



CHRIS SORENSEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WEEKEND CONFIDENTIAL : ALEXANDRA WOLFE

Bob Roth

The nonprofit executive is working to bring transcendental meditation to all

Bob Roth knows his field sounds a little like “woowoo” spirituality, as he says. But as a teacher of transcendental meditation, he now works with a wide-ranging clientele that includes celebrities such as Katy Perry and Jerry Seinfeld, hedge-fund managers, inner-city students, prisoners and veterans. He has the same goal for everyone: to teach them the virtues of T.M., as it’s called—a practice that involves silently reciting a mantra over and over for 15 to 20 minutes twice a day.

Proponents say that the practice reduces stress and raises self-awareness. Bridge-

water founder and co-chairman Ray Dalio, a student of Mr. Roth’s for more than a decade and a donor to the foundation, is a believer. The practice has been “integral to whatever success I’ve had in life,” he says. “It makes one feel like...a ninja in a movie, like you’re doing everything calmly and in slow motion.”

Mr. Roth, 66, is chief executive of the David Lynch Foundation, a nonprofit he co-founded with the film director in 2005 that is dedicated to teaching transcendental meditation, particularly to at-risk populations, “to improve their health,

cognitive capabilities and performance in life,” as the foundation’s website says. Some of its funds come from teaching courses to companies and individuals; a four-day training course costs up to \$960 a person. The foundation has 60 employees in the U.S. as well as partners in 35 countries.

In early June, Mr. Roth opened the nonprofit’s first office in Washington, D.C., where he says he is currently teaching a dozen members of Congress. His organization has also been participating in studies in prisons recently. In a study published last year in the *Permanent Journal*, 181 male inmates at the Oregon State Correctional Institute and the Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem either took a transcendental meditation program through the foundation or did nothing outside their usual routine. The researchers found greater reductions in anxiety, depression and trauma symptoms in the group that had taken meditation.

Mr. Roth finds an analogy in the sea. “The ocean can be active and turbulent on the surface, sometimes with tsunami-like 30-foot waves, but is, by its nature, silent at its depth,” he says. “The surface of the mind is the active, noisy, thinking mind—often racing, noisy, hyperactive, turbulent. But like the ocean, the mind of everyone is quiet, calm, silent at its depth.”

T.M. was developed in India by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, a physicist turned meditation teacher, in the 1950s; it gained popularity in the 1960s

when he worked with the Beatles and other celebrities.

The son of a doctor and a teacher, Mr. Roth dreamed of being a senator when he was young. He started meditating in college at the University of California, Berkeley, after a friend suggested it as a way to relax amid the student riots on campus.

He was skeptical at first but soon became hooked. After he graduated in 1972, he started teaching meditation to children in inner-city schools in San Francisco. A few years later, he traveled to Europe to study under Maharishi Mahesh Yogi before returning to California to continue teaching over the next decade. In 1982, he moved to Washington, D.C., where he eventually met Mr. Lynch, the director of “Blue Velvet” and “Twin Peaks,” who had taken up the practice in the 1970s. “If you are a human being, [transcendental meditation] works,” says Mr. Lynch.

Contrary to what you might expect for a meditation teacher, Mr. Roth often wears a suit with a crisp white shirt. (More predictably, he has a serene demeanor.) He lives alone in New York, and in his downtime enjoys trying new Asian fusion and Italian restaurants and watching sports, especially baseball. “I grew up with Willie Mays, who was my first hero,” he says.

He spends half his time teaching and the other half running the organization. For all of his new students, instruction is the same. He conducts a short ceremony in which he acknowledges

past teachers and gives each student a mantra—a sound or word that has no meaning and is to be repeated silently during the meditation. (The student keeps that mantra forever.) After that, the student closes his or her eyes for 20 minutes and silently recites the mantra while sitting in a comfortable position.

In follow-up sessions, Mr. Roth discusses the benefits of the practice, refreshes students’ techniques and answers any questions they have, often meditating alongside them. Critics have said that the practice isn’t any better than therapy, exercise or medication at reducing stress, but Mr. Roth points to studies that have shown it to be effective, including in reducing high blood pressure. “It’s not a matter of ‘either or,’” he says. “It’s a wiser matter of ‘and also.’”

The foundation is now participating in a study with the University of Chicago’s Crime Lab to research whether T.M. can reduce violence and improve scores in a trial with 2,000 children in five Chicago public schools. Next year, the research will expand to 800 students in two public schools in New York.

Mr. Seinfeld has been working with Mr. Roth for the past eight years and has performed at some of the foundation’s benefits. “It completely changed my ability to do work and be active and do the things I want to do,” he says. “Wives like to go out to dinner and husbands just want to lie there, but now I find I can do anything, with the T.M. to restore me,” he adds with a laugh.