

Extract from www.sewaaspire.com

Website put together by Andrew Roberts using Squarespace

The ASPIRE Program was born out of Sewa's heartfelt response not simply to the perceived need, but to the genuine request for help from refugee children in Houston.

OUR MISSION

Sewa's mission is to empower communities by sharing with them the resources and skills needed to enhance their own lives. For underserved youth in Houston, that empowerment is taking place through the ASPIRE Program.

The focus is on the overall development of the children, nurturing in them the knowledge and qualities required for social and academic success, such as emotional intelligence, competence in core subjects, critical thinking, and creativity.

OUR ACTION

Since 2013, we have been providing free out-of-school tutoring, mentoring and enriching activities to children of low-income families in Southwest Houston. ASPIRE addresses education gaps that many children face due to cultural and language barriers. Sewa runs three after-school programs, all at no cost to the students and their families. Each center is housed in an apartment that's been converted into a learning space, directly in the apartment complex where the students live.

The ASPIRE centers are highly popular in the communities that they serve. The centers are open during after school hours when students would ordinarily be home alone, providing a safe and motivating space for them to work together. Because the tutors at the centers are working directly in the apartment complexes where the students live, the tutors get to know families on a personal level. This type of relationship creates a unique opportunity not just to provide academic help, but also family assistance and guidance when applicable. Because many families that ASPIRE serves are new to the United States, this type of support from a local contact can be invaluable.

OUR MODEL

Each center develops a style that meets the needs of the children that it serves. Those needs are based on differences in English language ability, cultural background, age, schools they attend and personal development challenges.

Many students attend the centers to receive help with their homework and to improve their English. At an ASPIRE center, they have the opportunity to practice speaking English with the teachers, volunteers and their peers. Besides academic and language support, students have access to enriching activities, such as arts & crafts, team sports and STEM projects.

During the summer, Sewa runs the Get Involved Houston (GIH) and Lead internships. GIH is for college students who want to help develop curricula and activities for the summer session, as well get experience working at a nonprofit. Lead is for high school students that want to help run activities with the ASPIRE students.

Extract from <http://clearmindshaolin.com/blog/chi-kung-and-mindfulness/>

Website built by Andrew Roberts using HTML5 and CSS3

While the practice of mindfulness has gained popularity in recent years, it is by no means something new. The practice of being mindful of one's thoughts is at the very core of spiritual traditions dating back thousands of years. Mindfulness is in itself a fantastic practice, which I highly recommend, but this article will focus on how mindfulness is ingrained in Cosmos Chi Kung.

Every session of Cosmos Chi Kung follows the same basic structure:

1. Enter Zen/"chi kung state of mind"
2. Perform a chi kung technique to generate a flow of energy
3. Allow the chi flow freely
4. Return to stillness, enter standing meditation

As you can see, the very first stage of a session of chi kung is entering Zen, or as we more commonly call it in Shaolin Wahnam, "entering a chi kung state of mind." At this stage, we enter silence and cease to think. It's common for beginners in their first few sessions to be a bit surprised by this, and perhaps have thoughts of, "Am I not thinking? Should I be thinking of something? Hey look, I'm not thinking!" To this, the advice is, "Simply let go of your thoughts." With practice, these thoughts cease and the practitioner simply enjoys the mental stillness. That is the Zen approach to mindfulness. You don't philosophize about how to let your thoughts go, or if some thoughts are better than others or if you're doing it correctly. You just let them go. Enjoying a state totally free of thoughts generally takes quite some time to reach, but with Cosmos Chi Kung it can be reached relatively quickly.

At stage two, a practitioner enjoys being mindful of their movements and their breathing while they feel their energy flow increasing. This is highly effective for improving mindfulness since it combines the physical body, breathing, energy and the mind. Rather than aiming straight away at total mindfulness using only the mind, combining these four elements makes it easier for a beginner to keep the mind focused.

At stage three a practitioner lets go and allows the chi flow they've generated to cleanse their system. If a person has a physical ailment, such as heavy pain, the constant pain might be a daily, constant distraction for their mind. By flushing out the physical blockage, the pain will go away and their mental focus will improve. If a person has emotional blockages, the strain of emotional imbalance will prevent mental clarity and peace. By clearing away those emotions, again the peace and clarity of the mind will improve. This same basic process holds true for energetic and mental imbalances.

Completing the session at stage four, the practitioner brings the chi flow to a graceful stop and returns to Zen, which we call "standing meditation." Once again, this is a time of no-thought in which the person simply enjoys the stillness. This allows the mind to be quiet and fresh. At this stage, a person might not "practice mindfulness" as it is generally understood; rather, they will enjoy the result of the practice - mental quietude. They might find it to be a state beyond words; a state beyond differentiation, beyond "yin and yang." Of course, this must be experienced to be truly appreciated.

Our Educational Proposal

Critical Thinking

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Tomás de Berlanga School focuses on leading education in the Galapagos away from the traditional “sit-and-listen” classroom approach to adopt a more contemporary and progressive way of interacting with students. While there are many key elements of this type of education, critical thinking is one of the primary skills Tomás de Berlanga aims to instill in its students. We want students to feel that their education is a chance to explore their own ideas with their peers and teachers.

“Critical thinking is essentially the ability to define a problem you want to solve, make a guess or hypothesis about what the answer is, and then investigate to decide if you were right,” says school Director Sheila Roberts. It can be thought of as applying the scientific method of investigation to everyday scenarios, such as determining whether something heard about an acquaintance is true or not. For students it’s also about applying that method to all of their studies, whether it be in literature, mathematics or the arts. To be a successful critical thinker it’s not enough for students to listen to their teachers make a statement and accept it as fact; they need to be capable of asking themselves, “Does this sound right?” and then come to a conclusion.

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It’s common in traditional education to take the alternate approach of requiring students to accept everything the teacher says as fact simply because they are the teacher. Avoiding the critical thinking of students in class not only hinders them in their academic life, but in the long run will also affect their ability to be successful once out of school.



The Science Fair at Tomás de Berlanga is an excellent opportunity for students to put their critical thinking into practice. This project lets the kids delve into the investigative method of choosing a problem or a subject, formulating a hypothesis, carrying out the research and then deciding upon a conclusion. It’s not just about choosing a topic and researching it, but also reinforcing the importance of methodology and having a systematic order of thinking. Last year’s theme was “Exploring Our Health” and each section of the school chose a subtheme. Elementary focused on the five senses, middle school on “health through contact with nature” and high school chose “genetics in health and home remedies with local plants.” Having students perform experiments lets them apply the skills of questioning, analyzing, guessing, experimenting and explaining, all of which ignite the critical thinking process. After completing his investigation on human health, elementary student Richard Vargas said, “My conclusion is that we have to eat well to be healthy.” The Tomás de Berlanga science fair is an example of making the crucial shift in Galapagos towards an educational system that always includes critical thinking in its practice and methodology.





Critical Thinkers, Creative Problem Solvers and Decision Makers

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Teaching students to think critically doesn't require any specific methodology or adherence to "rules" of teaching; it mainly requires teachers to have an open mind and a desire to explore ideas with their students. Asking open-ended questions that don't have a yes-or-no answer draws students out of guessing responses and invites them to formulate a well-developed argument. This is much more rewarding for the student speaking and for those listening. Open interaction in the classroom where students don't always have to be concerned with having the "correct" answer gives them the freedom and confidence to expand on their own ideas and think critically about what they're saying and what they're hearing from others.

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"Habits of Mind" are common traits among people who are successful problem solvers. One of these traits is meta-cognition, which is essentially thinking about thinking or "being aware of your own thoughts, strategies, feelings and actions and their effects on others."¹ This can be modeled in a classroom by having teachers use a system of thinking-out-loud with the students, which is highly more enjoyable than copying notes – for everyone involved. Stressing reading comprehension also emphasizes critical thinking. If a student is learning a new language it's common for them to do a lot of reading, but it's not enough just to perform the activity; it's essential that the teacher test the student's understanding of what's been read.

1. Costa, A. and Kallick, B. (2000) *Habits of Mind. A Developmental Series*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development



Excerpt from <https://seenordrew.github.io/icecreamnirvana/locations/churn/index.html>

I remember the day clearly when I first came upon such a mad experiment of science. After stepping out of the dry Arizona heat and into the cool purveyor of fine dairy sweets, I looked inside the freezer to see what flavors were on display, only to find what might be something radical enough to bring together the most fiery of enemies. “What? Goat cheese flavored...ice cream? Certainly it could not be. Goat cheese...in ice cream? I...I need to sit down.”

But, alas, my weary legs that had just driven for five hours proclaimed, “Nay, my good man! Ye must tempt fate and provoke the gods of flavor by embarking on this most daring adventure.”

And thus, I turned to the attendant and decreed, “My lady! I shall try this concoction you call goat cheese, walnut honey ice cream.” As our eyes met, I felt instantly that she too knew this was the right choice. It was all too obvious when she replied, “Okay.”

She retrieved a tasting spoon. Not any regular spoon...no. A spoon she had clearly selected just for me, specifically for this occasion. She scooped a sample and upon passing the spoon to me the electricity in the room began dancing. She could barely contain her emotions as she said, “Here ya go.”

Just as the conductor prepares the orchestra with a swift raising of the baton, I had my first taste of this madness. Oh, the flavor! Oh, the richness! Oh, the balance of the soft-flavored goat cheese with the crunchy walnuts and the sweet honey! It was all there: frozen to the optimum temperature, full-bodied texture, not overloaded with sugar...my decision was made.

“M'lady! Ye have graced me with such a noble flavor. Please, may I request a full scooping of thine creation? Enough to fill a small cup of the paper variety?”

If only you could have seen the ecstatic joy, the abundant life in her eyes as she said, “Sure.” The conductor had started the prelude of the grand symphony, but only now was the masterful melody truly going to begin. She passed me the cup of ice cream, this time with an even more spectacular spoon – pink plastic – and the harmony of the strings, the singing of the horns, the crashing of the percussion all possessed the room.

What a flavor, such smoothness! The mad experiment had paid off, and Churn Creamery had solved the riddle of how to turn goat cheese into world-class ice cream.