

Working with the Life Processes

In 1910 Rudolf Steiner began to outline his understanding of the seven life processes active in the human organism: ***breathing, warming, nourishing, secreting, maintaining, growing, and generating***. These processes are prerequisites for all life: even in plants a kind of breathing occurs; and warming, whether inwardly possessed as in mammals and birds, or as in the case of plants and insects — and also reptiles, amphibians, fish — directly due to the sun's warmth, is clearly evident. Similarly, each of the other processes is integral to life — indeed; life is unimaginable without each of them being active in the organism. Significantly, we can observe that activities such as *movement* and *sensation* are found in animals and humans but not plants, and therefore must be soul processes. Such a contrast helps us understand *life*.

The life processes are also *time* processes. But it would be an error, however, to think of them working only sequentially. While some linear relationships seem apparent — for instance, between nourishing and secreting — and in the following 'variations', I will consider them in sequence, we must try to imagine all these processes inter-permeating, inter-weaving, and overlapping in time.

These seven life processes have cosmological origins — for instance, we find in the ancient Indian text, the 'Rig Veda':

There was neither death nor immortality then. No signs were there of night or day. The ONE was breathing by its own power, in infinite peace. Only the ONE was; there was nothing beyond.

Darkness was hidden in darkness. The All was fluid and formless. Therein, within the void, by the fire of its fervor arose the ONE.

Here we read of the processes of ***breathing*** and ***warming*** as the preconditions for all further creation. Through breathing, a rhythmical relationship is established between what is inner and outer — a space is opened up within space. This space, really no more than a kind of pulsating differentiation, is then permeated by warmth, a warming which inhabits the space, thus forming a kind of content, and establishing a basis for presence. In the further stages, the *nourishing* process begins to draw inward all that is necessary to give shape to this formative space.

Secreting, in a wonderful way, is a central point. A sifting and sorting process takes place, retaining what is essential, rejecting the inessential — an alchemical process through which form is given substance. At this point, creation is manifest.

The existence of any entity must then be regulated and moderated, through a process of constant ***maintaining***. This would only keep things as they are, however, were it not for the process of ***growing*** that underlies all development. Organisms develop, from juvenile forms to maturity; this is a process which fills us with wonder and awe when we perceive it in any living thing. Finally, there is a process through which replicative or reproductive capacities appear at some level in the organism, ***generating*** its own kind, creating something new.

All these processes operate below the level of ordinary consciousness, and we generally become aware of their existence only when their normal healthy activity is disturbed; then we might notice, through the inward monitor of our *life sense*, that something is not in its usual equilibrium. However, their relationship to the processes of the soul, and especially to our *consciousness in time*, is of interest. We learn that these subliminal life processes underpin the processing of events in consciousness. As parents, then, we could consider how to

create a supportive environment for our baby or toddler. And teachers could ask themselves: in terms of the life processes, what is the right relationship between teaching and learning? Both teachers and parents could ask: how might I then work more effectively in managing behavior, through processes that enable the child to find a true relationship to conscience? And every adult human being could ask: how are the life processes present in all encounters and their transformation, as relationship processes to which we can be more attentive? And how might any one of us undertake a meditative or contemplative path that enables greater awareness in the fields of life? The following is a set of variations on this theme of working with the life processes.

First Variation

If we want to work with understanding into the life of a baby or toddler, what is relevant? The answer is simple and thus complex: everything, for they partake in everything around them, responding as an open sense - being to their environment. Therefore, everything we do will be either a support or hindrance in their development.

In considering babies and little children, we need to be mindful that while we can work in accord with the life processes, we must not interfere directly, or intervene in their workings. That is always a medical matter. We support their healthy functioning. The body has its own wisdom, and we would be wise in deciding not to obstruct the play of its wisdom.

If we observe a baby's breathing, we notice how irregular it is, and how easily affected it is by sudden events — any unexpected change is a shock, and it registers in the breathing. This irregular breathing — labored at times, and almost suspended at others — can be a source of anxiety in a parent, and that is exactly what is not needed. Breathing is easily polluted, and not only from physical causes. A baby breathes most easily in a calm environment, one which is free of any nervous or emotional intensity and flurries of abrupt activity.

Breathing is a metaphor for all steady rhythmic processes and transitions, as steady and rhythmic as the tides of the ocean and their turning. As we live into this, we will find its reality in the seasons of the year, the 'seasons' of each day, in waking and sleeping. And we will notice further that our sense impressions, our awareness of inner and outer realities, also have an oscillation. Two phrases from Jungian psychology seem relevant here — *focused consciousness* and *diffuse awareness*. Can we observe that even consciousness has its polarities, between breathing in and breathing out?

Thus we are not so much concerned directly with the baby's actual breathing, as with all that 'breathes' around it: with all that opens or closes, with our awareness for the spaciousness of the physical and soul environment in which the baby is enveloped.

So, too, we can consider **warming** in the first place as an environmental influence. It is easy for us to conceive of loving as a warming activity. Warmth is love. We know the baby does not have a conscious relationship to its own warmth, so we have to ensure that the physical surroundings are right, that the baby's head is covered against heat and cold, for instance, especially in those first years when the fontanelles are still open.

And there is the warming love we direct towards the child. There is a lot of research to show that touch is the most direct way of giving expression to this love — touched babies thrive. Therefore, holding, embracing, caressing, stroking, massaging, are acts of love, the natural actions of a loving caregiver. Love wants to be demonstrated in the world — it is never abstract and cold.

Here we might pause and consider for a moment the over-effusive 'love' that can smother a child. Can we grasp that breathing and warming are to be understood together? Breathing opens a space, and warming fills it. Because this breathing continues, the mood- atmosphere does not become too humid, too over-heated. The effect is like mild, fresh springtime air. So we see that both breathing and warming are evident forms of love, especially when they are in proportion.

Then there is all we can understand of **nourishing**. Physically, this process is more tangible, as babies have to be fed, and they demonstrate quite strong metabolic responses! So we can talk about nourishment in terms of the quality of their food, and we reflect that organic or biodynamic food is to be preferred. We can consider the nature of root, leaf, flower and fruit, and their nourishing qualities — and how we need to balance them for the constitution of our particular baby.

We will be concerned for the context, the setting, for a meal — for we are really nourished through our senses. Everything a baby takes in is nourishment or malnourishment. So again we look at the whole environment of the child, seeing it as food for the senses. Are we 'force- feeding' or 'starving' the baby? What do we mean by 'wholesome'? And again we come to love — just to think about these things is already loving, but our deeds are so nourishing. We know how a baby 'devours' our attentiveness, flourishing in our devoted gaze.

Secreting is a secret process, a mysterious activity through which the human organism sifts and sorts the essential from the non-essential. Thus it involves both retaining and letting go. The undisturbed wisdom of the body will effectively process most physical substances. The miracle of secretion is this complete transformation of substances, so that nothing remains as it was, and everything has its place — or is excreted.

Secreting, as the fourth life process, is thus right at the centre of things. We can see how specific capacities are secreted out of transformational experiences — just think how walking remains, but the frustrations of the struggle seem to be discarded in the celebratory event of accomplishing it. Is there not a comparable activity at the basis of all soul life? This ability to transform our experiences — to not get stuck, to not remain obsessed with some mental or emotional blockage, to digest and retain our learning but not the pain of the lessons — this is an active power in the life environment of a baby.

At this point we might pause again and reflect that Rudolf Steiner referred to a *Pedagogical Law*: our activity at a higher level affects the child at a more fundamental level. Therefore, for instance, our soul experiences will directly impinge upon a child's life forces. Mothers especially may have observed that if they are emotionally distressed, the baby's health can be affected. Each of these life processes can be affected by our mental and emotional state of being, and any behavior originating from that. Why should we have to deal with our own 'stuff', through a work-out in the 'soul-gym'? Apart from our own needs, in order to keep the life-realm of the child fresh and clean.

The process of **maintaining** is a further miracle. Why am I still me, despite the fact that not one cell of the child I was has remained? What maintains my form? I am like the axe that has had several new handles and a new axe-head but is still the 'same old axe'. I am not thinking here of my spiritual identity, but simply of my status as entity. Life is characterized by this maintenance of form — and when I die, the form will dissolve.

Health and safety consciousness is one aspect of maintenance in the life environment of a baby, a vigilance that attends to all possibilities. Seeing that each day is sufficient — that our activity of nurture suffices — is another. Maintaining implies a steadfastness that is difficult amidst the forces of contemporary life. To just keeping on going. This constancy is a vital element in a child's life — a reassuring constancy and dependability

that can be relied on. This is not a desperate bid for survival, nor resignation to circumstances, but rather a calm and solemn 'yes-saying' to all that comes. This implies a capacity for equanimity, which often has to be worked for amidst great adversity.

The life process of **growing** is obvious in a child. We never grow so much as in the womb, and then never again so much as in the first months, the first years... This process of quantitative growing is gradually supplanted by qualitative growing in soul qualities though the process of dying. The physical basis of growth is in cell division and development, and we see here an intimate relationship between growing and maintaining. But the crucial difference is that maintaining keeps things as they are, whereas growing advances things. Stasis and change. Form follows process — process follows form. One is the precursor for the other.

How do we allow for growth? How do we promote it? The capacity for wonder is the essential quality we look at here — openness towards what will come, a positive looking for it, without preconditioning its nature through imposed attitudes. This propensity for growth in a child tends to be faster than any consciousness on our part — we comprehend it only retrospectively. And so — we must wonder. To marvel at the rate of change, the kinds of change, the unexpected aspects of it all...

Finally, we are faced with many questions when we ponder what we might see in a baby as an underlying process of **generating**. We usually think of generation in terms of sexual reproduction, and clearly these forces become active only around puberty. The generative organs are of course already formed in the womb, and we can note their development, showing that this life process is present from that time onward.

However, there is another aspect of this generating process that dominates the first three years of a child's development. It is a succession of deeds that seem to rise up through the child, first lifting it from its helplessly prone position to accomplish the extraordinary freedom of walking; then to find utterance; and ultimately to think and to remember. These three accomplishments — walking, talking, and thinking — are the foundations of creative freedom. Each one generates active presence in a world. Walking provides an orientation in a world of physical space; talking forms a basis for orientation in a world of soul; and thinking orientates the child in a spiritual world. At the age of three the child can *conceive* thoughts. Then, in the following years, in the child's remarkable capacity for imitation, we witness the replicative, reproductive aspect of generating present as a learning tool.

Witnessing this journey, and accompanying the child upon it, is an extraordinary experience. Wonder, reverence, our sense for the wisdom-filled harmony of each of these processes, and a gesture of devotional self-surrender to this sacred procession of accomplishments — these soul qualities constitute the mood in which a parent can watch their child develop.

We support the life processes by providing an environment that nurtures their activity. And as the steward of that environment we realize that we have to work at our personal development.