

# Creativity and Consciousness

Jazz prof Ed Sarath is bringing meditation to the U-M—and just maybe saving the world.

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A young man sits expectantly on the Power Center stage, electrodes attached to his head. Behind him is an enormous colored projection of the EEG that's monitoring his brain. On his right stands John Hagelin, a Harvard-educated physicist and former presidential candidate. On his left is David Lynch, director of surrealistic works like *Mulholland Drive* and *Twin Peaks*. As brain waves twitch chaotically on the screen, Lynch announces that the young man is about to perform Transcendental Meditation. The meditator closes his eyes and smiles calmly, and within seconds the EEG image settles into a coordinated groove.

Lynch turns to the murmuring audience and declares, "This is what meditation brings you—a sense of awareness, of wakefulness, of energy. True happiness is not out there. True happiness lies within."

The event was organized by music prof Ed Sarath—flügelhorn player, chair of the U-M jazz department, and man on a mission. His controversial goal: to revolutionize higher education—and society itself—by bringing meditative practices to the university.

Seven years ago, Sarath's Program in Jazz and Contemplative Studies became the first degree-granting program in the country to incorporate what he calls "contemplative practices" into its core curriculum. Now he hopes to use his Faculty Network for Creativity and Consciousness Studies—which promoted the David Lynch event—to found a campuswide major in contemplative studies. If he succeeds, he says, all U-M students will have greater access to contemplative practices, with benefits that range from heightened creativity to a transcendent connection to the universal current of life. And if other schools follow suit, the results could change the world.

"Humanity is at a point where change has to take place," Sarath says passionately. A slim man with a graying beard, he talks over the sound of music students practicing in neighboring rooms. "We have no choice—we've got all kinds of crises that are threatening our survival. And the challenges we're dealing with in the world today call for a much broader kind of human development than we've had up to this point."

He leans forward intently. "Here's my favorite question for people: How sustainable is the course humanity is on right now? People blowing themselves up in the name of God, flying airplanes into buildings, attacking other countries—these are not sustainable practices. And in light of these challenges to our very survival, it's clear that the current educational paradigm is unsustainable too. That's why I think it's inevitable that higher education make a

huge shift.”

Sarath envisions a university in which students’ perspectives are fundamentally altered—and their lives potentially transformed— by introspective contemplation. Education, he says, must not focus solely on objective facts and measurable skills but must also help students cultivate a connection to their deeper beings—what he calls the “study of the self.” If his current program in the U-M School of Music is any indication, this would translate to a curriculum heavy on psychology and Eastern thought. Alongside the typical classes in music theory and practice, the Program in Jazz and Contemplative Studies offers electives like “Buddhist Studies,” “Islamic Mysticism,” and “Psychology and Spiritual Development.” Most important, it requires students to take four semesters of the “Contemplative Practice Seminar.”

Seminar students engage in breath awareness, free writing, drumming, and other activities meant to quiet their thoughts and deepen their awareness. They’re encouraged to continue these practices daily outside of class. “We give them a list of meditation centers. Ann Arbor’s a hotbed for that sort of thing,” Sarath says. “It’s not a requirement that they go, but we highly encourage it.”

Meditative practices, Sarath says, can bring profound benefits to his students’ lives— and eventually to the world they live in. “There’s a transformational experience that often happens in these classes,” he says, “where students discover new aspects of themselves and experience modes of consciousness that are not generally available to them. Jazz students report a sense of freedom and joy in their improvising, and others experience a general expansion of their creative horizons. “They’re liberated from the dull, ordinary awareness that pervades most of our existence. They engage more fully in what they’re doing, feel a greater sense of happiness, a greater connection to others—they’re going in and out of different transcendent states.” Harp music swells beautifully in the classroom next door, and Sarath laughs self-consciously. “This is ambitious, I realize. And it may be kind of utopian. But to me, this is the mission of the university: to develop the full potential of the human being, to foster an awareness of the connections between all life.”

Sarath recalls with a laugh that when he first proposed the Program in Jazz and Contemplative Studies, in 2000, “all hell broke loose.” Though the music, theater, and dance faculty ultimately approved the program, strong opposition within the school led to an unusually close vote. “The use of meditation in the classroom was their primary objection,” Sarath recalls. But in his view, the biggest obstacle was academic inertia. “I think there’s just a general tendency for faculty members to resist change. Higher education is a place where you’d think that an exploration of new ideas would be commonplace. But the faculty actually tend to be quite conservative.”

Not surprisingly, the program’s critics resent this characterization. (Reluctant to revive personal animosities stirred by the vote, all insisted on anonymity.) “One of the worst things you can be branded at the University of Michigan is conservative,” complains one faculty member. “And when you have a program like this, which is extremely divisive, terms like that poison the debate. So anyone who tries to stick up for academic standards does so at his own risk.”

There's anger in this professor's voice as he recalls the controversy. "One of the program's goals was that students would reach higher states of consciousness that would unleash their creative potential. But how will students know—how will anyone know—whether they have reached that goal through these meditation techniques?" He shakes his head and shrugs. "The fact is it's possible to *not* achieve this skill and to still receive credit."

Another opponent raises a larger issue. "A lot of the language surrounding this proposal was about the idea that human consciousness is a unified thing that allows us to overcome all kinds of divisions—divisions among academic disciplines, divisions among people," he recalls. "And what a lot of us were saying was that there is no academic consensus that consciousness is unified. And what's more, a belief in a unified consciousness is akin to a belief in some kind of transcendence . . . a belief in the soul." He smiles ironically. "But when some of us pointed out that this was a specific kind of religious program, the supporters simply said, 'Oh no, this isn't about spirituality, this is about consciousness and creativity.'" His voice rises in frustration. "Universities don't have programs like this! We may have a religious studies program, but we don't have a Christianity program. We don't have a program that teaches students to practice Islam. And we shouldn't have a program that teaches them to meditate."

Sarath says that his programs do not endorse any particular spiritual belief. Yet during his Power Center presentation, David Lynch explicitly sought to recruit practitioners of Transcendental Meditation (TM)—a practice based on the repetition of Hindu mantras. Adopted by the Beatles in the 1960s (and currently taught for a hefty fee), TM teaches that if enough people engage in its brand of meditation, they will generate world peace by radiating harmonious energy into society. Sarath's belief in meditation's transformative potential seems to echo this teaching, and Lynch's co-presenter at the Power Center, John Hagelin, may be its most prominent advocate. Hagelin ran for president in 1992, 1996, and 2000 as the candidate of TM's Natural Law Party and currently heads TM's "U.S. Peace Government."

But Sarath says he was disappointed at Lynch and Hagelin's recruitment efforts: he says he often schedules events that promote the general benefits of meditation, and that's what he'd expected Lynch and Hagelin to do. Sarath emphasizes that his courses expose students to a variety of generic contemplative practices and do not advocate any specific tradition or belief. In fact, he says, when it comes to meditation, belief itself is irrelevant: "One can sit down and meditate without a belief that these practices will do any good—one can even believe the practices are useless—and still gain benefits. Why? Because belief is a mental construct. It is a thought. And meditation allows the mind to transcend thought and experience the most silent depths of consciousness that are devoid of mental activity, but fully wakeful in the radiance of the transcendent Self."

And what about those who feel that only their God is transcendent, and that teaching students to access the "radiance of the transcendent Self" implicitly contradicts their faith? Sarath laughs nervously. "Well, it's interesting. If you're talking about Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, the mystical dimensions of these traditions are similar, in many ways, to Eastern thinking—the same kind of ideas behind the consciousness studies movement." Since he sees the three Abrahamic religions fueling conflicts that could threaten humanity, is Sarath hoping consciousness studies might ultimately lead people away from the Western concept of a separate God, and toward the

Eastern concept of God as universal oneness? After a pause, he says quietly, "It could be, yeah. I'm hesitant to be quoted on that, but I really like the idea."

How do university administrators feel about all this? Lester Monts, the senior viceprovost for academic affairs, was one of the principal supporters of Sarath's "study of the self" in the music school (he's a trumpeter and ethnomusicologist by training). But Monts initially hesitates when asked whether he thinks contemplative practices should be offered as a separate field of study.

"I think that would have to be carefully crafted," Monts says. "And I would have to hear Ed's dialogue on that before I could really respond. But Ed Sarath is a brilliant person. He's constantly thinking beyond the boundaries, moving away from the status quo. So if some of the methods, techniques, pedagogies, or whatever that Ed is using will expand the horizons of education campuswide, I'm all for it."

He seems to warm to the topic. "One of the things that intrigues me about his courses is that they aren't just for musicians. He teaches people from the Medical School, from the School of Theater and Dance, from athletics—he taught the entire offensive line of the football team! It's a coming together that's unprecedented on this campus. This is what higher education at Michigan should be like."

Monts seems untroubled by the spiritual overtones of Sarath's program. "In terms of the creative process, meditation is highly advisable and widespread in the music-making community," he says matter-of-factly. "There are conductors of orchestras who engage in a lot of yoga before they perform. And I'm almost certain that composers like Beethoven and Stravinsky had ways of connecting with their consciousness—higher powers, or whatever—in order to create the kind of music that they created." He smiles. "People are always seeking ways to move beyond their normal state, in order to connect with the pinnacle of their creativity. I think that's where, to a large extent, our creativity as human beings comes from—the inner self being able to relate to something that we consider to be a higher power."

But couldn't the same argument be used to justify teaching prayer in the classroom? Monts frowns slightly at the suggestion. "Well . . . I mean, prayer to whom? If one is seeking a connection with their own consciousness, fine. But if it's proselytizing, or trying to pull someone into another person's way of believing, I think we would have a problem with that. But I think Ed has enough integrity not to let that happen. . . . I don't think there's anything happening in this program that would drive anyone to take it as a substitution for their own religious beliefs."

So is it safe to say he endorses Sarath's goal of transforming society by bringing meditative practices to higher education? "Umm . . . well, yeah." Monts laughs nervously and then seems to regain his footing. "I mean, I don't think we have opened up higher education enough to encompass all there is to know about the world around us. We don't have all the answers to human existence in this country. And there are times when I feel that sustainability in our democracy really is being threatened. Because we are becoming so isolated, and so . . . domineering. I think that higher education is going to have to make a series of grand steps in order to counter the direction our society seems to be taking."

Monts pauses for a moment, as if weighing his words. “I don’t know what your political persuasion is, but when I listen to George Bush . . .” He shakes his head in amazement. “He is an idiot. But this is the person who is running our country. And what I’m saying is that in order to counter the idiocy of someone like Bush, we need more people like Ed Sarath teaching the next generation of students to lead this country in a different direction.”

Not all U-M higher-ups are so open to Sarath’s vision. When asked whether he’s ever had to defend the contemplative studies program to skeptics in the administration, Monts doesn’t hesitate: “Ohhhh yeah. I was talking to one of my close colleagues, who is just a wonderful scholar, and I said, ‘Hey, have you heard about Ed’s program?’ And she just goes . . .” Monts rolls his eyes, purses his lips, and hums the title theme of *The Twilight Zone*.

The program’s supporters chafe at that kind of response. Richard Mann, a professor emeritus of psychology and a member of Sarath’s faculty network, denies that meditation has any supernatural overtones. “‘Subjective’ knowledge doesn’t mean ‘wishy-washy’ and ‘weird’—it means everybody, all the time, is the subject,” he says testily. “When all the content of your mind begins to quiet down, what’s left is an experience of pure awareness. There’s no denominational or religious tag to it. There are no mythic figures lurking in the background. But when meditators start to search around for a verbal feeling to express that experience, they’ll look anywhere and everywhere—they’ll read poems, they’ll read the Bible, they’ll read Eastern mystics. So if some people talk about universal consciousness, that’s fine. But that’s just a way of expressing.”

Sarath agrees. “People may or may not call meditation spiritual,” he says. “But if [critics] don’t want any talk of spirituality in the academy, they should look at all the other areas, from psychology to life sciences, where this dialogue is taking place.”

At Michigan, that dialogue is happening in some unexpected places. Rita Benn, a member of Sarath’s network and a longtime meditator, is education director of the U-M’s integrative medicine program: “We have a separate program in my department for faculty, and we teach them concepts and theories related to alternative medicine—from herbal therapies and chiropractic techniques to acupuncture and meditation. So faculty learn the research around these issues. Then they experience these different healing modalities themselves, including meditation. They love it—we have more applicants than we have spaces. At the end of the year many tell me the program has changed their lives.”

If both students and faculty are so interested in contemplative practices, why have universities been slow to accept the field as an academic discipline? In Benn’s view, it comes down to academia’s stubborn insistence on objective knowledge. “I think our institution is a very big research-based institution, and the only way the university will buy into meditative practices is when we show there’s research and evidence to support their benefits,” she says with a shrug. “But that body of knowledge is being accumulated.”

According to Benn, research even lends credibility to some of Sarath’s more ambitious claims. “There are now scientific studies showing that areas of the brain that are related to compassion and positive well-being are enhanced by meditation,” she says. “I saw this in action in a study I

did on Transcendental Meditation in a charter school in Detroit. I organized a clinical control trial, and some students meditated for three months while other students did not. And we found that meditating students felt more positive in their daily life, and had less negative emotions than their non-meditating peers. As more and more studies emerge showing these kinds of results, then a more conventional body like the university will feel more comfortable advocating the kinds of changes that Ed wants to see.”

Sarath points out that in recent years contemplative practices have found their way into the curricula of more than eighty institutions, including Columbia, the University of Massachusetts, Harvard, and Yale. But in spite of the increasing presence of meditative practices in higher education, advocates lament that their work still isn't taken seriously by the academic mainstream. When Sarath organized a national conference last fall called “Creativity, Consciousness, and the Academy,” the mood was more frustrated than triumphant.

Arthur Zajonc, a physics professor at Amherst and a leading light of the contemplative studies movement, illustrated the problem succinctly. He asked the audience how many of them served in administration at their universities. No hands went up, and as the crowd chuckled, Sarath spoke up: “We had one administrator sign up—but they were a no-show.”

Nodding sagely, Zajonc summed up the dilemma: “If we present contemplative studies only as a tool for stress reduction, [the administration] will say, ‘That’s very nice, but it belongs in student services’”—but if advocates promote what they see as the deeper benefits of meditation, administrators instinctively recoil: “When a colleague wrote a course proposal that had the word *compassion* in the name, the administration turned it down, saying, ‘We don’t teach compassion’ here!”

Zajonc sighed. “Most people think of knowledge as something external, something measurable—something separate from our ways of living. We need to add a new component to what it means to know. Contemplative inquiry is—if we dare say the word in the academy—an epistemology of love.”