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# FOCUS: Sense of Life

## The Life Sense Within the Perspective of Point and Periphery

~ Barbara Baldwin

*Our rightful place as educators is to be removers of hindrances.*

*Each child in every age brings something new into the world from divine regions,*

*And it is our task as educators*

*To remove body and soul obstacles out of the child's way.*

*To remove hindrances so that the spirit may enter*

*In full freedom into life.*

*~ Rudolf Steiner  
"The Spiritual Ground of Education"  
(GA 305, Lecture 4).*

Early in my career in curative education, I felt drawn to the work with young children. They bring into the world from divine regions new impulses from the spiritual world, which will carry us into the future. Early childhood teachers are blessed with the chance to be closer to the spiritual world through the children they teach. How can we actively experience this connection and learn from the children, while staying aware of their frailties and open to their needs?

When a child is born, the spirit, which was expanded in its pre-earthly life, gets compressed into this tiny physical frame and orients itself in the

physical world. In *Die Zwölf Sinne des Menschen*, Dr. Ernst Lauer, who in 1953 was the first person to attempt an anthology of Steiner's twelve senses, quotes Steiner as saying that the four lower senses are actually a reflection of the child's pre-earthly existence. Everything we take in through the senses is more than mere sense impression. Through our senses we experience those spiritual forces that make us what we human beings can become:

"The early experiences of the lower senses are an echo of pre-natal experiences.

1. The **Sense of Balance** is a reflection of our experience in the actual spiritual world (the realm of the Zodiac).
2. The **Sense of Movement** is a reflection of our experience in the planetary spheres.
3. The **Sense of Life** is a reflection of our experience in the etheric region surrounding the earth.
4. The **Sense of Touch** is related to the formative effect of the external world on the human organism" (Lauer, Chapter 3).

In infancy, the sensory experience is unified and undifferentiated. As the three faculties of thinking, feeling, and willing develop, the senses take on a more distinct character. Initially this happens unconsciously and can later be raised into consciousness. This process can clearly be seen when, for example, a small child inadvertently touches the sides of the bassinet, an event that slowly triggers awareness. The action is repeated until it becomes an experience. We will later see how actions later in early childhood, such as bumping into things and scratching, are attempts to experience boundary in the physical world—where perhaps the early experiences were somehow insufficient.

This article explores the life sense within the context of the twelve senses, particularly how it reveals itself with all its frailties in children who have different learning needs and who may need special education. We will also view conditions of the senses in relation to point and periphery, a central concept in curative education and the motif of the meditation given by Rudolf Steiner to curative educators. We will consider how sensory activity changes during the course of life—"the biography of the senses"—and will also view extremes of sensory activity, particularly as regards the life sense, which we encounter in children today.

### Foundational Concepts

Rudolf Steiner did not refer to the senses as a twelvefold unity until 1916 and subsequent years, in lectures such as *The Riddle of Humanity* (GA170) and *Toward Imagination/Cosmic Being and Egohood* (GA169).

Steiner originally spoke of just ten senses, regarding touch and ego as intrinsic to all sensory activity: every sensing is a form of touching and our ego is involved in every sensory process. While this is true, he later deemed touch and ego to be two distinct senses: the former giving us a boundary between ourselves and the world, the latter enabling us to go beyond this boundary to an awareness of others as separate beings. Touch and ego are deeply connected. Touch conveys an awareness of where I end and the world begins, at the same time bestowing an innate sense of security, of *being* within my own body. It separates me from the world and connects me to myself within my body. We find many disturbances in this area in children today, seen in excessive touching (of self and others), hitting, scratching and more, which can be seen as attempts to reinforce the experience of the body as a boundary.

We know that touch forms the basis for the unfolding of the sense of the I of the other person. Steiner called this sense the *Ich-Sinn*, or sense of ego. He was not referring to one's personal sense of self, as in "I do" or "I feel," but the sensing of the other as a separate entity, which allows us to "sleep into the other and wake up to myself" in quick succession. He spoke of the need to experience this distinction during early childhood in lectures such as *The*

*Foundations of Human Experience* (GA 293, Lecture 8). To do this requires the fundamental experience delivered by the sense of touch. Just as many children have disturbances of the sense of touch as mentioned above, many adults also today have a weakness in the sense of I or other. They lack awareness and may even a fear invading another person's space. It can also express itself as rudeness, indifference, and lack of empathy—a total blotting out of the other.

This brings us to the fundamental distinction between doing and sensing, between thinking and perceiving.

Willing and sensing are united in the infant and only gradually become separate faculties. In *doing*, our will and metabolic-limb system are involved; in *perceiving* our intention and nervous system are involved. Willing is an instinctual drive from within, inherent from birth, which engages the musculature; sensing and perceiving are slowly awakened in the child through interaction with the environment. As will activity permeates the body and comes under the child's control, the sensory system is freed into activity. In willing, an inner motivation moves toward the world; in sensing and perceiving, the world imprints itself on our being. Thus kindergarten teachers must understand that the child is fully a sense organ, as Steiner described in *Soul Economy and Waldorf Education* (GA 303); he discusses the soul imitating the surroundings in *The Child's Changing Consciousness and Waldorf Education* (GA 306). The child takes in everything in her environment, and the environment makes a deep imprint on her young and impressionable organs.

Another essential fundamental distinction is what Karl König called *discrimination* and *integration* in his book, *Being Human*. While discrimination is an analytical activity (through discrimination I learn to differentiate and the world becomes richer), integration is a synthesizing activity (I bring things together, making a wholeness of the parts). In the process, my experience of myself becomes stronger.

I remember as a child, walking and playing on the meadow, enjoying the feel and the smell of the grass and jumping into pungent newly-mown piles. My father was a gardener and one day he taught me to distinguish the different types of grass and to recognize the different so-called weeds as herbs.

Suddenly, the greenness underfoot was no longer just “grass.” It became a whole world of interest and delight.

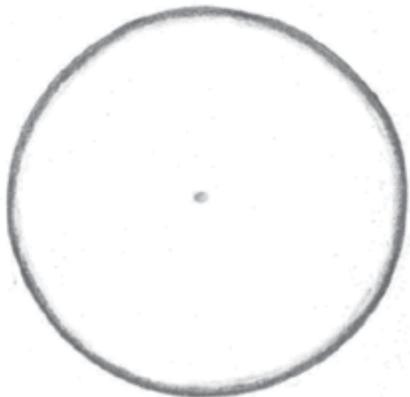
We exist in a twofold relationship to the world. On the one hand: I am my world, am at its center. From this center I activate my senses, which connect me with the world. On the other hand: the world flows in through my senses and affects me unconsciously. Yet the more conscious I become, the more I can refine my sense activity and experience myself as separate from the world—as a knowing and growing separate entity.

Many senses are already active *in utero*, but only after birth does the child gradually wake up to the world of the senses. The world around enters the child’s consciousness through the senses, and sense impressions awaken and further activate the sense organs to intentionally connect with the surrounding world.

One’s own I is the great integrator of the senses. Without the I, the sense world invades us. Sense activity awakens the child’s I, which then is able to educate and direct the sense organs’ activity.

### **Point and Periphery**

This brings us to the central theme of this article: point and periphery. Steiner refers to this motif, in relationship between self and world:



Meditation Image Showing Point and Periphery

*Through the wide world  
there lives and moves the  
real being of man;*

*While in the innermost core  
of man the mirror image  
of the world is living.*

*The I unites the two and thus  
fulfils the meaning of existence.*

*~ Rudolf Steiner  
Verses and Meditations*

The theme of point (or center) and periphery is central to our topic. Every sense has a central and a peripheral aspect. We are all obviously the center of our own lives, but both in our families and in our work, we form the periphery for our children. How we do this determines the level of protection or openness we provide. In the family, we have to grow with our children and not be overprotective. In our kindergartens we have to be aware of the level of protection and openness needed for different age groups, for different temperaments and constitutions, and for individuals with special needs. This demands constant awareness and adjustment. We have to be grounded in our center so that we can move our awareness to the periphery without losing our grasp of the center.

Every morning we create the circle, a periphery which is at the same time its own center. Each child is her own center on this periphery and at the same time we create this center together, with the room and the world around on the periphery. What is at its centre? It is something intangible that affects us all. What happens to the children who are unable to join in creating the circle? What do they experience? Some throw themselves into the center, as though they cannot bear to be so exposed on the periphery.

Others remain on the periphery and cannot become part of the little center.

### Some Examples

How can we respond when we see a child “outside,” on the periphery? It is said that some children are happy on their own and prefer to be outsiders. As a result, some children remain on the periphery for their entire kindergarten careers. The truth for many, as heard from those who can express themselves through assisted communication, is that they *wish* to join in but cannot. It may be right to allow them to stay on the periphery for a while, as they adjust to kindergarten routine; but we must always inwardly include them and gradually also outwardly invite them into the circle.

Japanese author Naoki Higashida wrote as a thirteen-year-old autistic boy: “The truth is, we’d love to be with other people. But because things never, ever go right, we end up getting used to being alone, without even noticing this is happening. Whenever I overhear someone remark how much I prefer being on my own, it makes me feel desperately lonely.”

These children are stuck in their own little centers and cannot find a way to connect. They cannot move between center and periphery as most people learn to at a relatively early age. Many junctures in their day create intense discomfort: the transition from home to school, from indoors to outdoors, from one activity to another. In fact, many children today have difficulties with transitions. The experience of these difficulties is conveyed through the life sense and may be expressed through various behaviors—from pushing and bumping, to hitting and biting, to covering the ears and screaming. These behaviors express discomfort, arising in the life sense, and communicate that they do not feel safe or happy.

How can we respond? We can find what they *do* enjoy, what they *can* respond to, and begin there. Join in their repetitive play so that they don’t feel so alone. Join their little centers. Realize that they often participate from a distance and are not ignoring you. It’s just that they cannot show their participation through facial expression or eye contact. Don’t give up on them or assume they don’t understand.

At the other extreme are children who throw themselves into the middle of the circle, spoil the

togetherness, and destroy the ambience. Truly every child would like to join and be part of the group, pleasing their teacher and parents. They would if they could, but they can’t. Some feel a constant agitation and restlessness, which drives them into action when the rest of the class is silent.

### Case Study: Josh

*Josh was a “wild boy,” always on the move, who pushed and shoved to get what he wanted. His voice was loud. Any piece of wood would become a gun or weapon, wielded indiscriminately, along with loud, vulgar-sounding noises. How to deal with this disturbing factor in the kindergarten? The wise kindergarten director began each day in the yard, working with a rake or a broom. When Josh arrived, she greeted him with a smile: “Josh, I’ve been waiting for you. I need your help,” she said, and handed him a broom or a wheelbarrow to help with the “job” she was doing. That done, she’d send him to the wooded end of the kindergarten to “shoot the wild bear” or to catch the giant fish. There he could shout and wield his weapons without endangering others. Some of his surplus energy had been gotten rid of by the time everyone came together for playtime or morning circle.*

It requires moral imagination to understand and deal with these children without resorting to isolation or punishment.

Another example of this separation can be seen in children who want to speak but cannot. Sometimes they speak at home and not at school; some can speak with other children but not with adults; some fall silent the moment they step out of their homes. These children carry the diagnosis of selective mutism. Adults who have overcome selective mutism say that they find this diagnosis offensive. It is not a choice; they long to speak but cannot. Teachers often report that they simply won’t talk, because they have heard the child speak to other children or to a parent. Teachers must not take it personally. These children long to chatter away like others—and at home they are often loud and bossy. Yet outside the home, they are unable to make a sound. Their muteness is a silent communication that something is blocked between themselves and the world, often based on fear or anxiety. Only love, patience and acceptance

can help to heal the pain they feel at their exclusion. Observing these children will amaze you: they are usually extremely intelligent, often quite interactive, but they just cannot speak.

### **Case Study: Lilly**

*Lilly is a slender girl with light, transparent skin and big eyes. She keenly observes everything the other children do, listens to and enjoys stories, often smiles when another child is naughty. She clearly understands everything, is intelligent and usually plays quietly in a corner. She likes to help the teachers with little tasks. At home she is reported to be boisterous, loud and dominating.*

*Initially she is totally silent at kindergarten, following all routines, but never speaking or making a sound. When she needs something, she indicates with her eyes that she needs the toilet or wants a drink.*

*Gradually she is heard to hum some of the circle songs (all of which she sings at home). With time she joins in all the gestures and slowly, very slowly and quietly, she is able to join in.*

It is a fatal mistake to cajole or even compliment her on her progress. She might once again become paralyzed by the expectations. Quiet patience and acceptance is what she needs to help unlock the prison of the center and allow her to move more freely between herself and others, between center and periphery.

### **Point and Periphery Again**

As mentioned above, every sense has its central and peripheral aspect. As you sit and listen to a lecture, you can focus your auditory and visual attention on the speaker, screening out peripheral information while directing your attention to what is important. Well-adjusted people do this constantly. Karl König gives an amusing example relating to the senses of touch, self-movement (body image), and life.

Imagine lying on a warm, sandy beach with a relaxed experience of well-being. Suddenly you feel a tickling move up your arm. An ant is progressing up your arm. You try to ignore it. But soon focus changes from well-being to the ant. Without looking,

you catch the creature and toss it back to the sand, now to resume your sun-bathing.

How is this possible? At one moment you were totally lost in the peripheral experience of well-being. The next, your sense of life is disturbed by the itch, your sense of touch follows its progress, and your sense of self-movement informs your other hand exactly where to swipe in order to catch the creature. From peripheral to central awareness and back again to relaxation and semi-oblivion, the senses have worked together seamlessly throughout.

### **The Life Sense in Life**

The basis for the functioning of the life sense is already present *in utero* and is closely linked to the sense of wellness of the mother. It is functional in its own right from the moment of birth. A sleeping baby radiates harmony and contentment. Conversely, as soon as the infant experiences any discomfort, hunger, or pain, the life sense shoots into action, sending messages of the disruption, and the child cries. The sense of life gives information about the state of the body, not about the soul, so we must realize that when a child cries, she is externalising bodily pain. Soul pain arises later. As Edmond Schoorel writes in his excellent book, *The First Seven Years*, the sense of life functions as a “mirror” of the bodily functions, alerting us to anything that is not in order within the body, within the life processes.

Initially the experience of the disruption of the life sense is all-pervading. The infant has no sense of the different parts of the body, so any discomfort or pleasure is a whole-body experience. Picture a baby feeding: she drinks not only with her mouth; her fingers and even toes show involvement and enjoyment. Similarly, any pain is for the infant a total experience, provoking gut-wrenching screams until the source is dealt with by the adult. A toddler will often tell her parent that she has hurt herself, but not be able to point to the source of the pain. Only very gradually does this become more localized. By four years, most children can tell whether they have a headache or a tummy ache or where they have hurt themselves after a fall.

However, this normal development does not take place in children whose life sense is disturbed. Such children—often but not always girls—respond

intensely to every discomfort. The smallest hurt or pain causes a major disruption in their sense of well-being. They cry excessively and require comforting (often with some soothing cream or a Band-Aid) before they can return to a state of equilibrium. They live in a heightened state of alertness and anxiety because they so often feel pain and discomfort.

In our kindergartens these children cling to their parents, find it difficult to adjust, and like to stick close to the teacher. They generally do not move around much, preferring to stay in one place. They often whine and complain that everything is “too much!” With their demands, these children can easily get on our nerves. What is happening here?

In these children many of their senses are too alert and too acute. When any sense is overreacting, the life sense is affected. Any disruption anywhere will affect the life sense of these children—and initially they need our protection, our understanding, and our sympathy. Only gradually, through our understanding and empathy, can they learn to manage their pain and discomfort.

### **Case Study: M.O.**

*M.O. is a bright little six-year-old, with a large head, blue eyes, and curly blond hair. He talks with a pleasant, melodious voice and can express himself well when he feels well. However, he often feels unwell, tires easily, seems to complain a lot, and can't really express himself during these states. It is as though he goes into “shut-down.”*

*Once at a playground, he wanted to go onto a small rotating toy. But as soon as he was on, he wanted off, not wanting to expose himself to the gyrations. As soon as he was off, he wanted on again. And so it went until the adult, losing patience, called him a “woos” (Australian slang for coward), adding insult to injury. He had been trying to overcome his fear and discomfort of an over sensitive sense of balance. Now, the physical pain he had been trying to deal with became soul pain: remorse and shame.*

*The adult quickly realised with shock what distress she had caused, apologized, and validated his feelings.*

However, the adult's shame and guilt at having misread and mismanaged the situation lasted a long time. I was that adult and for a long time I inwardly asked for

forgiveness from my grandson, for this shameful lapse in my human understanding and empathy.

This incident made me acutely aware of how easily and how often we do these children an injustice. They are so sensitive that they are often late with skills like bike riding that come easily to most children. Their hypersensitivity causes discomfort, makes them anxious, and prevents them from engaging when they really long to participate.

At the other end of the spectrum of reactivity, we have children with a very high pain threshold. Very often they seem like bulls in a china shop: blustering, bumping into people and things, pushing things over, talking too loudly, and reacting too little. We often fear the disruptive element they bring into the kindergarten. We like things to be calm and orderly, but these children arrive with a bang. In some cases, with their strong urge to play, they direct things and know exactly what they want and will punch and pull things to achieve it. When they fall, they never cry, don't seem to notice the pain, and similarly are oblivious to the pain they cause others. Bumping into others gives them sensation, and they seek sensation because their senses, and most specifically their life sense, is under-responsive; it does not give them the feedback they crave.

Every child wants to belong, to be accepted and loved. It pains them not to feel the connection. Yet they will often repeat annoying or pain-causing behaviors because at least the pain gives them an experience. A boy once fell and cut his leg to the bone, but didn't notice until other children screamed and pointed to the blood. His life sense gave him no feedback, so he was constantly in search of sensory experience, making him a danger to himself and a major disruption to the class.

These children also need nurturing but from the opposite extreme. One needs to give them deep muscle experiences: rolling them in a blanket, kneading them like dough, rubbing and brushing their skin to awaken sensation and gradually softening the touch to bring them to self-awareness. Simple body geography, touching them in different ways—playful slapping and scratching, rubbing, brushing, tapping and stroking—can help them feel their boundary. Learning to sense differentiation can draw them from the perpetual periphery into the comfort of their own centers.

Sensory disturbances may be of two kinds: **hyper**, meaning too sensitive and overreacting, or **hypo**,

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meaning under-reactive and sensation-seeking. In some forms of ADHD, children don't experience their boundaries and get lost in the periphery. Children on the autism spectrum get caught within their own organisms and cannot connect with others as they would wish. Some children swing between these two poles.

Problems that superficially appear to be behavioral are in fact manifestations of disturbances of the senses, in particular of the life sense. If we can begin to recognize these extremes of behavior as disorders of center and periphery, we can find new paths toward understanding and developing new approaches to them. ♦

**Barbara Baldwin** is a curative educator, therapist and speech pathologist. She works in Australia and internationally with children and families.

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#### Resources:

*This article will appear electronically at [www.waldorfearlychildhood.org](http://www.waldorfearlychildhood.org) in the coming months, including an enhanced discussion of point and periphery. See the Resources section of this newsletter at page 38 for details.*

- Naoki Higashida, *The Reason I Jump* (New York: Random House, 2014)
- Karl König, *Being Human* (Spring Valley: Anthroposophic Press, 1989; originally *Heilpädagogische Diagnostik*, 1984)
- Hans Erhard Lauer, *Die Zwölf Sinne des Menschen* (Basel: R. G. Zbinden & Co, 1953)
- Edmond Schoorel, *The First Seven Years* (Fair Oaks: Rudolf Steiner College Press, 2004).
- Rudolf Steiner, *Verses and Meditations* (Great Barrington: Steiner Books, 2004)