

# THE ETHERIC BODY

Report of a lecture by

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# The Etheric Body

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To talk about the etheric body is a difficult task. Today we are used to speaking about facts, taking notes, then carrying them home with us. Facts alone can't create a picture of the etheric body. You can count the parts of the physical body. You can even speak this way about the astral body. The etheric body, however, is always regenerating; it is changing all the time. Therefore what you know about it now does not mean that it will be the same tomorrow, or next year or in ten years. This is a difficult concept, and so I will try to give you a picture upon which you yourselves can elaborate. I can quote some facts but I will be happy if you forget the facts by transforming them into imaginations.

As you know the etheric body is one step above the physical body. Above the etheric is the astral body and above that the Ego. This is what we learn from anthroposophy. It is decisive for us to know the difference between etheric *forces* and the etheric *body*. As you know there are forces coming from the periphery. They have their center outside and they are opposite to the forces related to the earth. The latter have their center inside the earth. Etheric forces come from outside. This presents a problem because our type of thinking is the opposite. We think causally, that one thing causes another. The etheric forces stream in from outside and to say it in a more concrete way: the planets are more or less the origin of the etheric forces. The stars and planets belong to the region from which light comes. Life has to do with light. When we speak about etheric forces it is appropriate that we use an expression other than “life forces.” As Rudolf Steiner mentioned we can call etheric forces “light forces”. We also can say “time forces,” however what is essential is for us to see what lies behind the name.

Etheric forces work in time. Time is bounded in a certain way by our planetary system. The ancient Greeks understood this as a fundamental truth. The furthest planet, Saturn, was called “Chronos,” meaning time. Kronos was for the Greeks the end and the beginning of time as we think of it. Life only exists in time. When we are born on earth, time starts. It ends when we die. We cannot isolate a part of it, though we would sometimes like to do that when we have children. We would like to keep them as one- or two-year-olds. They are so nice at that age, but it’s impossible to keep them there; they grow! (Later they are often not so nice anymore!).

Growth is an expression of etheric forces. When we study growth processes we can observe two different types. You

can watch living substance grow. Consider bacteria for instance. They grow forever and never die by themselves! Here etheric forces are at work but they never come to form an etheric *body*. Why not? Because a body is a unity and bacteria never form a unity. They never form a shape; you never find a “Gestalt”. Shape and Gestalt are unities and when they are to a certain extent isolated from the whole etheric world they build a body. We can then speak of an etheric body which is a unity in which, for example in a plant, one part belongs to the leaf and the leaf to the stem. The shape of the leaves differs depending on whether they are on the bottom or the top. This creates a unity but you cannot find this principle in bacteria. So you can work with etheric *forces* in bacteria but they are not pulled together in a shape which forms a *body* or creates a unity. A unity means that one part is in relationship to the other part; left to right, top to bottom and so forth.

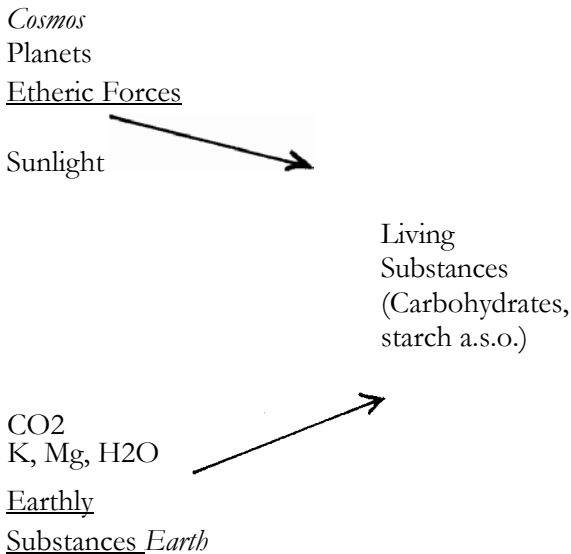
That is why we call the etheric body an “architect.” An architect doesn’t endlessly place one brick upon the other. Rather the growth process continues until it reaches a certain point at which it stops. Not so with bacteria: they grow as long as they have a nutritional source. In contrast, a tree or plant grows to a certain size and then stops. So do animals and human beings. Look at identical twins. Each of them has an etheric body, not half of it. Both of them accept etheric forces from the universe, but they have the same starting point: one fertilized egg-cell. The physical separation does not mean that the etheric body is separated too. The result is two whole identical twin bodies.

When we study light and how it works through etheric forces we can differentiate two different types of light. The first has to do with its connection to growth processes.

There is no growth without light. Plants die without it. Light creates new living substance by way of photosynthesis.

When light enters a dead substance it is never transformed into life but rather into warmth. However, light accepted by a plant can be transformed into living substance. A living organism uses the light to produce life. Thus we note a decrease in the temperature of living substance when it is in the process of building more substance. This is *endothermy*, chemically speaking, it is a reduction. It is typical for the plant. As the plant grows it needs warmth. Plants consume warmth and light in photosynthesis and transform them into life.

*Life is transformed light!* It is not just a coincidence, that both words are very close. This etymological fact is an expression, that both of them have the same origin, the etheric world.



That is one aspect of light. The other can be illustrated by a dandelion growing in the shade and another dandelion growing in bright sunlight. Observe the difference. Which one is bigger? You may be surprised! The bigger plant is in the shade! The plant needs light to grow but in the shade, where there is not that much light, it is bigger! This question tantalized me as a child. I asked why the cows don't prefer the bigger dandelions? My uncle smiled and answered that the cows know better. Of course the cows know better! They like the small plants and not the big ones. I thought they were stupid. If someone had offered me a choice of candy I would have taken the bigger piece. The bigger the better! (so we think) The cow, however, makes a different choice. My uncle could not explain it but I observed it. The difference is a matter of shape. Observe and you too will see that the bigger dandelion does not have the right shape. It is floppy, does not have the right tissue, and it is bigger and not all green. At the other extreme when you go up a mountain you will also see dandelions but there they are very small and with finely structured leaves. It will be full of life. That is what the cow senses. They don't know it but they taste it and so you see shape, structure, and formative forces come by way of light as well.

So there are two different types of forces in light. On the one hand there are forces in light which stimulate growth and the production of new substance, and on the other hand there are forces that give form and shape. It is a known fact today that growth and life are more dependent on the red side of the spectrum, while the blue-ultraviolet side affects more the formation and shape. Light contains still other forces which we are not able to see, for instance the influence of the other planets and other stars, but that is another story

You can observe the formative forces inherent in light when you expose bacteria, which—as we noted—do not have an etheric body, to that kind of light that gives shape and form, namely ultraviolet light. Such light kills the bacteria. It is more of a blue light. Red light is light that promotes undifferentiated growth. Both blue and red light are present in the sunlight and thus influence the etheric body.

The etheric body is not just an architect, it is an artist as well. We have to make this differentiation today because the modern architect is not just an artist but a technician also. In former times the architect was primarily an artist. Look at the cathedrals of the Middle Ages and you will see a type of architecture we simply don't have anymore. The cathedrals were built out of a cosmic harmony. With one rope they made the construction of the cathedral! Go back further in time to the Greek temples or yet further to Egyptian times. These early temples were not just constructions; they were artistic creations! All that was built was art. And our etheric body is an artist par excellence. That is why our bodies are also artistic creations. Our whole body is based upon the golden section. When you compare the three parts of the finger, then the ratio between the smaller to the next bigger is the same as between the bigger to the whole. In the same way many parts of the human organism are based on the golden section. That is art and that is harmony. The etheric body is a body of harmony. It is, in respect to harmony and wisdom, far superior to that which we have in the astral body, and again superior to that which we have in our Ego. We are formed by a harmony that comes from a higher world.

In former times people felt a direct relationship to the higher world by way of religion. Indeed, from where does religion come? It is a knowledge of the heavens, of a higher



world! The construction of our etheric body is crystallized religion, is harmony. People of former times experienced harmony as being in the heavens and disharmony as being in hell. When they smelled the fragrance of a flower they felt that it was a gift from heaven. And in hell it stinks! In heaven music sounds! (I am sure, that angels play music which is cosmic harmony, but prefer Bach and Mozart when they sometimes play “human” music). Harmony belongs to music—and where do we find noise? In hell, of course! Devils make a lot of noise. (Today not only devils and machines make noise which we cannot avoid, but many people do it intentionally! You'll know examples enough.) Noise and disharmony were always connected with the underworld, with hell. Harmony had its origins in the spiritual world. It is not just a manner of speech when I say that the etheric body is crystallized religion or music or light. All of them are expressions of the higher world. Harmony is enclosed in them though it is not obvious to see. In other words: the origin of life and etheric forces is the world above the earth. The earth alone never can create life.

How can the etheric body manage to build up a substance full of life? I mentioned that only the plant can receive etheric forces. An animal or human being does so too, but differently. How do plants directly receive etheric forces? Of course they need a receiving substance. One condition this substance has to meet is that it is watery. Where there is no water, like in the desert, there is no plant-life. We learn that water *is* life. This is really an over-simplification, and it's wrong. Pure water is also poisonous. When you are very thirsty and your stomach is empty, and you drink enough “pure” water, you will die from it. Distilled water is not a living substance. What do I mean by this? When you have any plant juice, or blood from an animal or human body it is

never “pure” water. Never! It always contains salts, traces of sugar, of proteins and so on. It is a unity of many substances.

There is a particular substance which is needed so that the etheric body can enter water and that is *potassium*. Isolated potassium is a dead substance, but it is another bearer of etheric forces and like water they belong together! That is why we find potassium in any living liquid and cell. Therefore we need potassium and water as a basis for life. On the other hand, potassium is unable to receive light. To handle light the plant needs *magnesium*. Magnesium is concentrated light. The plant accepts light via chlorophyll, which is an organic magnesium. For water to be alive it must contain potassium and magnesium among many other substances. These three are just mentioned as example.

How do etheric forces work into a physical substance? One of the essential conditions is the presence of a huge *surface*. Let us look at a plant. What is a plant? Its central organ is the leaf. The leaf is functionally a surface. It is not three-dimensional—it is just a huge surface. A tree is also a surface, just surface. Etheric forces work through surfaces. Consider earthly forces, mainly gravity. They are opposite to etheric forces, and work from the center. How can something lose weight but not necessarily mass? By pulverization—vastly increasing the surface area! We can demonstrate this as follows: First, I take a piece of chalk in my hand, open my fingers and watch it fall down. Then I take the same chalk and grind it to obtain a powder. The powder does not drop down but rather floats in the air. It loses weight when exposed to the forces of the periphery. The smaller the substance the bigger the surface and the more it is exposed to etheric forces. The bigger the substance the more it is exposed to earth forces. This is why we

generally have such small cells in our body. The smaller they are the bigger the total surface, the more they are exposed to etheric forces. In this way our etheric body handles the cells.

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The etheric body is “far away” from our Ego, and during a lifetime we use and abuse it with our astral body, which is between the Ego and the etheric body. Before birth we have to start building up our bodies and this can only be done by producing living substance. How is it possible? Through a knowledge of the higher world it becomes clear that we ourselves can’t do it, nor does it happen by itself, but that higher beings do it for us. Ask a pregnant woman how she makes a child—ridiculous! Nobody can do that. It is a matter of collecting etheric forces which we bring down to earth and transform into living substance. These are of course forces related to light which are in turn related to the planets and to the whole cosmos. In other words, inside the uterus where the child grows is an enclave for the cosmos. It is part of the cosmos. And it is significant that its shape is that of an egg. The ovoid shape is an expression of cosmic forces. The planets do not move in a circular pattern around the sun, they follow an ellipse! An ellipse and the shape of an egg are expressions of cosmic forces. Such a shape can receive the cosmic forces which penetrate inside from outside. The tragedy of modern research in embryology is that attempts are made to discover how and why the embryo grows by studying the embryo itself. The answer cannot be found in this way. Formative forces come from outside. Thus, formative forces penetrate and come to rest in the manifestation of living substance.

The organ which creates life is the liver. Life—liver (*Leben—Leber* in German). The relationship of these two words is found in many languages. The liver produces life. In

modern textbooks the liver is described as producing protein, glycogen, fat and so on. All of this is of course correct, but it is not decisive! What is important is that the liver produces life, i.e. living substance. Protein and other substances are just bearers of life. As long as we are embryos we use the liver completely for growing. That is why the embryo grows continuously and fast until the time of birth. The volume of the liver of an 31 cm embryo is 10%; of a newborn 5%; of an adult 2% of body volume. A newborn does not grow for a couple of days, indeed it even loses weight for three to six days, and after ten days it again reaches its birth weight. Why? A new influence enters; this new influence starts catabolism, or a breakdown of substance, and is triggered by what occurs with the first breath. This signals the incarnation of the astral body and Ego. We can't go into this today, however. I only want to indicate that the unending growth of the etheric body is overcome by a new influence, a new impact. The liver becomes smaller over the course of a lifetime. The younger a person is, the bigger the liver in ratio to the body weight, and the older the person, the smaller the liver. A natural death then is really a dysfunction of the liver. The liver, and the etheric body by way of the liver, do not support us anymore.

People in olden times were aware that the liver is the central organ of the etheric body. Of course they didn't have the possibilities that we have today to carry out scientific investigations. They expressed it differently. They used imaginations, and one of these wonderful physiological imaginations is the myth of Prometheus. Prometheus brought light and fire to human beings; the light and fire that is the sparkling of the Ego. Only the human being can handle fire—no animal can do this. As a punishment for bringing fire to man, Prometheus was chained to a rock in

the Caucasus. Each morning an eagle came and ate of his liver, and each night Prometheus' liver grew to its original size. This is pure physiology! The eagle in mythology is always an imagination for the forces of the head and those of the nervous system that destroy the body. The eagle is a bird of prey. It lives off other life forms. It destroys life. That is its task within the ecology of the earth. We do this to our bodies when we are awake. Our consciousness—the eagle—destroys life—the liver. Modern research reveals exactly what this myth describes. During the night the liver builds up glycogen which is the human type of a carbohydrate, analogous to starch in the plant. This starch is a living substance. We produce virtually the same substance that a plant does, adapted to human needs. The liver is like a plant in us. Consciousness is like an eagle.

During the night we replenish the liver. Thus, a balance is established between anabolism and catabolism. We observe the etheric body which builds up during the night, and the higher members—the astral body and Ego which destroy during the day. A healthy liver is full of glycogen, a sick liver is poor in glycogen. Why? Because there is not enough anabolism, not enough production especially of a living, plant-like substance.

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What can we do to strengthen, cultivate and save the etheric body? Rudolf Steiner explained that through about age seven the etheric forces of the child are bound up in growth processes. The change of teeth at this time signals that a part of the etheric forces are freed. It is like a birth in the region of the head and now the child is able to use these forces for thinking. Thinking is a complicated action, so much so that many people are afraid to do it. Only the human being can think and that is a matter of the Ego. We can only think when we are awake and that involves the

astral body. The basis for the “substance” we think with is constituted by the etheric forces—transformed etheric forces.

We transform life into thought! It is the evolution of what Plato called the Idea. Idea—the word in Greek is “*Idea*” and it in turn comes from the verb “to see” = “*Horao, Opsomai* = I will see; *Eidon* = I saw”. Completely different words for one action! *Eidon*, “*idon*”— “*Idea*, meaning “that which I have seen”. It is a perception, and perception is a matter of light. What I have *seen* gives me security, not what I have smelled, heard or tasted. And again you see a transformation, a second transformation. Light is transformed into life (plant) and then life is transformed into the idea (human being). Why can't we see an idea? We are confined within it by thinking. We are within life; in the midst of light. We cannot see the idea but we can recognize it in other people. In English when it happens that you understand something, (sometimes people understand what one says)—then they say “I see, I see!” Why don't they say “I smell, I smell!?” It's a matter of vision, a matter of seeing. To understand means to see with spiritual eyes and that is the next transformation of the etheric forces.

Of course we also need the astral body and the Ego for this transformation but the etheric forces provide the “substance.” That is why a person who feels weak or is sick cannot think. In this case, it is not a matter of the astral body or the Ego, it is a matter of the etheric body. That is what happens when a child reaches seven years of age. Our task is to protect the child and literally save the etheric body until it reaches the seventh year. If this transformation takes place before, then the child will not be able to build up the brain in the right way. The cells of the brain don't grow anymore

after birth. Rudolf Steiner describes however how the finer structure of the brain is built up, by what is called “myelinization.” We know today that this finer structuring of the brain continues to develop as the person matures. When a child under the age of seven is exposed only to nonsense, it will build up the brain in such a way as to only be able to think nonsense later on. I think I may refer to “Sesame Street” and the nonsense in this program which people produce specifically for children.

It is the formation of the brain and not the growth of its cells which needs to be protected through the seventh year of life. What kind of questions do children ask during the period before which they transform the etheric body in the head? Their questions focus on harmony, on the artistic and religious. In contrast, with puberty, the astral body is freed up in a certain way. The budding adolescents become aware of their intelligence and use it and they are proud of their intelligence. Cleverness is a matter of the astral body, but wisdom is a matter of the etheric body. And here you can see another difference. The etheric body grows and works and regenerates slowly with time. All this growth is a matter of time. You cannot stimulate a plant to grow or tell it to grow a little bit faster. You can, however, stimulate the astral body to work faster and it comes sooner to an end, to a finished state. We like definitions, ‘define’ (Lat. *definio*) means 'towards an end' (Lat. *finis*). There everything is fixed. In contrast to that the etheric body should be flexible. That is the reason why Rudolf Steiner prompted the teachers not to use definitions, but descriptions, characterizations, to save the etheric body.

The astral body is always fast. Take a look at our way of life. The first is the best and the faster the better; both are expressions of astrality. The etheric body is completely different. The etheric body doesn't ask whether it's the first.

That is absolutely of no importance. The Greeks had a special word for "right time" and they called it "*Kairos*". This word no longer exists in any modern language. "Right time" is not too late and not too early but simply on time, and it is a matter of the etheric body. As we have to wait for the right time, so we must wait for wisdom. We cannot accelerate the acquisition of wisdom. We can however accelerate the gaining of intelligence and cleverness. That works on the astral level. The etheric body is the body of wisdom and religion, and is what the child transforms when he starts thinking. Observe the quality of thinking in children before the seventh year, between seven and fourteen, and after fourteen you will see the contrast in the type of thinking that emerges when the astral body is freed at the time of puberty. They then acquire a cutting, destructive intelligence. Wisdom, as already mentioned, is a matter of time and you cannot compel time, as wisdom never uses compulsion.

We can save and protect the etheric forces of the child. We can also educate the etheric body, and the key element in this education is repetition. Proper repetition is doing something in a rhythmical way. You always do the same, so that the child can turn it into a habit. We say in German, "*Es geht in Fleisch und Blut*"—"It goes into flesh and blood". When we learn something it becomes a part of the etheric body. The basis for learning is the etheric body and thus some older persons may have problems learning new facts. The young child learns immediately because his or her etheric body is flexible. Consider the quality of repetition. It can happen in two different ways. When repetition is done rhythmically the etheric body is kept flexible. But repetition can also mean beat—doing the same action exactly the same way. Stamping or hammering on a table is a means by which the child will learn as well, but it will contribute to a rigid



etheric body. This forms a basis for terrible sclerosis later in life. Why? Rhythm is not just blind repetition. An archetype of rhythm is the waves which come up against the seashore. A wave— a wave—a wave and no wave being the same as another, always different. That is rhythm. Beat is repetition of the *same* thing.

I remember having a patient in our hospital. He was educated in a repetitive way. He had a good etheric body but a completely rigid one. He had set himself a routine which included taking a daily walk at 4 p.m. I recall one day when I met him as we were both leaving the hospital. “Oh no!, it’s raining and it’s terrible,” he said, “I have to take my walk.” I said, “Go and read now, and take your walk later.” I cannot describe his expression. He looked at me as if I were completely crazy. No, he had to take his walk then and not later! He was fixed in his habits. He walked between four and five o’clock and would read between five and six. He was healthy but he was sclerotic. This illustrates a tragic problem, namely that people are proud that they are so healthy and can do so many things. Everything except change! Such lifestyle works against the etheric body. The etheric body must be flexible.

Rudolf Steiner indicated how we can stay flexible. We have to change our attitudes! For instance, we all have our way of writing. When we change our way of writing we change our habit, we change ourselves, and this keeps us flexible. Or consider that we all have our own way of opening or closing a bottle. Try it with the other hand and you will see how complicated it is. Have you observed how you tie your shoes? It is fast and nearly automatic and it works. Try it another way. That is what keeps our etheric body flexible. But of course it is a challenge to do this and we

don't like that because we have no time—we have an excuse, we have to save time—to be the first. The older people are, the more they tend to become fixed.

To stay youthful, we have to care for our etheric body in time—then we stay useful—as an English play of words says. I mentioned how to do it. But what happens, if the etheric body doesn't stay flexible? The result is a sclerotic tendency! Life forces, which are not transformed into a higher life to provide the basis for thinking, continue to work on the physical level. The person stays “young”, looks “healthy” and indeed is healthy from the biological point of view. What is lacking is the memory, the concentration, the thinking, typical signs of a cerebral sclerosis. How can we prevent it? By transformation of the biological life, which is a necessity for older persons. And how can we transform it? By spiritual activity! Decisive is the word “spiritual”. Not any activity, not physical fitness training or watching TV, even not just listening to music, but doing it, or painting and so on. Or start a completely new work. It is an experience that retired people, who finally “do nothing”, are in danger of becoming sclerotic or die! The typical remedy for elderly people is not a conservation of life, but a transformation to get new life! It is an experience too, that spiritually active persons do not become sclerotic, at least not in the same degree as inactive persons. (Of course we have to consider that a physical disease, like a degeneration of the nervous system can occur, that then is a matter of destiny, not only of what we do with the etheric body.)

We followed the development of the etheric body from embryo to old age. What happens in aging, is already significantly predisposed in youth and childhood. By knowledge of the laws of the etheric world, we can, as teachers, influence the etheric body so that it stays flexible, which is of advantage to the

“child” perhaps after 60 or 80 years. The teacher and the medical doctor always have to look at the whole of life, not just the next hours, weeks or months. And they have to consider not only the biological, etheric life, but also the higher, spiritual life, that means, the whole human being.

