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The Threefold *and* Fourfold Nature *of the* Human Organism *from the viewpoint of* Anthroposophic Medicine

J.J. KUEHN, MD

Conventional medicine sees humans as determined by physiological/chemical and physical phenomena, measurable like specimens in a test tube. Accordingly, since soul/spiritual faculties are rarely or never measurable, their relationship to the physiological-chemical or physical attributes is largely unknown.

The anthroposophic medical view regards the human more holistically, including a soul and spirit within the body; and considers that soul/spiritual forces penetrate and influence the physical aspect into every last cell. By far the larger part of these forces work totally outside consciousness. Only the smallest part is used for conscious soul/spiritual activity. We will describe these forces in greater detail below.

Anthroposophic medicine concurs with conventional medicine in its natural scientific view, but expands upon this to include a detailed view of soul and spiritual forces, recognizing that they affect the physical and physiological/chemical body and are a prerequisite for the state of being human in health, as in illness. A physician trained in anthroposophically

extended medicine attempts to observe these forces in his/her patient and to use the results in treatment.

In his book *Riddles of the Soul* (1917) Rudolf Steiner first proposed the idea of the threefold human being. Before Steiner, the German poet Schiller, and poet/scientist Goethe had developed similar themes. Understanding the concept provides a basis for a comprehension of what anthroposophic medicine is.

Seen anatomically, the body consists of three main areas of function, two of which

are in polarity. These are the skull and abdominal cavities, with the chest cavity situated between them.

Anatomically the skull cavity includes a mass of sensory organs (eyes, ears, organ of balance, taste buds, olfactory epithelia) and nerve tissue (the central nervous system with midbrain and brain stem). Thus the anatomical region of the head can appropriately be designated a nerve-sense system.

The abdominal cavity is anatomically characterized by concentration of metabolic organs: intestine, liver, spleen, kidneys, reproductive organs. The limbs are activated by muscles whose tissue is also highly

metabolic. Together, they can be designated as the metabolic-limb system.

The heart and its vessels, and the lungs, fill the chest cavity. These organs are marked by rhythm (systole and diastole, pulse and breath). This region can be named the rhythmic system.

Of course all three systems interpenetrate each other (for example, nerve tissue occurs in the foot), but there can be no doubt where the highest concentration of each activity is located.

The above descriptions are largely anatomical, but the three systems also have significant functional differences.

The nerve-sense system has characteristics not found in the other two domains. The brain's nerve cells no longer divide after completing their growth. They largely lose a significant life process, the ability to reproduce. This shows itself in an extreme need for oxygen; if they are deprived of it for more than six minutes these cells die. In the sense organs another life process, blood circulation through the tissues tends to diminish. There is a minimum in the visual part of the eye whose transparency would be hindered by blood flowing through vessels. These sense organs are nourished through diffusion.

Altogether the nerve-sense system manifests a

distinct tendency for living tissue to deposit out into a more mineral-like state. An example is the brain sand of the epiphysis; another example is the statoliths in the organs of balance.

A third attribute of the nerve-sense system is its pronounced formative principle. For example, its delicate nerves extend over large areas without tearing. Another example is the pronounced structuring of the sense organs. The eye is similar to a camera; the hearing apparatus is housed in an intricately formed bony structure similar in form to a snail's shell. In comparison, the metabolic-limb system is strikingly opposite. The reproductive ability of its organs is impressive. In no other part of the human organism is there such joy in proliferation. Daily, millions of cells replace each other. The most extraordinary example is the creation of a new human life. The child's growth in the womb is possible only thanks to extraordinary cell growth and reproduction. Likewise, the circulation of blood, reduced in the nerve-sense system, is enhanced greatly in the metabolic-limb system. Nowhere in the body is blood supply as intensive as in the digestive cavity.

Formative force, on the other hand, although not absent, retreats into the background in the metabolic-limb system. In both abdomen and limbs

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the organs constantly change both form and position (kidneys, intestines, musculature).

Warmth, another function, plays a great role in abdomen and limbs; much less so in the head region.

Movement is characteristic for the metabolic-limb system. Major movement occurs in digestion and is continued in the intestinal walls and liver. Muscle activity engenders movement. The head needs rest in order to focus; there, movement recedes strongly. This explains why the head is sensitive to sudden shaking or assaults from outside (as in a concussion).

The rhythmic system is distinguished by its placement between the other two polarized systems. Through the circulation of blood and through breathing, rhythm connects with, and balances, both. We observe this anatomically and functionally. For example, the human heart muscle belongs to the metabolic-limb system through its enormous musculature and metabolic activity. At the same time, it is governed by electrical activity like that of the central nervous system. The nodes, the pacemaker of the heart, send impulses that affect the right and left chambers, stimulating heartbeat. In the heart valves we have a tissue not directly served by blood vessels,

but rather nourished by diffusion. In this tissue metabolic activity is greatly reduced, which also makes it prone to calcification at a certain age. Here again we encounter diminished life forces. Cooler blood, streaming from the head, interpenetrates in the heart with somewhat warmer blood coming up from below.

So far we have studied primarily anatomical and functional aspects. A further aspect shows how closely soul-spiritual capacities are united with the three systems discussed.

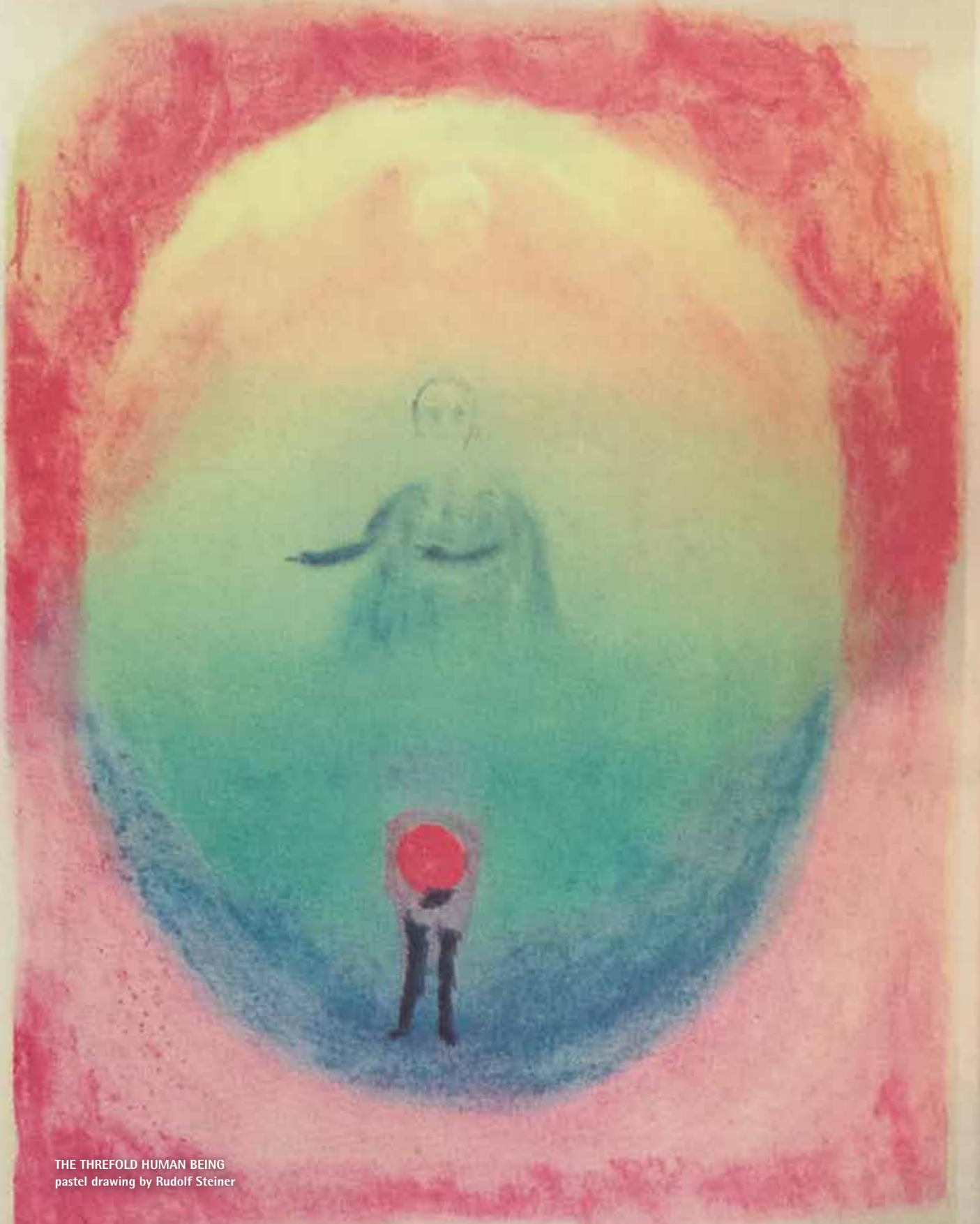
We know that thinking is based in the central nervous system, and that the brain is the instrument upon which thinking plays. The metabolic region is the arena of the will activated when we move arms and legs. The metabolic-limb system is the instrument employed by the will for its realization.

Feelings, as we know them, are accompanied by heart/circulatory phenomena. We blush when ashamed or overjoyed, and our heart beats faster. It beats more slowly when we pale in fright. Lie detectors bear witness to the subtle difference in breathing that occurs as soon as an untruth is spoken. The circulatory and breathing rhythmic system is the instrument upon which feeling plays.

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“The cause of many illnesses can be understood as a displacement of forces from their main functional area. For example, metabolic forces in all their intensity, can become dislocated to areas where they don’t belong, such as the nervous system.”

Der dreifache Mensch



THE THREIFOLD HUMAN BEING
pastel drawing by Rudolf Steiner

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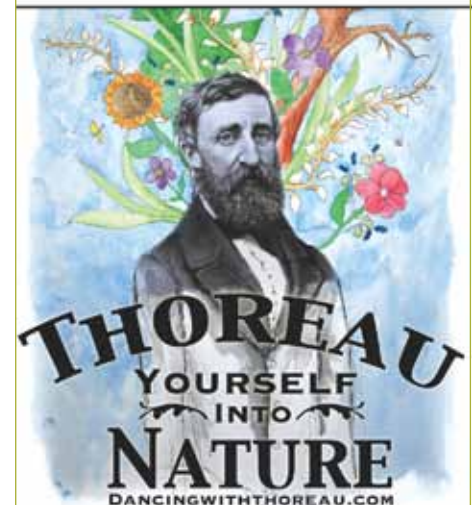
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The cause of many illnesses can be understood as a displacement of forces from their main functional area. For example, metabolic forces in all their intensity, can become dislocated to areas where they don't belong, such as the nervous system. Conversely the forces of the nerve sense-system can become overly active in the metabolic system where they can cause havoc.

One illness caused by powerful metabolic processes in the nervous system, is migraine. In this case, the vessels in the head behave like abdominal vessels, sensitively reacting to an abdominal hormone (serotonin) by contracting, which causes headache. Arthrosis is a nerve-sense process occurring in the metabolic-limb sphere. Life processes are diminished, resulting in hardening of cartilage with accompanying bony deposits. When structure and formative nerve-sense forces recede or are too weak in an organ, a proliferation of cells can occur (tumor growth).

Studying the above three illnesses according to threefold principle leads us to the understanding of their treatment.

The nerve-sense forces are supported, and metabolism forced back, by applying ice packs for migraine.

The overly strong nerve-sense processes that occur in arthrosis are countered by activating metabolism through warmth applications (external wraps and baths).

The weakened formative principle and proliferating tendency of cells is positively influenced by treatment with mistletoe whole extract, which activates formative forces as it dampens overabundant metabolism and cell activity. This treatment is enhanced through artistic therapies. They stimulate harmonization of all three regions: perception (thinking) combines with experience (feeling) and results in artistic action (will).

To further understand tumor illness and its treatment, the threefold principle can be further expanded to a fourfold image of the human being in health and illness.

the fourfold nature of the human being

Anthroposophically extended medicine, based as it is on a spiritual view of illness and the human being, employs some basic tools as aids in diagnosis and treatment. In the last issue we spoke of the threefold nature of the human organism (nerve-sense system, metabolic-limb system and



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rhythmic system). Today we would like to describe a fourfold membering that can be objectively perceived, described, and experienced.

The physical body is determined by material/chemical laws. This body would immediately decompose without its partner, the etheric, or life body.

This latter is the repository of life, as manifest in the functions of regeneration, growth, and reproduction. It continuously maintains the form of organs and limbs, in spite of constant tension between building up and breaking down. The etheric body remains largely in the unconscious, except as a general feeling of the body's state of well-being. Some etheric forces are transformed and used for thinking and memory.

A third member is expressed as the domain of the astral, or soul body. Degrees of sympathy and antipathy are expressed in the astral. Many of these feelings remain in the realm of partial or sub-consciousness although they do also rise to consciousness. This body has the ability to effect disintegration in the organism and can be viewed as a partial internal cause of illness and death.

Finally, the human being, possessing the above three members in common with the animals, is endowed with a fourth

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and crowning member—the ego. This is the spiritual kernel that enables unique self-knowledge, characteristic of each individual human being. No one else says “I” to me; only I can call myself that. In the exercise of understanding the laws of the world, the spirit within this member lights up.

are withdrawn, the etheric body is free to restore the physical body during that time.


In nature we find the same four forces working harmoniously together. The lifeless mineral realm contains laws and forces that are also active in our physical organization. In plant processes we observe

“The human being, possessing the three of her fourfold members in common with the animals, is endowed with a fourth and crowning member—the ego. This is the spiritual kernel that enables unique self-knowledge, characteristic of each individual human being.”

These four members interact and influence each other intensely. The life body animates the physical body and causes it to grow, maintain itself, and carry out rhythmic functions. Etheric body and physical body are inextricably entwined, and separate only at death. To varying degrees, both of them are interpenetrated and molded by the astral body and the ego. The stronger the ego’s influence, the more individually formed and controlled is the astral.

During sleep, ego and astral body withdraw from physical and etheric (in the nerve-sense region), only to return at the moment of awakening. Because they

an interpenetration of physical/mineral forces with the life principle, enabling growth, regeneration, and reproduction. In the animal realm a third principle is added to the duality of physical-mineral and life: the soul body, which imbues animals with feelings (pain, sadness, joy). The fourth principle, the ego, is found in humans alone.

Insight into these connections allows for an understanding of illness, and the treatment of illness. 

At the time of publication, **J.J. KUEHN, MD**, was a researcher and an anthroposophic physician at the Lukas Klinik in Arlesheim, Switzerland. In 2004, the 93-year-old Ita Wegman clinic and the 50-year-old Lukas Klinik merged to become Klinik Arlesheim AG. www.klinik-arlesheim.ch