

ACEM MEDITATION INTERNATIONAL NEWSLETTER

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The Power of Silence

In the summer of 2003, meditators from around the world will gather in Norway for one week of self-reflection and multi-cultural exchange. The First World Retreat of Acem Meditation will be directed by Dr. Are Holen. He founded Acem in 1966 and is the international head of the organisation.

Dr. Holen is an inspiring lecturer and meditation guide. His evening talks will explore the psychology of meditation, not as an abstract topic, but as a deeply personal and existential subject. Basing his talks on questions from participants, he will often be able to turn apparently technical queries into stimulating discussions of the human condition.

Meditation and guidance

Dr. Holen will also give training sessions in mindful awareness. Each session highlights different aspects of meditative techniques. How can we become more conscious of our body and our breathing? How can we become more sensitive in our relations to others? How can we expand our awareness of the space around us? These techniques may be useful supplements to Acem Meditation.

According to Dr. Holen, the most significant changes in our meditation (and in our lives) take place in long meditations followed by thorough and clarifying guidance. This enables us to grasp the silent, concealed movements of the psyche and helps us to accept aspects of ourselves that previously we may have chosen to ignore. At the retreat, there will be ample time for meditation and guidance. Guidance groups are led by experienced instructors and supervised by Dr. Holen.

The reflective dimension

Dr. Holen is married, has two children and lives in the Norwegian city of Trondheim. He is both a medical doctor and a psychologist, with a Ph. D. in stress psychiatry from the University of Oslo. Currently, he is associate professor and chair of the Department of Neuroscience and Movement at the Faculty of Medicine, Norwegian University of Science and Technology. He has also worked as a research scientist at the University of California in San Francisco and as a visiting professor at Stanford University.

As a world-renowned stress researcher, Dr. Holen was one of the international experts brought in to help some of those directly affected by the September 11th terrorist attacks. When he returned to Scandinavia, he told the leading Danish newspaper Berlingske Tidende:

- Even people in other parts of the world now live with a higher level of stress than before September 11th, due to the terror threat and the fear of bio-chemical attacks. However, a short period of increased stress is not entirely negative. Even if the safe world we thought we were living in suddenly feels more insecure, we will learn to adjust. Such a reorientation is healthy, because it makes us cope more realistically with the situation we are in.

modern man rarely gives priority to the reflective dimension

He emphasises, however, that extended periods of stress can be harmful to our body and can lead to illness, even when the stress results from everyday factors like unpaid bills, marital problems or worries about our kids. Therefore, it is important that we set aside time in our lives for stress relief – by walking in the woods, listening to good music or maybe meditating once or twice a day. He said to the Danish newspaper:

- One of the most important problems of modern man is the fact that he rarely gives priority to the reflective dimension, where one rises above things, gets an overview of one's life and gets the calm to work through experiences and thoughts that lie hidden just under the surface.

Through his work with Acem Meditation, Dr. Holen has helped to stimulate this reflective dimension in a large number of people in different parts of the world.



Dr. Are Holen is the moderator of The First World Retreat of Acem Meditation.

East and West

Norway is not usually associated with meditative traditions, and it has come as a surprise to many that, as the BBC World Service put it, "a new Scandinavian style of meditation is taking India [and, indeed, several other countries] by storm".

Dr. Holen maintains that Norway has always had a meditative tradition, only it has never been so named. Meditation is a way of reconnecting to that part of the human psyche that is most in tune with nature. Norwegians have a close affinity to nature, and nature is easily available in the country.

the World Retreat seeks to stimulate the fundamental rejuvenation of mind and body

Dr. Holen was 20 years old when he founded Acem School of Meditation (then called Academic Meditation Society) in Oslo, Norway in 1966. At the time, he was already well acquainted with Indian philosophy and culture. Gradually, however, the organisation developed a new and radically different approach to meditation, based on experience and in line with modern thinking and psychological perspectives.

International interest

The integration of an Eastern technique with a Western understanding of psychology and stress medicine has resulted in a unique synthesis. As a result, Acem is now able to help people realise more fully the potential of meditation. International interest in this approach has increased, especially after the internet made it possible for people all over the world to read about Acem. Last year, Acem Meditation was taught in 15 different countries on all continents. Many of these countries will be represented at the World Retreat.

The World Retreat seeks to stimulate the fundamental rejuvenation of mind and body that Acem Meditation brings about. It also provides an opportunity to learn more about the exceptional background and methodology of Acem, to share with meditators from all parts of the world, and to meet with the large number of people who have contributed to the development of Acem Meditation over the years, including Dr. Holen.

Meditating with a free mental attitude

The free mental attitude of Acem Meditation involves, on the one hand, a supple, effortless repetition of the meditation sound and, on the other hand, a free and accepting awareness in relation to impressions that appear during meditation. Acting to bring about this free mental attitude is a process. In our daily lives, this process provides breathing space for unprocessed experiences from the day. At meditation retreats, it helps to loosen the grip of undercurrents in our personalities.

The free mental attitude of Acem Meditation is an attitude of acceptance. Thoughts, bodily sensations, moods and evaluations are allowed to enter the mind. We let them appear and disappear in our mental awareness, neither avoiding them nor actively pursuing them.

This accepting attitude is a central and effective element in psychological processing. Like the 'free-floating awareness' of psychoanalysis, it allows associations to come and go without censorship. A supple, accepting attitude reduces psychological defence mechanisms and repression: we are more ready to accept and take in whatever is on our minds. Difficult themes that we have suppressed become accessible for processing.

Awareness

The free mental attitude should characterise both our repetition of the meditation sound and our awareness: the way we direct the focus of our attention during meditation. This awareness is the opposite of concentrated, analytical observation, where there is a distance between the observer and the experience being observed. The free mental attitude means to relate with a certain degree of intimacy to whatever fills our mind at any given time.

During meditation, this means giving room for thoughts, memories, bodily sensations and feelings, not analysing or observing from a distance. Active reflection upon the contents of the thoughts and the repetition of the meditation sound should be done outside the meditation, preferably in a guidance group.

In interpersonal relationships, a free mental attitude can be compared to active listening, where one takes in, with an attitude of understanding, the experiences and feelings of the other person. Empathy is a basic principle of good dialogue, whether it takes place between a therapist and his or her client, between parents and child, in a love relationship or between

friends. Empathy requires giving time and paying attention – acceptingly and patiently.

Psychological processing

Most of us have experienced how good it feels when someone listens attentively to our feelings, frustrations and needs. Even if it does not change unpleasant circumstances past or present, it eases the emotional pressure. To be accepted and to be paid attention to by another person satisfy a deep-rooted need in the human psyche.

Acceptance, awareness, and empathy are basic elements in all psychological processing. An accepting attitude counters low self-esteem. Over time, what used to appear difficult may begin to appear as a challenge: something that is not beyond one's reach. According to Fritz Perls, the American psychologist and founder of gestalt therapy, if you accept 'what is', 'what is' changes. Processing frees energy and attention that would otherwise be spent on keeping difficult themes (such as loss or other strong experiences that need to be dealt with) at a distance.

Recovery

Acceptance and awareness can alleviate and cure mental wounds and low self-esteem. Many techniques for meditation and relaxation reduce stress and can thus alleviate tension, pain and other physical ills. Self-administered methods mobilise the organism's own ability to heal. Relaxation and a free mental attitude can reduce muscular tension and increase blood circulation in tense parts of the body. To the extent that illness is related to stress or anxiety, relaxation, awareness and acceptance can reduce or remove the worry and can help to heal.

This also applies to problems caused by the mental strain that comes with serious, long-term or chronic illness with a clearly physical base, such as cancer and heart problems. At times, problems caused by anxiety and tension can be worse than those related to the basic illness. Self-administered methods and treatment, directed towards psychological and existential aspects of being ill, can help to heal. At the very least, they can improve quality of life, even if they do not remove the basic problem. Both professional care and one's own effort are important.

There are a number of interesting observations relating to the effects of psychological and behavioural factors on the progress of serious physical illness, but there are also many unanswered questions. Experience indicates that mental strain reduces longevity, for example in depressed people with heart failure. Some research has shown that life expectancy increases in patients that participate in discussion groups for improved quality of life, for example in cases of advanced breast cancer.

So far, however, we have little knowledge of what groups of illnesses are affected and to what extent. We are waiting for research to provide stronger evidence regarding the types of biological and behavioural elements that are effective.

Self-help

Interpersonal relationships characterised by acceptance and awareness often give rise to positive expectations that may have a strongly motivating effect. In care-giving professions, one expects a general treatment effect due to attention and care, a so-called placebo effect (from Latin *placebo* 'I please'). This general treatment effect appears in addition to the specific effects of a certain treatment. The placebo effect may be strong and important in both traditional and alternative treatments. It may unlock a locked situation and often leads to a positive motivation to make changes in attitudes and life style. The effect is often attributed to certain features of the treatment, or of the people who were involved in it.

In certain cases, an active, empathic interest can have a seductive effect, actuating unrealistic expectations and fantasies, rather like being in love. A person in love tends to experience strong positive feelings and hopes for the future. If these are not met,

disappointment, anger and bitterness may follow.

In connection with therapy and other interpersonal relationships, the accepting



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attention comes from another person or from an institution. Occasionally, this may result in a strong bond and a feeling of dependence and helplessness, for example in relation to a professional treatment institution. In meditation and other self-administered methods it is, to a large extent, we ourselves who provide acceptance and attention by the way we apply the method. Self-care and self-administered methods tend to enhance our self-confidence, because we ourselves make an important contribution towards our improvement and progress.

Mindfulness vs. concentration

Some descriptions of meditation use the word 'mindfulness' to describe something that resembles the awareness or attention characterised by a free mental attitude of Acem Meditation. In contrast to Acem Meditation, however, 'mindfulness' often entails an active awareness of breathing, posture and, to some extent, thoughts.

Although this may not be intended, we are sometimes led to believe that words like 'free mental attitude', 'awareness', and 'mindfulness' refer to an idealised state: something one arrives at and experiences when one meditates correctly. This stems from the notion that ideal meditation is a state of pleasant bodily relaxation, where thoughts are either not very insistent, or are experienced as 'deep' or meaningful. In contrast, we interpret humdrum, turbulent thoughts, physical tension, tiredness and restlessness as superficial or 'wrong' meditation. Such beliefs are supported by certain traditions that compare man's mind with what takes place in the head of a monkey that jumps from tree to tree without purpose, and therefore needs to be controlled.

As a consequence, we are likely to introduce elements of concentration (either as a conscious element in our practice, or by focusing very strongly on breathing, meditation sound or certain types of thoughts) in order to push away impulsive, 'disturbing' thoughts and bodily sensations. When our meditation no longer lives up to our expectations of an idealised state, we may be tempted to try to 'help' the process forward by introducing a little control and concentration, even if this limits the process and goes against the principle of a free mental attitude.

Empathy directed inwards

When we try to increase the free mental attitude in our practice of meditation, we establish empathy inwards - towards parts of ourselves that we do not easily accept. In daily life, the first challenge is to set aside time for meditation, in order to give our-



Body and mind become calm, providing space for a meeting with ourselves, the way we are behind the façade.

selves relaxation and recreation as well as energy and mental calm. The next challenge is to repeat the meditation sound with a free mental attitude, making it possible for unprocessed experiences from one's daily life to be met with empathy. Whether these unprocessed experiences appear in the form of troubling thoughts, restlessness, emptiness or tiredness, an accepting attitude will ensure that the unfinished business of the day finds a channel and loses some of its grip on us. This will set free our awareness and energy. In our daily lives, the free mental attitude of Acem Meditation stimulates determination and forcefulness.

During courses with long meditation sessions, we may advance a step further. Gradually, the echoes from our daily lives quieten down. Body and mind become calm, providing space for a meeting with ourselves, the way we are behind the façade. We get in touch with impulsive undercurrents in our personalities. We discover how deep down we control and limit ourselves with an intensity that we had no idea existed.

The first challenge is to sit long enough to discover that we are not repeating the meditation sound freely and effortlessly, but instead we are concentrating and exerting ourselves, trying to add or subtract a little in order to do better. When we discover these efforts, the next challenge is to go on repeating the meditation sound as freely and effortlessly as possible, even if we have a strong feeling that we are not doing it well enough.

Often this will bring us in contact with feelings of resignation, fears of failure, and low self-esteem. This we may experience as negative and meaningless: something that we want to get away from. However, this is the first step towards establishing empathy for the parts of us that create tension and disturbance.

The key is to repeat the meditation sound with a higher degree of free mental attitude. This is not always easy. It requires time, patience and empathy with our own lack of perfection. Some of our basic character traits are difficult to change. Meditation may help us to accept them, see how they control us, and learn to live with them. This reduces their limiting effect on us and thereby makes a big difference both to ourselves and to the people around us.

Translated by Nina Tjomsland

Questions for discussion

1. What do we mean by "a free mental attitude should characterise our awareness"?
2. What is the relation between a free mental attitude and empathy?
3. How can Acem Meditation affect illness?
4. Can Acem Meditation help us reach a meditative state of mind? If so, how? If not, why not?
5. How do the effects of a retreat with long meditation sessions differ from the effects of everyday meditations?

Why participate in the First World Retreat of Acem Meditation?



Joy Chun-hsi Lu
Supervisor
Ministry of Finance
Taipei, Taiwan

For me this is a precious opportunity to meet and discuss with meditators from other countries, especially the country where Acem originated. I want to use the opportunity to see Norway, and perhaps to participate in the International Deepening Retreat as well. Acem Meditation gives me energy and concentration. I have become less short-tempered and perhaps a little more mature in my dealings with people around me.



Jothi Sundar
Secretary
Caritas India
New Delhi, India

I used to be quite shy, but after I started practising Acem Meditation, I have become more confident, even in big groups, and much more outspoken. I feel better now, and I want to learn more about Acem and meditation. I also look forward to hearing talks by the person who founded Acem. I will be attending the conference with

my husband John, our son Kamal and our daughter Chithra, all of whom practise Acem Meditation.



Edwin C. Mac Gillavry
Researcher
criminal law
Groningen University
Groningen
the Netherlands

I look forward to the opportunity to practise long meditations followed by guidance every day. I have participated in a week-long retreat once before, and found it gave me

something beyond what the daily meditations can offer. Meditation has given me more flexibility and made it easier for me to recover after setbacks. The World Retreat will be something special. I am very eager to hear the experiences of meditators from various parts of the world.

“The most beautiful place in the world”



Optional 4-day post-retreat
tour of Norway
Sunday July 20
to Thursday July 24 2003

The tour will provide an opportunity to visit some of the most scenic places in Norway, including:

Day 1

Valdresflya An old road along the wild river Sjøa and the wide mountain plateaux and high peaks of Jotunheimen National Park
Hedalen Stave Church Built in 1160, the church has a unique ambience and contains precious medieval art objects.
Ridderspranget Knight's Leap. According to legend, Sigvat, a 13th century knight, jumped over this gorge in order to marry the girl he loved.
Strynsvatnet. A beautiful lake close to a world of glaciers and a summer ski centre.

Day 2

Kjenddal Glacier An offshoot of the Jostedal glacier, the largest glacier in mainland Europe.
Norrangsdalen Valley. Here an old farmhouse can still be seen under the clear water.
Hellesylt. We travel by boat through a breathtaking fiordscape.
Geiranger Fiord. Majestic snow peaks, wild waterfalls, green lushness and the deep blue fiord water, often described as “the most beautiful place in the world”.

Day 3

Travel by car and ferry to a number of stunning locations on **the west coast** of Norway, rarely seen by tourists.



Hellesylt. A picturesque village on the west coast of Norway

Herdalssetra Here you can see Norwegian goat cheese being made.
Tresfjord Experience both traditional and modern Norwegian farm life.
Molde Every summer this small town hosts Europe's oldest jazz festival.
The Atlantic Road Brings us to the vast ocean and the little fishing village of Bud.

Day 4

Trollveggen Europe's highest vertical mountain wall, where you can watch courageous mountaineers and maybe even daring base-jumpers.
Romsdalshorn and Trolltindan Beautiful peaks surrounding the area.
Rauma River Here we will have lunch at a secluded spot by the riverside.
Veidarvon A cottage in the mountain world of the legendary figure Peer Gynt, made world-famous by Henrik Ibsen's play.

Day 5

Return to **Oslo**, travelling through the green forests and rich farming areas of Eastern Norway.

The First World Retreat of Acem Meditation

Seminars and workshops

At the World Retreat, participants can choose between a number of seminars and workshops with experts in their various fields who are also experienced Acem instructors or meditation teachers. (Programme is subject to change.)

Workshops

Painting your self Eva Skaar, Artist
Creative writing Christopher Grøndahl, Novelist

Seminars

Meditative processes and family relations
Psychologist T. Suzanne Berg-Nielsen, Ph.D.
Group psychology, dreams and communication
Psychotherapist Maria S. Gjems-Onstad
Love as a meditative mystery
Carl Henrik Grøndahl, Artistic Director
Scientific evidence for biological effects of meditation
Professor Øyvind Ellingsen, MD/Ph.D.
Ethics in a meditative perspective
Professor Ole Gjems-Onstad, Ph.D.
The philosophy of “life context”
Associate Professor Dag Jenssen, Ph.D.

The meaning of words in meditation and literature Deputy Director Monika Wirkkala
Acem: background and future
Professor Tor Hersoug, Ph.D.
Acem Meditation in various cultures
Professor Halvor Eifring, Ph.D.
Introspective visions of the East and West
Torbjørn Hobbøl, Meditation Teacher

ACEM School of Meditation

is a non-profit organisation which helps people develop existentially by means of a mindful, reflective process known as Acem Meditation.

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