

Psychology and Subud

By Dirk Campbell

I joined Subud when I was twenty years old, congratulating myself on having found a spiritual path that ticked all the right boxes: new, evidence-based, egalitarian, free from dogma and hierarchy. That it was also rather old-fashioned and authoritarian appealed to me as well, though I did not spot the paradox at the time. I bought into everything I was told by other Subud members (thereby immediately constructing the missing dogma!) and committed wholeheartedly to the process. Thirty years later I found I was still unable, despite all the surrender and the Subud promise, to escape my judgmental attitudes to my family, people around me, the world in general and Subud in particular.

I have since learned that my judgments on other people are really self-judgments; I condemn and reject others because I am scared to death myself of those very things being done to me. I have also learned that this condition is actually very common. It is the fear small children feel in connection with their parents, whom they love, on whom they are completely dependent, and by whom they are frequently shamed, threatened and punished. The only possible explanation in the child's mind is that he or she must be a bad person to deserve such treatment. In adulthood, close relationships will tend to trigger this deep-rooted belief and its accompanying fears. Anger, projection and blaming others (including one's children) are standard compensations which may temporarily lessen the pain of self-judgment, but which ultimately do not work. They only ensure, in the end, the 'false safety' of separation.

I have recently returned to the latihan after an absence of several years while I studied these and other lessons. I had realised that if I did not change, my relationship to Subud would remain sour: I would go to latihan and come out feeling worse than when I went in. The insights and tools offered by modern psychology have transformed my relationships and, consequently, my life. There is still much work to do, but things are, in general, easier and happier. I can't help thinking that if the learning I have done in the last few years had been available from the start as part of my hopeful, idealistic journey with Subud, I could have saved myself a very great deal of unnecessary suffering. But psychology is discouraged within the Subud model. True inner progress, it is held, can only be achieved by total surrender to God. Anything else is the work of the 'heart and mind', and not the will of God. This inflexible attitude is elegantly exposed in one of Varindra Vittachi's favourite tales, 'The Holy Man and the Flood', related at the end of this article.

Why the 'heart and mind' cannot be a conduit for the will of God in this respect is nowhere explained, but that is one of the central tenets of the Subud model.[1]

Bapak knew a lot about a wide range of things. Psychology is a subject about which he apparently knew very little. I have only ever found one reference to psychology in his talks, where he defines it as 'the study of character'. The inner being, he says, can only be changed by God, whereas a psychotherapist can alter your character. Other Subud opinion-formers such as Ibu Rahayu appear to regard psychology as something you only need concern yourself with if you are mentally ill. For her, it stands in relation to the 'heart and mind' as medicine does to the physical body: if you are ill, see a doctor. This attitude is probably influenced by Bapak's claim that 'doing the latihan will make you healthy in mind and body', the implication being that recourse to medical or psychological help is something that over years of latihan you can expect not to need, or at any rate not to the same extent as people not in Subud. In my experience this claim is misleading. Everyone, whether in Subud or not, can benefit from medical help. Equally everyone, whether in Subud or not, can benefit

from the insights, tools and healing principles of contemporary psychology.

The Subud model is based on Bapak's scheme, familiar to long-standing Subud members, which includes concepts such as the scale of life forces, the *nafsu* (vehicles of the 'lower' life forces), the *jiwa* (soul),^[2] the 'heart and mind' and the power of God. It is the standard traditional Javanese presentation. All Javanese spiritual groups, of which there are hundreds if not thousands, subscribe to it. It is, of course, a psychology in part, in that it offers an explanation of human behaviour and motivation. But it differs in most key areas from the study that has developed in western countries over the last hundred years or so.

There is no doubt that Bapak was in top condition mentally up to the moment of his death and never needed psychotherapeutic help (though in later life he often needed medical help for his ailing body, despite his claim for the latihan as a universal panacea). He himself attributed his mental agility and emotional stability to the practice of the latihan. Psychotherapists are, by contrast, frequently unstable individuals, and all of them today have arrived at what understanding they have by undergoing a great deal of psychotherapy. It is perhaps on this basis as much as any other that the Subud model ignores or underrates psychology: 'If Bapak and the prophets didn't need it, why should we?'

My answer to this question is that Bapak was one of the last remnants of pre-modern society in the modern age. His oriental brand of psychology reflected the preoccupations and perceptions of a bygone era, even in Indonesia. The problems of his world are not the problems of today's world. Modern, industrialised societies have produced modern, industrialised problems: alienation, consumerism, addiction, social fragmentation and various kinds of mental and emotional dysfunction to which the emergence of modern psychology is a direct response.^[3]

Western psychological theories arose initially out of clinical studies, and the generally suspicious attitude to the profession for a long time reflected this. When I was a child, a common word for a psychotherapist was 'shrink' ('head-shrinker', i.e. someone to be feared as they would mess with your head). Today it is unusual to find anyone holding such a prejudice. Terms such as 'subconscious', 'denial', 'reinforcement', 'projection', 'paranoid' and even 'psychopath' are now commonly understood and in common use. The Latin word *ego* ('I') was first appropriated by Freud to denote the operative mind, but the word has now taken on a more widespread and significant meaning which I shall return to.

The early work of Freud, Jung and Adler set out the parameters of modern psychology. Later developments such as Gestalt, Transactional Analysis (TA) and Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP) have been integrated into the contemporary picture. Concepts established by Jung early on ('collective unconscious', 'archetype', 'shadow', 'animus' etc.) combined with his emphasis on creativity and spirituality have developed into the broadly accepted model known today as 'transpersonal psychology'.^[4]

The development and dissemination of psychological knowledge was made possible largely by the investment of post-war US governments in education and research. Many leading psychologists emerged from US military and clinical backgrounds. Without exception, all advances in psychology since the Second World War have been pioneered in the USA. Trust in the discoveries of psychology and excitement about its potential have attracted some of the USA's most creative, intuitive and intelligent minds to the discipline since the 1950s.

Because of this, psychological knowledge has developed so far in depth and scope that its principles are applicable in any human situation. Like McMurphy in *One Flew*

Over the Cuckoo's Nest, it broke out of the mental hospital long ago; its discoveries are for anyone who wishes to lead a freer, happier and more effective life. Jung's transpersonal model has created a central place for spiritual awareness within psychology. Influential figures such as M. Scott Peck, Harville Hendrix and Chuck Spezzano have developed powerful healing models, based on standard principles, and extended to include religious and mystical experience.[5]

Perhaps the main difference between psychology and the Subud model put forward by Bapak concerns feelings or emotions. In the Subud model, ordinary feelings (*nafsu*) are a type of 'lower order' experience which is to be transcended by spiritual or 'higher order' experience. Emotions are like the weather, constantly changing, coming and going. (In this the Subud attitude closely follows the Buddhist one.) The *nafsu*, the 'vehicles of the lower forces', cannot be relied on and mask us from the inner reality. 'Outer' feelings or emotions are distinguishable from purer and finer 'inner' feelings which can only be accessed in the latihan state, or a quiescent state.

Psychology, on the other hand, regards ordinary feelings as significant. Feelings may come and go, but their coming and going reveals an important pattern which indicates what is going on in the *subconscious* and *unconscious* parts of our mind. The reward of accessing these levels is that it puts us in touch with our purpose, usually hidden from the *conscious* mind. It can also reveal mistaken beliefs and choices, arising out of childhood experience, that cloud or distort our purpose. These beliefs and choices are, in adult life, frequently ineffective, counterproductive or even delusional. The conscious mind does not understand the subconscious and the emotions it generates. Emotions feel good or they feel bad and that's about it for the conscious mind. Why did Alexander the Great want to conquer the known world? Because it felt good. Why did Hitler want to do the same? Because he did not want to feel bad. In both men the subconscious agenda was so strong that they could convince thousands or even millions of people to follow them by means of rhetoric—unconscious-level language.[6] Which goes to show how much more powerful the unconscious and subconscious levels of mind are than the conscious.

Concepts in the transpersonal model such as purpose, gifts, higher guidance and connection with higher mind are, of course, closely matched in the Subud model, where they are referred to collectively as the *kejíwa'an* (domain of the *jíwa*). In transpersonal psychology connection with the higher mind is seen as a vital developmental component, and Subud's access to it is acknowledged. In the Subud model, the missing component is basic psychology. It is my belief that the integration within Subud of ordinary psychological principles would greatly enhance the effect of the latihan on all Subud members, by helping to heal the subconscious and unconscious agendas that tend so often to block it.

Many years ago my wife Adrienne was editing a collection of essays on spirituality for Element Books. One of the essays was by a Tibetan monk. His thesis, if I remember correctly, was that there is no point in Westerners trying to apply Buddhist principles until they have done enough Western psychology to enable them to properly benefit from the study. The Subud latihan is, of course, different from the methods of Tibetan Buddhists; but his conclusion surely applies. The landscape of the modern mind is not the one on which the older models were based. A certain repositioning is necessary before the truths of the old ways can become useful, and this is one of the things that Western psychology offers.[7]

One psychology teacher put it like this: 'Between the conscious mind of everyday experience and the unconscious mind of dreams, myths and archetypes, exists what we call the subconscious mind. Most of our expectations, disappointments, responsibilities and competitiveness are situated in the subconscious mind. All these feelings are compensations for the self-attack that has taken root in the unconscious.'

In native peoples you will not find this subconscious mind. They have a conscious mind and an unconscious mind, without the self-attack agenda that we westerners are burdened with.' As I heard this I immediately thought of Bapak. A man without a subconscious? That would explain why everything was so straightforward for him. There was his unconscious mind with its stories of white tigers, the Queen of the South Seas, Adam and Eve etc. Then there was his conscious mind with its day-to-day concerns: railways, accountancy, building development. There was no tangled skein of the subconscious, because he was free of self-attack; *he did not believe himself to be a bad person*. Whereas I, when I listened to him talk about human inadequacy and sin, or the fate of people who die while in the grip of the material forces, I felt either ashamed, or afraid, or both. When he talked in critical terms about things that did not apply to me, I felt relieved! *I believed myself to be a bad person*. Nothing in all my years of Subud practice altered this core self-belief; in fact, I used the Subud model to reinforce it. I had so far conditioned myself that I was even afraid to leave Subud in case I was punished! As soon as I realised this, I saw that it really was time to leave Subud —not because I thought Subud was bad or anything, but because I urgently needed help.

In order to get help I had to accept new ideas, and in order to do that I had to let go of old ones. My self-imposed Subud conditioning had made me uncomfortable with the word 'ego', but it is a key concept in modern psychology. People have been using it as a shorthand for self-aggrandisement (he has a big ego) or self-image (he has an easily-bruised ego) for as long as I can remember. No comparable concept exists in the Subud model. There is the concept of *nafsu*, the vehicles or 'souls' of the lower forces, which have definable behaviours, though none of them comes close to the idea of 'ego'. [8] Perhaps the closest it gets is the word *pamrih*—self-interest. Admittedly, the ego is as much a construct as *jiwa* or 'heart and mind'. No-one seriously believes that there is an entity called an ego sitting inside us, any more than any Subud member seriously attributes personalities to *jiwa* or *nafsu*. But the construct is useful: a virtual entity, if you like. Like the *nafsu*, the ego has clearly defined behaviours and even strategies. The *jiwa*, by contrast, has no discernible agenda apart from its own growth. How I experience my *jiwa*'s growth has never been entirely clear to me, but may involve increased perceptiveness or sensitivity. [9]

In modern psychology, and particularly in Dr. Spezzano's model, the ego is what keeps us in a state of separation. It is a label for the bundle of concepts and behaviours that we decided on at a very early stage in life, because we believed they would keep us safe. Separation, however, does not ultimately make us safe, because in maintaining all the judgments that we need to keep us separate, we carry on our fights and our resistance to the joining and integration that would disable conflict and make us happy.

The purpose of modern psychology is integration. The integrative principle has been carried forward in Dr. Spezzano's work to apply to all the experiences we can have, both emotional and spiritual. As long as there is any separation in our minds, there is an underlying fracture to be healed. It is to be noted that in Subud there are some very clear separations: this world and the next world; the material and the spiritual; the incomplete human being and the completed human being. These separations bespeak conceptual fractures. In psychology no such divisions exist, except in the imagination. There are no debts to be paid, no chasms to be crossed, no totem poles to be climbed, no purifications to be undergone, no restitutions, no sacrifices and no punishments. All such constructs rely for their existence and maintenance on the mother of all fractures: guilt. I am driven by duty, responsibility and rules because I believe, very deep down, that I am a bad person. The truth, if I could know it, is that I am not fundamentally a bad person. If I were to be truly convinced of that, I would cease punishing myself and I would cease punishing those around me. But I am going to take a lot of convincing because I have lived all my life with the belief in my

culpability. Modern psychology states that only people who believe they are bad can inflict pain on others—as I have done all my life. If this is true, and assuming the principle is universal, we cannot believe in a God who desires any kind of punishment. Punishment of beings that He Himself has created, and for whose behaviour He is responsible, would mean that God believes himself to be a very bad person.[10]

This view is, of course, not one that is held by religious people, including Subud members who believe in God. The general consensus of those who believe in God is that He is ultimately loving. So why do we persist in our view of *ourselves* as sinful and deserving of judgment? Modern psychology states that as long as we believe in our own sinfulness we will judge and punish ourselves and those around us. Based on a hundred years of careful study and experiment, it has developed both an accurate map of the mind and a practical means of acquiring compassion and forgiveness: qualities that all religions and all spiritual disciplines teach, but do not, in general, provide the means of learning. Modern psychology is evidence-based, egalitarian, free from dogma and hierarchy. With its knowledge of the ways of the 'heart and mind' it helps us remove our self-imposed obstacles to receiving and living our purpose. Anyone who believes in the infinite benevolence and love of God surely must also believe that we are surrounded in every way by God's help. We cannot limit universal providence; but the ego in us limits our ability to take advantage of it. The following contemporary story, which is widely known in a number of different versions, illustrates the point:

The Holy Man and the Flood

There was once a man who was renowned for his piety and devotion to God. He lived in a village by a river in a coastal region. As sometimes happens in such places, there was a flood. The waters of the river rose and threatened the village, and his disciples called out to him to leave with them for higher ground. He answered: 'Have no fear for me. I am praying to God and I am confident that He in his mercy will act to save me.' The people obediently left him and he was alone. The flood waters rose further. A truck drove past the holy man's house, water lapping at its wheels. Seeing him, the driver of the truck called out: 'Get in, and I will take you to safety!' The holy man answered: 'Have no fear for me. I am praying to God and I am confident that He will save me.' The truck drove away and the waters rose even further, till they were almost at window level. A man in a boat came past the holy man's house, rowing for all he was worth. 'For God's sake get in!' he called. 'If you stay there you will be drowned!' The holy man, his faith strengthened by years of prayer and meditation, called back as before: 'I am praying to God and He will save me. Do not worry about me!' The boatman rowed away. Again the waters rose until the holy man was forced to climb on to his roof. A government helicopter, manned by a search-and-rescue team, spotted the holy man on his roof, and lowered a ladder. 'Climb up or you will be drowned!' shouted the pilot through a loud-hailer. 'No!' shouted the holy man as best he could above the noise of the chopper blades. 'I am praying to God and he will save me!' Seeing that they could not persuade him, the helicopter team flew on to search for other survivors.

The flood rose further; the holy man's house was swept away and he was drowned. His soul went to heaven; he was taken to meet the Maintainer of All the Worlds and asked to give an account of his life and death. 'I worshipped You faithfully all my life,' said the holy man, 'believing and trusting in none but You. I died because You betrayed my faith and trust, abandoning me to the waters of a flood.' 'Is that really what you think?' replied the Supreme Being. 'I sent you a group of friends, then a truck, then a boat and finally a helicopter. I don't see how, in terms of what is possible on Earth, I could have done any more.'

Notes

1. I use the term 'Subud model' to refer to the set of beliefs put forward by Bapak. The framework is somewhat more relaxed today than in Subud's early years, but still intact.
2. More accurately rendered in English as 'content of the self'—an expression whose meaning I have never quite grasped.
3. To say nothing of environmental problems, including global warming, of which Bapak appeared to have as little conception as he did of modern psychology.
4. One of the virtues of this approach is its linking of modern discoveries in psychology with ancient tradition, showing how each validates the other, on the principle that 'whatever is correct will coincide'.
5. Dr. Spezzano's work incorporates themes from Dr. Helen Schucman's book *A Course in Miracles*. This controversial work connects through Christian Science and Theosophical influences (*vide* Fr. Benedict J. Groeschel's book *A Still Small Voice*) to a number of strands in Gnostic and oriental mystical thought.
6. If you read their speeches you will find rhetoric identical to that employed by President George W Bush: threats to security and wellbeing, belief in a higher purpose, loyalty to the nation and so on. Beliefs are unconscious and can be used to manipulate nations; but note that no conscious-level exposition of them is required. The unconscious mind simply responds directly to unconscious-level language with powerful feelings.
7. Most psychologists today recognise the validity of spiritual experience. Abraham Maslow showed that 'peak experiences' are most common among people who belong to a religion or practice a spiritual path.
8. Bapak listed the *nafsu* as four: greed, anger, patience and acceptance. The first two are 'bad' *nafsu* and the second two 'good'. This distinction is, in my experience, not recognised by subscribers to the Subud model. Since Bapak always referred disparagingly to the influence of the *nafsu*, the word has become an easy substitute for the 'sinful tendencies' of standard religious teaching,
9. 'The heart and mind want to know, the *jiwa* wants to grow' is a little ditty that I remember from my early days in Subud, the implication being that the desire for knowledge is inferior to, and even hampers, the growth of the inner being.
10. Interestingly, one of the main tenets of the Gnostic churches, including the Cathar heresy, was that this world was created by an evil god, because only such a god could create evil and suffering. The realm beyond the evil god contained the Good Father God from whom Jesus came to bring the message of love and forgiveness. Sadly, no documents have survived from these churches to explain how a Loving Father God could permit the subordinate creator god to carry out his evil will, thereby impugning Himself.