

The Case for Not Having Helpers

by Rosalind Priestley

Some of the finest people I have ever met are helpers: dedicated, caring, self-effacing, generously expending their time and energy to keep their Subud groups running smoothly. They do a lot of good work. Why then am I wondering if we would be better off without them?

It's something I've been thinking about for most of my forty years in Subud, roughly half of them spent as a helper. I've had a chance to experience Subud from both sides and although being a helper has its rewards, I became more and more aware of the problems and frustrations. The following are the inherent difficulties I see with the helper's role.

- Helpers tend to function as elder brothers or sisters, dispensing knowledge and advice and keeping an eye on new members' progress. This can easily encourage any innate tendencies in the members towards over-dependence and passivity. On the other hand, new members who value their independence and don't like to be given advice may feel nervous around the helpers, especially if the limits of helper authority have never been spelled out for them.
- Helpers are sometimes felt, especially by newer members, to be at a higher level and possess special abilities. If helpers actually believe this, it can lead to over-confidence and arrogance; if members believe it, it can set them up for eventual disillusionment.
- Helpers constitute an inner circle in the group. This automatically means that everyone else, except perhaps the committee, is relegated to an outer circle. Helpers' work, helpers' latihan and helpers' meetings create a kind of bond between the helpers which doesn't exist among the other members. To the members the helpers can appear to form a social clique from which they are excluded. The helpers, as part of their role, tend to feel responsible for almost everything that happens in the group, at the social level as well as the spiritual, and this makes their burden very heavy. This division can generate subtle feelings of resentment on both sides: the members resenting their lack of access to the effective centre of group life; the helpers resenting that they have to carry so much responsibility with so little support from the members.
- For the most part applicants only get to know helpers, with whom they develop a feeling of comfort and familiarity. Other members are mostly strangers to them. Once they're opened, they still very much rely on the helpers, but on regular latihan nights the helpers may be busy with other helper responsibilities. New to the group and possibly a little taken aback by the strangeness of the latihan, they may be wary of the other members, feeling that only the helpers are to be trusted. So they tend to be left on their own during the period when they most need answers, reassurance, acceptance and integration. This is especially true for new members who haven't come in through relatives or friends.
- Helpers' groups tend not to represent a wide variety of approaches to Subud. They are supposed to be Bapak's helpers. Members that don't regard Bapak as

their 'Spiritual Guide', or that don't accept the standard Subud concepts and terminology, are unlikely to become helpers. Since throughout the organization helpers are chosen by other helpers, a certain conservatism is perpetuated. With the social and spiritual heart of the group inherently conservative, those of an independent habit of thought are likely to be relegated to the fringe.

- This helper conservatism has implications for the way the group functions as a whole and it also affects the applicants, who have probably during their three months' waiting period heard only the orthodox Subud view as expounded by Bapak and may not realize that other approaches are possible and may be represented among the members they haven't met.
- Because helpers' groups are Bapak-centred, they tend not to be open to ideas that are outside the 'Bapak' box, which limits the group's access to its own creativity and intelligence. For example, it's unlikely a group would show interest in exploring the origins of Subud in Indonesian culture, or would include in their library classic works of spiritual or mystical literature.
- The point I am about to make is, I feel, an especially important one. Helpers help. They spend time with members, giving advice (when asked) and testing members' problems. They learn how to listen deeply: how to put their own views and feelings aside and be in a receptive state where they can feel what to say, whether to speak at all, and what the member needs from them. It is a spiritual training in the sense that it enhances our capacity to be humane and makes us wider in our feelings and sympathies—qualities that can carry over to our outer life as well. Helpers through their work also acquire a lot of valuable experience in testing. But these opportunities are only for helpers. The other members, although they have joined Subud primarily for the purpose of spiritual development, are excluded from these important learning experiences. Sometimes there are special training workshops for helpers at Congresses and other gatherings, from which, again, non-helpers are usually excluded.
- Being a helper is a life-time commitment so there are many cases of burn-out or terminal discouragement. Potential helpers shy away from taking on such a heavy burden of responsibility.
- Helpers make decisions for the group through testing, the most obvious instance being in the choice of group chair. There is a vote but it is mainly perfunctory. The fact that the helpers in effect make the decision for the members reinforces the members' impression that they, the members, are on the outside and do not play a real role in the group.
- Helpers also speak for the members in their yearly reports, which are passed up through the organization to the international level. Often testing is used to obtain answers to questions about the state of the group or the quality of the latihan. But as a helper, I always felt that the reports should be treated as a good excuse to get useful feedback directly from the members. Why shouldn't members speak for themselves about their Subud experience: what they like about it; what they feel is lacking; how they feel about their own latihan? Testing simple questions about the spiritual state of the group can perhaps give a general impression of how things are, but what's really needed are specifics. Especially we need to hear from the minority, from the people on the fringe, who are often the ones most in need of a voice, and who are also the ones most likely to leave Subud. For the helpers to decide through testing what the members need feels paternalistic and disrespectful.

- The helper/member model is not necessarily best suited to our modern Western culture. It seems to me that when you have an elder brother/younger brother distinction, it normally represents either a master/apprentice model or a mentor/disciple model. If members were novices or apprentices and helpers were experts, there would be observable and measurable skill levels; we would have standard tests for advancement, and symbols of achievement like black belts or certificates (as in martial arts or learning a language).

The mentor/disciple model, on the other hand, doesn't necessarily involve clear-cut levels. But one would expect to see a specific path of development that produces a superior human being, i.e. someone qualified to instruct those on a lower rung of the ladder. That doesn't happen in Subud. There is no set path. Everyone proceeds at their own pace and not necessarily through the same succession of stages. Since everyone's experience is different, no one is in a position to be a mentor to others. Helpers are not obviously more advanced than other members of the group. And in fact Bapak advised against helpers trying to be teachers.

On what grounds then are helpers set apart from the members?

To the above, I believe Subud helpers would respond: there is no superiority; there is no expertise; *it's just a job*. If it's just a job, why make it for life; why make such a sharp demarcation between helpers and members? Why define certain functions as helpers-only?

Why not organize ourselves differently?

The helper's job includes certain specific duties: timing latihan; talking to applicants; conducting openings; testing with members; visiting the sick; calling people who haven't shown up for a while; dealing with crisis cases.

Let's look at those duties. Timing latihan is an option, often not chosen, and it doesn't take a helper to say "begin" and "finish". In talking to applicants, the experiences of a new member may be more relevant than those of an ancient helper who can barely remember her own opening and first years in Subud. Helpers are not required to transmit the contact. Regarding testing, all members should have the chance to deepen their experience of it, beginning as soon as they feel ready. Members often prefer to test with non-helper friends; why not legitimize this reality? Visiting the sick is most appropriately done by the people who really know and care for them, helpers or not. Contacting people who have stopped coming to latihan, if it is done at all, should also be a job for someone who is close to the member concerned. The danger is that such a call will be interpreted as a cultish, paternalistic attempt to bring them back. About crisis, fortunately this is a fairly rare occurrence these days. But helpers are not necessarily better equipped than anyone else to deal with it. This is something that we should *all* be better informed about.

The kind of organization that has a strong appeal for me is summed up in the French Revolution motto: "liberty, equality, fraternity".

We are not in Indonesia where there is a strong tradition of paternalism and a natural deference to authority. There's an Indonesian term, 'Bapakisme', which refers to the practice of consulting respected elders on any issue of importance. In our own culture, by contrast, an imposed authority can generate resentment, reaction, questioning and anxiety. In any case, many Subud members joined on the understanding that the latihan alone would be the teacher.

What I propose is a support group model: where we are all equals; where the jobs and responsibilities are all short-term and shared by everyone, according to aptitude and interest; where everyone has the opportunity to help as well as be helped; where newcomers are automatically integrated right from the time they apply; where you don't need special events, Congresses or projects to create a great feeling because you get it every time you go to latihan and meet with a group of trusted friends who know you well and accept you totally just as you are.

I had that kind of experience for a few years within a helpers' group and I found it very sad that we couldn't find a way to extend it to include all the members. I know a group of young men who latihan together and also have that kind of relationship. Although at least one of them is technically a helper, no one plays that role. They are just friends, laughing or commiserating together, helping and supporting one another. In both cases, a relationship of equals.

I know some people will say that in a small group of friends you can expect mutual respect and consideration, but in a larger group, without leadership you will get chaos: some members dominating discussions or taking all the available time for their own problems. Well, this already happens, even with helpers in charge. What we need are facilitators or moderators, people who have some expertise in conducting meetings; at the minimum we need some general guidelines in place that would gradually train each of us in how to support healthy interactions.

With the help of the latihan we could practise such things as how to listen; how to be conscious of our own state and that of others; how to give love and respect to our fellow members; how to offer our opinions in a non-threatening way; how to make sure that all voices are heard, so that no one dominates and no one is left out; how to create an atmosphere of trust; how to collectively arrive at workable solutions to our problems.

In the kind of organization I envisage, helpers at the higher levels would be redefined perhaps as 'co-ordinators'. It could be one of their duties to provide regularly updated training courses in the techniques listed above. Something else they could do is go to all the Subud groups in turn, gather together all the Subud wisdom that can be put into words, the knowledge and strategies that each helpers' group has acquired and learned through years of experience, and make up a booklet of solid advice, which every member could keep as a reference. Helper knowledge would become general knowledge, empowering the members to find their own answers and be more self-sufficient. It could also be the co-ordinators' job to identify specific recurring problems and seek solutions, from our shared experience and also from sources outside Subud.

I recognize that replacing a paternalistic structure with one that is more free and egalitarian would be a radical change. Perhaps groups that are attracted by the idea could try it as an experiment. It would take some serious thought and preparation plus the whole-hearted support of the group involved. To create an inclusive group that fosters real caring and co-operation would be a challenge, but the results would speak for themselves to members and outsiders alike.

The helper's role contains too many contradictions and fosters too many problems for the benefits to outweigh the disadvantages. This is the conclusion that my twenty plus years as a helper brought me to, a conclusion so deeply felt that it was a huge relief for me to resign. The members are the heart of Subud and its future; without members there would be no need for either helpers or committee. It's time to recognize their importance, to give them the respect they deserve, and to place them at the centre, where they belong.

