

Redefining Success

by Rosalind Priestley

For some years now many Subud members have been preoccupied with the apparent failure of Bapak's mission to bring the latihan to humankind. At one time Bapak evidently foresaw a huge influx of new members who would be transformed by the latihan and demonstrate its fruits in a compelling new kind of spirituality. The world would be so impressed that it would beat a path to our Subud Centres. Partly in the service of this grand vision Bapak inspired a series of building projects, financed by the members, whose purpose, among other things, was to give Subud a high profile that would attract new members.

But so far nothing like this has happened. The influx of applicants is still a trickle and we lose about the same number to attrition. Few Subud members have achieved either material or spiritual success striking enough to bring them to the world's attention as advertisements for Subud. Bapak's great projects have mostly failed too, with disastrous results for those members who committed more than they could afford. The failure of the membership to grow in numbers has been especially dispiriting for the helpers, who enthusiastically welcome and nurture applicants only to find that the vast majority of them disconnect themselves from the group, usually within a year or two.

We are all looking at the possibility that Subud may be yet another spiritual movement that failed.

Our collective veneration for Bapak makes it hard for us to question that original vision. We are reduced to thinking about how we, the members, must somehow have gone off the rails. Some search Bapak's talks for the formula that would put us back on track. Some think we need another mega-project and this time we'll get it right. Some feel that we have to go back to basics and follow Bapak's advice on everything, but with even more commitment, energy and sincerity. Some believe that the fault lies with our latihan, which are not deep and surrendered enough to achieve the kind of personal transformation that would fuel a wider success. Some take hope from an obscure prediction that it will all come right with the third generation of Subud members. As members die off, we can feel time running out. We look for signs of a change in the wind that would bring that long-awaited influx of enthusiastic, bright, and preferably young, new members.

But perhaps we are now ready for some hard questions. Were those original expectations overblown? How many ordinary people are even capable of being inwardly transformed into living advertisements for a spiritual path? Are spiritual seekers really going to be attracted by hotels and office buildings? If a spiritual movement is failing, wouldn't one normally first question the effectiveness of the practice before blaming the members? (We humans are supposed to be flawed; that's why we need spiritual help in the first place.) Especially, we need to ask: What are the reasons for members leaving, and is there anything we can do about it? Surely we are putting the cart before the horse, trying to attract new members when we don't yet know how to keep the ones we've got.

It seems self-evident to me that Subud's success or failure is determined at the local level rather than the international, and measured by the satisfaction of the members. Success in this sense doesn't have to entail growth in numbers, but it's a highly probable side-effect. If a majority of those who have been opened over the last fifty years had remained as long-term members, we would probably now have a Subud population in at least the hundreds of thousands.

So, are Subud members generally satisfied with their experience of the latihan? Probably the vast majority of long-term members would tell you that they have found it to be a source of strength, guidance and fellowship. While their inner development may not always be clearly visible to the outside world, to themselves it is nevertheless real. Even among newer members there are some who appreciate what the latihan does for them and continue to attend. But we are not perhaps in the habit of contemplating what specifically we gain from the latihan. Many of us prefer to think of the latihan only within the framework of Bapak's explanations, which include a lot of abstract Sufi theory, Kejawen beliefs, and some unverifiable points relating to the afterlife. But suppose we consider the latihan strictly on its own, separate from the explanations and the belief system; what can we say about it? What benefits do we actually experience?

The following is a tentative personal list:

- Latihan movements and singing feel as though they are tapping a deep creative source and as such are satisfying and pleasurable.
- After the exercise, I may feel cleansed and refreshed and unburdened, rather like after a long deep sleep.
- The exercise often seems to connect me to a source of optimism and faith; it restores balance, makes me feel lighter, more relaxed.
- It helps me to relate to other people at a deep level.
- It helps me to roll with the punches and not get upset over trifles.
- It connects me to a store of unconscious wisdom that I would not otherwise have access to.
- It helps to reconcile me to my own nature and to the way my life has unfolded.

I believe it would be good for all of us to ask ourselves the same question. Our combined answers would add to our understanding of the path we follow.

If we rely only on Bapak for our knowledge of the latihan, we are limited by the limitations of Bapak's experience, Bapak's habit of thinking, Bapak's religion and Bapak's cultural background. Many points in his explanations have to be taken on faith, and so have little relevance for those of us who don't subscribe to the belief system implicit in the Talks. My impression is that even after fifty years of Subud in the world, we have very little objective knowledge of the latihan: the benefits and the drawbacks; the positive potential and also the risks. We need to share our individual experiences of the latihan and build on what we learn. We need to be concerned with reality, not theory, not theology. We need this knowledge for the sake of our own self-confidence and in order to be able to speak with assurance to enquirers. We also need it to light the road ahead.

The kind of benefits I have listed above are not spectacular enough to bring about the Grand Vision, certainly not in the short term, but in my view they are worthwhile in themselves—whether or not they ultimately turn us into paragons of virtue, famous artists, or wealthy and beneficent entrepreneurs. The cumulative effects of the latihan are likely to result in at least some modest gains in character and functionality, and even modest gains are not to be despised in this difficult world. In addition, the latihan has the well-known advantage that it requires no special abilities or training.

The latihan clearly has some value for those who practise it. Though Subud as a movement has not enjoyed great success, neither has it been an utter and complete failure—except when viewed against the exaggerated expectations of Bapak's vision. But if the latihan has value and there are tangible benefits, why, in forty years, haven't our numbers grown, even slightly?

To my mind, part of the reason is that we were looking to the world to discover us

instead of working to make ourselves worth discovering. We accepted the Grand Vision as our mission and laid endless guilt trips on ourselves for not achieving it. We set up ourselves up for failure and, not surprisingly, it has left us feeling helpless and discouraged.

I believe our best course is to forget the Grand Vision and work at the group level to clear away the obstacles that stand in the way of applicants joining and members staying. I see many such obstacles: the pervasive influence of Bapak's own cultural and religious background; the Indonesian words; the religious terminology that puts off seekers who are not conventionally religious. I think we should also look at the role of the helpers, the top-down tendencies, and the lack of democracy. I believe we should feel free to think about and re-examine anything that might be relevant.

Yes, we are dying out and changes need to be made, but we should make them within the framework of modest and reasonable expectations and our own empirical investigations—not under the sway of unquestioning belief and baseless fantasies.

The heart of Subud is the latihan. From our years of following this practice, from our experience of testing, from the way we feel after exercising, we have all gained some intuition of the human qualities that the latihan fosters. In my experience the dynamic of the latihan relates to our interconnectedness, to faith in our own higher purpose, to creativity, to love, to joy. It seems to me that these inherent values, just in themselves, are a good foundation on which to build the future of Subud.