

Peace and health

Nyawenha skannon – thank you for our wellbeing and peace!
 “Skannon is our word for peace which has the meaning for health. These simple introductory words characterise the foundation for peace in our community and our insight that peace is not possible without wellbeing”.

Oren Lyons, chief and faithkeeper, Onondagaindians.

The Dream of the good method for peace and non violence, comes from the well known connection between public health, social well being and sustainability – an approach within healthcare meaning “to be at peace with oneself and others”. The Dream of the good fosters an approach of non violence and peace, it’s behaviours and values, with the help of exercises, promoting mental and physical health founded on a holistic model of peace. As such, the education applied can get a valuable and positive effect on the social- and health related issues existing in schools today – problems that have grown like an avalanche during latter years in size and costs.

According to a report in 2003 from the Swedish Institute of Public Health an increase in mental health issues, particularly amongst children and teenagers and an increase in work related absence are two of the five most serious health problems in Sweden. Absence due to illness: 8,2% are absent more than 28 days/per year. 20 % are at risk of becoming burnt out as reported (www.lararforbundet.se/article by chairman). Mental health issues amongst children as reported (Dagens Nyheter).

What is a holistic training of peace and health about?

A holistic training is to provide time for learning and experientials for children and teenagers to help them understand and come in contact with their inner essence – the source for peace within themselves on a regular basis. The training enhances learning together with others and socialising in harmony with people from different cultures and societies. Primarily a holistic education is aimed at the teachers and through our supporting network, they are assisted, in the long term, in the classroom to build a culture of peace.

Holistic models all around the world from Montessori to the University of Maryland/McGill, Harvard and Cornell have researched qigong and other peace related methods that are being used by the Dream of the

Good. The peace program promoted by UN's Cyber school bus include many methods similar to the Dream of the Good.

Stillness in tough inner city schools in the US :

Create an inner room

By Anna Bornstein

Sit down comfortably and relax. Breathe deeply, slowly and quietly from you belly. Think of an inspiring word, like peace or joy, a line in a poem you like or a calming phrase like "everything will be all right or "let it go". Focus on your word or sentence. Don't pay attention to other thoughts that may appear. Don't perform or worry about how well you're doing this

If your attention wanders, just return to your focus.

Practice once or twice a day, 10-20 minutes each time. Or do shorter moments, if you are very busy, as an alternative.

The relaxation response is connected with lowered metabolism, slower breathing, lowered BP, less oxygen consumption. It brings increased peace of mind, better mental balance. It develops your self-confidence and sense of self-control, improves concentration and thus your capacity to learn by making you more open, harmonious and creative.

"The students who come to us are at times, in a desperate situation and have no secure place or anchorage in their lives. Some have quite a rough attitude. Many have parents who are drug addicts or are criminals. Most of them have never learnt to use their inner resources." With suppressed fire, Beth Greenberg, one of Professor Herbert Benson's assistants, tells about her experiences in the "tough" inner city schools in Los Angeles, Newark and Boston the latter where the Institute for Mind Body Medicine is located. The Institute is involved in a research project in teaching relaxation and stillness to the teachers at first, and through them to the students. Many tough youngsters learn to breathe in the right way and to do relaxation and visualization exercises !

Afterwards they are astounded. "I feel as if I could float out of here". They become relaxed, calmer and more open to learn, Beth says. And this is a common reaction we meet in the schools where we have tested our training program.

Often the U.S. social workers can't reach these students in their home environment where the misery is self-perpetuating. Tumbledown school buildings, desperate teachers loaded and drained by too much work. The students, can not often speak English nor understand why they are in school in the first place.

The project has been developed as a non-violence policy. It is a well-known fact that low self-esteem and depression add on to destructive tendencies, leading to bad performance and results in school and as such contribute criminality and abuse of drugs and alcohol. All becoming a vicious circle. Relaxation and meditation have shown to improve self-confidence and the ability to exercise self-control. Prolonged practice leads to permanent changes in the biochemical and physiological functions that counteract the secretion of stress hormones. Changing the vicious circle into 'good' circle.

The training in the schools has been going on since the beginning of 1990's aiming primarily to 'teach' teachers the methods of relaxation and stress management. It includes four steps: relaxation and meditation, physical training, like aerobics, yoga, tai-chi and stretching exercises, dietary advice and stress management.

The stress management includes fundamental cognitive exercises where you carefully watch yourself, notice how you think, and get to grips with negative attitudes and common negative distortions. You might become aware of certain patterns, like "this is how I've 'always' been thinking." And of the need to find a new subtlety and approach - as those very ways of thinking may have caused chronic intestinal catarrh or high blood pressure.

The teachers are of course not patients, but they might have problems with their health, Beth tells me. Some participants who had had two heart attacks said: "Why didn't I learn this 15 years ago, why didn't I at an early stage find out that there are other methods of stress management than pouring coffee down my throat?" Often the teachers are close to burn out when they begin the training.

Beth herself worked as a teacher for students with special handicaps and emotional problems at Boston University, and with prisoners, before she joined Herbert Benson's pioneering institute. Her firm voice and concentrated presence impresses me! If it is a result of the relaxation training or if she has always been like that is hard to tell. But only to listen to her has a calming effect. Surely, she has the same effect even on very agitated students.

The teaching program is voluntary and about 25 % of the teachers in a school usually sign up. Even though the teachers' work involve responsibility and is stressful, they often give priority to the training, Beth explains. Many go to their colleagues and say; 'you too really need this. Why don't you join us?'

Through this, the word is spread...

When the teachers are acquainted with the methods and begin to see the results in themselves they in turn are motivated to teach their students. So far, the methods have been tried at the middle and high school levels, where the students are between 9 and 16 years old. The program addresses also students with special learning disabilities and other needs. The student groups vary between 3 and 30 participants.

It isn't easy for teachers to adapt to a new 'role' and begin teaching meditation after maybe having taught mathematics or literature for 25 years! When they get going, they often say; "this is much easier than I thought, despite being something different my students really appreciate it".

10-15 minutes of the daily lecture time is reserved for the training. The program aims at making the students aware of the stress. They talk about what stress is, about the fight-or-flight response and about the physiological effects of stress. A popular teaching tool is the stress mark – a small round mark, sensitive to body heat that the student puts on his or her arm, and it changes color with the students state of mind.

The students learn to create a peaceful space within, where they can take to break when they need to at no cost ! They don't have to travel anywhere to get there. They can do it just where they happen to be at that moment, e.g. in the classroom together with 30 classmates.

A part of the teaching material has been developed in collaboration with the students themselves and thus has become experiential. The students answer questions like: "What is stressful in your life? What do you do about it?" In his answer, the student gives the clue

or leads that later develop into a new experience in the moment. In another exercise, they are asked to write down their ten favorite activities. Then the question is put to them: "Do you actually do this? What stops you from doing what you feel is meaningful and inspiring?"

Other methods demand more inner work that isn't suitable in a group situation but has to be done at home. The students are told about them. For example, they are asked to begin watching their mechanical negative thoughts and feelings, the pessimistic films that are running in their heads, the negative expectations that may not even happen, the compulsive patterns, the unfounded fears. But they also learn to discover and nourish the creative impulses and good dreams - the inner treasures that can help them change their life.