

## The Threefold Human Organism

Anthroposophy approaches and analyses the nature of the human being from many different directions. The aspect which is perhaps most straightforward for us to understand and concur with is the threefold expression of human soul life in thinking, feeling and will. This forms an important basis for Waldorf pedagogy and understanding of child development.

For many years, Rudolf Steiner lived with the question as to the relation between the soul forces and man's physical body. In 1917, two years before the founding of the first Waldorf school, he published the initial results of his research in the book *Riddles of the Soul*. In this book he gave a new scientific understanding of the human organism as having an essential threefold foundation:

- The nerve-sense organization, centered in the head, provides the bodily basis for consciousness and thought.
- The metabolic-limb organization, centered in the abdomen and limbs, provides the bodily basis for our acts of will. It is the pole of *life* as opposed to *consciousness*.
- Mediating between these two polarities is the rhythmic organization, centered in the chest (heart and lungs) which provides the bodily basis for our life of feeling.

Whilst these three systems are focused in the upper, middle and lower parts of the human body, clearly they interpenetrate and are not limited to these regions. As Edmond Schoorel puts it (in *The First Seven Years*):

*We can distinguish the three regions of the body and the corresponding soul functions, but we can not isolate them. Sense perception occurs in all parts of the body, as do feeling and willing. The point is where the three soul functions and the three bodily organizations have their bases. I could formulate it in this way: wherever there is sense perception – even in the big toe – the upper pole is present; wherever there is feeling – even in the head – the middle region is active; wherever there is willing, the lower pole is at work.*

To many people this might seem a forced and far from obvious picture of the human body but it can at least be entertained as a model, a way of seeing that can, in time, lead to a whole host of insights into how our physical bodies work as vehicles for the human spirit. Indeed, the picture of polarities mediated by a (flexible) middle can prove to be a key to many of the mysteries of existence. Rudolf Steiner's careful elaboration of this in human anatomy and physiology may, in time to come, come to be considered a key discovery of the Twentieth Century!

We highly recommend the little book *Living with your Body* by Dr Walter Bühler, MD for those interested in exploring further.

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