

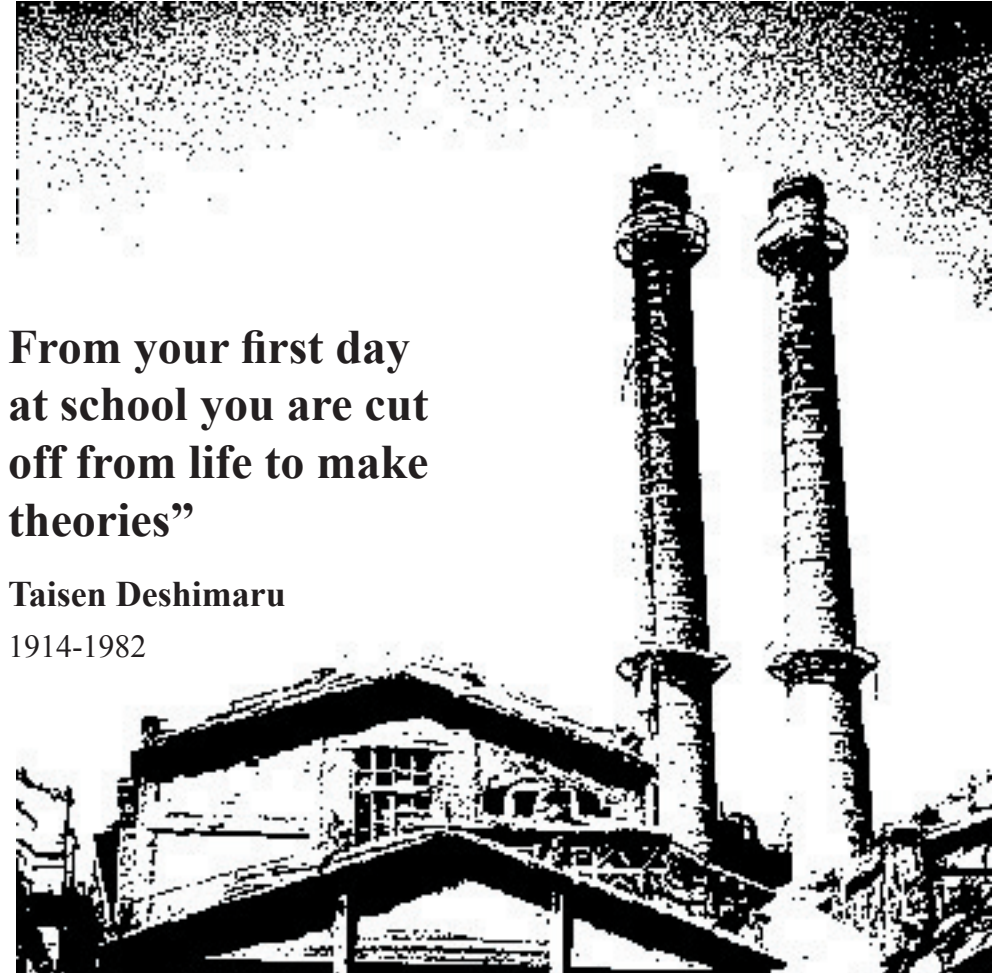
# Student Life and Other Contradictions

An inquiry into the value of modern education.

*oppression reigns because men are divided not only amongst themselves but within themselves. What separates them from themselves and weakens them is also the false bond that unites them with Power”*

Raoul Vaneigem

*The Revolution of Everyday Life*



**From your first day  
at school you are cut  
off from life to make  
theories”**

**Taisen Deshimaru**

1914-1982

A Pamphlet By Raoul Vaneigem  
Edited by Lake County Anarchists  
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LIFE is the continual exploration of the relationship between the individual and the world. Institutional schooling inverts this process. Our education system progressively alienates the individual from her-*Self*.

Education begins as playful adventure, but this is just a confidence trick. Creativity and curiosity soon falter under the increasing weight given to obedient imitation and the spirit of competition. By the time the child reaches high school education has already become a chore.

Obedience and imitation require nothing original from the child - nothing that originates from her-*Self*. By definition they require the exact opposite: the docile appropriation of others' ideas and behaviour. The quasi-penal atmosphere of the classroom belies the primary purpose of schooling: submission and indoctrination. Education is how the *status* stays *quo*.

This gradual removal of the child from consideration of what is best for them is simply the gradual removal of the child from her-*Self*. The more time spent in educational institutions the more advanced this process of separation becomes; a process that finds its logical conclusion in the automaton. And so it is that our schools, colleges and universities transform the originally inquisitive and exuberant child into an apathetic, joyless functionary – another cog in the economic machinery.

***Modern education literally sucks the LIFE out of the student.***

## learning nothing

*The university has become an institutional organization of ignorance.”*

Situationist International and Strasbourg Uni students, 1966

*On the Poverty of Student Life*

*Men are born ignorant, not stupid; they are made stupid by education”*

direction that doesn't emanate from within your-*Self* is necessary to 'clear the decks', so the speak. With this reversal of perspective education becomes a matter of using that which *resonates* with that within you and ignoring the rest. That is, education becomes part of the *Art* of living - it becomes part of LIFE.

***And what is good, Phaedrus, and what is not good - need we ask anyone to tell us these things?”8[8]***

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screen that separates us from our-  
*Selves*. Refusing the boredom, frustration and alienation implicit in  
spectacular life is the daily revolutionary act from which all others will  
issue. *Joie de vivre!* - Living as well as possible is the only point to life.

## Conclusion

*Happiness is a new idea*”  
Paris 68 graffiti

*These past few weeks have witnessed the truth of what the poets have been  
telling us since the beginning of time: there is no adult world. Youth is  
reckless, generous, valuable, but the world of wise, mature and organized  
adults for which youth is supposed to be a preparation does not exist*”

Peter Lennon (commenting on the Paris revolt of May 1968)  
*Paris in the Sixties*

The secret to fulfilment, happiness and a better world is *there is no secret*.  
After wrestling with the enormous absurdity and frustration of modern life  
you eventually say: Fuck it! This deep thought is depressing me too much.  
*I just want to enjoy myself*”, and ironically you solve your dilemma. You  
rediscover what you already knew as a child - that happiness is your  
purpose - and realise that, as an adult, ***doing what makes you happy is the  
most revolutionary act imaginable***. Oh, and for those solemn souls who  
think such selfish anarchic pleasure will destroy the world, haven't you  
ever noticed that happiness is something that only grows *when it is shared*?

Someone quite famous - Nietzsche probably - reckoned you had to go  
through nihilism and come out the other end to understand life. Seems the  
mad bastard may have been right. Rejecting every value, belief and

Bertrand Russell

*I might have gone to uni, but at least I know I'm dumb*”

TISM

Reared on a diet of junk knowledge that becomes even less nutritious as  
she enters university, the student is mentally weak. Atrophied critical  
faculties and a profound historical naivete leave her disorientated, unable to  
critique or conceptualise the information she is force-fed. An ever-  
expanding mass of technical information is presented to the student as  
*serious* knowledge, together with the understanding that academic success  
is defined as the general acceptance (by academia, not the public naturally)  
of the student's own esoteric ruminations. Hence to succeed is primarily to  
imitate. And to imitate is to add to the mountain of (largely irrelevant)  
technical information that, being abstract, literally *draws* the student *out* of  
direct connection with the world.

The aesthetic sense operates only in direct connection with life. Although  
this fact is obvious to anyone who has ever seen a pretty girl, the academic  
world - lost in its subjective/objective universe - is still trying to work out  
why beauty and value seem impossible to grasp intellectually. It is obvious  
that beauty isn't measurable, like size, shape or colour - it is not objective -  
so only one category seems to remain: beauty and value, we are told, must  
be 'subjective', which is another way of saying 'relative' or simply 'not  
*real*'. But aesthetic experience is as REAL as it gets.

Beauty and value are not objective yet they are real, *more* real than both  
subjects *and* objects. Aesthetic experience takes you *out of yourself* (*eg*  
losing yourself when dancing); it provides an intuitive knowledge – Quality  
– that is obscured upon self-consciousness. The ego occupies awareness at  
the expense, or at least the dilution of direct experience. Then it proclaims  
what it obscures to be imaginary – replacing aesthetic reality with its own  
static conceptual projections (the first and major division being – 'me' and  
'world'). Egoless experience is neither conceptual nor logical; it just *is*, for  
without an ego there is no one to do the reflecting. But we are told that if  
something isn't logical it isn't real. Even though logic – being an abstract  
concept - isn't real itself! Distanced from direct experience in her  
conceptual cocoon the student drifts into squareness and, in time, nihilism.

Squareness and gullibility are the hallmarks of the student. Being a mediocre exponent of Reason, the student's relationship to rational knowledge is based on faith - the university as *Church of Reason*. Ever naive, the student dismisses the possibility of engaging with the world in any manner other than that of compulsive and lousy analyst. Consequently she becomes more and more cut-off from her own desires and passions, more and more cut-off from LIFE. The Chinese say, to know and not to do is not to know"; therefore it can be reasonably assumed that most students and nearly all academics know **nothing**.

## expert knowledge

*An expert is someone who knows more and more about less and less until eventually they know everything about nothing."*

Anon

The academic is a creature of self-conflict. Clinging to a vestigial self-importance (stemming from a time when university was a prep school for the ruling class), they cannot escape the fact that they now manage only an assembly line. Testament to this contradiction is the false modesty with which most academics carry their meaningless titles. When most doctors of *philosophy* couldn't tell you what the word means, it becomes very difficult to take this hollow honorific seriously. The technician usurped the intellectual a long time ago.

With the continuing proliferation of technical knowledge comes the continuing creation of new expert disciplines and, of course, new expert academics to fill them. As the pie gets bigger each academic's share becomes proportionally smaller, until none of them seem able to say (or at least agree on) what type of pie they are dealing with, **or why**. Isolated from other disciplines (and the public) with their jargon, academics run together in gangs dependent on field; and within these fields they run in 'sub-gangs'. Perpetually partisan, the academic somehow remains convinced of his own impartiality. He is an example of false consciousness *par excellence*.

endeavours. Vicariously competitive, they too often alienate the child from his-Self, his parents and the *fun of the game*. My uncle used to say that soccer was working man's ballet, and he was right: Sport can be an *Art* and often still is. But ultra-competitiveness and the spirit of seriousness are antithetical to *Art* - to the *game*. They are the stuff of anxiety and stress, not creativity and play.

Any activity can be an *Art*, but it is *things* that are art. The stuff of passive consumption is 'art' - just another commodity produced for the commodity-spectacle. '*Art*' on the other hand isn't a 'thing' at all; it's an *interrelationship* - a symbiosis between the individual and the world. It is that state in which the individual is relaxed and focussed and *part of what* they are doing.

The Situationists<sup>7[7]</sup> aimed for the 'realization and suppression of art', by which they meant the realization of *Art* as LIFE, and the suppression of culture (art) as a centrally organized and/or passively consumed commodity. Their name was derived from their aim: to create open-ended participatory situations, with the perspective of the situation or experience being primary. Instead of subjects experiencing objects, we have an undivided situation of which the individual is an integral part. Feeling *part* of an experience, being immersed in it, simply defines those things we *like* to do. Sex, sport, surfing, dancing, motorbike riding, fishing - it doesn't matter. The immersion and immediacy, the Quality and loss of self-consciousness - this is why we do them. Art is spectacular, *Art* is participative; art is a thing, *Art* is an interrelationship; art is serious, ***Art is fun***.

***Fun is the only revolutionary weapon***. Fun destroys the hierarchical society that seeks to control (*ie* destroy) it. Fun ridicules the 'dogmantras' of bureaucratic pseudo-revolutionaries who are preoccupied with the serious business of being boring. Fun emanates from the *Self*, connecting the individual with others and the world. Fun is the stuff of creativity and spontaneity; it is the enemy of the spirit of seriousness. The rallying cry of the liberated student will simply be: ***if it isn't fun why do it?"***

Ignoring anyone and anything that doesn't help satisfy your desires or engage your interest **is** the revolution. All these square 'leftists' and 'rightists' are missing the point - ***all -isms are wasms***. Ideology is the

It is difficult for us to recognise the violence that has been effected upon us from an early age. Just as the crab doesn't realise what's happening as the water in the pot slowly heats up, so the child's gradual slide away from desire and fun and LIFE is near imperceptible, except when viewed retrospectively as a whole. You have been taught to disregard your own feelings, desires and judgement, letting parents, teachers, police and politicians 'guide' you instead. And guide you to what? The Promised Land of boredom, anxiety, fear, drug addiction, environmental, physical and spiritual decay - woo hooo! Do you *really* want to be like your parents? Like John Howard? Like every living-dead, suit-wearing fucker whose only pleasure seems to lie in taking you down with them? You are a product of an intrinsically violent society - **you are intrinsically violent** - and the only way to stop it getting worse is to get off the train now and try a different track - your *own* track.

## 5. serious fun

*I have never really been sincere or enthusiastic except when I used to indulge in sports and, in the army, when I used to act in plays that we put on for our own amusement. In both cases there was the rule of a game which was not serious, but which we enjoyed taking as it were."*

Albert Camus

*The Fall*

The economic organization of everyday life is the organization of a living death. Not content with the systematic drudgery that is work and school, remnant areas of autonomous and spontaneous activity are gradually infected with the *spirit of seriousness* that permeates and sustains the *commodity-spectacle*.

What was traditionally the bastion of working class camaraderie - sport - is now part of the machinery that long ago crushed it. Sport is now *serious* business. Just look at all the money that corporations pour into football teams, or the seriousness parents devote to their kids' weekend sporting

What the academic as technical expert illustrates most clearly is the *fragmentation of knowledge*. Unaware of the need to reassemble these fragments into a coherent whole, the academic instead concentrates his attention on a single splinter, until it becomes the whole world to him. And so the splinters multiply and so the need for their integration grows, and from this situation a tragic irony ensues. The child's natural bent towards this integration, towards a truly philosophical understanding, is stymied in favour of specialisation. When even philosophy (the study that is supposed to link all others) succumbs to this overly reductionist approach we are left completely adrift, unable to find a base, an anchor, from which we can begin constructing a *good* 'map of reality'. A good" map being one that helps us realise a *better* life.

Viewed as a whole the authoritative declarations and counter-declarations of the academic body are reminiscent of the *Blind Men and the Elephant*. Absorbed in the analysis of his discrete little parcels of information, each technician is certain that *his* is the one that contains the **Truth**. Yes, academia *is* a farce - a tragicomic farce. The hilarity implicit in the elevation of the technical and trivial is offset by frustration over such wasted potential. This pretentious technical myopia is piss funny yes, but when is the joke going to end?

## 3. reasonable desires

*To learn without desire is to unlearn how to desire"*

Raoul Vaneigem

*A Warning to Students of All Ages*

*Gnothi se auton" (know thyself)*

Inscription at the Delphic Oracle in Ancient Greece

It is a rare student that knows himself. Academic success - requiring obedience, imitation and abstraction - comes at the price of personal desire and *Self*-knowledge. The student doesn't know what he wants; only what he *thinks* he wants (which is usually based on what he thinks *others* want). How else do we account for why students study what they do? It certainly

seems to have less to do with subject matter (who reads a textbook for fun?) than with *career pragmatism*. And what is career pragmatism but trading immediate enjoyment for the future reward of a job (if you're lucky) *based* on what you had to force yourself to endure in the first place. Career pragmatism is the logic of the masochist.

You say, in all honesty, that you want to be successful, rich, and powerful; but these are just the wants of social status and sexual desire. Status, celebrity, wealth and sex are desirable alright - they are desirable for *all*. They are innate/instinctive drives. Biology and Society are a part of us all and, relied on exclusively, they homogenise and automate us. We can escape the limits of these forces through Reason: recognising these compulsions and checking them when we feel they are not a good idea. But Reason is a faculty that needs to be developed. We are not born rational animals. Our intellectual capacity develops in parallel with our language skills and relies on a careful observation of how the world operates. Reason is, at bottom, an understanding of cause and effect.

Science is Reason's most gifted child. Science seeks to formulate principles or laws that account for the operations of the natural world. The scientific method is simple:

1. Observe phenomena
2. Formulate a hypothesis to explain the observed phenomena
3. Test hypothesis

This simple schema allows us to see exactly where Science and Reason fit together with *Art*. *The formulation of a hypothesis is an entirely creative and intuitive act; it is Art*. In other words Reason, if not grounded in *Art*, *does not work*.

This simple point – a truism to any good scientist<sup>1</sup>[1] - has some obvious repercussions for our beleaguered student. If Science is not grounded in *Art* it loses its direction – the source of its hypotheses. *Art* is the domain of the *Self*; it is direct intuitive knowledge. Separated from his-*Self* the student is a stranger to *Art*, intuition, creativity and authentic desire. In other words, Reason divorced from an intuitive connection with the world falls back into relativity and nihilism. It serves only the goals of biology and society. Reason becomes a tool for justifying the *status quo* rather than a means of challenging it. And this is what has happened.

Your desire, which springs from the *Self*, is your connection with the sublime - a spark from the divine fire. It is the source of the highest knowledge or *gnosis* as the Greeks used to say. It is the reason why the consummation of pure desire in the act of sexual intercourse is referred to as 'knowing another' in the Bible. *Self*-knowledge is prior to rational knowledge - it is the *ground* from which rational knowledge emerged. This is why rational knowledge is useless, irrelevant, if it doesn't *remain* grounded in *Self*-knowledge. 'Ungrounded' knowledge is the stuff of scholasticism and trivia; it is the stuff of university.

#### 4. benign violence

*Tat tvam asi*" (that thou art)

Hindu saying regarding the identity of consciousness and universe

*Disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has ever read history, is man's original Virtue."*

Oscar Wilde

The student is a masochist but doesn't know it. Unable to be himself because he doesn't know how, he asserts what he thinks is his individuality but is in fact an amalgam of those behaviours and images he is surrounded by. Unquestioning, he swallows and internalizes the dictates of authority, unaware that he hamstringing his own authenticity. The student's lack of control over his own life; his disconnection from his desires and passions; and his oblivious acceptance of his emasculation as natural, make him a caricature: the supercilious slave. He becomes someone who knows himself only through what others think of him - all form and no content. This was the genius of Bret Easton Ellis in *American Psycho*: to show that 'success' in the Eighties (and not much has changed) was to sever all connection with the *Self* - to imitate perfectly and consistently until there is no real you left, just a shell. The **violence** of this separation - this *evisceration* - is mirrored in the main character's greed, disgust and, ultimately, his propensity for sadism, murder and mutilation. *Violence begets violence, and violence has many forms*.

domain of aesthetic and moral value, which is why they are dismissed by so many of the exclusively analytical. They convince themselves that these values don't really exist even though they use them everyday. What other 'reason' is there to do anything, to believe anything, other than that is has value. It is this sense that directs our lives and when ignored or overridden leaves us miserable and frustrated. The awareness of value - of *Quality* - gives rise to (a proportionate degree of) desire.

This primary apprehension of value can be lost or obscured through the intellectualisation of experience. Trying to understand value with reason is to put the cart before the horse: *Reason (truth) is a subspecies of value (good)*. 'Truth' is a term we use to describe statements or explanations of very high Quality. Once the reflective path is taken it is the beginning of the movement away from value and desire, towards rationalisation and confusion.

This intuitive sense of value (the source of so many colloquialisms: 'gut feeling'; 'feel it in my bones' etc), and the desire it causes to spring are the guides to a happy life. This presents a challenge for the student because the majority of his education, especially at high school and university, is of low value. It is only his 'talent' for rationalisation and *Self*-denial (and the fear that grows out of self-consciousness) that prevent him from walking out of class, mocking the teacher as he does so. This dismissal of value is practised so regularly during a young life that the student puts himself in danger of forgetting how to desire altogether. He develops a perpetual inner monologue that makes it hard for him to separate thought from feeling. And so he continues letting others tell him what to do and what to want, mistaking the voice of '*Cultural Reason*' for that of his own desire.

But the *Self*, no matter how diligently we repress it, is indomitable. From time to time it fights its way up through our rational monologue into consciousness. Sometimes subtle, sometimes visceral, it is that sudden feeling that dwarfs the authority of any logical conclusion, though it often seems like the essence of logic itself. It is the song that makes the hair on your neck stand up; the person whose mere presence in the room changes your psyche more poignantly than any drug; the wave of fury that washes over you when you witness injustice. Have you not noticed these moments? - These guideposts to excellence, beauty and happiness. Ignore them at your peril.

The development of Reason and the development of democracy are historically contemporaneous. The idea that man should be free to do what he wishes as long as he doesn't impinge on the freedom of others is not so new, but it, like the idea of democracy, is reflected only faintly in the world around us today. We have regressed. Social rather than intellectual values predominate. Instead of freedom we have increasing corporate power, surveillance, war, laws and more prisons than ever before. Instead of democracy we have the rule of the ill-gained dollar: kleptocracy. The causes of this historical turn are to be found in the conflicts *within* each of us - 'History is abstracted from biography'<sup>2</sup>[2]. Society is part of us just as we are part of it.

This regression is due to the divorce of Reason from Intuition, of Science from *Art*. Without *Quality*, Reason cannot escape relativity and leads only to nihilism. This partial Reason separates the student from his-*Self* and joins him with the structures that stunt his intellectual and aesthetic development, replacing his unique desires with the ubiquitous fame, wealth and sex routine.

Authentic desire is not an instinctive drive, nor does it reinforce the sense of separate self. Instead it arises in those moments when there is *no sense of separate self* - the 'I' recedes and there is only experience of what *is*. Rather than being a property or intention of the individual, authentic desire *contains* the individual. This is why, when referring to the highest desire, we say I am *in love*" - it is not so much *me* that loves, rather it is through losing the sense of *me* that love arises.

Many scientists would dismiss love as merely an emotional state - an epiphenomenon associated with the biological imperative. Many philosophers would hold that love is illusory because we cannot truly know another. In both instances the terminal rationality of these poor folk separates them from the 'immersive' experience that comes through loss of separate self and is the only path to love. This is why ecstasy is such an important drug for the student and academic. Ecstasy<sup>3</sup>[3] melts the ego and immerses the individual in the experience. Ecstasy relieves anxiety (which arises from self-consciousness) and curbs the analytic reflex that distances the individual from the present. Used in moderation it has undeniable medicinal (as shown by recent use in the treatment of Parkinson's disease) and aesthetic/spiritual potential.

**The seamless union - or *interpenetration* - of individual and world is the *Self*.** The *Self* is the *present*. As Pirsig says in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*:

*The present is the only reality: the future exists only in our plans, the past only in our memories*"4[4]

**The *Self* is real;** the separate self (the classical 'subject') is a conception - a *projected idea*. The *Self* is *undivided experience*. It is that state in which there is no distinction between what is experienced and who is experiencing it - *no division between subject and object*.

Descartes' '*I think therefore I am*' only reinforces the conceptual nature of the subject. Intellect *produces* the subject (I) - the separate self. This is what intellect *does*. By differentiating ourselves from the world we are able to analyse it objectively - *et voila*, science! But are we always so engaged? Are we always self-conscious? Does everything think? No, of course not (for one thing thought requires symbolic language). The subject/object split is how intellect works, but it is not the ultimate nature of reality. The absurdity of this continuing assumption goes unchecked only because the great majority of those that pursue questions of a philosophical bent think *too much*. Their ever-present self-consciousness convinces them that 'they' are permanent and fundamental, when 'they' are really only an idea.

**Undivided experience is fundamental.** Before any abstractions based on sense data and metaphysical assumptions are made there is only the flow of perceptions.

The dissenter: *But who has these perceptions? -Who can have them but me?"*

This is where the stumbling block is.

Remembering that the present is the only reality what can we say about it? What is the present like? The present is simply a continual flow of perceptions: sights, sounds, smells, the meanderings of consciousness. 'I' only begin to exist when intellect is applied to these perceptions - this is when consciousness becomes self-consciousness. 'Me' and my senses are *ideas* that come *after* experience, as all ideas do. Experience is immediately apprehended (phenomenal); senses and 'me' are postulated

(conceptual). The phenomenal is beyond doubt; the conceptual is abstract and always provisional.

This is not easy to grasp straight away. If you doubt that 'you' – the separately existing self - are actually just a creation of intellect (albeit a very useful and socially convenient one that I have been employing throughout this whole essay) think back to the first 18 months of your life. Why can't you remember? Because experience – the flow of perceptions – had not yet been organised. Patterns had not formed yet. As we develop we start to register recurring patterns in the flow of experience. Probably emotions (hunger, pain etc) at first, then maybe 'mum' or 'dad' and 'me' and pretty soon we learn to attach words to these patterns. After a while we learn more words that refer not to concrete objects or emotions but ideas, one of which is 'me' as the self-conscious separately existing subject – the ego. These are the beginnings of intellect. It is at this point that 'I' start to exist.

So if the subject/object division is not the nature of reality what is? Well first and foremost it is ultimately ineffable – beyond intellectualisation. The logic of this conclusion is simple: If reality is experience in the present, and ideas are concepts applied retrospectively upon this experience, then ideas always refer to what has past and are therefore essentially unreal. Or to quote Pirsig: *you can't be aware that you have seen a tree until **after** you have seen the tree*"5[5].

So we – as classical subjects – are unreal. Strange as this sounds, this is precisely what Buddhists have known for thousands of years. From here the Buddhist concept of *maya* (veil of illusion) - the way we consciously experience the world disguises its true unity – follows logically. As does the problem of 'self'. Clinging to the notion of self as an autonomous, separately existing entity is the primary cause of *dukkha* (Buddhist term for suffering/being out of kilter). It is more accurate to see ourselves – according to Buddhism, physics, psychology, ecology, phenomenology and Pirsig's *Metaphysics of Quality* – as *sentient elements of a connected Dynamic reality*"6[6]. Dynamic because reality is not static: *reality* is continuous and flowing; *ideas* are static and discrete. Ideas can never capture reality.

It is this dynamic reality, 'this cutting edge of experience', that is the