

The Introductory Period

by Helissa Penwell

There was no introductory period in the early days of Subud. Many people joined without much preparation to receive the latihan; for example, some attended a lecture about Subud and then were invited to stay to be opened directly afterward. At the end of the '50s, when centers and local helpers were being established, Bapak instituted the three month 'Probationary Period', later renamed 'Applicant', then 'Introductory', and now sometimes called 'Inquiry Period'. The helpers generally accepted this time of talking to applicants as an important part of their job, and, understandably, tended to justify it by pointing to perceived benefits for the applicant. Recently there has been criticism of the Introductory Period. Some, especially among younger or newer members, say that it is too long. They say that people these days are not willing to wait for three months, so it is an obstacle to their coming to Subud at all. Moreover, they say that it reinforces the image that Subud is an exclusive, secret society that does not welcome newcomers. They claim that the harm the 90-day period does outweighs the benefits — if telling people they have to wait months before being allowed to join prevents them from coming in the first place, how does that help? Given these differing opinions, it's time we reevaluated the Introductory Period through more realistic eyes. Let's review some of the claims helpers make for keeping it as is.

Most helpers maintain that it is a good idea to talk with people before they are opened to give them an idea of what the latihan is and what it might mean for their lives. Few of us would want to return to the time when a person was opened without any preparation whatsoever. Most of us accept that there are a few basics about how to best receive the latihan that everyone should know. However, does it take three months to communicate these? Too often these basics are covered in the first few weeks and then the helpers end up filling the rest of the time in discussions which may not always be beneficial or appropriate. We all have heard stories about a few helpers preaching their beliefs to the applicant, listing rules, condemning lifestyles, or sometimes just generally trying to meet their own ego-needs for attention or dominance. Now these helpers' negative behaviors don't necessarily stop after the person is opened, but at least the dynamic is changed — the person isn't trying to accommodate the helpers because he wants to receive the latihan. He can tune them out or walk away once he is a member. However, more commonly the helpers just end up telling personal stories of their experiences. Usually this is innocent enough and a source of entertainment. Occasionally they may be too 'wild' and the applicant becomes frightened about what the latihan might do to him. Or, if he likes what he hears, he might get unrealistic expectations, thus setting him up for possible disappointment, perhaps contributing to his eventually leaving Subud. A shorter introductory time would limit these kinds of interactions.

Helpers have noticed over the years that three months gives the applicant more time to prepare inwardly to receive the opening. That is certainly true of some people, but in the long run is it worth it? Let's say two spiritually identical twins, A and B, come to two different Subud groups. Twin-A is opened two weeks after coming, as is the policy of his group, and Twin-B is opened in the traditional three months. If you compare them at the time of opening, then Twin-B may receive more deeply than Twin-A. However if you

compare them both at the three month mark, then who receives best? Is it the twin who is doing latihan for the first time, or is it the one who has already done latihan twenty times? And, what about a year later, or five years later — does Twin-A catch up to Twin-B's initial advantage, assuming that there is one? If there is some benefit to waiting for three months, we can't be certain that it is more than temporary. It may be that a shorter period could yield the same results. In the end the most important consideration needs to be whether any benefit for the small number of applicants we have today outweighs the greater benefit of creating a more open, accessible, and inviting Subud that could attract many more people.

Some helpers claim that meeting with newcomers for three months helps them to stay in Subud. This sounds good, but is it true? Given that over 90% of all Subud members leave, how can we say that anything we are doing contributes to keeping people in? But, let's say there's some truth to the statement. One possible compromise would be to meet with and then open a person no more than one month after coming, then continue to meet with him regularly afterward for two more months — three months altogether. Meeting with the new member after he receives the latihan, rather than only before, could actually be more beneficial than the present process: the time could be used to do special latihan with him, if he is having difficulty feeling his latihan; it could be used to introduce him to testing, when appropriate; and the talk would tend to be more practical, focusing on his own experience of the latihan.

Finally, in addressing this topic, helpers typically say, 'We can always test to open someone early, so what's the problem?' Even though this is true, the newcomer may still have to wait three months. That leaves us with the issue of having a policy that contributes to the negative image of Subud as being a closed up club that judges whether the person is good enough to join. Adding to the problem, some helpers are even reticent to tell the applicant that he can ask to be opened early, preferring instead that he somehow figure it out on his own. Even if he does ask, in some groups they might postpone the testing, accompanied by excuses, until weeks or months go by. When the testing is done, it may be influenced by a helper's strong prejudice against opening people early. My friend, Abraham Spivak, related this story from many years ago: 'A wealthy man came to Subud quite interested. He was told about the probationer period of ninety days. He said that he couldn't wait, and would like to be opened right away. The helpers said it couldn't be done. The man left. Later, when Bapak heard about this, he said quite simply, they should have opened him.' We would do well to emulate Bapak's flexibility in this regard.

Now at this point some people might be asking, 'Why don't we just test to settle this question?' That just won't work at this stage of the discussion. Let's imagine that we gather all the National and International Helpers together to test about shortening the Introductory Period. Then let's imagine also asking all the members below the age of thirty-five years to test the same thing. What are the chances that the testing results would be the same? And if different, wouldn't each side distrust the other's testing? Each group would feel that its testing was correct, and the result would be that the respective opinions would become more deeply entrenched by being 'supported' by testing, thus making continued dialogue even more difficult. No, this is not an issue that lends itself to the Quick Fix Test. We need to talk amongst ourselves in our own groups, in internet groups, and at gatherings; we need to do it in a respectful way; and it shouldn't be just helpers, but everyone. Really listening to various viewpoints is an opportunity to help break down our own prejudices, which block receiving creative solutions and are

obstacles to receiving guidance. This will take time, but we need to get started.

In conclusion, most of us want new members to come to Subud. We do not see ourselves as an exclusive, secret society, and we don't want others to see us that way, either. If we are projecting that image in today's world, then we need to adjust ourselves and our procedures to seem more welcoming. We don't need to be throwing up obstacles to joining Subud at a time when our numbers are dwindling. Some are saying that shortening the Introductory Period would be a step in the right direction. We need to seriously consider it.