

On Judging

by Rosalind Priestley

When I was twelve I was confirmed in the Presbyterian church. The process stirred up a lot of questions for me. Heaven and Hell were concepts that didn't make sense. How could anyone, no matter what they'd done, be deserving of eternal damnation? How could an innocent child be sent to Purgatory just because he was unbaptized? I argued with the minister. I was confirmed, because it was expected of me, but my reservations remained, and a couple of years later I announced that I would no longer be going to church.

But there were some aspects of Christianity I held on to. (Christmas, my favourite festival, I just re-interpreted a little.) The Christian teaching of mercy and love has always resonated with me. The story of the good Samaritan. 'Judge not lest ye be judged.' 'Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.' In my teens, when I thought about guilt and free will, I came to the conclusion that we are who we are because of our genes and our upbringing. I like the French saying: 'Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner.' To understand all is to forgive all. Not that forgiveness is easy; in some circumstances I'm sure it's next to impossible. But it's something to aim for.

I felt that understanding and forgiveness would naturally be an intrinsic part of any spiritual approach. When I joined Subud over forty years ago I expected to find people who would nurture that impulse in me; I expected to find people with a big capacity for love and compassion.

But I was disappointed. Although I very much appreciated the latihan, I found Subud people in this respect no better than anyone else and sometimes worse. I was surprised by how ready they were to pass judgement on each other. Subud seemed to bring out this quality in people who were probably quite different with their own families and friends. In many cases it seemed to relate to over-zealousness in applying Bapak's advice. I saw members looked down upon for such things as their style of dress, for the way they did latihan, for so-called 'mixing', for eating pork, for having a partner out of wedlock.

It was something I kept encountering. When I became a helper, I sometimes found myself defending members to other helpers. It was frustrating that helpers would put so much energy into establishing a rapport with applicants and then as soon as the applicants were opened, they became potential targets for criticism. It seemed to be a bad habit our group had fallen into. But I heard of other groups that had even more conflict and bad feelings. Why were we, an organization of supposedly spiritual people, so unkind to each other, so ungenerous? At times Subud had a distinctly unpleasant aura, it seemed to me, though I had faith that the latihan would eventually sort it all out.

Looking back, I think that some of the bad feeling came from a widespread fearfulness generated by the tremendous authority we granted to our Spiritual Guide. We were all eager to get it right, to follow his instructions to the letter, and we all felt somewhat insecure, especially since when Bapak tested us, or talked about our general progress, it seemed we were all still pretty much at square one, at the material level, and at times even regressing. That made us inclined to judge ourselves harshly.

At the same time, the latihan is not a practice where progress is demonstrable; so, if and when you notice signs of progress in yourself, you tend to take pride in that, and since probably no one else has had quite the same insight, it can look to you as though you have progressed further than others have. Others meanwhile have gone through the same process regarding their own insights. Between the insecurity and the desire to see progress in oneself, there was fertile ground for ego trips. In effect, yes, we are all spiritual pygmies compared to Bapak, but I am a taller pygmy than the rest of you. Some even prided themselves on being one of the very few who could really understand Bapak's message. It was not a good formula for relaxed, comfortable relationships.

Sometimes strong feelings developed around relatively trivial issues, such as: how we should begin and end the latihan; how many helper latihans the committee should be invited to; whether the women or the men should take the upper floor during simultaneous latihans; whether the women could wear pants to latihan; whether or not the hall should be reserved for the exclusive use of Subud members; how much light there should be in the latihan room; and so on. On some questions Bapak's views changed or were inconsistent, so we could have opposing sides both quoting Bapak. Now and then a member returned from Cilandak with the latest word from on high, giving rise to some new obsession or conflict. Later, while reading books about the Cultural Revolution in China, I was struck by how the elite circle around Mao Zedong were constantly on tenterhooks in anticipation of his next pronouncement, fearful about whether or not it would vindicate their own views on some disputed policy. To my mind the Mao 'cult of personality' was not so very different from the way we regarded Bapak.

Sometimes friction between members led to ugly scenes, when voices were raised and feelings ran high. I noticed that, perhaps to preserve their spiritual quiet, other members generally would not let themselves get drawn into a dispute, not even to offer support. Which meant that there was often no mediation, and no resolution. Hurts festered for years.

At other times judgements were arrived at privately within the helpers group. In such cases the person being judged, if he or she happened to hear about it, had no opportunity to respond, even when their character was being attacked or false motives imputed to them. Nothing is more frustrating or feels more unfair than to know that you are being discussed and pigeon-holed with no chance to explain yourself. Still worse if the judgement is based on a 'receiving'.

Because the helpers' function has the clearest link to Bapak's authority, it's not surprising that a lot of the judging originates with them, some of it directed at each other, some of it directed at members or the committee.

It was not uncommon in the old days for there to be power struggles within helper groups, with one helper implicitly claiming a leading role by virtue of seniority, or experience, or closeness to Bapak, or ability to receive in testing. The other helpers sometimes reacted with passive, or even active, resistance.

As far as members are concerned, helpers are supposed to be in some sense monitors, with the task of making sure that the members are really receiving in latihan, and attending regularly, and aware of Bapak's advice. But monitoring can easily be experienced as judging, especially when what is being monitored is something so intimately connected to you as your latihan. Members are sensitive and can feel it when they are being judged negatively. Even members who are not themselves the target can

sometimes sense it when there is judgement in the air.

Helpers often feel that it is part of their job to share the insights they have gained with members. But it's arguably preferable for members to be left to experience their own insights, which might lead in a quite different direction. Lip service is given to the idea that we each of us progress in our own way towards realizing the full potential of our unique selves. But in practice there is pressure to conform, to accept the basic Subud narrative, and to suppress the parts of ourselves that don't fit.

Testing is one of the main helper functions; to the extent that we see it as authoritative, it too can encourage our propensity to judge, and to see things in black and white terms. When there is testing for a group Chair, for example, you feel that there is more at stake than in an ordinary election. We are looking for that one person God has in mind for the position; all the other candidates are seen as somehow unworthy. After getting a negative answer to whether she should become a helper, I remember one woman declaring that she felt 'rejected by God'.

Testing gives answers but it may not give you a context or tell you how to understand them. A negative answer that in ordinary life would be softened by an understanding of the circumstances and a sense of the limits of human knowledge can come out sounding hard and unfeeling. Helpers may feel that they are just a channel; 'let the chips fall where they may'. Testing about God's Will risks leading us in the direction of oversimplification, all-or-nothing attitudes, and valuing results over process. The end — which is nothing less than God's Will — can justify any means.

Also, testing is not used well if it bypasses normal channels of human communication. Simply talking may be a more effective path to mutual respect and understanding, with the potential to find resolutions that are more complete and more satisfying to all parties.

It may be a contributing factor to this judgmental tendency that many of us have an unusually strong faith in our own intuition and instincts. Consequently, we are in danger of interpreting our own gut reactions as 'receiving', and with our bias against thinking, we tend not to second-guess ourselves. Judgements are often made hastily, without asking questions or hearing the other side of the story.

In the old days, all this judging of one kind or another contributed to an atmosphere that was at times unwholesome, disturbing, deadening, even toxic.

Of course I am not saying that judging was the whole story. There was also a counter-dynamic at work: the belief that we are all united in the latihan as one human family. At larger gatherings especially, there was often a strong family feeling, with lots of genuine caring and love, not to mention laughter and lightness of heart.

Despite a tendency to pass judgement himself (e.g on other gurus) Bapak himself advised against judging. I once committed to memory his prescription for how to make spiritual progress: 1) don't feel superior to other people; 2) don't feel inferior to other people; 3) don't gossip; 4) don't criticize; 5) don't pay attention to things that are not your business.

On examination, all of these seem to boil down to one basic idea: don't be judgmental, either of yourself or others. It also makes the important connection between judging and feeling superior or inferior. Part of what makes being judged so unpleasant is that someone else has placed themselves higher than you and is implicitly claiming a kind of

authority over you. Being judged is a demeaning experience; it feels like an attempt by the person judging to reduce you to their own inevitably distorted picture of who you are. But we can never fully know one another. To recognize that in our interactions is to show basic respect.

In my experience judging creates a stifling atmosphere, especially for those being judged, but also for the judges themselves, whose judging eventually turns inwards and casts a cold, unsympathetic light upon their own faults and shortcomings. Conversely, those who don't pass judgement on others are better able to accept themselves, with all their faults. It was a moment of great liberation for me when I really accepted myself as an imperfect being. With the judging tendency muted, the possibility arises for deeper, warmer, and more grounded relationships.

Since those old days (for me, definitely not the *good* old days), one way or another I think we have made a lot of progress. Subud people seem to be more open-minded now and big egos are much less in evidence. How much of it is due to the latihan and how much is simply the natural maturing process I don't know, but I have been in helpers groups that were really caring and loving and non-judgmental, and I think this is more the norm now.

The propensity to judge was perhaps never as noxious in Subud as in other cults. But it was naturally stronger in the days when Bapak was alive, when his talks attracted a great deal of attention and were being eagerly read and passed around. Since Bapak's death their influence has waned. But to the extent that there is still a widely-held belief system based on his authority, there are still traces of the same dynamic of superior and inferior, approval and disapproval.

Looking at today's Subud, we can see that some of Bapak's own cultural prejudices still survive, even though we live in a society that has generally outgrown them. I am thinking particularly of homophobia. It can't be a good instinct that makes some helpers want to inform gay members that their sexual orientation is 'not pleasing to God'. For the majority of educated people in my country, homophobia is well on the way to following anti-feminism, anti-Semitism, and other kinds of bigotry into oblivion, where it will hopefully remain. Of course individuals may still believe what they want to, but for our organization not to repudiate this prejudice is suicidal, I feel. Other Subud attitudes are suspect too: the link between money and spirituality, for example, which tends to make us regard wealthy people as our superiors; also the teachings around gender roles, sexual purity, conception and abortion.

One of the clear indications that the propensity to judge is still alive is that members who want to take a fresh look at elements of the Subud belief system or the structure of the Subud organization come under attack. The reaction to Subud Vision editors is a case in point. We have been told that we think too much, that we don't receive well in the latihan; some actually say that we are evil. It's impossible to take such attacks seriously, but the attitude behind them constitutes a real obstacle to the productive debate we need to be engaged in.

As most of us are aware, using our minds has been given a bad name in Subud. Thinking is associated with the influence of the 'material forces'. So if you argue against some common Subud practice or belief, nothing is easier for your opponents than to invoke the anti-thought bias. On the other hand, if you argue in favour of the establishment view, the status quo, they will say you are receiving well and in touch with your inner. In fact it's all thinking, on both sides, and all subject to various influences, but

this bias offers an convenient mechanism for opponents of change to judge and dismiss opinions they don't agree with.

A vocal minority are still outraged by any questioning of the Subud belief system. This is not surprising. For many older members their understanding of Bapak's teachings has enriched their lives and is the focal point of their existence.

But there are others who, in spite of their appreciation of the latihan, for various reasons are not drawn to Bapak's explanations. Subud cannot afford to excommunicate or bar the door to all those members, past, present and future, who fall into this category. Belief cannot be forced; we believe only what speaks to our souls. It would violate an essential freedom to try to deny that. So the tension between the authoritarians and the independents is not easy to resolve, unless both sides can agree to live and let live.

Human beings are a varied lot. Outside Subud, people who in their lives have acquired a little knowledge, humility and flexibility accept that good may be derived from a wide range of religions and teachings, and that it is beyond the powers of any human being to determine that one teaching or one teacher is greater than all the rest. It is a feature of civilized behaviour to accept differences in belief without passing judgement on the believers, without the need to make war on them or send missionaries to convert them. In our Western societies for the most part we live harmoniously with people of different religions or no religion, people with very different cultural traditions, or politics, or even values.

This is the attitude we need in our Subud groups. Surely in a genuine spiritual path, there should be the flexibility to let people be themselves, and evolve according to their own inner compass, without the imposition of an external and arbitrary standard.

If we deliberately attach a belief system to the latihan, the latihan may lose its capacity to be something radically new, open-ended, and revolutionary in our lives. How can we be open to new receiving and new development when we see everything in a closely circumscribed context? What if, for example, for some members, the way they need to develop is away from religion and belief systems? Then they would have a conflict between where the latihan is leading them and what the belief system around it allows. To make boundaries and set limits on the latihan feels like a betrayal of its essence.

I think the authoritarian, judging aspect of Subud has been detrimental to its growth, and to the practice of the latihan. We would be a very different kind of organization if belief were more clearly an individual choice, completely free of communal pressure, and if our decisions were based on weighing and considering all factors and opinions, not just those that can be linked to a Bapak quote.

To turn ourselves into imitation Bapaks is neither a worthwhile nor an achievable goal. Instead, what if we all had the courage and honesty to be exactly who we are, without claims or pretensions, without feeling superior or inferior, and as far as possible without judging either ourselves or others?
