



A Study of the Art of Living Foundation

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Abstract

The focus of this thesis is the Art of Living Foundation (AoL), a splinter group from Transcendental Meditation (TM). My primary goal is to present a systematic overview of this large but understudied movement. Over the course of this overview, I examine AoL through a variety of different interpretive frameworks. Throughout the thesis I inspect Art of Living through several different lenses: an analysis of discourse about the guru Sri Sri Ravi Shankar as a leader-founder, focused especially on the themes of charisma and hagiography; an inquiry into the various legitimation strategies utilized in AoL; an overview of AoL's gradual splintering from TM in terms of sociological analyses of the schism process; an examination of the origin of the organization based on a model of 'cult formation' put forward by Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge; and some discussion of the conversion process. Finally, an important sub-theme of my thesis is how AoL is differently appropriated in two distinct cultures.

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1 Introduction

The focus of this thesis is the Art of Living Foundation (AoL), a splinter group from Transcendental Meditation (TM). Established in 151 countries, the organization spreads its founder's message of a "violence-free, stress-free society" through the mediums of meditation, yoga and breathing techniques, as well as numerous initiatives in education, development and peace work.

My primary goal is to present a systematic overview of this large but understudied movement. Next to some of the Japanese New Religious Movements (NRMs) and to Transcendental Meditation, Art of Living is probably the largest New Religion in the world – depending, of course, on where one draws the line between groups that are NRMs and groups that are not. Over the course of this overview, I will examine AoL through a variety of different interpretive frameworks. I will also, throughout the thesis attempt a comparative endeavor between AoL in a Norwegian and an Indian context.

My principal source of information has been the primary sources produced by the movement itself plus certain secondary sources – especially what little literature there is on AoL, but also studies of other movements, particularly studies of TM. These sources have been supplemented by a limited amount of participant observation research. Specifically, I have taken basic AoL courses and attended a few AoL events in both Norway and India, and interacted informally with AoL participants in these contexts.

I also conducted some basic questionnaire research on a few hundred AoL participants. Except in the Appendix where I examine the survey findings in more detail, the select data I pull from the questionnaire responses in the main part of the thesis are used primarily to supplement a more general presentation and analysis of the movement.

1.2 The “problem”

The 'original' hypothesis for this thesis grew out of Milda Ališauskienė's findings about the different attitudes between Lithuanian and Danish participants regarding *Sudharshan Kriya* (AoL's core practice, often abbreviated SKY¹) as a 'scientific'

¹ *Sudarshan Kriya*, a breathing technique which is the cornerstone practice of the movement.

technique. Specifically, Lithuanian practitioners were significantly more likely to ascribe scientific status to SKY, a systematic difference Ališauskienė attributed to Lithuania's Soviet background. I suspected I would find a similar difference between the attitudes of Indian and Norwegian practitioners, but did not. However, although this has turned out not to be the main theme of the thesis, it is still an interesting topic, in part because Ališauskienė's work has served to highlight this theme and in part because of an emergent body of literature on NRMs and science.

To minimize the potential for error, the 'science question' was asked in several different ways in the questionnaire. What I found was that the marked tendency to view this practice as a scientific technique, which characterizes the attitude of practitioners in former Soviet countries, does not extend to either Indian or Norwegian practitioners. Instead, I discovered traces of an 'indigenization process' that has been taking place as an Indian movement was being transplanted into a Western environment. This process has not only impacted attitudes toward AoL's presentation of SKY as scientific, but also attitudes toward other practices. Moving abroad, AoL/SKY was appropriated in terms of Norway's (and likely other Western countries') alternative spiritual (new age) subculture. However, the process of appropriation was not one-way; following the example of TM, AoL rapidly adapted itself to a new environment – for example, by deemphasizing guru devotion and other distinctly Hindu aspects of the group.

1.3 Methods and theory

1.3.1 Research History/ Literature

Scholarship on Art of Living from a Religious Studies perspective (in contrast to the numerous studies of SKY published from a medical/therapeutic perspective) has thus far been solid, but relatively limited.² The research endeavors of Ališauskienė, as well as Cynthia Humes, Alexis Avdeeff and Kathinka Frøystad, have been extremely helpful in understanding the organization and its founder. I have also spent much time on Art of Living's various websites³ trying to gain a thorough understanding of its practices and

² From a religious studies perspective, the most significant works are those of the Lithuanian academic Milda Ališauskienė. Her doctoral thesis on AoL in Lithuania (in Lithuanian) and her chapter in McKay, Williams, Goddard, Foxlee, and Ramanauskaite (2009) are the principal sources.

³ For example <http://www.artofliving.org/no-no>, <http://gwsadmin.artofliving.org/in-en>, <http://srisriravishankar.org/> and <http://www.youtube.com/user/ArtOfLivingTV> (all links last accessed 14.02.12)

activities.⁴ The present thesis will thus add to the scholarship on this important NRM by presenting a systematic overview, as well as by bringing a number of relevant theoretical perspectives to bear on this movement.

For this thesis I have drawn upon a wide variety of literature concerning New Age/New Religiosity, New Religious Movements, and Art of Living. The corpus of literature on NRMs is large despite the fact that this field of study is relatively new. My supervisor, James R. Lewis, is an authority on NRMs, and his literature suggestions have provided me with a road into this mostly unfamiliar field. I have relied on his scholarship especially on the topics of legitimation strategies and schisms between new religious movements. For supporting theoretical perspectives, I have referred to many authors. Lorne L. Dawson, Eileen Barker and Titus Hjelm – as well as some of the contributors to Lewis (ed.) 2004 – have been useful for defining the field and for discussions of NRM classifications. Humes has also been invaluable in understanding the Art of Living's connections to Transcendental Meditation, AoL's parent organization.

In India, AoL's connections to a Hindu belief-complex are quite obvious, and can be well-documented in AoL 'scriptures' and practices. The emergent New Age movement in India has thus far been little explored, and I am indebted to Fred Clothey and Frøystad for providing me with a few pointers in that direction. Also, the extensive scholarship on Transcendental Meditation and on AoL's connections to this organization have given me some perspectives on how to understand AoL in both a local and a global context, and in relation to conflict and religious innovation. Norway is such a small and relatively transparent society that an 'exotic' NRM is easy to spot and delineate. As briefly noted above, in Norway I discovered that Art of Living is deeply embedded in the alternative spiritual/New Age subculture. Compared to India where scholarship on New Age/NRMs is relatively limited, there is much more literature available on NRMs and the New Age in a Western context. Last year, for example, both Siv Ellen Kraft and Pål Ketil Botvar & Ulla Schmidt (eds.) published books on new/alternative religiosity in Norway, and from their books I have drawn both

⁴ I have not attempted a theoretical analysis of the website content other than what was necessary for the description (and analysis) of the organization. In future studies of AoL, a useful project would be to conduct a deeper content analysis of the websites, as the websites are an important avenue of communication and self-portrayal from the organization to its practitioners and to the 'outside' world.

perspectives and data. Further, in a Norwegian setting I also have my own cultural background on which to rely. Not that I am an infallible ‘guru’ on the Norwegian New Age, but I think it is probably easier to ‘intuitively’ understand the place and function of a NRM in a culture I know so well. On the other hand, my pre-conceptions might make me overlook some factors that outsiders might easily perceive.

There is an ongoing debate about the definition and significance of NRMs, but I have not been particularly attentive to fault lines of disagreement. And though I recognize the perspectives of various authors, I have rather chosen to move through interpretive frameworks as I would a supermarket. What I have experienced and read about Art of Living functions as my ‘shopping list,’ and allows me to pick terms, ideas and perspectives from the different scholars I pass, seeing that their various theoretical perspectives can illuminate different components of my thesis.

1.3.2 Some language considerations

When studying a phenomenon in another culture there are always questions about language and how it expands or limits understanding. So even for the minimal observations I made in India, I am aware that some readers might see language as an issue, which is fully understandable. However, it is important to remember that the AoL members are, at least the ones I met, urban, well-educated and speak several languages.⁵ At the course I attended in Bangalore, for example, out of about 40 participants a few spoke only Kannada,⁶ and one or two spoke mostly Hindi. The rest spoke English – often much better than myself. I speak neither Kannada nor Hindi, though I am able to understand a bit, which means that I was not able to facilitate a proper level of communication with the non-English speakers in attendance. However, I do not see this as a major problem. I was not conducting in-depth interviews, nor interacting with my co-participants on other than a ‘social’ level. Yet, if the pattern at this course (as well as more generally at the *ashram*) is representative of Art of Living as a whole, then only

⁵ We did not include a question of language in the survey, but from personal observation it is very common, at least among well-educated Indians, to speak several languages. This is often a combination of English and regional languages – for example Hindi and Kannada.

⁶ The official language in the state of Karnataka, India, part of the Dravidian language group. It has according to a 2001 census approximately 38 million native speakers, while ca. 13 million speak it as a second language. I expect the numbers to have risen sharply in the last decade. (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kannada>, accessed 14.02.12)

ca. 4 out of 40 people (10 %) are not fluent in English – which is an amazing percentage.

Additionally, the fact that the language of the survey was English does not seem to have raised any concerns among Norwegian respondents. As in India, English is taught in Norwegian schools from an early age, and Norwegians are generally well exposed to English through the mass media. Norwegian respondents also had the option of answering the open-ended questions in their own language (only one or two respondents did) – which unfortunately was not an option for the Indian respondents. An additional consideration in the thesis is the use of quotations and notational apparatus. Contrary to the common use of ‘[sic]’ in quotes, I have rather chosen to edit respondents’ errors regarding spelling, punctuation etc. A frequent use of ‘[sic]’ disrupts the flow of the text, and additionally can reflect badly on the competence of respondents.

1.3.3 Methods and analytical perspectives

For this thesis I have utilized mixed methods; primary and secondary literature, a quantitative online survey that included options for respondents to express themselves qualitatively, and as informal participant observation. Mixed methods (formerly known as triangulation) is acknowledged as a third major research approach or paradigm, over and above quantitative and qualitative research (Johnson and Onwuegbuzi 2004, Johnson et al. 2007). R. Burke Johnson et al. note that “Mixed methods research is an intellectual and practical synthesis [which] recognizes the importance of traditional quantitative and qualitative research but also offers a powerful third paradigm choice that often will provide the most informative, complete, balanced, and useful research results” (2007: 129). The philosophy behind using mixed methods is pragmatism, while at the same time this approach is creative and inclusive. Homa Milani notes that this method is conducive “to induction (or discovery of patterns), deduction (testing of theories and hypotheses), and abduction (uncovering and relying on the best of a set of explanations for understanding one’s results)” (2012: 1). Similarly, Grønmo (2004) states that strategic considerations are important for a mixed methods approach. In the same way that society is complex and manifold it makes sense to combine many different theoretical and methodical perspectives. The “combination of methods can form the basis of a more inclusive way of shedding light on the phenomena under study,

more than single methods used separately” (Grønmo 2004: 56, my translation). For my multi-variant perspective on Art of Living, the mixed methods perspective has been extremely helpful.

The primary and secondary literature, survey responses and observational data together make up the basis for the overview of – and for the comparative analysis of – the organization and its practitioners. Since the scope of this thesis is very broad, the variety of different approaches utilized in its pages have yielded results that I was able to ‘cross-check,’ and to synthesize into a coherent text.

The method of participant-observation; attending courses and spending time at both the Oslo center and the Bangalore *ashram*, have given me a personal, bodily understanding of the movement’s practices, adherents and locations – which has added necessary depth to the information derived from literature and from the survey. I attended two basic/part 1 courses, one at the Art of Living Centre in Oslo and one at the AoL *ashram* in Bangalore, India.⁷ Both courses stretched over a weekend, from Friday afternoon to Sunday night. In Oslo I also attended the Sunday night *satsang*,⁸ and I attended morning yoga practice and evening *satsangs* (with Ravi Shankar present) during the Indian course.

I think the component of informal field observation which I used for supplementing my largely text-based approach was one of the most important avenues for me to gain a real sense of a previously unknown organization. Participant-observation has additionally been important in exploring the differences and similarities in the organization and its courses in Norway and in India. Thus, many of my analyses of the organization and of its national differences are based on my own observations, but (as is the ideal behind a mixed methods approach) I have made sure that my observations are supported by the literature and survey findings, thus minimizing the margin of error in my own understanding.

⁷ I attended a course in Oslo in May 2011, and in India in September 2011.

⁸ *Satsang* comes from Sanskrit: *sat* (true) and *sanga* (company). According to Frisk a *satsang* is “a traditional activity in the Indian spiritual context, meaning ‘being with good/righteous companions.’ Satsang is a sitting together with an enlightened person who usually gives a short speech and then answers questions.” (2002: 67)

1.3.4 The survey

For this thesis my supervisor and I together settled for analyzing some of the (general) observations I had done through the lenses of available literature. Importantly, we also opted for an online questionnaire. Stenbjerre & Laugesen (2005) state that, “To contain costs as much as possible, we rely on internet surveys. When conducted properly on carefully selected samples, research has shown these to be highly representative.” The cost-effectiveness of an online survey is beyond doubt. It also would have been difficult to have interviewed 211 informants in a ‘traditional’ way – though this same is still small from a statistical point of view. The representativeness of the survey is mixed. The Indian subsample is poor, but the Norwegian subsample is good. AoL Norway leaders informed me that the number of currently active participants is close to 200 (which is probably an unconscious exaggeration; the real figure is likely closer to 180-190). Thus a sample of 100 is better than a 50 % response rate, which is really quite good.

The survey of AoL practitioners that the questionnaire data on which this thesis is based is hosted at www.surveymonkey.com⁹ and is in English. The questionnaire is based on previous surveys designed by James R. Lewis – for example, the Pagan Census (co-created with Helen A. Berger) and the Satan Survey. The AoL survey asks questions about demography, and also explores the practitioners’ attitudes towards and use of other alternative ideas and therapies. It examines their other religious affiliations, how they originally got in touch with Art of Living and *Sudarshan Kriya*, how frequently they practice and how often they are in touch with the organization and other practitioners. The questionnaire also offers a selection of open-ended questions, in which the respondents are asked to describe, for example, if they have had any particularly ‘meaningful’ experiences with SKY (Out of 211 respondents, 132 answered this question). The open-ended questions provide a nice touch of flesh-and-blood humanness to an otherwise quantitative survey, and give the respondents an opportunity to express their views and highlight important issues.

⁹ The survey engine is an academically credible institution, with some 10 years’ experience in internet technology and survey methodology. The engine is available in 15 languages, and both free and paid plans are frequently used by researchers and companies all over the world.

1.3.5 Structure

The structure of this thesis is quite traditional. Its structure can be compared to the form of an inverted triangle, where the beginning is quite broad. Chapter 2 surveys some attempts at defining New Religious Movements, especially in a Western context. I examine notions of secularization, the ‘New Age’ matrix and the influence of Hinduism on NRMs. Additionally I take a look at the relationships between NRMs and media. This chapter is important as I attempt to place AoL within a NRM/ New Age field, listing some aspects of the movement and the field of study that makes such interpretation possible. I also briefly note that in an Indian context AoL is a NRM, but that the Hindu traditional connection is very strong. Chapter 3 analyzes the guru/leader/founder of the movement, focused especially on the themes of charisma, a short biography and thoughts on the construction of hagiography. I focus on Shankar’s connection with TM, and attempt a sociological analysis of the schismatic process. Further I attempt an examination of the origin of the organization based on a model of ‘cult formation’ put forward by Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge; and some discussion of the conversion process. I also make a point of Shankar’s role as a religious entrepreneur. As the triangle narrows I shift focus to the ‘minutiae’ of the movement: Chapter 4 presents some of the key practices in Art of Living, a short overview of the courses, some perspectives on yoga, and finally the cornerstone practice in the movement – *Sudarshan Kriya*. In this chapter I also analyze certain differences between Indian and Norwegian survey respondents, as an important sub-theme of my thesis is how AoL is differently appropriated in two distinct cultures. The questionnaire research was especially helpful in this regard by revealing certain systematic differences between Indian and Norwegian adherents. The comparative analysis extends to Chapter 5, wherein I analyze various aspects of SKY as a ‘scientific’ practice. First I examine the connection between traditional ‘Vedic’ philosophy and science. Then I examine the *pranayama* (controlled breathing) practice itself and how informants relate to understanding the practice in terms of scientism.

1.3.6 Some final notes

I believe that in this thesis I am shedding some light on what Art of Living is about and how the organization came to be, relying on relevant parts of the extensive literature on NRMs and on the AoL organization itself, but also on my own observations and the

questionnaire data. The primary goal of this thesis is to provide an overview of a little-known movement, its guru and its key practices, as well as to locate Art of Living within 'real-life' cultural and religious contexts. This thesis relies heavily on a selection of different theoretical perspectives and primary/secondary sources, but AoL practitioners' voices are also audible, especially in the sections concerning the cornerstone practice *Sudarshan Kriya* and relations to scientism, and in the Appendix.

2 What are New Religious Movements?

In this chapter I am attempting to present an overview of the field of Religious Studies concerning New Religious Movements (NRMs) and New Age. Through a number of theoretical lenses I define NRMs, especially in a Western context. I place AoL within the academic field, and suggest some avenues of interpretation for the organization as it appears in Norway and in India. I make notes of a connection to secularization in a Western context, and how important the influence of Hinduism has been on the New Age. In addition I attempt a short analysis of NRMs and media, and note some characteristics of Art of Living public relations.

2.1 Some attempts at defining New Religious Movements

In the Introduction to his *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements* (2006), Peter Clarke notes that NRMs are a global phenomenon, and that such movements have become relatively ‘easy to invent.’ In the modern world religion has been uprooted from its original cultural context and the wider circulation of religious beliefs and practices of every kind. This process of globalization has occasioned a shift in religions from geographically and culturally specific ‘facts,’ that is from their being associated with one particular geographical and cultural zone such as the Middle East, Asia, the West, or Africa, to being a reality everywhere. (2006: 8).

World religions like Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam, which until the countercultural shift of the 1960’s had been viewed as exotic imports on the fringe of Western religious culture, have now become increasingly mainstream. These new varieties of religion have profoundly changed cultures in both the West and the East. Clarke states that Asia has seen a growth in spirituality that is socially engaged, while in the West he sees an increased interest in spirituality that is inwardly directed. Referring to Y. Lambert (2004), he mentions that although many in the West still self-identify as Christians there is nothing in that self-identification which precludes adhering to ideas or following practices related to ‘foreign’ religions at the same time, whether it be ‘belief in reincarnation, the notion of God as impersonal, and the practices of yoga and vipassana or insight meditation” (2006: 8). Further, Clarke states that

Although the confluence, of historically unprecedented proportions, of religious systems and spiritualities has contributed, along with other processes that include modernization, urbanization, new developments in science and technology, economic migration, and legal changes such as the repeal of the Asian Exclusion Act in the United States in 1965, to make the phenomenon of NRMs a global one, there is, none the less, much variation in the structure, content, size, and in the goals of these religions and in their orientation towards the wider society. (2006: 8)

Attempting ‘watertight’ definitions of New Religious Movements (NRMs) is difficult, as, first of all, there are so many of them. Secondly, they are all distinct organizations. Some like Scientology have campaigned to be recognized as a religion through the legal system, while others like Transcendental Meditation (The Science of Creative Intelligence) have worked to achieve the opposite (Barker 1998). Gordon Melton (2004) states the problem well when he says that,

I have found that all the definitions that approach new religions by posing one or more shared characteristics fall by the wayside, even some of the more popular ones that begin with, for example, charismatic leaders, relative uniqueness, or millennial ideas. Even less satisfying are definitions that impose a set of negative qualities on NRMs from their involvement in immoral and/or illegal activities, their psychological effect on members, or their purported use of mind control. [...] I am suggesting that the field of new religions studies is concerned with groups of religious bodies/movements which, though they do not share any particular set of attributes, have been assigned to the fringe by, first, the more established and dominant voices in the religious culture and, second, various voices within the secular culture (government officials, watchdog groups, the media, etc.), and thus are basically to be seen as a set of religious groups/movements existing in relatively contested spaces within society as a whole. (Melton 2004: 74-75)

I agree with Melton in that it is an exercise in futility to attempt to construct a set of characteristics that can encompass *all* NRMs. However, for particular organizations some (among the many) *defining characteristics* fit better than others.

The pluralism of, and within, New Religious Movements gives rise to a number of different ways of defining these organizations, though some definitions are more problematic than others. Referring to Titus Hjelm (2005) and Eileen Barker (1998) it is, for example, difficult to draw a boundary between “new” and “old” religions – even though this distinction seems to be implicit in the very name *New Religious Movements*. Hjelm exemplifies this issue by referring to the Mormons and the Jehovah’s Witnesses, which are still being treated as new religions, as opposed to the temporally-new

independent African churches created in the late twentieth century that have been conceptualized as old (or traditional), due to the nature of their teachings. Thus attempting a definition of New Religious Movements based on temporality may be quite difficult. However, Barker suggests that a convenient point of departure for understanding the issue of temporality is where “we can define new religions as groups or movements that are *new* in so far as they *have become visible in the West in their present form since the Second World War*” (1998: 15). Indeed, Melton (2004) points out, as does Clarke (2006), that virtually all of the novel religions or spiritualities that can be found in the West (at least in their early stages) could and should be interpreted as modern versions of one of the major religious traditions of the world.¹⁰ This familiarity with “parental religions” also similar to Barker’s ideas (1998) where she suggests some characteristics of New Religions are doctrinal.

The beliefs and practices of NRMs are not restricted to the Judeo-Christian tradition, but can be drawn from almost any tradition, idea or ideology imaginable. How intricate and systematic the belief systems are depends on the organization, but according to Barker they can vary from “comprehensive theologies...to a collection of esoteric or mundane ideas gathered from a hotchpotch of widely disparate sources”¹¹ (1998: 18-19); everything from yoga to meditation, dance, chanting or prayer – and a vast number of other more or less elaborate rituals.¹² Art of Living, for example, exhibits many of the beliefs and rituals drawn from their Hindu-inspired worldview, expressed through yoga, meditation, *pranayama* and chanting.

Similarly, one can choose to interpret NRMs contextually; *in relation to the wider society*. Juxtaposing the two quotes from Clarke and Melton cited above, one can note that NRMs can (and do) exist on a relational continuum where the organizations can, on one hand, as Melton (2004) points out, be on the social fringe and marked by tension. On the other hand NRMs can, as Melton and James Lewis phrase it, “become an integral part of a new, truly pluralistic “mainstream” (1992: ix).

A contextual view of what constitutes an NRM could, as Hjelm states, mean “acknowledging that the most common feature of groups described as NRMs is their

¹⁰ Here Melton mentions Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Shinto, Sikhism, Sant Mat, Taoism, Zoroastrianism, and Native American (and other ethno-linguistic religions).

¹¹ Barker is referring to the Unification Church as her example of “comprehensive theology,” but other (Indian-oriented) movements with elaborate theologies include ISKCON (Hare Krishna) and the Osho (Bhagwan) movement (see for example Frisk 2007 on these movements in Sweden).

¹² See also Holm (1998) and Dawson (1998) for similar lists of beliefs and rituals in NRMs.

alternative status vis-à-vis the wider society. As it is, ‘alternative’ and ‘mainstream’ are always defined by the social context.... This means that, depending on context, the substantial definition of NRMs changes radically” (2005: 111). This is also one of Melton’s points (2004); most countries have a specific religious tradition to which the majority belongs. And from the standpoint of people who are part of the socially dominant tradition, groups hailing from other traditions can appear as outsiders. Such outsider religious organizations might be what he calls ‘unacceptably different,’ leading to a conflictual relationship with society. Because of their ‘alternative’ beliefs and rituals, Barker (1998) also states that throughout history NRMs have tended to exist in tension with society at large.

However, this is not to say that *all* NRMs exist in conflict. To somehow ‘measure’ the NRM’s relation to the world Barker suggests utilizing Wallis’ classic typology, which classifies New Religions as world-rejecting, world-affirming or world-accommodating. With respect to Art of Living, I would argue that it falls under the second category (along with its parental organization, Transcendental Meditation). World-affirming religions, according to Barker “embrace the world’s secular values and goals while using unconventional means to achieve these” (1998: 21). That AoL in addition to (or perhaps indivisible from) their (relatively, context-based, ‘unconventional’) beliefs and practices¹³ embrace secular values is quite evident – as there seems to be a strong drive in the organization to make the world a better place. The importance of these values within the AoL organization may be related to Clarke’s (2006) notions about Asian NRMs often focusing on socially engaged spirituality. Accordingly, personal development seems to go hand in hand with social/ societal development and social work¹⁴ within AoL, which may reinforce a positive public view of the NRM – thus strengthening and reiterating a world-affirming relationship. Additionally, it is important to note that though Barker (1998) and Hjelm (2005) use the terms ‘unconventional’ and ‘alternative’ to describe the ways in which NRMs seek to achieve their goals, they also make sure to note that what is considered unconventional and alternative is strongly dependent on context. Further, Melton states that,

¹³ “If that alternative belief system includes some unusual beliefs (e.g. scientifically questionable or pseudoscientific) or practices (e.g. mummification, channeling, magic) then the chances of being seen as different are heightened” (Melton 2004: 82).

¹⁴ See for example <http://www.artofliving.org/no-en/archive/146> (accessed 06.02.12) for a list of projects AoL is involved in.

In different cultures, specific characteristics that will lead to assignment as an outsider group will vary, of course. For example, some forms of Asian medicine would be quite mainstream in parts of the world while their efficacy is continually questioned in the West. That is, relative to religious practice, what is considered “cultic” in one culture will have a quite different status in another (2004: 83)

Thus, for example, AoL practices are not unusual in an Indian context, while in Norway they can seem rather exotic. However, especially when it comes to Indian-oriented movements such as Art of Living, the practices and the spirituality of some NRMs are so baked into Western popular and religious culture that classifying them as marginal or conflictual – as opposed to simply pluralistic or (semi)exotic – is difficult to support. There are indeed religious movements that are constantly in conflict with the mainstream society, but AoL is not one of these.

Historically, a church-sect typology encompassed very few new religions, and the subsequent ‘cult’ model “did not adequately incorporate the range of non-sectarian alternatives. Conceptualizing the concepts of church and sect, adding ethnic religious groups and the broader category of new religious groups, and linking them through a single dimension provides one way of addressing the longstanding conceptual challenges” (Bromley 2009: 5).

2.2 Secularization, the ‘New Age’ matrix and the influence of Hinduism on NRMs

In this part of the chapter I will examine some characteristics that I believe to be important for the rise of a NRM like Art of Living, especially in a Western context. In brief, secularization can be interpreted as leading into (re)sacralization, enhanced by deep, cultural influences from the New Age and the connected ‘Indian turn.’

Clarke (2006) notes that one can find some common sociological explanations for the rise of NRMs in the history of research on New Religions – for example as a reaction to rapid social change. New Religious Movements, according to Lorne Dawson (1998), appeared on the religious scene in the 1960s and early ‘70s. So, over the last 50

years ‘cults,’ or NRMs,¹⁵ have emerged and evolved in a complex interplay with multiple stakeholders. The practitioners themselves, whose religious/spiritual orientation seems to be an important part of their life-world, are of course the most deeply involved. But the various definitions and perceptions of NRMs have also been shaped by academicians, counter-cultists and by media and popular culture. Basing my analysis on Dawson (1998), Pål Ketil Botvar (2011) and Colin Campbell (2002 and 2007), I will discuss the emergence of NRMs as developments in both the ‘macro-’ and the ‘micro-environment’ through the lenses of secularization and (re)sacralization, and NRMs as simultaneously a reaction to cultural change and as a manifestation of cultural continuity.

First, Botvar (2011) notes that for many years the leading theoretical paradigm in religious studies was that of secularization, which postulated that religion would lose its meaning in all spheres of modern society. Referring to Casanova (1994¹⁶) he mentions three types of secularization theory – or, more correctly, three *levels* of secularization: societal, organizational and personal.

1. First, it appears that religion has divorced itself from other public sectors – such as politics, economics and education – thus lessening its impact on and power over all of these.
2. Secondly, secularization can be seen as a form of privatization. This, the authors suggest, means that religion has little or no impact in the public sphere – religion becomes a private, personal matter.
3. Third, secularization can be interpreted as a state of affairs in which religion loses its importance to the individual members of society. People become estranged from religious belief and practice due to the influence of modernity. Thus religion ends up being unimportant and people stop adhering to traditional forms of religious practice.

The borders between these levels of secularization are, of course, blurred, and they are entirely capable of existing both separately and together. Additionally, the various

¹⁵ In this thesis I will not use the word ‘cult,’ but will rather stick to the more conventional NRM. It is worth noting that the concept of ‘cults’, and the common usage of the word is still predominately pejorative. However much I would like to see the cult concept redressed I will use the less loaded ‘New Religious Movement.’

¹⁶ Public religions in the modern world, University of Chicago Press

levels of secularization are regarded as having different ‘strengths’; Botvar (2011) sees them in terms of a continuum from weak to strong. Weak secularization happens on a societal level – as seen in the first model – concerned with the differentiation of various aspects of society. On the other hand, he regards the process of religion becoming an increasingly private matter as strong.

Thus, if NRMs have grown as a reaction to cultural change they seem to be related to what Dawson (1998) calls cultural dislocations. These dislocations fall into three categories: changes in values, in social structure and in the character and role of religious institutions. It seems that Botvar’s first level of secularization aligns to some extent with Dawson’s cultural dislocations. Following Robert Bellah (1976)¹⁷ Dawson writes that abrupt changes in societal values and structure, and subsequently the lack of legitimacy for traditional religious institutions were brought on by the 1960s counterculture and by political change. Increased birth rates, affluence and educational opportunities, the rise of mass communication and a new ‘youth culture’ eventually “eroded the legitimacy of established institutions of business, government, education, religion and the family” (Dawson 1998: 44). The waning of traditional religious authority was a “necessary preconditioning for the rise of nationally significant and relatively exotic NRMs” (Dawson 1998: 61), a rise that was also the product of an increased religious pluralism and tolerance in society. However, these are all forms of ‘weak’ secularization.

The strongest form of secularization is found on the personal (micro) level, where religion loses its importance to individual members of society. Dawson claims that for young people especially, abrupt changes in culture lead to a feeling of “anomie – a sense of normlessness, of having lost their way” (1998: 47). Consequently, young people can leave organized religion and become ‘rebels without a cause,’ or they can turn towards new religions/new spirituality instead. However, this ‘youth crisis model’¹⁸ is not just personal; its root cause lies in changes in the social structure. Dawson explains the growth of NRMs partially in terms of their functioning as substitute families for the anomic youth, providing an alternative to what he calls the lack of

¹⁷ “New Religious Consciousness and the Crisis of Modernity” in Glock, C. and Bellah R. (eds.) *The New Religious Consciousness*, University of California Press

¹⁸ This ‘model’ will be discussed and criticized more thoroughly in a later chapter, where I will analyze who joins NRMs and who, specifically, joins Art of Living.

‘mediating structures’¹⁹ in society. If this is true, then part of the attraction of the NRMs would be their (re)socializing function. And, importantly, such young people would find that “symbolically and experientially, a highly personal and integrated way of life is sustained” (Dawson 1998: 55).

In his and Ulla Schmidt’s 2011 volume, Botvar examines changes in religiosity in Norway.²⁰ He is quite clear on the fact that the findings are *relatively* stable. There is some rise in religiosity; however, there is also a noticeable fall.²¹ In general, the findings show that Norwegians are less religious than they were earlier. This he says, upon examining demographic and socio-economic factors, is mainly due to structural changes in Norwegian society – for example, centralization, higher levels of education and increased gender equality; the same factors Dawson (1998) mentions. Thus, the Norwegian data seem to support a “traditional” view of secularization. However, NRMs do not only find footholds because of societal changes or individual rootlessness. And it is not a given that just because a society changes it also follows a linear development model of secularization. Earlier academic paradigms suggested that different forms of secularization were unilinear and causal; one level follows the other and eventually the role of religion in society and for individuals is over and done with. However, as Botvar strongly suggests, there are other views that may be worth examining. He mentions theories concerning, for example, the privatization of religion. In this view religion is generally seen as situated somewhere in between a strong and a weak form of secularization. But, as privatization is concerned with the individual’s relation to religion, it thus has the possibility of opening up some new perspectives on religious change. The privatization and differentiation of religion on an individual level is what Botvar, referring to Karel Doebbelare (2002),²² calls compartmentalization. Compartmentalization means that religion, like many other spheres of our modern-day lives, is set apart in its own particular space in society and in the lives of individuals. Though religion is actively visited, it does not necessarily infuse the whole of existence.

¹⁹ “Extra-familial sources of support [that] stand between the world of the nuclear family and the world of large corporate and government bureaucracies...” (Dawson 1998:53-54), eg. the function of small communities and extended families.

²⁰ Botvar and Schmidt (2011) have gathered data from three big questionnaires on religion in Norway, in 1991, 1998 and 2008. Through this data they have been able to uncover some trends on religious beliefs and practices over the last 20 years, and are able to see, not surprisingly, both continuity and change in the ways Norwegians relate to religion.

²¹ The changes in the variable are mostly at the edges of a nonbelief-belief continuum; those that previously have been uncertain about their religious views are now increasingly decided. (Botvar 2011)

²² Secularization: An analysis at three different levels, Peter Lang, Frankfurt

So in a sense it is fair to say that religion has become individualized on a new scale. However, and importantly, “individualization does not necessarily lead to weakened religiosity” (Botvar 2011: 13, my translation). This statement is to some extent supported by the Norwegian data. Botvar states that the numbers of people whose self-reference is strictly non-religious have grown from 1991 to 2008. The numbers of people that are uncertain about their religious beliefs have become fewer, but the number of people that define themselves as religious is as large today as it was in 1991. This generally means that more people have clarified their relationship with religion, from uncertainty towards belief or non-belief – and that viewing religion personally and individually does not necessarily make people believe less, maybe only differently. At this point I believe it is important to briefly mention some of the influence of the New Age on the religious culture of the West, and on the rise of NRMs. First of all, in a context of, for example, Art of Living, the boundaries between the ‘New Age Movement’ and a New Religious Movement are blurred and the two seem to overlap in many places. Historically, however, many NRMs²³ materialized from what Colin Campbell referred to as the ‘cultic milieu,’ an alternate spiritual subculture that can be seen as the predecessor to the ‘New Age’ (Lewis 2013 a). Two decades ago, Lewis outlined some of the important issues on the *boundaries* concerning the study of this spiritual subculture (1992).²⁴ First of all, because the New Age practitioners no longer refer to themselves as such, a research situation becomes much more complex. In particular, one can no longer ask people that believe in crystal healing, reincarnation or sacral therapy if they are ‘New Age’ and get a positive answer. One can further ask if the term ‘New Age’ is at all meaningful, because it is so loaded with connotations. However, the term ‘New Age’ is a comprehensive category that is ‘good to think with,’²⁵ and therefore not easy to let go of. Even today, 20 years after this book was written, there is no complete alternative to ‘New Age,’ though other terms²⁶ are used interchangeably. Thus, it is easy to “favor retaining ‘New Age’ as an etic category” (1992: 2). However, Partridge (2005) has recently coined the term ‘occulture,’ which is

²³ Or more correctly the “groups that Becker and others referred to as cults” (p. 5)

²⁴ Lewis and Melton’s 1992 volume *Perspectives on the New Age* is the first comprehensive collection on this indistinct religio-spiritual phenomenon.

²⁵ Sort of like Levi Strauss’ binary oppositions; especially if we see New Age in a context of opposition, counter/subculture, fringe phenomenon, alternative you name it...

²⁶ For example ‘New Religiosity’ or ‘New Religions’, or other expressions (like ‘the cultic milieu’, a term coined by Colin Campbell) focusing on an alternative status vis-à-vis ‘mainstream’ religion.

a broad concept – encompassing what traditionally is seen to be New Age in combination with aspects of popular culture. The term ‘occulture’ may thus far be the most comprehensive concept. However, for my purposes here, I still prefer ‘New Age’ because it entails a stronger focus on matters of spirituality/religiosity.

There are also *larger issues* connected to the boundaries between New Age and the “larger spiritual subculture.” The margins are quite vague, and I agree with Lewis where he observes that the New Age “is merely the most visible part of a more significant cultural shift” (1992: 4). Beliefs and practices that were formerly considered marginal are no longer necessarily so; reincarnation, yoga, meditation and astrology have entered a multifaceted mainstream. Thus, in the case of Art of Living, I believe that members can be defined (and define themselves) as belonging to a ‘larger spiritual subculture’/ pluralistic mainstream – as part of the New Age and as members of a New Religious Movement.

As we noted with NRMs, there have been a number of attempts to define the New Age according to a variety of different characteristics. I believe that terms like “epistemological individualism” and “revelational indeterminacy,”²⁷ as well as transformation²⁸ are all important for understanding this field. Transformation, however, is an especially important concept, in part because it is closely related to notions of healing, learning and religious experience, as well as at what I believe to be one of the core ideas on the continuum of the “larger spiritual subculture”— learning. “[L]ooking at the broader New Age phenomenon through the ‘lens’ of the learning theme helps us notice that, in contrast to many other religious movements, the dominant New Age ceremonies are workshops, lectures and classes, rather than worship ceremonies” (Lewis 1992: 8).²⁹ The same pattern applies to many NRMs, among those AoL, where courses and *satsangs* – both centered on learning – make up the main bulk of religious socializing.

Also important for understanding the New Age and certain New Religious Movements is the vast influence of India on the West. Andrea Diem and James Lewis (1992) trace the history of the influence Hindu spirituality on the West, especially in North America, and discuss how and why Hindu spirituality became so important

²⁷ Both of these terms are coined by Roy Wallis.

²⁸ Referring to Gordon Melton, seeing transformation as a defining characteristic both on a personal and a cultural/ collective plane

²⁹ Here Lewis refers to the scholarship of Mary Bednaroski.

within the New Age. They view this development through two lenses, specific historical links and social-psychological factors.

The authors state that historically South Asian religions, among them Hinduism, entered the US in three waves – each with a different emphasis. The first was overwhelmingly textual, resulting from the translation of Hindu religious scriptures into English. These texts thus became available, at least for members of the literary, academic elite. These translated scriptures heavily influenced the Theosophical Society, a movement which, according to Kraft (2011), has been formative for the New Age field as we know it, from the seventies until today. The second phase dates to the late 1800's and early 1900's, and was marked by Hindu *swamis* visiting the U.S., lecturing to American audiences on their particular forms of Hindu spirituality. Most famous of these was Swami Vivekananda whose Vedanta Society became enormously influential despite its relatively few members.

The third phase began around 1965, after the U.S. laws restricting immigration from Asia were lifted and “a new wave of Indian gurus found a receptive audience among young Americans seeking religious inspiration from nontraditional sources [...] Indian spiritual teachers were the most numerous (as well as, in the long run, the most influential)” (Diem and Lewis 1992: 49). An important factor for the growth of Hinduism in the West was also the emergence of what the authors refer to ‘idealized stereotypes’ of India, her religion and philosophy. According to their analysis, the historical origins of the pattern of projecting idealized images onto the subcontinent dates back at least as far as the British Orientalist scholars-officials who ‘discovered’ India’s ‘golden age.’ These Enlightenment-inspired scholar-officials were open to discovering a Hindu golden age in the past, in part because of a “cosmopolitanism engendered by the universalism of rationalism, and in part by the desire to find societies other than classical Western civilization to use as an element of critique of eighteenth-century Europe” (Diem and Lewis 1992: 52). Their focus was not on the India of their contemporaries, but on an idealized notion of a classically-great Indian culture in the past to serve as a civilized, admirable ideal for what Western culture *should* be. Though circumstances have changed, and while India has been brought out of the past and into the present, a comparable pattern can be found among many contemporary participants in the New Age or in Indian-oriented NRMs. Diem and Lewis thus summarize the socio-psychological process by which the East is romanticized:

(a) Rejection of or revolt against one's own culture and society, (b) formation of, and identification with, ideas and ideals which represent the polar opposite of the object of revolt, (c) projection of one's polarized ideals onto a culture, movement, or figure greatly removed in time or space from one's own culture, and finally (d) employment of one's own projected image – in a guise borrowed from another culture – as legitimation, both for one's own “counter-cultural” ideas and for attacks on the rejected culture (1992: 57-58).

Though this analysis may have been more fitting in the oppositional counter culture of the Sixties, I believe that similar tendencies may play a role (though perhaps subconsciously) for many involved in the New Age. However, as Lewis and Melton (1992) mention, the influence of Eastern religion on the New Age movement may have been greater in the earlier stages than it is at present.

Campbell discusses alternative beliefs in his 2007 book on the ‘Easternization’ of the West, observing that in the West people are familiar with religion as something deeply private, and “as largely irrelevant to the majority of life’s activities; that is, to think of this dimension as clearly compartmentalized or insulated from the larger predominately secular world” (Campbell 2007: 35). However, Campbell brings a new perspective to the secularization debate. While partially refuting secularization, he also notes the influence of ‘Eastern’ philosophical traditions. Secular activities can be interpreted as fundamentally spiritual, and Campbell claims to see this perspective increasingly coming to the fore in the West. He refers to activities such as martial arts, archery, and yoga.³⁰ There is also a growing tendency to combine sports and spirituality – for example running, golf or “Zennis” – giving commonplace Western sports an “Eastern-style spiritual gloss.” Even in *Art of Living* there is evidence of this mechanism – for example, when *Sudarshan Kriya* practice is combined with tango dancing. Campbell suggests that there currently “exists in the West a tendency to cast all aspects of life³¹ in an Eastern-style mold, that is to say, as adjuncts to a spiritual outlook [...] a spiritual exercise, something capable of leading to self-discovery and personal growth” (2007: 37)

³⁰ See the discussion of yoga in Chapter 4

³¹ Apparent, according to Campbell, in all areas of present-day life; from feng shui to *The Tao of Cooking* (p. 37)

Thus the rise of NRMs can simultaneously be interpreted as a process of secularization and of de-secularization, or as a demand for religious complexity.³² “Traditional forms of church authority experience problems of adherence, while the interest on the other hand grows for religious categories that are more open to individual interpretation” (Botvar 2011: 14, my translation). Botvar also notes regarding religious complexity that not only have the numbers of believers/non-believers changed; there is also reason to believe that the content of religiosity itself has changed. Here he cites from a 2008 survey in which a question about “spirituality” has been included in addition to the terms religion/religiosity. Here he notes that “...12-13 percent of the Norwegian population refer to themselves as spiritual, in the sense that they are ‘concerned about the supernatural or the sacred,’ but at the same time they are also skeptical towards the terms *religion* or *religiosity*” (Botvar 2011: 21, my translation). This type of religious change could be referred to as re-sacralization. New and individualized forms of religiosity – including New Age spirituality and certain successful NRMs – appear to be edging into the space previously occupied by traditional religion. These religions (or forms of spirituality) are removed from traditional forms of religious authority. And because the ultimate locus of authority is one’s own self, there are also possibilities of combining beliefs and practices from any culture in which the individual might become interested. One example from Botvar (2011) is that of a personal Christianity combined with belief in reincarnation, a ‘typically syncretistic’ New Age style belief system that is not uncommon in the AOL context as well.

Thus, changes in religiosity in Norway can to some extent be explained in terms of both weak and strong perspectives of secularization, with religion becoming an increasingly individual matter. Botvar may have a point when, referring to Nicholas Demerath (2003),³³ he states that neither secularization nor sacralization are fully able to explain the changes taking place in the field of religion, and that it is sensible to combine these two perspectives. Elements of religion will always be present in society, though in the modern or post-modern world there may be *new* phenomena that become sacralized.

³² There is always a possibility of debate concerning supply/demand dynamics in religiously pluralistic societies.

³³ *Crossing the Gods: World religions and worldly politics*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, 2003.

The rise of New Religious movements can also be, as Dawson phrases it, an expression of cultural continuity that is not necessarily related to the processes of secularization or (re)sacralization. In the American context religious dissent has had a long history, through several periods of religious innovation and identity formation. Religious schisms seem, according to Dawson, to be at the core of a national self-understanding – and can be understood as having provided room for the growth of both new religions and the organizations that oppose them. Whether the new (not necessarily new *per se*) religions were of a Christian or of a more exotic heritage, “a new air of legitimation arose for religious innovation and lifestyle experimentation, and in that respect the recent rise in new religious activity is in continuity with other times in the American past” (Dawson 1998: 67). This continuity can also be seen in the larger perspective of the ‘Western’ world. Throughout history Europe has teemed with esoteric groups and in that sense there is no significant change from historical to modern times, even as our society has taken the full step into the religious marketplace of the ‘New Age.’ Importantly, this religious smorgasbord historically and contemporarily includes an offering of ideas and practices from Indian religious philosophy, and indeed there exist numerous NRMs (what Humes (2009) calls Indian-oriented religious organizations – like the Rajneesh (Osho) movement, Transcendental Meditation, and Art of Living) that offer up their goods and services.

2.3 NRMs and media

Art of Living has thus far not been a very controversial New Religious Movement. But many NRMs have been, or have been pegged as such by the mass media and by the anti-cult movement (ACM). James Beckford (1994) offers a short analysis of ways media have related to NRMs – relations which have been marred by negative, conflictual perspectives. First of all, Beckford asserts that much of the reason for public “dislike” of new religions is a notion that religion and violence are inseparable – a connection promoted especially by contemporary critics of religion. He cites modern secularized society as a source of much of the skepticism towards religion. Because the level of tolerance towards the active practice of religion is relatively low, ‘unconventional’ religions tend to be especially problematic. Furthermore, when some of these NRMs face hostility from society at large, they tend to react with equal hostility, and eventually leading to a spiral of antagonism that eventually leads to outright violence. Not all publicity is good publicity, and it seems that the only NRMs

that are given space in the media are the 'bad' ones associated with violence and murder/ suicides.³⁴

Negativity towards NRMs seems to be especially visible in the American context (though one can cite examples from other countries). In any case, it is through sensationalistic news reporting that the view of New Religions as dangerous and deviant seems to have disseminated into the public consciousness. Beckford (quite scathingly) puts the blame for this 'cult scare' on many different actors.

Historically NRMs have been, and still are, a marginal phenomenon. Few people have been involved in these organizations, read their literature or attended meetings. The public knowledge of NRMs is therefore quite scant, and because what the public knows about NRMs is what comes through the mass media, and opinions appear to be easily swayed. Beckford refers to his own data when he concludes that "even people directly affected by NRMs relied for their information overwhelmingly on the mass media. Very few people managed or tried to contact the movements directly. Instead, they preferred to contact journalists who had published stories about the movements" (1994: 2). By and large, Beckford blames the bad reputation of many NRMs on journalistic agendas, and on the connections between the ACM³⁵ and mass media journalists. Again he says,

The latter find the ACM useful precisely because it attacks the very existence and modus operandi of NRMs without drawing on doctrinal issues. It is actually common for the ACM's activists to disclaim any 'religious' intent or any animus against religion as such. They prefer the strategy of exposing alleged illegality and exploitation in NRM's. In other words, the critics' aim is to disqualify 'cults' from the category of 'religion' altogether, thereby framing problems as 'economic', 'political' or 'psychological'. (Beckford 1994: 3)

Beckford analyzes the forces that incline the mass media to portray NRMs as controversial and to emphasize the potential for conflict.³⁶ I will here say a little about how some of Beckford's points tally with what I perceive as AoL's relationship with the

³⁴ For example the tragic happenings at Jonestown, the Branch Davidians at Waco, the Solar Temple, and Heaven's Gate (Dawson 1998), see also Lewis (2011)

³⁵ Anti-cult organizations, or more commonly known under the umbrella term 'the anti-cult movement' emerged in the 1970's as a response to the alleged danger NRM membership posed to young people, often middle-class students, whose "aggrieved relatives and former friends tended to have the money, connections and confidence required to make their complaints heard in centres of influence and power, at least at local levels" (Beckford 1994: 2).

³⁶ These are conflict and news-worthiness, conflict as the Leitmotiv, cross-references to conflict, conflict feeding on stories of conflict, conflicts, journalists and control, as well as the idea that one conflict can hide another (Beckford 1994)

media. This is not the place for an in-depth analysis of the media relationship to AoL, but I believe there is a different pattern than suggested by Beckford in the public portrayal of AoL.

Beckford emphasizes in his analysis that NRMs are generally worth mentioning in the media only when a conflict is involved, as “(a) the main occasion for the portrayal and (b) as the principal means of structuring the account. Even those accounts which aspire towards a balanced, i.e. two-sided, presentation of the issues tend nevertheless to allow the conflictual aspects to predominate” (1994: 4). Beckford mentions the incident in Waco, Texas, as the ‘crown example’ of this.³⁷ However, in the case of AoL, media coverage seems to be the opposite. First of all, when searching Google for AoL and media³⁸ the results are fairly scant, both in Norway and abroad. There might, of course, be a discrepancy between what is accessible in printed media and in the online news. But still Art of Living is not exactly frequently mentioned. The most comprehensive source for AoL PR is actually the AoL webpages³⁹ themselves, and in their press report pages one can find archives of AoL media relations going back a few years. These press reports are naturally positive, sporting headlines like “Global Humanitarian and Spiritual Leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar Embarks on a Peace Mission to Pakistan”⁴⁰ and “Karnataka lawyers boycott courts; spiritual guru Sri Sri offers to mediate.”⁴¹ So although there is some truth to Beckford’s emphasis on the importance of the theme of conflict regarding NRMs and the media, with respect to AoL the conflict does not revolve around the organization in conflict with the wider society. The press coverage rather seems to revolve around AoL and Ravi Shankar entering areas of conflict in society, in an attempt to spread a message of peace and facilitate an environment for communication. Thus conflict can be interpreted as a leitmotiv even in the AoL media coverage, but with a different root cause and meaning than Beckford intended.

Beckford mentions that traditionally “the movements which drew on Asian philosophies and cultures tended to arouse suspicions merely for being foreign and therefore perceived as threatening” (1994: 2). Historically, and in an American context,

³⁷ See also Lewis (2011)

³⁸ Accessed 15.03.12, in both English and Norwegian

³⁹ See for example <http://www.artofliving.org/latest-news> and <http://www.artofliving.org/no-no/press-archives> (accessed 15.03.12)

⁴⁰ <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/g/a/2012/03/12/prweb9273590.DTL#ixzz1pBwOlye7> (accessed 15.03.12)

⁴¹ <http://www.ndtv.com/article/karnataka/karnataka-lawyers-boycott-courts-spiritual-guru-sri-sri-offers-to-mediate-18287> (accessed 15.03.12)

this may be true. In modern-day Scandinavia, however, these NRMs do not seem to pose a problem – especially as Indian-oriented beliefs and practices are an integrated part of the fairly common and seemingly legitimate New Religiosity mindset in this part of the world. I also believe, to move away from Beckford’s historical take on media, that the advent of the internet has changed the way the public views NRMs – especially because of the possibility of gathering more diverse information online. One can almost say that unless an organization has a presence on the internet it hardly exists – and more so for an organization like AoL that aims to create a global community. Since through the net organizations have much more control over their (self) presentation than earlier, I believe that the potential for conflict with media (and society) is lessening. In a Scandinavian context it is hard to say much about the public view of NRMs without a proper analysis of media. But generally, having been spared such public dramas as seen in the United States, I believe that the views of NRMs are more positive in this part of the world – or perhaps NRMs are less visible here. The ‘invisibility’ of NRMs may allude to the relative secularization of Scandinavia, and also possibly to the homogeneity of Scandinavian societies. Too much publicity either way causes an organization to be viewed as extravagantly deviant, thus leaving it in tension with or in opposition to mainstream society. However, this also depends on the nature of the NRM. In a Scandinavian context it seems like it is the ‘homegrown’ NRMs that have been viewed as most controversial. Certain neo-pagan belief systems, particularly Satanism, have been met with what borders on extreme opposition,⁴² while other organizations ‘quietly’ do their thing, under the radar. Art of Living is definitely one of the latter.

2.4 Some final notes

To summarize, in this chapter I have noted some definitions, and aspects of the study of NRMs and the New Age, and connected the field to secularization and Hindu-orientation within the Western New Age. Over the decades there have been some serious ‘cult controversies’ in some areas of the Western world, particularly in the US. In Scandinavia, however, the milieu seems to be more open to Asian-oriented NRMs, though these have been (and still are) marginal phenomena both in society and in mass

⁴² Especially in the US, but also in Scandinavia, see for example Hjelm (2006), Jenkins (in Lewis (ed.) 2004), Lewis (2001) and Lewis and Aagaard Petersen (eds. 2008)

media. But through contemporary means of communication such as the internet, NRMs have carved out a niche where their communications with the public are no longer completely controlled by journalists and a hegemonic media apparatus. In the following chapter I will, for example, show how successful public relations has helped the movement grow to its current massive proportions – in the same way as other multinational companies. To gain a deeper understanding of the movement I will trace the guru Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's biography, and note some hagiographic and charismatic aspects of his religious persona. I will further analyze AoL's schism from its parental organization Transcendental Meditation. Finally, with help of Bainbridge and Stark's model of cult formation, analyze the guru/ leader/ founder as a religious entrepreneur.

3 Sri Sri Ravi Shankar: from schism with Transcendental Meditation to Guru and Religious Entrepreneur

The word *guru* stems from Sanskrit, where it traditionally was said to signify someone dignified, whose words and actions carry weight. The modern usage has the same connotations: describing a spiritual guide or teacher who has attained a high level of spiritual knowledge or enlightenment. Humes states that

[the term's] most basic meaning signifies any qualified teacher, regardless of discipline, in India. However, when the term applies to Hindu world views, overtones emerge: the guru is the skilled preceptor and divine saint through whose grace and assistance disciples make the spiritual crossing from the ocean of *samsara*, the endless cycle of birth and death, to the ocean of awareness, from the changing flux of phenomenal reality to insight into the real, *Brahman*, the far shore of liberation, from death to immortality. (Forsthoefel and Humes, 2005) in (Humes 2009: 372)

The Indian subcontinent is famous for its many holy men and women. Some of the gurus originating from India have attained international fame and fortune through their charismatic personalities, messages of spirituality and self-development – and their successful organizations. All these gurus have become integral parts of the religious scene in India, as well as having a profound impact on alternative religion in the West. Millions of followers around the world devote themselves to their gurus, among them Osho (Baghwan Shree Rajneesh), the recently deceased Sai Baba, and Transcendental Meditation's Maharishi Mahesh Yogi,⁴³ of whom Ravi Shankar himself was a devotee for many years. Before we go on to discuss Ravi Shankar's involvement with – and schism from Maharishi and Transcendental Meditation – I will briefly trace his biography.

⁴³ TM was founded by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, whose name translates to great (*maha*) sage (*rishi*). According to Lowe (2011) Mahesh is said to be his given name, while Yogi is a title that is awarded to practitioners of yoga. Maharishi's rise to world fame started with the inauguration of his Spiritual Regeneration Movement in 1957, which seems to have morphed into Transcendental Meditation in 1959 (Humes 2009).

3.1 Biography or Hagiography

A tricky category in any biographical endeavor involving a spiritual leader is the literature written by those belonging to the movement itself. For this article I have chosen not to delve into the extensive writings of Ravi Shankar himself, but rather tried to glean information from the organization's numerous websites as well as the official biography, *The Guru of Joy* (Gautier 2004). Like Ališauskienė (2009), I agree that this biography is hagiographical to the core, as it is written by a long-time devotee of Ravi Shankar. The movement literature's focus on sainthood, enlightenment and guru status makes a neutral biographical endeavor difficult. Thus my efforts to trace Ravi Shankar's biography and the history of the Art of Living Foundation are marked with devotional rhetoric found in this literature, though I have done my utmost to avoid paraphrasing hagiographic language. I have tried to keep in mind Dorthe Refslund Christensen's words:

Hagiographies are not "objective" historical accounts put forward in a narrative style meant to reproduce all the highlights of the person's life. On the contrary, hagiographies are social and textual constructions produced with the particular aim of informing the recipient about specific paradigmatic events and actions connected to the founder or originator of a religion (2005: 233).

This pattern certainly applies to Ravi Shankar. Art of Living literature tends to emphasize the favorable time of Shankar's birth, his name, and his Brahmin heritage, thus conspiring to put him "under favorable skies in the eyes of Hindu believers. Furthermore, like many hagiographies, [the biography] puts emphasis on the predispositions and rare capacities shown by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar during his childhood" (Avdeeff 2004: 2). It seems the idea that Ravi Shankar was on a path to sainthood since he was a child, the "known fact" that he has attained enlightenment, and the numerous other stories that build up under his holiness are very important within the movement. Avdeeff states that a majority of devotees believe in Shankar's enlightenment, and believe that he became enlightened during the period of a ten-day silence in which he claims to have received the technique of *Sudarshan Kriya*. Interestingly, the official biography does not explicitly mention this, and Ravi Shankar himself neither confirms nor denies these 'rumors.' He rather maintains an ambiguous stance on the subject, through mystical utterances like, "Many can cross with the help of the One who has

crossed” (Avdeeff 2004: 3). Ravi Shankar himself seems to extend this ambiguity to most of his own biography. He rather seems to favor the current moment, emphasizing how he has kept true to the child he once was, never really growing up. According to Lowe (2011) this is a fairly common pattern when dealing with gurus; Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, for example, largely held back when it came to his individual biography, and most particulars about his pre-fame life are less well known.

Christensen’s analysis of the production and preservation of L. Ron Hubbard’s⁴⁴ hagiography observes that though Hubbard passed away in 1986 he is still the “... only ultimate source and legitimizing resource of the religious and therapeutic claims of the church” (2005: 227). To some extent this statement fits AoL as well. While Ravi Shankar is not the *only* source of legitimization in the movement his persona is extremely important. And while he is still very much alive it will be interesting after he passes to see if the organization will continue his involvement in the same all-embracing fashion as Christensen notes for L. Ron Hubbard and the Church of Scientology.

3.2 A Short Biography

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar was born on 13 May 1956, in Papanasam, Tamil Nadu, South India to Vishalakshi and Venkat Ratnam. The family moved to Jayanagar in Bangalore when Shankar was a small child. In India, Ravi is a fairly common name meaning “sun.” The name Shankar, however, is derived from the Hindu saint Adi Shankara, with whom Ravi Shankar shares a birthday. There is a plethora of stories from various sources concerning Shankar’s childhood, and in a hagiographical fashion most of them point to the guru he would become. François Gautier’s biography *The Guru of Joy: Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and the Art of Living* (2008) is one of the most extensive, compiling stories from Ravi Shankar’s childhood from his father, sister, aunt and old friends. Spiritual interests appear to have been evident in Ravi Shankar’s life from early on. A well-known legend among devotees is that as an infant Shankar’s traditional Indian hanging cradle, supported by metal chains, fell to the ground. Instead of crushing Shankar in the cradle, the chains fell outward as if by a miracle of physics. Various other sources^{45,46} state that as a four year old Shankar would recite passages from the

⁴⁴ The founder of the Church of Scientology

⁴⁵ See <http://www.srisriravishankar.org/biography> (accessed 30.08.11)

Bhagavad Gita, one of the holy texts of Hinduism. The sources tell stories about his early-age rebellion against the practice of untouchability and other forms of injustice, and his unwavering devotion to religious practice through daily *pujas* and Sanskrit studies. Ravi Shankar's father⁴⁷ seems, among the family and personal friends, to be the most vocal about his son's spiritual maturity, asserting that "He is both my son and my master" (Gautier 2008: 29). According to the sources he was a studious and intelligent child. He preferred to write and study more than play, and is said to have written poems and plays at an early age. Science was also an interest for the young Ravi Shankar; he graduated from St. Joseph's College in Bangalore with a Bachelor's degree in physics. However, for Shankar his scientific interests and an ordinary life as a bank employee were not enough – he also became a scholar in Sanskrit literature, and ultimately chose to follow a spiritual path.

According to Avdeeff (2004) in the early years of the movement Ravi Shankar himself taught *Sudarshan Kriya*, but soon realized that he needed to train other people to teach the technique. Art of Living teachers were quickly trained and sent out into the world. Currently, Shankar no longer teaches the technique himself. In the thirty-odd years since he founded the movement it has grown into a vast organization with ashram headquarters in Bangalore, India and Bad Antogast, Germany. As the organization has grown into a global religious/spiritual movement the guru can now travel comfortably around the world enjoying the fruits of his labor as a religious entrepreneur. However, before analyzing Ravi Shankar as a religious entrepreneur, we should examine some more of AoL history, particularly the movement's connection to and schism from Transcendental Meditation.

⁴⁶ See <http://www.yogajournal.com/lifestyle/738?page=3> (accessed 29.08.11)

⁴⁷ Throughout the years both Shankar's parents were deeply involved in Shankar's trust, the Ved Vignan Maha Vidya Peeth, and much involved in running the Art of Living Ashram in Bangalore, India. To this day Ravi Shankar's parents are deeply revered in the Art of Living movement; *Pitaji* is one of his son's most ardent followers, as the statement above clearly shows, and the enormous meditation hall in the Bangalore ashram is named *Vishalakshi Mantap* for his mother.

3.3 AoL as a Schism: the connection to Transcendental

Meditation

TM and Art of Living are connected on many levels. First, some of the practices in the two organizations are extremely similar. I will examine these closer in the beginning of the next chapter where I analyze the key practices in Art of Living. Additionally I will shed some light on the organizations' different views on traditional Hindu philosophy and science. Here, however, I will focus at the organizational level and on what little we know about the point when Ravi Shankar's new movement split from TM.

Wallis (1979) notes that "Accounts of a number of schisms seem to suggest the *grounds* or occasions for schism are rather diverse. A wide range of social divisions have been implicated: economic, national, rural-urban, status, cultural, etc. Likewise, many schisms are seen as having resulted from personality conflicts and/or ambitions for the attainment of power or position" (1979: 177). I will attempt an analysis of schism with TM (and potentially within AOL) with diversity in mind – noting the inescapable complexity of forces that enter into such processes.

In his 'biography' of the AoL founder, Gautier (2008) describes Ravi Shankar's stint in TM in short but flowery terms. After being introduced to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and his Transcendental Meditation movement at a meeting in Bangalore, Shankar followed the Maharishi to his ashram in Rishikesh. He spent time there and gradually gained the trust of the founder, whereupon he was given more responsibility within the organization. "Although Sri Sri was very young, Maharishi recognized his abilities and put him to work. He was thus sent to various places to give talks on the Vedas and science" (Gautier 2008: 36). Ravi Shankar was also sent to various countries in Europe to continue his teaching and to set up centers for learning, and furthered his talent for organization through many events within Transcendental Meditation. Gautier says that even though very little is known about the time Ravi Shankar spent in the TM organization, he believes this to have been a formative period for Shankar as a young man.

Ravi Shankar eventually broke off from TM to start his own spiritual venture, the Art of Living Foundation. On an organizational (meso) level TM can thus be referred to as AoL's parental organization. One can also, like Hjelm (2005 and 2009),

describe the relationship between them in terms of a metaphor of family resemblance.⁴⁸ Shankar had been a prominent disciple of the Maharishi and a teacher in the TM organization for many years before he started his own *ashram* in Bangalore, and according to Humes. “[t]he marked resemblance of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar’s marketing plan to that of Maharishi is obvious; clearly under his teacher’s tutelage, Shankar developed the managerial skills necessary to set up and run his own religious firm” (2009: 295-6).⁴⁹ It is also more than a little likely that Ravi Shankar based the name of his movement on one of Maharishi’s best-known publications; *The Science of Being and the Art of Living* (1963).

The schism from TM seems, as Gautier briefly describes it, to have happened in a fairly amicable and gradual way. According to Humes (2009), this form of schism is classic in Hindu guru movements, where one guru surfaces from being a disciple of another guru to create his or her own organization. Thus one can argue whether the split between TM and Ravi Shankar should be interpreted as a schism at all. Ravi Shankar continued to work within the TM movement while setting up his own ashram in Bangalore and conducting his own courses on the newfound breathing technique. Lewis and Lewis (2009) state that schisms usually emerge out of conflict and that the term *schism* refers to a *group* that breaks away from a larger organization to create its own. Thus, in a strict definitional sense, it might be problematic to interpret Shankar’s entrepreneurship as a religious schism due, in part, to his status as an individual who exited TM and, in part, to the lack of overt conflict between him and TM. Humes (2009) mentions that Ravi Shankar recommended that TM practitioners in the US continue their involvement with the Maharishi’s organization. However, they were encouraged to integrate the *Sudarshan Kriya* techniques as complimentary to their TM meditations. Humes notes there is evidence that Maharishi even supported Shankar’s teachings: “TM practitioners were initially allowed to take his [Ravi Shankar’s] techniques and attend his courses” (2009: 296). So for over a decade, from the time Ravi Shankar founded the Art of Living in 1982, the two organizations seem to have co-existed, and catered to a similar audience.

⁴⁸ Originally coined in regard to NRMs by Eileen Barker, who referenced Wittgenstein’s philosophy as her source for this expression. It can also successfully be used as a system of classification – here Hammer (2009) refers to works such as Melton’s *Encyclopedia of American Religions* (1989) and Partridge’s *Encyclopedia of New religions* (2004)

⁴⁹ In this quote Humes refers to Stark and Bainbridge (1985); see this chapter for an analysis of Ravi Shankar as a religious entrepreneur

However, according to Lewis and Lewis, schisms tend to develop in complex and dynamic ways. In the introduction to their 2009 anthology on schisms they list a number of factors that available scholarship has identified as potential ‘schism factors’ within religious movements.⁵⁰ For the TM/AoL split, the factor of personal ambition/personality conflict appears to have been especially important. Schisms often are instigated by individuals with leadership ambitions, and I deem ambition was likely one of Shankar’s motivations for branching off on his own. To some extent this is qualified guesswork, as there is very little information available.

Following Finke and Scheitle (2009), one predisposing factor that enters into schismatic processes is the structure of a religious organization, especially its internal processes of resource distribution. The authors focus mainly on resource exchange between the denomination (the larger religious organization) and the constituent congregations that make up the organizational ecology:

The reality is that instead of being a single organic being, a religious group or denomination is a heterogeneous collective of different organizations and individuals all connected by various networks of social ties. Congregations, denominational agencies, seminaries, ministers, members, and central authorities are some of the most common [...] some of these resources may be tangible, such as money, land for buildings, and worship materials. Other resources, such as legitimacy and authority, are less visible but just as important. These ties vary in the balance of their exchanges (Finke and Scheitle 2009: 19).

One might think that these explicitly Christian concepts (e.g. denominations and congregations) would not apply to Indian-oriented movements, but in the case of TM/AoL they fit very well. One could apply the denomination-congregation distinction both between TM and AoL as well as within AoL. AoL began a congregation under the TM ‘umbrella,’ and could be regarded as such until Shankar was finally excommunicated in 1993. One can also view (as I choose to do) the AoL organization in India (the Bangalore *ashram*) as the ‘mother ship’ and the small(er) chapters around the world as its congregations. This line of interpretation provides some interesting perspectives on the potential for schisms: Finke and Scheitle point out that the balance of power is a key: “when one party’s dependence does not equal the other’s, then there

⁵⁰ These are membership subgroupings, personal ambition/ personality conflicts, doctrinal/ liturgical/ behavioral norm disagreements, the death of a charismatic founder and availability of alternative means of legitimation.

is a power imbalance where the latter holds power over the former” (2009: 19).⁵¹ It seems that the power between TM and AoL were imbalanced for many years. Maharishi was still Shankar’s guru, and many of the practices within AoL are extremely similar to TM’s. The less visible factors of legitimacy and authority were still held by TM, where the ‘Maharishi brand’ would have made good for the training, qualifications and perceived expertise with consumers/practitioners. However, as Shankar’s individual legitimacy and authority grew,⁵² the power balance between the two organizations would invariably have shifted.

Currently, the same kind of balance of power can be seen between the central authorities and the many ‘congregations’ within AoL. Art of Living is what Finke and Scheitle calls a ‘highly centralized, bureaucratic, or rational-legal denomination [...] where the central office provides resources and legitimacy to seminaries’” (2009: 19). Without the central organization, the relatively smaller local branches would have little in the way of professional credentials and capital. The central organization also provides many direct benefits, worship materials, brand name and religious history (Finke and Scheitle 2009). The local chapters do provide some resource feedback to the central organization, but the power balance is clearly in favor of what Finke and Scheitle refer to as the denominational office. The authors are clear that this form of organizational structure is less conducive to schism than other forms.⁵³ A centralized organization has actors that are individually less powerful, and thus have more invested in solving problems formally, through the organizational system. This explains, in part, why the schism between TM and Art of Living was so low-key and drawn-out. It also explains why AoL seems to be a (relatively) conflict-less organization, where potential problems are most likely solved before they get a chance to get out of hand.

However, the process of schism between the two guru movements peaked in the early nineties, as TM began to adopt a hostile attitude toward Shankar’s organization. Thus the status quo of “don’t ask, don’t tell,” where “no overt action was taken by the TM movement hierarchy in the United States against Shankar’s programs [lasted] until 1993” (Humes 2009: 296). At this point the devotees that practiced *Sudarshan Kriya* along with TM began facing an increasing number of sanctions, though it was not until

⁵¹ The authors refer to Emerson (1962) here; “Power-dependence Relations” in *American Sociological Review* 27: 31-41

⁵² And when he learnt to utilize other forms of legitimation strategies (that may or may not be similar to those of TM)

⁵³ For example a decentralized or ‘charismatic’ denomination (2009: 20)

AoL workshops started to outrank TM in popularity in the US that “[b]rand loyalty to Maharishi was insisted upon” (2009: 302). Thus, the risk of TM adherents leaving the movement laying out their money on the less costly programs of Ravi Shankar and Deepak Chopra⁵⁴ became an obvious threat to the TM organization. Humes points out that the subsequent breaks from Art of Living and Chopra can be interpreted as part of a larger design within the TM movement, likely based on competition for customers and the need for “product differentiation” (2009: 386). Humes says that in Chopra’s case his ejection from TM came as a bit of a bombshell. Maharishi recognized that Chopra was competent and charismatic enough to be a real threat, and instead of risking open competition within TM he rather chose to completely disassociate from Chopra. This schism took the form of a forced excommunication. It seems, however, that the break between Maharishi and Ravi Shankar was less unexpected and less dramatic. Humes notes that:

The strong emphasis on guru veneration in the Hindu tradition has ensured that Shankar never openly criticizes or speaks out against his master Maharishi. But the affection seems to have been mutual: only when the *Art of Living* workshops threatened to become more popular than standard TM fare did Maharishi take action against Sri Sri in North America. (2009: 392)

Drawing on resource dependency theory, Finke and Scheitle (2009) discuss the closely related concept of inimitability as a potential deterrent to schisms. They say that to the “extent that a denomination holds claim to an exclusive truth, prophet, historical tradition, or ecclesiastical office, the chance of schism will also be reduced. In the parlance of organizational theory, the organization holds a competitive advantage because it provides an inimitable good or service” (Finke and Scheitle 2009: 23). Likewise, Wallis notes that “the propensity to schism increases directly with the availability of means of legitimating authority. The more bases of legitimation there are, or the more widely available they are, the greater the likelihood of schism” (1979: 186). Thus, if a breakout group wants to leave they will thus lose the exclusive assets that a centralized organization can offer, and with that most likely experience the abovementioned loss of legitimacy. This may be the reason Ravi Shankar spent ten years building his organization under the wings of TM, until it had grown enough to

⁵⁴ Another ex-TM devotee and “rival Indian leader” to become a religious entrepreneur in his own right (Humes 2009).

stand on its own. Much of an organization's legitimacy (especially in guru-centric movements such as TM and AoL) stems from the founder/guru himself,⁵⁵ where he as the 'prophet' holds the predominance of definitional power. The guru (and his adherents) may believe that his is the only truth and thus create a sense of imitability – which can be a strong deterrent for defection. Or he can – as in the interplay between Ravi Shankar and the Maharishi (regarding initial 'double membership' and consonance of TM and AoL practices) – proclaim the compatibility of his 'inventions' with other practices and movements. Likewise, in the present (and in the future) Ravi Shankar's 'access to the divine' and his ownership of the *Sudarshan Kriya* technique may contribute to create a sense of inimitability in the AoL organization.

However, impressionistically it does not seem that the AoL movement is much for a concept of inimitability. Finke and Scheitle also mention what they call 'ecological space' as a potential cause of schism. They refer to a continuum of tension in which most NRMs can be tentatively placed, ranging from ultra-liberal to ultra-strict (2009: 15). They assert that most people prefer a religion somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, that is moderate/conservative strictness and that "offers close relations with the supernatural and distinctive demands for membership, without isolating individuals from the culture around them" (Finke and Scheitle 2009: 15). These are also the religious movements which are less likely to experience schisms. I would argue that AoL places itself quite firmly in the middle, but probably more to the moderate than to the conservative side (depending on the cultural context of a specific country). In AoL one can largely *choose* how close of a relationship one wants to have, both to the supernatural and to the organizational structure. There are no formal demands for membership as such, but there is a distinction between 'lay' devotees and more involved 'career' devotees within the organization. Also, AoL does not in any way isolate its practitioners from the culture around them. As an AoL member one is free to pursue other spiritual/religious paths, and many members do. This statement is supported by the AoL survey results, which indicates a large overlap between AoL practices and practices taken from other "traditions." Respondents' past (and current) involvements are reported to be everything from Reiki healing through Buddhism and all the other major world religions, but there seems to be a majority of Indian-oriented

⁵⁵ See for example 'the Prophet Motive' below, and the legitimacy gained from experiencing 'divine intervention'

positioning (though some respondents were never previously involved any form religion/spirituality prior to becoming part of Art of Living).

The non-imitability of the AoL organization leads us back to Humes (2009), where she notes another important fact regarding TM: the largest schisms within the movement are the most dispersed – and perhaps most discreet. A majority of the people who were involved with TM in its early days did not linger in the movement. Rather, they seemed to continue in what she calls a ‘conversion career.’⁵⁶ Referring to Rochford (1989),⁵⁷ she sees a similar pattern within TM, where “many voluntary defectors [...] joined other religious organizations but retained their primary religious framework, thus evidencing a strategy to avoid reconverting to the conventional secular worldview” (Humes 2009: 304). It seems, based on the survey data collected for this thesis, that many TM ‘defectors’ have ended up in the AoL movement. Respondents from TM backgrounds did not say much about their reasons for joining AoL, but the high degree of similarity between the two organizations undoubtedly smoothed the journey. Some ten to twelve of the respondents who elaborated on their prior spiritual activities/involvements mentioned TM – and a few were also involved with the Osho (Bhagwan Rajneesh) movement. For these respondents, TM and Osho seem to have been one of many spiritual involvements, and not an exclusive commitment. Thus, in the AoL context, it seems that schisms resulting from tension within the movement are unlikely to happen on a large scale. Rather, people may move on individually as part of their spiritual path or explore several paths without entirely severing their ties with the AoL organization

In the future it will thus be fascinating to observe the AoL movement and its potentials for schism. First of all, the concept of inimitability could be sorely tested upon the death of the founder, which according to much of the NRM literature is when an organization is most threatened by conflict and schism. Art of Living’s Ravi Shankar is still young, but it will be interesting to see how the organization will continue after his death. However, as the three TM schisms investigated⁵⁸ by Humes (2009) occurred

⁵⁶ The term ‘conversion careers’ was originally coined by James T. Richardson in his 1979 book *Conversion Careers, In and Out of New Religions*, Sage Publications

⁵⁷ On a case study of the ISKCON movement; “Factionalism, Group Defection, and Schism in the Hare Krishna Movement” in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28 (2): 162-79

⁵⁸ “Robin Carlsen’s World Teach Movement; Ravi Shankar’s quasi-independent following, which remained nominally within the TM fold; and Deepak Chopra, who was ejected from TM as a potential threat to the Maharishi’s authority” (2009: 7)

while the Maharishi was still alive, it remains to be seen if the same pattern of schism will be repeated in Ravi Shankar's organization.

However, based on Finke and Scheitle's analysis (2009), I predict that the current state of affairs within AoL, for example regarding the organizational structure, will make schism less likely to occur. First, they say, there are some religious markets and organizational dynamics that promote schism formation. The country where the organization resides and the cultural and religious diversity within that country are important. It is crucial to "understand the barriers potential new groups face. Will they lose subsidies and do they face penalties from the state or larger culture once they are formed? But even when sects can compete on equal footing with the dominant religions, the calls for schism will vary" (Finke and Scheitle 2009: 14). In the case of the TM/AoL, schism the tension was low, and there did not seem to be severe sanctions for AoL once it had formed (until some years later). It does not seem that AoL faced any penalties at all in starting up – rather just the opposite seems to have been the case wherein AoL quickly garnered support (probably both morally and financially) from the state, politicians and influential members of society. Thus, an organization such as AoL can experience almost limitless growth (as it seems to be doing in its country of origin India) due to wide niche definitions, as well as the fact that the number of potential adherents within the niches are growing. Also, I predict that there is some likelihood of one or more NRMs with new religious entrepreneurs emerging from AoL in India at some point. In a contemporary Indian context, the religious life is so diverse that the genesis of yet another new religious group is no big deal – especially if, like AoL, the NRM follows the traditional guru-devotee-entrepreneur pattern that is so common with these movements. In the Scandinavian context on the other hand I believe there is a limit to how many potential adherents can become. This may be especially so in the case of exotic, foreign movements such as the Indian-oriented ones. It is easy to interpret the 'cultic milieu' in this part of the world as larger than it is, because aspects of the New Age are highly visible in the public and in the media. But looks may deceive, and thus for the comparatively marginal phenomenon that AoL represents in Norway to experience the degree of growth and diversification that may lead to schisms seems unlikely.

3.4 Ravi Shankar – a Religious Entrepreneur

There are many factors that have influenced and legitimized Ravi Shankar's wildly successful creation of Art of Living. Many of them have been mentioned, or will be further explored in subsequent chapters. These include the genesis within and schism out of the TM organization, adherence to the Hindu religious framework, alignment with modern medical science and a hagiographical construction of the founder's life. Though Hammer (2009) describes schism and consolidation within the Theosophical movement, he makes some points that are interesting to consider when analyzing Ravi Shankar as an entrepreneur. Hammer, first of all, considers NRM innovation as a form of *bricolage*⁵⁹:

The *bricoleur* is a handyman who arranges various pre-existing elements into a new configuration. In the world of religion, *bricolage* is ubiquitous. Few concepts or practices are truly original; much religious innovation adjusts the details of already known traditions, recombines and reinterprets available elements into new combinations, or replaces old interpretations of existing scriptures with new ones (2009: 196-197).

In their 1985 paper, Bainbridge and Stark state that for a NRM to come into being, two processes must take place. A new spiritual or religious idea must be hatched, and the idea must be accepted and embraced by a certain number of people. Thus the crucial part of inventing a new religion, in the authors' view, is the social aspect. Additionally, Hammer notes the importance of identity politics: "Creating a separate identity is accomplished by branding one's own movement" (2009: 197).

To first provide a background to entrepreneur theory; one of the key terms in Bainbridge and Stark's rational choice approach to religion is "compensation." According to this fairly reductionist view, the basic human condition is all about gaining rewards and avoiding costs, and if people cannot gain the rewards they seek they turn to compensators. These compensators vary depending on the worth, generality and form of rewards for which they are substitutes. According to Stark and Bainbridge (1987) there are both specific and general compensators. These need not be religious, but often are. In this view, "Religions are social enterprises whose primary purpose is to create, maintain, and exchange supernaturally based general compensators" (1985: 284). In the case of AoL this particular definition may need to be slightly modified.

⁵⁹ A "nearly untranslatable term" coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss in 1966

Although the organization provides some other-worldly based compensators,⁶⁰ like many NRMs it also veers off in the direction of “a ‘this-worldly’ orientation, which places them among other so-called ‘world-affirming movements’” (Ališauskiene 2009: 4). The degree of ‘this-worldliness’ is, according to Ališauskiene, determined by temporal and spatial circumstances, but additionally Shankar’s teachings are without a doubt tailored towards ordinary issues and how to solve these in the present moment. “[T]he purpose of the breathing techniques he introduced is to enable people to cope with the stresses they experience in their everyday lives, and there is no need to withdraw from the world to learn and practice them” (2009: 4). Bainbridge and Stark explain that “the entrepreneur model notes that cult founders often may consciously develop new compensator systems in order to exchange them for great rewards” (1985: 287). So within Art of Living one of the most obvious reward-compensators would be *Sudarshan Kriya*, which promises practitioners good health and peace of mind through the breathing exercises. The whole idea of a guru, which is so intrinsic to this movement, is also a potent compensator. Both of these compensators are this-worldly and quite specific, although their worth and value differs from practitioner to practitioner.

Bainbridge and Stark discuss three models of cult formation.⁶¹ I will not endeavor to explain either the psychopathology or the subculture-evolution models, other than to say that Ravi Shankar expresses few or none of the traits associated with Bainbridge and Stark’s psychopathology model; there is no evidence that he is anything other than a stable and mentally well-balanced person. And while the subculture-conversion model may apply to some extent (as part of the social nature of NRMs), Art of Living was deliberately created by Ravi Shankar. This intentional manufacture, however, brings me to the model that is most relevant to Art of Living, namely that of the *religious entrepreneur*.

Creative endeavors can pay off in business, including, in this case, religion. From the viewpoint of the religious entrepreneur, creating a new religion can be a smart business strategy. As mentioned above, the concept of branding (or brand management) is important to consider when analyzing a movement through the distinctly business-

⁶⁰ Such as an ‘underhand’ belief in reincarnation and other traditional Indian religious ideas

⁶¹ The psychopathology model (hallmarked by visions, “divine intervention” and to some extent psychological illness), the subculture-conversion model (exemplified by a form of cultic social auto-genesis) and the entrepreneur model.

like model of the entrepreneur. Hammer (2009) notes that some of the common demarcating identity politics of a NRM, apart from doctrinal and ritual innovations, are polemics against and degradation of competing movements. These negative demarcations do not seem to happen in AoL to any large extent (although Ravi Shankar has been known to criticize other religious or secular leaders when the opportunity arises). However, it is important for a movement like AoL to utilize different “elements of successful branding [which] include fashioning visually striking material artifacts, instituting communally celebrated festivities, creating easily identifiable symbols that designate affiliation, and using iconography and public discourse in order to elevate the schismatic leader to near-mythic status” (Hammer 2009: 197). These items will all be mentioned below as I explore Bainbridge and Stark (1985) entrepreneur model. The authors list a number of constituents that are essential in this context, and I will survey these components in terms of their applicability to Ravi Shankar and Art of Living.

1. Cults are businesses which provide a product for their customers and receive payment in return.

This point is valid and indeed essential to the Art of Living enterprise, as their main product is the courses and workshops that they sell to customers. I do not know, and I believe that very few outside of the organization know, how much money and other assets are owned by Art of Living. But it is easy to see that they are not a poor organization. The courses and workshops are not free, especially not for foreigners taking courses in India. While Indian citizens pay approximately 5000 rupees for a residential basic course at the Bangalore ashram (which is not an insubstantial sum), foreign participants pay the equivalent of 290 US dollars. In Norway the sum for a basic, non-residential course is more or less the same, although there are student discounts and two-for-one schemes. I assume that longer, residential courses in Norway, such as Art of Silence, cost substantially more. Thus, Art of Living caters mainly to a semi-affluent upper middle class audience,⁶² though they make allocations for the poor of society. Donations to the movement can also be interpreted as a form of ‘payment,’ which may again award some ‘compensators.’ When asked why the organization charges fees for its courses they answer:

⁶² See for example Dawson 2003

We do indeed charge fees for our Art of Living Part 1 courses, courses for children, teenagers, students and so on. The income from these paid courses is then used for those programs, that are aimed at community development in impoverished areas and the free schools that the organization runs, among others. We also find that people get so much out of the courses – learning how to handle negative emotions, calmly taking on greater challenges in life – that they are happy that their course fees are helping to educate a poor child, or put a roof over a family’s head. After all, charity cannot happen from an empty bowl.”⁶³

Barker (1998) states that NRMs have several different ways of obtaining funds – from tithing to selling goods, or even gathering donations in public spaces. Art of Living solves the money issue in several of these ways, for example course fees and donations, as well as the manufacture and sale of goods and services. The Bangalore *ashram* has three stores on campus: a book store that sells devotional literature, DVDs and CDs, a fine arts/handicrafts store and a convenience/devotional paraphernalia store. On campus there is also a spa/*ayurvedic* treatment center, a travel bureau, a café/juice shop/snack bar and several small tea stands. The employees in these stores are drawn from the AOL membership and are possibly what Barker calls “businesses in which members work with non-union rates and conditions” (1998: 19). In Bangalore AoL also has its own Human Resources department. I, for example, received an email offering “Job opening across the globe for AoL members,”⁶⁴ advertising openings in different projects and initiatives within the organization. These vary from “senior management, middle management and junior management... whether you are looking for a full time job in a corporate or within The Art of Living”. Having a job and earning a good living seems to be as important in AoL as it is in the rest of society – and the survey results show that AoL members are generally very well educated and work in good-paying jobs.⁶⁵ Further,

2. *Cults are mainly in the business of selling novel compensators, or at least freshly packaged compensators that appear new.*
3. *Therefore, a supply of novel compensators must be manufactured.*

Bainbridge and Stark have a very broad definition of compensators. I would argue that in Art of Living the *Sudarshan Kriya* breathing technique, the *pranayama*, meditation and yoga can be seen as such, being the cornerstone of their teachings. The techniques are, at least in the case of SKY, said to be exclusive to Art of Living, but in

⁶³ <http://www.artofliving.org/about-us-faq?page=3> (accessed 16.04.12)

⁶⁴ Received 27.01.12

⁶⁵ See Appendix for detailed questionnaire data.

the context of various forms of similar techniques in Indian culture, it might be more accurate to characterize them as “freshly packaged.” If one uses compensators in the broadest sense, then most of the activities within Art of Living are compensators: the guru as a father figure and idol, the ashram (or smaller unit) community as an extended family, workshop participation as a network opportunity. Even the many opportunities for shopping in the ashram, ranging from books and other material to clothing and decorative items, can be seen as compensators – in the popular view that one can buy happiness, at least for a short length of time. And the ongoing creation of new compensators is evident in the new courses, workshops and other activities that have been continuously created over the last 30 years. Here again, the business side of the organization is evident; new products are not offered for free.

There is also another side to the manufacture of novel compensators, at least when viewed through a “this-worldly” lens. AoL has been wise in creating global marketing strategies – thus one of the organization’s main strengths is that the movement is thoughtfully and intelligently branded so that it is recognizable everywhere it is presented. It is a given that the internet is a practical way of recruiting and connecting to devotees all over the world, and thus an important medium of information exchange and advertisement. Hjelm goes so far as to say that in Finland “the Internet has become the main vehicle for communication and recruitment in the Wicca and wider Pagan community” (2006: 36). There is reason to believe that the internet functions more or less the same way for other New Religious Movements. The Art of Living websites⁶⁶ testify to the vastness of the movement spearheaded by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, offering an overview of a manifold organization. All the national websites are made on the same platform and with the same design, making them uniform and easily recognizable (in the fashion of Hammer’s “visually striking material artifacts”) – an easy way of keeping in touch with the movement. The various websites have numerous options for connecting: one can sign up for courses and find follow-up centers, participate in the live streaming sessions of *satsangs* from the Bangalore ashram, or read knowledge sheets and Q&A’s from the guru. One can also follow Ravi Shankar on twitter, watch his youtube videos, get a daily *sutra* (a sentence of wisdom) from the guru delivered to your inbox, and even participate in online meditations. In this context I am tempted to

⁶⁶ See <http://www.artofliving.org/in-en>, <http://vvmvp.org/Home/tabid/37/Default.aspx>, <http://srisriravishankar.org/> (all accessed 20.09.11)

view even AoL's online endeavors as a compensator package. It might be a bit of a stretch, but for a tech-savvy generation that spends much of its time online, being able to readily communicate with the guru and the movement in a virtual world as well as in the "real" world can definitely be viewed as a reward.

4. *Both manufacture and sale are accomplished by entrepreneurs.*
5. *These entrepreneurs, like those in other businesses, are motivated by the desire for profits, which they can gain by exchanging compensators for rewards.*
6. *Motivation to enter the cult business is stimulated by the perception that such business can be profitable, an impression likely to be acquired through prior involvement with a successful cult.*

Although one may argue that Ravi Shankar can be seen as the sole entrepreneur of the Art of Living enterprise, entrepreneurship does not come forth out of a vacuum. It is a social action, as both Christensen (2009) and Bainbridge and Stark (1985) observe, and for a NRM to be successful a group of people must be involved. Shankar's brand and face is present in every aspect of Art of Living activities, and doubtless some of this thoughtful branding has been concocted by businesswise entrepreneurs within the organization. Pens and calendars, for example, are posters for Shankar's image and words of wisdom – as the organization can be seen to use "iconography and public discourse in order to elevate the schismatic leader to near-mythic status" in Hammer's words (2009). However, this is not thereby to say that AOL brand management is as consciously profit-oriented as Stark and Bainbridge's theory seems to imply. Hammer states that even though the term is "typically used to denote the conscious efforts by contemporary firms and organizations to employ marketing strategies in order to influence the impressions others will have of them [...] The effects of brand management may arise without any explicit desire to treat one's religious tradition as a commodity to be marketed" (2009: 197-198). Further, the courses on offer also show a fair degree of creativity; the Norwegian Art of Living organization is, for example, offering a new course in which they teach the curriculum along with tango dancing. Thus, all these new ideas participate in strengthening the name brand of the "guru of joy," and also help with the gathering of more funds. Additionally, as Bainbridge and Stark note, previous involvement in a different new religion can up the chances of participating in, or creating, a new NRM. Ravi Shankar's previous involvement with

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's highly successful and profitable international organization is undoubtedly the formative experience that gave him the idea of creating Art of Living.

7. *Successful entrepreneurs require skills and experience, which are most easily gained though a prior career as the employee of an earlier successful cult.*

As noted above, through his involvement in TM Ravi Shankar would have gotten first-hand experience managing an organization, and would have seen the possibility of replicating this success with an organization of his own. Transcendental Meditation and Art of Living are, as the proverb goes, "same, same but different." The basic teachings and techniques are very similar – for example that of mantra meditation – but Ravi Shankar, in addition to creating SKY, tweaked the techniques to become his own. Thus,

8. *The manufacture of salable new compensators (or compensator packages) is most easily accomplished by assembling components of pre-existing compensator systems into new configurations or by further developing successful compensator-systems. And further,*

9. *Therefore, cults tend to cluster in lineages. They are linked by individual entrepreneurs who begin their careers in one cult and then leave to found their own. They bear strong "family resemblances" because they share many cultural features.*

The 'family resemblances' that Bainbridge and Stark mention are present on several levels; first, there are several NRMs like Art of Living and Deepak Chopra's (or 'enlightened' individuals like Robin W. Carlsen) that spring directly from Transcendental Meditation (Humes 2009). However, these organizations and many more like them⁶⁷ also belong to a distinct family of Indian guru movements. The philosophy, ideas and techniques they teach are relatively similar, and all stem from a shared Indian tradition that is said to reach back thousands of years. Partridge (2007) mentions one example, in what he calls the "purging of the mind" in the search for truth as a common factor in many NRMs. Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (later known as Osho) stated that, "Only if you are ready to drop the ego, your judgments, and your rationality, your intellect – only if you are ready to allow me to cut off your head – will you be able to understand what is going on here" (Thompson and Heelas 1993 in Partridge 2007: 244). This is, in a slightly different phrasing, exactly what Ravi Shankar teaches his disciples – and if I'm not mistaken there are similarities all over the board among

⁶⁷ Osho, Sai Baba, Hugging Amma etc.

Indian-oriented NRMs. Thus historical-cultural features are widely disseminated throughout these movements, but they have been ‘dusted off’ and revamped for the modern world. These ‘historical’ Art of Living teachings are also successfully mixed with modern ideas about science and self-development, thus connecting the intellectual and the experiential. This corresponds to Bainbridge and Stark’s last point:

10. Ideas for completely new compensators can come from any cultural source and personal experience whatsoever, but the skillful entrepreneur experiments carefully in the development of new products and incorporates them permanently into his cult only if the market response is favorable.

Thus, it is not surprising that Art of Living has gained such an enormous popularity over the last thirty years. From humble beginnings with SKY as a basic teaching Ravi Shankar and his team have been adept at recognizing and acting upon responses from client-followers. They have created an organization that provides an audience with what they feel they need, and even preempt them with new offerings they did not know they wanted. One can argue that building a religious enterprise is as much an exercise in psychology as anything else, where a culturally sensitive balance of the blatant and the subtle seems to be a successful formula. The Bangalore ashram is, for example, balancing the overt materialism of lavish buildings and ample shopping opportunities with a quiet striving within devotees for self-exploration and self-development. Likewise, the frenetic devotion displayed towards Ravi Shankar may, from a “Western” standpoint, feel somewhat bizarre; in a more secularized culture like Norway the cultural ethos strives towards a more private and non-authoritative spirituality. Thus, Art of Living has intelligently provided room for various cultural mindsets, as their techniques and teachings can be tailored to fit a diversity of situations and audiences.

3.5 The charismatic guru and the Prophet Motive

Another important factor, however, is Shankar’s charismatic appeal. As a guru he attracts the love and adoration of a vast number of people, and devotees will literally push and shove to get a glimpse of him, and maybe even touch him or talk to him. According to Christensen (2005) the concept of charisma was developed as one of the early 20th century theorist Max Weber’s ideal types. While charisma is not the only factor contributing to the success of an NRM, it definitely helps for the leader to have

the “it-factor.”⁶⁸ However, it is not enough for only the guru to have it; for charisma to function it must take on the form of a social contract. “Thus, charisma is access to the supernatural and/or superhuman qualities claimed by, or ascribed to a person, and the acceptance of these claims by a group of followers. Charisma, as such, is a complex set of social relations” (Christensen 2005: 349). The interpretation of the charismatic leader as part of a social contract is crucial. Kershaw (2008) notes regarding the authority of Hitler (I make no comparison beyond that point!) that the social aspect of charismatic leadership is paramount. The notion is not so much about the individual and his attributes, but rather the qualities *ascribed to him* by his followers – of personal grandeur and heroic leadership. This aspect of charisma is important in AoL also, as seen in, for example, the endeavors of hagiography from the guru’s followers noted above – and in the devoted way many of his followers speak of him, as I will note in the next chapter. Thus, seeing charisma as a social contract is a useful tool for gleaning some insight into the relationships between a guru and his followers. In addition, Kershaw notes that an important aspect of charisma relates to followers attempting to predict and act upon what they perceive as the leader’s wishes. In other contexts this strategy has led to unspeakable atrocities, but it may as well, as I suspect is the case in Art of Living, have given rise to much creativity within the movement. As I have shown above, entrepreneur-wise, followers seem to want what is best for the movement, and very little seems to be done if it is not in accord with either what the guru wishes or, so to speak, ‘in his spirit’. As Christensen mentions that the power of charisma must be stabilized and institutionalized, and that it must be incorporated into a well-functioning religious structure. The charismatic leader has to be thriving, and his “...teachings and original practices must constantly be considered effective and relevant by his followers” (2005: 350). As has been consistently noted in schism literature, charisma – tied to available means of authority – “because of its very fluidity [...] because it is not tied to visible and acknowledged forms of institutional structures and positions, is likely to be the major form of authority invoked in justification of a breach with them” (Wallis 1979: 186). Thus the charismatic authority of Ravi Shankar is, I believe, one of the main reasons his entrepreneurship and the schism from TM were so successful in terms

⁶⁸ Some of the most successful cults/NRMs have had singularly charismatic founders and leaders. One good example is Osho (Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh), who commanded an ardent adoration from many of his (female) followers. (See Goldman 1999)

of followers and economy. Both the perception of his personal aura and his supernaturally endowed powers gave him the necessary claim to guruhood of his own.

Many founders of NRMs start their organizations prompted by what is experienced as direct encounters with or communication from something perceived to be sacred or supernatural. In the case of Art of Living this is an important consideration, as Ravi Shankar allegedly received his breathing technique *Sudarshan Kriya* from divine sources. Thus, religious experience (whatever one's interpretation of this highly contested expression) is often a strong motivational factor when it comes to founding a new religion.

Bainbridge and Stark (1985) mention the very real possibility of a successful cultic business being based on fraud, such as Uri Geller's audience cult, blatant scams in medical client cults and Bell's Rosicrucian conspiracy cult movement. Art of Living can be categorized as a cult movement, but has not (as yet) been associated with any kind of fraud⁶⁹ and its devotees are obviously more than clients. "In order to grow, a cult movement must serve real religious functions for its committed followers, regardless of the founder's private intentions" (Bainbridge and Stark 1985: 290). Part of Ravi Shankar's intention behind Art of Living may well have been based on profit, but Bainbridge and Stark's model is also only one aspect of a larger picture. As Lewis (2003) notes, it is important, when utilizing the entrepreneurial model, not to confuse a profit motive with a prophet motive.

3.6 Some final notes

In the course of this chapter I have traced some of AoL's history, noting especially its many connections to, and the schism from, Transcendental Meditation. The history of the organization is inextricably linked with the biography/ hagiography of the leader/ founder, who holds authority on many levels in the NRM. Not only is Ravi Shankar a religious entrepreneur, but he is also an accomplished businessman, having managed to create a religious movement that in many ways is comparable to any multi-national company.

With this knowledge of the movement I will move on to an analysis of the movement's key practices, especially the breathing technique *Sudarshan Kriya*. In the

⁶⁹ Although there in South Indian newspapers at the end of 2011 have been vague speculations about land grabbing and corruption. However I am unsure about the veracity of these claims.

following chapter I will also deepen the comparative endeavor, investigating differences in the frequency of *Kriya* practice and a potential connection between socialization with other members of the movement and the frequency of practice, together with other characteristics such as age and family obligations.

4 Key Practices in Art of Living

In this chapter I will first briefly look at some similarities between TM and AoL practices, and note some of the types of courses that AoL offers. I will then attempt to say something about how yoga is practiced in AoL before I move on to a deeper analysis of the ‘cornerstone’ technique in Art of Living, namely the breathing exercise *Sudarshan Kriya*. Throughout this chapter I will compare data from Norwegian and Indian respondents, and discuss some of the differences between AoL in these two countries.

Hjelm (2005) writes that the word *new* in the category of New Religious Movements can be understood to mean two things; either that a NRM has no substantial traditions, or that an organization has invented traditions for itself. Only the second characterization is valid for Art of Living. The invention of tradition is in itself nothing novel, but Art of Living has created a product that at first glance appears to be exactly that: new. However, the question is whether AoL’s product really stands apart to such an extent that it can be referred to as genuinely new. There is, according to Avdeeff (2004), many similarities between AoL and TM. Some of them were mentioned in the previous chapter. However, other similarities can be found in the department of organization and practices. Art of Living, like TM, is a guru-centric religious movement. Their organizational structures are almost parallel. Both organizations also employ what Avdeeff calls a missionary style of teacher training, where the techniques can easily be disseminated throughout the world. Ališauskienė also mentions that, “There are a number of obvious similarities between the two organizations: both teach techniques which help to reduce stress, both have Hindu origins and both claim they are not religious but NGOs”⁷⁰ (2009: 3-4). Thus, technique-wise both organizations teach (among other things) a simple *mantra*-style form of meditation and yoga. The form of meditation the Maharishi taught in TM’s early years in the West was relatively easy, based upon words selected for the meditator by a TM teacher, derived from *mantras*

⁷⁰ Ališauskienė’s discussion of the movement self-identifying as an NGO as opposed to an NRM is too large to reproduce *in toto*, but I see no problem in describing AoL as both. Officially it calls itself a not-for-profit educational and humanitarian organization. In India AoL supports numerous initiatives in the education and development sector, for example the Sri Sri University, Management Institute, Center for Media Studies and Ayurvedic College. The organization also runs numerous rural schools and the 5H (homes, hygiene, health, human values, harmony) initiative in impoverished areas, as well as the Sri Sri Rural Development Program. AoL is a Non-Governmental Organization recognized by the United Nations, where it holds a special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council. In Lithuania AoL refused to register as a religious community, rather choosing NGO status (Ališauskienė 2009: 6).

from Indian tantric traditions (Lowe 2011). Tailored to the Western mind, TM insisted that their particular style of meditation should be natural, modest and uncomplicated. The meditation techniques taught in AoL are quite similar⁷¹ – and they are portrayed correspondingly in AoL communications. Also, both TM and AoL teach a set of simplified hatha yoga postures as the core of their yoga endeavors.

4.1 A short overview of AoL courses

The Art of Living Foundation manifests itself slightly differently depending on the cultural context. However, the courses and techniques are more or less the same everywhere in the world, and it seems that all teachers receive a very similar comprehensive training. One of the main characteristics of the educational courses offered by the Art of Living Foundation is that the courses aim to provide participants with a set of techniques, skills and knowledge through which they can achieve a better quality of life. The participants are taught ways of coping with mental and physical stress, and also how to react to the stressful situations that arise around different tasks and demands in daily life. The techniques, which consist of breathing techniques, meditation and yoga exercises promise to improve health and well-being. Art of Living offers beginner⁷² ⁷³and advanced courses⁷⁴ ⁷⁵, as well as special courses for children and youth.⁷⁶ There is also a plethora of other programs on offer. In Norway the Art of Living organization was this winter (2011-2012) trying out a new course in which Ravi Shankar's teachings are combined with tango dancing. They also arranged a special

⁷¹ Sahaj Samadhi Meditation (or Art of Meditation) teaches what the website calls a “graceful, natural and effortless” meditation technique.

⁷² The Basic Course (also called Art of Living, Part 1 program or Art of Breathing) forms the basis for other Art of Living courses. The course includes learning and performing special breathing techniques; Sudarshan Kriya, the three-stage pranayama (also known as *kaniskha pranayama*), and the *bhastrika* technique, as well as simple yoga exercises. These are described in greater detail below.

⁷³ The Sri Sri Yoga course teaches various facets of yoga; yogic knowledge, postures and stretching, meditation and breathing techniques.

⁷⁴ The Advanced Course (also called Art of Living, Part 2 Program or Art of Silence) is a residential course building on the teachings of the basic course, and promises its participants an ‘opportunity to experience powerful silence along with the deep serenity of Hollow and Empty meditations.’

⁷⁵ DSN (*Divya Samaj ka Nirman*) can be translated as “creating a divine society,” and aims to teach participants spiritual knowledge, yoga, meditation and breathing techniques, as well as group processes.

⁷⁶ The Art Excel (All Round Training in Excellence) course is for children between the ages 8-13, it teaches yoga, meditation and breathing techniques. YES! (Youth Empowerment Seminar) is a course for teenagers in the 14-17 year age bracket. The description of this course states that the teens are given a “comprehensive toolbox to both manage their own emotions and stress as well as dynamically navigate through adolescence.” At http://www.artoflivingindia.in/course_beginners.asp (accessed 26 September 2011). ⁷⁶ The YES + (Youth Empowerment and Skills) is a course for students and young professionals between the ages 18 and 30. The program teaches yoga and *pranayama*, as well as mental, social and emotional skills.

Navaratri residential course in the AoL's European headquarters in Bad Antogast, Germany. At the Bangalore *ashram* in India one can find another variety of courses. These range from Vedic mathematics and Ayurvedic cooking to Apex programs⁷⁷ and the Blessings course, stating that through meditations participants "become a perfect instrument for the Master's Grace to flow through."⁷⁸ Other courses at the Bangalore *ashram* seem to be more esoteric, and thus aimed at individuals who have climbed high in the AoL "spiritual hierarchy." Both Guru Puja⁷⁹ and Eternity Process further reinforce Art of Living's roots in Hinduism. The Eternity Process also seems to presuppose a belief in past lives and reincarnation, stating that "our beloved Guruji has designed a course ... which enables one to see into our past lives, and eradicate the negative elements, while we are surrounded by his love and grace, so that we can overcome the past impressions and learn to be in the present moment and celebrate life."⁸⁰

4.2 Yoga in Art of Living

During AoL courses the participants are taught a multitude of different forms of knowledge, in addition to the SKY and other *pranayama*. Yoga is an important part of AoL teachings, but in relatively "mild" forms that are suitable for everyone. At the Part 1 courses the yoga is usually taught as early as possible, probably to warm up and relax the body, making it ready for learning and practicing *pranayama* and *Sudarshan Kriya*. The most common yoga "programs" in AoL are *Surya Namaskara*⁸¹ and several other *asanas* (yoga postures)⁸² that are said to offer a host of physical, mental and spiritual benefits. Interestingly, AoL has introduced their own playful take on yoga, "village yoga."⁸³ This short program mimics the everyday work done by women in Indian villages, such as "sweeping with a broomstick," "grinding wheat in a stone flourmill," "washing clothes with hands" and "pulling a bucket of water from the well." The rationale behind this village yoga is, first of all, physical benefit. This form of work is strenuous, and will exercise the body (although done only as yoga exercises). Secondly,

⁷⁷ Training for corporations and professionals

⁷⁸ See http://www.artoflivingindia.in/course_advanced.asp (accessed 26.09.11).

⁷⁹ Which teaches puja chanting, Vedic traditions and knowledge.

⁸⁰ See http://www.artoflivingindia.in/course_advanced.asp (accessed 26. 09.11).

⁸¹ Sun Salutation; see <http://www.artofliving.org/sun-salutation> (accessed 29.02.12) for postures and further information.

⁸² See <http://www.artofliving.org/beneficial-yoga-poses> (accessed 29.02.12) for images and descriptions.

⁸³ See <http://www.artofliving.org/yoga-village> (accessed 29.02.12)

I interpret it as being a way of bestowing some worth to the work that is done in the villages on an everyday basis, while also criticizing the urban way of life that is generally perceived as ‘unnatural.’ The ‘romantic simplicity’ of village life is imparted to urbanized participants, as they are told that “people in the village naturally perform yoga postures as part of their daily work [which] stretches their arms and waist as they breathe accordingly in rhythm. In the village people lead a far more healthy and happy life.”⁸⁴ Yoga is the activity that received the highest scores in the AoL survey,⁸⁵ both when it comes to the number of respondents who have tried it, and how often they practice.

Figure 24: Which of the following groups, activities or therapies have you tried?

YOGA	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Regularly	Frequently	Response count
India	10.2 % (5)	4.1 % (2)	20.4 % (10)	36.7 % (18)	28.6 % (14)	49
Norway	0 % (0)	9.3 % (9)	20.6 % (20)	37.1 % (36)	33.0 % (32)	97
All respondents	2.5 % (5)	6.9 % (14)	22.5 % (46)	35.8 % (73)	32.4 % (66)	204

I have pulled out the numbers for yoga practice from this particular questionnaire item, and the responses make it clear that yoga is extremely popular, and that it is practiced often. There seems to be a pattern of yoga practice that cuts across nations. Although Indian and Norwegian respondents are the bulk of respondents, it seems to hold true for the respondents from other countries as well. Generally, over 35 % of the respondents practice yoga regularly, and around 30 % practice frequently. Due to the way in which the survey items were worded, it is unclear precisely what ‘regularly’ and ‘frequently’ mean,⁸⁶ but ‘regularly’ appears to mean several times a week, whereas ‘frequently’ means every day or almost every day.

⁸⁴ <http://www.artofliving.org/yoga-village> (accessed 29.02.12)

⁸⁵ Please refer to the Appendix for further information about the demographics of the AoL respondents, and some baseline information of their involvement with the movement and SKY (*Sudarshan Kriya*)

⁸⁶ A few of the respondents also questioned these categories. This item was taken from a questionnaire that was originally used in a study of neo-Pagans, and the larger questionnaire item that the yoga question has been pulled from mentions numerous other practices that do not break down easily into weekly, daily, and the like.

The survey does not specify which form of yoga the respondents practice, but one can assume that it is most frequently the form of yoga taught by AoL.⁸⁷ This questionnaire item also did not mention whether the yoga was practiced alone or in a group. However, AoL in Oslo has weekly follow-ups for members where yoga, *pranayama* and SKY are practiced, and I assume that there are similar offers available at the AoL *ashram* in Bangalore. Similarly, there are a huge variety of yoga classes available in both these urban centers, so yoga enthusiasts have a vast variety to choose from.

I believe that in an Indian context the traditional view of yoga as a thoroughly spiritual exercise is in continuity with both historical and contemporary Indian society. But as the practice traveled to the West it came in contact with a very different culture. Campbell (2007) briefly traces the historical development of yoga practice in a Western context, where yoga was relatively unknown until the 1940's. The practice became hugely popular, especially in the US, during the 50's and 60's, mainly through television shows and popular literature. Although yoga "is really as much a system of philosophy as a system of exercises and associated postures, and is meant to be undertaken with the aim of attaining a mystical union of the self with the Supreme Being, this was not typically how it was regarded in the West at that time" (Campbell 2007: 34). In its early days of popularity yoga was regarded as exercise, a kind of 'slow-motion aerobics' divorced from its spiritual basis. Campbell connects this view of yoga to an aspect of secularization, wherein a spiritual tradition has lost its original meaning. However, Campbell also notes that in the contemporary West views on yoga have changed. Yoga is still a means of stimulating health and fitness, but the spiritual aspect has seen a renaissance – yoga has become a "spiritual technique aimed at deepening [practitioners'] awareness of the essential unity of all existence" (Campbell 2007: 34-35). It is important to remember that yoga for Western practitioners is unlikely to have the same meaning as it has for Indian practitioners, or indeed for *yogi* mystics. But one can, like Campbell, say that "the original spiritual character of this practice has been restored (if not exactly in its original form), not necessarily displacing the Western values, but rather embracing them within its orbit" (2007: 35).

⁸⁷ However, many of the respondents mentioned other forms of yoga that they are or have been practicing, such as Iyengar yoga, Ananda Marga yoga, Sahaj yoga, Bihar school of yoga, Siddha Samadi yoga, Tibetan Buddhist yoga, Integral Yoga (Sri Aurobindo), and other unspecified yoga classes.

4.3 Sudarshan Kriya; “the breath has a great secret to offer”

When visiting an Art of Living website one will find photographs of two techniques that are invariably featured, due to their recognizable physicality. These two techniques are taught in the basic courses along with *Sudarshan Kriya*, and are meant to function as a “warm-up” before starting the *Kriya*. The three-stage *pranayama*⁸⁸ is a cycle of breathing in various stages. In *ujjai* breath, a special technique that produces a hissing sound in the back of the throat, a particular number of inhalations, holds and exhalations are performed with hands placed on hips, chest and shoulder blades. Practitioners then move on to the *bhastrika*⁸⁹ technique, a very forceful form of *pranayama*. Sitting on the knees in *vajrasana*⁹⁰ one inhales and lifts the arms above the head, and with a strong exhalation the hands are brought down to shoulder level.

Somewhat less physical but even more demanding is the cornerstone of Art of Living practices: the breathing technique called *Sudarshan Kriya*.⁹¹ Part of Ravi Shankar’s hagiography rests on his “receiving” this technique during a ten-day period of silent retreat in Shimoga, South India, in 1982. Ališauskienė (2009) notes that the birth of SKY is presented within AoL as the most important event in Ravi Shankar’s life. Shankar himself says that, “During a period of silence, the *Sudarshan Kriya* came like an inspiration. Nature knows what to give and when to give. After I came out of the silence, I started teaching whatever I knew and people had great experiences.”⁹² Thus, it was for the purpose of teaching the *Sudarshan Kriya* that Shankar started the Art of Living Foundation, and to this day the technique is taught in every Art of Living beginner’s course. Ališauskienė states that the coming of SKY may have had religious aspects, as “its ultimate aim is to change the world and people, to make people happier and enable them to live without stress [...] The elimination of stress is associated with a greater quality of life in society as it currently exists, but ultimately it also brings people to a qualitatively different existence.” (2009: 343). Thus the ‘world-affirming’ quality

⁸⁸ Also known as *Kaniskha pranayama*. Art of Living explains that the word *pranayama* stems from Sanskrit, where *prana* refers to a “universal life force” and *ayama* is to lengthen or regulate. In these exercises the practitioner controls the prana through the breath. AoL also issues a small warning about *pranayama*; the exercises are powerful (“deals with a subtle force”) and are therefore not to be experimented with. See <http://www.artofliving.org/yoga-and-pranayama> (accessed 29.02.12)

⁸⁹ Otherwise known as the ‘bellows’ technique, a form of very forceful hyperventilation.

⁹⁰ A kneeling pose, very common when practicing meditation or *pranayama*

⁹¹ Loosely translated it means “healing breath.”

⁹² See <http://www.artofliving.org/in-en/sudarshankriya-origin> (accessed 26.09.11).

of AoL is constantly repeated –‘salvation’ is not necessarily found elsewhere but in *this* life.

According to Ravi Shankar the rhythm of breath is very specific. It corresponds to one’s emotions and body, and also to the rhythms of earth and nature. For various reasons these rhythms are often out of tune with each other, and it is the mission of *Sudarshan Kriya* to bring them back into harmony. The technique is basically a cycle of breath. The *Kriya* has three rhythms; fast, medium and slow. The practitioner sits on his/ her knees, in the yoga position known as *vajrasana*. The body is relaxed, and the practitioner breathes through the nose. First there are twenty slow breaths, followed by forty medium and forty fast breaths. This cycle is repeated three times, with no break in between. At the end the practitioner takes five to six long breaths, and then relaxes. It is suggested that the practitioner then lay down for a while, thus entering a state of meditation where the mind and body is aware but deeply rested. The technique is taught in two varieties; the long *Kriya* that is guided, often by a tape where one listens to Ravi Shankar’s recorded instructions. The long *Kriya* is meant to be practiced in a group, for example once a week. There is also the short, “everyday” *Kriya* which is meant to be practiced often, following the other breathing techniques described above. By controlling the rhythms of breath the Art of Living teachings say that people can also control their emotions, their bodies and their minds. The organization provides examples, stating that when one is sad, the breathing comes in a long and deep fashion. Likewise, when angry, the breath becomes short and quick. Because the breath corresponds to emotions, the organization’s teachings proffer that this can be reversed; one can utilize the breath to change emotions. “It (*Sudarshan Kriya*) flushes our anger, anxiety and worry; leaving the mind completely relaxed and energized.”⁹³

4.3.1 Frequency of SKY practice and level of involvement

When looking at the survey it has many questions on SKY. In the appendix I will examine a few, and in the next chapter I will analyze how respondents feel about SKY and the importance of its scientific rationale. In this chapter, however, I will look at how often respondents practice the *Kriya*, and examine a possible connection between socialization with other members of the movement and frequency of practice, together with age and family obligations.

⁹³ See <http://www.artofliving.org/in-en/sri-sri-sudarshan-kriya> (accessed 26.09.11).

The survey measured how often respondents practiced SKY, and we can see that the numbers vary between the Indian and the Norwegian respondents:

Fig. 25

How often do you practice Sudarshan Kriya? (Norway)		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Every Day	19,4 %	19
Regularly	34,7 %	34
Sometimes	23,5 %	23
Rarely	17,3 %	17
Never	5,1 %	5
Comment (optional)		12
answered question		98
skipped question		1

Fig. 26

How often do you practice Sudarshan Kriya? (India)		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Every Day	60,4 %	29
Regularly	27,1 %	13
Sometimes	12,5 %	6
Rarely	0,0 %	0
Never	0,0 %	0
Comment (optional)		4
answered question		48
skipped question		4

Thus we can see that Indian practitioners seem to be more ardent in their practice than Norwegians. The Norwegian respondents seem to practice less often than the Indians – 34.7 % report to practice SKY regularly, while the majority of Indians (60.4 %) practice every day. In the Norwegian contingent 19.4 % practice every day and 23.5 % practice sometimes. Also, interestingly, 17.3 % of the Norwegian respondents practice rarely and 5.1 % never practice the *Kriya* at all (though they usually have done so regularly in the past. Apart from the majority of Indians who practice every day, the rest practice either regularly (27.1 %), or sometimes (12.3 %). None of the Indian respondents practice either ‘rarely’ or ‘never’, which is interesting.

The regularity of practice may also be connected with the level of involvement with other AoL members outside of one’s family. Here the numbers also differ widely between the countries:

Fig. 27

How often do you meet with other Sudarshan Kriya practitioners (outside of your immediate family)? (No)		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Daily or almost daily	6,1 %	6
Weekly	30,6 %	30
Monthly	17,3 %	17
Yearly	15,3 %	15
Never or almost never	30,6 %	30
answered question		98
skipped question		1

Fig. 28

How often do you meet with other Sudarshan Kriya practitioners (outside of your immediate family)? (In)		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Daily or almost daily	43,8 %	21
Weekly	47,9 %	23
Monthly	4,2 %	2
Yearly	2,1 %	1
Never or almost never	2,1 %	1
answered question		48
skipped question		4

While the majority of Norwegian respondents have a larger degree of infrequent/sporadic social contact with non-family members (36.7 % meet others daily or almost daily/ weekly, while 63.2 % meet others ranging from monthly to yearly never or almost never), the Indian practitioners are hyper-social in comparison: 43.8 % meet with other members on a daily (or almost daily) basis, while 47.9 % meet other practitioners outside the immediate family weekly. Further, only 8.4 % meet others monthly/ yearly/ never or almost never.

The questionnaire did not ask specifically why respondents practice as they do, but there might be some clues in other datasets that can offer a partial explanation. First, one reason may be that the Indian respondents are much younger than the Norwegians, are generally unmarried and have few children, are students (refer to appendix for data). Hence they have a lot more time to be involved with a movement and to practice regularly. Some of the Norwegian answers to the open-ended question asking if a factor preventing greater participation is distance from an Art of Living center seem to support this: “Distance from an Art of Living center and my family situation [are] two major factors preventing greater participation,” and “I don't attend the weekly follow-ups often due to the distance to the location. Also because the time of the follow ups are difficult in combination with family life with small children.” Furthermore: “unable to do so as

much as before because the kids are a priority; money, time and proximity to centre in that order.” None of the Indian practitioners indicated that these were factors hampering their participation in AoL activities. I further surmise that the Indian respondents’ proximity to centers (especially to the Bangalore *ashram*) and a much larger niche base of other practitioners with whom to socialize have a positive influence on the frequency of practice and depth of involvement with the movement.

Ališauskienė (2009 b) has some interesting observations on the levels of involvement between practitioners in Lithuania and Denmark. She sees a clear distinction between practitioners that are devotees (*swamis* and teachers) and those who are adepts-clients (permanent visitors). Ališauskienė’s analysis coincides to some extent with my own conclusions where she says that

Swamis commit their life to the organization, they live and work in the ashrams, while teachers give most of their time to the purposes of the organization in the society in which they live. Adepts-clients are the permanent visitors of Art of Living Foundation activities, they attend courses and participate in satsangs, and they are distinguished from other clients in their loyalty to the organization” (2009 b: 20).

Barker (1998) points to lifestyle as a defining characteristic of NRM members. She notes that the lifestyles of practitioners tend to vary, both between organizations and within them; “from community living with members working full-time for the organization to members leading perfectly ‘ordinary’ lives but joining with other members for special gatherings once a week or so” (Barker 1998: 19) – which accurately describes Ališauskienė’s description of AoL. Thus in the same way that changes in lifestyle (for example, adopting vegetarianism) vary within AoL, practitioners on both ends of the spectrum of involvement can be found within the organization. Within AoL, and especially in the Indian context, both one’s personal and professional life can be led entirely within the movement. In the Bangalore *ashram* many practitioners live on the premises full time, and do all kinds of work for the organization. Some are teachers, and others do the hundreds of odd jobs that keep the *ashram* running. Other devotees simply pop by for Sunday *satsang* where they join with other members “for special gatherings every once a week or so” (Barker 1998: 19), or take a course every now and then, thus landing in the opposite end of the scale of involvement. The levels of involvement in the movement thus vary widely, which seems to coincide with Barker’s and Ališauskienė’s models. From the survey data

regarding involvement with AoL we can surmise that for the Indian respondents⁹⁴ there seems to be a clear trend of relatively high involvement among those whom Ališauskienė calls adepts-clients. In Norway the depth of involvement is less, and the number of active teachers and full-time devotees is small in comparison.

However, it does not seem like the frequency of either practice or social meetings with other non-family AoL practitioners impact respondents' views on *Sudarshan Kriya* and the effects the practice has on them. According to Ališauskienė “the majority of informants were brought to the Art of Living Foundation by stress, increased speed of life and the problems it creates, and a search for the answers to modern existential questions” (2009 b: 20). This seems to be a theme among the informants in this study as well: respondents from both countries have much the same positive attitude toward the results they experience from practicing the technique (results frequently ‘promised’ on the AoL websites). Thus when asked to if they have had any particularly meaningful experiences as a result of practicing SKY, Norwegian respondents basically fall into two categories: those who perceive *Kriya* as relaxing and harmonizing, and those who have (had) health issues and feel that the practice has helped them overcome these issues. To some extent the Indian respondents can also be placed in these categories. Some are concerned with the health benefits of SKY practice, but based on the qualitative answers there seems to be a stronger religio-spiritual connection and degree of guru veneration among the Indians.

4.4 Some perspectives on Art of Living in India

As will be noted in the next section, the responses regarding SKY and stress, relaxation and spirituality are similar among the Norwegian respondents and the Indian respondents⁹⁵. Indian practitioners describe their experiences with statements like: “In total bliss...”; “Life has changed...a positive approach and enjoying present moment as a present in life”; “There is a general sense of wellbeing after every day's practice. The mind stays alert and the body feels light. There is a sense of bliss during the practice”; and “Feel totally alive, happy and peaceful during Sudarshan Kriya.” In addition to a

⁹⁴ Although they are way too few to make any ‘valid’ statement

⁹⁵ In answering the survey several respondents were careless regarding spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. I felt that rather than recount their mistakes through the traditional notational structure applied in situations like these (e.g., “[sic]”), I have elected to make minor corrections. Utilized throughout when quoting these notations are not pretty, and they interfere with the flow of the text. Additionally they tend to portray the author of the original as ignorant. If I have made exceptions it is to insert brackets indicating where I have added necessary words into the quoted statements.

sense of well-being created by the practice, among Indian respondents there additionally seem to be a strong emphasis on interpreting SKY as a spiritual practice.

4.4.1 Raised in Hinduism and Art of Living – choosing similarly

The emergence of NRMs in India can be interpreted in terms of continuity and change. The formations of many of today's 'world religions' can be interpreted as schisms – for example, Buddhism emerging as a splinter from Hinduism – with a strong and charismatic leader/guru. The same schisms can partly explain the rise of NRMs, either within a religion (for example Hinduism), or from one NRM giving rise to another.⁹⁶ But NRM formation need not solely be interpreted from a conflict perspective; it can also be understood as continuity in a culture (like India's) that is hallmarked by religious pluralism. Fred Clothey seems to believe that NRMs have a particular function in India, where "people seek to rediscover the essence of their faith, and, in the process, their own identities" (2006: 214), noting that the guru movements seem to provide this for their followers. This statement seems to be valid for the Indian AoL members; 89.8 % of respondents were raised as Hindus, and 57.1 % of the respondents were raised in Art of Living – a considerable overlap. Thus it seems that AoL membership is based on continuity rather than change for these particular practitioners. Further, figures from the questionnaire which asked respondents to describe their view of the afterlife seem to support a 'Hindu' worldview: 51.1 % of Indian respondents believe in reincarnation, while another 42.2 % believe in the conscious survival of the soul/self in some other realm. The conflated number of 93.3 % is a bit higher than for Norwegian respondents (84.4 %), but the numbers clearly show that both respondent groups at least are concerned with, and have reflected on the afterlife.

Thus the family resemblance approach works well for Art of Living in India, where the organization seems to blend easily into a general Hindu framework⁹⁷ encompassing the inclusive and the exclusive as well as all the in-betweens. According to Gautier (2009) Ravi Shankar grew up in the Hindu faith. This notion is also

⁹⁶ The formation of Art of Living as a schism from Transcendental Meditation has been more closely investigated in an earlier chapter, as well the role of AoL's founder as a guru and religious entrepreneur.

⁹⁷ The discussion of Hinduism as an invented tradition is too vast to give justice to here, but it can be said that what is understood as Hinduism today is not a homogeneous tradition. Its roots are rather multiple and inclusive, eagerly encompassing a variety of religious expressions into the Hindu fold. However, one cannot fail to mention certain powers within this framework that ally themselves closely with right-wing politics to further an ideology of exclusive and xenophobic *Hindutva* (Hindu-ness).

supported by Humes (2009), who notes that Shankar himself takes a devotional stance toward the supernatural; the Hindu practice of *bhakti*, devotion, is paramount in Shankar's teachings of Divine Love devoid of the pitfalls of the ego. Selfless love should be given to fellow people, to the guru and to God. Additionally, Shankar regularly performs rituals (*pujas*), and many Hindu religious festivals are celebrated in Art of Living's Bangalore ashram.⁹⁸ Another example that supports Ravi Shankar's strong adherence to the Hindu tradition can be found in Humes (2009) where she notes that in comparison Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, though he was celebrated on *Guru Purnima*, asked his disciples to desist from overtly showing emotional attachment to him,⁹⁹ a practice otherwise common in Hinduism.

Shankar, by contrast, allows others to fawn over him as Hindus characteristically do to their masters – thereby locating his teachings within a Hindu mode of legitimacy, making him a popular choice in guru for Indians. Expressions of love and attachment to the guru is common in weekly Satsangs, “gatherings of holy people,” devoted to Sri Sri, where, unlike in TM circles, traditional bhajans or hymns are sung (Humes 2009: 384).

This statement aligns with my own observations in the Bangalore ashram, where guru worship is frequent and important to practitioners. When Ravi Shankar is in attendance there are large gatherings, *darshans*, where the devotees meet the guru. These are immensely popular, and the large prayer/meditation hall is filled to the brim every night. Devotion to the guru is prominent and highly emotional, expressed through *bhajans* as well as individual songs, poetry recital, and testimonials in open-mike sessions – and in the love expressed in the survey responses by many of the Indian respondents. Clothey (2006) states that in India a tradition of religious seekership and guru association can be traced back to the times of the *Upanishads*,¹⁰⁰ and that the tradition is common even today – a notion is reflected in many of the qualitative survey answers from the Indian

⁹⁸ At the time of my visit to the Bangalore ashram, the *Ganesh Chaturthi* festival was performed and *pujas* were held in Ganesha's honor on the ashram grounds. There a large outdoor hall that was constantly open, and decorated with a large statue of Lord Ganesha. People could come and go as they pleased, perform *pujas* or listen to the *bhajans* (devotional hymns) played over loudspeakers. Proper respect and *pujas* are also frequently given in honor of the many other deities in the Hindu pantheon.

⁹⁹ This view can also be found among other gurus, like the well-known Jiddu Krishnamurthi who also asked his followers not to adhere to any guru, let alone himself, and rather regard their own selves to be the utmost form of authority.

¹⁰⁰ For a short description of *Upanishads* see for example <http://www.hindunet.org/upanishads/> (accessed 22.04.12)

respondents: “jgd.¹⁰¹ kriya makes me feel very much close to HH guruji. I remain in network always as I do kriya regularly”; “Sudarshan Kriya has changed my life. Love you guruji and thanks a lot to make my life so beautiful” (partial response); and, “always feeling connected with my sri sri , feels lots of love from sri sri, can tackle any problem.”¹⁰² These statements align with some of Ališauskienė’s findings where she states that there among her respondents there were two types of attitudes toward the guru: spiritualists and pragmatists. Most Indian respondents fit into the first group, in which “the relationships with the leader have religious aspects; he is adored, admired and attributed supernatural characteristics” (2009 b: 21).

However, it is interesting to note that although survey participants are predominately Hindu, an idea emphasized within the organization is the relative openness with which Art of Living receives its devotees. First, a multi-local faith is very common in Hindu practice,¹⁰³ so being a SKY practitioner and a devotee of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar does not mean restriction from visiting other gurus, movements and temples. Further, examples of religious tolerance can be seen clearly in the main hall at the Bangalore ashram. The walls of the vast, circular room are decorated with symbols from many other religions, so almost no matter where one sits in the room there is a view of a half moon, a cross or a star. In that sense there seems to be nothing wrong with being a devotee from another faith, such as Islam or Christianity, though the majority of Indian devotees were raised in the Hindu faith (often combined with Art of Living), as mentioned above. The number of respondents who reported being raised in other faiths is quite minimal; 6.1 % Buddhist, 4.1 % Muslim and the same percentage Sikh, 6.1 % Jain, 2 % Catholic and the same percentage Christian, and 2 % Zoroastrian. Thus one can ask if the tolerance of other religions is just part of the organization’s veneer, or if they genuinely welcome practitioners from all walks of life.

¹⁰¹ JGD is an abbreviation commonly used by AoL members. It means *Jai Guru Dev*, which in an AoL context can be explained such: “‘Jai’ means Victory, ‘Guru’ means the biggest, the greatest. ‘Dev’ is the big mind the higher self in you” See <http://srisriravishankarquestionandanswers.blogspot.com/2008/06/what-is-meaning-of-jai-gurudev.html> (accessed 22.04.12) However, it seems like the phrase is often used also when referring to Ravi Shankar himself.

¹⁰² Partial response. The respondent used only uppercase letters, but that is the only change I made in this quotation.

¹⁰³ Although Ališauskienė reports him referring to ancient Hindu writings stating “‘Poojo aur na deva’ – do not worship other gods” (Šankaras cited in Ališauskienė 2009. 5).

4.4.2 AoL and the Indian New Age

Frøystad characterizes one of the movements in her study as “showing continuity with established forms of Hinduism, as well as representing recent transformations and imports” (2011: 82). This observation can also be applied to Art of Living. Frøystad speaks about what she calls the Indian version of the New Age movement, and as New Age frequently has been conceptualized as a Western phenomenon primarily based on Hindu and Buddhist (but also to some extent Native American) beliefs, it may seem odd to apply this tag in the Indian context. However, New Age has over the years gained a foothold in India too – predominately among the urban middle class. In India, Frøystad states, the practices of the New Age are different from those of the West.¹⁰⁴ During her fieldwork in India she encountered many movements, each with their beliefs and practices, but rather than focusing on a single movement she searched for “patterns that emerge *across* movements [that] are equally worthy of analytical attention as those that emerge within a movement.” (Frøystad 2011: 82). She finds that the Indian New Age includes all the practices mentioned in the footnote above but – in comparison with a Western standpoint – there seems to be a more frequent use of ‘New Age’ as a term of self-referral, more guru movements and fewer references to Native American tradition. Thus, Art of Living exhibits many of the characteristics on Frøystad’s list. It is a guru movement which teaches meditation and techniques that impact the ‘bodily flow of energy’ (*Sudarshan Kriya*, other *pranayama* and yoga), and believe in reincarnation and the ‘meaningfulness of all events.’ Practitioners also seem to have a high degree of belief in so-called alternative ideas and practices that can be seen as having continuity with a New Age worldview. For example, compared to the 39.5 % of Norwegian respondents who found astrology to be of help to them, 65.2 % of Indians report the same (in comparison, some of the other alternatives chosen by the Indian respondents were Tarot, 8.7%, palmistry. 26.1%, and psychic readings. 2.2%). Frøystad mentions that Indian New Agers refers to themselves as ‘spiritual’ rather than ‘religious,’ in much the same way New Age participants do in the West. This statement aligns with my own observations in and around the Bangalore ashram. During courses the teachers seldom or never mention ‘religion’ at all, and if they do they seem critical towards the concept

¹⁰⁴ The ‘Western’ practices Frøystad (2011) lists span “meditation and astrology to Reiki healing and tarot card reading, beliefs in reincarnation, the meaningfulness of all events, bodily flows of energy that may be enhanced through various techniques and, not least, the coming of a global spiritual enlightenment that will form the beginning of a new era.” (p. 82)

of religion and its implications. I interpret this as being similar to the ‘self-spirituality’ and the authority of the self that is common in the New Age movement.¹⁰⁵ If anything, in AoL the term ‘spirituality’ seems to be much preferred, as reflected in one quote found in AoL literature: “finding security in inner space is spirituality.”¹⁰⁶ Further, if one searches the AoL webpage, there are, for example, nine pages of search results for ‘spirituality.’¹⁰⁷

It is also interesting to ask whether the growth of New Age in India aligns with what Dawson (1998) calls compensators for cultural ‘dislocations’ – associated with rapid cultural change. This is, of course, an oversimplification, and not something specific to India. But there seems to be some truth in this statement, especially in reference to urbanized living. What the Western world saw happening in the 60s concerning education, affluence and communication is happening in India as we speak, along with fast-paced urbanization. Contemporary metropolitan people are typically much less ‘traditional’ than earlier generations. I would not go as far as to call this development a process of secularization¹⁰⁸ in the way secularization has classically been perceived, but NRMs seem to play a socializing role in an increasingly pluralistic and changing society. India lies between modernity and tradition, and the processes of change and continuity are not mutually exclusive. Art of Living in India encompasses both.

4.5 Some perspectives on Art of Living in Norway

Norwegian respondents describe their experiences as: “Have felt I have been in touch with the self; absolute peace and bliss”; “-Stress relief -Experience of a ‘broader view’”; “My body get peaceful and calm. I feel clean inside”; “Fills up with energy and calmness”; “Warm feeling Feel completely relaxed Stress is reduced/removed Feeling very good Feeling very comfortable”; “Feeling of freedom and belongingness. Being part of something eternal.” Almost every respondent mentioned feelings and emotions, and the words ‘stress’ and ‘relaxation’ are also extremely common in the responses. On the basis of the analysis in Chapter Two, I believe that in a European, and especially in

¹⁰⁵ See Heelas (1996).

¹⁰⁶ This is an example of one of the many *sutras* that are ‘given’ to the students at Art of Living courses. This particular one is from a leaflet called ‘Welcome Home.’

¹⁰⁷ <http://www.artofliving.org/search/node/spirituality> (accessed 05.05.12)

¹⁰⁸ Although I am tempted to do so when talking about a small, (relatively) affluent, upper-middle-class, (relatively) young segment of the (urban) population that have more or less eschewed religion and turned towards science.

a Norwegian context, Art of Living can be interpreted as part of a New Age culture,¹⁰⁹ or what in Norway is commonly referred to as *nyreligiøsitet*¹¹⁰ or New Religiosity. Barker points out that New Religiosity includes “ways of thinking and acting that are associated with new religions in the cultural rather than the structural or organizational sense” (1998: 16). This culture can be interpreted as quite individualistic and accepting of some ideas that are derived from the East (but fairly new to the West); for example, reincarnation and practices such as chanting, meditation and yoga.¹¹¹ The answers above seem to radiate a calm, positive (albeit pretty vague) form of spirituality, focused on an experience in which the body and mind come together in a relaxed state and in alignment with ‘something eternal.’

Taking a look at the religious/denominational/spiritual paths Norwegian respondents were raised in, one can to some extent say that the secularization theory discussed in a previous chapter may fit. Twenty-five and a half percent of Norwegians were not raised in a religion, which is a fairly high percentage. Adding together the respondents who identified their religious backgrounds as ‘Christian’ or ‘Protestant,’ the figure adds up to 70.4 %. However, many of these respondents were not really raised *religiously*. In the optional qualitative answers to the question of religious background, a number of respondents reported to have been raised “Regular ‘statskirkekristen,”” or, as one respondent explained, “Not really raised as Christian. Me and my family were just members of the official church in Norway, like everyone else. Only activities we did in church were baptism, weddings etc.” These narrative responses dovetail with statistical findings on the contrast between the high figures on state church membership vs. low church attendance in Norway.¹¹² We can surmise that being raised as a Christian

¹⁰⁹ The discourse about defining this field is too extensive to reproduce here. However, one can select definitions such as Heelas’ “[s]elf-spirituality” (1996). Or, one can choose to view the problem like Sutcliffe; “[i]nstead of a ‘movement,’ I identify a series of social networks within which ‘New Age’ has undergone an episodic career, used first as an apocalyptic emblem and later as a more idiomatic humanistic signifier” (2003, 8).

¹¹⁰ Defining New Religiosity is as murky an enterprise as defining New Age. Torunn Selberg, for example, calls it “en både blomstrende og mangfoldig religiøsitet som hovedsakelig fremstår som uorganisert” [an organic and manifold religiosity that is mainly portrayed as unorganized (author’s translation)], at <http://www.hanko.uio.no/planses/TorunnSelberg.html>, accessed 23 September 2011.

¹¹¹ According to Barker as far as these include “some kind of religious or spiritual rituals or assumptions” (1998, 16). Kraft (2011) also states that New Age- ‘believers’ take on everything from crop circles, angels, magic, energy and healing – assuming thereby that everything is connected, that the ‘self’ is constantly evolving and that it is only the individual that can affect any changes (p. 36) [author’s translation].

¹¹² Botvar (2011) notes that, referring to the 2008 survey of religion in Norway, “participation connected to transitional rituals is a substantial part of Norwegian church activity, around half of all visits to the State Church of Norway every year (jf. Winsnes 2002)” (2011: 17). However, participation beyond life

in the state church does not necessarily mean having Christian beliefs. Interestingly, however, several of the respondents reported that they were raised as ‘Spiritual.’ That can mean many things: 10.2 % of the Norwegian respondents were raised in Art of Living and 3.1 % pagan – but most of those self-referring as spiritual have chosen the option ‘Other’ – 10.2 %. Further, we can note that few of the Norwegian AoL members were raised in Asian religions – only 13.3 % report being raised Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim. Thus, the Norwegian respondents seem to have a spiritual outlook on life, but are not necessarily Christians – or at least not very into organized religion. What seems to appeal to respondents are ideas that are Indian in origin, but that are also an integral part of New Age practice/philosophy.

First, 47.9% Norwegian respondents believe in reincarnation, and 36.5% in the conscious survival of the soul/self in some other realm. It is difficult to judge whether this high frequency of belief in reincarnation is a consequence of AoL membership, or whether it was part of a wider New Age belief that respondents held prior to their AoL involvement. In support of the latter interpretation, Botvar (2011) reports that the frequency of belief in reincarnation among people who can be categorized as ‘New Age’ is much higher than among non-alternative people.

Secondly, it is interesting to examine statistics on Norwegian respondents’ views on, for example astrology. Thirty-nine and a half percent report that they have found astrology helpful (some of the other alternatives in this category were Tarot, 16.3%; palmistry, 10.5 %; and psychic readings, 18.6 %). These relatively high numbers support the notion of general background in New Age thinking among Norwegian AoL members.

Although there seem to be many similarities between Indian and Norwegian respondents, they differ in other respects – for example, with respect to guru veneration. As noted above, answers to open-ended questionnaire items from Indian respondents were extremely positive towards Ravi Shankar. Also, in the *ashram* (especially at the point when I was there, and when the guru also was in attendance), the whole atmosphere felt loaded with his presence; his figure seemed central to most activity at the ashram. However, for the Norwegian respondents, feelings for the guru were different. In particular, the importance of devotion to the guru seems significantly

cycle rituals is quite low – in the same survey 43 % report that they never visit the church, 42 % visit rarely, only 8 % visit a few times a year and 7% monthly.

diminished.¹¹³ This may be a strategic choice pertaining to Norwegian culture, which can be interpreted as more individualistic than Indian culture, especially when viewed through the lens of New Religiosity and the authority of the self. Thus some opposition and skepticism towards external authority in the form of a guru figure can be expected, at least among new practitioners. This notion is reflected in some of the qualitative answers from the survey:

I came from the AoL courses with a feeling that AoL is more 'Indian' in the sense that the role of the guru is strongly emphasized. Being a typically scientifically minded Westerner, I prefer a more individualistic approach. [...] I found the philosophical part of the AoL course annoying. I also find that in AoL the guru gets a bit hyped as very intelligent and the kriya presented as something extremely unique, but in fact there are many powerful practices available in different yoga traditions/styles, as there are many deeply wise people in the history of yoga and meditation. Which practice suits you depends on your temperament and body type, not a particular guru.

Further, another respondent stated that

Kissing guru pictures and talking about souls and the afterlife is religious. I think resting one's sense of security and meaning on imaginary, vague notions of immortality and transcendence is risky, and I think teaching and encouraging irrational thinking is immoral, but for being religious AOL does comparatively little damage. The practices are healthy, but I've seen people dedicating almost their whole lives to this organization and being completely obsessive about the ideas of purity and rules. I guess it's better that they ended up in AOL than some cult.

It appears the focus of Art of Living in Norway is more on self-development and personal spirituality, as opposed to the stronger community-oriented and guru-driven atmosphere in India. While Indian practitioners tend to, as noted above, be what Ališauskienė calls spiritualistic in their relation to the guru, most of Norwegian respondents are what she names pragmatists: "informants maintain a pragmatic relationship to the leader of the group; he is understood as the one who provides 'useful information'" (2009 b: 21). In this sense the Norwegian style of AoL attachment seems similar to the findings from Ališauskienė's research in Lithuania, where the popularity of AoL seems to rely on the "strategy of providing spirituality and the means of coping with everyday stresses" (2009: 6). However, as Ravi Shankar has visited Norway two

¹¹³ Although Ravi Shankar is still present as a figurehead and founder of great importance

times over the last couple of years,¹¹⁴ it would be interesting to know if the attitudes of Norwegian practitioners toward the guru had changed due to his focusing on, and spending time in, Norway. Further, the founder has received some media attention in Norway during his visit¹¹⁵ which has been positive toward both his persona and the AoL organization. Time will tell if the organization gains some new members/devotees in the wake of these visits.

4.6 Some final notes

In this chapter I have presented an overview of the courses AoL offer and the key practices of the movement, especially noting the views on yoga, *pranayama*, and the *Sudarshan Kriya* breathing technique. The comparative element has been important in this chapter, as I have uncovered some differences between the Norwegian and the Indian respondents regarding frequency of practice – as there seems to be a connection between age, family relations and socialization with other practitioners and how often the AoL members practice SKY. I have also noted a difference in relations to the movement's guru; where the Indian respondents seem to have a spiritualistic, devotional approach, as opposed to the Norwegian, more pragmatic style. I have also found it important to let the practitioners' own voiced be heard, in the many quotes from the qualitative survey responses.

In the following and last chapter I will follow the same structure, taking a closer look at *Sudarshan Kriya* in connection to various levels of scientism. In this chapter primary sources from AoL have been very important; I have utilized much information from the organization's web site, and both quantitative and qualitative data from the survey. I note especially how science functions as a very important legitimation strategy within the movement, but also that the importance science is awarded differs from the organizational to the personal level – and, as Milda Ališauskienė notes, in different cultural contexts.

¹¹⁴ Once attending a public meeting in the aftermath of the terrorist attack in July 2011, and most recently being present at a huge course weekend in Sarpsborg between 27th April and May 1st 2012.

¹¹⁵ See for example the interview in A-magasinet (Aftenposten) 04.05.12, and in Sarpsborg Arbeiderblad 02.05.12

5 The Science Question

In this chapter I will analyze Art of Living discourse about science. First I will investigate how traditional Hindu ‘wisdom’ is taught in AoL through a lens of Hindutva science, and note its legitimating powers. I will then look at how the organization, based especially on the *Sudarshan Kriya* technique, relates to various sciences, particularly in the form of medicine and therapy. I will also analyze how individual respondents seem to award science a different level of importance than the larger organization. Finally, I will examine certain systematic differences between Indian and Norwegian respondents.

With respect to the tendency to ascribe scientific status to SKY, Milda Ališauskienė found a marked difference between AoL participants from Lithuania and Denmark. She notes general similarities in practices, teaching and administrative structures between the Danish and Lithuanian branches of the movement (similar to Norway and India, as noted in a prior chapter). However, when it came to views on how ‘scientific’ SKY and AoL are, she found that their attitudes differed significantly:

Lithuanian informants emphasized the scientism which might be found in the doctrine and practices of the Art of Living Foundation. The emphasis on scientism might be interpreted as the understanding of science which is related to scientific atheism, as the only legitimating system. Meanwhile informants from Denmark did not emphasize scientism in the doctrine and practices of the Art of Living Foundation (Ališauskienė 2009 b: 21).

A significant portion of this chapter will be devoted to analyzing responses from Indian and Norwegian practitioners to relevant survey questions, where I try to determine whether either of Ališauskienė’s conclusions about scientism holds for the Norwegian and/or for the Indian subsample.

5.1 Vedic science and the Knowledge Sutras

Before I analyze how AoL/SKY relates to ‘medical’ science I will make a detour to discuss a different way of regarding religion as scientific, namely what Lewis (2011 b) calls a scientific *worldview* legitimation strategy. This particular discourse about religion and science can be exemplified by TM’s relationship with Vedic science. As a

preface to this discussion, we should note that Lewis refers to Hanegraaff (1998¹¹⁶) where the latter states that what is commonly known as ‘New Age science’ is more correctly what is known in German as *naturphilosophie*; a philosophy of nature and a certain interpretation of science rather than sciences in the proper sense. Whether referred to as ‘fringe science’ by critics or as ‘cutting edge science’ by its proponents, New Age *naturphilosophie* is a relatively benign phenomenon (despite the fact that it is commonly conflated with natural science), but both Lewis and Humes (2012) point out a less benign side of religions appealing to science as a strategy for enhancing their legitimacy.

One can choose to interpret the relations between Vedic tradition¹¹⁷ and science through many lenses. One common manifestation can be found in contemporary Hindu nationalism, where tradition and so-called Vedic science are used to legitimate Hindutva¹¹⁸ political goals. Lewis states that

Intellectuals associated with the Bharatiya Janata Party have articulated a number of Vedic sciences (also referred to as *Hindutva* sciences) that include Vedic physics. Upon examination, it turns out that Vedic physics is yet another *naturphilosophie*, aimed at demonstrating that the truths of Hinduism are supported by physics. In the hands of nationalist propagandists, however, Vedic sciences are deployed chauvinistically, as a way of demonstrating the superiority of the Hindu tradition. [...] *Hindutva* thinkers do not confine their appeal to science to the *worldview* of modern physics. As Meera Nanda points out, Vedic science also claims to have adopted the *methodology* of the sciences: Vedic science posits a “relationship of homology, or likeness, between scientific empiricism and the Vedantic view of experience and reason, leading to a declaration of equality between the two.” (Nanda 2003, 95) (2011 b: 30)

The complicated history of Hindutva is also traced by Humes (2012), who emphasizes similar identity politics in the articulation of theories of Indo-Aryan invasion and

¹¹⁶ New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought, State University of New York Press, Albany, New York

¹¹⁷ *Veda*, according to Subbarayappa (2011) can be translated as “knowledge” or “to know.” The knowledge of the Vedic period, from approximately 1600-700 BCE, is found in the four Vedic scriptures, of which the *Rigveda* is most famous. The Vedas are alleged to have been revealed to the sages of old, thus being divine in origin. “The Vedic sages intuitively recognized that the universe is ordered [and they] believed that Vedic natural laws, called *Rita*, governed the entire spectrum of the observable phenomena...” (Subbarayappa 2011: 196). Thus, the Vedas gave rise to religious action governed by astronomy and geometry – even then combining a religious with a scientific worldview.

¹¹⁸ “Hindu-ness”

migration, focusing on what she calls indigenist and out-of-India¹¹⁹ theories as yet another attempt at collective Hindu nation-building in contemporary India. The identity politics of modern India has a long historical tradition. Diem and Lewis state that the idealized image of India's past 'Golden Age' that had been created by British scholar-officials was subsequently "taken by the Indians who themselves adopted the textually recreated golden age as an ideological weapon" (1992: 53). As a response to colonialism, but still ultimately relying on the ideas of Western Orientalist scholars, many proffered (and still uphold) a view of Indian superiority over Western civilization based on the teachings of the Vedas.¹²⁰ Additionally, Humes calls attention to the racialized view of the Aryan discourse in Europe, and examines the parallelism between this discourse and Hindutva discourse in modern India. Proponents of a Hindutva, nationalist, communalist worldview also tend to appeal to Hindutva *naturphilosophie* as a legitimation strategy. Humes (2012) discusses what she calls 'mythistory' and pseudoarchaeology as two of these more specific strategies. "*Hindutva* science thus provides us with a useful example of how religious traditions can appeal to the authority of science" (Lewis 2011 b: 30).

The pattern of appealing to a legitimating *naturphilosophie* can also be found in the Art of Living movement, bequeathed to AoL from its parent organization Transcendental Meditation. As noted by Scott Lowe, there are "a number of Hindu and neo-Hindu movements such as TM [which] have adopted this brand of *naturphilosophie*" (Lowe 2008 in Lewis 2011 b: 30). Lowe states that for the Maharishi, TM was the portal through which to attain world peace, and that the ancient teachings of the Vedas offered total knowledge about every single thing in the cosmos (2011). The Maharishi's particular interpretation of the *Vedas* is what Lowe calls both "absolutist and ultra-orthodox [where a]bsolutism conveys the fundamental role played by the Veda, while allowing ancient texts to be interpreted in highly imaginative ways" (2011: 55, 71). Thus, in the case of TM, there seems to be a strong focus on the connection between the Vedas and modern science, and though Vedic science was seen

¹¹⁹ This theory is what Humes calls extreme, where the "proponents claim that the Indo-Aryan Vedic culture is not only native to South Asia, but that the origins of the entirety of the Indo-European culture must also be native to South Asia. In this view, the "Indo-Europeans" expanded out of India into what is now identified as the Indo-European linguistic and cultural area" (2012: 13).

¹²⁰ "One significant change which the nationalists made in Orientalist vision was to portray the foreign invaders as being *responsible for* India's 'degenerate' state [...] the same scholarship which has been used to justify imperialism was later used to attack imperialism – an ironic and perhaps fitting fate for classical Orientalism" (Diem and Lewis 1992: 53).

as the supreme form of knowledge, Maharishi successfully married the innovative and the traditional through a modern form of meditational practice and efforts to bond Vedic Science and Western physics. There is much evidence to support the impact of Maharishi's particular brand of spirituality, science and tradition on the practices and philosophy of the Art of Living Foundation.¹²¹

Lewis points out that in the contemporary period the focus seems to have shifted from other institutions claiming veracity and legitimation through religion, to religions legitimating themselves by appealing to the authority of science. In a world of competing religions, where the competition for potential adherents – and the struggle to maintain followers – is increasingly fierce, it is only logical to turn towards alternative means of legitimation. Zeller notes that Indian-origin NRMs and New Age movements “... seek to harness the power of contemporary normative science while upholding indigenous Indian scientific and spiritual positions” (2011: 7-8). Likewise, Lewis states that

Science is a natural choice for this kind of appeal for at least two reasons: 1. Unlike traditional religions, the truths of science appear to be universal – Hindu scientists [...] et cetera all utilize the same scientific system. 2. Science addresses many of the questions traditionally regarded as religious – the origins of the cosmos, the nature of the human being, and the like. (2011 b: 37)

These statements hold true for the case of AoL as well, as the age-old Indian tradition functions as a discreet legitimization strategy within the movement.¹²² There is no apparent tension between modern scientific research and traditional Indian philosophy within the movement; rather the varied approaches seem to support each other in extolling the benefits of *Sudarshan Kriya*, yoga and *pranayama*. Even the movement's guru is commonly described on this axis; Gautier, for example, states that in Ravi Shankar he finds a “beautiful blend of Veda and science” (2008: 35). AoL seems to choose different phrasings (contra TM) than for the same thing in their discourse, purporting ‘traditional Indian wisdom’ instead of outspoken ‘Vedic science,’ though the basic ideas are similar. Thus the organization may stand by something like Campbell's (2007) notion of heterodoxy – particularly in a Western context where ‘science’ is a

¹²¹ Ališauskiene (2009), Humes (2009), Lowe (2011), Gautier (2008), and Avdeeff (2004).

¹²² Examples can for example be found in the movement's many alignments with traditional Hinduism, as well as in the introductory courses where the teachers often refer to “ancient Indian wisdom.”

more clearly demarcated field. In the West, a medical-scientific legitimation strategy seems more appealing than the foreign notion of Vedic science, whereas in an Indian context, the notion of ‘Vedic science’ appears more orthodox, and thus more acceptable.

Imparting traditional knowledge and wisdom to course participants and regular practitioners is a crucial part of AoL ‘ethos.’ Much of this knowledge is actually a hybrid of traditional Hindu wisdom,¹²³ self-help rhetoric and common sense. It is also, in my view, one of the strongest ‘outlets’ for tradition as a legitimating strategy in the organization. This view is confirmed by Ališauskienė (2009), where on one hand In this teaching, which takes the form of daily messages to followers that are later published, Shankar quotes various Hindu-origin concepts and Hindu writings such as the Bhagavad Gita and Ashtavakra Gita, which raises questions about the origin of his ideas. For example, in his messages about the laws of the nature he explains:

“There are three powers in nature: Brahma shakti, Vishnu shakti and Shiva shakti. Usually one of these powers dominates. Brahma shakti is a power that creates something new. Vishnu shakti is the power that sustains existence while Shiva shakti is the power that transforms, gives the life or destroys. (Śankaras 2001: 208)”

But at the same time, in his messages to his followers Ravi Shankar also uses concepts and metaphors from Christianity, thus making his teaching more accessible to a Western audience. (Ališauskienė 2009: 343)

On the other hand, much of the wisdom comes ‘directly’ from the guru himself without any mediation, where he says things like “Finding security in inner space is spirituality.”¹²⁴ Thus we can see that Ravi Shankar garners legitimacy from tradition, but also from other sources.¹²⁵

Within the New Age movement there is a strong emphasis on the theme of learning, and the same pattern can be found in Indian-oriented NRMs. To a great extent the method is ‘learning by doing,’ where initiates are quickly introduced to the practices of the organization while text-based learning (commonly found in Western religion) is imparted in ‘drips and drabs’ along the way. This is also very much the style within AoL. The *practices* – SKY, yoga and other *pranayama* – are the basis of the courses (at least the introductory ones), and the *theory* of traditional Hindu (Vedic) wisdom is

¹²³ Wherein much of this wisdom seems to align with the *naturphilosophie* of the TM tradition mentioned in the previous chapter

¹²⁴ <http://www.artofliving.org/no-en/wisdom-quotes> (accessed 17.04.12)

¹²⁵ Such as science, charisma and “divine connection”

secondary. It is also important to note that the teaching format is not textually based, but imparted through (short) sermons and in conversations/group work. Thus the hybrid AoL ‘theoretical’ knowledge is primarily orally shared (or taught). In the Basic courses the students are given an introduction to AoL philosophy from the teachers, through mixed mediums of parables and stories, group discussions and exercises. The themes vary widely. Some of the sessions encourage the students to ponder their selves, relationships and life in general, and to think about and discuss questions like ‘What bothers you?’ ‘When will you be happy?’ and ‘What do you take responsibility for?’ The teachers do not set themselves up as having all the right answers, but rather in an ‘Indian fashion’ they utilize special AoL *sutras*,¹²⁶ which by and large are coined by Ravi Shankar and based on traditional Hindu wisdom. The *sutras* are explained as ‘a railing to hold on to,’ both in the sense that they are easy to remember and that they prevent us from falling down. Some of these slogans are fascinating in their simplicity but quite ingenious: ‘Don’t postpone the happiness,’ ‘You can only give what you have – peace or stress,’ ‘Mind 100% empty, heart 100% full, hands 100% busy’ and ‘Accept people as they are.’ The stress on these *sutras* is probably specific for the introductory courses, as AoL operates with a course hierarchy. These courses also briefly discuss topics of ‘energy and matter’ where the teachers explain concepts from Indian philosophy in a way that is easily accessible for newcomers. To take one example: the breathing techniques “infuse every cell with *prana*¹²⁷ and release toxins. [This] affects all seven layers of existence¹²⁸” (pers.comm.).

The AoL *satsangs* are basically structured in the same way. Whether in Norway or India they start with *bhajan* singing. If the guru is not present the congregation usually watches one of his speeches or sessions on tape, but if Ravi Shankar is in attendance he either gives a speech or answers questions from the audience, response in which he seems to draw on the long tradition of Hindu knowledge. A focus on direct experience is, according to Campbell (2007), typical for the religions of the East. They

¹²⁶ “In Hinduism *sutra* denotes a distinct type of literary composition, based on short aphoristic statements, generally using various technical terms. This literary form was designed for concision, as the texts were intended to be memorized by students in some of the formal methods of scriptural and scientific study” see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/S%C5%ABtra> (accessed 22.04.12)

¹²⁷ *Prana* is Sanskrit for ‘vital life’ and ‘breath’. “In Vedantic philosophy, *prana* is the notion of a vital, life-sustaining force of living beings and vital energy, comparable to the Chinese notion of Qi”, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prana> (accessed 22.03.12)

¹²⁸ Which in AOL teachings are body, health, mind, intellect, memory, ego and self (pers.comm.)

are not particularly religions of the book, he says, in contrast to the religions of the West. Rather,

large numbers of Westerners are able to have direct experience of the religions of the East, and – should they wish to – obtain an understanding unmediated by books, merely by sitting at the feet of the gurus and swamis themselves. [...] they tend to center on spiritual techniques and ritual practices, and a proper appreciation of these can only really be gained through direct instruction from skilled and experienced practitioners. In other words, the assumption shared by teachers and students alike is that enlightenment cannot be achieved by reading alone but only through direct experience accompanied by practical instruction. (Campbell 2007: 28)

Within AoL this focus on direct experience is strong, and in courses the teachers often emphasize that there is no need for the students to ‘overanalyze’ the practices they are taught. With the correct practice knowledge will come to the practitioner. However, although much of the AoL philosophy is orally transmitted, this is not to say that the organization lacks an interest in the written word. Ravi Shankar has quite an extensive authorship under his belt, and AoL literature is easily purchased – in stores or online.¹²⁹ Yet, though the books are credited to Ravi Shankar, he has not personally *written* many of them; rather they are collections of speeches and ‘sermons’ the guru has given over the years – and so, as in many other of the world’s religions, the oral tradition continues over into the written word. The speech-into-text strategy is also evident in AoL online material. It is exceptionally interesting to see how the organization imparts traditional Hindu knowledge through the internet; one example is the live real-time transcription and online publishing (which can be attended by signing up online) of Shankar’s *mahasatsangs*.¹³⁰ Another online example is Ravi Shankar’s commentary on Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras, which has been collected in a series of articles – to which practitioners can subscribe.¹³¹ Interestingly, as much as this may sound like sermon-teaching, there is also space for commentary and discussion from practitioners on the sites. In the commentaries section followers answer questions from the text, which serves basically the same function as a commentary field in a blog or online newspaper, only they discuss spirituality and the wisdom of Patanjali rather than current events.

¹²⁹ See for example http://www.artoflivingshop.eu/index.php/site/products/products_list/books,1,1/ (accessed 28.03.12), the first of 8 pages of books compiling the wisdom of Ravi Shankar

¹³⁰ *Maha* means big/ great

¹³¹ <http://www.artofliving.org/in-en/yoga/patanjali-yogasutra/knowledge-sheet-1> and subsequent pages (accessed 28.03.12)

5.2 The Science Question - Art of Living practitioners' perspectives on SKY

The benefits of *Sudarshan Kriya*, according to Art of Living teachers and devotees, are multiple. The emotional benefits mentioned above are important, and the website lists a host of other benefits ranging from spiritual to interpersonal relationships and mental/physical health. On a personal level devotees report an increase in the ability to cope in work situations and in everyday life; “As an engineer, I need to be both analytical and critical. Mental clarity and stamina are also essential. *Sudarshan Kriya* and meditation enhance these abilities. An additional plus is a better sense of well-being” (William Hayden, NASA Senior System Analyst, USA).¹³² Not all of the feedback on *Sudarshan Kriya* is as positive as it seems from the testimonials on the website, but generally, among people who practice the technique regularly, the view is positive.

In the online survey of Art of Living practitioners on which parts of this thesis is based, we asked a question in which the respondent is asked how they would describe the role of *Sudarshan Kriya* in their own life. They could choose between SKY as a part of their spiritual path, as a mind-body therapy or as equal parts of both.

Fig. 25

	Mind- body therapy	Part of personal spiritual path	Equal parts of both	Other
India	17.0 % (8)	36.2 % (17)	44.2 % (21)	2.1 % (1)
Norway	45.4 % (44)	12.4 % (12)	38.1 % (37)	4.1 % (4)
All respondents in survey	32.5 % (66)	20.2 % (41)	43.3 % (88)	3.9 % (8)

¹³²See <http://www.artofliving.org/sudarshan-kriya-experiences> (accessed 15.09.11).

As we can see from Figure 25, 43.3 % of all the respondents to the survey state that *Sudarshan Kriya* is equally a part of their spiritual path and a mind-body therapy, while 32.5 % call it a mind-body therapy only. In Norway the choices are the same but the pattern of responses to these two options are reversed, 45.4 % stating that SKY is a mind-body therapy, while 38.1 % feel it to be equal parts therapy and spiritual path. Although the Indian respondents were few, the spiritual attribution is more pronounced. As a personal spiritual path SKY gets 36.2 %, while 44.2 % answered that SKY was equal parts of both.

It seems that various aspects of the SKY/*pranayama*/yoga practice are actualized differently in the different cultures. It may, for example, make sense to interpret AoL practices along a continuum of instrumentalization in the two countries. Kraft states that in Norway “the hybrids in the field of [New Age/ alternative] therapy are often marketed as ‘techniques’ or ‘tools’¹³³ based on a specific religious tradition” (2011: 78, my translation). This statement seems to align with the fact that almost half of the Norwegian respondents view SKY as a mind-body therapy – or, if we combine these responses with ‘equal parts of both,’ 83.5 %. It also resonates with many of the other forms of alternative therapy in Norway,¹³⁴ wherein the practices show little ‘overt’ religiosity, but rather are focused on physical and psychological benefits.

If the AoL data is representative of Indian practitioners, one may cautiously suggest that the level of instrumentalization of the practices is much lower in the subcontinent. 36.2 % of Indian respondents view SKY as primarily a spiritual practice, compared to 12.4 % in Norway. And again, if we combine this 36.2% figure with ‘equal parts of both,’ we obtain a number of 80.4 %. I would argue that not only is a ‘New Age mindset’ – an interpretive framework that tends to view meditation techniques in terms of practical benefits – less common in India, but also that the idea of AoL being an integral part of the Hindu religious framework is a crucial notion for Indian respondents.

Both *Sudarshan Kriya* and yoga practice can be interpreted in a multitude of ways. Some New Age practices can be construed as being at the crossroad between holism, self-development and therapy, and I will argue that both SKY and yoga can function in these ways. These practices are connected with “an interest in self-

¹³³ “redskaper” eller “verktøy”

¹³⁴ Kraft (2011) exemplifies with “Mindfulness” therapy

development, in aesthetical experiences and for the possibility of other experiences than an everyday, routine-based life can provide” (Botvar and Henriksen 2011: 60, my translation). The rationale for self-development in a New Age context seems to be the authority of the self; what Heelas and Woodhead call ‘the subjective life.’¹³⁵ To fully experience a good and valuable life, Botvar asserts, one must have the courage to face the inner self – and through finding the inner strength, one can ease life and communication with others. This is remarkably similar to the teachings of Art of Living – as a pervading theme in the organization’s orally transmitted and written knowledge and as an integral part of SKY and yoga practice. If the practitioner is grounded in, and knowledgeable about, his or her self, the wisdom that follows seems to make life easier and better.

5.3 A short note on science and legitimation

Both TM and AoL offer worldviews that are simultaneously religious and (that are also said to be) scientific. Such a combination of seemingly divergent mindsets is not uncommon in New Religious Movements. Various NRMs approach the science-and-religion question differently, from outright rejection to full-on embracement.¹³⁶ In this context I believe it is important to make a differentiation between medical science – which is an important point of reference for both AoL’s and TM’s efforts to portray themselves as scientific¹³⁷ – and other strategies for clothing one’s religion in the apparel of science – such as the Vedic science which has been important for the TM movement throughout its history. But first, a short sojourn into some analyses on religion and science.

With great attention to detail, Lewis (2011 b) analyzes how, not just why, religions appeal to the authority of science. First of all, different religions can be placed on a continuum of scientific appeal, which ranges from complete divorce from science, to assertions that a particular religion is well-matched with science, to stating that a religion is indeed scientific. In a few cases, he also states, there are movements such as

¹³⁵ 2005, see Botvar and Henriksen 2011: 61

¹³⁶ Zeller (2011) provides a short overview of the field. Also note Hammer and Lewis (2011) on religion and science.

¹³⁷ If one, for example, does a Google Scholar search for Transcendental Meditation, one can literally find hundreds of papers on the medical benefits (and detriments) of the techniques

those appealing to Vedic science¹³⁸ (that I have briefly discussed above), where the faithful have “constructed alternative sciences as a way of bringing traditional religious notions into alignment with science” (Lewis 2011 b: 23). Because science in the modern world has a ‘mystique of authority,’¹³⁹ it is understandable why science would come to be important for emergent religious movements. Lewis bases his discussion of legitimation strategies in Max Weber’s tripartite analysis of traditional, rational-legal and charismatic authority. However, he is also careful to note that the borders between these strategies, which tend to “emerge more or less spontaneously out of the ongoing life of the community” (Lewis 2011 b: 25), are often blurred, and NRMs tend to utilize more than one of these strategies simultaneously. Weber placed great importance on role of charisma in legitimating emergent movements. Lewis agrees that the original Weberian concept of charisma¹⁴⁰ important, but also point out that the notion of charisma can be extended to interpret certain appeals to the authority of science (which, Lewis argues, is a form of rational authority) as well as conscious appeals to the authority of tradition.

First of all, Weber conceived of traditional authority as something we take for granted, as something that has become unreflexive habit. In this context, however, the tradition to which NRMs appeal is often either consciously invented or an older tradition that has been consciously reinterpreted so as to make a specific New Religion the true embodiment of tradition. When an NRM makes an explicit appeal to traditional authority, Lewis (2011 b) says that this kind of appeal is to the charisma of tradition, to its ‘magnetic, celebrity-like aura.’ It is not an authority of habit¹⁴¹ that is being appealed to but, I believe, more likely an oceanic feeling of lineage and interpreted belongingness that comes into play. In overt appeals to the authority of science, according to Lewis, science has come to function in the same way as conscious appeals to tradition. In other words, science has the same sort of magnetism because science has come to be “viewed quasi-religiously, as an objective arbiter of ‘Truth.’” (Lewis 2011 b: 26). Thus, a

¹³⁸ But also found in Qur’anic science and creationism, and in NRMs such as Scientology, Religious Science and Christian Science

¹³⁹ Here Lewis refers to Levine (1990: 228)

¹⁴⁰ See Chapter 3. Also, charisma “includes direct revelation from divinity as well as the leader’s ability to provide both mundane and supernatural benefits to followers...” (Lewis 2011: 24)

¹⁴¹ Engler and Grieve, *Historicizing Tradition in the Study of Religion* (2005) is the source of characterization of Weberian traditional authority as habitual authority.

religion that can convincingly portray itself as aligned with science will (even today) draw on the legitimacy and high esteem in which our culture holds science.

Campbell (2002 [1972]) offers some perspectives from the crossroad of ‘the cultic milieu,’ science, legitimacy and secularization. First of all Campbell mentions that in the case of NRMs secularization can function in two ways. Either the structural changes that secularization has brought upon society are beneficial to the growth of a NRM/ New Age movement,¹⁴² and that modern society’s religious pluralism and cultural relativism encourages the growth of alternative religions, *or* that secularization actually works against the ‘cultic milieu’ via “a cultural process (or processes) of rationalization stimulated and supported by the social institution of science and those who derive from it” (Campbell 2002: 21). This second perspective on secularization explains the weakening of the power of Christian churches at the expense of the rising power of the ‘scientific community’ – science becoming the new hegemonic power in society. However, this perspective requires that one accept, as a bedrock assumption, the notion of the irreconcilability of religion and science.

To certain extent, I agree that the power struggle has been won by science, but I also agree with Campbell where he later says that “it is by no means clear that the scientific and religious outlooks are behaviorally incongruous” (Campbell 2002: 22). Thus it is interesting to note (alluding to the frequent view of NRMs as deviant on the basis of their *religious* beliefs and practices) Campbell stating that a religious organization can be viewed as culturally abnormal due to *scientific* unorthodoxy. Or, in other words:

The changeover from a religiously based to a scientifically based culture does not remove the problem of maintaining a dominant orthodoxy in the face of a continuing threat of heterodoxy. [...] it is to be doubted whether science as a body can compare with the churches in either their desire or their ability to repress heterodox views in the society at large. [It can be difficult for people] to distinguish what are orthodox and what are heterodox scientific views. They may, as a consequence, end up believing in flying saucers or ESP because of the convincing scientific “evidence” (Campbell 2002: 22-23)

Campbell’s notions are parallel to Lewis’, where he highlights the importance of noting that there can be significant variances between “real” science and popular views of

¹⁴² See Chapter 2, as well as the fact that “the decline in power and influence of the Christian churches has inevitable weakened their role as custodians of “truth” [...] whose condemnations remain unsupported by secular sanctions and unnoticed by the public in general” (Campbell 2004: 21)

science. To many of us non-scientists the most important feature of science (in conjunction with technology) is its ability to solve everyday problems. Thus the NRMs that portray themselves as scientific tap into this cultural understanding and tend to be ‘this-worldly,’ as “the emphasis in these religions is on the improvement of this life” (Lewis 2011 b: 26). A science-related ‘this-worldliness’ is an important feature of AoL, as the organization through its practices attempts to enhance life for its practitioners – oft legitimated through medical science – or what Lewis calls ‘mainstream scientific methods.’

In terms of Campbell’s analysis, AoL is not preeminently heterodox; overall, their relation to science stays within the boundaries of orthodox science. This is another legitimation strategy AoL has learnt from TM; “The preeminent example of this approach is Transcendental Meditation, the purported benefits of which have been the subject of over 600 studies. TM is the most researched meditative technique of all time” (Lewis 2011 b: 34). Lewis notes that in addition to solving practical (and medical) problems, emerging religions in this lineage see themselves as employing a scientific style or methodology, but generally not methods as severe or investigative as randomized research and medical trials. However, Art of Living seems to incorporate ‘science proper’ – or, more correctly, the Art of Living practices are, like TM, and scientifically tested. One important example is AoL practitioner and Professor Fahri Saatcioglu at the Department of Molecular Biosciences, University of Oslo. His study examines the effects of the AoL techniques (yoga, breathing) on female breast cancer patients, a study which started in 2010 and is still on-going.¹⁴³ Professor Saatcioglu’s study is described on the AoL Norway webpage¹⁴⁴ in this way:

A research study is being conducted at the Cancer Clinic, Oslo University Hospital Ullevål, and University of Oslo, Norway. The target group is women with breast cancer. It is a controlled and randomized trial with 60 patients in each arm of the study. At recruitment, patients are randomly assigned either to an education program, or the education program plus the 10-day Sudarshan Kriya and related Practices (SK&P) program. The measurements are made at the time of recruitment, after the SK&P intervention, and six months after the SK&P intervention. The rates of psychological disturbances, such as depression, anxiety, and stress, are being evaluated by standard self-report questionnaires. Saliva samples are taken to measure the stress hormone

¹⁴³ See <http://www.med.uio.no/helsam/english/research/projects/healing-breath-program/index.html> and http://www.alternativ.no/Nyheter/alternativ_forskning_kreft.html#Anchor-Gun-59557 (accessed 21.03.12)

¹⁴⁴ <http://www.artofliving.org/no-en/breast-cancer-research-study-oslo> (accessed 09.04.12)

cortisol. Blood is taken to measure proinflammatory cytokine production plus components of the antioxidant enzyme system. The results from the first half of the study will be available in mid-2012.

Feedback from patients: 'Should be offered to all cancer patients and schools!' 'Got rid of much stress, reminded me what was important/ not important. Was surprised by the effects of the course, especially the breath. Got much more energy, became more present...' ¹⁴⁵

The therapeutic and scientifically measurable effects of SKY (and yoga) hold various levels of importance for the Art of Living organization and for practitioners. On one hand, on a 'public' and organizational scale, referring to medical science and therapy are important strategies within the organization. Ališauskienė (2009) mentions that the only academic research related to AoL at the time of her study appeared to be medical articles that focused on the healing and stress-reducing properties of the *Sudarshan Kriya* technique. ¹⁴⁶ These studies are mainly from India, but there are also some from other countries. ¹⁴⁷ These can all be found at the Art of Living research website, where a short summary of the outcomes of some of these studies is also published, ¹⁴⁸ this being as diverse as noting improved brain function, a reduction in the stress hormone cortisol, and positive effects on antioxidants, blood lactate, immune function and blood cholesterol. The note also states that there are measurable anti-depressant effects from practicing *Sudarshan Kriya* and *pranayama*. Also, when asked about the health benefits of SKY and how it can help in curing illnesses, Ravi Shankar refers to medical science: *Sudarshan Kriya* helps in preventing many illnesses. A professor who is working on genes in Oslo University, Norway says that there are 300 chromosomes which are responsible for hypertension, cancer etc. And pranayama and Sudarshan Kriya suppress these 300 chromosomes. So, if one keeps practicing these techniques there is less and less chance for getting these illnesses. ¹⁴⁹

The debate on whether breathing techniques, yoga and meditation actually work is not one to reproduce here, though both subjective testimonies and scientific research seem to support the idea. What can be stated unequivocally, however, is that Art of

¹⁴⁵ 'Bør tilbys til alle kreftpasienter og skoler!'. 'Ble kvitt mye stress, minnet meg på hva som er viktig/ikke viktig. Ble overrasket over effekten av kurset, spesielt pusten. Fikk mye energi, ble mer til stede...' (Author's translation to English, the website kept the feedback in Norwegian)

¹⁴⁶ This is also the focus of the few newspaper articles on (AoL) yoga and breathing exercises, see for example <http://www.aftenposten.no/helse/article1165224.ece#.T2nOFNUg69U> (accessed 21.03.12)

¹⁴⁷ The health benefits of *Sudarshan Kriya* are being studied even as we speak, on people as diverse as cancer patients in Norway and members of the armed forces in Slovenia.

¹⁴⁸ See <http://AoLresearch.org/pdf/TheScienceofBreath.pdf> (accessed 28.09.11).

¹⁴⁹ See <http://www.artofliving.org/in-en/sudarshan-kriya-faq> (accessed 28.09.11).

Living utilizes science as an important legitimization strategy. Alluding to Rothstein (1996: 17), Ališauskienė states that "... contradictions between science and religion in the Judeo-Christian milieu determined the emergence of science as a dominant system of meaning ... a NRM which exists on the periphery of the religious life of the mainstream society tries to legitimate itself by becoming part of the dominant system of meaning" (2009: 4). Without investigating the various definitions of science,¹⁵⁰ it can thus be noted that Art of Living constantly refers to scientific research and results. Science is an important part of the websites, as well as in courses, on posters and leaflets.

5.4 Scientific, physical/ psychological or spiritual type of support

However, although science is an important focus for Art of Living as an organization, it may not necessarily be so for the SKY/Art of Living practitioners on a *personal* level. As I will demonstrate below, practitioners seem to view their practice in terms of a more complex framework, as part of a movement that, like certain other NRMs, "see themselves as scientific in the more general sense of taking a broadly empirical approach to spiritual-mental phenomena, and as verifying their results in the lives of individual converts. They perceive this as sharply departing from the dogmatic, non-empirical approach of older religious bodies that, in this view, simply expound on received tradition" (Lewis 2011 b: 28). Thus, if we take a look at the data from *all survey respondents* regarding the benefits of SKY (scientific support, physical and psychological benefits, spiritual benefits), an interesting picture emerges. In the hypothetical context of explaining SKY to someone new (and unfamiliar with the practice) the respondents would clearly prefer to talk about SKY's physical and psychological benefits.

¹⁵⁰ See for example Hammer and Lewis (2011)

Fig. 26

If you were to describe the practice of Sudarshan Kriya to someone who you had just met, which of the following would you likely emphasize?		
Type of support	Percentage	n
Scientific support	13,1 %	25
Physical and psychological benefits	81,7 %	156
Spiritual	5,2 %	10
Other, or add comment		26
answered question		191
skipped question		20

The numbers show that 81.7 % of all the respondents would highlight the physical and psychological focus, which seems to tally with what I perceive as the general importance of medical and therapeutic legitimation within Art of Living as an organization. The scientific support for the SKY benefits comes to 13.1 %, while the spiritual benefits from the practice receive a mere 5.2 %. In this particular question respondents were forced to choose one of three alternatives, but in the section that allowed open-ended responses there seemed to be a general agreement that the practice and the categorization of SKY are rather more complex. All three benefits from practicing SKY are important for the respondents, and in their comments they note that they will often mention all of the various benefits (and more, depending on their own experiences) to others. Respondents also say that they often determine which approach they think the person they are talking with will be interested in, and settle for that. Most comments are along the lines of “All three of these options in nr 47 are very relevant to me” and “I would share my personal experience. Physical, mental, social, emotional benefits. Emphasis on social and emotional benefits. Healthier, happier.” However, there were also some respondents who were critical towards the whole concept of the ‘packaging’ of SKY as a commodity:

Interesting – most people "pushing" SK when asked personally will mention the spiritual benefits but the story they "sell" is the science or the physical/psychological benefits...I suppose it's so that it can be packaged in a way people would be willing to buy it... sometimes it strikes me as potentially deceptive though – SK being sold as a cure-for-everything.

This general trend of highlighting physical and psychological benefits holds even when we look at the Indian and Norwegian respondents separately, though Norwegian emphasis on this theme is significantly stronger than the Indian: The physical and psychological benefits reach 86.5 % and 68.6 % respectively.

Fig. 27, Norway

Type of support	Percentage	n
Scientific support	10.1 %	9
Physical and psychological benefits	86.5 %	77
Spiritual benefits	3.4 %	3

Fig. 28, India

Type of support	Percentage	n
Scientific support	20.0 %	9
Physical and psychological benefits	68.9 %	31
Spiritual benefits	11.1%	5

5.5 Scientific support at point of ‘conversion’

Secondly, if we consider the data on the importance of scientific support for SKY at the point of respondents taking their first AoL course, figures for all respondents show that science is *not* a major factor for joining AoL and learning SKY.

Fig. 29

When you decided to take your first Art of Living course and learn the Sudarshan Kriya technique, how important was scientific support for the benefits of the technique in influencing your decision?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Not important	53,5 %	108
Minimally important	19,3 %	39

Moderately important	13,9 %	28
Important	6,9 %	14
Extremely important	6,4 %	13
Please explain in a more detailed way		43
answered question		202
skipped question		9

Over half (53.5%) of respondents answered ‘not important.’ Additionally, if we add together the numbers for ‘not important’ and ‘minimally important,’ we obtain a figure of 72.8 %, or almost three-fourths for all respondents. What this means if this sample is representative for AoL practitioners in general, then scientific ‘proof’ for the efficacy of the techniques is relatively unimportant. This is reflected in the comments section for this question: one respondent writes that “I didn't know any scientific support for the benefits of the technique before I took my first AoL course,” and another that “My experience was the most important thing.” Likewise, the categories of respondents who considered science ‘moderately important’ to ‘important’ represented 20.8 % of the sample, which means that about one fifth of respondents noted that scientific support was important, but probably not the primary reason they got involved. Additionally, only 6.4 % of the respondents found science to be ‘extremely important.’ Some of the qualitative responses also reflect these notions: “They were important in a way that they made it easier for me to take the leap, and to furthermore involve my partner. (Who has a slightly more "scientific-oriented" mindset than me.)” And, “It, kind of, gives Sudharshan Kriya a quality-sign. I knew that I was buying something that would work.” Thus, while some respondents are aware of and interested in the scientific findings on the benefits of SKY, overall there seems to be much more emphasis on personal experience.

Further, if we compare Norwegian and Indian responses to the same question, we find the same emphasis on the physical and psychological benefits of SKY for potential recruits. At the time of the respondents’ point of ‘conversion,’ *science* was relatively unimportant, though it was more important for Indian respondents than for Norwegians. 41.3 % of the Indians respondents stated that scientific support was ‘not important’ at the point of involvement with the movement, compared to the 53.6 % of Norwegian. Interestingly however, 17.4 % of Indians reported that scientific support was ‘extremely important,’ compared with only 2.1% of Norwegians.

Fig. 30, India:

When you decided to take your first Art of Living course and learn the Sudarshan Kriya technique, how important was scientific support for the benefits of the technique in influencing your decision?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Not important	41.3 %	19
Minimally important	21.7 %	10
Moderately important	10.9 %	5
Important	8.7 %	4
Extremely important	17.4 %	8
Please explain in a more detailed way		4
answered question		46
skipped question		6

Fig. 31, Norway:

When you decided to take your first Art of Living course and learn the Sudarshan Kriya technique, how important was scientific support for the benefits of the technique in influencing your decision?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Not important	53.6 %	52
Minimally important	15.5 %	15
Moderately important	22.7 %	22
Important	6.2 %	6
Extremely important	2.1 %	2
Please explain in a more detailed way		20
answered question		96
skipped question		3

However, based on the qualitative responses from Norwegian practitioners, more Norwegians than Indians seemed to be *critical* of the form of scientific legitimation presented within AoL. One respondent stated that “I considered it [SKY] not to be aligned with modern science, yet I loved it and found it almost a bit sad that my idea of

science did not recognize what great points were in the course. Today I find the course very scientific but at the same time it touches upon points that are very subjective, which I find can go deeper and further than objectivist science.” Another respondent was even more negative about how scientific support for SKY is presented in the organization: “It would have been important if I had seen any. We were shown one study, but it had no methods section, or critical discussion and no relevant control group as far as I could tell so it looked more like a tabloid article.”

Further, many respondents emphasized their personal experience of SKY as being much more important than a rational, scientific explanation. One respondent noted that “When I personally experienced the difference it made to my life, why should I bother for scientific support?” Attitudes like these align with one of the basic tenets of New Age thought, namely that the authority of a practice ultimately comes from the self, not from an outside agency (Kraft 2011). I would at this point argue that, for most practitioners, direct personal experience combined with the physical and psychological benefits that seem to accrue from the practice is the key to understanding participants’ ongoing relationship with SKY rather than the appeal of SKY as a ‘scientific’ technique.

According to Kraft (2011), the therapeutic aspect of New Age/New Religiosity is strong in Norway. Though this subculture is relatively, its core revolves around health-related strategies and products, and Kraft quotes numbers from 2010 which indicate that 1 of 2 Norwegians have tried so-called ‘alternative’ medicine.¹⁵¹ Importantly, users of alternative medicine do not necessarily have to be part of the field of New Religiosity, or even ‘believe’ in any of the associated ideas. Belief, according to Kraft, is irrelevant for the social significance of New Religiosity. Rather, there is an inherent willingness to ‘try everything’ (especially in the context of chronic illnesses or pain), and thus it may be that “offerings from alternative medicine overlap with the New Age view of reality, and many of the therapists stand on New Age ground” (Kraft 2011: 87, my translation). Thus much of New Age/ New Religiosity seems to revolve around therapy, and I believe it useful to interpret *pranayama*/SKY (and to some extent yoga)

¹⁵¹ (2011: 86). Kraft mentions similar numbers from Denmark, and also that up to 70% of Canadians had tried alternative medicine. However, she also mentions that the Norwegian survey has been criticized for defining alternative medicine too broadly – for example including massage – and that the numbers therefore may be too high.

practice as a form of therapy. This view seems to align well with many of the qualitative responses to the survey, both from Indian and Norwegian respondents.

- After I attended YES!+ (Youth Empowerment and Skills) Workshop, I felt it releases a lot of toxins that one keeps accumulating in everyday life. It makes me stress free and is an excellent start for the day. It boosts my stamina and increases my productivity. It also helps me be calm.
- ...I went for the introduction, on that day I was suffering with a bout of asthma and I was struggling to breathe. There the teacher gave intro talk and made us to do *bhastrika pranayama*. For the first time I really felt that I can breathe easily and good, it was so nice and it energized my body like anything. That's when I decided I will take up this course.
- As I have Anxiety and OCD problems
- I started practicing it as a means to cure depression and also as a way to attain spiritual enlightenment.
- People in the family have practiced it before and experienced a lot of health benefits; I attended the course a couple of times and found it useful.
- 13-14 years ago, I had depression and compulsive thoughts. I was looking for something to help me
- ...I have asthma and are very interested in all kinds of breathing techniques.
- ...I was burnt out (and felt constantly nervous) and realized that the only time I felt normal was when I was doing the *kriya*.
- I struggled with burnout. I was lying on the couch for a year, no strength, the doctors could not help me, I thought I'm not going to function in life. When I started *Sudarshan Kriya* I got a new life full of energy and joy and can write a book about all the good I've got from Art of Living techniques...

To summarize, in this chapter I discussed the appeal to science in Art of Living on two general levels. On the *organizational* level we find 'Vedic science' – which in this case is as much a legitimation strategy through the lens of the Indian spiritual tradition rather than as a stratagem of homology, as seen, for example, within TM. Rather, on an organizational level, AoL seems to focus on aligning itself with modern medical science (in much the same way as TM also does) – to some extent keeping the spiritual and the therapeutic aspects of its practices apart. Both foci are equally important, and both refer to different legitimation strategies as Art of Living fuses tradition and modernity. Further, both tradition and science in the AoL case are firmly placed within the realm of orthodoxy – neither are 'outlandish' enough to be overtly oppositional to society at large nor to the traditions (both religious and medical) that the NRM places itself within. My interpretation of AoL in this context resonates with Ališauskienė's description of the organization's philosophy as 'secular spirituality.'

However, when investigating the *personal* level of AoL practitioners' attitudes toward AoL's appeal to science, a different picture emerges. Neither a scientific view of

the benefits of SKY nor a spiritual view are the most important. Rather, respondents emphasize the personal/psychological and the therapeutic aspects of the practice. The spiritual aspect is definitely important – more so for Indian than for Norwegian respondents – but in their personal responses, the ‘official’ AoL appeal to the authority of science was clearly not very important. Rather they emphasized SKY as being personally therapeutic, helping them with everything from mental to physical illness.

5.6 Some final notes

Ališauskienė (2009 b) noted that her Lithuanian respondents emphasized science in the practice and teachings of Art of Living. I believe that my Indian respondents, albeit few and non-representative, are closer to a scientific view of AoL/SKY than Norwegian respondents. This conclusion about my Indian respondents is reinforced by some of Frøystad’s remarks on the role of science in Indian New Age/NRMs: “scientific rhetoric has become enormously widespread in Indian guru movements and New Age activities targeting the urban middle class, and it comes in numerous forms” (2011: 93). Another explanation may be science’s growing importance for India as a developing nation.

However, although the numbers show that the Indian respondents are more engaged with science than the Norwegians (17.4% and 2.1 % respectively, as noted in Fig. 30 and 31), it seems to be significantly less so than Ališauskienė’s Lithuanian respondents. In contrast, Ališauskienė’s Danish respondents did not emphasize science – and thus there seems to be a correlation between them and my Norwegian respondents.

Norwegian and Danish cultures are similar enough in the areas of secularization and New Age religion, and neither have the Lithuanian post-communist ‘ethos’ of scientific atheism, nor the religious plurality and Hindu traditions of the Indian culture. Rather, some of the Norwegian respondents are skeptical towards the way science is portrayed in the organization – perhaps not deeming it sufficiently orthodox. But basically, as I have already noted, I believe the authority of science has taken a backseat to the New Age ethics of the ‘authority of the self’ – the ‘authority’ derived from personal experience of the practices – and a backseat to the therapeutic (not necessarily in the orthodox medical sense of therapeutic) aspects of the practice. However, some aspects of a scientific mindset/ worldview are difficult to ‘escape’. An interesting thought experiment is predicting practitioners’ responses if we had, for example, asked “Would you have joined the Art of Living movement if you knew its practices was entirely unscientific?” Particularly in the West, people live in societies and with mindsets that

are fundamentally scientific – science has become inseparable from how most interpret the world. As I have noted in this chapter science is an important legitimation strategy in Art of Living – perhaps so fundamental to practitioners that it is ‘taken for granted’. I thus predict that most answers to the hypothetical question above would have been negative. Without the conjoined effects/ melding of spirituality on one hand, and the legitimating power of science on the other, Art of Living as a NRM would have lost a large part of its meaningfulness. Much of the success of this type of movement lies in offering a religion that is in consonance with the *zeitgeist* – and in that sense Art of Living manages to balance tradition and modernity, spirituality and science in a way that is eminently understandable in a globalized world. Art of Living is a movement that is, indeed, ‘same, same but different’ – the structure of the movement is the same from country to country, but what is deemed most important in a situation of membership/ practice do differ. But, no matter how varied beliefs and motivations may be, all AoL practitioners share a common goal: the most important reason of SKY practice is to help them to help themselves, towards a better, less stressful life.

6 Conclusion

The focus of this thesis is the Art of Living Foundation (AoL), a schism from Transcendental Meditation (TM). The organization spreads its guru/leader/founder's message of a society free from stress and violence through the practices of meditation, yoga and breathing techniques, as well as education, development and peace work initiatives.

My most important goal in this thesis has been to present an overview of the movement through a number of different interpretive frameworks. I have focused particularly on comparison; seeing systematic differences/similarities between the movement in Indian and Norway, and added a special focus on the movement's key practice, the breathing technique *Sudarshan Kriya* (SKY).

I found that the Art of Living Foundation exhibits many of the traits common to New Religious Movements. Spatially it is a global organization, and temporally it is new in the sense that it has appeared in the West fairly recently. Contextually AoL can be interpreted through (again in a Western context) its alternative relation to the wider society. However, this relationship does not seem to have been marked by conflict, setting it apart from more controversial NRMs. The success of NRMs like AoL in the West (and especially in Scandinavia) can be attributed to a high level of secularization in society, where the emergence of new religions can be interpreted as reactions to cultural change and manifestations of cultural continuity. The influence of India on the West has also been important for the success of AoL, as Hindu-related philosophies and practices offer an avenue where adherents can experience what Campbell, for example, deems a re-sacralization of existence. Additionally, through a short analysis of relations between NRMs and media I found that AoL does not exhibit the conflictual aspect of public relations that are commonly found with NRMs that have a more 'threatening' relationship with society. Rather, the organization has managed to attract generally positive media coverage. I also note the importance of the internet in AoL's PR endeavors.

Comparatively, AoL manifests somewhat differently in the two countries, conditioned by India's and Norway's different cultural milieus. In Norway, Art of Living can be understood as part of New Age culture (in Norway generally referred to as *nyreligiøsitet* or New Religiosity), a culture which is regarded as quite individualistic. Importantly, the Western New Age milieu is accommodating to ideas

and practices that are ‘imported’ from the East, for example reincarnation and practices such as chanting, meditation and yoga – which are all part of the Art of Living system. Norwegian respondents are, on average, in their mid-forties, well-educated and have families. A little over 70 % are female, and seem to have been involved in/tried several other New Age practices/therapies either before or while involved with Art of Living. The Norwegian respondents practice SKY less often than their Indian counterparts, which may be the result of differences in age and family obligations.

Indian respondents are, on average, more than ten years younger than the Norwegians. While well-educated with good incomes, they are still generally unmarried and have no children. The Indian sample is also overwhelmingly male (62.7 %). With fewer family obligations, they have time to nurture a stronger social connection to the movement – and to practice SKY more regularly than the Norwegians. In an Indian cultural context it is important to note that a ‘family resemblance’ approach works well for Art of Living, as the organization seems to merge effortlessly into the broader Hindu culture. This is observable at the Bangalore *ashram*, and also in the biography of the guru. Ravi Shankar grew up in the Hindu faith, and seems to personally uphold a worshipful attitude toward the divine. However, in addition to his obvious connections to Hinduism, and to AoL’s parental organization, Transcendental Meditation, Ravi Shankar is a successful religious entrepreneur in his own right – commanding an organization which is largely built on the social contract of his charismatic leadership. I have utilized Bainbridge and Stark’s theory of cult formation to interpret the guru as a religious entrepreneur. The religious entrepreneurship/creation of a successful religious organization seems to be something Ravi Shankar learnt from his own guru, namely TM’s Maharishi Mahesh Yogi; he has built up his own organization in the same manner as TM, and indeed as any multi-national company; with a strong business and marketing strategy radiating from the headquarters in the Bangalore *ashram*. However, not only did Ravi Shankar learn the ‘trade’ from TM, he became so successful as a guru in his own right that he was eventually evicted from the TM organization. I analyze this break and schisms in general through certain patterns found in contemporary literature. Although there are many differences between AoL in the two countries there are similarities too. The courses and techniques the movement teaches are similar throughout the world, and teachers receive a comprehensive training. One of the foremost characteristics of the educational courses offered by the movement is an aim to

offer participants a set of techniques, skills and knowledge through which they can achieve a better quality of life. Participants are trained in ways of coping with stress, both mental and physical, and also how to act and react to various demanding situations that frequently arise around the demands of modern daily life. The techniques, which consist of breathing techniques, meditation and yoga exercises promise to improve health and well-being. In this context it is interesting to look at yoga practice: the survey responses make it clear that yoga is enormously popular and practiced often in the Art of Living organization. Additionally, the pattern of yoga practice seems to cut across nations - while Indians and Norwegians constituted the majority of respondents, this pattern seems to hold true for the respondents from other countries as well. Over 35 % of respondents practice yoga regularly, and around 30 % practice frequently.

Comparatively, I believe that in an Indian context the traditional view of yoga as a wholly spiritual exercise is in continuity with both historical and contemporary Indian society. But as the practice traveled to the West it came into contact with a very different culture; in the beginning it was regarded as exercise divorced from its spiritual basis. This is one aspect of the secularization process – wherein a spiritual custom has lost its original meaning. However, in the present-day West the ‘old’ view of yoga seems to have been revived, as the spiritual aspect has seen an upsurge – which may be due to the efforts of NRMs like Art of Living.

The key practice in AoL, the *Sudarshan Kriya* (SKY) technique, is essentially a cycle of breath. The *Kriya* has three rhythms; fast, medium and slow, and the *pranayama* is taught in two varieties; the long, guided *Kriya*, meant to be practiced in a group, and the short, “everyday” *Kriya* that can be practiced individually. One of my sub-goals in this thesis, which started out as the ‘original’ hypothesis, grew out of Milda Ališauskienė’s findings about the different attitudes between Lithuanian and Danish participants regarding *Sudharshan Kriya* as a ‘scientific’ technique. With respect to the tendency to ascribe scientific status to SKY, Milda Ališauskienė found a noticeable difference between AoL participants from Lithuania and Denmark. She notes general similarities in practices, teaching and administrative structures between the Danish and Lithuanian branches of the movement, alike to those I have found between Norway and India. However, when it came to views about the ‘scientific’ status of SKY and AoL, she found that their attitudes differed significantly: Lithuanian informants emphasized the scientism which can be found in AoL’s presentation of its doctrine and practices,

which may be interpreted as the residue of the Soviet pattern of appealing to scientific atheism as a legitimating system. Her Danish informants did not highlight scientism in the principles and practices of AoL in the same way. Thus, a portion of this thesis has been devoted to analyzing responses from Indian and Norwegian practitioners to relevant survey queries, where I have tried to settle whether either of Ališauskienė's conclusions about scientism are valid for the Norwegian and/or for the Indian subsample. To minimize the potential for error, the 'science question' was asked in several different ways in the questionnaire. I suspected I would find a comparable difference between the outlooks of Indian and Norwegian practitioners, but this did not turn out to be the case. Neither the Indian nor the Norwegian respondents ascribed the same importance to science as Ališauskienė's Lithuanian respondents, and are thus more comparable to her Danish respondents.

Instead of the expected scientism I discovered suggestions of an 'indigenization process' as part of an Indian movement's adaptation to Western society. It seems that the process of relocation has not only influenced AoL's presentation of SKY as scientific, but also attitudes toward other practices. Moving out of its founding country, AoL/SKY was appropriated in terms of Norway's alternative spiritual (new age) subculture. However, this appropriation process was not one-way; following the example of TM, AoL rapidly adapted itself to its new environment – for example by deemphasizing guru devotion and other distinctly Hindu aspects. While the science question has turned out not to be the main theme of the thesis, it is still a fascinating topic. This is due in part to the fact that Ališauskienė's work has helped to highlight this theme and partly because of an evolving body of literature on NRMs and science.

6.1 Some suggestions for future research

It is an incredibly rewarding experience to work on a movement that has been the focus of so little academic study. In this thesis I have, due in part to the inherent constraints of a thesis project, been able to offer only a short overview of a large and complex movement. Most aspects of the movement I have discussed in this thesis could have been expanded and deepened. I would very much have enjoyed being able to investigate this global organization in yet other cultural contexts, such as in the United States or Canada.

One of my findings from the Norwegian survey was the importance of health-related issues as a motivation to practice *Sudarshan Kriya*. Further investigation of

mind-body practices – through the lenses of both therapy and spirituality – that organizations like AoL offer would be an incredibly interesting project. I would also have liked to have expanded the analysis of gender issues in Art of Living, for example focusing on structural and cultural aspects that help or hamper women in leadership positions. Regarding leadership, as I mentioned in Chapter 3, it will be fascinating to follow the movement into the future and to study its potentials for conflict and schism – especially after the leader passes away.

When researching a movement like Art of Living, the possibilities are indeed endless!

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Appendix: Who joins Art of Living - overview of the questionnaire findings on the demographics of the membership

The following appendix presents some of the data from the questionnaire research that was an aspect of my MA thesis project. This chapter will survey the demographic characteristics of the membership in AoL, and tentatively discuss how people became members. In this chapter I will present only a small amount of the collected survey data. I have chosen to focus on demographics in order to understand who the AoL practitioners in Norway (and to some extent in India) are. Some of the demographic statistics that will be discussed are birth country/residence and age (mentioning the out-moded ‘youth crisis model’¹⁵² and reasons for age change among converts to NRMs). I will also compare levels of education and income, sex ratio and sexual preference, children, ideological alignment and voting, as well as how practitioners initially came into contact with Art of Living and SKY, and their duration of active practice.

The survey was completely anonymous; it was set up in Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com) so that respondents could not be traced through IP-addresses or such. The high degree of anonymity has, I believe, been positive for the respondents – as some of them have shared quite personal data and stories. This would probably have been different in a face-to-face situation, as the additional stress of an interview situation is minimized. The survey is also quite long, so the online medium probably gave respondents more time to reflect on their answers.

The data collection method for this survey has been called ‘Convenience Sampling’ or ‘Accidental Sampling.’¹⁵³ Through this method (which has also been referred to as grab or opportunity sampling), participants are selected because they are available and convenient. When meeting a person s/he may be included in the sample, or participants can be chosen through technological means such as internet or telephone. Additionally, this means that the sample is non-random, and probably fairly biased (see Dorofeev and Grant 2006). Sigmund Grønmo notes that even though the sample is

¹⁵² The youth-crisis model refers to various analyses that explained conversion to alternative religions in terms of the stresses associated with the process of adolescent maturation (e.g., Levine 1984; Melton & Moore 1982). ‘Youth-crisis model’ is an expression utilized by Lewis in his discussion of various forms of this explanatory mode, rather than a term utilized by the theorists themselves (refer to Lewis, forthcoming 2013).

¹⁵³ Grønmo (2004) calls it ‘slumpmessig utvelging’ (p. 100-101)

‘accidental,’ it is also based on strategic choices. For example; “accidental sampling can [...] be used to establish strategic selections with a conscious one-sided composition” (2004: 101). For this thesis the sampling method mainly entail that participants were AoL practitioners who were (relatively) young and urban. They were contacted via the internet (generally by e-mail) and asked to participate in the study. I also tried to recruit people within AoL who I met in person, and to some extent used the ‘Snowball Sampling’ method (see Grønmo 2004: 102-103), where respondents help recruit more informants for the study.

Another consideration regarding convenience sampling is the high percentage of potential respondents. Even though 211 respondents was not an especially successful sample for this particular survey, there is nevertheless enormous potential in this methodology. The possibility for further comparison is there, through gathering more respondents and/or branching out to additional countries. On that note, it was interesting to see how this small survey traveled to the most ‘distant’ corners of the world. There are participants from the United Arab Emirates, Fiji and Serbia – whose voices I hope can be heard in a future expansion of this project.

In Norway the convenience sampling method seems to have worked out well, which is due mainly to the enthusiastic participation of the Art of Living board of directors. They sent out the survey twice through their electronic mailing list, provided their input to the logic of the questionnaire, also made themselves available for questions and queries. James R. Lewis’ efforts in ‘winning them over’ was also important. As the supervisor of this project it is fair to say that his credibility as a well-known researcher definitely eased my entrance into the field. Hence, with respect to the Norwegian subsample, my data stands on fairly solid ground. I collected exactly 100 responses to the survey, and, as I discussed in the introduction, this represents a reasonable percentage of Norwegians currently *active* in Art of Living. Thus it is not unreasonable to draw some cautious conclusions about Norwegian AoL members – especially as the data supports some of the inferences I drew from field observations and from an examination of Art of Living literature.

The status of the subsample of Indian members is quite different. There must be hundreds of thousands of AoL practitioners in India, but the survey received only 52 responses from Indians currently residing in the country. I believe there were several

reasons for this low response rate.¹⁵⁴ What seems to have produced the most respondents in India was a combination of the convenience and the snowball sampling method. India in particular tends to work on a ‘you know somebody who knows somebody...’ basis, and this situation is very much the case within Art of Living. I have been most successful obtaining respondents via friends or family who either know somebody in AoL or who have been practitioners themselves. Their AoL connections likely feel a stronger obligation to participate (or at least feel more positive about participating) in the survey, since it has been ‘vouched for’ by their friend. I also gained some respondents from the course I participated in at the Bangalore *ashram*. The research project may have been concretized for my co-participants (and for the course teacher who sent out the group email) by personally meeting me, seeing that I am generally benevolent and not overly critical towards the organization. For the Indian respondent data, it seems like the strongest statement I can make is “if this sample of Indian AOL members is representative, then...” which is obviously far from ideal, but the questionnaire data is a supplementary rather than a primary source for this thesis. The bottom line is that while the Norwegian subsample is reasonably good, the Indian subsample is not representative enough that for me to draw any definitive conclusions – or as Wiki phrases it, “the researcher using such a sample cannot scientifically make generalizations about the total population from this sample because it would not be representative enough.” So I cannot draw any ‘strong’ conclusions from the survey data alone – but I can refer to the data where it backs up – or is clearly contrary to – field observations or other hypotheses I have derived from an examination of AoL literature or from the secondary literature.

This appendix is loosely based on James R. Lewis (2006) “New data on who joins NRMs and why: A case study of the Order of Christ/Sophia.” I will follow his layout and focus on a few, important results. I will also often refer to Lorne Dawson’s (2003) “Who Joins New Religious Movements and Why?” As Lewis states in his introduction, “Although some of the OCS [Order of Christ Sophia] data supports generally-accepted conclusions that researchers have drawn from earlier studies of New Religious Movements (NRMs), on certain points the data calls into question – sometimes dramatically – prior generalizations” (2006: 91). I hope to add the Art of

¹⁵⁴ These are, for example, survey format (long and extensive), combined with varied access to technology, and a potential issue of hierarchy in the organization – which probably has affected the dissemination of the survey.

Living data to the discussion about NRM demographics, and show that although some aspects of the older conventional wisdom about NRMs still stand, Art of Living seem to follow the “new” NRM pattern of practitioners that are mature adults, well-educated, middle- to upper-middle class, and have joined an organization via a network of family and friends.

Country of birth versus country of residence

For the purpose of comparing Norwegian and Indian respondents, I had a choice between two parameters, birth country or country of residence. These two yield slightly different results. These differences arise because of migration. Many of the *Indian-born* respondents, for example, have migrated to other countries. The US features high on this list. For example, only 2.9 % of all respondents were born in the US, but 12.4% of respondents reside in the US. This means that when selecting country of residence as the determining characteristic, *Indian-born* respondents that live outside of India are ‘lost.’ In Norway, the reverse has happened. A number of AoL respondents in Norway were born in other countries.¹⁵⁵ Thus the survey ‘gains’ many respondents who otherwise would not have been counted. These differences makes choosing between birth country and country of residence rather problematic, as each parameter offers a slightly different demographic cross-section. Despite these snags I have decided to use country of *residence* as the criterion for separating respondents into subsamples.

¹⁵⁵ Out of the entire sample, 39.4 % were born in Norway while 47.4 % listed Norway as country of residence.

Fig. 1 Country of birth, AoL survey

Country of Birth	No.	Percentage	Country of Birth	No.	Percentage
Canada	2	1.0 %	Pakistan	1	0.5 %
Cote D'Ivoire	1	0.5 %	Serbia	1	0.5 %
Colombia	1	0.5 %	Russia	2	1.0 %
Germany	4	1.9 %	Sweden	1	0.5 %
Fiji	1	0.5 %	Suriname	2	1.0 %
Ireland	1	0.5 %	Taiwan	2	1.0 %
India	83	39.9 %	United States	6	2.9 %
Iran	2	1.0 %	South Africa	5	2.3 %
Kenya	1	0.5 %	Skipped question	3	
Lithuania	1	0.5 %			
Norway	82	39.4 %			
Peru	1	0.5 %			

Fig. 2 Country of residence, AoL survey

Country of Residence	No.	Percentage	Country of Residence	No.	Percentage
United Arab Emirates	2	1.0 %	Oman	1	0.5 %
Australia	1	0.5 %	Serbia	1	0.5 %
Canada	3	1.4 %	Russia	1	0.5 %
Cote D'Ivoire	1	0.5 %	Sweden	1	0.5 %
Chile	1	0.5 %	Taiwan	2	1.0 %
Germany	6	2.9 %	United Kingdom	1	0.5 %
Denmark	1	0.5 %	United States	26	12.4 %
Fiji	1	0.5 %	South Africa	4	1.9 %
India	52	24.9 %	Skipped question	2	
Lithuania	1	0.5 %			
Netherlands	2	1.0 %			
Norway	99	47.4 %			

The age question

The question of age has been important in the study of NRMs. The ‘general’ findings have long been that “...with rare exceptions, though, the new religions of today are a game for young people and, relative to the population, middle-aged and old people are markedly underrepresented... the membership of most NRMs are disproportionately young” (Dawson 2003: 7). For some groups, this may still hold true. Some of the studies he cites, for example Barker’s (1984) study of the Unification Church, places the average age at recruitment at 23 years of age, with about half the members being between the ages 20 and 25. Another case Dawson mentions is Rochford’s Krishna Consciousness study, where over half of the members were in their early twenties, and about half of the devotees joined before the age of 21. However, in the case of Art of Living,¹⁵⁶ I have found a different pattern. Although it is problematic to make generalizations based on the data from non-Norwegian respondents, it nevertheless appears that AoL members follow a different pattern from the ‘youth crisis model.’

Fig. 3 Age in Art of Living

Country	Average Year of Birth	Average Age
All respondents	1973.32	38.68
Norway	1967.82	44.18
India	1980.77	31.23

The average age of the entire AoL respondent base is 38.68 years. The Norwegian demographic is older, reaching an average of 44.18 years old, while the Indian set is younger; averaging 31.23 years old. Dawson (2003) cites studies of other NRMs where the average age of the followers reaches well into the thirties. One example is Wilson and Dobbelaere’s study on Nichiren Shoshu (Soka Gakkai), where “their extensive survey revealed that 68.2 per cent of the membership were under the age of 34 and 88.4 per cent were under the age of 44” (Dawson 2003: 122). The mean age for joining this

¹⁵⁶ There are participants, albeit quite few, from many other countries. These have however been omitted from this appendix for purposes of clarity of argument and for making comparisons between the Indian and the Norwegian subsamples.

group was reported as 31 years old, while Wallis's study of Scientology in Britain found an average age of 32 years old at recruitment. While an average age range of early- to mid-thirties cannot really be termed "old," it is nevertheless markedly older than the studies of ISCKON and the Unification Church mentioned above.

Lewis' (2006) study of The Order of Christ/ Sophia (OCS), an American NRM in the tradition of the Holy Order of MANS, also found an older age group than expected NRMs. In OCS, the average age was 40 years old. Because the average time spent in the movement was two and a half years, then the average age at recruitment was ca. 37 years. Lewis also notes that he has had regular contact with other NRMs such as the Raelian movement and Eckankar, and his impressionistic sense is that "if one gathered data on people who joined new religions during the past five years, one would find the average new member to be in their thirties rather than in their twenties" (Lewis 2006: 93). This statement fits AoL perfectly. If we look at how long respondents have been involved with the organization, and how old they were at the time of first contact we find a pattern that is comparable to both Lewis' impressionistic hypothesis, and to demographic data from three other surveys of NRM members. (All data I refer to in this section, apart from the AoL data, can be found in Lewis' forthcoming 2013 article.) Lewis investigated the ages at which people became 'practicing Pagans' and people joined the Adidam organization.¹⁵⁷ He also examines data on the membership of the Church of Scientology in Denmark (collected by researchers at the University of Copenhagen). I will not reproduce any of this data here, except to say that the 'youth crisis model' seems to have fit the demographics of NRM converts in the early 70's very well. The numbers from 2005 onwards,¹⁵⁸ however, show a different pattern. In recent years, Pagans began self-identifying as such at an average age of 30.51 years, while recent converts to Adidam exhibit a mean age of 47.5 years old. And in 1996-98, the most recent period for which we have data on Scientologists, the mean age of converts to Scientology in Denmark was 30.68 years old.

In comparison, the Art of Living practitioners overall were, on average, 31.47 years old when taking their first AoL course. I take this as a confirmation that there has been an age change in the NRM demographics. Members are getting older, and potential new recruits also typically belong to an older age group than earlier recruits.

¹⁵⁷ See for example <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adidam> (accessed 02.04.12)

¹⁵⁸ The Pagan survey went on from 2005-2009, the Adidam survey is currently in process but started in 2005, and the Scientology data is from 1996-1998

There was also a significant age difference between Norwegian and Indian respondents. Norwegian respondents were older, 35.83 years old, on average, when first becoming affiliated with the organization. Interestingly the Indian practitioners were, on average, 25.23 years old, thus a little more than ten years younger than the Norwegians. There are many possible explanations for the youngness of Indian respondents at the age of joining, but one that comes to mind is simply the fact that the population in India is comparatively very young.¹⁵⁹ Also, AoL's appeal to young, urban and (relatively) well-off Indians may have something to do with it. Finally, it could just be an artifact of the non-random sample of Indian respondents.

¹⁵⁹ According to the CIA Factbook (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2177.html>, accessed 02.04.12) the median age of India is currently 26.2 years. In comparison, the Norwegian median age is a whopping 40 years.

Biological sex

Fig. 4 Biological sex, India

Biological Sex India		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Male	62,7 %	32
Female	37,3 %	19
answered question		51
skipped question		1

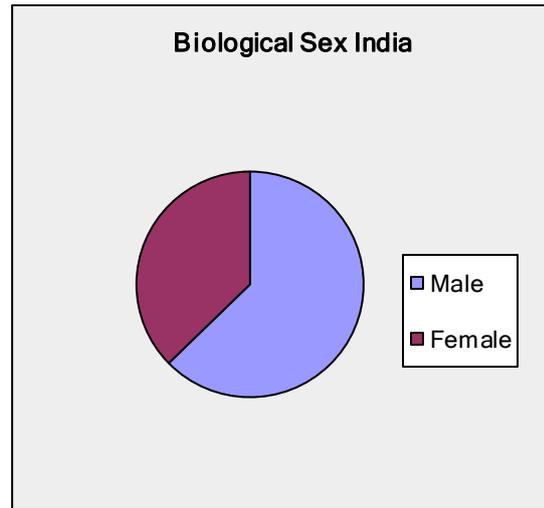
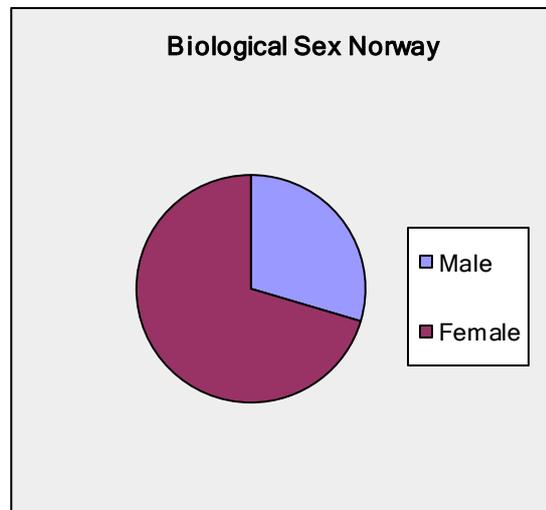


Fig. 5 Biological sex, Norway

Biological Sex Norway		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Male	29,6 %	29
Female	70,4 %	69
answered question		98
skipped question		1



As can be seen in figures 4 and 5, there is a marked differences in the sex ratio of the AOL practitioners in Norway and in India. In India, the proportion was 62.7 % males to 37.3 % females, while in Norway the percentages were 29.6 % male to 70.4 % female.

Gilhus and Mikaelsson (2005) note, regarding the New Age, that there are quite few quantitative studies on practitioners in this field. However, referring to Rose

(1998¹⁶⁰), they say that although New Age practitioners come from all walks of life, they tend to share three defining characteristics – namely, at least half are middle aged, they overwhelmingly middle class and almost three-quarters are women. Frisk (1998) also notes that, generally speaking, more women than men are engaged in any measurable form of religious activity. The demographics of Norwegian respondents to the AoL survey fit well with Gilhus and Mikaelsson's points above: approaching middle age and 29.6 % male to 70.4 % female. These figures also dovetail with my observations from the AOL course and *satsang* in Norway – the course was overwhelmingly attended by women, while in the *satsang* the genders were more balanced but still female-dominated.

As a background, it could be noted that in Norway the male-female ratio is much more balanced than in other parts of the world; in 2012 there is actually, in the total population, 0.98 males to every female.¹⁶¹ In comparison, India as a whole has per the latest census (2011) a total gender ratio of 940 females to 1000 men,¹⁶² and in the state of Karnataka the ratio is 968 females to 1000 men.¹⁶³

With respect to the survey data, Gilhus and Mikaelsson's figures tally well with the Norwegian respondents. In India, the sex ratio of survey respondents was inverted. However, based on my impressions from the field, I believe that the survey response on this particular question is quite skewed. In the Indian case, first of all, the survey response is too low to make it possible to generalize from the survey data. Secondly, when visiting the Bangalore *ashram* it seemed, as far as I could observe, to be a relatively equal proportion of men to women involved with the movement, or at least present at the *ashram*. The easiest place to spot a predominance of either sex would have been in the *satsang* sessions, where the hall was divided into a male and a female side. In each *satsang* I attended there seemed to be a rough fifty-fifty balance between the genders. On the other hand I may be mistaken in my observations, as I have observational data only from the Bangalore *ashram* and survey responses came predominately from the Bangalore area. It may be the case that more males are recruited to AoL. However, AoL has taken a clear public stand on matters of gender equality in

¹⁶⁰ Rose, Stuart (1998) "An Examination of the New Age Movement: Who is Involved and What Constitutes its Spirituality" in *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 13, 1, 5-22

¹⁶¹ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2018.html> (accessed 10.04.12)

¹⁶² These and subsequent gender ratio data is taken from <http://www.mapsofindia.com/census2011/female-sex-ratio.html> (accessed 09.04.12)

¹⁶³ This is better than the national average and up 0.31 % from the 2001 census of 965 females.

India and around the world. The organization provides various women empowerment projects,¹⁶⁴ and even hosts an annual International Women's Conference.¹⁶⁵ The explicit importance given to women by AoL supports my observations in Bangalore that the genders are reasonably balanced.

Gilhus and Mikaelsson also refer to Steve Bruce (1996¹⁶⁶), where he states that it is possible to see a gender difference in attraction to different religious content in the New Age: "parapsychology and esoteric knowledge have a tendency to attract men, while healing, channeling and spirituality attract women" (Bruce 1996: 220 in Gilhus and Mikaelsson 2005: 180, my translation). Although this statement may be somewhat essentialist, it seems to fit with AoL as in terms of practices – as healing (in shape of therapy/ self-development) and spirituality are large parts of what AoL is about. While this may fit the larger New Age subculture both Frisk (1998) and Lewis (2006) state that there is considerable debate whether it also counts for New Religious Movements. Frisk notes that generally there seems to be a balanced gender count within NRMs, but some appeal more to one sex than the others. For example, she says, "some movements, especially those with a patriarchal structure, seem to attract more men than women. One example is the Hare Krishna-movement. In movements like the Osho-movement, where women are given more scope of action, the relation is opposite. This [mechanism] also seems to apply to other more loosely structured guru-centered movements" (Frisk 1998: 199, my translation). Lewis (2006) notes similar tendencies – some studies show a predominance of women within NRMs¹⁶⁷ while other studies refute a generalization of females within new religions.¹⁶⁸ However, he notes that both through his own observations at New Age happenings and through researching NRMs he has discovered a majority of female participation; for example in "the Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness (MSIA), which in the mid-nineties had almost twice as many female as male participants (Lewis 1997:162). The OCS¹⁶⁹ is even more disproportionately female; out of the sample, 56 (almost 3/4) were women, and 21 were men" (Lewis 2006: 96). This

¹⁶⁴ See <http://www.artofliving.org/women-empowerment-home> (accessed 09.04.12)

¹⁶⁵ This year (2012) the conference was held between 3-5 February in Bangalore, India.

¹⁶⁶ Bruce, Steve (1996) *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults*, Oxford University Press

¹⁶⁷ Here he refers to Maclalek and Snow 1993 and Wilson and Dobbelaere 1998

¹⁶⁸ eg, Barker 1984 and Wallis 1977

¹⁶⁹ Order of Christ/ Sophia. This movement, according to Lewis (2006) emerged from an earlier all-female movement, which may explain the current female predominance. Interestingly Lewis predicts that if the OCS had come about differently the female ratio would probably have been closer to the 2/3 seen in for example MSIA.

general pattern of a 2/3 female ratio in the New Age/ NRM milieu can also be observed in Art of Living in a Norwegian context. AoL fits Frisk's generalization of loosely structured guru-centered movements offering much more space for women, and it deals in the practices of therapy and spirituality that Bruce (1996) named as especially attractive for women. There may, according to Frisk (1998), be both sociological and New Age-ideological reasons for a gender division and overrepresentation of women in this field in the West. There seems, however, to be a severe lack of data on gendered participation in NRMs in India, but to a certain extent I assume that some of the same social mechanisms are observable in Art of Living in upscale, urban Bangalore.

Sexual orientation

Fig. 6

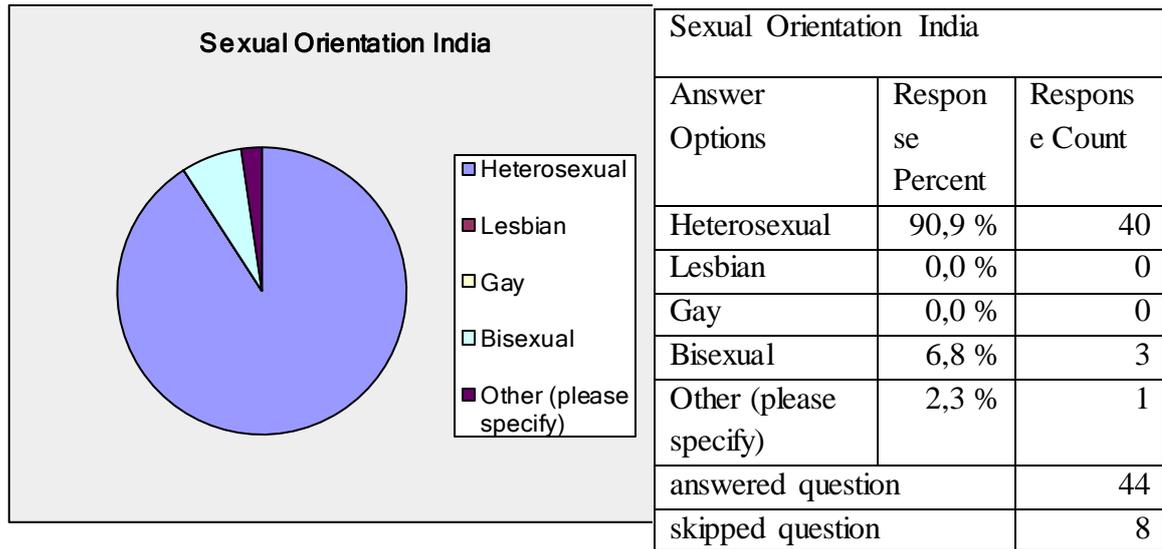
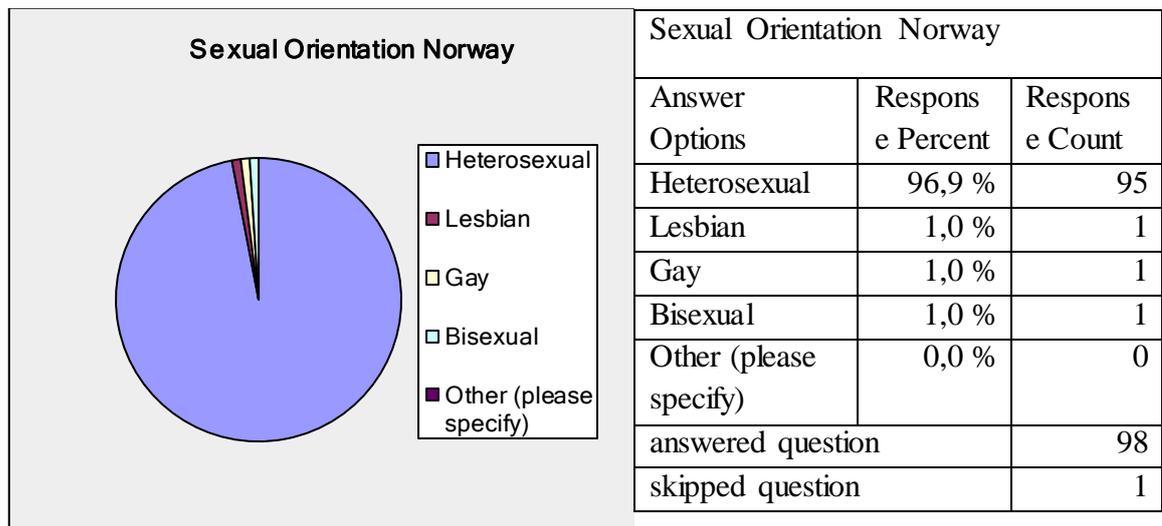


Fig. 7



The figures concerning sexual orientation in the two countries are equally interesting. In India 90.9 % refer to themselves as heterosexual, while 6.8 % are bisexual and 2.3 % (one respondent) stated 'other.'¹⁷⁰ Among the Norwegian respondents 96.9 % state that they are heterosexual, while 1 % is lesbian, 1 % gay and 1 % bisexual (these options were chosen by one respondent each). Thus there is in AoL an overwhelming

¹⁷⁰ In this case I think the specified answer was 'straight.' I am unsure why the respondent chose to answer in this fashion.

prevalence of heterosexuals. Since AoL is a movement with an Indian heritage, I am guessing that homosexuality, at least in India, may be a taboo – or, at most, ‘silently accepted.’ There are some indications of a silent acceptance in the few quotes I have managed to find when keyword-searching the AoL websites. There are few hits concerning sexual orientation. Below are two of the few passages from Q&A sessions with Ravi Shankar I was able to find:

Q: Is homosexuality a sin? Is it possible to change the orientation of a human being by Sadhana and Spiritual Practices?

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar: See, these tendencies come in you because you are made up of both mother and father, a combination of two. Everybody has both male genes and female genes. When male chromosomes are dominating or when female chromosomes are dominating, these tendencies come and go. You don't have to brand yourself about that. It can all change. There is a possibility of those tendencies changing. Know that you are more than just the body. You are a scintillating consciousness, energy. You are sparkling light, and so, identify yourself with that light more.¹⁷¹

Also,

Is homosexuality a disease? Can you please talk about it?

First of all if you think it is a disease, you have already made a mindset. All is a physiological inclination in the mind. These tendencies can always change because everything changes. Some people I meet turn to be homosexual after 40-50 years and there are some people who in the beginning are homosexual but later on they have a family and children. All types of tendencies are there in the world. We shouldn't discriminate anybody because of this tendency. We should love everyone help others to move ahead towards their goal, whatever goal they have set for themselves. You know all needs of body are very little, small. If you are stuck in the needs of body we forget we are something great, something, for which we are born, the need of the spirit, the need of the soul. The spiritual need of everyone needs to be fulfilled. Unfortunately people are stuck in the small needs. Food, entertainment, companionship is what their concern is throughout their life and they forget the real purpose of our life – To connect with the universal self. The real purpose of our life is to connect with the universe.¹⁷²

There seems to be some ambiguity in Shankar's answers, but there is an acceptance that homosexuality exists, and that it is not a 'mortal sin.' However, Shankar focuses on saying that the needs of the body are minor and consciousness and spirituality more important – while taking the quite modern standpoint that “we shouldn't discriminate

¹⁷¹ <http://www.artofliving.org/no-en/logic-can%E2%80%99t-console-emotions-quiet-presence-works> (accessed 09.04.12)

¹⁷² <http://www.artofliving.org/no-en/18-%E2%80%9Cwhen-we-are-upset-it-opportunity-us-know-how-much-have-we-grown-knowledge%E2%80%9D-oct-9th-dresden> (accessed 09.04.12)

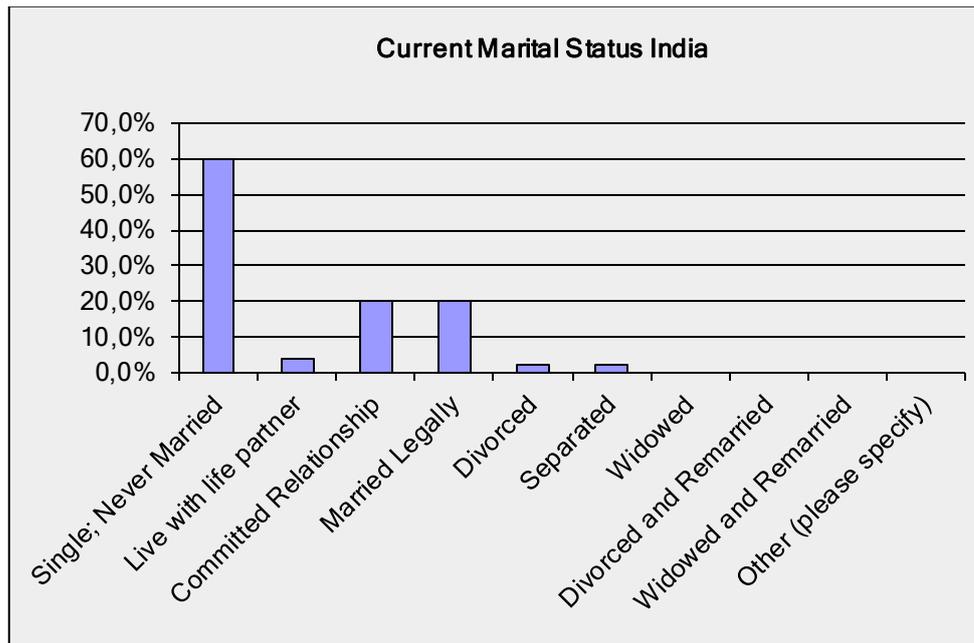
against anybody because of this tendency.” Apart from these few quotes I infer that homosexuality is not an issue that is widely spoken about, and overall AoL teachings are quite heteronormative and focused on ‘family values.’

The situation regarding views on homosexuality may be different in Norway, as it seems to be more socially and culturally accepted. Also, Botvar (2011) states that views on homosexuality in the Norwegian population have changed quite radically in the last twenty years. In 1991, 47 % of the population regarded homosexuality as wrong, but in the 2008 census over 60 % of the population had no problems with homosexuality. I would expect to find the same tolerate attitude in the alternative religiosity milieu – perhaps even stronger. If the self is the ultimate moral authority, judging others is problematic.

Sarah M. Pike notes that “sexual behavior, marriage, and family life in NRMs are shaped by interpretations of part history, sacred texts, current social contexts, and utopian ideals” (2007: 219). Relations vary from celibacy to polygamy and ‘free love.’ Undoubtedly there are celibates within AoL, but for the survey respondents only the last (and undoubtedly most culturally common variant) of Pike’s four-part schema could somewhat suit AoL: “traditional heterosexual marriages but with some variations that diverge from the norm” (2007: 219).

Current marital status and number of children

Fig. 8



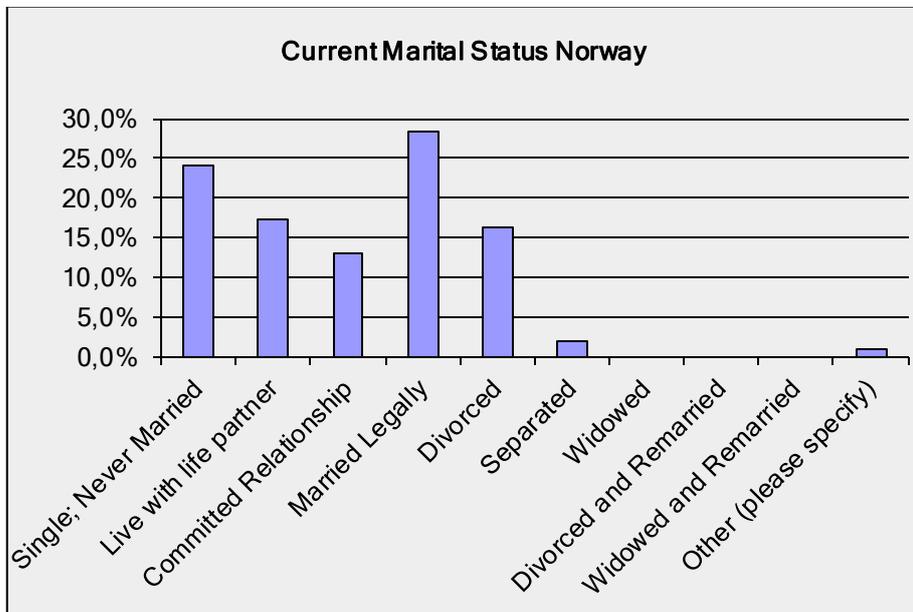
Current Marital Status India		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Single; Never Married	60,0 %	30
Live with life partner	4,0 %	2
Committed Relationship	20,0 %	10
Married Legally	20,0 %	10
Divorced	2,0 %	1
Separated	2,0 %	1
Widowed	0,0 %	0
Divorced and Remarried	0,0 %	0
Widowed and Remarried	0,0 %	0
Other (please specify)	0,0 %	0
answered question		50
skipped question		2

Number of Children, India (please list 0 if you have none and include all your offspring whether minors or adults)			
Answer Options	Response Average	Response Total	Response Count
Children	0,44	19	43
answered question			43
skipped question			9

“I only came here to meet women”

This above quote from one of the survey responses seems to summarize the marital situation for the Indian respondents. 60 % are single and never married – which tallies well with their gender and their predominately young age. The rubrics ‘Committed Relationship’ and ‘Married Legally’ received 20 % responses each; while 4 % live with a life partner.¹⁷³ Two percent are divorced and 2 % are widowed, while none are divorced/widowed and remarried. These low numbers are, again, explainable from the relative youth of the respondents – and possibly also by the traditionally negative view on divorce in Indian society. The young age of Indian practitioners also possibly explains that the response average on the number of children is also as low as 0.44. However, I do anticipate that most of the young Indian respondents will at some point get married – in the fashion of Pike’s ‘traditional’ marriage mentioned above.

Fig. 9



¹⁷³ I would interpret this alternative to mean a homosexual/ lesbian relationship, but I am uncertain whether this interpretation is similar for Indian (or Norwegian) respondents.

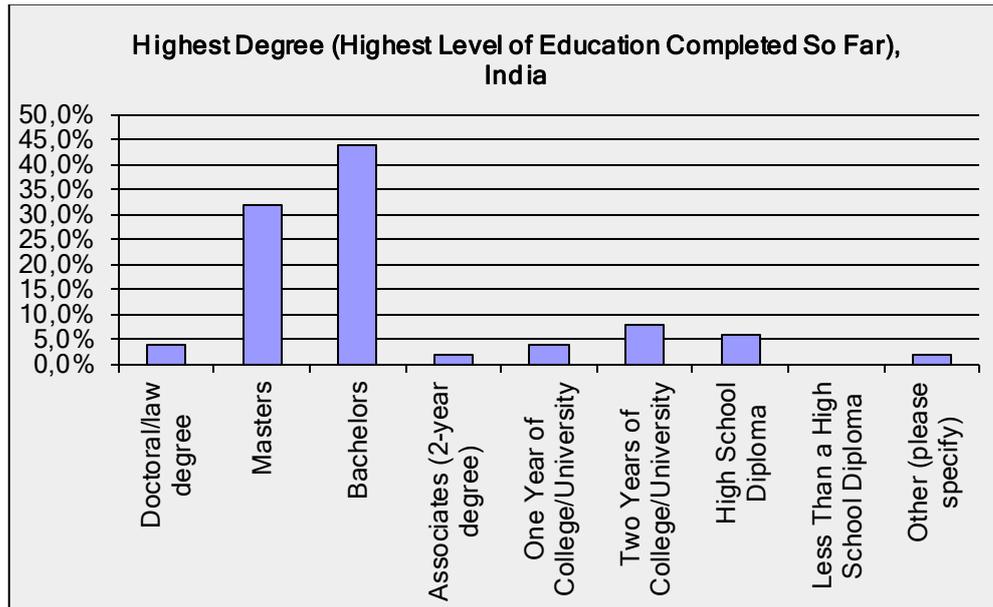
Current Marital Status Norway		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Single; Never Married	24,2 %	24
Live with life partner	17,2 %	17
Committed Relationship	13,1 %	13
Married Legally	28,3 %	28
Divorced	16,2 %	16
Separated	2,0 %	2
Widowed	0,0 %	0
Divorced and Remarried	0,0 %	0
Widowed and Remarried	0,0 %	0
Other (please specify)	1,0 %	1
answered question		99
skipped question		0

The Norwegian respondents' marital situation is quite different from the Indians. More than ten years older than the average Indian respondent they have had more time to settle and to produce offspring. The response average of children is 1.36, and while 24.2 % of the Norwegians are single and never married, all of 58.6 % are either living with a life partner (17.2 %), in a committed relationship (13.1 %) or married legally (28.3 %). Additionally, 16.2 % are divorced, while 2 % are separated. None of the respondents are widowed or divorced/ widowed and remarried.

Number of Children, Norway (please list 0 if you have none and include all your offspring whether minors or adults)			
Answer Options	Response Average	Response Total	Response Count
Children	1,36	133	98
answered question			98
skipped question			1

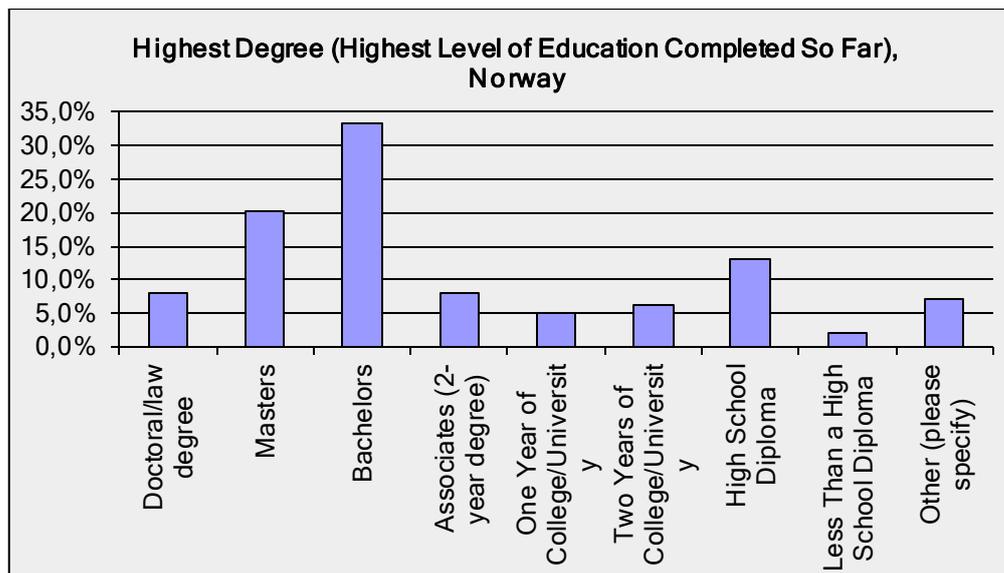
Highest level of education

Fig. 10



Highest Degree (Highest Level of Education Completed So Far), India		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Doctoral/law degree	4,0 %	2
Masters	32,0 %	16
Bachelors	44,0 %	22
Associates (2-year degree)	2,0 %	1
One Year of College/University	4,0 %	2
Two Years of College/University	8,0 %	4
High School Diploma	6,0 %	3
Less Than a High School Diploma	0,0 %	0
Other (please specify)	2,0 %	1
answered question		50
skipped question		2

Fig. 11



Highest Degree (Highest Level of Education Completed So Far), Norway		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Doctoral/law degree	8,1 %	8
Masters	20,2 %	20
Bachelors	33,3 %	33
Associates (2-year degree)	8,1 %	8
One Year of College/University	5,1 %	5
Two Years of College/University	6,1 %	6
High School Diploma	13,1 %	13
Less Than a High School Diploma	2,0 %	2
Other (please specify)	7,1 %	7
answered question		99
skipped question		0

Both Indian and Norwegian respondents are generally well-educated. As the Indian respondents are younger comparatively (as noted below 29.8 % are still students), only 4 % hold a doctoral/law degree, compared to 8.1 % of the Norwegian respondents. However, 32 % of the Indians have completed a Master's degree. 20.2 % of the Norwegian respondents hold a Master's, while 33.3 % have completed a Bachelor

degree. In comparison, 44 % of the Indian respondents have completed a Bachelor. While the other categories of lower-level education have relatively few Indian responses (22 % compiled), the Norwegian responses are more evenly spread: 41.5 % have from an Associate's degree (8.1 %) to less than a High School diploma (2 %). It is interesting to note that none of the Indian respondents hold less than a High School diploma. I believe this coincides with a general stress on a good education in the Indian middle-class, which constitute the majority of participants in AoL India. In this case Norway and India exhibit similar patterns of high levels of education.

Lewis (2006) mentions several studies, especially Dawson (2003), which stress that NRM members are remarkably well-educated – significantly more so than the general public – and (here Dawson refers to Wilson and Dobbelaere 1998) thus are able to understand and familiarize themselves with the often exotic teachings and techniques of NRMs. Frisk has a similar perspective: “The ratio of highly educated on the other hand varies depending on the type of movement: the more complex and intellectually focused the movement, the more highly educated (and the more men) are involved” (1998: 200, my translation). Lewis however, calls these conclusions ‘ultimately not persuasive.’ In his study of the Order of Christ/Sophia he finds that the respondents’ levels of education are startlingly high,¹⁷⁴ only comparable with the Osho (Rajneesh) movement. “In a study of Rajneeshpuram members, Latkin et al. (1987) report 64% held a college degree. In a further random sampling, they “uncovered 24% with a masters degree and 12% with a doctorate of some sort” (Dawson 2003:122)” (Lewis 2006: 95). Thus, compared to the OCS and the Osho movement, I am happy to report that the Art of Living respondents are about as well-educated. It is, however, worth considering if they joined this organization in part because they were well-educated enough to grasp its intricacies, or if there are other factors that may explain the correlation of high levels of education and NRM membership.

As mentioned earlier, I believe that social class is an important factor understanding AoL members. This view is supported by both Dawson (2003), who states that NRM members tend to be part of the privileged sectors of the populace, and by Lewis, who states that NRM members’ “relatively privileged position provided by their class background generally leads to a better education and the resulting

¹⁷⁴ 5 % held a doctorate, 26 % a Masters, 49 % a Bachelors, 14 % some college education, and only 5 % had no college education.

opportunities to consider spiritual alternatives (whether inside or outside of the classroom), as well as more freedom to experiment with these alternatives” (2006: 94). One of the most obvious parameters for social class is annual income.

Annual income

Fig. 12

Annual Income Before Taxes In Local Currency, India			
Answer Options	Response Average	Response Total	Response Count
Income	808 947,37	30 740 000	38
answered question			38
skipped question			14

Fig. 13

Annual Income Before Taxes In Local Currency, Norway			
Answer Options	Response Average	Response Total	Response Count
Income	356 043,96	32 400 000	91
answered question			91
skipped question			8

Both the Indian and the Norwegian respondents earn reasonably good incomes. In an Indian context an annual income before taxes, albeit in the local currency, of a little over 8 lakhs is pretty good. According to this webpage¹⁷⁵ the gross average of Indian salaries is ca. 411.200 INR, which places the AOL responses in a bracket where a comfortable life is possible. The average incomes of Indian respondents seem to coincide well with their education levels; the same website reports a general annual income of approximately 650,000 INR for a software engineer/developer and an average gross salary of approximately 834,309 INR for people holding a Bachelor’s degree. Since the Indian respondents are still young, and many of them are still students, one can predict that their average salary levels will be much higher in the coming years. According to the same website¹⁷⁶ Norwegian average annual income is approximately

¹⁷⁵ <http://www.averagesalariesurvey.com/article/average-salary-in-india/28162105.aspx> (accessed 11.04.12)

¹⁷⁶ <http://www.averagesalariesurvey.com/article/average-salary-in-norway/20061003.aspx> (accessed 11.04.12)

450800 NOK. This number is a bit higher than the response average of the Norwegian AOL practitioners of approximately 356 043, 96 NOK, but does not indicate that the respondents lack in material wealth. According to the data on the website, holders of a Bachelor's degree earn approximately 585,218 NOK in average gross salary.

Lewis reports that for his OCS respondents,¹⁷⁷ “Based on the relatively high average income of respondents, it is reasonable to infer that a substantial proportion are from middle- or upper-middle-class backgrounds” (2006: 94). However, why there is no discrepancy in the salary average from the website data and the Indian respondents, while the Norwegian respondents seem to earn ‘less’ than average, I am unsure. It may, however, have to do with the current primary occupation of the respondents in the different countries, and the average salary levels of the occupations.

Current primary occupation

Fig. 14

Current primary occupation India		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Student	29.8 %	14
Computer Science Professional	10.6 %	5
Editor/ Writer	2.1 %	1
Homemaker	6.4 %	3
Teacher/ Professor	17.0 %	8
Medical Doctor	4.3 %	2
Other Health Professional	2.1 %	1
Administrator/ Manager	6.4 %	3
Self-employed/ Business Owner	8.5 %	4
Social Worker	2.1 %	1
Engineer	8.5 %	8
Travel Attendant	2.1 %	1
Other (reported to be student/ clinical research)	6.4 %	3
Answered question		47
Skipped question		5

¹⁷⁷ Where the average was \$46,000 for individual income

Fig. 15

Current primary occupation Norway		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Student	15.8 %	12
Computer Science Professional	5.3 %	4
Homemaker	1.3 %	1
Teacher/ Professor	10.5 %	8
Artist	2.6 %	2
Counselor/ Therapist/ Psychologist	2.6 %	2
Medical Doctor	1.3 %	1
Registered Nurse	5.3 %	4
Other Health Professional	9.2 %	7
Administrator/ Manager	6.6 %	5
Administrative assistant/ Secretary	5.3 %	4
Sales personnel	1.3 %	1
Self-employed/ Business Owner	13.2 %	10
Librarian/ Archivist	2.6 %	2
Accountant	3.9 %	3
Social Worker	1.3 %	1
Engineer	6.6 %	5
Technician	1.3 %	1
Military	1.3 %	1
Personal Care Worker	2.6 %	2
Other (various)		28
Answered question		76
Skipped question		23

Norwegian respondents had a much broader spectrum of primary occupations than Indian respondents. This is at least partly a function of age, as the Norwegians have been in the job market for much longer. In both groups there were many students, but while 29.8 % of the (relatively young) Indians are still students, only 15.8 % of the Norwegians are still in school (although this makes them the largest occupancy group by a small margin). It is interesting to note that the Indian respondents who are working tend to have 'high-status' occupations, such as Computer Science Professional,

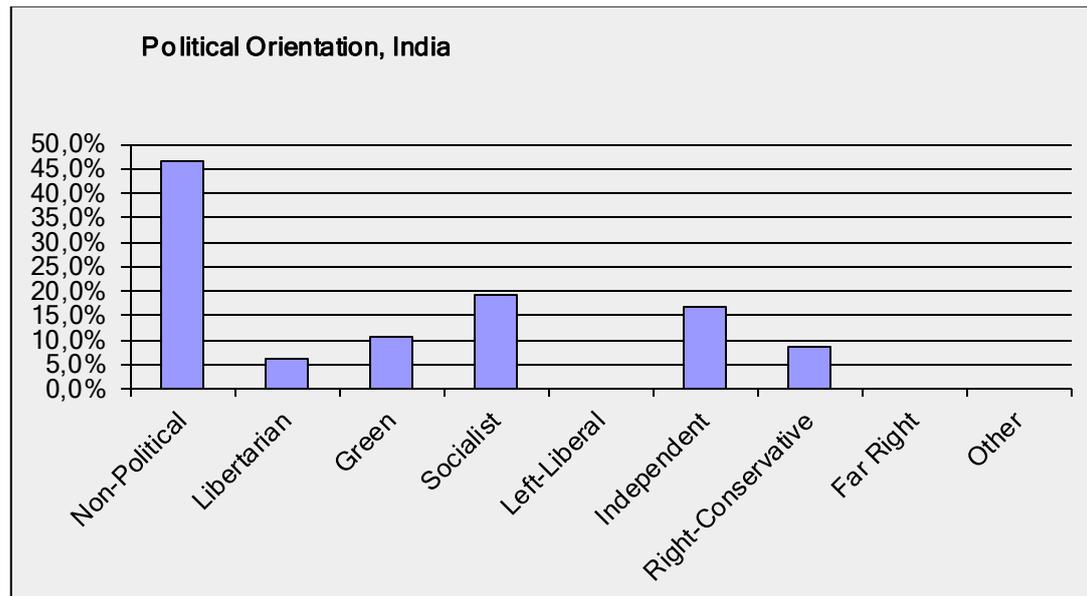
Professor, Engineer and Self-employed/ Business Owner. This may be a function of the fact that 62, 7 % of the Indian respondents were men. The Norwegian respondents, in addition to 'high-status' jobs, have occupations that require other skill sets, such as Artist (2.6 %) and Librarian/ Archivist (2.6 %). Among Norwegian respondents, the 'Other' category was also large. Where in India those who have reported under this heading are students/clinical researchers, in Norway the occupations varied from retired to unemployed, journalist, HR manager and PhD student. 'Other' also encompasses many jobs which should have gone under the 'other health professional' bracket, for example dental technician (1) nutritionist (1), natural medicine/reflexology (1), skin therapist (studying to be a nurse) (1), and physiotherapist (1). That so many of the Norwegian respondents (22.3 %¹⁷⁸) reported being employed in health-related sectors is interesting. However, on the basis of this data, it is difficult to say if there is a correlation between an interest in – and occupation relating to – health/ alternative medicine/ therapy and AoL membership, but there is no doubt that health-related aspects are important for AoL practitioners.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ Compiled numbers; Counselor/ Therapist/ Psychologist, Medical Doctor, Registered Nurse, Other Health Professional, Social Worker, Personal Care Worker. The 'other' bracket is excluded, but the number would be significantly higher if included.

¹⁷⁹ See the discussion in Chapter 4 and 5. Also, Kraft (2011) reports that according to a 2010 census 50 % of Norwegians have utilized some form of alternative medicine/ therapy. Danish censuses report similar numbers, and in Canada the ratio is as high as 70 %. However, the Norwegian census has been criticized for a too-inclusive definition of alternative medicine, making this number too high.

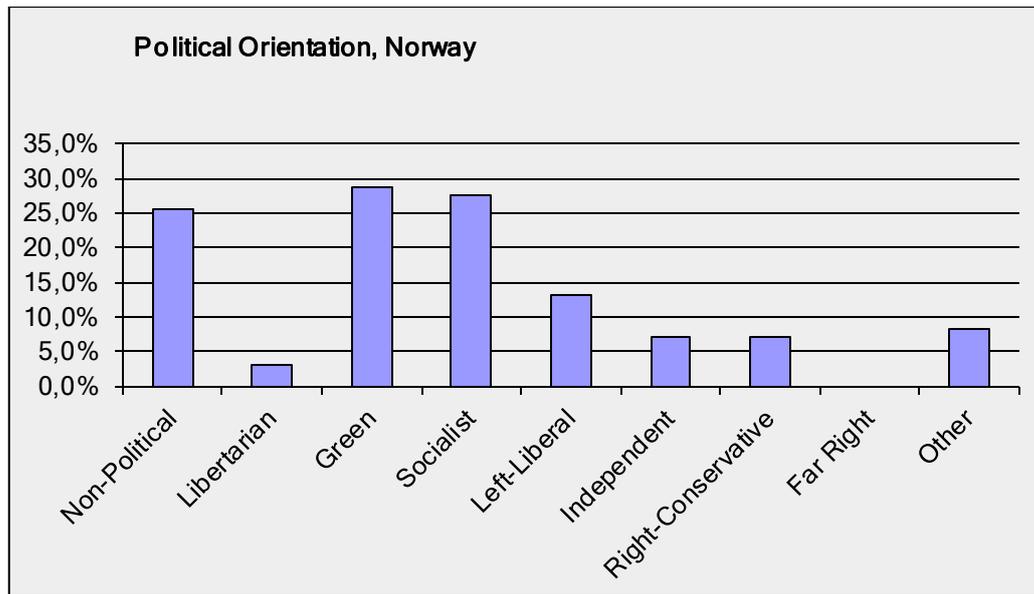
Political orientation and voting

Fig. 16



Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Non-Political	46,8 %	22
Libertarian	6,4 %	3
Green	10,6 %	5
Socialist	19,1 %	9
Left-Liberal	0,0 %	0
Independent	17,0 %	8
Right-Conservative	8,5 %	4
Far Right	0,0 %	0
Other	0,0 %	0
answered question		47
skipped question		5

Fig. 17



Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Non-Political	25,5 %	25
Libertarian	3,1 %	3
Green	28,6 %	28
Socialist	27,6 %	27
Left-Liberal	13,3 %	13
Independent	7,1 %	7
Right-Conservative	7,1 %	7
Far Right	0,0 %	0
Other ¹⁸⁰	8,2 %	8
answered question		98
skipped question		1

Although it is difficult to construct an international set of options for political orientation, it is interesting to see the differences between the AoL practitioners in Norway and in India. First, 46.8 % of Indian respondents said they were non-political, compared to only 25.5 % of Norwegian respondents. The Norwegians are markedly

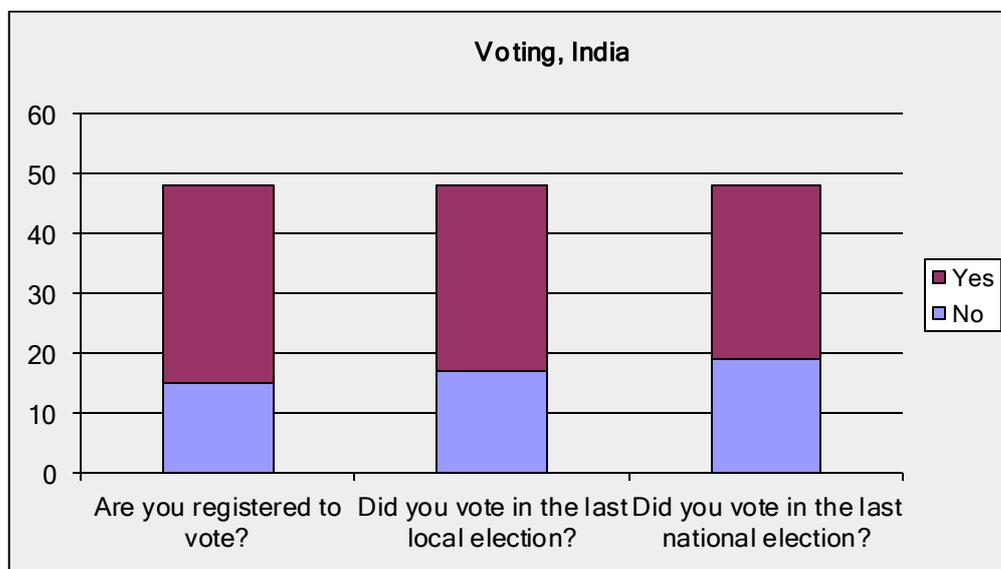
¹⁸⁰ not interested, mainly green, combinations of the above (e.g. green/ socialist)

left-leaning politically; the green, socialist and left-liberal brackets together gain 69.5 % of the AOL practitioners. If the ‘other’ bracket also is included the number rises to 77.7 %. Comparatively, among Norwegian respondents only 17.3 % are independent, libertarian or right-conservative.

The Indian respondents that are politically aligned seem to be a tad more conservative – the ratio is more balanced between the ideological left and right. The green-socialist brackets (no left-liberals) gain 29.7 % of the politically aligned, while 31.9 % are libertarian, independent or right-conservative. It may be somewhat unfair to collapse these categories in this fashion, but it awards a simplified, yet interesting, glance at the political alignments of the AoL respondents in the two countries.

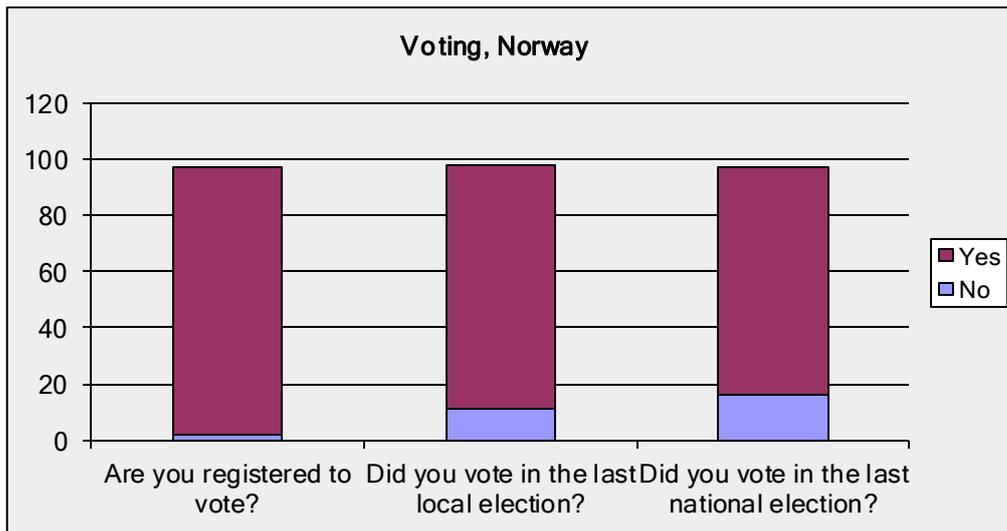
The political orientations – at least the ratios of non-political orientation – also seem to affect the voting ratios of the respondents. Indian respondents have a 46.8 % rate of non-political alignment, but 33 of 48 respondents are registered to vote, 31 of 48 respondents voted in the last local election, and 29 of 48 respondents voted in the last national election. Comparatively, among the more politically-oriented Norwegian respondents (25.5 % are non-politically aligned) 95 out of 97 respondents are registered to vote, 87 of 97 respondents voted in the last local election, and 81 out of 97 voted in the last national election.

Fig. 18



Voting, India			
Answer Options	Yes	No	Response Count
Are you registered to vote?	33	15	48
Did you vote in the last local election?	31	17	48
Did you vote in the last national election?	29	19	48
answered question			48
skipped question			4

Fig. 19



Voting, Norway			
Answer Options	Yes	No	Response Count
Are you registered to vote?	95	2	97
Did you vote in the last local election?	87	11	98
Did you vote in the last national election?	81	16	97
answered question			98
skipped question			1

QUESTIONS CONCERNING *SUDARSHAN KRIYA*

Years of practicing SKY and initial involvement with SKY/AoL

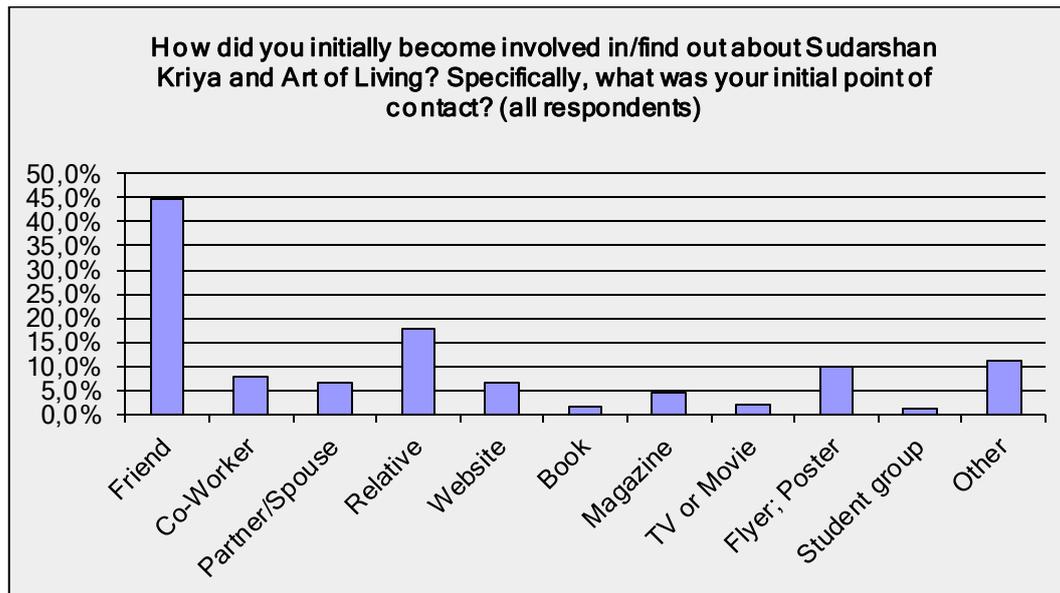
Fig. 20

How many years have you been practicing Sudarshan Kriya?				
Answer Options	Response Average	Response Total	Response Count	Skipped question
Years, all respondents	5,47	1 104	202	9
Years, Indian respondents	4,89	225	46	6
Years, Norwegian respondents	5,96	584	98	1

There is no significant difference in how long respondents have been practicing SKY between the countries. Overall (all respondents) have practiced an average of 5.47 years. The Norwegian respondents have, although they generally are much older than the Indian respondents, practiced an average of 5.96 years, which is only a year more than the average Indian response of 4.98 years.

There may be ground for saying that the modes of initial involvement with AoL have had an impact on the length of SKY practice.

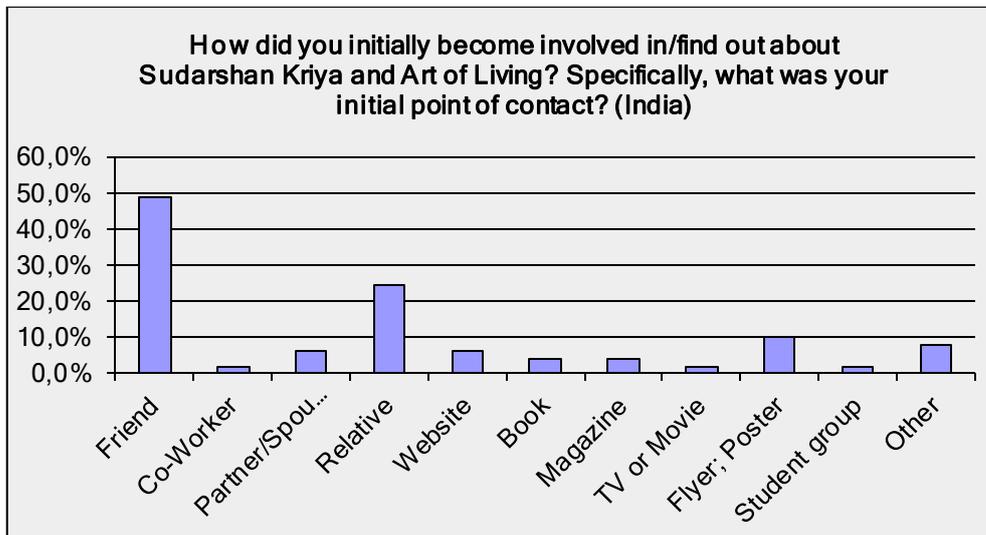
Fig. 21



How did you initially become involved in/find out about Sudarshan Kriya and Art of Living? Specifically, what was your initial point of contact? (all respondents)		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Friend	44,6 %	91
Co-Worker	7,8 %	16
Partner/Spouse	6,4 %	13
Relative	17,6 %	36
Website	6,4 %	13
Book	1,5 %	3
Magazine	4,4 %	9
TV or Movie	2,0 %	4
Flyer; Poster	9,8 %	20
Student group	1,0 %	2
Other	11,3 %	23
answered question		204
skipped question		7

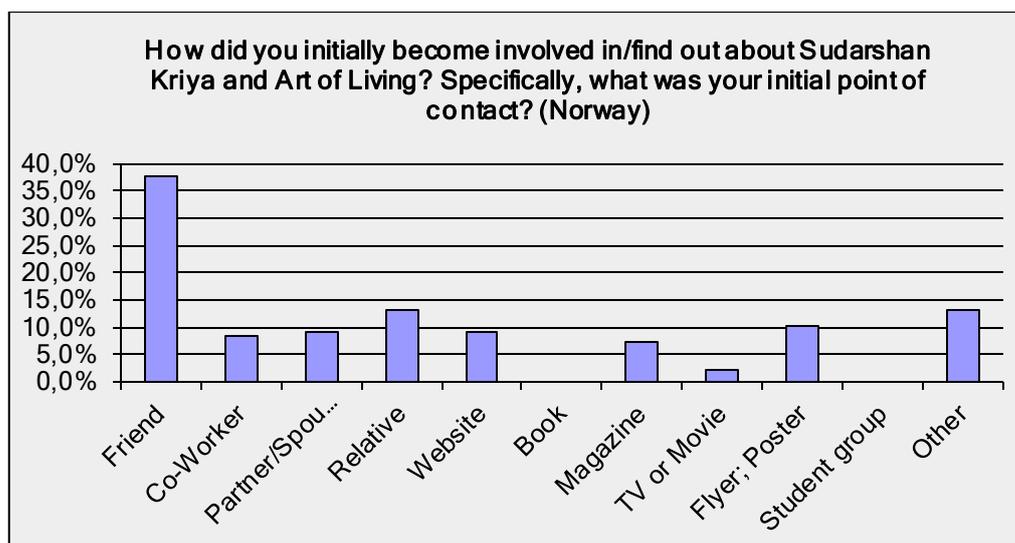
The responses from *all* survey participants show that the single most important factor for becoming involved in AoL is having friends or family already in the movement. If the numbers of friend, co-worker, partner/ spouse and relative are compiled, the numbers of recruitment through a network of family and friends is as high as 76.4 %. Similarly, the same compilations for Indian and Norwegian respondents give percentages of 81.6 % and 68.5 % respectively. Friends seem to be the most important category, with 44.6 % (overall), 49 % (India), and 37.8 % (Norway) response ratio.

Fig. 22



How did you initially become involved in/find out about Sudarshan Kriya and Art of Living? Specifically, what was your initial point of contact? (India)		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Friend	49,0 %	24
Co-Worker	2,0 %	1
Partner/Spouse	6,1 %	3
Relative	24,5 %	12
Website	6,1 %	3
Book	4,1 %	2
Magazine	4,1 %	2
TV or Movie	2,0 %	1
Flyer; Poster	10,2 %	5
Student group	2,0 %	1
Other	8,2 %	4
answered question		49
skipped question		3

Fig. 23



How did you initially become involved in/find out about Sudarshan Kriya and Art of Living? Specifically, what was your initial point of contact? (Norway)		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Friend	37,8 %	37
Co-Worker	8,2 %	8
Partner/Spouse	9,2 %	9
Relative	13,3 %	13
Website	9,2 %	9
Book	0,0 %	0
Magazine	7,1 %	7
TV or Movie	2,0 %	2
Flyer; Poster	10,2 %	10
Student group	0,0 %	0
Other	13,3 %	13
answered question		98
skipped question		1

The AoL data from the survey seems to support a broad view wherein people become ‘converts’ principally through friendship and family networks. Even in responses to the open-ended option “Other,” many of the respondents who answered reported to have been recruited by family or friends, as their written responses clearly show: “Parents introduced me into Art of Living”; “A few of my friends took this program and recommended it to me”; “Cousin”; “Parents”; “My brothers”; or even “My father’s friend’s wife.” Thus, if the same numbers as above include the ‘Other’ bracket we find a 87.7 % (overall), 89.8 % (India), and 81.8 %

(Norway) response ratio.¹⁸¹

The discussion of how individuals become involved with NRMs is long standing. Initially it was sparked by the Lofland-Stark model of conversion (1965), based on data from the early Unification Church – the ‘Moonies.’ Lofland and Stark

¹⁸¹ Give or take some for the few ‘Other’ responses not related to involvement via preexisting family or friends networks.

articulated a seven-step model that would produce what they named a ‘total convert.’¹⁸² The model has been tested time and again, in different contexts that have produced different levels of applicability. However, Dawson proposes (referring to Kox et al.) that the Lofland and Stark model does “not represent so much an integrated and cumulative model of the actual process of conversion as a fairly adequate statement of some of the key ‘conditions’ of conversion” (2003: 118), giving rise to much academic research in the field of conversion. Importantly, Dawson states that there is much empirical support for some of the same mechanisms of conversion that I have found in the AOL survey:

In the first place, studies of conversion and of specific groups have found that recruitment to NRMs happen primarily through pre-existing social networks and interpersonal bonds. Friends recruit friends, family members each other and neighbours recruit neighbours [...] the majority of recruits to the majority of NRMs come into contact with the groups they join because they personally know one or more members of the movement. (2003: 119)

A network of familiarity is also reported by Lewis (2006) as the prime condition of conversion for the members of two of the NRMs he has studied: OCS and MSIA. In OCS he states that (if limited to friends and relatives) 42.9% have been recruited this way, but if the parameters are expanded to include professional contacts and co-workers (as I have done with the AOL data) the percentage rises to 57.2 – more than half of the respondents. Likewise the numbers for MSIA supports Dawson’s proposal of the importance of social networks: comparatively “only 3.6% people who became involved in MSIA did so via impersonal media (Lewis 1997:183)” (Lewis 2006: 98).

Thus, the data gathered from all three organizations in various time frames and contexts looks to be supporting the generalization of modes of conversion based on networks of family and friends, harkening back to Lofland and Stark’s model.

¹⁸² The seven steps are, summarized; tensions in life, a religious problem-solving perspective, self-referral as a religious seeker, a turning point of NRM encounter, affective bonds to other members, reduced extra-cult attachments and intensive interactions with other converts (Dawson 2003: 118).

Concluding Remarks

Lewis states in his OCS paper that he was intrigued by, on the one hand, how much earlier research continued to be applicable to the understanding of a present-day group like the Order of Christ/Sophia, and, on the other hand by “the marked *inapplicability* of other generalizations derived from studies of the youth-oriented new religions of the sixties and seventies” (2006: 101). To summarize, I have similar feelings about Art of Living. The youth crisis model seems, overall, non-applicable to the (tentative) demographic profile of AoL practitioners who instead seemed to be bearers of social, cultural and economic capital: AoL respondents are, regardless of country, well-educated and reasonably well off. Regarding sexuality and marriage they are overwhelmingly heterosexual and, when not unmarried, in traditional heterosexual marriages or partnerships. There are some marked differences: in the Norwegian subsample the greater percentage are female and they are more politically active when contrasted with the Indian subsample. However, regarding SKY, we find similarities. Although the Norwegian subsample is much older than the Indian, they have practiced the technique for a similar length of time. Also, both groups of practitioners were introduced to the AoL movement and to SKY by a network of family or friends.