

Transcendental Meditation makes a comeback Filmmaker David Lynch is among those bringing new attention to a discipline that gained favor in the 1960s.

By Nora O'dowd

"TM? Is that still around?"

That's the immediate reaction of many to the mention of transcendental meditation.

After a bright turn in the psychedelic limelight of the 1960s when it was embraced by celebrities such as the Beatles and Donovan, it seemed to go the way of bell bottoms, flower power and love beads.

But others maintain that it's never gone away. Even in the years when TM "was not so popular in the United States, it was extremely popular in other areas of the world," said Bill Sands, director of the Maharishi Enlightenment Center in Paoli, Pa.

An estimated 1.5 million people in the United States practice TM twice a day. Repeating a mantra given by a teacher, they settle into a quiet and relaxed state.

"It's as if you are a deep-sea diver with lead boots on," said Donovan. "You dive immediately and deeper than ever with TM."

Adherents describe a blissful state. Their well-being is echoed in medical study after study, about 700 in all, attesting to the benefits of meditation, specifically TM.

Helen Hamilton, co-director of a TM center in Summit, N.J., believes that what may have waned will soon wax.

"My feeling is that we're preparing for a more positive aspect of that cycle," she said. One reason for the resurgence of interest, she said, is the work of someone who may seem an unlikely champion: filmmaker David Lynch.

About six months ago, he began the David Lynch Foundation for Consciousness-Based Education with a goal of raising enough money to train any child who wants to learn how to practice TM.

Donovan has joined as the musical arm of Lynch's foundation and the two are planning free concerts in coming weeks to spread the word on TM.

What's more, there has been a surge in recent planning for 3,000 "peace palaces," centers for meditation, incorporating spa treatments and holistic health approaches.

Construction and placement of the pre-engineered peace palaces are according to ancient Vedic tradition of natural balance with an entrance facing north or east.

It all stems from the work of a gentle Hindu monk who in the 1950s began teaching the way to enlightenment with what he called transcendental meditation. As it was taken up by countercultural icons of the '60s and '70s, photos of the mystical Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's grizzled locks and flowing robes appeared regularly. Those images and the alternative nature of TM may make it all seem a bit cultish.

"There can be that impression," said Hamilton. "People will make of it whatever they will." She explains TM's allure this way:

"All of meditation involves some effort, concentration or contemplation, but this is completely effortless and quite natural. ... The mind naturally seeks the more charming aspects of thinking. It brings you to the source of thought or creative intelligence."

One difference between TM and other forms of meditation, said Hamilton, is that TM "allows the body to experience the deepest state of rest. The body gets the chance to eliminate stress and not just manage stress."

Another difference is the price. A typical seven-day TM course costs \$2,500. Considering the benefits, said Sands, the director of Philadelphia-area programs, it is a bargain.

Sands, who has practiced TM for 36 of his 55 years, holds a doctorate from the Maharishi University of Management in Iowa, and lived for a time near the Maharishi himself, in the Netherlands.

"If you can think a thought, then you can learn" TM, he said.

There's a great need for this now, he said, referring to the peace palaces and the schools for ayurvedic -- or ancient Hindu -- medicine and agriculture.

"There's a growing dissatisfaction with the medical system, a dissatisfaction with food production, a growing concern for all aspects of the environment," he said. "Global warming is a real concern. People are opening the door to alternatives."