

Reading Bapak's Talks

By Andrew Hall

My first two years in Subud were quiet and tentative on the outside while I was discovering the mystery of the latihan. After five years, I began to discover the wonder of testing. The experience so impressed me that I felt moved to learn more by reading Bapak, and I also began coming early to latihan once a week for a tape session. The men sat on the floor and listened to a series of tape cassette recordings of Bapak, interspersed with English summaries by Sharif Horthy.

Reading the talks, I suppose I applied what I then knew about how to read the Bible. Try to be quiet and let it touch the heart. Try to stop and be aware of how I am feeling. How is this text touching me? Does it strike any chords within me? This is key. Is it opening me up? Is it filling me with gratitude? Does it help make me feel touched by divine grace?

Some of what I find in Bapak's talks can have an impact on me just as profound as the Bible. When Bapak tells his audience to pray for a heart as wide as the ocean, I feel this deeply.

I also experience a whole range of other feelings when reading the Bible; some parts do move me—a lot; some parts do nothing for me; and some parts repel me. And I thought the same thing would happen with Bapak's talks.

I would sometimes wonder what listening to the audio recordings of Bapak did for those men who had known Bapak. Did listening to his voice on tape bring back other memories? I have talked with members who were enormously impacted by Bapak, who often had the experience in his presence that Bapak was talking directly to them.

Not that the men ever seemed to talk about the content of what they heard on the tapes. These weekly tape sessions were in accord with what Brodjo, one of Bapak's original Indonesian helpers, said in the preface to the original *Advice and Guidance to Helpers* about how to approach Bapak's talks:

[T]he greatest benefit from Bapak's wise advice and guidance is got by reading and accepting it peacefully and in tranquillity, letting its wisdom soak into us, so that when the need arrives the answer is there within us, flavored with our own personalities....

How Bapak's Words Became Suspect

My disillusionment began in 2003. This happened after Subud groups in Canada held discussions about whether a non-discrimination clause should be added to the preamble to Subud Canada's bylaws. The proposed bylaw language is fairly standard in Canada, the same as used in the Canadian constitution, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. The debate in my own Subud group focused on homosexuality, and especially what Bapak said or felt about homosexuality.

In the end, my group voted down the proposed non-discrimination clause. Several members were certain that homosexuality was not okay and was not approved of in Subud. We did know that Bapak had opened homosexuals, but one member excused this by saying the people were not practising homosexuals.

I felt a terrific disappointment after this group meeting. Discrimination against

homosexuality had been part of my own upbringing and I was shocked to find out that some Subud members held similar attitudes.

A few weeks after that, a member from another Subud group showed me a book that included Bapak's answers to questions after the Subud World Congress in Briarcliff in 1963. Bapak's response to a question about homosexuality took more than a page. To me, the answer that Bapak gave painted a very crude stereotype of homosexuals as sexually promiscuous. I felt the words lacked compassion.

Turning to the member who was showing me the book, I told him that I disagreed with Bapak and I felt that Bapak was wrong.

Looking at this text now, I feel that Bapak's language is so judgemental, so black and white, that it could comfort those Subud members who hold homophobic prejudices.

Here's what Bapak says about homosexuality elsewhere, in *Pewarta Kedjiwaan Subud*, Replies to Member's Question, Volume 5, #157

Your habit of being a homosexual is actually a habit and conduct which violates the Will of God. For this reason, if someone behaves in this way he is classed as a sinner. This is how it is. So you should really and truly feel about this matter, and since you have been able to receive and practice the latihan kedjiwaan you should prevent the urge of the passions which want to do this, and turn your inner-feeling to the Power of Almighty God with trust and sincerity, so that your inner-self will be protected from the influence of these bad forces. That is all, and Bapak prays that you will be able to carry out what Bapak has said above. (V/5/157)

I no longer wince when I read this, and the outrage and anger that I felt when I first encountered it is gone.

But I wonder, is it possible for a group that calls itself a spiritual brotherhood to stand against prejudice and decide to disavow these words of its founder—Bapak?

What to Believe and What to Ignore

Since I declared four years ago that Bapak was wrong about homosexuality, I no longer read his talks. I wonder: If he can be so wrong about homosexuals, how do I feel about other statements by Bapak that I find challenging or confusing?

I recently heard that some of the young women in another Canadian Subud group are finding testing sessions with two women helpers to be wonderfully exciting and fulfilling. It has enriched their Subud lives and inspired them so much, I am told, that some have decided to start reading Bapak's talks. Hearing this, I wonder, will they eventually encounter a similar disillusionment?

The official Subud world strongly promotes Bapak's talks. Here is a quote from a talk that Ibu Rahayu gave last year in Tokyo (15 August 2006):

Bapak's talks are the sole source of guidance that can explain what the latihan is. It is not enough just to do the latihan.... Some members think that it is enough just to go to latihan. They think they do not need to listen to or to read Bapak's talks, and so they do not have a good understanding about the process of the latihan.... [I]f you keep reading the talks, in the end you will not read them in the way you read a newspaper, the talks will touch your feelings. By reading them you will become better prepared and you will come to understand what used to puzzle you. So I encourage you to read Bapak's talks; it is very important. You will get the guidance you need for the latihan by reading Bapak's

talks, because we do not have a holy book like the Koran or the Bible in Subud....

(In the interest of space, I have omitted a few sentences from this excerpt but I have not altered the meaning or misrepresented Ibu Rahayu. Readers can easily check for themselves at www.subudlibrary.net)

Reading or hearing such statements, I used to wonder, am I doing something wrong? Not trying hard enough? Am I still using my mind and unable to let go? I'm certainly some distance from the attitude that Ibu Rahayu might consider correct.

The common advice in Subud would be to turn off my critical faculties and feel mellow, to follow Brodjo's advice that I quoted earlier and not use my mind when reading the talks.

If I contemplate a picture or a piece of text or mantra (for example, a scene of Christ healing a leper or a line of prayer like "Thy Will be done"), then my mind can eventually find quiet and let whatever associations come that arise from my subconscious or from elsewhere. But I can't do this when reading.

Language is symbolic and full of associations. Reading words on a page may seem automatic, but unless I consciously try to avoid understanding it—which I can only do for very brief periods, sometimes by paying attention to the phonetic sounds—my brain is always engaged in making sense of what I read. I really don't understand how reading can be otherwise or anything else.

Brodjo's advice about how best to benefit from Bapak's talks, to stay in a very mellow, tranquil and uncritical state, this seems to have also become a Subud stricture or warning against talking at all about the talks.

To me, talking can help bring clarity and freedom. Do Subud members hold other assumptions—such as, that talk can be unsatisfying and heavy?

The Idolatry of Bapak's Words

Being in Subud, reading some of Bapak's talks that I strongly disagree with and seeing how Subud people talk about Bapak's words—this all revives long-buried and sometimes uncomfortable memories for me.

During my childhood in the 1960s, we attended a small Baptist church where the Bible was believed to be the literal word of God. The preacher and some members of the congregation frequently and loudly made this point. One result is that I find it difficult to this day to use the word "believe".

When people ask me what I believe in, I almost choke trying to climb that mountain.

Because I have developed a hyper awareness and aversion to religious exclusionism, I react very strongly to things in Subud that remind me of these.

I fear that making Bapak's talks into something sacrosanct and saying that the talks are beyond discussion is going in that direction.

A Plea for Specific Stories

I usually find it worthwhile to learn from others through their personal stories or experiences.

Please, let it be a personal story, where a Subud member feels they gained something from a specific talk or from something specific said in a talk.

If, for example, a Subud member tells me that they received guidance in latihan or elsewhere about something they remembered from one of the talks, that would be very enriching for me to learn about.

I would like some balance for my current critical attitude towards Bapak.

But I also have this other need—to feel free to talk about my own misgivings.

Here's another example. Bapak gave a talk in 1978 (78 CDK 10) advising against meditating or practicing asceticism. Bapak said such practices are instinctive but they can lead to becoming “a regent in the kingdom of the devils.”

I am bothered by this criticism about meditation. I wish I knew more about it. And I wonder if Bapak really understands, or if he is tolerant towards other religious traditions.

Such are my own thoughts prompted by reading this particular talk by Bapak.