

# NEW STATESMAN

SOCIETY

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UK £1.4

US \$3.5

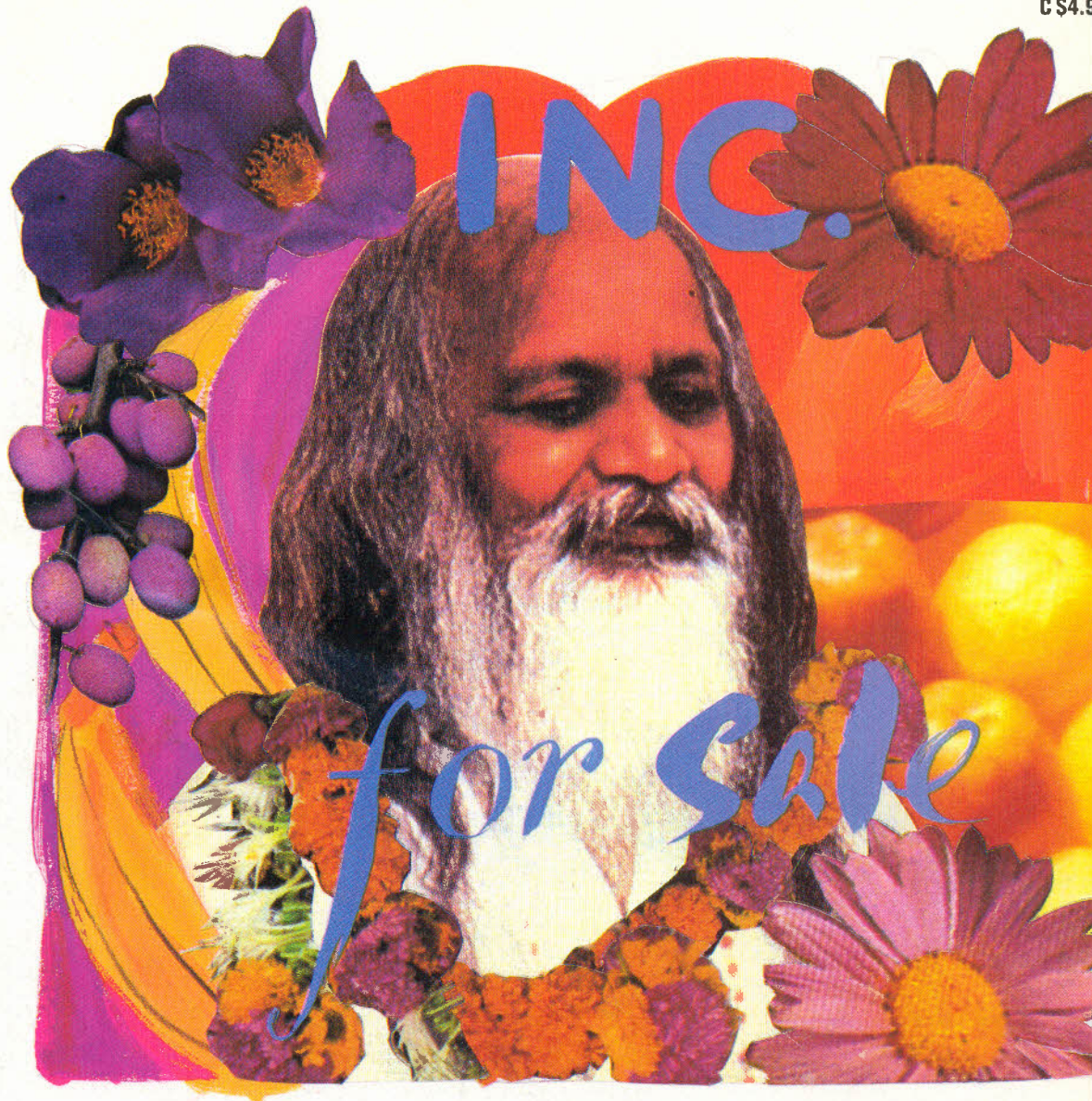
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## Heaven on Earth, Inc

Duncan Campbell on how  
His Holiness the Maharishi's  
commodity brokers run the  
cosmic consciousness clan







## ENLIGHTENMENT

# Heaven on earth

*There's more to former Beatles guru Maharishi than transcendental meditation. Duncan Campbell finds a multimillion-dollar religious cult up to its neck in commodity broking and real estate, and promising earthly paradise on the outskirts of Skelmersdale*

**S**urrounded by flowers and with his retinue of loving, clean-cut, expensive-suited western followers, the bearded guru of transcendental meditation is back in town. This Monday, at Vlodrop, Netherlands, His Holiness, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, summoned the world press to hear him "describe the measures by which his worldwide transcendental meditation movement is resolving the Gulf crisis".

Even more astonishing claims are routinely reported to top-level members of the TM cult. Late last year, the movement's Governor General for Europe, Dr Geoffrey Clements, wrote to TM Governors that the removal of the Berlin wall was a "direct result of Maharishi's special attention". Embarrassed by the leak of this letter, Peter Warburton, TM's UK press officer and Minister for Information and Inspiration of the

World Government of the Age of Enlightenment, said that the letter "wasn't supposed to be a public document".

Behind the grand claims, glossy brochures, scientific-sounding language, and a plethora of imposing international organisations, there is evidence of something more ordinary than an Age of Enlightenment. TM is in effect a New Age philosophy blended with profitable courses, products and gimmicks which achieve real power over people's lives. Many Christians further object that the movement is a form of Hinduism in pseudo-scientific disguise, although other Christians in TM say that they are comfortable with its religious aspects.

After learning meditation, members are encouraged to take more expensive training courses to "achieve higher levels of consciousness". The next higher level, Sidha (one who has



achieved perfection), costs £1,200. Meditators who take more courses or who work for the movement may be appointed Governors or, higher, Ministers. A key trick learnt by Sidha-level members is levitation or "flying". Flying, however, simply consists of hopping or bouncing on your buttocks while in the lotus position. In public demonstrations, top Sidha meditators bounce on springy mattresses in order to achieve higher and longer hops.

The cult's British leader, the "Right Honourable" Stephen D Benson, Chief Minister of the World Government of the Age of Enlightenment (Great Britain), now lives in a luxurious five-storey Kensington Palace Gardens mansion, Hyderabad House. The house was bought for a reported £10 million in 1982 by one of the TM movement's Swiss corporations. A Bentley and a Rolls-Royce, owned by leading TM members, have been seen parked in the driveway. The Chief Minister's London mansion is one of several expensive properties bought by the cult on the proceeds of its business activities. The others are the famous national TM headquarters at Mentmore Towers, Buckinghamshire, and Roydon Hall in Kent.

The cult's principal source of income is from selling TM (an introductory course costs £165) and from the subsequent and assiduous promotion of courses and events in which followers are promised the bliss which many find elusive. The latest sales promotions for TM include newspaper publicity and advertisements, and a network of private medical clinics that sell "Maharishi Ayur-Veda" medicine. Four days before Maharishi arrived in Europe, a team of TM doctors called a press conference in the Waldorf Hotel, London, and said they were setting up a Maharishi College of Natural Medicine.

A Maharishi "ideal village" has also been established at Skelmersdale, near Ormskirk, Lancashire. It celebrated its tenth anniversary on Sunday night. More than 500 meditators and their families now live there. The TM township includes a Maharishi school, health centre, shops and about 70 businesses including estate agents and investment advisers. The village is now called European Sidhaland, and has a clear caste structure in which Sidhas and Governors dominate. Ormskirk might not be the most obvious site in Britain for "Heaven on Earth", but the movement was fortunate to obtain houses cheaply from the Skelmersdale Development Corporation. Skelmersdale even has a TM temple. Meditators meet at the Maharishi Golden Dome in the centre of their settlement and meditate together to produce "coherence".

What is surprising about TM is the continuing gullibility of some journalists who resign their scepticism in the face of the welter of apparently serious scientific claims. A single article about TM or one of its related spin-offs, invariably including a free phone number for information, can bring thousands of new recruits.

Many of those who have joined and then left TM are bitterly critical of its commercial aspects and unfulfilled promises. In the US three years ago, Robert Kropinsky, a former member, won \$137,890 damages after a Philadelphia court found that the TM movement had defrauded him with false promises of mental bliss and neglected to warn him about the possibility of adverse side-effects. Most of Kropinsky's claim was overturned in an appeal this summer, but financial settlements have been made with other claimants against TM, the movement admits.

One former British meditator who may have experienced severe side-effects from TM is Pamela Bordes. She told the *Daily Mail* six months ago how in June 1988 she had destroyed much of the furnishings of *Sunday Times* editor Andrew Neil's flat, as well as his clothing. She did not mention that she had done so in the middle of learning the advanced TM-Sidhi technique. The press reported the incident as the result of her suspicion that Neil had been dating another woman. But her meditating colleagues, who were present on the evening she came to the TM centre and talked about smashing the flat in a frenzy, suspected it had more to do with TM. "It's pretty well known that when people learn the TM-Sidhi technique, they can get spaced out to the extent that they don't know what

they're doing," explained a fellow-student of Ms Bordes. "People will almost brag about it. It's well known that people have cracked up." After the incident, TM teachers declined to allow Ms Bordes to continue.

Despite the movement's claims that TM automatically makes for enlightenment and success in business, a succession of TM businesses at Skelmersdale collapsed in the mid-1980s. These include the showpiece Age of Enlightenment Company Ltd, whose creditors were owed £333,000.

With the decline in popularity of TM among students, the movement has focused on business and medicine to keep TM sales buoyant. A London-based consultancy, Maharishi Corporate Development International, promotes TM to City businessmen. In the United States, a major commodity futures company forming part of the cult's American campus has been accused by investors of overcharging and high-pressure sales tactics. The International Trading Group Ltd in Fairfield, Iowa, received commissions and fees totalling more than \$250 million between 1984 and 1989. A series of complaints about

## *The cult's British leader lives in a luxurious five-storey mansion costing £10 million. A Bentley is normally parked outside*

overcharging led in 1988 to the company's being fined \$90,000.

Globally, the Maharishi movement operates a range of trading companies which have more in common with merchant banking than meditation. Maharishi International Trading Group Ltd and Maharishi Diamond Ltd were set up in 1988. They are owned by Swiss-based members and Isle of Man nominee companies. Their activities include trading in diamonds and ship-broking.

The latest boost to TM sales, launched in 1985, is Maharishi Ayur-Veda medicine. Dr Roger Chalmers, who spoke at last week's press conference, is confident that adoption of Maharishi Ayur-Veda would lead to a "50 per cent reduction in the need for medical and surgical care throughout the NHS". Dr Chalmers and a colleague, Dr Leslie Davis, are currently being investigated by the General Medical Council following complaints by Aids patients of serious professional misconduct. The doctors admit that they have prescribed scientifically untested Maharishi herbal pills, for which patients are charged \$6,000 a year, as a remedy for Aids.

Specialists in the natural medicines movement think the Maharishi claims are a sham. "I know people who have been sucked into that movement and spat out the other end," said Leon Chaitow, a leading osteopath and consultant. Maharishi-style meditation, said Chaitow, has been "hyped up to be something it isn't... you might as well say Coca-Cola or bananas [as a Mantra]... Well-off, ostensibly quite well-educated people are prepared to give up everything to become disciples. They spend thousands of pounds and hours trying to bounce around on their knees. It does show what a mess we're in."

A particularly brazen example of the Maharishi's operation's piling up treasures on earth—to borrow a biblical phrase—is the recently launched US property business, the Heaven on Earth Development Corporation, which has headquarters in Malibu, California. It wants to build 50 Maharishi Cities of Immortals. Thanks to TM, says Heaven on Earth, Inc, these communities will be free of stress, pollution, crime and noise.

Tempted? If you think that the next life sounds like too long to wait, a piece of the heavenly action can be purchased in the here and now—for between \$300,000 and \$1 million a home. ●

*Additional research by David Baxter and Alex Holmes.*

**In Britain, the sacred and the profane join in a new cult sales lines from Maharishi Global Trading Enterprises Ltd. On offer for 1990 are astrological forecasts (\$50), Maharishi-style gems, and Yagyars or traditional Vedic sacrifices. For a mere \$1,000, Maharishi world headquarters at Delhi will do you a fine sacrifice, with trimmings. A 45-day supply of Ambrosia tablets can be purchased for \$45. A jar of Nectar of Immortality costs \$50. Maharishi steel tongue scrapers sell for \$3, a silver tongue scraper goes for \$12. (there are no instructions in the sales brochure).**