

My Search for Spiritual Guidance

By Caroline Yabsley

My journey on the spiritual path began when I was a child attending Sunday school at the local Presbyterian church of a small country town in Australia. In my teens I confirmed my faith in Christ in the usual church ritual, and at school attended Christian meetings and camps. At university I took part in prayer meetings in which we took turns at leading the session. At this stage I became cynical about my spiritual experience thus far, as my efforts seemed to be more about showing how clever I was at leading discussions, coming up with meaningful prayers and displaying my knowledge of the Bible in all of this. I knew this wasn't what I was after, so I left it all alone, and felt quite liberated as a result. I decided not to deliberately search for spirituality; it could find me.

I trained as a physiotherapist, married and had two children. As a physiotherapist I wanted to help people in pain. I was dissatisfied with what physiotherapy had to offer in this field so I decided to undertake a training in the Feldenkrais Method, which is a means of gaining self-awareness by learning how to move better. The student is guided through various movements and encouraged to pay attention to sensations that accompany the movements. They learn to discriminate between effective and ineffective movements in terms of what the movement is supposed to achieve. This skill enables them henceforth to correct their own posture and movement patterns, and even find pleasure in movement.

The pain relief from moving better is a definite advantage, and you learn much more about yourself at a deeper level as you explore your own movements. In this way the Feldenkrais Method touches on spirituality as you peel away your habitual movements to discover your own unique way of moving. You also start to think more for yourself, rather than think as you were taught to think. I found it very liberating.

In my mid-thirties, not long after my introduction to the Feldenkrais Method, I had an intense anxiety attack that lasted a week. I remember feeling insecure now that I had two young children to bring up. Despite being in a strong marriage and well provided for, I felt very unsure of my ability to provide for my children and get them to maturity. Soon after commenced a rolling series of crippling depression/anxiety cycles, interspersed with periods of coping, that was to last for more than fifteen years. It has been suggested that the Feldenkrais Method had a role to play in this turn of events. At the time however I refused to hear this, as I was thankful for the liberation that comes with moving more freely and reducing habitual thinking. These days I am more likely to consider that the Feldenkrais Method did contribute, but I am aware of other events earlier in my life that would have also contributed. My current Subud experience would suggest that probably some purification process had been started, but in a rather unbalanced way.

None of the antidepressant medications the doctors tried me on were helpful. However doctors sometimes give inspired suggestions, and I was grateful to the doctor who introduced me to meditation and Buddhism. I did the practice and studied the teachings for five years, first with Theravadin Buddhists from Thailand, then moving on to Dzogchen teachings and practice from Tibet. I attended meditation retreats for ten days at a time. These were wonderful experiences,

very peaceful. Despite this I found it difficult to carry over my meditation experiences into my everyday life. The teachers did emphasise this as being a prime objective of meditating, but it just didn't seem to be happening for me. So the best that meditation did for me was keep a lid on my anxiety a bit. It didn't move me through it. I was very interested in Buddhist philosophy, but I was not very confident in my ability to meditate.

I was introduced to the latihan five years ago. The thing that attracted me to the latihan, was that I didn't have to be good at it. I don't have to "do" the latihan. In fact it seems more that the latihan "does" me. Doubting my skills as I did with meditation simply wasn't relevant, and the less I did, the more full was my experience of the latihan. As the Subud "old hands" say, "you simply have to receive". How true! So I stopped going to meditation classes as the latihan was having a more profound effect on me, although I still find Buddhist teachings and philosophy useful as a guide to living my life.

The latihan has calmed me down. The intensity of the anxiety diminished considerably. The turmoil of purification seems minor in contrast to what I went through before starting the latihan. Interestingly, the Buddhists also talk about purification, as this is supposed to be what happens when you meditate properly. They also warn that the process can be unpleasant at times, but well worth it, as this is how you can "come to know your true face". I remember the lama saying this many times.

I remember a clear "instruction" I received during latihan not long after I started. One of the difficulties I had during the anxiety period was not being able to prioritise the tasks I had to do, so that simple relaxing activities and urgent survival-related activities were grouped together. I often felt caught like a rabbit blinded by headlights, not knowing which way to turn, and afraid of some (imagined) catastrophe headed my way. This is how I had been feeling prior to this particular latihan. The guidance I received very clearly this Sunday morning was to go home and do some sewing. I was very surprised by this, and could easily have dismissed it as my imagination. But I decided to act upon it. I actually had a sewing project I had started five years earlier that remained uncompleted. I went home and for the remainder of that Sunday was engrossed in the task of completing that skirt, and aware of the peace that this focussed concentration was bringing me. I didn't worry about other chores that weren't being completed. I knew I was doing what I was supposed to be doing, because the latihan had guided me to this task. The skirt is now one of my favourite skirts to wear to latihan. And this experience has taught me to simply ask for guidance in my latihan when I'm not sure how to prioritise my activities.

The latihan has given me much more than relief from depression/anxiety. I am grateful for the guidance I am able to receive on how to live my life. There are so many subtle variations in how I feel and experience the latihan. I also seem to know through my latihan when I should rather be consulting my brain, e.g. "You have to do your sums to see if this financial decision is appropriate, not just be guided by feelings." This is very useful in my current position as Treasurer of Subud Sydney. Up until recently I was quite financially illiterate, but now I'm being given the opportunity to learn, while also being spiritually supported. My position as treasurer inspired me to do a short course in bookkeeping. I thought it would be useful to understand the different ways in which money is measured and therefore able to be tracked. Not only can I now have a more intelligent conversation with our Subud bookkeeper, but I also understand the movement of money in my own life a bit better.

And this brings me to another great thing about the latihan. It is practised in the context of this large organisation called Subud, in which there are many opportunities to put into practice the guidance we receive in our latihan. There are many roles to be filled and jobs to be done to enable Subud to do what it sets out to do. And we can participate in these activities with other people who are also being guided by their latihan. I find this a great preparation for following one's guidance while acting in the larger non-Subud world. This is such a good vehicle for integrating your spiritual practice with your everyday life!

Not long after starting the latihan I lost my ability to do the Feldenkrais Method. I found this perplexing. It had been fifteen years since I first became involved with it, and I had been using the Method in my work for ten years. I had always been passionate about the Feldenkrais Method. For me it was the first step on the path of discovering who I really am.

If I look back on this event, I would say that my need to help other people was probably a bit intense and over the top, and the Feldenkrais Method facilitated this intensity. Perhaps the latihan brought this all to a head. So I took a job as a physiotherapist in a public hospital doing more traditional physiotherapy, something I had previously never thought I would do. What's more I became very happy in this job.

A friend recently re-introduced me to meditation, this time using sound technology to get into the meditative states of mind rather than the mind itself. At the time of writing I have been using this system for two months, and the last vestiges of anxiety seem to be leaving me. Sleep is finally becoming reliable, my thinking clearer, and to my delight my latihan is going to greater depths and is less habitual in nature. I think this is because it is becoming easier for me to surrender.

I see the latihan as one of a vast number of spiritual practices available on this planet. Certainly I haven't tried them all, but of those I have tried it seems to encompass a larger part of my life than any other practice. I am very grateful for having been shown this path.