

Historical Attempts to Introduce the Teachings of Karma and Reincarnation

In *Karmic Relationships* Steiner offered the challenging thought that the Anthroposophical Movement was actually “returning to its own germinal impulse.” There he also specified, “Apart from this, I can remind you today of something else. The first few lectures I was to give at that time [1902] to a very small circle were to have the title, ‘Practical Exercises for the Understanding of Karma.’”¹ Then Steiner proceeded to confess that he became aware of intense opposition to this proposal and therefore the lectures were not given. He concluded, “Thus we return in a certain sense to the starting point. What must now be a reality was then intention.” Let us deepen this exploration further.

The same idea expressed above was brought up throughout the *Karmic Relationships* cycles. In Volume 5 Steiner said, “And now that we have tried through the Christmas Meeting at the Goetheanum to re-organize the Anthroposophical Society, I am able to speak about a certain fact to which probably very little attention has been paid hitherto.” And further: “I gave a first lecture which was similar in character to the lectures given later to the groups. This first lecture had an unusual title, one which might at the time have been considered rather daring. The title was ‘Studies of the Practical Working of Karma.’ My intention was to speak quite openly about the way in which karma works.”² From the above it appears that at least one lecture was given; none followed.

Much the same is said in *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 6. “At the very first gathering held in Berlin for the purpose of founding the German Section of the Theosophical Society, I chose for a lecture I proposed to give, the title, ‘Practical Questions of Karma.’ I wanted to introduce then what I intend to achieve now, namely, the serious and earnest study of karma.”³ As to what these lectures and “practical exercises” could be, that is specified in *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 2, Lecture 6. Immediately after introducing what is known as the “Moon/ Sun/ Saturn exercise,” Steiner had this to say: “And if one is going to speak of practical karma exercises—I told you already that I wanted to do it at the beginning of the foundation of the Anthroposophical Society, but did not succeed at that time—then one must really begin in this way.” This offers us an understanding that Steiner had in mind quite advanced exercises when he initially brought forth his teaching of karma and reincarnation.

Although Steiner conveyed that he did not achieve his goals in the way he had set out to do, he added a telling comment. After saying that his impulse was not taken up, he continued, “It therefore remained a task which had to be pursued under the surface, as it were, of the anthroposophic stream, performed as an obligation to the spiritual world.”⁴ Even after the false start of 1902, Steiner had brought up his karmic research here and

¹ Steiner, *Karmic Relationships*, Vol. 4, September 5, 1924 lecture.

² Steiner, *Karmic Relationships*, Vol. 5, March 31, 1924 lecture.

³ Steiner, *Karmic Relationships*, Vol. 6, April 16, 1924 lecture.

⁴ Steiner, *Karmic Relationships*, Vol. 5, March 31, 1924 lecture.

there. Already in the lecture of October 18, 1903, he mentioned that Copernicus was the reincarnated Cardinal Cusa.⁵

We can distinguish three phases, or waves, in Steiner's attempts to bring out the teachings about karma and reincarnation together with the practical exercises—although traces exist also in between these phases. The first was the above-mentioned isolated attempt as early as 1902, from which Steiner soon desisted.

The second wave occurred in conjunction with the performing of the Mystery Dramas. Lectures about karma and reincarnation followed in their wake, most intensely from 1910 to 1913, then later with isolated lectures. These include the cycles *Manifestations of Karma* (1910) and *Reincarnation and Karma* (1912); the comments on the Mystery Dramas present in *Secrets of the Threshold*; and those gathered in *Three Lectures on the Mystery Dramas*. In 1910 Steiner also gave the cycle of lectures on *Occult History*, in which he followed individuals from one incarnation to the next. In the backdrop of the whole cycle lie the figures of Eabani and Gilgamesh, Aristotle and Alexander the Great, through which he was pointing back to his own incarnations and those of Ita Wegman. These lectures could be called the first karma cycle, although they were given in a veiled fashion; Steiner did not explicitly point to the individualities of the present. Steiner's second effort came to an end with the onset of World War I.

The years 1909–1910 were pivotal years for the revelations streaming from the spiritual world through Steiner. In addition to giving us the first Mystery Drama, these years are marked by the first lectures mentioning the reappearance of Christ in the etheric, and the first revelations about the Fifth Gospel (starting from the *Gospel of Saint Luke* with the revelations about the two Jesus children). And the drama, *The Portal of Initiation*, was inaugurated, with the vision by the seeress Theodora of the coming of Christ in a new form.

The fact that Steiner gave the first karma exercises in lectures given in the years 1911-12 is of great importance for our study.⁶ It seems that initially Steiner was still tentative, maybe knowing how much the ground needed to be prepared to overcome the resistances he had met in 1902 with the first attempt. In one of the lectures he spoke about how to work on the soul life in the realm of concepts and thinking, emotions and will. Regarding the latter he says the insight that “The most beneficial influence on our will is exerted by a life wholly directed towards comprehending human karma. We might also say a soul life which strives to develop, as its primary characteristics, serenity and acceptance of our destiny. And what better way can one find of developing this acceptance, this calmness of soul in the presence of one's destiny, than by making karma an actual content in one's life.”⁷ Within the lecture he illustrates how to face one's sorrow and one's joys. Pain and sorrow are usually deserved, and the cause is either in this life or in the previous. And to this we need to respond by inwardly conducting ourselves with this specific understanding, and by promoting acceptance of destiny. Meanwhile, joy most often points to the future, not to the past. “When we investigate karma by occult means, we always discover that in most cases joy has not been earned, and we should

⁵ Steiner, lecture of October 18, 1903, not translated.

⁶ Steiner, *Esoteric Christianity and the Mission of Christian Rosenkreutz*, “Jeshu ben Pandira and the Christ Impulse,” November 5, 1911 lecture; “The Dawn of Occultism in the Modern Age,” January 29, 1912 lecture; and “The True Attitude to Karma,” February 8, 1912 lecture.

⁷ Steiner, *Esoteric Christianity*, November 5, 1911 lecture.

accept it gratefully as sent to us by the gods, as a gift of the gods.” This should motivate us to apply what comes to us as joy usefully for the good of our fellow human being. Acceptance of our karma, made a reality as in the two instances above, strengthens our will. Reactions of anger or depression rob us of vitality. What was still a general injunction or a desired attitude in 1911 evolved into more specific exercises in 1912. We will return to these later in the chapter.

Steiner’s continued effort on the Mystery Dramas was prevented by the outbreak of World War I. About this he said,

I will try to give a brief outline of what was to have been the content of the Munich lectures; but the most important and essential information that was to have been given there must be reserved for less turbulent times. I am astonished to find certain people thinking that the strenuous efforts required for giving very important teachings of Spiritual Science (as was intended in Munich), can be applied in times such as those in which we are now living. But it will be realized one day that this simply is not possible; that the highest truths cannot be communicated when storms are raging. As far as my theme is concerned, I will give a course of lectures on it later on, when karma permits, in substitution for what was to have been given in Munich.⁸

The stream of karma revelations decreased considerably, and fully resumed only after the Christmas Conference. The final attempt, which was only partial because of Steiner’s premature death, took place after World War I, and most strongly after the Christmas Conference. And the reason for this is the following, according to Steiner:

There were mighty followers of Michael...but also mighty demonic powers, which, under the influence of Ahriman, opposed what was meant to come into the world through Michael. ...And each time, even after having experienced and lived with these questions for decades, it was nevertheless as though, if you tried to express these things, then the enemies of Michael always came and stopped you from speaking. [But] recently it has become possible to speak about these things...Now the connections between earth lives can be discussed openly. This is linked to the revelation of the Michael Mysteries...What has happened is that the demons which previously prevented things from being voiced have been forced into silence.⁹

⁸ Steiner, *Occult Reading, Occult Hearing*, Oct. 3, 1914 lecture.

⁹ Steiner, *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 8, August 12, 1924 lecture.