LIVING THINKING UNIVERSITY NETWORK

by Nigel Hoffmann, November, 2026.

EDUCATING LIVING THINKING

The name Living Thinking University Network unambiguously expresses a definite aim. Across the world there are many centres of learning for adults which work with the ideas of Rudolf Steiner; also many individual teachers. These centres and teachers are dedicated to preserving and communicating the dynamic, profoundly living quality of Steiner's ideas. It is this international community which can give shape to a new kind of university – through sharing, collaborating and together finding the way forward in this challenging task.

Waldorf or Rudolf Steiner school education is through and through an education for living thinking; that is the reason these schools came into existence over a century ago. The aim of this education is to revitalise world civilisation through a restoration of the relationship of the human being to life and to the spirit. At every stage of the curriculum, from early childhood to Year 12, the essential task is the same – to bring about a new culture of enlivened thinking which can carry young people into the world equipped for life in ways which an intellectualistic education cannot do.

There is not a comparable worldwide movement of tertiary education dedicated to cultivating living thinking. There are teacher trainings, colleges for the arts, for medicine, for eurythmy, for agriculture and so on – specialist institutions connected to the ideas of Rudolf Steiner. A new age is now upon us – the age of Artificial Intelligence. AI is almost inconceivably clever but it is, and only ever will be, a machine form of intelligence. As we enter the age of AI tertiary-level educators have the responsibility to make the significance of living thinking clear for all humanity and to show how it is cultivated. These existing tertiary trainings and new initiatives can now link with each other through the conscious, overt aim of educating living thinking. That is the purpose of the Living Thinking University Network.

The key challenges are these: what is the character of a tertiary institution which is right and necessary for the age of AI? What kind of university education will speak compellingly, not just to the minds of students but just as much to their hearts? These universities, like Waldorf schools, should be for everyone. Steiner's prescient

indications can guide us here in the recognition that the central aim of the new form of university is to cultivate a living, imaginative form of thinking.

In Steiner's last years many were seeking his views on the rethinking of academic studies.[1] What he never said is that anthroposophical content should be communicated and worked with just theoretically or conceptually, like in conventional universities. Here is one of his indications:

> …a spiritual contemplation of nature will provide means for the kind of training in thought which, among other things, make it possible to comprehend the social organism.[2]

Anything living must be understood with a living thinking. The opposite of course also applies; a mechanistic kind of thinking will only see the mechanical in nature and the human being. As Steiner observes:

> When I begin to think mechanistically, life goes out of my knowledge. I then have a science of dead matter. We must be absolutely clear that we are setting up a science of dead matter so long as the mechanical and physical aspect is the sole object of our study of nature.[3]

But "life" means much more than life science studies. It is also the social organism and all its "organs", including the professions of the social sciences, law, education, medicine, economics, theology, all the arts, architecture and so on. All these studies and professions involve living human beings – beings of body, soul and spirit – and all depend on a training in living thinking based on "a spiritual contemplation of nature".

AN ORIENTATION COURSE IN GOETHEAN PHENOMENOLOGY

We need to penetrate what Steiner means by "a spiritual contemplation of nature". A contemplation of nature through the conventional "life" sciences only trains a lifeless, spiritless form of thinking – looking at all the mechanisms in nature and the human being. What Steiner means is a training in Goethe's artistic, living way of studying natural forms, including colours.

[1] See R. Steiner, *Reimagining Academic Studies*, SteinerBooks, Great Barrington, 2015.
[2] R. Steiner, *The Renewal of the Social Organism,* Anthroposophic Press, Spring Valley,1985, p.126.
[3] R. Steiner, *Origins of Natural Science*, GA 326, Lecture IX.

Now, it is often heard said that Steiner, while he did engage in Goethe's natural science intensively when he was a young man, advanced far beyond it into a spiritual science – and that is certainly true. So why bother about Goethe? The point is that all Steiner's spiritual scientific perceptions came out of his capacity for a profoundly living form of thinking which he himself developed from Goethe's artistic form of natural science. There is very good reason why Steiner made the following statement during his discussions on the renewal of academic studies:

> Anthroposophy is established on the foundation of a Goethean phenomenological understanding of nature.[4]

The Living Thinking University Network wishes to take this indication seriously. It is of minimal value for students just to hear and absorb the content of anthroposophy; they need to be trained in the fundamentals of living thinking so they themselves learn to think in a living way. The process of learning a musical instrument goes nowhere if students just listen to wonderful performances. They need a practical training to master the rules and laws of the art they are trying to learn and these rules and laws become something natural and free when the student reaches the point of mastery. This then allows them to become a creator in this field, not just a "reproducer". It is exactly the same with training the faculty of living thinking.

In the Living Thinking Universities students begin all studies with a spiritual contemplation of nature in the form of an orientation course in Goethean phenomenology. In the age of AI, university students should be helped to recognise the difference between machine intelligence and living thinking, and also to understand the relationship between these intelligences. In this way they can take responsibility for their education. They need to know that the aim this orientation study of plant and animal form, colours and human physiology, is to *train their thinking,* their capacity for living thinking, along the pathway forged by Goethe and then by Rudolf Steiner.

THE ESSENTIAL LETTERS OF THE LANGUAGE OF LIVING FORM

Goethe brought forward in his natural scientific studies three basic principles of life: polarity, metamorphosis and intensification (*Steigerung*). These have all been discussed with great insight by Steiner in his early books on Goethe's

[4] R. Steiner, *Reimagining Academic Studies*, op. cit., p.3.

phenomenology of nature.[5] These are the three principles – we can call them the key "letters" in the language of living form – which are firstly worked with and experienced in the Orientation Courses and then, in an intensified form, in the different faculties of a Living Thinking University.

Polarity is expressed in different ways on every level of life. With the polarity of the magnet and of light and darkness, we are as it were on the boarder of the living. With the flowering plant, the poles of seed/root and flower – expressing the greater polarity of Earth and Sun – are mediated by the vegetative organisation. Animal and human life comes within the great polarity of spirit and matter, expressed in specific ways in the polarity of the sense-nerve and metabolic organisations. Likewise there is a polarity in the social organism, between the life of the individual and the life of the collective. All this was indicated by Steiner and has been expanded on by others.

Let us take the example the polarity of light and darkness as expressed in the opposition of yellow and blue; this, in relation to the other colours, is studied in the Orientation Course (Nature). The approach is to allow these polarities to become a profound inner experience: the radiating gesture of yellow is held as a living picture imagination in relation to the inwardly-retreating gesture of blue. We enter pure yellow and pure blue and open ourselves to their inner dynamic. And to find words adequate to this revelation is itself a significant task.

Likewise with metamorphosis and intensification; the changing forms of leaves on a plant is entered into with the flexible, sensitive faculty we call a "water thinking" – Goethe's term was exact imagination. The changing forms become an inner experience of a musical nature – dynamic and gestural. Our thoughts themselves become gestures. In the experience of the flower what is hidden in the seed comes to visible revelation through a living intensification. This is not a concept, it is a living thought, a thought which has a gesture specific to each plant and flower.

When the student moves to studies within a faculty, each of these three "letters" of life is experienced in a new way, as guided by the teachers. In every subject area these life principles are worked with – in the sciences of the natural realm and of the social organism; and also in the performing and visual arts where these principles are not so much discovered as brought to expression. Here three faculties will be briefly looked at.

[5] R. Steiner, *Goethean Science*; R. Steiner, *Goethe's World View*; R. Steiner, *Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe's World Conception*.

In a teacher training for Waldorf schools, a living understanding of polarity, metamorphosis and intensification is essential. In the first fourteen of the forty five lectures Steiner gave during a two week seminary for prospective teachers, he spoke of the duality of the human being – our generic being, our body, our race and sex, the culture in which we were raised, and its polarity which is our unique spiritual identity.[6] He went on to talk about the polarity of sympathy and antipathy in the education of children and about the three seven-year periods of child development. Today, when students are introduced to these themes, they can easily find their way into them through what they have gained as living experience of polarity in plant form and colours. They will also have experienced metamorphosis and intensification in plant and animal form, allowing them to readily, with exact imagination, enter into the metamorphosis and intensifications of child development.

Let us take one sentence from Steiner's lectures on the new art of education; he says: "Thoughts do not become gestures and they must become so once more".[7] If trainee teachers hear this in a lecture or webinar it is difficult or impossible for them to know what to do with it; it is likely to remain merely an interesting concept. If, however, the students have already – in an orientation course – studied colours and plants goetheanistically, then they will have *seen* and *thought* the gestures of those colours and plants. In that case they will be ready to have living thoughts themselves in their teacher training. The same thing applies to all other trainings. Goethean nature study is practical and engages the whole human being – not just the thinking but also the feeling and willing.

In medicine the polarity of the sense-nerve and metabolic-limb organisations is fundamental to a living understanding of both health and disease, as indicated by Steiner. As with the colours, this polarity is inwardly experienced as a living picture imagination, entered into with a water thinking to the point where our thoughts about this polarity themselves become gestures. Then it will be possible to have a genuine living conception of the related polarity of sclerosis and inflammation. Further, the student can now inwardly experience, as a language of gesture, the metamorphosis and intensification which is the progression of an illness.

In the performing arts faculty the living thought-gestures attain a bodily expression as physical gestures. This is how it is with the drama training of Chekhov developed out the indications of Steiner. Chekhov advised that trainee actors should observe

[6] R. Steiner, *The Study of Man*, GA 293.
[7] R. Steiner, *A Modern Art of Education*, GA 307, Lecture 4.

colours, plants and flowers, to discover the "gestures and qualities that are contained in them".[8] This could be extended to include the phenomenology of animal form. The pathway from the Orientation Course (Nature) in Goethean phenomenology to the performing arts faculty is clear but now needs to be developed, experienced and shared in the Network to enliven the artists and the art.

PHENOMENOLOGY

The word "phenomenology" is gaining considerable currency in the anthroposophical world, in both the arts and sciences – but what is meant by it exactly? Steiner refers to Goethean phenomenology as the foundation of anthroposophy, so this question is very important. Indeed, it is the key to a training in living thinking as an orientation course for all the faculties. If you look up "phenomenology" on Google, you will find it defined as the philosophy of "conscious experience and first-person perspectives". That is the phenomenology deriving principally from Edmund Husserl and his notion of "lived experience". Everything in this notion of phenomenology relates to what a human subject goes through or experiences in the performing arts, architecture, in studies of phenomena like water and colours – in all the fields. But that is not what Steiner means.

Steiner, around 1880 when he was a student, attended lectures of the psychologist and phenomenologist Franz Brentano at the University of Vienna, three years before Husserl who also became the student of Brentano at that university. It was from Brentano that Husserl learnt about phenomenological method and "lived experience" and it was this Husserlian version which has had such impact in the twentieth century, and still today. But Steiner, while professing to hold Brentano "in the highest esteem", took his own thinking on phenomenology in a very different direction – toward spiritual science.[9]

A phenomenon means "that which appears" and what appears is only the outward expression of a higher life, a spiritual idea which is invisible to the physical senses. For Steiner phenomenology is a form of *reading*; when we learn to read a phenomenon it becomes a revelation of this idea. Where is this idea – *behind* the phenomenon in a spiritual world? No, as Steiner by explains, it is inherent in the

[8] See J. Pitches, *Science and the Stanislavsky Tradition of Acting*, Routledge, London & NY, 2006. See Chapter 4: "A delicate empiricism: Romantic science and the Michael Chekhov technique".
https://library.uc.edu.kh/userfiles/pdf/1.Science%20and%20the%20Stanislavsky%20Tradition%20of%20Acting.pdf
[9] R. Steiner, "Franz Brentano: In Memoriam", *Riddles of the Soul*, GA 21.

phenomenon itself, like the meaning is inherent in the letters of a word if you can learn to read it.[10] It's as if the form becomes transparent to its meaning.

Steiner explains how this "reading" comes about: by submerging ourselves in the phenomenon lovingly; then "the idea comes from the phenomenon itself".[11] We cannot submerge ourselves in a phenomenon through the intellectual mind, through object thinking – it can only happen through heart thinking, through an exact form of feeling and willing. On the Orientation Course the students learn to do this by observing colours, leaves and flowers, animals and the form of the human being – then they later, in the faculties, can do the same with the phenomena of medicine, law, education, performing arts and all other studies.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND LIVING THINKING

Everyone now knows how quickly AI is entering and transforming our lives. To give just one example from one of the professions – law. Barrister and King's Counsel Sir Robert Buckland declares that "the development and deployment of AI judges is probably inevitable".[12] The truth is that AI is like the coming to fruition of a form of intelligence which has had a very long development. We could call it the apotheosis of the mechanistic mind. In the medieval universities the re-discovered Aristotelian logic provided the basis for learning in all the faculties, including law and theology.[13] After that the mechanistic mind was refined through the deductive sciences; it became the model for certainty, rationality, solidity, logical exactness of thinking which influenced all the subjects at modern universities, including the humanities. The only real knowledge, it came to be thought, was deductive scientific knowledge. Thus the phenomenon of "science envy" came into existence.

The transformation of human intelligence from ancient atavistic spirituality into the mechanistic mind has been a descent into materiality and spiritlessness – but this is the very act which has given thinking its certainty, its definiteness and solidity. AI can now serve as a mirror for us because in artificial intelligence we can discern clearly the image of our own mechanistic mind. A machine (AI information technology) can only think mechanistically. The mechanistic mind is extraordinarily clever but it is lifeless and what is lifeless can only see what is lifeless. This extraordinarily clever

[10] R. Steiner, *Reimagining Academic Studies*, op. cit, p.9.
[11] Ibid. p.13.
[12] R. Buckland, *AI, Judges and Judgement: Setting the Scene*, https://www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/mrcbg/publications/awp/awp220
[13] See C.H. Haskins, *The Rise of Universities*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 2007, p.41.

thinking can only see the mechanistic and physical aspect of reality. Like knows like: only what is living can comprehend the living.

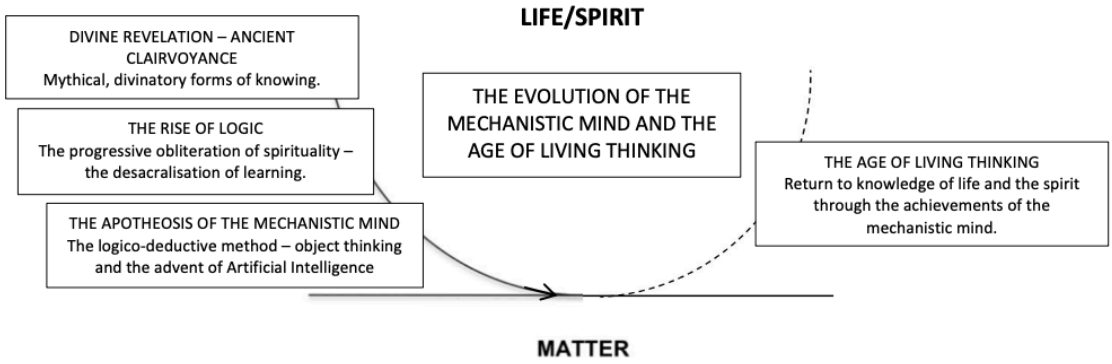
Art can help us to behold ourselves in the mirror. These are the perspicacious words of poet and novelist D. H. Lawrence:

> … To my mind there is a great field of science which is as yet quite closed to us. I refer to the science which proceeds in terms of life and is established on data of living experience and of sure intuition … Our science is a science of the dead world. Even biology never considers life, but only mechanistic functioning and apparatus of life…[14]

It is not just the so-called life sciences which are lifeless; the same thing applies to all the social sciences including politics, psychology, economics, law and to the various humanities disciplines. Nowhere, it would seem, in modern universities do you find a consciously developed living form of thought. Steiner describes living thinking as the capacity to experience thoughts, not as abstract concepts or theories, but as dynamic, formative forces, not merely "in the head" but containing the impulse of both feeling and will. Living thoughts have a gestural quality, growing and metamorphosing, coming to points of intensification, developing through an inner dynamic in the manner of an artistic act. They are dynamic like water but have other water-like properties – they are sensitive and receptive, able to conform themselves selflessly to another form or being.

An imaginal space is taking form in our time through the apotheosis of the mechanistic mind. It is a receptive space, fecund with the new. From out of this space the essential spirit of science speaks as the voice of the future and asks: what is the nature of a true science of life and how can it be educated at the tertiary level? The exactness but spiritlessness of mechanistic thinking is not negated - it transforms into its polarity, into an exact science of life and spirit. Through the veracity of this Imagination it becomes appropriate and accurate to speak of the advent of the age of living thinking.

[14] D. H. Lawrence, *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, Heinmann, London, 1961, p.6.



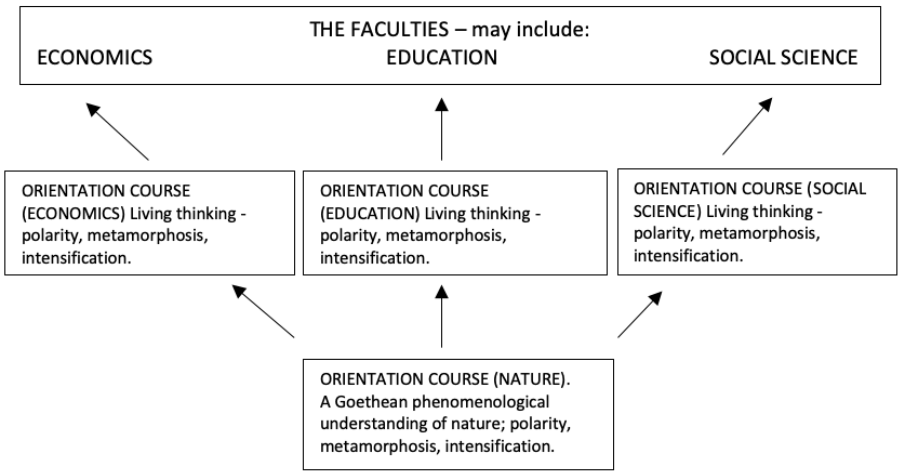
A PRACTICAL WAY FORWARD

Currently-existing anthroposophical adult education centres, cooperating with individual teachers, may decide to work in the ways outlined in this article; if they do, they can provide a firm foundation upon which to build. They can become the "seed faculties" for the creation of a Living Thinking University and take responsibility for the further development of the faculty. This may involve requesting others to create and teach unique courses.

The already-created Orientation Courses (Nature, Social Science, Education, Economics) can be used for all the Living Thinking Universities, anywhere it the world (or they can serve as a model for those who want to develop similar courses). When emailed to you they then can be used freely and indefinitely; a $150 (Aust) payment for all four courses will help cover the cost of maintaining the website of the Network. Samples of these courses can be found on the website. New orientation courses relating to different faculties can be created.

A first thing – if wished – is that interested people could undertake at least the Goethean phenomenology (Nature) course, to become familiar with what the students will be doing to cultivate living thinking. It can be done individually or ideally by a group or over a ten week period and would occupy about an hour and a half every week, including the meeting.

Here is the suggested structure of a Living Thinking University.



The term “university” is being used because of its special cultural and social significance. The “idea of the university” has evolved since the inception of these institutions in the medieval period and the time is ripe for a profound metamorphosis. In Australia the government controls the use of the term “university” and accredits the courses they run. It does so if they are what the government calls a “regulated entity” – that is, a business or corporation, receiving money and employing people. None of these things apply to the Living Thinking University Network nor to any Living Thinking University. The Living Thinking University is just a name, not even a business name – a name for a community held together by invisible threads. However, the faculties or research groups within the university may be businesses with their own website, receiving fees and paying teachers. Organisations don’t necessarily have to change what they already are in order to cooperate with others to form a Living Thinking University.

The unifying factors for the Living Thinking Universities are the Orientation Courses and the recognition of the need for a dedicated training in living thinking. The coordinators of this Network have no managerial or directorial role; the network is simply to promote and support cooperation between individuals and centres within the Network. Participants in the Living Thinking University Network work in freedom, as they should, within the cultural-spiritual sphere of the threefold social organisation.

TRIUNE NEWSLETTER

This newsletter will be one important way in which groups around the world can share information and ideas. New university initiatives can be described and contact

information provided. You are welcome to make contributions to the newsletter, even brief texts. It will be translated in languages other than English as necessary. You will find all previous editions of the newsletter on the website.

WEBSITE AND CONTACT

Please go to the following website to see more details about the Orientation Courses and other relevant information. This website will have a linking function for the international Living Thinking University Network, allowing different groups, organisations and individuals to find each other and to share methods and ideas. Living Thinking University initiatives in different countries will be listed.

The website address:

www.livingthinkingunetwork.com

If you are interested in being part of this network please write to:

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Nigel Hoffmann PhD was a Steiner high school teacher for eighteen years, in Australia and Switzerland. He is the author of *Goethe's Science of Living Form: The Artistic Stages*, Adonis Press, 2007; *The University at the Threshold: Orientation through Goethean Science*, Rudolf Steiner Press, 2020; and *Realising Society's Threefold Wholeness: A New Goetheanism*, Clairview Books, 2024.