

An Atheist View

By Merin Nielsen

Kejiwaan day: Almighty God gets mentioned once or twice. That's okay, because in my head it can be translated into 'the laws of the cosmos' or something such. Next, the idea of a 'true human being' comes up and the situation is getting a bit awkward. I'd like to point out that this notion is distinctly religious, whereas Subud is supposed to be non-religious, and it is blithely assumed that we're all on the same page. But hey, I'm apparently the only one present who has a problem with the topic, so to object might be self-indulgent. I keep my mouth shut, though silently vow to speak up if this sort of scenario ever takes place with Subud newcomers around. Anyway, the conversation moves on from lower forces, which I can also manage to abstractly translate into quasi-anthropological terms, when someone raises a point about ancestral sins — and that's done it! I hope to be polite, but it still seems rude to interrupt the proceedings: 'I don't see how latihan has anything much to do with ancestors.' Back comes the anticipated old self-righteous dare: 'Ah, but you really should test about it, Merin.' Or even worse: 'Don't you know what Bapak said on this? I can show you one of his talks.' Sigh.

Let's define an atheist as someone whose overall worldview is satisfactorily consistent and complete without including any higher power. Although such a picture might well be incorrect, I can't readily accept that creation is somehow revealed from the top down. If there's sacred guidance, I would say it originates from within rather than from above. It is also easier to be an atheist if you are skeptical about paranormal events. So its niche is small, but Subud Atheism isn't quite an endangered species. (I've heard there are also a few Subud Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims.)

Much of my life, through times of 'divine discontent', I've liked the idea of trusting in some sort of deity, and have often entertained vague images of a higher power. Particularly after being in Subud for several years, I was half persuaded that a higher power is real, but to no avail. Ultimately I'm a heathen. For me, there's no god or after-life, and not even free will. In response to that type of dry proclamation, a certain well-worn enquiry tends to be forthcoming: Then why practice the latihan?

The question is rather strange, and difficult to answer without expounding a total perspective on life, the universe and everything — and such preaching isn't suitable here. I'll simply say that the latihan helps allow me to feel better, or maybe even become better as a person. It never 'tells' me anything about reality outside myself, but it 'shows' me things about who I am — which is beneficial enough. While it seems to me that many other practices achieve much the same result for people all over the world, I'm sufficiently happy and comfortable with how my latihan has evolved, so I'll stick with it.

Atheists must sometimes wonder if they are considered arrogant for their reluctance to perceive life as involving matters that are necessarily forever inexplicable. One beautiful feature of Subud is the atmosphere of quiet humility that comes from people approaching the latihan as worship relative to some higher power. Moreover, latihan is commonly linked with benefits, like nurturing of the soul, that supposedly transcend everyday tangibles. Usually, I find this atmosphere refreshing, grounding and admirable. But also potentially deluding, because whenever humble attitudes become admired, there's the danger of conceit — especially if conviction is attached — when it stems from 'revelation'. Then the atmosphere can be tainted by the smugness of assuming ourselves to be on the right track.

The nature of the latihan can be elegantly pictured in terms of a higher power or God, just as Bapak portrayed it, and this obviously provides a valuable perspective for some, but not all of us. Bapak's talks came with an inbuilt belief system, and that's clearly fine at the personal, private level. At the interpersonal level, however, even if some doctrine or faith appears to match inner truth, the latihan should not be directly associated with it, or with any particular package of ideas, including atheism.

The source of supposed revelation, which so frequently turns Subud into a quasi-religion, is Bapak.

His talks were understandably framed in the context of his individual cultural background, but took for granted that this was 'the' appropriate basis for advice about the latihan. The outcome was that one particular way of seeing spirituality, a sort of Gospel of Bapak, soon permeated Subud. Today, being a member can have three facets: the latihan, the worldly organisation, and 'Subud-as-a-holy-dispensation' — which may include regarding Bapak as a teacher. For me, this third aspect doesn't exist. Surrendering — in my latihan and my life — has nothing to do with accepting some revelation.

Naturally we want to do the right thing, but often this seems in conflict with the principle of Subud endorsing no belief system. Officially it presents none, yet we're awfully inclined to adopt certain cultural terms, rituals and subtle responses. These reinforce a feedback loop adding up to strongly built-in religiosity, with a presumption that certain concepts are shared. Post-latihan casual small talk becomes one more occasion for unintentionally 'indoctrinating' impressionable new members.

One plausible rescue resides in our shrinking size, gradually helping us to recognise that maybe no other people will ever spot anything blessed about Subud. A further remedy, in my not so humble opinion, would be to stop expressly connecting the latihan with any intrinsic bundle of revelations. Surely a better move is to respect it as affording perhaps handy personal insight or transformation, but without objective truth on offer. That way there just can't be any definable 'right track' for us jointly to be on. Of course, this is exactly the kind of thing that you might expect an atheist to say.