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FXSC Group 4 Boys' Times

2020-2021: SSE Year In Review

Issue #1

Krishna Swaminathan

Year at a glance

Four dashboards: ceiling on desires technique proves effective for students

All Group 4 students eligible to vote in next U.S. election—civic duties are vital for our society

We must do our part in our community by doing our civic duties and responsibilities. A few important civic duties and responsibilities are voting, following laws, performing jury duty, and listening or reading the news in order to stay informed. Also, current Group 4 students will be eligible to vote in the next U.S. election. *(more on page 2)*

Practical tools for improving focus during the pandemic increase satisfaction among students

Many people struggle with the challenge of staying in the moment. Practical tips include setting a target for the day upon waking, keeping a mental list of daily achievements, and keeping a reminder to refocus attention. *(more on pages 2-3)*

Swami says we effectively utilize just 5 minutes per day—prioritization, focus, and diligence can help us with the other 23:55 *(more on page 4)*

Flipped classroom format improved engagement from students and Gurus alike

The flipped classroom format was implemented in SSE Group 4 this year, and consisted of preparing and learning about a topic prior to class, and then coming to class and discussing with peers.

Students increased self-awareness and self-discipline in 8-week LEAP project

Group 4 students created a unique and individualized Self-Improvement Chart for their LEAP project. Each chart had 3 to 4 self-improvement areas. Students focused on improving in areas that were meaningful and useful to them given the pandemic and virtual learning.

Followers of Zoroastrianism are dwindling—how we can keep the fire burning

Some areas of the world, like India, have many followers, but other areas do not. Zoroastrianism may soon have few to no followers due to the fact that the religion does not accept converts, and traditionally disallows children with parents of mixed religion. *(more on the column to the right)*



Fire temple in Yazd that has been burning for over 1,500 years. *Image courtesy The Iran Project.*

Varun Iyer

What can we do to respect the religion of Zoroastrianism?

There are only about 200,000 Zoroastrians in the world. This is a much smaller number of followers than for other religions. For example, there are almost 2 billion Muslims in the world, and there are more than 2 billion Christians. You may find this very surprising. Why are there so few Zoroastrians? What can we do to make sure that the teachings of Zoroastrianism continue to be spread over time?

One reason why there are so few Zoroastrians is because many of them were forced to convert to other religions, including Christianity and Islam. The Zoroastrians originally came from Persia, in modern-day Iran, but there was also a wave of other religions in that area that forced many Zoroastrians to convert their faith. Because of this, many Zoroastrians either converted to other religions or left their homeland in search of other places, like India, where they would not be persecuted. Another reason why there are not that many Zoroastrians today is because Zoroastrians must be born into a family where both parents are already Zoroastrian in order to be considered true followers of the religion. This means that Zoroastrians do not try to convert anyone else to their religion.

If you think about it, in the Sai Center we are doing our part to help keep the Zoroastrian faith alive by chanting prayers and singing Bhajans with Zoroastrian words in them, like Ahura Mazda (the name of God in Zoroastrianism). For example, we chant the Zoroastrian prayer “Ashem Vohu Vahistem Asti” each week before Bhajans.

An important belief in Zoroastrian faith is respect for the seven elements: sky, water, earth, plants, animals, humans, and fire. The Zoroastrians respect these elements so much that they even keep fire burning constantly in their temples for worship. We can learn so much from the Zoroastrian beliefs and practices. For instance, we can respect the element of water by conserving our water supplies, keeping water clean by not polluting, and doing service to help people get access to clean water. We can respect the elements of earth and plants by limiting greenhouse gas emissions, not littering, cleaning up our environment, recycling, and planting trees. We can respect the element of animal life by being vegetarian and by avoiding animal products like leather. Finally, we can respect the element of human life by being kind to one another, practicing human values, and spreading positivity through our own example.

Swami teaches us about the unity of all faiths, but He also taught us to remember each faith through its practices, prayers, and beliefs. It's important for us to learn about Zoroastrianism not only so that we know about its history and people, but also so that we can put into practice the teachings that the Zoroastrians have passed on for generations. So long as we continue to chant Zoroastrian prayers, read about Prophet Zarathushtra, and learn about Zoroastrian teachings in the Sai Center, we will help keep this beautiful religion alive.



Pranav Mandhan

The value of civic duty

As Group 4 students, civic duties matter more now than ever. In the 2024 United States General Election, every current Group 4 student will be able to vote and directly participate in our nation's political process for the first time. This year in SSE, we discussed the importance of civic responsibilities like voting, especially in light of Swami's guidance for members of the Sri Sathya Sai International Organization. Swami says that part of our Dharma is to be a model citizen, by following the law in good spirit and performing civic duties as required by our local and national governments. What exactly can we do to stand out as exemplary citizens, in accordance with Swami's guidance?

In school civics classes, we learn about the fundamental disagreements between Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, two prominent philosophers whose ideologies shaped the governmental structures of several modern nations. Both of them had diametrically opposing views on what would be the most effective form of government. Hobbes was a proponent of a monarchy, a system that placed control of the state in the hands of a single individual or family. Locke, on the other hand, believed that a government's legitimacy came from the democratic input of the populace. Despite their different views, both Hobbes and Locke were instrumental to our modern understanding of civil society structures. However, mere analysis of societal structure is not enough for each of us to develop deep respect for our society.

Of course, we need laws to help create balance in society and avoid chaos. But what benefit is there to instituting laws if there is no consequence for following or breaking them? For instance, why should we follow the speed limit or pay our taxes? Following laws not only keeps us safe but also makes other people safer and promotes law and order in society. Law and order is important because it helps provide good examples for acceptable behavior in society. Law and order encourages people to do the right thing for a common good, not just for mere self-interest. As a recent example, voting in public elections is an important duty we must fulfill for the common good of our society. Voting not only allows us to get our voices heard and participate in our democracy, but it also contributes to a larger cause, supporting a government by the people, for the people.

In SSE class, we outlined how each of our civic duties is not only beneficial to us but also to society as a whole. Paying taxes provides a valuable incentive for us to self-budget and keep a ceiling on desires, and provides funds for important public service and welfare initiatives undertaken by the government. Abiding by environmental regulations (for example, water usage limits and greenhouse gas emission standards) helps us understand our role in the global ecosystem and supports a societal endeavor to keep our planet clean and healthy. Respecting local laws and ordinances, like rules of the road and public health mandates, keeps each of us safe while providing a good example for others to follow so that they too can be safe.

Swami's vision for government goes further than just the provision of worldly benefits. An ideal society is one where each citizen can find a spiritual basis for upholding values in the form of collective behaviors. Swami says a good society is made up of individuals who obey societal guidelines and possess "human qualities," which we can interpret to mean human values, like the ones we learn about in SSE. He says, "To the extent these qualities are developed, to that extent the society, the state, and the nation will progress ... where human qualities are absent the society ceases to be civilized." In so many words, Swami motivates us with a very tangible reason for implementing human values in our lives: performing our civil duties with values such as integrity, honesty, and selflessness will enable a more unified, peaceful, and prosperous society. It is not just for our own sake that we ought to practice the values Swami preaches—we should strive to inculcate these values so that they yield positive effects on the society in which we live.



Current Group 4 SSE students will be eligible to vote in the next general U.S. election. *Image courtesy Getty.*

Jayant Kammula

The importance of focus

In SSE class this year, we spent a significant amount of time discussing the importance of focus. Especially given the drastic increase in online meetings and the blurring between work and home spaces, it is more relevant than ever to think about how our ability to focus impacts our productivity, health, and spiritual growth.

A dictionary definition of focus might define the concept as the ability to concentrate on a task. But, as we have learned in SSE and through practical applications in our own lives as Group 4 students, focus is a lot more than just being able to concentrate on one task or subject.

Focus is a human value that we have the opportunity to practice in everything that we do, including those activities where it is easy to overlook that something is even being done! From making the bed in the morning, to taking a math test, to tying shoelaces, and even sleep, all of these activities are best accomplished while maintaining focus. And just about any task requires some amount of focus to be completed at all.

One of the reasons that it's hard to stay focused on a task is because of our minds. Swami often compares our mind with a monkey, saying that monkeys are always jumping from one thing to another, never sticking around in one place.

One amazing fact that we stumbled onto while discussing this topic in SSE was that the average human attention span was only 8 seconds. One can attribute this short time to the current day and age. There are far more distractions these days than there ever were. TV, phones, and YouTube are all huge distractions, especially when now most schools and jobs take place at home and it is so easy to click off our current tab and go do something more entertaining.

Our SSE class had an interesting discussion about whether all tasks really need our full amount of focus. For example, one could say that brushing teeth in the morning is a mundane task that we've all mastered by now, so it might not require 100% focus. *(continued on next page)*

However, not focusing one's mind completely on brushing teeth won't give the desired result of clean teeth. While we may think that brushing teeth is a simple task because we've done it so many times, the reality is that there are many parts to this task, and in order to do it to the best of our ability, we have to really focus on the task at hand, even if it's an "easy" one.

While discussing tactics to stay focused in our SSE class, we all came to one conclusion. It was that not all tips will work for everyone and that there's nothing that will magically fix our focus overnight. In the end, how well we focus depends on us and our desire to get better. It will take time, and there will be many obstacles along the way, but in the end, it's worth the effort given that virtually every task we do will require focus. However, we also noticed that there were some tips that a majority of people in our group said were beneficial to helping improve their focus.

The first tip was having a space that was solely dedicated to work. This may be hard to do, given that we have limited space at home, but simply dividing our desks into one area where we work and another area where we don't focus on work was very helpful. This way, our brains automatically expect to work whenever we sit down in that specific space and will try to stay focused. Another tip that we all agreed was taking breaks. We found that when we took breaks, it gave our brains a chance to relax and that way, when we sat down again to do our work, we felt refreshed and ready to keep going. During these breaks, a great activity to do was meditation. Meditation helped us clear our minds and it usually only took us 1-2 minutes. An excellent meditation to do is thumb meditation, where you stare at your thumb for 12 seconds, trying not to think for anything, and then repeat 4 more times for a total of 1 minute.

Lastly, we found that having a specific to-do list whenever we sat to do work was very useful, as we would know exactly what to do, and checking off the boxes as we went along felt great, as we were one step closer to finishing our tasks.

In conclusion, our SSE class realized that having good focus was important, not just for the important tasks but also for the tasks that we thought were easy. All of us took up sadhanas, like controlling screen time, or meditation to try and improve our focus. In the end, we learned while focus is hard to achieve, it's ultimately worth it since every task we will undertake in our lives requires our focus.



Image courtesy iStock.

Varun Iyer

Smoothies for the soul



Making smoothies for the soul is fun, simple, and a great way to spend more time with your family during quarantine. I hope you enjoy these recipes!

Welcome to Varun's Smoothie Corner! I'm going to share with you some of my most favorite smoothie recipes that I have made at home with my family.

I love making smoothies because they are healthy, sweet, and are a refreshing way to get a daily serving of fruits and vegetables. More than anything, I love to make smoothies for my family. I like to do seva at home by making something nice for them and it helps us stay closer together as family. It's one of my ways of saying thank you to my family during this time we are all spending together. By the way, all of my smoothie recipes are vegan and made with fresh ingredients.

The first recipe is called *Very Merry Berry*, and obviously it includes many berries! For this recipe, you will need 1 cup of fresh strawberries, 1 cup of fresh raspberries, and 1 cup of fresh blackberries. You will also need 1½ cups of cold coconut milk and 1 peeled banana in order to get the right texture for the smoothie. Optionally, you can add ¼ cup of chia, hemp, or sunflower seeds to get a more hearty taste.

Put all the ingredients in a blender and blend the mixture until it is smooth. Pour the smoothie into cups and serve it to your family! You can add some fresh berries to the top of each cup when serving.

The next recipe is called *Swami's Sunrise*, and it's the perfect smoothie to have in the morning when you wake up! For this recipe, you will need 2 peeled clementines, 1 peeled and cut mango, 1 peeled and cut peach, and 1 peeled carrot. You will also need 1 cup of cold coconut milk. You could also add ½ cup of soy yogurt to thicken the smoothie. Blend all the ingredients until the mixture is smooth, and serve cold with an orange wedge on top. I like this recipe because it's bright orange, just like the sunrise!

I hope you enjoy these healthy smoothies! Making a refreshing smoothie for your family is a great way to say thanks for all that they do. I would recommend all of my SSE peers to try making a smoothie for your family (with adult supervision).

Sairam and thank you for reading!

Answers to the crossword puzzle *(on page 4)*

Down answers: 2. AHURA MAZDA, 7. SOCIETAL, 8. HUMAN, 11. IRAN, 12. SEVEN, 13. THUMB
 Across answers: 1. DHARMA, 3. HOBBES, 4. PRIORITY, 5. COMMON, 6. PARENTS, 9. PRACTICE, 10. MEDITATION, 12. SOCIAL, 14. MONKEY

Krishna Swaminathan

The myth of “time management”

Many of us in the Fairfax Sai Center, including the Group 4 SSE Boys, have struggled with the concept of “time management” during the pandemic. Since we shifted to working and studying from home, it has become paradoxically harder to manage our time effectively between the competing demands of school/work, family, and self. In SSE this year, we discussed our challenges with structuring our own schedules and came to several realizations. Importantly, we discovered that “time management” is really a facade that hides the values of prioritization, focus, and hard work. If we are able to practice these values, we will be able to overcome the seemingly challenging obstacle that is called “time management,” and in SSE this year we put into practice several life applications related to these values.

The first key value is prioritization. Prioritizing is determining a task's importance and urgency. If a task is urgent and important, we should aim to complete it first. Tasks in this category could include emergencies and last-minute preparations. Next, we should look for items that are important but not urgent, like personal health, hygiene, relationships with loved ones, and dedicated time for spiritual growth. Unfortunately, many of us ignore these important activities until they become urgent, and so we may not get around to doing these things at all in our daily lives. For example, it is really easy to avoid exercise until the doctor says we have put on weight since our last visit. In reality, we should be treating all important tasks with the same respect, regardless of urgency.

Once we have prioritized our tasks, the next largest hurdle that we may experience is procrastination. From a simple survey of the Group 4 Boys, it's clear that we all struggle with the challenges of getting work done on time. Procrastination is the action of delaying something despite knowing that it must be completed by a certain time. By postponing something that must be done, we add unnecessary pressure and stress to our lives. If we already have so many activities to do in a day, by pushing a certain task out to a later time, we compound the difficulty of completing the tasks we need to do now with the guilt that it has not been done and with the challenge of fitting more tasks into an even shorter period in the future. Swami recognizes this and tells us clearly: “In a day of twenty fours one misuses twenty-three hours and fifty-five minutes ... every moment must be used properly; that is the true duty of every human being.” If we are only using five minutes in each day properly, what hope do we have of mastering this so-called “time management”? Swami Himself has said that “God is the Master of Time,” so treating time as a dispensable resource is clearly misguided. What can we do to increase our respect for the godly quality that is time?

In SSE this year, we discussed the value of setting short-term goals. We also brainstormed multiple life applications that we could implement in our daily lives to increase our respect for time. For example, at the beginning of each day, one can create a to-do list for the day with realistic and measurable goals.

To be able to do this, it is important to develop a good sense of self-awareness—otherwise, it will not be possible to predict the amount of time that will be needed for a task or to track the amount of time that has already been spent. Another life application we considered was the inclusion of well-planned breaks into our daily schedules. By taking a short, meaningful break at certain time points, one is able to conserve energy and be more efficient when they are actually working. In class, we discussed the Pomodoro method which involves a 25-minute work period followed by a 5-minute break period. We also discussed the importance of doing something meaningful during breaks, such as a short walk outside, exercise, a light snack, or connecting with family. Finally, we discussed the importance of staying organized by using planners, calendars, notes, and even technology to stay on track with our priorities. We also noticed that a well-organized workspace without clutter helped us keep organized and improved our efficiency on tasks. With relevance to students, Swami says, “Study cannot be postponed or done slipshod, so, whatever the obstacle or temptation, it must be overcome ... students deserve an atmosphere of peace.”

Ultimately, we put into practice many of these life applications to the betterment of our own efficiency at school, mental health, and spiritual development. By recognizing that “time management” is not a skill to be mastered but instead a respect for certain human values, we are able to grow as citizens of this world and as devotees of Swami.

Pranav Mandhan & Jayant Kammula

Crossword puzzle *(answers on page 3)*

ACROSS

- Swami says that it is part of our _____ to be a model citizen, by following the law in good spirit and performing civic duties as required by our local and national governments.
- Thomas _____ believed that a monarchy was the best system of government
- _____ is determining something's importance and urgency
- Law and order encourages people to do the right thing for a _____ good, benefiting the entire society.
- Only people whose _____ are Zoroastrians are considered to be true followers of the religion.
- The best way to improve focus is through _____
- This is a great tool for improving focus and something that all SSE students do in their class every Sunday
- The _____ contract is the fundamental agreement underlying a peaceful and civil society.
- Swami compares the mind with this animal

DOWN

- _____ is believed to be the one and supreme god and highest deity of Zoroastrianism.
- Swami defines a good society as being made up of each individual who obeys _____ guidelines
- The Society, state, and nation will progress to the extent that _____ qualities are developed.
- The Zoroastrians originally came from this modern-day country, originally known as Persia
- A crucial principle of Zoroastrianism is respecting the _____ elements.
- Focusing your mind on this body part is a great way to freshen your mind and give you a burst of energy to focus on your tasks.

