Learning on expedition

What is learning? And how and when does a person learn?

Text: Ansfrida Vreeburg  Image: Unsplash CCO

When our lives come to a standstill and mankind doesn't know what to do anymore, the question comes up: can we learn from this, and then: what is it that we can learn? What is learning and what does it require from us, right now?
What is learning?

What is learning? And how and when does a person learn? You could answer the first question with: learning is the acquisition of knowledge. Many people are (professionally) involved in this, for example in schools, universities, training agencies and in many other ways. These professionals would perhaps broaden the definition of learning a little further, towards 'acquiring knowledge, skills and behaviour and contributing to a certain (professional) attitude that is considered desirable (by that person or the outside world)'. This knowledge, skills, attitude and behaviour that a person wishes to acquire, usually serve a purpose.

*Can a person also learn spiritually and how does that work? Does the spiritual way of learning also have a clear goal? And if there is a goal, who is it that has this goal? Does man have a goal with his or her spiritual learning? Or does the soul have a goal to which it wants to elevate itself?*

Starting point of learning

For centuries it was common to be 'apprenticed' to a master because your father practiced the same profession or because the guild had sympathy for your family - it was about a mix of skills and knowledge. But from the very beginning of universities, people also consciously thought about how to acquire knowledge. During the Enlightenment two movements were popular, that of empiricism, which says that a person acquires knowledge from experience, and rationalism, which assumes that you acquire knowledge from the more reliable source, namely reason or thinking. Certainly in universities, learning was a goal in itself and the rich class could be occupied with it for a large part of life. It was about acquiring knowledge about all sciences, but with that you also developed into a better human being, or so the thought seemed to be.

In the past century, thinking about learning developed further. Learning serves a certain purpose, namely getting a job or even a career and money or prestige. Different learning styles are distinguished, and starting with one, a learner often goes through several or all ways of learning. In this way you can start from the concrete experience (empiricism), from reflection on one's own actions, from abstract thinking (rationalism) or from active experimentation. Seen in this way you move through
different stages or ways of learning. You could even say: learning = moving. And in the last decades learning is again and increasingly seen as a lifelong activity, which is necessary because the world around us changes so much during our lives and constantly requires new knowledge, skills or behaviour from us, so that we always (have to?) keep learning.

Where is the start of our spiritual learning process? A possible starting point is that you come to a standstill after an endless stream of experiences, as a result of which you and your soul are thrown back and forth. In this standstill all kinds of things can arise: restlessness, powerlessness, confusion, disappointment or maybe just resignation. But perhaps this is a starting point for the soul to make itself audible in the stillness that has arisen. Or perhaps the starting point is an obvious awareness or feeling that, although life was still so favourable to you, there must be something behind this movement. How can it be that, despite all the knowledge and immense projects of the past thousands of years, you have still never succeeded in having and keeping peace, that things are still so unfairly divided in the world, despite all the efforts. There are also stories of people who have been able to experience unity with all living things for a moment (or longer). Or is it simply a knowing from an early age and a conscious or unconscious act in listening to the soul?

**Lifelong learning**

In a lifetime, there's nothing more natural than learning. A child doesn't know any better. After all, in the first few years he or she already learns how to get the best food and love within the family's own context, learns to take steps and walk, imitate words and talk. And while communicating with people around him or her, feeling the hot heat and falling from a bicycle, he or she quickly learns. There is a total openness to the whole environment. In the beginning learning progresses completely by itself, without intention, without pressure from outside. We also call that developing. A baby seems to start without a pantry filled with experiences, blank. However, often he or she already has his or her own personality and inner knowing and drive that suggest otherwise. The child unconsciously fills that pantry every day, starting with learning language, creating structure in thinking.

And for a young adult who is still regularly experiencing things for the first time, wonder and the desire to be able to do new things could be the basis for learning, if it is not extinguished by our learning system, or the adoption of an attitude towards the
other (tough) young adults. The more experienced adults will see patterns and repetitions. There is a chance that the very experienced adult will not even see what is happening, but will see what he expects; the openness then changes very slowly towards rigidity. The structure of the pantry may be carved in stone and moving (= learning) becomes slower. But if the structure is too fixed, there is no more amazement and no more learning.

How about that learning for the soul? Whereas in the beginning it seems to be an intuitive, almost automatic process for the human being (the child learns every day through experience and almost without intention) it becomes more and more intentional during life. And for the soul? For the soul, isn't it much more a matter of unwinding instead of learning? So instead of taking conscious steps and learning knowledge or skills (as a human being does or tries to do), it may be much more important for the soul to free itself, to take away the covers under which it lies hidden. Whatever starting point the soul had for development, this is a totally different learning journey than intentional learning to a consciously chosen goal.

Let us imagine this as an expedition. Although the soul, and by listening to her, also the personality, knows entirely that there is another goal waiting for it, we do not know exactly what that goal looks like. Not only the goal is unknown, the exact method is unknown as well, although many souls have already gone before us and want to help us in every possible way.

As with a physical expedition that wants to be the first to sail the Grand Canyon, there is a strong longing for that goal for which we don't have the words to describe it yet. The method is to go step by step, because after every next step the 'land' is unknown again and the right direction (the goal) has to be rediscovered. Will the boat be our means of transport or do we have to continue on foot? Have we strayed or is this the desired golden mean? And just like with a physical expedition, this journey of development might be better done in a group. Together, the group ensures the right focus on the goal and also provides a multitude of knowledge, experience and insights. Together you get an ever better picture of the goal; the group makes you strong.

So far, we did present learning as a purely positive process. But it is for a reason that people say that we learn most from mistakes. If so, then ideally we would rapidly make mistakes in order to learn quickly, to do better and to make mistakes again. A child learns to walk by very often falling and getting up again and looking for balance.
But somewhere in our lives we become afraid to make mistakes, because making mistakes does something to our image and therefore to our self-image. The spontaneous openness to what is new disappears into the background, because in a new situation we don't know if known actions will produce the expected results. That is why those who are older rely more and more on the structure that is known, which may be more conservative and less open to new insights.

*When you are older and have already seen everything, can't you develop spiritually anymore? Maybe when you are older it takes a little more effort to start unlearning patterns and certainties. But is there a greater chance that peace has come and that the silence of the inner being is sought?*

*The expedition we spoke of is also characterised by a lack of certainty. You can go wrong or sail into the wrong canyon, or be in danger by underestimating rapids. At the same time, the exact method is unknown, and so it is a search, a step by step attempt, making 'mistakes' or 'slips' and picking up again. If man dares to let go of the fear of making mistakes and can surrender to the guidance of the developing soul, the expedition can really start, from desire and trust.*

**Learning in our present time**

In a short period of time our society and living environment has changed in an unexpected way. It is not only limited to one country, but currently we are seeing a shock wave of change worldwide. What we used to consider so normal, shaking hands as a greeting, physical encounters to perpetuate our connection, working and travelling in the physical world, is suddenly undesirable. Arriving in this new reality requires constant alertness. After all, we have to adapt our behaviour and our underlying expectations (temporarily?). Because of this, anthropologist Jitske Kramer argues, we may have ended up in a collective, global culture shock. Each of us is in a different phase of this culture shock. Am I in the phase of incomprehension, of acceptance (or not) or in the phase of seeing opportunities or impossibilities? And my interlocutor, where is he?
Everyone reacts differently to this 'crisis' or 'new reality'. We get to know ourselves in an unexpected and new situation and everyone gives it their own meaning, their own story. Each one of us is asked, no almost required, to be resilient. And in this obligatory flexibility we learn a lot, about the world around us or about ourselves.

But more than anything else, this offers everyone the opportunity to reflect on life. What moves me, what do I have to learn? In this day and age, when something else is asked of me, what gives my life value? I feel insecure about how my life will change, how can I deal with that? Can I move forward and learn as uncertainty or even fear about what our society will look like, gets me stuck and stiffens me?

*Can this uncertainty in our outer life be a starting point for another life? Maybe the life that has come to a standstill can invite us to enter. Can we let the expedition of inner soul development seep into our outer life? Perhaps it is the art of this new age that we are all once again faced with the fundamental uncertainty of our existence. Experiencing that the control that seemed to be there was an illusion. Then not only in our inner life an expedition is going on, but we can also experience our outer life as an expedition. Not fearful, but from an inner certainty, which is the only essential certainty we can know in life. Full of confidence and longing to embark on the adventure. Then all aspects of our life are based on longing for a goal, knowing that step by step the road unfolds.*

*Seen in this light, the most essential thing we should learn in life is to trust in our inner foundation. Learning to go on an expedition. Uncertainty and change are the constant, our attitude and flexibility to take on life is our challenge.*