

Questioning Oneself

by Fuchsia Black

"Fuchsia Black" is a second generation Subud member who was opened in her mid-teens and spent several years in Subud before leaving in her early twenties. Out of respect for her family and friends, she is using a nom de plume.

When I start to sit and write about Subud, my introduction tends to run to ten pages before I even begin writing what I want to say. I was born into Subud and was opened in my mid-teens after a series of personal difficulties. I was a member for five years and eventually became a helper, before leaving when I was 22.

It is my experiences after leaving that I want to write about.

As a Subud member I had a healthy mistrust of atheists and anyone who claimed Subud was a dangerous cult. I did my share of mocking and bashing those people because atheists just seemed so ludicrous to me. How could Subud be a cult when we were all so genuine? I could feel God myself, so how could it be a lie?

I gained so much from being in Subud - from the lovely people always willing to listen to me cry and offer me hugs and tea and cake, to those who wanted to start businesses with me and go traveling round the world and save the planet and the like.

I left when I began to doubt the validity of mine - and everyone else's - receivings. Around this time the pain of my experiences became greater than the good things in life.

I became conscious of the ways in which Subud values were at odds with my life as a 21 year old student. I became conscious of the cognitive dissonance between wanting to be a normal woman and feeling that God had chosen something different for me, something better. Other girls my age just wore jeans and went to yoga classes and that was perfectly normal behaviour, but in Subud I was criticised for not wearing a skirt to Latihan, or for practising karate and yoga. I felt shallow and bad for wanting to be like them. I would cancel nights out to go to Latihan, wouldn't go out for meals and drinks because I was trying to do Ramadhan, and felt torn between my own dreams and God's Will. I felt a panicky sense of, "what is right?" which eventually led me to test every single possible question in my life. Every ordinary choice whether to go out with friends, or what to wear, or what to eat and drink, developed an unnecessary significance. And that is just the superficial stuff. Beneath the surface I was battling self-harm, depression, an eating disorder, minor addictions, family breakup and struggles at University.

It was the suicide of a non-Subud girl I knew that caused the catalyst for me to finally leave. The "exit" was unpleasant, as I had close friends say hurtful things before turning around and saying they had "received" to say them. I don't judge them too much, though, because I myself was neurotic and barely functional. Other Subud friends were far more supportive and willing to listen, whilst others just kept asking when I was coming back to Latihan.

The first six months after leaving Subud were a nightmare. I was neurotic and depressed. I was terrified and unable to care for myself. I struggled to wash, dress and leave the house. I can't even fully explain why. I don't think my fear was real. I think it was a result of spending five years convincing myself that every random thought and impulse in my mind came from God. When I left Subud, all those things became magnified, and I was terrified of both human and supernatural worlds. I couldn't cross the street. I couldn't sit in a coffee shop and order coffee. I didn't know what was real and what wasn't. I'd freeze when the phone rang. I thought about ending my life. Thankfully my GP counseling referral didn't come through for another six months, or I would have been labelled with something unpleasant, I'm sure of it.

After six months I began picking myself up. At this point I started thinking about all the experiences I'd been through in Subud, all the things I had done, not as a result of my belief in God, but as a result of my belief that other Subud members knew better than me. I had a pervasive sense of worthlessness, which made me feel less than all other people in the entire world.

For the next three or four years I battled with this confusion, blind anger, neurosis, and calm, whilst all the time trying to pick my life up. I became aware that my degree was completely unsuitable for my interests, and yet I had done it because I thought that's what "God" wanted, so I threw all my energy into altering my career. I adopted blanket atheism as a way of shutting out the fear and chaos and doubt, symptoms that are the same for almost anyone leaving a closed organisation (I frequently used the word "cult"). I read loads of information on gurus and mind control techniques, hypnosis, group suggestibility, vulnerability, and the like.

I can't blame Subud for me giving up all my power and responsibility as a teenager and young adult. It was my choice to give up my freedom and identity because Subud presented me with a better vision for myself. I replaced my angry, sarcastic, sixteen year old self with a different vision. A vision where I would grow up to be a beautiful, kind, generous woman in a long flowing skirt, singing sweetly and listening to God, exploring nature and the great mysteries of the Universe. I'd always do the right thing because God would always be with me, so I wouldn't have to worry about anything I did. It sounded so nice and I just gave up everything about myself. I... surrendered.

Unfortunately, the reality of Subud life is nothing like that, and my vision of becoming "Little Miss Saintylocks." was about as realistic as wishing to become a supermodel or the first chicken on Mars. After leaving I became conscious that my vision of my perfect self was unattainable and also completely out of keeping with my real interests and identity.

I finally admitted to myself that each and every thing I had ever received in the latihan, or in testing, was something I had made up.

That was a very hard lesson. I had believed in every single thing I'd said and done at the time.

I had believed every beautiful receiving where I thought I was floating across the Universe made up of stars.

I had believed every angry receiving where I was screaming and smashing the ground.

I had believed my answers to every surreal question ever asked during testing sessions and kejiwaan days. How does a Mexican dance? How do my feet feel when I'm walking with the angels? What should my attitude be towards cooking / friendship / anger / food allergies? What is the influence of Islam in my life? How would it be for me to change my name / move across the country / wear purple / do this random thing I hadn't ever thought about before this morning?

I believed the answer to every single one.

I believed that each and every answer came directly from God.

I believed it was God's way of communicating with me, guiding me, and making me a better person.

I believed that the food I ate for dinner and the colour of my skirt was really, really spiritually important. And because it was so important, I didn't want to get it wrong.

After leaving I became painfully aware that the answers had come from my own secret desires in my head and from an unconscious awareness of the goals and values that comprise Subud, however unintentional.

And it also became painful to think of all the members and helpers who praised teenage-me for my strong connection to God. They praised me for my spirituality and the clarity of my thoughts. They praised me for my insight and the strength of my Latihan.

It was very painful to accept that I spent five years making up everything I'd ever received and believing the wisdom of others, too. I wasn't consciously making things up. I never deliberately tried to deceive anyone. I believed 100% in my own lies. It was only with hindsight that I knew they were lies.

I think the latihan changes the brain, the part of the brain that regulates emotions such as fear. I think it results in the same chemicals being released as in meditation, exercise and in social contact. The "quiet" beforehand makes us receptive to experience, like a trance. That makes it an intensely powerful exercise. I think it changes us as people just by what it is. Generally, I think that having half an hour in a creative group space is wonderful. I think strengthening the links to our subconscious wishes and desires is interesting. But how dangerous it is to believe somehow that every random thing we feel is totally, completely sanctified by God.

Anyway, after three or four years of anger at Subud, that anger dissolved and I spent a lot of time feeling lost, wondering what life was really about. I started questioning myself and my values in a world without helpers to tell me what choices were right. Learning to trust

my own decisions was very hard, since Subud effectively stripped that trust away. Part of my anger was replaced by the awareness that most ordinary members simply want to do some good in the world, and the mistakes they make are a combination of good intentions and a total absence of best practise and strategic planning.

I also figured out that the rest of the world was doing just fine without Subud. Or, rather, the world is just so complicated that Subud isn't going to make things better. Every tiny religious group believes that its own personal practises and beliefs are going to heal the sick and end all wars. But I do believe that many Subud members are doing a good job with the best of intentions. And so are most ordinary people in this world, whether they are religious or not.

The last two years of questioning have forced me to accept something else. I also think that there have been times - no more than five or six - in my life where I've genuinely felt guided or compelled to something that turns out to be right for me. Not one single one of these has occurred in the Latihan nor in testing, and plenty of non-Subud members have had similar experiences. Does that stop me from being an atheist? No. There may be other explanations, and, besides, the minute you accept an idea of an interactive God, you get people trying to define that God and all the ways it may, or may not, influence you. Then, once again, people make things up.

I choose agnosticism - if there's something out there that desperately wants to intervene in my life, I'll strive to have the grace to accept randomness and opportunity as rare gifts.

At the same time, I would rather get on with my life and focus 100% on doing the best that I can here on earth, including taking responsibility for my own bullsh*t, without tugging at the hem of God's apron every five minutes with dumb questions like, "God? What does it feel like to be a star? What about a nebula? What are angels like, God? God, I feel like making a sculpture today. Is that okay, God?"

Six years after leaving, I want to put Subud behind me. I have now been out of it for longer than I was an active member, and I've needed all that time to heal from the complex multitude of damage and confusion, whether deliberate or accidental, that has characterised my life. Needless to say, there are thousands of extra pages I could have written regarding the details of my experiences, but that's not what I want to say right now. I've lost the wish to start heckling people for their beliefs, however ludicrous they seem to me. I need to move on from the pain and guilt I feel for the way I, too, acted when I was in Subud. The way it shaped my life forever.

But I do need to stand up and say, "Look, guys... I was making it all up. Not intentionally. I definitely believed my own stories, once I'd said them. But I still made it all up. And I'm 100% certain I'm not the only one."

I don't believe that many people in Subud can honestly question themselves and honestly answer, in truthfulness, whether every one of their latihan experiences really comes from God. Or even if ANY of those experiences have come from God. That isn't a sneering

judgment on Subud members. I just know that I couldn't have dared ask that question before I left. It was just so obvious to me that it was all God's will... right up until the humiliating and painful moment it became obvious that it wasn't, that it was just my will, and Subud's will, and the will of the helpers. I'm sure at least one member will rather self-righteously say, "Well, *she* obviously wasn't doing it right. Unlike me. I know *I'm* not making it up. I have too much evidence to the contrary."

I know that, ten years ago, I would have said the same thing...

Still, it all comes from "within," no doubt about that. And many times our receivings are right - perhaps because our subconscious is capable of making the right choices for us even though many of us have stopped believing in ourselves. And many times it is wrong - because we are still driven by ordinary conflicting needs, such as the need to feel accepted and valued, perhaps sometimes through the deeply buried, but very normal, desire to be praised as a helper or committee member (private desires that tend to be instantaneously dismissed as "lower forces" and pushed deep below the surface however ordinary they are), versus the equally valid and understandable desire to be wonderful, selfless, and genuinely spiritual - a "Higher Human."