

## Transitions as Developmental Dynamics Between Dissolution and Rebirth

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Starting from birth, there are three different streams mutually permeating each other in the child’s development:

- If we observe small children, we are amazed to see how they express their inner being through movements, gestures, sounds, gaze, and facial expressions.
- These lively expressions emerge from the innermost core of the child and are closely connected to the growth of the organism; there is harmony between soul qualities and physical development.
- The small child can be seen as one complete sense organ; this is the reason why he absorbs all external sensory impressions entirely, and, by the power of imitation, is deeply connected with his surroundings.

These three aspects permeate each other, and it is at this interaction point that the child develops day by day. The spiritual element radiates outwards towards the soul and is thus closely connected to the physical body and its surroundings. However, despite all the movement, we also notice phases of consolidation within the child’s temporal development. In these phases, the child incorporates new experiences and recently acquired skills into an existing framework, and by doing so, the experience in turn strengthens the child.

So, on the one side we see phases of consolidation, but on the other side we observe dynamic phases of metamorphosis which strongly influence the child’s development. New, unsettling impulses lead the child into transitional phases with their own dynamics of transformation, but also sensitivity and insecurity. The intention of the conference that will take place just before Easter in 2015 is to explore the qualities, dangers and possibilities of these phases of transition and re-birth.

### Anthroposophical perspectives on transitions

There is a dynamic relationship between Anthroposophy and the changes and turning points in child development. To start with, I want to consider the three stages of metamorphosis described by Rudolf Steiner at the end of lecture three in *Balance in Teaching* (September 21, 1920): conscious studying; meditative and repeated processing in order to “digest” and deeply understand the content; and, as a third step, remembering the anthroposophical view of the human being during teaching, which leads to new, creative impulses and activities.

To sum up, the three stages may be connected to the following qualities:

*Studying Anthroposophy—*

*Conscious thinking perception*

*Meditating Anthroposophy—*

*Repeated intimate contemplation*

*Remembering Anthroposophy—*

*Actively creating new impulses*

At the moments of transition from one developmental step to the next, when the child changes on the inside and on the outside, we are faced with the challenge of moving from stage one to stage two of the process described above. How do we achieve the transition from ordinary thinking and observation to a streaming way of thinking? The child’s inner being brings forth metamorphosis, and we can only discern this inner being if our cognition becomes “fluid,” as it were. If this does not happen, then there is a danger that we remain on

the surface of observation. Rudolf Steiner encourages teachers to develop a precise insight into transitional moments.

*Because of the scientific mindset that has ruled for the past three centuries, nowhere in contemporary civilization do we find the kind of intimate observation that sees the fine and delicate changes in the human soul or body organization. Consequently, people have little to say about the important changes that have occurred in the child's whole physical organization, such as those that happen at the change of teeth, at puberty, and again after the twentieth year. These changes are mentioned, it is true, but only as they affect the actual physical body of the child or are expressed in the soul's more superficial dependence on the physical body. This would require much more delicate observations (The Roots of Education, p. 19).*

Steiner describes a series of exercises which practice these kinds of delicate observations. They follow a certain pattern: through inner, flowing activity, we must strive to lessen the distance between ordinary thinking and profound observation and thus achieve true intimacy and deep cognition.

*These exercises are based neither on superstition nor merely on fantasy, but on clear thinking and deliberation as exact as that used for mathematics. They lead human beings to develop a capacity for thought in a much more vital and active way than that found in the abstract thinking of people today . . . Once we have condensed and concentrated our thoughts by means of the exercises mentioned, we experience spirit in such a way that we no longer have the abstract feeling, which is so prevalent today, that objects are far from us. We get a true sense of them that arises from practiced, concentrated thinking (The Roots of Education, p. 25).*

## **Exercises for observation and imagination as a bridge to active, vital thinking**

Let us consider the so called "cloud exercise" as described by Rudolf Steiner in *Practical Training in Thought*. He suggests to carefully observe some phenomenon at a certain time of day, for example cloud formations at the time of sunset. The observation should be retained in memory in all its details. Next day, the cloud formations are observed at roughly the same time. Thus, a series of concise cloud formation images is built up. Do not interrupt the connection to the phenomenon with quick, intellectual interpre-

tation or speculation but rather try to increase your awareness and retain as much detail as possible. If you achieve an intimacy with the reality of the clouds, then you can try, as a next step, to merge the pictures into each other, from one day to the next. There is a twofold movement within this process: First, avoid any speculation, focus your attention completely on the phenomena and retain it. Then, consciously, seek to move from one cloud picture to the next, as inherent in the nature of clouds. This movement emerges from the clouds themselves and is not invented by you. After some repetition, this exercise leads to:

- Higher awareness
- Awareness of quick, speculative thinking
- Trust in the union of phenomena
- Fluid, vital thinking which is closer to reality

These effects are possible because worldly events, through intense inner activity, bear upon the astral body and thus also upon the ether body.

*To the extent we insert ourselves into the course of the world through observation of the events in the world and receive these images into our thoughts with the greatest possible clarity, allowing them to work within us, to that extent do those members of our organism that are withdrawn from our consciousness become ever more intelligent. If, in the case of inwardly connected events, we have once acquired the faculty of letting the new picture melt into the preceding one in the same way that the transition occurred in nature, it shall be found after a time that our thinking has gained considerable flexibility ("Practical Training in Thought," p. 10).*

Here, Steiner describes a training in thought and observation which goes back to Goethe. It does not take place outside objects and phenomena, but rather at the core of life's processes.

## **The child at the age of three**

Bearing in mind the above, let us now consider the transitional phase at the age of three. The child's senses are still very much open, just as they were in early childhood; this can be seen when the child is completely lost in perception as in the following situation:

In late autumn, the child watches in awe as an adult is pushing a wheelbarrow full of dry leaves. The next day, the child pushes her own little wheelbarrow full of dry leaves alongside the adult. The child is comfortably absorbed in imitation. The adult,

needlessly, comments on the child's action by saying: "It's really nice that we are both pushing our wheelbarrows today." These direct words interrupt the child's active will. She stands still and says decidedly, "Both of us—and me!" Then, she carries on with the work.

A few days later, there is a second incident:

Walking through town, the child recognizes the streets; she realizes that she is close to the market square and suddenly wants to go there. The mother, however, wants to go somewhere else and the child protests angrily, "No! No! I don't want to go there!" The child is seized by a strong will which shows itself to the point of stamping and shaking. (Unfortunately, most adults have lost the ability to say "No" with such vehemence.)

A short while after the third birthday, there is a new phase in the described transitional period:

After a moment of contemplation, the girl asks with a serious expression: "Mama, how does God make hair grow? Does he sprinkle some grain on the head?"

In summing-up, the three incidents can be described as follows:

- The will to imitate is interrupted for a moment and sparks an instant of self-consciousness
- Anger flares up in a moment of defiance
- The child imaginatively weaves two pictures into a question

We understand the dynamics and relevance of the transitional phase better if we now try, from the child's perspective, to merge one image into the next. The child is still utterly devoted to her surroundings; however, this devotion is interrupted from time to time, in varying degrees, by an emerging self-consciousness. During peaceful, quiet moments, the emerging self-awareness turns inward and new questions arise. These are relevant for the child within her new relationship to the world and often appear as imaginative pictures. The parents have the impression that the quality of the earlier, natural devotion and imitation has changed: out of the inner will, little by little, self-consciousness and self-awareness emerge. This first feeling of self-awareness expresses itself in various ways during the transition period. There are moments of quiet contemplation, moments of energetic action, and sudden outbursts of anger.

The above depiction leads to a deeper understanding of the three-year-old and, as an inner consequence, shows the way forward: The child's own strong powers of development can unfold best when parents and teachers don't interfere directly, but rather when they create imaginative surroundings worthy of imitation including:

- Purposeful activities
- Lucid language
- True and sincere human encounters
- Artistic and musical activity, whenever possible
- A kind understanding for the true being of the child as it emerges step by step

Rudolf Steiner sums up the meaning and responsibility of the educator's attitude with the words,

*We have to be aware that we cannot influence the child with words of advice or by setting rules but only by what we do in the child's company* (from an untranslated lecture, February 28, 1921).

## **The child as the basis for education and curriculum**

The child's maturation can be experienced in the transition periods when the child is changing, as new forces grapple with existing ones and the young person is seeking safety on diverse levels. The better the caregivers understand the child's true being, by way of observation as described above, the more agile their observation and thinking becomes, and the better they are able to find educational guidance within the child herself.

*Each teacher should be permeated by a living comprehension of the human being . . . Those who develop this possibility within themselves, who configure their spirit in this way, make themselves alive in a different way in regard to developing children, even in large numbers. They gain the capacity of reading the curriculum from the nature of the developing child* (*The Renewal of Education*, p. 86-87).

In this sense, the term *curriculum* does not describe a complete program, but rather the realization of what the child needs for her development. If the educator implements what she or he perceives as the child's need, then a kinship grows between development and activity; this kinship has strengthening and encouraging significance. I want to describe the "reading" of the child a bit closer now, focusing on various phases during the change of teeth at the age of six or seven. Let us start

with the kindergarten teacher's perspective:

It is early summer and all the children are putting their wellington boots and coats on to go outside. While the teacher is helping some of the younger children, two boys are standing by the door, uncharacteristically hesitant. The older one, who's already lost some teeth, says, "Let's go to the shed and talk about lightning and such!" He starts to run and the younger one follows. Towards midday, they both sit quietly and watch the puppet show. The younger one is quickly absorbed in the images of the enacted fairy tale while the older one shifts between serious, wakeful, questioning expressions and complete immersion.

When the teacher hears the words of the older one she remembers other, recent incidents: how he withdrew from games, the lengthening of his body, the look of suspense and the emerging of the second set of teeth. All this creates an overall image of deep transformation. She becomes aware how new, strong impulses arise from deep within and change his experience of the world. Rudolf Steiner describes this kind of transformation:

*... the remarkable physiological conclusion of childhood occurs, when hardening makes its final push and the permanent teeth crystallize out of the human organism. It is extremely interesting to use spiritual scientific methods to look at what lies at the basis of the developing organism, what forms the conclusion, the change of teeth. However, it is more important to follow what I have just described, the parallel spirit-soul development that arises completely from imitation.*

*Around the age of seven, a clear change in the spirit-soul constitution of the child begins. We could say that at this age the capacity to react to something quite differently than before emerges. Previously, the child's eye was intent upon imitating, the child's ear was intent upon imitating. Now the child begins to concentrate upon what adults radiate as opinion, as points of view (The Spirit of the Waldorf School, p. 139).*

When the teacher and her colleagues discussed this particular boy and the way he had changed, they visualized his position in a kind of "tidal zone," between imitation (which still gave him a sense of security) and the impact of his new self-awareness. The encounters with the boy and the contemplation of his position helped the teacher to develop a new attitude towards

him: She addressed him with clearer words and gave him new tasks and responsibilities within the daily kindergarten routine. It was clear for everyone involved that he was ready for school. For the younger boy, the decision to let him start school was only taken in May, when his teeth start to change and new skills emerged. After a further three months marked by more changes, both boys were admitted to first grade.

## **The transition of the seven-year-old: a battleground for diverging forces**

Let us now look at the transition period, described above, from the perspective of teaching.

A few days after the start of the school year, the new first grade children happily enter the classroom. All eyes are on the teacher. The children are engrossed by her words which lead them to the choral recitation of the morning verse and further on to singing. This is followed by a few chosen words from a longer verse. It seems that the teacher's language opens a gate through which the children enter into their own world of imagination. The teacher now adds some gestures to the verse, these are readily imitated by the children. They become one with the language, rhythms, imagination, and movements. The younger boy described above is still very much absorbed by the pictures and copies the teacher's gestures out of a childlike, subconscious will to imitate. The older boy seems more awake and picks up some of the subtle nuances of the gestures. His speech is also more purposeful, he pronounces individual sounds with more certainty. Later, the teacher asks the children for their memories of yesterday's fairy tale; the older boy remembers the pictures and actions with ease.

As a notable tendency, the teacher experiences the children's increasing need to transform their outer abilities and skills into new, inner ones during the first few weeks of school:

- A profound listening to the words of the adults
- The harmony between beautifully spoken words and carefully led movement
- Imaginative inner pictures
- Being absorbed in stories
- Remembering what was told or happened the previous day
- Independent execution of tasks

The sum of these emerging inner soul qualities describes the re-birth of the etheric forces which free

themselves from the connection with the child's physical growth. With the help of careful observation and daily reviews, the teacher now becomes aware of what the children are looking for and need day by day. She thus understands and realizes the *inner curriculum* for this age group. Furthermore, she develops a more and more finely tuned perception of the children's *individual differences*. To the individual eye, the time of transition presents itself as a battleground for existing and newly emerging forces: the older boy is drawn to the new inner soul quality of imagination and memory; he needs to be encouraged to join in schoolyard games and to physically move enough. The younger one, on the other hand, who still runs, jumps and plays a lot, needs powerful stories and strong pictures to find his way to inner resonance which will eventually lead to the ability to remember. Rudolf Steiner describes this inner battle between existing and emerging forces:

*Here you have an interplay between soul and body that is quite real; the soul emancipates itself in the seventh year and begins to function—no longer in the body, but independently. At this point, those forces that come newly into being in the body as soul forces begin to be active. . . Then whatever radiates upward from the body is thrust back, whereas the forces that shoot downward from the head are restrained. Thus, during the time the teeth are changing, the most severe battle is fought between the forces striving downward from above and those shooting upward from below. The change of teeth is the physical expression of this conflict between the two kinds of forces: those that later appear in the child as powers of reasoning and intellect, and those that need to be used particularly in drawing, painting, and writing (Balance in Teaching, p. 15-16).*

The qualities of the transitional period around the age of six and seven can be summed up as follows: Comparing this phase with the changes in the three-year-old child, we see a more complex picture now. The early abilities for growth and imitation are transformed, but at the same time they remain side by side with new forces. Continuation, liberation, transformation, and re-birth completely permeate the young person—the inner spiritual aspects as well as physical growth.

The child's individuality is the conductor of these complex processes. On the one side it moves deeply into the physical body but at the same time it opens up completely new possibilities for the soul. The child's individuality now faces the teacher's individuality on an increasingly conscious level. We will discern the

child's true being if we improve our ability to think in fluid, perceptive ways and thus incorporate various perspectives and observations in one bigger picture. The complexity of the child's transformation at the age of six and seven forms the basis for Steiner's description of spiritual cognition in *Balance in Teaching*.

*In spiritual science nothing can be characterized without approaching something from different sides and then combining the different aspects into one comprehensive view. Just as little as a single tone comprises a melody can a single characterization be enough for what spiritual science describes. You must characterize from different angles (Balance in Teaching, p. 44).*

If we indeed achieve the ability to describe, and deeply understand, a child's or a group's *melody of development* based on a series of observations then we may learn to read therein the true curriculum and implement it in distinct educational steps. ♦

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