

The Driving Force of Spiritual Powers in World History

Lecture 1 — 11th March 1923

From our studies here you know that since the 15th century mankind has been living in the Age of Consciousness [note 1] when it is essential for any individual who wishes to keep pace with evolution to be enlightened about certain facts. Otherwise he cannot possibly find his bearings amid the conditions of social life today. His intercourse with other people and the different relationships developing in life, especially between human beings of different ages, the old with the young and the young with the old, bring him experiences that remain incomprehensible if he cannot grasp what spiritual-scientific knowledge contributes to every aspect of man's existence on this Earth.

We will study in greater detail a fact already well known to us, namely, that the four members of man's being discernible in the ordinary way — physical body, etheric body, astral body and ego — are directly connected with each other during the hours of waking life only. The physical body is closely linked with the etheric body on the one side and, on the other, the astral body and ego are separated during sleep from the former two members.

When we are looking at a human being he stands there before us in his physical body which has received its stamp from the etheric body. It is certainly correct to say this, for everything whereby one human being is revealed to another is due, not to the physical body alone but to the activity of the etheric body or body of formative forces within the physical body. It is therefore the living content of the physical and etheric bodies that reveals one human being to another on Earth. But what is determined in the depths of the ego, and is astir in the astral body, eludes outer observation and even for the individual himself passes into obscurity between the moments of going to sleep and waking.

This division of his being which happens to man at least once a day in the ordinary course is of fundamental significance for his whole life. Our senses and intelligence make it evident that from birth to death his physical body and etheric body undergo evolution.

From what comes to expression in the child, to begin with in his instinctive, imitative life and later in the life unfolding under the authority of his elders — from all this the human being evolves to a stage of greater self-dependence. Thus the different stages of growth, stages in the outer formation of the physical body, in what comes to expression in speaking, in thinking, in whatever is revealed through the physical body — although in reality it is all an expression of the life of soul — in all this a process of evolution is in evidence from birth to death.

The other evolutionary process — that of the ego and astral body between birth and death — does not become manifest in the same way. When a human being descends into life on Earth, many of the forces that were active in him in the spiritual world are still at work within him. During the stage of early growth, during the very obvious process of the child's bodily development, forces which in their full strength and true character work in pre-earthly life on the soul, through the soul and in the spirit of the human being, are still active. They are present in a weakening phase during childhood but they operate in the process of growth, in everything that develops gradually as a bodily expression of the soul. And deeply hidden in the bodily nature there are also corporeal expressions of the soul, for example the elaboration of the brain into the perfected organ of thinking, the elaboration of the vascular system underlying feeling, and so forth.

But these echoes of the forces of the pre-earthly life become progressively weaker and eventually reach their lowest ebb, the point at which, in respect of these pre-earthly forces, the human being comes to a standstill for the rest of his life. True, this lowest point is not reached until the 'twenties of earthly life; but then it is unmistakable.

The soul is then affected more strongly by the forces stemming from the developed physical body; the individual is no longer subject to such an extent to the echoings of the pre-earthly life but is now more under the influence of the capacities acquired by the physical body and of what in turn works back upon the soul from the physical body.

But if we were to observe with equal clarity the evolution of the ego and astral body we should reach definite conclusions about this process, just as in the case of the evolution of the physical and the etheric bodies from birth to death. We should say: In childhood the human being has an astral body and an ego in which changes are obvious during the years of his earthly life. We must of course also consider the changes that take place in the spirit and soul of the human being which emerge from the physical and etheric bodies during sleep. If as well as observation of a human being during his waking hours the ego and astral body could be observed from the moment of going to sleep to the moment of waking, two biographies of the individual would be available, both of equal importance in the life as a totality. Indeed the evolution taking place during the life of sleep is actually more important than that connected with the waking life for certain forces in the human being, but observation of the ego and the astral body is beyond the power of ordinary perception.

We will now consider a particularly important factor in the evolution of the ego and the astral body. This factor is due to the rôle played in human life by speaking, by speech in general — not this or that particular language.

The whole man in waking life participates in the act of speaking. The physical body participates in the vibration of the vocal chords, in the activity of the whole speech-apparatus; the etheric body also participates in the process, so too do the astral body and the ego. But by comparison the physical body and the ego do not participate to anything like the same extent in speech activity as a whole. The members essentially involved are the etheric and astral bodies.

The statement that the etheric body is more deeply involved than the physical body in the act of speaking may cause surprise. But after all, man's ordinary senses cannot perceive what goes on in the etheric body, nor does modern science tell him anything. Hence in the ordinary way he perceives only what the physical body is doing in acts of speaking, whereas the far more varied, far more strongly formative activity of the etheric body in acts of speaking — activity which then continues in the astral body — eludes sense-perception as usually understood. But if the rôle of speech is to be understood, the paramount importance of what takes place here in the etheric body and in the astral body must be realized.

Now consider this: because in speaking the main part is played by the etheric and astral bodies, speech has two sides. To begin with, the etheric body in conjunction with the physical body bring about outwardly perceptible, audible speech. But when we speak, something always streams back into our soul. We feel and live with it inwardly. In order to become aware of the content of our soul, however, the person to whom we are speaking is dependent upon the physical sounds. We, as the speaker, are inwardly united in our astral body with what we impart to our speech. But because in sleep the astral body is drawn out of our physical and etheric bodies, we carry something from our speech over with us into sleep, something of vital importance.

It is an actual fact that the element of soul we instil into our words from morning to evening continues to vibrate and pulsate from the moment of going to sleep until the moment of waking. We are unconscious of it but let me assure you that everything spoken during the day echoes on — admittedly in reverse order — during sleep. Not that the words actually sound again as they sound through our mouth during the day; it is rather the undulation of feeling in the words that resounds, the will-impulses that have flowed into them, the gaiety or sadness, the joy or pain expressed and revealed in the flow of the speech.

But these echoes during sleep are not vague or indefinite; what the soul experiences echoes in the very sequences of the sounds in that unconscious state through which a man passes in the ordinary way between going

to sleep and waking.

Until the seventh year of life whatever echoes in the child's soul during sleep is to a very great extent dependent upon his human environment. The life of feeling, willing and thinking brought to expression in words by the father, mother and other people in the environment and heard by the child — all this echoes in his soul from the time he goes to sleep until he wakes; his soul is given up to what has been laid into the words by the hearts and souls of those around him. During sleep the thoughts and will-impulses which the child experiences through the speech of older people are, however, connected much more intimately with the actual sounds.

In short, the child's whole being is given over to what he experiences from his environment. This state of things is already less pronounced in the second period of life, from the seventh to the fourteenth year, although it is still undeniably present. At puberty, however, at about the fourteenth year, something very definite begins: what echoes from speech into the sleeping soul tries by its very nature to establish relationship with the spiritual world.

It is a very remarkable process. Until the seventh year of life, during sleep too, the child will still be in full accord with whatever he has heard from those around him; to a certain extent this is also the case from his seventh to his fourteenth year, only during that period he is in closer contact with the actual soul-life of those in his environment, whereas until his seventh year he is concerned more with the external aspect of life. But after the fourteenth year, after the onset of puberty, it begins to be necessary for the soul during sleep to bring the echoes of speech into relation with Beings of the spiritual world. This is a remarkable fact. In everyday life man is not conscious of it but in sleep it becomes necessary for the life of soul to let what is spoken on Earth echo in such a way that the Archangeloi in their world may take pleasure in these echoes of speech.

It may be said with truth that it is necessary for the human being to establish relations with the Archangeloi through the components of speech which remain with him during sleep as echoes of earthly speech. The words spoken during the daytime echo in a remarkable way: the vowel-sounds are inwardly deepened, the consonants achieve the objectivity of mobile forms. This is an actual experience. And souls during sleep would feel unhappy if these echoes did not harmonize with the sounds ringing out from the other side, from the speech of the Archangeloi. There can indeed be harmony between the echoes of speech resounding in man's sleep and the speech of the Archangeloi resounding out of the astral world from every direction of the universe.

In his ego and his astral body the human being develops in such a way that from about the fourteenth year onwards, between going to sleep and waking, he has to cultivate intercourse — if I may so express it — with Angeloi and Archangeloi; during this intercourse it behoves him to establish understanding with these Beings. This is a deep secret of human life.

Now a characteristic of our epoch is that it produces more and more individuals who achieve no such understanding in the sleeping state, who take with them into sleep something from speech which actually hinders their souls from understanding the speech of the Archangeloi, and the Archangeloi find no pleasure in the echoes of speech during the sleeping life of these individuals.

The epoch has begun — one is obliged to use earthly terms in speaking of these things which it is naturally difficult to express in ordinary language — when the Beings of the spiritual world can no longer come to any real understanding with sleeping human souls, when misunderstandings keep occurring between what the Beings of the spiritual Hierarchies say and what echoes in the souls of men during the hours of sleep. Discrepancies, disharmonies creep in.

This is the aspect which in our epoch presents itself from the other side of life. A tormenting condition of misunderstanding, of a complete lack of understanding between human souls and spiritual Beings has insinuated

itself into the state of sleep. And the question as to the reason for this condition must weigh heavily upon those who have knowledge today of a fact of spiritual life such as this.

Now the words which we draw from the range of our native language may, while we are learning them in childhood, develop in such a way that they apply to the physical world alone. This has been increasingly the case in the age of materialism. Words are available but these words only express something that is physical. Just consider how things were in earlier times: a human being became so intimate with the language that there were many words which, through their content, transported him into spiritual worlds. It must certainly be admitted that true idealism has become feeble in our time, particularly in those who absorb modern intellectualistic culture.

It makes a great difference whether ideals are or are not embodied in the language used. Today we find that individuals who are supposed to be students certainly have a feeling for words which refer to external, solidly material things but that when it is a matter of rising to the level of pure thoughts reflecting the spiritual, they immediately stop thinking and the threads of their thought are broken. It is precisely in those who are considered well-educated according to modern standards that this most often happens when they are called upon to assimilate the idealistic concepts of pure thinking. The words seem to be no more than semblance. It is indeed a fact that in our days children grow up with a language whose words have no wings to carry them away from earthly conditions.

In the first phase of life, until the seventh year, the child is still able, during sleep, to experience the spiritual through the echoes of the speech emanating from his human environment. If materialism causes this environment to repudiate the spiritual, it is repudiating itself for it consists of both soul and Spirit. But during the first phase of life the human being is still able during sleep to experience the spiritual.

This continues during the second phase of life, from the seventh to the fourteenth year. But if eventually there is no longer any idealistic, spiritual significance in the words used around the young human being — as may well happen in this materialistic age when religious ideas too have lost their strong spiritual influence upon the souls of men — then, after the fourteenth year, with the onset of puberty the young person enters a phase of the life of soul which chains him during sleep to the physical. The soul is not released from the physical during sleep. The echoes of the words coerce the soul and confine it to the physical. The resonance of the mineral world vibrates from all directions into what the human being experiences between going to sleep and waking; so too does resonance of the physical content of the plant world. This brings discord into the echoes of speech; the soul cannot then elaborate what the genius of speech otherwise imparts to the language and which can bring about understanding between the human soul and the Beings of the higher Hierarchies.

And then a peculiar condition sets in. The soul experiences something but cannot express it, because it is not experienced consciously. What the soul experiences may be characterized approximately in the following way. — After the age of puberty, when the human being passes in sleep into the spiritual world, the world of the Archangels opens out before him; he senses it but no threads of thought pass from that world into his soul, or from his soul into that world. And on waking he comes back into the physical body having suffered this tragic deprivation.

Since the last third of the 19th century this state of things has been present for a large part of humanity. And in the unconscious, behind that of which man is conscious, there lies in many souls today something that causes them to say unconsciously to themselves on waking: We have been born into a world which does not allow us to enter rightly during sleep into spiritual existence. — Souls who experience this condition may well say: As children we have been received into a human world which has denied us spiritual reality in the words that are used. All this is astir in the feelings with which in many ways nowadays, youth faces the old. This is the spiritual aspect of the feelings manifesting through the Youth Movement.

What is the attitude of the young human being to the old today? He cannot express it because as a result of what he inherits in the course of his education, his consciousness is repressed rather than set free by those who are old. He cannot express it, but he feels it. In the dim obscurity of his life of soul he feels: As a child I have to accommodate myself to what has been handed over to me by older generations. I have to be educated by these older generations, yet they make it impossible for me to come to an understanding with the spiritual world when this is necessary. To the same extent as materialism increases in every sphere of life — in the spheres of knowledge, of art and of religion — to that extent the young will be unable to understand the old, because they confront the old with the feeling that the latter have denied them idealism in speech and the intimation in words that points to a spiritual life. The materialism of civilization is the cause of the cleavage between the young and the old. And the real source of the lack of understanding lies in the fact that the corruption of speech by materialism brings about an unhealthy condition of the soul-life of young people during sleep.

Certain phenomena of modern culture can never be understood today if the spiritual side of life is ignored, for we are living in the epoch of consciousness and must therefore be alive to the spirit that moulds the human being and promotes his development. Understanding between youth and age will not be possible until the words in our languages again acquire the wings they have lost, the wings which raise the words out of the sphere of crass materiality into the world of conscious ideals.

In the year 1859 the people of Middle Europe were commemorating the centenary of Schiller's birth. In a certain sense, however, it was the very year of the death of true idealism. And what the young today see in Schiller they often disdain because what is taught them is not the true Schiller but only a superficial hotch-potch of words; it does not present what actually lived in Schiller, because the words no longer have the wings which in his days lifted men into the realm of ideals. And when Schiller is introduced to youth today with words that bear the current prosaic, philistine meanings, this is far more likely to become a burden in the soul than a liberating force.

What the soul needs cannot be restored to it in any external way nor by the nebulous, so-called idealisms which are only shams, cropping up here and there out of current materialism — maybe with good intentions but springing fundamentally from false thinking. The soul can be given what it needs only if, through genuine spiritual knowledge, vitality is restored to language and it is able once again to lead to the genius of speech.

Language as it is today does not really amount to more than a medium of understanding on the physical plane. As regards declamation and recitation we have even come to the point where the actual prose-content is considered all-important. We find that speech is being divested of everything that promotes descriptive power, rhythm, measure, melody, dramatic effect — that is to say, everything that leads it back into the realm of the soul, where the imaginative element lifts it into the spiritual world. And so we find that in language a further concession has been made to materialism.

Language as it exists today among all civilized peoples, fetters the soul during sleep to the purely physical murmurings of the mineral world, to the rustlings of the purely physical content of the plant world, and no longer enables the clear speech of the Angeloi and the resounding trumpet-tones of the world of the Archangeloi, with their deep significance, to be audible to the soul.

From the age of puberty onwards the human being today ought to bring with him into sleep something from speech that has prepared his brain during waking hours in such a way that in his everyday life he understands the ideal content of what is expressed by the words. He ought to be able to bring with him — for the speech of the Archangeloi can be heard by his soul during the hours of sleep — something that enables his circulating blood to experience, to some degree at least, the spiritual depths of cosmic happenings. And if today he cannot acquire spiritual knowledge, if our school-education is not spiritually deepened, he brings with him instead the rumbling

sounds of the physical mineral world; he also brings with him in his blood the rustling, thudding sounds of the physical part of the plant world.

As a result, for the purposes of conventional speech he is dependent upon this mineralized brain, made disharmonious by sleep, and upon the blood-system with the sounds of hissing and rustling surging through it, and thus he is confined through speech to life in the earthly sphere alone, whereas in other circumstances the words could have borne him above merely earthly experience to experience in a higher realm.

How could individuals who have received the materialistic education of today still affirm from the depths of their souls: 'Thought is my boundless realm and my winged instrument is the word?' [note 2] For men of culture today thought is by no means a 'boundless realm' but a strictly circumscribed realm, embracing only the material objects to be seen in the environment. And the word is no 'winged instrument' but an instrument by means of which we stammer from mouth to ear utterances of a vague soul-life, but in such a way that there is little super-sensible significance in what is said. And whereas through a spiritual world-conception speech could be an ocean into which a man's inner being sinks and which could then lift his soul to greater and greater heights, it becomes instead the means of chaining him to the Earth, chaining him to rigidly limited conditions of earthly existence.

Today this state of things takes effect in the destiny of the whole human race. We see how modern civilization is based upon the differences among men all over the Earth as expressed in their languages. Attempts are made to create new cultural divisions according to language. But because of what language has become it is evident at once that these cultural divisions and ideal are concerned with purely material life, that they form as it were the covering spread in the guise of civilization over the peoples of the Earth, in order to shut them off from the spiritual world. Everywhere today we see this wall of materialism being built around man's life of soul, and it is this that inculcates the materialism of mental attitudes, of thinking and of feeling, into external life as well. It is this that gradually causes man to forget that within the human race conditions are determined from the super-sensible spheres, but when humanity is divided into nations, races and so forth, men are more and more strongly imbued with a blind belief that they must persist in a purely materialistic existence.

And so we see entering into earthly life in the form of civilization and culture, the element of materialism which has laid hold of the spheres of knowledge, of art, of religion. In the national groups that have come into being on the Earth we can recognize how the forces from the cosmic expanse which once worked creatively and formatively in life on Earth, no longer do so; the forces now in Operation issue from the depths of the Earth itself. We see man, as a member of a nation or people too, uniting more and more closely with the purely material side of earthly existence.

If people could resolve to pay attention to what in many ways sounds paradoxical in our times, namely that the human ego and astral body also have a biography, the individual phases of which become manifest from the time of going to sleep until the time of waking, just as the external physical life in its evolution from birth to death becomes manifest during waking hours, they would perceive the source of a great deal in our modern civilization that must not be allowed to continue ! But if we stop short at the findings of purely external sense-observation, we shall fail to perceive the most important, indeed the all-important things that must be done in order to change the present decline into an ascent leading into the future.

If this view of life is to have practical effects, a spiritual knowledge of man's existence is essential, and for this the world-view of Spiritual Science is necessary. This world-view must therefore permeate the whole of education, in such a way that instead of acquiring a store of words from which all wings have been removed, the child absorbs and is guided by the spirit and receives, together with the words, the power that raises him into the spiritual worlds in which man's being is rooted. In physical life we can deny the spirit. With the spiritual part of our being which must lay aside the physical and etheric bodies during sleep, we cannot deny the spirit. And if from the physical side of existence we repudiate the spirit, then we wake up each morning as grown men who no longer understand life; and

this lack of understanding is imparted to all our thinking, feeling and willing. The coming generation is growing up in such a way that its members inevitably feel that the heritage transmitted by their forefathers is deserving of reproach because this heritage thrusts them into an abyss where they cannot be materialistic but where they needs must be spiritual when living in the ego and astral body.

The older languages of mankind were so constituted that their inner content could be taken into the spiritual world and lead to understanding with the spiritual Beings with whom man needs must associate when he is free of the body. The evolution of language to its present condition has reached a point where, when man should rightly associate with spiritual Beings, he inevitably remains spiritually deaf and dumb and is able to absorb only that which drags him down, namely, the physical element of the mineral and plant kingdoms.

And so in order to understand life today — if I may use trivial words — we must look behind the scenes of this life. But that is possible only through genuine Spiritual Science.