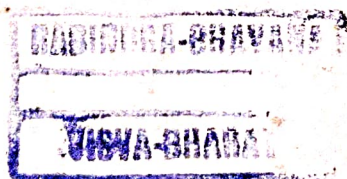
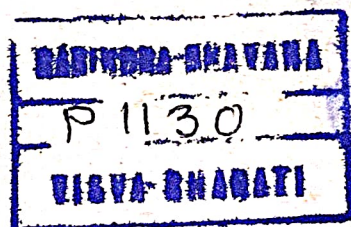


LEONARD ELMHIRST

MOVEMENT IN
EDUCATION



MOVEMENT IN EDUCATION

RABINDRANATH TAGORE TO L. K. ELMHIRST

MIRALRIO, 24. 11. 24

Introductory Note

Knowing that Leonard Elmhirst was planning to set up a new school in England at an early date, Rabindranath Tagore, on a number of occasions during his convalescence in Argentina, enlarged upon his own ideas and experience to Elmhirst personally. Elmhirst took full notes in longhand, and this is a transcript of notes taken at the time. Only three short sentences of a more personal nature have been omitted. Paragraphing has been introduced to assist readability.

Poupee¹ tries to speak to me with the whole of her body. Meeting me on the boat, she expressed her delight in the form of a dance of her own design. As she danced, her speech was through her whole body. Life is sweet, she wanted to say, life is beautiful, but having as yet no language of words, her small mind, stirred to its depths, broke out into a complex movement of dance. Her whole body moved as if to music.

It is a function of the body, not merely to carry out vital actions so that we may live and move, but so that we may express, and not with the face alone, but with the legs, the arms and the hands. All our limbs have their own power to express. This truth came to me one day in London. One of your people, a great thinker, asked me to lunch with him. I won't give you his name, but there he was, another philosopher, sitting opposite me. Suddenly, he left his chair and began to walk up and down. As soon as his thoughts had started circulating in his mind, he felt he needed the accompaniment of a circulation of movement, a co-ordination of his body. This was because his mind felt a vital connection with his body, and his body with the spontaneous and natural movement of his mind. The act of leaving

¹ Poupee : the pet name of the Poet's adopted grand-daughter, aged 2½.

his chair and of walking up and down expressed the demand of his body for free play for his thoughts.

We often take a brisk walk when we are agitated, because thought needs bodily expression if it is to perform its work freely and fully. Children must dance. They must be restless. When they think, the body becomes restless and ripples with a variety of movement that helps to keep their muscles in harmony with the mind.

In children the whole body is expressive. It is in going to school that we take our first false step. There we are required to think sitting. We mustn't move our arms. To our teacher we present so many masks. All the time we are forced to control those physical and parallel lines of movement that would be the natural accompaniment to our thoughts. Whenever, as children, we are stirred emotionally or feel receptive to thought, we need an appropriate accompaniment of physical movement.

Children can quite quickly acquire the habit of receiving thoughts sitting still. Their minds have then to think unaided by the collaboration of the body. The body, in its turn, feels neglected because it is not aiding its great partner, the mind, in its internal work. Our minds suffer ever after as a result. This does not mean that for certain kinds of thinking you need never sit still. Sometimes, as in the world of mathematics, you have, if you are to apply all your physical and mental energy to a problem, to eliminate all distracting movement, especially when you wish to explore to the depths a complex subject. For certain types of thinking, sitting still is useful.

But for creative work the mind acts as a co-ordinator of ideas, and we discover best by thinking and by expressing. When we try to express ourselves merely in words, we feel incomplete, and for the fullest expression there should certainly be arm and leg movement as well. The poet or the musician gesticulates as he works. He must move his arms or his hands, and wrinkle his

RABINDRA-BHAVANA

VISVA-BHARATI

face. Why, then, doesn't he start up from his chair and dance his ideas out in the sunshine? Because he's been to school. It is at school that he has learnt the habit of stifling so thoroughly the natural companionship of body and mind. His widowed body feels neglected, because he has lost the art of composing or of thinking whilst he is dancing or moving. The result is that the whole body, which is designed for expression through movement, loses one of its most important missions in life, the urge to express. The body becomes feeble, and only the face retains some power and freedom to express through movement. As you think you wrinkle your forehead. As you smile, or as you weep, each emotion is expressed in some movement of your face. But as a small child you smiled with the whole of your body, you wept with every muscle you had, and in anger you beat with your feet upon the ground. The whole body expressed whatever emotion you felt deeply. This power and this freedom we have deliberately mutilated, and of both we have deprived our children.

When I was young, my body was very expressive and graceful. All my limbs worked perfectly in harmony. Then I began to give too much time just to thinking. I sat down and wrote sitting, a process in which the whole of my body took no part at all. Only my face screwed itself up, and now and then I would stretch my arms. Whilst the rest of the body remained still, my muscles became inarticulate. In this way the body may continue to perform its other utilitarian functions, but it loses grace. I may have retained some element of beauty in my face and even in the movement of my arms, but the general shape or form of my limbs has lost something that was invaluable to me in my early youth. Only my face and arms today retain any ability to express what my mind is thinking.

You remember our seeing together those great Japanese

actors, and our discussion of the training they underwent so that with their whole bodies they could express any idea the play demanded from them. They had specialized in this power from childhood, using every muscle in the body to convey some specific emotion or a single idea. Every limb, and not just the muscles of the face, should have a part of its own to play and should know how to give to our inner sentiments their own perfection of expression. There is a wealth of language in movement that it should be simple for us to exploit and realize. To find expression for a single sentiment all our limbs must be free to move and act. Why not then admit that in the process of thinking there are two stages : the act of thought itself and the process of giving to that thought appropriate form or shape, even though not in words ? The grouping and shaping of these thoughts should be expressed in rhythm of movement and the body should sway with the inner movement of the thought.

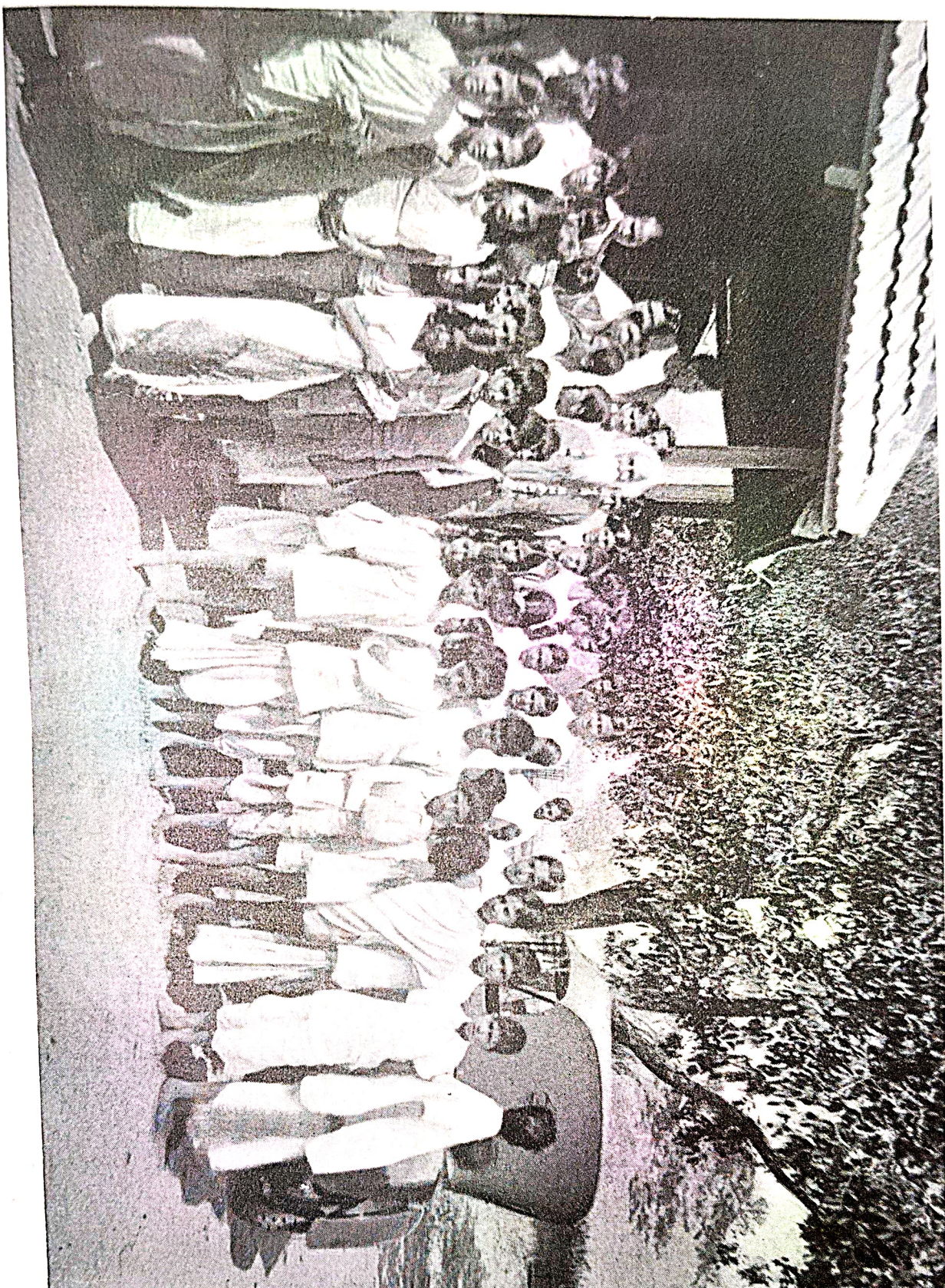
The best actors will always be those who have been trained to use the whole body as a tool for the expression of thought, of emotion or of sentiment. Words, to convey the full perfection of their message, must be accompanied by the appropriate bodily movement. If our schools were run on the right lines, boys and girls would never lose their natural gifts of bodily expression, making use for that purpose of all their limbs.

Unfortunately, today, in civilized communities, expression through movement is ordinarily repressed and is no longer looked upon as quite proper. Turning your face into a blank mask helps you to live in a crowd and among strangers without attracting notice, and thus you can achieve respectability. It is much safer to learn how to repress any vivid form of expression. By constant practice we can, and have, become adepts at concealing our real sentiments and thoughts. Sometimes we want to experience once again this freedom, this power to express

thought or sentiments. Then we have to employ men who have specialized in such an art from birth and are not at all like the ordinary run of human-beings, which has altogether lost it. We pay actors, therefore, to cultivate their natural gifts, and to give us the chance of experiencing the joys we crave, but can no longer achieve through the repression of our bodies. We get a kind of vicarious enjoyment by watching great actors perform a part. It is only to a few outstanding professional actors that we permit the expression of ideas through the use of all the limbs and of the body. We needed, then, to think deeply as to whether we cannot make some new kind of compromise between our bodies and our minds.

It is true that we cannot any longer be spontaneous or natural in the expression of our feelings before strangers. The cultivation of such an art would have to be the outcome of special training. In the developing of your own school I advise you to make the practice of drama and of the histrionic arts compulsory for all children. We must make dramatic performance a regular subject of education. Children need the opportunity to give expression of their sentiments through perfect and graceful movements of the body. Never allow this capacity to use the whole body as a medium of expression to die out. Man, as a fraction of a multitude, may feel he has to repress his individuality. Let us defy this feeling. So introduce the dramatic arts into your school from the beginning. This is the only way.

But you can also have walking classes, once a week, perhaps on Sundays. Boys and girls should become accustomed to talking and learning whilst walking, and the teachers too. They should not just sit like statues in a museum all the week. If you can let these walks be oftener than once a week, so much the better. For walking can also be a most natural accompaniment to thinking. It is when man turns himself into a vagabond or a



The Poet at a Literary Meeting organised by the Children
Photograph by Pinakin Trivedi



A Santiniketan Class
Photograph by Sambhu Saha

tramp that talk becomes natural and spontaneous. Lessons or ideas can then be assimilated the more easily. Talk becomes organic.

By repressing all activity of the body, so many school lessons remain absolutely dead and ineffective. To compel the mind to use only one portion of the body in the learning process is not natural. In the process of taking in and of digesting our food, a whole symphony of life is being performed in which heart, eyes, tongue and ears are playing their part. The same process should occur when you are taking in your lessons or trying to swallow useful information. You can, with the help of the class-room, dull all the faculties. But Life should be entire, a co-ordination of all the different faculties and functions. There should be nothing dead or inert about life in school. I would allow all our boys and girls during class to jump up, even to climb into a tree, to run off and chase after a cat or dog, or to pick some fruit off a branch. This is really why my classes were preferred, not because I was any special good as a teacher. I tried to keep in mind the need of the child to use the whole of its body in acquiring a vocabulary and in mastering a whole sentence.

I remember, in teaching English, I was trying to get the children to master the idea of "tearing", verb "to tear". Now it would have been easy enough to demonstrate by tearing a leaf from a book, but instead I asked each of them to climb to the top of the nearest mango tree and to tear off a leaf and bring it back to me. The whole process of tearing, when accompanied by such a full body movement, became a living thing. Most of our teachers used to get disgusted when they heard the children in my class laughing and shouting and clapping their hands. A boy would say to me, "May I go for a run?" "Yes, of course", I would say, because I knew that by this means some tedium would be broken and that when again he felt lively, it would be

much easier for him to receive and to digest. It is while children feel dull, from the passivity of their minds and through being asked to be inert receptacles, without any activity of body, that they cease altogether to assimilate the non-living lesson.

We should understand that, in reality, the body is one with the mind. You cannot separate them into different compartments. My only wish as a poet is to be free to walk in the open air and to use a pen whilst the body is responding to the mind, in rhythm. According to such a rhythm I would punctuate. Suddenly, I should be moving slowly, *andante*, then *allegro*, and the time would change with the changes of expression. Whilst composing my poem the body would be helping me with its own movements.

So with children in school. Let them recite while out walking, let them do their thinking aloud. If possible, I would recommend children to carry their notebooks and to go on writing while they are "on trek". First these notes would be about the things they see around them, facts and observations of natural history, aspects of the countryside, experiences on the road, of market day, of topics of conversation, of their special interests. All the picturesque details of the life around them they should sketch or record.

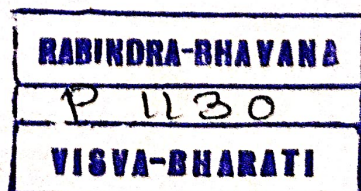
I used to encourage them to watch the Santal women filing by with materials for sale on their heads, with their pottery or water vessels, to listen to the singing of the cartmen and to all the signs and sounds peculiar to the roadside on a market day. Sometimes they would record detached, isolated facts only, but to walk along the road on a market day, when loaded bullock carts or women were streaming by, was an exercise for body and mind, for eyes and ears, an exercise in observation, with movement, in writing or sketching at the same time, while walking. By demanding this kind of co-ordination of body

and mind, eye and ear together, the exercise could become more and more complex and interesting.

I am perfectly certain that if the whole body were active in all its functions, we should learn that much more rapidly. My school now has 300 boys and girls, but I started with not more than ten and encouraged them to develop widely their freedom of body and of mind. The old house had big verandahs, long corridors, spacious terraces. Occasionally, I would bring them all out on to the verandah and change the place of the class. When we are ill, the doctor often advises a change of air. Then why not a change while we are well and in school? After the class was over, I made it a rule, the place must be changed for the next class. We would move from the shade of one tree to the shade of another. I insisted on a five minute break so that they could run and dissipate the obstructions of the mind.

Sh— would never allow a child to leave until the whole class was over. He would keep his classes overtime, so that the children had to race to avoid a reprimand from their next teacher. Their time was too much taken up by tyrants, and some reasonable gaps were badly needed between the different regimes of tyranny. Five minutes is not at all too long when children are under pressure between one period after another.

But the moment you leave a little space fallow, the utilitarians will pounce upon it, and say, "Why leave the space unfilled? You should grow a crop there." They possess such a superstitious faith in the efficiency of their own teaching that they don't realize that periods of non-teaching are just as important as a means of tempering the formal. Utilitarian by nature, they must fill every niche and leave no space or time for "not-teaching." Poor body. Nature made a perfect adjustment between the body and the mind. It is civilized man who, by his formalism in the classroom, has caused dissension between the two of them, who has severed the connection and made the gap as wide as



possible. But body and mind are indissolubly connected. The most natural form of healing is that which takes place through the suggestion of the mind. We are at last coming to accept this idea. Civilization has built up the barrier between the two, and it is our task to break down this gap and to open up once again the natural passage-ways between the two. The Greeks were probably aware of the need for this inter-relation, for they cultivated a perfect harmony of body and mind. They linked teaching with music and with games.

PRICE ANNAS EIGHT

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THE VISVABHARATI QUARTERLY

SANTINIKETAN, WEST BENGAL