

## **“Pedagogical Intuition” – a post-graduate research project of the Dept. of Waldorf Education, University of Rostock**

**Dr. Angelika Wiehl in conversation with Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Nieke, University of Rostock, and Shozan Shimoda, a post-graduate scholar of the dept. of Waldorf Education**

Intuition is something that figures large in education. It is not always clear, however, whether it is the result of a conscious act of perception and cognition, or a more or less unconscious feeling that happens in the heat of the pedagogical moment. Pedagogical intuition is currently the subject of the doctoral dissertation of Shozan Shimoda, sponsored by the dept. of Waldorf Education, University of Rostock. In conversation with him, and with his supervisor, Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Nieke, Angelika Wiehl here inquires into the sources and epistemological basis of pedagogical intuition. In his research Shozan Shimoda has incorporated elements of Japanese Zen philosophy in addition to the perspectives of Western philosophy and Waldorf education.

**Wiehl:** *Mr Shimoda, since April 2016 you have been a post-graduate research scholar at the dept. of Waldorf Education, doing a dissertation on “Pedagogical Intuition” under Prof Nieke. How did you arrive at this topic, and what is the aim of your research?*

**Shimoda:** I began with a simple question. It arose when I was starting my masters thesis at the Freie Hochschule in Stuttgart and was looking for a research topic. I began by studying Steiner’s “Philosophy of Freedom” and saw what a high value he placed upon the concept of intuition. The same goes for east-Asian philosophy, which lives very strongly in my normal experience of the world. This led me to ask what, in fact, intuition is. I personally use or hear the word “intuition” or “intuitive” being used in a whole range of different situations, without any real clue as to what this concept actually means.

In the course of my research I have found that this does not only apply to me, but to most people writing about education. They do not use just one, but a variety of intuition concepts – the same words, “intuition” or “intuitive”, are used with different, often contradictory, meanings. On the one hand, there is the opinion that it is not a good idea for educators to trust intuition; on the other hand, it is characterised as a highly effective line of action. The point, of course, is what is meant by “intuition” in each case?

The oft-posed question as to whether intuition can be trusted is, to my mind, too much of a generalisation. It’s more a question of *which* intuition is to be relied on in *which* situation. Leading on from this question, I also consider how the faculty of intuition can be trained.

**Wiehl:** *Prof Nieke, Daniel Eggenberger has already written a comprehensive work, which sounds out a full range of philosophical, psychological and pedagogical theories on the subject of pedagogical intuition. Does this provide a useful platform for further research?*

**Nieke:** The title of the Swiss Eggenberger’s dissertation sounds as if it would be extremely relevant to our purposes, but in spite of its comprehensiveness it uses a very broad and thus scarcely practicable concept of intuition, which is not given any secure underpinnings. The Book was more or less rejected by educational

academics, perhaps also because it tries to deal with too many disparate themes and is structurally somewhat unclear in terms of method and formulation of the problem. Obviously we checked it out for what leads it might give, but the current international discourse on the philosophy and psychology of intuition does not set much store by the authors Eggenberger bases his work on. Rather it establishes itself along quite different theoretical and empirical lines.

**Wiehl:** Where then are these relevant and fruitful lines of enquiry to be found, for I assume Mr Shozan Shimoda is looking for a new approach that can be formulated scientifically.

**Nieke:** He starts from the observation that in the classroom context it is the most natural thing in the world to speak of pedagogical intuition: an action derived not from any kind of rational planning, but from a “gut feeling”, a feeling of being unconditionally, but also inexplicably, right. There is nothing in educational science that can account for this. It does come up for discussion, but in connection with concepts other than intuition, as, for instance, in Diethelm Wahl’s attempt to account for the well-known phenomenon of “action under pressure”. Thus it would seem that the moment has come to investigate this discrepancy between theory and practice more exactly, and then to look at what tacit assumptions already exist in the way of explanations for this mode of action, without necessarily always associating them with the term intuition, which, in its original meaning of something “inserted from outside”, is decidedly pre-modern. In addition, it would be helpful to cast an eye over the history of education, and, in view of the special area of competence we have at our disposal here, to include a consideration of extra-European traditions, where such things as intuition are still much better known than in the West. Further aspects will include an appraisal of the modern psychological conception of intuition as routine action in every-day situations.

**Wiehl:** *What importance, in your estimation, does intuition have for the theory of pedagogical action as a whole?*

**Nieke:** The importance of a precise formulation of what pedagogical intuition is can scarcely be over-estimated in its practical significance, for the bulk of professional pedagogical action takes place in communicative interactions within teaching situations, but chiefly also as offshoots of the actual lesson, and also outside the classroom. Here the unforeseen and surprising must constantly be grasped and answered with split-second timing. This cannot be done by thinking something through in rational terms, but only through a mode of action which is fast, reliable and felt to be right. That is the way it happens in practice, but these every-day intuitions can often be off the mark and have serious side-effects. This is why this faculty needs to be trained such that it meets the standards of professionalism, i.e. occurs according to the standards of an optimal view of the world. This requires a theoretical analysis of, and guidance in, *fast thinking*, as Daniel Kahnemann calls it, thus distinguishing it from slow, in other words, complex analytical and deliberative thinking. It should be noted here that translating the English word “fast” with “schnell” only addresses the time-dimension; above all, however, what is meant is the certainty and decisiveness which this fast thinking implies and the security it gives to action.

**Wiehl:** *And to what extent do you view intuition as a philosophical or as a pedagogical matter?*

**Nieke:** The philosophical dimension of this subject is of an epistemological nature: as well as the analytical approach there has always been in the history of philosophy an opposing stream that has upheld the value of immediate perceptual experience. The version of this still widely accepted today is Husserl’s well-substantiated idea of phenomenology as the unconditional perception of being. This is the foundation for the so-called qualitative methods in empirical social research, which are also practised by educational science. For our purposes the pedagogical dimension is the ability to act under pressure by means of a routine which can be reflected upon and rationally accounted for, but which in the actual situation is available without thinking.

**Wiehl:** *Intuition is also an every-day concept, and has been discussed in Western philosophy in many different ways. Mr Shimoda, what lines of approach have you found to the concept of intuition? Have you incorporated your own cultural background into the process?*

**Shimoda:** The first thing that strikes me is that nowadays the word “intuition” is used rather intuitively! In Western philosophy, in various sciences or in every-day speech the word “intuition” occurs mostly with no regard to how its particular use relates to other ideas of intuition or the intuitive. I feel, therefore, that it is not

very illuminating to simply place concepts of intuition from a range of different authors beside each other as Eggenberger does. Instead these various concepts should be sorted in terms of their comparability. The most important of these – which I compare in my dissertation – are “intuition as recognition” and “creative intuition”. Psychology tends for the most part to view intuition as nothing other than an instance of pre-reflective or pre-consciously acting “recognition” – this is the opinion of the American intuition researcher, Gary Klein. By contrast, one finds – for instance, with Steiner or in Zen philosophy – the conception of intuition as a new, creative inventing of ideas, which arise through concentrated mental activity and cannot be reduced to antecedent patterns. Both these interpretations, however, are in agreement that intuition is not merely the occurrence of something “irrational”. For this reason I treat both these notions of intuition not as “either-or”, but as “both-and”, even though Waldorf thinking tends towards the latter, in other words, designating intuition as a purely ideal and creative thought experience. We need to look more closely into why different phenomena can be designated as intuitive.

**Wiehl:** Could you illustrate this with a concrete example?

**Shimoda:** In a teaching situation it is readily apparent that pre-reflective intuitions are constantly in play and that they contribute to pedagogical success in the long term – Prof Nieke referred to this. Every situation involving children is more or less new and unexpected; but experienced teachers know precisely how to identify the crucial dividing line or decisive moment that will meet the children and make a success of the lesson, even though they cannot verbalise or explain this. We should not underestimate this process.

I consider this fundamental openness of creative intuition as the most essential ability for a teacher to have. As a teacher one often finds oneself in situations, in which the normal patterns of experience are not much help. Experienced teachers have told me that it is out of such critical moments that a creative intuition can arise if they concentrate on the actual event before them and rely on their own presence of mind.

**Wiehl:** In connection with intuition I am reminded of the philosopher, Dieter Heinrich, who for many years has been researching how philosophers suddenly get ideas that lead to some “fundamental insight”. These, according to Heinrich, have two common features: they can be mathematical-logical, as in the case of Archimedes, or take the form of religious revelations. Do observations like this play any part in your research?

**Nieke:** No, Heinrich’s thesis is heavily laden with pre-suppositions, and can only be applicable to the thinkers he investigated, all of whom from early on had dedicated their lives to some great general theme, as has been shown, say, for Schopenhauer. The philosophers he studied were mostly figures who operated outside the realm of empirical science, in other words, at the edge of philosophy, where the main aim is the creation of a narrative “theory of everything”. To this end a form of intuition was used that is described in modern psychology as pattern recognition within large volumes of information.

**Wiehl:** Have you come across other thinkers, who have a specific understanding of intuition?

**Shimoda:** Here I would like to name a few authors, who, while they do not speak explicitly of “intuition”, nonetheless deserve a place in intuition research. In his well-known book, “Theory U”, Claus Otto Scharmer, who has been strongly influenced by Steiner, offers a different term: presencing. This concept, in that two meanings – “presence” and “sensing” – are merged in it, gives us clear pointers to an understanding of creative intuition. Presencing involves remaining fully present in every situation no matter how familiar it is. In this way creative ideas that bring innovative change to ourselves and the world can be born. One shortcoming of Scharmer’s work seems to me to be the fact that he reduces ordinary modes of thinking and behaviour to “downloading”, in other words, to repeated and repeatable processes.

In contrast to this, what oriental philosophers have to say about intuition is to me highly significant. They designate as intuitive not only creative events like, for example, a great invention, but also our normal behaviour, such as walking, speaking, drinking, eating etc. Nishida Kitarō, a well-known Japanese philosopher of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, says that, insofar as we sustain our attentive awareness of our present situation, normal behaviour can be understood as a moment in which there is no longer a split between subject and

object. Zen Buddhism also enjoins us to be newly mindful of every habitual act, even when we do not experience anything special or new about it.

Three types of intuition have been initially identified: 1. Creative intuition, which transforms both the world and ourselves; 2. intuition as a habitualised experience which is renewed each time it is re-experienced; 3. intuition as an event happening below the level of attention and pure thought – it can no longer be called intuition, but something more like “autopilot”.

**Wiehl:** *What modes of thought have you found to be fruitful for the investigation of pedagogical intuition? At the current stage of the dissertation are you in a position to say something about this?*

**Nieke:** Research projects such as dissertations are always an adventure. Something new is being tried out, explorations into unknown territory. This means that the results can only become visible at the end of the process. Then it is likely to be several years before the academic world learns to appreciate the findings – or not, on account of the intellectual stream taking research in a different direction, or because the argumentation upon which the project’s thesis was built was found to be unconvincing. Neither of these two possibilities necessarily reflects the quality of the dissertation, which, from a different perspective, can appear in an entirely different light.

**Wiehl:** *In the courses of this graduate college the main focus is on discussing the foundations of Waldorf education. In Waldorf educational practice intuition is a widely used concept. What interpretational framework would you give it?*

**Shimoda:** Well, there is, of course, Steiner’s valuable concept of intuition, which is very much part of the life of educational practice in Waldorf schools. It is widely used by Waldorf teachers, and for that very reason presents a danger.

Even in Waldorf schools situations can arise in which an evidently subjective intuition is carelessly projected as a “genuine” one. This should be avoided at all costs, for simply saying “I had an intuition” could imply that the word “intuition” is just being used as a way of avoiding pedagogical responsibility.

It is important here to assess, by means of self-critical reflection or dialogue, whether the statement “because I had an intuition ...” refers to the genuine article, or is just an excuse on the part of the teacher, because he can’t explain his action in any other way.

For me, however, the advantages of Waldorf education as the pedagogy of intuition, can be viewed on another level. Here the freedom of the teacher is especially important. For fixed curricula or overly detailed lesson plans can suppress the faculty of intuition and the possibility of learning it. In this regard one can draw attention to the special place Waldorf education has in intuition research.

**Wiehl:** *In his early work, “The Philosophy of Freedom” (1894/1918), Rudolf Steiner tackled the subject of intuition. Every time I read this book I am always profoundly impressed by the fact that I can call forth a unique, purely spiritual intuition experience through an act of cognitive perception. It is a noetic encounter with myself as a being. I have a vivid memory of discovering this in my youth, and I have never forgotten it. Such an experience of intuition is not open to doubt. Either you have it or you haven’t. How do you see this?*

**Shimoda:** Yes, this can be compared to the previously mentioned moment of creative intuition, which cannot be derived from any earlier pattern of experience. Here the act of thinking is such that its object has nothing to do with accustomed pattern recognition, rather one is so present in the moment that a new creative idea can be experienced. This could be called the moment of freedom, in that it is a state of oneness. At the same time this means that new, previously unknown and unforeseen images of self and world can be born. It seems to me that through practice this experience could be made more easily achievable, even though we can never know which moment will produce a creative intuition.

What method can I employ to ensure that in spite of repetitive thoughts and experiences I remain present and open in every situation? Here I see two important things: firstly, it might happen that we veer off into unfree absence, or, at worst, we delude ourselves that we have had an intuition. Secondly, we cannot

assume that there is anything final about the moment of intuition, but must courageously set ourselves again and again to be open to new ones. Every unique experience of intuition in action is deeply moving. But the above-mentioned experience of presence can immediately disappear, and the intuitive thought become “automatised” if we become complacent and think: I know everything already, I don’t need to develop myself any further. This danger of “automatisation” is ever-present. To be able to endure this tension seems to me to be a great and life-long challenge.

**Wiehl:** *Steiner tells a cute little story about how to behave as a teacher. Two teachers are very well organised; they review their previous year’s experience of teaching and on this basis have worked out exactly what they will do with their classes in the coming year. A third teacher is also preparing himself for the coming year, but would like to stay open so that he can gear his teaching to what the children need. Now, we could say that this third teacher has got things intuitively right. The example, however, brings up the question of whether pedagogical intuition is spontaneous or can be prepared for. What do you think?*

**Shimoda:** The important thing here, it seems to me, is the difference in the way these teachers prepared themselves. Two teachers prepare their lessons very thoroughly and have a very clear idea of what they want to do with the students, even though they haven’t seen them yet. Such exact ideas of what to teach can suppress intuition. As far as I understand your description, the third teacher is the intuitive one. He prepared himself only by immersing himself in the material, but held back on the concrete individual lesson preparations until he came into actual contact with the students. Intuition has more chance of coming into play with this third teacher. Here I have been singling out a certain kind of preparation, but that does not mean that the teachers who prepared in the other way would not be capable of pedagogical intuition in the spontaneous sense, or that they would only be able to act upon “gut feelings”.

**Wiehl:** *If I may bring in Steiner’s intuition concept from the “Philosophy of Freedom” here, does he provide criteria for judging intuitions occurring in every-day school-life?*

**Shimoda:** Only by implication. Let’s take, for example, the concept of intuition found in the ninth chapter, where it only appears as the fourth level of cognitive motivation. Here Steiner characterises intuition as the highest level, which is, as it were, “conceptual thinking with no relation to any object of perception”. In order to find, in terms of this description, the criterion by which intuition, this highest level, can be phenomenally distinguished from the other three levels of motivation – perception, feeling, thinking – would entail embarking upon a path of intense mental training. This seems to me to be a reason why people say so easily and carelessly: I’ve had an intuition!

But “the Philosophy of Freedom” gives us indications as to how we can arrive at the criterion ourselves. I think this has very much to do with the faculty of reflection, by which we create the exceptional state in which we succeed in making our own thinking the object of our observation.

**Wiehl:** *For over 40 years. Per Ahlbom from Järna, Sweden, has been running a training in intuition for teachers. According to his philosophy, the yardsticks of “intuitive pedagogy” are elegant fit and aptness. The main thing in teaching is not to be well-prepared, accomplished or exact, but the experience of aptness, of having found what fits. This is also what enables us to come to grips with unexpected and surprising situations. How do you rate the potential of this kind of “intuitive pedagogy”? Does it not stem from an understanding of intuition based more on feeling?*

**Nieke:** “Aptness” is very closely related to plausibility. This mental category is actually central to every-day thinking for the determination of what is true. It can easily be shown that plausible intuitions are very prone to error, when they rely solely upon this form of “aptness”. Our research will show that pedagogical intuition can and must be schooled and supported in a very different way.

**Wiehl:** *Intuition rests upon self-observation and can be grasped in epistemological terms. How can these two levels be brought into accord, or must we content ourselves with a distinction between subjective experiences and plausible scientific explanations?*

**Nieke:** Intuition is something different from self-observation. It is always directed towards the world, but at the same time is aware of the feeling accompanying the particular moment of attention. It is precisely in this that it distinguishes itself from the rational and analytical procedures of an abstract, mathematical description of the world, which currently is once again setting the tone of educational theory, in that the human being is modelled scientifically as an exclusively natural entity. Modern psychology and cultural science are, of course, aware of the relevance of feelings as integral to any kind of valid worldview, and in this connection are trying to find categories that bring into focus the specifically human in comparison to all other animals.

**Wiehl:** *In nearing the end of this conversation, we have certainly not covered every aspect of the field of “pedagogical intuition research”. Could you perhaps add a few further thoughts on intuition, that you consider important – for instance, because they shed new light upon the theory and practice of education?*

**Shimoda:** Looking forward, I would like to say that it is, of course, important to undertake the conceptualisation of intuition and to envisage ways in which it could be schooled, but this is only a beginning. It is essential that educational science and pedagogical institutions strive in the future to find new approaches to developing the faculty of intuition in teachers. In my research project I pose more questions than I have answers for. In school how can one, say, design a “feedback loop” in the course of teamwork in such a way that intuition becomes practically effective and enlivening? Finally I would like to say that I think Waldorf methods can make a valuable contribution here.

**Wiehl:** *Thank you for talking to me.*

## Literature

- Ahlbom, Pär: *Intuitive Pädagogik*; online unter: [www.intuitive-paedagogik.de/intuitive.paedagogik.de.htm](http://www.intuitive-paedagogik.de/intuitive.paedagogik.de.htm)
- Eggenberger, Daniel (1998): *Grundlagen und Aspekte einer pädagogischen Intuitionstheorie. Die Bedeutung der Intuition für das Ausüben pädagogischer Tätigkeit*. Bern: Haupt.
- Henrich, Dieter (2010): Die Sekundenphilosophie. Ein Gespräch. In: *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte*. H. IV/3, Herbst 2010, S. 5-21.
- Kahneman, Daniel (2011): *Schnelles Denken, langsames Denken*. München: Siedler.
- Klein, Gary (2004): *The Power of Intuition: How to Use Your Gut Feelings to Make Better Decisions at Work*. New York: Crown Business.
- Nishida, Kitarō (1993): *Über das Gute. Eine Philosophie der reinen Erfahrung*. Aus dem Japanischen übersetzt und eingeleitet von Peter Pörtner. Frankfurt a. M.: Insel Verlag
- Scharmer, Claus Otto (2011): *Theorie U*. Heidelberg: Carl Auer.
- Steiner, Rudolf (GA 4) (2015): *Die Philosophie der Freiheit. Seelische Beobachtungsergebnisse nach naturwissenschaftlicher Methode* (1894/1918). Basel: Rudolf Steiner Verlag.
- Steiner, Rudolf (GA 166) (1982): *Notwendigkeit und Freizeit im Weltgeschehen und im menschlichen Handeln* (1916). 3. Auflage, Dornach: Rudolf Steiner Verlag, S. 60-81.
- Suzuki, Daisetz Teitaro (1994): *Zen und die Kultur Japans. Der Geist des Zen in Dichtung und Malerei, Theater, Tee-Weg, Garten- und Baukunst, Philosophie und den Kampfkünsten Japans*. Bern, München, Wien: Otto Wilhelm Barth.
- Suzuki, Daisetz Teitaro (2006): *Zen Buddhism. Selected Writings of D. T. Suzuki*. Edited by William Barrett. Doubleday, New York: Three Leaves Press.
- Wahl, Diethelm (1991): *Handeln unter Druck: Der weite Weg vom Wissen zum Handeln bei Lehrern, Hochschullehrern und Erwachsenenbildnern*. Weinheim: Deutscher Studien Verlag.