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## Life in Mind

The Role of Steiner's symbolic picturing exercises  
in the development of Imaginative cognition

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# Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>The research question</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Relevance</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Literature review</b> .....	<b>13</b>
General literature .....	13
Steiner related literature .....	18
<b>The role of Steiner’s symbolic picturing exercises in the development of Imaginative cognition</b> .....	<b>22</b>
Overview .....	22
<b>Steiner’s epistemology</b> .....	<b>23</b>
The structure of ordinary consciousness .....	24
The phenomenology of representation .....	28
<b>The idea of super-sensible cognition</b> .....	<b>33</b>
<b>Overall principles in the development of Imaginative cognition</b> .....	<b>41</b>
<b>An example of a symbolic picturing exercise</b> .....	<b>45</b>
<b>The role of symbolic picturing exercises in the development of Imaginative cognition</b> .....	<b>49</b>
Results.....	56
Summary.....	64
<b>Freedom, morality and science</b> .....	<b>65</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>68</b>
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	<b>70</b>
<b>Appendices</b> .....	<b>73</b>
<b>Some further exercise examples</b> .....	<b>73</b>

## Abstract

In this thesis, I explore Steiner's rationale for the development of super-sensible perception. The window I use to do this an enquiry into specific contemplative exercises that I call symbolic picturing exercises. These have the aim of facilitating a shift in ordinary consciousness such that the first step in super-sensible perception is made. This first step is what Steiner calls 'Imaginative' perception, and it can be understood as a re-orientation of the process of inner picturing and representation as well as a strengthening of the activity of thinking. This brings the super-sensible ontology of the human organism into consciousness and potentially the super-sensible ontology underlying all living entities.

The background context for the enquiry is science, seeing as this is the discourse within which Steiner contextualised his practice. My underlying question is also, therefore, how a 'science of the super sensible' could potentially relate to science as it is currently understood. I don't directly try to answer this question but it is a background theme that could be said to be informing the discussion.

My main findings are to do with the specific role of the symbolic picturing exercises in the development of Imaginative cognition. I conclude that these exercises carry out a subtle and complex process through which the influence of sense-based experience is reduced, the picturing activity of the soul is released, and the activity of thinking is greatly strengthened. Through this, self awareness is made autonomous of sense-based perception enabling that a conscious, mediated experience of the super-sensible can begin.

Finally, although this is a theoretical study, the aim is that it facilitates a deeper level of practical application of the methods it explores. Although I do not directly address issues of practical application, this study should be understood as having this in mind rather than a theoretical justification of Steiner's views.

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## Introduction

By way of introduction, I would like first to consider the following: Steiner was clearly committed to the idea that what he was doing grew out of general ethos and methodological approach of *science*. He made a clear distinction between his ‘science of the super-sensible’ and science as it is normally understood, which he referred to as natural science or anthropology, and yet he also wanted to be understood as a scientist and by scientists.

His stance towards the mystical and spiritual traditions- with which he is far more often associated, was that these traditions had found their natural death and end point in the scepticism of natural science (1983, pp. 96-99). He saw his own super-sensible science as something entirely new that needed to emerge out of this end point, but taking with it the central ethos and stance of natural science. He therefore saw what he was bringing as a new birth from within science rather than as something that tried to return to the practices of the pre-scientific spiritual traditions.

Understanding precisely what Steiner means by this is a challenge, and it is not one that we will directly address here. However, I think this theme is *underlying* what we will address here. Our focus is on the transition from normal, waking consciousness to what Steiner calls *Imagination*<sup>1</sup>. For him, this is an entirely new step that opens up a whole new field of super-sensible experience, which can be understood as direct perceptual experience of the ontologically real that is not mediated via the physical body or by experience through the physical senses.

We are therefore stepping into an area that would be dismissed by science out of hand. And yet this doesn’t necessarily mean that Steiner was wrong or that what he was doing was unscientific. The question we have to ask is how can we meaningfully understand what he was doing, and ideally from the perspective of science- given that this is the way he wanted to be seen- but also acknowledging the fact that what he was doing was clearly outside the normal, acceptable boundaries of science. This is no small task, but we are helped in the fact that Steiner’s starting point was the same as that of science, in other words, he grew his understanding of super-sensible experience out of an understanding of sense-based experience, and in this we can also see his attempt to root his practice in science. And yet somewhere in this process is a quantum leap from something familiar and recognised to something that remains completely unrecognised in any sort of acceptable scientific sense.

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<sup>1</sup> Not to be confused with imagination as it is understood in normal experience. Steiner generally used the convention of capitalizing the ‘I’ when using the word in this unusual and technical way. I will follow the convention here

The leap we are referring to could perhaps be demonstrated in the following way: When you look at Steiner's general philosophical perspective up until about 1900, it sits very well alongside Husserl, Polanyi, Brentano, and others. In other words, it sits comfortably alongside thinkers who are now very much within scientific discourse- albeit in the qualitative fringes. This is not to say that what Steiner is saying is the same as these thinkers, but it sits comfortably alongside them. However, when it comes to the 'spiritual science' that emerged after 1900, this is a whole other story. For whereas in his early epistemology the argument is all about the emergence of reality through the *combination* of mind and body (percept and concept), in his super-sensible science, the argument is all about the emergence of reality through the *separation* of mind and body. This goes against the whole grain of the progressive and 'embodied' end of qualitative science (Thompson, 2007; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991; Varela & Shear, 2002), which Steiner's early epistemology would otherwise have an affinity with. We could say that had Steiner stopped at his epistemology, he would now be a recognised- if minor- forefather of embodied and enactive views of the mind-body relationship alongside Husserl, Polanyi, Brentano et. al. However, Steiner's 'science of the super-sensible' is something quite different, and as a result, he is absolutely off the radar as far as scientific discourse is concerned.

At the centre of Steiner's super-sensible research methods is therefore a problematic move, namely, a radical separation of the mind and the senses. This can be seen as straying dangerously close to discredited 'log-centrism', idealism, mind-body dualisms etc. Therefore, we could say that although part of what Steiner contributed sits comfortably within scientific discourse, there is another part that makes a quantum leap beyond it. It is precisely in the crossing point or zone between these two that the current enquiry is situated. Our aim is to try to grasp the nature of the 'turn to the super-sensible' that Steiner makes, so that we can begin to understand it for what it is.

So the first thing to say is that Steiner is contributing something different from normal qualitative science. It would be wrong, for instance, to place it alongside phenomenology, narrative research, auto-ethnography, action research, art-based research, heuristic research etc. These methods are valuable and bring a much needed recognition of the role of the researcher in the generation and practice of research. However, super-sensible research, as Steiner intended it, is something else entirely. Steiner may have been wrong and deluded in what he was doing, but it is clear that what he was doing was different from anything that currently goes under the name of science. And yet, as we have said, he believed that what he was doing was science.

The overall context for this enquiry is therefore *science*. This does not mean that we will try to apply normal scientific criteria of validity and reliability to assess Steiner's approach, it means that we will look at Steiner as a scientist with a research method, rather than as a

spiritual teacher with a path of spiritual practice. It also means that what we will draw on as a reference point is our own sense-based experience and ‘common sense’ logical understanding. We are therefore approaching this as scientists not in the sense of being burdened with the concepts of science but in the sense of being fully awake, enquiring, open, critical and discerning researcher/readers. What is also clear from the nature of the subject in question is that a theoretical study alone would be pointless. As Steiner himself says:

A theoretical refutation of such things is by the very nature of things, impossible. For the question here cannot be that of a theoretical exposition regarding the existence of a super-sensible world, but only that of possible experiences and observations (1934, p. 12)

What follows from this is that although this is a theoretical study, its entire orientation and reason for being is towards *practice*. This also means that the theory has to be of a particular nature. For, if it is to lead towards practice, then it must in some way already be an example of the kind of practice it describes. In other words, it has to already *be practical*. To put this yet another way we could say that even though this is a theoretical study, it aims to facilitate in the reader an *exercising* of the faculties it describes, not just a theoretical understanding of them. This at least is the aim.

If I have been at all successful in this, then by the end of reading, you should on the one hand have an understanding of what I think Steiner meant with his symbolic picturing exercises, and on the other, have an *experience* of what you had to do in order to have this understanding.

There are a couple of further points to add. The first is that the writing of this thesis has been something of a journey. I initially started off with the intention of doing something more practically orientated. I wanted to create some kind of applied research in which I would create a curriculum of contemplative exercises and phenomenological discovery, and from this address the same theme but with a more hands-on approach. As I tried to do this I discovered that in order to clarify what Steiner really meant, I had to go back to his texts. Gradually this whole project became much more text based and theoretical than originally intended, however I think this was necessary. It is easy to engage in practical application of this sort without fully understanding what the rationale for the practice is, and this makes it hard to engage with it deeply or to assess if it is effective.

What this also explains is the perhaps incongruous fact that this thesis is written within an education context. This would have been less incongruous with my original plan, which was also about developing curricula for actual practice. However I still hope that the

theme addressed here relates closely enough to education and learning to be relevant. On the one hand this could be understood in relation to the foundations of Waldorf education, for it is precisely through his super-sensible research that Steiner developed his pedagogical approach. On the other hand, it could be understood as an enquiry into the foundations of learning, for Steiner's enquiry is an enquiry into the structure and function of cognition which of course also directly relates to the capacity to learn.

However, it has to be admitted that the journey has taken me away from the more specifically pedagogical focus with which I started. I hope that on the basis of the current study, I will be in a better position to carry out something more practice orientated as I had originally intended

## The research question

In the introduction we established the overall focus of this study: This is the transition from normal sense based experience to Imagination- the first stage of super-sensible perception as Steiner formulated it. However, we have also made the point that a purely theoretical study in this area is of limited value. Theory alone can clarify what Steiner might have meant, but it cannot establish if he was right or wrong in his claims. For this, actual experience is the only possible route. This study therefore also aims to contribute towards practical replication of Steiner's methods, such that they can be assessed and validated through research-based practice.

Our question, then, focuses on a specific kind of exercise. I have chosen this particular window because it is inherently practical- i.e., it is an *exercise*- and it also provides a great opportunity to open out into far broader questions of rationale. For in order to understand the exercise, we also have to understand why it is the way it is, what it is designed to achieve, etc. This helps to contain the enquiry within well defined borders, while also leaving the door open for excursions.

The exercises we will look at I have called *symbolic picturing* exercises. This is not Steiner's term and to my knowledge he never specifically differentiated this kind of exercises from other such exercises. However, I think they contain something of particular importance, which I hope will become clear in what follows.

My research question is therefore the following:

*What is the role of Steiner's symbolic picturing exercises in the development of Imaginative cognition?*

In addressing this question, the aim is obviously to try to find specific answers, however, in arriving at answers, the whole rationale for Steiner's super-sensible research will hopefully come into view. It would be impossible to answer the question without at least to some extent doing this. The question could therefore be seen as on the one hand a pretext to engage with the overall rationale for super-sensible research as Steiner understood it, and on the other, to provide a practical understanding of actual exercises that can then be carried out.

## Relevance

We have said above that this study is about the transition from normal sense-based experience to what Steiner calls Imagination. We have also said that Steiner contextualised his own stance primarily in relation to science rather than in relation to the spiritual traditions, and that this is how we will approach the subject here. In this section I would like to consider the overall question of relevance, and specifically in where this study connects to issues of wider concern.

First of all, I have called this study *Life in Mind*, which is a reference to Even Thompson's book *Mind in Life* (Thompson, 2007). The subtitle to Thompson's book is 'biology, phenomenology and the sciences of the mind', and in it, Thompson draws on fields as diverse as evolutionary theory, molecular biology, complex systems theory, neuroscience, psychology, analytic philosophy and continental phenomenology to show that mind and life are more continuous than previously accepted. Where there is life, argues Thomson, there is mind: life and mind share common principles of self organisation, and the self organising features of mind are an enriched version of the self organising features of life (Thompson, 2007).

We could say that Thomson is part of a growing movement to dissolve the traditional dualistic, mechanistic and reductive understandings of mind in its connection to life, exploring instead the possibility of a 'deep continuity' (Thompson, 2007) between mind and life. In order to facilitate this emerging understanding, the first person methods of phenomenology, meditative practice and introspection are just as acceptable as the external investigations of the physical sciences. A central hypothesis here is that whatever it is that organises and structures life might also be key in organising and structuring mind. To explore this possibility, Thompson uses autopoiesis<sup>2</sup> to build a bridge between the philosophy of the organism and the philosophy of the mind. The thesis here is that in order to be able to recognise something as being alive in the world, we must also be living beings ourselves. Or in other words: somewhere in our ability to comprehend the world, the same factors must be active that appear outwardly in the rhythmical and integrated regulation of life. Hans Jonas succinctly formulates the same idea as 'life can be known only by life' (Jonas, 2000, p. 91).

Within this idea is something that can also connect directly to the current theme. For Steiner's claim is that through super-sensible perception, and specifically through Imagination, the phenomena of life become *directly perceptible*. What is required for this is a

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<sup>2</sup> The principle in living organisms where each part serves the whole (and visa versa) in an interdependent and coherent way

mode of perception that is entirely free of sense-based experience. Through this, we can develop the capacity to directly 'see' life. Thus Steiner posits a mind-life connection that is somewhat different than that described by Thompson et al., and yet the two are clearly related. Thomson's claim is that we could understand both life and mind more completely if we were to recognise their 'deep continuity'. Steiner's claim is that the mind actually becomes an 'organ of perception' for life once a specific transformation has taken place. Thompson's primary aim is perhaps to show that the mind is not an abstract, disembodied entity, nor is it only a product of electrochemical events in the brain. Rather, it is deeply embedded in and continuous with the world of embodied, lived experience (hence mind-in-life). Steiner's aim is to show that life itself is a super-sensible medium that is 'put to death' in the human mind in order to facilitate our conscious experience of ourselves. Through intervention in this process, the activity of life can itself become a direct experience 'in the mind' (hence life-in-mind).

What I would like to propose is that Steiner is bringing something to this discussion that is *not* already in the field, namely, that the mind can not only comprehend the nature of life, it can potentially also *experience it*, just as an existing sense experiences the medium to which it is adapted. This then, is the first reason why this study could be considered as making a relevant contribution to contemporary discourse.

There is a further aspect that I would like to mention. We have said that first-person methods are an acceptable aspect of this new embodied stance emerging in the science of mind (Varela & Shear, 2002; Thompson, 2007). What is of particular interest to the current study is that included in these methods are meditative or contemplative practices drawn from the spiritual traditions, and particularly from Buddhism. Precisely how Steiner's methods relate to Buddhist practice is a complex and subtle question. We have already said that he distanced himself from the spiritual traditions and yet there are also clearly parallels. We will not go into a discussion of this here. The point I would like to make is that contemplative and meditative practice is now acceptable within scientific discourse- even if only within a very small area. This, for me, makes a re-evaluation of Steiner's contribution timely, particularly in that he specifically tried to grow his method out of a scientific approach, and that therefore he may have something additional to add to the contemplative methods already in the field. This is the second reason why this study could be considered relevant.

In relation to both these points above, I would hope that this study would contribute in some way to a practice orientated research culture around these issues. As I have said, theory alone in this field is pointless, and any contribution that could arise from this would have to be in the field of applied practice rather than theoretical argument.

There is one final aspect with regard to relevance, and this is on a more personal level. I have been engaged with this particular theme on and off for twenty years. It is one of the

few consistent threads in what is otherwise a remarkable erratic and inconstant journey. If I look back to some of my notebooks of fifteen years ago, they carry comments on this particular subject that could also appear in my notebooks of today. If this is an indication that I am stuck on this subject and I need to move on, then I hope that this study will enable me to do this. If this is an indication that this theme is justifiably central to my life, then I hope that this study will enable me to deepen this subject to the point that I can evolve with it to the next level. Whichever the truth of the matter, this study engages with something that is central to me, and this, in a personal sense, makes it relevant. In engaging with the subject in the context of formalised learning, I hope to precipitate whatever needs to happen in my relationship to it. You could say I am prodding the fire with a stick. On a personal level, then, this is the final reason why I believe this study to be relevant.

So in summary, I have pointed out three reasons why this study can be said to be relevant. The first is the growing interest in the mind-life connection and how Steiner's particular view on this could potentially make a contribution. Secondly, there is the emergence of first-person meditative and contemplative practice within scientific discourse which suggests that the time might be right for a re-evaluation of Steiner's contribution on this subject. Finally, there is my personal connection to this theme that can perhaps be evolved to its next step through an enquiry such as this.

## Literature review

We have said above that this is essentially an enquiry into Steiner's rationale for his symbolic picturing exercises. What this means is that the references in the main body of the text will be to Steiner's own texts rather than those of commentators on Steiner or literature in other related fields. The main text therefore doubles as a literature review for Steiner's texts on this subject.

In this section, we will contextualise this enquiry further by placing it in relation to a wider range of related subjects. There are clearly a lot of areas that could potentially be relevant for this. For example: introspection, psychology, philosophy, philosophy of mind, consciousness studies, a large number of spiritual, mystical and esoteric practices, qualitative research methods, mnemonics, sensory deprivation, synaesthesia, etc. It would be beyond our immediate task to consider any of these fields in relation to this study in detail. The focus here is on Steiner's rationale and we therefore want primarily to understand what he thought he was doing rather than how what he thought he was doing relates to other approaches. The following is therefore meant to indicate some points of connection that can help to orientate the reader in placing this study into a wider context. It is not a comprehensive study of the many areas to which this enquiry potentially relates.

As this study is primarily dealing with Steiner's texts, it also means that it is backwards focused. In an attempt to bring in a connection to current practice, I have added a second section on practitioners and commentators who have worked and are working further on Steiner's basic indications in this field.

## General literature

One field that this study clearly relates to is that of introspection as it has been practiced within the scientific tradition. Although there is nothing in this literature- to my knowledge- that directly comments on our central question, there are many themes here that are of general relevance. Good general summaries of the history of introspection can be found in William Lyon's *The Disappearance of Introspection* (Lyons, 1986) and Kurt Danziger's *History of Introspection Reconsidered* (Danziger, 1980). Of particular interest in relation to this enquiry is perhaps the so called 'imageless thought controversy' in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. E. B. Titchener's school at Cornell University came into conflict with E. Kulpe and his colleagues in Wurtzburg. Through scientific introspection the two schools had arrived at two completely contradictory results as to whether thoughts could be 'imageless' or not.

This controversy contributed significantly to the entire demise of the introspectionist agenda within science. By 1915, behaviourist and linguistic approaches to understanding the mind had more or less taken over and would remain the dominant approach until the 1970's or 80's. From another angle, Wallace's *The Taboo of Subjectivity* (Wallace A. , 2000) gives a fascinating account of the role of subjective, first person experience in science and how this has been excluded, connecting it also to the same puritanical control agenda that lead to the suppression of sensuality in the reformist Christian church.

Although the scientific practice of introspection is related to our enquiry in a general sense (i.e., it is concerned with the 'view from within'), its main direct relation is in confirming the general shortcomings of this approach if it does not also involve a specific strengthening of consciousness. As we will see, Steiner held introspection as it is normally understood to be an entirely inadequate means of gaining knowledge of the soul. The history of scientific introspection generally seems to confirm his stance, in that relatively little of value has emerged from it. One of the interesting things about the current re-emergence of introspection is that the need for specific 'self knowledge' training is recognised. Pierre Vermersch (Varela & Shear, 2002) summarises his own recommendations with regard to this as follows:

The researcher ought to have an in depth personal experience of the practice of introspection, that he should have a real familiarity with the structure of his subjective experience relative to his object of research and in such a way as to be able to control his implicit projections upon the experience of others (Varela & Shear, 2002, p. 40)

Two other areas of direct connection to our theme within science are perhaps mnemonics and sensory deprivation. Jack Vernon's *Inside the Black Room* (Vernon, 1963) gives an interesting account of some scientific experiments into sensory deprivation. Mnemonics is a large field that has received a lot of interest recently. It would be well worth looking into the research in this area in more detail though it is not something I have been able to do in time for this study.

Phenomenology offered a somewhat more sophisticated scientific attempt to engage with the introspective process than the practices of early psychology. However, one problem with phenomenology-particularly of the Husserlian kind- is that it is difficult to find clear descriptions of the actual method. Also, Husserl himself is enormously difficult to read. The clearest and most practically orientated description that I have found is Clark Moustakas' *Phenomenological Research Methods* (1994). This gives a clear description of Husserl's phenomenological and transcendental reductions. The reason why this is directly related to our study is that Steiner's imaginative picturing exercises can be seen as facilitating a

particular form of what Husserl would perhaps call transcendental reduction. The connection between Husserlian phenomenology and Steiner's Imagination would be an interesting theme to explore. As far as I know there is no English language literature that goes into this connection in any depth. Husserl is discussed in relation to Steiner by Brady (Brady) and Welburn (2004), but not on this particular point. Of great interest in this regard is Husserl's own description of his research into the experience of time (Husserl, 1991). In particular his descriptions of fantasy and 'reproduction' are relevant (Husserl, 1991, pp. 47-48). Although Husserl used a method of radical reduction, there is no description, as far as I know, of him using or experiencing Imagination in the way that Steiner describes it. A good general survey of the considerable amount of literature in the field of phenomenology is found in *Exploring Phenomenology* (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990). There are also four descriptions of applied phenomenological research examples in an introspective context in Varela & Shear (2002).

There is of course a huge amount of literature within the philosophical tradition that directly relates to our theme in one way or another, so much in fact, that it would be impossible to try and summarise it here. As a token gesture, we could mention that the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (Thomas, 2012) has a good summary of all the main views on the status of mental imagery in philosophy. A further overview on this subject can be found in Beaney's *Imagination and Creativity* (Beaney, 2005), and in the section Consciousness and Content in *The Nature of Consciousness* (Block, Flanagan, & Guzeldere, 1997). Although there are many interesting avenues of exploration in the philosophical tradition with regard to inner picturing and representation, there is nothing-as far as I am aware- that relates directly to our theme of symbolic picturing exercises and the development of Imagination as Steiner describes it.

We have said above that our main context for this study is science rather than the Eastern or Western esoteric spiritual traditions. However, we have also made the observation that meditative practice drawn from the spiritual traditions is now beginning to be used within a scientific context. In connection to this, Wallace explores the Buddhist practice of *Samatha*, which he describes as 'the development of attentional stability and vividness' (Varela & Shear, 2002, p. 177). *Samatha* is achieved through a combination of *introspection*- which is understood as a kind of internal monitoring or quality control, and *mindfulness*- which means 'steady recollection' of the object. (Varela & Shear, 2002, p. 178). Wallace also explores this theme further in his *Bridge of Quiescence* (Wallace A. , 1998). This is commentary on a 15<sup>th</sup> century text by the Buddhist contemplative Tsongkhapa. The main focus here is on a detailed description of the control of the attention and how to hold it on its object with a minimum of either 'excitation' or 'laxity' (Wallace A. , 1998). Steiner gives relatively little detailed guidance on control of the attention, which is perhaps surprising given that this is a very central aspect of his method. He generally describes simply what the attention is to achieve

without describing how to achieve it. *The Bridge of Quiescence* also suggests that Buddhist contemplatives experience ‘life force’ as a result of their practice. Life forces, according to Wallace, are experienced ‘in relation to the conceptual framework in which they are designated’ (Wallace A. , 1998, p. 116). However, I have not found descriptions of an etheric phenomenology in Buddhist literature, at least not in a comparable way to that found in Steiner. However, given the vast amount of Buddhist literature, this does not mean that it is not there. The use of contemplative mental images is also common in Buddhist practice. These range from simple, natural objects, like pebbles or sticks, to ‘significant’ objects like images of the Buddha or mandalas (Wallace A. , 1998, pp. 177, 178). There is a clear parallel between this and Steiner’s symbolic picturing exercises and this would need to be explored in more detail.

As far as I understand it, what Steiner would call Imagination is seen as purely illusory in Buddhist practice. It is simply put aside along with all other illusions on the path to non-dual awareness. In Steiner’s terminology, we could possibly say that the goal of Buddhist practice is Intuition, with the preceding stages of Imagination and Inspiration being seen as unnecessary distractions. Although Steiner recognises Imagination as illusion (Steiner R. , 2009, p. 23), for him it is still an important stage in the development of super-sensible perception. In fact it is that which can enable the potential for a scientific stance within super-sensible perception (Steiner R. , 2009, pp. 20, 25). It would take a separate, in-depth study to adequately assess how Buddhist practice and Steiner’s practice are related.

There is one further point I will mention with regard to Buddhism. Of course there are many ways of going about meditation within this tradition. However, there is one important point that may seem to contradict the entire spirit of what Steiner describes. For example, Chögyam Trungpa (1991) describes a path of meditative practice that simply accommodates to the real. All strategies, agendas or methods for reaching something different or ‘higher’ are to be abandoned, and the practitioner is simply to accommodate themselves to what *is*. As we will see below, Steiner’s approach is filled with agenda and a sense of aspiration towards transformation. The practitioner is to work hard to achieve something that is difficult and this requires techniques and practices of imaginative picturing exercises, moral development and the like. This quality of aspiration in Steiner is also at odds with some modern approaches to spiritual practice, which perhaps have a more Zen approach. This also appears in a more sociological/psychological way in, for example, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s bestseller *Flow*, the ‘psychology of optimal experience’ (1991), or with a more ‘spiritual development’ focus in Eckart Tolle’s Oprah Winfrey endorsed *The Power of Now* (2005). In a scientific context we could perhaps also see the same recognition of agenda-less, spontaneous ‘anything goes’ approach in Paul Feyerabend’s *Against Method* (Feyerabend, 2010). In some ways, Steiner’s earnest and difficult spiritual science is at odds with these agenda-less ‘be here now’ non-

methods. We could perhaps say that there are two paths to the goal: You either work out or find out how to get there and implement the plan, or you decide you are there already, in which case you have to rid yourself of the desire to be elsewhere. So both approaches have a task. Steiner appears to be firmly in the former camp, though again, this may be an over simplification.

In connection to this, there is another field of practice that we could mention. It would be easy to identify Steiner with the logo-centric tradition that was attacked so strongly by the French post-structuralists in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They identified a powerful current in European thinking going back to Plato and Aristotle that prioritises speech and presence over writing. In this prioritisation, there are two kinds of memory, the first (good) kind of memory is literally an act of unforgetting, a recollection of spiritual truths that the soul has forgotten in its fallen state, and in its confinement to the prison of the senses. However, this can be re-accessed through wise teaching and the disciplines of self-knowledge, purification and self-development. The other (bad) kind of memory is the kind that substitutes mnemonic devices for genuine living wisdom. This simulation of knowledge can be seen particularly in *writing*. (Norris, 1987, p. 31). Through the practice of deconstruction, Derrida and others set out to show that this idea of pure presence or pure unmediated meaning is a myth, for conscious experience is always embedded in representation and ‘writing’. The histories of European science and religion are filled with this attempt to exclude and suppress the evil of sensuous representation in favour of the pure, unmediated access to divine meaning and truth. In the progression from sense based perception, to Imagination, Inspiration and Intuition we can see a classic example of what post-structuralist theory would call a ‘myth of origin’, or a prioritisation of logos over the distorting evil of signs. Derrida’s stance is that there is nothing behind the sign, only more signs, and to pretend that truth can somehow emerge in a pure and unmediated way is to misunderstand the very nature of meaning. Interestingly, although Steiner would certainly appear to be deeply logo-centric in his approach, it is also possible to see him as recognising and directly addressing the very problems that post-structuralism raises.

This is a large and complex field that would be impossible to consider here in any detail. Norris (1987) gives a good introduction to Derrida and his general stance. Derrida’s deconstruction of Husserl (Derrida, 1989) is also interesting, because he applies his method to a line of reasoning- the origin of geometry- that could relate directly to Steiner. As far as I know, the only discussion of Steiner in relation to post-structuralism is by Yeshayahu Ben-Aharon (Ben-Aharon). He suggests that a meeting of Steiner’s idea of the super-sensible with French post-structuralism would have produced interesting and fruitful results, and in this I tend to agree with him.

Finally there is one further area we will touch on. Clearly at the centre of Steiner's agenda is a deeply human centred view of the universe. Humans are basically the central project towards which our world- and even our whole solar system- is focused. Steiner could perhaps be called a radical humanist in this respect- though his agenda is very different from that of the humanist movement. John Gray (Gray, 2003) presents what is perhaps a polarically opposite view to Steiner in this. For him, the more conscious we become, the more mechanical we become (Gray, 2003, p. 133). To live a good life is to recognise that we are simply animals, doomed to rise and fall along with other animals. It is only our arrogance that has lead to the deluded view inherent in the Christian tradition, that we can somehow author our own lives. All evidence shows that we have as little control over the course of events as any other animal. Our civilisations rise and fall as does any other natural process. We are not on any privileged developmental trajectory towards knowledge, truth or goodness, we are simply living out the same inevitable life cycles as all other animals. Gray is not arguing that there is no truth or that truth is relative, this he dismisses as another version of anthropocentrism (Gray, 2003, p. 55), rather, he is arguing that nature is far more powerful than we can ever be, and that to believe that we can somehow pull ourselves above or out of nature, is a deluded fallacy that needs to be overcome. Quite simply, *we are animals and nothing else*, and our history is ample evidence of this. Gray's is a powerful argument that makes an interesting counter picture to Steiner's. As such, I would say it is of great relevance to this study.

## Steiner related literature

In this section I will look briefly at some practitioner's and commentators who have engaged with Steiner's ideas as they are explored here. Of particular relevance in this respect is the recent work of Arthur Zajonc. From a background in science, Zajonc has developed his own contemplative method that he calls *Contemplative Enquiry* (Zajonc, 2009). The reason why Zajonc's work is particularly relevant is that his background is academic and scientific and he describes a practice that is similar in many ways to the one explored here.

Contemplative enquiry is basically a contemplative methodology that draws primarily on Steiner's method, but also on Buddhist meditative practice. It begins with specific cultivation of feelings of humility and reverence and progresses to a stage of 'inner wellbeing' or 'inner hygiene' where the attention is brought to a state of balance and stillness. This leads to a 'birth of the silent self' where the body goes into a state of rest or sleep and the presence of the 'witness' or 'silent self' is experienced. Zajonc relates this to the 'not I, but Christ in me' experience of St Paul. From this state of alert, self-awareness, the actual enquiry

can begin. Content of some sort is made the focus of sustained attention, this could be contemplative images, words, mantra, a question or some other relevant content. The attention is also brought to focus on the sustaining activity that maintains the content. All this is then completely eliminated and a state of open and empty awareness is sustained for a period of time. The practitioner then returns to re-focus on the content and the cycle is repeated. Zajonc calls this the ‘lemniscate of attention’. This cycle can be repeated a number of times. The return journey is made through integration of any findings into normal conceptual consciousness, and finally, a mood of gratitude for what has been revealed ends the practice. This is a sophisticated and practical method that brings diverse elements from Steiner and the contemplative traditions into one integrated and coherent whole.

Another contemporary, Steiner-based approach that is very relevant to this study is the *Bildekräfteforschung* method that has emerged mainly in Germany over the last decade. There are three main practitioners connected with this approach: Dorian Schmidt, Jurgen Strube and Marcus Buchmann. There are no official English translations of any of the published material. The method is similar in its overall principles to the one explored here, though there are also some differences. In particular, symbolic picturing exercises are not generally used as part of this method. What is used instead is a kind of introspective phenomenology of the practitioner’s own life body. This is used to create detailed descriptions of ‘etheric’ phenomenology in plants, etc. What is also of interest is that these practitioners describe the same kind of etheric phenomenology that Steiner describes, and therefore can be said to be confirming Steiner’s findings to some extent. The German titles that document this are, among others, *Die Beobachten des Denkens* (Strube, 2010), *Lebenskräfte* (Schmidt, 2012), and *Bildekräfteforschung* (Buchmann, 2010).

Working from another perspective, Dennis Klocek has also made significant contributions to our theme. His approach draws heavily from Steiner’s Imaginative and contemplative methodology but also draws on the alchemical tradition as a further reference point. His main book in reference to the current study is probably his *Seer’s Handbook* (Klocek, 2005) where a practical path of contemplate practice towards super-sensible perception is described.

There is a relatively large amount of English language material that comments directly on Steiner’s earlier epistemological works. Some is more from a theoretical/philosophical perspective, others have applied it more to contemplative and phenomenological approach. The latter include the Hungarian born Georg Kühlewind. Of the various books he authored, *Stages of Consciousness* (1984), and *From Normal to Healthy* (1988) are perhaps most relevant to the current theme. These offer what could be called a phenomenology of thinking and perception together with practical exercises to facilitate a gradual experience of ‘living thinking’. Kühlewind was a pupil of Massimo Scaligero’s who

also worked in a similar field. His main work in English *The Light* (2001) is subtitled ‘an introduction to the creative imagination’ and it offers a stream of consciousness description of the self-investigation of thinking. Related to these two authors is Friedmann Schwartzkopf who was a pupil of Kühlewind’s. His main book is *The Metamorphosis of the Given* (1995) and it focuses on describing the creative and spontaneous will within thinking as the basis for a new ‘ecology of consciousness’. These three authors can be said to represent a particular approach to developing super-sensible consciousness that uses concentration on simple man-made objects as its starting point. Generally, these authors describe what in this study is referred to as ‘sense-free thinking’ and ‘morphological thinking’, which is also connected to a strengthening of self-experience. They do not appear to explicitly make the further step of Imaginative perception.

Perhaps the most lucid investigation of Steiner’s epistemology from a more philosophical standpoint is a- to my knowledge- unpublished manuscript by Ronald Brady. His main text on the subject is called *Steiner’s Epistemological Works* (Brady) and it is a detailed commentary on Steiner’s *Truth and Science* (1993). It lucidly describes Steiner’s ideas about the self-determination of thinking while also clarifying Steiner’s stance on Fichte, Kant and others. Also of potentially great significant to the current study is Jonael Schickler’s *Metaphysics as Christology* (2005). I have not fully grasped the implications of this book in relation to what is explored here, otherwise it could perhaps have made a more central contribution. Schickler makes the claim that Steiner’s ‘esoteric system’ retains the central advances of both Kant’s transcendentalism and Hegel’s dialectic without succumbing to their respective shortcomings. In fusing pure thinking and super-sensible perception, Steiner achieves a fusion of Hegel’s dialectic and Kant’s transcendentalism (Schickler, 2005, pp. 161, 162). This is of particular interest to the current study because, as we will see, this same duality is central in the practice that Steiner describes in his symbolic picturing exercises.

As a more general overview of Steiner’s epistemological stance, Andrew Welburn’s *Rudolf Steiner’s Philosophy* (Welburn, 2004) is also useful, particularly in his discussion of Nietzsche and Husserl. Owen Barfield’s *Saving the Appearances* (Barfield, 1988) gives a critique of the disappearance of sense perception from scientific enquiry and relates this to Steiner’s and Goethe’s approach to science. Also of great importance with respect to Goethean or qualitative science (though not with direct reference to Steiner) is Henri Bortoft’s *Goethe’s Way of Science* (1996). This, in my view, is the best English language text critiquing ‘quantitative’ science from a holistic or qualitative perspective. Also important with respect to qualitative or Goethean science is a collection of essays called *Goethe’s Way of Science* (Zajonc & Seamon, 1998)

There are of course many other works not in German that could be very relevant to this study, and it could be considered a significant shortcoming that I have not had access to

these. However, this is a shortcoming I have just had to accept. Ideally I would develop my capacity to read German for any future studies of this sort.

# The role of Steiner's symbolic picturing exercises in the development of Imaginative cognition

## Overview

Having introduced our theme, considered the research question and considered its possible relevance and contextualisation within contemporary discourse, we are now in a position to begin our enquiry. As we have said, this is an enquiry into the role that Steiner's symbolic picturing exercises play in the development of Imaginative cognition, and yet our broader interest is also to use this as a means of understanding Steiner's method and as a means of understanding super-sensible perception in general.

Our route towards this is therefore the following: Our first task is to look at Steiner's epistemological stance with regard to normal consciousness, both from the perspective of sense-based experience and from the perspective of super-sensible experience. We will then consider in a general sense what Steiner means by 'super-sensible' cognition, and how this can be meaningfully understood in the context of this enquiry. We will then look at the general developmental process that leads from ordinary, sense-based experience to the first stage of super-sensible experience- Imagination. From here we will be in a position to consider the role that the imaginative picturing exercises play in facilitating this development.

Before we proceed, there are a couple of points to make regarding the use of texts. As I am not a German reader, all Steiner's texts used in researching this study are in English. This of course has consequences, not least the huge variation in quality of translation. However, I am not so sure that this is as big a problem as it might seem. Clearly the English versions are different from the German, but that does not necessarily mean that they don't give access to basically the same content. I also suspect that the variety of voices coming through the different translations might even add something. Anyway, this is something that I have just had to accept and it may or may not compromise the result.

There are two other possible problems with the texts, but these would also apply in the original German. The first is that the majority are stenographed lectures given in a wide variety of contexts over a twenty year period. Ideally each statement would be understood in the context in which it was delivered, but this is not possible. With the books it is slightly different. Here Steiner was formulating his thoughts with a reader in mind rather than an audience and presumably they are less context dependent.

The other problem is that Steiner makes references to our current theme- the development of Imagination through imaginative picturing exercises- in many different places

and often in passing. This means that the references are scattered over a large body of material that addresses a huge variety of other subjects. In order to build up a consistent and complete picture, there is a lot of comparing and relating of dispersed and disconnected material. In doing this, one finds that while there is much that is similar in the descriptions, there is also much that varies. One option is to select the descriptions that essentially match up, and from this, offer one consistent account. The other is to try to accommodate the complexities and offer an account that is multifaceted and varied. I have chosen the latter option. My impression is that there is no inherent contradiction in Steiner descriptions, and the fact that there are complexities and differences perhaps helps to maintain an open and fluid understanding of what might otherwise become an over-simplified 'system'. In a round-about way then, the problems of the source material may actually help. The aim is not to pin down the subject matter and arrive at fixed solutions and definitions, the aim is to build up a mobile and flexible picture that recognises the inherent nature of the material. Ambiguities in the text may help to do this in that they help to maintain a multi-perspective approach. At least this is my hope.

In the text that follows, I have streamlined some words that might appear differently in different translations. This includes the term 'super-sensible'. I use this term rather than 'spiritual' or 'clairvoyant' because it seems less laden with unhelpful associations. I have tended to use the term 'soul' when referring to the general super-sensible constitution of the human being. I mean this not in the technical sense of soul as distinct from spirit but more in the general sense of 'psych' or 'mind'. However, sometimes it is used in the more technical sense of distinguishing between soul and spirit. The different usage should be clear in the context in which it is used. I will clarify the use of other words as and when they arise. Finally, when I use the term cognition or cognitive, I mean it in the general and non-technical sense of 'an act of understanding'. In other words, any kind of 'mental' activity through which knowledge, understanding, recognition or meaningful experience emerges.

## Steiner's epistemology

What is normally referred to as Steiner's 'epistemology' or 'philosophy' are his pre 1900 writings based on the implicit theory of knowledge found in Goethe (1993; 1999; 1978; 1998). Steiner took it upon himself to make this implied epistemology explicit, and in so doing, created his own epistemological stance that he continued to refer to throughout the rest of his life. It is easy to get the impression that Steiner's views radically changed after 1900, but according to him, what he said after 1900 was always implied in what came earlier (1999, p. 108)

According to Schickler (Schickler, 2005, p. 141), Steiner does not present a rigorous philosophical argument. He fails to fully justify his stance on thinking and he fails to clarify the kind of relations between concepts that can afford them the objective status he claims. However, this does not necessarily detract from the argument that will be presented here, for we will be considering Steiner's epistemology in its relation to his later super-sensible research. In this we are in agreement with Schickler when he says:

Most of the emphasis of Steiner's early philosophical writings is placed on describing and understanding the thinking process. In the spirit of such thinkers as Brentano and Steiner's contemporary Husserl, he thus practices what could be called a phenomenology of thinking. Yet what above all distinguishes Steiner from these thinkers, is that his phenomenology of thinking lays a basis for understanding the clairvoyance that grows out of it (2005, p. 139).

Steiner's claim about the real role of his epistemology, at least in later years, was that it was primarily a kind of exercise activity for thinking rather than a philosophy (1983, pp. 106, 107; 1970, pp. 9,10). Its main role was to develop in the reader a specific strengthening of thinking that could serve as the basis for super-sensible perception. It is with this in mind that we will consider his 'philosophy' here. We will also use Steiner's basic understanding of normal consciousness as it is described in his philosophy as a way of understanding super-sensible cognition. Finally, we will briefly consider the question of ethics in his super-sensible research drawing on elements of his epistemology.

Our task in this section is to present some core elements of Steiner's epistemological stance in relation to our theme, so that we can draw on this in the chapters that follow. The description that follows is a free rendering of Steiner's epistemology as it is described in his *Philosophy of Freedom* (1999) and *Truth and Science* (1993)

### The structure of ordinary consciousness

For Steiner, all self-conscious, knowing experience exists between two completely different poles or origins. One is a fundamentally active or creative origin, the other is a fundamentally passive or 'given' origin. All experience- i.e. everything that can be recognized and understood in any way- bears the stamp of *both* these modes of origination.

Steiner calls that which originates from the active pole *concept* while that which originates from the passive pole he calls *percept*. Percepts are understood as everything that is given to us through any kind of possible sensing, while concepts are everything that is created by us through thinking. That which we create is fully transparent- and therefore 'known', and

that which is given is opaque- and therefore 'seen'. All objects of perception, to the extent that we are conscious of them, bear this double stamp, although we are not normally aware of this distinction. Both elements blend seamlessly into an object that we both see and know. In the case of a physical object, it appears to exist 'out there' independently of us, but to the extent that it has been understood as something, it has partially emerged out of our own productive act. In the case of inner objects such as feelings, these also approach us in exactly the same way as outer objects- they are 'given' through some kind of sense and are placed into relation with other percepts through thinking.

What is important to realise is that for Steiner, this cognitive act of combination is not creating anything new, it is putting something back together that ontologically *is* together. In other words, the combining act that thinking carries out between percept and concept is actually a *re-combination*. Although reality first appears in a divided form (percept and concept), the division is due to our own cognitive constitution. Cognition re-combines what has been artificially separated. Steiner can therefore claim that cognition gives us access to reality, but only as long as we realise that this reality emerges out of the act of cognition and is not given before.

Failure to realise this can result in the mistake of taking either the perceptual pole or the conceptual pole as the source of the real. Classically, this can result in idealism, where it is believed that something 'sense like' can be derived from concept,<sup>3</sup> or materialism, where it is believed that something 'concept like' can be derived from percept.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that the percept/concept split is actually a unity also accounts for the fact that although they are originated differently, we cannot experience one without the other. We do not acquire a concept *from* a percept, (or *visa versa*) because they are part of the same whole and will always 'appear' together given the right conditions.<sup>5</sup>

As we have said, the combination of concept and percept is brought about through the act of thinking. Thinking therefore has a special place in Steiner's epistemology, as it is through thinking that all meaning, relatedness, connectedness, distinction, etc., emerges. This gives thinking a unique phenomenology that can be experienced in relation to our own past thoughts. These have the quality of *transparency*. Past thoughts are transparent because I observe the trace of *my own* past activity. 'I' and the act were 'one' and for this reason I can see right through the trace I left behind. In past thinking, I observe an object that has only

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<sup>3</sup> Steiner attributes this tendency to Hegel and Schelling (1983, pp. 122, 123)

<sup>4</sup> Looking to percepts for reality also results in the Kantian 'thing in itself' where something actual (but never perceivable) is believed to exist behind percepts

<sup>5</sup> In phenomenology this is called *intentionality*, i.e., consciousness is always consciousness of *something*, it is never just consciousness.

recently become not me, and as a result, I know it intimately. From this we can also see that the act of thinking is intimately bound up with the human 'I'. The part of the world that I call 'I' is just this part that has the greatest proximity to the thinking act. The 'I' is just as much of a mystery for normal awareness as is thinking, and yet both share the same 'place' in this awareness. We could even say that both are different states of the same 'thing'. For when thinking takes place, I have to let go of my self-awareness for a moment, and when thinking ceases, I can experience myself again as a self-conscious subject.

But here is also a paradox, for although thinking is the most subjective act- i.e., it is that which is most closely identified with my 'I', the content it introduces is the least subjective. In other words, it tells me about things from the perspective of the things themselves. If I see a cup, my visual perspective will always be particular to me (unless I could share the eyes of someone else), but with thinking I grasp the same cup as someone else, and in fact it is only this that makes us aware that we are looking at the same cup.<sup>6</sup> Thinking, therefore, does not 'see' from any particular location, or rather, it sees from the perspective of the thing itself, but at the same time this completely 'objective' perspective enters through my most personal subjectivity or 'I'.

However thinking itself does not enter normal awareness. We can observe past thoughts but when we come to think new ones, we generally have little awareness of how we do it. Thinking just seems to 'know what to do', which is a remarkable fact. Thinking therefore presents a kind of boundary that we don't even know is there unless we consciously try and engage with it. We live on this boundary constantly, and yet we are really only conscious on one side of it, namely, once thinking has ended

But there is something else. When a concept is combined with a percept, we do not simply experience the real entity that emerges from this, a trace of this entity remains as a memory within us. For this Steiner uses the word *Vorstellung* for which there is no easy English equivalent. *Vorstellung* is to be understood as a combination of concept (*Begriff*) and sense-based perception (*Wahrnehmung*). *Vorstellung* has been variously translated as 'mental picture'<sup>7</sup> 'representation'<sup>8</sup>, 'visualisation' and 'conception'<sup>9</sup>.

In the discussion that follows I will use *representation* as a translation of *Vorstellung*. While acknowledging that this is not an ideal solution, it seems to me to be most neutrally

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<sup>6</sup> A concept can of course also be wrong, but this is not the point. If I share a concept with someone else (right or wrong), it is the same concept. This is not the case for the percept

<sup>7</sup> Wilson's translation of the *Philosophy of Freedom* (Steiner, 1999)

<sup>8</sup> Poppelbaum's translation of the *Philosophy of Freedom*

<sup>9</sup> Samuel and Loni Lockwood's translation of *Wisdom of Man, of the Soul and of the Spirit* (Steiner, 1971)

placed between concept and percept. There is also another reason why I have chosen this solution rather than Wilson's<sup>10</sup> preferred choice of 'mental picture', but I will explain this later. A representation, then, is that which remains in the soul once the percept has gone. It is therefore a subjective percept as opposed to the objective percept that is given to the senses.<sup>11</sup> It is a 'particularised concept that points to the percept' (1999, p. 85). Representations are therefore to be distinguished from concepts, for

I can convey the concept lion to someone who has never seen a lion. I cannot convey to him a vivid representation without the help of his own perception. Thus the representation is an individualised concept. (1999, p. 84)

To give another example: When I visualise a round figure I have a representation. When I know that a circle is defined by all the points that are equidistant to a given point, I have the concept (2009, p. 3).

In summary then, we have four elements in normal cognition: The first is *percept*, which is that which is given to the senses. The second is *concept*, which I inwardly create but only in relation to what is given as percept. Thirdly there is *thinking* which combines percept and concept into the objective world 'out there' and the subjective world 'in here'. Thinking is therefore neither subjective nor objective, since it defines both. Finally there is *representation* which is a subjective version of the combined percept and concept. My 'inner world' is a complex of representations and concepts all bound up with emotions and orientated around a sense of self. Steiner defines this as *soul*<sup>12</sup> as opposed to *body*, which is the physical entity available to the physical senses, and *spirit* which is the super-conscious act of thinking (1994, p. 25).

What is implicit in Steiner's epistemology is that our own cognitive activity is implicated in the production of the objective world. For Steiner, this does not imply that our cognitive experience of the world is subjective. What it means is that something 'cognition like' is an inherent aspect of the world, and there is no way that we could understand the world if this were not the case. Our cognitive process is embedded right at the centre of

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Wilson has made what is generally agreed to be the best translation of *The Philosophy of Freedom*

<sup>11</sup> Mistaking the subjective percept for the objective percept results in 'sense datum' theories of perception, where our perceptual experience of the world is said to be merely a subjective mental picture.

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed description of the constitution of the soul as Steiner understands it, see (1971)

things, it is not something added on from outside as an afterthought or as a clever means of evolutionary adaptation and survival. There are therefore 'no limits to knowledge' (1999, pp. 89-104), because the essence of the world is also our essence, and this essence emerges through our most intimate centre or 'I'.

Within our knowing activity, the innermost core of the world expresses itself. The lawful harmony by which the universe is governed comes to manifestation in human knowledge (1993, p. 59)

In this also lies the essence of freedom because if we can experience this inner lawfulness of thinking, then we actively participate in the emergence of the inner lawfulness of the world. The lawfulness of the world is then not something to which we conform, because it is not outside us, it is brought into being through our creative act.

If we have once known this lawfulness, then our actions are also our creation. The lawfulness is then not given as something that lies outside the object in which the occurrence manifests, but rather as the content of the object itself that is engaged in living activity. The object in this case is our own 'I' (1993, p. 60)

Steiner saw in this creative act of thinking the essence of morality and freedom, because only a free act could be moral and only a creative act- ie one that issues from our own essence- could be free (1999, pp. 121-145). This, then, is the highly confirming and positive stance in Steiner's epistemology, and we will return to the ethical implications of this later.

Having given this brief summary, we now need to consider in more detail something that we touched on above. This is what we have called *representation*. We have identified inner pictures, or representations, as being a subjective combination of percept and concept. In the next section we will consider this in more detail and with a more phenomenological approach, also drawing in some insights from Steiner's super-sensible research.

## The phenomenology of representation

Through being able to internalise and preserve experiences as representations, we extend our concepts and can also recognise the world around us. However, if we try and observe these representations, then we find that they have a particular phenomenological quality. For example, if I try and picture to myself an image of my front door then I can see it

quite clearly ‘in my mind’s eye’, but if I ask the question as to what I am actually looking at, then there is very little in the way of an actual image,<sup>13</sup> or at least little in the way of an image that looks like my front door. However, I still have the experience that I am inwardly looking at a complete image of my front door. Similarly, if I turn to my store of memories, then I find that they are equally weak and indistinct as *actual* image. To the extent that there is an image it is unstable and lacking in detail and content. However I can recall a lot of content and detail about my past experiences, and some of this can appear to be quite vivid. This phenomenological quality comes from the fact that the representation is both image and concept. When I ‘look’ at a representation, I hold a *knowing* of what I see as much as a seeing of what I see in my consciousness. For this reason there can seem to be much more detail than is actually there in any ‘image’.<sup>14</sup>

We can also create inner representations that are fantastical, i.e., that we have never seen and that are entirely ‘made up’. For example I can visualize quite clearly the image of a landscape with a massive, semi-submerged banana pointing up at an angle out of the ground. In other words, things can be created *in the imagination*. This is still related to the senses in that I draw the elements from sense perception. I have seen a banana, I have seen a landscape, but I have not actually seen them in this combination. Could I imagine something completely unfamiliar? (ie, something that was not simply a re-combination of familiar elements). This is an interesting question. According to Steiner everything that we can inwardly imagine in normal experience is drawn from sense-based outer perception (1991b, p. 10). Seeing as we only have percepts by means of the physical body, and seeing as we can only create concepts for that which has been perceived, this means that the representations and concepts of normal consciousness are related purely to sense-based perception.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> If I picture my front door, I normally only picture to myself the point on which my attention is focused as it ‘moves over’ the representation, i.e., the key hole, then the top right hand corner, then the door handle etc. The visual or image-like imagination only re-creates that point. The rest is ‘there’ but not as a percept-like image

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, research has shown that this is the same with external perception. The sense image I perceive is only clear and distinct on the actual point where my attention is focussed. Everything around this is very indistinct and of poor quality. And yet I have the experience that the visual picture I see is high resolution and detailed across its whole surface. This ‘virtual’ quality of our imaging activity is explored by Noë (Noe, 2004), and it is a central aspect of enactive approaches to understanding conscious experience

<sup>15</sup> Baring in mind of course that we don’t get our concepts *from* that which has been perceived. We gain access to the concept *through* perception, as we saw above.

As well as the capacity for fantasy, we also experience *dreams*. Here we experience something else entirely. Detailed scenes and situations are miraculously created for us in the semi-conscious state of sleep. In dreams, inner representations appear to have an expert life of their own. Completely unfamiliar situations can be rendered in exact detail. What we can see from this is that although the inner picturing activity in normal waking consciousness appears very weak, there is clearly a far greater picturing capacity available, which dreams demonstrate. This shows that representations can become as strong as externally visible images. However, they only seem to do this in the semi-conscious state of dream. We could conclude from this that there is a connection between self-consciousness and a reduction in the capacity to create vivid representations, because as soon as self consciousness returns, the dream image disappears, and we return to the weak representations of normal awareness. We will explore this in more detail later.

In summary of the above, we can say that there are four distinct kinds of ‘image making’ going on in normal consciousness.

1. The first is the image making of external perception. Here the actual object only emerges through an active combining of percept and concept, however the percept itself is given. While the percept is there, it is vivid and strong and maintains itself (i.e., it is ‘given’).<sup>16</sup>
2. The second is representation. Here we have a subjective combination of percept and concept that is entirely drawn from outer, sense-based experience. This is also what is normally known as *memory*, but memory pictures are also shadowy and indistinct as actual image, because of their conceptual nature. When we look ‘inwards’ towards our personal inner selves, what we see is in fact the outward surface of this sense-based perception. We clothe our self-representation in the sense-based images of past experience. For this reason, Steiner describes representation as an externalisation of the present.

You have truly become one with the chalk of today,<sup>17</sup> but the chalk of yesterday has become something external to you. The chalk observed today is identified with your own inner being of today; your memory picture is, to be sure, something upon which you look back, but in comparison with the other it is objective and external. And it is

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<sup>16</sup> One way to experience this ‘givenness’ of the percept is to gradually turn one’s head and watch as new visual impressions enter the visual field. There is not doubt that something is just purely ‘there’, and I can experience myself responding to the ‘thereness’ of new emergence. I can also reduce this response and attempt to experience something that is *only* given. But this is a challenge.

<sup>17</sup> Presumably while saying this, Steiner was giving a lecture and holding a piece of chalk

the same with everything you have experienced in your soul with the exception of the present moment. The present moment is for the moment your inner being; everything that you have experienced you have rid yourself of, it is already outside you (1979, p. 48)

Another interesting characteristic of memory is that we know that it refers to an *actual* event that it is not. In other words, we can distinguish our memory of the past event from the event itself. We could justifiably ask at this point how is it that we are able to do this? If our only access to a past event is through our memory of it, how is it that we know that the memory is not the event? It implies that in some way we also have access to the event in a way *other* than memory, otherwise we would mistake our memory for the event itself. Another way to put this would be that we must have access to experience in ways other than through the physical senses, otherwise we would not be able to distinguish our purely sense-based memory from the event that is represented.<sup>18</sup>

3. Thirdly we can also experience the capacity to ‘imagine’ representations that have not been experienced. These are generally of the same intensity as memory representations, i.e., they are ‘shadow and indistinct’ as actual image, even though they may contain a certain amount of ‘intended’ or ‘meant’ detail. They are only different from memory images in that I know they are ‘made up’. In relation to our previous consideration this is also interesting. How is it that we can distinguish a made-up mental image from one that is not made-up? What is certain is that we can tell the difference, unless, that is, we have mental health problems. One of the criteria that identifies someone as being essentially mentally functional and healthy is that they can make this distinction, and most of us don’t seem to have a problem. Clearly the capacity that enables us to distinguish a memory of an event from the event itself might also be involved in differentiating a made-up representation from one that is not made-up.

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<sup>18</sup> Steiner discusses this issue when trying to clarify the difference between the soul and the soul’s experience through the senses. He relates a dispute between Franz Brentano and William James about the difference between the seeing activity and the thing seen (1970b, pp. 30, 31). Brentano takes exception- and on justified grounds according to Steiner- to James’ assertion that we should stop classifying psychic (soul) and physical phenomena as different classes of appearance. According to James, they are simply difference degrees and intensities of essentially the same phenomena. According to Brentano however, the act of sensing and that upon which the act is directed ‘are as different from one another as my present recollection of a past event is from the event itself’ (1970b, p. 29).

4. Finally, in dreams the image making capacity is greatly increased. Here it is comparable in intensity to sense based perception and yet the senses are entirely inactive. This is clearly a major question mark in the whole process. How on earth are we able to produce these images to this degree of detail and ‘givenness’ when this capacity is so lacking in waking consciousness? This question is important for our theme and it is also central to the whole understanding and rationale of the imaginative picturing exercises. We will return to this below.

Before we move on in our discussion however, we will briefly consider an insight of Steiner’s in relation to the above. Steiner explains these four kinds of image making- outer percept, memory, fantasy, dream- in terms of the soul’s relationship to the physical body (1985b, pp. 6, 7). Outer perception arises when the soul is completely embedded in the physical body. In memory we experience a slight loosening of this relationship. In fantasy the relationship is loosened still further. In dream, the relationship is loosened to the extent that purely soul contents start to inform the pictures. Here also the pictures greatly increase in their vitality for reasons that we will explore later. What informs the images in dreams are recent experiences of the soul, it may be anxieties, wishes etc. These become clothed in contents taken from sense-based experience, and the contents are re-arranged with sometimes bizarre results. The stimulus that is clothed might also be current sensations coming from the physical body, but these now have a greatly loosened relationship to the soul, and hence the soul can react by creating images, again drawn from sense-based experience.

As a result of the above considerations, and in preparation for what follows, it is necessary to make a further distinction with regard to the elements of conscious experience. This is not a distinction that Steiner explicitly makes and I therefore offer it with caution and as a proposal only. However, I do believe that it is *implied* in his argument, and it may also be referred explicitly somewhere.

We have said that representations (*Vorstellungen*) are individualised concepts, i.e., concepts that have been connected through thinking to some aspect of experience through the senses. Although representations are different from concepts, they contain a strong conceptual element. This results in the ‘image’ aspect of representation being hardly image at all. However the soul also clearly has the capacity to create image, as is evidenced in dreams, which are as rich and ‘given’ as the external world if the senses. Our discussion below will focus on this image or picture making aspect of representation, and therefore I will introduce a further distinction to the ones outlined above. I would like to distinguish between the image pole of representation and the concept pole of representation, and I will therefore call the image pole of representation *mental picturing* (It is for this reason that we did not use Wilson’s translation of ‘*Vorstellung*’). Mental picturing, then, is the image aspect of

representation as opposed to the conceptual aspect. I am not therefore implying that mental picturing and representation are of a different class, like, for instance, concepts and representations. Representations can be understood to exist on a continuum that is at one end more ‘mental picturing’ and at the other end more ‘conceptualising’.

In summary of the above, we have tried to gain an overview of the knowledge process as Steiner formulated it. We have also tried to make some observations with respect to the picture creating capacity of the soul in order to lay the necessary foundations for what will follow. Next we need to consider in a general sense the idea of super-sensible cognition as opposed to the ‘ordinary’ cognition described above. This will enable us to consider the first stage of super-sensible cognition that Steiner calls Imagination.

## The idea of super-sensible cognition

We saw above how Steiner’s epistemology can be understood as being positive and confirming about the human knowledge process. However, within this positive and affirming ‘no limits to knowledge’ stance, there are also very real limitations. We could formulate this as the following: Through the synthesis of percept and concept we have access to the real, however, the real we have access to is only the real of the *lifeless*. For acquiring knowledge at *this* level we are fully equipped to engage in a deep understanding of the real. However, for acquiring knowledge of ourselves or the living world, this mode of consciousness is completely inadequate (1991b, p. 6). Steiner summarises the reason for this as follows:

It is the function of this consciousness (ordinary consciousness) to strengthen the self-conscious ego. To achieve this it must cast a veil over the connection of the ego with the objective world, and it therefore cannot show how the soul is connected with the true world (1973b, p. 451)

Man feels himself as a self conscious ego through the fact that he perceives an external world with his senses and that he experiences himself as being outside this external world. Were it not so, the self conscious ego would not emerge (1973b, p. 451)

To put this in the language of the previous section, we could say: We are given percept and concept separately, and through this self-consciousness arises. By re-combining percept and concept, we overcome this split. But the reality that results is an ‘objective’ reality, i.e., it is one that I experience myself as being separate from. However, this is also the case with our own perception of ourselves, for, as has already been suggested, our inner world is also an ‘outside’

If, within the limits of ordinary perception, the human being wishes to study his soul, it will not suffice for him simply to direct his mind's eye backwards, so to speak, in order to discern by introspection his nature as someone who looks out upon the world. He will see nothing new by this means. He will perceive himself in his capacity as a spectator of the world- merely from a different direction (1985: 5)

As observers of ourselves, we are just as external as we are to the external world. Another way of saying this is that all our 'inner' life bears the stamp of our external perception through the senses. And it is just this externalised perspective that is suited to a knowledge of the material, for inert matter is *actually* external to itself. This externalised stance is simply applied more rigorously in science, and in a sense, we are all scientists in that we share the basic experiential stance of externality. For Steiner, *actual* science simply takes this stance to its logical conclusion, and with massively impressive results (1973b, p. 451). But the result of this is that science has no access to anything other than the dead, inert world of lifeless matter. And we- who are all 'scientists'- have no direct access to ourselves, or that which is 'self-like' in the world.

It is interesting in this context to imagine what a mode of cognition might be like that was *not* externalised. The idea even seems absurd, because we don't experience our cognitive stance as being external. We don't experience it as being anything at all, or rather, it is simply what it is, because we can't get 'outside' it enough to know what it is. And this is precisely the point. We need to get 'outside' things to know them. What would knowledge of the inside be like? Or put another way: how could I know the thing through being the thing rather than not being the thing? It is not that we do not *experience* being inside, it is that this experience isn't recognised until it becomes 'knowing', that is, until we can turn it into something that we are not; until we can *materialise* it.<sup>19</sup>

According to Steiner, there is something within this scientific, externalised consciousness that is purely interior. This is *mathematics*, or rather what Steiner calls 'mathematising' (1970; 1991a; 2012), which is to be understood not as the specific practice of mathematics, but as general mathematical thinking. For Steiner, there is something of great significance in this 'mathematizing'. For in it, we are not directed to an outer world but we live directly in the objects of our mathematical knowledge

What we refer to as mathematical is never some part of the outer world which we perceive with the senses, it is always something inwardly constructed. It is something

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<sup>19</sup> The double meaning of this word- to bring out of nothing and to make material- is very apt here.

that only lives in the part of the soul that is not concerned with the senses as such (1991a, p. 11)

In mathematical knowledge we stand with our whole soul within the objects of our knowledge, and what is observed as substance is the result of an experience in our soul of what we ourselves constructed (1991a, p. 12)

We have such affinity to this inner activity of mathematizing, that we try to penetrate the externalised, impenetrable world with it. We feel in this way that we get inside things, but in actual fact we are trying to penetrate nature with something that is radically different from nature, namely, mathematical thinking. In bringing this inwardly constructed element to bear on the outer world we gain intimate access to an aspect of the outer world- namely inert matter- but we lose the reality of the living. In the living world mathematical thinking is devoid of content, it is 'mere image' (1991a, p. 41). To illustrate this, Steiner gives the example of optics where the perceptual field is overlaid with a detailed and complex layer of mathematical constructs. This can explain the purely mechanical process in the eye, but entirely misses that actual phenomena of colour, which is something alive. 'If one uses just a little bit of objectivity, it is clear that in what is constructed in the mathematical picture, there is nothing left of the abundance of colour' (1991a, p. 15).

Steiner compares this process of turning into 'mere image' to the carbon cycle of plants. Something alive is taken in from without and combined with something that is produced purely inwardly. The combination produces a death process (1991a, p. 15). What is vital for Steiner is that we must see that mathematical activity is produced purely inwardly. 'One must realise that this inner human construction has been achieved apart from the outer world, and yet, it has brought one closer to an aspect of the outer world (1991a, p. 17). The reason why this experience of mathematizing is so important for Steiner is that 'everyone can learn from the study of "mathematizing" what clairvoyance is on a higher level' (2012)

If we approach mathematics in the right frame of mind, we come to see precisely in the mathematician's attitude when "mathematizing" the pattern for all that one requires for super-sensible perception. For mathematics is simply the first stage of super-sensible perception. The mathematical structures we "perceive" in space are super-sensible perceptions- though we, accustomed to perceive them, do not admit this (2012)

Another way of saying this is that in mathematics, we have a super-sensible perception of the inert world of matter. It is produced entirely internally and yet it exactly matches and

expresses the essence of something external. We can also use this to get an idea of what super-sensible perception of the *living* world might be. In this, the practitioner would like to

gain forms that will live in his soul in exactly the same way as these mathematical forms, but which go beyond the mathematical in their content. He would like to gain forms that he can apply in the same way to the plant kingdom as he applies purely mathematical forms to the mineral kingdom (1991a, p. 43)

Steiner calls these ‘forms’ applied to the plant kingdom Imaginations. Imaginations are therefore something produced entirely independently of the senses like mathematics, but they reveal life in the same way that mathematics reveals the laws and forces of the material world. However, Imagination is not ‘mere image’ like mathematics, it is inwardly alive and dynamic. Just as Imagination corresponds to the living world, so a still further mode of perception, called by Steiner *Inspiration*, corresponds to the sentient world. Finally, a still further mode of perception corresponds to the human or ‘spiritual’ world. This is called by Steiner *Intuition*.

So the first thing that we can say about super-sensible cognition is that it is produced entirely inwardly in complete isolation from sense-based experience, and yet it somehow reveals the essence of that which underlies sense-based experience. We can also say that it reveals this underlying reality at three levels: the living, the sentient and the human, and that there are three modes of super-sensible cognition that correspond to these three levels.

One way to clarify this further is in relation to our previous consideration of ordinary consciousness. There we found that there are essentially four aspects to ordinary experience-*percept, concept, representation* and *thinking*. Elsewhere (1970, pp. 4-7), Steiner describes these same four in relation to super-sensible cognition. In normal consciousness we have

1. percept
2. representation
3. concept
4. ‘I’ (thinking)

At the first level of super-sensible perception, *Imagination*, the percept of the physical senses is removed and is replaced by ‘self-created Imaginations’. The soul has to develop the capacity to create inner images while the physical senses remain entirely inactive. Thus we can say that at the Imaginative level there is

1. representation
2. concept
3. ‘I’

At the next level of *Inspiration*, the representations of the previous level are eliminated and the practitioner lives ‘wholly in a super-sensible world’ (2009, p. 6). Here the picturing or representational component is provided by the activity of Inspiration. At this stage there are therefore two elements:

1. Concept
2. ‘I’

With the final stage of *Intuition*, concept is eliminated and the practitioner becomes that which is perceived, ie, they ‘slip gradually into all things’ (2009, p. 7). At this stage there is only

1. ‘I’.

Super-sensible perception can therefore be seen as progressing increasingly from a *representational* mode of cognition to a *participatory* mode. We could also take this to mean that at each level the representational activity takes a step closer to the being of that which is represented. Or to put this yet another way: what was an act behind the representation becomes itself representative of a more interior act.<sup>20</sup> In *The Philosophy of Freedom*, Steiner defines intuition as a coincidence of percept and concept (1999, p. 80), and this definition would be applicable here too. In fact the experience of ‘I’ is the one genuine intuition that we can have in normal awareness. The ‘I’/Intuition is at the same time a percept and a concept, the two are entirely fused, and this gives the ‘I’ its unique presence in our normal awareness.<sup>21</sup>

In ordinary life we have only one ‘intuition’, namely, that of the ‘I’ itself. For the I can in no way be perceived externally. It can be perceived only in the inner life (1970, p. 7)

Another factor that can help us to understand the nature of super-sensible perception is the flowing: Our observer consciousness is closely linked to our experience of three-dimensional space. If we lived in a two-dimensional world then we would not be able to separate ourselves from the things around us. We would be ‘in the picture’ as it were, not observing the picture from outside. Steiner describes the progression in the three modes of super-sensible perception as being a reduction in dimensionality: Imagination is *two-dimensional*, Inspiration is *one-dimensional* and Intuition is *no-dimensional* (2012) (1991b, pp. 16, 17). We live increasingly within that which is cognised as the dimensionality decreases. Each stage therefore also requires an increasing activity on our part in order to

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<sup>20</sup> This is a classic ‘logocentric’ reduction of the kind attacked by post-structuralism

<sup>21</sup> In language, this is represented by the unique fact that the word ‘I’ can only be applied by myself to myself (1970a, p. 7)

‘move within’ the image. With the final stage, all image disappears and there is only being-in-movement. This can therefore be seen as a similar progression to the one described above. At each step the participation or identification with the thing cognised increases, meaning also that we become increasingly that which we cognise.

There is one further aspect to add to this. Although this progression into an experience of ‘inside’ might seem like a withdrawal into some private and inner world, it is in fact just the opposite. For although it is on the one hand an entrance into the ‘I’, on the other, this is at the same time an entrance into the world. This is because for Steiner, the ‘I’ is ‘in the world’<sup>22</sup>

One will arrive at a better conception of the ego from the viewpoint of the theory of knowledge not by conceiving the ego as inside the bodily organisation and reviewing impressions “from without”, but by understanding the ego as being itself within the law conformity of things, and by viewing the bodily organisation as only a sort of mirror that reflects back to the ego through the organic bodily activity the living and moving of the ego outside the body (1934, p. 28)<sup>23</sup>

I live with a colour *outside* my body; through the activity of my body, that is, my eye and my nervous system, this colour is transformed for me into a conscious perception. The human body is not the producer of perceptions and of mental life in general but a mirroring device of psychic and spiritual processes that take place outside the body (1973b, p. 454)

In perception and thinking we are therefore ‘in the world’ and only appear to be in the head due to the mirror activity of the physical brain. This illusion is created in the same way as if I were to look into a mirror with no prior awareness of the self who is looking, in which case, I might take the reflection to be me (1973: 454).<sup>24</sup> In relation to this we can make a further interesting observation: In mapping the correlation between conscious experiences and electro-chemical events in the brain, it has been discovered that the later precede the former

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<sup>22</sup> Of course in this context we have to be careful with words like ‘in’ or ‘out’ that have spatial connotations. What is meant here is not a spatial ‘in’ or ‘out’.

<sup>23</sup> For a similar description see (1973b, p. 454)

<sup>24</sup> It is an interesting exercise to consciously explore this possibility in practice. For instance, observe an object and reflect on your own conscious experience of this object. Imagine that what you take to be your consciousness of the object is in fact its consciousness experiencing itself in you. The object wakes up to itself in you. ‘I’ am then the consciousness of the thing seeing itself in me. This is particularly interesting with living things such as trees and plants.

(Glynn, 1999). However, this is in no way a contradiction to what Steiner is proposing, which is that we become *conscious* of the body-free, super-sensible activity via the ‘mirroring’ activity of the brain. It is this mirroring activity that is recorded as electro-chemical events in the brain. The conscious experience occurs fractionally after this activity, but the super-sensible activity of the ‘I’ which is outside the body takes place before<sup>25</sup>

It is true that the thoughts which the soul experiences are the result of the brain’s activity. The brain’s activity, however, is first the result of the spiritual activity of the soul. In misunderstanding this fact is what is unsound in the materialistic world view (1985b, p. 17)

In summary of the above we can say the following: We have tried to gain a general idea of what Steiner means by super-sensible experience. From the starting point of Steiner’s positive and confirming stance on the process of cognition as it occurs in normal consciousness, we observed that there are also profound limitations to this mode of cognition. In particular, it serves the maintenance of cognitive separation from the world on which self-consciousness is based. In a general sense, super-sensible cognition can be seen as the process of overcoming this externalised ‘observer’ stance, and adding to it a mode of cognition that is far more participatory and involved.

As an example of this in normal experience we looked at mathematical thinking, which, according to Steiner, is already a super-sensible perception of inert matter. Imagination- the first stage of super-sensible perception- can be understood as providing for the living what mathematics provides for the purely material, that is, an internally produced ‘Imagination’ that nevertheless reveals an external reality. A further ‘mathematics’ for sentience is gained at the next level of super-sensible perception (Inspiration), and something equivalent is gained at the third level (Intuition). Here, however, experience is no longer representational, but fully immersive and participatory. We can also see this as being a reduction in dimensionality as the researcher becomes increasingly active in what is being experienced, and we can see this as a process of the soul becoming increasingly free of the influence of the body and waking up to its own presence ‘in the world’.

It was important for Steiner to emphasise that at all levels of super-sensible perception the experience of normal self-consciousness is maintained. Super-sensible perception continues alongside ordinary waking consciousness and this ordinary consciousness is present during super-sensible perception ‘like a memory’ (1970, p. 23). The researcher knows that it

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<sup>25</sup> Again we have to be careful of terms like ‘before’ and ‘after’ when describing super-sensible interaction with the physical

is the same 'I' who is present in this new super-sensible experience as is present in normal, sense-based awareness. (2006, p. 136). The practitioner must also be able to switch at will between normal waking consciousness and super-sensible consciousness. This requires a strengthened will power so that super-sensible perceptions can be completely suppressed when required (1979, p. 238; 1984, p. 39). If this capacity were not developed to the necessary extent, then the practitioner would be in the same plight in the experience of the super-sensible as someone who could not look away from an external sense object (1979, p. 238).

We could also add that because of the complete autonomy of the practitioner and the clear, mathematical consciousness that is maintained throughout, Steiner felt that his method of super-sensible research was completely different from any sort of mediumistic, somnambulist, automatic or mystical visionary experience. He referred to these practices as 'diseased' and saw them as 'enhanced materialism' (1970, pp. 24, 25).

As a further clarifying point, Steiner also emphasises that super-sensible perceptions cannot be remembered in the same way as normal experience. If a super-sensible perception is to be remembered, then the practitioner has to 'see it again'. In other words they have to re-live the actual perception, they cannot simply remember it. What can be remembered is that process through which the perception was brought about (1984, pp. 19, 20). The practitioner can also learn to develop a kind of memory of super-sensible experience by consciously impressing their super-sensible perceptions into the physical organism. In this way they can be recalled in a way that is similar to normal memory but still to be distinguished from it (2006, p. 137).

There is one further point to make regarding the overall nature of super-sensible perception. We pointed out above that a tension appears to exist between Steiner's epistemology and his super-sensible research. This tension is dissolved when it is understood that we 'make sense' of a super-sensible perception in the same way that we 'make sense' of a physical perception, that is, we have to find the right concept. Super-sensible experience is therefore primarily an extension of *percept* rather than a transformation of the fundamental knowledge process. Steiner emphasised this in one of his author's additions to *The Philosophy of Freedom* (1999, pp. 105-109), which was written some twenty-five years after the original book.

Having given a very general description of how we can understand the idea of super-sensible cognition, we are now in a position to move on to the next step, which is to look in more detail at the first step in this process.

## Overall principles in the development of Imaginative cognition

We have said above that the ‘I’ lives in the world, that is, our own essential being is outside the body and living in a closer and more intimate union with the real than is apparent at the level of normal waking consciousness. In the process of normal cognition, this continuity is divided into an externally given percept and an internally created concept, and it is at this level that we wake into normal consciousness, believing ourselves to be inside a body looking out. For Steiner, what is left over of this continuity in normal consciousness is *concept*. In other words, concepts are the ‘corpse’ of our living and vital continuity with the world. As this is an important point I will quote a fairly lengthy passage to clarify Steiner’s view on this.

Anthroposophy demonstrates that, besides the relation of man to wolf,<sup>26</sup> which is there in the sensory field, there is another relation as well. This latter does not, in its immediate specificity, reach into ordinary-level consciousness. But it does subsist as a living continuity between the human mind and the sensuously observed object. The vitality that subsists in the mind by virtue of this continuity is by the systematic understanding subdued, or benumbed, to a “concept”. An abstract idea is a reality defunct, to enable its representation in ordinary-level consciousness, a reality in which the human being does in fact live in the process of sense perception, but which does not become a conscious part of his life. The abstractness of ideas is brought about by an inner necessity of the psyche. Reality furnishes man with a living content. Of this living content he puts to death that part which invades his ordinary consciousness. He does so because he could not achieve self-consciousness as against the outer world if he were compelled to experience, in all its vital flux, his continuity with that world. (1970, pp. 60, 61)

In conceptual abstraction we therefore experience the ‘corpse’ (1984, p. 61)<sup>27</sup> of our living continuity with the world. I can live within this corpse and explore its structure, but the inherent life that was there has disappeared. This abstract thinking ‘experiences nothing real, it is as if pressed out’ (1984, p. 33). In the living activity of sense perception and thinking, which, as we have seen are not ontologically separated, we merge into a continuity with the

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<sup>26</sup> With the reference to man and wolf, Steiner simply means the normal relationship between ourselves and things external to us.

<sup>27</sup> It is ‘corpse like’ for Steiner because it cannot be explained from out of itself, so that which created it must have come before

world, however in this we are unconscious. It is only in the suppression of this continuity that we wake up, and in the waking up we experience a 'dead' concept in the head and an external or separate object 'out there' to which the concept relates. Concepts, therefore, relate externalities and it is just this form of 'super-sensible' perception that is appropriate for inert matter. Now, for Steiner, what brings this suppression about is the inflow of physical sense impressions

This suppression is effected by every sense perception. Consequently, when the mind receives a sense impression, there is a benumbing of the life of the representation and it is this benumbed representation which the psych experiences as the medium of cognition of outer reality (1970, p. 39)

It is also important to realise that this happens *before* we become fully conscious. In other words, the split into percept and concept *gives rise to* waking self-consciousness, for in being presented with a world where concepts and percepts appear separately, we wake up to our own intuition of 'I' that is not separated in this way.<sup>28</sup>

We looked above at concepts and how they are distinct from representations. We also looked at the particular phenomenological quality of representations and found that they are somehow there and not there at the same time. This is because they are a *combination* of concept and percept, and are therefore as much an intended or meant image as they are something 'given'. We then made the further observation that within representation a purer image activity is observable and we called this *mental picturing*. In dreams, mental picturing is shown to have a far greater power than it appears to have in normal awareness, however, it only displays this when we are semi-conscious and unable to bring the discernment of our waking selves to bear.

Putting all this together, we can say the following: In inner representations we can see a fusion of something corpse-like (concept) with something that is inherently alive (mental picturing). We can now make the following tentative proposal: If we were to close off the inflow of sense impressions, and if we were to remove or reduce the influence of concept, then we would re-discover a far stronger power in mental picturing. Steiner describes this as follows.

If someone has a sense-perception while the outer object is impressing him, then the perception has a certain inner potency for him. If he turns away from the object, then

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<sup>28</sup> The unique presence of the 'I' in our awareness is precisely that it is given as both percept and concept, as opposed to everything else that is partly given and partly created by us.

he can re-present it to himself in a purely internal representation. But the intrinsic strength of the representation has now been reduced. Compared with the representation effected in the presence of the object, it is more or less shadowy. If he wants to enliven these shadowy representations of ordinary consciousness, he impregnates them with echoes of actual contemplation. He converts the representation into a visual image. Now such images are no other than the joint effects of representation and sensory life combined. But the “imaginal” representations of anthroposophy are not effected in this way at all. In order to bring them to pass, the soul must be familiar with the inner process that combines psychic representation with sense-impression, so familiar that it can hold at arms length the influx of the sense-impressions themselves (or of their echoes in after-experience) into the act of representing. This keeping at bay of post-sense-experiences can only be achieved, if the man has detected the way in which the activity of representing is pre-empted by these after experiences. (1985b, p. 40)

‘Post sense experience’ and ‘after experiences’ refers to concepts and the conceptual aspect of representation. So both sense-impressions and concepts need to be ‘held at arms length’ in order for representations to become “imaginal”. In the context of our discussion above, we could say that the mental picturing activity within representation is freed. This leads to free floating imaginations that Steiner refers to as ‘pure illusion’ (2009, p. 23).

Thus Imaginative cognition begins with a freeing of the picturing process that lives within us. It is freed when the inflow of sense impressions and the influence of concept is removed from the picturing activity within representation. Just as in dream, this freed picturing activity becomes responsive to pure soul contents. Only in this case waking self-consciousness is maintained and the dream images that arise can be identified purely as illusion (1985b, p. 10). However through this illusion, the actual activity of the soul can also be discerned. The dream pictures start to ‘gather around definite centres. It becomes clear that beings are speaking to us through them’ (2009, p. 24). The practitioner realises ‘that their practice of creating images now makes it possible for outer spiritual reality to weave together with the images produced by the strengthened self awareness’ (2006, p. 135)

As we have seen above, what is brought into consciousness in this way is equivalent to what mathematics offers to the perception of matter. Ie, an entirely inwardly created element that exactly matches and explains the living. However, Imaginations can also reveal beings and forces that do not exist at the physical level at all. These super-sensible beings are, in fact,

always present; they hover continually around human beings but cannot reveal themselves to them without an opportunity to do so. They are given this possibility

when we manifest the capacity to let sounds, colours, and such arise before our soul, even when not caused by a physical object (2009, p. 24)

What is also given through imagination is an insight into the way that human consciousness functions at the level of ordinary awareness. All that we have said above regarding the body free status of the 'I', the reflective activity of the brain, the split into percept and concept etc., all this is experienced at the Imaginative level (1984, p. 121; 1973b, p. 454). Thus Imagination is also the mode of cognition appropriate for what could be called an expanded consciousness studies. It is therefore implicit in Steiner's stance that normal consciousness can only be understood from a perspective that is not subject to the limitations of normal consciousness. In other words, true self-knowledge can only be achieved through super-sensible cognition (1984). For Steiner, 'ordinary consciousness, however we may look at it, cannot solve the problems it nevertheless must raise' (1973b, p. 261).

Imagination therefore, gives access at a certain level to our continuity with the world and ourselves. However, it is important to realise that this also requires a strengthening of *self-consciousness*. It is precisely the suppression of our continuity with the world that enables us to experience ourselves, and in re-instating this continuity, the experience of self has to become independent of the normal process of cognition. This is a central aspect of developing Imaginative cognition, and in a sense, the whole process centres around a strengthening of the 'I' and thinking. It is this strengthened thinking that enables the suppression of sense perception and concept from the representational activity of the soul. As we will see, the imaginative picturing exercises enable this strengthening of thinking as well as the freeing of mental picturing from sense bound perception. But here we are getting ahead of ourselves.

We can summarise the main points above as follows: Imaginative perception, as Steiner proposes it, can be understood as re-instating something that is lost through normal cognition, namely, our living continuity with the world. Normal consciousness is dependent on a suppression of this continuity so that self-consciousness can be maintained. Imaginative consciousness develops when, though a strengthening of thinking, sense perception- and its echoes in conceptualised representation- is suppressed. This leads to a freeing of the picturing activity in the soul. In beholding this freed picturing activity, the soul can begin to discern within it, the activity of super-sensible beings and forces. It is this discerning of the activity of the soul underlying the freed picturing activity that is understood as the real content of the Imagination. The freed picturing activity itself can be understood as a form of controlled illusion (2009, pp. 5, 23)

Having presented a general overview of the developmental process that leads to Imagination, we are now in a position to consider the role that the imaginative picturing

exercises play in this process. However, before we do this we will consider an example of one of Steiner's 'symbolic' picturing exercises.

## An example of a symbolic picturing exercise

I should first of all say that Steiner gave many exercises that could be understood to either directly or indirectly facilitate Imaginative perception. Our focus here is on a particular type of exercises that I am calling symbolic picturing exercises. These exercises all share the principle that a representation is inwardly created as a focus for meditation or concentration. There are other such exercises that follow similar principles but in the context of words, outer perception, feelings and more. Here the focus is on exercises that use what we have called *representation*, and specifically visual representation or visualisation, as opposed to say, auditory representation. They also all have a 'symbolic' aspect, which we will explain later.

The example given here is perhaps the most detailed description that Steiner gives of a 'symbolic' imaginative picturing exercise. This is the so-called rose cross meditation. As it is important for us to understand the details of the process involved, I have reproduced the description as it appears in *Occult Science* (1979) more or less in full.

The practitioner is to build up a thought sequence as follows:

We think of a plant, how it has its roots in the soil, how it sends out leaves one after another, and blossoms at length into a flower. Now we imagine a man standing beside the plant. The thought lights up in our mind that the man has characteristics and capabilities which can truthfully be called more perfect than are those of the plant. He can move about at will, he can go this way or that way as he feels inclined; whereas the plant is rooted to the spot where it is growing. We may, however, then go on to think to ourselves: Yes, that is so, the human being is more perfect than the plant; but I also find qualities in him the absence of which in the plant makes it appear to be more perfect in other respects than the human being. For he is filled with desires and passions, and these he sometimes follows in his behaviour, with the result that he goes astray, falls into error. When I look at the plant, I see how it follows the pure laws of growth from leaf to leaf, how it opens its blossoms, calmly and tranquilly, to the chaste rays of the sun. I perceive therefore that whilst man is in some respects more perfect than the plant, he buys his comparative perfection at the price of letting impulses, passions and desires have their seat within him, instead of what appear to be the forces at work in the plant (1979, p. 230)

The exercise begins by directing our thoughts to a comparison between the plant and the human being. Initially the observation is made that human beings are more perfect in comparison to the plant because they are more developmentally advanced and can act freely- they are not 'rooted to the spot'. But on further reflection a deeper level of perfection is found in the plant because it follows more exactly its own pure laws of growth and does not try to be other than what it is. In contrast the human being is distracted (from an equally essential path) by desire and passion. The apparent perfection and sophistication of the human beings is bought at a price, which in some way makes them less perfect than the plant. The description continues:

Then we can go on to picture to ourselves how the green sap flows right through the plant, and how this green sap is the expression of the pure unimpassioned laws of growth. And we then think of the red blood as it flows through the veins and arteries of man, we find in this red blood the expression of impulses and desires and passions. We then let this whole thought live in our soul. (1979, p. 230)

In this step, the previous reflections are connected to a visual element: The purity of the plant is connected to the green sap running right through the plant, and the passion and desire of the human being is connected to the red blood that runs through the body. The description continues:

Carrying it a little further we call to mind how man is after all capable of development; he possesses higher faculties of soul, by means of which he can refine and purify his impulses and passions. We recognise that thereby the baser element in them is purged away, and they are reborn at a higher level. The blood can then be thought of as the expression of these purified and chastened impulses and passions. (1979, p. 231)

A further thought is added here which is that of *potential for purification*. Even though the human being has 'desires and passions' they can be mastered through 'higher faculties of soul'. The duality of the previous consideration (purity/sap, blood/passion) can be synthesised. This synthesis is then represented in a further image:

And now we turn our thought, let us say, to a rose. We look in spirit at the rose and say to ourselves: In the red sap of the rose, I see the green colour of the plant sap changed to red; and the red rose follows still, no less than the green leaf the pure, unimpassioned laws of growth. I can let the red of the rose be for me a symbol of a blood that is the

expression of chastened impulses and passions which have thrown off their baser part and resemble in their purity the forces that are at work in the rose. (1979, p. 231)

The rose becomes a symbol for both purity- because it is a plant, and passionate desire- because it is red. It is therefore a fitting image for the synthesis of passion and purity that has been the focus of the thought sequence. A further key element is then added:

..we try not merely to go on turning these thoughts over and over in our mind, but let them come to life in our heart and feeling. A sensation of bliss can come over us as we consider the pure and dispassionate nature of the growing plant; and we feel obliged to admit that certain higher perfections have to be purchased by the acquisition at the same time of impulses and desires. This thought can change the feeling of bliss that we experienced before into a solemn feeling; and then a sense of liberation can come over us, a feeling of true happiness when we give ourselves up to the thought of the red blood that can become the bearer- even as the red sap of the rose- of experiences that are inwardly pure. In pursuing this train of thought that serves to build up a symbolic picture, it is important to accompany the thought at all times with feeling. (1979, p. 231)

The practitioner has to not only think the thoughts but also be touched by the thoughts to the extent that feelings are activated. This begins with *bliss* in the recognition of the purity of the growing plant, then *solemnity* in the recognition that purity- at least for the human being- is only acquired through hardship, and finally *true happiness* in the realisation that the blood can also become a bearer of the same purity that has been observed in the plant. Finally, the thoughts and feelings that have been built up are re-caste into the following thought picture:

Imagine you see before you a black cross. Let this black cross be for you a symbol of the baser elements that have been caste out of man's impulses and passions; and, at the point where the beams of the cross meet, picture to yourself seven bright red roses arranged in a circle. Let these roses symbolise for you a blood that is the expression of passions and impulses that have undergone purification. (1979, pp. 231, 232)

This final step is where the 'symbolic' image is actually created. It is this that is used for contemplation. The effectiveness of the image will depend on how long the practitioner is able to hold it in their awareness without 'allowing any other idea to disturb the meditation' (1979, p. 232). The practitioner does not need to re-build all the steps described above each

time they carry out the meditation but can simply focus on the completed rose cross image while allowing the ‘feelings that were aroused in the preparatory chain of thought to echo on within him’ (1979, p. 232). The practitioner can also return to the building up process whenever the mood of the experience begins to fade (1979, p. 233)

There are three distinct stages to the exercise described above which require three distinct activities. The first stage is where the component parts of the image are understood, requiring an activity of *reflective observation*. The second stage requires a *feeling participation* in what is observed. The third stage, where the final image is created, requires a focussed and exclusive activity of *contemplation*.

The three cognitive activities required in the exercises are therefore:

1. Reflective observation
2. Feeling participation
3. Contemplation

There are four steps in the reflective observation stage as Steiner describes it. These are:

1. Reflections on the relative purity/impurity of the plant and the human, leading to a realisation of how the lack of desire in the plant can be seen in relation to the ‘desire filled’ human being
2. The duality of desire/lack of desire is assigned to the image of the red blood and the green sap respectively
3. The possibility of purification of desire is recognised
4. The idea of purification of desire is assigned to the image of the rose because it is both red and a plant and can therefore be seen as a synthesis of both desire/passion and purity

This, then, is an example of an imaginative picturing exercise. I have included some more examples of such exercises in the appendices. However, as we will see, the actual content of the exercises is of secondary importance. I would also like to propose that once the inherent principle is understood, the practitioner might find that it is more effective to develop their own subject for such an exercise, and in fact Steiner suggests this (1991b, p. 12). The reason for this, in my view, is that in order for the right feeling engagement to take place, the practitioner has to find contents that speak to them in the right way, and this can only be found on an individual basis. However, this does not mean that for some people an ‘off the shelf’ solution may not be entirely appropriate.

Our task, then, is to understand the role that these symbolic picturing exercises play in the development of the imaginative cognition. In our discussion above we already established Steiner's basic epistemology of consciousness, both from a sense-based and super-sensible perspective. We have identified within this the particular quality of representation and how this relates to experience through the senses. We have explored in outline the idea of super-sensible perception, and the overall principles involved in developing Imagination. We have also considered in some detail an example of a symbolic picturing exercise. We are now in a position to bring all this together and address our research question directly.

## The role of symbolic picturing exercises in the development of Imaginative cognition

In light of our findings so far, we could say that a key principle in the development of Imagination perception is that the active image making capacity of the soul is freed from both concept and outer sense-based perception. In freeing this activity, the soul must also strengthen its capacity to retain full waking consciousness in a 'sense-free' environment. Within this environment it can begin to perceive its own creative activity, and also, how this creative activity lives 'in the world'. What this requires initially is a strengthening of the autonomous act of thinking. In some examples, Steiner describes this as a pre-step to the imaginative picturing exercises (1983, p. 106), in other cases he describes it as something that is achieved through the picturing exercises themselves (1934, p. 5; 1991b, p. 12)

Thinking exercises- i.e., those that are specifically designed for strengthening thinking- generally consist of focusing the attention on some thought sequence that is built out of itself rather than with reference to elements outside it. For instance, the practitioner chooses a simple, man-made object and thinks only about that for a period of time (1979, pp. 245-250). As we have said, Steiner also states that his *Philosophy of Freedom* was written specifically with this in mind. It is a book that strengthens and exercises thinking in the very understanding of it, and hence it is not a book on philosophy in the normal sense. For this reason- according to Steiner- it was also deeply misunderstood (1983, p. 106; 1970, p. 9).

In descriptions where the practice does not involve separate thinking exercise, the imaginative picturing exercise itself is described as carrying out the same task. A 'symbolic' image is one that 'does not have a point of support in the external world' and thus the soul is driven to 'rely on itself alone' in building and maintaining the image (1979, p. 229). So in building up and contemplating the image, thinking is also strengthened. We can therefore understand the imaginative picturing exercises as essentially thinking exercises, and it is clear that the transparent quality of thinking is meant to permeate the entire practice.

Among the soul functions of normal consciousness only thinking can free itself from perception, and lead to independent activity unconditioned by bodily processes. Super-sensible vision, as I use the term, does not sink below thinking into deeper organic processes; rather, it rises to realms that begin with thinking when thinking is inwardly illuminated by the soul and controlled by the will. From such self-controlled thinking the soul develops super-sensible vision as it is meant here. *Thinking is the paradigm for vision.* (his italics) (2006, p. 59)

In general summary then, the symbolic picturing exercises involve building up a thought picture- such as the rose cross- and using it for contemplation with the ‘complete exclusion from the mind of all external sense impressions and all ordinary activity of the intellect’ (1934, p. 5). The component parts of the image are drawn from sense-based perception, however it is not this aspect of the image that is important, for it is the way that the image is put together that constitute its effectiveness. ‘The awakening is brought about solely by the *way* in which the single details have been *put together* to form the picture. For that, no prototype is to be found in the outer world’ (his italics) (1979, p. 233)

Steiner clearly states that the actual content of such exercises is of little importance (2003, p. 225; 1934, p. 6). What is important is that ‘it is something entirely new, something that one confronts only with respect to its actual content, which is not associated with any experiences of the soul’ (2003, p. 225). The image should not be drawn from memory, ‘for in memory, all manner of vague impressions cling to our concepts’ (1991b, p. 12). To clarify this further:

The important point is not the content of truth in the thing, but the fact that we survey such a thought content completely. This cannot be done if we take a thought content out of our own memory; for so much is associated with such a thought content in the most indeterminate way, so much plays a role in the subconscious or unconscious and it is not possible to be exact if one concentrates on such a thing. What one fixes, therefore, in the centre of ones consciousness is something entirely new, something which one confronts only with respect to its actual content, which is not associated with any experience of the soul. What matters is the concentration of the forces of the soul and the strengthening that results from this (2003: 225, 226)

With respect to the rose cross exercise this is an interesting point, for clearly the rose cross might be thought to contain precisely this kind of subconscious or unconscious association. It is also unlikely to be ‘entirely new’, and this would have particularly been the case with Steiner’s Theosophical audience, who would have been well aware of the

Rosicrucian associations. We could also ask whether the image is still 'entirely new' once it has been practiced a number of times. Steiner does not address this question directly- at least to my knowledge- but I would propose the following: The image is new to the extent that its meaning is *given by me*, so this does not necessarily mean that the content needs to be new each time. In other words, in creating the image each time, to the extent that it has not been drawn from sense-based perception, it will be 'new'.

In the case of the rose cross, I build into the image exactly what I want the image to mean, it is therefore transparent to my understanding. However in this example, it is interesting that the one aspect of the image that is not understood in this way- at least not in Steiner's description- is that there are *seven* roses. Of course we could look for all sorts of justification in the significance of the number seven but this would be precisely to miss the point, for this would be drawing in from outside something that I should build up from out of myself. A 'significance' imported from outside would go against the rationale for the exercises. 'All contents of the mind which relate in marked degree to objective elements outside of themselves have little effect if used for the exercises we have characterized' (1934, p. 5). The significance of the number seven should therefore be something that I build into the image if it is to appear there. This remains an unexplained factor, at least in my understanding.

What is of primary importance is that the image and the meaning assigned should be *unreal* to the senses, for, 'in the fully conscious representation of sensory unreality one develops the strength to behold the spiritual reality' (1985b, p. 11)

Suppose we were to voluntarily think a conception that we knew for certain to be an error. Let us think an error. At first sight this might not seem like a desirable thing to do, but in a higher sense it can be useful because, if you bring to bear the requisite force and energy and frequent repetition in voluntarily thinking an error, you will notice that this error is something real in the soul, that it has a real effect. The error we think voluntarily knowing it to be an error, proves nothing, elucidates nothing, but it works on in us. The effect is all the more remarkable because we are not distracted by any prospect of arriving at truth; when we voluntarily think an error we are quite alone with ourselves. By continuing this process long enough we achieve what we have always described in spiritual science as the calling into being of hidden forces in the soul, forces that were not there before (1971, pp. 162, 163)

This is an interesting point. In consciously placing a known error before the exclusive attention, a certain activity is required that is appropriate for awakening the sense-free forces of the soul. However, it is clear also that while the imaginative image should be an error from

one perspective, it should also be a truth from another perspective. 'In its relation to sense reality it is an erroneous conception but as an allegory it is spiritually significant' (1971, p. 163). Steiner also says that images should be chosen to the extent that 'cosmic processes can be seen in them' (1934: 7). Therefore it would not be effective to choose *any* unreal image- for example: a dog with a toothbrush for a head- for while this image would be unreal from the perspective of sense based experience, it would also lack 'resonance' with super-sensible reality. And this is clearly a key point, in the meaning or signification of the image, the aim is that it resonates with something that is super-sensibly *real*, as opposed to the unreality that is presented to the sense bound intellect. However, this super-sensible reality must also be fully understood and actively built into the image. Thus it would be wrong to think that the image has an inherent power, like, for instance, a religious or sacred image.

In the case of the rose cross, the meaning or 'super-sensible reality' of the image is built in in the idea of *purification*. Specific thoughts and feelings to do with purification precede the actual contemplative activity. These become symbolised or represented in the image, such that one aspect of the image (the black cross) represents 'the baser elements that have been cast out of man's impulses and passions', while the other aspect of the image (a circle of seven roses at the crossing point of the cross) represent 'passions and impulses that have undergone purification' (1979, pp. 231, 232). In the building up stages of the exercise, a preliminary purification sequence is also included. The red of the blood (representing untransformed passion) and the pure form of the rose (representing the pure forces of plant growth) are combined in the image of the rose that then becomes a symbol of 'purified passion'. Although these thoughts are not repeatedly gone over during the contemplative phase of the exercise, they are still living in the soul in the form of awakened feelings. And this, I would say, is particularly important in understanding the nature of symbolic imaginative images as opposed to non-symbolic imaginative images. We can perhaps understand this more deeply when we consider a further aspect of Steiner's description.

As we have seen, the imaginative image of the rose cross embeds an inherent idea of purification- or less pure to more pure- and it is specifically in this developmental transition that Steiner locates an important aspect of the practice. For in this 'will' activity to correction, ie, not simply in recognising a true/false polarity but in instilling the impulse to correct or change in the direction of truth, the resonance with the super-sensible is established (1971, p. 162). We could also perhaps add that in order for this 'will to truth' aspect of the exercises to be alive and effective, it is not enough that it remains at the level of concept, it has to also awaken *feeling*. In other words, the practitioner has to have recognised at some level the inherent power and reality of what they are thinking, for it is only this that could awaken feeling in this context. We could also add that to the extent that a feeling can be experienced here, it is of a delicate and unusual kind, for it has been aroused in response to a 'pure

thinking' or 'I' activity. Normally our feelings are entirely orientated towards our personal relationship to the world, here they are turned towards the sense-free or super-sensible activity in the soul.

What we could say in summary about this is that in the embedding of an aspiration to truth in the imaginative image, a resonance is set up between something ontologically real in the soul and something ontologically real in the super-sensible medium in which the soul lives, and it is this that is expressed in the emergence of feeling.

It is also interesting to consider this true/false polarity from the perspective of memory, for Steiner describes the imaginative picturing exercises also in relation to memory (1991a, p. 94). However, first we need to clarify Steiner's general understanding of how memory functions. For him, the capacity that enables us to remember a sense-based image is entirely different from the process through which the image was given to us in the first place. If there were only this latter process, the image would disappear as soon as the outer stimulation disappeared.

It is all wrong to say that if I have a mental image today, the same mental image shows up tomorrow in my memory, having stayed somewhere inside me in the mean time. On the contrary, the mental image (i.e., the perception of the outer object) that I have right now is a phenomenon that passes away with the present moment. But if a memory intervenes, a process takes place in me that is the result of something additional to what has gone on in the relationship between me and the outer world, something other than the evoking of the current mental image (1994, pp. 67, 68).

Now, in relation the phenomena of recognition, Steiner says the following:

Today's image is given to me by my perception, that is, by my sensory system. But who conjures up yesterday's image in my soul? It is the same being in me who was present at yesterday's encounter and today's. Through the preceding discussion, this being has been called "the soul" (1994, p. 68)

What Steiner is saying here is that it is the super-sensible soul that enables memory. And it does this by creating again the image of what occurred, not by retrieving something that is located 'somewhere', as if from a library archive. Now we can add to this something else, for in this creative process in memory, two tendencies can be observed: a creative and artistic fantasy activity that nevertheless tends towards *truth*, and a second tendency towards *falsification* (1991a, p. 95). We have to be aware of both these tendencies in order to lead a healthy soul life. What Steiner also says is that to the extent that memory is able to tend

towards truthfulness, there is a sense free activity going on. In other words: No matter how much our (physical) organism may participate in what lives in the memory process, ‘this involvement may not add anything of real content, if our memories are to remain pure and true’ (1991a, p. 97).

Now it is precisely this ‘truth’ activity within memory that can be transformed into something else that is no longer just memory, and it is through the imaginative picturing exercises, according to Steiner, that this transformation in memory is brought about (1991a, p. 94). So one way of understanding the meditative picturing exercises is that they aim to engage with and transform this ‘truth’ aspect in memory.<sup>29</sup> But here also we can gain a new understanding of the purification or truth/falsification aspect in the symbolic picturing exercises. For what Steiner is saying with regard to memory is that to the extent that it is true, it is a direct experience of the soul, or in other words, the soul manifests in ordinary experience as truth in memory. Thus in building an aspiration towards truth in the imaginative exercise, we can see a willed recognition of the ontology of that which is being entered. It is this that sets up a resonance with the super-sensible.

In summary of the above, we can therefore say that we have discovered a particular quality within the symbolic imaginative picturing exercises. On the one hand they are thinking exercises in that they strengthen the thinking capacity through holding something in consciousness that is ‘unreal’ to the senses. On the other hand, they are a kind of bridge that enables a feeling connection to be established to a super-sensible reality. We can immediately know the extent to which this connection may or may not be there because of the feeling quality that arises. If the feeling is not there, then the exercise remains ‘cold’ and ineffective (1979, p. 232). We can also see from this the importance of finding or creating images that are meaningful to the practitioner in the right way. It would be very hard, for instance, to create this connection through a thought image that was inaccessible or lacked the potential for a feeling resonance.

What is also very important in this practice is that the practitioner gradually strengthens the ability to create *strong* inner images. We can understand this as happening naturally as the capacity for mental picturing becomes increasingly freed from the influence of concept. According to Steiner, mental picturing has to be enhanced to the point that it becomes as strong as outer visual percepts.

When a soul wishes to acquire the capacity to penetrate knowingly into the suprasensory world, it must first strengthen its powers so that it can, from within outward, develop a capacity that is fundamentally “picturing” in nature. But such

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<sup>29</sup> Steiner also refers to this as ‘pure’ memory (Anthroposophy and Science, 97)

imagining (or visualizing) must be carried out to a greater degree than it is in ordinary consciousness, where it is used in connection with sensory perception. There, imagination is much weaker than sensory perception. If imagining were practiced with only that ordinary intensity, the soul would never develop the capacity for entering the suprasensory world. Although imaginative perception (or picturing) remains just that, it must become as strong as perception. It cannot stay at the level where it weaves a shadowy copy of visible things. It must concentrate itself into actual, visible images. One creates *living images* (2006, p. 134)

We said above that it is the conceptual element in representations that makes them transparent and ‘shadowy’. With the normal image making capacity, only the part of the image that we actually focus on appears ‘image like’. The rest is known but not seen, i.e., it is concept. The aim with the exercise is that a far greater part of the image should become self-sustaining. This requires that the soul ‘summons up from the depths much stronger forces than it is accustomed to employ for the ordinary process representation’ (1979, p. 236).

It is as it is when, in physical life, one transforms a solid into steam. The solid has its own boundaries on all sides. One can touch these boundaries. They exist in themselves. If one transforms the solid into steam, then one must enclose it in solid boundaries so that it will not escape. Similarly, the soul, if it would hold fast the dream while awake, must shape itself, as it were, in to a strong container. It must strengthen itself from within (1985b, p. 11)

Drawing some of the strands together from the above discussion, we could outline the following key points with regard to the symbolic picturing exercises.

1. Symbolic picturing exercises serve to re-orientate the attention towards a super-sensible reality, such that a gradual awakening of super-sensible faculty develops. This is done through building up and contemplating a particular kind of thought image.
2. The thought image should be unreal to the senses, that is, it should refer to nothing external, the aim being to strengthen and intensify thought within itself. It should not therefore be drawn from memory or from outer perception.
3. The thought image should correspond to a super-sensible reality. This means that the ontology of the soul can begin to resonate with the ontology of the medium it wishes to become conscious within. This resonance is made living through a feeling participation in the aspiration towards truth or ‘purification’ that is embedded within the image.

4. The image should be completely transparent to the understanding awareness, meaning that it should be completely known and understood.
5. The image should be strengthened to the point where it becomes like an outer sense percept. The attention should be entirely held on this powerful image to the exclusion of all else.

Steiner also give various other practical pieces of advice. For example: The duration of the exercise is of little importance, provided that it is carried out with ‘absolute serenity of soul’. (1934, p. 5). He also said that the exercises should not be too long (1970, p. 7). He also ‘expressly emphasised’ that what really counts is the repetition (1934, p. 4), and that the same contents should be used again and again ‘at definite intervals’ (1934, p. 5).

## Results

Through consistence repetition of the exercises over perhaps a long period of time, the practitioner begins to experience specific changes in both the image and the thinking activity that sustains the image. Steiner describes this in many different ways and it is clear that results could vary widely from person to person. One result is that ‘we simply begin to experience pictures’ (1991a, p. 95). These images are not memories, but they ‘issue in the psyche in a similar way’ (1970, p. 49). They are like memories but they do not refer to anything we have experienced in the normal sense. We are aware that these images contain ‘strong inner reality’, but we are also aware that they are ‘just images’ (1991a, p. 96).<sup>30</sup>

Gradually we win the capacity to live in such imaginations of our own making, although in their content they are not of our making. The exercising of this capacity results in imaginations rising up in the soul, and if we maintain a ‘mathematical’ attitude of soul, we can make sure at any time that we are not being fooled by suggestion or auto-suggestion. We begin to have mental images with the characteristic form of memory pictures but with a greater degree of intensity (1991a, p. 95)

Steiner also refers to this as the practitioner becoming a ‘fully conscious, wakeful imitator of the dream’ (1985b, p. 10). This happens if ‘while awake in the forming of mental pictures, one makes oneself as independent of the external world of the sense as one is in a dream’ (1985b, p. 10). The practitioner starts to experience images that are comparable to

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<sup>30</sup> It is only with the next level of Inspiration that they become filled with more intense experience (1991, p. 96)

‘particularly lively dream images’ (1983, p. 110), or: memory images that ‘do not merely refer to our own experiences but to something objective’ (1991a, p. 66). They are experienced with the same clear presence of mind found in any clear concept produced by the observations and experiments of natural science (1984, pp. 21, 22). The ‘objectivity’ of the imaginative or dream experience is enabled because self-consciousness is fully present, and as a result, the illusory quality of the dream falls away.

The dreamer takes his dream pictures for realities. If one is awake, one can see through their unreality. No healthy person when awake and imitating the dream will take his dream images for realities. He will remain conscious of the fact that he is living in self created illusions (1985b, p. 10)

The illusory nature of the dream falls away because it can be identified as illusion by the waking consciousness. For normal awareness, it is only after the dream has ended that this is possible. We take dreams for real while dreaming because the autonomous activity of the soul is weak. ‘The fleeting dream content overpowers this activity’ (1985b, p. 11). However, in bringing the dream state into waking consciousness we maintain the capacity to recognise the dream images purely as illusion.<sup>31</sup> ‘Something is placed before one’s inner view that one regards, in the fullest sense of the world, *only* as illusion’ (1985b, p. 10) (his italics).

Steiner also describes how in this wakeful dreaming, sense qualities break free from their location in sense-based experience:

What was customarily regarded as going forth from things “outside in space” or “clinging to them” as properties (colours, sounds, odours) now float free in (inner) space. Perceptions break free from all outer things and swim free in (inner) space, or fly around in it. Yet it is known with strict accuracy that the things before us are self-induced by the human being (2009, p. 23)

What also results from this is a significant change in the nature and experience of thinking. Steiner describes it as thinking that has become ‘touch like’ or ‘condensed’ (1973b, p. 453). We begin to ‘feel ourselves thinking in the same way that we walk, grasp or touch’ (1991b, p. 13). Steiner also refers to this as ‘morphological thinking’ (1970, p. 13), ‘active thinking’ and ‘Imaginative thinking’ (1970, p. 13)

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<sup>31</sup> This is different from lucid dreaming where we wake up into the dream state. With imaginative picturing the dream state is brought into waking consciousness. However, lucid dreaming is also likely to start happening as a result of carrying out the exercises.

A moment will come when he (the practitioner) recognises that this thinking has really changed. It no longer runs on in the old passive pictures but is inwardly full of energy—a force which, although it is experienced quite clearly, is known to be just as much a force as the force required to raise an arm or point a finger (1991b, p. 13)

The ordinary passive thinking does not hit anything, but simply presents itself to be hit, for it has no reality; it is only a picture. But the thinking to which we have come in the way describes is a reality, something in which we live. It can hit against something as a finger can hit a wall (1991b, p. 13)

A man then comes to a point where his previous abstract, purely ideal world of thought is permeated with inner life. The thoughts coming to him are no longer lifeless, passively acquired; they are an inward world of living force which he feels in the same way as he feels the pulsing of his blood or the streaming in and out of the air he breathes. It is therefore a question of the ideal element in thinking being replaced by an inward experience of reality (1991b, p. 20)

Steiner also uses the analogy of a snail that can extend and withdraw its feelers and ‘feel about in the spiritual world’ with this thinking that has become ‘super-sensible touching’ (1991b, pp. 13, 14). This transformed thinking therefore starts to ‘touch’ the super-sensible and starts to experience itself in an entirely new way.

We can identify two distinct processes that are going on here which can be understood as two sides of the same process. In our discussion of Steiner’s epistemology we found that there was a picturing activity within the normal representational process of the soul. We called this mental picturing. We also explored the unique activity of thinking of which we are only partially conscious. It is at the same time deeply subjective and yet is somehow filled with objective content. The change that is brought about by the imaginative picturing exercises can be said to work on both these aspects of normal consciousness. As a result, the image making activity is set free of sense-based representation, and at the same time, a ‘condensing’ process in thinking takes place, through which thinking becomes ‘vital’ and ‘alive’ and can be experienced in a way that is not possible in normal awareness. In the *Philosophy of Freedom*, Steiner makes the point that in ordinary experience ‘the thinking I observe is never the thinking in which I am actually engaged but another one’ (1999, p. 27),

in other words, I can never observe my current thinking.<sup>32</sup> However, in super-sensible perception this is precisely what becomes possible

Now it must be said that those who find that this is impossible (carrying out the thinking activity and observing it), will not get anywhere with the science of the super-sensible, because this “impossibility” is just what the researcher has to achieve. We have to be able to split our soul life wide open so that we can observe scientifically what we ourselves do (1973a, p. 16)

Steiner also describes this as the practitioner becoming aware of the activity of the soul underlying the image making process. For in beholding these ‘imaginal’ images that have become ‘sense free’, ‘alive’ and ‘free floating’ the practitioner can also begin to experience the movement of soul that is active in creating them. It is this activity that then becomes the focus of the next phase in the exercise. In the vivid experience of content that is unreal to the senses, the soul ‘discovers itself as spiritual entity, and this now becomes the content of its vision’ (1985b, pp. 11, 12)

..in suprasensory perception you do not use your soul strength only to linger on these images. You direct your attention away from the images themselves and towards your activity in creating them. By doing so, you will find an inwardly strengthened self awareness. As you practice this soul exercise for weeks, months and perhaps longer, you may also notice that, by becoming aware of your strengthened self awareness, you enter into a relationship with a suprasensory world (2006, p. 134)

It is not always clear from Steiner’s descriptions whether this beholding of the activity underlying the Imaginative images is to be understood as Inspiration, or whether it is part of the process of Imagination.

What is clear is that Imagination does not supply anything relating to the external world at this stage, to begin with it leads only to ‘self knowledge’. The practitioner must recognise that the images that arise ‘are, to begin with, nothing other than the reflection of his own being’, even though they ‘seem to be alive and in a new world’ (1979, p. 238). Even though this is only an experience of the self, ‘it is a far deeper level of self-knowledge than

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<sup>32</sup> This was also a well explored theme by the early psychologists. William James developed his introspection as retrospection to try and deal with this problem (Lyons, 1986, p. 7), while Brentano made the distinction between ‘inner perception’ (Wahrnehmung) and ‘inner observation’ (Beobachtung). (Lyons, 1986, p. 4)

would be possible through ordinary self-contemplation' (1970, p. 12). The soul also experiences itself as becoming 'body free', only now this does not involve a loss of consciousness as is the case in sleep, but an 'enhanced wakefulness' (1979, pp. 236, 267).

What also emerges from this is an experience of what Steiner calls the etheric body.<sup>33</sup> It appears initially as a 'memory tableau' (1991b, p. 17; 1973b, p. 459; 1970, p. 14). However, these 'memories' are not to be confused with memory as it is normally experienced, for

these are on a deeper level. Man actually sees into an etheric process that builds up, saturates and penetrates, indeed, has always penetrated the physical organism. Everything that has occurred since birth in the physical body as growth was produced in it- how the separate organs were plastically formed, how our capacities of thinking, feeling and willing were drawn out of the depths of the bodily organisation, everything that is connected with organic life that is otherwise hidden from consciousness- all this shoots up in the form of active, inwardly experienced, substantial thoughts. In a certain sense man passes from ordinary thinking to a thinking that experiences its own etheric body<sup>34</sup> (1984, pp. 118, 119)

We can now see the memories of normal consciousness in a new light. We said above that it is the inflow of sense impressions that deadens the life of the soul to the level of abstract representation. The deadened 'surface' that is created in this way acts as a kind of mirror that obstructs a direct experience of the life of our own super-sensible being (1991a, p. 103). We can also note that normal memory images are experienced entirely in the present (as is all other experience of normal consciousness). They relate to the past but are experienced in the present. With the dissolution of normal memory in Imagination, the past becomes *actually* present, and it is this that Steiner's refers to as the etheric body. The experience of time as running shifts to an experience of time as simultaneous. Past events are presented in one simultaneous 'picture'. However, as was discussed above, this is an Imaginative picture and therefore it is to be understood as two-dimensional. The practitioner therefor experiences themselves as within the picture, not as an observer from outside (1991b, p. 17).

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<sup>33</sup> We will not consider the various super-sensible bodies as Steiner describes them. A full description can be found in *Theosophy* (1994). The etheric body is the super-sensible body that regulates growth and life forces.

<sup>34</sup> The etheric body is also described by Steiner as having 'direction' in time. It is orientated from the past towards the future. There is a second body called the 'astral' body that is also a time-based body but its direction is from the future to the past (1985, p. 121,122)

We made the point above that super-sensible experience cannot be remembered in the same way as normal, sense-based experience, and here we can see why. For super-sensible experience is brought about through an intervention in the process that normally gives rise to memory. However, the normal process of memory as it relates to sense-based experience remains unchanged once the capacity for Imagination has been developed. (1984, p. 120)

Another way that we can understand the transformation involved in Imaginative cognition is that thinking moves from the medium of space into the medium of time. We saw above how thinking becomes condensed into a kind of ‘touching’ and this can also be understood as thinking entering the time medium of the etheric body (1970, pp. 10 ,11).

Thinking becomes a super-sensible touching, and through this super-sensible touching, the etheric or formative forces body can be, in a higher sense, both grasped and seen (1991, p. 14).

This is therefore something of a paradox, for on the one hand Imagination is a process through which spatial thinking enters the medium of time, but on the other hand, it is a process through which time becomes spatial, or ‘simultaneous’. Here again we can see the two aspects of Imaginative perception- a freed picturing activity and a strengthened, condensed thinking activity.

In relation to this, we can also add a further point regarding memory. We said above that the soul does not store memories but creates them. From a body bound perspective we could rightly ask how does the soul ‘know’ what to re-create?, i.e., it must have stored something somewhere. But from a super-sensible perspective, the soul lives *in time*, not in space, therefore its ‘body’ is spread out over time. It is at the same ‘place’ ten years ago as it is today, just as my physical head is at the same point in time as my physical hands and feet. (1984, p. 119)

Here we can also see the radical difference between any kind of physical phenomenology no matter how refined or subtle, and super-sensible phenomenology as Steiner describes it. It is of a completely different order.

What is also clear from Steiner’s descriptions is that there is a process around discerning when an Imagination is real or not. One way of determining this is the extent to which the practitioner feels themselves as within the image or merely looking at it from outside. To the extent that they are ‘in the image’, the experience is, for Steiner, a real imagination as opposed to a fantasy. Steiner describes this as follows:

Imagination exists first when not only the colour is lifted wholly apart from the sensory impression, but also when three-dimensional space has fully lost itself. That this is the

case can be confirmed only by a certain feeling, which is described by saying that one no longer feels oneself to be “outside” but “inside” the coloured picture and has the consciousness of partaking of its coming into being. If this feeling is not there, if we remain before the thing as before a sense-bound coloured picture, then we are not yet dealing with real Imagination but with something fanciful (2009, p. 44)

This is an important point in considering where reliability in this process lies. Reality is discernable to the extent that the practitioner is no longer an observer of the image but experiences themselves as ‘within’ the image. What is key is that the practitioner feels that they are partaking in the ‘coming into being’ of the image. It is in this that the difference between ‘visions’ and Imagination can be distinguished

They are real Imaginations experienced in two dimensions, but it is not as though a man were standing in front of a painting in the physical world, for then he would be experiencing visions, not Imaginations. Rather, it is as though having lost the third dimension, he were himself moving about within the picture. Hence it is not like seeing something in the physical world; anything that has the look of the physical world would be a vision. Genuine Imagination comes to use when, for example, we no longer see colours as we do in the physical world, but we experience them (1991b, p. 20)

While acknowledging that the potential for illusion is high (2009, p. 5), Steiner maintains that the difference between a real Imagination and a sense-based ‘vision’ is as distinguishable as the touch of an imagined piece of hot iron is from the touch of a real piece of hot iron (1934, p. 12). The ‘world one has entered in this way is not only just as real as the world of sense but *much more real* (his italics) (2009, p. 5).

As well as gaining an Imaginative experience of the etheric body, the practitioner can also gain Imaginative experiences of super-sensible forces and beings in the outer world. For this, ‘one must become capable of such acute inner activity that one can exclude and suppress conceptual thinking from the activity of perception and surrender oneself to bare percepts’ (1983, p. 109).

Whereas in ordinary life one sees colour, let us say, and at the same time imbue the colour with conceptual activity, one can now extract the concepts from the entire process of elaborating percepts and draw the percept itself directly into ones bodily constitution (1983, p. 100)

This, according to Steiner, is the experience that Goethe was beginning to discover in his work with colour. (1983, p. 100). We will not consider this aspect of the practice in more detail, however we will make the point in passing that one of the things that this shows is that Steiner is not proposing in his Imaginative perception a Platonic denial of the senses, for Imaginations can also arise in relation to sense based percepts. What is excluded in both cases is conceptualisation. Steiner describes the Imaginations that arise in relation to pure perception as a 'dim dream of inner occurrences that accompany what is seen through the eye' (1985b, p. 12).

It is not easy to learn how to pay attention to the delicate formations of one's soul. Which during one's development begin to mingle with the common experiences of daily life. At first such formation of the soul resemble what are generally referred to as casual impressions. Everything depends on learning to distinguish what arises from the ordinary world from what, through its own nature presents itself as manifestation from higher worlds. In a quite introspective mental life we must acquire this discernment. It is necessary first to develop a sense of value and meaning of those intimate formations of the soul that mingle with daily life as though they were "chance impressions". [] They vanish as soon as we seize these things in a crude way and apply the measuring stick of sensory life to them (2009, p. 12)

Elsewhere, Steiner describes these 'fleeting impressions' that can 'easily be dismissed as worthless'. They light up only for a 'barely measurable moment. One could say that the instant they arise they are already gone' (2006, p. 60). Because of this, a particular agility of attention is needed to even notice that they are happening

Only a quick awareness, an agile adjustment of attention, leads to noticing a genuine super-sensible experience. Those who have not developed in their souls this agility of consciousness coupled with an attitude of attention may have super-sensible experiences, but they will have no knowledge of them. That is why so many people deny the existence of the supra-sensory world. Interaction with the supra-sensory world is actually something quite common and universal. But the ability to follow this

interaction cognitively, with one's power of consciousness working swiftly, is won only with difficulty (2006, p. 61)<sup>35</sup>

As we have said above, the Imaginative pictures that can arise through carrying out the exercises are only the first stage in a three-step process. The next step is to suppress all the Imaginative content that has been built up in this way so that the forces underlying the picturing activity become conscious. Only at this stage is the real 'external' super-sensible world experienced (1979, p. 238). Just as Steiner calls Imagination an enhanced remembering, the next stage of Inspiration can be called an enhanced forgetting (1991b, p. 18). Similarly, just as ordinary thinking is transformed into 'morphological' thinking at the Imaginative stage, so morphological thinking is transformed into what Steiner calls 'reversed thinking' at the next stage of Inspiration (1970, p. 22). We will not explore the process leading to Inspiration further, but descriptions can be found in (1991b; 1979; 2009) and elsewhere.

## Summary

In this section we have considered the role that the imaginative picturing exercises play in the development of imaginative cognition, and we are now in a position to formulate a tentative response to our question. We said above that the exercises operate at two levels. On the one hand they are unreal to the senses, meaning that they represent no outer reality. On the other hand they are created in such a way as to set up a resonance with super-sensible reality. We saw how in the case of the rose cross exercise a powerful aspiration to purification and truth is built into the image, and that this is made fruitful by a feeling participation in the possibility that this aspiration presents. By considering memory we also saw how this aspiration to truth can be seen as a recognition of the soul, seeing as it is the soul that creates the possibility of truth in memory.

We also saw how what results from carrying out the exercises happens at two levels. The picturing process that was used to build up the image now starts to become 'alive' and 'free floating', while the thinking activity used to create and hold the image becomes 'touch like' and 'condensed'. Through deepening this process, the practitioner begins to 'live within' the image and it is in this two-dimensional participatory seeing that true Imaginations are

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<sup>35</sup> As a way of developing this swiftness of attention, Steiner proposes that the practitioner should develop the capacity for reviewing complex situations in normal life, arriving at decisions and acting decisively and swiftly upon them (2006, p. 61).

experienced. The practitioner shifts their attention from the image content of the exercise to the soul activity that supports and creates the image.

Through deepening this process, the practitioner becomes aware of the body free status of the soul and of their own etheric body, which appears like a great picture or 'memory tableau'. Through turning this activity outwards, i.e., through withdrawing conceptual activity from sense percepts, Imaginations can be experienced relating to the outer world. In the further complete elimination of all Imaginative content, the practitioner enters a new level of Inspirative experience.

This then, is our initial answer to our enquiry about the role of symbolic picturing exercises in the development of Imagination. This is clearly a complex and subtle subject and I by no means claim to have given a complete account here, nor would I want to. As we have said, it is ultimately a question of practical experience and application, and the discussion above has been presented with this in mind.

We will next touch briefly on a subject that we mentioned in the introduction and in the chapter on Steiner's epistemology. This is the subject of ethics. We will address this subject in the light of the discussion above and also in relation to another theme that has been hovering- that of *science*.

## Freedom, morality and science

Our main focus has been on understanding the role of the symbolic picturing exercises in the development of Imagination. Here we will briefly touch on the same subject but from another direction. We could start by making the following observation: The importance of ethics in science is clearly already recognised. It may not be practiced to a great degree, but it is something that is acknowledged by a great number of people- including practicing scientists- as being important. This issue also becomes more and more critical as the technological results of science become ever more powerfully embedded into our lives.

However, it would be a completely different matter to suggest that the quality and rigour of science itself could in some way be connected to ethical stance. In other words, if the moral and ethical stance of the scientist were somehow related to the quality of the scientific results they produced. Although this would be very strange in ordinary science, it is a central aspect of Steiner's rationale for super-sensible science. For he presents the idea that in super-sensible research it is of fundamental importance that the practitioner also undergoes a process of 'moral' or 'ethical' development, and in fact, we can see the whole development of super-sensible perception as being also a process of ethical development.

However, what Steiner means by this is subtle, and we can get a sense for this subtlety if we recall a point made above, namely, that for Steiner, the question of morality is bound up with the question of *freedom*. An act is ethical when it is free, because it is founded in the inner lawfulness of the world that is also essentially our inner lawfulness. To be ethical is not to conform to an outer idea of ‘right’ or ‘truth’ or ‘duty’, it is to produce out of our inner essence, in other words, it is to be *creative*. And this is also precisely the process that takes place in the development of super-sensible perception outlined above. Something is produced entirely inwardly, and to the extent that it is free of all outer influence from the physical senses, from personal desire, from memory etc., it will be ‘true’. If memory, outer perception, personal desire, etc., is mixed in, then the perception is likely to be ‘false’ (1991a, pp. 96, 97; 1970, pp. 49, 50). Thus the question of truth and reliability in super-sensible research is intimately bound up with the capacity of the practitioner to purify the senses with which they perceive, and this can also be understood as the extent to which the perception is ‘free’ or ‘moral’.

From the other side, we can see this same aspiration to freedom and morality in the whole process of self-mastery and purification that Steiner referred to as the ‘first obligation’ of super-sensible practice (1970, p. 29). The practitioner must be master of their own desires and wishes so that these do not enter in to the process of super-sensible perception. Steiner also describes this as a process of becoming ‘self-less towards phenomena’ (2009, p. 31). It is only this greatly heightened sense of self-knowledge and self mastery that can distinguish truth from illusion in the radically changed experience of the super-sensible. It is only the ‘ethics’ of our cognitive activity (i.e., the extent to which it is free), that makes it truthful.

Thus we can see in Steiner’s science of the super-sensible a fusion of two things that in normal science remain strictly apart, namely, morality and scientific practice. In the science of the super-sensible, ethical intention acquires the same status as a well prepared laboratory, where all influencing factors that could negatively effect the ‘truth’ of the experiment are kept to a minimum. The soul is the laboratory, and within this laboratory, reverence, devotion and wonder, for instance, are just as important for accuracy and reliability as sound protocols are in the practice of physical science.

In relation to this it is interesting to consider Steiner’s objection to the many requests he had to do blind and double blind tests of his abilities. Scientists wanted him to prove his claims by accurately predicting or identifying things- for instance, what someone was thinking- through super-sensible perception in a controlled laboratory setting. Steiner claimed this request was based on a misunderstanding of how super-sensible perception takes place.

The preliminaries leading up to the conditions under which super-sensible perception is possible have to be furnished by the psych itself and by the total disposition of the

psych. External arrangements of the kind that lead to natural-scientific experiments are not so furnished. For instance, one part of that same disposition must of necessity be, that the will impulse prompting to an observation is exclusively and without reservation the original impulse of the person to make the observation. And that there should not be anything in the artificial external preparations that exerts a transforming influence upon that innermost impulse (1970, p. 66)

To put this in other words we could say that the very intention to carry out the 'controlled' experiment would be a distorting influence on the capacity to perceive accurately. In this we can see at least in principle what Steiner is getting at when he talks about the role of ethical intention in the practice of super-sensible research. What it also shows is where a key and fundamental difference lies in the practice of natural scientific research and super-sensible research.

## Conclusion

We started this enquiry with some thoughts about Steiner's overall stance, namely that in developing his science of the super-sensible, Steiner's main reference point was science. We also looked at what we called a quantum leap within Steiner's method, where a shift from something familiar to something completely unfamiliar takes place. We made the point that although an aspect of Steiner's stance could be happily accommodated within scientific discourse (his epistemology), the other aspect (his super-sensible research) took a turn into the problematic area of 'minds separated from bodies'. In other words, it appears to go against the current flow towards embodied, enactive and holistic approaches to understanding the mind

Having looked in some detail at the idea of super-sensible perception as Steiner develops it in relation to his imaginative picturing exercises, we can perhaps re-visit our initial considerations. First of all, we can now say that we know what this 'turn to the super-sensible' is, for it is identical with what we have explored in the symbolic picturing exercises. On the basis of a recognition that our normal interaction with the world serves self-consciousness rather than an experience of the real, Steiner proposes a very specific intervention in the normal functioning of consciousness. This is to close off the physical senses and those aspects of our inner life that relate strongly to sense based perception, in order that something that is not of the senses comes into view. In order to achieve this, the capacity for mental picturing is released and re-orientate towards the soul and spirit. We also saw in this a parallel strengthening of thinking to the point where it becomes 'touch-like' or 'condensed', and a parallel strengthening of self-consciousness to the point that it is no longer dependent on sense-based perception. Through a combination of this released picturing and powerfully strengthened thinking, a new capacity is formed to behold a deeper level of the real. This is the first step in a three step process and it can be compared to the awakening of dream-like experiences, that are yet experiences with the fully awake and enquiring awareness of the scientist.

This process should not, then, be understood as a separation of mind and body, but could perhaps be understood as the forming of a *new* super-sensible body, one that gradually developed 'sense organs' in the same way that the physical body develops sense organs.

The symbolic picturing exercises can be understood as an integrated way of facilitating this process. Firstly in the strengthening of thinking and mental picturing that takes place and secondly in relation to the aspiration to truth and purification. The symbolic picturing exercise is like a bridge that establishes a connection between the soul and the environment towards

which it aspires. At one end it serves to close of the influence of the senses, and at the other, it sets up a resonance with the soul and its super-sensible environment. It is this resonance that can gradually build the ‘organs’ that perceive in this environment.

There are clearly also serious practical challenges in this. Buddhist contemplatives spend many years of full-time practice to achieve the kind of strength of attention that Steiner mentions. It requires that the attention is completely focused on its object with no interruption, and it also requires that the image is built up so strongly that it is like a sense image in its strength. What is also clear from the description is that a purely technical fulfilling of the requirements would not be enough, for it is as much in the aspiration to truth and the parallel awakening of feeling that the exercise is made effective. But this is also a challenge, for in our post-post modern, ironic world, we are not used to engaging in feeling in this way.

Given that there are inherent difficulties, what is proposed in these exercises- and in Steiner’s general stance- is also a fascinating and wonderful possibility: This is that we stand on the threshold of an entirely new field of experience that can lead us into a far deeper understanding of, and participation in, the real. If Steiner’s view of the human being is correct, it also implies that we carry an immense responsibility towards nature and the further evolution of the Earth. The small step from normal sense-based experience to Imagination can be understood as the very first step in this entirely new path of ‘involution’ as opposed to the evolution that has brought us to the current, externalised perspective of science. It could be understood as the first step in our journey home, back into the beating heart of the real, only this time with fully awake consciousness of the ‘I’. I would like to end on this possibility as a question.

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## Appendices

### Some further exercise examples

In this section we will look at some further examples of Steiner's exercises. Some are symbolic exercises of the same type as the rose cross, others are imaginative picturing exercises that have a slightly different focus.

### Further symbolic picturing exercises

In a lecture to the Fourth International Philosophical Congress in Bologna in 1911 (1934), Steiner gave some further examples of symbolic picturing exercises. This was an audience of mainly philosophers, psychologists and scientists. Having described the rationale for carrying out 'mental exercises', Steiner goes on to describe the kind of content that should be used in such an exercise.

For the discipline of the mind which has been described, most concepts in human life are scarcely at all usable. All contents of the mind which relate in marked degree to objective elements outside of themselves have little effect if used for the exercises we have characterized. In far greater measure are mental pictures suitable which can be designated as emblems, as symbols. (1934, p. 5)

Steiner then goes on to give some examples. He first mentions Goethe's 'archetypal plant' as a good subject for the exercises and then suggest the following:

Let one conceive the being of man in a mental image in such a way that the lower human nature, related to the animal organization, shall appear in its relation to man as a spiritual being, through the symbolic union of an animal shape and the most highly idealized human form superimposed upon this — somewhat, let us say, like a centaur. The more pictorially alive the symbol appears, the more saturated with content, the better it is. (1934, p. 7)

In the same lecture, Steiner also describes the following:

An old symbol which may be used with good result is the so-called staff of Mercury — that is, the mental image of a straight line around which a spiral curves. Of course, one must picture this figure as emblematic of a force-system — in such a way, let us say, that along the straight line there runs one force system, to which there corresponds another of lower velocity passing through the spiral. (Concretely expressed, one may conceive in connection with this figure the growth of the stem of a plant and the corresponding sprouting of leaves along its length. Or one may take it as an image of an electro-magnet. Still further, there can emerge in this way a picture of the development of a human being, the enhancing capacities being symbolized by the straight line, the manifold impressions corresponding with the course of the spiral.) (1934, p. 7)

There is no further specific guidance given for these exercises, however we can clearly see a similarity with the rose cross exercises. In the case of the Centaur, the same duality of pure/desire filled forces are combined into an image that has not been seen. In the case of the Staff of Mercury another duality of forces is imagined, (though this time there is no ‘purification’ step). The straight line is to represent either the stem of a plant, one current of an electro-magnet or the enhancing capacities of the human being. While the spiraling line is to represent the putting out of leaves along the stem of a plant, the other current of an electro magnet or the ‘manifold impression’ of the human being. These polarities are synthesised in a common image where they become integrated and harmonised. I would further propose that the more specific guidance given for the rose cross meditation would also be applicable here. For examples, following a stage of reflective observation, the practitioner should awaken a *feeling* involvement with the subject matter. It would not be enough simply to hold the sequence of thoughts in the awareness, the thoughts should also be powerfully *felt*.

## Loving kindness exercise

Shortly after the description of the rose cross exercises, Steiner gives a further exercise which he refers to as being directed wholly towards ‘certain feelings or emotions’ (1979, p. 234). This description is important because it demonstrates how the same principle that has been outlined above can be arrived at in another way. The practitioner is to look for

examples in the world of someone acting out of ‘real goodness of heart’ (1979, p. 234). When someone is observed acting in this way, then this can bring about a feeling of pleasure. The practitioner can then use this experience in a quite specific way:

Take the feeling of joy. In the ordinary course of life, we can rejoice over something we see taking place. Suppose a man who has a healthily developed life of feeling observes someone performing an action that is inspired by real goodness of heart. He will be pleased, he will rejoice in the kind deed. And it may be he will go on to ponder over a deed of this nature in somewhat the following way. A deed that proceeded from kindness of heart, he may think to himself, is one in which the doer follows not his own interests but the interests of his fellow man; he may therefore call it a ‘good’ deed.

But now he can go further. He can turn right away from the particular action that he observed and that gave him pleasure, and create for himself the comprehensive idea of loving-kindness, ‘goodness of heart’. He can picture to himself how it arises in the soul, namely through the person absorbing, as it were, the interests of his fellow, making them his own. And he can rejoice in this moral conception of kindness. The joy that he now has is no longer over this or that event in the physical world, it is joy in the *idea* as such (his italics). If we try to let joy of this kind live in our soul for a considerable length of time, we shall actually be practicing meditation upon a feeling. It is not the mere idea that will awaken the inner faculties, but the prolonged surrender of the soul to a feeling that is not just due to a particular external impression. (1979, p. 234)

We can see in this example that the exercises discussed previously have been partially turned around. Whereas the building up of the symbolic image exercises required us to create meaning and feeling and combine these into a previously unseen image, in this example an external, real-world experience is the starting point to create a combination of meaning and feeling. This latter then becomes the object of contemplation, but only once the experience has been *generalised*.

We could say that the key step here that turns a normal experience of joy into the opportunity for a meditative exercise is that the feeling is removed from the particular instance from which it arose and consciously re-assigned to a generalised principle or concept. The ‘idea as such’ of goodness of heart is what the attention is turned towards rather than the particular example. We here touch on one of the key underlying principles of these exercises and I will discuss this in more detail once we have built up further examples.

This exercise also has distinct steps. The beginning point was *experience*, in that a particular experience gave rise to a feeling- in this case joy. The second step could be called *reflective observation* where the experience is recognised as being an example of something more general and universal (the ‘idea as such’). The final stage is one of *contemplation* where the feeling that has been re-assigned from the particular experience to the ‘idea’ is allowed to ‘live in our soul for a considerable length of time’ (1979, p. 234).

In summary, the stages of this exercise are therefore:

1. Experience (of an event and the feeling connected with the event)
2. Reflective observation (where the feeling is re-assigned to the idea)
3. Contemplation (where the feeling/idea becomes an exclusive object of concentration)

## Growth and decay exercise

In *Occult Science*, after discussing the rose cross meditation and other examples, Steiner refers the reader to *Knowledge of Higher Worlds* where other ‘particularly fruitful’ examples are to be found. He mentions the ‘coming-into-being and passing away of a plant’, the ‘forces of growth that lie dormant in the seed’, and the ‘forms of crystals etc’ (1979, p. 233). This gives us an indication of which exercises in *Knowledge of Higher Worlds* Steiner puts in the same group as the ones in *Occult Science*, and this is not at first obvious from the book itself. We will therefore follow this indication and review the three exercises mentioned above.

The first of these is the ‘coming-into-being and passing away of a plant’. Steiner describes it as follows:

The first step is to be made by directing the attention of the soul to certain happenings in the world around us. Such happenings are, on the one hand, life that is budding, growing and thriving, and, on the other, all phenomena of fading, decay and withering. A man can see all this going on together whenever he turns his eyes, and in the nature of things it evokes feelings and thoughts in him. But in ordinary circumstances he pays too little attention to these thoughts and feelings. He hurries too quickly from one impression to another. The essential point is that he should fix his attention intently and consciously upon them. Wherever he observes quite definite blossoming and thriving, he should banish everything else from his soul and for a short time give himself up to this one impression. He will soon convince himself that a feeling which would previously have flitted through his soul now acquires a strong and energetic form. He

must then allow this feeling to reverberate quietly within himself while maintaining perfect inner calm. He must shut himself off from the rest of the world and follow only what his soul has to say about the phenomena of blossoming and thriving (1985a, p. 47).

This is clearly not a symbolic picturing exercise of the rose cross kind, however there are still common elements, particularly with the feeling exercise based on joy. The practitioner is to direct the attention to specific phenomena in the world (the growth and decay of living things) in order to become more aware of what accompanies these phenomena at a thought and feeling level. Rather than letting these thought and feelings ‘flit through the soul’ as would normally be the case, the practitioner is to ‘fix his attention intently and consciously upon them’. Steiner also specifically emphasises that this process must begin with ‘keen outer observation’ (1985a, p. 47).

This re-focusing of attention gives rise to a new content in the soul (a ‘strong and energetic form’). It is this that can then be taken as the object of a more exclusive focusing of attention. The practitioner is to explore this feeling (the strong and energetic form) in complete seclusion and find ‘what the soul has to say’ about blossoming and thriving.<sup>36</sup>

The main difference between this exercise and the loving kindness exercise is that here there is no specific guidance to re-assign the felt experience to a generalised principle or concept. The shift that takes place is simply a shift of attention from the normal outer phenomena to the fleeting ‘thoughts and feelings’ that normally accompany the outer phenomena (Of course to assist this shift of attention an additional shift may be required to isolate the outer phenomena, for we may never have specifically noticed ‘phenomena of growth and decay’ as such). In this exercise the mere act of shifting the attention to a normally unobserved content gives rise to something new (a feeling with a ‘strong and energetic form’). It is this feeling that the practitioner then takes as the object of exclusive contemplation, allowing it to ‘reverberate quietly within himself while maintaining perfect inner calm’.

The practitioner is to consult this feeling and hear what the soul says about the phenomena of blossoming and thriving.

This last point can give us a clue as to what is meant by feeling with ‘strong and energetic form’. If it is something that can be consulted in order to gain knowledge of blossoming and thriving, then this implies that it has become expressive of blossoming and thriving. Normally a feeling is expressive of our reaction *to* something. It expresses our state

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<sup>36</sup> At this point the text only mentions blossoming and thriving, however it is clear from what follows that Steiner includes an equal focus on the feeling associated with death and decay.

and can perhaps tell us about ourselves but will not normally tell us about something objective in the world. Here the feeling has ceased to become solely expressive of our state and has started to become expressive of something else- hence enquiry about the phenomena using the feeling is possible. The stages of the exercise can be summarised as:

1. *Outer observation.* (Phenomena of growth and decay are selected and consciously observed)
2. *Inner observation* (Secondary phenomena that accompany the outer phenomena become the object of a secondary process of observation. This results in the emergence of new phenomena- feelings with ‘strong and energetic form’)
3. *Contemplation.* (The new phenomena become the subject of exclusive contemplation)

## Mineral, plant, animal exercise

The above exercise appears in a section called *Preparation* and it is the only exercise in this section. The following two exercises appear in the next section called *Enlightenment*. The first of these has to do with a comparative observation of the three kingdoms of nature- mineral, plant and animal. Steiner describes the exercises as follows:

The beginning is made by studying different beings of nature in a particular way; for example, a transparent beautifully formed stone (crystal), a plant and an animal. One should endeavour at first to direct one’s whole attention to a comparison of the stone with the animal. The thoughts here indicated as examples must pass through the soul accompanied by alert feelings, and no other thought, no other feeling, must intrude the intensely attentive contemplation. The pupil says to himself: ‘The stone has a form; the animal too has a form. The stone remains motionless in its place; the animal changes its place. It is natural impulse (desire) which causes the animal to change its place. Natural impulses are moreover served by the animal’s form. Its organs and limbs are in keeping with its impulses. The structure of the stone is not fashioned according to desire but by power that is void of desire (1985a, pp. 56, 57)<sup>37</sup>

The description here can be compared with the building up process in the rose cross meditation. A comparison of two separate classes of phenomena (animal and mineral) is brought about through reflective observation. The comparison is orientated around desire/not

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<sup>37</sup> Here Steiner adds a footnote distinguishing between this exercises and the disreputable practice (in his opinion) of ‘crystal gazing’

desire as was the case in the human/plant comparison of the rose cross meditation. A direct connection is also made between the physical characteristics of the thing observed and its desire/lack-of-desire nature. The comparison must be accompanied by alert feelings. Steiner continues:

If one thinks deeply into such thoughts, while contemplating the stone and the animal with fixed attention, two quite different kinds of feelings will arise in the soul: one kind from the stone and the other from the animal. At first the attempt will probably not succeed, but little by little, by dint of genuine and patient practice, these feeling will ensue. This must be practiced over and over again. At first the feelings are present only as long as the contemplation lasts; later on their after effects continue. And then they become something that remains alive in the soul. The student has then only to reflect and both feelings will always arise, even without the contemplation of an external object. (1985a, p. 57)

The practice of reflective observation on the physical characteristics and desire/lack of desire nature gives rise to secondary phenomena of ‘two quite different kinds of feeling’. Here we can assume that Steiner is referring to a comparable feeling to the ‘strong and energetic form’ of the last example. It is clear that these are new phenomena brought about- or at least made visible by- the activity of reflective observation and feeling participation. We can also assume that as the feelings are ‘from the stone’ and ‘from the animal’ they have become responsive to something other than my own states.

Steiner then goes on to describe that if a plant is included in the meditation, then the feeling that arises from this will be experienced as being midway between (‘both in character and degree’) the feelings that arises from the stone and the animal. He also mentions that ‘organs of clairvoyance’ are created out of these thoughts and feelings. (1985a, p. 57).

Although Steiner doesn’t explicitly state this, it is clear that the initial observation is to be carried out with an actual, physical stone/plant/animal rather than an imagined one. This is implied because Steiner mentions that after a while the specific feelings referred to can arise ‘even without contemplation of an external object’ (1985a, p. 57).

Steiner does not discuss in any detail the technical challenge of thinking ‘deeply on thoughts’ while contemplating external objects with ‘fixed attention’ (1985a, p. 57) and we can only assume that the fixed attention he means must be an oscillating attention that modulates between thoughts, feelings and external perception.

In summary, the stages of this exercise are:

1. Reflective observation (Mineral and animal are compared in outer characteristics and desire/lack of desire nature)

2. Feeling participation (Alert feelings accompany the reflective observation)
3. Observation/contemplation (New feeling phenomena appear relating to mineral, plant and animal)

## Seed exercise

Steiner describes this exercise directly after the mineral/plant/animal exercise. The practitioner is to carry out a contemplative sequence based on the observation of a seed. Steiner describes it as follows:

Let the pupil place before him a small seed of a plant. The point is to intensify the right kind of thoughts while contemplating this insignificant object and through these thoughts to develop certain feelings. First, let him realise clearly what his eyes are actually seeing. Let him describe to himself the shape, colour, and all other distinctive features of the seed. Then let him reflect as follows: ‘Out of this seed, if planted in the soil, there will grow a plant of complex structure.’ Let him visualise this plant, build it up in his imagination and then say to himself: ‘What I am now picturing in my imagination will later be drawn out of the seed by the forces of the earth and the light. If I had before me an artificial object which imitated the seed to such a deceptive degree that my eyes could not distinguish it from a real seed, no forces of the earth or light could call a plant forth from it.’ Whoever lays hold of this thought clearly, so that it becomes an inner experience, will be able to unite the following thought with the right feeling: (1985a, pp. 63, 64)

The exercise begins with careful observation of an actual physical seed leading to a vivid imaginative thought picturing of the plant that will emerge from the seed. A connection is made between the imagined plant and the real plant that will emerge later. ‘What I am now picturing will later be drawn out of the seed by the forces of the earth and light’. The thought process is also backed up by rational, concrete deductions: We know that a real plant will grow from the seed, so there must be an *invisible something* ‘here’ already that prefigures the plant that will emerge. If this were not the case, then there would be no difference between a hypothetically identical (but dead) replica of the seed and the real seed.

Steiner then mentions the following in passing: ‘Whoever lays hold of this thought clearly, so that it becomes an inner experience, will be able to unite the following thought with the right feeling’. The sequence that has been described needs to become an inner *experience*, which

means that it needs to become something more than simply logical deduction.<sup>38</sup> On the basis of having achieved this experience the practitioner will be able to ‘unite the following thought with the right feeling’. Steiner does not further elaborate what the right feeling is. He is appealing to the practitioner to know what he means by ‘right’ in this case. The thought that is to be united with this feeling is:

All that will ultimately grow out of the seed is already secretly enfolded within it as the *force* of the whole plant (his italics). In the artificial imitation of the seed, no such force is present. And yet to my eyes both appear alike. The real seed therefore contains something invisible which is not contained in the imitation. It is to this invisible something that thought and feeling are now to be directed. (1985a, pp. 63, 64)

This thought is a condensed repetition of what has already been built up. Only what was previously the ‘forces of the earth and the light’ is now the *force* of the plant. Having identified an invisible but nevertheless present ‘something’ that will become the physically visible plant, the practitioner is then to direct thought and feeling towards this ‘something’. Perhaps we could re-phrase this and say that logical thinking is used to identify something that *must* be there and the thinking and feeling attention is then focused towards this absence, so that whatever is there can begin to emerge.<sup>39</sup>

The exercise then concludes with a further final step:

Let the pupil picture the following to himself: This invisible something will presently transform itself into the visible plant which I shall have before me in shape and colour. Let him hold firmly to the thought: the invisible will become visible. If I could not think, then that which will become visible only later could not already announce its presence to me. (1985a, pp. 64, 65)

Here the thought sequence is simplified down to an essence: The invisible will become visible and it is through my thinking that the invisible already announces its presence to me. Here the connection is made between the medium of my thinking and the ‘invisible something’. This final step is important because the medium through which the whole exercises is conducted- felt and willed thinking- is itself included in the picture. In this

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<sup>38</sup> I would propose that here Steiner is referring to a felt experience of the reality of what is being considered.

<sup>39</sup> An analogy could be an astronomer directing their telescope towards an empty space in the sky because the movements of planets around this space indicate that something must be there

exercise a thought essence that includes the thinker replaces a more visualised, imaginative picturing process (of the fully grown plant). We can therefore see this as distinct from the symbolic image exercises discussed above.

Steiner then adds further practical guidance, emphasising that the above sequence must also be intensely felt and '*experienced*, with no disturbing intrusions from other thoughts' (his italics) (1985a, p. 65). Sufficient time must also be allowed for the 'thoughts and feeling united with it to penetrate the soul' (1985a, p. 65).

There then follows a description of what can be expected to arise from this process. Gradually, after many attempts, 'an inner force will make itself felt, and this force will create new power of perception' (p. 65). This can give rise to the following experience.

The grain of seed will appear as if enveloped in a small luminous cloud. In a sensory-spiritual way it will be felt as a kind of flame. The centre of this flame invokes the same impression as the colour lilac; the edges give the impression of a bluish tint. Something formerly not seen is here revealed, created by the power of the thoughts and feelings that have been inwardly stirred to activity. (1985a, p. 65)

Steiner then describes that the same exercise can be done in reverse. A fully grown plant is the object of observation and the death and seeding process is inwardly pictured. The thought sequence is described as follows

This plant with its forms and colours will in time be no more. But the fact that it produces seeds teaches me that it will not vanish into nothingness. At present I cannot see with my eyes what preserves it from disappearance, any more than I could previously see the plant in the seed. Hence there is something in the plant that my eyes do not see. (1985a, p. 67)

This exercise can give rise to an experience of a 'flame form'. Elsewhere Steiner clearly states that such perceptions are 'nothing but hallucinations' (2009, p. 23) at this stage of the perception process.

In summary, the stages of this exercise are:

1. *Observation* (A seed or plant is physically observed)
2. *Reflective observation/ imaginative picturing* (A thought sequence about the non-present phases of the plant's life cycle is combined with imaginative picturing of those phases)

3. *Contemplation.* (Thought essence that includes the medium of thought itself. The thought sequence is boiled down to an essence and the medium of thought is brought into the picture)

## Random content exercises

In a lecture given in North Wales in 1923, Steiner gave some rather unusual guidance for generating content for contemplative images. He also referred to the same method on at least one other occasion, also in 1923 (2003, p. 225). The guidance is as follows:

Instruction can be sought from a teacher who — one might say — remains invisible. The student takes a book he has never seen before, opens it at random and reads any chance sentence. He can thus be sure of coming on something entirely new to him, and then he must work on it with inner activity. A subject for meditation can be made of the sentence, or perhaps of some illustration or diagram in the book, so long as he is certain he has never previously come across it. That is the third method, and in this way a teacher can be created out of nothing. The book has to be found and looked at, and a sentence, a drawing, or anything else chosen from it — all this constitutes the teacher (1991b, pp. 12, 13)

It is interesting partly because it seems not to fit with indications that Steiner gives elsewhere. A book is to be randomly selected, opened at random and a chance sentence or diagram is to be taken as the focus for contemplation. No other specific guidance is given but it is probably safe to assume that the exercise would follow a generally similar pattern to the exercises already discussed, meaning that once the content had been generated in this way the practitioner would work with it using reflective observation, feeling participation and contemplation. What is interesting here is that it shows that the exercises can also work when there is no underlying pattern to the content. Of course Steiner mentions various exercises where this is the case, for example, in his booklet *Practical Training in Thought* (1985c) he gives an example of where the practitioner is to focus on arbitrary thought content, the only rule being that it would not be something the practitioner would normally think about. This is to develop that capacity for 'having the right thought at the right time' (1985c, p. 16). Similarly in the first of the *six subsidiary exercises* the practitioner is to focus on a randomly chosen, man-made object. This is to develop control of thinking (1979). What differentiates these from the random book exercise is the context in which they were given. The 'right

thinking at the right time' exercises and the six subsidiary exercises are described as essentially supportive exercises to the main practice of the kind of exercises focused on in this study- we could call them secondary exercises as opposed to primary exercises for the development of imaginative cognition. In the two instances where Steiner mentions the random book exercise, they are both in the context of describing *primary* exercises.

For example, in the second lecture from 1923 where Steiner mentions the random book exercise. Having introduced the idea of 'super-sensible cognition', he refers the reader to *Knowledge of Higher Worlds* and then describes the general principles according to which such exercises operate. First he uses the analogy of exercising a muscle to make it stronger then discusses the issue of suitable content for the exercises.

When I say that something should be selected for this content of concentration that one finds in any sort of book- even some worthless old volume that we know quite certainly we have never previously seen- this may seem trivial. The important point is not the content of the truth of the thing, but the fact that we survey such thought content completely (2003, p. 225)

In this case completely random content is suggested for an exercise directly intended for the development of imaginative cognition, as opposed to an essentially supportive or secondary exercise. This is also true for the description of the same exercise given in North Wales. The question that is interesting to pose here is why *randomly* generated content would be suitable in this context.

A simple, easily apprehended concept is preferable, a creation of the moment, not having anything to do with what is remembered. For our purpose it can even be something quite paradoxical, deliberately removed from any passively received idea. We have only to make sure that the meditation has been brought about through our own inner activity (1991b, p. 12)

What Steiner seems to be saying here is that the practitioner can create any 'content' for themselves as long as it is a 'creation of the moment', and not passively received or remembered. It can even be 'quite paradoxical'. This guidance is clearly very different from the detailed and very specific content of the symbolic image exercises, the feeling image exercises etc. Here the impression is that the practitioner can just make something up on the spur of the moment and use that for their meditation- as long as it is spontaneous, unfamiliar etc.

