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JOHANNES ITTEN:  
MASTER TEACHER AND PIONEER OF HOLISTIC LEARNING

*Kathleen Shukair*

Teaching cannot be repeated in its most valuable moments — when we succeed in touching a student's innermost core and striking a spiritual light.

This description of my teaching seems to me poor compared with what actually happened. The tone, the rhythm, the sequence of words, place and time, the mood of the students, and all the other circumstances which make for a vital atmosphere cannot be reproduced; yet it is the ineffable which helps form a climate of creativity. My teaching was intuitive finding. My own emotion gave me the power which produced the student's readiness to learn. To teach out of inner enthusiasm is the opposite of a mere pre-planned method of instruction.<sup>1</sup>

In this, the opening statement to his book, **Design and Form: The Basic Course at the Bauhaus**, Johannes Itten offers personal testimony to his incredible genius as an educator who maintained throughout a long career the kind of intellect, energy, and magnetism that can only be attributed to one who has achieved the status of master teacher. Artist, innovator, dedicated educator, he not only inspired under his direct tutelage, countless artists, architects and educators to develop their own independent creative paths, but they in turn as ardent disciples disseminated many of his ideas throughout the world until his influence can be felt in art schools even today.<sup>2</sup>

Over sixty years ago, Itten devised a teaching method which served to release latent creative powers through integration of all

aspects of the personality — physical, intellectual, and emotional. Believing that the body is an instrument of the mind, Itten felt that the purpose of any training should be to develop the "total man".

If new ideas are to take the shape of art, it is necessary to prepare and coordinate physical, sensual, spiritual, and intellectual forces and abilities. This insight largely determined the subject and method of my Bauhaus teaching...<sup>3</sup>

His now famous orientation course at the Bauhaus was highly innovative not only in philosophy but was unorthodox, rigorous, even bizarre in some aspects in methods of implementation.<sup>4</sup> Understandably it was received with considerable skepticism by the academic community at the time.<sup>5</sup>

What was the origin and what could possibly be the rationale behind such a method of training? Why would Itten evolve such a stringent regimen for the aspiring student? Was this really a valuable aid toward releasing innate creative impulses?

Disturbed by the moral disillusionment and socio-economic collapse of western civilization in the wake of World War I, Itten was convinced that western scientific technological civilization had come to a critical point, that current outward-directed scientific research and technology had all but usurped inward-directed thought and forces of the soul.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, in his training as an educator he was influenced by several German and Swiss revolutionary trends in art (**Jugendstil**, the German Art Nouveau) and art education (artistic ability being a natural trait, a natural unfolding of the individual as witnessed in primitive folk art, and advanced by Goethe, Fiedler, Hildebrand, Britsch; also the **Werkbund**, German reform movement in arts and crafts)<sup>7</sup> and by the unconventional methods of two dynamic mentors, one the young director of a teacher's college in Switzerland (Ernst Schneider),<sup>8</sup> the other, a professor at the Stuttgart Academy of Art (Adolf Holzel).<sup>9</sup>

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Furthermore, he was exposed to and adopted the philosophy and principles of a relatively new religion, Mazdaznan, holistic in concept, (the belief that through integration of body, mind and spirit the individual can achieve her or his intellectual and creative potential). Mazdaznan had its origin in the timeless, universal tenets of the Eastern religion Zoroastrianism and the mysticism of early Christianity. It was founded in 1902 by a German-American typographer, Otto Hanisch, later known as Dr. Othoman Zar-Adusht Ha'nisch.<sup>10</sup> Mazdaznan as a dualistic religion (the forces of light being engaged in a constant battle against the forces of evil) teaches that "man is on earth to dwell therein."<sup>11</sup> According to Mazdaznan the power to reclaim the material, the body, and make it as perfect as the spirit, is the power of breath. However, Mazdaznan also emphasizes a discipline of breathing, rhythmic prayers and chants supplemented by diet and exercise.<sup>12</sup>

Having become an ardent disciple of Mazdaznan, Itten was a living example of its truths, possessing an intense, magnetic colorful personality. He could inflame and activate to the point of adulation. He showered and engulfed his students with his own self confidence, his freedom to create, and his exuberance for search. Testimonials by numerous students and peers attest to his effectiveness to inspire and in some instances to repel. To wit:

Itten stands before us like the guru of an esoteric sect, dressed in the monkish Bauhaus robe which he had designed himself and which was also worn by his assistant, Georg Muche; his skull is shaved, a wire frame with circular lenses perches on his nose, his hands are crossed and a look of pious meditation is on his face. Yet, in spite of these affections, there emerges the picture of a teacher of genius, but one whose remarkable ability was coupled with the intolerant arrogance sometimes found in a man fired by the missionary zeal of freshly discovered

universal truths.<sup>13</sup>

Itten knew how to inflame us, shake us up, break down all the dikes and plunge us into a veritable frenzy of production, and still become one of us. We had the greatest respect for him.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, it appears that his students would do anything that their master demanded. According to Lothar Schreyer:

When one day Itten declared that hair was a sign of sin, his most enthusiastic disciples shaved their heads completely. And thus we went around Weimar.<sup>15</sup>

Believing also that within each student resides a genuine creative power which needs only to be released by the teacher, Itten saw a need to devise a teaching method which would not only educate the imagination and promote the harmonious development of the whole personality by integration of the body, mind, and spirit, but would allow learning to occur as a natural unfolding of the individual. Furthermore, the students would be learning not only for school, but for life, allowing them to make their own independent ways after leaving the period of training, and conduct their life's work in a unified and integrated manner.<sup>16</sup>

Thus it was that Johannes Itten proceeded to develop a basic orientation course compulsory for all first-year students, regardless of their ultimate direction. First, it was to be a carefully structured, comprehensive experience with all possible qualities of the visible world based on a theory of contrasts:

In his book Itten writes:

Finding and listing the various possibilities of contrast was always one of the most exciting subjects, because the students realized that a completely new world was opening up to them. Such contrasts are: large-small, long-short, broad-narrow, thick-thin, black-white, much-little, straight-curved, pointed-blunt, horizontal-vertical,

diagonal-circular, high-low, area-line, area-body-,  
smooth-rough, hard-soft, still-moving, light-heavy,  
transparent-opaque, continuous-intermittent,  
liquid-solid, sweet-sour, strong-weak, loud-soft, as well  
as the seven color contrasts. All these contrasts had to  
be studied in detail...<sup>17</sup>

Second, in accordance with the notion of the "total man", the students were required to approach the contrasts from three directions: "They had to experience them with their senses, objectivize them intellectually, and realize them synthetically."<sup>18</sup>

Countless exercises in all sorts of media were assigned to his students, based upon individual needs and sensibilities, using actual materials and textures in design problems, a highly original approach at the time. An example of how his students were encouraged to immerse themselves totally into a situation can be seen from the following excerpt by Felix Klee:

One colleague, for example, by the name of Pacha, had a long mane that came down all the way to his shoulders,...One day, in full public view he was shorn of his adornment. But more important, Pacha artfully made this hair the central point of one of his studies of materials.<sup>19</sup>

Third, even in the analysis of reproductions of the Old Masters, Itten wanted the students to project their emotions into the picture in addition to the usual intellectual approach. They were to put these feelings onto paper in terms of light and dark contrast, distribution of mass, rhythms, lines of composition, or other factors suggested by the picture. In 1921, Schlemmer wrote:

At Weimar, Itten teaches analysis. He shows slides to the students who then have to draw certain elements, say, movement, the main line, a curve...He shows a Gothic figure, then the weeping Magdalen from the Frunewald

Altar. The students are working hard to extract the essence of this very complicated composition. Itten watches their fumbblings and roars: If you had any kind of artistic sensibility, you would not sit there drawing in the face of this sublime representation of tears — the sorrow of the world — you would be dissolved in tears yourselves! With these words, he rushes out, slamming the door behind him.<sup>20</sup>

Accordingly, he stressed working from the student's own experience, perceptions, and intuition. Kinesthetic or body awareness and sensitivity were not only conducive, but were an absolute necessity to awaken a vital feeling for the subject. Indeed, Itten believed that only through such physical and intellectual readiness, could heightened sensitivity to the world be acquired, and could the intensive and concentrated mental and physical effort required for true artistic intervention, that is, genuine work, take place.<sup>21</sup>

This then, became the rationale behind his unique theory and methods.

To this end, he imposed upon the students a rigorous system of physical exercises and body hygiene which included their diet, clothing, indeed —their very breathing.

For example, he would begin each morning class with relaxation, breathing, and concentration exercises to establish the intellectual and physical readiness in preparation for intensive work. He writes:

How can a hand express a characteristic feeling in a line, when a hand and arm are cramped? The fingers, the hand, the arm, the whole body can be prepared for the task and sensitization.<sup>22</sup>

The body can be relaxed in three ways, he says: first, by movement of the whole body, especially the spinal column and arms and legs. He would have them bend and turn, twisting from side to side, up and down, with the effect of loosening up the external muscles.<sup>23</sup>

Says one of his students:

There were about twenty of us, predominantly men, with very few women. The door opened. Itten came in and said, 'Good morning', we stood and in a chorus said, 'Good morning', thereupon Itten said, 'That isn't a good morning!' went out, came back in, and said, 'Good morning!' The same from us, only louder this time. But Itten wasn't satisfied. He felt we hadn't woken up yet; we were still cramped. 'Please stand up. You have to be loose or you won't be able to work. Turn your heads. That's it. More! You've still got sleep in your necks!'<sup>24</sup>

Second, by thought concentration while keeping the standing, sitting or reclining position with the body perfectly still, the internal organs could be relaxed. According to Itten, this is the only way to accomplish such a feat.

The third way of relaxing, balancing, and harmonizing the body consists in the use of sound vibration. First by practicing sound production the student would learn to deal where the sounds vibrated in the body. Even if low, the hummed note must be intense. Of this, Itten says, "A sound filled with the powers of the heart can work wonders."<sup>25</sup>

The fourth way, and perhaps of greatest importance according to Itten, is the art of breathing properly.

As we breathe, so we think and conduct the rhythm of our daily routine. People who have achieved great success in their lives always breathe quietly, slowly, and deeply. Those who are short of breath are hasty and greedy in their thoughts and actions. By means of breathing exercises I tried to train my students to breath quietly and more deeply.<sup>26</sup>

On diet, too, there were definite procedures and regulations set forth. A vegetarian diet was followed, the food being prepared in a

special manner in the Bauhaus kitchen according to strict rules set by Itten. Paul Citroen, one of the students, speaks:

This selected diet must be prepared in a special way and enjoyed in proper sequence and with proper concentration.<sup>27</sup>

Fasting, too, was a way of life:

Fasts were the high point of our training, and spring and autumn were the seasons designated for this.<sup>28</sup>

Evidence that through this regimen of physical exercise, diet, breathing and meditation, the individual experienced a heightened sensitivity and precision of feelings, even an altered state of consciousness, is given in testimonials by the students themselves. Many of them had become keenly aware of the physical qualities of things, were able to distinguish gradation of tone, color, or shape, in the contrasting pairs of perceptions of his carefully structured composition course and on other things as well.

One student speaks thus:

But I must admit the inconveniences meant nothing at all beside the unique, unforgettable experience we had during and because of the fasting. The bodily changes and transformations gave rise to unexpected moods, opened unknown regions of feelings. I would never have thought it possible to attain such 'transparency', to become so receptive to otherwise hardly noticeable spiritual vibrations. In the end it was a pity to have to leave this exalted, almost unearthly state.<sup>29</sup>

Unorthodox as his methods may have been, they were not as far-fetched as would first appear, especially in the light of subsequent trends in art and scientific discoveries. Today, after three decades under the influence of abstract expressionism, the relationship between limbering up exercises, awareness of one's own body, and of the movements which the hand undergoes in projecting a



visual image, especially onto a large surface is more readily understood. That regular physical exercise makes one more alert, efficient, and engenders a feeling of well-being, is generally acknowledged today by physical fitness experts. Modern research has proved also that fasting, meditation, and rhythmic breathing can lead to heightened states of consciousness and optimum physical and mental performance.

And finally, his unorthodox methods, under criticism at the time by the academic community, have found support in several educational circles, including prevailing trends in art education in post World War II West Germany. Current research into various mind expansion techniques and interest in holistic ways of learning have resulted in scores of retreats, conferences, experiential workshops, institutes and schools being organized to examine methods not unlike those of Itten's, some also with a base in ancient Eastern religious principles. Guided by dynamic visionary individuals from all fields, humanistic and scientific, these groups are seeking ways to ensure preservation of individual creativity and spirit in today's complex society.

Therefore, not only was Itten an important figure in the tide of educational reform begun a century earlier with educators such as Pestalozzi, Herbart, and Froebel, but he could be considered a true innovator and visionary whose ideas, too advanced for his time, now have come of age. Itten not only had rediscovered some universal and timeless truths and was able to structure them into a highly original design, but had the courage and energy to implement them in such an inspiring manner that his influence is still felt in every progressive art school the world over.<sup>30</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Johannes Itten, **Design and Form: The Basic Course at the Bauhaus**, tr. by John Mass (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corp.,

1964), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>Henry P. Raleigh, "Johannes Itten and the Background of Modern Art Education," **Art Journal**, Spring, 1968, Vol. 27, p. 287.

<sup>3</sup>Itten, op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>4</sup>Eckhard Neumann (Ed.), **Bauhaus and Bauhaus People**, (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1970), pp. 46-49.

<sup>5</sup>Eberhard Roters, **Painters of the Bauhaus**, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1969), p. 46-47.

<sup>6</sup>Oswald Spengler, **The Decline of the West: Perspective of World War History, Vol. II: Perspectives of World History**, Tr. by Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1928), p. 500.

<sup>7</sup>Raleigh, op. cit., pp. 284, 285.

<sup>8</sup>Willy Rotzler and Anneliese Itten, **Johannes Itten: Werke und Schriften**, (Zurich: Orell Fussli Verlag, 1972), p. 19.

<sup>9</sup>Roters, op. cit., p. 48.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>11</sup>J. Gordon Melton, **The Encyclopedia of American Religions**, (Wilmington, North Carolina: McGrath Publishing Co., Vol. 2, 1972), p. 443.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Roters, op. cit., p. 47.

<sup>14</sup>Neumann, op. cit., p. 44.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>16</sup>Itten, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Neumann, op. cit., p. 39.

<sup>20</sup>Roters, op. cit., p. 51

<sup>21</sup>Johannes Itten, **Design and Form: The Basic Course at the Bauhaus and Later**, (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corp., 1975), p. 7, 12.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Neumann, op. cit, p. 56.

<sup>25</sup> Itten, Revised ed., p. 9.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 8, 9.

<sup>27</sup> Neumann, op. cit., p. 46.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>30</sup> Raleigh, op. cit., p. 287.