

Breathing Light: A Yoga for the Senses

Colors and sound are windows through which we can ascend spiritually into the spirit world, and life also brings to us windows through which the spiritual world enters our physical world... Human beings will make important discoveries in the future in this respect. They will actually unite their moral-spiritual nature with the results of sense perception. An infinite deepening of the human soul can be foreseen in this domain.¹

—Rudolf Steiner

Between the physical, sense-perceptible world and the world of spirit a chasm yawns. It is no physical chasm, yet as we draw near to it, our inner experience is much like that we have when standing at the very edge of a cliff. Dark emotions threaten to overwhelm all thinking, all other feelings, and we feel paralyzed. In Rudolf Steiner's words:

The soul may feel as though it were looking into an infinite, blank, desolate abyss. The feeling is something like fear and dread, and the soul lives in it without being aware of the fact.²

At first the spiritual world is so foreign, so "other" that we do not sense its presence in any way, rather we only sense the loss of the familiar, the emptiness everywhere, and feel the fear that accompanies them. So we turn aside from the threshold, often unconsciously.

Cultivation of an active inner life through meditation places us regularly near the threshold. We begin to know and feel the faithfulness of thinking, even in the void of consciousness that first embraces us. As the sense world vanishes, the spiritual activity within thinking lives on and sustains us. As the objects of consciousness pass away, and sleep threatens to overtake us, the life of thinking radiates its own vivifying, awakening force. We gradually learn to live within the shifting waters of a living, immaterial world, even if at first it remains dark and enigmatic. We are buoyed by the birth of our higher self in meditation, and it becomes the firm spiritual center of our spiritual awakening.

But parallel with the cultivation of an inner life, Rudolf Steiner also consistently emphasized another aspect to meditation, one directed not inward but outward into the sense world. On various occasions, he contrasted the path inward, into the soul, with the path outward into the sense world, terming them the "mystical" and "alchemical" paths respectively.³ Concerning the mystic path into one's soul, he indicated how difficult it can be to know if one is free of the deceptions caused by Lucifer and Ahriman.⁴ Try as we might to draw something from ourselves, it constantly suffers the danger of being permeated with instincts. Steiner states

it dramatically in his January 1924 lecture after the Christmas Foundation Stone meeting: "All that arises from within becomes impure. The time for such creation from within is over and gone."⁵ By contrast, the outer path is more secure, even if the imaginative experiences to which it leads are more delicate and short-lived. Natural phenomena are a safe starting point for spiritual practice. In this lecture as elsewhere, Steiner speaks of a practice that transforms outer sense experience into inner soul experience. We first fully engage the sense object – the blue sky, the growing plant, or the human form, for example, but then we must go beyond these outer impressions.

"The movement caused by the external impression has finished, and for most persons that is the end of the matter. This is, however, where the pupil must take his start..."⁶ Having taken it in deeply, we then turn away from the external impression in order to feel the moral echo or afterimage that rises up within our souls. Precisely here is the starting point for a new relationship to the world, one that leads us beyond sense experience towards the supersensible. Then will the sense processes have become ensouled again, as Goethe and Steiner both sought to accomplish, and a crossing point to the spirit established.⁷

Against this background, we understand why in *How to Know Higher Worlds*, Rudolf Steiner urges us again and again to turn our careful attention to the budding and blooming of plants, or their dying and decaying, to crystal, plant and animal. Likewise, we gain a new understanding of his *Calendar of the Soul*, which allows us to accompany the passing seasons of the year inwardly. In all these ways Rudolf Steiner directs us to a health-giving dimension in meditative life granted by the hand of nature. Outer phenomena can thus provide us with a fine starting point for spiritual practice, becoming a "yoga of the senses."

I use this phrase quite consciously, because Steiner himself saw his book *How to Know Higher Worlds* as a transformation of the traditional Eastern breathing practice into a cognitive breathing process. In 1917 he said,

All the exercises in the book How to Know Higher Worlds are the spiritual correlate suited to the West, of that for which the Orient longs: to bring the rhythm of the process of breathing into the process of cognition.⁸

Before the Mystery of Golgotha, potent beneficial forces lived within the air, or as the Greeks called it, *pneuma*, which meant both air and spirit. We need only recall that it was the breath of God which awakened Adam. But since the Mystery of Golgotha the soul nature of air has changed, and so should our meditative practice. Christ lives now within the world of light, the etheric, and thus our breathing should take place within

that element. We need to learn to “breathe light,” that is, to work at the level of cognition as described above. If we do so, then we will become aware that beings of the rank of angel dwell in every color and tone, in every sense impression. As Steiner says,

When we open our eyes and look around at everything that surrounds us affecting our senses, we are not aware that our Angel dwells in the sun's rays which penetrate our eyes, making objects visible. The beings of the Angeloi live in waves of sound, in the rays of light and color and in other sense perceptions.⁹

Throughout his written and spoken work, Rudolf Steiner draws us toward the sense world, to nature and the arts in order to establish a new inner relationship to them. Particularly in the arts we work intimately with color, tone, movement and form. We gradually understand in just what sense the arts are, as Virginia Sease has written, “a bridge over the abyss, over the threshold into the spiritual world.”¹⁰ Here especially we can find a fruitful basis for spiritual practice that leads to a higher consciousness, one that can open for us the proximate world of the elemental beings and angels.¹¹

Many in the West have worked with breathing exercises, and have felt the benefit these provide for their peace of mind and health. It is important to know that in the Buddhist canon, breathing was only one of forty standard subjects for meditation. Eight of them were sense subjects: earth, water, air, fire, and the colors blue, yellow, red and white. These *kasinas*, or “devices,” were to be meditated on by the Buddhist monk in much the same way that Rudolf Steiner describes the meditation on sense objects. By taking up only the breathing practice in the West, we have selected only a fragment of a much richer meditative tradition.

In past meditative traditions, one often shut out the sense world, spending long periods, even years, in isolation, withdrawn into oneself in order to reconnect with the lost world of spirit. Today, for most Western souls, a safer path can be found through a practice that works with the light of nature in which the Christ works and weaves. Here the arts, especially in their anthroposophical forms, can be an enormous help. Few of us can or should withdraw into a remote hermitage, but we all can benefit from a prolonged engagement with the arts. Even today, Eastern practice involves many long hours of sitting in mindfulness of the breath. I think that the proper metamorphosis of this sitting practice is a Goethean-artistic mindfulness of color, movement, tone, shape.... Every art offers us wonderful possibilities for practicing a yoga of the senses through which we can learn to find the moral-spiritual in the sensory.

After long practice, we will have learned how to unite our moral-spiritual nature with sense perception, and so

have set out upon the “infinite deepening of the soul” that Steiner foresaw. What appeared at first as a subjective and ephemeral impression of the soul will then slowly become a new ground on which we can walk, one of living water. As He did to the apostle Peter, Christ beckons, and gives us the means to walk on the lake of spiritual waters no matter how stormy the sea or tumultuous the air. He becomes the bridge over the abyss.

Arthur Zajonc, Amherst, MA

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