

# From Subud to You-Bud

By Reynold Ruslan Feldman

. . . *Subud is you, and you are Subud. . . . (Bapak Muhammad Subuh)*

*When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. (1 Corinthians 13:11; Webster's Bible Translation)*

To channel Varindra, our late long-time World Subud chair, "Well?" I can just see him quizzically raising his eyebrows as if to ask, "So what happened? Has Subud really become you? I'm not so sure." Bapak, the founder of our spiritual practice, died 25 years ago, but we, his spiritual children and heirs, have been slow to take over and make the family business our own.

Having just spent five months living in the Rungan Sari Subud community in Indonesian Central Borneo, I am more convinced than ever that Subud has somehow gotten trapped in a time warp—mid-1980s Java. Bapak himself was careful to update the organizational rules and regs whenever he felt it necessary. As a result Subud went from no waiting period to three months for candidate members, from long skirts for ladies to whatever ("Just no bikinis!"), from 18 to 17 as the minimum age for membership, from men and women sitting apart to sitting together for talks, from no regions and zones to regions and zones, from no enterprises to enterprises, from no wings to wings, etc. Since his death, however, our watchword has been—"Listen to Bapak" and cleave to all the last things he said. Ibu Rahayu has been nothing if not the dutiful Javanese daughter in this regard, carefully curating Bapak's memory and counseling us consistently that we forget his advice at our peril—and Subud's.

A chief symbol of this frozen-in-time status is Bapak's bedroom at Rahayu's house in Pamulang, Jakarta. My wife, Cedar, and I were able to visit there in mid-January for a "Sabtu-Wage" evening in the *pendopo* (the large, enclosed Javanese gazebo). For those of you who don't know what a Sabtu-Wage is, *sabtu* is the Indonesian for Saturday, while *wage* is one of the five (!) Javanese days of the week. A form of Javanese fortune-telling is based on examining the combination of the Western and Javanese days of the week when someone is born to predict a person's character and life events. Mini-birthdays are also celebrated on that intersection of days. Bapak happened to be born on Saturday-Wage. That combination, occurring roughly every six weeks, is the occasion for Friday-night celebrations at Subud houses all over Indonesia. If you happen to be in Jakarta, you hitch a ride through the teeming streets of South Jakarta to Ibu's housing complex in the suburb of Pamulang. At the Rungan Sari Subud Complex, Central Borneo, it's easier: You just walk to the Latihan Hall.

Anyway, Bapak's room— It was the place he spent most of the last year of his life. Apparently nothing has been changed there since he left it for his final trip to the hospital the night of June 22/23, 1987. The only exception is the fresh cut flowers replaced daily. The room itself is a faded naval gray-green. Paint here and there is chipped. An old-fashioned big-box TV dominates the room. The visual impact, at

least on me, was drab and depressing. The place cried out for redecorating. Yet when I visited the room this trip, after latihan and a video of a Bapak talk, a number of mainly Subud sisters, including Westerners, were kneeling on the floor, imbibing the spiritual vibes they believed inhabited the space. It was not so much a room as a mausoleum.

It hit me later, though the idea had been slowly forming over the last few years, that Subud itself has become a mausoleum, a memory house dedicated to the wonderful, insightful human being who pioneered our spiritual path, now elevated to *wali* status, our saint, determining the heft and girth of our spirituality from beyond the grave. No wonder Subud is not growing, I thought. As a bright Dayak woman, a friend of and collaborator with Subud members in Central Borneo, told me later in Kalimantan, "I've been attracted by Subud but haven't yet joined because, as far as I can tell, it's a *kejawan*" (a Javanese spiritual practice based on the ideas and charismatic personality of a local saint, usually a mixture of Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim elements just like Javanese culture itself).

Now in my 52<sup>nd</sup> year of our spiritual practice, I'm convinced that if Subud is to reach "all mankind," in that old-fashioned term of Bapak's English translators, it will have to be de-Javanized. "Listening to Bapak" will have to be replaced by listening to that still, small voice within as we each develop the ears to hear and the will to follow it. Bapak's gift to us was the Subud spiritual exercise, which has the capacity to sharpen our inner hearing and strengthen our will to put that guidance into daily practice. After all, Subud, he told us, was us, and we [for better or worse] were Subud. If doing Subud were a matter of simply listening to Bapak and following his advice, rather than our own receiving, then doing the exercise would be a vain practice and a waste of time. We'd simply be members of a new Javanese religion called Subuhism.

Non-Subud persons everywhere confuse Bapak's name with that of our organization. This error is understandable enough. After all, *Subuh* and *Subud* differ by only one letter. We Subud members know better of course, at least intellectually. *Subuh* is our founder's name. It's the Indonesianized Arabic for the pre-dawn Muslim prayer. *Subud*, on the other hand, is one of those acronyms the Indonesians love so much based on the initial letters or letter of *susila*, *budhi*, and *dharma*. Yet in our hearts or at least our behavior, we tend to make the same mistake: Subud is Bapak and Bapak is Subud. Pak Subud, not Subuh!

I was fortunate to have experienced Bapak many times in person, on several occasions one-on-one. Having learned Indonesian early in my Subud life, I could converse with him as well as understand his talks to a great extent in the original. He was, and is, the most impressive human being I have met in my nearly 73 years of living. Yet I have also come to understand him as our training wheels, so to speak, in Subud. As a former Roman Catholic, I am familiar with the comforts of a clear, unwavering set of rules and regulations. As spiritual adults, however, there comes a time when our training wheels must come off and we make that scary but necessary transition to riding a two-wheeler.

In Subud that means, in my view, reliance on our personal relationship with the Great Life Force, or God, developed through many life experiences but clearly intensified for most of us through our Subud practice. Doing so, moreover, should have

implications for the language we use about that practice and some of the rules (though I know that we're not supposed to have any) like the three-month candidacy period, separation by gender in the exercise, lack of personal interaction around our spiritual development (the implicit attitude is that Subud is an individualistic practice between the person and the Great Life Force), critical attitude toward non-heterosexual human beings, our constant quoting of Bapak (I'm a huge offender here), the use of theistic language, and even the initial requirement to believe in God or have the wish to.

Bapak tells the story in his autobiography of the big folio volume that mystically plopped down on his table days or weeks after his direct opening from Upstairs. It gave him all kinds of guidance, even answering his questions in the form of videos emerging on an opened page. Then one night, without warning, the book disappeared into his chest. From then on, he recounted, he had only to get quiet and look inside for guidance and answers to his own or others' questions. No need for outside consultation.

Bapak died the early morning of June 23, 1987. As I write these words, it's the evening of August 4, 2012, a quarter of a century and more than a generation later. High time, I think, for us Subud members to follow suit and not keep looking for answers to our questions about "right living" in the thousands of pages of Bapak's talks. No— As spiritual adults, we must begin perusing the pages of the book we have each been blessed to receive within ourselves over the months, years, and decades of following our wonderfully simple, dogma-free, and efficacious spiritual exercise. Do I mean never to read Bapak's advice or avail ourselves of an audio or video of his talks? Not at all. Rather, it's all about understanding that we and Bapak share the same Source, and learning that as spiritual adults our first recourse must be It directly, as in our spiritual exercise, and not It through him.

If not, not only will Bapak's mission to the world have been in vain, but we as his helpers and heirs will bear the primary responsibility for this failure. Thanks to Bapak, we have received a miraculous gift. It's time for us to grow up spiritually, begin standing on our own two feet, and do our part in effecting a global spiritual renaissance needed even more today than when Bapak left us.