

An Adequate Humanity

By John Elwyn Kimber

*The free provision of a flying saucer
Is little use to man-at-end-of-tether,
Ballasting himself with scrip or scripture.
Full power could send his planet out of orbit:
The captain waits till he regains composure.*

After five years of Subud Vision, it would appear that deadlock has been reached. The would-be-reformers have made all the important arguments. The conservatives, for the most part, continue to decry them as impious mischief-makers. Subud continues to lose more members than it attracts or retains. There is now more talk of an alternative organisation, offering a no-strings Latihan on much the same terms as T'ai Ch'i or Hatha Yoga sessions.

As I understand the proposal, the Latihan would be presented as neutrally as possible to give the new practitioners more opportunity to come to their own conclusions about it based entirely on their own experiences. This might work, at least for some: opinion in the West seems far more polarised between hard-line religious opinion and hard-line atheism than when I was young. Agnostics willing to contemplate the possibility offered by the Latihan may be more likely to come from the fringes of atheism than the ranks of self-identified 'believers', so making the approach to the Latihan as agnostic as possible seems a sensible step.

But on reflection this seems like an incomplete solution. The Latihan may be an 'exercise', but there is a self-dedicatory and aspirational aspect to an opening into the Latihan which is not like taking up the practice of oriental calisthenics. To what or whom would such recruits be able to dedicate themselves? Would they always come spontaneously to such a sense of personal dedication, guided solely by their inner intuition?

Subud started on a wave of visionary and prophetic inspiration. In the West the core-group were ex-Gurdjieff students looking for a more devotional, less analytical approach to mystical experience. The Latihan seemed like the answer to a prayer. Without that inspirational expectation to carry people through the ups and downs of the process, I can only too easily imagine most recruits to the local Latihan session drifting away once the immediate novelty has worn off. And this is probably the fundamental sense of Bapak's recommendation 'man needs a religion' - that there must be some kind of strong personal credo with which one's own latihan can interact.

In that sense there has always been more of an unavoidably religious aspect to the practice of Latihan than T'ai Ch'i or Hatha Yoga. This may be why Subud is so susceptible to its own devotional tendencies, for better and for worse. So perhaps in addition to trying to accommodate the agnostic, we need to think harder about the relationship of the Latihan with religion. How may we improve our understanding of the pitfalls, the better to liberate the aspirational power of the individual's relationship with his or her own Latihan?

A few suggestions. My first thought is that Sufis preserve a valuable definition of what a spiritual exercise is, as distinct from a prayer or meditation or similar contemplative practice. This is that the purpose of a spiritual exercise is essentially purgative. It is meant to improve the inner condition of the practitioner so that he or she is more open to spiritual influences. It is not itself expected to be the source of those spiritual influences. The spiritual exercise empties and cleans the vessel, but does not necessarily fill it up again. That may be the job of a subtly-different aspect of our inner natures. And obsessive cleaning for its own sake is not a sane or healthy thing to do.

All of which may perhaps suggest why Subud religionists are going astray by taking the part for the whole. A religion provides a transcendental philosophy, an emotional focus, a body of scripture, a powerful source of symbols, imagery and the like for visibly representing an invisible spiritual reality, and above all a liturgical routine which can be followed by a community of believers. This gives the heart and mind something to do. The human faculties which need to be set aside in Latihan can be given free play in the sphere for which they are better suited. Something similar is true of artistic expression. The gist of Bapak's point would seem to be that the Latihan should be balanced by something else.

When Subud itself becomes the practitioner's religion by default, the 'credo' followed is a mish-mash of ideas picked up from Bapak's talks. 'Bapak's Islam' seems derived partly from Islam, partly from the Sufism of Rumi, Suhrawardi, the Qadiris, and the Naqshbandis, and partly from Indonesian folk-belief intertwined with vestiges of Hindu tradition. To the Subud believers, this superstructure of belief may all-too-often become a self-confusing and inhibiting barrier to the effective practice of their own Latihans.

For mystics, an intense devotion to the potentiality of the transcendental - some sort of Faith, in other words - is usually essential in some shape or form, even if it is an agnostic form. But many Subud members have got it into their heads that they should mistrust all of their emotions, not just in Latihan but at all times. And even though some kind of metaphysical or theological understanding, or misunderstanding, is unavoidable so long as we are equipped with brains, many Subud members have got it into their heads that it is unspiritual to exercise their critical faculties at all.

This kind of idiocy is what creates the cult-like ethos in Subud. Unsurprisingly, to orthodox Muslims it comes across as dangerous and incoherent heresy, and to Sufis as a degenerate presentation of their own traditions, as Dirk Campbell has noted in his Subud Vision essay 'Subud and Sufism'. This is hardly an encouraging state-of-affairs either for Subud members or their critics.

So whether we are speaking of religiously-minded conservatives or art-loving agnostics or anything in-between, the problem of presentation may be a more subtle one: how to prevent the problem of fixating on the Latihan itself or upon the organisation which is making it available. And this is to say nothing of the melancholy truth that no new Subud-like organisation, open to all comers, is going to be any more immune than Subud to the recruitment of 'weighty friends' - bores, bullies and busybodies - for whom exercising control over others is far more interesting than the practice of a mere mystical exercise. I can foresee no one miracle reorganisation providing the solution to the problem of slow decline. There is no substitute for a more profound appreciation of what the Latihan is and is not, and what it may and may not have to offer that is not available elsewhere.

Meanwhile, we live in a dangerous, evil, and insane world, in which accessible opportunities to cultivate any kind of contemplative higher awareness are all too few. It would appear to me to be the duty of any committed practitioner of Latihan at least to help ensure that those who might benefit from Latihan are aware of its existence and can access the group-network, which means supporting the group-network. So the most pressing question would seem to me to be how best to achieve this. I would suggest that where decision-making power has been centralised the process should be reversed, wherever possible, so that the national, regional, and local groups can respond flexibly to the situations in which they find themselves.

Other than this, should anyone happen to ask me, I could only advise others to do as I do. I intend in future to support and to avail myself of any Latihan-group regardless of whether it calls itself a 'Subud' group or not. I take Subud at its word these days, that it is a supra-religious organisation which offers no teaching of its own and is intended to be compatible with any religion or none. Bapak has never been my guru. Subud has never been my religion. I neither expect nor desire to go to some neat little celestial suburb of Subud when I die. If anybody finds these statements impious or mischievous, well, that is their problem and not mine. I remain what I have been for all of the thirty-five years since I was opened: a sort of heterodox western Hindu with wide religious interests and an underlying faith in the power of the Divine Life Force, Holy Spirit, Shakti, Baraka, or whatever you want to call it.

Their problem and not mine? I do not say these things in order to be offensive. I do not despise Bapak or his advice. But if I needed Bapak or Ibu Rahayu to be my guru, or 'Bapak's Islam' to be my religion, then the Latihan would be a failure and there would be no point in practicing it or having anything to do with Subud. As I've stated elsewhere, as a heterodox western Hindu the nearest thing I have to a guru is Sri Aurobindo, who emphasises the same things as Bapak, the need for surrender to the Divine, the transformative power of the Divine, and thus the evolutionary spiritual potential of consciousness, but expressed in ways which I find far easier to assimilate.

It was through a blend of receiving via Latihan and insights into that process derived from Sri Aurobindo that I was finally able to overcome the problems I described in 'Confessions of an Ex-Latihaneer'. This does not make me an Aurobindonian devotee so much as someone who has found a valuable alternative source of advice, but I am well aware of the likely knee-jerk reaction even to such a modest declaration from some quarters within Subud. I speak as I find: and those who find in my remarks only some heretical and sinister recommendation that we should all indulge in wanton 'mixing' are, I'm afraid, merely proving the point of all those perceptive Subud Vision contributors who have so often pointed out how fearful, inward-looking, and cult-like Subud thinking has been allowed to become.

'Man needs a religion', says Bapak, and 'choose the religion that is easiest for you'. As there is no modern Hindu spiritual figure more universally-expected than Sri Aurobindo, I can hardly be accused of any perverse unorthodoxy of my own. His followers are for the most part conventional Hindu devotees, but that does not alter the revolutionary inner dynamic which he recommends, how closely it parallels that recommended by Bapak, even how closely the development of phases of receiving in Aurobindo's circle coincides in time with the development of Subud. It looks suspiciously to me like a single Divine initiative at work, with its seeds planted simultaneously in different cultures.

Nor are there no other parallels elsewhere, in other religious traditions: the most famous mystical meditations of Teilhard de Chardin, for example, notably *Le Messe sur le Monde* and

Le Milieu Divin, were written at the same time as the advent of the Latihan. Subud members should have been looking for evidence of the Divine Life Force at work in the wider world from the time of the advent of the Latihan onwards. That they have failed to do so says far less about the expansiveness of the Divine Life Force than it does about the neurotic narrowness of all too many Subud members - spooked perhaps precisely by the unexpected and awesome power of their Latihan experience, as we all may be at times. But we need to get over our own crises in order to make any spiritual progress.

I continue in the stubborn certainty that the Divine Life Force has the power to transform and transfigure not just the individual soul, but 'harsh reality' itself. The best way to play one's own part in this ultimate cosmic drama is to plunge in and go wholeheartedly with the flow, not to stand on the brink nervously dipping a toe in the water. Those who do the latter should not be allowed to discourage or hold back the less-inhibited. For all of the foregoing reasons I recommend that all practitioners of Latihan retain a lively interest in the wider world of religion and spirituality and look for common ground with other movements wherever it is to be found. Any new transmission of the Latihan to others may depend on this kind of outward-looking dialogue.

But above all, I would encourage others to make a declaration similar to this one: that I do not cede my spiritual autonomy or individual conscience to Subud, Bapak, Ibu Rahayu or anyone else; that I do not allow the editors of Subud Voice - or even Subud Vision - to tell me what to think or feel; and that I follow my own better judgment and 'continue whole-hearted, my other loves and loyalties distinct and clear', to paraphrase the late Robert Graves. In fact, the Latihan - or my Latihan, at any rate - demands no less.

Newer members may feel at times that they lack the self-confidence to stand up to quasi-religious peer-pressure, but they can at least be assured that the substantial testimony of the Subud Vision contributors now exists, much of it written by Latihan-practitioners of many decades experience. This represents a collective view of the significance of the Latihan and how it should be presented and practiced at least as authoritative, if not more so, as anything emanating from Cilandak, or any of the official organs of Subud's rather pretentious International Bodies. It is vitally important to grasp that the Latihan does not belong to Subud, or to Cilandak, or to Ibu Rahayu: it belongs to the world. And in case we still need it to be, we should recall that that's official: Bapak said so. In the last analysis your Latihan belongs to YOU. You are entitled to your Latihan and to your own relationship with your Latihan, and once you're opened, nobody can take it away from you.

I want to say one last thing, perhaps particularly to encourage those who in the years to come are determined to maintain a Latihan-practice, yet may find themselves far from congenial company, except possibly via the Internet. It is this: that the most underestimated aspect of pursuing the Inner Life is the priceless value of friendship. In my early years in Subud, I had a friend who had problems with receiving as he would have wished. He had been to Cilandak. He had tested the problem with Bapak. He undertook epic long Latihans under the supervision of Mas Sudarto. No result. We did some Latihans and testing-sessions at home together. His receiving improved immediately. Was this because I was a more powerful spiritual dynamo than Bapak or Sudarto? Probably not, but the difference was that we were friends. Never underestimate the spiritual power of friendship. One good friend in the Latihan is worth a whole conference-centre full of Ibu Rahayus and a whole army of international helpers. So, if possible, find a good friend to do Latihan with. It can make all the difference.

Ultimately the outward health of any organisation dedicated to transmitting any means of higher awareness depends on its inner condition. An optimum inner state may not be best represented by those who seek controversy for its own sake, but neither is it upheld or encouraged by those who misidentify spirituality with a lack of controversy, mere "peace and quiet". The real issue is whether whatever this or that group of people is doing, or not doing, is furthering the spiritual progress of humanity as a whole.

Whether inside or outside Subud, the spiritual future of humanity will not belong to the false Pharisees, hypocrites and dogs-in-the-manger who 'shut the Kingdom of Heaven in men's faces, neither entering themselves, nor suffering others to enter' (Matt. 23). It will belong to the pioneers who answer the acute spiritual challenge of our time with an adequate response. And spiritual adequacy in the twenty-first century will require nothing less than a radical transformation of human nature itself. We need to learn how to avoid perpetually falling short of our own higher humanity. The Latihan remains a very potent means of furthering this aim, and, whatever our intellectual differences, that priority should remain uppermost in our minds.