

Unthinkable Decision-Making

By Merin Nielsen

On the 28th of February, Subud Brisbane had a Special General Meeting. After testing with the three candidates for a new chairman, the helpers retired to another room for about fifteen minutes. They emerged to say they had ruled out one candidate, but had been unable to decide about the other two. The ruled-out candidate withdrew her candidacy. At this stage, different views emerged. One view was that the meeting should just take a vote. A competing view was that no vote should take place, since the helpers had not arrived at a conclusion, and therefore that the meeting had to be adjourned. The adjournment was stipulated to allow for helper-committee dialogue during the following week, and also for more members (including more helpers) to show up when the meeting was reconvened.

It is interesting to compare the two views mentioned above. Should the meeting have simply voted? Or is it important for the helpers to first reach a conclusion? This latter view assumes that testing by the helpers is likely to provide a better result, but this assumption was not shared by everybody at the meeting. After all, there is no Subud belief system, so there is no requirement for Subud members to believe any particular spiritual idea, including the idea that it is useful to apply testing in this way. Accordingly, it appears hard to justify overriding the normal process of voting, as this would be imposing a spiritual belief upon all of those present at the meeting. In this light, perhaps testing should happen only at the request of individuals, and purely on their behalf. Nevertheless, a motion was passed whereby the meeting was adjourned.

During the week, one of the two remaining candidates decided to withdraw her candidacy, so in the end there was just one person to vote for. If there had still been two, the helpers would have wanted to reduce the field. Then imagine if helper testing seemed to confirm which candidate was best, but the other candidate refused to withdraw his or her candidacy. Imagine having a candidate (properly seconded by somebody else) who politely declined to test with the helpers about his or her suitability in the first place. Imagine if this was the only candidate. Then it would be illegal not to hold a vote!

I joined Subud on the understanding that it had no belief system. I nodded thoughtfully when it was explained that the organisational side was entirely subordinate to the spiritual side. These were also said to be completely separate, but I think this is not actually the case. Just how is Subud governed? It's not really democratic (ruled by the people) as indicated by the account above. Nor is it theocratic (ruled by the clergy) since committees are not technically obliged to go along with dewan 'guidance', even if most of them invariably do. Perhaps it could be called devoutocratic (ruled by the devout) — although it is odd that many Subud members are in fact devout, considering that there's no official belief system. The belief system is unofficial, yet sustains a comforting sense of community among the more devout members, who appear to regard the less devout members as not greatly trustworthy.

The Subud priority has always been face-to-face decision-making, supposedly permitting those present to offer their input and then submit in an atmosphere of communal harmony, as well as affording the best prospects of all-round accurate receiving. However, face-to-face meetings are also more exposed to the influence of individual status stemming from, perhaps, force of personal expression, lineage, financial commitment to the organisation or alignment with 'truly Subud' ideals — all markers of devoutness. Of course, members with the most status are more inclined to hold committee or helper positions, attend Subud get-togethers, be familiar with Subud protocol, and get nominated for subsequent positions. To Subud's long-standing detriment, failing to question our governing processes means that, by default, we consistently reinforce an inner circle of the devout, which tends to get the most say in Subud affairs.

On top of this, we feel a pressure to give in for the sake of consensus, which it seems imperative to establish before people feel too tired or have to head home. This takes the place of alternative formats (such as internet conversations) that are sometimes more mentally laborious, but would be more conducive to collectively and reliably working out the best responses to a problem. Moreover, it is commonly understood that discussion via the mind is unsuitable within Subud, where we are mystically shown what is right, providing that the mind doesn't interfere. However, 'mental decision-making versus surrendering' is a false dichotomy — they are not mutually exclusive. The use of intellect is itself open to potential inner guidance, just like any other creative or productive human activity. It could be a great mistake to shun thoughtful analysis because of a penchant for testing, whose results may themselves be dubious.

It is also often forgotten that disagreement does not equal disharmony. Instead, the Subud fear of disharmony can result in repressed conflict or dismay among members who experience power plays or peer pressure. In accordance with traditionally conceived Subud standards of spiritual virtue, though, any sense of being dominated is dismissed as driven by lower forces. Passivity, deference and humility thus masquerade as representations of social harmony: clumsy counterparts of the latihan's patience, trust and sincerity. When members attempt to submit and turn off their minds during our meetings, they are setting aside the very faculties needed to be aware of any inadequacies or flaws in Subud proceedings.

A certain 'article of faith' permeates Subud culture, leading to some odd questions for testing, outside anyone's experience, sometimes concerning 'the group' or 'Subud' or 'the world'. It is, by implication, the belief that there is always a best course of action — the one God favours — which testing allows us to grasp. I find this notion disturbing, encouraging over-confident acceptance of custom-made interpretations of received platitudes based on contrived issues.[1] In addition, helpers can be put on the spot of apparently having to interpret what God favours (much like priests). Of course, it's very natural for the results of testing to be fuzzy, but if the receivings are too different, it might seem embarrassing. As everybody knows, this is why helpers frequently confer together in private before announcing any outcome about testing for chairman — though the lack of transparency is hardly reassuring. Furthermore, there's the amazing presumption that God actually has a preference about this or that. For example, perhaps no members are available who would be a good chairman, but several could be adequate in the job. So is it fitting for testing to be used with the agenda of revealing 'the one right answer' when this might not exist?

Subud members, and especially helpers, really need to distinguish between speaking in terms of their own beliefs and speaking on behalf of everyone who is present — especially in composing a question for testing. Basically, testing questions that conform to the de facto Subud belief system, but that go outside the standards of everyday society, are improper impositions on other people. The more such views are allowed to dominate, the more they'll be taken for granted as the only permissible modus operandi of Subud. They will become entrenched, like fixed, dogmatic beliefs in a religion, but they are plainly incompatible with the beliefs of most people who are not in Subud, as well as many who are. The path out of this dead-end requires the more conservative, devout members to loosen up and put more trust in the less devout. This includes giving up the reins of value-laden, belief-loaded testing.

Subud's democratic character is very weak. Neither World Congresses nor National Congresses are designed to allow significant alterations. Subud's primary tendency has long been to defend the status quo, partly due to over-reliance on testing by helpers, who are liable to be pretty conservative, and partly because congresses are incapable of properly focusing on new proposals. Congress working parties, for instance, typically meet during congress at much the same time as each other, carrying little weight in terms of the plenary sessions. Compounding the problem, Subud was organised so as to regularly replace its officers (except helpers) all at once. There is also huge difficulty in its international level operating across diverse cultures and languages. In addition, any ideas coming from the membership must pass from local level to regional level to national level to zonal level before they can be

considered by the WSC — a journey that may take years. Along the way, national councils might want any proposals to have been first examined by every regional centre; zone meetings might want proposals to have been examined by every national body; and WSC itself might want proposals to have been examined by every zone.

None of us joined Subud just to make its organisation work. We primarily signed up because of a desire to work on our inner selves. Very few are interested in Subud committee work other than to escape it. Originally, Subud had a charismatic leader in charge, and everyone more or less enthusiastically went along with whatever came down from on high. Unfortunately, we're mostly still in that same mindset, but nothing is coming down from on high! Subud these days appears extremely rigid — not only is there a lack of bold initiatives — neither are we making ongoing adjustments to the fast changing world. But if Subud doesn't move in new directions, then its diminishing membership will surely lead to its disappearance.

If Subud had a capacity to adapt, what kind of modifications could or should be tried out? How about decision-making through video conference? Or committees employing discretion without deferring to helper testing? WSC or national councils might be persuaded to proactively support experimentation at the group level. For example, how about helper positions being voted for, or being open to review, or no helpers at all? Shortening or scrapping the applicant period? Somehow advertising Subud? No more testing about who becomes chairman? No longer promoting the talks of Bapak or Ibu Rahayu? Officially recognising that the many 'explanations' offered by Bapak were often essentially teachings of a religious nature? Endorsing the formation of 'Bapak fan clubs' that would be totally independent of the Subud organisation, allowing anybody to honour Pak Subuh as they might personally choose, but without committee sponsorship?

For the more devout Subud members, most of these proposals probably sound like heresy even if they wouldn't be called that. Such seemingly radical suggestions threaten the idea that Bapak was divinely guided in setting up Subud's once-and-for-all structure. To the devout, they stand for lack of faith and even spiritual incompetence, representing an unthinkable betrayal of the belief system through which Subud culture is blessed — although in reality they might be the most appropriate solutions to Subud's crisis of survival. One of the less clear-cut helper duties is 'to monitor the unity of the membership', but it might be helpful to check whether 'unity' ever gets confused with 'conformity' in relation to our customs, and whether this particular duty is relevant to any situation outside of practising the latihan.

The philosopher Daniel Dennett says the secret of happiness is to find something bigger than you are and devote your life to it. For many of us, Subud fits the bill in representing a way of life. For many others, however, it's merely an adjunct to daily life. If it is your way of life, then you could celebrate this privately without making the official organisation reflect your belief system. Nor is it necessary to keep Subud the way Bapak left it. It's very easy to see Subud and Bapak as one package — that, as the latihan is special, the person who introduced it should be special too — but this unnecessary, intrusive connection with the paternal figure of Bapak is a profound deterrent to outsiders, who are likely to find it cultish.

When a person applies to join, they are not obliged to agree with any of our peculiar Subud beliefs, such as 'it is best for chairmen to be tested into the job, instead of being voted in'. We don't ask them to believe that Bapak was special in any way or that Bapak's words are even relevant to them, apart from advising on the conventions that we've adopted for practising the latihan. They are told that Subud has no religious basis. Yet Subud's unofficial though obvious, built-in, Bapak-oriented belief system, which is both cherished and flaunted by our devout members, makes mockery of the claims that Subud is non-religious and that the latihan is indeed available to all humanity. The big pity is that the latihan, in the form maintained by Subud, might be lost before it ever has a realistic chance to mature as a neutral, non-partisan spiritual practice genuinely available to modern people.

Note:

1. Two examples:

'How is it for the group if the committee puts a Subud symbol above the door?' One person gets wideness, like a desert. But surely, as somebody points out, the proper interpretation is wide like an ocean, full of life.

'May we each receive how it is for us to read Bapak's talks at least once a week/just once a month/ less than once a month/never?' One person says they received an empty head, but successively getting fuller. The emptiness is interpreted by somebody as transcending the mind, which all concur is a positive sign for reading the talks.