

## **Johannes Denger**

### **The long way from the head to the hand – and back**

as a challenge to professional training

This transcript of a lecture by Johannes Denger focuses on how we can support students in finding their own access to anthroposophical human studies and to the disabled person. If we investigate why there is such a seemingly unbridgeable gap between disabled and not disabled, or between theory and practice, and how this gap can be bridged with a three-step method developed out of meditatively acquired human studies we realize that it is the foremost task of the training facilitator to meet the student with a <prophetic eye> and act as <midwife> in helping him or her <give birth to their true self.>

### **The idea in Reality**

Contrary to a widespread misconception anthroposophy is not a philosophy that commits its followers to a particular set of values or even code of practice but is there as a help in looking at the world. People interested in anthroposophy have questions about our origin, about our past and future, about the meaning of life in general and their own biography in particular. Rudolf Steiner's spiritually acquired knowledge helps them to ask their life questions and to answer for themselves the basic philosophical question of <What shall I do with my life?> Especially people who are about to embark on training or are in training live with this question. Conventional answers are rarely satisfactory. This is most evident in curative education and social therapy, for in the encounter with children or adults with so-called <mental disability,> traditional norms and Pisa standards tend to fail. If I want to find access to a disabled person I have no choice but go towards him with an open mind and develop, in the actual encounter, ideas for teaching and educating him or for supporting him on his individual path. What help can anthroposophy give me in that situation?

Becoming aware of the idea in reality – that *is* anthroposophy! We can also call it phenomenology or Goetheanism. When the young Rudolf Steiner, at the age of 23, commented and edited Goethe's scientific writings, he wrote in his preface: <Becoming aware of the idea in reality is the true communion of human beings.> It is that, if it really happens, which makes anthroposophical initiatives so successful, whether it is the physician looking at his patient, the farmer looking at the soil or the teacher looking at the child. <Anthroposophical> means that we gain knowledge out of the essence of the other person and act in accordance with it. If that is successful there can be no question of dogmatism. Any kind of philosophical dogmatism was suspicious to Rudolf Steiner. Which is why he wrote as the last sentence of his *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*: <We must be able to confront the idea in living experience or else fall into bondage to it.>

### **Fallen away from the all-embracing**

After long, historically well-documented, periods of excluding disabled people from all kinds of areas we have for some time witnessed a paradigm shift that has aimed, first, at integration through welcoming back and ultimately at inclusion in the sense of unconditional belonging. It is probably an endeavour for generations that will have to overcome long-established habits and views. One basic problem that tends to lead to segregation is rooted in our cognitive constitution which students also have. It might therefore be helpful to begin with some epistemic considerations.

How do we think about people with disabilities and what is the effect of such thinking gestures? The basic epistemic problem is that whenever we think about something we create a division of subject and object – here is the thinking subject and there the object that my thinking relates to, or as Karl Jaspers said: <Having been thought means having fallen away from the all-embracing.> (Jaspers 1971, p. 26)

As human beings we can't but repeat this <falling away,> this fall from paradise, as it were, because of the way our mind works. What Günther Dellbrügger (2000) proclaims in his book about Hegel's struggle with human intelligence, namely that <knowledge inflicts the wound – and heals it> is expressed even more radically by Hegel himself: <Knowledge heals the wound that it itself *is*> (Hegel, quoted from Dellbrügger 2001, p. 33). This is why <God> cannot really be thought: if I grasp the all-

encompassing, the all-embracing, in a concept, I make it my – the thinking subject's – object. This <disability> in our cognitive constitution, the fact that we cannot fully and comprehensively grasp reality, is also the basis for the development of self-awareness.

It is on the object that we achieve self-awareness in our relation to the world. We separate I and world, subject and object, because we separate perception and concept. Perception and concept – we could also say appearance and inherent law – are in reality one in the world. It is only the human mind that separates them in order to reunite them in the thinking process. The <right> way of thinking, that is, the thinking that corresponds to the object, therefore really heals the wound inflicted by the tearing apart of perception and concept. Rudolf Steiner says: <Because it is through our subject that the whole appears to be torn into perception and concept, true knowledge arises from the reunion of the two.> (p. 125)

Karl Jaspers (1971) calls attention to another division that is caused by thinking: <Each specific object, thought clearly, always relates to other objects. It is their specificity that distinguishes the one from the other. Even in thinking of being as such, I think it as the opposite of nothingness.> (p. 26) Separating is our nature! Not only are we separate from creation due to our conscious mind, we separate in the process of getting to know the world, for instance into disabled and not disabled. The act of gaining knowledge itself has therefore a segregating, separating dimension. I therefore propose the thesis that segregation and its overcoming through integration and inclusion are initially knowledge problems – how do we prevent the necessary distinction, the capacity to differentiate, from becoming condescending discrimination?

### **Choosing oneself**

There are plenty of examples from past and present of people being made objects. The question is: is there a specific kind of cognition that allows us to distinguish between object and person? To be sure, this is no sentimental attempt at performing intellectual pirouettes to deny the fact that disability exists. On the contrary, it is to show that any differences between a person with and a person without conspicuous disabilities, however pronounced these differences might be, are a matter of degree and not of principle. We each of us, disabled or not, have ourselves as a task. It lies in the nature of this development that knowing and accepting the task of becoming oneself is possibility and not obligation. Habermas wrote, in his reworking of Søren Kierkegaard: <The individual person must bring himself to an awareness of his individuality and freedom.[...] He must retrieve himself from the anonymous distraction of a breathless fragmented existence and lend continuity and transparency to his life. A person who has become self-aware in this way has himself as a task that is set for him, although it has become his through him having chosen it.> (Habermas 2001, p. 18f.) This having-chosen-oneself includes the disability. Some people with disabilities are authentic to a degree that we can only dream of! There is an obvious destiny dimension here.

Does choosing oneself rely on superior intellectual capacities and are people who don't have these capacities therefore excluded? No, on the contrary: <... and so the richest person is nothing before choosing himself, and what one would have to call the poorest person is everything if he has chosen himself; because greatness is not being this or that, but being oneself. And every person can be that if he chooses to.> (Kierkegaard 1975, p. 728)

### **Gradually overcoming dualism**

Students face two problems: how do I get from understanding to doing (from theory to practice, from the head to the hand) and how do I get from doing to understanding (from practice to theory, from the hand to the head)? The ideas we absorb in our studies – such as the knowledge of the human being – were thought almost a hundred years ago and can be seen as abstract impositions. We search for the reality that guarantees their validity. And vice versa: we are overcome by the perceptions of reality – and we search for the idea in them that gives us knowledge. One could say, in somewhat absolute terms: we cannot convey an idea to reality because reality already holds the idea. It is terrible – although it is often done – to suggest to students: if you just listen well in the theory lessons and put

what you understood straight into practice all will be well!

Learned ideas are abstract and abstractions don't go well with living practice. Life seems to be allergic to abstractions. They either quench life or life swallows them and they vanish ineffectively. The practitioner who is overcome by the sheer multitude of perceptions, on the other hand, will never comprehend others or his own actions without exercising his intellect in order to penetrate the practice cognitively. The growing need for documentation is an example of the danger that arises from the ultimately pointless attempt to bring order to life through conceptuality. The colleague who is busy documenting draws back from the life around him and instead of the documented reality the act of documenting in itself becomes a reality! In his lectures on a meditatively acquired understanding of the human being Rudolf Steiner (1983) suggested a very fruitful method for overcoming the theory-practice dichotomy (see also Andreas Fischer's contribution). <As teachers we must study the human being; we must come to understand the human being through meditation; we must hold the essence of the human being in our memory – then the memory will become vigorous life. It is not ordinary remembering but a remembering that generates new inner impulses. Memory wells from spiritual life and brings to our working life what we know as the third stage: Understanding through meditation is followed by the creative remembering which is also a receiving from the spiritual world.> (p. 52f.) One page before that we read: <If you study the human being as we did you first become conscious of it. If you then meditate on it, an inner process of digestion will go on in your soul and spirit and that will make you a teacher and educator. Just as a healthy metabolism makes you a living person, this meditatively digested true knowledge of the human being makes you an educator. You stand differently in front of the children if you have experienced this meditative process and its results. What makes you a teacher is what grows out of the meditative effort of acquiring such knowledge.> (p. 51)

### **A highly effective three-stage method**

If we simply studied the human being and tried to apply the acquired knowledge in practice we would end up being overcome by abstractions as described earlier. Anthroposophy would become rigid dogma. It is through the meditative digestive process in soul and spirit that the ideas are internalized and individualized. That involves a fourth step (in fact the third) that Steiner does not explicitly mention but that I think has to take place and indeed does take place: forgetting what we learned about the human being! Only what has sunk deep down in meditative digestion can be remembered creatively in a fourth step in the actual situation. Let's say I studied the constitutional polarity of hysteria and epilepsy and connected with the contents in a way that lets me experience how a thin-skinned person feels when exposed to an onslaught of unfiltered impressions. If that experience has sunk from waking consciousness into oblivion and I then meet a person with just that constitution, I will intuitively behave different towards him and have more ideas for dealing with the situation than if I simply refer to the <hysteria chart> and try to determine who fits in where.

### **The incomplete person**

The question of choosing oneself and being able to be oneself is of course also critical for <anthroposophists>. Do we not often practise and present anthroposophy as an ideology? Or can anthroposophy be a possibility to better understand the world and individual people? What is the human essence, what is good for a human being and how can we discover, foster and develop that? I would like to go back to and deepen the above mentioned epistemic considerations, which Rudolf Steiner elaborates on in the *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* and which, in my opinion, are crucial when we ask about the difference between a person with and a person without disability. A disabled young woman once said in a discussion: <All people are disabled!> We say that because it feels right, but the feeling can be cognitively corroborated.

In the *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* Rudolf Steiner describes as a fundamental problem of the human constitution that, as human beings, we set the world apart from us. We do not unquestioningly live in it like animals and other beings. Imagine we had the consciousness of an ant that goes about its allocated task as part of the ant colony; or that of a bee or beaver. There is immense instinctive security in just being part of the world! Beavers don't ask: <why am I a beaver?> or <how can I become more beaverish?> or even <is my kind of beaverishness still up-to-date?> That we as human beings ask such questions shows that we really have withdrawn from the simple, pleasant, almost paradisaical

being-one with the world. We have questions about the world. We separate ourselves from the world and develop object-consciousness. The object of perception and the concept are one, Rudolf Steiner said. Every tree that grows out there contains the information, the law, which made it grow into what it is. Only human beings need to ask: <What is that? What law underlies its growing?> Because of our cognitive constitution we separate perception and concept in order to reunite them in our thinking. The moment the perception is reunited, in my thinking, with the corresponding concept the wound I inflicted in the process of cognition heals. Steiner pointed out that perception and concept are in reality one and that it is we who take them apart and reunite them; this was true, he said, for all phenomena in the world except our own selves. <For us as human beings concept and perception are in fact separate at first, and we have to unite them.> (Steiner 1962, p. 169). This is a very interesting and fruitful thought since it signifies that as human beings we are the only beings in the world that are not complete. We are not perfect because we can become more human! Perception and concept of the individual human being are not *a priori* identical, there is scope for development. Development then, if all goes well, means *I* shape the concept of myself, gradually bringing the perception and concept of myself together. This potential for growth is typical of the human situation.

What does this mean for the question about the difference between people with and without disability? It means that it is a difference in degree, not principle. The task described above is one we all share. We start with different premises, some of which can be called disabilities, and we need to become more congruent with ourselves in the course of our life – not in the sense of an externally imposed moral imperative, but out of the deep human longing to be able to be oneself.

### **Training as a help toward self-choice and self-development**

It can therefore be seen as the first and foremost task of training in curative education and social therapy that trainers act as <midwives> for the students on their way to self-congruence, the lifelong process of giving birth to oneself. The trainer should not form the students in his image but help them form themselves. The highest possible degree of authenticity is in itself an achievement, but it is also a prerequisite if one wants to support disabled people on their individual path, because their sense of authenticity is – as we well know – infallible.

This support takes place through understanding when we meet the other. The philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer (2000) wrote the following wonderful sentence when he elaborated on Heidegger: <...that understanding is not an attitude of the subject but it is being's way of being.> (quoted from Tietz, p. 31)

As human beings we need to and are constituted to strive, throughout our life, towards understanding the world that has become a question to us and towards understanding ourselves.

### **Developing the capacity to perceive human beings**

People who met Rudolf Steiner personally often described how they felt deeply perceived and recognized by him and how he helped them to understand themselves better by making them aware of dormant questions and motifs in their encounter with him. Friedrich Rittelmeyer's description of his meeting with Rudolf Steiner is a particularly illustrative example (*Meine Lebensbegegnung mit Rudolf Steiner*): <Above, in the half-open door, Rudolf Steiner stood, having just said good-bye to another visitor, and watched most carefully as I slowly came up the stairs. I have never seen anyone as observant as he was. It was as if – quite immobile, given up selflessly – he let one create oneself again, as it were, in a subtle element in his own soul, which he offered up for the purpose. It was not a matter of thinking about the other, more an inner mental re-creating in mind and spirit in which the whole growth and development of the other would be revealed.> (Rittelmeyer, quoted from Selg 2008, p. 11)

The short account is highly significant and reveals the method we can apply to deepen our encounter with another person. What is Rittelmeyer describing? He speaks of perception through careful observation that requires selfless devotion in the moment. And then the decisive statement: it is not Steiner who re-creates the other but he offers a subtle element of his soul in which he lets the other re-

create himself! An inner re-creation in mind and spirit in which the whole growth and development of the other would be revealed.

We can indeed say with Rüdiger Janisch (see his essay): Anthroposophy arises in the encounter! It might sound ambitious but the meeting of trainer and student also needs the <prophetic eye> that detects the still dormant potential in the soul of the other, making him aware of his own developmental possibilities. Where this is even only slightly possible, it is developmental support in the best sense. It is that which makes our task so satisfying!

*Translated from German by Margot M. Saar*

### **Bibliography**

Dellbrügger, Günther (2000): *Das Erkennen schlägt die Wunde – und heilt sie*. Urachhaus, Stuttgart.

Habermas, Jürgen (2001): *Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur*. Frankfurt/M. English title: *The Future of Human Nature*, Oxford 2003.

Jaspers, Karl (1971): *Einführung in die Philosophie*. Piper Taschenbuch, München. English Title: *Way to Wisdom. An Introduction to Philosophy*, London 2003. Tr. R. Owsley and R. Manheim.

Kierkegaard, Sören (1975): *Entweder-Oder*. DTV, München. English title: *Either/Or*. Princeton 1987. Tr. H. and E. Hong.

Selg, Peter (2008): *The Therapeutic Eye*. Great Barrington MA. Tr. A. Meuss and M. Saar

Steiner, Rudolf (1962): *Die Philosophie der Freiheit (GA 4)*. Rudolf Steiner Verlag, Dornach/CH. Published in English as: *The Philosophy of Freedom or The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*.

Steiner, Rudolf (1983): *Meditativ erarbeitete Menschenkunde*. In: Steiner, Rudolf: *Erziehung und Unterricht aus Menschenerkenntnis (GA 302a)*. Rudolf Steiner Dornach/CH. Published in English as *Balance in Teaching*. Great Barrington 2007. Tr. R. Querido.

Tietz, Udo (2000): *Hans-Georg Gadamer*. Junius Verlag, Hamburg.