

What the...?!

By Marius Kahan

About thirty-five years ago I went in search of enlightenment and found Subud. I make no claim to have become 'enlightened' (I don't even believe that's possible — not on this planet anyway) but through the latihan I've experienced things I could never have imagined possible. As an enquirer I sensed a buzz, a spark among Subud members that I hadn't seen elsewhere and the latihan has absolutely delivered on the promise I inferred from that. Some might suggest that this had more to do with youthful enthusiasm than spiritual energy but the feeling that Subud really was something special persisted, for a few years at least.

But to my eyes something has changed because, looking around today, I just can't seem to find what I recognise as Subud anywhere. I see isolated pockets — embers of the Subud that I believe could have been — but in general it's proving difficult to triangulate a location for the real thing.

I'm only too aware that there are those who will write this off as 'a typical Subud Vision diatribe' but bear with me, because this should be of concern to everybody who wants Subud to live up to its stated ideals of being non-denominational, free of dogma and teaching, and inclusive of all humankind. Which, if you give it a moment's thought, is exactly what Subud Vision is about.

In the 'good old days' people were quite content just to do their Latihan, secure in the knowledge that Bapak would pop over every couple of years to tell a few strange tales or nag the brotherhood about enterprises. Nobody had to take charge because the voice of authority obviated any need for the membership to think.

After Bapak had the temerity to die on us, my impression was that a handful of well-placed people started driving Subud forward on the basis of their interpretations of Bapak's edicts. From where I stood, it seemed that if consensus could not be reached through testing, then the loudest voices would carry the day — democracy, logic and common-sense having been excised from the process.

So what was a non-denominational environment for people of widely differing beliefs (but a general trust in the founder) has become, roughly twenty-five years down the line, a formulaic spiritual movement with socio-political pretensions in which criticism of the association is considered sacrilegious. Subud is already in decline and, unless serious action is taken, said decline may well be terminal. People are staying away in droves — if Subud were a corporation the receivers would already be winding things up or trying to sell it to Kraft Foods.

The Authorised Version of Subud is like a runaway train with a handful of maniacs at the controls who, despite impending catastrophe, have jammed open the dead man's handle, convinced that if they continue resolutely on their present course everything will work itself out.

It won't. Just look at the numbers.

Subud seems to have calcified and the reason is as simple as it is obvious. In terms of general attitude, where Subud used simply to be an association of people practising the latihan, it's now largely morphed into a place where you are either a 'True Believer' or persona non grata. Thirty years ago, despite the fact that we mostly all did Ramadan and adopted the peculiar vocabulary Bapak had introduced, Subud zealots were the oddballs — almost everybody seemed to be relatively open-minded. But the dynamics of fundamentalist zeal have crept into the establishment and now it's the free-thinkers who are held to be heretical.

This was bound to beget something like Subud Vision which is, of course, dismissed (by those who are more comfortable not asking the hard questions) as an instrument of dissent that threatens to fracture a previously harmonious association. True believers are at the helm, while those who follow the oft-quoted Bapak maxim of 'don't believe it until you've received it' are deemed rebellious and lacking in insight. Oh the irony!

There's nothing new in what I'm saying — not on the Subud Vision forum at any rate — but the recent world congress yielded something that is, for me, emblematic of the problem and a stark indicator of how alarmingly Subud has lost its way. It came in the form of a document entitled:

COLLECTION OF SOME OF THE QUESTIONS
SOMETIMES PRECEDED BY RELEVANT QUOTES FROM BAPAK
THAT WERE TESTED AT THE
WORLD CONGRESS IN NEW ZEALAND

I hate to sound uncharitable (no, really — I do) but the whole document rankles, right from the cover page. Perhaps it's the phrasing of the title, which offers a foretaste of the muddle-headedness that follows in the main document. What would have been wrong with simply calling it: '*Selected questions that were tested at the New Zealand World Congress*'?

Especially worrying is the clumsily placed phrase, 'sometimes preceded by relevant quotes from Bapak'. Do I really need to point out how completely this undermines the whole notion of receiving for ourselves? Then there's a disquieting credit at the end: 'These questions were suggested by the outgoing team of international helpers.' Streuth chaps, if this is the best we can do we're in trouble!

Part of the reason I see this as *such* a problem is that there are blanket suppositions inherent in the way these questions are phrased, such as the idea of 'worship' and the implication that Bapak's world-view was automatically correct for everyone (even though he repeatedly said that it wasn't). The assumption is that all these questions will be taken on board quite uncritically, when in fact it's only reasonable to subject at least some of them to scrutiny.

By placing these questions under a critical light I'm trying to demonstrate that the testing of hypothetical situations can fog the mind and encourage over-thinking the spiritual. It's not uncommon to do these tests, leave the congress on an emotional high and go home,

only to slip into the same old patterns within days if not hours.

Bapak often stated that change can only come from God — but I would say that ‘change’ is too weak a word for what he meant. Whether from God, the subconscious or some other personal force that we have yet to master, the only *lasting* change is *transformative*; without transformation we stay the same, whereas with it, we *cannot* go back. A handful of ill-thought-out tests isn’t going to change people’s lives, yet few seem to have realised this. Indeed, the prevailing attitude — apparently endorsed at the ‘highest levels’ in Indonesia — seems to be one of ‘don’t rock the boat, don’t change anything. Subud will be OK, because it’s God’s will’. But if Subud is to survive it *must* transform.

I’ve long felt that Subud members’ reliance on testing for just about everything made a nonsense of any claims they might make to having faith in God, but this collection takes the cake. There’s a time and place for testing — and it’s not as a substitute for using one’s innate intelligence and emotional sensitivity.

Almost any question on the list could have been answered using any one of a plethora of useful psychological techniques such as NLP or TA. So why don’t we just forget testing, take our lives in hand (like regular people) and make nice with each other? Then maybe Subud will get somewhere. My feeling is that a lot of the congress testing is not a million miles away from recreational drug use — something to counter the perceived mundanity of ‘regular’ life. And as a recovering testaholic, when I see people testing some of these questions I feel a bit like a friend of mine must have done when he, a recovering alcoholic himself, found someone from his AA group lying on the pavement in Soho clutching an empty whiskey bottle.

Don’t people wonder how the rest of the world gets by without testing? Because on the evidence, they do pretty well: we’ve got aeroplanes, medical breakthroughs, great literature, the Hubble telescope — all created by people not endowed with the gift of the latihan and testing. Where are the fantastic achievements of Subud people? Could it be that leaning on testing has actually *prevented* us from making progress?

I’m all for testing when orthodox reasoning has run out of options — in the case of medical questions when conventional treatments ‘feel’ wrong, for example, (although it’s smart to use science for diagnosis) or when committing one’s child to a school wherein all sorts of hidden traumas may await.

But in general, all we really need to know from testing is that God loves us unconditionally. Whether a saint — or a fornicator, unscrupulous merchant, heavy drinker, pot-smoker, compulsive masturbator or general layabout — God still loves each and every one of us with a force beyond imagining. And once you get that — well, you can go forth and really engage with life, rather than trying to follow something received. Because whether that receiving comes from a ‘higher plane’ or is simply manifesting some subconscious anxiety or desire, something tested is likely to represent an ideal that cannot be attained unless the problem that drove the testing in the first place has been dealt with at a fundamental, transformative level.

I really, really wish that the people who run the WSA would take up the suggestion I made in a previous article for Subud Vision that Subud organise a worldwide poll to define who and what we are, and to use the results as the basis for a democratically

chosen 'mission statement'.[1]

Using modern communications tools — web-based questionnaires and bulk e-mails for example — this is eminently do-able, and without it I anticipate that Subud will fall victim to its organising body's head-in-the-sand approach; we are showing the world not 'the best we can be' but a stultifying caricature of the potentially world-changing movement I joined some thirty-five years ago.

Finally, in order to help everybody out, I've made up answers to a number of the questions posed, thereby saving people the trouble of testing them for themselves while at the same time proving what a handy little accessory the rational mind can be.

I should also note here that there are many assumptions made in the way these questions are phrased. If we are going to use testing, we need really to understand what it is we're testing — and many of the questions asked at congress seem to stand on the shaky foundations of preconception.

For most of my Subud life, thanks to the guy who introduced me to the association, I've had a sort of automatic filter that screened out phrases like 'Almighty God', 'by Your Grace', 'if it be Your Will' and so forth. But recently my filtration system broke down and I can no longer tolerate hearing questions phrased in a manner that dictates, by the very language used, what my perception of 'God' should be. I'm sure that this phraseology is neither conspiratorial nor deliberate — but I think that it does point to a general laziness about the language we use in Subud and may be off-putting even to members, let alone enquirers.[2]

QUESTIONS:

Testing about Aging:

How do I currently feel about getting old(er)?

Are you telling me that you *don't* know how you feel about it? The possibilities are that you love it, you hate it, or — more probably — a little of both.

What difficulties may I confront as I get older?

Why not make your own list? Does anyone really need to test this?

What is the best way for me to care for my body as an older person? My mind? My health?

The answers should be obvious! Eat well, take supplements, exercise, see a herbalist and keep your mind active (read books, write articles, play an instrument, visit places of interest — online if physically unable). There you go.

How do I currently feel about death? How would God have me feel?

What is the best way for me to prepare for death?

Surely, the Latihan is our preparation for death — I've instinctively known this almost since I was opened. If the Latihan is a gift from God, I would have thought it reasonable to assume that death should hold no fear for us. If death is that much of a worry, I can't see how asking a couple of questions in a Latihan hall is going to change that.

Show in your latihan how you worship God according to your own individuality.

Better: Show in your Latihan whether the notion of worship is relevant to God. The idea

of worship is something handed down by religion — we need to establish what we understand by that before we even begin testing it. Personally, I think it would be a remarkably vain God that demanded our worship.

What is my self-image? How could it be? What blocks me from having the self-image I could have? What can help me improve my self-image?

Part 1: I'm in Subud, I'm taking part in this testing, ergo my self-image is inadequate.

Part 2: I could grow an ego.

Part 3: The certain knowledge that I don't want to turn into an arrogant pig.

Part 4: Maybe dropping these ego-centric notions and being a real person.

The Forces or Levels:

What is the material force within me? Where should it be? What is the effect of the material force on my life at this time? When the material force is in its correct place, how does it affect my life?

Part 1: Something about which I'm testing too much.

Part 2: In my wallet.

Part 3: Hard to describe something so intangible at this time in my life.

Part 4: I get to buy the Aston Martin.

The above questions, along with the batch that followed (which I have deleted, but were the same for each force in turn) are the product of circular logic. If these forces are not in their correct places then I'm pretty sure that I cannot even perceive that, let alone correct the imbalance with a spot of testing, whereas if they are in their correct places then there's really no need to test it, is there? And all this assumes that you subscribe to a cosmology that has its roots in Javanese mythology and was a major influence on Bapak. I do buy into it as it happens — but that doesn't mean I'm right!

Testing about Work:

What is the importance of working in our life?

Can anyone come up with a good reply to this? Honestly — who among us, if we won the lottery, would go back to work the following week unless we were one of the lucky few (successful musicians or artists, cutting edge scientists and inventors, Hollywood A-list actors and the like) able to do as they please for a living?

What is my attitude towards money?

Part 1: What *exactly* is meant by this? Very vague if you give it even a moment's thought — are we talking about money I have, don't have, that I see other people having, how I spend it, how I save it, whether it's best just to waste it, whether I should go to the casino and try to win more, etc....

Deepening the Latihan:

Quote from Bapak: 'The way you are able to know whether you are doing the latihan correctly or not is that, when you do your latihan, if it is right, then you have no feeling of heat within you. Secondly, you have no feeling of confusion. You do not feel pulled this way or that by your heart and mind. You have, instead, a feeling of being neither happy nor sad, but just completely at peace. Thirdly, you have a feeling as though you do not remember anything.'

Er... doesn't that pretty much cover it???

How is my latihan when I surrender 30% to the power of God? 70%? 100%?
Totally wrong question — should be 28%, 63% and 104%.

Receive who is your true self. How does your true self express itself in the latihan?

What is the purpose of sitting quietly after latihan?

I think we've all seen people doing tests like these. It goes something like this:

Part 1: MAAAARRRRRIIIIIUUUUS KAAAHHHAAAANNN!!!

Part 2: With loud singing and chest beating!

Part 3: Anyone who needs to test this clearly doesn't get it.

Being Bapak's Helper:

Bapak received a way to become one with the power of God through the practice of the latihan. We are Bapak's helpers because we are helping people to connect to this power through the path (Subud) that Bapak received. Ibu has strongly recommended that we read Bapak's talks.

OK — enough of this 'Bapak's Helper' stuff. We are not Bapak's helpers, certainly not anymore — Bapak's dead. We are supposed to be the members' helpers and unless we really want to deify Bapak and turn Subud into a religion with all the trappings, this kind of terminology needs to be dropped forthwith.

Awakening Testing:

Quote from Bapak: 'Our worship is to make us healthy in body and soul. When every part of us is made alive by the holy force, everything we do is worship.'

The power of God resides in everything. Where is the power of God within my being?

Er... based on the above... everywhere?

How does an American laugh? How does a German, Russian, Englishman laugh?

Nonsense. I can tell you from personal experience working all over the world with people of many different nationalities that the only variations are between individuals, not countries of origin. And anyway, what does it prove? National laughter traits are just another Subud myth.

Peace Testing:

By the Grace of God, at this time: (ahem — more religious-speak...)

In what way am I preventing peace with X [name of the person with whom I have the greatest conflict]?

This suggests that I am in conflict with many people, including one person in particular with whom the conflict is so great as to be unbearable.

I particularly dislike this one. The implication is that we are all such social incompetents that we can't even live at the most basic level of harmony with most people.

When conflict develops out of a misunderstanding I will seek a diplomatic solution — otherwise I disregard it. I have been on the receiving end of some absurd behaviour from a few people in Subud, but I have better ways to spend my time than mooching around wondering whether I can develop a perfect relationship with someone who has either wronged me or taken exception to me for no justifiable reason. Clearly, they're not going to listen to reason and more to the point — as stated above — I don't care. This isn't cold or unfeeling; it's moving on and behaving like an adult.

I do realise that, occasionally, there will be family rifts worth the extra hard work, but the suggestion that we must all have unmanageable levels of conflict in our lives is to characterise us as emotional pygmies. This is perhaps the saddest reflection of all — a public acknowledgement of failure and (with the notable exception of the charitable initiatives) a possible indicator of why Subud has yet to bear worthwhile fruit in the world.

I'll end with a quote from Galileo: 'I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use.' Now *that's* the kind of person we need in Subud today.

Notes:

1. See *Subud Vision*, July 2009, 'Can We Fix It?'
2. See *Subud Vision*, April 2010, 'Watch Your Language' by Marcus Bolt