

A Spiritual Democracy

By Ragnar Lystad

In one of his books, Varindra Vittachi tells the story of how, in the early days, he complained to Bapak about the behaviour of an elder Subud member. Bapak then tested with him. To make a long story short: the gist of it was that the elder member was on a spiritual level high above Varindra's, but he was still capable of behaving rudely.

The incident illustrates a general rule, relevant on every level, but rarely recognized in most religious and spiritual movements. As long as we are human beings, we are all targets of innumerable influences and we cannot avoid making mistakes. Bapak himself acknowledged this, saying that only God is without fault. The problem is that if we have experienced, beyond a shadow of doubt, the spiritual eminence of another person, we are likely to think and feel that that person is infallible in every respect and should be obeyed without question. Many of us even have a strong yearning that it should be so. It relieves us of the burden of having to find answers ourselves. We can just listen or read — and the truth is shown to us. We can have faith in something that we can even see, in clear print, with our physical eyes.

Personally, I have had such experiences with Bapak that I cannot possibly doubt that he was a person of high spiritual stature. It was not just (as I was told) that the latihan had come to us through him, and that the latihan itself had such an effect that my life was profoundly altered. It was also his personal charisma and the power he radiated. And in a couple of instances he definitely gave me important personal advice, through hints that did not even seem directed at me. For all this I was — and am — very thankful. So it took some time before I realized that he was capable of making mistakes. The sad story of the Subud enterprises — without doubt disastrous for the Subud movement — was one reason. But I also had the opportunity to observe how he sometimes was what seemed to me unjust, unloving and judgmental. All of this conveyed a message that I admittedly was very slow to grasp: that I had a responsibility, especially towards myself, to evaluate carefully everything he said.

The history of Subud, and of Bapak himself, is but one illustration of how and why a spiritual movement easily becomes a theocracy. To achieve personal spiritual enlightenment seems so difficult that we tend to rely instead on belief in a teacher who claims to have attained superior insight. We prefer a theocracy.

A theocracy ought to mean that God is ruling, but in practice this is not the case. The leader or the clergy claim to speak on behalf of God, and the power lies in their hands. This corresponds to one definition of theocracy found in modern dictionaries: e.g. 'a system of government by priests claiming a divine commission', and is clearly in accordance with what we observe. Certain people emerge as spiritual leaders believed to be inspired by a spiritual power immensely higher than the level of the common member. The leader makes the rules and literally lays down the law because he has spiritual authority, often assumed to come from God Himself. And if we believe that the words we read or hear come from God, how can we reject them? How can we object, if we really experience that this person emanates a supreme spiritual power? We put ourselves in the position of pupils, sitting at the chair of our teacher in order to receive wisdom, but without any right to dissent or opportunity to discuss what we've heard. We

do not really learn anything that way, except to believe what we cannot verify. Such attitudes are dangerous. Theocracies are dangerous.

In a spiritual movement especially, it is necessary to cultivate a perceptive, discerning attitude. Each one of us must be able to make up his or her own mind individually, based on available evidence, personal experience and personal awareness, thus learning to nurture a free mind that is not easily led astray. This attitude should be prevalent all the time and in every single instance. It is not sufficient to make a general assessment of a special person or a special teaching, and let that assessment colour all our later involvement.

Such an attitude, if we could practice it, would imply a new direction for Subud — although it is not really new, it has simply been put aside and forgotten. Subud would be moving towards democracy. Learning to make a personal judgment is actually a training in democracy, something indeed only possible in a democracy and a necessary requirement for a working democracy.

At the risk of becoming overly philosophical, I would say that the idea of democracy is a spiritual one, that has gradually been accepted in most of the world as the only political system that is worthy of universal acclaim. Democracy recognizes the right and even duty for everybody to have an independent opinion, upheld by the lofty ideal of every single person's innate value. This is clearly a spiritual idea. Why then should democracy be restricted to politics and secular institutions? If it is a spiritual impulse, it should be even more relevant in spiritual movements.

It is easy to take it for granted that democracy cannot work in a spiritual movement. We tend to assume that such movements preach unalterable spiritual truths that are impossible for the ordinary person to verify. How can we do without such doctrines? What is there to cling to otherwise? How can we vote about eternal truths, when we are only too aware of our own incompetence? Many will say that democracy fails here; certain things cannot be decided by voting. That is true, but not every spiritual movement needs to profess or even agree upon specific eternal truths. It is not a must for a spiritual movement to have a teacher or a holy book. On the contrary, democracy is the most natural solution in spiritual matters too, at least in Subud. The way of the latihan cannot be a road spelled out in sacred texts; it has to be an individual path to personal insight. And what each individual attains is that person's private achievement. The way is individual and the wisdom learned is also individual, adjusted to the needs and capacity of that person. And the touchstone that everything must ultimately be measured against is the experiences, feelings and receiving of the single individual. Unless there is a need for joint action with regard to a particular issue, there is no need to arrive at a unified approach. So that is not something we should aim for. This is how democracy ideally works. And who decides whether joint action is needed? The membership, of course, following democratic procedures.

It follows that we cannot find guidance in something said or written many years ago by some all-knowing paternal figure. As previously stated, we cannot vote about truths, and neither should we deny that eternal truths may exist, but the value of believing in ideas that are not genuinely our own is questionable and sometimes will even be negative. This means that the question of what is the truth — if there is interest in such a question — could be discussed, argued and deliberated, including browsing through pertinent literature, in a setting where everybody could take part. Then we would not have a

school with a dominating teacher, but a democratic community for grown-up people who are aware that they may never find the final answer to everything, but are still encouraged to form their own opinions, that may and should show much variation and diversity. This would also help us concentrate on our real tasks, which are simply the practice and dissemination of the latihan.

We can also combine a spiritual approach with democracy in another area, where the present situation is also unsatisfactory, though less so. A spiritual movement, like any other organization, must be properly organized. In order to function at all, it needs some basic practical and administrative rules. In Subud we need to agree on such matters as how to arrange the latihan, admit new members and so on, and we could also do with a collection of useful recommendations for the newcomer. In addition there are economic and explicit organizational matters. In a secular movement, such issues would be decided by voting, in most cases by representatives (chosen by voting). This should be the case in Subud too, but we also have the possibility of finding guidance through the procedure called 'testing'. The essential point is that this has to be done in a democratic way, i.e. every member should take part in voting between alternatives, while consulting his or her personal inner guidance. What is not satisfactory, if we look at the present situation, is the disproportionate influence of the helpers, who have not been chosen democratically.

It may not be necessary to distance ourselves completely from Bapak and his teaching. We cannot deny our history, but I hope it could be generally recognized that Bapak's talks should be taken with more than one pinch of salt, and that they should not be regarded as a final authority. Further publication of the talks should not be supported, as it gives the wrong signal. Only a tiny proportion of the talks is relevant for the practice of the latihan, and even that should be regarded as mere practical advice that may later be supplemented or changed. It is actually a healthy sign if it is changed, of course by a majority vote.

If we present Subud as a movement which is integrated with a specific spiritual teaching, we diminish its potential. What Subud can offer is the opportunity for everybody to find a contact with the spiritual realm — God — within themselves. The latihan gives people the possibility of making that a reality, but we have to do away with unnecessary teaching and theocratic elements. Then we might even be an example to the world of how to reconcile a spiritual approach to life with the principle of democracy: a spiritual democracy.