

Foundation of Higher Learning 'guru' Imre Vallyon's followers kept in the dark about his past

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All around the world, Imre Vallyon's devoted followers bring their children to bask in his aura.

But it is in his lush subtropical gardens at Waitetuna Retreat near Raglan, a coastal settlement west of Hamilton, known for its surf culture and natural-living communities, that Vallyon - "The Teacher" - forms the nucleus of the Foundation of Higher Learning, a spiritual group he established 35 years ago. His followers pay thousands to hear his esoteric teachings at his worldwide retreats - from New Zealand to the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Australia, Canada, and his native Hungary.

Together, FHL devotees are trying to "bring light into the world," says former follower, Peter*.

If Vallyon's followers cannot receive his teachings in person, they can purchase one of his many books, and recordings. Or he can beam direct into their homes to share his wisdom over the Internet.

Vallyon's vision: a patchwork of east and western philosophies: Yoga, Zen, Sufism, Catholicism, Mysticism and more - has gained thousands of followers around the world.

But what Vallyon does not enlighten his followers about is the time he sexually molested a young New Zealand girl who went to him seeking spiritual advice about a dead relative.

It was whispers of this secret part of Vallyon's past that prompted Peter and his partner to leave the group.

Stuff has agreed not to reveal their identities, as they are still connected to a European chapter and fear Vallyon's followers could cut contact with them. They were unable to find any details of his convictions and contacted the media after they saw a photo of one of his retreats and noticed young children among the attendees.

Allegations about Vallyon stem back to the 1970s
- spanning Hamilton, Auckland and Canada.

AN OPAQUE PAST

A 1998 sentencing report details the sexual abuse carried out by Vallyon on one young girl at one of his "institutions" a decade earlier.

Vallyon was convicted of four representative counts of indecent assault and one count of sexually violating the girl.

The sentencing report was released by Hamilton District Court Judge David Wilson QC.

Vallyon's encounters with his victim happened in one-on-one spiritual

"teaching" sessions. The girl had travelled with her mother, a devoted follower of his, to an "institution" - not named in the report - where Vallyon was the recognised spiritual leader.

Judge R.P. Wolff's sentencing notes record that the child had gone to him alone for spiritual guidance about her dead family member.

"In the guise of assisting her with self discovery or self awareness," Vallyon kissed the girl and lay on top of her on a bed.

During the time the girl remained at the institution, Vallyon indecently touched her, kissed and massaged her sexually, and on one occasion performed oral sex on her, the sentencing notes say.

Vallyon's lawyer produced 80 references from people who said he positively influenced their lives.

That side of Vallyon's character was not revealed to many people he had influenced, Wolff remarked as he sentenced him to three years' imprisonment: "This is something that a lot of people did not see."

The sentencing notes record that Vallyon did not recall the encounters.

However Judge Wolff said a cynic might take the view Vallyon's was: "a selective memory" - noting the guru appeared to remember some offending of a sexual nature in Canada. That crime was not outlined, except to say it was "not too far removed from this time".

The Judge also noted Vallyon had a history of crimes of a similar nature from 1978 - "and no one has been able to assist me with the details as to the extent of that, or really anything too much about that at all".

Vallyon had offered money to his victim, who had not asked for it - and Judge Wolff remarked he could not escape the impression: "in some senses this is an offer to make it all go away".

At the time, Vallyon refused to accept he needed rehabilitation. There was a video that captured the guru expressing views that he did not think it inappropriate to progress young girls from spiritual to sexual teaching, the judge noted as he sentenced Vallyon to three years' jail.

"You abused the trust of a particular vulnerable young child, possibly with a vulnerable mother as well. In the guise of spiritual advancement you embarked on a course of conduct over weeks involving sexual abuse, and severe sexual abuse... for your own gratification."

"I KISSED HER... THAT WAS IT"

Waitetuna Retreat is based in a quiet valley near Raglan, at the end of a long metal road. There are beautiful gardens and native bush with buildings dotted around them, including a dining facility and an office block.

A woman greets us, but says Vallyon is not available without an appointment. Told that it's important, she gets the guru on the phone. "What's this about?," he asks.

His conviction for child sex offending. "That's ages ago," Vallyon complains. Eventually he agrees to meet, and we ask the woman if she knows about Vallyon's conviction: "Yes, but it wasn't the truth."

Another older woman who says she's visiting from Hungary looks stunned when told of the offending.

Eventually Vallyon, a stooped elderly man, emerges from a path that leads to his home in the bush above the retreat.

"I don't understand why this is coming up now," he says. "I've been in jail and it's finished and that was the end of it. I haven't heard from [the victim] or anybody ever since then."

He says the accusations against him were "exaggerated".

"There was nothing what we call serious."

So what did he do?

"I kissed her here," he says, pointing to his cheek. "That was it. She had a good lawyer and they made it into a very big case," he continues.

"I am not innocent, I did kiss her. I suppose it was wrong, yes definitely. I pleaded guilty because of my lawyer, he wasn't very good."

Vallyon's lawyer was a Queen's Counsel, John Haigh, who died in 2012.

"At that time it was really difficult to defend anything because there's a kind of a hysteria about it and... the atmosphere at that time was you had to be guilty no matter what. It was hysteria in those days."

Judge Wolff's sentencing notes made express reference to the infamous Centrepoint community, but drew no parallels between the two.

Vallyon strongly denied there had been any other allegations against him.

He said he did not tell his clients about his conviction because it was not relevant.

"It's not of any interest, there's nothing happening in that kind of energy. The teaching is very abstract it's nothing physical, nothing to do with men and women, it's just purely meditation."

He said if children came to the retreat, he did not know about it.

"This is not a children's place. If they come I don't know, I don't see them because I live upstairs, I give my talks and that's it."

WHAT IS THE FOUNDATION FOR HIGHER LEARNING?

At Waitetuna, there is a set of swings, and a trampoline.

In photos of his 2016 European and New Zealand retreats, dozens of children are visible.

Peter,* a longtime practitioner of meditation, had met Vallyon at one of the European retreats. Introduced to Vallyon as a "guru", he had felt warmth in the embrace of the movement.

"During my first year I felt like I was 'coming home'."

Vallyon's website biography explains he was born with cosmic consciousness. He emigrated from Hungary to New Zealand at age 16, in the 1950s, and by 1982 had established FHL, purchasing the Waitetuna land in 1986.

"From a young age," the bio says; "he has had inner revelations that gave him insights into other levels of consciousness, and the deeper dimensions of our human existence."

His followers credit him with predicting the February 2011

Christchurch earthquake two days before it occurred. In that talk,

Vallyon explains over an hour the cosmic machinations spurring the earth's turmoil, before his followers intone for 25 minutes, to a rhythmic drumbeat and soaring strings.

Peter says the retreats entailed chanting, meditation and talks by Vallyon,

who would travel over from New Zealand in the Europe summertime, attracting hordes of followers.

At first, Peter saw the group as "new age".

He recalls asking why Vallyon, who seemed to him to have a successful degree of fame, had not gone "international".

He grew concerned about what kind of group Vallyon was running - noticing the strange blend of Latin and Sanskrit chants, the "hodgepodge" of religions - and the rumours trickling in about the guru.

When he discussed this with his partner he was told there was talk Vallyon had been jailed before - maybe in New Zealand or Australia.

"It was not exactly clear... what was the exact reason for this, so we decided to ask around to clear this up."

But no one could tell them much more - "except that there was a family that left the group and they accused Imre of indecent behaviour towards their female child".

Peter tried to raise this with other followers - "most are very friendly and loving people that do not intend to harm others" - but was troubled by the responses. Any rumours about Vallyon were said to be a "past life" or the work of "evil forces" that wanted to destroy the group, Peter claims.

"I quickly started feeling strange about all of this."

One day a former group member visited Peter's partner, hearing they had left the group, and told them the rumours about Vallyon were true.

In early 2016, Peter saw the photos of another retreat in Europe. Young children's faces stuck out at him starkly from the grinning crowd shots. He could not find any information online or in his own country's records of Vallyon's past.

Troubled, and unable to let it go, Peter turned his mind to the guru's home, isolated isles across the world he had never visited before, and looked for a journalist.

A TOUR THROUGH THE ARCHIVES

Vallyon's past is almost invisible to whoever wants to know.

He is believed to have seen the District Prisons Board in 2000 then left prison on April 19 of that year.

Its archives are managed by the Department of Corrections - which declined an Official Information Act application to view Vallyon's records - citing privacy.

Without a date and location of court in which the charges are heard, it is difficult to apply to access his archived records.

Unable to find any media coverage of his case, *Stuff* requested access to his trial records in February 2016.

Judge Wilson signed off the release of Vallyon's 1998 sentencing report four months later. Access to all the trial notes would have required the newspaper making an application to Vallyon himself.

More charges exist from 1978 - details held by the North Shore District Court.

A representative said the files detailing the case would have been destroyed - except for the official charging documents.

After a ten-month delay the court staff said the application for the charging documents had not been passed on when staff-members turned over.

It began processing the request again in December after the newspaper requested it be expedited. However it was not ready by time of print.

Like many historic sex offenders, Vallyon's crimes took place long before the expository power of the internet - which immortalises the crimes of his counterparts convicted today.

His Wikipedia page reveals attempts to edit his history - one edit saying Vallyon had been tried and sentenced for "paedophilia" was made from an IP address located in Switzerland. But it was removed by Wikipedia's editing community, which requires references for such allegations.

Peter felt "betrayed" to learn the "guru" had kept a secret past hidden from his followers, who looked to him guidance to living a pure life.

"Had I known this from the start, I would not have joined this group. My feelings started to grow stronger by seeing that Imre was being worshipped like some kind of god by many, but not all, members of the group. I highly resented that practice."

Vallyon's followers seem "brainwashed" to Peter. "Group members are so convinced that he is an enlightened being that they will not accept the real truth."

"They just all close their eyes."

The FHL is registered in New Zealand as a charity called Temple Light Trust, which, as a religious organisation means it is exempt from paying taxes. Vallyon and his wife are two of its four trustees.

The trust declared an income of \$331,957 this past financial year, with \$264,323 earned from holding retreats.

**Not his real name*

Do you know more? Email talia.shadwell@fairfaxmedia.co.nz

**Comments are closed*

- Sunday Star Times

<http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/89635618/Foundation-of-Higher-Learning-guru-Imre-Vallyons-followers-kept-in-the-dark-about-his-past>