

The Problems With Enterprise

by Rosalind Priestley

I have never had any aptitude for business or interest in the business world, so it is not surprising that Bapak's talks on the subject of enterprise never caught my imagination. But for other reasons too I have been skeptical of the concept from the beginning.

When Bapak first started promoting enterprises, some members found the idea very exciting. But for me it was a distraction from our central focus. It called the latihan into question. I felt that the latihan, like other spiritual practices, ought to be sufficient unto itself; why would we find the latihan boring and need something else to keep our interest? (Surely the latihan is at least as engaging as meditation.) I thought members and potential members would just be confused by this new emphasis on making a big splash in the business world.

I understand the idea that spiritual (or, if you prefer, psychological or moral) development needs to be put into practice, put to the test in real life. But it seems to me that testing of this kind happens anyway, and most naturally through relationships with other people. Everyone except an extreme recluse has opportunities to check their principles against their behaviour in the course of their daily interactions as parents, children, siblings, spouses, friends, citizens, care-givers, teachers, pet owners, shoppers, bosses, employees, and any number of other roles. It is not necessary to set up enterprises for this purpose.

Traditionally in our Western society an ability to make money has no significance in spiritual terms. Think of the spiritual and religious leaders of the past: if Gandhi had been rich, would that in any way have enhanced his message to us? Those who have had a Christian education remember that a rich man can as easily enter heaven as a camel can go through the eye of a needle. Christian monks and nuns take a vow of poverty. Christian saints are known for identifying compassionately with the lowest levels of society.

In our Subud group some years ago a successful businessman came as an applicant to talk to the helpers. The helper who talked with him happened to be a big enthusiast for enterprises and explained the concept to him at great length. The businessman left and never came back. In general, successful people are looking for something that takes them beyond the sphere of money and material power. Less successful people go for career counselling; they don't join a spiritual movement.

Because of Bapak's emphasis on enterprises, Subud members have (in my view) tended to be overly focussed on Subud's material success to the detriment of our collective spiritual awareness and growth. Why, if we are on a spiritual path, isn't there more discussion about our spiritual goals? Why is there so much attention given to big projects and so little given to the question of whether the latihan is doing what it is supposed to do, that is, turning us into people of good character? For me a spiritual path has to do with achieving the state Bapak once described, where you always feel, say and do the right thing automatically and effortlessly, guided from within. If there isn't a moral element to spirituality, then it's just about power, and spiritual power without ethics is not something attractive to contemplate.

When Bapak was alive the founders of successful Subud enterprises were the Subud heroes. (I remember some Subud journalist jokingly coined the title MBB, Mentioned By Bapak, to distinguish the more successful businesses, the ones that had caught Bapak's attention.) But isn't everything we do 'enterprise' in the widest sense? Why make one particular way of earning money superior to all the others? Why stress the ability to earn money at all? The problem with having such heroes is that success at enterprise becomes a measure for judging ourselves and others.

Women especially may feel left out, since many of them because of their child-rearing responsibilities choose not to enter the work force or, if they do, never have the chance to develop full careers. To a greater degree than men at least, their natural inclination is towards teaching, healing, service or care-giver roles. Our capitalistic society already imposes a lot of pressure to achieve financial success. It seems unfair that Subud members should get a similar message from the spiritual side too, from the very place that ought to be our refuge from materialistic values.

There is an especially serious problem that arises in connection with the big projects. All of them have tried to raise money from the membership. The projects were huge; the membership was small – which increased the pressure on individuals to contribute. If anything, it should have been the other way around: small projects for a large membership. The way it usually happens is that first an organization becomes a success, then it generously gives back to society. With us it was the opposite. We were not succeeding, therefore we had to show the world how significant we were by means of huge projects that would draw public attention. Whether this approach ever had any validity is doubtful. Did anyone come into Subud because of Widjojo or Anugraha (when they were doing well)? Is material success what you actually look for in a spiritual organization? It could even be viewed as a warning sign that they might be after your money.

But the point I want to get to is that it is unconscionable for a spiritual organization to put pressure on members to invest or donate by appealing to God's will or the dire predictions of a charismatic leader. This is the *modus operandi* of the sleazy televangelist. We know it's wrong when a TV audience is encouraged to reach deep into their pockets. During the prime enterprise years, I knew that something was wrong too. In retrospect, one indication was that I felt too embarrassed to mention to non-Subud friends and family that my husband and I were putting money into Subud projects. People who claim to speak for God are in a unique position of power and influence, and asking for money is an abuse of that power (quite apart from the question of whether anyone should claim to speak for God).

The shame of Anugraha and perhaps other large projects is not that they failed to make big profits or fulfill our expectations, but that ordinary members, sincere, devoted people, were influenced to part with their hard-earned cash. In some cases they invested more than they could afford to lose, bringing serious hardship upon themselves.

Bapak used to cite as proof of his spiritual power that money just came to him without his making any effort. In the Javanese world-view, it appears that wealth is associated with power or potency, a potency that operates in both worlds, material and spiritual. I think this gives us a strong clue as to the reason why Bapak stressed enterprises. He saw wealth as proof of the power of the latihan. Some Western Subud members have consciously adopted or unconsciously slipped into this Javanese view of wealth. But it is a stretch for those of us who see no connection between riches and what we would consider to be genuine spirituality.*

Of course, I have no objection to Subud members (individually or in groups) starting

enterprises that might benefit themselves and incidentally Subud, or benefit Subud and incidentally themselves. That is their right, and good on them if they succeed. What I object to is the idea of 'enterprise' as an integral part of the Subud experience, with the implication that those who do enterprises are more 'Subud' than those who do not. I don't like to see it written into our aims. I don't like to see the Subud organization or any branch of it promoting this idea. I sincerely hope that members will never again feel pressure to invest in a large project or to start their own small one.

Something Bapak (or possibly Ibu Rahayu) once said struck a deep chord in me, though I can't vouch for my memory's accuracy after all these years. It went something like this: *people will want to come to Subud when they see the quality of the caring that exists between the members*. A quality of caring was also what distinguished the early Christians and made them remarkable in their time. Supposing the quote is right, that quality is not something that can be faked; it can't just be a façade. We will have to find the way through the latihan and our evolving spiritual consciousness to come to that place of compassion. Getting rich will not take us there.

* There are superficial similarities to the Javanese view in certain Christian traditions. The Puritan 'work ethic', for example, emphasized 'the necessity of constant labor in a person's calling as a sign of personal salvation'. More relevant still, 'prosperity theology', a prominent feature of some modern charismatic Christian sects, 'is the doctrine that prosperity, particularly financial prosperity, and success in business or personal life is external evidence of God's favor.' [Quotes from Wikipedia]