

A View of Arcadia

By Sahlan Diver

Some years ago a religious sect posted one of their leaflets through my front door. The leaflet showed a picture of a pleasant, sunny, rural scene with many people lying about under the cooling shade of trees, helping themselves to food and drink from picnic baskets. The scene was intended to represent the eventual reward for the righteous, but not just allegorically, these people meant it literally. They believed that after 'judgement day', the true believers would return to a planet Earth from which all the bad people had obligingly removed themselves to go to live in Hell. From that time on there would be a pleasant sufficiency of everything, and there would be no more discord. The detail of how this paradise on Earth would function was conveniently passed over. Who would deliver the picnic baskets? Would they come by horse-and-cart, or by lorry? If the latter, would there still be air pollution, global warming even? Who would work at growing the food; who indeed would make the knives and forks — would there still be 'dark, satanic mills'?

Subud supposedly does not require us to subscribe to any specific beliefs. Nevertheless, for a group of people who claim to be individually guided from within, a great many of us seem to hold to a remarkable coincidence of theories about the spiritual. In a Subud Vision article entitled 'Subud-think', I set out to expose these theories and argue that, rather than being evidence of a shared spiritual enlightenment, they represent an incompletely thought out collection of ideas, whose validity can be seriously questioned.

My article gave many examples, and I thought I had all the angles covered, but a subsequent discussion with two Subud members made me realise that I did not. I had left out a very important angle, probably the most important angle, the origins of which go back several decades.

In the early days of enthusiasm for Subud enterprise, it was not uncommon to meet members who thought of business as something intrinsically unclean and dishonest, who believed that if we Subud members were to get involved in business, then we must show the world that we were doing it in a special way — the 'Subud' way. But enterprise as intended by Bapak is probably much simpler than that. There is no special 'Subud' way. Subud members who get involved in business should do it in the normal way, the only distinguishing factor being that the shareholders would take a 25% cut in their dividends in favour of that money being donated to charity (plus a proportion to keep the Subud organisation going as well). This in itself should have been a sufficient and noble aim, but there is nothing specifically 'Subud' about it. Many businesses already do lay special emphasis on their responsibility to benefit wider society. Take this recent example from a Dublin recruitment agency: '[We are] a carbon neutral company and as a business we try to work in the most sustainable way we can.... A percentage of our income is also donated to various environmental and humanitarian charities.'

Perhaps the naked simplicity of what Bapak was encouraging us to do in the 1970s and '80s was lost on Subud members, who, having believed themselves to belong to a spiritual movement, were suddenly being asked to get involved in business, a mixing of

activities which clashes with traditional teachings, (the camel through the eye of the needle, and all that). An acceptable sweetener was the idea that we wouldn't just be doing business, we would be adding an extra 'Subud' dimension to the activity; thus the concept of a 'Subud' enterprise was born. A Subud enterprise would be a shining example of what Subud was about, unlike all those other businesses who, according to Subud members, were motivated only by profit. We on the other hand would show we were made of different stuff.

The idea there is a special 'Subud way' of doing things has affected not just our enterprise efforts but is, I believe, at the root of all our activities. To give another example, take S.I.C.A. As an organisation that exists to nurture the cultural aspirations of our members, whether amateur or professional, SICA is perfectly legitimate and praiseworthy. But look at articles written by members in our Subud press and a very different impression is gained from the reverent tones with which SICA activities are often described. Because this is Subud culture, just as with Subud enterprise we can't resist the temptation to believe that there is automatically something special about it. SICA activities become special just by virtue of being SICA. Many members no longer use the word 'culture' in a Subud context, they substitute the word 'SICA', elevating to the level of a high human activity what was originally no more than a set of initials. Worse, some members have imbued SICA with such special-ness that they have come to regard it as a quality that is a part of their inner selves — there are even members who earnestly 'test their SICA'.

Taking this further still, we find that the idea of the special 'Subud way' determines our conception of how we should prepare for the growth of Subud in the future. Subud will not grow in any normal way, its way of growth will also be special, can only be special.

Like the religious sect who posted the leaflet through my front door, Subud seems to hold to a vision of its future that is essentially Arcadian in nature. The vision goes something like this:

'As a result of our doing the latihan, sufficient of us will be purified and reach a good state that automatically things will work out well and we will all start to act in a way that touches people. Subud will thus be noticed by outsiders, and many will join us at that time. Eventually the influence of Subud will grow to the extent that society itself will be changed. So it is not necessary for us to do anything or worry about anything. We should just diligently attend to our own latihan with an attitude of faith and sincere submission.'

Of all the tenets of 'Subud-think' this one is surely the most constraining on our will to act, because this belief that we are merely patiently and dutifully preparing ourselves for a predestined spiritual golden age is pervasively embedded in the Subud psyche.

The idea that the future of Subud is predetermined and that all we need do is 'follow' probably has a number of unconscious causes. Firstly, it parallels the practise of the latihan itself. In the latihan we follow where it leads us both literally in terms of our latihan movements and in terms of any effect the latihan has on our character. So we can take the same concept and apply it to Subud — just do the latihan and Subud will also develop and grow. A parallel idea is the setting aside of action. We are told we should not try to aid the latihan with any special techniques, because it comes from beyond the will. Again it's a simple but not necessarily logical step to say that we should not seek to improve or grow Subud by our own will. Then, there is the idea that the latihan is sent by

God. If God has sent it then surely He will look after it and we should not interfere. However, can we really say that the many wars, atrocities and horrors of this world are evidence of God looking after us? Sticking to a religious explanation we could of course say that these are the evidence of man's weakness or sin messing up God's plan, but then surely Subud will be no more immune to our weaknesses; its future progress, even from a religious point of view, is certainly not guaranteed.

Psychologically, there may be another reason why Subud members tend towards an Arcadian view. I have noticed that whenever members get involved in a discussion of a difficult matter regarding Subud, which is not immediately and simply resolvable, there is a tendency to either go off and over-simplistically test away the problem, or to conclude by saying, 'Well, it's all up to God, we shouldn't worry too much.' Former Subud member, Luthfi O'Meagher, told me a story about some Subud members who were averse to discussing the legacy of financial loss and hardship caused by Anugraha, saying that instead we should just 'offer it up'. Luckily for the Anugraha hardship cases there were a small number of people who knew that it doesn't work like this: the shortcomings of this world have to be put right by the instruments of this world, not by the instruments of the next world. By clever negotiation with the lenders those people were able to stave off what would have otherwise been a very damaging financial situation for the Subud members involved.

Subud members do not like to think of themselves as belonging to a cult. Unfortunately the beliefs of many of their fellow members can be so cult-like as to make it difficult to deny the accusation. For example, characteristic of a cult is that its members invent or adopt a new mental reality, opposed to the way the world works in practise. Last year I had discussions with a member who vehemently rejected the idea that any improvement to the organisation of Subud can assist in the growth of Subud. According to him it's all down to our spiritual state. If we are not purified enough then no amount of good organisation can help us. The Arcadian view again — just do latihan and don't worry. Yet in the real world one can find any number of examples of where bad or corrupt organisation can seriously affect the fate of individuals, even of whole countries. Take the situation in Zimbabwe, for example. Is the recent state of that country merely a consequence of the collective state of its people, or is it more likely the consequence of the erosion of democracy in favour of a self-serving dictatorship? One could give lots of examples, but frankly it gets tedious. These Subud members are determined to hold on to their mantra that only the latihan counts, however much evidence is produced to the contrary. After all, isn't it much easier to absolve ourselves of responsibility for thought and effort. We 'just do the latihan'.^[1] Then we can take the moral high ground and say Subud isn't progressing because members aren't diligent enough with their latihan. A revival in fact of good old-fashioned religious guilt (we are all unworthy etc.) — and who says Subud isn't like a religion?!

Bearing Witness

The theory that our personally evidencing the effect of the latihan will by itself attract many others is unrealistic. It makes no allowance for human psychology in the modern world. There are incidents of people being attracted to Subud because of a change they have noticed in a friend, or even in a casual acquaintance. I know of several examples myself. But because this undoubtedly happens on a small scale it does not prove that it could ever happen on a large scale. I'll give a personal example:

I am not a Catholic but I happen to live in a foreign country where 90% of the population are Catholic. Once, I had to hire a room for a play rehearsal in a school run by the Christian Brothers. The headmaster of that school made a deep impression on me — it was clear that he was a shining example of his faith. I had proof later on that this wasn't just my imagination when an actress in my theatre group independently remarked on her own similar impression of the man. But there is no way my observation of the deep effect on that man of his faith would persuade me to become a Catholic — there are just too many things about that religion that I cannot accept, and also I don't ever want to be identified with a religion. Similarly, we Subud members need to become sufficiently aware of others to realise there may be just too many ideas attached to Subud, particularly all those many ideas stated in Bapak's talks, that act as a block to people joining us, however favourable their impression of individual Subud members might be. And in the modern world, many people will simply not want to become identified with a minority spiritual movement. It's just too strange a thing to do. Keeping everything in Subud the way it is now will not be enough to spread the latihan to others; the whole package of membership in Subud, and its implications, needs to be reconsidered.

The Arcadian theory also implies that collectively we will reach a sufficient level of purification that we will all suddenly co-operate, there will be no more discord and we will start to achieve things. This positive situation will then attract many others to join us.

This again is wrong, for two main reasons. Firstly, the misconception of harmony as being an absence of disagreement, which misconception in turn leads to an aversion to any controversial discussion, for fear of it 'rocking the boat'. So rather than showing the evidence of being more skilled than others at working through disagreement to a productive conclusion, Subud members actually become less skilled, because their efforts are effectively directed to achieving polite stand-offs. Such stand-offs are by nature unproductive. They are also dangerous because, in the absence of a proper debate and elucidation of the right way to proceed, other human mechanisms come into play, such as, for example, peer pressure to 'fit in'. Deanna Kemler gives a perfect example of this in her Subud Vision article, where she describes a testing session on the subject of 'a personal relationship with Bapak' and how difficult it was for her to challenge that idea.

Secondly, the theory of our improved spiritual state leading to greater and greater numbers of members, has not been sufficiently thought through. Presumably the supporters of this theory would agree that we are not all of an equal spiritual state, some may be much further on than others, but it seems that, despite this, the 'higher-ups', let's call them, are unable to sufficiently influence the 'lower-downs' to create the desired productive situation of harmony. Note that even when Bapak was amongst us, his very high spiritual state was not able to guarantee our success. But let's stay with the theory and try to imagine a situation later on when sufficient will reach a higher state such that the balance of high versus low will be tipped in favour of harmony and success (according to the theory). At this point, (also according to the theory), many others will join us. Maybe there will be more new members than existing ones. These new people, being beginners in the latihan, will presumably throw the balance of the spiritual mix back to low and disharmonious. It's taken fifty years of Subud to get to the state we're in and we are not at the supposed ideal goal of harmony yet, so when these new people join, will there be a further delay of fifty or a hundred years to get back to a collective harmonious state again, and then if there is another influx, does it start all over again? In other words isn't the ideal state of harmony according to the theory inherently unstable

and unsustainable?

In fact, hasn't Time really given the lie to the claim that the latihan will eventually purify our faults? There are now many members who have been in Subud their entire adult lives, and have passed on, and although they may have been well appreciated by their families and friends, no one would say that they had achieved a state of being fault-free. If Subud is a spiritual path whose goal cannot be achieved in a whole lifetime of practice, then either Subud is obviously a failure or it should change its goals and its expectations.

Arcadia Revisited

The writer H.G. Wells in his brilliant novel, 'The Time Machine', describes arriving in an Arcadia of the future somewhat like the religious picture that was posted through my front door. The pretty and peaceful inhabitants, the 'Eloi', who are the future descendants of the human race, spend their days in idle feasting in a pleasant, warm and sunny landscape. Their tables are always laden with food, their clothes are always new, genetic engineering has perfected many beautiful fruits and flowers, and disease no longer exists. Wells' time traveller can't understand how the society of the Eloi functions. Since the Eloi do not work, from where come their clothes and food? And he is puzzled by many observations that don't fit. The Eloi have seemingly developed a perfect society, but they have the intelligence of half-wits, so much so that their language has degenerated to simple, two-word sentences. The grand palaces in which they live are old and decaying, but rather than repair them they allow them to fall into ruin. During the daytime the Eloi are carefree, but at night they have an absolute terror of the dark. Gradually the truth behind the apparent paradise reveals itself. The Eloi are merely cattle, tended to by the 'Morlocks', a technologically superior race, also descended from humans, who live below ground, emerging only at night to harvest the bodies of the Eloi for their cannibalistic feasting.

I'd like to draw parallels, albeit unintended by H.G. Wells, between his Time Machine story, and the current state of Subud. The Eloi represent Subud members. Their Arcadian paradise represents our belief that doing and enjoying the latihan alone is sufficient to meet all our present and future needs and obligations. Their dumbed-down language represents our prejudice against using the mind to examine our affairs. Their decaying palaces represent our unwillingness to admit we have problems that we could fix now if only we had the will to do it. And the underground-dwelling Morlocks represent, in Subud mythology, the 'lower forces', who have usurped our position of control and who have got us just where they want by persuading us that we need do nothing different to secure the future of Subud, the perfect bait in fact to keep us as their placid and unwitting fodder.

Subud must wake up and drop the belief that it is progressing steadily towards a golden age. What is certain is that it shows no evidence of being able to achieve Arcadia through the latihan alone.

1) Luthfi O'Meagher refers to this phenomenon as 'latihan man', which I think sums it up quite well.