



# The Activity of Thinking

by

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In my previous article on “Observation and Thinking,” we came to the conclusion that in our thinking we can be at one with the creative powers of the world. This is easily said, however, and much more difficult to experience; for on all sides in life today, we find that this active thinking, of which we ourselves could be the conscious master, is very little recognized.

It is very difficult to expel the popular belief that to accumulate thoughts and be able to reproduce what others have taught is to be able to think. For this reason, we are cursed with a whole flood of books in which knowledge is made easy. Every branch of science, philosophy, literature and language is represented in editions wherein information is “potted” to suit the popular understanding. Even the Bible has been produced as a kind of novel. For we seek today to have the facts themselves rather than to develop the power by which we may find knowledge.

If we would know more of this mysterious power which is ours, then we need first to observe it. It is easy to observe our thoughts, but it is not so easy to observe and to think about our thinking. However, for a little while, let us make the attempt. If we consciously set ourselves a subject of thought and concentrate upon it for a short period, we can come to certain experiences. There are two different lines of thought which we might follow, and here people will certainly vary in regard to which they will find the more effective. We might, for example, concentrate upon an object for a few minutes and form around it all the thoughts which we are able to bring together. On the other hand, we might choose to hold for some while before our consciousness a picture image which has for us some content, perhaps an image of the rising sun.

Now I think all who have done even the simplest thinking exercises would agree that a complete concentration is by no means easy, and that our first experience is that our thoughts are all the while escaping us. Only with the greatest difficulty can we hold them in check. This attempt to master our thoughts

can well be compared to the mastering of a spirited horse. Now, it may well be that many people consider that they have no difficulty in concentrating. For instance, the average person is doubtless able to carry through with the writing of a letter or the adding of his accounts without any undue wandering of the thoughts. But just in the exercises which we have set for ourselves and which are therefore free from the constraint of life's necessities, we experience the wayward nature of our thinking, and the effort to control it is a struggle.

If, however, we are willing to persevere in the struggle, and particularly if we are willing to do this repeatedly, we come to a further experience. We begin to feel within our thinking a certain life, and our thoughts, as it were, enter into existence. At first, while we are gathering around the chosen object all the thoughts which we are able to form, we may find that these are abstract. We are merely collecting together facts of information. But we can reach a higher level. For through our thinking we are able to discover the origin of the object we have chosen, whether it be from the realm of man's thoughts or from the life-powers of the universe. We are able to find the connections which underlie the many phenomena of nature, the invisible bonds which unite the objects of the world and our very selves within the universe. And at this stage our thinking ceases to be abstract. We experience, as it were, a draught from the well of life.

If we have chosen to contemplate a picture image, then, at first, this may appear before us with all its external characteristics, even, to a certain degree, photographically. But if, instead of concentrating on the outer form, we contemplate this picture with devotion and wonder, and try as far as possible to unite ourselves with the being and with the quality of that which we contemplate, then a new experience awakens. The picture becomes life-filled and vibrant. From this point our thinking is no longer only our own affair, our own individual activity. It seems now as though it streams forth as a light, enlivening and calling to life all upon which it shines.

It is not for nothing that in common speech we have such phrases as "to shed light upon a subject" or "to be an enlightened personality." For thinking was long ago experienced as a creative, light-giving activity, and it is only the modern world which conceives of it as a mechanical power which registers impressions and fits together the separate phenomena.

As we enter this world of thought and know it as something wider and greater than ourselves, we can perhaps begin to experience the birth of that tranquility which a true thinking can bring. We can perhaps now realize a little how the energy of our thoughts has something akin to the life processes of the plant. Each thought which we take, either from our own past judgments or from the researches of others, is as a seed—the condensed and contracted product of a powerful activity. But inasmuch as we brood and ponder over this thought, under the warmth of our enthusiasm it awakens to life, it strives to take on form

as a living being, and it attains, at last, within our understanding, its light-filled true content, just as the plant bears its radiant flower—the inverted image of the heavenly world above. When thoughts are formulated and expressed, they become once more as seeds, to lie dormant until the activity is there which can awaken a true understanding.

It is of the greatest importance that we should experience once more the growth power and the light-radiating quality of our thinking, for only so can a new education arise. No new methods and theories can aid us at this moment when we are confronted with the downfall of a civilization. We need to develop the power to take that which the past has given, not as a tradition to be preserved in an abstract form, but as a seed from which can awaken new life. Many of our accredited facts will be disproved, and a great deal of our accumulated knowledge will be lost, for are we not at this moment witnessing the driving out or silencing of those who are bearers of learning? Man can only now find the strength to face life by developing powers of the spirit which can forever enable him to face life anew. He may pass through the darkness, for he has within him the power to create activity, life and light.

Certain experiences can be obtained by the training of our thinking, and this calls forth a question: “Of what value is this thought training for practical life?” It is natural that this question should be asked, for there are a great number of people who consider that to be practical in life, common sense is needed rather than thought and that the cultivation of one’s thinking in the way suggested is a dangerous rather than a desirable schooling.

One is often met, for instance, with this type of argument: “What is said of the need to train our thinking is all very well, but first of all it is necessary to give man the right social conditions, and after that it will be possible to develop the spiritual life.” Man first needs to be given his daily bread and only afterwards can God’s will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.

Such an argument is the result of our modern world-outlook. For, consciously or unconsciously, most of us base our lives on the assumption that matter is the foundation from which the world has arisen and only gradually has life evolved. But if we think a little clearly from our own immediate observation and life-experience, such a theory is found to have no connection with realities.

We experience ourselves as surrounded by a world of objects. A number of these are created by man, while many others are there without his apparent cooperation, as the many forms which are bestowed by nature.

Now, if we first consider the objects which have been made by man, our argument can be very clearly demonstrated. We need only to ask ourselves: “Which came first, the object or the thought according to which the object was shaped?” and we realize that no man-made object would be there if man had not first planned it. For example, the plan and design of a house is destroyed; but so

long as there are still human beings capable of conceiving plans, other houses will be built. Furthermore, if certain substances are lacking which the architect had first of all intended to use in his structure, he will certainly be able to find other materials to take their place. It becomes apparent that the thought is the origin, and according to the thought, matter is taken up and molded and formed.

It is perhaps more difficult to see the process in the case of the plants. Yet, if we observe the plant, we discover how it takes up the world of matter and transmutes it through the most wonderful and varied forms, gradually refining substance until it shines in the ethereal coloring of the flower and becomes more and more invisible in the pollen and scent. For anyone who truly observes, it is clear that these changes are due not to the chemical reactions of the substances, but to the life activity which can transform the material world; and this life-activity, while itself invisible, can withdraw for a while and again clothe itself in outer appearance in a perpetual rhythm. The substances which it takes up become infinitely complicated and are perpetually changing and transforming, but when they are laid aside again, they fall back once more into simpler forms and elements.

We can come to another experience. It is not our physical strength which determines our deeds; it is we who can be the controller of our strength. Our ability to perform and carry through what we have determined depends upon the guiding motive. In some cases, great love or fear impels human beings to deeds of which they are incapable according to the normal standard of their strength. Such feelings work with far greater power than our everyday consciousness. But it is possible to develop a consciousness which can transcend even such feelings, and deeds can be done which are held unbelievable from the judgment of only our physical capacities.

We can therefore come to the following conclusions:

- Thought controls matter;
- Life transforms substance;
- Spirit creates power.

And now we have to answer the statement: “Man needs bread before he can develop spirit.” Let us for a moment consider it from the opposite point of view: “Bread will fail if man cannot discover spirit.” Today, indeed, we give our children stones. For out of our materialistic outlook, we consider that the value of food depends on its chemical content. We imagine that substitute products from wood or coal, provided they contain the necessary chemical content, can be of equal food-value with the more natural products. For we reckon only with the reality of the world of substance and deny the world of life activity.

To one who has lived in the country, it is obvious that chemically purified bread has lost its life value. To understand the making of bread, we need to watch the wheat growing from green blade to golden ear. We need to realize how the flower is insignificant and withdrawn, so that all the forces of the plant may go to the forming of the grain, and how the starch which is usually contained within the root, is here formed within the ear where all the forces of the sun may enliven it. If we compare the flour of the wheat with that of the rye, the one so white and soft, the other greyer with its curious musty odor, we realize the sun-filled lightness of the wheat and the strong mineral salts of the rye. We then know that the powers and activities of these grains cannot be chemically analyzed or duplicated. The whole universe with its life processes takes part in their growth and we need these powers to nourish us. Chemical food may seem to satisfy, but we become hardened and gradually lose all power of creative thought.

We need to turn our attention once more to the world of life, not in a blind way as in some back-to-nature cult, but in the way of understanding and knowledge. If we are to work in harmony with the life-powers of the world, we need to know them, and knowledge can be obtained only through a systematic training of our observation and thinking.

If we imagine that we are practical when we consider only the world of objects as real, we are living in illusions, and it is just to dispel such illusions that the present crisis has come upon us. There has probably been no time in history when a greater number of people have lost all that they counted sure and certain. But such experiences can work for a new world outlook, for, in spite of the most materialistic world conceptions, one is driven by one's very fate to a recognition of the ephemeral nature of all matter and the eternal re-creative power of the spirit.

We cannot really act effectively in our daily lives without developing the activity of our thought, and that often the so-called common sense actions are those done out of routine and tradition. In continuation, I would like to show how the development of our thinking can enlighten the most commonplace duties and tasks of daily life.

Today, most people suffer the pain of having to do work which they cannot love. In almost every realm of life—in the office, the factory, the school and the home—much of the work is regarded as drudgery, and everyone longs for the free hours, the weekends and the holidays. According to our position and outlook on life, we regard our work either as a necessary routine by means of which we procure enough money to support ourselves and gain enjoyment or as the sorrow which man has to bear as his portion in earthly existence. Yet perhaps a little consideration may give us a deeper insight into our labor, so that through it we may find our connection with the world.

There was certainly a time when work was done with a very different impulse than it is today. Many of us can probably remember a grandmother or elderly relative who all her life had taken the greatest pride in the keeping of her home. She polished the stoves and the copper-pots, made all the bread and cake, to say nothing of the sausages and brawn. With the help of perhaps one sturdy family maid, she did the household cleaning and laundry and raised a large family of children. Even in her old age she rose early and worked late, and despised anyone who wished to escape from work in order to seek recreation.

Such characters can still be found in country places; but whereas half a century ago the average mother took such a pride in her home and family, it would be almost impossible today to find this type in any large village or town. What change has come in our life that the work which was once undertaken with pride is now regarded with distaste?

It is not generally recognized that our grandparents lived with quite another world outlook than that of today. The modern woman needs to go out into the world to find experience; she feels herself a prisoner if she stays at home. But our grandmothers, in the heart of their families, felt that they were in the midst of life. They still retained a feeling for the life-activity of the substances with which they dealt. They did not only look for labor saving devices, but were interested in the task for its own sake.

They had, for instance, something of a sense for the healthy nature of a wood-fire, and the blessing it bestows upon the bread baked among its ashes. They took joy in the beautiful shining copper of their pans or in the strong iron saucepans and the rounded form of the wooden spoons. They probably had very little learning, but they still felt something of the qualities of the metals and the materials with which they worked, and through these they felt themselves in connection with the substances of the universe.

Today, we are only anxious for our work to be done quickly and conveniently. We are delighted with aluminum pans and electric stoves, but it never occurs to us to consider that perhaps food cooked over wood or coal retains more of its life-giving power than that which has been heated by electricity, and that perhaps the iron and copper pans, which are certainly more difficult to work with, may nevertheless have a better influence on their contents than those of aluminum.

Our grandmothers still felt themselves at one with many life processes. They looked after the good friendly barn-door fowls, and perhaps shared in the making of the butter and the cheese. We are accustomed to buy all these from the shops like every other commodity and to think of them as merely so much food value.

Few consider today that the mood with which the work is done is of much importance; the main point is that the work is done efficiently. Yet in those days of big families and large gatherings, a great part of the joy in the work was

gained from the fact that the kitchen was really the heart of the family life, and the meals were social gatherings. Anyone who has experienced, even if it is only from the tales of elders, the warmth and jollity of the big country family parties of long ago knows that the modern city socials with their intellectual diversions or unnatural dancing are poor affairs in comparison.

We have only to read a book like Schleich's *Those Were Good Days* (original title *Besonnte Vergangenheit*) to appreciate the joyous human enthusiasm which could live in the great family gatherings of seventy years ago. But in modern homes where the wife feels herself isolated in the flat, and hurries forth to serve on committees or attend meetings, and the husband comes back exhausted from the city, and where but too often an only child is delicate and difficult, there is little joy in human intercourse.

Yet though it is easy to praise the good old days, we certainly do not wish for their return. There was also a very dark side to the life of that time, and we can justly claim some progress. However, if we seriously face the facts, we have to acknowledge that, with all our advances, the enthusiasm for healthy hard work and the genuine warmhearted enthusiasm of the past are gone, and we cannot regain them in their old form. We can, however, find them in another way. Our grandparents still formed their lives out of their instinctive relationship with the world of nature and out of their practical experience; we have developed a more conscious thinking but have abstracted it from life so that our work has become so specialized that we can no longer find its world connection. We need to bring a living thinking to our labor and to find again our connection with the life of the universe. Wherever we stand, and whatever objects we deal with, we are able to reunite ourselves with world activities.

We can take a different interest in cooking if we recognize the egg, for example, as not only a necessary protein, but as a substance with its own individual place in the world of life. It is significant that the birds who of all creatures are the least bound by the law of gravity, nevertheless give over their young, before the time of their true birth, into the grasp of the earth. Yet the egg, which is so formless as far as the life of the young bird is concerned, mirrors within it the whole universe. We can see, as it were, an inverted universe in the golden round of the yolk floating in the clear liquid and surrounded by the alabaster shell. And just because the life powers have not yet started their work of forming the young organism, and the formless fluid is open to the influence of the whole world, the egg has its peculiar value for human food.

We can enliven our most distasteful tasks by the thinking which we bring to them. Washing-up is generally regarded as one of the most wearisome undertakings; yet we can find interest in our washing-up if, instead of wishing it finished so that we can escape to the cinema, we think a little of the objects which we wash and how they came into existence.



Suppose for a while we consider a cup. We are not concerned here with finding a dictionary definition, but with attempting to realize something of the origin of the object in the world of thought and the purpose which it serves. A cup, in order to be a drinking vessel, has both to receive and to give, for if it could only contain, it would be of little service. Its essential nature is service. Its essential nature is that it receives and holds only in order to give away again.

It is often held that man came to create cups through imitation; that first he drank from the cup of his hand, and then from a shell found perhaps by accident, and at last he came to model a form from clay in the likeness of these. But this is too superficial a view.

In all the world around we can experience the activities of receiving and giving. The mountain lake receives the water from the heavens and is forever giving it away to the streams and the rivers and back to the heavens once more. The human body at birth receives the life of soul and spirit and gives it away again at death; and it is no empty symbolism that represents the human body as a cup.

Man is surrounded in the world by the activities of receiving and giving, and although in past days he was not conscious of these in the way we are today, yet out of his living at one with these powers, he could form the objects in accordance with them.

From the humblest objects, whether given by nature or formed by man, we can, if we seek, find our way back again to the creative powers of the universe. There is no life so drab that it offers no point from which a view may be gained into the heavens. Though the old world is lost, out of conscious thinking we can again find ourselves at one with our work and with our fellow men.

Just as we cannot any longer live instinctively in harmony with natural powers, so we cannot now form a social life out of our blood relationships. There has to arise a new form of human intercourse and understanding, and of this it may be possible to speak further at another time.

Life today offers us a dark future, and we are often prone to fall into despair; for the estrangement of our Thinking from Life has not only brought barrenness in our inner life, but has also caused us to turn all our forces to destruction. Our ancestors also suffered; but they regarded their sufferings as the judgment of God for human wickedness, and their answer to it was a mood of repentance and devotion. Our suffering is the experience of desolation, and our answer to it has to be our striving to find again in every realm of life the working of the spirit and to unite ourselves once more with its power.

Through a living thinking, we can bring interest even to the most distasteful of daily tasks and how, wherever we stand in the world, we can find once more our connection with the universe. In continuation I would like to reveal how, out of an active training of our thought, our human relationships also may become more enlightened.



Just as we can no longer work in the way of our grandparents, so our human connections can no longer depend on the bond of the blood. The family as the center of a social life no longer exists. It is notorious that nowadays relatives rarely have much sympathy for one another, and it is no longer a custom for children to follow their parents in the choice of a career. We are even very frequently faced with the picture of a family where the child seems a complete stranger to his parents. The build, the physiognomy and the temperament are so different that we are brought to wonder how such a child can appear in the particular family at all.

Not only has family life disintegrated, but there is no more the intimate relationship of colleague with colleague in the different professions and industries as there used to be, for instance, in the time of the guilds. We may work side by side in a factory, in an office or on the staff of a school, yet inwardly we are strangers, for our deepest experiences are not brought into our work at all. It frequently happens that workers who are intimately concerned in the same business are not even on speaking terms, and it is rare to find any creative social life arising from the common work together.

Yet the very fact that the life of family and of guild cannot any longer form the basis of human understanding causes us to turn our gaze in another direction. For we have come to the time when we have to form our human connections not out of blood relationships, nor out of the fact that we are employed in the same work, but out of the recognition of one another's true being.

This is by no means an easy task, for we are not really anxious in our acquaintance with people to probe beneath the surface. When we meet, we put up a cautious guard not to become too intimate at first in case afterwards we wish to withdraw. We prefer to talk only in superficialities or intellectual abstractions because to speak out of our most heartfelt human experiences would lead to an intimacy which we dare not face. In consequence, when we meet with someone, we recognize his temperament, his habits and customs and are aware of the sphere to which he belongs, but the one part of his being which is individual remains hidden. Yet all who look into their human relationships know that those connections which have really enriched their lives are not based merely on similarities of taste and habits or on a common sphere of life, but on the experience that their deepest beings have touched one another.

If we wish to train ourselves so that we can find a true basis of human understanding, then we need to develop our powers of observation so that we can penetrate further than the mere surface impressions. And for this we need a certain attitude of mind.

In all human intercourse there lie beneath the surface sympathies and antipathies. On the one hand these are not sufficiently recognized and on the other they are not understood. For if we feel an antipathy towards someone,

we take good care to have as little to do with him as possible, while if we feel a warm sympathy and delight in another's company, we do not often enough consider: "Are we through our friendship developing something together? Are we bringing something to birth in the world?" It is important that we do not run away from our antipathies or only sun ourselves in our sympathies, but that with a certain objectivity we learn to understand out of what they arise. For it makes a great difference in our human connections if our antipathies arise because we see in the other personality our own failings, or because we belong to an entirely different stream of thought. In the former case, our antipathy is probably the greater. If we have ourselves suppressed certain faults, let us say perhaps that we have a certain hidden conceit, then the appearance of this failing in another gives us the greatest annoyance. Or, if we give way to our natural disposition and we are perhaps be of a melancholy temperament, then we are not likely to be pleased with another who resembles us in this. We are prone to think: "Why on earth should he be so melancholy, he has no reason for it."

It is otherwise if we belong to a different stream of thought. Perhaps at first we feel no antipathy at all; we may even be drawn to one another! But the difficulties arise as soon as we have to work together in any very intimate way. For we soon realize that our most earnest strivings meet with complete lack of understanding. However much we may charm one another on the surface, we cannot pass this barrier. Such a discovery can lead to great suffering between those who thought at first that they were very much at one.

In each case, it is possible to overcome antipathy through understanding. In the first place, if we try to make good our own failings, we can view those of others calmly, and perhaps even discover that fundamentally we have much in common and can work in a most positive way. Or in cases where a personality arouses antagonism through an unfortunate manner, we can perhaps surmount this difficulty through a quiet observation which reveals to us the cause. One who has had an unloved childhood may easily in later life be cold and sullen, but in his real being he may have quite other feelings. Our patience to bear with his outer mannerisms may lead us to find the hidden qualities. It is often the case that those who later have become our most valued colleagues had at first aroused our strongest antipathy, while many for whom we experienced abounding sympathy failed us in our time of need.

An entirely different approach is required to one who belongs to another stream of thought than ourselves. We may be in sympathy with his temperament, yet we need to develop the greatest understanding and tolerance for his point of view and leave him the freedom to act in his own way, provided he does not infringe upon our realm of responsibility. But it is a mistake to imagine that we can carry through any task together when we are inspired by entirely different impulses. A compromise with those who have a different aim can satisfy neither,

and brings any creative work to a kind of standstill. It is, however, possible to seek again and again for a foundation where we are at one, for inasmuch as we are all human beings living in the same period of earth existence, some connection is necessarily there.

If with this objective attitude we learn to read behind the outer symptoms and to understand what underlies our sympathies and antipathies, we can begin to develop the ability to recognize our true connections with one another. Mostly we do not cultivate the special kind of awakesness necessary for this recognition. Occasionally we meet with a person of some position who has very great insight and in one interview can judge both those who will be of service to him and those who are completely unsuitable. But since the days of examinations, testimonials and approval by committee, this gift is less likely to be found. Yet certain people have it to a marked degree. I will give an illustration from life.

There lived a certain man of considerable ability and vigor, yet by no means a genius, and he worked in quite an ordinary sphere of life. One day, a girl whom he did not know came into his shop, and he immediately said to a friend, "Do you see that girl? She will be my wife." He thereupon took pains to discover her family and become introduced. He was soon a regular visitor, and in the course of time proposed to the girl. She refused him. However, he continued to visit and proposed again. She still refused. But he persevered and upon the third time of proposal she accepted him. They suited one another ideally and lived long and happily together.

In the biographies of men of genius we can find much more striking examples of this type of sudden intuition. For instance it happened to both Garibaldi and Schleich that the moment each saw the girl whom he was later to marry, he knew: "She is to be my wife." But I have given the above example to show that this faculty is not the special gift of genius but can be possessed by very ordinary people. I think nearly everyone will have had the experience one time in his life that in meeting some stranger, he spoke to him suddenly in the spur of the moment for no preconceived reason, and that from this developed a connection of the greatest importance in the lives of both.

Through such connections we learn of the power which hate and love can work in the world. In these days of so-called objective thinking, we accept the assumption that if one man does a piece of work in two days, two men will do it in one; and where we are concerned with purely mechanical labor, this formula will undoubtedly prove more or less correct. But if anyone has ever been responsible for creating out of his own initiative, he knows very well that it is fundamental for those who work with him to be in sympathy with his aims. And if he has the good fortune to find a friend of such a nature that the two can mutually inspire one another, then it certainly is not a case of two men doing the work in half the time, but of a union from which an entirely new creation arises.

On the other hand, the presence of a critic who stirs up doubt and suspicion can completely prevent a work from being accomplished at all. This is naturally recognized in obvious cases, but in ordinary life we do not sufficiently observe how opposition and criticism work with deadly certainty to destroy all that they touch, while hope and confidence can bring an undreamed of renewal of life. This is the secret of the magic of the Middle Ages: the black magic of hate and the white magic of love. For love and hate can indeed work in ways quite beyond our materialistic thinking, and unless we can develop an observation of these hidden streams which flow through all human intercourse, we fail to reckon with some of the most powerful forces in the world.

Today we are facing the onslaught of just such powerful forces. We can indeed meet destruction with destruction and hate with hate. But there is only one power which is greater than destruction and hate, and that is the love which is born of wisdom. Whether we can overcome our enemy with material weapons or not, there is only one way that freedom can be won for mankind, and that is through the spiritual strength which arises from a true knowledge of man.

**Notes:**

This article came from Great Britain and was made into a pamphlet in 1975 by good friends Nathan and Yolanda Melniker who ran St. George Imprints. The clarity and value of the contents suggest that it come to the attention of contemporary readers.

The Rudolf Steiner College Bookstore has published a booklet with more of Eileen Hutchins lectures entitled *Observation, Thinking, the Senses* available online at <http://www.Item #1361 available at http://www.steinercollege.edu/store/product.php?productid=17806&cat=0&page=1>