

## A Dead Parrot?

By Marcus Bolt

Mr. Praline: Look, matey, I know a dead parrot when I see one, and I'm looking at one right now.

Pet Shop Owner: No, no, he's not dead, he's restin'. Remarkable bird the Norwegian Blue. Lovely plumage.

Mr. Praline: The plumage don't enter into it. It's stone dead.

Pet Shop Owner: Nononono, no, no! 'E's restin'.

(From 'The Dead Parrot' sketch – Monty Python)

Forty years ago, when I first enquired about Subud, I was told that its core experience, called the latihan, was 'a one-to-one, direct contact with the Life Force ruling the universe' and that it was a uniquely individual experience, as old as the hills, but newly sent in a 20th Century, life-on-the run format. I also picked up that an Indonesian called Bapak had been chosen by this power and, after a period of 'cleansing', realised he could pass this contact on to others directly. He had then made it his mission to make the experience available worldwide.

This explanation sat comfortably with me in those heady 'Maharishi and the Beatles' days. I saw the latihan as the culmination of my long search for a way to release my 'true self' from both inherited and adopted psychological 'hang ups', thereby becoming at one with nature and at peace within – ideas gleaned from a piecemeal study of mysticism, 'pop' Zen, the psychology of Jung and experiments with hallucinogens. The concept still rings broadly true for me today.

This latihan not only appeared to be exactly what I was looking for – a purely experiential process, free of religious dogma, rules and study, but it worked – in spades! Within months I was experiencing less anxiety, feeling more contented and my old zest for life had returned after a period of deep mental anguish and depression.

At the time, Subud, the organisation, was growing in numbers – slowly but surely – and those members I met and befriended were over-brimming with energy and excitement over this astonishing 'gift' we had been given. Only those with a religious bent talked of Allah, God, the soul, faith and worship, and although they were regarded as quaint by the rest of us, they were as tolerantly accepted as the Gurdjieff followers, flying saucer fanatics and train spotters among us – the only caveat being, 'Fine, but don't do it in latihan'.

Also, back then, the organisation seemed to exist solely to hand out membership cards, and helpers were there to help people join, to time the latihan and to have a stab at answering any questions that might arise. 'Surrender' simply meant 'going with

the flow', 'sincerity' implied nothing more than coming twice a week, while 'patience' was taken to mean, 'Don't try to go faster than the process.' And that was it – all you needed to know; now just get on with it.

Over the next twenty years, a variety of animistic and Indonesian customs (from ancestor placation to selamatan for the dead) and Sufi concepts (such as hierarchic forces) entered our culture, while Abrahamic religious terminology was being woven into Subud's official and insider languages. Then in crept dewans, wings, complex committee structures, international enterprises (all of which failed) and a belief that we were, somehow, 'saving the world'. I had no problem with any of this (each to his own) and a lot of it was predictable; after all, Bapak – by now considered a 'Prophet' by many – was both an Indonesian and a Muslim and had studied Sufism when young. But today, I wonder why did he allow and even encourage it? Especially as he told us, time and time again, not to copy, or try to be like him, but to find our own true natures, to be ourselves.

In 1987 Bapak died, and since then Ibu Rahayu (who'd already had a proclaimed 'ascension') has been increasingly afforded equal status with her father, as she travelled to World and National Congresses, giving talks to the shrinking band of the faithful. In truth, she brings little that is new, merely reiterating and entrenching deeper the now ingrained religiosity, and her remit seems to be 'save Bapak's legacy at all costs'. This, unfortunately, not only blocks evolutionary change, but also empowers the theists among us, and today international helpers tour the world testing questions such as, 'If it is the Will of Almighty God, may we receive, how do we feel the work Bapak still does although he is no longer with us?' and 'What is the importance of reading Bapak's and Ibu's talks?' as benchmarks of spiritual growth. Meanwhile, helper gatherings are testing such questions as, 'How is it when you are surrounded by tempting angels?', 'How would Almighty God have me be?' and the convoluted, 'What is it that is given for me to do as one of Bapak's helpers in accordance with the Will of Almighty God and my own inner nature?' (I'm not making these up), not forgetting that the UK's largest Subud property sports a public signboard displaying 'Times of Worship' – just as random examples.

After forty years, it feels as though the Subud organisation has segued from a joyful freedom song into a doleful dirge, and now, with a dwindling membership, it even seems to be failing in its own stated aim 'to facilitate the spread of the latihan worldwide'.

In fact, during a recent question and answer session with Ibu, a member asked about Subud's lack of growth. Her response was, in part, 'So if you feel, "Why has Subud not succeeded in its task in the world?" the reason is that many Subud members are not really putting Subud into practice yet.' 08 CDK 6

This is the first time the Subud hierarchy has even hinted at a systemic failure, and Ibu puts the blame squarely on our shoulders, telling us we're not using what we've been given.

She continues, 'We all need to be introspective, "How come when I tried this, it didn't work; I tried that, it didn't work?" The reason is that your personal state is not strong enough to lift the obstacles you face in this world yet... That shows that the conditions

in this world still dominate you....’

Now she seems to be indicating that the latihan hasn’t worked on us after all, adding, ‘So, one’s circumstances improve as one’s value, one’s quality as a person improves...,’ which has echoes of the Victorian, Protestant work ethic – ‘worldly success is a sign of personal salvation; the poor are merely Godless ne’er-do-wells’. (At what point did this new god of ‘material success reflects spiritual growth’ enter our pantheon?)

So, Subud is failing to grow because we’re either too lazy or too base seems to be the official position.

Personally, I think there are darker reasons. Could it not be, for example, that ‘God has switched channels’ to use one of Bapak’s dire warnings? And could that have happened because we have turned Subud into what looks suspiciously like a weird, pseudo-religious cult to the outside world, forgetting the neutrality of the latihan, as well as claiming it, and God, as our own and ourselves as special? Or, worse, are we, like so many tired spiritual movements before us, at that stage of desperately trying to turn the movement into a religion, complete with sacrosanct dogma and ritualistic behaviours, in order to compensate for a waning power?

Whatever the reasons for failure, it seems that we’ve lost the original plot somewhere along the way and somehow made Subud look unattractive to the rest of humanity.

I have to say, my personal latihan still ‘works’ in the cathartic/mystical terms that I joined for, and it still seems easy, fresh and totally free of religious bias. No issues there – but I am embarrassed by what Subud, the organisation, has become and wish it could go back to its roots, dropping the inflated concepts of ‘missions’ and ‘saving the world’ as well as its dressing-up box of cultish paraphernalia, its overblown claims and ‘official’ religious language.

We need a top to bottom reformation, and I fear if we don’t radically reform, and soon, we’ll end up like most spiritual movements – extolling the beauty of the plumage, refusing to admit that the parrot is, in fact, dead.