

THE SEVEN LIFE PROCESSES

What does Rudolf Steiner mean by the seven life processes?

How can each one be characterized?

How do they apply to social processes?

Life processes at all levels of human existence

A single-celled organism can do anything. A single cell is omnipotent. A healthy, fertilized human egg cell is also omnipotent: It is sensitive, mobile, capable of nourishment, and exhibits all seven life processes. The life processes characterized below are valid at all levels of physical, mental, and spiritual life, but also for the various social processes. A social conflict always indicates that at least one of the life processes is severely disrupted in its function.

- **1. Opening, Breathing**

At the beginning of all life lies the opening to the environment. Something dead doesn't need an environment or a surrounding from which it lives. When something comes into life, it creates the surrounding it needs. Something dead can be lying wherever, for millions of years; it doesn't bother anyone. Something living can only exist if there is a surround with which an interplay of intake and release takes place. This makes all life vulnerable. Life is an open system, is developing, is a process, has a beginning and an end. Life therefore begins with opening. When egg and sperm meet, the egg's surface is open for a moment, allowing the sperm to enter, and then it closes again. This is how life begins. Opening to the perimeter also includes the opening of the senses, breathing, and nutrition. Only where spiritual and social openness prevails, human openness, can life flourish. We cannot remain closed off forever, holding our breath.

- **2. Warming, Adaptation**

Rudolf Steiner calls the second process warming up. It is a process of warming up to the circumstances. If this adaptation, this warming up to what is absorbed, fails, then the organism feels burdened and can become ill. For example, one catches a cold if one cannot warm the air one breathes sufficiently before it penetrates further into the body.

- **3. Nutrition**

Once one has warmed up to what has been absorbed, the work of nutrition begins. This is linked to processes of transformation. Nutrition always also means the destruction of what has become, what exists, in order to serve the developing being or to serve another being in its life context, so that it may become something new.

- **4. Separation, Decision, Excretion**

Once nourishment has taken place, the question arises:

What must be kept, what can be used further, and what must be excreted?

A decision is required—physiologically speaking, an excretion. Separation is, in psychological terms, the decision between yes and no. This is a very important life process, especially in social life—but also in thinking, when I have to decide whether something is right for me or not, whether I should continue in a certain way or not.

- **5. Self-Preservation**

Five is the number of crisis, and processes often get stuck there. Because the fifth process—self-preservation—is essentially beautiful: Now you have everything you need, you're strong, no one can knock you down so easily. You're secure, you have a house and garden, a car, money, a family, a career. Actually, you don't need anything more... and that's precisely what causes the crisis. You should ask yourself:

Am I only there for myself and my own needs?

Is it enough to provide for myself, or is there something else to do?

- **6. Growth**

Growth occurs when more is learned, when more is accumulated than one needs for oneself. This can continue into old age. For example, the German patient association 'Gesundheit aktiv' (Active Health) is made up of almost 90% retirees. We don't have any young recruits; it's very difficult to recruit new members. But these touching retirees, 70% of whom have absolutely no money, donate €10 or €20 a year.

Having surplus strengths means being able to see where you can still support something, where you can surpass yourself, and give something back to the world around you, thus showing your gratitude and joy in life. We can never thank and give back everything we have received in our lives. There is always a huge amount of what has been given. The growth process can bring this into consciousness a little by considering who or what you care about, so that other developments can be encouraged or new ones can emerge.

- **7. Reproduction**

The seventh life process leads entirely to selflessness: From this perspective, reproduction means completely detaching something from oneself and letting it go. The physical archetype for the healthy seventh life process is the cutting of the umbilical cord. The painful cut brings to consciousness the overcoming of oneself required for this. When you release something from oneself, it detaches itself and you let it go – like a good mother who lets her child go without making a contract with them about how many post cards and phone calls must be received so that the young person – even if they no longer live at home – may continue to be a 'good child'. You convey to them: "You are your own master now. I will still help you, but I am no longer the boss. You are no longer attached to my umbilical cord." This is reproduction in the sense of granting self-worth, of enabling an independent life.

Degeneration of Life Processes in Two Directions

All life processes can degenerate pathologically in two directions and fall outside of a healthy state of life due to too much or too little. Health is always a both/and, a precarious balance, a constant struggle – never an either/or. If one pole takes over, something becomes pathological. Humans are creatures of crisis. At every stage of their development, they are newly vulnerable and at risk:

1. A **disruption of the opening process** occurs when someone is too open or too closed.
2. A **disruption of the warming-up process** occurs when someone adapts too strongly or cannot adapt at all.
3. A **disruption of the nutritional process** occurs when someone eats or takes too much or too little.
4. A **disorder of the separation process** occurs when someone always throws or gives away everything, but also when someone is a hoarder, unable to throw anything away, and may therefore have two garages full of junk and things that weigh them down because they have no use for them.
5. A **disorder of the self-preservation process** occurs when someone is never satisfied with themselves and always feels that their achievements are insufficient, when they can never experience genuine joy in what they have accomplished and created.
6. A **disorder of the growth process** occurs when someone fails to develop surplus energy or is unable to feel gratitude.
7. A **disorder of the reproduction process** occurs when someone is unable to let go. Many social ills stem from this.

If we experience the seven life processes in their pathological state, we must address them, for example, in therapy, in such a way that we focus on the healthy, ideal states and attempt to counteract the unhealthy, life-threatening ones accordingly.

Life processes applied to thought life

The following is a small, concrete example concerning our own thinking:

1. Someone takes up an anthroposophical idea,
2. works through it to get used to it,
3. examines whether the idea nourishes them or not,
4. and discards it if they can't relate to it.
5. If so, they truly embrace the idea and consider what it means for their own life.
6. Over time, they gain experience in dealing with it,
7. ultimately discovering what they can do for the world with it.

Anthroposophy aims to address every individual who seeks to understand themselves, but who also seeks to recognise what is common to all, what is universally human. It is about both:

- becoming fully individual
- and growing beyond oneself into the fully universal.