

Introduction

Though there is no consensus regarding a definition of the term new religious movement or an agreed upon set of essential characteristics for the New Religious Movement (NRM) category, if we survey the various analyses of the topic for the last forty years, we find that the Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement most certainly fits inside the discussion. It is decidedly new, having reached its apex in the mid-1970s, and it is also religious, despite its claims to the contrary. Furthermore, as a religion, it is specifically best categorized as a form of Neo-Hinduism in the tradition of Shankara's Advaita Vedanta, and consequently co-relative with such movements as the Vedanta Society and the Self-Realization Fellowship. Like these, it was exported to the West by a Hindu guru, rather than imported by someone from the West.

While describing the development of the TM movement, various analyses of its similarities and differences from other and related NRMs will be shared, as will analyses developed by the academic study of NRMs. Regarding the latter, a continuous theme and thesis here is that the TM movement, as a broad category, contains two populations of supporters: an insider group of committed believers, who not only practice TM but have also accepted Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's philosophy and mission, and the far larger outsider group of casual meditators who learned TM, and may continue to practice it today, but do so on their own, with no commitment to the formal TM organization or Maharishi's Vedic Science. Understanding this division in the demographics of the movement is critical for answering the question: Is TM a religious practice? As we'll see, it most certainly is for the former group and yet not for the second group (a reality the official organization often plays upon to support its claim of being nonreligious). And this separation has numerous repercussions relative to how the TM movement can be described in connection to theories of NRMs.

Speaking in broadly descriptive terms, the TM movement fits easily within two of the eight family groups of NRMs described by J. Gordon Melton (Melton cited in Dawson 2003: 33): Family 5 of the "ancient wisdom family," in that TM is said to derive from the "immemorial" Vedic wisdom of India, and Family 7 of the "Eastern and Middle Eastern family," for the same reason. Note that it also fits within two of Lorne L. Dawson's broad categories, specifically groups associated with Asian traditions and those of the human potential movement (Dawson 1998: 14). Moreover, the TM movement carries such general characteristics of NRMs as that it was begun by a charismatic leader (a key consideration for Eileen Barker 1985); individuals joined it voluntarily; and it offered rewards beyond those of either the traditional faiths of the West or the secular establishment.

If we move our focus from the general to the particular, we still find that the TM movement has a place among NRMs, though at this level of analysis the aforementioned divisions necessarily alter the descriptors. For example, many NRMs sprang up as what the sociologist Robert Bellah has described as successor movements to those of political protest and cultural experimentation in the 1960s, and this was definitely the case for TM insiders, the majority of whom learned TM while college-aged and involved with various aspects of the counterculture. But, it should be noted that the vast majority of those who learned and may still practice TM were not drawn from this group. They *were* and *are* members of the TM movement broadly speaking, but their cultural affiliations remained with the mainstream, and what attracted them to TM dealt more with daily concerns of health and wellness than spirituality or utopianism. Consequently, if we employ a typology of NRMs like Dawson's, based on his one-variable model drawn from Max Weber, which focuses on the "mode of membership" and the "consequent form of [the NRM's] social organization" (Dawson 1998: 35), we find the TM movement is bifurcated into two groups dependent upon their degree of engagement and commitment to the formal organization. Seeking descriptive accuracy, we find useful the categories of William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark (2003: 64), who propose that based on who joins and/or belongs to such groups, three types of NRMs can be identified: audience cults, client cults, and cult movements. The vast majority of TMers fall into the first two of these categories, having joined the movement either in the *audience* of people who simply purchased TM as a product or – with only a bit more commitment – developed a loose *client–consultant* relationship with their local TM center. But in contrast, TM insiders, mostly drawn from the youth culture of the 1960s and early 1970s, deeply embraced Maharishi's teachings, finding meaning and purpose in his Advaita Vedanta philosophy while also enjoying the social rewards of participating in his organization. Consequently, these insiders fall into the last of Bainbridge and Stark's categories, that is, *cult movement*.

Understanding the division between TM insiders and the casual class also influences where we position the TM movement relative to other key descriptions of NRMs. For instance, Roy Wallis (1984, 2003) has offered a tripartite typology of NRMs dependent upon their attitude toward the culture and society in which they emerge. Some NRMs are "affirming" of the values and norms of their host cultures and societies; some are "accommodating," exhibiting only mild dissatisfaction with them; and others are "rejecting" of the views and values of the world around them, sometimes even separating from it. Utilizing these yardsticks, TMers of the *audience cult* and *client cult* varieties, who today may number over 200,000, form a subclass of the *affirming* type, while TM insiders of the *cult*

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movement variety, hoping to generate an Age of Enlightenment with new norms and values, are members of the *accommodating* subclass and number at most a few thousand. In summary, and as we'll see more clearly later, understanding the specific views and commitments of these two subclasses is critical for understanding the TM movement as a new religious movement.

This Element begins in the 1950s, with the circumstances of Maharishi's establishment of the Spiritual Regeneration Movement (SRM), designed to enlighten all humanity. Sections 2 and 3 deal with Maharishi's realization that to accomplish this mission he must recruit and train a large number of teachers, which, by good fortune on his part, he accomplishes by appealing to the youth culture of the 1960s. Sections 4 and 5 cover Maharishi's attempt in the 1970s to distance himself from both spirituality and the counterculture by favoring scientific terminology, emphasizing the health benefits of meditation, and having his followers dress in conservative clothing. Section 5 ends with a discussion of the pivotal court case in New Jersey, in 1976, that identified TM as a religious practice, bringing the movement's heyday to a close. Maharishi's decision to turn his movement inward by asking his followers to move to Fairfield, Iowa, in 1979, along with his development of the TM-Sidhis Program, his first of several ancillary practices to TM, is dealt with in Section 6. Moving into the 1980s and early 1990s, we will discuss splinter groups that broke away from Maharishi, including those of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and Deepak Chopra. The reactions to those apostates by the official TM organization are described in Sections 7 and 8. During the 1990s, Maharishi developed a line of health treatments and medicines based on traditional Indian medicine and collectively labeled them Maharishi Ayur Veda, and Sections 8 and 9 focus on reactions to these new programs from both within and outside Maharishi's organization. Section 10 describes the TM movement as it is today, while also offering analyses of the TM movement in relation to other new religious movements and Neo-Hindu groups.

The authors of this Element, Dana Sawyer and Cynthia Humes, met in 1984 as graduate students in the School of Religion at the University of Iowa, and have carried on a discussion about the TM movement ever since. Sawyer was a member of the TM organization from 1971 to 1983; his understanding of Maharishi's philosophy began during his six months of training in France and Switzerland (1974–5) to become a TM teacher. During that time, and while on additional advanced courses, ending in 1983, Sawyer compiled hundreds of pages of notes taken from Maharishi's lectures (delivered either in person or via videotape), establishing not only a deep understanding of Maharishi's worldview but also an insider's grasp of his organization's operation.

In addition to personal experience with Maharishi and his organization, Sawyer and Humes, who also learned TM, relied for their analyses on extensive published work (in print and online) by and about the TM movement, while also conducting dozens of interviews with TMers, beginning in 1996 and continuing until 2021. In addition, the authors engaged in extensive email and phone correspondence on specific issues – often with key figures of the movement’s history, including Jerry and Debbie Jarvis, Charlie Donahue, Nancy Cooke de Herrera, Gemma Cowhig, Shannon Dickson, Robert McCutchan, Chuck Shipman, Larry Domash, Rick Archer, and John Knapp. Many sources asked that their views be shared anonymously, given either that such comments would irritate close friends or family who remain inside the group or would draw recriminations to themselves if they have remained inside. The authors request that readers understand this call for anonymity – noting that many respondents did not request it and are identified – while also pointing out that he or she can consult the acknowledgments section at the end of this Element for a longer list of primary interviewees and respondents.

1 The Very Beginning of TM

No American sect of an Asian religion or branch of what is commonly called the New Age has ever been as successful as the TM movement. During its heyday, the decade between 1968 and 1978, more than two million Americans learned to practice TM and there were TM centers in every major city of the United States and Europe. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1917–2008), the group’s longhaired founder, became the first Indian holy man to appear on the cover of *Time* magazine since Mahatma Gandhi, and appeared as a guest for every talk show host, from Edwin Newman to Johnny Carson. A battalion of movie stars (Mia Farrow, Clint Eastwood), rock stars (the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Doors), professional athletes (Joe Namath, Johnny Bench), and other celebrities endorsed Maharishi’s brand of meditation. Consequently, “What’s your mantra?” became a common question at cocktail parties and TM was a household word. Furthermore, even after its heyday, and even after the death of Maharishi in 2008, the TM organization (TMO) has continued to grow, and the group reports that more than six million people have been trained, today mainly with the help of the David Lynch Foundation.

Why was TM once so popular? Why did its popularity wane? What became of the TMO after its heyday? How is the TM movement similar to and different from other NRMs? How, in particular, is it similar to and different from other Neo-Hindu groups – most of which arose during the 1960s and include the followers of Sri Rajneesh, Swami Satchidananda, Yogi Bhanjan, Swami Muktananda, Amrit

Desai, Sri Chinmoy, Guru Maharaji, and the Hare Krishnas (ISKCON). These are the primary questions we'll explore, unfolding the trends of thought that made the TM movement what it was – and what it became. The overall goal is to give an accurate and measured description of the group's history and significance, while also revealing points of resonance and dissonance with other NRMs. In all regards, the primary focus is on accurate description and assessment, with weighted attention to the TM movement's presence in America, given that the United States is where it has had its greatest success.

Jan Nattier has argued that various forms of Buddhism arrived in America via one of three routes: as imports brought home by Americans who embraced the religion; as exports delivered to the West by evangelical teachers from Asia; and as cultural baggage brought, figuratively speaking, to the United States in the handbags of Asian immigrants (Nattier 1997: 72). In general, Nattier's categories apply equally well to American Hindu and Neo-Hindu groups, with the TM movement specifically an instance of the second type, taking root in America (and elsewhere) via the conscious efforts of its charismatic founder, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (hereafter Maharishi). Later, most Americans would learn TM from other Americans, so there would be an import aspect to the group's profile. But in the beginning it all depended on a young monk from India.

The TM movement had its soft opening in October of 1955, when Mahesh Prasad Varma, only thirty-eight years old, and not yet titled "Maharishi," appeared in Cochin (now Kochi) at what was advertised as "The Great Spiritual Development Conference of Kerala." A souvenir booklet for Varma's talk, printed by supporters, informed attendees that he represented the "Beacon Light of the Himalayas," and would announce "The Dawn of a Happy New Era," brought to the world through "simple & easy methods of Spiritual Sadhana" (Mason 2014: 34). Touted as a spiritual luminary and "Great Seer" (i.e., *maharshi*, later anglicized as "Maharishi"), Varma's impact was entirely modest, and the growth of his movement would be slow during its first two years, hampered by the fact he was delivering a message the audience had heard innumerable times, and would hear again from other speakers at the same conference. Varma was a *brahmacari*, a student monk, in the monastic lineage of Shankara, the well-known ninth-century philosopher of Advaita Vedanta, but this gave Varma little cachet with his countrymen; he wasn't offering a new perspective, as his remarks made clear. "Remember," he told the audience that day, "it is the same age-old voice of eternal peace and happiness which the child of Kerala, the pride of India, Shri Shankara, gave out to the world more than two thousand years ago" (Mason 2014: 34).

However, the fact that his message was stale was remedied two years later, in 1957, when "Maharishi Mahesh Yogi" found a fresh audience in the West.

While appearing in Madras at another religious festival, he announced to a receptive crowd his bold plan to bring the wisdom of the Vedic Tradition to the entire world. Later he would confess he hadn't planned to initiate such a global project, soon to be called the SRM, but the crowd's enthusiasm had inspired him to do so. Consequently, he is reputed by the TMO to have rolled up his few belongings in a carpet and begun his first world tour. Within a year, he had taught his Transcendental Deep Meditation, as he labeled it in the early years, to a few hundred people and had established small meditation centers in Burma, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Hawaii. After Honolulu he headed to the American mainland, arriving in San Francisco on January 29, 1959, but soon moved to Los Angeles, where he established a successful base of operations (Forem 1973: 209).

In LA, Maharishi, surrounded for the first time by mostly white faces, learned quickly what appealed – and didn't appeal – to an American audience, and these lessons formed the foundation for the TM group's first talking points. In line with what Nattier described as originally appealing to American Buddhists of the import type, these first American TMers, largely middle-aged adults of the upper-middle class, placed a premium on such characteristic American values as "individualism, freedom of choice, and personal fulfillment" (Humes 2005: 57). They knew Maharishi was a Hindu monk offering the ancient wisdom of Vedic culture, but they took him at his word when he said that anyone, regardless of their religious views, could practice his meditation without compromising their own views. Furthermore, he assured them he had no plans to become their guru. Each person would simply meditate and then, as they rose further into self-realization, follow the path of their own progress – however they conceived of it – but with the assurance that expanded consciousness would lead them in the right direction. There was no required dogma, no organization to join, and no need for a personal guru. The organization he had started existed only to teach meditation, not to dictate a worldview. In summary, Maharishi learned quickly what attracted those who today fall into the demographic of "spiritual but not religious" and, as we will argue, helped establish it. Moreover, members of his first Western audience were well educated and scientifically minded; consequently, it helped that Maharishi had studied physics at Allahabad University.

What was the nature of Maharishi's meditation practice and how had he learned it? And related to these points, what philosophy was he espousing as the rational foundation for his meditation practice? Dealing with the first question, Maharishi was vague about how he had learned the procedure, usually only remarking that he was passing along the blessings of his master, Swami Brahmananda Saraswati (1871–1953), with whom Maharishi had studied for

thirteen years and whom he referred to as Guru Dev, “Divine Teacher.” Over the years, several conflicting assumptions arose in the TM camp, including: first, that Maharishi had been taught the technique by Brahmananda, who had corrected an ancient form of meditation that had become corrupted over time; second, that Maharishi had invented the technique himself but was given Brahmananda’s blessing to do so; and third, that Maharishi and Brahmananda were both simply passing along the established technique of their monastic lineage. Today, the latter theory is most plausible, but whatever the case, the TM technique has remained consistent over the decades, involving twenty minutes of mentally repeating a mantra twice each day in the morning and evening – a practice that led Maharishi’s students to coin the adage, “TM in the AM and PM.”

Maharishi gave out mantras at the end of a ceremony he called puja, varieties of which are daily occurrences in pious Hindu households. A candle burned in front of a portrait of Guru Dev as Maharishi stood before it, waving incense and making offerings of water, parched rice, sandalwood paste, fruit and flowers, all the while chanting phrases in Sanskrit that sometimes included the names of Hindu gods. Then Maharishi gave the new meditator a mantra (in those days based on their gender, but later based on age), and the initiation was complete. The new initiate then performed a short meditation, and once Maharishi was certain they had practiced correctly, they were free to go home and meditate on their own ever after – with no requirement that they attend further meetings. The entire process took about an hour. But why should such an apparently simple and easy meditation practice be worth bothering with? What did these first meditators hope to gain?

Maharishi explained during his seven lectures leading up to initiation that people commonly suffer because they don’t know who they are. They know themselves as a certain person with a particular gender, personality, and occupation, but they have no idea who they *really* are. Each person, he related, is a composite of two selves: a physical self made up of their mind and body, and a spiritual self that transcends their physical being. While the physical or “relative self,” as Maharishi referred to it, focuses its attention on the concerns of life, such as working and raising a family, the “Absolute Self,” existing at a deeper level of their being, generally goes unnoticed – though it, Maharishi contended, is the foundation of who they are. The problem is that without the experience of the Absolute Self, people lack perspective on what their life is truly about.

Maharishi explained that people vainly look outside themselves for a happiness and illumination that lies silently within everyone residing in the deeper, or higher Self. He maintained that human desire is potentially infinite,

but all things that can be possessed in the physical world are finite – that is, limited by time and space. Doing the math, Maharishi argued that our *infinite* capacity for desiring can never be quenched by owning a series of *finite* objects, no matter how expensive or attractive they might be. Consequently, most people chase after happiness like duped mules, plodding endlessly after a carrot that remains ever out of reach. But – and Maharishi was effusive on this point – if we attain the experience of our absolute Self, we will own the very abode of bliss and fulfillment. Due to its infinite nature, this Self is the only gift that truly keeps on giving. To enjoy *infinitely*, we must experience *infinity*. This was Maharishi’s core message. But how could this deepest level of self be realized?

Information about the Self, he related, is ultimately useless without the direct experience of it. The highest truth is not simply a body of information, but rather a direct, inner, mystical experience of the Self, and when that experience becomes permanent – an inevitable consequence of repeated contact with the Self through meditation – the meditator reaches a state of spiritual enlightenment that Maharishi referred to as Cosmic Consciousness, borrowing a term from Maurice Bucke’s well-known book of that same title (1901). A person might have a clear philosophical understanding of the Self, but theories and notions are as different from it as a cake recipe is from a cake, Maharishi told his audience. The highest truth is the direct experience of the transcendent and absolute Self, hence “Transcendental Meditation.”

Thus far the message may have sounded selfish to some in Maharishi’s first American audience, or at least overly self-focused. It seemed to advocate that a person turn away from the world to meditate, and then, after they had reached enlightenment, to sit smugly within their own bubble of bliss. But Maharishi argued that Cosmic Consciousness – and the inner peace one would feel along the way to reaching it – would not only bring happiness to the individual, but *through* the individual to the entire world. He argued that peace grows in a society through the peace of the individuals who make it up, so if his listeners wanted world peace, they should first find inner peace. “A forest is only as green as the individual trees in the forest are green,” Maharishi explained, adding that as more individuals began to meditate, more “trees in the forest” would become “green,” eventually resulting in the fully green forest of an enlightened society.¹ This was the utopian aspect of Maharishi’s message at that time, an aspect that would be expanded upon and augmented in the years ahead.

Maharishi giggled as he delivered his talks, and his demeanor and charisma made him an excellent advocate for his views. Seated before his students in his

¹ These and other quotes from Maharishi are taken directly from course notes and lectures with the guru himself, and will be recognized by TM teachers.

white robes and flowing beard, he seemed the embodiment of an enlightened sage and, perhaps best of all, he said that anyone could reach the enlightened state of consciousness – the equivalent of being a living Buddha – simply by meditating twice each day. But how, the students wondered, did the technique generate the experience of the deeper Self?

Maharishi explained that his practice was not only easy but also unique, utilizing what he termed the “natural tendency of the mind” (Mahesh Yogi 1963: 49). The mind, he observed, wanders all over the place but never does so aimlessly. The mind might seem to flit here and there without purpose, but actually it always gravitates toward that which offers it “something more.” For instance, it may enjoy reading books but if the books are boring, it will effortlessly drift toward something more attractive. The mind is restless, constantly seeking out what will fulfill it most, but too often settling for temporary pleasures that distract it and ultimately leave a hangover of frustration. In reality, Maharishi contended, it actually wants to experience the boundless root of its own being. That is what the mind is always truly seeking; it wants to know the infinite level of its Self in order to enjoy itself infinitely – all as part of a process of realizing who and what it really is. Furthermore, this restless urge for more, this natural tendency of mind that occurs spontaneously, can be harnessed to allow the mind to travel inward without effort.

Maharishi told his initiates that during meditation, after sitting easily with their eyes closed for half a minute, they should begin thinking their new mantra easily, without concentrating on it. Thinking the mantra easily, he maintained, would cause the mind to stop fixating on outer objects and inner thoughts, becoming free to drift wherever it wished, and when it was completely free, it would drift inward toward its source. No mental object, he explained, is so attractive to the mind as the “source of thought” in the infinite Self. Consequently, by repeating the mantra, the mind, using its “natural tendency,” would drift toward what offers it more – gravitating toward that which offers it *most*, the deep Self. As he often reiterated, “when the mind goes in the direction of the absolute bliss of the transcendent Being, it finds increasing charm at every step of its march. The mind is charmed and is led to the experience of the transcendental Being” (Mahesh Yogi 1963: 49). One only need repeat the mantra over and over effortlessly, creating a sort of drone, letting the mind float where it willed. But what if one unintentionally stopped thinking the mantra during meditation? No problem. Maharishi’s instruction was simply to come back to the mantra as soon as one realized it was gone.

This is TM in a nutshell. However, after their initiation, many of Maharishi’s new students were eager to learn more. As a result, Maharishi expanded upon his philosophical position during the advanced lectures open to initiates (TM meditators) only. During these talks, he elaborated on his

views about the transcendental Self, explaining that it was even grander in nature than he had first let on. He explained that in the same way that we have a transcendental level of our being, so does the universe. Below the surface fluctuations of the cosmos, all of which are bound by time and space, there exists an infinite field of consciousness and energy from which all creation arises. In later TM terminology, this ground of all being is termed the field of Pure Creative Intelligence, but in the early days Maharishi referred to it as Absolute Being or simply Being, positing it as analogous to the ocean from which all waves of creation arise. The waves constitute a multiplicity, but they arise from a singularity and, in fact, they cannot be separated from the ocean. They are part of the ocean's Oneness. There is no impermeable firewall between the transcendent level of *the* Absolute Being and the finite universe that surrounds us. The latter is simply the most manifest level of the former.

Then Maharishi explained the relationship between the Absolute Being and the absolute Self. Reality is a Oneness made up of manifest things that arise from their transcendent source in the Being – and since we too, on the level of our physical selves, are some of the things arising from that transcendental Being, we too are not separate from it. Moreover, given that it is the root of all being, it is the root of *our* being. That said, students came to understand that Maharishi was equating this transcendental level of the universe with what he had termed the deep Self in earlier lectures. Therefore, when a person experienced their deep Self, they would not only experience the transcendent level of *their* being, they would also experience the transcendental level of *all* being. People do not have their own private deep Selves, he explained, each separate from the other; their deep Self is *the* deep Self of all people – and of all creation, a sort of world soul analogous to what Emerson termed the Over-Soul. The benefit of this ontology, Maharishi contended, is that when a person knows their deep or absolute Self, they are in spiritual resonance with all reality because the universe, transcendent and imminent, is a Oneness that they are in tune with at the root of their being. “In enlightenment,” Maharishi explained, the meditator therefore feels the “support of almighty Nature” in everything they do (Mahesh Yogi 1969: 133).

Scholars familiar with the Advaita Vedanta of Adi Shankara (d. 750) will recognize Maharishi's message as a stripped down version of that Hindu philosophical system, with its emphasis on realizing the atman (Maharishi's Absolute or transcendental Self) as not differentiated from Brahman (Maharishi's Absolute Being). In addition, it's easy to identify Maharishi's transcendental consciousness or pure consciousness (interchangeable terms he used for the state meditators experienced when in contact with the deep Self) as identical to Advaita's *turiya* or the first stage of samadhi; Cosmic Consciousness, his term for enlightenment, is synonymous with Advaita's *jivanmukti* or *nitya-samadhi*. So why the new terms?