



News and views from the School

Twice termly: Issue no 12



Welcome to Issue No. 12.

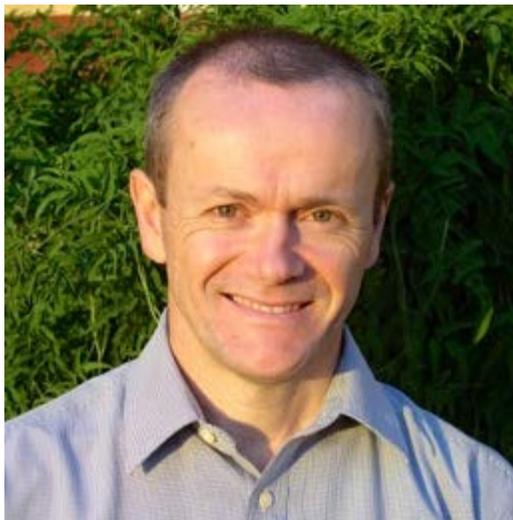
This issue marks 2 years of Insight. Many thanks indeed to all our contributors. Anyone can read back issues at Schoolinsight. Anyone can subscribe at the bottom of this newsletter or forward to friends.

I hope you will enjoy the three articles in this issue, all contributions from students in the School worldwide:

- Why Meditation Matters
- The Power of Music
- Sailing

With very best wishes,

Christine Lambie, editor



Dr Hased, student in Melbourne, writes about meditation, bringing to the subject both his professional knowledge and deep enthusiasm. Craig is a medical doctor and senior lecturer at Monash University in the Department of General Practice.

(The small numbers indicate references which can be found at InsightHased.)

Why Meditation Matters Craig Hased, Melbourne

How did you come to be interested in meditation?

At the age of 19 I was experiencing much of the angst that comes with being a teenager and a medical student, feeling somewhat disillusioned with university studies with no clear sense of direction in life. Wishing to be free of this burden, the thought of meditation came to mind.

Not knowing what it was, the simplest thing I could think of was that meditation had something to do with sitting still and just observing. So, with a beginner's mind, I sat and observed for quite some time. Whatever this practice was, I was a different person when I got out of the chair. Underneath all that angst it was self-evidently true that I was completely whole and unaffected; this seemed to be the single most important and direct path one could take to self-understanding, health and happiness. That experience deeply sowed a seed for the future life and work.

That seed germinated in two main ways, firstly an interest in wisdom, which took me to the School in 1985, and secondly, dedicating my career to promoting to others what was so valuable to me.

How has your work in the School influenced your professional work?

The School has been enormously important in providing a practical grounding in the world's great wisdom traditions. There was also the learning of meditative practices: 'The Exercise' which could be characterised as a mindfulness-based practice, and then later, mantra meditation. For me, the teaching of meditation to people in the general community has largely focused on mindfulness-based approaches.

How has your work in this field developed?

In 1989 I took up a position as a lecturer within a large university medical faculty. If it was possible for doctors - in this case general practitioners - to be more aware of the importance of meditation and the consciousness-mind-body link then they might inform their average of 1,500 patients about it.

It was necessary to learn how to communicate what the wisdom traditions had to say in a language that was simple, practical, grounded in science, not shrouded in mystery, which could be respected in clinical and scientific environments. Learning how to communicate effectively took years, meant learning from numerous mistakes, and overcoming a deep-seated fear of public speaking.

What are the scientifically-validated benefits of meditation?

The original scientific research on meditation in the 1970s and 80s was largely done on Transcendental Meditation. There is every reason to believe that similar results would be found with any of the major forms of meditation, so long as the approach does not only emphasise the meditation practice by itself but also the capacity of meditation to cultivate awareness, non-attachment, acceptance and being in the present moment in one's day-to-day life. Studies of the brain suggest that there are two main modes of brain activity:

- 1 Active tasks: tasks associated with paying attention and being present
- 2 Default states: when mind is inattentive, idle, recalling past, daydreaming, ruminating

Inattention and leading an unengaged life with very passive leisure activities is not healthy for the brain – it is like physical inactivity for the body. ^(1 2 3 4) In people who are trained in meditation, however, it has been found that the level of default mental activity is reduced and even when it is present the areas of the brain involved with self-monitoring and cognitive control are also active, correlating with the person being more aware of this mental activity and not being so drawn into it. ⁽⁵⁾

What are some of the main therapeutic effects of meditation-based approaches for which there is evidence?

- ⁽⁷⁾ 1. Mental health: e.g. depression relapse prevention, ^(8 9) relief from anxiety, panic disorder, and stress, emotional regulation, addiction (smoking ⁽¹⁰⁾ and drug) rehabilitation, improved sleep, ^(11 12) better coping, ⁽¹³⁾ less avoidance and greater control ^(14 15), reduced burnout, greater empathy and compassion. ^(16 17)
2. Neuroscience: ^(18 19) e.g. structural and functional changes in the brain (neuroplasticity), generation of new brain cells (neurogenesis) particularly in the memory and executive functioning centres with implications for the prevention of dementia, reduced activity in the amygdala ⁽²⁰⁾ (fear and anxiety centre in the brain), improved sensory processing and working memory, greater mental flexibility.
3. Clinical: e.g. pain management, ^(21 22 23) symptom control, coping with major illnesses like cancer ^(24 25), reduced allostatic load (effects of chronic stress), metabolic benefits (reduced blood pressure, glucose and lipids), hormonal changes, weight management and eating disorders, ⁽²⁶⁾ reversal of cardiovascular disease, ⁽²⁷⁾ improved genetic function and repair and slower ageing ⁽²⁸⁾, improved immunity, ^(29 30) and fewer days off work. ⁽³¹⁾

4. Improved performance - zone or flow states:e.g. sport, academic, leadership.

Where to from here?

Nearly all of my work as a doctor and university lecturer these days is taken up with the teaching of meditation-based strategies within healthcare, educational, community and corporate environments. My strategy is simple - to say yes to every opportunity that presents itself to pass on the teaching.

See **Craig on UTube: [HassedMed](#)**



Top Tips

Items recommended by readers

Overview: On the 40th anniversary of the famous 'blue marble' photo of the earth from space, this 20 minute film documents the perspective-altering experience of astronauts. Wonderful photography. Go to [Overview](#)

2. Wisdom Works: Sign up for a weekly reflection and practical exercise, all arising from self-remembering. Go to [WisdomWorks](#)



This senior student in London, tells of her life journey through music, from a promising start, through tragedy, being awarded an Honorary Doctorate from Middlesex University to expanding work overseas. The photo shows Margaret with her husband Walter.

The Power of Music

Margaret Lobo, London

My love of music, growing up in a small suburb of Vancouver, Canada, came from listening to my mother singing daily as she went about her domestic chores. Both my parents could have had professional singing careers but growing up during the depression in the 1930's, this was not an option.

When I became an 'earner' my priority was to help support the rest of my family; there were 7 of us children. But I was given permission by my father to put some of my earnings towards private singing lessons. Apart from music, my life was very

isolated and difficult and there is no doubt in my mind that it is music that gave me a purpose for living.

Musician of the Year

One day my teacher put me forward for a competition where I was chosen as "Canadian Musician of the Year". Shortly afterwards, I was accepted on the Banff School of Fine Arts summer school, where I was

given my first opera role. This led to the Toronto Conservatory offering me a full scholarship to study for my Master's degree, with a contract to sing with the Canadian Opera Company.

Polio

I won another competition, the Metropolitan Opera Young Artist Programme to study in New York. But a year later, aged 21, I became very ill and was diagnosed as having polio, temporarily paralysing my legs and one vocal cord. Specialists told me that in time, with the help of physiotherapy, I would walk again, but singing was not possible. This put an end to my aspirations of a singing career but what hurt the most was the great disappointment my parents suffered. Little did I know that this would one day be the catalyst for the healing power of music to later reveal itself.

Upon hearing of my plight my great aunt from England invited me to come and stay with them in London for a year. I was fortunate to get a good job, but my heart still grieved for my love of singing and my desire to be useful to humanity.

By Chance

One lunch hour, when walking down Piccadilly I happened to pass in the street the Canadian conductor who had supported me whilst at Banff. At the time, I was too distressed to tell him what had happened - he thought I was in London studying. He said he needed to hear me sing.

Frightened that he might be horrified at my damaged voice, I was shocked when he wept for my loss. He recommended I contact the great baritone and teacher Otakar Kraus who might help me. In my first session with Otakar, he said he had never worked with anyone with my vocal problems but would find it a challenge to see if he could help.

For the next four years I had two lessons each week at the Trinity College of Music (now the School of Economic Science building!). For the first two years I was only allowed to sing specific vocal exercises using only vowels. At the start of the third year I was introduced to singing words, which to me was a revelation and from there we progressed to Italian, French, German songs and then to Oratorio and Opera. I was then accepted to sing with a newly formed Opera Company performing Oratorios, Opera and recitals around the country.

Tragedy again

When my teacher died I lost the desire to perform for the next 3 years. At this time my search for good company, a thirst for knowledge and a more useful life seemed further away than ever. My prayers were answered when I was introduced to a homoeopathic doctor, who handed me the School leaflet, which was to change my life completely. I still remember vividly my first impression when I walked through the doors of the School – I had come home!

My group was invited to join a Sounding and Calligraphy class - we were asked to sound the pure Sanskrit vowels. When I opened my mouth, no sound came out which was devastating. The tutor recommended I practise sounding for a few minutes every morning and evening, listening without any self-criticism. Towards the end of the week I began to find this tolerable and progressed to understanding how listening and sounding these Sanskrit vowels began to purify my voice. Gradually my confidence and love of singing returned.

Music Therapy

Two years later I met my husband Walter in the School and with the offer to take early redundancy from my job, he encouraged me to find a way of using music to help others. So I undertook a Music Therapy degree course at Guildhall.

For three years I taught singing at the Guildhall and worked in our small dining room with disabled children. Seeing the great need in the community for this work, Walter and I took out a mortgage to build a studio in

the back of our garden and set up the Otakar Kraus Music Trust in honour of my teacher. We started with two autistic children and the studio now operates 6 days a week, employing 7 music therapists working with over 250 children.

Our therapists also work in 15 Outreach centres across the country, enabling us to give over 2,000 individual and 300 group sessions per year. The Trust receives no Government funding and for the past 22 years has been self-funding with one part time member of staff and ourselves as volunteers. We try to part-fund over 70% of the families who come to us.

The effect on the children is remarkable. One mother told me after a session that she "saw her child smile for the first time". Another child, now 12 years old, previously thought to be mute, recently sang "Where is Love" from Oliver at his school assembly.

Expanding work

The Sanskrit vowels form the whole backbone of my work although our therapists do not necessarily use them. Working with people who have had strokes, brain damage and terminal illness, sounding the vowels and focusing on their breath has led to many of them beginning to speak again. I know from my own experience that once one has broken through this 'pain' barrier, the joy is beyond measure.

In brief, from 2005 we were invited to establish trusts in both India and Nepal. These now serve thousands of children across both countries. In addition we introduced a Music School in West London for children and young adults with special needs and learning difficulties.

Walter and I continue to follow the demands and joys of this great journey. Our philosophy is to Listen, Learn and Act, and who better to tell us what the community needs than the parents and carers of these special people. Keeping constantly in mind the School's teaching and practising it fully, has opened the heart and convinced me that service to the universe is the right way to live.

See more about the [OtakarKrausTrust](#).



Philosophy in Action - one student describes her adventure

I Am Sailing

Mary Anne Geal, London, had both legs amputated in her 40s. In April 2012, she took a 10-day voyage with Tall Ships around the Portuguese islands of the Azores. The 'Lord Nelson' was designed so that disabled and able-bodied people can sail together as crew on an equal basis.

My husband Brian had given up so much to look after me and our family – he deserved something in return, so for our ruby wedding anniversary, our adventure was planned.

For the first couple of days, the weather was rough; nearly everyone was seasick. Having to control my wheelchair with the ship rolling, I crushed my fingers – very painful.

The whole experience took me totally out of my comfort zone, and the only way to deal with it was to stay in the present and meet each new challenge as it was presented, to surrender all my ideas about it. During the voyage, we all took turns on watch; I climbed (yes!) up to the rigging, with lots of help (and harness for safety), getting as far as the topsail platform – very exhilarating but also exhausting and scary.

The most amazing part of the whole trip was when we were on the midnight to 4 am watch, in the middle of the Atlantic. As I sat up on the bridge steering the ship, there was total unity with everything - the elements, the sea, millions of stars, the ship and the other crew members. Algae on the surface of the water was fluorescing with the light from the ship. It was truly blissful and something I will never forget.

Go to [UTubeTallShips](#) - Mary Anne is holding the wheel.

Meet Marsilio in Malta

This 5-day international Ficino Symposium held in December 2012, hosted 70 participants from 4 continents to consider the words of the Renaissance philosopher. Passages were selected to meet Marsilio in church, in the countryside, at his writing desk etc. The event included cultural visits and concluded with a concert at the prestigious Auberge de Castille, in the company of the Prime Minister and his wife.

One participant commented: *'The mornings were inspired by the amazingly profound and positive words of Ficino, followed each afternoon by the discovery of beautiful places of cultural and historic interest. What was special about the week was the ever-increasing revelation of excellence, delight and wonder, day by day.'*



Reader Feedback



*This is an incredibly powerful issue [11] of your lovely newsletter. I was particularly touched by the Ficino article and of course the reflections that Mr. and Mrs. Posnick offered. It is so honest and filled with the love that they radiate moment in, moment out. Seeing their brilliant faces made their story that much more poignant. Thank you for this. **New York***

*Thank you for yet another beautiful 'Insight' – they are so inspirational and I often send them on to people who aren't attending the School – they always appreciate them. **London***

*It was lovely to read a straight talking, unsentimental article about a difficult subject (Alzheimers) from the Posnicks. True, touching and awakening. **Dublin***

Again, I have enjoyed reading the latest Insight newsletter. Well done. I am not so keen on the new masthead however. It lacks the clear distinct visual strength of the last

one. Why the change? London

Sorry you don't like it, but it seemed like time for a change – Editor.

Thanks for reading

Subscribe Free – click on the link below to sign up.

Please keep that feedback coming. I need all your suggestions of personal stories, insights, links, articles, cartoons, video clips – anything that will be of interest to our philosophy community. Do you know someone in the School who has an interesting story to tell? E-mail me at: editor@seslondon.org. Thanks again for reading, CL

The views expressed in this document are not necessarily those of the Fellowship of the School of Economic Science

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