

# How I Teach Anthroposophy

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*Translated in cooperation with the author by Ann Stackpole*

**Is it at all possible to teach anthroposophy? And what is anthroposophy anyway? A kind of faith? A science? Or rather some sort of lifestyle? Arve Mathisen has been running courses in anthroposophy for trainee teachers for a number of years and here he offers the reader a glimpse into his classes.<sup>1</sup>**

Waldorf education has its source in Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy. Concepts and thoughts from anthroposophy have a central position in Steiner's ideas about children, school and education from his early work in 1906 and right through to the last lectures about Waldorf education in 1924. Waldorf education was founded upon and presented through the same anthroposophical concepts which Steiner otherwise used in almost all of his innumerable lectures. I have taught Waldorf education and anthroposophy for many years, first in seminars for parents at the Steiner School in Bærum (Norway), later at the University College of Eurhythmy in Norway and now at the Rudolf Steiner University College for teacher and preschool teacher students.

"Is it possible to teach anthroposophy?" one might ask oneself. And I have certainly often thought that it really isn't possible. For what is anthroposophy? Is it the contents of Steiner's books and lectures? Is it a belief or a world view, or a kind of science? Is anthroposophy a road to knowledge, a method for understanding the human being and the world? Or is it something quite different? Considering the fact that concepts such as knowledge and learning appear to be nearly impossible to define, I will not attempt to formulate a concise definition of anthroposophy. But for a student of Waldorf education it is important, despite these difficulties, both to attain an understanding of anthroposophy and to form own opinions and attitudes related to anthroposophy. If you are a recently educated teacher interested in further developing your pedagogical practice, it is, in my view, useful to know about the ideas that created and continue to create the basis for Waldorf education. Knowledge is the key word here. Through knowledge, understanding is deepened, criticism is sharpened and educational practice is changed. Anthroposophy can be a profound source of inspiration for working with children and adolescents. In the following, I will give an account of thoughts and teaching content from lessons in anthroposophy at the Rudolf Steiner University College. I won't describe any kind of set plan that I use again and again. Each year has a different focus, and the subject matter also varies. This text combines teaching material from several student groups.

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## **Anthroposophy and sex instruction**

Each time I teach a group of students in anthroposophy, I ask them what they wish to learn and what kind of expectations they have. Of course I receive many different answers, but there are two subjects that often come up. The students want to learn about anthroposophy in a way that is related to working with children and adolescents, and they want to understand anthroposophy better. They want clear and straightforward explanations. Many also express that they are sceptical of anthroposophical ideas. They do not want to accept the idea of reincarnation right away and feel alienated from or troubled by concepts like etheric or astral bodies. For this reason I have chosen to compose the lectures by integrating dialogue about questions coming from the students and a thorough presentation of selected concepts from Waldorf education and anthroposophy. Teaching anthroposophy reminds me in many ways of sex instruction in the lower secondary school years. There is knowledge that can be communicated, but the value of the teaching depends on all the participants feeling free to make their own decisions and form their own attitudes. A norm for what anthroposophy can mean for each individual is just as non-existent as a “normal” sexuality. This has been a prime concern for me in teaching anthroposophy: how can I contribute to making an open, critical and inquiring atmosphere which both opens for what is interesting and potentially valuable in anthroposophy and at the same time nurtures a critical attitude? This is not as simple as it perhaps sounds. For as soon as I start using anthroposophical concepts, such as etheric body, for example, and try to present theoretical and practical perspectives on this, a kind of tacitly understood acceptance of the existence of an etheric body begins hovering in the classroom. According to the French thinker Michael Foucault’s ideas, it is evident that something as simple as a conversation and a reflection on a concept at the same time involves an influence upon those participating in such activities. I discuss this with the students and ask them to be careful. I want to contribute to an understanding of anthroposophy, not to the spreading of what I call “anthroposophical conceptual realism”. By this, I mean that such things that Steiner describes in his lectures are automatically expected to have a parallel in the students’ experience. Ideas should be treated as ideas. It is then up to each individual to decide how the ideas can relate to his or her own thinking, personal experience and practice. The intention of the lectures is to work with Steiner’s basic ideas and concepts with the students in an understandable manner, without the individual student blindly accepting the whole or parts of Steiner’s world of thought. As I see it, a pronounced critically oriented teaching can penetrate deeply into anthroposophy’s descriptions of the human being and the cosmos.

### **Basic ideas?**

What is meant by basic anthroposophical ideas? Steiner’s work covers innumerable themes from religion, art and science. A catchword catalogue published in 1998 filled over 2500 pages<sup>2</sup>. Who can take this in or have the courage to present parts of such an overwhelming amount of material? Luckily, one might say, Steiner has nevertheless tied most of his presentations to just a few major concepts. Yes, to put it simply, it can be said that Steiner expressed large parts of his anthroposophy from two perspectives. The one perspective is thinking-feeling-willing. Steiner uses this triad of concepts when he presents topics like the human physical body as well as psychological and spiritual phenomena. At the founding of the first Waldorf School in 1919, it was just these three – thinking,

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<sup>2</sup> Steiner, Rudolf, Mötteli, Emil (1998). *Register zur Rudolf Steiners Gesamtausgabe*. Dornach: Rudolf Steiners Verlag.

feeling and willing – that were the point of departure for Steiner’s presentation of central pedagogical and human aspects of Waldorf education<sup>3</sup>. The other major complex of concepts in Steiner’s work builds upon a fourfold division of the phenomena of the world, best known through the so-called kingdoms of nature and the four elements. Steiner arranged minerals, plants, animals and mankind in a fourfold concept structure. All of them have a *physical body* and may be observed and placed as materially perceptible phenomena. Plants, animals and mankind have a life in themselves that Steiner characterizes as their *etheric body*. Animals and the human being use their senses and ability to move in a conscious and often intelligent way. They communicate with their environment. According to Steiner, the fundamental abilities of consciousness such as sensing, moving, wakefulness and communication are the qualities of an *astral body*. In addition, the human being has the ability of reflection, self-reflection and restraint. Steiner associates these qualities with the so-called *ego*. These four – the physical, etheric, astral and the ego – are concepts in anthroposophy which very often turn up in Steiner’s descriptions. In Waldorf education they are key concepts.

### **Ideas in dialogue**

Thus, there exist a triad and a fourfoldedness of basic concepts in anthroposophy, and these are, in my opinion, very well suited for the teaching of anthroposophy. The students get the opportunity to accumulate knowledge which is essential for understanding Waldorf education, and at the same time, they become acquainted with concepts that can be further pursued in other aspects of Steiner’s works. It’s like learning a language.

One of the really big problems for anyone who wishes to understand anthroposophy is that it has partly existed in a kind of vacuum regarding communication and sharing of knowledge. Steiner was set on emphasizing what was unique about his anthroposophical project and marked a critical distance to many, if not most, of his contemporaries. Waldorf education, for example, has much in common with reform education of that day, but Steiner rarely pointed out similarities or relationships in this instance. On the contrary, he propounded critical comments on contemporary reform educational experiments. For a current understanding of anthroposophy, it is my opinion that a kind of restoration process must take place. It is not only a question of building bridges here. Perhaps the image of ‘opening the dams’ could be a better metaphor. Wherever I get deeply absorbed in philosophy, education, sociology, psychology or the theory of science, I find themes that touch upon and ‘converse’ with anthroposophy. In the same way that it is difficult to really know one’s own country before one has been abroad, it is my opinion that anthroposophy is very hard to understand or work on without dealing with it comparatively. That is why I have generally related the study of Steiner’s basic concepts to other thinkers who have taken up similar themes.

The idea of understanding education based on thinking, feeling and willing is by no means new with Steiner. We find germs to such a pedagogical idea in Plato’s work. Comenius, who is often characterized as the ‘father’ of modern education, emphasizes that learning must take place in all these areas. Most famous is perhaps the Swiss educational pioneer, Johan Heinrich Pestalozzi, who built his educational practice on a balanced engagement of ‘head’, ‘heart’ and ‘hand’. John Dewey,

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<sup>3</sup> This is especially expressed in the lectures published in the book: *The Study of Man*. This can be called a classic in the Waldorf education world. At the same time the book, through its complexity and enigmatic contents can also be characterized as being on the border of the understandable.

still of current interest, has reflected upon this, and today there are countless pedagogical theories that emphasize emotional learning and different forms of learning by doing in addition to cognitive or intellectual schooling.<sup>4</sup> There is something intuitively and almost pedagogically self-evident about theoretical learning belonging to emotional involvement and happening when pupils gather concrete experience. A theory of education based on this triad of concepts invites children and adolescents to learn and develop in a complete way. Thinking, feeling and willing refer to activities. The verbs 'to think', 'to feel' and 'to act' say something about what children and adolescents do in kindergarten and school. When these activities are put into an educational and developmental perspective, Waldorf educational reflection and developmental work is underway. In Waldorf kindergartens and Waldorf schools, thinking and the formation of concepts builds upon emotional experiences, which in turn build upon the most basic 'learning by doing'. The integration of thinking, feeling and willing means that the establishment of identity and ethics connects with learning. The pupil is given the opportunity to be emotionally present and actively prepared for his or her thoughts. Based upon the intuitively pedagogical side of the ideas of thinking, feeling and willing and on how other pedagogues have worked on these ideas, anthroposophy's distinctive character and its 'normality' can come into view. In many ways it is alluring how this triad of concepts in Waldorf education appears popular and understandable. On the one hand, an aspect of anthroposophy appears as an almost mainstream view on education. On the other hand, some of Steiner's reflections on thinking, feeling and willing lead way, way out into what are, for most people, unknown waters. Those who have read, or have tried to read, *The Study of Man* know what I am talking about. After a comparative study of the idea of thinking, feeling and willing, selected aspects of this book may be introduced for discussion and reflection. In the article *Pedagogical Aspects of Slowness. Aristotelian and Platonic Elements within Knowledge of Man*<sup>5</sup>, I have discussed a few of Steiner's descriptions of thinking, feeling and willing, also comparatively. In addition to reading excerpts from Steiner's original texts, I have let the students read this article. Sometimes, the students have summarized and given introductions for discussion, while other times, I have done so.

### **Complex and fourfold**

Steiner's descriptions of the fourfoldedness of nature and the human being are experienced by many students as being far less intuitive than the ideas of thinking, feeling and willing. The mere words 'ether' and 'astral' cause many to shake their heads. In the same way, the old idea that nature is built up hierarchically with minerals at the bottom and the human being on the top, will be unacceptable. Several students will point out that animals communicate and have their own ways of thinking.

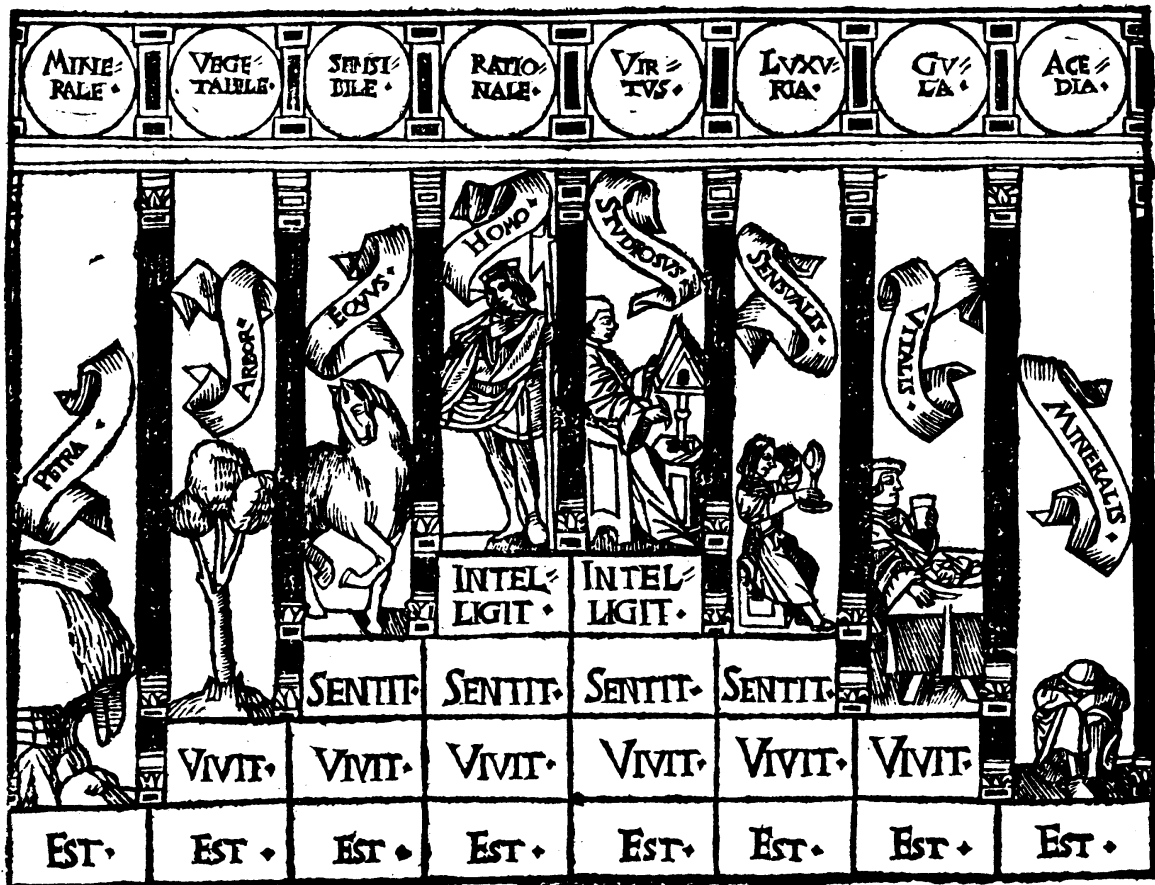
During the lectures, we take our time studying and reflecting upon the idea of the fourfoldedness of the human being and world. This is a very old idea that we can trace from early Indian Upanishads via Aristotle and Plato in Ancient Greece and into our own time. The idea flourished in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and is still kept alive by certain thinkers, also outside anthroposophy. I have

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<sup>4</sup> A current book that argues in favour of the interplay of thinking, feeling and doing is: Ellis, Ralph D., Newton, Natika (2010): *How the mind uses the brain: to move the body and image the universe*. Chicago: Open Court. Both authors are philosophers, and the book emphasizes a kind of basic research that in many ways converses well with Steiner's understanding of the human being and education.

<sup>5</sup> The article can be downloaded from: [www.arvema.com/tekster/Slowness\\_LivingEducation3\\_2007.pdf](http://www.arvema.com/tekster/Slowness_LivingEducation3_2007.pdf)

compiled a compendium documenting this idea's many historical expressions through short excerpts of original texts<sup>6</sup>.



A print from the book *Liber de Intellectu* (Paris, 1510) by the French author, philosopher and theologian Charles de Bouvelles (1471-1553). The picture illustrates the division of the kingdoms of nature into four levels: est (to be, exist), vivit (to live), sentit (to sense, feel, experience) and intelligit (understand). On the left hand side of the picture, levels from mineral to the human being can be seen, while the right hand side shows how the human being sinks down if he succumbs to deadly sins such as lust (luxuria), gluttony (gula) or sloth (acedia).

Two interesting current thinkers who have concerned themselves with the idea of dividing reality into different levels are Michael Polanyi<sup>7</sup> and Norbert Wiley<sup>8</sup>. Polanyi argues for the existence of a creative tension between various levels both in the human constitution and in the world, as, for example, between biology and the mind. Instead of claiming that everything boils down to material processes, or that everything is biology, that everything is basically psychology, or everything is

<sup>6</sup> If you are interested, you can download the compendium (partly in Norwegian) here: [http://dl.dropbox.com/u/383934/Kompendium\\_de\\_fire\\_2010.pdf](http://dl.dropbox.com/u/383934/Kompendium_de_fire_2010.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Polanyi, Michael (2009). *The tacit dimension*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

<sup>8</sup> Wiley, Norbert (1994). *The semiotic self*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Se kapittel 6, 7 og 8.

language, etc., these two authors point out how a composite understanding of the human being has many advantages. Like Steiner, they see a value in approaching the human being as a complex material, biological, mental, lingual-reflective-social being. There are plenty of arguments against such a fourfoldedness. While thinkers who partially share Steiner's ideas are given space, it is of course necessary to present conflicting or alternative thoughts.

The idea of a hierarchical division of nature from imperfect minerals, plants and animals to the human being towering freely at the top of the creation has been associated with value ranking and, later, discriminating ideologies of various kinds. Quite a few authors have discussed the problems of such thoughts, and especially in the last few years, there has been a great interest in the characteristics of animals<sup>9</sup>. Steiner often expresses himself along the same lines as classic value ranking and hierarchical ideas when he describes the relationship between animals and mankind, but there are also important exceptions to this in Steiner's work. I have chosen to emphasize some of these in my teaching. The printed picture from the 1500's shows the human being in possession of all four qualities or levels, while animals and plants have fewer. In several accounts, Steiner reacts to such a lacking description of minerals, plants and animals. He claims that everything existing on earth has all four qualities, they are just put together in different ways: "This fourness exists in all beings on earth"<sup>10</sup>. In this way, a mutual equality between the various 'citizens' of the planet Earth is emphasized.

Another example of a way of thinking that represents both a clear contradiction and an interesting thought development in relation to Steiner is Michael Foucault's work. While Steiner was to a great extent preoccupied with the 'ego' as an expression for the ability of speaking, thinking and free action, Foucault researched the various mechanisms and structures of power that influence the human subject, often in such subtle ways that the person believes himself to be acting of his own will and freely. Foucault has, for example, referred to how knowledge and language discipline and structure people. Interestingly enough, it turns out that many of Steiner's statements about the 'ego' are far from being in contradiction with Foucault's analyses here. In Steiner's concept of the ego there lie qualities of both giving and receiving, the ability to both influence the environment and be influenced by the environment. At the end of his life, when Foucault was preoccupied with the self's "concern for itself" through self-developing exercises, his thinking coincided to a large degree with Steiner's thoughts on ethics and human development.

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<sup>9</sup> Calarco, Matthew (2008). *Zoographies: the question of the animal from Heidegger to Derrida*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Derrida, Jacques, Mallet, Marie-Louise (2008). *The animal that therefore I am*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Lurz, Robert W. (2009). *The Philosophy of animal minds*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gould, Stephen Jay (1977). *Ontogeny and phylogeny*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Steiner, Rudolf (2001). *Bewusstsein - Leben - Form (GA 89)*. Dornach: Rudolf Steiner Verlag, s. 293.

## **Etheric body – visible and invisible**

Now, it can appear that the teaching of anthroposophy to a great extent is philosophically orientated and has less focus on education and practical career relevance. However, I try to create a balance here. As an example of how pedagogical reflection and conversations on the concrete teaching of children also have their place, I will finish off by bringing up some aspects of how we have approached Steiner's concept of the etheric body. Having looked at a couple of Steiner's original texts, it becomes clear that his understanding of the living (the etheric) has to do with processes in time that express themselves rhythmically. According to Steiner, the etheric body is the carrier of "habit, character, conscience and memory"<sup>11</sup>. These catchwords alone open for a cascade of themes of concrete pedagogical relevance. For example, how can the school contribute to the development of good habits? How can teaching be done in a life-promoting and rhythmic way? The close connection between etheric and artistic activity becomes a topic. Also, Steiner's thoughts on the seven life processes are appropriate as a starting point for conversations on how a life-promoting, varied and 'nourishing' education can be formed. In addition, we have worked comparatively. It turns out that habits have been one of the most discussed pedagogical topics throughout all eras. On the one hand, we have Plato, Augustine, Luther and Bourdieu, just to mention a few, who have seen habits as an obstacle, a reduction of the human being's freedom, and even as the location of original sin, according to Luther. On the other hand, pedagogically relevant thinkers such as Aristotle, Dewey and Deleuze have shown how habits are central to the human being's development. Often, the formation of good habits is related to educational ideals regarding the development of ethical and self-determining individuals<sup>12</sup>. In this context I let the students read excerpts of an article I have written, where the practical pedagogical relevance of habits is discussed in relation to art and artistic teaching. Here, ideas from Steiner meet similar thoughts of Dewey and Bourdieu.

I don't know how many lectures we use to dwell on the topic of life (the etheric) in the teaching of anthroposophy. By looking at life in relation to experience and pedagogical thinking in general, in addition to the presentation of Steiner's thoughts, these lectures invite each student to work out his or her own understanding and assessment of a concept like etheric body. For while the etheric is both invisible and, to a large extent, an unrecognized concept, habit, character, memory, art and rhythm have clear connections with both completely visible everyday school life and with pedagogical thinking beyond Waldorf education. In addition, a concept like etheric body can lead to both feelings and reflections that touch on life's greater questions and secrets. It makes way for marvelling at the entire world, for new thoughts about one's own life and for new perspectives and possibilities in working with children and adolescents.

## **A 'secret garden'**

For me, anthroposophy can be like a garden, even a 'secret garden', where it is not first of all a question of what grows there, but where the value lies in all that can happen with whoever works and lives in the garden. The garden is a meeting place where diversity and differences not only are

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<sup>11</sup> Steiner, Rudolf (1983). *Die Erkenntnis des Übersinnlichen in unserer Zeit und deren Bedeutung für das heutige Leben* (GA 55). Dornach: Rudolf Steiner Verlag, s. 123.

<sup>12</sup> For an inspiring introduction to the history of the concept of habit, see: Carlisle, Clare (2006). Creatures of habit: The problem and the practice of liberation. *Continental Philosophy Review* 38, 19-39.

tolerated, but make up the basis of life. From year to year, other and perhaps new plants grow in a garden, and both flowers and weeds belong there. The garden as a metaphor fits well with the above reflections. The garden symbolizes a living world, a partly visible and partly invisible microcosm. In medieval literature, the garden was frequently used as an image for a 'place' of initiation – and at the same time, the garden is a piece of nature where the dandelion stands smiling strong and yellow.