CHAPTER 15

Acem: Disenchanted Meditation

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Oslo, February 2008: we are in a fin de siècle apartment building in one of Oslo’s more affluent areas. In the salon of what appears to have been an impressive residence, rows of simple chairs and a projector screen have been set up, giving the rather grandiose room a low-key, informal ambiance. Eight people have found their way to the Acem1 house this evening. Most of them appear to have come alone, and together we make up a demographically disparate audience. A glance around reveals a pair of juvenile Converse shoes, two or three grey heads and at least one exclusive designer handbag. The majority of these people are in their forties or fifties, although a few people in the audience look like students. There are slightly more women than men. Discrete chatter is heard from a side room where the course instructors catch up while we wait for the clock to turn six.

As the first event in Acem’s introductory meditation course, the evening starts with a lecture on the basic principles of Acem meditation, Acem’s history, its organisational structure and the benefits of meditation. Great care is taken to portray Acem as a Western and scientific meditation technique. Within five minutes the instructors “assure” the audience that Acem has nothing to do with religion or mysticism of any kind. The bulk of the lecture is about research results on Acem meditation by audiovisually presenting charts and graphs on how meditation can reduce stress hormones, blood pressure, improve the ability to concentrate et cetera. There is no mention of Acem’s historical background as a part of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement. By and large, my first encounter with Acem gives the impression of a radically transformed remnant of the spiritual counter cultural wave of the 1960s.

By looking further back into the past, this chapter seeks to shed light on the early emergence of Acem as the Norwegian branch of the Academic Meditation Society within Maharishi’s Spiritual Regeneration Movement. How did what originated as a New Religious Movement come to vehemently oppose any association with religion? What were the tensions that caused the original AMS

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1 The organisation was initially known as AMS (Academic Meditation Society), but changed its name to Acem in 1974. Acem (pronounced “akem”) is an invented name without any symbolic or semiotic meaning.
to crack up and create a definitive fissure between Acem and the Maharishi movement? Following developments up to the present, the article also tells the unique story of a Nordic movement that not only has re-wrapped meditation – but also re-exported it to India and several other non-Western countries.

**A Branch that “Cut Itself Off the Tree”: Acem and the TM Movement**

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s first visit to Norway in November 1960 stirred up a wave of popular interest in Indian meditation (see e.g. VG 1960; Aftenposten 1960). Having established the *Spiritual Regeneration Movement* only three years previously, the Indian guru had already been on one international tour to propagate his teachings and recruit new followers. In the firm belief that Westerners were “in a habit of adopting things quickly” he particularly saw Europe and the United States as fertile ground for new branches of the TM movement (Ebon 1968: 10). And he did indeed find an attentive audience. An experimental protest movement that would affront the establishment both politically and spiritually was on the rise among Western youth. By the middle of the 1960s the counter cultural seeds would blossom into a mass movement. Maharishi profited from this general trend and spearheaded subsequent and more systematic efforts to give the TM movement a more scientific profile by specifically recruiting students. In January 1965, a group of European students who practiced TM was convened in Germany in order to find ways to recruit more academics. The result was the establishment of a new subdivision of the Spiritual Regeneration Movement called the *Academic Meditation Society* (AMS). Participants at the meeting were encouraged to establish local branches of the AMS at their respective universities, and AMS thus quickly spread to several European countries and the USA (AMS 1967; Holen 1966).

One of the young TM enthusiasts at the 1965 meeting was Are Holen (b. 1945), a psychology student at the University of Oslo, Norway. Holen founded a Norwegian subdivision of the AMS in January 1966 together with fellow students practicing Transcendental Meditation (Holen 1966). This would be the internationally most successful AMS branch in terms of number of adherents, although it would eventually “cut itself off the tree,” to use Maharishi’s phrasing (AMS 1972: 12). During its first years in existence, however, the organisational and doctrinal ties between AMS Norway and the international TM movement were strong. AMS seems to have been fully in tune with the official teachings and practices of the TM movement, which at this point still had an overtly Hindu profile (Lowe 2011). The main goal of the meditation was