

Sailing to Ithaka

Anniversary Reflections

By Marcus Bolt

Part 1: An Ongoing Odyssey

On Friday, the ninth of October, 1968 at 8.00 pm, I entered the rented, octagonal Quaker Hall located in Stevenage (UK), took off my shoes and glasses, and, while attempting to 'ignore those exercising around me' as requested, was duly opened in Subud.

Despite our being aware nowadays that measurement of time can never be exact and that years vary in length, anniversaries, it would seem, still help to satisfy our desire for order and meaning (hence annual celebrations of birth, wedding and Holy days). And it is a well-documented phenomenon in counselling circles that anniversaries of personally important events often bring up a wealth of emotional baggage and, if the events were traumatic or life changing, can give rise to much soul-searching.

The forty-third anniversary of my Subud Opening is, for me, no exception and the soul-searching question I'm asking myself is, 'Has the Subud latihan delivered what it promised on the label all those years ago?'

While floundering for answers in a sea of uncertain memories, confused feelings and conflicting understandings, I serendipitously came across this remarkable little poem. It's called 'Ithaka' and it reprises Odysseus' journey as an allegory of human life. It was written in the early 20th Century by the Greek poet Constantine P. Cavafy and translated by Philip Sherrard.

As you set out for Ithaka
hope your road is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
angry Poseidon — don't be afraid of them:
you'll never find things like that on your way
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare excitement
stirs your spirit and your body.
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
wild Poseidon — you won't encounter them
unless you bring them along inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.

Hope your road is a long one.
May there be many summer mornings when,
with what pleasure, what joy,
you enter harbours you're seeing for the first time;
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations

to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
sensual perfume of every kind —
as many sensual perfumes as you can;
and may you visit many Egyptian cities
to learn and go on learning from their scholars.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you're destined for.
But don't hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you're old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.
Ithaka gave you the marvellous journey.
Without her you wouldn't have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.

As I read the poem, it became, for me, a near-perfect analogy for my latihan journey to date. Having a teleological mindset, I too perceive 'Ithaka' as a goal. When I first started latihan forty-three years ago, this goal was simply to find my true self; and when I first joined, it did indeed seem like arriving at a new port, packed full of fine things and sensual perfumes. But then, as time passed, I bought into the Subud culture wholeheartedly, because I needed a sense of family, a sense of belonging, a sense of meaning and purpose to my life — and I needed to feel special. Subud delivered in spades — it was glorious and I loved being a member of the tribe, convincing myself I was, after all, special and chosen. Ithaka then became a future Abrahamic-style after-life — actually attainable by my soul as long as I did my latihan regularly over the years to come with 'patience, acceptance and submission' and followed to the letter what the Divine Will pre-ordained for me. I believed that what that actually would be rolled out in due course.

In fact, since being opened I have done two or three latihan a week without fail — that's about six and a half thousand — completed some thirty-six Ramadan and a few Lenten fasts, read most of Bapak's talks and probably every book written about Subud, even written one myself and, most of the time, I've been a helper or held a committee role. No 'Divine Will' in the Subud sense has thus far been delivered.

I did bring things with me 'inside my soul', for many years mapping my new experience over my old, hanging on to such concepts as the perversely punishing yet loving God of the Abrahamic religions, plus the lack of self-worth created in my childhood — the Sufic/Subud 'lower forces' construct exacerbating the innate Christian notion of being born in sin. Thus I convinced myself I was on a low level and only years of latihan purification would take me to the true human level and eventually raise my *jiwa*, my soul, to perfection and guaranteed entry into the after-life. But, over this half-a-lifetime-plus, and despite my diligence, I've had no spiritual

revelations, no out-of-body experiences, nor have I done any astral travelling; I've never seen an angel, had any visitations or contact with dead relatives, seen any blue lights, felt any inner vibrations — none of the plethora of documented Subud experiences.

So, I began to ask myself if this meant I wasn't made of the right stuff, that I was too deeply flawed, too 'dirty' inwardly, or that my ancestors had been? According to the Subud canon, that would be the case. But now, paradoxically thanks to the latihan, I don't believe that for a moment. I've never been particularly promiscuous, I've never hated or wished anyone harm, nor robbed a bank.... I'm OK, basically. And today, after a long journey, indeed 'full of adventure and discovery', I perceive Ithaka as simply arriving at the moment of my death with no regrets and a sense of having done my best. Perhaps this will change yet again and I will, eventually, 'have understood by then what these Ithakas mean'.

The 'arrival at new harbours' I interpret as the discovering of fresh ideas and new concepts; the collection of 'fine things' I sense as the gaining of wisdom (through the experience of mistakes made as well as the grasping of both contemporary and classical concepts); the finding of 'sensual perfumes' I intuit as the enjoyment of all life has to offer: creativity, culture, sex, friendship, close family and even my unique self. And I do think I am 'wealthy with all I've gained on the way', believing that my latihan experience has made me realise I am rich in my own, unique way, and that the reward is the journey I am on — my life now, not an imaginary future state of bliss.

So, now, forty-three years after being opened, what have I got to report? There has been much inner change in terms of personal psychology, in that I no longer feel a victim or, when things don't go according to plan, that an avenging God is punishing me. Happily, I can say there are still 'summer mornings when, with what pleasure, what joy, I enter another harbour I'm seeing for the first time': a new place, with different and more exciting fine things. In other words, life is still inspiring, creatively stimulating and well worth living. One 'fine thing' that has taken me completely by surprise is the development within myself of empathy to the point where watching the evening news can be too painful to bear....

So, yes, Ithaka has given me a marvellous journey and I do feel wealthy with all I've gained on the way, particularly all the positive changes within me, and I would recommend the latihan experience and its individual process to anyone, and in that sense, the latihan has delivered what it promised on the label.

But, hey! I'm reading the poem this way, correlating it to my latihan experience and making the associations and assumptions I'm making, because that's the way I am; and I am the way I am in my seventieth year because of what I have experienced on my so-far lifetime's journey to my personal, and ever-changing Ithakas, interpreted through my conditioning. It couldn't be any other way.

A theoretical physicist would tell you such an interpretation is bordering on the anthropic (the cosmological principle that we see the universe the way it is because, if it were different, we would not be here to observe it). But that's to be expected; it's what humans do. We're hard-wired to create meaning out of chaos, but the meaning we create can only relate to the program that's been uploaded in our genes, through

our ancestry, our culture and our familial upbringing. The whole is then constantly modified by our life experience 'as we go'.

Thus I'm certain we all create meaning from the raw material 'out there' through our inherited and experience-tinted lenses and, in particular, our 'culturally translatable replicators' — our language — whether we be Christians or Baha'is, Danes or Australians, football fans or academicians, peripheral or fundamentalist Subud members.

In my world, it appears that those with a religious bent, those used to, or believing in (or even expecting), religious epiphanies, angelic visions, manifestations of the spirit etc. will indeed experience these through the latihan process, but again, only in relation to the depth of their belief (or surrender). While, those who came into Subud through psychedelic or 'mind expanding' drugs, deeply imbued with Zen Buddhism, will be searching for and expecting Zen moments of spontaneity, of selflessness, of 'At-one-ness' — and they will find them. Similarly, those with a more psychological take on things will experience the latihan and subsequent inner change as psychological events, catharses, or breakthroughs in self-realisation on their personal road to individuation. And so on — all the multifarious variations of experience depending on an individual's mindset, adopted or inherited belief system and cultural filters.

Basically, what I'm saying is, in direct relationship to how deeply one can let it be so (believe, surrender, submit), it seems to me now that the workings of the latihan can be interpreted as whatever you perceive or want them to be. In turn, to my mind, this broadens out the latihan, making it bigger than any 'religion'. It becomes an aspect, mechanism or tool of Creation — call that what you will: the Power of Almighty God, The Will of Allah, Dharmakaya, Tao, Prakriti.... Perhaps too, it's what Bapak meant when he said, 'Everything is in the latihan.'

The Subud Belief System

So far so good... The latihan has done wonders for me in my own terms and I feel full of gratitude for it (but to whom or what, I have no idea).

However, I also sense a huge disappointment over the development of a restrictive and narrow belief system within the Subud organisation, one which begets an unwillingness to embrace the possibility of change and improvement through analysis and questioning of its outer *modus operandi* — and I find this ironic for an organisation that, on paper, is dedicated to change for the better.

Most older members still believe in, as I did for several decades, Bapak's highly seductive Sufism-based thesis that the world is constructed of four forces: the material (which is responsible for our thinking), the vegetable (responsible for our emotions), the animal (drives and passions), and the human (apparently, a lower and a higher human force; Bapak is not clear on what part of our makeup these are responsible for, but I would assume any quality that animals do not possess — compassion, for example).

The theory is that any one of these forces driving our mind, feelings, passions, etc. (collectively called 'nafsu') usurps the role of our *jiwa* (inner nature, or soul), which

should be in control and fuelled by higher, angelic/spiritual forces. The a priori assumption is that most humans are on the material (or satanic) level and have undeveloped 'jiwas'. This situation, it is believed, has come about through the inheritance of past (ancestral) sins and our own wrong behaviour. Thus the latihan becomes the instrument of purification of an individual's collective wrongdoings. The more one is purified, the more one is able to receive guidance through surrender to Almighty God, the ultimate aim being to become a true and noble human, exemplars being Jesus, Muhammad and Bapak, able to follow unerringly what the Divine Will prescribes for them while on this earth.

Consequently, progress towards this ideal is judged by the faithful through the cultural screen of Bapak's and now Ibu's talks, Varindra's and other writers' works and a wealth of documented Subud experiences — plus an admix of the ancient writings of the various Holy Books, with their confusing and sometimes conflicting blend of traditional wisdom, folk lore and superstition.

Subud has also developed, in line with all the New Religions, a tribal mythology that believes it is the only true way and is sent by Almighty God to save the world. These 'moving forward while looking in the rear-view mirror' attitudes (thanks to Marshall McLuhan for that metaphor), coloured, highlighted, deemed important or meaningful by the religious-minded, would be no problem if restricted to individuals — but when the thesis is presented as mainline Subud, as a 'one size fits all' tribal belief system, something has gone horribly wrong. Then, to me, it's as though Subud, the organisation, becomes merely the box that an exciting gift once came in.

To my mind (or should I say my cultural filters) it seems as though, since Bapak's death in 1987, the Subud Association, as a corporate whole, has slowly metamorphosed into an entity reflecting the more obvious aspects of Bapak's outer persona, presenting itself, metaphorically, as an elderly, eastern gentleman, with all the religious trappings of unshakeable and unquestionable belief in an Abrahamic, punishing/rewarding God and deep reliance on the Holy Books for a narrow, black and white morality. Not in itself a terrible thing — better than a Torquemada or a Hubbard, I suppose. But, if Subud is essentially about change for the better, about finding one's own, unique self (which is how it was originally sold to me), this restrictive, homogenising, Bapak-centric and religious view of the latihan is surely counter-productive, particularly if one of the beliefs is that the latihan is for all humankind.

I think it unfortunate, or perhaps inevitable, that those who enjoy power, or the organisational side of things, generally seem to perceive the latihan as something of a religious nature. Consequently, their view, their take on things, becomes the dominant 'flavour' in our outer dealings.

Such attitudes within the Association do not affect me personally (to each his own), except when I am asked about Subud. Then I can only describe my journey in my own psychological/metaphysical terms and say how good the latihan has been for me, asserting that I believe the organisation should be neutral in its presentation of the latihan, and then feel obliged to warn that the Subud organisation, having set itself up as a closed-loop, self-congratulatory system with its own, narrowly defined, second-hand religious Ithaka 'has nothing left to give me now' on a personal level... but it may, of course, hold something for them. So, it's a case of *caveat emptor*... you

have been warned.

PART 2: Arriving at a new harbour

'We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking up at the stars.' [Oscar Wilde]

While I was struggling with this article, the term 'universal intelligence' came into my mind. I had never, to my knowledge, come across the term before, so I Googled it. The concept of 'Universal Intelligence' was first expounded by D. D. Palmer in his 1910 book, *The Chiropractor's Adjuster* in which he wrote:

As the Intelligent Energy that operates the human machine is derived from an Infinite Source, the Universal Intelligence, and is, therefore, limited only by the capacity of the brain to transform and individualize it, it is evident that any excess, deficiency or irregularity of action, either of which is a form of disease, must be due to some mechanical obstruction which prevents its normal transmission. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/D._D._Palmer]

When you clean out all the religious references within the Subud canon, you are left with a philosophy that concurs fairly exactly with the above.

Before I'd managed to lace all this together, I realised I had been thinking along the same lines. To me, the term had meant the ability of energy, whether in human or animal, insect, plant or material form, to organise itself in relation to its environment. Everything that exists, it seems to me, is a manifestation of an Intelligence that is superior to the organism's comprehension, whether individually or grouped. Everything in the universe chemically interacts, reproduces, finds sustenance and manages to survive (or evolves to a surviving species). It would seem that everything is in contact with a universal intelligence *that knows what to do...*

Theoretical physics today posits that before the existence of the universe we know, energy was in equilibrium, or symmetry, as anti-matter constantly cancelled out matter. Somehow, the symmetry was broken and all the matter that exists was created in the Big Bang, initially as elementary particles. From this developed giant clusters, which collapsed then exploded, forming more and more complex atoms, then grouping into suns and galaxies and planets, creating ever more elaborate molecules until life developed, eventually giving rise to sentience and creatures such as ourselves with the ability to observe, measure and conceptualise our own existence. It's all so stupendously intricate and clever; and had the Universal Intelligence got it wrong by a billionth of a fraction of a degree, it could never have happened.

I recently watched a TV programme about yellow slime mould (*Physarum polycephalum*). When placed on a sheet of glass and presented with oat flakes matching the towns surrounding Tokyo, a blob of this single-celled, brainless slime mould constructed a network of nutrient-channelling tubes almost identical to the existing, highly efficient rail network which was painstakingly created from the ruins of the war by a team of talented engineers.

Then I saw a clip on You Tube: a bird was being fed bread in a garden; the bird took the bread and dropped it into the fishpond; when the fish rose to nibble the bread, the

bird snapped up the fish....

And then there is the placebo effect. For example, in 2002, group of patients with serious knee cartilage problems underwent a common type of knee surgery known as debridement at the Baylor College of Medicine, but some were given 'real' surgery, others 'placebo' surgery (i.e. the placebo group were also anaesthetised and the same key-hole surgery incision made in the knee, but no actual procedure carried out). Throughout a two-year follow-up, the 180 patients in the study were unaware of which procedure they had received; those who received actual surgical treatments did not report less pain or exhibit better functioning of their knees compared to the placebo group. In fact, periodically during the follow-up, the placebo group reported a better outcome compared to the patients who underwent actual debridement.

These stories stick in my mind, all seemingly having a common thread running throughout, stimulating my cultural filters to now interpret my latihan experience and the apparent cleaning up of my psychological act — all done by merely singing and dancing around a hall for half an hour, twice a week over the last forty-three years — as the most sophisticated placebo effect, but one that not only works on my body, but also on my mind, feelings, emotions and innermost parts. In turn, this sophisticated placebo effect appears to me as a mechanism of Universal Intelligence — that which 'knows what to do' — whereas my mind alone most certainly doesn't.

Looking back, I can see now that when I joined Subud forty-three years ago, I was unknowingly seeking to re-contact that Universal Intelligence, that I already 'knew' that it existed and that I had lost contact with its guidance, but could never have expressed that even to myself.

As a corollary, I can only surmise that there must have been an element of wish or desire to be opened already within me (interpreted in Subud helper terminology as 'readiness'). In turn, this leads me to believe that nothing whatsoever was 'passed on', but a self-permission was given for me to contact and release that which was already there, and had been since conception, but was hidden under my socio-cultural conditioning.

So, that's where I am today. You may not agree with me, you may pooh-pooh my idea, you may already know more than I do, but it's where I'm at. However, at least I recognise that my understanding may change yet again, for my journey to Ithaka is, I sense, far from over.

Coda

Last night, during the emptiness that sometimes comes at the end of a physical workout-style latihan, I became aware of myself looking up inwardly, directing my awareness to where I guess I imagine my Creator resides.... It suddenly occurred to me that I have done this throughout my forty-three years of latihan experience and that this looking-upwardness is a deeply ingrained fixation originating in my Christian cultural upbringing. Churches have steeples pointing heavenwards, priests raise their arms in supplication, hymns proclaim, 'Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty! /Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee' and classical religious paintings invariably show light and angels descending from above and Saints gazing up to Heaven. And our language is riddled with phrases such as 'Heavens above' and 'it smells to High Heaven'.

I then slipped into becoming aware for the first time that what I was attempting to connect with was already within me, inexorably connected, because, just as everything is, I and my Creator are one and the same thing.

Later that night, I stayed up to watch 'Beautiful Minds' on BBC 4. This particular programme was about Professor Jenny Clack, the world-leading paleontologist, who made the breakthrough discovery that tetrapods (four-legged animals with digits) evolved from fish-like creatures while still in the water, not on land as has been assumed for a century or more.

She ended the riveting account of how she tracked the fossils down by stating that (I paraphrase), 'What I constantly remind myself is that we, the human species, are only temporarily here', implying that we too will eventually evolve to extinction and another species will rise in our place. When questioned on this, she thought that perhaps the next species to rise would be the rodents.

Again, I saw the Universal Intelligence evolving itself, rising to sentience in one form, then another. What fun it must be (or we must be having) to do that over and over across such an enormous time frame....