

The Harmonious Development of a Child by Anna Kamensky

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[Page 1] THE famous formula "the harmonious development of a child" has long ago been brought to the foreground by the representatives of the most advanced education, and it is being considered in the home and in school by parents and tutors who pay serious attention to problems of education. This formula is beautiful and full of meaning, because it comprehends all the spheres of a child's life as a whole, and points to the necessity of cultivating all the abilities enfolded therein. Thus the problems of physical, ethical and spiritual education are understood in it, *i.e.*, the satisfying of the needs of the body, the soul and the Spirit.

From a general point of view the life of a man is divided into two parts: the materialistic (the life of the body), and the spiritual (the domain of emotions and thoughts). But from the standpoint of Theosophy we must accept three divisions: (1) the physical sphere (life of the body); (2) the ethical [Page 2] sphere, the domain of feeling and thought (the life of the soul); and (3) the spiritual sphere, the life of the immortal ego, the Thinker himself, whose proper attribute is the creative will, *i.e.*, the will illumined by love and true knowledge and wisdom. This sphere is in close union with the religious consciousness of man. Let us consider this formula from the Theosophical standpoint.

First of all we will consider the physical education in this light, next the education of the mind and feelings, and lastly the education of the will of a child.

During the last few years, physical education at home and at school has made rapid progress. Attention, has been drawn towards the necessity of providing good air, right movements, a regulated succession of work and rest, regularity in sleep and food — all this has been a subject of lively discussion between educationalists, and it is reflected in the educational literature of our day. The importance of gymnastics has particularly been brought forward, as well as out-of-door games, manual work and excursions. In this respect both school and family owe much to the untiring energy of the late Professor Lesgaft, who organised special lectures for men and women educationalists, creating a new and deeply interesting movement in education. From a Theosophical standpoint such an energetic setting forward of the problems of physical education is of very great importance and value, but there still remains much to be desired. As long as schools are not built [Page 3] outside towns, and children are not in constant, lively communion with nature, it cannot be said that the problems of physical education have been entirely solved; the more so as work in the open air can only be properly organised under such conditions. Excursions cannot be the same to children as the constant living amid cosmic vibrations, sun-rays, nature's sounds and colours. We mark with joy the first efforts at building schools under such conditions, amid woods and fields, as well as the settling of some parents in suburbs, forming new types of intellectual colonies; but these are only the first swallows, promising the coming summer. [Such are the schools of Madame Levitsky in Tsarkoye and Madame Kirpichnikoff, near Moscow. Also the wonderful

school of Madame Gaguina in her country house, in the Province of Riazan.]

Now let us pass to the education of the mind, first to the intellectual development, then to the emotions.

Intellectual work must first of all be divided into two parts: the gathering of material knowledge, and the working over these materials. Concerning the former, the gathering of knowledge, it is being done in such dimensions that the question involuntarily arises of an overloading of materials, which children are incapable of mastering; in truth our programmes are, for the most part, only formal, and the working for examinations often causes nervous disorders and all kinds of exhaustion. As to independent mental work, it has but very small scope. Children either repeat the conclusions given in their books, or the opinions of their teachers. And it really cannot be [Page 4] otherwise with the solving of questions entirely out of the reach of the pupils. But can mental education, in such a case be considered as directed along its proper lines ?

Is there not a pernicious chase after quantity to the detriment of quality? Are not educationalists too enthusiastic over certain theories, regardless of their doubtful adaptability in practice ? Do they not forget that the question is not as to the quantity of books read, but as to the learning *how* to read; not as to the quantity of compositions written, but as to the ability to grasp the materials, and to mark out the way of correct work ? If parents and teachers did not so impetuously pursue, the formal carrying out of programmes, the preparatory work at home and the work at school would not wear such a hasty, feverish appearance. The aim of education would not be the passing through a certain course of studies, but the training of the pupils to see their way through the scientific matter set before them, the teaching them how to work. From the standpoint of Theosophy this alone is of value, for only conscious and independent work teaches how to think and induces true development. That which is habitually understood by the word development, *i.e.*, the knowing how to discuss many topics, only induces idle, empty talk and very undesirable presumption.

It may perhaps be said that parents and educationalists are not at all enthusiastic over formal knowledge, but that they are forced to take the formal demands of the Government schools into [Page 5] consideration. But such an answer is of no avail with regard to the new free schools, where yet the same enthusiasm concerning quantity exists, though in another direction; there, also, it is not the question of quality of knowledge that stands foremost.

It is true that the ancient languages are put aside; but instead of them the new programme is so overloaded with such enormous quantities of mathematics and natural history — without counting the so-called practical studies in the laboratory — that the same tendency of pouring as much knowledge in as short a time as possible into the heads of pupils is but too evidently visible. There is no time, with such a system, for earnest thought and the classification of materials; no time for considering questions philosophically; no time for synthesis. All is snatched hastily at haphazard. There is no time for setting a sound foundation, and the building must of necessity prove unsound.

In addition to this there is yet another still more dangerous tendency in the new schools — it is the effort to give the scholars as little work as possible. The chief point, according to the most ardent representatives of this tendency, is to save children from a feeling of repugnance towards any subject,

and for this reason studies are organised in the most attractive way, are illustrated by the most interesting experiments, the lesson is turned into a lively discussion or an interesting lecture. The chief work is done in the class, the greatest part of the work is done by the teacher; the greatest exertion falls to his lot, the [Page 6] lesser part is left to the pupils; but even this small part gives rise to irritability and protest on their part, as soon as the charm of novelty is worn out and a few moments of concentration are required, thus changing their passive attention into an active one. To set the element of pleasure so much in the foreground is dangerous. (I do not mean to say that lessons must not be interesting and lively, but still it seems to me that a sense of duty and a serious bearing towards study should hold the first place.) With such a way of considering the question, work becomes a terrible phantom, and study is accepted as a tedious necessity, which must be surrounded with all the compensations possible; parents and teachers are anxiously busied with the seeking of these compensations. As a result of this we find the capacity for work diminishing year by year, as well as the capacity of endurance; and, as a natural consequence, appears the decreasing of moral strength and intelligence in the pupils. In this respect it is difficult to imagine more unsatisfactory conditions than those we are witnessing in the present Russian schools and Russian society.

Thus we come to the conclusion that the Government school leads to the accumulation of formal knowledge, an unproductive capital which is stowed into the store-rooms of the brain, fated to be forgotten there; and the new school leads to idle talk, self-sufficiency and inability for work. As exceptions, must be mentioned the new schools run on Theosophical lines — those of Mme. Kirpitchenkoff and Mme. Gaguina. [Page 7]

One may draw my attention to the practical work in the new school, which may to a certain extent serve as a palliative against the general idling of scholars; but even if it be so, I ask: "*At what price?*" There is a tendency to keep a tacit silence concerning doubtful facts in contemporary education, but such a silence only proves that the teachers themselves do not feel upon firm ground, and for that reason they prefer avoiding certain questions. But Theosophy teaches us to throw the light of truth upon all the events of life, and not to fear that light, even if it hurts us to fix our gaze upon it. We must have that courage. Parents and teachers are thinking too little upon the moral side of the so-called "practical study", when children, to prove the words of the teacher, dissect and draw fishes and frogs, previously killed in their presence. And it is even questionable whether the animal that is being sacrificed is entirely dead. Not long ago a teacher of natural history confessed to me that, on the whole, one never can be quite sure of this. But let us even admit that it is so: the fish or frog is eventually killed — in some schools dozens of them are brought, and every pupil receives a live specimen for his scientific experiment; but still it is killed, *i.e., life is sacrificed to so-called study*. Life is taken away in order to allow a number of thoughtless children to realise more clearly the direction of a certain vein, or to hear more distinctly the beatings of the living heart of the tortured living creature. Such a careless attitude towards the life of others, even if it be but the life of a fish, frog or insect, [Page 8] inevitably leads to moral coarseness, cruelty and rough manners, without mentioning a monstrous selfishness. I have heard from children of eleven, twelve and thirteen years of age how hard it was for them at first to settle down to practical studies, how cold and faint they used to feel, and what dreadful dreams they dreamt in those days. "But", they added, "now it is all right; now I am used to it; *now I do not feel pity, but interest*". Perhaps some teachers will rejoice at such results of scientific experiments, but to me these words seem terrible. When the heart loses its dominion over a man, and cold reason and utilitarianism take the first place, then an involuntary fear overcomes one for the future of the younger generation, especially in such a hard and complicated time as ours, when coarseness of manners is growing but too rapidly around us.

Compassion for the suffering of animals is called sentimentality, and cruelty towards them is excused by calling it austere necessity; and thus scientific men are justified who wish to base their conclusions upon experiments. But even if it were so, Theosophy admits of no such compromises, and reminds us that the *end* never justifies the means; even if it were so, what right have boys and girls of twelve and thirteen years of age to consider themselves as learned investigators, when but one-tenth part of them perhaps reaches the higher schools? The value of life is brought down to such a low level in our days, life is exposed to such a coarse violence from all sides, and there are so few people who know how to respect it in [Page 9] the widest sense of the word, that one cannot comport oneself carefully enough towards it, one cannot instruct children earnestly enough to be attentive and loving towards all that lives. We must agree that if under such conditions, a large amount of intellectual knowledge be acquired, this would be gained at the detriment of more important sides of the human soul. So that the formula of "harmonious development" has not so far proved satisfactory.

Let us now turn to another state of the life of the soul, to the sphere of emotions, with which the mental reason is closely related. Out of different thoughts definite emotions are born, and *vice versa*. What are the emotions which are most trained at home and at school? Are children taught to respect other people's personality, other people's work, other people's rest? Are they taught how important it is to show attention, gentleness and patience? Are they taught tolerance? Are they taught to value all that is beautiful and noble, to revere greatness, to worship beauty? Do they at least learn to be grateful for all the labour and strength spent upon them? In examining contemporary education more attentively, we must confess that it is most deficient in the domain of the emotions. Because children are not trained in emotions of love, their bearing towards their elders is free and exacting, towards their equals rude and intolerant, towards those younger than themselves thoughtless and cruel. At home they give free vent to a monstrous selfishness, and with this selfishness they come to school, where they often find a not less [Page 10] favourable scope for it. Children are not taught to love, but they learn all too soon how to be self-sufficient and to claim their rights. Why, should they practise modesty and gentleness, when they can live more comfortably and gaily without them? What need to be polite and prudent, when one can be exacting and almost command? This is a much more advantageous and tempting part. Children very easily get into the habit of ordering, and imperceptibly a very ugly kind of intercourse with their elders is taken up, especially with teachers and parents, and this it is very difficult to alter afterwards. It is a slow but entirely definite process, during which the soul of a child gradually loses its equilibrium, and easily falls into all kinds of extravagances. It begins with the children constantly feeling themselves to be the chief centre round which are busied all the thoughts and cares of their elders, who serve them with entire self-forgetfulness; and this feeling of being the centre imperceptibly passes into the coarsest selfishness, which refuses to take anything but itself into consideration.

But, it may be said by the new school, one is making serious efforts to train children and to awaken a social instinct in them, which must hold back the too much developed feeling of selfhood in them. Such efforts are in fact being made. But social feeling, if it is only developed in theory and has no chance of practical application, cannot stand upon firm ground; it but too easily degenerates into a mere phraseology and the worst kind of sentimentality. [Page 11] Social feeling is no doubt developed on the ground of comradeship and the friendly life of the class, and in this direction the work of the school can be very valuable; but the purely utilitarian regulation of this question, as is in most cases being observed, cannot bring a final and right solution of this question. It can only be solved satisfactorily when the child is raised to a higher sphere, the spiritual sphere, where it will realise its moral responsibility towards all for its own manifestations.

There are certain emotions which serve as an awakening of spiritual life by touching the deepest and most tender strings of our hearts. I mean the aesthetic emotions, always so closely connected with the ethical ones, when they are true and not counterfeited. All that is pure, high and beautiful brings them to life. Beauty, beginning with the beauty of sounds and colours, and ending with the beauty of feelings and thoughts, *i.e.*, the beauty of an ideal character — beauty is the source of aesthetic emotions, and it must therefore become the atmosphere in which the younger generation lives; it must surround children, enter into their life, constantly inspire them. The atmosphere of beauty is as necessary for the soul as oxygen is for the lungs. It is the bread of life, without which the soul is dwarfed, decays and fades. This is perhaps the most important of all the elements which the formula of the "harmonious development" comprehends.

What is done for children in this respect ? In what conditions do they work and play ? How are the [Page 12] lessons, of Art organised, and to whom has such an important mission been entrusted ?

We must confess that in this respect affairs have a very sad appearance. The nursery, decorated with pictures too inartistic to be hung up in the drawing-room, and the schoolroom with its blackboard, black furniture and bare yellow walls, are all that for the most part surround children. What do they read? If the choice is made by their teachers, they often read anti-artistic works, with a tragical note of sadness and despair in them; if the choice is their own — things are still worse: they read Pinkerton, Mayne-Reid and Artsybasheff (a modern author of the realistic school, a follower of Zola), all heaped together. A complete chaos pervades this region, and children have no wise help to guide them and train their taste. The reading-stock for children is in itself a question of vital importance and requires particular attention. As to Art, at home it is almost ignored and at school it plays the pitiable part of a complementary subject, which nobody takes much into consideration and which only a few gifted pupils are left to study. The school of beauty is transformed into a worshipping of talent, and along this line an ugly rivalry is set up. The so-called "ungifted" are simply sent out of this "holy enclosure". From the standpoint of Theosophy, whose attention is ever directed to the Spirit, to the contents and not to the form, such a way of putting the question is wholly wrong. Beauty is the very first teacher of spiritual life; it teaches us to love, to worship, to imitate, and no child should be [Page 13] deprived of its blessed help. The whole atmosphere of home and school must be pervaded by it, teachers must be inspired by it, and the hearts of children must kindle and glow in it. This is why the arts must have a place of honour in questions concerning education. Of how great a value the influence of beauty is upon the soul of a child is proved by the great part it has ever had in the education of remarkable thinkers, and we can all witness with what deep gratitude they always look back upon those first luminous rays of their childhood. We need but read the autobiographical indications of Ruskin. Not long ago I chanced to hear a most interesting story of a young teacher, who in his youth had suffered from acute fits of despair. He was only saved from suicide by his love for beauty. "I do not know why", he told me, "but every time I was on the brink of a fall, or of committing suicide, I was always held back from it by the remembrance of beauty seen or felt in my childhood — a sonata my mother used to play, or one of the landscapes I admired so much as a child".

Such an indication is of very great importance for us. Beauty, of its own self, without any earthly considerations, as a perfectly pure and disinterested power, appeals to the highest that exists in us; and once this divine power has been awakened, nothing can extinguish it, and its light tells us of the higher sense of life, of the Good Law, which, as Kant used to say, lives in us as surely as we see it guide the stars in heaven. The coming into touch with our [Page 14] inner harmony makes us realise the external harmony. As long as we do not understand this, the child will always be overloaded mentally, and

spiritually it will be *starved*. Unconsciously we deprive the child of its most vital food, the spiritual food, and thus condemn it to spiritual hunger. Thus we have to come to the conclusion that the formula of "harmonious development" is one-sidedly adapted to life, and that its wider sense is not yet clear to many people. The light of Theosophy alone is able to disclose its deep meaning.

This is particularly true with respect to the third point in education — spiritual education. Here we stand before its deepest and most important problem, how to help the unfolding of the Spirit, the immortal ego, awakening in us the feeling of moral responsibility towards all and for all, and the ardent desire to transform ourselves according to the ideal disclosed, transform ourselves and life itself. In other words this is the awakening of the creative Will, illumined by Love. It is the result of the awakened religious consciousness, which has realised its own divinity, its unity with the divine life of the universe, and consequently its responsibility. The unavoidable state of such an awakened consciousness is a creative power in the moral sphere, the self-acting of our higher nature, which aims at pouring out the light it has received into life itself. An active and loving bearing towards the world is the dominant note of such an awakened consciousness, a luminous, brave and joyful disposition is its companion. In such a state the will is [Page 15] strengthened, the character is built, and a mighty individuality grows, in which all is harmonised — tenderness, strength, patience, fearlessness, purity and ardour. This is a true rebuilding of oneself and of all the foundations of life according to the higher light, by the force of the divine ideal which has illumined us; and for this reason it is necessary that the greatest ideal of humanity, the ideal of purity, compassion and love, God in man, *i.e.*, the religious ideal, should be placed before children in a vivid light. Every religion possesses such a divine ideal. The Hindûs have Shrî Krshna; the Buddhists, Buddha; the Musalmâns, the great prophet of Islâm, Muhammad; the Hebrews, Moses; the Christians, Christ; the Bahaists, the Bâb and Baha-Ullah. Our children must learn to feel Christ, realise His divine beauty, so as to make them love Him. Their hearts and thoughts must be drawn towards Him, and they must be guided by an ardent desire to serve Him and obey His commandments. In other words, children's religious emotions must be satisfied and their religious consciousness must be awakened. In every child, even the most neglected and lonely, there is a need to satisfy its religious feelings, and if we deprive that feeling of its lawful and indispensable food, it will for a long time decline, to the detriment of the whole moral growth of the child, or it will take a disfigured and ugly shape, which must inevitably be reflected upon the child's spiritual nature. We have no right to stunt any of the child's capacities, for we know that the laws of nature cannot be disregarded with [Page 16] impunity. And therefore the unwise teachers, who treat too lightly this deepest and subtlest need of the child's soul, are guilty of a very great fault.

It is an interesting fact that thoughtful teachers, even those of a positivist turn of mind, all notice the important value of the religious feelings of children, and many of them recognise that a religious disposition in childhood and especially in youth, is usually a sure sign of a deep and spiritually rich nature. On the contrary, a child or youth of an irreligious nature gives no great hopes for the future.

Why is it so ? Where lies the mystery ? The fact is that a religious disposition awakens all the spiritual forces of a young being, and his soul expands and grows as joyfully and swiftly as nature grows after a bright, warm shower. During religious elevation, man realises the divinity of his higher Self, and both his power and responsibility are revealed to him. For this reason teachers and parents must be guided by religious feeling, and the whole of education must be religious in its tenor and bearing. Education at home and at school must be understood in this unity of disposition, uniting all teachers into one great, friendly family, making them enter the nursery or class-room as one enters a temple. A teacher, thus

attuned, will particularly value the emotions of love and beauty, because he knows that, under the influence of beauty and love, the God within us is for an instant brought into contact with the God outside us, the God of the part with the God of the whole; and this coming into touch with Divine Beauty [Page 17] transforms our enthusiasm into wings, upon which we in truth rise to heaven. Where such moments of high enthusiasm and inspiration are not to be found, there such wings cannot grow, neither can strong personalities, greatness, or the heroism of love exist. That is why in our days, when people feel so strongly and so much, when they think so intensely and anxiously, when in their fancy they are ready to rebuild the whole world, and in reality cannot even master their own moods — that is why nothing complete, strong and great can be achieved. There is no strong will, there are no strong characters, there are no capacities for loving entirely, and as entirely serving. These capacities will come to a regenerated humanity, when the centre of education will be the training of an active will; when living, great ideals will be set before childhood; when its atmosphere will be harmonious; when teachers will realise the unity of ethical, aesthetic and religious problems; when the whole school will be transformed into a school of love and beauty; and when the light of Theosophy will by its quality of synthesis illumine all the spheres of human activity, all the sides of the life of the world. Then the formula of " harmonious development " will, in truth, be realised in life in all its wide meaning, and the aim of education will not be to create a candidate for one or another diploma, nor a man of science, nor a clerk, nor even a citizen, but simply a real *man* — a *man* in the deep, all-embracing sense of this word, *i.e.*, with all the divine possibilities which that word implies.