

## The Importance of the First Three Years

Georg Kühlewind

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### **What is birth? The Ego and the Body**

At birth an Ego and an organism connect. The connection grows stronger in time. Brain physiology verifies that these two components of the human being exist. The different structures in the parts of the brain come about not by natural development, like hair or teeth, but by the corresponding activities of consciousness. So, for example, the structures in the centres of speech which enable the adult to speak fluently and without special effort, come about only after the small child begins to speak. The child first speaks without structures; structures develop afterwards only if the child speaks. The same holds for any specific human faculty and even for certain faculties of animals. There is someone who begins to speak and uses the body for its most complicated movements in the speech-organs. The conjunction of the Ego and the body is a long process and absolutely dependent on the influence and impact of the human environment.

### **Taking hold of the body**

If the child enjoys a healthy human environment, then the process of taking hold of the body by the Ego follows certain predictable steps, milestones in human development. The first human communicative gesture is eye-contact. Eye contact is one of the most natural features of the human child and perhaps just because it is so natural it is almost unexplainable. To the question: What is the child looking for when she makes eye contact? The only answer can be: the "look" of the partner. But what is "look?" It is not a point in the physiological eye, nor a physical point, it is a "doing" of the partner, hard to describe and specifically human (no-one can have this type of eye-contact with animals).

The next developmental point is the smile shared between the child and one adult person. Again, this is a specific human feature; no animal can smile. In the adult the smile differentiates into hundreds of meanings in the baby's smile, all possibilities are encompassed. (The next stage of development is in the use of the hands, but we won't deal with this because it is not specifically human). Attaining the upright position is a truly human gesture, to which there has been no natural stimulus; the upright position is physically much more unstable than being on four limbs. By rising on the feet, the hands become free, and the Ego is meeting the world face-to-face from a higher position; the head, site of most senses, is lifted higher than the trunk. This movement is not instinctual, as it is in the case of birds. Articulated speaking usually begins after standing in the upright position.

### **Acquiring the mother tongue**

The mother tongue is acquired by "imitation". This type of imitation goes much further than the sounding of the language spoken; it reaches the meaning of what is spoken and with that exceeds the achievements of any imitating animal, (for instance, the parrot). The main question is: how does the child get the meaning of the first hundred words? There is no possibility to "explain," because the explanations would have to be understood. Moreover, the fact is that even among adults the majority of the words given by the mother tongue ("yes", "no", "and", "but", etc.) cannot be explained.

The meaning of the spoken text reaches the child by the child's attentiveness, in the manner of mute archetypal direct communication, (used still today by traditional archaic people in Australia, Africa or Asia). The "feeling-attentiveness" of the child is sensing the "speaking intention" of the adult (without the mediation of the spoken language). The words and the grammar help to break down into parts (elements of any thinking) the one meaning of the sentence which the child feels. There is no other explanation of how the child gets the meaning of the communication.

### **What does language do with the child?**

Every child is born with a sensitivity to meaning, comes to the world "tuned" to meaning that cannot be taught because any teaching presupposes it already. This capacity to understand meaning is in the child general and unstructured. The first "understandings" (we have no words for this capacity) are the largest concepts or ideas. The first uttered syllable ("da", "tha", "ma", etc.) has the meaning of "world", everything but me; everything is "tha": the milk, the parents, the things, warmth, etc. This first syllable with the broadest meaning differentiates later into names and concepts for things and activities. This differentiating of language provides the prototype patterns for thinking. The words structure the world into things, doings, properties, modes, etc. The grammar connects these fragments into unities.

This means that the elements of thinking enter into the consciousness of the child by the mother tongue. This will be the pattern of the thinking for the first 8-10 years; later thinking emancipates itself from these patterns by the influence of modern civilization. To think in concepts, words and grammar (taught by the mother-tongue) presupposes a more general capacity of "understanding" or sensitivity to meaningfulness. Any child could have any language as his or her mother-tongue according to the speaking human environment, the mother tongue makes



the general understanding more specific. The mother-tongue is not inherited, and this has deep bearing on the anthropology of the child. Consciousness is “free-born”, i.e., patternless, not prepared for using a specific inherited language. The speech organs are totally free as well, to be then used in a certain way, according to the sound palette and phonology of the mother tongue. Language teaches a system of thinking and at the same time, it structures (through language-given concepts) the world of sense-perception as well as the inner psychological world. By structuring the world in a meaningful way language structures, the soul according to a power that was called in ancient times the Logos: the meaning-creating power of the world. This structuring of the soul appears as the meaningful, expressive behaviour of the child.

In acquiring speech or language the main factor in attentiveness is the feeling attention which can reach anything in the world, because everything has a feeling quality. By this cognitive feeling ancient people succeeded in making technology without analytical science. They built large and beautiful buildings or pyramids without calculations, they made ceramics and enamels without knowledge of chemistry, they found medicinal herbs and substances and healing-procedures without using trial and error methods. There is no evidence of trial and error, such as collapsed buildings or heaps of waste ceramics.

The feeling attentiveness of the small child can only help to understand the spoken communication if in the speaker there is something present to be felt: the inner reality of the speaking-intention, the attentiveness by which she or he turns to the child. If speaking happens without the whole dedication, only with a fraction of attentiveness, mechanically, without feeling attentiveness or love, then the child gets only a fraction of the reality of the speech. All the structuring of the soul, the world, thinking and feeling in a meaningful way will be defective or lacking. The results will be speech- disturbances, behavior disturbances, psychological illness or psychoses, and physical illness in a generation of children. Because even parents today seldom have the will,

time and energy to occupy themselves with their child, more and more problematic children arise. In state homes for abandoned children the staff are over-burdened. There is no time, or energy to give each child the minimum of care, attention, and love. Apart from this, lacking instinctive pedagogical feeling, the staff very seldom get the corresponding training (and so they don't know what effects they have caused by their behaviour towards the children). The importance of the first three to four years in the acquisition of speech is decisive in affecting the whole psychological and spiritual structure of the human being. Changing this later on is not impossible but very difficult.

### **The substance of the soul**

The substance of the soul is made of the substance of the Ego. Ego or human attentiveness is a potential to acquire any language, even more than one mother tongue and through language the art of thinking. Language lives on three different levels: phonology (palette of sounds and rules of their usage) vocabulary (words); and grammar (including syntax). The acquiring of all three levels is superrational. An example of this is the unmediated understanding of communications or the acquiring of grammar by the child. What interests us most now is thinking in language, because the whole constitution of the soul depends on the first thinking gestures which are still guided by cognitive feelings, not separated from the will. There are two kinds of thinking. The first is thinking in terms of concepts (already acquired understandings). The second is connecting, differentiating and expanding the concepts. This is original thinking, in which new concepts are found or built, new thoughts are conceived or understood for the first time. Both capacities are forms of attentiveness. There is the ability to "perceive" (acoustic or other) sense-perceptible signs and their meanings in the acquisition of language. There is the ability to "find" new meanings, not given by other beings from outside. These meanings are not linked yet with signs, i.e., with sense-perceptible symbols, so that the "finder" of them has to provide the signs in order that the new ideas become communicable.

Both kinds of attentiveness, and articulated feelings, ideas, concepts, memories, even illusions are experiences that belong to someone (not to something) whose experiences or memories they are, a subject we call "Ego". "Ego" is the capacity of being attentive, to dedicate oneself to "meaning". This capacity can function without self-consciousness as in the small child or in ancient people. In this case it is guided by influences and circumstances. And attentiveness is aroused by a "will" from outside. It can also work with self-consciousness, when it is kindled and directed by the will of the Ego itself. That is the reason we know without thinking about it that all experiences we make or have made are our experiences. This "knowledge" doesn't have its origin in the object, but it is intrinsic to attentiveness itself, and we usually suppose that it mediates the experiences. Attentiveness or the Ego takes the shape for a short time of what is experienced, it becomes "that" and identifies with the "object" for a short time. This is not experienced usually because of its brevity.

This "identification" is the reason why the structuring of attentiveness keeps shaping both the ego, and the personality of the small child. If it receives whole speech, which is the outer and the inner reality, (or meaning), and if the meaning is present in the speaker and can be experienced by the attentiveness of the child, the Ego will be structured in a healthy way. The will, feeling and thinking will be in harmony. If the speech in the environment of the child is



defective (not whole speech), there is little or no inner reality to be experienced, because attentiveness, dedication or love is lacking. The personality will be misshapen and missing the harmony of the three soul functions. False speech especially has this effect, when the words uttered, and the feeling of the speaker don't correspond to each other.

The reality necessary for the functioning of human attentiveness is meaning itself. The question of the existence of meaning is a philosophical problem, but here we have to presuppose its existence. Otherwise, the phenomena of speech and thinking cannot be understood or even described.

For further reading on this view of the very young child, see Karl König's *The First Three Years* and Joan Salter's *The Incarnating Child*.

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*Georg Kühlewind (1924-2006) was a well-known anthroposophical author and lecturer. His books include "Becoming Aware of the Logos", "Forgiving", "From Normal to Healthy", "The Life of the Soul", "Logos-Structure of the World, Stages of Consciousness", "Working with Anthroposophy and Star Children". He has laid special emphasis on the relationship of inner meditative exercises to the development of new forms of thinking. In his later years he took a deep interest in the young child, especially in the first three years.*

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