

Why Did It Go Wrong?

By Ragnar Lystad

The greatest trauma in the history of Subud was occasioned by the economic disasters following Bapak's efforts to found big Subud enterprises. We have had, in succession, Bank Susila Bakti, PT S Widjojo and Anugraha. Later, without Bapak's involvement, we had Premier Hotels. The search for gold and other minerals in Kalimantan has not yet borne fruit. But such traumas should not stay unresolved. They haunt us, even if we do not think about it. They contribute to the widespread cynicism, disillusionment and lack of self-respect in Subud today.

We have been inclined to put the blame on the whole membership, and especially on those who should have made Bapak's visions reality. It is not difficult to rattle off the errors they made. The question is: Did they not, after all, do the best they were able to, given their personal limitations? If we are going to learn from our mistakes, we have to first make an assessment of what happened on all the various steps in the process. So it is appropriate to take it from the beginning and spotlight the ideas and ambitions that were the starting point.

When I left Cilandak after the World Congress 1971, I had a certain feeling of sadness, which I did not understand. Looking back, I feel that maybe it was because the decision to start a Subud bank set us on a wrong track.

It is questionable whether the aims of the enterprises (I will not recount these aims here, as they have been explained at length in Bapak's talks, especially in 1972) would have been met, even if the enterprises had been successful. But in any case the problem is that we were not able to run such enterprises.

Those who have tried to embark on a new enterprise know how difficult it is to establish a stable and lasting co-operation even between just two or three people. In general it is not advisable to start something that presupposes an immediate, well-functioning co-operation between a lot of people who do not know each other or have not worked together before. It is especially difficult in Subud where the lines of command tend to be indistinct, where everybody feels that they are on an equal footing, and where spiritual deliberations are often given the same weight or more than the strictly economic ones. It is established wisdom in business life that a company does not start big, but small, and has to grow like an organism. Well-known examples are the American IT companies that started in a garage. If you look at the history of successful companies, it is difficult to find examples to the contrary. Even if we find such examples, we will find that they did not start from scratch, but were backed by another business organization. To start so ambitiously was scarcely professional, and in every case it doomed us to failure. Thus, there is no need to look for the specific mistakes made in each instance. The idea was faulty in itself and could not end in anything but fiasco. And that is also the answer to the question in the title.

Connected with this is the disease, common among religious people and especially prevalent in Subud, of mixing spiritual and worldly affairs. We appeal to God all the time, through the procedure we call testing, for help in business and economic affairs.

This is to debase the latihan, but it also puts us on a straight (sometimes crooked) path to disaster, because here the mind is the relevant instrument. It is true that Bapak asked us to reserve testing for spiritual matters only. Enterprises, however, could and should be run with indications received from within. But when there is a

pressing problem and no receiving, it is tempting to resort to testing. The distinction between receiving and testing can be blurred. In the end, there is no doubt that numerous members got the impression that Subud enterprises could and even should rely on testing.

Why did we discard common business principles and embark upon something so precarious? Some of us were not really professional, but others were and should have known better. The reason is that we thought we had the backing of God himself, so that we could not fail. Such an idea is preposterous, even dangerous. And Bapak's own receiving could not be doubted. Also a blameworthy attitude.

I do not claim to understand everything that happened. What I can perhaps understand, to some degree, is my own attitude, which was shared by some of my co-members. I remember well how I made an extraordinary effort to make money for investing in the bank. At that time I really felt an obligation to invest, because I believed that the bank was necessary in order that Subud should grow and more people have the possibility of receiving the latihan. I was not the only one. And these same attitudes are found in Subud right to this day – among some, while others are in the grip of disillusionment.

Why we were led onto a path that could not succeed, we may never understand. If we believe that these initiatives were willed by God, we also have to believe that we were willed to fail. Someone I knew, when pondering over this problem, received the words 'sacrificial play'. So it might have been just a way for us to learn something, maybe the difference between what is our responsibility and what is not. If so, we should really take the lesson to heart, and also to the mind, because we paid a lot of money for it.

Big enterprises with aims that verge upon the spiritual presuppose that there are a lot of people with essential spiritual qualities such as the ability to set self-interest aside and to distinguish between the spiritual and the material. This is utopia. Large-scale Subud enterprises are therefore also utopia. The time has never been right for great Subud enterprises and probably never will be. As we cannot have an obligation to do what is beyond our capabilities, we have no obligation in that direction and we never had, so in a deeper sense it may well be correct that we failed. Maybe fiasco was not just the only possible outcome, but also the best possible. The time has come to put all the big Subud enterprise stuff aside, as something belonging to the past.

This does not mean that there was anything wrong with the recommendation to do enterprises. Encouraging us to combine spiritual activity with work in the world is clearly relevant, especially for those who have a strong spiritual inclination. Even so, doing enterprises may not be the right thing for everybody. Maybe it's best to go back to what we were told in the beginning: always try to be aware that we, in our daily activities, do not stray too far from our direct inner guidance. Some of us may feel this as a liberation.