

Both Simple And Complex

By Hadrian Micciche

The Subud spiritual exercise is quite simple. You allow yourself to get quiet. You allow the exercise to happen.

The Subud culture is quite complex. *Subud Survival Guide* (by Harry Armytage) is an example of that complexity. It has almost 100 pages of summaries of and quotes from among the 1,300 talks and 180,000 papers and letters of Subud's founder, Muhammad Subuh. And, to help members survive in Subud, the *Guide* offers a two page "Glossary of Subud Terms and Jargon".

I remain largely ignorant of what M. Subuh had to say. To those who question me about that, I say that I don't believe in mixing anything into Subud, even the Javanese mystical teachings found in M. Subuh's "explanations". □

M. Subuh uses terminology and viewpoints coming from the blend of Animism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam found on Java. His esoteric explanations present an unorthodox view of many religions and offer guidance on a wide variety of topics. For example: did you know that fishing when your wife is pregnant could cause your child to be born with a birth defect?

Not surprisingly, some Subud members find M. Subuh too influenced by Javanese and Islamic culture to be relevant to them and wish to rid Subud of such influences.

Indeed, I prefer simplicity. I do the exercise. When asked, I talk to people about Subud. Before I do, I learn what I can about their personality, interests, way of understanding the world and way of expressing that understanding. And then I try to communicate with them in those terms.

I prefer to explain the experience of the Subud exercise in terms of each person's own religion, as they themselves, not M. Subuh, understand it.

When talking about Subud, if an English word will do the job, I use it. If a word is Subud jargon, in whatever language, I avoid it. I don't want the person to have to work to fit into the Subud culture. Instead, I work to broaden the Subud culture to embrace them.

After all these years, the Subud exercise continues to work. People come, receive the exercise and, in their practice of it, receive guidance.

I'm not sure that the Subud culture ever really worked. The need for a Subud Survival Guide is a warning that it is the Association's survival that is endangered.

Most people who join Subud leave. Of those who stay, many continue to do the exercise with a group but have little other involvement with the organization. Only a few find that both the Subud exercise and the Subud culture work for them.

Is Subud Unique?

Sharif Horthy, a translator for M. Subuh, says that in the more than a thousand talks by M. Subuh are found explanations that are an "instruction manual" for the spiritual exercise of Subud ("Looking Back, Looking Forward", *Subud World News*, June 1998). Obviously, that is of benefit to some members.

And, according to Mr. Horthy, listening to or reading M. Subuh's words can "change our state and move us to a deeper state where we are able to understand, and receive the guidance we need at the moment".

This is how I get into such a state: I sit quietly, patiently, and allow myself to surrender. I do this before each exercise. I was under the impression that this was common practice in Subud. Any more instruction than this, for me, is too much. And I don't need the magical power of M. Subuh's words to help either.

The claims Horthy makes for the usefulness and power of M. Subuh's talks are old news in the world of spiritual practice. Indeed, even the spiritual exercise is not unique to Subud.

There is a whole vocabulary available to us from the tradition of yoga, for example, with terms for talks by a spiritual guide, being opened, receiving divine energy, undergoing purification, experiencing spontaneous movements, and even a term for "words that are alive" (as Horthy characterizes M. Subuh's). These practices and experiences are not unique to Subud.

Among all the ways to access the experience found here, what I found unique about Subud was the promise of the exercise being available without teaching or teacher.

Horthy has written that some Subud members find M. Subuh passé. They have the attitude that "we can receive whatever we need for ourselves".

Can't we?

Isn't this why we are in Subud?

Living Wisdom, Dead Wisdom

One source of my dissatisfaction with most religions is that much of what is offered is what I call "dead wisdom". It may have been true for certain people at a particular time and in specific circumstances, but those people are now dead, their time is gone, and their circumstances may not be my own.

Yes, some circumstances may be universal to all of humankind. We may all suffer from the same condition. We may all have a common destination. We may all live under the same blue sky. Why, then, are there so many different religions, with so many different branches and sects, with disagreements, misunderstandings and even warfare between them?

Dead wisdom and its fundamentalist promoters do not foster a living spirituality. Unfortunately, some in Subud are what I call "Bapak Fundamentalists". *Subud Survival Guide* addresses the phenomena (see quotes at the end of the article).

A Bapak Fundamentalist brings into play what I call "borrowed authority". If this person used his or her own words to tell people what to do, they typically would be ignored. So instead, to be heard and heeded, they borrow the authority of a respected person by using that person's words.

I ask them: "Of all the words of M. Subuh, how do you know which of them, if any, truly apply to me in my current circumstances?" If they are wise enough to discern what is the correct advice to give me, then they are wise enough to use their own words.

But more importantly, I tell them: “Don’t give me advice unless I ask for it.” I never felt a need to ask M. Subud for advice. Why then would I want their unsolicited advice, offered in the guise of “what Bapak said”?

Also, it is a misuse of the spiritual exercise to use it as a tool to attempt to exercise authority over others. To the fundamentalists in Subud, I say, “Don’t suggest that I do a ‘focused receiving’ (what in Subud jargon is called ‘testing’) about the advice you offer.” I don’t need help setting the agenda for the guidance I seek.

An Enlightening Source of Guidance

The spiritual practice of Subud is an enhancement to my religious and spiritual life, not a substitute for it. I am a follower of Buddhism, a way with a rich tradition. I can turn to the teachers, guides, advisors, scholars and fellow practitioners on the dharma path for help and advice, should I need it.

But largely, when I need guidance, I open myself with mindfulness in meditation to the “*budhi*” spoken of in my religion. And with surrender in the spiritual exercise, I open myself to the “*budhi*” spoken of in Subud.

A word about meditation. It is an essential part of my religious practice, as is prayer to people of other religions. Ignorant people who would never think to ask a Muslim in Subud to not do his or her daily prayers find reason, mistakenly, to advise me not to practice my religion—ever, even outside of the time spent doing the Subud exercise.

Unfortunately, it does seem easier to be a Javanese mystic or a Muslim than it is to be a practicing Buddhist in this association—again, a quirk of the Subud culture that doesn’t seem to serve Subud well.

I regard myself as a “radical latihanist”. It is an orientation radical in the sense that it is “rooted” or “centered” in the exercise of Subud. The core of my involvement in Subud is the spiritual exercise. Through it, I have the opportunity to gain a “living wisdom” much more valuable, I find, than the dead wisdom found in too many religions.

It is important to honor the dead, their memory and even the wisdom of their time and place. For me, it is even more important to be open to a source of living wisdom.

Appendix

Excerpts from *Subud Survival Guide* by Harry Armytage

“Bapak said”

You may come across a spiritual bully in your Subud life. A spiritual bully is a person who quotes Bapak whenever they are faced by something they do not like. Some use it to block change: “Oh you can’t do that because Bapak said....” Learn to recognize these members and firmly resist their devious methods.

Bapakers

Isn’t this a fantastic label? Bapakers are always saying, “Bapak said this” and “Bapak said that”. These members do not seem to have any experiences of their own. As a result they can be really boring—they are probably bored with themselves. I am impatient with people who cannot talk about their own experiences or from their own

receiving but always have to put Bapak up there to show that this is what must be done.

“Don’t...!”

“Don’t...” advice is freely dispensed by some helpers and by some of the more “experienced” members to younger and newer members. If you get hit by this sort of advice, suggest to your elder statesman that you receive the reality or otherwise of this advice with them. That is the beauty of the latihan: you don’t have to take anything on trust, you can receive it for yourself.

Lecturing

This is an occasional practice amongst some helpers. Please do not encourage them as they are robbing you of direct experience. Rather than listen to the lecture, why not go and receive for yourself, with the lecturer. You do not have to take their word for it.

Stand on your own feet

The core of the Subud experience is that you receive, through your latihan directly from God—...what is suitable for you and what is not. It follows from this that if you are committed to and diligently following your latihan that you should be able to [must] stand on your own feet. You need not rely on anyone else to tell you what to do or where to go in your life—you have your latihan...a direct link....