

# Seven Questions about Subud Culture

By David Week

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What is the culture of Subud? By 'culture', I'm not thinking of dance, music, and literature—but of culture as defined by the anthropologists: patterns of belief and behaviour widely shared within a group of people. For a pattern to be characteristic of a culture, it is not necessary that all members of a culture share that behaviour or belief: just that it be widespread. A culture is like a rope: its character comes not from any one thread that runs the length of the rope, but the dense overlapping of many strands.

Here are some of the strands of behaviour within Subud: going to latihan, celebrating Bapak's birthday, reading *Susila Budhi Dharma*, testing, doing Ramadan, having helpers, having a committee, quoting Bapak, having national congresses, and changing personal names. Some of the strands of belief are: 'Bapak was the first person to receive the latihan', 'the latihan is the power of God or the Great Life Force', 'the latihan purifies us', 'harmony is important', 'conflict comes from the action of the lower forces'. These are all explicit, 'foreground' aspects of Subud culture. We are aware of them, and can talk about them.

But all cultures have also have a tacit, 'background' dimension, which is much more difficult to see and understand. The tacit dimension is thus more important, because it operates unseen, and unquestioned. Einstein said, "What does a fish know about the water in which he swims all his life?" We rarely acknowledge, let alone examine, the ocean of culture in which we swim.

We don't examine this shared background just because it is difficult to see. An encounter with another culture, a personal crisis, a philosophy class or a therapeutic event sometimes provides the opportunity to examine these deeper shared patterns by which we live. Recently, for instance, I spoke with an Australian lawyer who has been training judges in Cambodia. She described how the Cambodians asked them: 'On the one hand you tell us that we have to be objective and impartial, that when we walk into a courtroom we have to leave our personalities at the door. On the other hand, you tell us that we can use our personal qualities to help a victim feel comfortable when speaking about some traumatic event. So which is it? Do we park our personal qualities at the door, or do we bring them in and use them?' In response, the lawyer's colleague launched into a very complicated ad hoc explanation of this apparent contradiction—in essence, a defensive cover-up. My acquaintance, on the other hand, stayed silent. She realised she didn't really understand the idea of 'impartiality', and that these were important questions she had never really looked at.

Rather than wait for outside events to raise questions, we can start to examine our background beliefs for ourselves. If we don't do so, then others almost certainly will. And as long as we don't do so, we will be influenced by biases and tendencies of which we are often only marginally aware.

Here are some questions about Subud culture that I ponder from time to time.

## **Question 1: Is surrender inaction?**

Does surrender mean being passive? I don't think so, but sometimes I wonder if there isn't some kind of tacit connection between surrender and passivity in Subud's collective consciousness. This might come from the primary meaning of 'surrender' in English, which is 'to give up.' It is often easier, in Subud, to do nothing, than to do something. Inaction often trumps action. Bravery gets punished, timidity excused. Plans, visions and goals are rarely set. Innovation and change proceed at a molasses-like pace.

The emphasis on 'surrender' in Subud comes no doubt from Pak Subuh's Islamic background. 'Islam' means 'surrender'. But what does 'surrender' mean? Even the most cursory investigation of Islam's heritage indicates that it does not mean 'to give up'. When Muhammad's enemies were seeking him, he actively hid from them. When the Meccans attacked Medina, he actively organised a defence and counter-attack. When he found his followers fumbling their prayers because they were inebriated, he took them to task and banned alcohol. Earlier prophets in the Islamic tradition were not different. Isa (Jesus) got himself in a lot of trouble with the authorities, so that many today see him as a prototype for the revolutionary hero. And Musa (Moses) led his people out of captivity. These were hardly people of inaction.

'Submission', in Islam, means specifically and solely submission to the Will of Allah. The Will of Allah is what's written in Al-Qur'an—and to nothing else. It means to live by a certain ethical code. Living by such a code rarely requires passivity or inaction. It almost always calls upon one to act: to speak the truth, to counter injustice, to help those in need, to defend the oppressed.

There is no reason why 'surrender' should not be associated with being pro-active, forward-looking, energetic and innovative. The Christian existentialist Soren Kierkegaard noted that in life, we don't really have the option of doing nothing. Both action and inaction are choices. Both have consequences. Which is the right choice varies according to the situation. The situation may sometimes require one to do nothing. But if one does nothing as a matter of habit, then one is not making ethical choices.

Since there is nothing in the tradition of 'surrender' that suggests inactivity or 'giving up', shouldn't we choose different words, free of this connotation?

## **Question 2: Does Subud *look* experiential?**

Bapak's function is like that of a school servant, who sets out the books, opens the door, cleans the classroom, and arranges the desks and chairs for you to sit on. When you are all there, sitting down and facing the front, facing the blackboard, the teacher will come and give the lessons; and the teacher is God, not Bapak.

—*The Spread Of Subud In The World*, Subud International Congress, 19 August, 1959

I recently saw a listing of spiritual movements that divided them into guru-based, book-based, and experiential. If we take seriously what Pak Subuh says here, then Subud should fall into the experiential category. But on the surface, Subud often looks guru-based. This is because—after fifty years in the world—Subud looks like a school in which the students still have very little to say about what they have learned. The words of the school servant are painstakingly numbered, recorded, transcribed and distributed. But the students remain largely silent.

If the picture given by Pak Subuh is true, then each member should be able to speak from their own understanding, and their own experience, without borrowing the words of Pak Subuh. This does not seem to be happening. I rarely see, for instance, an

explanation of the *latihan kejiwaan* which is not to a large extent copied from Pak Subuh's explanations.

The obstacle to each of us expressing our own experience may well be a misunderstanding of what it means to hear of the experience of a person from another culture. If we take what Pak Subuh is saying as literally true, then we might imagine that our experiential lessons need to involve meetings with the Queen of the South Seas, falling balls of light, and other magical encounters. When we don't experience such things, we might imagine that we haven't 'got it' yet. But the experiences of Pak Subuh are very Javanese experiences. Many Javanese not in Subud report meetings with the Queen of the South Seas, and seeing falling balls of light. For a traditional Javanese person to experience things is normal. It's part of their cultural experience. It would be highly unusual for an English person or a Vietnamese person to experience these things.

In a truly experiential movement, each person's experience will be their own, and framed in terms of their own cultural experience and background. Should we not speak of our own understanding, in our own terms, and not attempt to borrow or follow the metaphors, images and experience of a culture of which we understand little?

### **Question 3: Is Subud open to all religions?**

Yes, I come back to it again, at present I always seem to be referring to Islam. Of course Bapak is a Muslim, so what can you expect?  
— "Right and Charitable Action", Lewes, England, 15 Sep 1979

Subud is not supposed to be a replacement for Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Baha'i, Jainism, Confucianism, Taoism or Zoroastrianism. And since the latihan is in itself 'empty' of any teaching or religion, we should expect people to be free to interpret the latihan according to their own background and experience.

Bapak was a Javanese Muslim. He often acknowledged, as in the quote above, that he interpreted his experience of the latihan in terms of the concepts, language, precepts and beliefs of his own religion. His talks are littered with references to 'in Java, this is called...' and 'in Islam, this is called...', making completely explicit that he is speaking in a language derived from his own background and tradition.

If Subud members all followed this example, then we would expect to see Christian interpretations of the latihan, Jewish interpretations, Buddhist interpretations, Baha'i, Hindu, secular humanist, Jungian, post-modern and Zen interpretations. Instead we often see people attempting to learn the language and metaphysics of the religion of Java—*jiwa, nafsu, prihatin, roh ilofi, roh kudus, wahyu*. Even translating these into English doesn't help. Such translations are simple English language versions of the religion of Java. In the religion of Java, for instance, there is an emphasis on 'power'. We see this in the frequent use in Subud language of the words 'power' and 'force'. In contrast, for a contemporary Christian, for instance, 'love' is far more important than 'power' or 'force'. For a Buddhist, 'emptiness' is a far more central value. And for a secular humanist, 'equality', 'truth' and 'liberty' carry greater weight. It's not a matter of translating a foreign culture into English language; it's a matter of rediscovering the latihan for oneself in terms of one's own culture—whatever that may be.

When Subud becomes confused with the religion of Java, we have a problem: followers of other religions or ways of life have good reason for turning away. To be true to its promise, doesn't Subud need to be without a particular religious colouring?

### **Question 4: All of humanity?**

I often hear that the latihan is something for 'all of humanity'. Yet of all the different human groups that I'm a part of, Subud is one of the most insular and isolated. Subud is typically not a member of any other associations—not even a neighbourhood association. Nor is it in dialogue with related communities.[1]

We can't on the one hand claim to be 'for all of humanity', and on the other hand fail to establish real relations with our neighbours. As the social philosopher Eric Hoffer once put it: 'It is easier to love humanity as a whole than to love one's neighbor.' And this is the point. Just as we would judge a human being as decidedly odd if they rattled on and on about 'humanity', but failed to have any friends, so too is Subud decidedly odd as an organisation and a community if it rattles on and on about 'humanity', but fails to have any organisational and communal 'friends'.

I read recently that all of the Christian denominations in Australia (except the Baptists) had gotten together and agreed to share facilities—that is halls and churches—wherever possible. This seemed like an extraordinary expression of people reaching out past their parochial boundaries to do something of both practical benefit as well as symbolic power. I can't imagine Subud ever being part of such an action, because Subud rarely reaches out beyond its own boundaries, to engage in real dialogue with anyone other than itself.

If we don't connect with others as a community, then we lose the ability to learn from others, and we also hamper the development of our ability to explain ourselves. You can't reach six billion people, if you're incapable of engaging with a community of a few thousand. Aren't there more ways in which Subud can engage and dialogue meaningfully with other communities?

### **Question 5: The Will of God?**

I question the way in which the words 'if it's in accordance with the Will of God' is used in conjunction with all kinds of (relatively) minor human events and choices. I recognise that this term has an ancient and special significance to those in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim lineage. But for each of those traditions, it also meant '...as expressed in writing in the Torah, the Bible, or the Qur'an.' In these traditions, 'the Will of God' is concerned expressly and solely with what might be called 'right living'.

As 'the Will of God' is often used in Subud, it seems to hark back to earlier, pre-monotheistic religions, in which the gods or the spirits or the ancestors have preferences as to who marries whom, who does what job, and who lives where. There is no problem if individuals choose to adopt such beliefs, but if the community as a whole endorses them, it creates a distance between us and almost every religious community on Earth. The major religions represent a very explicit move away from the conception of God as micromanager, to God as a creator of just laws within which human beings have enormous freedom and responsibility. This was a major step in human development. It was a move which—in a sense—created ethics, moral action, and individual accountability.

The phrase 'in accordance with the Will of God' seems to be bound into the very definition of Subud, because this is Pak Subuh's translation of the word '*dharma*'. '*Dharma*' is a Sanskrit word, and is more commonly translated today as 'right action', 'virtuous life' or—to use a more contemporary term—'ethical life'. For someone writing in the Muslim tradition, 'to live in accordance with the Will of God' and 'to lead an ethical life' are one and the same concept, framed in different ways.

For us Westerners, with our broad range of religions and religious views, might not 'ethical life' be a more useful translation, with its clear emphasis on doing the right thing? And mightn't this translation again be more open to a broader range of faiths—including those who prefer not to rely on faith?

### **Question 6: Does Subud have a future?**

A psychologist once told me that you can tell more from what a person doesn't talk about, than from what they do talk about. Everyone talks at various times about their past, their present, and their future. Not talking about one of those three can indicate some unfinished business or trauma.

In Subud, we seem to be markedly silent about the future. We have extensive writings and references to the past, including an official history. We also get very vocal and involved in talking about what is happening *right now* in Subud. No problems there. But the future seems to be a curious void. Is this the result of an unusual interpretation of 'surrender'—i.e. 'make no plans'? Is it because Subud's chief visionary—Pak Subuh—died? Is it a collective trauma from the many projects and initiatives that Didn't Quite Go As We Hoped in the 1980s?

I've been around long enough to know that this silence wasn't always there. In the early days of Subud, there was a lot of talk about the future—often with rather messianic overtones. Subud would Grow Rapidly and Solve Everything. Such grandiosity can also be worrisome. But perhaps the pendulum has swung too far—from hubris to silence. Perhaps there's a middle ground where we can have claims that are finite, but still valuable; plans that are feasible, but still interesting; and a future that is modest, but still desirable. Where is that middle ground?

Again, we might usefully compare Subud with a human being. A human being who believes the he or she, alone, will Save The Planet or Save Humanity may well have delusions of grandeur. A human being who is absolutely silent (at least in the presence of others) on what they have to contribute to the present situation may well have inadequate self-esteem. The middle ground is one in which we are able to express at the same time humility, consciousness of limitations, confidence, and self-value.

### **Question 7: Is Subud a family?**

In Subud, we have the terms 'Bapak', 'Ibu', and '*saudara-saudara*'. 'Bapak' and 'Ibu' mean—literally—'father' and 'mother'. And '*saudara-saudara*', the term with which Pak Subuh opened his talks, gets translated as 'brothers and sisters'. In his later years, Pak Subuh was fond of referring to members as his 'children'.

So in language, Subud seems very much like a family. This is no accident. Sociologists tell us that much of Indonesian society is patterned on the family. The terms 'Bapak', 'Ibu' and '*saudara-saudara*' are widespread. The head of a Government department is called 'the Bapak' of the office, you address elderly shopkeepers as 'Ibu' and '*saudara-saudara*' is just as often translated as 'ladies and gentlemen'.

Many are fond of this model of Subud as a family. We share a long history together. Some use 'Subud is a family' to argue for a particular approach, and others complain about 'Subud bureaucracy' or 'creeping corporatism' in distinction to the earlier family warmth. For someone like me, born into Subud, many members seem like *de facto* uncles, aunts and cousins.

However, Subud is an association of adults. You have to be of a certain age: seventeen. Members are brought together by a common interest, not by blood. Subud emphasises being responsible, not being child-like.

Subud is not a family: it is a community. It can be a close community, a caring community, a compassionate community. Acknowledging that it is a community makes it the responsibility of the adults in the community to actively create the kind of community they want it to be. Should we not more conscientiously make this shift, from patriarchal family, to community of responsible adults? [2]

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We have changed things in Subud. We now call interested people ‘applicants’ not ‘probationers’. Subud is now commonly called an ‘association’, rather than a ‘brotherhood’. And at the Innsbruck Congress, one working group focused on tuning language to the audience, rather than to the past. Therefore, we can change things—if we will. So I’m raising these questions as prompts not just for reflection, but as potentially prompts to action. The central question for me is: Do these tacit traditions serve us well, in the times in which we now live?

I think each person has to ask that for himself or herself. For myself, I’ve arrived at my own answers.[3]

What are yours?

## Notes

1. We know that Subud split early in its history, and Sumarah is its sibling. We know that Lydia Duncan carried the latihan into Osho, who practice it, and acknowledge from whom they got it. We don’t have to fuse with these people—but to fail to even say ‘hello, let’s compare notes’, seems a tad antisocial.
2. A simple way to change from thinking of Subud as family, to Subud as community, is to change the language. For that reason, I consciously choose to call my fellow members—depending on context—my colleagues, my fellow practitioners or my friends. I sometimes refer broadly to ‘our brothers and sisters’—but by that I mean every human being, not some limited subset. I don’t see that the world needs any more limited subsets.

Similarly, I choose to use the Indonesian words ‘Bapak’, ‘Pak’ and ‘Ibu’ as they are used in the normal Indonesian way. This precludes using ‘Bapak’ and ‘Ibu’ as if they were the proper names of particular persons. Only Indonesian children refer to ‘Father’ and ‘Mother’ in that way. Rather, I call Pak Subuh and Ibu Rahayu by their names, and use the honorifics appropriate to their age and position.

One positive side-effect of such a change in language is that by normalising it, I eliminate one more unnecessary barrier between Subud and society.

3. For the curious, my answers for myself are:
  1. **Is surrender inaction?** ‘Surrender’ means submitting self-interest and desire to some higher purpose or ethos. It means right living. Right living sometimes requires inaction, but most often it requires positive action, and this is exemplified in the lives of historical persons we hold in high regard.

2. **Does Subud look experiential?** Learning from experience means understanding things in one's own terms, and putting reality before traditional authority; it also requires the ability to disagree with—even oppose—one's elders or predecessors.
3. **Is Subud open to all religions?** Openness to and respect for other worldviews is extraordinarily important in this globalised world. Openness starts with understanding the real differences that exist out there, and that one's own worldview is no more nor less parochial than any other. Therefore, the first step is to ditch all presumptions that we have 'the answer' or even 'an answer'—and to go out there and *learn*.
4. **All of humanity?** 'Humanity' is best served by each of us relating to and serving the real human beings we encounter in daily life. The rest we know only as we imagine them, and imagination makes it too easy to get it wrong.
5. **The Will of God?** The 'Will of God' (if one wants to describe it like that) is pretty clear, and has been iterated in various ways in the religions and ethical systems of different cultures; it's simple, and challenging, and the really tough job is to be what it asks us to do: to be the best in us.
6. **Does Subud have a future?** Subud's future is the same as that of every human being: to grow up. Growing up means becoming humble, learning one's limits, but also knowing what one can contribute, and then contributing just that.
7. **Is Subud a family?** Families are wonderful things. I am lucky enough to have several. That's enough, and I don't need to find another in Subud. What I want in Subud is something that nourishes the adult in me, not the child.