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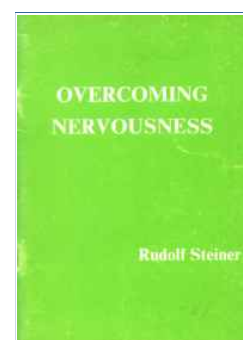
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Be sure to read another version of this lecture:
Nervous Conditions in Our Time (pub. 1929).

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OVERCOMING NERVOUSNESS

TODAY let us try to add something to what is already familiar to us. What I have to say may be useful to some of you in that it will lead to a more exact idea of the nature of man and his relationship to the cosmos.

Anthroposophists often hear objections to spiritual science from outsiders. Scholars and laymen alike criticize the division of man into the four members of physical body, etheric body, astral body and ego (see [Note 1](#)). These skeptics often say that perhaps one who has developed hidden soul forces may be able to see these things but there is no reason why one who has not should concern himself with such ideas. It should be emphasized, however, that life itself, if one is attentive to it, confirms what spiritual science has to say. Furthermore, the things anthroposophy has to teach can be extremely useful in everyday life. This usefulness, which is not meant to be taken pragmatically, gradually comes to carry conviction even for those who are not particularly inclined to concern themselves with clairvoyant perception.

Now let's consider nervousness. It is well-known today that there are many people who complain of nervousness and all that this implies, and we are hardly surprised when the statement is made that there is none who is not afflicted. Considering present social conditions to which all this nervousness can be attributed, such a statement can be readily understood.

Nervousness becomes manifest in a variety of ways, most obviously perhaps when a person becomes an emotional fidgety-gibbet, that is to say, someone who constantly jumps from one thought to another and is unable to hold a single thought in his head, let alone carry it through to a conclusion. Such constant scurrying in the inner life is the most common form of nervousness. Another is one in which people do not know what to do with themselves and are unable to make anything of themselves. When called upon to make a decision in a given situation, they are at a loss for an answer. This condition can lead to more serious symptoms that may finally be expressed in various forms of disease that simulate organic illnesses in a most deceptive way. Gastric disturbances are an example. Many other conditions might be mentioned, but who in our time does not know of them? We need only mention the "political alcoholism" that has pervaded the important events of public life. This expression was coined because of the way political affairs in Europe have been conducted during recent months. There has been no little talk about it since people began to notice how unpleasantly the prevailing nervousness is making itself felt.

If people remain as they are, we need not doubt but that there will be no improvement in the near future. The prospects of change are by no means hopeful. There are many harmful factors strongly influencing our lives that pass like an epidemic from person to person and thus those who are weak also become infected.

It is extremely harmful for our time that many of the men who hold high and responsible positions in public life have had to study as one does today. There are whole branches of learning that are taught in such a way that throughout the entire school year the student will be unable to spend his time and energy really thinking through what he has heard from his professors. As a result, when he is faced with an exam, he is forced to cram for it. This cramming, however, is dreadful because it provides no real connection of interest of the soul with the subject matter that the student is to be examined in. No wonder the prevailing opinion of the student often is one of wanting to forget as soon as possible what he has just had to learn!

What are the consequences of these educational methods? In some respects, men are no doubt receiving the training needed to take part in public life. But, as a result of their schooling, they are not inwardly united with their work. They feel remote from it. Now there is nothing worse than to feel remote in your heart from the things you have to do with your head. It is not only repugnant to sensitive people, but it also acts most adversely on the strength of the etheric body. Thus, because of the tenuous interest that may exist in the core of a person's soul for his professional pursuits, his etheric body is gradually weakened. Precisely the opposite effects are obtained, however, when anthroposophy is taken up in a healthy way. A man will not merely learn that he consists of physical body, etheric body, astral body and ego. He will also come to behave in such a way that these members unfold strongly and harmoniously in him.

Often in anthroposophy, even a simple experiment repeated with diligence can work wonders. Let me speak in detail, for example, of forgetfulness, so common and such a nuisance, but also so significant in our lives. Strange as it may seem, anthroposophy shows it to be harmful to health, and that many upsets bordering on severe illness can be avoided if people would only be less forgetful. And who can claim to be exempt, since there is no one who is not forgetful to some degree. Just consider the numerous cases in which people can never find where they put things. One has lost his pencil, another cannot find his cufflinks, etc., etc., all of which seem trivial but such things do, after all, occur often enough in life.

There is a good exercise for gradually curing such forgetfulness. Suppose, for example, a lady is forever putting her brooch down when she takes it off in the evening, and then cannot find it in the morning. You might think the best cure for her forgetfulness would be to remember to put it always in the same place. There is, however, a far more effective means of remembering where it is. This does not, of course, apply to all objects but in this case the lady should say to herself, "I will put my brooch in a different place each evening, but as I do so I will hold the thought in mind that I have put it in a particular spot. Then I will form a clear picture in my mind of all the surroundings. Having done this, I will go quietly away. I realize that if I only do this once, I probably will not succeed, but if I make a habit of it, I will find that my forgetfulness gradually disappears."

This exercise is based on the fact that the person's ego is brought consciously into connection with the deed he does, and also that he forms a picture of it. Connecting the ego, that is, the spiritual kernel of man's being, in this way with a pictorial image, sharpens memory. Such an exercise can be quite useful in helping us to become less forgetful.

Further results can also be attained from such an exercise. When it becomes habit to hold such thoughts when things are put aside, it represents a strengthening of the etheric body, which, as we know, is the bearer of memory. But now assume you have advised someone to do this exercise not because he is forgetful but because he is nervous. It will prove to be an excellent cure. His etheric body will be strengthened and the nervous tendencies will disappear. In such cases, life itself demonstrates that what spiritual science teaches is correct.

Here is another example that may also appear trivial on the surface. You know that the physical and etheric bodies are intimately connected. Now anyone with a healthy soul will be moved to compassion for clerical workers and others whose professions demand a great deal of writing. Perhaps you have noticed the strange movements they make in the air whenever they are about to write. Actually, with some of them the movements are not so extreme and they may only give a kind of jerk when they write, a jerk repeated for every up and down stroke. You can see the jerking in the writing. This condition is easily understood through spiritual science. In a healthy human being the etheric body, guided by the astral body, is always able to permeate the physical body. Thus, the physical body is normally the servant of the etheric body. When, un-directed by the astral body, the physical body executes movements on its own, it is symptomatic of an unhealthy condition. These jerks represent the subordination of the etheric to the physical body, and denote that the weak etheric body is no longer fully able to direct the physical. Such a relationship between the physical and etheric bodies lies at the occult foundation of every form of cramp or convulsion. Here the physical body has become dominant and makes movements on its own, whereas in a healthy man all his movements are subordinated to the will of the astral body working through the etheric.

Again, there is a way of helping a person with such symptoms, provided the condition has not progressed too far, if one takes into account the occult facts. In this case we must recognize the existence and efficacy of the etheric body and try to strengthen it. Imagine someone so dissipated that his fingers get to shaking and jerking when he tries to write. You certainly would do well to advise him to write less and take a good vacation, but better still you might also recommend that he try to acquire a different handwriting. Tell him to stop writing automatically and try practicing for fifteen minutes a day to pay attention to the way he forms the letters he writes. Tell him to try to shape his handwriting differently and to cultivate the habit of drawing the letters. The point here is that when a man consciously changes his handwriting, he is obliged to pay attention to, and to bring the innermost core of his being into connection with what he is doing. The etheric body is strengthened in this way and the person is made healthier.

It would not be a bad idea to introduce such exercises systematically into the classroom to strengthen the etheric body even in childhood. But, even though an anthroposophy can give such pedagogical advice, it will doubtless be a long time before leading educators will consider it anything but foolish. Nevertheless, suppose that children were first taught to write a particular style of penmanship and after a few years were expected to acquire an entirely different character in their handwriting. The change, and the conscious attention it would involve, would result in a remarkable strengthening of the etheric body.

So you see, something can be done to strengthen the etheric body. This is of immense importance because in our time weakness of the etheric body leads to many unhealthy conditions. What has been indicated here represents a definite way of working upon the etheric body. When these exercises are practiced, an actual force is applied to the etheric body that certainly could not be applied if the existence of this body were denied. Surely, however, the effects of the force, when they become apparent, demonstrate the existence of the etheric body.

The etheric body can be strengthened by performing another exercise, in this case, for the improvement of memory. By thinking through events, not only in the way they occurred but also in reverse sequence, that is, by starting at the end of an event and pursuing it through to the beginning, will help to make the etheric body stronger. Historical events, for example, which are usually learned in chronological sequence, can be followed backwards. Or a play or story can be thought through in reverse from end to beginning. Such exercises when done thoroughly are highly effective in consolidating and strengthening the etheric body.

When you come to think of it, it soon becomes apparent that people do not do the things that would contribute to the strengthening of the etheric body. The restless daily bustle of modern life does not allow them the opportunity to come to that inner quiet required for such exercises, and in the evening after the day's work they are generally too tired to be bothered. Should spiritual science begin to penetrate their souls, however, people would soon see how many things done in the bustle of modern life could be dispensed with, and they would find the time to practice such exercises. They also would become aware of the positive results that could be achieved if such exercises were carefully applied in education.

Another little exercise may be mentioned here. If it has not been cultivated from early youth, it is, perhaps, not quite so useful in later life. Nevertheless, it is still a good exercise to practice in later years. With certain things we do, no matter whether or not they are of enduring value, it is good practice to look carefully at what is being done. This is comparatively easy in writing and I am quite sure many people would

soon correct their hideous handwriting if they really looked at the letters.

In still another exercise a person should endeavor to watch himself the way he walks, moves his head, laughs, etc. In short, he should try to form a clear picture of his movements and gestures. Few people actually know what they look like when they are walking, for instance. While it is good to make this experiment, it should not be prolonged because it would quickly lead to vanity. Quite apart from the fact that it can be corrective of undesirable habits, this exercise also tends to consolidate the etheric body. When a man cultivates an awareness of his gestures and involuntary actions, the control of the astral becomes increasingly stronger over the etheric. Thus, he also becomes able, if necessary, to suppress certain actions or movements out of his free will.

It is an excellent accomplishment to be able to do quite differently the things we do out of habit. Nowadays, people only alter their handwriting for unlawful purposes, but I am not advocating a school of forgery when I suggest that if one changes one's handwriting honestly, it will help to consolidate one's etheric body. The point is that it is good to be able to do quite differently on occasion the things we do habitually. This does not mean that we need become fanatical about the indifferent use of our right and left hands. If a man, however, is occasionally able to do with his left hand what he commonly does with the right, he will strengthen the control of his astral over his etheric body.

The cultivation of the will, as we may call it, is most important. I have already mentioned how nervousness often makes it impossible for people to know what they should do. They do not know their desires, or even what they should desire. This may be regarded as a weakness of the will that is due to an insufficient control of the ego over the astral body. Some people do not know what they want and, if they do, they never manage to carry it out. Others, still, cannot bring themselves to will firmly what they should.

The way to strengthen one's will is not necessarily to carry out something one wishes, provided, of course, it will do no harm to leave the wish unfulfilled. Just examine your life and you will find countless desires it would no doubt be nice to satisfy, but equally possible to leave unsatisfied. Fulfillment of them would give you pleasure, but you can quite well do without. If you set out to examine yourself systematically in this way, every restraint will signify additional strength of the will, that is, strength of the ego over the astral body. If we subject ourselves to this procedure in later life, it becomes possible to make good much that has been neglected in our earlier education.

Let me emphasize that it is not easy to apply what has just been described in the education of the child. If a father, for example, denies a wish of his son that he could fulfill, he is apt to awaken the boy's antipathy. Since it is thus possible to arouse antipathy, you might say that the non-fulfillment of wishes in education is a doubtfully correct principle. What, then, is to be done? The answer is for the person guiding the child or pupil to deny himself the wishes in such a way that the child becomes aware of the denial. There is a strong imitative impulse at work here in the child, especially during the first seven years, and it will soon become evident that he will follow the example of his elders and also deny himself wishes. What is hereby achieved is of untold importance. When, through our interest in anthroposophy, our thoughts are directed in the right way, we come to know spiritual science not only as theory but as a wisdom of life that sustains and carries us forward.

A most important means of strengthening the control of the ego over the astral body was presented here in two recent lectures (see [Note 2](#)). In them I discussed the importance of being flexible enough to consider what is said not only for, but also against, an issue to be able, as it were, to see both sides of a problem. Generally, people see only one side, but there is really no problem in life that should be treated this way. Pros and cons are never lacking. We would do well to acquire the habit of always adding the pros as well as the cons in a case. Being what they are, human vanity and egoism usually favor what one wants to do. Therefore, it is also good to list the reasons against.

The fact is that man would so much like to be "good" that he is often convinced he will be if he does the things there are so many reasons in favor of doing, and disregards the things there are so many reasons against. It is an uncomfortable fact to have to realize, but there are always many possible objections to practically everything we do. People are not nearly as good as they think. That is a universal truth, a truism, but it can become an effective truth when it is made a practice in everything that is done to consider also what might be left undone.

The results to be attained by these means can be clarified by an example. No doubt you have met people so weak-willed that they would rather let others take care of their affairs. They would rather sit around asking themselves what they should do than find reasons in themselves to act. What I am now going to say must also be conceived as having many cons as well as pros. Assume that one of these weak-willed people is confronted by two others. One of them says, "Do this." The other says, "Don't." The one whose will exerts the stronger influence on the weak-willed person will be the victor. This is a most significant phenomenon because the decision of "yes" or "no" made by the weak-willed person will have been brought about by the adviser whose strength of will was the greater.

In contrast, however, suppose that I stand alone and quite independently face in my own heart the necessity of making a "yes" or "no" decision. Then, having answered "yes," suppose I go forth and do what must be done. This "yes" will have released a strong force within me. When you thus place yourself in consciousness before a choice of alternatives, you allow strength to prevail over weakness simply from the manner in which your decision is made. This is important because in this way the control of the ego over the astral body is greatly strengthened. Try to carry out what I have just described and you will find it will do much to strengthen your will.

This problem, however, also has its darker side. You will not strengthen but only weaken your will if, instead of acting under the influence of what speaks for one course as opposed to another, you were out of slackness to do nothing. Seemingly you will have followed the "no" direction, but in reality you will have been merely lax and easy going. If you feel limp and weary, it would be better not to attempt to make a choice until you are inwardly strong and know that you can really follow through with the eventual pros and cons you place before your soul. It is obvious that such things must be brought before the soul at the right time.

The control of the ego over the astral body is also strengthened when we witness from our souls everything that creates a barrier between us and the surrounding world. The anthroposophist, however, should not feel that he should repress justified criticism if it is objective. On the contrary, it would represent a weakness to advocate the bad in place of the good, and one need not do this. But we must be able to distinguish something that is to be criticized objectively from something that we find exasperating simply because of its effect on ourselves. The more we make ourselves independent of what confronts us, the better. Thus it is good to practice self-denial in not considering bad in our fellow-men the things we consider bad only because they are bad for us. In other words, we should not apply our judgment only where we ourselves are not involved. This is really difficult to apply in life. When a man has lied to you, for instance, it is not easy to restrain your antipathy, but having caught him in it you should not immediately jump to conclusions. There is another way. We can observe from day to day how he acts and speaks and let this, rather than what he has done to us, form a basis for our judgment. Then you are taking into consideration what there is in the man himself and are not basing your judgment on the effect his conduct has made on you. Your personal relationship with him should be disregarded in order that you may view him quite objectively.

It is advisable for the strengthening of the ego to reflect on the fact that in all cases we might well refrain from a considerable portion of the judgments we pronounce. It would be more than enough if but a tenth of them were experienced in our souls. Our lives would by no means be impoverished thereby.

These may seem like small details I have given here, but it must also be our task now and again to consider such problems. Then, in order to lead purposeful, healthy lives, we see how differently life must be grasped than is ordinarily the case. It is not always right to send to the drug store for medicine when a man is ill. What is important is to order life in such a way that people become less susceptible to illnesses and that they have a less oppressive effect. They will become less oppressive when we strengthen the influence of the ego over the astral body, the astral body over the etheric, and the etheric body over the physical. Self-education and an influence upon the education of children can follow from our fundamental anthroposophical convictions.

Note 1:

Spiritual science views man as a fourfold being:

1. The physical-mineral body man has in common with the mineral kingdom.
2. The etheric or life body is the carrier of all life and growth forces. It is the element man has in common with the plant kingdom. Plants have physical and etheric bodies.
3. The astral body is the carrier of feelings, instincts, etc., that man has in common with the animals, which possess a physical, etheric, and astral body.
4. The ego, unique spark of divinity in man. It makes possible self-awareness and enables man to become a free being capable of choice between good and evil.

— Translator

Note 2:

How to Disprove Theosophy, January 8, 1912; *How to Prove Theosophy*, January 10, 1912. These lectures have not yet been published in English.

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