

I escaped

A CULT



From a young age, Susan Shumsky was brainwashed and kept as an unwitting follower. Here, she tells her remarkable story

Before the Indian guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi travelled to the West in 1959, there was no 'meditation', 'yoga', or 'mantra'. Within 10 years, with a little help from his friends The Beatles and other superstars, he had made these into household words.

In the 1960s, Maharishi represented Transcendental Meditation (the TM Technique) as a simple mechanical method that anyone could practise without a change in beliefs or lifestyle. He de-emphasised religion and used language such as 'stress-release' and 'increased productivity'.

So how did a 'mechanical' meditation practice become a cult? Perhaps it was because, through our Western eyes, any guru would be considered a 'cult leader'.

My relationship with Maharishi started in 1966, when I entered the TM Center, a two-storey stucco building near the University of California, Berkeley, in the San Francisco Bay area. From a photo on the wall, Maharishi smiled - or more accurately, beamed. Most striking was the spiritual emanation radiating from his large, sparkling, magnetic, ebony eyes. If God wanted to visit earth and look like someone, I imagined this was how He would look.

As soon as I saw his photo, I knew this was where I could learn real meditation.

A flower child/love child/hippie who fully embraced the counterculture lifestyle, I'd tried to reach nirvana by following Timothy Leary's advice to take LSD, 'turn off your mind, relax, and float downstream... turn on, tune in, and drop out'. But taking LSD didn't work out



Susan Shumsky in front of her house in Fairfield, Iowa, 1988

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too well. I didn't come down from the drug for months. Suffice to say, it was terrifying.

So when I learned TM and found myself somewhere entirely new and wonderful, I was hooked. In meditation, perfectly calm and peaceful, I sank into a placid pool of solitude, without a ripple, silent and motionless, in profound relaxation, contentment and serenity. For the first time ever, I experienced something entirely unfamiliar - happiness.

TM changed my life in a good way, so I wanted to teach it. I applied for Maharishi's Teacher Training Course in

Rishikesh, India, three times. But I was too young to be accepted. Finally, for the January 1970 course, Maharishi allowed younger students to attend. I was 21.

I spent six months at Maharishi's ashram in Rishikesh - three months on the course and another three months hanging out with him and hanging on every word. He was the happiest person I'd ever met - always cracking jokes. His laughter was contagious. He was charismatic to the point of hypnotic and projected a vastly irresistible, unparalleled love vibration.

In 1971, I asked Maharishi if I could join his



Bangalore 1970 (above): Susan (circled) and other members on the teacher training course pose with Maharishi (centre); Susan (below, left) caught in a crowd of Maharishi devotees, 1970; Paul, George, Ringo and John were all fans, August 1967



international staff, and he agreed. For the next six years, I rode an intense emotional roller coaster, from heaven to hell, as Maharishi administered a kind of 'open-ego surgery' on me. At the time, I wasn't aware that a guru's job was to bring disciples to higher consciousness by dismantling their ego so spiritual transformation could occur.

Maharishi used to tell us he was a carpenter and his disciples were blocks of wood. Imagine how a block of wood feels being carved up. Granted, the wood will change into something beautiful - expressing its full potential. But being carved isn't a whole lot of fun.

So there was a method to Maharishi's madness of alternately making me feel like the most important person in the universe, saving the planet, or the most despicable,

useless, worthless worm. Just as a military drill instructor uses tough love to train his recruits, so Maharishi dispensed severe treatment to his closest disciples. In the worst instance, he chastised me severely in front of 400 of the TM organisation's leaders for doing the exact thing he'd just asked me to do earlier that day.

I worked in various capacities on staff: editing copy, drawing and painting, graphic art and design, accounting, managing a luxury hotel, and more. Whatever my assignment, it was the most urgent task in the universe that had to be done immediately and would purportedly save the planet, but it always needed improvement and was never finished. It was a wild ride, resembling a Tibetan sand mandala, where monks spend weeks creating a vastly intricate design, only for it to be swept away in ▷



Celebrity followers of the Indian guru also included (from far left) Jenny Boyd, Mick Jagger, Marianne Faithfull and Pattie Boyd. They are seen here at a Meditation Meeting held by Maharishi in August 1962

'Everyone got sent away eventually. When my day came, I was devastated – thrust into a threatening world, alone'

a ritual ceremony that symbolises the evanescence of life.

Though Maharishi kept me on staff longer than nearly everyone else, everyone got sent away eventually. When my day came in 1976, I was devastated – thrust into a threatening world in bliss-withdrawal trauma, alone and penniless. Expelled from the heady heights of his paradise, nothing seemed real. I had no context for a new life.

Fractured and dispossessed, devoid of social or survival skills, I was incapable of relating to anyone. In culture shock, I was a displaced refugee from a remote planet, speaking an alien language: Maharishi-speak. So I clung on to dear life by staying in his ashrams for another 13 years. Though not in his presence, I remained in his organisation.

The first seeds of TM transforming into a cult emerged in August 1979, when Maharishi gathered 2,600 meditators for a World Peace Assembly. He made the fantastic claim that the Goddess 'Mother Divine' had threatened to annihilate the entire Earth's population. After Maharishi pleaded with her, she allegedly agreed to give him one last chance to save the planet through his 'world plan' to create world peace.

Maharishi then declared time had run out and there was a world emergency. All of us had to relocate our families to Iowa within one week and practise group meditation there permanently. So we moved to Maharishi International University (MIU) in Fairfield, Iowa, where the cult gradually took over our lives.

Maharishi terrorised us into believing that if we didn't adhere to his programme, we'd be responsible for nuclear holocaust or the end of the world. He used fear, intimidation, manipulation and flattery to control us. If we blindly followed his ironclad belief structure and rigid routine, we were 'on the programme'. If we wavered, we were 'off the programme' and branded as outcasts, blacklisted and shunned by the community.

Fairfield became 'Fear-Filled'. Since we believed TM was the only path to enlightenment, and Maharishi was the only true spiritual master, we lived in terror of banishment from TM's presumptive heavenly paradise, resulting in losing our only chance for spiritual enlightenment.

As the ungodly repression became increasingly unbearable, the MIU library purged all 'negative' books and non-TM self-help books, including those authored by Indian gurus. We were forbidden to visit any spiritual masters, to take classes on any subject not officially sanctioned by the TM organisation, or to even to take a vacation to India.

I began to realise I'd spent over two decades in a repressive organisation, largely motivated by fear. In 1986, I took my first baby steps towards liberation when I started a prayer circle at my house where we learned a method called 'Divine Revelation'. We developed our intuition, gained self-empowerment, and crawled out from under the TM shadow.

After the TM spies blacklisted my prayer circle attendees, nearly everyone in Fairfield avoided eye contact with me. Branded persona non grata, I came to realise I would have to sell my house and leave Fairfield.

Though it was painful to cut the cords with Maharishi and all my friends, leaving Fairfield in 1989 was my ticket to freedom. I remember the day in 1973 when Maharishi gave me a rose and said, 'Don't look to anyone. When you don't look to anyone, then everyone will look to you.' Now I've authored 14 books and run spiritual events all over the world. ■

♦ *Maharishi & Me: Seeking Enlightenment with The Beatles' Guru* by Susan Shumsky is published by Skyhorse Publishing, priced £19.99

