



## Stillness – A Healing Methodology in Swedish Pre-Schools and Schools

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### ABSTRACT

*The increased mental disease and violence among Swedish students has resisted amelioration by experts in any of the conventional ways. The situation calls everyone in the society, not only politicians, principals and teachers, but parents and grandparent, to question the very fundamentals of the Swedish life style. Anna Bornstein, writer and journalist, discovered students' 'hunger for stillness' when lecturing on non-violence in high schools. Today, the Dream of the Good programme she initiated has become a healing factor in pioneering schools and pre-schools in many parts of Sweden. The method, consisting of simple stillness exercises, works with all ages and can easily be woven into the curriculum. Not only children and students but also teachers experience a quantifiable increase in wellbeing and a reduction of stress.*

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*To understand – through stillness. To act – from stillness. To win – in stillness.*

Dag Hammarskjöld, General Secretary of the UN 1953-1961

### I HEARD THE WINGS OF A BUTTERFLY

It was a beautiful day in September. At the pre-school Armbandet in Norrköping, Sweden, a young, newly graduated teacher, trained in the Dream of the Good methodology, decided to try out a stillness exercise for the first time with her group of two- to three-year-olds. I saw her and the row of toddlers disappearing among the trees on the hill behind the low yellow school building in the morning. I was still around to hear her tell her colleagues of the experience at lunch. She had asked the children to sit in a circle and listen to nature. Everyone was very quiet for a long, long time – so long that she herself began to feel nervous. Afterwards the children shared what they had heard. Someone had heard the wind blowing through the foliage of the trees; another had heard the humming of a bee on the meadow a little bit away. When the turn came to Anders, two and a half years old, he declared in a hushed voice: 'I heard the wings of the butterfly when it flew!'

'Suddenly I understood what the Dream of the Good is about,' his teacher said.



Figure 1. Children from the pre-school Armbandet in Norrköping, Sweden doing the Tiger in the Children's qigong.<sup>1</sup>

In the Rudbeck High School in Sollentuna, a suburban area north of Stockholm, the Dream of the Good methodology has been part of the Sports and Health programme for the past twelve years. The course is offered as a free choice twice every semester and runs for 8 weeks, two sessions per week. Year after year far more students than can be admitted flock to the course. In their evaluations the students express how the stillness affects them:

*Learning the methods changed my life!* a sixteen-year-old girl concluded.

*The stillness practice has given me faith in myself and shown me how I want to be as a person. Now it's fun to live; I even think positively about the future,* another girl explained.

*It has helped me feel good about myself and even my parents think I've become more open and happy!* a boy expressed.

*Everyone in school should get to experience stillness! It is the basis of what is most important in life. Now I am happy and comfortable with myself and who I am,* another boy reflected.

The vast network of pre-school, elementary, and high school teachers in the Dream of the Good provides us with many moving examples of how children and youngsters take to simple stillness practices. The methodology consists of four simple tools: stillness, touch, reflection and contemplative movement. It has been developed during sixteen years in pre-schools and schools, adapted and trimmed down to suit the various schools' budgets and social issues.

<sup>1</sup> The photographer for Figures 1 and 2 is Tommy Gärdh.



Figure 2. 'Sometimes when I get angry at my parents I do qigong in my room at home too. I do the Bird or the Tiger, then I shake my body a little. It feels as if I shake off my anger'. Girl in 5th grade, Askersund.

The thoroughly tested set of exercises and learning materials meet the requirements of the educational system and are tailored to the needs of students of all ages. In Sweden, the methods are spreading from school to school, teacher to teacher. Politicians and policy makers are beginning to interest themselves in their potential.

Norrköping, the fifth largest urban area in Sweden, has become a pilot city for the methodology and is implementing it in its schools. In Norway, the method has been researched at the Centre for Peace Studies in the University in Tromsø and is now being studied in pilot pre-schools. In Spain and the United States, the methodology is being used in a few schools. And lately some New Zealand schools are requesting it.

## **THE MESSAGE OF RESEARCHERS**

The positive experiences with the Dream of the Good stillness methodology are confirmed by Swedish research in junior high school, which has shown very good results.

The students practiced stillness exercises at two or three scheduled occasions per week, depending on which exercises were chosen, over an eight week period. Results from controlled before and after studies showed reduced mental ill-health, less stress, improved peer relations, fewer psychological symptoms, and an increase in well-being at school as well as an improved self-image (see Terjestam, 2010 & 2011; Terjestam, Jouper & Johansson, 2010).

Another, smaller, Norwegian study in Swedish pre-schools and schools confirmed that the methods develop non-violent behaviour. Indicators showed an improved ability to react with peace and non-violence in provoking situations, more empathy, and a developed group harmony with less aggression (see Sommerfelt, 2004; Sommerfelt & Vambheim, 2008).

American research over many years in inner-city schools with similar methods showed that stillness facilitates learning and leads to better grades, less aggression and violent behaviour, alleviation of medical symptoms, less absenteeism due to illness, enhanced self-confidence and improved self-control and concentration (Benson-Henry Institute, 2012).

## **HOW THE QUEST BEGAN**

For me, pioneering stillness in Swedish pre-schools and schools began twenty years ago. I had written a book on Tibetan non-violence, which featured the Dalai Lama, who in 1989 was rewarded with the Nobel Peace Prize for his work. The book was widely used in Swedish high schools and I was invited to schools all over Sweden to give classes to students in all the various programmes, Science and Language as well as more practical training programmes such as Building and Vehicle Technology. Stress in students was severe already at that time, with more and more students suffering from anxiety and nervous disorders. I lectured about the intimate connection, rediscovered by modern science but taught already at the time of Buddha and Plato, between the outer and inner world. I described a few non-violence meditation exercises which could be used for transforming not only anger and hatred but also other painful human emotions such as disappointment, self-hate, and unhappy love. 'The first step is always to still your mind', I explained to the students. The actual exercise that followed my little talk was always voluntary. But it hardly ever happened that anyone got up and left. When I clapped my hands at the end, no one stirred. Only after a few minutes the students began to stretch and yawn. Often they crowded around me as I was leaving, asking where they could learn more. The teachers were always stunned at the response.

When the Dalai Lama was visiting Sweden in May 1996, I and some friends had the opportunity to bring him together with 8,000 high school students in Stockholm. The meeting took place in the Globe, a newly built arena in Stockholm, and was preceded by a full year's non-violence seminars and stillness workshops for students, teachers and parents in all the public high schools of Stockholm.

When we initiated the project we were confronted with massive scepticism from both teachers and principals. May is the traditional partying time for the newly graduated students in Sweden and the teachers warned us that the students would prefer partying. Some commented that the tickets probably would be dumped in the wastepaper basket. But as the work proceeded the students went to their principals and teachers demanding to participate.

No one had anticipated the great wave of youth enthusiasm, which carried the simple programme to its grand finale. We could have filled the Globe many times over with students eager to meet the Dalai Lama and listen to his message of inner and outer peace.

The success weighed on my friends and me. After a whole year of voluntary work in the schools we were eager to return to our regular professions.

'What are we going to do now?', a student asked me when we were packing up to leave his school. The glimpse we had been vouched of, the youngsters unfulfilled need, called us to do something more; that something we

called the Dream of the Good. It was spurred by the intuition that stillness is a neglected pedagogic treasure trove that can reverse the downward trend in the schools.

We decided to find out if simple stillness methods could be woven into the daily high school curriculum. I wrote another book, *Drömmen Om Det Goda (The Dream of the Good)*, and made some films to go with it. The films featured the Dalai Lama and other role models, scientists and Swedish youngsters engaging in the inner and outer peace work.

‘If you were a father and had children in the West, what would you teach them?’ I asked the Dalai Lama in one of my interviews with him for the book and the films. ‘I would teach them that you can learn to be calm ... and to pay attention to your mental attitude’, he answered. For the school curriculum, he recommended the study of the mind and simple meditation exercises.

The ‘Good’ in our name refers to the inherent human goodness, the value that according to the code of Democracy is the same in all of us: that which Nelson Mandela celebrating 10 years of democracy in South Africa referred to when he said: ‘Historical enemies succeeded because we were prepared to accept the inherent capacity for goodness in the other’.

We started to systematically try out simple stillness tools in the high schools. Soon teachers and principals from elementary and pre-schools joined our workshops and asked to try the exercises in their classes or groups of children. Soon we were steeped in pilot projects on all levels of pre-school and school. Our network of enthusiastic pedagogues has steadily been growing over the years.

Although the exercises are very simple, similar methods work for all ages, with very small adjustments. In fact, some exercises popular with one- and two year olds work wonderfully with eighteen-year-olds and with middle-aged parents and teachers.

The fourfold methodology allows the individual a choice. When the teachers have tried out all the four forms they are invited to choose one or two to implement in their group of children/students. If they need support, our instructors come to their pre-school or school and help them get started.

## **THE FOUR ‘DOORS’ TRADITION: OLD KNOWLEDGE AND MODERN SCIENCE**

Behind each of the simple practices or ‘doors’ into relaxation there is a wealth of knowledge, research and culture. Stillness and contemplation is a practice with ancient roots in philosophy, literature, art and religion, in the Eastern as well as Western hemispheres. It is also a fast growing research area both in medicine and psychology. Experience and research show that stillness supports and develops the inner resources – such as attention, emotional balance, and power of concentration – of the student. According to physics professor Arthur Zajonc, Chairman of the Mind and Life Institute (and a leading spokesman for contemplation in higher studies), meditation practice enhances engagement with texts, understanding of natural phenomena, the arts and other cultures, and it also develops the power to discover relationships and sustain complexity and contradictions. The four ‘doors’ to relaxation are: stillness, touch, reflection and movement.

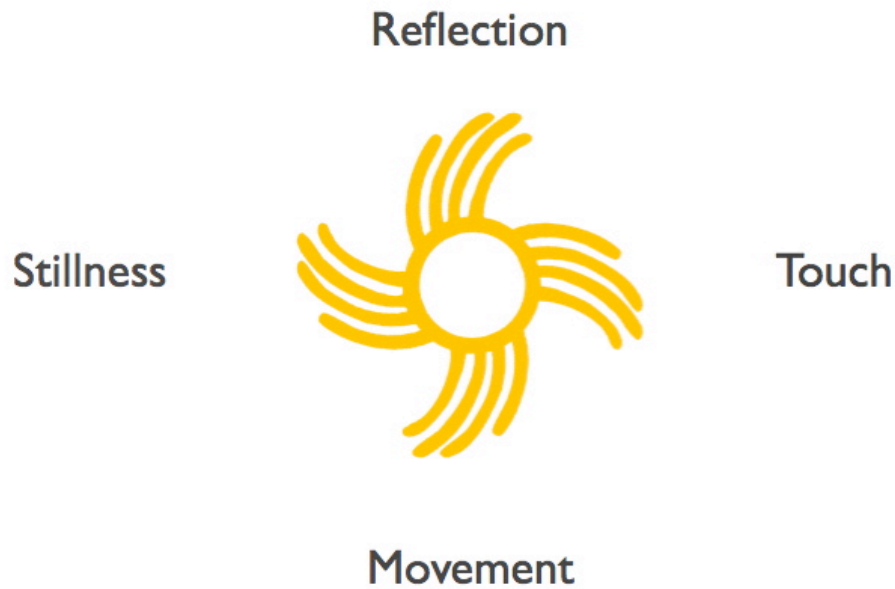


Figure 3. The four 'doors' into relaxation

### **Stillness**

Stillness is an essential tool in the non-violence traditions for transforming the raw emotions of fear and hatred.

The great Swedish diplomat and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Dag Hammarskjöld created a meditation room at the UN during his time as its Secretary-General (1953-1961). 'We all have within us a centre of stillness surrounded by silence', he wrote when the room was reopened in 1957. 'This house, dedicated to work and debate in the service of peace, should have one room dedicated to silence in the outward sense and stillness in the inner sense'.

The stillness method of the Dream of the Good methodology consists of simple exercises, beginning with a body scanning and deep relaxation, which lead into a few minutes of silence and ending with feeling your way back into the room, stretching and yawning. The exercises are not demanding, the students are allowed to lean on their desks and doze off if they need to do so. Every day at pre-schools in Sweden, the children sit in a circle and listen to a story or sing together. In the Dream of the Good programme, such gatherings are begun with a few minutes of stillness. One experienced teacher held up her hand instead of telling the children to be quiet. 'My hand can talk', she said, 'Can you hear what it says? It says "peace and quiet"!'. She moved her outstretched palm slowly around the circle facing each child in turn as she met his or her gaze, smiling. Her hand was very persuasive and she never had any problems getting the children to be still. The same teacher invented silent breakfasts, which became very popular. The children used sign language when they wanted their friends to hand them milk, butter or bread. One day a parent complained about not being able to have the radio on at breakfast on Sunday mornings any longer, since his child had talked them into doing the practice at home. The children quickly adapt to sitting quietly cross-legged on a pillow, relaxing and shifting their attention to the heart where they are asked to visualize a mild sun raying out warmth and light not only to all the parts of their



body but also to the teachers and friends sitting in the room. ‘It feels so good, my head is sleeping’, a little girl said.

Elementary and high school teachers who hesitate to begin with the stillness practice in their classes often find that that practice turns out the most popular.

In one of the high schools working with the Dream of the Good some Arab male students founded an organisation against honour-related violence and were invited to speak in the Swedish parliament. Before their talk they were very nervous, and one of them suggested that they go into the Men’s room to do one of the stillness exercises they had learnt in school. It relieved their tension and a few minutes later they spoke without faltering to an audience of several hundred parliamentarians in the Chamber!

At another junior high school a class with 15-year-olds had practiced the methods twice a week for about a month when one of the boys came up to the teacher asking: ‘Can’t we do the Dream of the Good on Fridays, so we can bring some peace and quiet home over the weekend?’.



Figure 4. *Stillness* is one of the most popular and easy-to-do Dream of the Good practices. Here, three junior high school students from Nacka are trying it out.<sup>2</sup>

### **Touch**

Touch (i.e., massage) is one of the oldest forms of therapeutic methods in the world, dating back 5000 years in China and in Europe, where the Greeks used it to cure disease. In Sweden, massage in school and pre-school is thoroughly researched and documented, and has shown very good results, improving both academic performance and power of concentration, as well as creating a more peaceful atmosphere in the group/class.

The Dream of the Good method for peaceful touch consists of a few grips of classical massage for the older students and simple story games involving touch for the pre-school kids. Both methods are taught to the

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<sup>2</sup> The photographs in this section are from the YBC High School in Nacka, Sweden, taken when the Dream of the Good programme was introduced to the students. Photographs: Anders Rosenberg.

children/students who then do it on each other. Touch is especially good for students with neurological disorders and problems of concentration because it gives a concrete support for the concentration, while also cultivating bodily presence and awareness.

Students who shy away from bodily touch because of cultural and religious background or psychological inclination, may try to massage each other's hands or do a self-massage, by clapping their bodies. The most simple touch exercise is to ask the students to put their hands on each other's shoulders and stand quietly, concentrating on their hands, opening up to the other person.



Figure 5. Simple grips of classical massage are taught to the older students who then do it on each other. Here two junior high school students are practicing *Touch*

### Reflection

Reflective talks and sharings ensouled by silence and contemplation has been practiced among the indigenous peoples in many parts of the world.

In the reflection exercise you learn to express yourself from the heart and to listen not only to the words spoken but also to what is behind them, to the motivation and whole spectra of feelings. The reflection starts with a few minutes of silence allowing everyone to become present. The themes recommended are existential: 'What is true strength?'; 'Who am I in the greater context of Nature?'; 'What is love?'. Reflection opens dimensions in the students that often surprises and awes the teachers.

Putting the chairs in a circle and placing the 'talking stick' with a lighted candle in the middle, prepares the place for the reflective talk.

You take the stick only when you have something to say, and are instructed to talk from the heart. When you hold it, the others will listen and no one will question or criticize you.

If you don't have anything to say you participate with your attentive listening and silence. In that way you show respect both to the person who talks and those who listen. What is shared during the reflection is not discussed



afterwards.

Reflective talks are easy to introduce in the classroom and very popular with the children. In one school the students were so eager and appreciative that the practice spread to all the classes. Today the headmaster announces a theme every week which everybody reflects on.



Figure 6. A group of junior high school students *reflecting* on the meaning of their lives

### **Movement**

Contemplative movement in its simplest form is to walk mindfully, with the awareness that with each step we touch the earth, which in modern environmental science is often defined as a living being.

The Dream of the Good yoga method uses Western terms and focuses on nature. With small adjustments the same method works for all ages. As a growing seed, a tree, a volcano etc., you are encouraged to experience nature as part of yourself, to know it from the inside.

The qigong method is two-fold, The Children's Qigong for small children 1-10 years old and the Peace Power Qigong for the older kids. The former is playful and imaginative using the five animals in traditional Chinese medicine: the bird, the bear, the tiger, monkey and deer. The latter is more strenuous, calling on the inherent goodness and harmony of the adolescent. Both methods are created within the renowned Biyun tradition.

Throughout our long experience with stillness and contemplative movement in the schools we find it especially efficient for reducing stress in the increasing number of children with neuropsychiatric diagnoses such as ADHD. Our experience coheres with results of recent scientific studies where mindfulness meditation training has shown to be a beneficial complementary treatment approach for adolescents and adults with ADHD. Positive findings are highly favourable ratings of the treatment by participants and reductions in self-reported ADHD symptoms. Practice of meditation has been shown to switch off the default mode network linked to lapses of attention (e.g., see Zylowska et al., 2008).



Figure 7. A group of junior high school students undertaking the Super Hero *movement* of Dream of the Good Nature Yoga

In conclusion, the Dream of the Good, the non-profit organisation behind this programme, is a modern network organisation spreading on the grassroots level with the help of a growing number of engaged individuals and resource persons. It has a website with a free, rich offering of inspirational materials and documented experience and research. The methodology has also been introduced in pilot schools in Norway, Spain and the United States. Today, there is a growing interest also in New Zealand to use the programme.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Anna Bornstein is a Swedish author, lecturer, journalist and initiator of the Dream of the Good methodology. In her books and articles she investigates a deeper perspective on man, focussing on stillness, depth psychology and nonviolence. The nonviolence project, 'The Dalai Lama's Perspective' carried out in Stockholm high schools in 1995-96 inspired her and her co-workers and friends to design and test simple stillness practices in pre-schools and schools. Long experience and a lot of pilot projects in pre-school, primary and high schools have shown that with very simple means it is possible to improve conditions for children and youths.

For further information and resources on the Dream of the Good programme please go to: [www.dreamofthegood.org](http://www.dreamofthegood.org). For information on the Dream of the Good contact in New Zealand, please email: [yes@dreamofthegood.org](mailto:yes@dreamofthegood.org)