

# The Development of the Transcendental Meditation Movement

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The Transcendental Meditation movement is now growing at a rapid and accelerating rate in this country. Since its emergence in the late 1950s the expansion of this movement has been markedly uneven in terms of numbers of initiations, organizational growth, and support in various strata and sectors of American society. This essay describes and examines the Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement's particular pattern of growth in light of three developmental periods in the movement's history and of two subpopulations in the movement.

## Methodology

The following analysis of the Transcendental Meditation movement is based on my participant observation and hermeneutical study of the movement. I initially became involved with the TM movement over six years ago. I maintained close contact with and researched the movement between August 1974 and August 1975. Following Buford Junker's (1960) typology of forms of participant observation, my activities are best characterized as "participant as observer." Consistent with the profile Junker outlines for this role, intentions as a researcher were disclosed to a limited number of persons in the movement, who were fully accepting of them. At the same time my activities as an observer were subordinated to my activities as a participant within the context of the movement. In the course of participant observation I took part in formal classes, lectures, videotape and audiotape presentations, meetings, and informal interactions, discussions, and activities associated with the TM movement (see Woodrum 1975, pp. 57-62). My efforts in these contexts were informed by Sevryn

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Bruyn's (1966) discussion of the "knowledge of meanings" sought by the participant observer.

Hermeneutics is the study of the methodological principles of interpretation. Objective expressions or texts are studied in an effort to reconstruct the mental processes of their creators. The textual basis for this hermeneutical study of the TM movement was twofold. First, I analyzed a collection of pamphlets, books, videotapes and audiotapes of talks, and written transcriptions of talks and question-and-answer sessions produced by organizations and individuals in the TM movement since its emergence. The second textual basis for this study was newsletters, mailouts, and other written announcements from a TM center over the past six years. During this period the center was established and became a major base of operations for the movement in the Southwest. By comparing chronologically the various texts from both sources it is possible to identify trends in the movement's belief system and organization and to reconstruct aspects of its development from the late 1950s to the present.

### **Three phases in the movement's development**

The first developmental period in the TM movement's history extends from 1959 to 1965 and might be called the Spiritual-Mystical Period. During these years the movement operated through the first organization for the spread of TM, the Spiritual Regeneration Movement (SRM). Evidence suggests that participants in the movement during this period were, for the most part, middle- and upper-middle-class business and professional persons united by a general interest in spiritual growth and mysticism (see Maharishi 1961). TM was interpreted as the most important component of a holistic program for spiritual evolution, nonattachment to the relative, material realm, eventual liberation from the cycle of rebirth, and attainment of nirvana. Other components of this rather traditional vedic program included the daily performance of yoga asanas (physical postures), prana yoga (breathing exercises), and the silent recitation of a brief prayer (Maharishi 1962, pp. 3-9). Dietary practices (Maharishi 1966, pp. 124-25) and periodic attendance at meditation residence courses also contributed to the "purifying effects" of TM (Maharishi 1967, p. 347).

The TM movement began as and has remained an urban phenomenon, most successful in technologically developed societies. Only in recent years, following its acceptance in the West, has the movement begun to win significant support in India and a few other Third World

countries. It was in India that the movement's founder and leader, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, first tried to establish the practice of TM, following the death of his guru and an appropriate period of solitary contemplation in the Himalayas. After a few years of teaching the technique in southern India, Maharishi concluded that the movement's growth rate was too slow and that he should take his teaching to the West, "where people are in a habit of adopting things quickly" (Maharishi, in Ebon 1968, p. 10).

During the first developmental period the TM movement emphasized attainment of traditional Hindu, otherworldly goals through a holistic yogic program (Maharishi 1967, pp. 132-3, 331-2). The movement was one among many marginal "Eastern, spiritual" groups appealing to only a small number of adherents. At the end of 1965 only one teacher of TM and approximately 220 practitioners lived in the United States (Forem 1973, p. 217).

The second developmental phase, extending from 1966 to 1969, might be referred to as the Voguish, Self-Sufficiency Period. During these years the TM movement expanded rapidly into two new population bases and won publicity by temporarily identifying with aspects of the counterculture. The expanding young segment of American society antipathetic to the dominant material and spiritual institutions was intentionally sought after by leaders of the movement (Ebon 1968). At the same time individuals in the general public who were less mystically oriented than were members of the Spiritual Regeneration Movement were solicited. The TM movement's approach to these two sources of initiates entailed organizational specialization, a strategy which is characteristic of the movement. The Students International Meditation Society (SIMS) was founded in 1966 to address student-aged audiences with a program and interpretation of TM adapted especially for them. Within a year the International Meditation Society (IMS) was established to present a more reserved, relatively popularized version of the movement to the general public (see Schneider and Dornbusch 1958). Since the organization of SIMS and IMS the Spiritual Regeneration Movement has been progressively pushed into the background as an embarrassing reminder of the unreservedly spiritual roots of the TM movement.

During the Voguish, Self-Sufficiency Period the traditional Hindu understanding of the goals and effects of TM were significantly modified. The goal of "cosmic consciousness" was described in terms of bliss, energy, and peace without reference to the loss of the individual ego or the

serious implications of nonattachment to the relative, material realm (see Maharishi, in *Ebon* 1968, pp. 136-9). The themes of spiritual self-sufficiency, reductionism, and mentalism made the practice of TM the vogue of a spiritually inclined avant-garde in the late 1960s. During these years the movement expanded rapidly, so that by the end of 1968 approximately 12,000 transcendental meditators and 200 teachers of TM lived in the United States.

The success of the TM movement in expanding into the young, counterculture population during this period was promoted by publicity that TM and the movement's founder, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, received after several prominent entertainers began practicing the technique. The fruitful association with the counterculture was severed in 1969, which marked the end of the second developmental period in the movement's history.

Two events occurred at this time which pressured the movement to redefine itself and reappraise its primary audiences. These events were the termination, because of lack of attendance, of a rock-concert-cum-TM-lecture-tour by Maharishi and bitter criticism of him as materialistic by well-known counterculture spokesmen. With the waning of the counterculture and a general constriction of the "market" for meditative and other spiritual groups at the close of the 1960s, the TM movement experienced a crisis. However, this movement has been able to do what most of its competitors have not proven capable of, namely, changing its public image and expanding again in the 1970s through a new strategy for recruitment.

The third phase in the movement's history, the Secularized, Popular-Religious Period, began in 1970 and continues to the present. To overcome the taint of faddishness incurred during the late 1960s, the current strategy of the movement emphasizes the practical physiological, material, and social benefits of TM for conventional persons, with almost no otherworldly references (see, for example, *Fundamentals of Progress* 1974). The movement produces a steady stream of evidence of "scientific validation" of the merits of TM through a new organizational arm, Maharishi International University (MIU). MIU embodies the rationalized professionalism of the contemporary TM movement with its staff of Ph.D. meditator-researchers and extensive printing and publicity facilities (see *Maharishi International University Catalog* 1974). TM is also promoted in the commercial and governmental sectors through the American Foundation for the Science of Creative Intelligence and the World Plan Executive

Council. The tendency of the movement toward organizational multiplication and specialization has been greatly accentuated by its recent successes. For example, an organization now exists in the movement to encourage the practice of TM by professional athletes.

Currently there are over 7,000 trained teachers of TM in the United States. In the past year alone over 300,000 people were initiated into the technique (World Plan Executive Council 1976, pp. 3, 8). Yet even these statistics fail to convey the entrenched and accepted status of the TM movement, which is presently represented in American private industry, public programs in drug abuse, mental health, and rehabilitation, public and private schools and universities, and the U.S. Army, to give only a partial listing (see Bloomfield, et al. 1975).

### **Two subpopulations in the movement**

The present organization of the TM movement builds upon patterns of participation associated with subpopulations of active meditators. The term "active meditators" is used in recognition of the fact that an undetermined number of individuals practice TM following initiation with no further contact with the movement or discontinue using the technique altogether. These individuals may approximate either of the two ideal types to be discussed to the extent that they participate in the TM movement at all. It is hypothesized that the two subpopulations that I have identified hold distinct motivational orientations and attitudes toward the technique of TM and toward the movement's belief system, now known as the Science of Creative Intelligence (SCI). They also see the ultimate significance and potential of the TM movement in rather different terms. For heuristic purposes these two subpopulations, with associated participation patterns, motivations, and attitudes, will be discussed using pure or ideal constructs.

The first subpopulation in the movement approximates an ideal type that I will refer to as "average meditators." This group has been growing steadily as a proportion of the overall movement population during the current Secularized, Popular-Religious Period. Average meditators have practical, utilitarian motivations for practicing TM, which they regard simply as a useful mental exercise. They consider the technique of TM essentially separable from its attendant belief system, in which they have little interest. Members of this subpopulation evaluate TM rationally in terms of tangible costs and benefits. It is their conclusion that the practice

of TM sufficiently contributes to their health, energy, and efficiency in performing other primary tasks to justify the time, expense, and inconvenience of learning and utilizing the technique. These persons characteristically participate in the TM movement through individual and group meditation, regular "checking" of the technique at TM centers, and occasional attendance at advanced lectures and residence courses. It is important to recognize that the average meditators' pattern of participation does not directly promote the further numerical growth of the movement.

The second subpopulation constitutes the "inner movement." As an Ideal Type these individuals have soteriological, metaphysical motivations for practicing TM and participating in the movement. The motivations, attitudes, and participation patterns of persons in the inner movement were dominant in the movement during its Spiritual, Mystical and Voguish, Self-Sufficiency Periods. Members of this subpopulation continue to play a crucial role in the movement during the present Secularized, Popular-Religious Period; but their essentially mystical, salvational orientation is now relatively covert. These individuals regard TM primarily as a path to "cosmic consciousness." They evaluate the technique in metaphysical terms according to the Science of Creative Intelligence, which has profound significance for their personal lives. They believe that the TM movement is a viable vehicle for world transformation in keeping with the seven goals of the World Plan:

1. To develop the full potential of the individual.
  2. To improve governmental achievements.
  3. To realize the highest ideal of education.
  4. To solve the problems of crime and all behavior that brings unhappiness to the family of man.
  5. To maximize the intelligent use of the environment.
  6. To bring fulfillment to the economic aspirations of the individual and society.
  7. To achieve the spiritual goals of mankind in this generation.
- (Denniston and McWilliams 1975, p. 344)

The characteristic activities of members of the inner movement include those of average meditators as well as others which directly maintain and expand the TM movement organization. As an Ideal Type persons in the inner movement regularly attend and present advanced lectures and

courses on TM and the Science of Creative Intelligence, learn to become and act as meditation "checkers," participate in residence courses as students and instructors, and when possible train to become TM teachers and devote themselves to the movement on a full-time basis.

Empirically, variations and combinations of motivations, attitudes, and participation patterns in the TM movement exist which are not adequately characterized by these two idealized models. But this limitation is inherent in the idealization strategy, which simplifies complex phenomena for purposes of analysis (see Weber 1949, p. 90). Although the idealized model of two subpopulations in the movement has this limitation, it can contribute to an understanding of certain crucial relationships in the movement facilitating its growth and development. For example, this heuristic model explains the high level of dedication, characteristic of members of evangelical religious sects, among "inner movement" persons working to spread the practice of TM. Given the movement's present secularized and popularized recruitment strategy, one can also understand their assertion that they are merely teaching a method of deep rest to individuals (average meditators) who are apparently uninterested in deriving more than that from the technique.

At this point in the TM movement's development the two subpopulations of active meditators make important complementary contributions to the movement's maintenance and growth. The average meditators lend the credibility to the secularized, practical image of TM that is basic to its current broad appeal. Much of the average meditators' significance for the movement lies in their fulfilling the image of "worldly, active, serious-minded persons" described by TM spokespersons as the "average individuals" interested in TM. While the average meditators legitimize the conventional image and practical appeal of the technique, the inner movement is essential to capitalize on that image and appeal. The inner movement supplies the man-hours and dedication that actualizes the TM movement's potential for growth. The designation "inner movement" reflects my belief that within the larger TM movement this subgroup possesses the distinctive characteristics associated with a social movement or instance of collective behavior (cf. Smelser 1962, p. 8).

## **Conclusions and projections**

In this essay I have endeavored to describe and explain the growth and present status of the TM movement with reference to three periods in its

development and two subpopulations of participants. There are four assets or characteristics of the TM movement which in my opinion have contributed most significantly to its success in this country. First, the TM movement has consistently adhered to the tried-and-proven formula of popular religion in this country (see Schneider and Dornbusch 1958), emphasizing individualism, reductionism, optimism, and mentalism (Woodrum 1975, pp. 15-56). Second, its leadership rests in a forceful, charismatic individual capable of inspiring the devotion of the inner-movement subpopulation. Third, the movement has effectively employed the strategy of organizational specialization and ready utilization of communication and public-relations technology. And fourth, the leadership of the movement has shown considerable flexibility and pragmatism. The leadership has initiated and coordinated recruitment strategies and various interpretations of TM and has developed organizational systems when those strategies and interpretations have brought results. It has been prompt either to abandon previous strategies, interpretations, and systems when they ceased working or to isolate them in separate organizational arms when they remained viable for only a segment of the movement. It appears that decisions about strategies and programs to maintain and encourage further growth of the movement have been rationalized to an important extent.

Before concluding this study it might be appropriate to venture a few projections concerning the future of the TM movement. First, I would anticipate that the current popularizing trend in the movement will continue, with a growing acceptance of TM and the SCI by established sectors of technologically advanced societies. This is certainly likely in the United States. Second, the tactic of developing separate organizational arms of the movement for specific populations and functions can be expected to continue. This practice will be continued by the movement's pragmatic leadership because it has been employed successfully in the past.

Although these strategies have served the TM movement well heretofore, I anticipate that eventually they will dialectically inhibit the further growth of the movement. This paradoxical effect will result, I would suggest, when two processes presently embryonic in the movement have developed sufficiently.

The first of these processes is the erosion of the inner movement's dedication to the spread of TM because of the progressive instrumentalization of the technique by the movement's leadership. In popularizing

TM the leaders of the movement are severing the technique from its original metaphysical interpretation. Eventually this separation will advance to the point that the subpopulation of the movement now dedicated to expanding TM on the basis of those metaphysical ties will find little connection between their underpaid work for the movement and achieving the metaphysical ends they are seeking. The movement will then begin suffering from a lack of what has been one of its strongest assets, a large number of highly motivated inner-movement workers.

The second of the dialectical hazards in the movement's future will result from the strategy of organizational specialization. The organizational proliferation of this international movement is accelerating, and it is doubtful whether Maharishi or any central authority will long be able to unite and coordinate its widely dispersed efforts. If the predicted shortage of workers in local centers comes about, the organizations of the TM movement will become top heavy and lose their flexibility and cohesion. But this grim forecast may fail to do justice to the resourcefulness of this particular social movement. In summary, I anticipate that the TM movement will stabilize as a denominational popular religion.

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