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# NewAcropolis

Philosophy and Education for the Future

## Philosophy of Education

Gross National Happiness and Education: A Conversation with Professor Thakur S. Powdye!

Education and Art

The Negative Impact of Technology on Education

PHILOSOPHY

CULTURE

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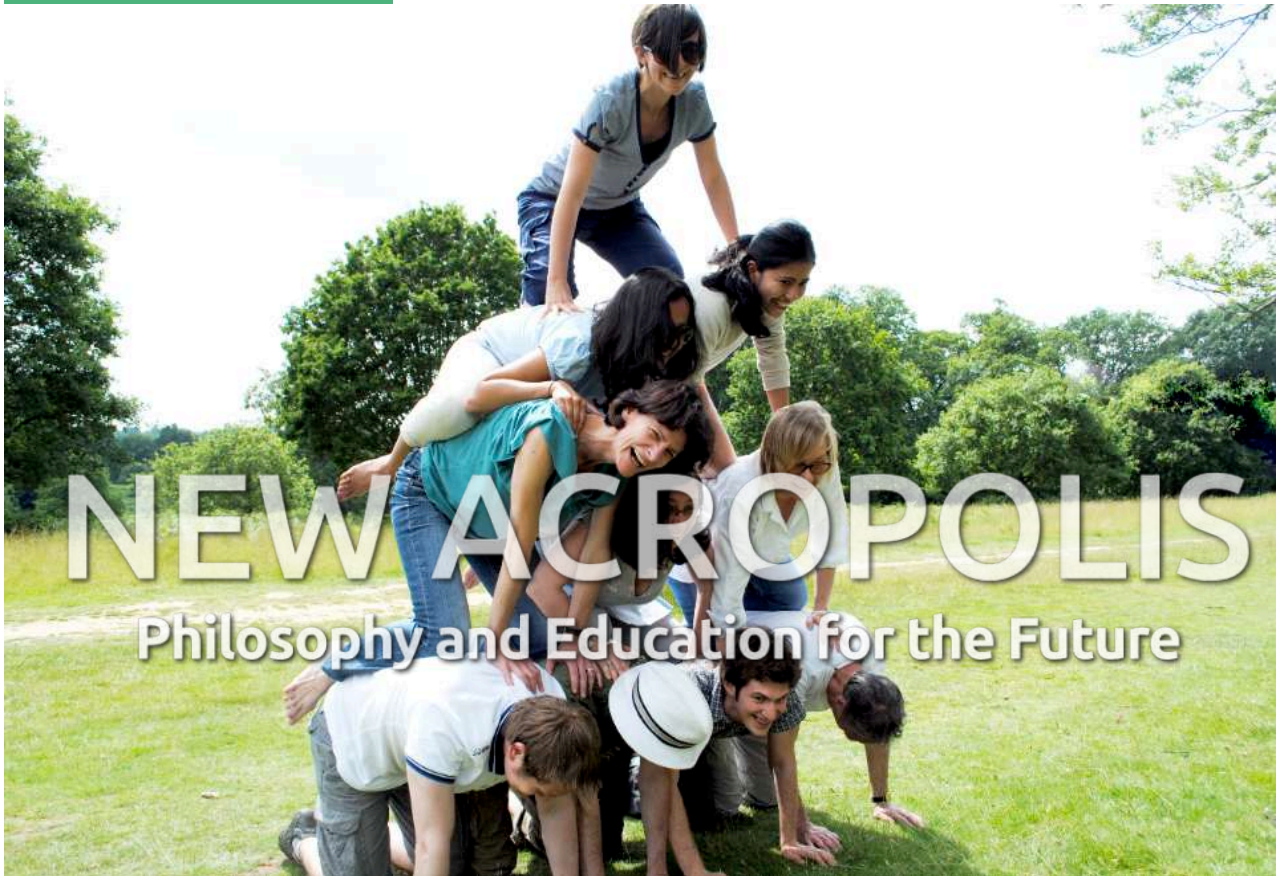
ESOTERICA

ART

AND MORE

Celebrating  
our

50<sup>th</sup>  
ISSUE



## About Us

**NEW ACROPOLIS** is an international organization working in the fields of philosophy, culture and volunteering. Our aim is to revive philosophy as a means of renewal and transformation and to offer a holistic education that can develop both our human potential as well as the practical skills needed in order to meet the challenges of today and to create a better society for the next generation.

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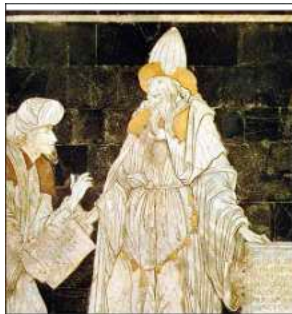
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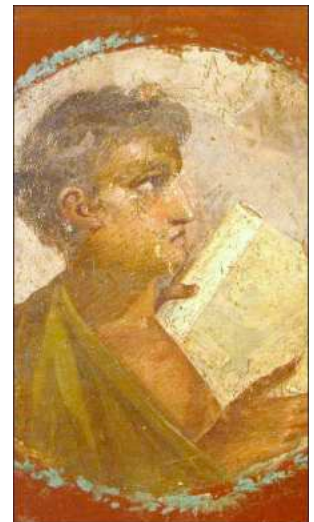
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## Editorial

### The Two Poles of Education

Welcome to the 50<sup>th</sup> edition of our magazine! We started in November 2013 as a humble newsletter with the goal of “disseminating ideas that can stimulate our thoughts, inspire our actions and help us create a vision of the future.” And from the very beginning, the subtitle for our publication was “Philosophy and Education for the Future”. Using this milestone as an opportunity to go back to our roots and to renew our commitment to this same cause, we decided to dedicate this edition to the topic of education. And if you have time to read only one article, I would warmly recommend that you read the interview with Bhutan’s former Minister of Education.

Education is, has been and always will be of the utmost importance. According to Nelson Mandela it is “the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” And according to Plato, the “direction in which education starts a man will determine his future in life.” Although the concept of education is universal and has probably been practised since the beginnings of humanity (simply by transmitting skills and experience to the next generation), our view of education has always been subject to huge variations and has often been the subject of strong disagreements. The type of education we give to our young people is definitely a mirror of the values and views we hold and is intimately intertwined with our worldview.

I have only recently found out that the word education is actually derived from two different Latin verbs: *educere* and *educare*. And this made me realize that, like everything in this manifested world, education also has two different poles that complement each other and need each other, and that it would be wrong to emphasise only one pole at the expense of the other.

*Educere* is the currently preferred one. It means ‘to draw out’ or ‘to lead forth’ and it is about the ‘drawing out’ of the inherent potential in a human being. An education based on the idea of *educere* will aim to give love, inspiration and encouragement and try to be completely ‘non-judgmental’ as to what ‘comes out’ of the child. Everything is good, okay, acceptable, ‘wonderful’. It is all about a process of awakening, of inner development, of becoming.

*Educare* is currently the problematic one. So many people have only experienced it in its ‘shadow expression’ and felt they had to rebel against it that they now have an almost allergic reaction to it. *Educare* means ‘to train’ and ‘to mould’. It carries the idea that the educator acts upon the learner to shape them into a form determined by the educator. It conjures up memories of the worst type of education during the industrial/Victorian age, where schools were almost considered like factories where children go in as raw materials, are beaten, shaped and moulded and come out as forms fit for the machinery of society.

We are still ‘reeling’ from this dehumanizing type of education and most of our educational reforms are still ‘reactions’ to it. However, we might be throwing the baby out with the bathwater. If *educere* and *educare* really are two sides of the same coin, or, in other words, a polarity or an interdependent pair, then they must both be valued and integrated.

One positive aspect of *educare* is the assurance of quality and high standards. We all want our doctors, nurses, teachers, pilots, lawyers, electricians, builders, hairdressers, etc. to be well qualified. But through *educere* alone, we will not be able to arrive at the necessary level of qualification. And if we think about some of the often-heard complaints about young people today: ‘they can’t spell, they lack certain literacy and numeracy skills, they are rude, they are unreliable, they lack resilience’, etc., then it seems that these are due to a lack of *educare* rather than *educere*.

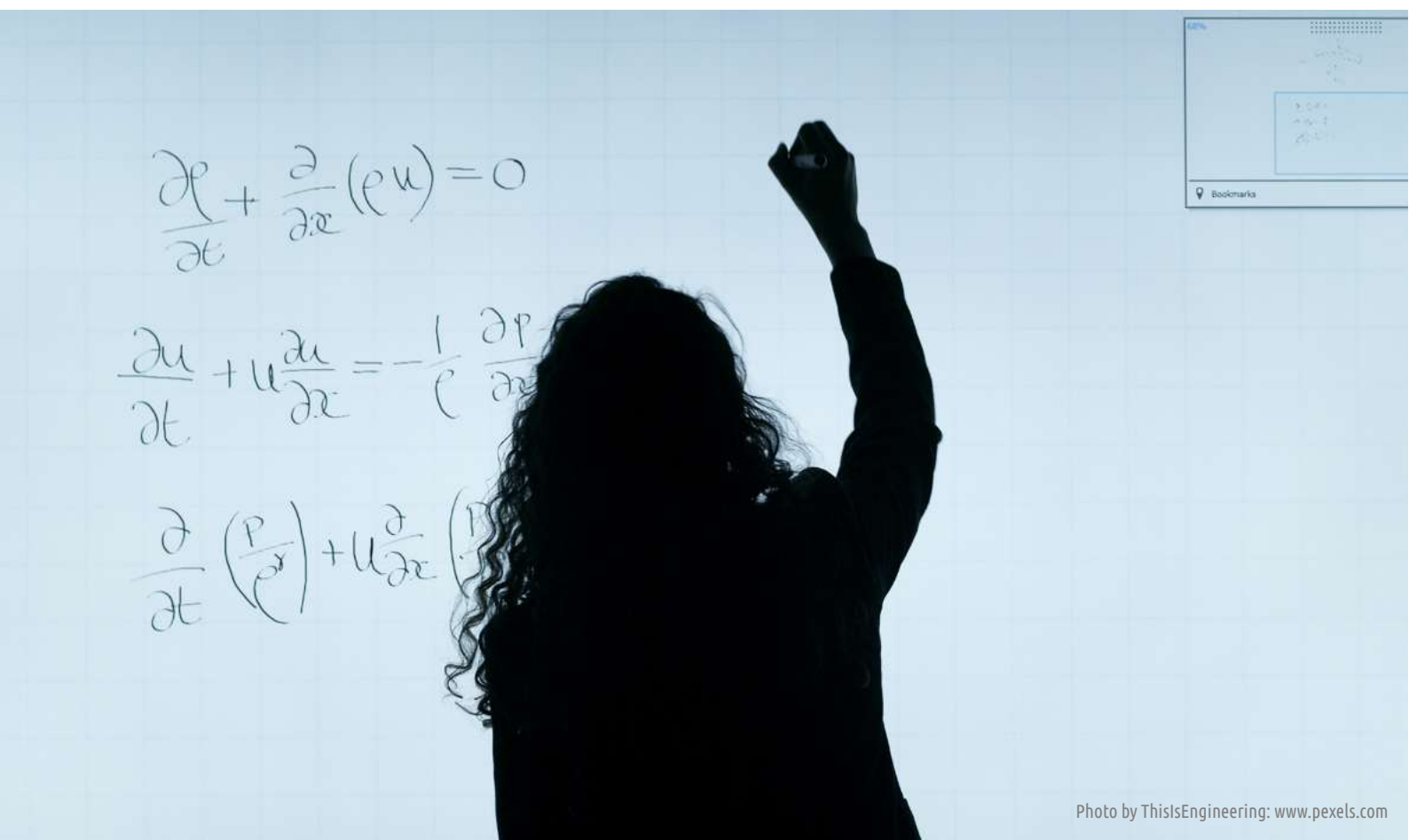
There is no doubt that we live in very polarized and polarizing times and that the topic of education continues to be fiercely debated. However, polarities are inevitable and cannot be solved by giving value only to one side and condemning the other. The ‘law of polarity’ states that both poles have their value, and both can be expressed either in a beneficial way or in their ‘shadow’ aspect. C.G. Jung observed correctly that ‘there is no energy unless there is a tension of opposites’. One thing we probably all need to learn more is to move from an either/or mentality to a both/and thinking, so that we can harness the power of synthesis.

Sabine Leitner

# Philosophy of Education

Napoleon once declared, "Of all political questions, education is perhaps the most important." Undoubtedly, education is important from a political perspective because it has a major effect on the development of the citizen. But what about its value for the individual? Perhaps both of these facets are equally important and, as Aristotle pointed out, ethics is intrinsically linked to politics and vice versa.

What is education? Although the modern tendency is to focus on the technical and vocational aspects of learning, such a utilitarian goal is surely insufficient, since the human being is far more than a person who performs a job. What, then, is an educated person? Is it simply someone who has a lot of knowledge, or is there an ethical aspect to education? It is interesting that in the Spanish language 'una persona educada' means a





polite person. So there is a cultural aspect to education as well, an aspect related to ‘character’ and also to morality.

For Confucius, there were four aspects in which a person should be educated: culture, moral conduct, wholehearted sincerity, and truthfulness. What is meant here by culture is two-fold: on the one hand, the intellectual aspect of learning, which broadens the mind and deepens the understanding; and on the other hand, the rules and customs of the society in which one lives. But



Japanese painting of Confucius, by Kanō Sanetsu. Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0

for Confucius, culture without moral conduct is worth little or nothing, because it is moral conduct that defines the human being. Sincerity is a ‘heart virtue’, hence the epithet ‘wholehearted’: it is to be open, frank and authentic, the opposite of duplicitous, crafty and hypocritical. Finally, truthfulness implies a love of truth and therefore a deep-seated integrity.

In Confucius’s approach to education, one can see that not so much importance is given to practical knowledge. In one of the short conversations recorded in *The Analects* one of his students expressed an interest in learning farming, to which Confucius replied ‘I am not as good as an old farmer’. This shows Confucius’s humility, but also indicates that this was not a field of primary concern for his teaching. It is not that he despised practical knowledge, far from it, but for him the fundamental aspects of education are cultural, moral and philosophical. If these are lacking, nothing will go right. A discerning and ethical intelligence must be our guide and the technical aspect will follow. What is the use of technical know-how if it is used for immoral purposes? There are countless examples in the modern world of technology being used for evil ends. This is well illustrated by the following letter which the head teacher of an American high school used to send out to all his teachers at the beginning of each academic year:

*“Dear Teacher,*

*I am a concentration camp survivor.*

*My eyes have seen what no man ought to see:*

- Gas chambers built by educated engineers.*
- Children poisoned by trained doctors.*
- Babies killed by qualified nurses.*
- Women and babies executed and burnt by people with college diplomas and university degrees.*

*- I do not trust education.*

*My request is as follows: help your pupils to become human beings. Your efforts must never produce trained monsters, qualified psychopaths or educated Eichmanns.*

*Reading, writing and arithmetic are only important if they help to make our children more human.”*

**(Published in Le Monde – 29 April 1995)**

For the American educationalist John Dewey, the social aspect of education is extremely important. The school should be a miniature community where the future citizen is prepared to become an active and committed citizen. We find a similar theme in some ancient writers, such as Plato, who also maintained (in *The Republic*) that a large part of what we now call primary and secondary education should be dedicated to the training of character.

However, Plato did not limit himself to the social aspect of education. He saw education as a progressive process that would lead to the unfolding of the best potentials within the human being. In his famous *Allegory of the Cave*, he suggested that the aim of human life is to emerge from the darkness of ignorance into the light of true knowledge; or, in his own words, 'from a kind of twilight to true daylight' (*The Republic* 521). It is a reorientation of the mind towards what is most 'utterly real' (the Platonic 'ideas' or 'forms'). In the Indian Upanishads, there is a similar phrase: "From delusion lead me to Truth. From darkness lead me to Light. From death lead me to immortality." (*Bṛihadāranyaka Upanishad* ch. 1, pt. 3, v. 28).

In this view, education must rise above utilitarianism and lead the human being to spiritual realization. But in order to reach such a high goal, young people need to receive training in qualities such as self-control and appropriate self-expression. In Plato's *Republic* a lot of emphasis is placed on physical training as a meaning of strengthening the character, while at the same time opening up the soul by exposure to the sciences and arts, which will develop gentleness of character and a love of truth, beauty and goodness.

To sum up, education is an art which should aim at the harmonious development of every side of human nature – physical, emotional, moral, intellectual and spiritual. While lip service is paid to this in many of our schools today, the reality is that the focus is on exam results (and future career prospects). It is very difficult to change an entire educational system, but it is



Plato, ancient Greek philosopher. From Thomas Stanley, (1655)

possible to introduce new models on a small-scale, like our own school of philosophy, where a more humanistic education, including character building, is valued more highly than academic grades, while at the same time giving the proper value to study and research as a way of broadening our minds, deepening our understanding and providing a never-ending inspiration on the path of life.

*Julian Scott*

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# Gross National Happiness and Education: A Conversation with Professor Thakur S. Powdyel

Professor Thakur S Powdyel was Bhutan's first democratically elected Minister of Education (2008-2013). An educator by choice, conviction and passion, he is respected for moving Bhutan towards fulfilling the country's constitutional mandate for education. As a recipient of numerous international awards such as the Gusi Peace Prize and the Global Education Award, he invested his public office with a spirit of integrity, service and selflessness. He has often been described as the most widely foot-travelled education minister in the world. The following is a transcript of an interview with Professor Powdyel by the Culture Circle of New Acropolis India.

**Q: As philosophers, discovering our human potential is an essential attribute of education and is of indispensable value. What does it really mean to be a human being? What makes us special?**

**A:** We have the special privilege to be born as human beings. In Bhutan, we use the term *milu rinpoche*, meaning 'the precious human being'. Human beings, as the most evolved species among all that we know, stand on a significantly different pedestal, compared to the other beings. The architecture of the human body is different from that of other species. But what stands out



Professor Thakur S. Powdyel

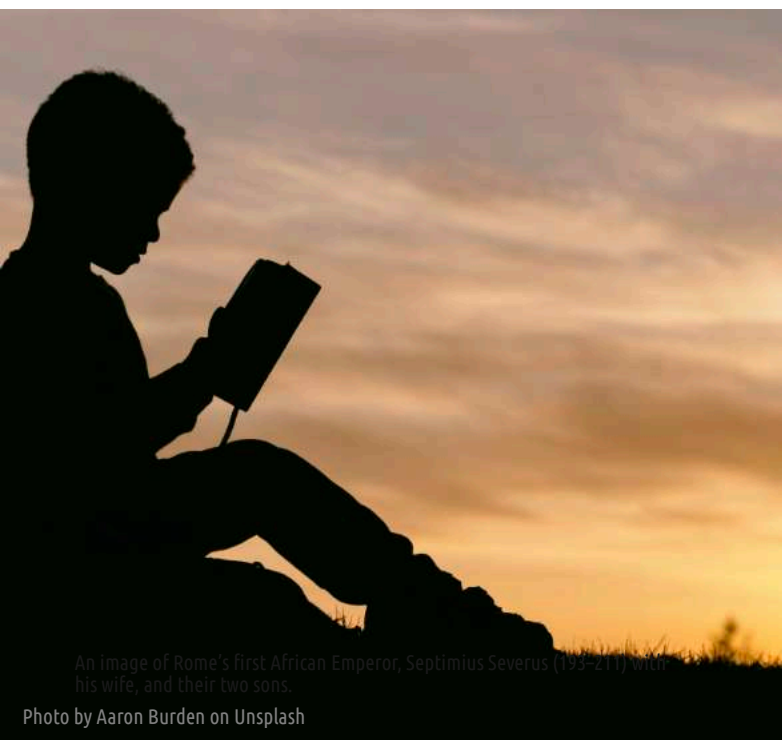
more are the other gifts, abilities, capacities and endowments of the human species. We can imagine... We can create... We can wonder... We can marvel... But at the same time, we can destroy... we can damage... and create havoc. We are not here to advocate the latter. We have the ability to think,



imagine higher values and ideals. We can aspire to a higher level of actualisation.

With our unique gifts, our unique presence, we can strive to elevate our consciousness to the level of the Buddha, of Christ, of the Prophet, and other great human beings. But at the same time, we can degrade ourselves, in our thoughts and actions to a very low level.

One of the most important aspects that distinguishes us from other species is our 'divinity' the capacity to be greater, more sublime, more enlightened. We have witnessed this in the march of humanity. From our species came the avatars and superior human beings like Mahatma Gandhi,



An Image of Rome's first African Emperor, Septimius Severus (193-211) with his wife, and their two sons.

Photo by Aaron Burden on Unsplash

Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln, and great scientists, writers and philosophers. Very often, we forget the sacredness, the sanctity, our sublime nature and get into actions driven by habits of the mind that are not becoming of the human species. As human beings, we can make the world a more humane, peaceful and beautiful place. No other species has this capacity and gift. Hence, we owe this gift of divinity, humanity, goodness, and goodwill to our societies, our institutions, our nations. We have to apply the intelligence of the human mind, the gift of the human heart and the

goodness of actions for the betterment of this world.

We can make ethical and moral distinctions between right and wrong, between truth and falsehood, between good and bad. I believe it is important to honour, secure and celebrate this potential, this dimension of 'divinity' within us, which we possess... which we are.

This is what the Ancient Greeks, Romans, the great civilization of Harappa and Mohenjodaro, and the ancient Chinese civilisation did. These great civilizations were the fruition of those great ideas, ideals, and dreams that human beings were able to see and elevate themselves to. Their civilizations, their cultures, their discoveries, their inventions, their art, sculpture, music, philosophy, literature, language, history, the humanities, signify the special abilities and qualities of the human species.

**Q: Could you help us understand the concept of Gross National Happiness, in the context of the true meaning of progress and development?**

**A:** Bhutan, the Bhutanese people, and the world need to recognise and offer our gratitude to the fourth King, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, for conceiving and proclaiming to the world this unique vision of a holistic and sustainable development model that he called Gross National Happiness (GNH). It marked a significant departure from the conventional notion of development measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP) which His Majesty perceived was a unidimensional, highly reductionistic, and utilitarian method. Such a measure of development takes into account only one factor - the material or economic factor - which is highly inadequate and unreliable to give a sense of the holistic development of society, because life is varied, subtle, beautiful, multi-layered, multi-dimensional, with so many facets.

His Majesty's model comprised a more holistic and sustainable way, using more variables that take into account not only the material needs but also the deepest needs of a human being that are connected to well-being. The most profound yearning of human beings across time and space, from

continent to continent, hemisphere to hemisphere, coast to coast, country to country, is the achievement of Happiness.

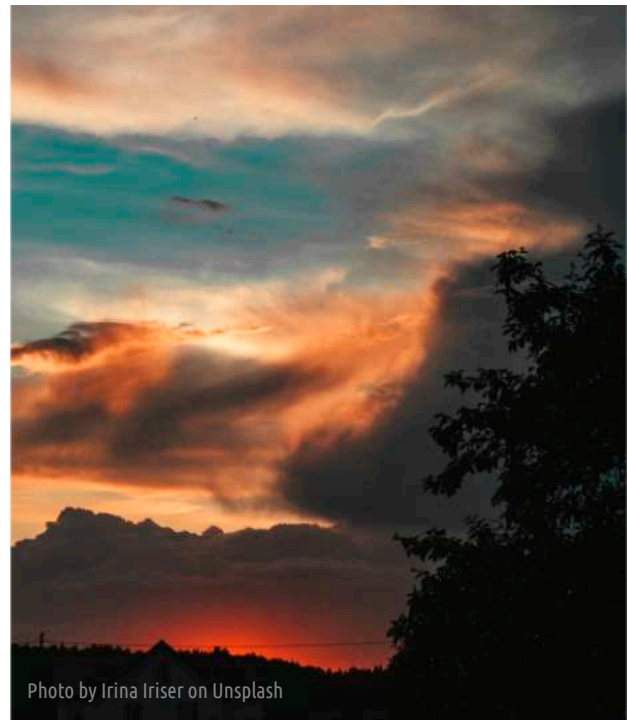
Therefore, we should not reduce the scope of human life simply to that of economic consumers and producers of material goods. Development must include various non-material, non-economic dimensions that make life worthwhile, meaningful and fulfilling - these have to be nurtured and developed.

As social beings, we have the ability to work in teams, celebrate each other, our social values, our sense of belonging and our sense of uniqueness. We have the ability to forge friendships, to trust each other, to be honest and sincere with each other, our capacity to love, our capacity for solidarity, our capacity to volunteer, our capacity to celebrate our moments of joy, and also to mourn and observe moments of silence in times of sorrow. Since the limited and narrow yardstick of GDP cannot capture this beauty and complexity of the entire scope of our development, we believe that GNH will provide a more holistic development paradigm.

There are four factors called 'Pillars' that support the architecture of GNH. The first pillar is facilitation of a **balanced and equitable sustainable socio-economic growth**. GDP doesn't bother about equity or social balance, as long as there is production and consumption, and an increase in revenue and national income. But for GNH, growth has to be balanced and equitable.

The next pillar is concerned with the **integrity of our Mother Nature**. A sense of honour for its sacredness is needed to define the relationship between the human species and the Earth. This planet is not only home to us, but also to an infinite variety of animals, birds, and other life forms. So to claim that all its resources belong to us and are for us to use, exploit and abuse, is an extremely irresponsible, thoughtless attitude. That is why GNH honours the sacredness of Planet Earth, the soil we walk on, the water we drink, the air we breathe, the oxygen we receive and need, the smells, the sounds, the sights we receive.

We need to celebrate the abundant variety of the Earth, which our senses can appreciate and need for nourishment. Today the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has declared Code Red for our Planet. Climate experts are trying to control carbon emissions so as to limit global warming to 1.5C. But is that going to be possible without a change in human behaviour, without a sense of responsibility?



The third pillar: **our culture**, our traditions, our heritage! All countries and communities have their own culture, a manifestation of who we are, as a people, society, as a nation. Culture gives us a sense of uniqueness, a sense of identity, a sense of belonging and a sense of personal integrity and respect. A community or a nation without a culture would be a valley of dry bones. The way we dress ourselves, the way we sing, dance, play, cook our meals, our drinks, our sports and games, our art and architecture, our values, our world view, our outlook, our ideals, our hopes, dreams, fears, superstitions, indeed a sense of who we are; the tangible and the intangible, the manifest and the subtle, the objective and subjective – these, and more come within the domain of culture.

If we lose sight of who we are, a time could come when we would become a mono-cultural world with no variety, beauty, or nuances. In Bhutan, we revere our culture - whether it is our big dzongs, the fortresses, the temples, the prayer flags, our homes, our songs and dances... Culture is an extremely important part of our GNH vision. In measuring GDP, on the other hand, culture is valuable only as much as the revenue it brings.

The last important pillar is the **quality of governance**. Governance cuts across all the other pillars. A lot of unhappiness in the world emanates from bad governance or mis-governance. As far back as 1627, the great Lama Zhabdrung Rinpoche, who unified Bhutan as a nation-state,



Zhabdrung Rinpoche, 17th c. painting.

said that if a government doesn't look after the welfare of the people, it has no right to exist. That is why His Majesty was very clear that governance ought to be an instrument of public service and it ought to win the trust of the people by its actions. GDP doesn't factor in the quality of governance and its implications on the environment, the quality of daily life, the holistic growth of humans and non-humans, or the future sustainability of the human race. The vision of GNH not only includes the wellbeing of the present generation, but also that of future generations.

### Q: Why do you regard Education as the Noble Sector?

A: When I started out, Bhutan was just opening up and one could have joined any ministry or department in the government. But I chose to work in the education sector. All the ideas and dreams that gave rise to great civilisations of the past could have served as the great foundations of our own civilisation; the religious foundations, the spiritual, philosophical, humanistic, and artistic foundations, could have actually been our strength, to guide us. But in our rapidly technologizing world, rapidly materializing world, rapidly industrializing world, there is a mad rush to run ahead of everyone else, to cover the last mile as quickly as possible before anyone else, and make quick money to succeed in the material world, by becoming as street-smart and clever as possible!

We have to invest in Education with wisdom; education is a lot more than the knowledge and information that is available today. It reminds me of the play Dr. Faustus by Christopher Marlowe. Today, we have Faustian science, Faustian knowledge, and Faustian technology, but no Faustian music. Faustus over-reached. But his redeeming quality was his love for Music!

Today, Education has come a long way away from what it used to be when it was called the Noble Sector. I quote T.S. Eliot: "All our knowledge leads us nearer to our ignorance... all our ignorance brings us nearer to death... nearness to death, but no nearer to God." But I still believe that education is, and ought to be, the Noble Sector of public good endowed with the purpose to heal wounds, to heal the broken world, to bring light and elevate. I assign to education the responsibility to take us closer to the truth. We ought to be able to expect that education have the higher goal of making us more sublime, to elevate the minds and thoughts of our children.

Today, Education has lost the capacity of hope for a beautiful world. We use our institutions to respond to the call of the market, factories and corporations. Education has surrendered itself to serve those rather mundane functions. However, commercial



enterprises are not necessarily attuned to the enhancement or flourishing of human beings or to human self-actualisation. We, of course, need nations to grow and develop financially. But can financial growth alone make our lives truly beautiful and joyous? Will it make society more peaceful? Is the world becoming more united?

The Education system has to respond to the deeper urges, impulses and yearnings of humanity. It has to concern itself with the intangibles, while it responds to something as tangible as the market and employment.

Education without values and morality is dangerous; today some of the most qualified people are involved in some of the most destructive activities of the world. While we try to get them to become smart and clever, very few people are heard saying: 'You have to be a good human being... You have to honour your own divinity and humanity... You have to be responsible for a higher cause, for society, the nation and Mother Earth.' Today, our institutions just perform the minimal function to complete the syllabus, to get people to graduate, award degrees and certificates and diplomas... But what happens to these people eventually? What kind of contribution can they make to their societies? If education can't get them to be wiser, then no other sector can do this. That is why education has to be elevated to the Noble Sector that it is meant to be.

Therefore, my concept of a Green School is a strategy to restore this core function of education and engage it as an instrument for the flourishing of noble values within society and humanity.

Education responds to the intellect or thinking mind! But students are much more than just their minds. My biggest concern as an educator has been the preservation of the integrity of the learner. I have to educate the whole person. I cannot just take the child as a potential future employee, or as a potential future revenue earner. That would be a reductionistic and a minimalist, unfair approach. Today's process of teaching and learning ought to address the multiple dimensions that make up the lives of our children.

Our planet has become an object of exploitation and consumption; that's why we have these unseasonal rains and floods, tsunamis, forest fires burning millions of hectares, killing and obliterating life in their multiple forms... this is utterly sad. And we have already 'educated' countless number of people all over the world?

However, it is still possible to look towards the future, engage our children, young men and women on the principle of nobility. Arise... Arise... Arise... Awaken and advance onto this different path!

In the context of the Green School model, green is a colour but more importantly, it is a metaphor for anything and everything that supports and sustains life in all its infinite variety, in all its multiple forms. The preservation and celebration of life therefore, is a prime principle of education. And when we build our schools, institutions, and our curricula, we need to ensure this true goal of education and learning is present.

So we can have a green school, a green home, a green parliament, a green judiciary, a green executive, a green legislature, green diplomacy, green business, green industry, green planning, green mining, green orientation, green mental habits, green thoughts... anything that supports life.

For me, education is twice-blessed - it blesses those who give it and those who receive it.

Education is an important holder of our dreams, of our beliefs, and of our ideals. Its reaffirmation and re-assertion as the Noble Sector ought to lead us across to the sunnier side of the street and redeem humanity!

*This interview was originally published in **The Acropolis** magazine of New Acropolis India (<https://theacropolis.in/>), and has been reproduced here with their kind permission. We would also like to thank Professor Powdyal for his inspiring words.*

# Integral Education

Integral education is a popular term covering educational systems that focus not only on cognitive skills, but also on physical, vital, spiritual and psychological abilities. The idea of integral education is to provide a complex structure that can help to develop all aspects and all levels of the human being. Students who learn in this way are equipped with abilities that can be applied throughout their lives, no matter what kind of challenges they have to face.

Many integral schools are connected to Aurobindo Ghose and his collaborator, Mirra Alfassa (who was called 'The Mother'). Aurobindo, or Sri Aurobindo as his followers called him, was an Indian yogi and spiritual philosopher. He developed a spiritual practice called integral or

supramental yoga, which was based on the idea that the Spirit manifests itself in a process of involution, in which it forgets its origin, followed by the reverse process, which is evolution. During human evolution, the spirit unfolds itself and yoga is a good support to aid this evolution since it makes it quicker. With the help of integral yoga it becomes possible to be aware of the Divine, and to integrate all aspects of the human being, from the physical to the spiritual level. This concept was described in his books *The Synthesis of Yoga* and *The Life Divine*.

Aurobindo used the term integral education in two ways: integral means the various aspects of the human being as mentioned above, but it also means the evolution of a nation or of humanity



itself, which contains unity in diversity. In the West, where the focus in the educational systems is on mental and physical skills, the spiritual aspect is missing. To remedy this, the schools that use integral education give space to activities connected to all aspects of the human being. They promote learning by doing and teaching by play instead of using just the 'classroom and chalk' method. The focus is on the potential and personal interest of the student, as each soul is a unique being with an evolutionary purpose. It develops original thinking so the student will be prepared for the upcoming challenges. It provides freedom for the students who are different in terms of background, learning abilities, etc.

There are also other systems of integral education apart from Aurobindo's. Rudolf Steiner's Waldorf schools and the Montessori schools also differ from mainstream educational institutions. While mainstream schools are based on a materialistic and mechanistic worldview, Steiner's and Montessori's pedagogic method is based on humanistic and spiritual roots. In North America, more integral approaches were championed by Dewey and Kilpatrick, while in Asia there were the value-based Indian methods, including the approaches of Aurobindo, Tagore or Vivekananda; in Europe, Steiner and Montessori were the pioneers of the integral or progressive pedagogies.

Steiner and Montessori were inspired by Theosophy, a 19<sup>th</sup> century movement founded by Helena Blavatsky, which aimed to unite the wisdom of East and West. Steiner's movement, which was called Anthroposophy, was founded in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and focused on the human aspect and the comprehensible spiritual world. For this reason, in Steiner's Waldorf schools, imagination, intuition and inspiration are emphasized as tools which can be used to promote inner development and better understand spiritual experiences. According to Steiner, the results of spiritual research should be expressed in the same way as the results of scientific research, because they are equally important and relevant. He positioned his movement and educational system between

mysticism, which transcends rational and exact knowledge, and natural science, which only accepts that which can be perceived, so both have their own limits. Steiner's approach towards the human is very similar to that of Aurobindo. He regarded the human being as a complex structure of the physical, etheric, astral and mental bodies and built into his system the concept of karma and reincarnation. Nowadays, there are more than 1,000 Waldorf schools around the world, in 60 countries.

The Montessori school was founded by Maria Montessori and builds on the child's natural interests, emphasizing their independence. In Montessori schools, there are mixed age groups, like 0-3, 3-6, 9-12, or 12-15. A class can be three hours long, so the students can become deeply involved in an activity and there is no rush. They often work with materials, such as wood, so they gain first-hand experience and practical skills as well as conceptual knowledge. In Montessori schools, the attitude, abilities and characteristics of the student are more important than the results.

Despite the growing number of alternative schools and the fact that these new methods have been in existence for over 100 years, mainstream schools haven't changed much in the above respects over the last century. And most schools are still using the old techniques to prepare the next generation for life. In these schools, the main goal is still results-based and concerned with the acquisition of the necessary skills and knowledge to become part of the utilitarian world we are living in today. However, as we progress into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are signs that this materialistic and very old-fashioned way of life is not sustainable. To build a different world, where people are in harmony with themselves and nature, of which they are a part, a different, more holistic approach is needed, and this gap can perhaps be filled by integral education.

*Istvan Orban*



# The Study of (Western) Esotericism

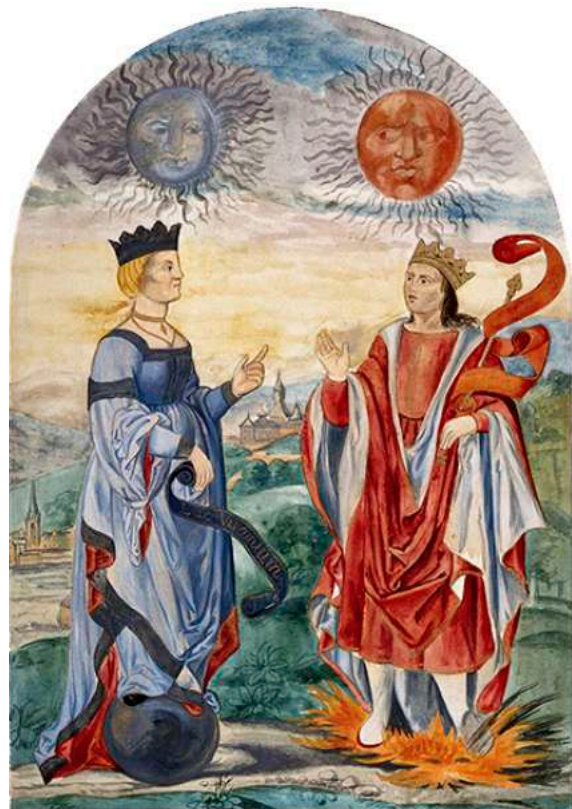
We live in the so called *Information Age* in which any kind of knowledge is at our fingertips. Topics which fall under the categories of ‘esoteric’, ‘metaphysical’ or ‘occult’ have never been easier to reach. Hundreds of research papers on these topics can be freely downloaded on various online platforms (e.g. [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu)), while thousands of antique books with occult themes have been digitised and made available online. The publishing of “mind, body, spirit” books has been booming for years and shown no signs of slowing down. While a staggering number of YouTube videos featuring so-called ‘esoteric’ topics are only a mouse-click away.

We can see that there is no lack of interest in these topics, but despite this interest, the field of ‘esoteric’ studies is still at an embryonic stage and I believe that it will still take many years before it becomes part of our formal education. This is an emerging field which only recently has gained entry to academia. Let’s now explore together some of its features and implications.

The term *esotericism* has its root in the word *esoteric*. Esoteric comes from the Greek *esôterikos* and it refers to anything that is “inner” (or “hidden”). The term *esoteric* first appeared in English in the 1701 *History of Philosophy* by Thomas Stanley. The noun *esotericism*, in its French form *ésotérisme*, first appeared around 1828. The words *esotericism*,

*esoterism* and *Western esotericism* have often been used interchangeably.

In the field of history of religions and spirituality, *esotericism* is a kind of artificial category which scholars have applied to a range of currents, movements and ideas that were known by other names and developed within Western society at least before the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Among



Personifications of the principles of mercury and sulfur, from the sixteenth century. Credit: Wellcome Collection

these spiritual currents and traditions we find Hermeticism, Gnosticism and Neoplatonism, to mention just a few.

Actually, there has never been a field of study or doctrine per se that can be labelled 'esotericism'. There is instead the study and practice of the 'inner' (and 'deeper') aspect of a religious/spiritual 'tradition'. Its aim is (or perhaps was) to redirect all the components of man's psyche (emotional, mental, volitional, etc.) towards an inner regeneration and re-harmonisation. In antiquity, this 'esoteric training' or education served as the foundation to reach higher stages of spiritual realisation. These stages constituted the so-called 'path of initiation'. But *initiation* is not the same as *esotericism*. One can be an esoteric seeker or a student of esotericism but not an initiate!

The reason why the study of esotericism (and its applications) has never reached great popularity is due to many factors. In a general sense, we can say that a clear rejection of many of these teachings took place before the advent of the *Age of Enlightenment*, when in Europe there emerged a hostile (Counter-Reformation) critique towards various forms of Western thought that had developed with the Renaissance. Later on, when the *Age of Enlightenment* was already in full swing, these teachings came to be regularly categorised under the labels of "superstition", "magic" and "the occult". The term *magic* for instance, became 'stigmatised' and relegated to everything that was not modern (i.e. scientific and rational). Modern academia, which was then in the process of developing, continued to reject and ignore topics that came under "the occult". This kind of prejudice towards esotericism within academia has persisted until now.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, this situation was partly balanced by the appearance and development of initiatory societies professing esoteric knowledge (such as Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry). Later on, Romanticism (which included philosophical movements like German Idealism) and historical figures like Max Weber contributed to the re-emergence of Western

esotericism and the re-enchantment of the *natural world*. The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of new trends of esoteric thought now known as *occultism*.

Prominent groups in this century included the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

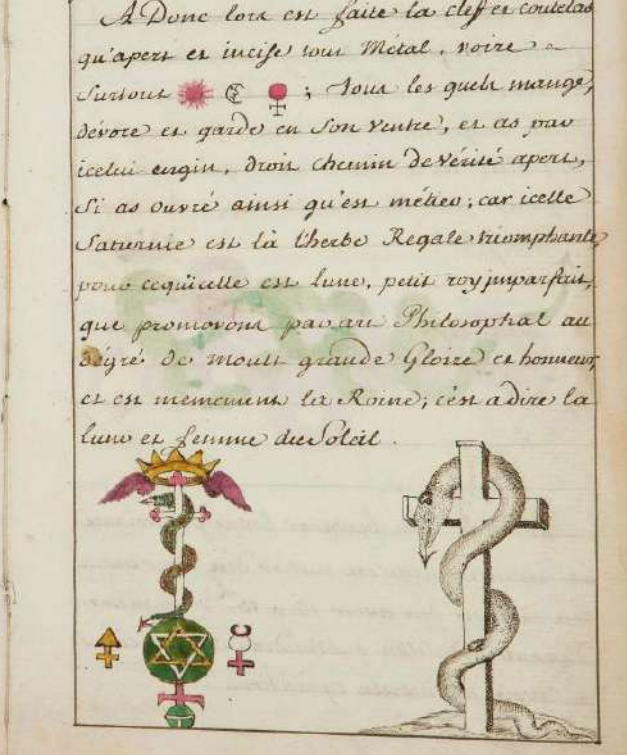
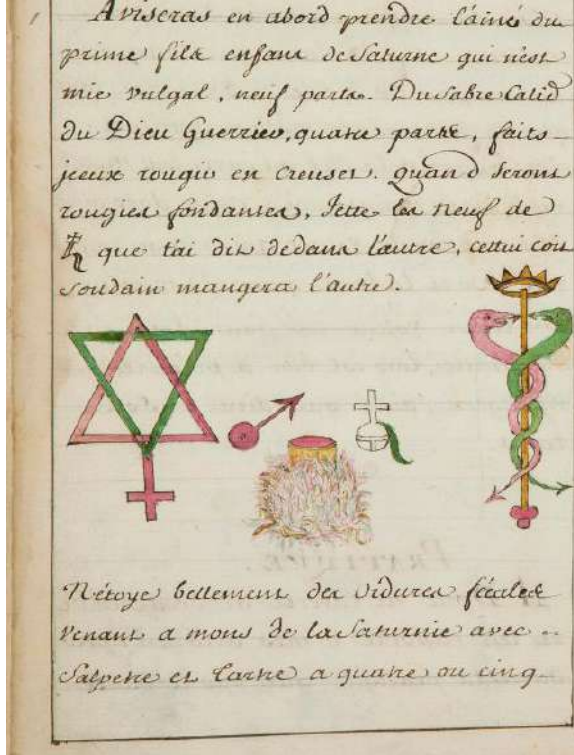
The academic study of Western esotericism was pioneered in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by various individuals who came especially from the field of history of religion. In the works of people like



Hermes Trismegistus, floor mosaic in the Cathedral of Siena

Henri Corbin, Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade and even Carl Gustav Jung (not a historian but a psychoanalyst), we see a reevaluation of the study of esotericism. Around this time, for instance, we find the Warburg Institute, an important centre of esoteric studies with such great scholars of *Hermeticism* like Frances Yates. In 1965, thanks to professor Henry Corbin, the university of *La Sorbonne* in Paris established the world's first academic post in the study of esotericism. And in 1979, also at the Sorbonne, the French scholar Antoine Faivre developed the study of Western esotericism into a formalised field.





Because scholars have brought their own philosophical approaches into this field we find various definitions of the study of esotericism. Those belonging to the 'Perennial' school of thought, for instance, have also seen esotericism as a 'Perennial' hidden tradition. This approach views Western esotericism as just one form of a worldwide esotericism at the heart of all world religions and cultures, reflecting a hidden esoteric 'Reality' or 'Universal Tradition'. This approach has been dominated by a predominantly *religionist paradigm*<sup>1</sup>.

Another perspective has seen the study of Western esotericism as a way of 're-enchanting' the world by seeking to rebalance the positivistic, atheistic and over-scientific world views which have come to dominate the Western world. The scholars who have embraced this perspective have abandoned the *religionist paradigm* and have emphasised more empirical, historical and discursive approaches.

Finally we find those scholars who view esotericism as a category encompassing all of Western culture's 'rejected knowledge'. *A kind of dustbin containing those theories, teachings and world views rejected by the mainstream intellectual community*<sup>2</sup>. This perspective has brought a greater interdisciplinary debate across the boundaries of the humanities.

1. Within the academic field of religious studies those who study different religions in search of an inner universal dimension to them all are termed *religionists*.

2. As quoted by Wouter J. Hanegraaff in *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

From 1980 (with the formation of the *Hermetic Academy*) onwards we have seen the birth of various institutes and universities embracing the academic study of esotericism. We could mention the University of Amsterdam (with a chair in the History of Hermetic Philosophy), the Exeter Center for the Study of Esotericism (EXESES), the North American Association for the Study of Esotericism (ASE), and the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE).

To conclude, it is important to emphasise the potential that lies behind the study of esotericism. Many of those individuals who have engaged themselves fully into this field (and its applications) have become transformed in heart and mind. Their historical and religious horizons have broadened while the central themes of 'Western culture' have acquired new and deeper meaning.

Agostino Dominici

### Suggested bibliography:

*Western Esotericism: A Concise History* by Antoine Faivre

*Esotericism and the Academy* by Wouter J. Hanegraaff

*Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* by Wouter J. Hanegraaff

*Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge* by Kocku von Stuckrad



# Education and Art

There are many studies that show that involvement in the arts can lead to increased academic performance. Dance, drama, music, and the visual arts in the school curriculum enable children to develop self-confidence and self-understanding, problem solving skills, perseverance and discipline, focus and concentration, creativity, self-directed learning, collaboration and many others – these are all skills that are increasingly important in the workplace and keys to a successful career. Another valuable aspect of art in education is that young people discover the power of their own potential for expression, which is vital for our psychological well-being and happiness.

However, in this article I would like to leave the ‘well-travelled road’ of the academic mainstream and explore another dimension of the educational value

of art for the unfoldment of the human potential: the power of art to develop our *inner* senses.

Although sound, colour, texture, etc. play on our physical senses and can be received as very pleasant stimuli, beauty and meaning (in my view, theatre is more about meaning than beauty) are not perceived by our physical senses but by our inner senses. Otherwise, we would all be able to see the same beauty and meaning in things, but this is not the case as the old dictum of ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder’ shows.

It is obvious that in order to perceive anything we need to develop organs of perception. To be able to see we need to develop eyes, to be able to capture sound waves we need to develop ears. If we did not have a nose, smells and fragrances would be non-existent for us.



But seeing and hearing alone are not enough to enable us to perceive beauty. Everyone with healthy ears can hear a piece of music, but not every person will be able to resonate with its beauty. The difference lies in our inner sense and not the physical sense. To be able to appreciate the beauty of music, dance or poetry, or the profound meaning of a play we need to develop our *inner* senses.

We probably all have an experience of how our inner senses have grown and developed over time. A piece of music that did not touch us when we were younger has now become very beautiful. A book we read some time ago and which was maybe not particularly interesting then, is suddenly full of meaning and we can hardly believe that we have read that book before. What has changed? Not the notes of the music or the words of the text, but our inner ability to perceive their beauty and meaning. It seems that while our physical ability to see and hear diminishes naturally with age, our inner senses grow over time, and we are able to see more with our heart and the eyes of our mind.

All perception is a question of resonance. A string or a tuning fork will resonate when another instrument emits the frequency it is tuned to. A different note will not make it resonate. Developing these inner senses is like developing tuning forks that are able to resonate with more and more subtle vibrations.

Why do these inner senses matter? Because they enable us to access higher realities. Psychology speaks about different types of intelligence and the inner senses develop our aesthetic intelligence. We could say that aesthetic intelligence is the faculty of perceiving beauty and appreciating it in ever more subtle ways. *Aesthetic intelligence* allows us to experience heightened states of consciousness (e.g. the experience of beauty and meaning) and to love and value life more because we can see more of its beauty and meaning.

Our outer senses inform us about the external world where things can be defined, measured and quantitatively assessed. However, our inner senses enable us to perceive quality rather than quantity. Our inner senses develop our discernment and also our own inner compass for what is good, right and beautiful.

How can we develop our inner senses? There are usually many roads that lead to Rome, but I believe that the exposure to great works of art and the practice of art are invaluable tools to support this process. Exposure to art and the possibility of practising an art should be part of every good education. Taste is acquired and needs to develop over time. Without an appropriate education, the beauty and the meaning of the greatest works of art will probably be non-existent in the same way as colour does not exist for a blind person. Great art needs an education to be appreciated. Only an education that includes art will ensure that the greatest works of art can continue to be sources from which future generations will be able to draw strength and inspiration.

It seems to me that evolution is a reaching for ever higher levels of consciousness, like a stairway towards higher realities. From the sensible to the intelligible, from the phenomenon to the noumenon, from physical beauty to transcendent beauty, from the literal to the symbolic. Art has always been a bridge between the two worlds and art in education and an education in the arts can therefore help us to realize our human potential.

Sabine Leitner

**"Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."**

***Ode on a Grecian Urn by John Keats***

**"Music is the one incorporeal entrance into the higher world of knowledge which comprehends mankind but which mankind cannot comprehend." Beethoven**

**"Nulla Aesthetica sine Ethica, Nulla Ethica sine Aesthetica." (No Aesthetics without Ethics, No Ethics without Aesthetics) - Words written on the building of the Reina Sofía Higher School of Music in Madrid.**

**"There is such a thing as a stairway of beauty, a progressive appreciation and sense of the beautiful. Taste has to evolve and reach maturity and refinement." N. Sri Ram**



# History of Education in the Western World

The history of education has also been described as the history of civilisation. Education has a role in perpetuating and passing on knowledge and values to the next generation. Therefore, it has a culturally specific connection – “enculturation” as defined by the cultural historian C. Dawson.

The education systems of the world are the product of centuries of changes through successive stages of transformation to the present systems.

The story of formal education in the Western world begins with its roots in Ancient Greece based around the written word after the introduction of the alphabet.

The word education has its roots in Latin, ex – meaning “out of” and ducere meaning “to lead”, “to lead out of or guide out of”. Latin ‘educare’ in essence would mean “to bring up or rear a child”.

Education in Ancient Greece, in the city of Athens during the 5<sup>th</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C. was aimed mainly at preparing young elite men for public life and taking part in the democratic process. It was still for the privileged, as only families wealthy enough could pay tuition fees to a private tutor. Students from citizen families could receive a basic education preparing them for citizenship, including



Roman relief showing a teacher with three disciples. (180-185 AD)



oratory and ethics. Only male Athenian citizens were allowed to participate in the democracy, while slaves, foreigners, or women were not.

Other Greek states such as Sparta, on the other hand, had a publicly funded education with its main focus on the martial arts, rather than academic subjects. In Athens, if you wanted a physical, academic and arts education, these were covered in different schools: the paedotribes covered gymnastics and general physical education, the kitharistes (named after the kithara or lyre) covered music and lyric poetry, and the grammatistes taught reading, writing, and arithmetic, as well as literature.

Chaperoning these young boys to and from school, was a slave known as a paidagogos, meaning literally “child leading”. From this are derived the words pedagogue and pedagogy, even though the slave didn’t actually do any teaching.

After a basic education they could go on to study higher education in the practical arts (such as medicine or architecture) or in philosophy. This is where famous philosophers such as Plato, and Aristotle had their own schools. Plato’s school was named after Akademos the Athenian hero, and later known as Academia, from where we get the word academic.

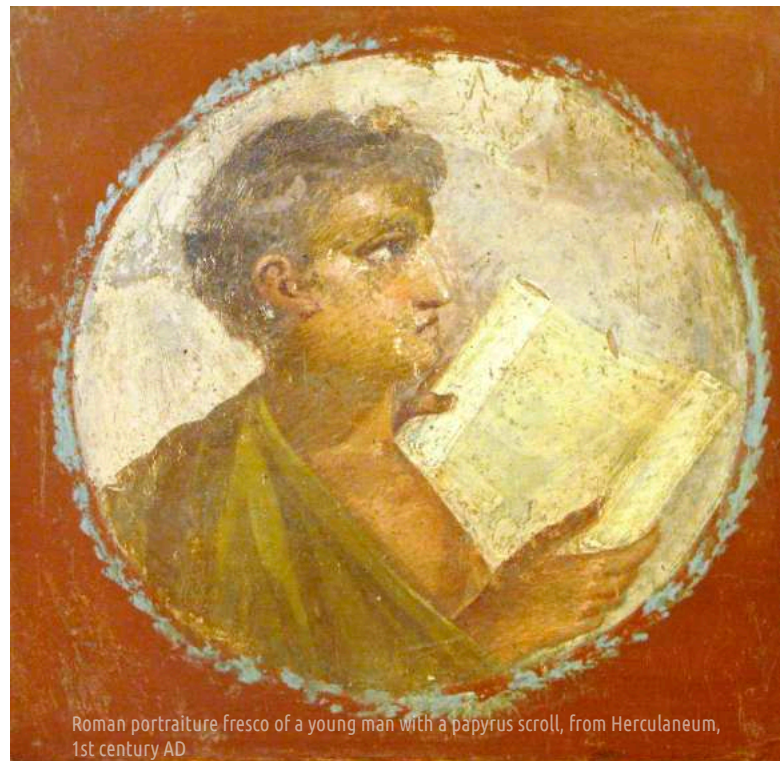
In Rome they continued in the same line as the Greeks, with a strong emphasis on rhetoric and oratory, which were necessary skills for taking part in Roman public life in their Republican system. Sadly, physical education and music dropped out of the main curriculum. But one of the notable differences was that women were given a basic education.

It was during this period that liberal arts education took place. In Latin liberalis meant “free”, so a liberal education was an education for the freeborn people. The notion of free is connected to the word school itself, as in Greek skhole means “leisure”. Not that school was a leisurely pursuit, but for one to go to school one had to have leisure time outside work.

Education in Rome was divided into three levels. At level 1, boys and girls from about 7 to 11 years

of age were taught by ludi magiste, the “schoolmaster”, and covered the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. At Level 2, students aged 12 to 15 would be taught grammar and literature by a grammaticus. And the final Level 3 was accessible for boys over 16 who could move on to the rhetor to learn rhetoric – girls were not permitted as there was no opportunity for public speaking.

We have many educational words that come from Greek and Latin and some from Germanic roots.



The word teach, comes from Old English tæcan and ultimately from the Proto-Indo-European root \*deik- which means to show. This is also the root of the word dictionary, the Latin word dictionarius being coined in the 13th century by an Englishman, John of Garland, who taught in Paris, and wanted to create a resource to help his students learn Latin vocabulary.

Often in teaching, the teacher “shows” how to do the “work”. Work, an integral part of the pursuit of study, is etymologically connected to the word student, meaning to be eager, to take pains, to strive after, from the Latin ‘studere’.

Teaching is not without care and nurture, as we see in the word ‘tutor’, which developed into its

educational sense, and comes from Latin 'tueri', meaning "to protect".

Pupil is another word for student, and is the diminutive form of pupus "boy" and pupa "girl" in Latin. In Latin pupilla could also be used to mean "doll", from which we get pupil in the sense of the dark aperture in the eye, because if you look in someone's eye you can sometimes see a little doll-like version of yourself reflected.

The main word for student in Latin was discipulus, from where we get the word disciple. This word has its roots in the Latin word 'discere' meaning "to learn" and has its source in the Proto-Indo-European root \*dek- meaning "to take or accept", and curiously is also where the Latin word 'docere' meaning "to teach" comes from, which gives the English word doctor, the highest class of teacher in further education.

During the Renaissance, ancient culture was rediscovered and referred to as the classical, implying it was better than the medieval period that followed. And all the ancient texts were readopted and copied, leading to the 18th Century, which is referred to as the Neoclassical period.

The notion of a classical education referred to education in the culture of the classical world, rather than an attempt to repeat or replicate education from the ancient world. The emphasis is more on the Greek model, with less focus on the theological education of the mediaeval period. Education of the early modern period involved classical languages like Latin and Greek, as well as the natural sciences.

In the mediaeval period, education was largely conducted by the church. Students could attend a monastic or cathedral school in order to become a member of the clergy or to become a scribe. As the values of society shifted, so too did the emphasis of education.

Greek and Roman education, on the other hand, emphasized preparation for public life and citizenship. Medieval education focused on the next life after death. Physical exercise was out, and textual study was definitely in. Students were taught

reading and writing in Latin, not their own native language, and they would spend their time copying church writings.

However, the basic subjects still came out of the ancient period in the form of the seven liberal arts, first codified in the 5th century by Martianus Capella, growing out of the 'enkuklios paideia' – "the circle of arts and sciences considered by the Greeks as essential to a liberal education" (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

The seven liberal arts were made up of the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic) and quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy).

Our most well known and most prestigious establishments of education, the universities, were born out of the middle ages, as a result of the demand for education outside of the cathedral schools.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries Frederick the Great of Prussia, during the Napoleonic wars, outlined the Prussian model of education in the Generallandschulreglement, a decree of 1763, authored by Johann Julius Hecker. This model is more popularly known as the Factory model of education, where students are educated by age. Its conception was seen as modern and novel at the time with egalitarian views of education for the masses.

This age-based cohort model of education still remains the basis for our modern-day education system around the world.

*Jim Pang*

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_education](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_education)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prussian\\_education\\_system](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prussian_education_system)

The Crisis of Western Education, by Christopher Dawson

<http://www.alliterative.net/> (Mark Sandaram)

# The Negative Impact of Technology on Education

In this article I would like to share with you an interesting paper entitled “Four Ways Technology Has Negatively Changed Education<sup>1</sup>”, by Dr Khadija Alhumaid. In it she describes the extent to which technology has gradually been integrated into our education processes and methodology.

Technology is not something new and specific to our industrial civilisation, but has been present ever

since mankind began to walk the earth, as a tool to “harness nature and defy its unconquerable forces”.

However, over the last century it has become ever more present, to a point where it is not a mere add-on, but rather indispensable to our lifestyles. For example, 300 hours of video are uploaded on YouTube every minute, and almost 5 billion videos are watched every single day<sup>2</sup>. Digital devices such

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1. Journal of Educational and Social Research, Vol. 9, No. 4, October 2019

2. <https://fortunelords.com/youtube-statistics/>

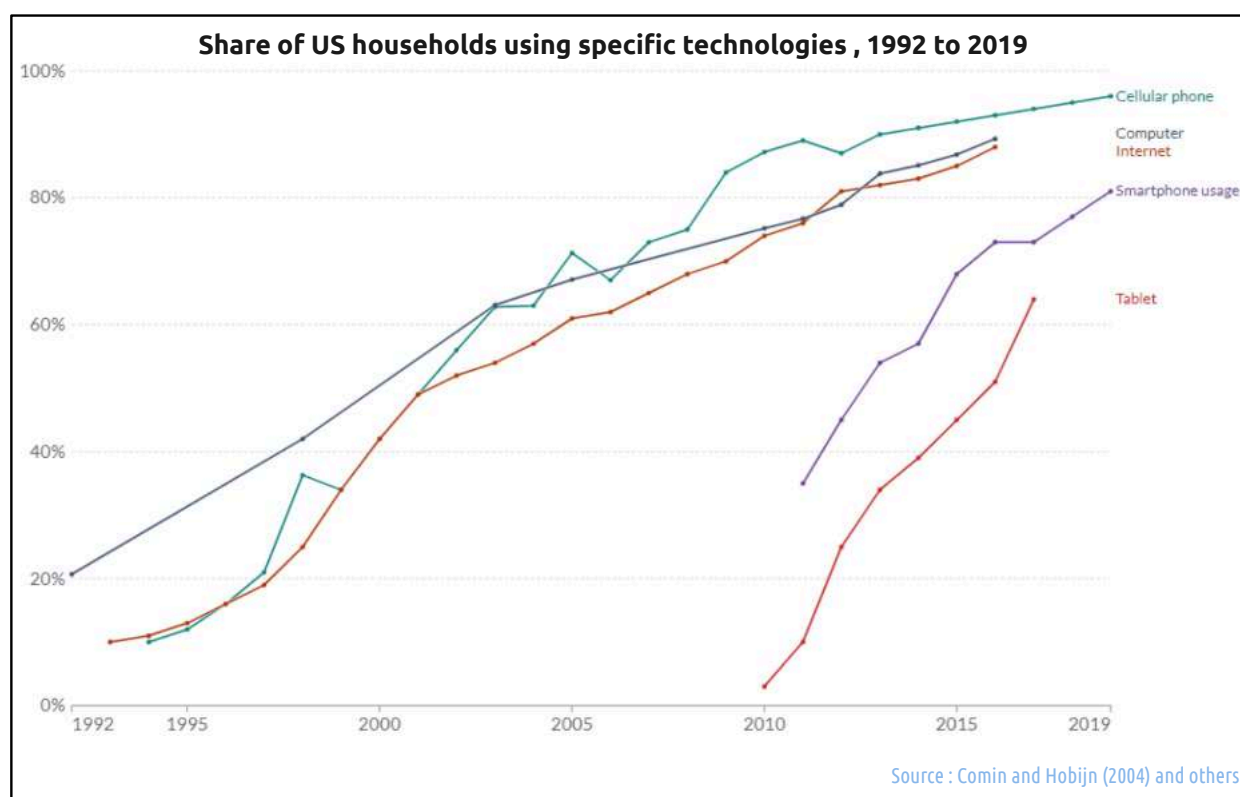




as computers, tablets, iPads, word processors, e-mails and the Internet have entered the classroom and altered the face of teaching and learning. Teachers are encouraged to use technology as frequently as they can and students are daily exposed to large amounts of information reaching them via a variety of technological devices. And if there is a stockpile of research eulogizing the unequivocally-positive effect of inserting technologies into the normal course of instruction on students' performance, there isn't much related to the negative effect it might also bring.

they would when communicating electronically. A Canadian institute showed that 51% of high school students in a survey acknowledged having cheated during exams, and that technology had its part to play by making it easier to cheat.

As the title of her paper suggests, Dr Alhumaid describes four main ways technology can impact negatively on the education process: the deterioration of students' competencies in reading, writing, and arithmetic, which are the three basic skills any student is expected to master; the dehumanization of education in many



It is a fact that more and more students have access to more technology throughout the world. For example, in the US in 2015 more than 80% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders say they use computers at home for schoolwork.

However, various studies have shown that the use of technology does not necessarily improve the performance or learning skills of students. There have been signs of negative impacts on writing skills amongst students using digital tools, as they have a tendency to write fast and carelessly, using more and more abbreviations in their writings than

environments and the distortion of the relationship between teachers and students; the isolation of students in a digital and virtual world that distances them from any form of social interaction; and the deepening of social inequalities between the haves and the have-nots, that is, students who can possess technology and those who cannot.

This is not to say that technology does not improve students' academic achievement or enhance their motivation to accomplish their tasks, yet too much reliance on technology also seems to affect negatively on their reading, writing and arithmetic

skills. Which is normal when typing is preferred to writing, or when reading PDF and Word files is preferred to paper books or magazines. The proper use of punctuation is a good example where texting has had a negative influence. Regarding arithmetic, the use of calculators has negatively impacted the ability of the students to reach the right conclusion. Maths and arithmetic are, in their purest forms, subjects which promote discovery, exploration and critical thinking.

The over-reliance on technology in classrooms has created a barrier between teachers and their students, as they communicate directly via a

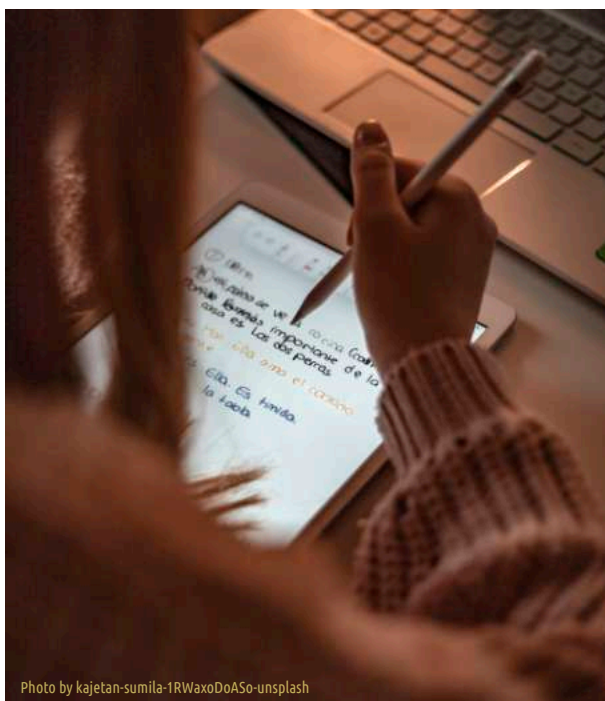


Photo by kajetan-sumila-1RWaxoDoASo-unsplash

machine. It is therefore difficult for teachers to entertain a healthy relationship with their students and have an impact on them. This generates a higher level of anxiety among high-school and university students. Overall, it leads to “eroding the social relationships involved in teaching, thereby eroding one of the main aims of education”.

As Dr Alhumaid puts it so well: “One distinctive feature of face-to-face teaching is collectivism and collaboration, whilst the most distinctive feature of technology-based teaching is the lack of any feeling of collectivism or togetherness”. A natural defence mechanism of the mind is isolation, as it might develop a sense of safety and security when

students are “wired to their gadgets”. Technology has a cocooning effect and gives us the illusion of comfort while depriving us of our need for social interaction and collaboration, leading to a feeling of loneliness.

Regarding the use and possession of technology, there is a gap between social classes. The lack of equipment in developing countries generates issues with students finding well-paid jobs and competing in the global market. Even in developed countries there is a “digital divide” between different social backgrounds. And this divide is even greater within poorer countries.

While our use and continued integration of technology has led to substantial changes in our society and in the way students learn and teachers teach, there is still time to mitigate the negative effects and “harness the good”. This could be done by promoting human interaction, communication and collaboration, by sharing and comparing works and projects to help better connect learners around the world and by encouraging “tech-savvy students” to design interactive content that would enrich their learning.

Our obsession with technology needs supervision and reflection, otherwise it can lead to numerous problems that can in some cases be extreme. We should be careful not to be so blinded by the good aspects brought by technology that we fail to pay attention to its negative consequences. The purpose of Dr Alhumaid’s article was to shed a light on the often-omitted negative aspects of technology in education and to give a few clues as to how these can be mitigated.

*Florimond Krins*

# The Educational Value of Folk Tales

*The Boyhood of Raleigh* by Sir John Everett Millais, oil on canvas, 1870. A seafarer tells the young Sir Walter Raleigh and his brother the story of what happened out at sea.



It is now a well-known fact that reading or telling stories to children starting from a young age has many developmental benefits. Just to name a few: stories can help to improve language and communication skills, develop the child's brain with the ability to focus, help with associating and expressing their feelings, learning about the world, about nature, stimulate curiosity and imagination. Story-telling has been part of many traditions, folk stories passed down from generation to generation. In our modern times, however, it is not very common to grow up with folk tales.

Parents and teachers will often discuss the question of "what kind of stories should we tell,



what kind of books shall we read to our children?" This has been a long-standing debate in education. In an attempt to find the best for our children, sometimes traditional folk stories are edited, some parts are removed or some aspects of the story are softened. Of course we have to be conscientious in whatever we teach or tell a young child, but we should perhaps also pay attention to the benefits of folk stories which traditionally were part of educating the next generation.

The demand for stories is an expression of the child's desire to learn more about the wonders of the world around them, to get to the heart of things, to come into contact with the universe. Especially at the early ages of childhood, stories lay the foundation of character and intuitive understanding. Children who grow up with folk tales and learn to listen to them with open ears and hearts are likely to be able to formulate their own



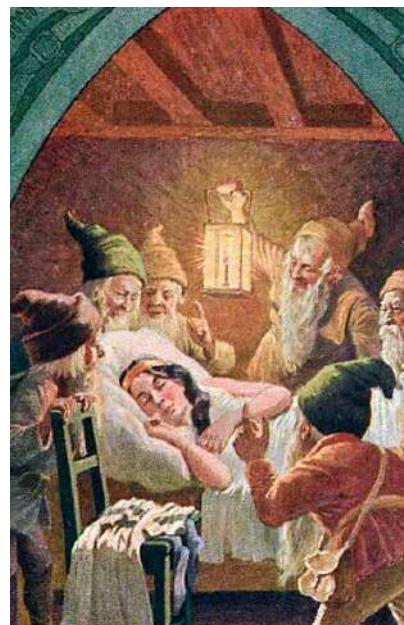
Photo by Ben White on Unsplash

imaginative and creative response to challenging situations that they may face when they reach adulthood.

Einstein referred to fairy tales as one of the sources of his intelligence. He said "If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales. When I examine myself and my methods of thought, I come to the conclusion that the gift of fantasy has meant more to me than any talent for abstract, positive thinking."

Fairy tales have many symbolic elements. The prince, the tailor, the miller, Snow White... all of these are images of different elements in our own nature. It is this recognition and resonance that makes the characters feel close and familiar. The first steps of connecting with oneself and the world can be experienced through the deep feelings experienced through a story. These feelings can mature and bear fruit many years later in life.

Another aspect of fairy tales is that the hero or heroine must undergo certain trials or go on a journey before succeeding in his or her quest. There is an acceptance that it is necessary to prove oneself worthy of the reward at the end of the path, whether the reward is the hand of the princess or a kingdom. They confront evil and overcome it. The inner qualities of the hero or heroine, acceptance of the challenges of life, proving oneself,



Snow White, illustration by Otto Kubel

trusting oneself are only a few points that a child might experience unconsciously. This experience of strength will guide them to deal with the challenges of life later on.

In fairy tales there is also hope and trust. We see how the weak can become strong, the evil can be turned to good, each human being can rise to his or her true potential. This understanding and trust in life and in oneself may be the most important educational value of fairy tales.

Rudolf Steiner described the need for fairy tales beautifully: "Just as our body has to have nutritive substances circulating through the organism, the soul needs fairy tale substance flowing through its spiritual veins."

*Pinar Akhan*



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