

This article first appeared in Subud Canada's national newsletter, SCAN (editor, Kumari Beck), in early 1998, as part of a feature on the role of the Subud Press. At the Spokane World Congress the previous summer, apart from one conspicuous instance of censorship, there seemed to be a freer atmosphere and a movement towards more open communications, both within Subud and between Subud and the outside world. Many of us were hopeful that the winds of change were gathering momentum. I leave it to the reader to judge whether we have made any progress since then towards a more open, honest, and normal functioning of the press in Subud.

The Role of the Subud Press: Some of the Questions

by Rosalind Priestley

At the World Congress last summer in Spokane, the fourth and final issue of the Congress newsletter, *Gee-wa*, was confiscated by Congress authorities because its editor, Michael Menduno, refused to make certain requested changes. There has already been a lot of discussion in print about whether this action was justified. Many of us have a gut reaction to the kind of censorship that is imposed from above: it feels repressive, patronizing, dangerously undemocratic, etc. etc. At the same time, in this case there were a lot of complicating factors. What sort of mandate did Michael have? What kind of newsletter was he supposed to produce? Who was he responsible to: the Congress organizing committee or Subud members attending the Congress? Who was the intended readership: Subud members and their families? The population of Spokane? The world? And of these, whose opinion ought to matter the most? It seems likely that a lack of clarity around these questions contributed to the confrontation.

In a sense it is now all water under the bridge. But the incident has got a lot of us thinking about the role of the press in Subud.

As far as I know, we have no publications that function the way an ordinary newspaper does. If our ISC and WSA leaders were taking political office in the outside world, there would be articles in the daily papers about what strengths and weaknesses they bring to their jobs, and critiques and commentary on their speeches and actions. Perhaps because Subud offices are mostly unpaid, this kind of assessment might seem inappropriate and ungrateful. But in some respects, a detached, analytical approach might have a lot to offer, especially where there are problems that need attention. Also, a genuinely independent Subud press would reassure newcomers who have fears about Subud being a cult. But how much freedom of expression are members ready to tolerate at this stage?

To the extent that we function as a kind of family, self-censorship comes into play. There are issues of morale and 'face'. Families don't disclose to the world all their problems. Within the family, the older generation may have secrets they conceal from impressionable youngsters, and the youngsters may have opinions and behaviour they conceal from possibly judgmental elders. With self-censorship the boundaries are indistinct; we may restrain ourselves unnecessarily out of a general feeling of the need for caution or out of a sense of the deference due to Bapak and others. Perhaps certain subjects are never addressed; others, only in a certain style or manner. Over the years norms have been established that may prove difficult to break away from. Do we *want* to break away from them?

Maybe there is a special Subud 'culture' that permeates our forms of expression. If

there is, is it something essential or just habitual? One of the problems with spreading Subud seems to be that most of us don't have any idea, and many are not particularly interested, in knowing what kind of impression we give the outside world. Would it be useful if our Subud publications could to some extent provide a kind of objective mirror for us?

And what does the readership want to read about? The usual fare is reports on Subud gatherings, international helper travel, Subud enterprises and projects, and the activities of the Wings. Of course these are important, but are there other areas that for one reason or another have been neglected?

Perhaps because of our strange Subud phobia about using our minds, there seems to be a general reluctance to examine and analyze our Subud experience. We try to make everything fit into the useful but limited framework of Bapak's explanations, and what doesn't fit, we tend to ignore. Could a free press encourage us to look objectively at our collective experience of the latihan with the aim of arriving at a clearer understanding of this path we follow?

How do we feel about controversy? Some readers delight in it; others become very uncomfortable. Some blame the publication if it prints views they don't agree with. Sometimes it is a discouraging experience for readers to discover how much their own assumptions differ from those of other members. But if we want a free press that is widely representative, there are bound to be disgruntled readers from time to time, given the diversity of outlook one finds in Subud.

Finally, there's the question of whether it is actually possible for a publication to be independent when it depends financially either directly or indirectly on its readers.

None of it is very straightforward. Personally, I found the irreverence of *Gee-wa* refreshing, and am relieved to see the Subud world becoming more open, more grounded, more in touch with reality. I would like to see us push back our invisible boundaries and brush away the cobwebs to become more self-aware, less culture-bound and in a certain sense, more 'normal'. Bapak in his later years was always urging us to stand on our own two feet and stop depending on him. Maybe we are finally ready to do that.

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