

Anthroposophy and the Four Ethers

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Rudolf Steiner often mentions the four ethers, namely the warmth, light, tone or chemical and the life ethers. They also appear in many of his lectures and courses without being mentioned by name, and this will be explored briefly here. Ether is neither substantial nor merely composed of finer substance than the physical, it is composed of beings. However these beings are not free like us and are constrained to behave in quite definite ways enabling us to approach the ethers scientifically, by seeking laws and modes of action that can be grasped conceptually. Otherwise it would only be possible to seek an "anecdotal" knowledge of them exclusively through clairvoyant perception. Thus we can speak of the expansive properties of the light and warmth ethers in a scientific manner, for example, because the beings involved - the sylphs and salamanders - are constrained to act out of sympathy and love. Steiner characterised reality as consisting of beings or the relationships between beings (Ref. 1), and the elementals composing the ethers are often the spiritual reality of relationships, or live in relationships, so that gnomes live where rock and metal are related, or undines where water and plants are in contact, and so on (Ref. 2).

Since our human etheric bodies are composed of these ethers we also possess relationships to other entities mediated by these beings, some being given but others in process of creation since we are (partially) free. Thus our special warmth relationship to the world exhibited in our body temperature of 37°C is maintained by the action of the salamanders making up that portion of our etheric body, while our form and its wonderful chemical complexity is moulded by the undines working in the fluid element, and so on. The marvellous capacity of the etheric body to heal physical injury and illness shows that the beings involved act to restore the correct relationships when they are disturbed, but depending of course on our karma. In addition we have relationships to other human beings which are more creative, as indicated in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us". Here relationships are created by the way we live in society, and once created they have enduring consequences - sustained by the beings engendered - which cannot simply be "wished away". The prayer indicates that the highest spiritual forces can ameliorate this depending again upon how we relate to others. Steiner speaks of a fifth ether, the moral ether (Ref. 3), which seems to be involved here.

In Ref. 4 Steiner refers to the Bhagavad Gita where it is stated (Chapter 8 Verse 23) that those which die in the smoke, the night, the waning of the Moon and autumn of the year will be reborn, while those that die in the fire, the day, the waxing of the Moon and the springtime of the year will not be reborn. He explains that this does not refer to human beings but to the elemental spirits brought into the way we relate to the world. Now in the *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* we learn that knowledge arises when we unite concept and percept, which can be

expressed spiritually by saying that we unite our being with the elemental spirits mediating our percepts. Thus our "concepts" are not merely abstractions but concern the way we actually are. We change when we acquire a concept, and that change in us then manifests in a new way of relating to the world around us. For example the concept of cause-and-effect causes us to judge our percepts in definite ways without which we would be much less effective on the physical plane. Given such a change in us we then relate to what we perceive more richly. But percepts are in reality relationships between us and the world mediated by elemental beings, and the latter die in us when bringing us percepts (Ref. 5). Thus the "act of knowing" can be translated from philosophy to spiritual science by seeing that these beings die into us according to the way we are i.e. according to our conceptual make-up. It is to this that the Bhagavad Gita refers. Thus if we are materialistic then they die into a materialistic context which corresponds to "dying in the autumn of the year", while if we meet them with spiritual devotion then they "die into the spring". This throws another light on the anthroposophical aim to develop living ideas which are "budding with life as is the spring". They die into the night if we are lazy but into the day otherwise, and into the fire if we meet Nature with spiritual understanding but into the smoke if we merely stare at Her. If we are peevish in our outlook they die into the waning of the Moon, but into its waxing if we are of a cheerful disposition.

Now we can see a clear relationship of this to the four ethers, for "dying into the day or the night" clearly relates to light and dark and hence the light ether, while as already indicated above the spring and autumn concern the life ether. Obviously smoke and fire concern our warmth ether relationships (thus mere staring is "cold"), which interestingly leaves the waxing and waning of the Moon to the tone or chemical (or number) ether. Thus our cheerfulness or peevishness relate in a much more real sense than materialism would have it (mere body-chemistry) to our "chemistry" or "tone". We see illustrated quite dramatically the importance of our relationships to the world around us. This also gives us quite another feel for the significance of the four ethers in a purely human context.

Another context where the four ethers are implied on a rather large scale concerns the relationship of the Apocalypse of St. John to our thinking. The horse is the occult symbol for thinking (Ref. 6), and the four horsemen of the Apocalypse relate to four aspects of the development of independent human thinking during the first four cultural ages of our present epoch. Now we are normally unconscious of our ether body, and it presents a kind of reflecting surface to our consciousness so that when we wake up each morning our consciousness is directed outwards to the world of the senses. If instead we "descend into the abyss" by diving below this reflecting surface then we contact the destructive forces lying behind our faculty of intellectual thought (Ref. 7). This of course has four aspects as we dive down into the four ethers making up our etheric body, and we see that there are four different modes of this destructiveness. We can relate this to the

destructiveness of the four horsemen. Thus we expect each of the first four cultural ages to have special relationships to the ethers, and a little reflection makes this clear. First consider the ancient Persian Age, where duality was paramount in the opposition of the god of light (Ormuzd) and of darkness (Ahriman): a clear relationship to the light ether. The Egypto-Chaldean Age was specially concerned with number, weight and measure (Ref. 6) as well as to cosmic harmonies in astronomy, so we see it related to the number or tone ether. It then follows that the ancient Indian Age related to the warmth ether (they had fiery interest for the spiritual world they were losing and little interest in Nature - c.f. the "staring" above - which only arose in the Persian Age), and the Graeco-Roman Age to the life ether. We see a recapitulation within our epoch of the order in which the four ethers arose in the course of planetary evolution.

This further relates to the four preparations Ahriman makes for his forthcoming incarnation (Ref. 8): the development of nationalism, religious fundamentalism, copernicanism and darwinism. Fundamentalism clearly relates to a wrong relationship to the light ether, as there you are either saved or damned in a religious context, without any intermediate possibility: the situation - as in all fundamentalism - is "black and white". Copernicanism relates to a distortion of the Egypto-Chaldean interest in astronomy and the cosmic harmonies, nationalism to a false kind of caste-system world wide, and darwinism to the denial of the individual (which arose so strongly in Rome) in favour of mere natural selection as an explanation of our origins. Thus these large sweeps of evolution are reflected at the etheric level, but of course their cause lies elsewhere. This relation to Ahriman is hardly surprising as the destructive aspects of thinking relate to death, upon which our consciousness at present depends, and Ahriman/Shiva is the lord of that.

Finally it is interesting to consider a more positive aspect, again to do with thinking. After we have been schooled in the *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* and have a healthy respect for the value of thinking, we find somewhat alarmingly in Ref. 9 that we cannot expect our thinking to reach reality if left to itself! Certain definite feelings must be added if we are to reach reality through thought. First of all we need awe or wonder, then reverence at the second stage, thirdly a feeling of being in wisdom-filled harmony with the laws of the world, and fourthly devotion and self-surrender. Recalling from the *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* that philosophically speaking feeling is a percept of ourselves, we see that wonder is a percept of a valid starting point. Intellectually I can conjure up thousands of questions and starting points for my research, but what truly concerns me and my karma? I perceive it in that which fills me with awe and wonder. However I must not stop there or no progress is made, but I must proceed to the second step where I resolutely tread the path towards my goal by adding reverence to my thinking, which is a percept of my continuing relation to it. However as a third step I must begin to perceive that I am making contact with reality through the feeling of being in wisdom-

filled harmony with the laws of Nature. Finally I must surrender my preconceptions and pet theories in devotion to the truth if finally my thinking is to reach reality.

These are indeed most practical stages and provide invaluable advice from Steiner about how to do research realistically. To orient ourselves correctly to the true role of thinking here he says

“Our relation to thinking must not be that we make thinking sit in judgement upon objects, but rather that we make it an instrument whereby the objects can express themselves”,

and again

“I ought not to expect that my thinking can give me knowledge of the truth, I ought rather solely to expect of my thinking that it will educate me”.

Again we can see a clear, and this time positive, relationship to the four ethers. The first step clearly relates to warmth, the second to the “light on the path”, the third to the harmonies of the tone ether and the fourth to the power of the life ether to plunge from the general into the individual reality we are investigating, for the life ether relates among other things to what is specific and individual. We see how to relate our thinking to the ethers in the right way, in contrast to what the four horsemen represent. This is a task for those concerned with spiritual science at the present time, for at least some people on Earth are needed to develop another kind of thinking than that represented by intellectualism. The shadows of the four horsemen are very strong in our present day science, but they must be met by a development of thinking in relation to the ethers which is no less vigorous and exacting, but is *alive*!

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