotation) it is so fleeting and mobile compared to the fixity of the physical world. To begin to experience it, we must learn to forget ourselves as we do in meditation. Suppressing the *selfness* of the “I” enables us to sink down into the so-called astral body. But to have access to what we experience there, this experience too

must be reflected—in this case, not by the physical organism but by the so-called etheric or life body, which is a body, we might say, of living thinking. To do this is more difficult than “reading” what our physical organism reflects, for what the etheric reflects is in continual movement—as it were, non-dual movement, outside space and time. This movement is a sign, which must be read or interpreted by “diving down” from the astral into the etheric body, “which is experienced as a fall into an abyss,” in the process of which we separate into three parts (thinking, feeling, and willing), each of which has access to an “inner hearing” which reveals the meaning of what we have “read.” The state of consciousness involved is akin to a conscious sleep state. It is the state of living consciously in the astral body, which enables us to experience the reflection of the spiritual world in the etheric body. But since this “reading” is actually a “descending into,” the reading becomes something closer to “hearing.” Then we realize how different true reality is from what we experience in the state of ordinary sensory-physical consciousness.

The process involved is one of identification. The fleeting world through which we encounter the spiritual world is one of images. First, we must clearly separate ourselves from these images. Then, in freedom we must plunge down into them, become one with them—in Steiner’s striking metaphor “eat them.” We enter their reality. Through this reality, the truth is heard. The phenomenon of “inner hearing” arises. But, in fact, it is not we that hear; more accurately, the image we have become “hears.” This is a living process through which we really hear an objective spiritual being—Steiner’s example involved communicating with the so-called dead—spiritually.

Much more, of course, is involved in all this than may be recounted here. Only the bare bones may be given. These lectures, in fact, which require close reading and even closer rereading, take us on a profound journey—one described in such precise and vivid language that we can sense something of the transformative magic that those listening to Steiner must have felt—from the sensory world into the experience of the spiritual researcher or meditator, and then back into the sensory world again.

Of central importance in the whole process is an experience of the Zodiac and the planets. When we dive into an image and identify with it, the image itself disappears. At the same time we feel diminished or reduced: we feel that we are only “a piece” of what we were before. As Steiner tells it, our experience is, as it were, a twelfth of what it had been: we feel ourselves in a circle, of which we occupy a twelfth. In other words, we have transformed ourselves into the Zodiac, through which the spiritual being, having penetrated through the image, speaks to us. We gaze, as it were, from the periphery inward—not, as in sensory perception, from the center outward—and discover there seven voices, corresponding to the planets. In other words, the astral body contains a twelvefold reflecting capacity and the etheric body a sevenfold reflecting capacity. Steiner then likens these two—the outer (astral, star-body) Zodiac and the inner planets—to vowels and consonants. In summary:

We can say that we perceive a series of images. First we stand outside the series; then we dive down into it. In that process, through our devotion and sacrifice, we form a world sphere around what we wish to perceive. This world sphere contains within itself, like seven planets, the vowel system through which the being in question can speak with us when we ourselves, through the twelvefold nature of our being, form the system of consonants.

We can only come into relationship with a being of the spiritual world by enclosing it; enclosing it in such a way that the enclosing gesture forms the cosmic consonants; the being itself can then address us in the cosmic vowels. And when the cosmic vowel system can work together with the cosmic consonant system, which we ourselves have formed, then reading and hearing work together. Then we penetrate into a particular region of the spiritual world.

These experiences must be reflected in the etheric body, where they may be cognized in the diluted, shadowy form of thoughts and ideas. If they were not so reflected, and we returned still bearing them into

the physical, we would die: our body could not contain it. Indeed, Steiner stresses throughout that in the process of meditation and the encounter with the spiritual world, the threshold of death is ever-present, a danger that must be navigated cautiously and carefully.

What does it mean, we may ask, that we cannot directly apprehend spiritual realities? It means that we are protected; but even more it means that we are called to realize them in other ways, which takes preparation, a kind of continuous moral awareness, beginning with “the constant practice of loving interest in everything that surrounds us in the world.” We must forego interest in ourselves. All the exercises in *How to Know Higher Worlds*, for example, have this as their consequence. Here Steiner gives some others, taking as his example ways of developing interest in other people. At a certain point in our development, we can enter into a completely different relationship with others, for instance, by taking a selfless, loving interest in their physiognomy, or the play of expression in their faces, or their gestures. Entering deeply into these three common realities, in fact, we have manifestations of three cosmic vowels. Later, Steiner will give clues to two more.

Throughout the first four of these lectures, Steiner speaks directly and candidly of his own research experiences—above all with the dead, but also, as the lectures unfold, with higher spiritual beings—in astonishing depth and detail. The lectures, therefore, ought not to be read for mere information about the spiritual world, but read and reread as a guide to our own inner and outer lives. Read in this way, readers will find them of almost inexhaustible wealth. In the last lecture, however, his tone changes. It is as intimate as before, but now it becomes more personal, as Steiner speaks, this time more out of his own life experiences than his research experiences, of the mission and task of Anthroposophy or spiritual science. What shines through here in a remarkable way, suffusing the text with a glow of warmth, is Steiner’s enormous love for humanity, for the human project, and for individual human beings.

The second set of lectures, “How to Achieve Existence in the World of Ideas,” follows on from the first, taking up several already-established themes, while giving them a somewhat different emphasis.

The call or injunction shifts from meditation and serious inner work to the consequences of such work for ordinary daily life. Common to both is the insistence that Anthroposophy not remain theoretical. One way of doing so is clearly to take up meditation. Another is to take up the spiritual realities discovered and articulated by those able to do the inner work, and put them into practice in one's life. Steiner is here concerned that Anthroposophists do not simply take up Anthroposophy as just another system of ideas to be schematized and philosophized about only intellectually. For him, Anthroposophy is nothing if it is not existential—if it does not change how we live. The second set of lectures thus builds in a new way on some of the spiritual realities touched upon in the first, as well as introducing others. It tries to show how, if people live their lives out of the conviction of their reality, their lives become different. Every spiritual fact adduced by the spiritual researcher has its application or extension in daily life. To live out of such conviction—in thought, feeling, and action—in fact constitutes a kind of second-order spiritual research. For when we take a spiritual fact as if it were a directive for life, and try to extend its reach by ordinary thinking, remarkable ethical and epistemological consequences appear in our lives and in our relationships with those we live with. They are changed fundamentally. Not nearly as dense as those preceding them, these lectures in their own way are equally astonishing. Time and again, as we read them, one senses “This is something I could do,” and a new insight dawns.

The collection ends with two extraordinarily moving—and relevant—Christmas lectures—Steiner's first Christmas lectures of the war. Then, as now, as he puts it, “one can hardly think of a sharper mental contrast” than that between the desperate state of the world and the angels' proclamation to the Shepherds:

Divine Revelation in the heights and Peace on Earth for people of good will.

Truly, these days the birth of the Christ child cannot simply be celebrated as usual; some deeper recognition is required, namely, that we face the reality that what entered the world at Christmas—and

how it did so—is still not understood. The full meaning of Christ Jesus—and His birth, life, death, and resurrection—still eludes us. Though it has been slowly moving and evolving in human consciousness for two millennia, the reality and meaning of Christ’s incarnation still has not penetrated humanity. It is perhaps the most difficult reality to grasp—and always has been. Historically, certainly, this is the case.

In the first centuries following the Mystery of Golgotha, for example, Mithras and the Mithraic Mysteries enjoyed great popularity. But Mithras was a very different being than Christ. Mithras could be encountered only in clairvoyant vision. He, too, was conceived of as a mediator between the spiritual world and the human soul, but he could not be conceived of as incarnating in a human body. He came down to Earth, but only in the imaginal realm. Ancient clairvoyance knew “The Future and Coming One,” a Sun Being, Christ, and knew that he was approaching the Earth to dwell there, but it could not grasp that He would actually take on a human body and that the future of the Earth and the cosmos would thereby be transformed. People could not experience that “the great gift of cosmic Love, the Christ, from the God whom one calls the Father” had come to dwell with them, to unite His being through that deed with the whole future meaning of earthly evolution. For this, people had to learn to love Christ Jesus as their brother: they had to develop a relationship of the deepest intimacy with Him.

To some extent, indeed, over the centuries, human beings slowly did create such a relationship of intimacy and friendship, but now this intimacy—which is only half of the picture—must be broadened to include the cosmic and divine dimensions of Christ’s work. Now Christ’s cosmic nature must also become part of the new Christianity.

Ancient clairvoyance knew of the Cosmic Christ’s work before Golgotha, but the Mystery of Golgotha itself came, as it were, as a stumbling block, which was aggravated by the general decline of spiritual vision. Thus, the great Mani, the third century founder of Manicheanism could see how Christ descended from the spiritual heights, but could not comprehend that He had penetrated the

earthly world and dwelt in a human body, changing everything. And after Mani, even that knowledge of the descent grew weaker until it disappeared.

Ancient Gnosis, too, knew these things and its testament, as Steiner shows, is still most moving, but spiritual science can now see further and more deeply. In this spirit he gives a beautiful verse, which is far from the ancient Gnostic view, but oriented, like theirs, toward the living Cosmic Christ:

Light is love ... Sun-weaving  
Love-radiance of a world  
of creative beings —

which, through ages unheard-of,  
holds us to its heart,  
and which at last has given us  
its highest spirit in the sheath  
of a man for three  
years: then He came into His

Father's legacy, which is now the Earth's  
innermost heavenly fire:  
that it, too, may once become Sun.

Now the task is to unite the Christ of Heaven and the earthly Christ in a single path of love, walked individually by each one of us. The attempt to do so, as Steiner says, will fill our souls, not only with love, but also and above all with humility. For by walking this path, we will begin to understand the enormity of the task of humanity, now and into the future: namely, "that human beings, as they go from incarnation to incarnation, must come more and more deeply to the understanding of what Christ really is."

To know Christ is always the most intimate, personal matter. It is the most inner affair and it occurs only gradually. Christ must be born in one's heart. That is why, as Christ becomes truly known, institutional Churches will wane and lose their purpose. For each

individual must make the relationship, so as to give birth to Christ within; which means that the relationship is direct and requires no mediation. This path is contained in a verse of Angelus Silesius, much loved by Steiner:

If Christ be born in Bethlehem a thousand times  
And not in you, you remain in eternal perdition.