

Airborne Again

Bigger and zanier than ever, the Transcendental Meditation movement has some lofty plans, but always at a price BY JOHN SEDGWICK



Students practice levitation at the Maharishi University of Management in Fairfield, Iowa.

From a distance, the Golden Domes of Pure Knowledge rise up from the campus like a pair of gilded breasts. Strangely seductive, they are an apt symbol of this singular institution of higher learning amid the cornfields of Fairfield, Iowa. For this is the Maharishi University of Management (MUM), founded by the Indian guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi of Transcendental Meditation fame, and its concentration is *not* in business (as the name suggests) but in such unusual academic fields as the Science of Creative Intelligence and the Maharishi Vedic Approach to Health. "Fairfield is a fair field in a fair field," Maharishi once mused about the unlikely location, although he might simply have been conveying his delight at the purchase price. In taking over what remained of bankrupt Parsons College for \$2.5 million back in 1974, says one former Maharishi associate, "we got a beautiful, ready-to-go college for 4 cents on the dollar."

For its 680 students, MUM has posted comforting photos of the gnomelike Maharishi in virtually every classroom and, to conform with the ancient astrological principles of the Hindu scriptures called the Vedas, from which the word *Vedic* is de-

rived, has blocked off all the campus's southern entrances. Still, I've visited nicer campuses. Everywhere paint is peeling. The walkways are rubble. And I have never seen so many junk cars at a university.

Just to notice such things may make me an infidel among all the true believers, and I half expect the students to come after me with rocks. One disillusioned former Maharishi follower named Susan Shumsky, who spent twenty-one years in the movement before going on to write *Divine Revelation*, a cautionary guide to cultlike religions, calls Fairfield "Fearfield" for all the creepy conformity it seems to inspire. "They're like the walking dead," she says of the meditators. "Total zombies." In town the farmers call the meditators "roos," as in gurus, and they tell wild stories of roos getting so jazzed up in the domes that they can't keep their cars on the road afterward, or walking around town dressed like mummies, terrified of sunlight. But then native Fairfieldians are bound to be a little upset to see Indian-style rooftops come to nearly outnumber corn silos, tandoori chicken take over from barbecue and a Maharishi acolyte nearly unseat Fairfield's twenty-four-year mayor in the last election.

The meditators never meant to take (continued on page 181)

Social Studies

(continued from page 172) over the town. It just happened. As Muslims are drawn to Mecca and children to Disney World, the members of the MUM community were drawn here to the two puffy domes—one for men, one for women—to practice the meditation that is so central to their lives it goes beyond sex, food, sleep or any other of the usual cravings of college kids. Twenty-four-year-old Nitya Huntley, a master's candidate and a part-time model, meditates four hours a day in the women's dome. "Meditation leaves you feeling so completely unbounded and refreshed," she says. "It helps not only me but society to create peace in the environment." It blisses everybody out—from the professors in their Moonie-like two-piece suits on down.

Sylvia Valentine, a 23-year-old senior, transferred to MUM from the more prestigious Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, but she is much happier here. "Everybody is so honest, so genuine, no masks, so real," she gushes. She recently ended a three-year relationship with her boyfriend, but the breakup has been great, too. "It's opened up an opportunity for me to explore my own avenues, my own heart and my friends. It's been all this light and so much fun and real happiness since that relationship stopped."

She never felt sad? The question makes her pause for a second or two, unhappiness being an alien thought to a TM-er. "I felt a grieving in my heart, but it dissipated with time."

Do you hear that? The constant joy? In TM-speak, this is known as "bubbling bliss." It's what brings everyone under the big top of the Golden Domes, or so I imagine, for hundreds of meditators skip the education part altogether and come to Fairfield just to enter the domes and be happy, happy, happy. Many of these New Age pilgrims live in the 200 mobile homes crammed into a weedy campus lot called, without irony, Utopia Park. "Meditating makes the world seem brighter," says Barbara Malone, 47, who moved into a Utopia Park mobile home with her husband three years ago. "It's like you're see-

ing everything through rosy glasses."

Yes, TM, that '60s conduit to cosmic consciousness, is still with us. Not only that—it's better than ever. No longer does TM merely allow the mind to achieve tranquility through the dreamy repetition of a

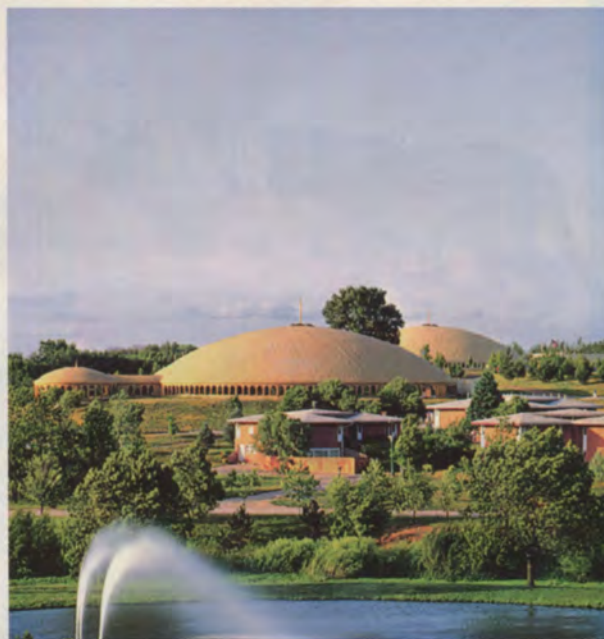
few varsity teams are called the Flyers. And Maharishi would have you believe that these Sidhis control the fate of nations. The Sidhis' brain waves (or something) supposedly create a kind of force field for good. Why else would the only sign of

discord I could detect on campus be the graffiti PEACE scrawled on a Plexiglas window by the library? This is called "the Maharishi Effect," and if you doubt its power (an awkward thing to do at MUM), take a look at the article by several MUM faculty members in the December 1988 issue of Yale's *Journal of Conflict Resolution*. There are enough graphs, mathematical formulas and statistics in there to fry a skeptic's eyeballs, and they all go to prove that when a group of Sidhis—think of them as spiritual marines—went to work in Jerusalem during the Israeli-Lebanese war of 1982 to 1983, tensions in the region subsided markedly. There are higher-ups in the TM movement who will swear that Sidhis also helped bring down the Berlin Wall, reduce crime in various American cities, lower traffic fatalities and spur on the post-1982 bull market. That's why they submitted a 412-page report formally proposing to President Bush that he allocate \$1 billion to the TM-Sidhi program. They're still waiting for the money.

Like most people, I had thought TM was over, gone the way of the Hare Krishnas and extra-wide ties while the country moved on to more electrifying theologies, such as those of the recently departed Heaven's Gate crowd and the so-called wackos in Waco. TM was big in the '60s and '70s, after the Beatles made a pilgrimage to Maharishi's retreat in India—only to quietly withdraw after John Lennon caught the supposedly celibate Mr. Yogi making eyes at Mia Farrow. Maharishi twice went on Merv Griffin, the Oprah of the day, and won over Mary Tyler Moore, the Seinfeld. At TM's height in the mid-'70s, 4 percent of Americans practiced it, according to one Gallup poll. But things had seemed quiet on the TM front since that time.

Then I started to notice something peculiar: Many of the writers whose books seem

The Golden Domes of Pure Knowledge at the Maharishi University of Management



Sidhis will have the "strength of elephants," the TM-ers say; they'll pass through walls, become invisible and, on a good day, fly.

personal mantra. That's the old, reasonably modest TM, which is far behind us. TM can now do much, much more. Indeed, the organization, run from the Netherlands by the 86-year-old Maharishi, has had enormous success within the U.S. book-publishing industry. It has global business interests, an extensive political network and, breathtakingly, plans to rebuild every edifice in the world according to Vedic architectural principles.

There's more: Reflecting TM's newly expanded aspirations, an advanced meditator—or Sidhi, in the lingo—can soon expect to wield the "strength of an elephant" and have the ability to pass through walls, become invisible and, on a good day, fly. The MUM view book shows three of them hovering in the air in the lotus position. Without meaning to be funny, the university's

to be permanently installed atop the *New York Times* best-seller list have a TM connection, in some cases a powerful one, that links them not just to the regular practice of meditation but to Maharishi's inner circle. It was as if they were all members of a cabal, their flesh tattooed in code. Maharishi has remained out of the United States for more than two decades—he has lived



HarperCollins, says the first book has sold some 6 million copies in hardcover, more than any other nonfiction book in history. Gray learned a lot from the master about how to build a mass movement and establish himself as a global authority, no matter how limited his expertise. (Gray's M.A. is in Maharishi's Science of Creative Intelligence, and his Ph.D. came via a correspondence course from Columbia Pacific University.) Gray spent nine years in the TM movement during the '70s, several of them as Maharishi's esteemed "skin boy," carrying the near sacred deer-skin on which Maharishi always sat to insulate himself, it was said, from negative vibrations. "I was like Maharishi's son,"

Left: Harold Bloomfield, left, with Maharishi in 1975. Below: Telegroup headquarters was built according to Vedic architectural principles.

since 1990 in the Netherlands—but his philosophy continues to have a grip on the American culture.

Consider Deepak Chopra, M.D., the New Age spiritualist whose nineteen books, such as *Quantum Healing and Ageless Body*, *Timeless Mind*, have sold nearly 10 million copies in English alone. Maharishi plucked the Indian-born Chopra from obscurity to exalt him as the "Lord of Immortality" in the TM movement because he did such a fine job of making TM respectable to the West. When Chopra split with the master in the early 1990s, TM-ers claim, he took Maharishi's ideas with him. "Deepak's knowledge is totally, utterly and completely Maharishi's knowledge," says Robert Winqvist, the former vice president of Maharishi International University, as MUM was originally called, who says the intellectual resources of the university were made available to Chopra for his early books. Those books also acknowledge Huntley Dent, whose "literary skills continue to guide my every effort." Before going Hollywood a few years ago, Dent was a longtime member of the *purusha*, celibate monks who are the ultimate TM devotees.

Next, there's the so-called relationship guru, John Gray, the author of *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* and its countless spin-offs, whose publisher,



Many of the writers whose books top the *New York Times* best-seller list have a TM connection that links them to Maharishi's inner circle.

Gray proudly tells me from a producer's studio, where he dispenses media interviews in twenty-minute blocks. "He once told me that in ten years everything would be mine." He adds pointedly, "I didn't hear him say that to anyone else."

Gray's ex-wife, Barbara De Angelis, who likewise learned the skills of self-promotion from the master, has produced such relationship guides as *How to Make Love All the Time* and *Secrets About Men Every Woman Should Know*. However, she argues that the real trampoline for all the

writers was not Maharishi but one another. "The network of writers from TM is like one of those charts you see in *Entertainment Weekly*," she says. De Angelis started a seminar business with Gray, and she drove the Yale-trained psychiatrist turned TM-er Harold Bloomfield to his first radio show. Bloomfield officiated at De Angelis and Gray's wedding and cowrote a string of self-help books, culminating in *Hypericum (St. John's Wort) & Depression*, which launched Saint-John's-wort, the herbal version of Prozac, in the United States. He has sold 6 million copies altogether.

There are other TM hangers-on, such as Herbert Benson, of *The Relaxation Response*, the huge-selling generic meditation

guide that TM-ers claim is nothing but a rip-off of TM; and Peter McWilliams, who has written a ton of spiritual-advice books in the *Life 101* series; and Philip Goldberg, who wrote *The Intuitive Edge*; and Wayne Dyer, of *Your Erroneous Zones*; and Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, the motivational speakers who have produced the latest mass-market publishing phenom, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. In short, TM might have mutated a bit as it shifted to new host bodies, but the virus is very much alive.

Once I started to scratch around, I found that TM had insinuated itself into other realms of business, too. Apple Computer's Steven Jobs, for instance, practiced TM. So did Clint Eastwood, Beach Boy Mike Love, *Green Acres*' Eddie Albert and Lotus founder Mitch Kapur, although he was so disillusioned by the experience that he has funded the cult-tracking Web site trancenet.org. Other TM-ers, with tighter, happier links to the TM organization, have gone on to make fortunes in business and have helped bankroll the movement as their way of saying thanks. Recently, with a little exaggeration, *Wired* magazine dubbed Fairfield "Silicorn Valley" for the half dozen high-flying entrepreneurial start-ups founded by MUM graduates. The biggest are in the new field of international "call-back" telephone services, which allow individuals to pay low U.S. rates on international calls even if they

originate in foreign countries. That is now a multibillion-dollar industry dominated by two Fairfield firms, USA Global Link and Telegroup. "TM has been essential to our business success," says Fred Gratzon, Telegroup's founder. Like Chris Hartnett at USA Global Link, he hires mostly TM-ers and tapped the global TM movement for his international sales force.

Other TM-inspired businesses are screwier. After MUM, Robert Winquist cornered the market in children's stickers. "I'm the number one children's-sticker guy in the U.S. right now," he practically shouts to me over the phone, still high from his morning meditation. "You could call me Mr. Sticker. And you know why? Great stickers have soul! And I give my stickers soul because I'm in touch with my soul! I've generated a force field of purity, integrity and right action in my life."

Such conversations make one wonder, What goes on inside those domes? Entry is granted only to those bearing special bar-coded badges, which are carefully scrutinized at the door. Yet on campus the PR representative who takes charge of me—his name is Harry Bright—announces that I will be allowed the rare privilege of looking inside the domes during the evening session. The TM movement being what it is, I assume that the decision has come down from the highest echelon, but I don't ask and Bright doesn't say. He says only that I should meet him promptly at five o'clock at the president's mansion and he will escort me in. One does not come late to an appointment in Nirvana, and believe me, I arrive promptly at five o'clock. When Bright drives me toward the dome, I see a number of grown men sprinting to the door, plainly terrified of being locked out of Heaven. Bright parks, and we make our way to the back of the dome. He unlocks the entrance, then leads me through an anteroom, where we stop before another locked door. He whispers that we should wait a few minutes until the meditators inside have settled down. Gradually, some mild rustling noises give way to silence, and Bright inserts his key into the lock. As he eases the door open, I am surprised by how hard my heart is thumping.

The writers who gravitated toward Maharishi must have felt a similar curiosity. How could they not have wanted to have a peek at the wizard behind the curtain? Eventually, the West would become littered with gurus—the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh of Rajneeshpuram, Oregon (until his deportation for conducting INS-dodging weddings); the baby-faced teenager Mahara Ji; Baba Ram Dass, the Timothy Leary side-

kick formerly called Richard Alpert. But Maharishi had something extra. The son of a schoolteacher, he had trained in physics, then studied under the celebrated yogi Guru Dev, whose hallowed memory the organization still honors. According to TM legend, Maharishi spent two years in a cave in the Himalayas preparing his message for the planet. He wore white robes; his skin smelled sweet; he carried flowers (but no money); he rode in a Mercedes; he seemed never to sleep yet was always on, always ready to expound eternal verities in his oddly high-pitched voice.

Entranced, the writers flitted about Europe with Maharishi from one out-of-season resort (where rates were low) to the next, teaching TM to hordes of eager students, making big plans that never quite came off, meditating endlessly, eyeing one another rivalrously and, since celibacy was supposedly the way to true wisdom, coupling only on the sly. The best among them, like John Gray—or Johnny, as he was called—were so devoted to the master, they coupled riot at all, for those who could maintain celibacy were rewarded with special marks on their ID cards. For nine years, Gray went celibate for the master. He says that, by the end, his sweat smelled of semen. But that was a good thing. "Semen in men is the source of certain powers," he says. If the semen was retained, those powers grew. Some days, when Gray sweats profusely, he claims, he smells of semen even now.

To be with Maharishi was not so much to be part of a fixed program of cosmic enlightenment, enticing as that might sound, as it was to be in on a roving bull session, with Maharishi at the hub. His conversation traipsed from science to literature to religion to philosophy with an air of mystical authority only enhanced by the giggles that were widely imitated throughout the movement. Yet, as far as the talk ranged, the true topic was one that was invariably closest to his listeners' hearts. It was the listeners themselves. More than that, it was their profundity, their innate wisdom, their celestial beauty and—commerce ap-



His Holiness Maharishi Mahesh Yogi

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A recent fund-raising ad in the *International Herald Tribune*

Veda Land, a TM theme park, is supposed to open in Niagara Falls, complete with rides, exhibits, a convention center and a Tower of Peace.

parently never being far from Maharishi's thoughts—their ultimate success. Gray makes no bones about this. "Maharishi promised what he called creative intelligence, and that is how to create what you want," he says. "TM teaches you how to have a thought and make it come true. That's what I learned from Maharishi, and I still benefit from it."

Hooked on their growing power, the writers stayed and stayed, drawn off by Maharishi to one little project or another that would save the world or cultivate their talents. He had an uncanny hold over his starry-eyed followers. At the height of his popularity in the '70s, Doug Henning was probably the world's most famous magician, appearing regularly on national TV and in huge shows in Las Vegas. But Henning had been introduced to TM by De Angelis (whom he eventually married, before she took up with Gray), and he met Maharishi in 1975. "The moment I saw him," Henning has said, "I knew that he knew the truth of life." In 1987, after Maharishi asked Henning to take on the project of creating a TM theme park called Veda Land, the magician performed the ultimate vanishing act: He disappeared entirely into the TM movement, never performing in public again.

Besides encouraging the writers' aspirations, Maharishi provided a unique model of success, in which every idea, no matter how cockamammy, is pushed to the absolute

limit. Take Veda Land. Originally planned for Orlando, Florida, not far from Disney World, it is now supposedly going to open in Niagara Falls, Ontario, complete with rides, exhibits, a convention center, a university and a Tower of Peace, where world leaders will gather to settle political disputes. And TM itself has been expanded to the point where it is the answer to every question, physical and metaphysical, asked and unasked. At MUM there are vast charts everywhere showing that the transcendent consciousness accessed through TM is the unifying force flowing through absolutely everything in the universe, from the DNA in our cells to all the world's governments to the gravitational attraction between large bodies. TM is what physicists would call the Theory of Everything—with a vengeance. And the students believe it completely. "The unified-field chart breaks down each subject to subtler and subtler levels," says MUM

skin. "I feel like a guru; yes, I do," Gray admits. "I'm a teacher. I teach the world." Under Maharishi, he says, he achieved "God consciousness," "unity consciousness" and "Brahman consciousness," a kind of spiritual Triple Crown that allows him to connect to everyone everywhere on the deepest level. "I've never met a person I couldn't relate to," Gray says. "Expansion of consciousness, man, that's what makes a best-seller."

If, on the publishing front, Maharishi has served mainly to inflate the egos of the writers, on the medical front he has had more pervasive effects. On its face, the Ayurvedic medicine of ancient India, which he has tirelessly promoted, looks a lot like a medical version of astrology, as everybody's psychophysiology is characterized by a balance among three *doshas*. (People with a *pitta dosha* imbalance, for example, are fiery and ulcer-prone; *vata*

rishi, that truth will take you only so far. According to Chopra, when Maharishi dropped to the floor with a heart attack in India ten years ago, he summoned a Western-trained heart specialist, Chopra's father, to treat his condition.

Despite breaking with Maharishi, Chopra has insisted, as he did in a faxed statement to me, that he has only "good feelings" for the master. (Ever the marketer, Chopra refused, through his publicist, to be interviewed for this article unless I added a sidebar on his Primordial Sound Meditation or his new Chopra Center for Well-Being in La Jolla, California.) Still, Chopra has removed all seven glowing references to Maharishi in *Quantum Healing*, and he also spiked the dedication, which had read, "With a full heart and deepest thanks to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi." For his part, Maharishi has banned all of Chopra's subsequent books from the MUM library. "It's the archetypal story," says Janet Di Giovanna, a TM follower who knows both men, "of the son who exceeds the father."

"I feel like a guru," Gray admits. "Expansion of consciousness, man, that's what makes a best-seller."

senior Sylvia Valentine, "until you get down to the source, which is the unified field of consciousness." Really? "Physics has found that it is true," Valentine responds solemnly. "But I'm sorry, I'm not a physicist, so I can't go into details."

Eventually, Maharishi pushed his ideas so far that his followers were forced to choose between Maharishi and reality, and many of the writers bid the yogi adieu. For Peter McWilliams, the break came in the fall of 1977. He had been assured by Maharishi that he would achieve cosmic consciousness after eight years of regular meditation, but the eight years were up and his consciousness seemed no more cosmic than ever. Now he was in New York for what was billed as a demonstration of yogic flying, yet the demonstrators were merely talking about the flying. "I kept saying, 'OK, it's time for the demonstration now,'" McWilliams recalls. "'Please, do the demonstration.'" Finally, the demonstrators admitted that they weren't sufficiently advanced to show him. They'd be embarrassed. Sorry. McWilliams quit the movement that day. "I just walked away," he says.

When the writers left, some set up empires like Maharishi's, selling their ideas through a network of followers. But now they were the ones perched on the deer-

types are nervous and inclined toward cardiac arrhythmias.) Impressively, Ayurvedic practitioners can identify your *dosha* just by taking your pulse. They then prescribe a host of unlikely, and often expensive, remedies, including a variety of cleansing enemas. Telegroup's Fred Gratton goes in for enemas regularly at the Raj, an upscale Ayurvedic spa in Fairfield. "You learn the dance pretty quick," he says with a smile, lifting his leg to demonstrate.

The details of Ayurvedic medicine tend to dissolve into a haze of Sanskrit, but the essential ideas now have a surprising hold on American culture. Credit TM or New Age philosophy or medical research (or a combination of all three), but nowadays many people believe that illness results as much from "stress," however poorly defined, as from microbes; that minds are inextricably linked to bodies in maintaining health; and that meditation promotes the kind of wellness that leads to a long and fruitful life. These are all Maharishi's ideas, as declaimed for the past decade through the good offices of Deepak Chopra. A cover boy for both *Time* and *Newsweek* in the past two years, Chopra may well have displaced Marcus Welby as America's preeminent M.D. There is probably some truth to the idea that a healthy mind makes for a healthy body. But, even for Maha-

Some of the TM-ers who have gone on to fortunes in business have been more loyal to the cause. Last fall one of Fairfield's most prosperous meditators, Chris Hartnett of USA Global Link, headed up a group of donors who have pledged \$440 million in stock to promote what the movement regards as the next great wave of TM-influenced thinking, and here is where things get a little wacky. The movement plans to remake every building in the world in accordance with the ancient Indian architectural principles of Sthapatya-veda. A few of these Sthapatya-vedic structures have already started to pop up on the outskirts of Fairfield along streets with distinctly un-Iowan names, such as Mandala Avenue, and in other TM outposts around the nation. The buildings look like Hindu temples, complete with urnlike ornaments on the rooftops, but the psychically important elements, supposedly, are the eastern entrances, the central atria, the fenced boundaries and a certain height-to-width ratio.

Bevan Morris, the current president of MUM and a member of TM's elite Council for Supreme Intelligence, as it modestly refers to itself, has just finished consulting with Wall Street investment houses about ways to leverage the \$440 million when I reach him by telephone at New York's Waldorf Astoria hotel. He is not daunted by the task of redoing all the world's architecture, although he admits that "it will take some time to rebuild New

York City," with its unpropitious north-south central axis. How about the White House? "It faces north," he notes, having researched the matter, "but the president often enters from the south. That is not a good thing." He has written President Clinton, recommending an adjustment, but so far has received no response. Before hanging up, I ask Morris about something that has been bothering me. Isn't Sthapatya-veda going to be a tough sell in China, which already has a psychic architectural system, fēng shui, that at times requires the very southern entrances Sthapatya-veda would ban? "We will need to have some discussion with the Chinese about that," Morris replies. At Veda Land, perhaps.

In downtown Fairfield, a tiny outfit with the presumptuous name of Maharishi Global Construction is at work to bring Maharishi Vedic Centers, built according to Sthapatya-vedic principles, to all 435 congressional districts in the United States. Ground has not yet been

for me in his well-appointed office. TM figured heavily in his presidential platforms, although I have to prod Hagelin to acknowledge it. The idea was that meditation and Ayurvedic-style preventive medicine would cut the national health budget in half and the TM-Sidhi program would help out with crime and national defense. As he speaks, Hagelin takes on the mannequin aspect of all TM-ers, and I have difficulty concentrating. The only time he comes to life is when I ask him an oddball question about his divorce and he calls his ex-wife a "great girl to visit—but I wouldn't want to live with her." It's a perfectly natural comment. That's why it's so striking. In all my interviews with TM-ers, it is the one time I hear anyone make a candid remark.

The dome is the size of a small sports stadium, and inside, across the floor, there are bodies, hundreds and hundreds of them, all grown men, turned sideways to me to face east. I watch, transfixed, from a

Yogic flyers hop around on mattresses like frogs, smiling blissfully. None stay off the ground for very long.

broken on any of them, though. Each center would have an adjoining residential area to provide a kind of Sthapatya-vedic dormitory for the faithful. Each would also house a TM office, an Ayurvedic health information office and, significantly, a suite for TM's political arm, the Natural Law Party.

TM has big-time political aspirations, but as with so many of its endeavors, it has gotten nowhere with them. John Hagelin, the chairman of the MUM physics department, has twice run for president under the Natural Law Party banner, and with 39,212 votes, he finished ahead of Lyndon LaRouche in 1992. He went on to garner 113,668 in 1996. (The latter figure might be a good guess at the number of TM loyalists nationwide.) Hagelin says about 400 other Natural Law candidates ran for office in 1996, including Fred Gratzon, who loyally competed for the U.S. Senate in Iowa and received 4,248 votes. No NLP candidates won, although the NLP says they received 760,000 votes altogether.

A Harvard Ph.D. in physics with a special interest in sound reproduction, Hagelin is so well modulated that I have the feeling I am encountering him on a high-end stereo TV as he lays all this out

comfortable chair on the dome stage. I say these are grown men, but there is something so eerie about the vast assemblage arrayed at my feet that I cannot be sure they are truly human. In their loose clothing, some with ski hats, they sit propped up on legless chairs that in turn rest on thick foam mattresses. A huge, incongruous American flag hangs from the ceiling; flags of dozens of other countries (in the global TM empire, presumably) are arranged around the tops of the walls. The windows have been draped with golden cloth, and in the tawny light, I think I have entered some vast cave where the bodies of meditators are stashed while their souls (or minds) fly like bats into the ether. But that is as close to an awestruck thought as I get, for mostly I think, This is the biggest nonevent I have ever witnessed. I search everywhere for signs of the paranormal, but aside from the sheer scale of the thing, zip. Everyone remains visible (as far as I can tell), no one walks through walls, and all butts remain planted firmly on seats. If the torsos weren't vertical, I would think this was nap time. In fact, the only movement I detect involves a man down to my right who is bending rhythmically at the waist, over and over, like a mental case.

Bright lets me watch for a few minutes, then signals that it is time to go. Outside, I ask him what made that the *advanced* meditation course. It looked like garden-variety meditation to me. "It's a process," Bright explains. "They're working up to the next level." To flying? "Actually, it's more like hopping. Kind of like a frog." I tell him I'd love to come back to see that, but Bright says no, sorry—the video on yogic flying that I bought at the campus bookstore will give me a good idea of what happens. I watch that when I get home. It is narrated by a cheery Doug Henning, and, yes, it shows a number of yogic flyers hopping around on mattresses exactly like frogs. None stay off the ground for very long, of course. But they are able to bounce a couple of feet into the air or go bounding down a kind of landing strip of mattresses, all the while smiling blissfully, which is an achievement of some kind. It's all quite athletic, and TM sometimes stages competitions for yogic flyers in the broad jump, the sprint and the high jump, events that are termed the Yogic Flying Competition.

Michael Persinger, Ph.D., a Canadian neuroscientist who has studied the neurophysics involved in TM, says that the hopping results from benign electrical discharges in the temporal lobes of the meditators' brains. "There's an electrical stimulation down the sciatic nerve that tightens the buttocks, and up the meditators go," he says. While they are often pleasurable, such mental fireworks in deep meditation aren't always good for you. A number of TM-ers suffer from a paradoxical condition known as relaxation-induced anxiety (RIA). It's a little like the experience of freaking out in a sensory-deprivation chamber: Some minds, apparently, resist being emptied out. The physical manifestations of RIA range from annoying tics to full-blown convulsions, and the mental problems can run from obsessive thoughts to hallucinations. Shortly after one student, Patrick Ryan, started TM, he found that at times his body shook uncontrollably. "I'd just start twitching," he says. "It was like I had Tourette's. I could hardly remember my name sometimes." To chill him out, his teachers prescribed...more meditation. Remarkably, Ryan stuck with the program for ten years. It has taken him five years more, plus medication, to recover. He sued the TM organization, agreed to a sealed settlement and founded an organization called TM-Ex to help other unhappy TM customers.

One reason a story like Ryan's is note-

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worthy is that it suggests a truth no official in the TM movement ever comes close to volunteering. Namely, that TM is not for everybody. It should come as no surprise. What is? But for the organization, such a revelation poses a profound dilemma. If TM might be harmful in some cases, how could it be the one true way?

Then there is the "brand-name problem" described by Jim Siegelman, a particularly astute observer of new religious movements and the coauthor of *Snapping*, a book about escalating cult fanaticism. It is all too apt that TM stands not just for transcendental meditation but also for trademark. Transcendental Meditation is registered with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, as are virtually all of Maharishi's offerings. Indeed, the TM-Sidhi program that is a major feature of university life in Fairfield appears in the MUM catalog with a tiny circled *R* after it, surely one of the few times that a registered-

and universities supposed to be happy to see their ideas disseminated? Shouldn't true knowledge be free?

But TM is not a science, no matter how much Maharishi's lieutenants insist it is. It is a religion, complete with prayer (meditation), holy places (those domes), a creed (the whole TM cosmology), devotional objects (the ubiquitous images of Maharishi), a saint (Guru Dev) and a deity (the transcendent consciousness). That's what a New Jersey district court ruled back in 1977, when some individuals objected to the teaching of TM and its Science of Creative Intelligence in New Jersey public schools. Judge H. Curtis Meanor declared that TM courses "are all religious in nature" and their presence in public schools thus violates the separation of church and state. He noted, for example, that when TM students are given their mantras, they are obliged to chant an invocation in Sanskrit "to lotus-born Brahma the Creator,

Williams points out, TM's evolutionary history makes sense only when the movement is viewed as a business enterprise. Valuable as the original TM may have been, it was a loss leader. Once meditators obtained their mantras, TM never got another dime out of them, but the meditators continued to hang around the TM centers as if they belonged, creating a terrible drain on the organization. "It was like unlimited free checking," McWilliams says. "TM was being grandfathered to death." Thus the new, improved and higher-priced version, which culled the most committed and then persuaded them to pay thousands for the advanced courses. Later the pricey Maharishi Ayur-Ved medicines added a merchandising arm, and now the Sthapatya-vedic residences offer the biggest-ticket buying opportunities of all.

Everybody's entitled to make a buck. The problems with TM lie in what economists call the externalities, or unfortunate side effects of the business. By basing its whole enterprise on a falsehood, TM has encouraged that streak of messianic irrationality that has always been a part of the American personality but that now, with all the dial-a-psychics, neo-Nazis, creationists and alien abductees, sometimes seems to be on the verge of eclipsing the rest. And as one of the first of the so-called new religions, TM offered both a target and a technique for less scrupulous gurus to follow. (In fact, they often ran off with some of TM's customers.)

Finally, as with all capitalist enterprises, TM has worked out a lot better for those on the top than for those on the bottom. Maharishi is sitting on a global empire said to be worth more than \$3 billion. He resides in Vlodrop, in the Netherlands, the home of another MUM. Despite his advancing years, the organization professes no concern about naming a successor, because, Bevan Morris informs me, the Maharishi has been recorded for years on videotape. In that medium, he will live on forever. Maharishi's followers, meanwhile, inhabit grim places like those mobile homes in Utopia Park and put their faith in his patent medicines. "I came here because I wanted something more," Barbara Malone tells me, expressing a sentiment that might be shared by TM-ers everywhere. As I look around her narrow metal home, with its many Maharishi Ayur-Ved products on the tiny kitchen table, I have to think that she has ended up with something less. ●

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Maharishi is sitting on a global empire said to be worth over \$3 billion. His followers inhabit mobile homes.

trademark symbol appears in the course offerings of an accredited university.

This was one reason Maharishi's organization was outraged when Herbert Benson published *The Relaxation Response*, which suggested that people could acquire all the benefits of TM without any of TM's proprietary mumbo jumbo, simply by sitting quietly and reciting a common English word, like *peace* or *one*. Such information threatened the franchise. While Benson offers his generic version for the price of a paperback, TM charges \$1,000 per mantra. TM has countered with studies claiming to demonstrate that Benson's stripped-down version isn't nearly as effective as TM in lowering blood pressure, reducing tension and the like. If the vast majority of these studies had not been generated by MUM researchers, often without the strict controls that are standard in quality research, they might have been more persuasive.

If TM were the science it says it is and MUM were a normal university, the publication of *The Relaxation Response* would not have created such a frenzy of resentment. After all, the book validates the merits of meditation, and Benson expresses nothing but admiration for Maharishi, whom he consulted in the course of his research into TM. Aren't scientists

to Vashishtha, to Shakti and his son Parashar" and a variety of other Hindu eminenences. The mantras are all the names of Hindu deities.

Besides turning meditators into half-baked Hindus, TM puts over the lie that its program is based on hard, scientific facts. This makes its followers the firmest kind of adherents, people who allow their faith to shape the totality of their lives and are willing to make almost any sacrifice for the cause. Yet when I ask Harry Bright, the PR officer, for proof of TM's core idea that consciousness is the unifying force, he acknowledges that "there is no physical evidence to support this. We're purely in a theoretical realm here." A fantasy realm is more like it. As the late Heinz Pagels, a prominent physicist who served as executive director of the New York Academy of Sciences, wrote in 1986, "The views expressed in the [TM] literature that purport to find a connection between the recent ideas of theoretical physics and states of consciousness are false and profoundly misleading. No qualified physicist that I know would claim to find such a connection without knowingly committing fraud."

As a religion, TM is a deeply American one that is at times hard to distinguish from straight capitalism. As Peter Mc-