

# On Freedom

By Henning Köhler

Translated by Genie Sakaguchi

*Freedom is a precious thing that grows when it is used  
and disappears when it's not used.*

– Carl Friedrich v. Weizsäcker

I would formulate it even more sharply: Freedom is a precious thing that arises first through being used. It requires daily maintenance.

This apparently has to do with something other than a habit often mistaken for freedom, the habit of denying all real connections and responsibilities, which essentially expresses the wish to reverse/rescind the incarnation. Everyone knows such moods. In themselves they are not wrong, but they must remain in the background. Otherwise we become sick.

Whoever wants to avoid all commitments lives in constant fear that his acts could lead to consequences from which he could not escape. A painful condition. In the denial of every obligation, there lives the longing “to float above it all.” Indeed, “a human being can only be a free being on earth” (Rudolf Steiner) in so far as he releases himself from all earthly circumstances, without falling into their bonds. Freedom lives in the heartfelt affirmation of one’s own actions. The archetypal scene is children at play. If children lose their joy in playing, they develop the disposition to avoid all liabilities (one should look out for this) and long to be back in Heaven.

There is no such thing as the status of freedom, but rather there are only free actions: activities, gestures, attitudes—including holding back—that are accompanied by the experience of freedom. The free action adapts itself according to experience, when a person has no other relevant reason for his action than that it seems to him to be deeply appropriate, authentic, and in accord with the situation, independent from considerations of need or goal-orientation, or according to the judgment of another person.

To understand that freedom in its essence is action, the actual concept must only be conceived widely enough. Thoughts are also deeds. Non-action can almost be an inner kind of music. “Action-without-action transforms itself into capacities for development,” writes François Jullien. Attention is activity, as everyone knows. “To exercise restraint” demands, as the word “exercise” already says, volitional activity. To be in stand-by mode is a condition brought about voluntarily. Otherwise it would be a kind of subjection.

In the element of freedom, the human being rises up as a spiritual individuality. This is also the source of the power of love. This is also true for children. Steiner spoke of this often and insistently.

It is a mistake to believe that freedom could develop in children without their having from the outset ample opportunity to confirm it for themselves in action. One cannot defer the question of freedom according to the motto: The I (ego) is born at 21 years of age; first at age 14 the efforts to assist in the birth could begin, and before that children are not in a position to deal with the situation of freedom, as freedom is a privilege of the mature human being. Here lies a misunderstanding. The I/ego is the guiding entity of development from the very beginning, long before the end of its “groundwork” on the so-called sheaths. Just in order to be able to bring this work to completion in the right way needs a great deal of freedom. From the beginning. The freedom of affirmation. Relaxed, casual play. And not least of all, the highly active doing of nothing in particular.

“What is achieved through play is, essentially, achieved through the self-directed activity of the child, through everything that we cannot avert with strict rules. Yes, just on this rests the basis of the essential and the educational in play, that we interrupt with our rules, with our pedagogical ... arts; [this should be] left to the child’s own forces,” said Steiner in a lecture given in Berlin in 1912. The basic Waldorf educational requirement formulated here holds good not only for young children, but rather for children at least up to the threshold of puberty.

We serve children better “the less determined and thought out [is] what takes place in their play, for the reason that a higher being, which cannot be forced into human consciousness, just then can come in. ... In a certain sense this remains an important educational factor for one’s entire life,” Steiner emphasized.

In the so-called “Christmas Course”<sup>1</sup> and referred to in *The Philosophy of Freedom* as the basis of his pedagogy, Steiner developed the idea that, with regards to the very young child, “one must bring up the question of freedom and, on the other side, the question of destiny.” For “when one looks rightly into the human heart, there one can see that the greatest portion of a human being’s earthly happiness in life, his feeling for his human worth, and his human dignity depend on the consciousness that he can have of freedom within his own breast.”

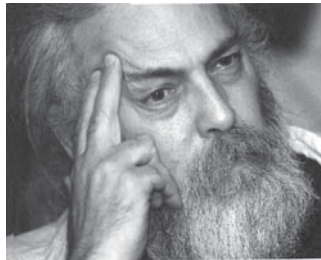
**Note**

1. CW 303, now published in English as *Soul Economy: Body, Soul, and Spirit in Waldorf Education*. Lectures to teachers, given in Dornach, December 23, 1921, to January 7, 1922.

**Literature:**

Rudolf Steiner, *Human History in the Light of Spiritual Science*, CW 61.

Rudolf Steiner, *Soul Economy*, CW 303.



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