

BRINGING
CALM
TO
THE
CENTER
OF
LIFE'S
STORM



MEDITATION
MAN



BY ANN BRENOFF



If there was a perfect year in which to discover transcendental meditation, it might just have been 1968.

That was the year that Bob Roth was a freshman at UC Berkeley — a campus considered Ground Zero for the anti-war movement and the cultural changes sweeping through the country at the time. He remembers living surrounded by helicopters spewing tear gas over student war protesters and Army tanks parked outside his front door. Demonstrations. Riots. Chaos. ¶ And against this backdrop, Roth did what many college students do: He took a part-time job. He sold scoops of ice cream at Swenson's ice cream parlor, never expecting that amid the rush of pending social changes engulfing him, it would be at the ice cream shop where he would meet a guy who would ultimately alter the course of his life forever.

A photograph of Bob Roth, a man with glasses and a grey suit, speaking into a microphone. He is holding a piece of paper in his left hand. The background is dark with some blurred lights.

Bob Roth speaks about the benefits of Transcendental Meditation (TM) at a health conference in Los Angeles in 2011.



The college crew at Swenson's was the usual motley collection of hippies, straights and everything in between, recalls Roth. But one guy stood out: Peter Stevens. "He was like a quiet reflection pool amid the chaos," recalls Roth, "and I was drawn to him."

"Peter was centered, energetic, super-smart, kind to all, easy-going, never agitated, with an ineffable calm about him," Roth told The Huffington Post. He learned that Peter "meditated," something that Roth said was a bit of a disconnect for him. "Meditation was not in my vocabulary." But he was intrigued and curious, and went with Stevens to a class in TM, a meditative practice derived from the ancient Vedic tradition in India. After just one class, Roth was hooked.

Today, Roth is the executive director of the David Lynch Foundation, where he has helped bring TM programs to more than 300,000 at-risk kids in 35 countries, as well as veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, and women and girls who are survivors of domestic violence. He's also the national director of the Center for Leadership Perfor-

mance, which introduces the TM program to business, industry and government organizations — and even some United Nations groups.

Today, Roth's student roster includes a lot of very recognizable names: Oprah, Russell Simmons, Russell Brand, Martin Scorsese, Mehmet Oz, Hugh Jackman and dozens of oth-

Roth's student roster includes Oprah, Russell Simmons, Russell Brand, Martin Scorsese, Mehmet Oz and Hugh Jackman.

ers. He'd be embarrassed to be called "meditation teacher to the stars," but such a description wouldn't be far off. For the past 40 years, he has meditated twice a day no matter where he is, in places as discombobulating as an airplane when need be.

He explains TM with the following analogy: The surface of the ocean is waves and white caps. But deeper down, the ocean is still. How TM differs from other meditations, he says, is that it doesn't attempt to still the



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You are thinking more clearly, are able to make decisions more ethically, perform more creatively.

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A student from the Nataki Talibah Schoolhouse of Detroit practices TM.





waves, but rather allow access to the stillness. By practicing it twice a day for 20 minutes, he said, studies have shown that people sleep better, reduce their stress, and lower their blood pressure. In children, the practice can reduce ADHD symptoms and symptoms of other learning disorders.

Not all Roth's clients are rich and famous. One of the key focuses of the David Lynch Foundation is to target those who aren't and improve their lives through TM. There's a story that

“It's not just about learning to relax. TM wakes up the brain and the executive functions. It resets the brain to perform in a less 'flight or fight' manner.”

Roth likes to tell about the DLF's Quiet Time program — where thousands of at-risk children are taught TM in school. It involves a little girl he called Jessica (not her real name) who lives in a crime-infested neighborhood of San Francisco. Jessica showed up

Thousands of at-risk students are taught TM as part of “The Quiet Time” program.





one day at school wearing a white dress splattered with what her teacher, at first glance, thought was red paint. It was blood — blood from Jessica’s uncle who had been shot that morning in a random drive-by while waiting with her at the bus stop.

Instead of running home, Jessica ran to school so that she could meditate, she told her teachers. The DLF Quiet Time program had been in her school for about a year at the time and for her, it made school a safe place whereas her home often couldn’t be. “For me,”

said Roth, “that says it all.”

As part of the Quiet Time Program, the foundation supplies teachers for each child to have one-on-one meditation instruction and follow-up. “In a school with 1,000 students,” he said, “we bring in 20 teachers.”

The results have been gratifying, said Roth, who believes that results must be quantifiable to matter. “Change needs to show up in grades, reduced number of suspensions and dropout rates,” he said. And the Quiet Time program has done all that. The San Francisco Unified School District reports an 86-percent reduction in suspensions over two years in

Students meditate at a San Francisco public school.



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Bob Roth attends the David Lynch Foundation's "Change Begins Within" benefit in 2011.





schools where the program has been introduced; a 65 percent decrease in violent conflict at the John O’Connell High School; and the *Journal of Psychiatry* shows reduced ADHD symptoms and symptoms of other learning disorders among students who practice TM.

Carlos Garia, retired superintendent of the San Francisco Unified School District, heralded the program as one which is “transforming lives.” He said,

“It is transforming schools and neighborhoods, and it will transform our society.”

All of which is music to Roth’s ears. TM is a life-changer for individuals, he said, but also a game changer in the broader sense. It may start with an individual’s desire to sleep better or reduce stress, but results are similar to what happens when you pull on one leg of the table, said Roth. “The whole table moves.” And what moves in this case are blood pressure numbers, heart attack risk factors, and the overall ability to make better decisions with a more focused mind.

Jerry Seinfeld (center) talks to George Stephanopoulos (left) and Bob Roth on *Good Morning America* in 2012.



“You are thinking more clearly, are able to make decisions more ethically, perform more creatively.” It’s like when you water a plant because some leaves are wilting, he said, but the whole plant benefits from the water. And it spills over into those around you in a chain reaction.

Companies interested in innovation are drawn to TM because of the positive impact it has on their work force. It’s why Oprah had Roth bring his program to her staff of 400. “It’s not just about learning to relax,” said Roth. “TM wakes up the brain and the executive functions. It resets the brain to perform in a less ‘flight or fight’ manner.”

And yes, it reduces stress. Whether he is teaching a homeless guy — the DLF has a program that works with New York City homeless — or a billionaire, “they both suffer from stress,” said Roth.

But as one celebrity who shall remain unnamed quipped when Roth asked her why she wanted to learn to meditate, “I want to maintain a permanent connection with the intelligence of the universe. I also can’t sleep.”

TM training allows people to access an ability they already are

hard wired for: to take a profound rest at will.

Roth says the tipping point has been reached in regard to the public’s understanding of the value of mediation. As he wrote on Maria Shriver’s blog, “It feels like something foundational can be done to help transform lives through

“I want to maintain a permanent connection with the intelligence of the universe. I also can’t sleep.”

meditation, not only among those most at-risk to suffer traumas in life, but also the teen in the private school who battles the very real demons of substance abuse and unspoken thoughts of suicide; the parent who is struggling to survive an ugly divorce and still keep the family intact; or just the person — man, woman, boy, girl — who is navigating life’s daily vicissitudes and can’t seem to catch a breath, turn off the noise, get a good night’s sleep.”

Ann Brenoff is a senior writer for The Huffington Post.

