

The Senses as Doorways of Relating

by Stephen Spitalny

*Our sense perceptions provide the basis for
the rest of our soul life.*

Rudolf Steiner

Anthroposophy (A Fragment), p. 98

*Now, this means that the first three years of life are those which prepare the child to become a member of the humanity. Man is born out of the isolation in which he existed in the maternal womb, because there he was nothing else but an isolated, developing being; a being given up to cosmic powers; a being spun into its own karma. This however is a germ which unfolds and grows into walking, into speaking and communicating, and into thinking and imparting, thereby developing the prerequisites for a social life... We also know that something else develops out of walking, speaking and thinking. The sense of word develops out of walking and thereby speaking comes into being; the sense of thought develops out of speaking and thereby thinking emerges, while the sense of Ego develops out of thinking and thereby the knowledge, the immediate sensory experience arises that the other person is an individual. You see, walking, speaking and thinking are the prerequisites for a social organism. (Karl König, *Man As A Social Being and the Mission of Conscience* pps. 38-39)*

Sense organs are communication links between the organism and the world around. Through the senses we receive images, or information, by which we learn to relate to ourselves, the world around us and each other. The senses are providing the information by which the *I* is able to be active and engage. Human beings perceive and experience the world through the sense organs.

The information, or images, received as sense impressions are taken into the human organism through the window of the soul leading to responses and/or reactions in thinking, feeling and/or willing.

*Let me put it this way: we are here; the world is outside us. We perceive this world, we take in what it has to give us, as it were, and we continue to carry this in our soul as we go about the world. The objects are outside us, the beings are outside us, and what they impart to us through our perception of them we carry with us in our soul. [as mental picture, as memory.] (R. Steiner, *The Realm of Language*, Dornach, 7/17/1915, p. 1)*

Young children being primarily will-oriented beings thereby have an impulse toward imitating what they perceive, to do what they see. Adults may think about, or feel, or do something in response to a sense experience.

Adult bodies and souls are already formed, but young children are in a process of forming their bodies and developing soul response patterns that are affected by all of their experiences. Sensory experiences are part of what is forming them. The I interacts with the world through its own soul, and it is the soul and body that sense impressions imprint upon. Also at work are other levels of sense experience, not noticeable by most adults. Children before age seven directly experience the moods, feelings and thoughts of the adults in their environment. The young child is wholly a sense organ, quite a bit like a sponge, soaking in all levels of experience into the process of forming their physical body and their soul life.

All of these experiences, all of the sense perceptions and non-sensory awareness (of feelings and thoughts) relate to the developing child as formative qualities. The child receives myriad images from the natural world around him, from human adults in his world, and even in the light streaming towards him from the stars and planets, all as substance for his formative forces to utilize in forming the organs, and creating patterns of soul and personality.

It is important to consider the source of the images received by the child. Are the images healthy for a developing being? Are the images truthful and following laws of nature and cosmos? Are they images electronically created and crafted to create consumers? Adults have the responsibility for the environment in which the child is immersed, as part of guiding the young child into the world. A consideration of what images we want for our developing child, and what is the source of those images must be part of our awareness.

There are at least twelve senses that are conduits for receiving images and perceptions of various kinds. It is through the senses that one relates to the world around them as well as relating to human beings. All sense impressions are images of a kind, touch, sound, taste all are received by the human being as an image. One could say it is images that form the young child, that form the human being; images of all kinds including images of human activity in their environment, images streaming toward earth from the cosmos and images from the world of nature around us. Human organs are formed and developed out of images received from the cosmos and from the human beings around them. We come from the cosmos, and cosmic images form our physical being and constitute our life forces.

The etheric body which develops in the human being is a world in itself. One might say that it is a universe in the form of images...It is of extraordinary significance that we, in our descent into earthly life, draw together forces from the universal ether and thus take with us, in our ether body, a kind of image of the cosmos. If one could extract the ether body of a person at the moment when he is uniting himself with the physical body, we should have a sphere which is far more beautiful than any formed by mechanical means – a sphere containing stars, zodiac, sun and moon. These configurations of the ether body remain during embryonic development, while the human being grows together more and more with his physical body...Indeed they remain right into the seventh year, until the change of teeth. (Steiner, May 26, 1922, Dornach)

Steiner described the life senses, or the lower senses, as those that give experiences of one's own body. Through the sense of **Touch** one experiences one's own limits. The sense receptors are the skin, the covering around our entire body. We usually are not aware of our sense of **Life** because it is a general feeling of well-being, of physical harmony. We only experience this sensing when our life processes are out of balance, as sensed by the body's inner organs. Then we feel out of sorts and ill at ease. This sense is connected to how well one is nourished by rest, nutrition and immune system health.

Dr. Susan Johnson (www.youandyourchildshealth.org) describes the function of the sense of life as determining whether to tell the bodily organism to be dominated by the parasympathetic nervous system or the sympathetic system. The sympathetic system is active when there is stress on the system, whether it is food that cannot be digested or anxiety due to others' behavior, and makes the body ready for fight or flight reactions, as well as inhibiting digestion. The parasympathetic system can be called the rest and digest system, creating feelings of safety calm, and allowing the body to be relaxed and take in experiences in a manner that feels safe and can be digested. We as the adults have to create an environment without stress where the child can function from the relaxed place of their parasympathetic nervous system.

The sense of **Self Movement** is how we experience our own body moving in space and nerve cells in the muscles and joints are the sense organs, and how freely we move through space. The sense of **Balance** is both the equilibrium of the body in space, as well as inner balance and calm. The physical organ that senses balance is the inner ear. These four lower senses deliver the relationship of self to body.

It is vitally important to support the development of these four life senses on the young child. Babies need to experience loving, warm touch. They need to be held and cuddled. We need to be aware of how much touch any particular child needs; some have difficulty with the same type of touch that others enjoy. There are 'touch-sensitive' children and we have to support them in getting the particular kinds of touch they need. Many babies and young children are calmed by gentle foot squeezing and massage, though for some their feet are too sensitive and ticklish. A life of daily rhythms supports the developing life sense in the young child. Regular meal times and sleeping times including napping (read *The 7 O'Clock Bedtime: Early to bed, early to rise, makes a child healthy, playful, and wise* by Inda Schaenen.) Calmness at mealtimes is a also big help.

Young children need the opportunity to move freely! Activities involving free exploration of nature, and climbing, and rolling all support the developing sense of movement. Bodily experiences of freedom are the basis for the possibility of the free human being. Hindrances in this development include time spent in car seats, time in baby walkers and bouncers at a time when they are still unable to stand or walk, and time spent in front of electronic screen entertainments.

The developing sense of balance is also aided by rolling and climbing, also spinning round and round. Walking on narrow surfaces such as balance beams, and hopping from one step to another are examples of balance development activities.

Through the senses of **Smell, Taste, Sight, and Warmth** the human being brings some of the world into itself and becomes aware of their relation to the world. These 'middle' senses bring awareness of the relationships of the self to the world around. Warmth is both physical and soul temperature and is sensed *in relation to* one's own warmth. Warmth perception stimulates the human being to warm or cool himself to the degree necessary to meet the other.

The higher senses relate the self to other human beings, and can be considered the spiritual senses. Through these senses we find our connection to other human beings. The four higher senses develop out of the foundation of the life senses. Each of the life senses supports the development of a particular higher sense as the individual grows and matures throughout life. The life senses give information about the human being's own body while the same function turned outwards gives similar information yet it is about another person, not one's self. The lower senses turned outwards are higher, spiritual senses, delivering information about the other the human being with whom we are interacting. In a sense, when one is receiving information through the higher senses, it is out-of-body experience.

The child's sense of balance, whose sense organ is the inner ear, is a foundation for the sense of **Hearing** the other – not the words, but the way the words are used, the musicality of sound and tone. Through this we experience not the content, but the intent of the words we hear spoken. Young children understand the meaning of what is spoken through their sensing of tone, long before they understand the words of a language. Hearing is the only one of the higher senses that is based in a physical organ. Hearing the other requires an inner stillness and calm, an inner quiet, so that sound sensations can be received.

The sense of our own body's movement through space supports a sense for the **Speech, or Word**, of the other. Through this sense one gets an experience of how the words of another human being move. And to understand another's ideas we must hear them expressed as words. When one has freedom and flexibility of movement, it is easier to move along with the spoken words of another person.

The sense of life, an inner sense of one's general physical harmony and well-being, is needed for a sense for the **Idea**, or the **Concept**, of the other. This is how one can experience the thinking of another human being. What is the idea this person is trying to express? Just as the sense of life is a sort of gauge for etheric balance, the sense of thought of the other is also a sensing of the etheric world, the world where thinking lives. We relate to each other in understanding by means of the thinking which is revealed in speech. Hearing, Word and Idea senses work together when, for instance, one wonders; 'What I hear you saying is this. Is this what you mean? Is this the idea you are trying to convey?'

The sense of touch is the other end of the spectrum of the sense of the **Ego of the other**. A developed sense of physical touch underlies the capacity to touch the very being of another individual human being whom one meets and experiences.

The perception of another human being is image sensation; as actuality, stands the fulfillment of what the sense of touch gives, so that, in this inwardness, the reality is given wherein the sense of touch is grounded. (Steiner, Anthroposophy (A Fragment), p. 203)

The ability to sense the Ego of another is based on a confidence in one's own awareness of self. 'I can let you into my inner life, because I trust in my awareness of who I am.'

Man as far as he is at rest, as far as he is the motionless human figure which has so to speak the head at its center, is the organ of perception for the Ego of the other. In this way the organ of perception for the Ego of the other human being is the biggest organ of perception which we have and we ourselves are as physical man the biggest organ of perception which we have. (R. Steiner, Das Ratsel des Menschen. Die Geistigen Hintergrunde der menschlichen Geschichte, July 29 – Sept. 3, 1916, from Karl König, Man As A Social Being and the Mission of Conscience, p. 137)

The sense of Ego of the Other works in sleeping and waking – we 'fall asleep,' in a sense, into the other, and then immediately reawaken back in ourselves. This is a sort of higher breathing process which works in a matter of seconds only. (see chapter 5) Empathy is based on sensing the other, and falling asleep to one's self.

Another way to think about Steiner's depiction of twelve senses is to consider them as eight senses. There are the four middle senses of Smell, Taste, Sight, and Warmth, and there are but four other senses. These other four have both an inward aspect and an outward aspect. They are Touch/Ego, Life/Idea, Movement/Word and Balance/Hearing. Any way you delineate the senses, they are the conduits for the images that are the nutrition for the body and soul of the developing child. Through various flows of sensation and information to the human being through the sense organs raw material is received for the building up of body and soul. It is these images that form the developing human, both in his physical form and functioning, as well as his soul constitution.

Are there still higher and lower senses? Yes – those mentioned thus far represent just a partial list. Other senses exist both above and below those we have discussed. (R. Steiner, p. 19, A Psychology of Body, Soul and Spirit, 10/23/1909)

The healthy development of the life senses, the four 'lower' senses, requires a healthy diet of images so those senses develop to their fullest possibility. Then is in place a sound foundation for

the much later development of the higher senses, the capacities for sensing the other. These are truly social senses, and are the basis for understanding and empathy for others. Attention to the development of the senses in young human beings is at the core of an education attempting to renew culture and create a fertile ground for human connecting. These twelve senses are the doorways to relating the self to the body, the self to the world around and the self to other human beings.

The human being has a hunger for sense impressions. (Dennis Klocek, *Knowledge, Teaching and the Death of the Mysteries*, lecture 2) It is because sense impressions form us at a young age and can nourish and rejuvenate us later in life. The modern world is running amok with images. We are bombarded with images from media of all kinds, from electronic screens to billboards and magazines and t-shirts. One can sense a sort of image craving in our world perhaps because the human being is seeking images that are 'healthy' in the midst of so much that is not. Life giving, life affirming images are vitally important for the young child. The development of the senses in the young child, especially the four 'life senses,' is a full time activity. Images, sense experiences of nature, of other human beings, of nutritious and wholesome food are what nourish the young child as they develop their own sense apparatus and the neurological structure to process those sense impressions. Electronically generated images are in fact a hindrance to this development. (see books and articles by Joseph Chilton Pearce, Keith Buzzell, etc...)

*We can see the rise of what might be called cultural autism. The symptoms? Tunneled senses, and feelings of isolation and containment. Experience, including physical risk, is narrowing to about the size of a cathode ray tube, or flat panel if you prefer. Atrophy of the senses was occurring long before we came to be bombarded by the latest generation of computers, high-definition TV, and wireless phones....But the new technology accelerates the phenomenon. "What I see in America today is an almost religious zeal for the technological approach to every facet of life," says Daniel Yankelovich, the veteran public opinion analyst. This faith, he says, transcends mere love for new machines. "It's a value system, a way of thinking, and it can become delusional." ...In *The Necessity of Experience* [Edward Reed] wrote, "There is something wrong with a society that spends so much money, as well as countless hours of human effort – to make the least dregs of processed information available to everyone everywhere and yet does little or nothing to help us explore the world for ourselves." None of our major institutions or our popular culture pay much notice to what Reed called "primary experience" – that which we can see, feel, taste, hear, or smell for ourselves. (Richard Louv, *Last Child In the Woods*, p. 64-65)*

In sensing we have an experience of the thing sensed, the thing generating the sensation, but we do not experience the sensing itself. We only experience that which is creating the sensation. The activity of sensing is below the level of conscious awareness. Young children, through their senses, touch the creator of the thing being sensed. They connect with the creator beings and living concepts that stand behind sense impressions. Images that are filled with life and that come from life nurture and nourish the young child. The child's etheric body and his soul thrive from these life-enriched images, rather than a diet of electronically created images that have no origin in life.

Deep Connecting

By allowing the ego of the other to speak their ideas through their words, by truly entering into their being through deep listening, then our own ego stands naked before them, not judging, but open-hearted and vulnerable. If we can truly stand freed of our me-ness, then our shining ego, truly ready to listen, allows the ego of the other to freely speak. Our ego gives strength to the ego of the other to free itself. The strength arises in being vulnerable and allowing, and then we can experience truly meeting the other.

In the deepening awareness of our own egoism lies the possibility of release from soul reaction patterns or habits ruling our actions. We are freed into connection with our higher ego. Then who meets the other is not our double, but our spiritual core. We then truly live in the realm of the higher senses which is the spiritual world. And our activity allows the other to connect with their ego as well, simply by us being present in that way. We give strength to the other by our allowing what is to just be. We learn to yield to what is. We give away our self, give away our power in freedom and in consciousness, so our spirit-I can guide us. This awake choosing to let go of the self is the path to Love.