

## **Anthroposophy, Bildung and Steiner education**

**Ruhi Tyson**

*Waldorf University College and Stockholm University, Department of Education, Sweden*

### **Do you have to be an anthroposophist to be a Steiner teacher?**

In my work with teacher education I am sometimes asked questions, quite important but also difficult, about the role of anthroposophy in Steiner education:<sup>1</sup> “Do you have to be an anthroposophist to be a Steiner teacher?” “Is it important that teachers talk about anthroposophical matters with each other at a Steiner school?” And other questions similar to these.

The answers, it seems to me<sup>2</sup>, depend to a great degree on what one imagines terms such as “anthroposophy” and “anthroposophist” mean. I think that by explaining something of how I understand them, I will also be able to outline the kind of answers that I have found enriching in reflecting on such questions.

Briefly put I understand anthroposophy as a Bildung-oriented worldview or a Bildung-path and, it follows, an anthroposophist is someone who is especially engaged in a process of Bildung.

A longer discussion follows shortly but to summarize the argument: the concept of Bildung refers to a philosophical tradition within education that has roots all the way back in antiquity. Its literal meaning can be translated as “formation” or “cultivation” and it shares many common roots with the tradition of liberal education.

An easy way to understand the concept is to consider educational experiences that have been especially formative, meaningful, enriching and memorable. Such experiences are experiences of Bildung and I understand the Bildung tradition as aiming at providing an education particularly rich in such experiences.

In this essay I will unpack the above one-line answer and refer to some statements by Steiner that, for me, have illuminated how anthroposophy, Bildung and Steiner education relate to each other. They represent both an argument and, perhaps even more, the presentation of an aspect of my own Bildung-path as it relates to Steiner’s work.

To be clear, this is a brief essay on the subject. It does not cover what others before have written (eg. Kiersch 2010, 2015; Schieren 2015) and it makes no claim to be comprehensive. That would require a more extensive and rigorous study, something quite warranted at this time. The aim here is simply to present some more personal reflections on the topic.<sup>3</sup>

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1. I will use the term Steiner education throughout for what is also known as Waldorf education. I understand this to encompass any educational initiative based more or less in Rudolf Steiner’s educational philosophy.

2. I will not be inserting the qualifying “it seems to me” in every sentence but only when I think it especially important not to be misunderstood. It can be generally assumed throughout. It should also be explicitly clear that the perspective developed here is one of several possible ones and that this in no way suffices to encompass anthroposophy entirely. One might consider this an educational perspective on anthroposophy, but even then, I am sure there are also other ways of illuminating certain relationships between anthroposophy and Steiner education.

## Anthroposophy and Bildung

To begin with, Steiner wrote, in a footnote to the fifth volume of his introductions to Goethe's scientific writing, that:

A concept is esoteric when it is viewed in the context of the phenomena from which it was won. Exoteric when it appears as an abstraction for itself.<sup>3</sup> (Steiner 1982 [1897], p. 377 my translation)

Second, towards the end of his life, he wrote in his *Leading thoughts* that:

Anthroposophy is a path of knowledge to guide the spiritual in the human being to the spiritual in the universe. It arises in man as a need of the heart, of the life of feeling. (1998a, p. 11)

Now, leaving these two statements aside for the moment, I will turn briefly to a characterization of Bildung.<sup>4</sup>

Bildung is a rich tradition to consider, but quite central to it is the insistence that knowledge loses its value if it is atomized, abstracted and impersonal, in the sense of not being meaningful in a personal sense to the individual or collective engaging with it. It is generally argued that knowledge as Bildung is formed in context, is a matter of creating relationships between different phenomena, concepts, etc.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Bildung is at heart a biographical process, a path to self-determination, integrity and self-understanding, all as a result of a reciprocal interaction with the world. This biographical aspect of Bildung also means that Bildung can't really be provided but only cultivated and afforded, ie. it is, in the end, up to each participant in a Bildung-process to ensure that it becomes just that.

We can't force it upon someone; and the more education is planned, regulated and compulsory, the more we must use our pedagogical imagination in order to bring about relationships where those we are working with (ourselves, our students and our colleagues) experience this work as a process affording Bildung (to be sure, there is an argument to be made in the exact opposite direction, ie. if education is almost entirely unplanned, unregulated and voluntary, we also need to spend a greater effort in order for it to afford Bildung. It is a short step from this to Schiller's *Aesthetic Letters* (2010), but this would take me too far off course.

Without doing violence to Steiner's first statement above, I think it could just as well be paraphrased as: Bildung is the result of concepts being understood in the context from which they have been taken. The absence of Bildung is when they appear in the abstract, each one for itself. It is fundamentally *ungebildet* (ie. to be lacking in Bildung) to educate or be educated in such a way as to abstract concepts and phenomena from the context in which they emerge.

An objection here is warranted since Steiner uses the term "esoteric" in more ways than this. It would be interesting to conduct a systematic study of the degree to which the other ways remain compatible with the concept of Bildung as I understand it here. We can take one of the most common: esoteric in the traditional sense of secret or hidden where the esoteric is that which if it is made public and becomes exoteric risks becoming profaned/desecrated by those who are uninitiated. But often this is precisely the case with our most deep and holy Bildung-experiences. These are experiences in life that have been so formative and full

3. "Esoterisch ist ein Begriff, wenn er im Zusammenhang mit den Erscheinungen betrachtet wird, aus denen er gewonnen ist. Exoterisch, wenn er als Abstraktion gesondert für sich betrachtet wird." I still remember when I was told this by Dietrich Esterl in a slightly different form during a conversation in 2005 and it opened up a whole new world of understanding for me. It took me, however, until 2016 to find the exact quote, since he didn't remember at all where he had it from and so there is a chance that he was thinking of a different statement by Steiner, since I haven't gone back to him to check). He said roughly that esoteric is that which is taken in its contexts, that which creates relationships, exoteric that which stands on its own, alone.

4. One might well object that I am treating Steiner's thought in an exoteric way (ie. devoid of Bildung) by separating brief statements from a wider context. However, they are then placed in a new context through the ensuing discussion and in how they are related to each other, and one, I think, which is faithful also to the original context from which they were taken if one takes the time to look into each.

5. A further, very interesting connection between Bildung and an anthroposophical perspective on the creation out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) is given by Günther Röscher (2023, p. 87-90) who points out, in an extended discussion on creation as emanation vs. creation out of nothing, that Steiner locates the creation out of nothing in the human soul. He goes on to discuss a statement by Steiner that our freedom in effect means that we continually create out of nothing and that everywhere that we establish relationships. He quotes Steiner (ibid. p. 87, footnote, my translation): "they are the experiences of the soul that are not given as facts but through relationships" [Es sind die Erlebnisse der Seele, die man nicht durch Tatsachen erlebt, sondern durch Relationen]. Röscher's perspective extends the meaning of what is discussed here on a cosmic scale.

of meaning that we may not be able to share them with anyone without experiencing a loss of magic and life in the narrative. From an educational point of view, one might say that every person's process of Bildung harbors a secret inwardness and as a teacher one needs to exercise deep care not to invade it. One might also understand this in the sense that a Bildung-oriented school needs to strive for an environment that doesn't unnecessarily profane our Bildung-processes. A school is esoteric/Bildung-oriented to the degree that children and adults can engage in a mutual participation in each other's Bildung-processes and exoteric/unBildung-oriented to the degree that everyone is left to him- or herself with a Bildung-process.

Having already written the above I came across the following Steiner-quote on esotericism from Ulrich Kaiser's excellent study on Steiner's narrative approaches (Kaiser 2020). It is from notes taken by a participant in Steiner's esoteric lessons and as such presumably not verbatim.

It is the way in which something is apprehended [or understood] that characterizes the esotericist. When we are able to receive what we encounter and to internalize it [the German *verinnerlichen* has more of an emotional element to it than the English internalize] then we are esotericists. Esoteric means internalizing the exoteric. We are esotericists when that which is told to us is experienced by us inwardly in a truly dynamic way. Not just with our minds or thinking but with all our senses and our powers of soul. (Kaiser 2020, p. 221, my translation).<sup>6</sup>

Or, as I would phrase it in terms of Bildung: a Bildung-process is characterized by the internalization of our experiences. It's depth grows when we comprehend something, not just with our minds, but with all our senses and powers of soul (and this depth can be increased more or less infinitely).

The spiritual that Steiner writes of in his second statement is a tacit or explicit condition for Bildung, especially when one takes the perspective that the spiritual can largely be understood as that which strives for, and lives in, relationships and participation (ie. a definition focusing on the functions of spirit rather than the substance or beingness). One of the roots of the Bildung-tradition is also that of German mysticism (the word itself was coined by the famous mystic Meister Eckhardt if my historical sources are correct). Another is that of German Classicism (a period of late Classic and early Romantic thought where, among others, Goethe, Schiller and Novalis are included) and both are deeply rooted in Christianity.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it is only in a limited sense that the Bildung-tradition can be thought of as secular. But one can still refrain from expressing this spiritual aspect and simply write: Bildung is a path of knowledge intended to lead the human being towards a greater participation<sup>8</sup> in the world-process (a lack of Bildung being synonymous with a distanced and abstract observation). It arises in man as a need of the heart, of the life of feeling (as long as school and other things do not extinguish it, this need seems to be present in most if not all children because it is a need, a deep desire, for meaning).

The point then with becoming familiar with anthroposophy as a Steiner teacher (apart from establishing an awareness of the historical roots of Steiner education), from this perspective, is that it can contribute to one becoming a person who is more *gebildet*, i.e. a person whose participation in the world-process (including participation in the inner life processes of the children and youth one is teaching) is strengthened and increased, a person whose self-understanding is deepened and within whom the realization is present that these are reciprocal. Participation enriches self-understanding, self-understanding leads to greater participation.

6. "Die Art der Auffassung nur macht den Esoteriker aus. Wenn es uns gelingt, das, was äußerlich an uns herangebracht wird, zu verinnerlichen, so sind wir Esoteriker. Die Verinnerlichung des Exoterischen ist Esoterik. Wir sind Esoteriker, wenn wir das, was uns äußerlich mitgeteilt wird, in unserem Inneren wirklich erleben, nicht nur denkerisch, sondern mit allen Sinnen und Seelenkräften." 3 September 1913.

7. Hans Erhard Lauer (1974) has produced a significant work of scholarship, *Der Kulturimpuls der deutschen Klassik*, exploring the links between this period in the Bildung tradition and how Steiner outlines anthroposophy. It is deeply relevant to the perspective developed here.

8. I write participation here, following Barfield (1988) because I think it is a more accurate description of the *kind* of knowledge striven for both by Steiner and by the Romantic Bildung-tradition.

## The risks inherent in our search for meaning

The way Steiner characterizes the esoteric also implies that it can be recognized as an increased meaningfulness, whereas the exoteric rather moves towards the meaningless since meaning is to be found in the understanding of how things relate to each other. On their own, few (if any) things are comprehensible.

However, the risks here should be obvious. It is characteristic of fundamentalisms of all kinds that they carry with them a sort of rigid and almost total meaningfulness. Steiner once wrote in an undated notebook entry: “One should not be driven by a will to refrain from the knowledge-drama in favor of a knowledge-grammar.”<sup>9</sup> (2005, p. 224, my translation). This is what happens when Bildung is reduced to a simple gathering of knowledge. Anthroposophy as a path to Bildung needs, as I see it, to be experienced as a drama and thereby to become personal. In this one sacrifices its totalizing explanatory value (i.e. those elements of meaningfulness that explain everything) in favor of a concrete participation in the world-process (Kaiser 2020 elaborates on these topics extensively).<sup>10</sup>

That Steiner education has its roots in anthroposophy means, as I understand it here, that it is an explicit and intensely practiced pedagogy of Bildung. And Bildung, considered as a process (a movement), is something that can occur in all kinds of forms and contents. This is one of the areas in which I have found Steiner to be a source of intellectual and moral virtue. In one of his most beautiful lectures (in my opinion) he poses the question if, to participate in what he calls “the Christ impulse”, one must have knowledge of its historical background, its name (1998b, p. 178). His answer is an explicit no (ibid. p. 185). His argument being that the important question is whether someone has understood love and its meaning in the world (the title of the lecture), especially as it relates to wisdom<sup>11</sup> and power.

This understanding can be found in people all over the world irrespective of religious or secular views. One can, to be sure, also find a lack thereof among some who insist that they participate exclusively in Christ. Fundamentalism, be it religious or secular, is, at heart, a confusion of wisdom and power on the one hand with love on the other. Beiser (2004, p. 28-31), in discussing the Romantic view of Bildung, also emphasizes the centrality of love both for the ethics of the Romantic poets and philosophers and as mediator between reason and sensibility. I think there is a direct and quite beautiful and striking continuity here between Schiller’s (2010) form (wisdom) and sense (power) drives and his positing of play (love)<sup>12</sup> between them and Steiner’s argument.

9. “Man soll nicht auf das Erkenntnisdrama zugunsten einer Erkenntnisgrammatik verzichten wollen.”

10. I think this has been my personal experience. I began, quite unprompted, out of curiosity about the foundations of the pedagogy I was experiencing as a Steiner-school student, to study anthroposophy at 17. The Bildung experience in the sense of a personal drama was, mildly speaking, intense. However, I reckon it took me about six or seven years to move past a constant back and forth between drama and grammar and I think this is one way in which fundamentalism originates (it also is easy to forget that grammar is descriptive and not prescriptive). One is initially so deeply affected by the meaningfulness that a revelation affords (and at an initial stage most, or all, knowledge is revelation) that one would like to impart it also to others. However, as stated, Bildung cannot be taught, and the more so the deeper it is. It can only be afforded, and this affordance must come out of one’s being not out of one’s teaching. Such being, on the other hand, takes a certain time to grow unless, I suppose, one is already ripe for it which I most certainly was not. Above all, it requires an established habit of speaking about the drama of our process of Bildung rather than presenting its contents or grammar separately. This holds for its philosophical elements as well. However, such presentations make us far more vulnerable than presentations of grammar, which perhaps also explains some of the violence that is exerted to defend ideas in principle. It is a way of hiding the intense vulnerability that these ideas embody for oneself. I still, to my retrospective annoyance, find myself now and again slipping back into ways of speaking that are grammatical, i.e. totalizing, rather than expressions of drama.

11. A reasonable objection here would be that Bildung and anthroposophy are both much more concerned with increasing wisdom than they are with practicing love. This objection cannot really be refuted in theory, but must be demonstrated in practice since it arises out of a concern that a knowledge-drama is substituted with a knowledge-grammar. The Bildung-tradition also knows this, consider, for example Goethe who writes in *The fairy tale*: Love doesn’t rule, but it cultivates Bildung and that is more (die Liebe herrscht nicht aber sie bildet und das ist mehr) (1999, p. 98, my translation).

12. In a stroke of genius, the Swedish language even spells this out in its word for love which is *kärlek* meaning literally loving-play or in-love-play, *kär* meaning to hold dear, to be in love and *lek* play.

## Conclusions

I think it is not very difficult, having said all this, to understand Steiner education in a corresponding way. A Steiner teacher then, is someone who has understood the meaning and importance of Bildung for the human being, no matter if he or she has ever heard of Steiner education. And for some who have this need of the heart and the life of feeling for Bildung, the need can also arise to deepen it through anthroposophy – but of course also through other traditions of Bildung since what is important is if they qualify as esoteric in the sense that Steiner characterizes it, and thereby lead to a deeper and richer participation in the world-process, to the establishment of deeper and richer relationships.

This, for myself, has led to a wholehearted and ongoing engagement with anthroposophy.

Where does this leave me regarding the initial questions? Hopefully it is clear that I would stress the importance of discerning drama from grammar, that it is important to understand what Bildung is and that this is a conversation that needs to be alive in a Steiner school. Without it, that school might have individual teachers who provide a rich education but as a whole it will struggle because it is in contradiction to its deeper purpose. I think such a conversation does not necessarily need to be explicitly about, or limited to, anthroposophy, but it does need to be esoteric in the sense characterized by Steiner.

A Steiner teacher needs to have a deep enthusiasm for Bildung (something my experience generally confirms but with some notable exceptions as I remember from my own days as a Steiner school student) but this is hardly the same as requiring an active engagement with anthroposophy in particular.

I think this also provides us with some fruitful ways of considering Steiner teacher education. First, we assume, tacitly or explicitly, that those who become teacher students are intent on a process of Bildung and desire with all their heart and feelings to participate in an educational context (Steiner schools) where Bildung is the center of attention. Perhaps being explicit about this would help some teacher students to orient themselves in their education. Furthermore it at least suggests that the anthroposophical study common to many (or all) Steiner teacher education programs could be prefaced by a broader introduction to the concept and tradition(s) of Bildung.

Finally, I would also propose a caveat regarding a more focused and systematic development of Steiner education into new forms, particularly impulses for a renewal of the Steiner school curriculum. Here I think that a more active engagement with anthroposophy as a path of Bildung is needed, quite simply because it is out of this Bildung-path or tradition that Steiner education was once borne.<sup>13</sup> In a sense anthroposophy constitutes the self-understanding that is needed in order to enrich the participation of a Steiner teacher engaged in systematic development. Lacking such self-understanding implies a risk of losing oneself in the richness and diversity of Bildung-processes. But only being concerned with such self-understanding implies a lack of participation in the needs and the life of the current world-process. As Steiner expresses it, and he does this in several instances and he is by no means the first to do so, rather, I would say, he is speaking out of one of the deepest roots of the Bildung-tradition (2005, p. 222):

Willst du dich selber erkennen

If you want to know yourself

Blicke in der Welt nach allen Seiten

Look out into the world in all directions

Willst du die Welt erkennen

If you want to know the world

Schau in alle deine eigenen Tiefen.

Look around in all your depths.

13. At this point the matter calls for a nuanced discussion of what “a practice” is, how it relates to being institutionalized and to issues of historicity, the fact that we are now positioned 100 years away from the origins of Steiner education. What Steiner and his contemporaries struggled with was to a large degree the establishment of a new educational practice and finding ways to institutionalize this practice that would do as little harm as possible to it. For us today this practice is a century-long presence, and the consequences should not be overlooked. One of them has been the topic here, the changing relationship to anthroposophy that this has brought.

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