

Boushma Is Too Deep to Understand: Just Do It

By Ramon Kubicek

Several years ago, while visiting Michael Scott (a Subud member) in Tangiers, I met a man he'd invited to dinner who told those gathered his unusual story. He'd been a successful computer engineer, married with a family, an elder in his fundamentalist Christian church. Then his company suddenly sent him to Aden on a six-month contract. There he met a variety of Muslims, who he said were the most spiritual people he'd ever seen in his life, as well as kind, generous, patient, and loving. As he told us this, his face grew long. What was the problem, we wanted to know. Well, he said, shaking his head, these people were all going to "Hell," and by this we understood he meant they would earn this fate because they were not Christians. We were somewhat stunned by this information and didn't quite know how to respond. Ever since then, he had been visiting Muslim countries on his holidays to try to reconcile his experience with his faith. It wasn't working for him, however, as at the time of the telling he had lost both his marriage and his status in the church.

Every now and then, I still think about this man and his saddened, even haunted, face. He was a "good" person, clearly intelligent and sincere, and yet had had his life wrecked by the inability to solve this problem of faith. For those of my middle-class background and education, such an idea (that hell was reserved for non-believers) was absurd, even pernicious, because unchecked such beliefs often led to terrible events, such as persecution or religious wars.

I am also reminded of the time when I was seven years old and a nun visited our classroom. With her habit and severe demeanor, she had a kind of terrible authority when she spoke, in her quiet voice of judgment. She told us that babies who were not baptized would go to "Limbo" if they died. Limbo was No Place, and they would never be rescued. They were in limbo forever. I remember my horror, my sense of injustice, my attempts at age seven to reason what it could mean to float around forever, nowhere. (It is true that recently the Catholic Church has changed its mind about the reality of Limbo, but that change hardly undoes the utter conviction and insistence of those earlier views.) Her message, by the way, was a prelude to collecting money for mission schools in Africa.

No amount of reasoning would ever change the point of view of the computer engineer or of the nun. But I am not always sure we in Subud are any better. In our zeal to maintain our superior position on the spiritual map, do we occasionally suffer from inflexibility and blindness? Are we complacent about our personal and group circumstances?

In my thirty-five years of doing the latihan, I cannot say that I have developed exceptional awareness, insight, understanding, compassion, kindness, tolerance, equanimity, and ability to inspire others. Nor can I find evidence that as an organization we are doing anything exceptional in the world. Many members feel that Subud

represents divine revelation at this time in history. This may be true, but I like the traditional saying that there are “ninety-nine paths to God”. Why limit God’s action? I do not like the point of view that divides the world into “us and them” and automatically consigns other paths to a lower tier.

We point with pride to such efforts as Susila Dharma. However, I don’t know of any extensive spiritual organization that is not doing equivalent work. Buddhism, Sufism, Taoism, Yoga, all have their charities.

Neither our enterprises nor our cultural efforts are anything special, that is, anything more than ordinary businesses or good-natured cultural expression such as we might find at a summer camp. So it would seem to me that we need more humility. We have an extraordinary spiritual practice, called the latihan, but for whatever reason, we are not able to manifest the results in the world in a way that makes the world take notice. I have seen more examples of narrowmindedness and complacency in our groups than I have of enlightened behavior. We rationalize our misconduct and sloppiness and give it special names like “crisis” and “purification”. We separate ourselves from the world by suggesting that our form of inner guidance is superior to other, non-Subud forms, that being “opened” our inner natures are moved by divine guidance and so our stubbornness is actually strength, our indolence is surrender, our judgment of others is really perception, our feelings about life are not just feelings, but “receiving” direct from the source. However, were that to be true, surely there would be more concrete evidence, other than people’s intense convictions.

I have heard that the reason Subud does not grow is that God has “a special plan for us, and when the time comes....” I have also heard that the importance of the latihan is not about numbers of members. Possibly, such statements are insightful, but it is also true that those statements have been made by cults, by persecuted religious groups, and even by committed environmentalists. Feeling that one has a special destiny is actually quite commonplace, so how do we differentiate?

Subud is a path of liberation, but to what extent is it also a thought-control and conditioning system? We like to think we are spontaneous, but in my experience we tend to be conformist and to reward conformity. The ordinary way to see if Subud has a thought-control system is to see whether all forms of dialogue and questioning are permitted. Presuming respect for others, are we really interested in hearing ideas that don’t happen to match our own and is there ever a venue for them where such different ideas are not patronized?

Most of us would admit to feeling that the latihan is the most precious gift we could have received. We want to live in a “Subud-minded” way. But many of us would never admit in public to being a member of Subud, nor do we even take the trouble to legalize our Subud names, so we walk around with two different names, like spies or cool dudes with street names, except that we are not cool. We try to find philosophical and spiritual reasons for not publicizing Subud, but I suspect that often we are embarrassed by what we do in our halls and whom we do it with. We can’t find a language that fits the ruling paradigms. Yet certainly Tibetan Buddhism, Yoga, and occasionally Sufism all have rituals and ceremonies, special forms of dress, and foreign words that do not deter their members from talking in public and writing about their experiences.

So I ask myself as I look back at my thirty-five year practice: have I failed myself? Have I

failed to actualize those possibilities in me that were within my reach? Maybe. I can only go forward, looking to find the elements to a new sense of purpose.

It might be interesting to apply one thought experiment to our spiritual path in the form of a questionnaire.

1. What qualities does a bogus or deeply flawed spiritual path possess that we could recognize?
2. Do we rationalize our flaws and contradictions as “tests” of faith?
3. Do we think that neologisms on a spiritual path suggest a superior form of knowledge at work, say, “boushma” (made up)? (It is boushma working; you do not understand the ways of boushma.). As a corollary to this question, ask yourself next time you come across a non-English word used as an English technical term or an entirely new word, whether you feel you have encountered a new way of looking at things (e.g., “*jiwa*” for “soul”). A non-spiritual example might be a government that wishes to justify higher taxes substituting the phrase “economic growth and stimulus levy” for the word “tax”. The acronym, the “E.G.S.L. might even make us feel good about paying more.
4. How could we know if we were being deceived?
5. What evidence would you demand as signs of individual progress?
6. What would constitute a deal-breaker for your continued attendance and devotion?

Applying such a thought experiment could lead us to insights about our own ingrained patterns of thinking and feeling and to our self-imposed limitations. Without something like this form of contemplation, it is premature to talk about giant projects or other forms of external change. We could then develop a special kind of detachment, not quite covered by the word “detachment” so let us call it “boushma.” All you need is love and boushma.

Keep saying it, boushma. Say it every day and at the end of a week it will have attained a reality in your mind that will be difficult to reject.