The Change of Teeth

By A. Renwick Sheen

The incarnation of a human soul on to the earth is not a sudden act, but a process which takes place very gradually. The physical birth of the baby is only the first stage of this process which is brought to something like completion when the child becomes the man in the twenty-first year of life. During the years of childhood it is the task of the parent and teacher to be at his side guiding and leading him so that he may learn to live in a right and healthy way on the earth. For such a delicate and responsible task the educator needs to have great insight into the evolving nature of the growing child. In his ideas on education he may incline towards one theory or another, but none of these speculative theories, however clever they may be, can be of any avail unless they spring from a deep and penetrating understanding of the being of the child. The true teacher and educator must be able to enter with sympathy and understanding into the depths of the child's nature, and he will be able to do this only in so far as he puts away from him his own prejudices and preconceived ideas and allows the child to speak to him in the language of its own changing and evolving being. Even the baby speaks to us of the nature of the human being when, in the first two or three years of life he learns to stand upright, to speak, and, in a simple way, to think.

It may even be said that never in after life does he speak such important "words" as during these early years; for in these three activities of standing upright, speaking, and thinking we see expressed the essential nature of man as distinct from the animal. Moreover, these first most important things he learns to do without any teaching from those around him. This does not mean that the adult is without influence on the tiny child; on the contrary, every action, every word, every thought even of those around him work deeply into his being, even into his physical organism. But still there is no question of any direct teaching in these early years; the child simply imitates what is going on in his environment.

Now when should we first begin to teach the child? When should he start to learn things which will be necessary for his life on the earth and which only someone older and cleverer than himself can teach him? To put the question crudely, when should he begin to learn such things as reading, writing, and arithmetic? As early as possible many people would answer. How proud parents often are that their children have learnt to read and write quite well at the age of four or five! Would these same parents teach and encourage a child to walk some months before it ought, and afterwards take pride when the result showed itself in the child's legs becoming weak and misshapen? Yet the effects of learning to read and write at too early an age, though not so immediately obvious, are nevertheless as serious, or even more serious, for the whole future development of a child. He will often become nervous and strained, and in later life physical disorders and illness may well be the result of such early education. What is the reason for this?

When a child is born into the world his bodily organism is by no means perfectly formed it may be said that the head is the only part of the body which is born in something like a completed condition. During the early years of life the forces within the child's organism are directed to one end, that of forming the bodily organs, straightening and strengthening the limbs and generally building up a strong and healthy body so that it may be a worthy dwelling-place for the soul and spirit. These health-giving life forces (Rudolf Steiner has called them the etheric formative forces) normally complete their initial task at about the age of seven, the age when the milk teeth are thrown out. This changing of the teeth is not only a physical occurrence, it is the manifestation of a deep spiritual change in the child's nature. For these etheric formative forces have reached a certain culmination in their work of perfecting the physical body and are now partly metamorphosed into an activity of soul-they now appear as forces of thought. If we try before this time, to teach a child to read and write (i.e. to bring before him something of an abstract nature which requires the application of intellectual thought for its understanding) we are calling these etheric forces away from their proper sphere of work on the physical organism with the result that the child will not have such a strong and healthy body as he should have had, had not we, out of our desire to "push him on," interfered with his natural development; indeed, severe nervous and organic illnesses may arise in later life as the result of such treatment. Thus the child himself, out of the very depth of his nature, "speaks" to us in clear physical manifestation of the change which is taking place in the soul life—the change which will enable him in a right and healthy way to begin learning to write and to read.

Rudolf Steiner gives a striking description of this epoch in a child's development in a course of lectures he gave at Ilkley, in 1923. After speaking in great detail about education in Greek times and in the Middle Ages he says:

"The time of the change of teeth was, in Greece, the age at which the child was given over to public education. And now let us try to envisage this contact of the Spirit with the human being, the relation of the Spirit to the human teeth. It will seem strange that in discussing man as a spiritual being, I speak first of the teeth. It only seems strange because as the result of their modem culture, people are quite familiar with the form of a tiny animal germ when they look through the microscope, but they know very little about what lies directly before them. It is realized that the teeth are necessary for eating—that is the most striking thing about them. It is known that they are necessary for speech, that sounds are connected with them, that the air moves in a particular way from the lungs and the larynx through the lips and palate, and that certain consonants have to be formed by the teeth. It is known therefore that the teeth serve a useful purpose in eating and speaking."

"Now a truly spiritual understanding of the human being shows us something else as well. If you are able to study man in the way I described in the first lecture, it will dawn on you that the child develops teeth not only for the sake of eating and speaking, but for quite a different purpose as well.
Strange as it sounds today, the child develops teeth for the purpose of thinking. Modern science little knows that the teeth are the most important of all organs of thought. As thinking arises spontaneously in the child in its interplay with its environment, as the life of thought rises from the dim sleeping and dreaming life of very early childhood, this whole process is bound up with what is happening in the head where the teeth are pressing through; it is bound up with the forces that are pressing outwards from the head. The forces that press the teeth out from the jaw are the same forces that now bring thought to the surface from the dim sleeping and dreaming life of childhood. With the same degree of intensity as it teeth the child learns to think.

"Now how does the child learn to think? It learns to think because it is an imitative being and as such is wholly given up to its environment. Right into its innermost being it imitates what is going on in its environment and what happens in its environment under the impulses of thoughts. In exactly the same measure as thought then springs up in the child—in exactly the same measure do the teeth emerge. In effect, the force that appears in the soul as thinking lies within these teeth."

Later in the same lecture he says:

"With the change of teeth the inner etheric forces which have pressed the teeth out, are freed and with these etheric forces we carry on the free thought that it begins to assert itself in the child from the seventh year onwards. The force of the teeth is no longer a physical force as it was in the child during the time when the teeth are the organs of thought; it is now an etheric force. But the same forces which produced the teeth is now working in the etheric body as thought. When we feel ourselves as thinking human beings, and feel that thinking seems to proceed from the head—many people only have this experience when thinking has brought on a headache—a true knowledge shows us that the force with which we think from out of the head is the same as the forces which was once contained in the teeth."

In all that has been said here we have a picture of the connection of the spirit with the bodily organs and of the freeing of the spirit from its physical activity at this important epoch of the child's development and we have seen why it is that this is the moment at which we can rightly begin to educate and teach the child.

Now, as is well known, animals also change their teeth, and we must try to understand, in the light of what has already been said, the essential difference between the process in the case of the animal and of the human being. The baby begins to cut his milk teeth a few months after birth, the last tooth usually being through by the end of the second year. Then for several years there is a marked pause until the seventh year when the etheric forces working on the child's organism begin to push out these first teeth, which are a heritage from the parents and the second teeth, the child's own teeth one may say, make their appearance. This process of the second dentition continues until about the tenth year. In the case of the animal (especially the mammal) the coming of the teeth takes place quite differently. The German scientist, H. Poppelbaum, says of the animals:

"Even at birth some milk teeth are generally present (this is the case with apes: Bolk) and directly the milk teeth are complete the increase in the number of teeth and the second dentition begin. The interval of several years which is so characteristic of man is nowhere to be found."

Thus we see that the process takes place much more quickly and without pauses. In fact, if we take the case of the ape it has its full complement of second teeth at the age of three years. This is typical of the animal, for in its bodily development it hastens rapidly to maturity and at an early age becomes fixed and rigid in form. In man, however, this development is retarded and so his bodily—nature remains for quite a long time plastic and impressionable. Impressionable to what? To the spirit which incarnates, in the human form, to the ego, the self of man, which expresses itself through the physical organism. On the other hand, the body and organs of the animal only serve its physical needs and so it "grows up" quickly in order to satisfy these physical needs. Poppelbaum sums this up as follows:

"Now when we consider what decisive events take place for the human being during these two life periods, t this remarkable postponement of bodily maturity must be recognised as the real foundation for the formative activity of the Ego. The postponement of physical maturity leaves room for penetration by the Ego—of which the completed organism is to be the image. . . . The physical development of the animal advances without a pause; no room is left for the imprint of the Ego."

Among the decisive events here referred to is the changing of teeth and the effect which this changing has upon a child and his education. The teacher who can read the nature of the child will not give any intellectual teaching (of which reading and writing may be taken as the type, though there are many ways in which a child may be trained intellectually) before the change takes place because he will consider that in so doing he will be sapping the child's forces and weakening its physical body. It is not for nothing that in normal children the change of teeth begins at about the seventh year, while in abnormal children mental weakness is often accompanied by a delay in the change, which will not take place perhaps till the tenth or eleventh year. The physical and spiritual interpenetrate, and nothing can be worse than to develop spiritual and mental qualities until the bodily foundation is ready to receive their impress. It is true that children will often learn, and learn easily, to read when they are four or five. They are imitative beings, and when they see the adults around them constantly reading, when they perpetually meet with newspapers within doors and hoardings without, they naturally desire to copy the activity around them. In the same way they would learn to use sharp knives and to smoke if their parents did not find tactful means of dissuading them! And when parents realise the ultimate-consequences of a child's reading before its time they will find the means of preventing it, by finding the children other activities, and by leading its questions on the subject into more fruitful channels. It is just because the soul and spirit do penetrate into the being of the child that education becomes possible and necessary. The changing of the teeth is a moment in that penetration which is of decisive importance in education.

†Ibid, p. 98.
* Man and Animal, by H. Poppelbaum. English translation, p. 84
†The "two life periods" are from birth until the change of teeth, the period dealt with in this article, and from the change of teeth until puberty which will be considered in a later number of the magazine.
†Ibid on 84 and 85