

First Steps

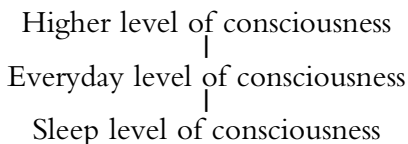
There is a general tendency today, among those who look to meditation as a way of broadening consciousness, to turn away from the ideas and opinions of our modern age—ideas that are largely determined by the way in which scientists see the world—and seek to achieve quite different levels of consciousness, which frequently have no connection with the scientific way of thinking.

In anthroposophy, on the other hand, the meditative path to knowledge firmly takes everyday consciousness as its starting point and first of all sets out to explore its boundaries. It is not a matter of simply giving up the old for something new, but rather of broadening the conscious experience that we have gained in an age when science largely determines our views. This is not done by speculation and theory, but by developing new faculties, faculties that we already have, but which are dormant.

The point is, then, to make use of a potential for growth and development that already exists, and not fill the mind with alien notions or seek to dress it up in foreign garb. We must learn to see where such potential lies, for the seeds are already there and can be made to grow well beyond the boundaries of our present conscious experience.

The potential we have for opening up consciousness is anything but small; in fact it is vast. We have to start small, however.

The following analogy will give a clearer picture of the steps that can be taken to broaden our consciousness.



In the middle is our everyday consciousness. Below it is the level of consciousness we have in sleep (the level of dream consciousness is ignored for present purposes). Sleep here means deep, dreamless sleep, with consciousness reduced to a point where it has no content. Sleep-walkers will of course be active even at this level, but they are unconscious of this. This is a level where we have profound and total darkness.

We need to go to this level of consciousness night after night for the health of our waking daytime consciousness, but we are of course unable to do any of the things in deep sleep that we are able to do when awake.

Above the waking level is a higher level of consciousness. It is exactly as far above the waking level as the deep sleep level is below it. Just as we are able to look down from waking consciousness to the level of sleep consciousness, where we know nothing of what we are doing or what goes on around us, so we are able to look down from the level of higher consciousness—once we have fully achieved it—to our everyday consciousness. This everyday level does not lose significance when we achieve higher consciousness, just as our sleep consciousness does not lose significance because we also have waking consciousness.

When we look down from higher consciousness to our waking consciousness, everything we do at that level will appear to us the way sleep-walking does when seen from the waking state.

From the point of view of our higher consciousness, we really have no idea as to what is really going on when we are in the waking state. We do the oddest things, yet we simply do not know what we are doing.

A comparison between everyday consciousness and sleep consciousness reveals the specific nature of the former. Its contents are always based on what we see, hear, touch, taste and smell; we form ideas, and on the basis of these also our memories. Initially, this level of consciousness contains nothing but what we have perceived with the senses, and our

memories of such perceptions. When we are asleep, all those sensory perceptions vanish, as do our memories.

The question arises whether it will be possible to go above the waking level, so that our consciousness, while remaining fully awake, can have a content that does not depend on what we have perceived with the senses, or on ideas and memories derived from this. Would it be possible to develop an inner faculty that is so powerful in its own inherent activity that it maintains itself while we are in full waking consciousness, but without having to rely on anything perceived with the senses?

For the moment, the question has to remain open, for it may well be that such a thing is not possible. Only observation and experiment can show whether such a power, or at least whether the potential, the germinating point, exists.

One such germinating point is one that every human individual can discover for himself. It is not yet at the level of that special faculty of higher consciousness, but it is related to it. We may call it the 'inner observer'.

Every adult—with few exceptions—has this inner observer, who notes everything we do, think, feel or want, and asks: What are you doing? What is going on?

It can be extremely frustrating to be aware of the inner observer at this first stage, where it is merely a focal point. Some people are bound to think that we should be much better off without it, for if one has such an observer watching all the time, spontaneity will no longer be possible. We are bound to be inhibited from opening up spontaneously in an encounter with others if we are conscious of an observer who keeps watching everything as if it were a play performed on a stage, and who makes positive or negative comments.

But this focus of self-observation—highly frustrating when all it appears to do is to inhibit spontaneous activity—also holds the potential for further development, and in that case will prove to be anything but inhibiting. We can enter into this focal point with our whole being and simply let our usual

attitude rest—not all day long, but perhaps for five or ten minutes.

Then the germinal point that exists in everyday consciousness can begin to grow, and its effect will now be entirely different. A new flower can begin to unfold: stillness—undisturbed by everyday life. This is something entirely new coming into being: a new world can come to flower. The anthroposophical path of meditation can be entered upon when this potential for inner development opens up.

Different elements of this process will be described below.

The Rose Cross Meditation

A basic meditation described in considerable detail by Rudolf Steiner in his *Occult Science: An Outline* (the chapter on ‘Knowledge of Higher Worlds. Concerning Initiation’) is the ‘Rose Cross Meditation’. It may serve as a starting point, with further steps in the meditative path of anthroposophy following on from it.

To begin with, it is important to realize that the meditation has four stages. These need not be mastered all at once. We can start at the first stage—which has its own intrinsic value—and then progress to the second, and so on, feeling in no way compelled to master all four at once.

In the first stage, the Rose Cross Meditation is developed in thought and feeling, entirely at the level of everyday consciousness. This stage is an essential preliminary for the actual image-based meditation. If we omit it, the whole meditation loses its power.

It starts with a simple comparison.

Imagine a plant growing in the garden—consider the roots that anchor it in the ground and serve as a means of taking up nourishment, the stem that raises it above ground level, the green leaves in which light is assimilated and, finally, the flower. Next, bring to mind that the plant remains in one and

the same place all its life. Everything that develops in the plant is unreservedly and harmoniously integrated in the whole of the universe. There is not the slightest opposition or resistance to the environment; everything is in perfect harmony.

Consider now a human being. It is immediately obvious that people have much greater potential than plants, because they are able to move about in space and do not have to remain in one place all their lives. They move freely—not only physically all over the globe, but also in mind and spirit—creating new things that did not exist before. In everything they are, human beings go far beyond what may be regarded as essential plant nature.

At the same time, however, they have an element in them that goes equally far below plant nature. Their freedom to act also gives rise to drives and passions that have destructive properties—hatred, envy, betrayal, lies, even murder. These cause destruction not only outside but also inside the individual, ultimately perhaps even leading to suicide.

Human potential thus extends both far above and far below that of plants. People are able to act in freedom but are also able to descend to the level of drives and passions and destroy the whole earth, including their own existence.

The difference between human beings and plants is also evident in the red blood of the one and the green sap of the other. Try to enter into the experience of these qualities—blissful harmony in the green of plants and a serious mood in the red of the blood.

What does ‘serious’ mean in this context? It means that the blood holds the potential for both rising above and falling below the essentially human level. Thus an individual may be faced with a major decision; something tremendous may be the outcome, or things may go completely wrong. That is the ‘serious’ mood that may also be called the ‘decision-making mood’; it differs greatly from the mood we experience in the green of plants. Everything is fixed where plants are concerned; human beings, on the other hand, may develop in one

direction or in an entirely different one. The decision is still open.

We can begin, for example, to work on our drives and passions. These are not base in principle but are objective powers within us; it all depends on the context in which they are brought to bear. The powers as such are not base, but there is this aspect in them which emerges when the destructive element comes in. We can discover the base aspect of our own drives and passions and see how all this really leads to death and destruction. The death-bringing quality can be distinctly felt, and we can then come to feel that anything that is base in our drives and passions may die—not the drives and passions as such, but anything that is base in them; this has death in it, and we can let it die. Here we have a precondition for higher human development, for when those base elements die, the nature of the blood changes and it becomes the expression of a purified inner life.

Having developed this sentient inner image in the process of building up the Rose Cross Meditation, return in your mind to the plant kingdom and call up the image of a rose. The red petals of the flower show the same balanced harmony as that seen in the green of the leaves.

We consciously choose a red rose as an image representing the blood that has been purified, with base drives and passions removed. This can only be achieved, however, if we let anything that is base in our drives and passions go through death within our inner life.

The next step is to choose a symbol for the process of dying—a black cross, the image of death. The cross is the image representing anything in our drives and passions that leads to destruction, disharmony and death. Everything that thus holds death within it is condensed into the image of the black cross. Then let a circle of seven red roses come radiantly into flower on the cross, at the place where the two black bars that make up the cross intersect.

Everything that has been described so far is the first stage of

the Rose Cross Meditation. We take something from everyday life as we compare plant and human being, but we choose it and put it together consciously, and an image arises in the process.

The image may be weak or powerful, depending on how strong our thoughts are as we build up the picture. The intensity of the image will also be enhanced by the feelings that go with our thoughts. If we limit the comparison between plant and human being to our thoughts and do not enter into it with feeling, the image will be cold and pale. It will grow all the more intense the more intensely we enter into the image we are building up in our thoughts. Each of the steps described above must be built up in thought and entered into with feeling in full conscious awareness: the green of the plant and the harmony between plant and environment, the red of the human blood and the potential to ascend to higher things or go down into the destructive elements in our drives, the 'serious' mood in facing decision, and so on. The thought that higher development can be achieved by taking the path that goes through death will then give rise to a feeling of happiness, and the image we have built up will be richly endowed with deep feeling.

In the second stage of the Rose Cross Meditation we allow ourselves to become utterly immersed in the image we have built up. We become totally absorbed in the image of the black cross with seven radiant red roses breaking into flower at the centre of it. Now all thoughts and reflections fall away—they were part of the first stage. The effort put into building up the image in our thoughts now creates intensity of feeling as we meditate on the Rose Cross.

If the thought effort has not been adequate, the image that arises at this second stage will lack intensity. It is obvious, therefore, that the first stage is an essential part. First the image is built up in thought, and this is followed by the actual meditation on the image where we develop a profound inner response to it.

Some people will always have the image appearing in clear, bright colours, sometimes so much so that it seems more powerful than anything seen with the physical eye. Others may find that the image is only a faint one and when the roses finally appear they are grey rather than red.

What matters, however, is the inner effort that has been made; the intensity of the image is much less important. To meditate on an image built up in this way calls for additional inner powers that we do not need for sensory perception. When we look at an outer object or call up a visual memory, this happens as if of its own accord; we do not have to do anything special. Meditation on an image, on the other hand, means that nothing is given or motivated from either outside or inside; the image has to be created out of powers that are entirely our own.

The image may also appear to be very far away, so that one wants to get closer to it. A new quality enters in if we succeed in not merely having the picture before us, so that we look at it, but in actually living within it. Then there is no longer the duality of onlooker and the thing looked on; the whole becomes a single process that we experience and to which we inwardly respond. The second stage of the Rose Cross meditation has been reached.

We may well ask why there should be seven roses coming into flower on the black cross. All that matters, surely, is to enter into the dying process that is symbolized by the black cross and the coming into flower symbolized by just one red rose. True enough, but the contrast between dying and coming into flower is enhanced if there is not just one rose—which is, of course, perfectly possible—but more than one. But why seven? If seven roses are included in the meditation, the most important thing is that they are a unified whole and not pieced together. Apart from that, the figure seven has a special quality of its own that is also apparent in some of the major time rhythms in evolution, and this serves to strengthen the effect of the meditation. It is merely a suggestion, how-

ever, and you are free to accept or reject; there is no rule about this. It is perfectly possible to have just one rose, but the effect will not be the same.

Another problem that some may experience is that the inner effort causes the muscles to tighten up and go into spasm. In that case the inner effort that was needed has gone in a direction that does not lead to creation of the image; it suddenly gets deflected. One can experience this as tension in the neck or another part of the body, or as grinding of the teeth.

This is best prevented by making sure that we are sitting in a relaxed upright position before we start and checking to make sure that this kind of tension does not develop anywhere in the body when the exercise starts.

Now come the third and fourth stages. Many people do not do these at all but only build up the image and meditate on it. That is perfectly all right, for the first two stages are valuable in their own right.

The third stage consists in making the image disappear and concentrating the attention on the inner powers that originally gave rise to it. This is usually far from easy, especially to begin with, and in most cases the result is absolutely nil. One then goes back to the first two stages and tries to intensify them. If sufficient intensity is achieved, we are more likely to succeed in extinguishing the image and concentrating the attention on the powers that had given rise to it. It will only be possible to live entirely in those powers for moments at a time. With practice and increased effort, however, it is possible to make those moments grow longer.

At the fourth stage, the powers that produced the image are also extinguished and all attention is focused on the spiritual entity that has given rise to those powers. As a rule, nothing at all will come to conscious awareness on which to focus meditative attention.

Once again it will be necessary to go back to the earlier stages and intensify the three stages of building up the image,

living in the image and meditating on the image-producing powers. If we then go on to the fourth stage, often after practising for a very long time, we become conscious in our souls of the power that is the innermost core of our being.

A help in preparing for this most difficult fourth stage is the following.

Imagine the whole history of human evolution, spread before you as in a single vast canvas, and say to yourself that throughout the course of evolution no single individual has ever been able to do the Rose Cross Meditation. Having imagined this, let the idea arise that it is possible after all, but only on an entirely individual basis. To do this, the meditating individual needs to marshal that power of the spirit's innermost core. The next step is to focus our whole attention on that power, so that it will after all be possible to do the Rose Cross Meditation. This sequence of ideas can prepare us for the encounter with the true essence of our own higher self, which is the aim of the fourth stage.

The four stages of the Rose Cross Meditation may thus be summed up as follows:

- Stage one Building up the image in thought, entering into it with feelings, as deeply and intensely as possible. Our inner response to every conception is just as important as the thought content.
- Stage two Meditation on the image, entering wholly into it rather than merely contemplating it.
- Stage three The image disappears; concentration on the powers that created it.
- Stage four Encounter with the essential self; concentration on the spiritual entity that gave rise to the image-producing powers.

As already mentioned, it is certainly possible to stay with the first two stages, even for years if necessary. But we may be deceiving ourselves, for human individuals are generally capable of much more than they think; it is just that it is rather

an effort to call up the necessary reserves of strength. We are also missing an opportunity if we never mobilize more than the powers that are immediately available and stop at the second stage. The very attempt—even if it fails—to venture on the third and fourth stages wakens powers in us that will intensify the first and second stages when we return to them. The powers we rouse in the effort pour into the work of building up the image and meditating on it. If the helpful suggestion given for the fourth stage is also taken up, so that attention is focused on the power of the spirit's innermost core, the building up of the meditation and the resulting image of the Rose Cross may be greatly enhanced as we now become aware of the nearness of our own higher self.

Thought Control

If we now leave the Rose Cross Meditation and look at everyday life, we soon realize that people often have great difficulty in achieving adequate concentration in thoughts and feelings. As soon as they begin to build up the meditation or enter into the actual process of meditation, they start to think of something entirely different. Lack of concentration is the problem. They cannot settle down to it, their thoughts flit around, scatter and jump from one association to another.

If this is the case, it is a good idea for them to return to everyday consciousness, but, rather than start with the first stage of the meditation again, do a preparatory exercise that will help to get their thoughts under control.

This exercise is not based on a major theme from human evolution but concentrates on a simple object—a penknife, for instance. All one does is to spend a short time, five minutes or so, on evolving thoughts on the penknife. It is important to take a very simple object, nothing complicated, but something perfectly ordinary and concentrate one's thoughts on it

for five minutes, noting whether it is possible to stick to the subject for that period of time.

Every one of us has the powers that are needed to develop higher consciousness; it is merely that they lie dormant, that is to say, they are normally scattered, shooting off in all directions, so that we have no awareness of them. Thought control exercises concentrate those powers on a simple subject, where it is possible to hold them together. In this case, we ourselves decide what we are going to think about. In everyday life our thinking is governed mainly by the enormous variety of sensory perceptions; here, on the other hand, we have to exercise conscious control.

One might start with the knife blade, for instance. What is it made of, where did it come from and how was it produced? It is always important to stick with whatever we have decided to concentrate our thoughts on. It would be possible, for example, to think of just the tip of the blade for five minutes, but that would be rather more difficult, as there is less content to it. It is advisable, therefore, to start with something that has reasonable content and not make things too difficult to begin with. Later it may be possible to progress to a point where we concentrate on the tip of the blade only, which will require greater effort.

Our thoughts may of course also start to wander when we do this simple exercise with the penknife. Thinking of the material of which the blade is made, we may think of how the ores for the iron were produced from mines where veins of iron ores run below ground, etc., and before we know where we are we are thinking of the geological stages of the earth. Our thoughts have gone astray despite our staying on the subject, with the result that thought control has been lost. It is important to stick closely to the subject and determine exactly what is part of it and what is not, what takes us away from the object and what does not. The aim of the exercise is to increase our powers of concentration.

Please note that if the exercise is done only once the effect

will immediately be submerged in all the uncontrolled thoughts that come to us throughout the day. The strengthening effect will only come when another important principle, the power of repetition, is brought to bear. If you decide to do the exercise not once but for five minutes every day for a month, the effect will be much greater; the ability to control your thoughts will be enhanced by the rhythmical element of repetition.

Something else that may happen is that when thought control has been practised a number of times one finds that the quality was much better at the beginning than at the tenth or eleventh time. You would assume that the more often you do an exercise the better the quality will be, but the reverse may well be the case. The reason is that concentration was at maximum pitch the first time, so that the exercise went well; it was new and interesting. This initial interest may be lost as time goes on and we tend to get careless, not keeping our thoughts firmly under control. Noticing this is, in fact, the first step towards dealing with the problem. It will be necessary to put more energy into the work now that the initial interest has gone. At this point another important principle begins to emerge: the exercises have to be done for their own sake; we must come to love them. The exercises must be done with love if they are to bear fruit.

It is interesting to consider how the thought control exercise relates to the Rose Cross Meditation.

There is no connection where content is concerned, but the power that has to be used to gain control is the same power that takes us to the fourth stage of the meditation. Without this power, which in thought control is in its germinal stage, we shall never achieve the final stage in the Rose Cross Meditation. It is well worth while to take careful note of the way in which the anthroposophical form of the meditative path is built up; the better we are at mastering this particular exercise the more intensive will be the way in which we are able to do the meditation.

The question also arises as to how much time should be spent on the Rose Cross Meditation and the thought control exercise, or on any meditation for that matter.

Initially, we ourselves decide how long it shall be, depending on the time available. In general it may be said, however, that a meditation of very short duration, half a minute or so, will have some effect, but not very much. The time may be extended until we have found our personal inner balance, for on the other hand there is also the danger of going on for too long. That is what happened to a young man, a follower of Rudolf Steiner, who tried to go through the night-time review exercise for a whole two hours and even then, going back through the day in reverse, only got as far as supper time. He mentioned this to Rudolf Steiner who told him that it was positively unhealthy to take so long over the review; the exercise could easily be done in a maximum of ten minutes. Rudolf Steiner suggested that the young man should do just a small portion of the review in painstaking detail and the rest in a single panoramic view. The small part done in detail would gradually increase and later on he would be able to do the whole review exercise in detail and only take five minutes.

The example shows that time management is an entirely down-to-earth, practical affair with meditations; that is to say, one attempts just as much as can be done in a reasonable time, while gradually seeking to increase the intensity.