

# EMBODIED LIVES

*Reflections on the Influence of  
Suprpto Suryodarmo and Amerta Movement*



*Edited by: Katya Bloom, Margit Galanter and Sandra Reeve*

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Suprpto Suryodarmo and Amerta Movement

**OPEN ACCESS**

***Chapter 25***

***Moving in the Law***

**Simon Slidders**

Edited by:

Katya Bloom, Margit Galanter and Sandra Reeve

Taken from the book *Embodied Lives*,  
published by:

Triarchy Press  
Axminster  
UK

[info@triarchypress.net](mailto:info@triarchypress.net)

[www.triarchypress.net](http://www.triarchypress.net)

First published in 2014.

Second edition published in 2025.

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-909470-32-3

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## A Balinese Saying

*Ilmu Padi* (a lesson from the rice plant)

*semakin tua semakin berisi, dan semakin merunduk*  
(the older, the fuller, and the more it bows)



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## 25. MOVING IN THE LAW

Simon Slidders (UK)

Every morning, as I come to work, I emerge from Holborn Underground Station, having raised my heart rate by walking up the two escalators (“Please stand on the right,” I growl beneath my breath at the spatial awareness of hapless tourists who have not noticed the Underground rules of movement). I slip through a couple of back alleys and emerge into Lincoln’s Inn Fields. I cross the park in the middle of the square diagonally. The caryatids of Sir John Soane’s Museum are behind me to my left, obscured by trees, the chapel and high walls of Lincoln’s Inn in front of me. I pass a catalpa (Indian bean) tree as I walk along the gravelled paths.

On summer days I cut through the tropical area where, among the ferns, a rotund man, with cigar, brightly coloured braces and mobile phone, occasionally fulfils the role of a tropical bird. I see the sky and sense the trees around me. I hear the crunch of gravel and momentarily feel I am connected to nature (listening and breathing), before I emerge, past a nineteenth-century monumental water trough, to walk down the outside of Lincoln’s Inn to the back entrance to the Royal Courts of Justice. Above me, a statue of Moses (the Lawgiver), atop the central apex of the building, looks down on my approach (Jesus and Solomon are at the front with Alfred the Great).

I enter, past the security guards and metal detector, before turning sharply up a steep set of stone stairs. At the top I swipe my pass into a secure corridor which leads down and up through an Escheresque junction of stone staircases. I slip on through one exit along a wooden covered walkway. From here I can look down into the wood-panelled courts on either side below, where the ushers are slowly arranging the black-robed, bewigged barristers before the judges come in. Soon, I am out into the central office section; up along long

corridors through double doors, swiping my pass and time card to reach my office on the third floor. I burst into my room as I tend to burst into any room, untangle myself from my rucksack, coat and scarf and greet my roommate. My primary movement of the day is complete. When I leave I will not be moving towards law. This is my work place. Here I spend the majority of my waking life.

The left wall is covered with shelves of law books and ends with two Zen calligraphies (one by me and one by my teacher) hanging by drawing pins from the wall, leading to my computer near the window. The window looks out over a paved courtyard to the East Wing in which judges can be seen working in their rooms late into the night, or their clerks bringing them coffee and sandwiches during the day. Judges' clerks and, occasionally, guards with prisoners cross the courtyard beneath.

I am not by nature a sedentary person, but the job involves a lot of working at a computer, phone calls, e-mails and meetings. Yet, as a manager, I take time to make myself visible to my staff in their rooms, which they also each share with one other lawyer. I am constantly in movement, delivering files, messages, consulting with colleagues, etc. I love this forward momentum of movement down straight, clearly defined corridors, the constant pushing and pulling through doors which divide them. Often I go further afield in search of judges in their rooms, finding my way through the labyrinthine passages of this metaphor of the legal system.

The Royal Courts of Justice is a huge complex of buildings, designed to express the majesty of the law, intended to bring visitors closer to an awareness of God as the lawgiver. In this building it is easy to experience law as bowing and praying. Tradition requires that lawyers bow when they enter and leave the court at all times, and all persons in court must rise when judges enter and leave the court. Still, there is also a strong sense in the courts, despite the adversarial system used in English law, that we are here for resolution: to heal, to mend, set right what has gone wrong before and to provide lines of direction for the future.

It is probably no coincidence that I chose or was chosen by a movement practice that has very few rules. I had come to movement work initially as a meditation practice, after my interaction with my own meditation practice had become so rigid that I had pulled myself to a full stop. Indeed, at first, the movement was an attempt to counterbalance my life in the law, as an escape from, or denial of it. A suit and tie seemed like a constriction I was constantly trying

to evade. Suddenly, at the end of a workshop in Assisi in 1997 (four years after I had first met him), Prapto appeared to absorb for the first time the fact that I was a lawyer, and challenged me to apply movement to the idea of law and law to movement. I did not immediately find his statement that “*man is in judgement, woman is in punishment*” that helpful, but it did eventually lead me to think of my experience of law in both the active and receptive sense.

I had become used to sashaying down corridors, giving full value to my movement as I grasped door handles and moved from one area to another, crossing boundaries, contracting, then opening into each new space. I had not previously considered the law in movement terms, nor movement in terms of the law. However, I quickly saw a correlation with the development of law, at least the English legal system, with the loose framework that Prapto gave to his workshops.

For many years when he worked with groups in Europe, Prapto would split us into three groups with the intention that each group work from a different perspective. *Circle* had the theme of *Bowing and Praying*. *Oval* was about *Purification/Healing through Circulation*. *Square* has been variously described as *Creation in Reflection, Unity in Diversity, Human in Society*. What these groups actually mean in movement terms seems to be very fluid and depends on the movement teacher or applicant<sup>1</sup> who is leading the group. However, it is in the dialogue about, and exploration of, the meaning of these terms that we learn something about our movement. For example, I tend to think of Circle as being about my relationship with God/Soul/myself/spiritual sense; Oval as my relationship with body/nature/the other; and Square as my relationship with society and performance. Or even more simply: Circle as temple; Oval as home; and Square as stage.

When working in Avebury with Prapto as applicants (with Kristina Bourdillon and Keith Miller) we have variously described the three terms as meaning: opening to the ancestral spirit of the land – exploring ritual in the environment (Circle); opening to our body nature in circulation with the land (Oval); and opening to cultural dialogue with each other and the land (Square). These terms are always merely an entry point, a key not the door or the room. It

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<sup>1</sup> Prapto describes the students whom he asks to lead groups as *applicants*, because he expects them to set the content of the group by ‘applying’ what they do in their daily life to their movement practice and vice versa, e.g. an applicant performer might wish to explore movement in performance, and/or how our sense of performance affects our movement.

is often the quality of not knowing that enables us to start to move most freely. Nevertheless, I found myself trying to introduce these to my idea of law.

Law in society has often seemed to me to start (in patriarchal societies at least) with the idea of law being handed down from above: law as bowing and praying to a God above, whose laws we obey as an act of worship. At the same time, in the receptive sense, there are the laws of Nature like gravity, a physical phenomenon which expresses that indeed things must always come to the earth, and that from the earth there is always movement up and out. This for me is connected to movement in Circle, but also to movement in awareness of the vertical, the connection between earth and sky and the sense of oneself as a puppet of God, examining angle and proportion with our joints as we see how we connect to this line. This is taking movement back to the basic sense of the skeleton, down to the bone of things.

Then, in England there was the development of the common law. This is an amorphous human body of law that grew out of past experience and listening to the heart or conscience, feeling for what was right rather than looking to an external God. I therefore see this as law being practised in Oval. I tend to think of Oval as being an exploration of bringing the past into the present. It looks at our tendency to be behind the moment as opposed to being in the moment (and thereby in our bodies). It is often my feelings resulting from past wrongs done to me or by me and my inability to express and let go of these feelings through my body that hold me back from being in the present. My meditation teacher used to say, "Judgement comes from experience. Experience comes from bad judgements". It is only in movement that I have come to understand the importance of the 'experience' of those judgements in my body.

Eventually common law is codified or developed into legislation – statute law – whereby Government attempts to impose structure on society from the outside. This is based on thinking ahead, towards the future in clear lines, imposing boundaries, channelling society in a forward direction, and at the same time giving society a skin. It deals with the diversity of society in general rather than the individual (thankfully it is humanised by judicial interpretation in each case).

Square is about unity in diversity. As much as law tends to complexity, it is also looking for a unifying element. This leads to a desire for a distillation of the law into an ideal (an expression of the

divine for the non-religious), a fundamental Bill of Rights, such as the European Charter of Human Rights. It seems that humanity is trying to create its own Ten Commandments based on a humanistic philosophy rather than theology. It is almost as if we are back in Circle again!

Did these concepts of movement applied to my idea of law affect my practice of it as a lawyer? In the everyday, it is difficult to see how they could. They did make me more conscious of the way people use the legal process to express and ultimately find their own pace of movement through pain and experience – something I had been aware of during my days as a divorce lawyer. Then I had slowly come to realise that the inbuilt delays in the system acted as a holding structure for the painful process of separation. So I am aware of the need for law to find its own pace and movement, for there to be both irrigation and clear decision-making.

In my movement practice, I try to work both with my sense of my body in relation to its own proportions and angles – e.g. the sense of the space between my horizontally bent arm and my chest, the way my hand curves in naturally towards my sternum – and with the sense of my body in relationship to other objects, living or inanimate, in the space, and the boundaries of the space itself. To this extent my movement practice is a celebration of the constantly shifting awareness of patterns of relationship that we have with our body and the environment around it. From these points of view I can also see law as offering both boundaries and channels for movement. When seen from this perspective, law becomes then not so much a restriction, but instead an access through the maze of life, always finding that ultimately the way in is the way out. In these constellations, the law does not bind but acts as a reference point for action.

When I considered what ‘laws’ govern the development of my personal movement, the paradigm that came to mind was the Walt Disney film adaptation of Pinocchio by Collodi. Pinocchio makes a similar journey from wood (a skeleton operated by divine strings over which he has no control, subject to wherever gravity takes him), to the acquiring of experience in muscle and flesh (including learning about his animal nature as a donkey!), before developing his own integrated conscience to give his life direction. In movement, in arriving in the space I explore the up and down, the strings, and the floor. I move into the horizontal, feeling more into the flow of my

muscles, celebrating the way they wrap around my limbs, following the sense of embrace, the space that my proportion creates, not so much seen as felt and supported, inhabiting the sensual world. It is only when we have humanised ourselves by really feeling the flesh of our bodies that we can then move on to a structure that incorporates both bone and flesh, to place ourselves in society, the space to say “here I am!”

While I have already said that law can be as much about the awareness of the transcendent and experience, I have found increasingly that I am concerned with boundaries, the edges of rooms, understanding what encloses, delimits and supports spaces, the lines and senses of directions in space. I realise how comforting boundaries can be, enclosing to protect and separate us from the other.

In the office, with the very many passages and doors I go through, I find that it is at these points of transition from one space to another that I become most aware of my body. I see my hand as it pushes against a swing door or grabs the handle. At that moment I feel my attention focusing, bringing my awareness of my body to a point. Then as I come into the new space my awareness expands, my awareness both of my body and the space around me. Exits and entrances continue to interest me both internally and externally. Once, having been asked to work in Square, I tried to work with the structure of the heart, that most fluid of organs. I found myself focusing on the exits and entrances, the valves.

Prapto for a time abandoned the use of Circle, Oval and Square, and asked his applicants to just work from their own experience. This was always implicit in the way he asked applicants to work. However, I had treated the comforting structures of Circle, Oval and Square as my Body of Law, and so to start from just my own practice was both alarming and liberating.

When I first started movement, I was often anxious to get it right, to be doing what the teacher wanted, worried that I was not doing the right thing. It was only gradually that I began to realise that my greatest anxiety was when I was about to do (or doing) something that was outside my own comfort zone, that was outside *my* rulebook. It really had nothing to do with the teacher as lawmaker or judge, but about stepping into the unknown. All these references to laws are ultimately only starting points, and it is when I start to move in areas where I do not know what the rules are that I feel that I am really beginning to stretch my boundaries.

Laws are mutable, changing in intention and approach, as the emphasis shifts, from feeling the lines (the boundaries) to feeling the movement of the body in the substance of what is enclosed – the flesh and blood of the law.

There are always my basic reference points or rules I can rely upon if I really get lost of course: “*receive my condition*”, “*mind my own business*”, “*give value to my movement*”, and “*be awake in the space*”, but there are no laws stopping me from moving, and I aspire to law being integrated into my body.

As to man in judgement and woman in punishment, I struggled with this as some sort of law handed down from the teacher, but as I understand it, Prapto does not see his role as a lawgiver at all, only as a seed planter. I prefer to interpret that seed as: ‘judgement being active and punishment being receptive’. To me, judgement is more directional, the laying down of the law, imposing, cutting through confusion (more Square). This is not to say that it is only two-dimensional. By creating lines or structures in space, there is inevitably space in and around them. Punishment can of course be active, but in this context I interpret it as more akin to suffering the consequences of judgement rather than the implementation of it. It is the containment I experience in those created spaces – in the consequences of the acts of judgement. In giving life by irrigation and ventilation to those spaces I am acting in a more Oval manner. Sometimes I confuse the two. Often I seek to impose punishment on myself, or move from an enduring sense of guilt from the past, assuming a particular quality of space, before I have checked the boundaries that have been laid down by the act of judgement in the present and what capacity they give for change. This also extends to my relationship with others in the space and my relationship with the environment. The terms judgement and punishment are intimately linked, but it is good to continually review their relationship.

Law, it seems to me, is not just about an analytical process, but also about understanding our spiritual/moral landscape and feeling our emotional landscape. In writing this chapter, I have felt constrained by a need to keep to the subject matter, to the rules, and have found myself constricted by that idea. I realise now that this is only a regression to the idea of law as being separate from myself. In fact, it is only by releasing myself from that idea of keeping to the rules that I can see how clearly they support me, that it is only my position that restricts and not the web of the law. I should not attempt to see the law as two-dimensional, but rather as living in

multiple dimensions, a breathing organism, as “*moving in living measurement*”. I am walking through it as if walking through a garden, which is changing with the seasons.

Perhaps this is also an expression of my essential Englishness. England is a country of constantly changing weather, which to a city liver, like myself, who gave up geography as a subject when I was 13, appears to operate under no rules at all. I love to move in nature and feel its strength and majesty, but am often most at home in an English country garden, such as that at Michaelchurch (a country house itself situated in a border area, between England and Wales). It is there where much of the movement work I have done with Prapto has taken place. The interconnected gardens, a series of walls and hedges in terraced layers, permit varieties of movement and yet give views out into the distance and to the dark wood beyond that comfort and support me. In this environment, I can allow myself to breathe fully, feeling that nature around me is giving me both sufficient space and structure to remain in my body and yet to take it out for a cleaning and feel renewed. A sense of order brings me peace. A sense of communion with natural law rather than obedience to it. At this point service really does feel like perfect freedom.

*Some of the ideas expressed here were first mentioned in a short piece for Impressions – the Sharing Movement magazine edited by Beate Stühm.*

*None of the ideas expressed here is intended to represent the opinions or views of Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service or the Ministry of Justice.*

~ ~ ~

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