

Soul Hygiene and Longevity for Educators and Teachers

David Mitchell

“Jack and the Beanstalk” is David Mitchell’s point of departure to explore meditation, resilience, cooperation, and the inner tasks of teachers. Concrete examples illustrate some of the obstacles we might face, but David also shows a way forward. His essay is an encouragement to become a truly engaged teacher, to meditate, and to become aware of the present.

Jack and the Beanstalk

“Jack and the Beanstalk,” as told by Andrew Lang, contains a subtle message for teachers seeking long, healthy careers in Waldorf schools. Jack trades a white milk cow for three beans and subsequently grows an immense beanstalk that stretches through the clouds into an unknown realm. Faith, childhood wonder, and trust allow Jack to make his beanstalk grow and to undertake his adventure. Eventually, he gains treasure in the form of a basket full of golden eggs.

The soil has to be robust to provide for his beans’ healthy root growth. This is where it all begins. The first and most important lesson for teachers is that we must enter the first day of our teaching profession, and each day thereafter, with our feet firmly on the ground. We need to be fully present and wakeful in all that we do with children.

Meditate, despite obstacles

But what about the beans and the beanstalk that grows from them? What can we use to allow us to climb as Jack did? Fortunately, we have many meditations, exercises, and thoughts from Rudolf Steiner that we can cultivate, like Jack’s three beans. With effort, steadfastness, and ever-renewed striving, we can grow our own beanstalks and ascend from everyday consciousness to an experience of our higher selves and the transformation of our habitual life of thought. This acquired consciousness transcends the day-to-day; it is empty and free and is achieved by concentrated attention and active, dedicated, inner work.

In the fairy tale Jack possesses a playful spirit; this mood is indicative of the gentleness of will that we cultivate as we enter into our meditative, transformative work. We create a space, as that of a child in quiet play, and allow ourselves to arrive at this space empty of judgment and expectation. Knowing this is a first step, but in doing it we face obstacles.

Many teachers in North America find it a challenge to establish and maintain a meditative practice. Western culture presents us with a host of distractions to the development of our meditative work. As we work to develop the refined soul force of imagination, we are flooded with diverting pictures from television, billboards, and movies—media that can easily fill our souls with falsehoods. It makes sense that the medieval monks took oaths of poverty to help them, absent everyday distraction, to gain this higher imagination. Further, a rhythmical, cloistered life was conducive to the purification of the astral body.

Facing distraction

As we strive to awaken to the higher soul quality of inspiration, we are bombarded by a cacophony of sounds—sounds from the technology we live with, music in every store we shop in, and the omnipresent, isolating iPod. This constant barrage of noise blocks or muffles our ability to listen to our own thoughts. The monks took oaths of obedience to cultivate higher inspiration and used chants and prescribed prayers from the Abbott to listen inwardly.

The higher soul power of intuition, an act of union, is dulled by our society’s fixation on sex—a yearning for union made physical—alcohol, and drugs. All of this becomes a distraction from higher intuition. The monks, of course, took vows of abstinence. Modern men and women look in vain to places other than themselves to hear the words of the gods. We are not permitted an



Essene existence, nor the protection of the abbey wall—we must transform ourselves and develop amid the dissonance and turbulence of modern life.

Our own childhood miseducation continually surfaces and threatens to influence our teaching. Our habits of thought cloud the philosophical foundations to which we dedicate ourselves. Our biographies present us with challenges at every turn. Each of these challenges also presents opportunities for growth. Given these overwhelming obstacles, however, how can we help ourselves to become the best Waldorf teachers we are capable of becoming?

The Practice of Inner Strength and Gracefulness

When we first encounter Waldorf education, we experience a curriculum that is both powerful and unique, but a curriculum alone does not make our schools special. What we, as aspiring Waldorf teachers, do is equally important.

We soon realize that Waldorf education is not a method alone; it depends upon active individual deepening and development through personal study and active involvement in spiritual science. A teacher's inner work energizes the curriculum and makes Waldorf education stand out from other educational philosophies in that every subject is related to the evolving human being. Today, the world and everything in it have become subject to question. The manner in which questions are posed, however, leads us deeper into chaos instead of toward resolution. Unexamined assumptions about the control of nature, the separation between human beings and the cosmos, and the lack of meaning in existence threaten our ability even to ask proper questions. Expanding consciousness requires the right questions.

Fortunately, Steiner offered some helpful and straightforward ways to develop our consciousness and to strengthen our soul forces. Working out of anthroposophy, each of us as a striving Waldorf teacher needs to take three particular steps in anthroposophical training if we wish to expand our everyday consciousness. These steps involve concentration, meditation, and active participation in our own moral development and may be described as follows:

- Concentration, in which we focus our consciousness on a freely chosen object and hold it fast;
- Meditation, in which we stay in our thought powers with an object, living with it but not pondering it intellectually; and
- Life-Guidance, in which we take ourselves on in our own moral development and actively guide ourselves in developing our own capacities for love, patience, and perseverance.



Athletic training exercises the muscles required for a particular physical skill. The development of consciousness also requires training, and the three steps listed above are exercises toward the attainment of a higher perspective, inner strength, and mobility.

We know that who we are as striving persons is as important as what we teach. Anyone who has taught children can confirm this. Children see right into our inner core, and we reach them in subtle ways beyond merely presenting a clever lesson plan.

Artistic Activity leads to Resilience

As teachers, it is also necessary that we look after our own personal hygiene, soul, and body, so that we can be properly present for our children. How we re-create ourselves is important if we want to succeed in our work. Cultivating interest in the arts, music, sculpture, painting, crafts, and reading are activities that rebuild the forces we exhaust in our teaching. Especially in our modern age, which often centres on passive entertainment, artistic activity is a potent healer. Conscious artistic development is an activity that rewards us with newfound strengths.

John Gardner, a pioneer in Waldorf education in North America, offered the following maxims for hygiene of the will:

- Always have in mind an aspect of yourself that needs strengthening.
- Always do what you promised yourself to do.
- Fight to establish order and rhythm in your life.
- Keep in touch with nature.
- Always be engaged in some form of creative art.
- Honor and properly prepare for sleep.
- Learn to pray.
- Do not squander strength for the illusion of pleasure.

The Seasons' Rhythms

Reflecting on my own teaching, I recognize helpful rhythms of the year. The summer, when many external pressures are removed, is best for creating an overview for the coming year. We do our background reading and gather our resources. We can use the summer's outbreath to prepare the mood for the year. We can separate essentials from non-essentials. We are carried by the enthusiasm of the coming new year.

Once the academic year begins, we have to take each day one at a time and pay attention to detail. In the autumn I feel my will forces to be strong, but by Lent I always feel weaker. During



the holiday break I prepare my blocks up to the mid-winter vacation. Then I try to organize the details up to spring break, after which I am finally able to prepare for the period that lasts until the end of school. At this time, I always begin to feel restored by the forces of spring and the returning light of the sun. We must learn to observe our own rhythms and plan our preparation time accordingly, allowing for months that may be difficult for us.

Walk, Sleep and more Rhythms

Each year, as extra meetings and late-night preparation begin to sap our strength, I remember that the prime sleeping time is in the hours before midnight, and I try to take advantage of it by going to bed earlier. The average person requires three successive nights of such sleep to restore themselves. I have always found that I can restore myself by doing this.

Steiner emphasized the importance of walking in the morning before meeting our students. This allows our thoughts to stir about in us and our ideas to metamorphose and transform. It is especially important to plan time specifically for ourselves and to be firm about holding to it. This will bring energy to our tasks and allow us to discover other aspects of our own being.

Establishing, maintaining, understanding, and working in harmony with our bodily rhythms help to keep us healthy. Every day brings profound changes in our mental and physical condition as our body and brain alternate between states of high activity during the waking day and recuperation, rest, and repair during nighttime sleep. These cycles are not a passive response to the world around us—they are prearranged and driven by an internal clock. Have you ever noticed that you can wake up within minutes of the time you intended to get out of bed? How does this happen?

Our organs and mental powers show evidence of more than one hundred circadian rhythms. We each have internal prime times during the day when we are mentally alert and fresh. We also have external prime times when we need external stimuli or interactions to motivate us. We need to pay attention to these biological times and prepare ourselves. Keeping a weekly log can help to identify individual peaks and troughs.

Other external rhythms affect us as well. The week also has rhythms. In antiquity, the seven days of the week were named after the planets: Monday for the Moon, Tuesday for Tyr or Tiwaz or for Mars, Wednesday for Wotan or Odin or for Mercury, Thursday for Thor or Jupiter, Friday for Frigg or for Venus, Saturday for Saturn, Sunday for the Sun. Studying the qualities of the planets

gave the ancients the astral characteristics of each day and their influence on the feeling life of human beings; these influences work beneath the threshold of waking consciousness. The seven days of the week also accord with the laws of the musical scale, which ascends in seven notes and reaches the beginning again with the eighth, one octave higher. This pattern may be imagined as a corkscrew spiralling upward.

The days of the week have the following overarching qualities for a teacher:

- Monday is a day of reflection.
- Wednesday is a day of movement.
- Thursday is a day of future promise.
- Friday is a day of enhancement.
- Saturday is a day of heaviness and rebuilding.
- Sunday is a day of peaceful contemplation and uniting with nature.

Sadly, the Sunday experience has been greatly diluted in our busy modern times and we can renew it only through effort.

The moon rhythm affects our entire being. It is a rhythm roughly equal to four times seven, or twenty-eight days. Human beings have evolved and become largely free of nature's control, but the moon exerts tremendous power over the earth's fluid elements, as seen in the ebb and flow of the tide at the seashore. Some claim that the moon's cycles affect our powers of imagination and spiritual productivity. Practicing self-observation helps us become aware of these subtle effects on us and how we can use them to our advantage.

The rhythm of the sun brings us to a full awakening in our earthly bodies. As mentioned above, light activates our circadian rhythms. Sunlight affects our moods and is necessary for our sustenance. Imagine what the power of light-filled thought does for the health of our souls if we apply it. As the sun is necessary for the heliotropic upright tendency in plants, the sun in its yearly rhythm supports the uprightness and health of our etheric beings.

Look Back and Renew Your Energy

Children need the etheric strength of their teachers. After the school day is completed, teachers frequently feel drained and tired. This is because the children have sapped our etheric strength. The way to rebuild this is through the activity Steiner called the *Rückschau*, or review. This activity, usually done in the evening, involves going backward through the day in memory, capturing significant activities without passing judgment on them. Many teachers have found, however, that it is also beneficial to do a review right after school ends. We set aside a few moments of quiet time for this. Then we can become quite refreshed before meeting our family and other obligations. A regular *Rückschau* is still performed in the evening. Other exercises in Steiner's *How to Know Higher Worlds* can help us to build up our "etheric insulation."

If we teach older children, those who are entering or in puberty, then we need to strengthen our astral bodies. Adolescents swim in astrality and it is their right to do so. They need teachers who can remove subjectivity from their thinking and work objectively. Steiner's *Practical Training in Thought* is an important aid to accomplishing this difficult task.

Cooperation

To work intensively with other human beings is a great gift. We form deep friendships and gain a sense of brotherhood through working together. There are also shadows in such work. Each of us invests so much in our work that it is easy to think we "own" it. We can become possessive of ideas we did not create ourselves. We can become the guardians of dogmatic principles. We may fall prey to fixed ideas or build castles out of thoughts that we then feel obliged to defend. We become knights who protect these little subjective castles of abstract thoughts. We speak, then, to another person's castle and not to the person. Such illusions may easily cause huge,



disruptive interpersonal difficulties. We may become fixated on a colleague's difficulties and blind to his or her strivings.

If we picture meditatively each evening such a colleague bathed in a golden light, we may avoid an emotional spider's web. During this meditation we have to remove all subjective thoughts and try to stir up feelings of sympathy in our own souls. Sometimes this activity requires many repetitions before we notice a change in our attitude.

To work together collegially requires that we have confidence in each other and that we speak our thoughts directly to one another. Gossip undermines a group's confidence. We must continue to use judgment and discrimination when dealing with our colleagues' problems, but when these flow into idle chatter, we violate the social fabric of a school's community. We must be careful not to wear our hearts on our sleeves, and we must beware of the trap of gossip that would lure us into illusory disputes which can bubble up from second-hand talk. Gossip may also act like a boomerang—eventually, the gossipers themselves become the object of destructive conversations. We must learn to observe the striving in each of our colleagues and not be caught by recognition only of their negative sides or doubles.

A Basket Full of Golden Eggs

John Ruskin (1819–1900) author of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, recognized the social health required for longevity in one's work, and he listed three necessary ingredients:

- You must want to do the work.
- You must experience your success and see it recognized by your colleagues.
- You must be careful to not do too much.

Steiner tells us again and again to strive for equilibrium—to bring some joy into our sadness and some sadness into our joy. We each need to find a colleague who is a safe “listening ear,” who is not judgmental, with whom we can share our struggles and from whom we can get advice. We all need to strengthen our egos; we must strive to not take everything that happens in our schools personally; and, finally, we have to learn to accept our own personal destinies.

Steiner gave four guiding beacons as guides toward health in his lectures to the teachers at the first Waldorf school:

- A teacher must be a person of initiative. [The teacher must tend to the hygiene of his or her ego.]
- A teacher must be interested in all that exists in the world. [The teacher must tend to the hygiene of his or her astral body.]

- A teacher must never compromise with truth. [The teacher must tend to the hygiene of his or her etheric body.]
- A teacher must always be fresh, never sour. [The teacher must tend to the hygiene of his or her physical body.]

The path of a striving Waldorf teacher is one of constant inner discovery and adventure. When we are in tune with ourselves, clear in our direction, and able to recognize our soul's hygienic needs, then we will find the greatest success and joy in our work. This will be our basket full of golden eggs.

David Mitchell was a Waldorf teacher first in England, then in Norway, and finally back home in the United States, where he took a class through the cycle, has been a Life Science teacher in the high school, and a teacher trainer. His passions were practical, kinesthetic, and experiential learning. He led wilderness Vision Quests, was a blacksmith, woodworker, and taught stone sculpture.

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