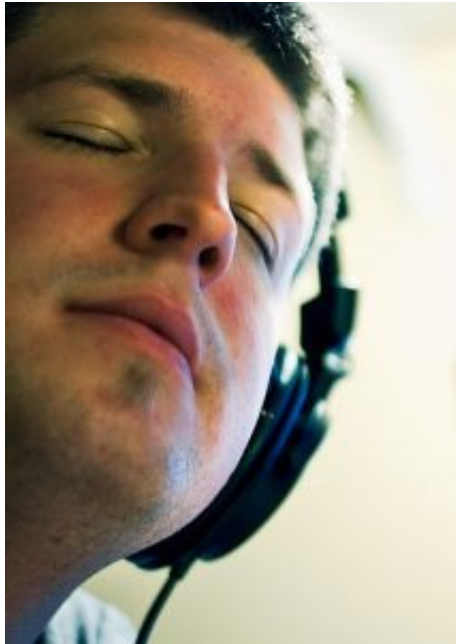


Beauty and meaning



Recently I have been pondering the ability to perceive beauty and meaning. In order to perceive anything it is necessary to develop organs of perception. In order to see we needed to develop eyes. Without ears, sound waves would be non-existent for us. If someone talked to us about fragrance and smells we wouldn't know what they were talking about if we didn't have a nose.

However, at some point it is also necessary to develop what could be called 'inner senses'. In order to appreciate the beauty of a piece of music, the ears alone are not enough. Cats and dogs have even better organs of hearing but presumably they don't appreciate the beauty of music as much as some humans (although a recent article on the BBC science page reported experiments that indicated that cats are amenable to classical music and seem particularly partial to Handel).

But in any case, our appreciation of beauty and our ability to perceive meaning differs from human being to human being and I don't think that there is any doubt that our inner perceptions grow and develop over time, especially if we practise using them. As the speaker at a recent talk on homeopathy put it, "intuition grows with time." Likewise, when I studied the violin and the piano at university I obviously appreciated music and spent hours every day with it. But over the years I have come to appreciate it even more and am receptive to the beauty of pieces now that did not touch me so much in my youth. It seems that while our physical ability to see and hear diminishes with age, our inner senses grow and we are able to see more with our heart and with the eyes of our mind.

In this way, our ability to perceive beauty and truth is not dependent on those qualities themselves, but on the development of our inner senses. Can we therefore judge with certainty what exists and what does not? The Theosophist C.W. Leadbeater once said: "It is one of the commonest of mistakes to consider that the limit of our power of perception is also the limit of all there is to perceive." How much more will there be to discover? And who knows, we might even develop a sixth sense!