

What is the esoteric task of the Section for the Spiritual Striving of Youth?

Repeatedly, the penetrating question arises: What is, really, the esoteric task of the Section for the Spiritual Striving of Youth? For the Youth Section is, of course, a section of the School of Spiritual Science, and all sections of this School have, as the well-spring and centre of their entire work, the esoteric path of knowledge. This communal well-spring within the esoteric School provides specific, fructifying impulses, nourishment, and work tasks; indeed, with a different nuance for each of the sections in accordance with their different fields of activity.

What is the situation in the Youth Section? Is the Esoteric (the esoteric content) of the Youth Section "the same" as the Esoteric of the general Anthroposophical Section, or is there a particular esoteric impulse and task which would be specific to the spiritual-scientific discipline of the Section for the Spiritual Striving of Youth?

First of all, we must grasp more clearly the meaning of esoterism. Every healthy younger generation wishes naturally to devote itself wholly to the current tasks of our outer social life; every healthy younger generation strives towards deeds, wants to participate in settling current events, to live with the burning social question of the age, and to be where the decisions are made. If one can feel: "I'm involved", then one can bear moments of defeat, opposition and disappointment. But it is inwardly unbearable, for young people in particular, to have to say to themselves: "Unfortunately, I was not present at the decisive moment – it all happened elsewhere; other people are acting and deciding the course of world events. At best, I can say that I'm still sitting on the fence watching everything from the distance – in fact I usually only hear much later about something that has happened". The young person wants, under all circumstances, to find himself in the fermenting process of world development; he wants to live dangerously and to partake in humanity's next steps into the future. One is only too pleased to leave the attitude of detached distanced observation to the older, security-seeking bourgeoisie. In this respect, every healthy younger generation is through and through one that works outwards, that is to say: exoterically orientated. It would condemn as abnormal every kind of flight from difficult tasks and every kind of self-encapsulating activity through which people become islands to themselves. Does this mean that the fundamental potential and central task of youth can never be that of working "esoterically".

If one understands the word "esoteric" to mean something self-encapsulating through which the social task of our present society are neglected and merely "talked about", then, one would have to confirm this.

But the meaning of "esoteric" can be grasped on a level of much deeper and truer important.

To begin with, we can see that the words "exoteric" and "esoteric" (in the Greek spelling) are used simply to direct 'outward bound' passengers ("exoteric") and passengers traveling 'inland' ("esoteric").

Another meaning of these words which has been applied since the days of Aristotle, is to differentiate between public lectures ("exoteric") and restricted lectures ("esoteric"). In exoteric lectures the speaker has the task of pre-supposing that his listeners do not already know the fundamental aspects of his theme. In "esoteric" lectures, however, the speaker can deal, from the outset, with advanced statements of the problem – such lectures are for those who have already worked on the matter.

But the word "esoteric" acquires a much deeper meaning if we characterize it in the following manner.

On the way to knowledge we base everything, in the first instance, on our sense perceptions and on the results of connections deduced by the intellect. Although much can be achieved on this path for practical use, as far as real knowledge is concerned, we remain at a superficial level. On this path we do not gain any genuine answers to the urgent questions of self-knowledge and world-knowledge. In order to be able to come to genuine knowledge, we must, first of all, radically see through the whole of our sensory and intellectual experience as being merely a preliminary stage, which, in contrast to real knowledge must remain a totally darkened sphere. If this becomes direct, inner experience, we are drawing near to a conscious experience of the threshold of the spiritual world – in the wake of this, everything that has been given from without vanishes, and everything must be found anew through spiritual activity. In our time there exists a strong yearning in our sub-conscious life to cross the threshold of the spiritual world, because a new and more certain path towards knowledge of reality can only be found through such a step. Many young people in particular, feel this drive storming in their sub-conscious, yet without being able to grasp it clearly. In this turbulent impatience and want of clarity, one often throws oneself headfirst into the arms of the most varied pseudo-spiritual teachers in order to find some kind of reality-soaked experiences – but experiences devoid of knowledge. This occurs because one has lived through enough of the empty nothingness of normal, bourgeois existence. Here, however, an

addictive desire for *experience* and fear of *knowledge* join forces in a fateful manner. Consequently, an urgent, spiritual task of our age is being gambled away. For the path to the threshold of the spiritual world, the crossing of this threshold, and the return to normal sensory intellectual experience, demand the clearest inner wakefulness and the strongest moral force; since all outer supports fall away when we cross this threshold, our clarity and inner power must be found through our own spiritual activity. Without this, any contrived attempts to force ones way across the threshold will certainly result in failure.

Only through our own individual spiritual activity, will the matted undergrowth of the forest of the soul – where the rampant creepers of the common "I-me-mine" frame of mind hold sway – yield in the face of objective spiritual realities. And this is a central tragedy of the youth of our present age: that so many, who are in fact, striving, searching human beings, have failed to endure the experience of the threshold and the testing trials they met there. The moral forces which permeate crystal clear knowledge and willpower were lacking.

And now we come to the deeper meaning of the word esoteric; we can only find true knowledge of our own being and of the world when we are able, in clarity of thought, to carry out the movement to the threshold of the spiritual world. We find true knowledge if we succeed in enduring the trials of the threshold in the moment when everything that hitherto sustained us falls away, with moral uprightness of will in the search for truth.

We shall now describe two of the manifold trials of the threshold of the spiritual world which occurs frequently and in the face of which one often founders. When everything that has outwardly supported us begins to give way under our feet, we feel ourselves to be facing a bottomless abyss. The voidness and weakness of our own being are then experienced so convincingly, that a crushing despair and a black mood of pessimism takes hold of our soul-life. But in contrast to this, the allpervading sharpness of perception possible on the threshold can lead to excessive arrogance: – because we now see through completely the worthlessness of our otherwise "established" life, we feel ourselves to be all-knowing, sublime and elevated above our fellowmen. Yet an especially subtle soul-state is when we reel to and fro like a pendulum: at one moment we are totally disheartened, at the next moment astonishingly arrogant. In both cases – through despair or through arrogance – we are on the path of failure. Because here, it is not a case of despair or arrogance, but of truth; of unadulterated truthfulness in the finding of oneself in a completely new way, and of the bearing of oneself in inner peaceful clarity; indeed of creating oneself. If we can look quietly at our own tendencies towards despair and arrogance in the same manner as we look at landscapes, that is, natural-scientifically, we can find the inner power of knowledge.

And this is, in fact, what we can call truly "esoteric".

Now it would be completely wrong to believe that the challenging experiences we meet on the threshold to the spiritual world take place in a sphere apart from our given life situation, apart from our active professional life, our training course, or apart from the life we lead with our fellow co-workers and students – for this is no longer possible for human beings who are standing in the midst of modern civilization.

In previous ages seclusion from outer life was not only possible, but desirable – indeed necessary. Today, however, the opposite is the case. The meaning we have given to the word "esoteric", that is, the experience of reality on the threshold, exists in every practical life situation. Life begins to become lucid and transparent: our concrete social situations become the soul's probation and the Esoteric exists in every outer event. The laboratory bench of the student and research worker becomes the place where man's consciousness beholds the creative spirit. In each human encounter the inner, spiritual being of the other is creatively present. Are we conscious of this? In this wise, what is "esoteric" lives at the heart of what is "exoteric". Indeed more: how should we be able to carry out our activities in the world, partake in current events and participate energetically in the immediate problems of society without searching, at all times, for the innermost kernel of the problem at hand? – and this kernel must always be found in the spirit.

This viewpoint can be carried out with respect to any thought we choose. In the first instance, and all too often, we grasp a thought only in its superficial, inferred significance, that is, divorced from its true context. But if we bring forth the thought again directly out of its original well-spring, it becomes immediately an "esoteric" thought. All other thoughts divorced from this wellspring are, in this sense, "exoteric", – again another possible meaning of the words "esoteric" and "exoteric".

A sphere which decisively reveals the existence or the non-existence of the Esoteric in man's consciousness is the concrete life of the smallest communities. The same is true of larger communities and of the largest community: the whole of humanity. But in these larger connections everything is much more complicated and more difficult; to be able to bring the Esoteric to life in these larger communities presupposes, in a certain sense, that one has been able to endure the greater trial if one fails in the smallest? – In every human community of human beings, striving for knowledge many forces initially congested – forces which stream from past destiny unconsciously into each human being. When this begins to be illumined through the experiences

and trials on the threshold an intensification of the same process occurs – a process which can also exist without conscious community building. Community building is, therefore, a special sphere in which the path of knowledge manifests and unfolds itself in a concrete and vivid manner in practical life.

Nevertheless, the processes which take place in most of these communities remain enveloped in a thick blanket of fog – one can feel the effects of past karma through the clouds of fog, but one cannot yet see it in its essence and reality. How can the fog be swept away? How can we achieve clarity on this path towards finding the true being of the other in our encounters?

It is a practical, simple, social task. It depends on every word, every deed, every thought, on the whole atmosphere. And yet it has nothing to do with the "group-dynamics", the "psychological understanding", the "release from tension" or the "sensitivity exercises" which have been fashionable during the last decade in the world of business and industry. An Esoteric first emerges in this sphere when we interest ourselves for the *spiritual* being of the other person and when consciousness of the threshold of the spiritual world awakens in our encounters with other human beings.

Naturally, there are always karmic streams which are congested. When these streams meet difficulties can arise if we do not inwardly discover one another. But each process can never only be related to the knowledge we have of the past: in the moment when the spiritual appears in our consciousness the seed of the future is always already living this is the birth of the tasks we wish to carry out together in the future. The more such tasks flow truly out of our spiritual being, the more do these tasks become esoteric. This is also the case when they stream outwards and give form to the future. A totally "outer" deed can, in the highest sense of the word, be esoteric when it flows out of the well-spring of man's being and has its foundation in the spirit.

These inherent principles hold good for all human beings, irrespective of their age. But young people approach these tasks with a quality and hue peculiar to themselves, as they find that they are right at the start of their lives and are just stepping into their professions. We can enter into this with such enthusiasm! The whole world seems to lie before those who are eager and strong in deed. We need only put our back into it and success is surely guaranteed. And in the unbridled unfolding of the forces of fresh creativity we feel ourselves to be storming forwards – yet how great the disappointment when we run up against hard walls of resistance. But the first disappointment is only a challenge which leads to intensified activity. The unspent strength and surplus-forces of the spiritual world which we carry out of our pre-earthly existence into life stream into this activity. Do we lift them into consciousness and behold them in our thinking?

For the most part, it must be said that young people suffer defeat or lose their way in the following directions: the vast majority of the youth are absorbed and drawn into the established systems of the past, as they already give up at the start of things and allow themselves to be formed by their environment. After a short space of time there is no longer any trace of the special vigour of youth. Those who do not allow themselves to be sucked in continue, in most cases, either by making senseless onslaughts, creating upheavals and kicking up rows, or they flee in a quiet and strange fashion to quiet and strange islands of illusion.

But who among the youth will be able to make conscious and raise to perceptive cognition on the threshold the whole force streaming in from the spiritual world which otherwise works so powerfully in our subconscious? And who among the youth will be able to endure the moral trials of knowledge which always take place at the moment of inner movement to the threshold? Who among the youth will have the power to find and to practice the true Esoteric in the simplest outer circumstances in life?

The esoteric task of the Youth Section, the Section for the Spiritual Striving of Youth, lies in this direction – the section that Rudolf Steiner also called the "Section for the Wisdom of youth", because the striving for the spirit cannot remain mere groping in the dark; the striving for the spirit must become clear and full of content; it must lead to the conscious beholding of those forces which otherwise only revolt in the sub-conscious, causing unrest and breeding dissatisfaction.

Why the Wisdom of Youth? Is this not identical with general, all-embracing Anthroposophy, "wisdom of man", and no particular "wisdom of youth"? Naturally everything springs from the general, all-embracing Anthroposophy. Only here, it acquires a specific quality or hue, since the process of incarnation, the descent into earthly life forms the particular task of youth. That is why there flows out of the general, encompassing Anthroposophy, the Youth-Sophia, the Youth-Wisdom. This is the direction of the esoteric task of the Youth Section. It can be found in every "exoteric" task and every life situation. And this must not only be recognized – it must, above all, be carried out with warmth and with clarity.

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